

Down and Out, on the Road: The Homeless in American History. *By Kenneth L. Kusmer.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Notes, index, figures, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN 0-195-04778-8.

Reviewed by Elaine S. Abelson

With homelessness at record levels in New York City, one would expect that street people, the quintessential expression of urban homelessness, would once again become sidewalk fixtures. This has not happened, not yet, but as the city plans more subsidized housing for the homeless and attempts, finally, to address the root causes of an escalating problem, a major religious institution in the center of Manhattan insists on its right to “house” the homeless on the sidewalks around the church. The old clash between “scientific,” organized charity and “urban missionaries” is, it appears, alive and well in the twenty-first century.

Historical memory is short, and we tend to forget (if we ever knew) that homelessness has a history that spans our national existence. The wandering poor were a disquieting feature of colonial cities, particularly in the North but, following English tradition, local responsibility for destitute legal residents was an obligation. Kenneth Kusmer’s fine new book follows the trajectory of homelessness in the United States from the moral certainties of the early republic, through the economic depressions and political turbulence of the nineteenth century, to the half-hearted and uneasy compromises of the post-World War II period. Kusmer looks at the myriad aspects of homelessness and finds it to be a complex phenomenon not divorced from the uncertainties of working-class life. The sense that “anyone could lose all overnight” was the harsh reality of industrial America (p. 86). Kusmer structures his discussion around the dual character of those who seemed not to have a permanent home: the down and out, a fairly stable group of men, and some women, who remained rooted in the cities; and the tramps and hoboes, a more volatile group, almost all of them men, who lived life on the road. An important part of the narrative is the response of the public to this floating population. Americans have rarely been of one mind about homelessness, and the image of the homeless man, Kusmer writes, “served many functions for many audiences” (p. 12). Hard-headed,

punitive responses that viewed tramps as a social peril and condemned unregulated charity alternated with sentimental attitudes toward poverty and the supposed freedom of life on the road. In tracing the hidden history of a vast network of helping organizations—groups such as the Western Soup Society—Kusmer has clarified the alternative responses and made a unique contribution to the story of American welfare and the vast network of voluntary associations.

Although most Americans were blind to the connections, widespread homelessness (a term rarely used before the Great Depression) emerged with the growing economic inequality of an industrializing nation. As cities became more important prior to the Civil War and native-born Americans and immigrant Irish swelled urban populations, poverty, and its accompanying homelessness, became a distinct social problem and a metaphor for disorder. Women as well as men fell into homelessness at mid-century, but it was the Civil War and army life that helped lay the groundwork for the male tramp who was characteristic of the late nineteenth century. Kusmer does a superb job with this material, detailing how soldiering and the concomitant expansion of the railroad contributed to the emergence of a tramp culture, which was alternatively reviled and celebrated by ordinary citizens, reformers, and writers, both professional and home grown. The culture of the road comes to life via hobo music, fiction, a “tramp census” of the 1890s, and even tramp memoirs. Kusmer’s claim—that the tramp’s rejection of the work ethic was a variant of oppositional culture, a prepolitical response, not to work per se but to forced unemployment and the conditions of industrial labor—is worth noting.

Not surprisingly, innovations occurred in cities. Whereas almshouses and police stations served as shelters for both men and women well into the twentieth century, the move to wayfarers’ lodges and municipal lodging houses was a more modern vision of how to handle the problem while continuing to ignore the cause. The persistence of old arguments about the homeless, intertwined with discussions about dealing with the very poor, has an eerie resonance today: work relief versus the charity of the dole; outdoor relief versus incarceration; shunning beggars or giving them the change in your pocket.

The vibrancy of the “Main Stem,” the skid-row area found in cities large and small, appears here in all its complexity but feels sanitized at the same time; the

alcoholism that played such a large role in Bowery culture is muted to the point of invisibility, and neither the social nor the psychological meaning of life on the street attains a reality. Attracting far less attention than railroad-riding tramps, the urban homeless represented a more static (some would say a more pathetic) counterculture, sustained at various times by a host of charities, public aid, flophouses, bars, and, possibly the most important factors, the “benign neglect” of urban political institutions and real estate interests. The Great Depression of the 1930s lent a stark and tangible presence to the problem of homelessness: people without a fixed address, mainly men but women and children as well, seemed to be everywhere. The New Deal legitimated the notion of federal responsibility for the poor and unemployed via a host of temporary measures, particularly the Federal Transit Program. The first, and until recently the only, direct federal response to homelessness, this program attempted in its short life to cope with a problem of unimagined proportions by providing shelter and feeding stations (albeit racially segregated in many parts of the country) for the masses of displaced Americans roaming the country.

The category of “homeless” is flexible but inclusive: white women and African American men and women were among the homeless at almost any given period, but Kusmer treats them as distinctive subgroups in this study. He’s right. Prior to the Great Depression, there were only small numbers of women among the lodging-house population, and the female drifter remained an anomaly; skid row was a male space—the only women regularly on the Bowery were said to be prostitutes. However, when large numbers of women (both black and white) did become homeless in the early 1930s, the public failed to see them or even to acknowledge their existence. Social prescription and sharp distinctions along gender lines relegated women to a domestic role, no matter the reality. This mismatch between mental image and actual fact was maintained until the explosion of female homelessness in recent decades. African American men present a different experience. Black men, Kusmer reminds us, were the hidden homeless, particularly in the post–World War II era. Far more numerous than homeless women, black men confronted persistent racial discrimination in skid-row enclaves throughout the country, which forced most of them to seek refuge in urban ghettos. Conversely (and ironically),

on the road and in hobo jungles black men found an equality rarely granted them in more stable urban environments.

Merely a “troublesome nuisance between 1945 and 1975,” homelessness has emerged as a “major social problem in recent decades” (p. 237). Kusmer says this but then stops short of documenting the present situation. This is unfortunate. In the 1990s there was a constant stream of statistics, policy studies, monographs, and “down-and-out” investigative reports by an array of academics, social welfare activists, and newspaper reporters. He has used some of this material but neglects to confront the main dilemma of the present: why, in spite of a multitude of programs in different parts of the country, have the numbers of homeless again begun to rise. Tackling the economic situation of low-wage workers, housing costs, racial issues, and “welfare reform” would have added to the value of this engaging and useful book.

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