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POST-REVANCHIST CITIES?

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ABSTRACT: This intervention focuses on how national-level rhetoric aimed at impugning ‘others’ has thrived of late, but how concomitantly 1990s-style urban revanchism has faded in cities that were once punitive crucibles against the homeless. Using Los Angeles as case study, I argue that the recent trend has been to grudgingly support the homeless, increasingly via taxpayer initiatives, leading to a potential but stymied post-revanchist city. If the spirit of revanchism remains, it is through the persistent NIMBY opposition to housing the homeless.

KEYWORDS: revanchism; Los Angeles; NIMBY

INTRODUCTION

The well-rehearsed notions of the revanchist city continues to interest urban and social geographers, particularly those focused on the intricate patterns of managing the visibly poor in urban public space (Stuart, 2014). From its very narrow empirical basis in 1990s New York City, Smith (1996) described revanchism as a class-based backlash against those who have apparently ‘stolen’ the city and its public spaces, with the guilty parties including racial minorities and the homeless, within a context of economic retrenchment. This assertion provided an overall conceptual framing of how public space had become increasingly intolerant since the 1980s (Mitchell, 2001), part of a larger punitive framing of social policy and gentrification that had led to:

...the emergence of a meaner city, the brunt of which has been born by the visibly poor and the homeless. A variety of well-worn tactics are used – criminalization of survival tactics, street sweeps, restrictions to accessing public space – to ensure a pristine city image and thereby [ensure] future growth. Despite...heavy reliance on discourse and desktop analysis, [this] framework has proven enormously popular and influential, dominating our understandings of the geographies of homelessness in US cities but also well beyond. (DeVerteuil, 2014: 877)

The ‘well beyond’ includes the ostensible exportation of the punitive model to the Global South, an emerging planetary revanchism (Smith, 2002; Swanson, 2007). The popularity of the revanchist framework among certain radical geographers has been, at times, nothing short

of Pavlovian – the sense of naked class warfare on city streets is undeniably exciting and validates many of their deep-down notions of a polarizing city.

Recent updates to the revanchist city thesis (e.g. Slater, 2016; Lawton, 2018) deepen its original contentions – and note its intensification and exportation - but also extend beyond its original urban moorings to larger issues around the ‘new economy’, criminal justice and political rhetoric. In this sense, revanchism has seemingly jumped to the national scale – it is now more openly nationalistic and jingoistic, aligned with populist movements and authoritarian leaders not just in the USA but also the Philippines, Hungary, Turkey, and Brazil. Marked by calls for vengeance against minorities, women, drug users, immigrants, and refugees, this free-floating, populist revanchism promotes an aggressive national nostalgia of better times when these ‘others’ ‘knew their place’. This populist revanchism is especially about retrieving a lost identity and social coherence. It is underpinned by the toxic notion that society’s most vulnerable populations are most to blame for social problems, while lauding those who sustain the structural problems in the first place (e.g. bankers, high tech, billionaires). While these emerging policies and rhetoric have been alarming, they pale in comparison to the 1930s in terms of the scope and scale of political violence against ‘state enemies’ (e.g. forced collectivization in the Soviet Union and the Great Purges, the rise of Nazism and fascism) and ‘alien peoples’ (e.g. Japanese aggression in China, Italian atrocities in Abyssinia). This suggests perhaps the need to promote alternative understandings of an incomplete revanchism that recognizes limits and competing alternatives, and perhaps that urban-level revanchism and national-level rhetoric are, in effect, very separate things that have not ‘jumped scale’ and may in fact be moving in opposite directions.

In this spirit, I argue that the revanchist city is no more than superficially similar to populist revanchism at the national level, given that the former is based on a very narrow empirical base from the 1990s, uniquely focused on visible homelessness and economic development rather than fantasies around social coherence. While it can be argued that some revanchist city policies have travelled beyond New York (e.g. Swanson, 2007), it is irresponsible to argue that revanchist city policies have in fact informed national-level rhetoric. This compels us to recognize a more limited mobility. Indeed, not all recent social policies, either at the urban or national scales, have veered towards the revanchist. If anything, there has been an increasing disconnect between national-level revanchist rhetoric excess since the mid-2010s, and a more local, on-the-ground reality that is alternatively supportive and ambivalent, which has been recognized in the wider literature critical of urban revanchism (e.g. DeVerteuil, 2014; Murphy, 2009; Cloke et al, 2010). These critiques argue that revanchism remains partial at best, as much a figment as a reality, out of touch with on-the-ground knowledge of the complexities of homeless management.

Ultimately, these critiques contend that punitive motivations are in relationship with, and cannot exist without, more supportive measures from city officials and especially the voluntary sector vis-à-vis visibly poor populations. The idea of an incomplete revanchism has also permeated other, less expressly urban arenas of social policy. An instructive example is the lack of a ‘war on drugs’ against the current opioid epidemic in the United States (Netherland & Hansen, 2016). The lack of a patently punitive response, of course, is not random, given that the drug-taking population in question is largely rural or suburban, and White. Just the same, seeing the current crisis as more an issue of public health via sympathetic treatment rather than a matter of criminal justice – and this towards the most

stigmatized of social groups (Proudfoot, 2019) - suggests that not all social problems are understood punitively, and that those framed punitively in the past (e.g. homelessness) can begin to reverse course.

WHAT DOES A POST-REVANCHIST CITY LOOK LIKE? 2019 LOS ANGELES

Arguably, the age of knee-jerk revanchism and blanket ‘zero tolerance’ may be over, at least for some cities in the Global North – although I will consider the case of Global South cities in the conclusions. One way to illustrate the disconnect between national rhetoric and local reality, as well as a reversing revanchism, is to revisit one of its key sites during the 1980s and 1990s, Los Angeles (Davis, 1990; DeVerteuil, 2015). Of late, Los Angeles has seen policy developments that suggest a criminalizing ‘war on the homeless’ has all but petered out. The case for Los Angeles being a punitive city was vividly described in Chapter 4 of Mike Davis’ (1990) *City of Quartz*. Entitled ‘Fortress LA’, it laid out extreme levels of containment, architectural fortification and ‘malign neglect’ of the homeless (see also Wolch & Dear, 1993). Although Smith (1996) developed his revanchist thesis in New York City during the same period, there is no doubt that by the early 2000s, Los Angeles had similarly adopted some expressly revanchist policies, especially against the homeless. These policies moved beyond containment to more open interventions using BID (Business Improvement District) security and the LAPD (DeVerteuil, 2015). The Safer Cities Initiative in 2006, promoted by former NYPD chief William Bratton, was blatantly revanchist towards the homeless within a gentrifying Downtown, including the homeless containment zone of Skid Row (Evans & DeVerteuil, 2018). The initiative hired more officers (Reese et al, 2010) to deploy street sweeps, increased ticketing for public defecation and jaywalking (and the enforcement of unpaid tickets), and enabled the gradual compression of Skid Row on its western boundaries (Stuart, 2014). By 2009, the National Coalition for the Homeless had named Los Angeles their ‘meanest city’.

And yet the fallout of the post-2008 housing boom in Los Angeles, which raised the scale of street homelessness to unprecedented numbers in prime urban spaces such as Venice, Santa Monica, Downtown, Hollywood as well as on public transportation, did not create a further revanchist backlash and ‘zero tolerance’ initiatives. Quite to the contrary, it engendered a remarkable tolerance as well as legal resistance – many of the more revanchist elements of the Safer City Initiatives were subsequently and successfully challenged by a variety of Skid Row institutions and the American Civil Liberties Union, arguing that it was unjust to harass homeless people on the street if there were not enough shelter beds. Building on this, by the mid-2010s a series of more supportive measures began emerging, based on the grassroots sense that homelessness could never be solved through arrests and harassment alone, but also a general increase in liberal attitudes towards urban poverty. This directly repudiates Mitchell’s (1997) contention that by the 1990s, the most liberal cities in America had turned the meanest, including Los Angeles. Instead, a variety of taxpayer initiatives were passed to directly build housing for the homeless. In 2016, the Los Angeles County Homeless Initiative was supported by more than 66% of voters, and involved raising the sales tax (Proposition M) to fund permanent and supportive housing County-wide, as well as homeless prevention. This was mirrored and supplemented by the passing of Proposition HHH at the City-level, which also involved raising the sales tax (a similar proposition passed in San

Francisco in 2018). The initiative drew inspiration from the ‘Housing First’ model based also in New York City, in which homeless individuals are provided with housing as soon as possible, rather than ‘earning’ it through sobriety and working through the shelter system (Baker & Evans, 2016). In effect, Housing First is based on the premise that housing is the foremost need for someone experiencing homelessness, and that the requirement for sobriety, employment, etc. can be best addressed once housing is secured. This is a major shift from the staircase model, a linear residential treatment which valued housing as a prize only for those ‘housing ready’ clients.

Just as revanchism was purportedly exported from New York City, this kind of supportive Housing First approach is similarly diffusing outwards, emerging in cities such as Seattle, San Francisco and Miami – all former ‘meanest cities’. This suggests that tentative redistribution rather than unadulterated revanchism is currently the dominant response to record-breaking levels of homelessness – the sense that cities can arrest their way out of homelessness has been proven both inhumane and wasteful of public funds. Of course this has not translated across all American cities, but the mood seems more open to different approaches to managing homelessness beyond mass arrest. But since Housing First provides chronically homeless clients with independent market apartments scattered throughout a city, its implementation must necessarily bump into strong spatial barriers that carry with them an element of residual revanchism.

Building on this insight, if the residual spirit of revanchism remains in Los Angeles, it is through predictably sustained community opposition to these new policies, particularly the siting of emergency and supportive housing for the homeless across all 15 of the City’s council districts, a rare attempt at ‘fair-share’ siting that is building towards the longer-term Housing First policies (Chiland, 2018). This opposition has emerged in locations as diverse as Boyle Heights (working-class Latino community) to Venice (gentrifying beach community) and Koreatown (mixed immigrant community), and so belies the sense that only gentrified areas reject poverty infrastructure (McElroy & Szeto, 2017). While discussion of NIMBY has largely faded from urban and social geography (DeVerteuil, 2013), it nevertheless structures siting decisions across ‘actually existing’ urban space amid a severe, post-2008 housing crisis in many large cities. This NIMBYism is particularly prominent as many cities become wealthier and gentrified, meaning that both local exchange and use values are vociferously defended – even by so-called YIMBYism (Yes in My Back Yard) that desires greater housing density, but not affordable housing. As McElroy and Szeto (2017: 30) memorably note, “liberal urbanism itself is not opposed to gentrification”.

What is interesting in the Los Angeles case is that the opposition to the siting of supportive housing cuts across rich and poor, White, Latino and Asian, and native-born and immigrants. While Housing First contains much promise – and has been welcomed in places like Downtown Los Angeles and Hollywood - it still cannot skirt community opposition city-wide. This opposition has stymied the construction of housing for the homeless – by 2019, painfully little new housing has been built from Proposition M and HHH, and public infrastructure for the homeless (e.g. toilets) remain in short supply, even on Skid Row. Revanchism never achieved much, but then again a lack of revanchism does not guarantee anything either. And so Los Angeles is currently in a sort of limbo with its homeless population, emotionally and politically supportive but with limits to its ‘on-the-ground’ generosity.

CONCLUSIONS – NIMBY AND THE REVANCHIST RESIDUAL

In conclusion, the Los Angeles case study shows a more fragmented but arguably less revanchist approach to homeless management in the 2010s. Just the same, NIMBY sentiments have not dissipated, and reflect a rather contradictory approach to homelessness – a willingness to be taxed more to pay for solutions, as long as those solutions are not in close proximity nor a threat to property values. This reluctance to fully embrace Los Angeles as a ‘public city’ (Dear, 1980; Marr et al, 2009) is mirrored in public transportation policy – taxpayers are willing to fund an expansion of transit, but many are not willing to ride it. NIMBY becomes a lingering barrier to a truly post-revanchist city, leaving it somewhat in limbo, more promise than practice.

As such, I call for a more serious effort to relate NIMBY to a partial and residual revanchism, rather than take it as immaculate proof of revanchism *tour court* without considering any alternatives (e.g. Davis, 1990; Smith, 1996; Mitchell, 1996, 2001). Can NIMBY be considered a self-interested and residual version of revanchism? It certainly shows the limitations of liberalism – and Los Angeles is now quite liberal in most respects – when faced with the hard calculus of redistributing resources in favour of the least advantaged. Yet NIMBY produces very different emotions (Hubbard, 2004) than outright revanchism – while the ‘others’ are still reviled, stigmatized and dismissed, it is done for defensive purposes rather than purely interventionist ones, less of a ‘take back’ than protecting one’s assets in a society where property remains the main source of wealth. This dynamic may be blurred, however, in places where the homeless are seen to be more than just others but outsiders, ‘invading’ areas unused to their presence. This was particularly evident when the Safer Cities Initiative helped to scatter Skid Row homeless individuals across a swathe of Los Angeles neighborhoods unused to their presence, including places such as Venice that are also rapidly gentrifying (Deener, 2012). An area of future study then is surely the relationship among neighbourhood change, supportive measures and residual revanchism, in which a variety of possible outcomes are possible.

A further area to consider in more depth is cities in the Global South, where revanchism remains a clear and potent policy option, and where the spatial separation of the classes continues unabated. In particular, much focus has been on the highly uneven provision of infrastructure within cities such as Mumbai (McFarlane & Desai, 2016). To Rodgers and O’Neill (2012: 402), “infrastructure is a key factor shaping people’s direct relationships both with each other and with their environment in cities. It demarcates both literally and figuratively which points in urban contexts can and should be connected, and which should not, the kinds of people and goods that can and should circulate easily, and which should stay put, and who can and should be integrated within the city, and who should be left outside of it, for example.” The *lack* of infrastructure to poor, informal settlements must be read as revanchist, recasting bypassed areas as part of an enduring backlash and punishment, of what Rodgers and O’Neill (2012) called ‘infrastructural violence’.

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