

## **BOOK REVIEW - Ruddick, Susan, 1996, Young and Homeless in Hollywood, Routledge, London.**

**Review by Kurt Iveson 1997.**

Susan Ruddick's **Young and Homeless in Hollywood** is a study of homeless young people in Hollywood from 1975 to 1992, but like the image of Hollywood itself, the value of the book extends well beyond this particular place. It is a sophisticated case study which contributes to theoretical debates concerning the spatial aspects of social conflict and identity construction.

Ruddick sets out to explore how the identity of some people in Hollywood came to be fixed as 'homeless youths'. She approaches 'homeless youth' as a *social imaginary* - a concept that is both socially constructed, and imaginary, in the sense that it does not simply reflect the object to which it refers, but is produced by the discourse that surrounds it. Such social imaginaries are never permanent, and are negotiated, contested. Yet when they are stabilised for a time, they tend to actually stand for an object to which they simply refer. By the end of the period of study, the term 'homeless youth' came to stand for a very diverse group of young people. How is it that the term 'homeless youth' acquired this status? Why were these people, in all their diversity, constructed and discussed as 'homeless youth', rather than as some other potential social imaginary, such as 'prostitutes', or 'drug dealers', or 'gang members'?

To approach these questions, Ruddick uses existing research from a range of fields, including youth studies, studies of homelessness, and urban studies, as well as conducting ethnographic research of her own. Drawing on youth studies literature, she details the breakdown of the modern conception of youth that had been relatively stable since the early twentieth century. This collapse of consensus over the meaning of 'youth' resulted in the deinstitutionalisation of many young people from juvenile institutions in the mid 1970s. With the decriminalisation of status offences, and funding cutbacks to correctional facilities, thousands of young people all over California found themselves on the streets.

In Los Angeles, there was already a large population of homeless people, and a conglomeration of services for homeless people, located in Skid Row - which Dear and Wolch referred to as a service-dependent ghetto. However, runaway and homeless young people did not gravitate to existing concentrations of homeless people and support services, but instead gravitated towards Hollywood. Rather than being passive victims of processes of urbanisation and congregating in the service dependent ghetto, young people attempted to carve out an identity as *youth* rather than as *homeless*. The spaces of Hollywood became the *medium* through which this struggle was fought. By congregating in Hollywood, they asserted a different identity to the homeless population of Skid Row.

Ruddick then details the creation of a punk scene in Hollywood by some of these young people. She describes how a group of runaway and homeless young people established their own self-support networks via their adoption of punk subcultural practices. Punk culture was established in Hollywood, and made tactical use of marginal spaces like empty manor houses, cemeteries and clubs. These spaces were more than simply the venue of this subculture, but were homologous with punk style, and played a constitutive role in the punk scene. This spatial approach recovers the agency of young people, without overemphasising the scope of this agency - the tactical use of marginal spaces, whose meaning is predominantly determined by other interests, is distinguished from the strategic use of space, which would imply that young people had the power to define a space as theirs.

With changing use of space within the Hollywood punk scene, and pressures for the redevelopment of Hollywood, punk spaces were gradually shut down - either through self-destruction, police sweeps, or demolition. According to Ruddick, with the decline of these spaces, along with other factors internal to the subculture itself, the self-supportive networks of punk Hollywood began to collapse. By this time (mid 1980s) a range of services targeting runaway and homeless young people had begun to locate in and around the Hollywood area, in order to gain access to their target group. However, to ensure their survival these services had to do more than access their target group. They faced a potentially hostile community, and had to gain some acceptance and legitimacy for the service they provided, lest they too became casualties of the redevelopment process.

In order to secure their place in Hollywood, service providers successfully became part of the local growth coalition. This coalition was intent on redeveloping Hollywood by trading on its glamorous image, and creating a vibrant street life. Service providers successfully argued that it was not the existence of services that attracted homeless and runaway youth to Hollywood. Rather, the very glamour of Hollywood's reputation and its' carnival-like atmosphere acted as a magnet. Service providers urged the community to view runaway and homeless young people as victims of family breakdown - as 'homeless youth' who were forced into occasional criminal activity in order to survive, rather than as 'criminals'. The growth coalition was then convinced of the need for services to alleviate this problem, by replacing broken down families with the ersatz 'families' of shelters and youth services.

Ruddick's analysis of homeless youth in Hollywood is more sophisticated than the stories offered by existing accounts of youth, of homelessness, and of youth subcultures. Literature in these fields often attempts to simply 'read off' social constructions of youth, or homelessness, from modernisation or urbanisation processes. These approaches fail to adequately take into account the agency of social actors, and the spatial nature of processes of identity construction. Ruddick, by contrast, offers a rich answer to her question 'why homeless youth?' by examining the spatial aspects of attempts to fix identities - from the way that social actors use space as a medium through which identities are asserted and contested, to the way in which space shapes the options open to these social actors, and the way their actions shape space.

As well as having advantages over structuralist accounts of identity construction, Ruddick's method addresses the problems of some contemporary discourse analysis. While she rightly focuses on the role of language in constituting the social (through the social imaginary of 'homeless youth', for example) she avoids treating language as somehow free-floating, and ties it down to spatial and material practices. In this case, the social imaginary of 'homeless youth' was inherently bound up with redevelopment processes in Hollywood, and the institutional survival of service providers in the locality.

The approach taken by Ruddick in **Young and Homeless in Hollywood** also shows the benefits of an historical and place-specific approach to youth. To speak meaningfully of 'youth' as a social category, given the enormous diversity of young people along lines of sex, class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc, this category must be constructed, and this process is the subject of conflict among a variety of actors. As Ruddick shows very effectively, to neglect the spatial aspects of this process is to neglect the very medium through which this conflict is often fought.

Further, Ruddick's study of punk Hollywood demonstrates the futility of approaching the subject of 'youth' without looking into young people's subcultural practices. These practices provide the tools used by young people to construct some form of identity, rather than accepting the role assigned to them by analyses which tend to cast them as victims of attempts at social control. However, there are some problems with Ruddick's exploration of punk Hollywood. Clearly, she does not claim to present a definitive account of the subcultural practices of punks in Hollywood. Her aim is a more modest attempt to demonstrate how young people attempted to carve out a new identity which could deal with their new situation following deinstitutionalisation. But I believe that her arguments could have been strengthened by a slightly revised analysis of the punk.

In Ruddick's story, punk simply appears as if from nowhere. The living of punk, and its decline, are rightly treated as inherently spatial processes. However, the initial arrival of punk is treated simply as the result of some vague subcultural logic. This risks a structuralist understanding of subcultural development, and given Ruddick's concern to avoid such accounts, it is surprising. Following Ruddick's approach to homeless youth, we might ask 'why punk?' Punk was one of a number of youth subcultures that were available to young people, as the result of global cultural flows (punk was imported from England, after all) and other local subcultural developments. Within these constraints, some young people in Hollywood chose punk. It could be argued that this choice made sense given the spaces available to young people in Hollywood at the time. Punk provided the philosophical grounding for self-support networks and squatting. It provided the stylistic justification of the choice of manor houses for squats, and cemeteries for places to hang out. The do-it-yourself and anti-star approach to music secured some clubs temporarily as punk clubs - that is, clubs where punks could participate in subcultural practices, rather than just be spectators of other people's music. This more sensitive approach to subcultural practice might also help to appreciate the heavy-metal culture which followed punk not so much as something that contributed to the decline of punk, but as a subcultural option that made more sense within the changing spatial opportunities available to young people in Hollywood.

However, this criticism does not detract from the overall value of **Young and Homeless in Hollywood**.

The complex account of the construction of the identity of homeless young people in Hollywood is of great value in understanding the dynamics of that particular place, and also in providing an excellent example of how to approach questions of this nature more generally. This book makes a significant contribution to studies of youth, and to critical urban theory.

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