An interview with Todd DePastino author of Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America

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Question: "Hobo" conjures up the 1930s—Woody Guthrie's *Bound for Glory* and all that—but you start your book with the post-Civil War army of tramps. What put that army into motion?

Todd DePastino: We remember Depression-era hoboes best because that was the last time huge armies of homeless men wandered the nation by rail. But similar masses of the homeless—and indeed similar "Great Depressions"—were a regular feature of American life since at least the 1870s. The word "tramp" was used during the Civil War to mean a long grueling march to battle. But in 1873, the first year of a major economic depression, "tramp" began to refer to the new kind of vagrant who was on his own grueling march with "no visible means of support." It fits, because many tramps of the 1870s were Civil War veterans, and they hitched rides on railroads that had transported troops during the war.

When the tramp army appeared in 1873, most of those in business, government, and charity work denied any connection between the depression and the legions of men on the road. No one, except those in the labor movement, recognized that the vast majority of tramping men were simply out of work. The word "unemployment" didn't exist yet! Wage labor was still a relatively new thing, and not until the Civil War did a solid majority of households, at least in the North, live on paychecks. As many are discovering today, jobs are hard to find during hard times. So beginning in 1873, hundreds of thousands of young white men began to hop trains to look for work.

Question: When did "tramps" become "hoboes"? Where did that word come from? What's the difference between a tramp, a hobo, and a bum?

DePastino: Well, there were endless squabbles about the differences between hoboes, tramps, and bums. One famous quip had it that the hobo works and wanders, the tramp drinks and wanders, and the bum just drinks. More accurately the tramp, the hobo, and the bum represent three historical stages of American homelessness, with the tramp coming first, in the 1870s, and the bum later, in the 1940s and 1950s.

So chronologically between the two was the hobo. Hoboes mark the coming of age of America's tramp army. The end of the depression in 1878 did not mean the end of tramping. Like our homeless population today, the tramp army was resistant to upswings in the business cycle. By the 1890s, after twenty years on the road, tramping had matured to the point where it now possessed its own unique institutions, culture, and even politics—taken together, what later came to be called "hobohemia."

Where did the word "hobo" come from? I've not found a convincing explanation. Some say it derives from the term "hoe-boy," meaning farm hand, or "homo bonus," meaning "good man." Others speculate that men shouted "Ho, Boy!" to each other on the road. One particularly literate wayfarer insisted the term came from the French "haut beau." Whatever its origin, the word "hobo" became widespread in American vernacular during yet another major depression from 1893 to 1897.

I sometimes joke that a hobo is a tramp on steroids. Hoboes were by and large more organized, militant, independent, and political than their predecessors. The widespread

use of the word "bum" after World War II signals the end of this colorful subculture of transient labor.

Question: In urban areas hoboes gathered on the "main stem." In Chicago the main stem was West Madison Street, and it was known as the Hobo Capital of the World. Can you describe this? What were hoboes looking for in cities, and why did they congregate there?

DePastino: The hobo job circuit began and ended in cities like Chicago. Hoboes found jobs in harvest fields, construction sites, and mining and lumber camps through the employment agencies (what hoboes called the "slave market") that lined West Madison Street and other urban neighborhoods in the Midwest and West. The concentration of railroads in Chicago made West Madison the busiest labor exchange in the nation. After a job finished, hoboes either hopped a freight to another worksite—often on a tip—or headed back to the main stem, where they took the "stake" they had earned and "laid up" for as long as their stake held out.

The main stem was where hobo culture really came to life. On the job and on the road, hoboes were subject to their employers, the police, or the "railroad bulls" who patrolled the rails. But on the main stem, which was segregated from residential neighborhoods and mainstream business districts, hoboes were relatively free to flaunt their countercultural way of life.

In addition to employment agencies and cheap hotels, the main stem hosted saloons, brothels, theaters, gambling houses, and the like. The main stem was also where activists such as those in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and other organizations maintained winter headquarters. By World War I, main stems throughout the West had bookstores, reading rooms, lecture halls, and soapboxes where hoboes absorbed radical ideas about how they were destined to bring about the end of the wage system.

Question: The excerpt we have here on our website is about the political organization of hoboes before World War I. Did hoboes have an impact on the broader political landscape of the time?

DePastino: Hoboes, as you could imagine, had virtually no impact on the electoral politics of the day because citizens without permanent addresses did not have the right to vote. Faced with this restriction, hoboes railed against ward and parliamentary politics as the opiate of the "homeguard" and instead advocated "direct action" against their employers to bring down the capitalist system.

The IWW led this crusade to mobilize hoboes for the revolution. They were on the far left wing of a much wider political current that included the Socialist Party of America and that wanted to rewrite the free-market rules governing economic life and guarantee a measure of economic security and on-the-job power for all. The IWW clashed with the Socialist Party for what it saw as the Party's naive belief in the efficacy of the ballot box to bring about the socialist future. The IWW hoboes instead took their campaign first to the streets, launching boycotts against extortionist employment agents, and then to the fields, striking against employers. These actions were successful

enough to elicit a fierce backlash from employers and the government that utterly destroyed the organization.

In another sense, however, the crackdown against dissenters in general and the IWW in particular marked the beginning of a longstanding effort to resettle white men back into steady jobs and stable homes. This attempt at "welfare capitalism" in the 1920s did not entirely succeed, but it did provide a blueprint for later efforts.

Question: "Hobohemia" was in decline prior to the new flood of unemployed migrants in the 1930s. Would hobo culture have disappeared without the Depression?

DePastino: Yes, it would have. And, in a sense, it did. One day in 1923, Jacob Coxey, who in 1894 led the first march of tramps on Washington, strolled down West Madison Street and remarked to sociologist Nels Anderson that "the old-timers will not be here much longer." He was right. The main stem was in decline as early as 1919. Employment agencies were shutting down, and large-scale workingmen's hotels no longer found financing. The population aged, and for the first time people began referring to the main stem as "skid row." Folklorists even began to collect the songs, stories, and jargon of hoboes, who, as one folklorist put it, were "anachronisms bound for extinction."

When I started my research into hobo subculture, I thought the book would end in 1930. But then I realized that there was a much larger story to tell about how the fears of a revived hobohemia—with its job-shirking, binge-drinking, anti-family ways—shaped the New Deal response to the Great Depression and subsequent generations of social policy.

Question: In other words, social policy was significantly shaped by the homeless hoboes?

DePastino: The corporate liberal vision for America that inspired the New Deal was designed precisely to prevent the emergence of another hobo army. When FDR took office his first instinct was to lure unemployed men off the road and into rival armies of recovery such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Transient Camps run by the Federal Emergency Management Administration. But these programs were sharply criticized because they allowed men to remain segregated from family life. So he cancelled the Transient Program in 1935 and replaced it with the Works Progress Administration, which gave work principally to male heads of households.

In the New Deal the state began to play a major role in managing the growth of the economy and also promoting a certain standard of living for white male workers, a standard that included single-family suburban housing and high-wage jobs with benefits linked to seniority.

No single piece of legislation embodies the corporate liberal vision better than the GI Bill of 1944, which was passed explicitly to prevent returning soldiers and sailors from massing into rail-riding armies of protest. With the end of the war in sight, many predicted a return to the Depression and mass unemployment. The GI Bill offered unemployment compensation and huge amounts of money for higher education in order to keep veterans off the road and out of the labor market. It also offered

massive subsidies for suburban homeownership, encouraging men to settle down with wives and children.

The GI Bill really represented the opening gambit of the great class bargain that was struck after World War II between the state, labor, and corporate capital. In return for a "family wage" that allowed men to keep their dependent wives and children in suburban homes and out of the work force, white male workers would forego the kind of militant protests that plagued the nation during the Depression. They would also give up their "romance of the road" for the duties of suburban breadwinning.

Question: Well, surely not everyone would. There's a postwar subculture that was still in love with the wayfaring life—the Beat counterculture of the 1950s and the Hippie counterculture of the 1960s. What was their connection, if any, to hobohemia?

DePastino: When the middle class is not gripped with the "fear of falling" into poverty and homelessness, the romance of the road is free to flower. Even as urban renewal claimed ever larger shares of skid row during the 1950s, Americans began to embrace the hobo romance once again through such stories as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road.* That novel is structured around a search for Dean Moriarty's aging hobo father, who is never found. Kerouac laments the loss of the open road of manly freedom from family wage conformity. In the absence of the road, the novel turns to nonwhite cultures, Mexican and African American in particular, as alternatives to "white ambitions." Kerouac turns, in other words, from a romance of the road to a romance of race.

Kerouac and the Beats are usually seen as the inspiration for the 1960s counterculture. But while that counterculture certainly entertained the image of the road-as-freedom in such movies as *Easy Rider,* it ultimately cast a jaundiced eye on any romance of white male virility. With the horrors of Vietnam, an entire generation became disenchanted with hypermasculinity, and so the hobo played only a minor role in the counterculture's androgynous iconography.

Question: Unemployment is on the upswing once again, and there is renewed attention to the homeless. How have the "new homeless" of the last twenty years differed from tramps, hoboes, and bums? Where are we in our understanding and treatment of the problem?

DePastino: The women and nonwhites who make up most of today's homeless are in much worse shape than their predecessors. The bulldozing of skid row has left them with few resources and options other than the streets. "Homelessness" has become "houselessness," a literal lack of shelter.

I am amazed at how little our thinking and policy-making on homelessness has advanced in these past two decades. On the one hand, we have liberals who focus on women and children in emergency housing so that they can depict the homeless as pitiful victims in need of protectionist legislation. On the other hand, we have conservatives who only talk about those literally sleeping or panhandling on the streets, mostly young, single men of color. This narrow focus allows conservatives to depict the homeless as irresponsible nonfamily men who don't deserve help.

The debate has gone stale because our housing policies are still about promoting nuclear family values. But many of the homeless have been brutalized by families and aren't willing to join one in order to get housing. An end to "houselessness" means affirming the right to "homelessness" in the cultural sense of the term.

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