

**Stephen Crossley**, *In Their Place: The Imagined Geographies of Poverty*, London: Pluto Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780745336831 (cloth); ISBN: 9780745336794 (paper); ISBN: 9781786801203 (ebook)

Stephen Crossley's book *In Their Place: The Imagined Geographies of Poverty* is a title in the exciting new "Radical Geographies" series published by Pluto Press, edited by Kate Derickson, Danny Dorling and Jenny Pickerill.<sup>1</sup> This book has a focus on the geographies of poverty and poor neighbourhoods in the UK in particular. Overall, it traces how policy makers, the media, and academic researchers have, in different forms, approached and represented the spaces and places of poverty in problematic, often lurid, ways, through, for example, accounts of life on "problem estates" or initiatives aimed at "troubled families". Crossley's argument is that such accounts and interventions ultimately implicate poor people themselves in the inequality they experience, rather than illuminating or tackling the wider unequal structures of society.

The book is a useful addition both to urban and political geography literatures, which have largely ignored many of the places and spaces at stake here (particularly in a UK context) as well as to social policy literatures, where there has been more of a focus on UK poverty, but with little attention to the politics of representation that are central to Crossley's argument. The project of bringing together issues of social policy and welfare with perspectives from social and cultural geography and sociology is a very fruitful one. I hope that it will encourage more engagement from geographers in particular with this terrain, given the ongoing dynamics of austerity and the current crisis in the UK welfare system (and elsewhere) and associated poverty. The focus of the book is mostly on the UK, although North American examples and policies are also discussed.

Following the introduction, the first two substantive chapters introduce notions of the "exoticising" or "othering" gaze that has been turned on poor people and the places they live, tracing histories of such discourses from 19<sup>th</sup> century philanthropists, to film makers studying

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.plutobooks.com/pluto-series/radical-geography/>

post-industrial ruins, to the “poverty porn” of recent documentaries. Chapter Four turns attention to UK social policy in particular, discussing some key policy moments in the past 20 years during which politicians have visited certain iconic “deprived neighbourhoods” and developed policy initiatives based on ultimately flawed and problematic approaches to tackling poverty. The literature on “neighbourhood effects” is also incisively critiqued as suggesting that neighbourhoods themselves are responsible for their own problems. Chapters Five to Eight take a more “close up” approach to the geographies of poverty, examining the street, the household, the domestic sphere, and terrains of encounter with the local state, as spaces apprehended within this overall approach. The final chapter, “Studying Up”, calls for more attention to the lives and geographies of the wealthy and powerful, instead of continuing to subject the lives of the poor to such examination and judgement.

The book is accessible and engaging and covers a lot of terrain, and it is refreshing that academic research and narratives are subject to critical scrutiny alongside media and policy discourses. Of particular interest to me was Chapter Eight, “Less Public, More Private: The Shifting Spaces of the State”, on the changing ways in which the local state is experienced, from concrete spaces of encounter such as the job centre or the children’s centre (spaces which have been the particular subject of austerity cuts; see Jupp 2017), to more punitive interventions into the home itself, or de-personalised interactions via forms of technology. These shifts certainly warrant further examination to draw out the changing relationship between government and citizens, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised citizens.

Another particularly interesting chapter is Chapter Five, “Streetwise?”, on “the street” as it has been constructed in social science (often criminological) research as a site of generation of deviance and criminality, devoid of wider contexts for such geographies. In this chapter Crossley also tackles a potential critique of his own argument—that it leads to an impasse in terms of the impossibility of any representation of poverty or poor families or households. Indeed, at a moment when much contemporary culture and politics encourages the general public to ignore inequality entirely, to argue that academics, media, and

government should not engage with or report on poverty seems problematic. However, here Crossley suggests that some forms of ethnographic research into poor streets or communities can in fact illuminate the connections and unequal relations of power which frame the research subjects' lives (see, for example, Fraser 2013; McKenzie 2015), rather than necessarily contributing to pathologising accounts of "cultures of poverty".

This seems like an important point to develop, and in so doing this is perhaps where Crossley could have engaged more closely with a geographical literature on the politics of space. Instead, he makes extensive use of Loïc Wacquant's and Pierre Bourdieu's work throughout the book, which whilst helpful in understanding stigma and marginality, arguably pays insufficient attention to the contested and lived nature of spaces that means their symbolic values and politics are never fixed. Indeed, the book opens with some quotations from Doreen Massey about the co-existence of multiple possibilities and trajectories within spaces. This idea, for me at least, means that seeing the wider cultural meaning of spaces (such as housing estates) as wholly determined by particular narratives or discourses will never be sufficient. Massey (2005) very much saw spaces as framing possibilities for encounters with difference. Without ignoring the hierarchies of knowledge and power implicated in, for example, a documentary about living in a poor neighbourhood, from this perspective encounters between media, policy makers or researchers and the poor always carry with them some possibility for progressive interaction or a shifting of positions. Even an intervention as obviously imperialist and exoticising as the 19<sup>th</sup> century philanthropists' incursions into the East End of London discussed, could, at least potentially and temporarily, shift subjectivities and perspectives and could be argued to have laid the foundations for progressive aspects of the contemporary welfare state (see Bradley 2009). Similarly, it is not very clear whether Crossley sees all the "area-based interventions" initiated under the UK Labour government (1997-2010) as inherently problematic; but, even if the overall narrative of poverty promoted was flawed, it seems reasonable to suggest that at least some resources and services were made available to communities, resources that austerity approaches have since largely withdrawn.

Whilst I strongly agree with the conclusion of the book, that the “overcultures” of the wealthy need to be subject to academic scrutiny too, in the meantime there is therefore also a need to enable people in poverty to be represented (or indeed to represent themselves) in forms which are ethical and alert to the politics of representation set out here. In developing a clearer sense of what these more progressive representations of spaces might be, Crossley might have also paid attention to Massey’s (1993) concepts of relational spaces and “power geometries” that seek to illuminate places as always “meeting places”—the product of (unequal and power-laden) interactions and relationships with elsewhere, rather than, as Crossley points out, seeing spaces (whether it be housing estates or poor families) as de-contextualised or with a clear inside and outside. Such points therefore suggest the need to deepen and enrich this dialogue between critical geography and social policy and welfare. This book opens up some very welcome terrain towards doing this, and I look forward to reading other books in the series.

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# ANTIPODE

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