

From the Puritans to the Projects: Public Housing and Public Neighborhoods. *By Lawrence J. Vale*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000. vii + 460 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, maps, photographs. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN 0-674-00286-5.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Blackmar

It is an ambitious undertaking to situate public housing within a more than three-hundred-year history of Americans' efforts to deal with the consequences of social inequality. In choosing such a broad frame for a study that centers on public housing in Boston, Lawrence Vale underscores changing conceptions of public obligation and public powers and, at the same time, calls attention to continuities in Americans' cultural interpretations of poverty. He notes that while in theory the sponsors and beneficiaries of public services should be one and the same group, in a "pluralist" (and socially divided) society, "it is easy to view public sponsorship as targeting some of the public much more than others" (p. 4). By highlighting the darker, stigmatizing, and disciplinary side of public welfare programs, Vale's analysis contrasts with other histories of public housing, which have stressed either declension from the utopian modernist vision of reformers or the pragmatic economic stakes of local elites, including employers and private builders.

Vale notes that Americans have been very resistant to public housing, which today shelters no more than two percent of the nation's people, in contrast to other industrial countries where nearly one-fifth of the population resides in government-built residences. He attributes this exceptionalism to the liberal American ideology and ideal of single-family home ownership, which influenced government policies from the 1862 Homestead Act through Federal Housing Authority-backed mortgages after World War II. Whereas beneficiaries of policies that promoted home ownership are said to gain independence as well as virtue, Vale argues that policies directed toward poor Americans have turned them into "public neighbors," whose social dependence places them under perpetual scrutiny to confirm that they deserve assistance. Thus, he links notions of "public" as government-sponsored and "public" as lacking in privacy.

The material counterpart to ideology in Vale's analysis is more spatial than economic. As an urban planner, he is attuned to how the design and location of public housing has revealed and shaped perceptions of its standing as a legitimate public good. "Power, in urban design as in physics," he writes, "is the rate with which force is exercised through space" (p. 5). Following World War II, that public power uprooted working-class neighborhoods without guaranteeing former residents affordable homes, and it concentrated poor people in projects in order to keep them under the surveillance of their betters.

The greatest strength of *From the Puritans to the Projects* is Vale's superb institutional history of the Boston Public Housing Authority (BHA), starting with the location and construction of twenty-five main projects between 1935 and 1954. Initially aimed at providing affordable housing for worthy white wage earners, including police and firemen, Boston public housing began losing status and political protection in the late 1950s when redevelopment projects unleashed new political turmoil. Working his way through the archives of the BHA, Vale finds smoking guns that link public housing staff jobs to the city's old party patronage system. But, by 1963, in response to pressure from the NAACP, the segregation of both the projects and BHA jobs was coming under closer scrutiny from city officials. At the same time, eligibility rules were revised so that families once screened out for lack of income (as well as for lack of political connections) could now find apartments. By 1966, Vale observes, even as African Americans gained access to Boston's projects, "nearly half of the households being admitted to public housing lacked an employed member, and half were headed by a single parent" (p. 315).

Although he credits the Civil Rights movement with making local officials accountable to national standards of equal protection of the law, Vale suggests that liberal reformers' ambitions to use public housing as "battlefield hospitals for the War on Poverty" may have overloaded the most basic goal of sheltering people who could not afford to rent housing produced for profit (p. 316). He finds, moreover, that social agencies replaced party patronage with advocacy that did not imply much reciprocity from tenants. Vale deftly summarizes convergent forces that left the Boston Housing Authority in receivership by 1979: too many desperately poor tenants without resources, poor architecture and design, poor management and maintenance, and an inadequate long-term financial structure. He then returns to his overarching thesis that "ultimately the problems with tenants, buildings, managers, and funding are products of the same underlying cultural unease" that kept Congress from funding "public housing production commensurately with the numbers of low-income families" (p. 333).

Vale offers an excellent account of the privatization of public housing since 1980, including the turn to rent vouchers that would let poor people blend into mixed income housing. Yet, in an odd turn and after 300 pages of treating reformers' surveillance critically, Vale worries that "mainstreaming" requires giving up the social control that had conferred legitimacy on past reform projects. Without much evidence, he sees the voucher system itself breaking down "over the same issue of moral surveillance; all too many private landlords refuse to take on the responsibility for overseeing former public housing families as their tenants. . . [and] public housing tenants themselves often fear entering into privately managed housing" (p. 388).

Vale's emphasis on ideology and the cultural meanings of poverty and home ownership shortchanges a more thorough analysis of how changing economic relations have positioned and repositioned poor Americans and determined the interests of employers, landlords, or private builders—as well as reformers or a larger public—in housing or discipline. He raises only to drop “the relationships among land tenure, house form, and labor” and their political impact on the history of low-income housing (p. 1). And, at the end of the book, he concludes that “no subsidized housing scheme—save that of the tax breaks for homeowners—seems wholly consistent with American ideological practice” (p. 387). Given the changing conditions (and inconsistencies) of American economic practice, this is perhaps too facile a conclusion. After all, in cities like New York the story of public housing is not quite so grim. Nonetheless, Vale's sobering history of Boston's experience with public housing is filled with valuable object lessons about good intentions gone bad.

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