# Turn On, Tune In, and Shoot Up—In Doorways

**by Theodore Dalrymple**

**The existence of homelessness** in rich cities induces a state of unease, if not of outright guilt, in the well- or adequately-housed—who, after all, are vastly more numerous than the homeless. Surely here, if anywhere, is a problem that the authorities, local and national, ought to be able to solve, or at least reduce to tiny proportions?

However, the matter is complex and while it goes under a single name, it has multiple causes which are different in different places. Homelessness is a syndrome rather than a disease.

For example, in London I have noticed that there are no persons of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin among the homeless, as there should be if low household income and the cost of housing were the explanation of homelessness. There are few blacks among them either, certainly no Africans, and the few

blacks that one sees are either frankly psychotic or on drugs—or, of course, both. Furthermore, by no means do all the white homeless come from the lowest social class.

In Paris, by contrast, the homeless, apart from the traditional *clochards*, seem largely to be immigrants from the Balkans or the Middle East, who set up encampments under flyovers or even bidonvilles adjoining the maze of highways into, out of and surrounding the city. The favelas of Rio are charming by comparison.

California is the Mecca or Inferno of American homelessness, depending on how you look on it. In a matter of very few years, San Francisco, for example, has been transformed from one of the most agreeable cities in the United States into one that is notorious for its filth and degradation. Between 2014 and 2019, homelessness fell in the United States except on the West Coast, where it increased by more than 5 per cent a year. The question is why, and what should be done about it?

The four authors of this book, who write separate chapters, have been studying homelessness in California for years, and have written chapters from the economic, legal, political and cultural points of view. All write clearly, and the sincerity of their concern shines through. They do not lose sight of the fact that each homeless person is a human being and not merely a statistic. They are human without being sentimental.

From the point of view of a non-Californian, some of the official policies and legal decisions mentioned in the book are so outlandish, so utterly disconnected from anything resembling common sense, that they raise interesting questions of psychology and political philosophy. How is it that such polices and decisions that year after year almost self-evidently benefit no one and adversely affect many, lead to no effective opposition in a supposedly democratic system? Why are hundreds of thousands of very prosperous people content to live in a city, whole areas of which they now avoid? Why do

they tolerate the fact that areas once frequented by tourists now host the homeless, who defecate in entrances and doorways, leave half-eaten food in the gutters, sow the ground with hypodermic needles, and obstruct the passage of pedestrians with their encampments? And why do they do this while at the same time continuing to pay sky-high taxes—a significant proportion of which go to sustaining the whole appalling status quo?

The ultimate answers, I suppose (if one disregards the very considerable institutional and bureaucratic vested interests that have been created in the continuation of the problem), must be found in ideology, whose effect on the mind, at least of the educated, has been for many years stronger than the apprehension of any concrete reality. Ideology is a lens that can distort Sodom and Gomorrah into a shining city on a hill. This is the only explanation of how people can see human excrement lying in the street not as disgusting and a health hazard, but as a manifestation of human liberty.

What are we to say of a judge who says that panhandling cannot be forbidden because it is a form of expression of opinion protected under the First Amendment of the Constitution? In that case, all human activity whatsoever is such an expression entitled to protection: indeed, a punch in the mouth or a stiletto in the ribs is usually the expression of a very strong, and sincere, opinion.

Advocacy groups bring actions on behalf of homeless litigants—whom presumably they must find, solicit, and select—against city councils that try to impose any kind of control, however feeble, on the homeless. Judges go along with the notion that citing persons who defecate in the street constitutes cruel and unusual punishment because, after all, defecation is an imperative human function and the homeless have nowhere else to perform it. You might as well punish people for irresponsibly exhaling carbon dioxide. Thus, in effect, the law has set up two classes of persons, those

licensed and those unlicensed to relieve themselves in the street.

There is an implicit contradiction between the views of the economist, Dr. Winegarden, and the other authors. Dr. Winegarden provides an economistic explanation of Californian homelessness. He points out that housing in California is vastly more expensive than in the rest of America (apart from Hawaii). In addition, electricity, gasoline and groceries are considerably more expensive there than in most American states. This means that an unusually high proportion of Californians—about 18 per cent, by his calculation—are but monthly wage packet away from financial disaster. Those without social support could be out on the street at any time, unable to meet their rent or mortgage payments.

I do not find this a very convincing explanation. It would suggest that the homeless population of California is divided into two, the mad or drugged on the one hand, and (much more numerous) the "respectable" homeless on the other who are simply the victims of bad luck and the high cost of living.

If this were the case, the solution to the problem of homelessness would be easy, at least conceptually or in theory: more cheap housing. Unfortunately, thanks to California's approach to regulation, cheap housing in California is very expensive, up to $700,000 a unit. To house the homeless at this rate would cost about $105,000,000,000. Even without draconian regulation, the cost would be vast, and supposes that no new homeless would appear to claim their free housing.

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But there is worse than the mere expense of it: namely, that for those homeless who *have* been allocated new housing, the outcomes are worse than for those who remain on the streets, as measured by drug consumption, mortality rates, etc. This is because California takes a resolutely non-judgmental attitude to the social pathologies of the homeless: that is to say, the object of all assistance rendered to them should be to reduce the harms consequent on their pathology, not the reduction of the pathology itself. Hence, if housing is made available to them, it should be unconditional, requiring no change, or even attempt at change, on their part. As Mr. Rufo, whose work admirably connects the testimony of vivid personal experience with statistical generalization, tells us, the result of self-congratulatory, self-designated broad-mindedness on the part of policy-makers is a disaster.

The authors recognise that it is important that we should separate the pathology from the person who has it: the sin from the sinner, to put in in an old-fashioned way. They do not advocate simply sweeping up the homeless from the streets and imprisoning them or forcing them into chain-gangs. But it is equally important to recognise that passively accepting and even defending such behaviour as publicly injecting heroin into the veins of the neck, mad paranoid assault, and using the streets as a vast lavatory is neither wise nor generous and condemns many ordinary citizens to suffer daily horrors, while doing harm to the people who behave in this way. Although the authors do not emphasise it, the aesthetic effects are lamentable: and if beauty is an important, albeit not an all-important, end of life, leaving the homeless to fester as they do in California perceptibly reduces both the pleasure and meaning of life.

Another mistake that led to the current degrading situation was the precipitate closure of the mental hospitals, without much thought having been given of what was to replace them. True, conditions in those those hospitals were often

deplorable, but no one would conclude from the fact that many of our schools teach nothing that we don't need schools. The idea that the psychotic should be free to live as they chose was all very well, but if in addition they were to be excused anti-social behaviour on the grounds that they were ill and could not help it, a Walpurgisnacht was bound to result, all the more so once psychosis-inducing drugs became as easily available as aspirin.

Balancing personal freedom and the need for the acceptance of some common standards of conduct has never been easy, and one of the things that this book illustrates is that there must be some of what Lord Justice Moulton called "obedience to the unenforceable" if a society is to be both free and orderly. The realm is large that lies between what the law enforces and utterly free choice in matters that are of no moral or social significance. In his speech in 1924, titled *Law and Manners*, Lord Moulton said:

> *The obedience [to the unenforceable] is the obedience of a man to that which he cannot be forced to obey. He is the enforcer of the law upon himself.*

If that realm disappears, we are left with two choices: anarchy or tyranny, both with a loss of freedom. For the moment, California has chosen anarchy, but tyranny may one day result. No one wants a society in which people behave well because there is a policeman behind every tree if they don't, or alternatively a society in which there are no standards of acceptable behaviour at all. As this book shows, California, at least in regard to homelessness, has chosen the latter. Its motto is turn on, tune in and shoot up—in doorways.

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