



December 2004

Seasons Such as These: How Homelessness Took Shape in America. Cynthia J. Bogard.

Robert Leighninger
Arizona State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Leighninger, Robert (2004) "*Seasons Such as These: How Homelessness Took Shape in America.* Cynthia J. Bogard.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 31 : Iss. 4 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol31/iss4/17>

This Book Note is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



Book Notes

Cynthia J. Bogard, *Seasons Such as These: How Homelessness Took Shape in America*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldyne de Gruyter, 2003, \$41.95 hardcover, \$21.95 papercover

Few, including Cynthia Bogard, seem to remember the 1941 *American Sociological Review* article by Fuller and Meyers, "The Natural History of a Social Problem," which introduced the notion that social problems were not simply objective conditions but something that had to be defined by the right people as a threat to society. But regardless of whether "social constructivism" is a re-invented wheel, it remains a useful perspective, and Bogard uses it effectively to document how homelessness came to be defined as a social problem and New York City and Washington, D.C.

The principal actors in the process were members of what Joel Blau called "the iron quadrangle": activists, the government, "experts," and the mass media. The fascinating part of Bogard's reenactment is seeing how and why homelessness came to be explained differently in each city. In the nation's capitol, activists led by Mitch Snyder and the Center for Creative Non-Violence worked to define homeless people as normal human beings who were victims of economic exploitation and entitled to shelter in fulfillment of basic social justice. In NYC, they were defined by state and city government as mentally-ill victims of deinstitutionalization.

The CCNV was good at creating events that attracted sympathetic media coverage in contrast to the Reagan administration's inept attempts to deny the problem or blame its victims. It was also good at getting prominent politicians and celebrities involved in the cause. Its religious base brought strong moral authority to the argument that here was a problem of such dimensions that only the federal government could, and was morally obligated to, deal with it.

The city administration of New York preferred the deinstitutionalization explanation because it shifted responsibility to the state and distracted attention from the fact that it was actively abetting the destruction of affordable housing via gentrification

in hopes of reviving the city economy. This explanation suited the media because stories of crazy street people were easy to write and fit their daily experience. Advocacy groups were not sufficiently organized to present an alternative image.

Social scientists, who might have provided credible estimates of the number of homeless people, did not do so because homelessness was very difficult to study, because no independent body wanted to fund them, and because existing estimates were so politicized that credibility would have been hard to attain under any circumstances. Experts were the "weak link" in the iron quadrangle. The CCNV succeeded in persuading the nation that homelessness required federal action, but it failed otherwise. Nationally, the individual-deficit explanation won out over economic inequality. The solution came to be seen as the provision of rudimentary shelter, not the creation of decent, affordable housing.

Unlike some constructivists, Bogard is not one who sees others as having socially constructed realities while she knows what *really* happened. She presents her own biases for the reader to evaluate with the others. The book is grounded in exhaustive periodical research. Unfortunately, it is exhaustingly presented, making it problematic for classroom use. Nonetheless, patient scholars should welcome it.

Robert Leighninger, Arizona State University

Barbara Berkman and Linda Harootyan (Eds.), *Social Work and Health Care in an Aging Society: Education, Policy, Practice and Research*. New York: Springer Publishing Co., 2003. \$ 52.95 hardcover.

Accessibility to health care as well as multiple and changing treatment modalities and delivery options pose significant challenges to social workers. Changes in Medicare options and coverage, as well as on-going technological advances, merge with the growing population of older adults to create particular concern for gerontological social workers. This compilation of papers by leaders and scholars in the field of social gerontology focuses on important issues at the intersection of health care and social work in an aging society.

Compiled and edited by Barbara Berkman and Linda Ha-