

Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America. By *Todd DePastino*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. xxv + 325 pp. Photographs, illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$32.50. ISBN 0-226-14378-3.

Reviewed by Elaine S. Abelson

As the official number of homeless Americans is once again increasing in urban centers throughout the United States, the topic of homelessness has assumed the dimensions of a growth industry. Literally hundreds of policy studies, first-hand reports, photo essays, ethnographies, and newspaper articles have been devoted to various aspects of the continuing problem, such as the asthma that afflicts children in the shelter system or people “housed” on the sidewalks surrounding a church in midtown Manhattan. The problem seems to be as intractable in the twenty-first century as it was in the closing decades of the twentieth, defying efforts to deal with its causes and effects. The gyrations of the economy have apparently not affected many of those who live on the margins of society; in fact, their situation has deteriorated at the same time as the number of billionaires on the Forbes list has increased. The homeless are once again visible on the streets, and demands for shelter today are approaching levels not recorded since the early 1990s.

What are we to make of all this? Modern homelessness, we know by now, has no single cause. It is a complex urban phenomenon that often merely reflects national social, political, and monetary policies affecting mental health care and housing programs. Decisions made at the federal level may intersect with local zoning decisions to eliminate single-room-occupancy units that further restrict the supply of “affordable” apartments, with budget decisions to limit work and training programs, and with personal vulnerability in any given instance.

Although the transient “wandering poor” were in evidence in the early years of the republic (when they were shunted from one community to another), Americans were not conscious of homelessness until after the Civil War. Fueled by dramatic changes in the economy and increasing dependence on wages, rapid industrialization and urbanization, changes in patterns of immigration, and a growing sense of social cleavage,

the homeless wandering male, known as “the Hobo” or “the Tramp,” assumed the mantle of “social problem” during the depression of the 1870s. It is at this point that Todd DePastino picks up the story.

Citizen Hobo is a splendid and challenging book. DePastino has looked at much of the same material that others have mined and has come up with an innovative, imaginative narrative that is as readable as it is important. This is an epic tale of the emergence of a floating tramp “army” that became a flashpoint in “the larger struggle over the destiny and meaning of the new industrial order” (p. 5). As the demands of the corporation and the institution of a daily wage system eroded the economic position of the independent farmer and self-employed artisan, men who could not, or would not, conform to the new economic order took off. The road became all. What Nels Anderson, a sociologist and one-time hobo, dubbed “hobohemia” replaced a structured work environment and domesticated home life. Enshrined in the imagination of late-nineteenth-century Americans for their irregular labor habits, seeming lack of interest in the accumulation of the markers of middle-class life, and unprecedented physical mobility, transient males in fact were enmeshed in a volatile and seasonal labor market. Many were labeled lazy “common tramps”; others, who were willing to work but only on their own terms, comprised the infrastructure of what DePastino calls the “wageworkers’ frontier” in the West: they picked fruit and vegetables, harvested wheat, mined iron and copper, felled trees, and helped build the railroads.

Technology played a crucial role. The railroad made the hobo possible. For men on the move, it provided both transportation and temporary housing. Riding the rails became part of the romance and mythology of hobo culture; for some men, the rootlessness of the hobo subculture was an important part of their early manhood. Jacob Riis, Jack London, and Carl Sandburg went on the road as young men. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, however, a new generation of forgotten men (and a few women) hopped the freights and became symbols *not* of wanderlust and individual freedom, but of the ravages of the economic disaster.

The Beat Generation of the 1950s and the young countercultural rebels of the 1960s were perhaps the last groups to romanticize the road. Bearing dim memories of the

hobo, these men and, by the sixties, women went “on the road” seeking personal liberation and escape from the bonds of bourgeois culture and conformity.

Todd DePastino presents a complex argument. Using traditional sources and citing a *mélange* of songs (clarifying, in the process, the words of “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” whose meaning has always puzzled me), dime novels, serious literature, letters, and the underground press, he makes a strong case for the life of unfettered white masculinity on the road. Racial exclusion, particularly of African Americans, seemed a given, and women who were not prostitutes were largely invisible in this new migratory world of casual labor. Homosexuality, which thrived in jungles and urban “main stems,” was the unspoken reality of hobo sexual practice. Encouraged by an unrestrained male culture and the near absence of women, the “jockey/punk” relationship offered young men an easy way to get by and provided older men a degree of gender status outside the bounds of reigning middle-class behavior.

Chapter Three, “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum,” brings all these strands to life in a way that no other investigation of the road has done. DePastino writes with an exhilarating energy. The rest of the book, though richly textured and full of fascinating detail, particularly the section on the politics of the International Workers of the World, never quite recaptures the verve of the early chapters.

Make no mistake. *Citizen Hobo* makes important claims that elucidate this particular slice of history. The book reveals how World War I became a turning point as the need for hobo labor in the West retreated in the wake of IWW activity, increasing mechanization, and the transformation of work itself. The dominant symbol of these changes was the automobile, which De Pastino says “redefined the very meaning of” the road (p. 173). The road as a location for a particular way of life and cultural practice became obsolete. Mexican migrants and destitute “Okie” families increasingly followed the crops—representing a radical departure from the rhetoric and iconography of virile white manhood that once characterized the wage workers’ frontier (p. 206).

The hobo has no modern counterpart. Skid Row replaced the main stem at the end of the Second World War, but even that refuge disappeared with the onslaught of urban redevelopment. The homeless, now a visible and troubling part of the urban environment, are today predominantly female (with or without children) and/or men from

racial minorities. No longer representing undomesticated manhood, the homeless are the end result of problems arising from the political economies of housing and race that most of us would prefer to ignore.

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