

H-Net Reviews

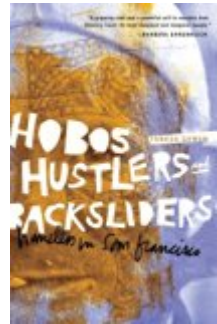
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Teresa Gowan. *Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders: Homeless in San Francisco*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. xxiv + 340 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-4869-6; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-6967-7.

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Published on H-Environment (January, 2011)

Commissioned by David T. Benac



For the past several decades in American society, poverty and homelessness have been framed—particularly among men—as a matter of individual failing, rather than the visible evidence of larger, structural issues. In a culture of meritocracy, where, despite waves of social change, 1950s gender roles for men persist, the homeless man is often cast as “lazy,” “shiftless,” and potentially dangerous. In *Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders*, however, sociologist Teresa Gowan confronts the reader with an intimate ethnography of diverse individuals struggling with systemic failure, as she explores the complexities of homeless culture as it is lived by men on the streets in San Francisco.

The volume, which is carried forward by the voices of Gowan’s numerous homeless informants and collaborators, re-places homeless individuals within society, by situating them in the context of local and national issues, such as systemic poverty, urban planning, mental illness and addiction, and the prison-industrial complex. While certain elements presented are specific to the time, place, and individuals involved, the overarching issues are replicated in cities throughout the country. Each year, the United States Conference of Mayors cites homelessness among the leading problems, nationwide, yet the problem of men, women, youth, and families living on the streets—sleeping in cars, on heating grates, and under overpasses—continues to grow. Thus, Gowan’s analysis carries a relevance that extends well beyond San Francisco to all cities, in this second decade of the twenty-first century.

Gowan constructs her study through the use of discourse analysis—an analysis of talk, and the social con-

texts in which that talk occurs—focusing on neither fault nor blame, but on the ways in which perspectives and understandings of the homeless experience are communicated. Doing so, her work leaves aside questions of whether, following Oscar Lewis, there exists a self-perpetuating culture of poverty, where deviant behaviors emerge as natural adaptations to continual adversity. The ethnography is not, as Gowan notes, “an anatomy of deviance,” but rather an investigation of how communication about poverty and homelessness—within and between both mainstream and homeless communities—shapes the everyday lives, self-images, and survival strategies of homeless individuals on the streets (p. xx).

Discussion of this approach shapes the volume’s initial chapter. In the chapter that follows, discourse about homelessness is organized into three main categories: sin-talk, in which the condition of homelessness is framed as a moral offense, resulting from the character defects and negative agency of the homeless individual; sick-talk, in which homelessness is framed as pathology, much like a disease, that may be treated and cured; and system-talk, in which homelessness is framed as the product of systemic injustice or instability. Each of these perspectives is most readily found in particular contexts: sick-talk, in shelters, rehabilitation facilities, and other formal institutions; sin-talk, in the “ex-con milieus” of San Francisco’s rougher neighborhoods; and system-talk, in the gentrified neighborhoods, by homeless urban recyclers, acutely aware of the collateral damage of the city’s efforts at urban revitalization.

The second section of *Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders* takes to the streets for three chapters, exploring the sub-

cultures and social spaces of homelessness in San Francisco, and the constructions of identity of the men who inhabit them. It is here that Gowan's work makes a substantial contribution to the literature, as a primary source on the experience of homelessness, via her discourse analysis. The men whose lives and works comprise this segment are united by circumstance, but their backgrounds range from archaeologist to auto mechanic, dealer to dogcatcher. Life on the street strips away layers of individuality, but through their unselfconscious interactions, a robust, complex, and sometimes contradictory picture of the urban homeless experience emerges. The final chapter in the section focuses on Gowan's primary area of expertise: homeless urban recyclers in the Dogpatch neighborhood, and the ways in which their participation in the city's informal economy structures their lives and enables them to reinhabit traditional mainstream masculine gender roles, as blue-collar laborers, earning their wages through meaningful labor.

The final section of the volume turns its attention to institutional discourse, examining San Francisco's strategies of what John Irwin has termed "rabble management"—the homogenizing policies and underfunded outreach of scattered, uncoordinated institutions charged with addressing homelessness in the city, and its continued efforts, like numerous other cities, to further marginalize and stigmatize homelessness through redlining, criminalization, and forced relocation. The policies and personnel of the institutions Gowan describes often diminish the homeless they are charged to serve and protect, through facile diagnoses of mental illnesses, dismissals as flawed addicts, and characterizations as impediments to the quality of life in the city. Little wonder that many of the homeless men in Gowan's ethnography chose life on the street over participation in a system that

openly casts individuals as a social problem. Rather than merely deliver an indictment of a broken system, however, the author illustrates the deep roots of these practices in the philosophies, political economic theories, and reform movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The body of literature on homelessness and its relationships with poverty, gender, addiction, and other variables has been steadily increasing since the 1990s, from such ethnographies as David A. Snow and Leon Anderson's *Down on Their Luck* (1993), Joanne Passaro's *The Unequal Homeless* (1996), and Philippe Bourgois's *Righteous Dopefiend* (2009), to numerous personal accounts, such as Lee Stringer's pathbreaking *Grand Central Winter* (1998), Janice Erlbaum's *Girlbomb* (2007), and most recently, Liz Murray's *Breaking Night* (2010). These multiple perspectives are vital to understandings of homelessness—an experience as diverse as the backgrounds of the individuals it affects—and Gowan's volume makes a significant scholarly contribution to that field. Her work carries the experience of well over a decade of working with men living on the streets who made their living in the informal economy, as "scavengers" and recyclers, and avoids many of the pitfalls of over-personalization, romanticism, and exoticism that plague some examples of existing scholarship.

Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders is written in accessible, nonspecialist language that is suitable for professionals in sociology, urban studies, and other social sciences; students in courses on community development, advocacy and activism, or social problems; and general interest readers. Additionally, its use of discourse analysis makes the volume of practical use for students of both anthropology and communication studies.

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Citation: Cynthia Miller. Review of Gowan, Teresa, *Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders: Homeless in San Francisco*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. January, 2011.

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