Explaining Homelessness

New Homeless and Old. Community and the Skid Row Hotel. CHARLES HOCH and ROBERT A. SLAYTON. Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1989. x, 299 pp., illus., + plates. $32.95. Conflicts in Urban and Regional Development.

Contrary to their apparent discovery during the 1980s, homeless people—and scholarly treatments of them—have been around for a long time. Since the publication of McCook's "tramp census" in 1893, hundreds of books and journal articles on the homeless have been produced by social scientists. This literature has developed in three waves, the first coinciding with the Great Depression, the second with the postwar skid row era, and the third with the recent emergence of the "new homelessness." In each period, the typical study describes the size and composition of the homeless population in a particular city (see, for example, Rossi *et al.*, *Science*, 13 March 1987). Membership in such a population, if explained at all, is usually considered a function of individual traits or deficiencies.

New Homeless and Old breaks with the tradition of previous research in several welcome respects. The principal question posed by the book is why Chicago and other large cities have experienced an unprecedented surge in homelessness over the past decade. According to Hoch and Slayton, this question can be answered neither ahistorically nor in exclusively individualistic terms. Instead, one must examine the effects of institutional actors on the low-income housing supply during the course of urban development.

That analytic strategy leads Hoch and Slayton to a simple yet persuasive conclusion: the new homelessness of the 1980s has its roots in the gradual destruction of single-room-occupancy (SRO) housing. Such housing was originally created by developers and speculators as a profitable response to the shelter needs of industrial migrants in the late 19th century. Though the quality of the early SRO accommodations varied widely, single persons of all social classes—but especially the poor and blue-collar laborers—were attracted by the peculiar blend of community and autonomy that the lodging houses and transient hotels subsumed under the SRO label had to offer. Ultimately, however, the reputation of these establishments as sites (if not breeding grounds) of immoral, "pathological" behavior would prove to be their undoing.

In Chicago, the case against SROs was made by a succession of influential institutions. Well-intentioned efforts by religious charities to "save the poor" at the turn of the century gave way to the "scientific welfare" of the 1920s and 1930s. During those years, University of Chicago sociologists laid the theoretical foundation for zoning, building codes, and other formal controls, expanding the role of government in housing reform. Interestingly, the "physical" solution to inferior shelter inspired by Chicago School theories did not receive its fullest expression until three decades later, when a coalition of government and business interests used federal urban renewal dollars to demolish skid row districts in the hope of reviving the city's core. Much of the SRO housing that survived the land clearance practices associated with urban renewal has since fallen victim to office construction, condominium conversion, and similar ventures undertaken by powerful players in the Chicago real estate market.

Despite the supposedly undesirable features of the aging SRO stock, its current occupants are far from dissatisfied. On the basis of interviews with a sample of Chicago SRO dwellers, Hoch and Slayton argue that such housing is actively sought because it offers convenience and security at an affordable price. Moreover, the social contacts and support available in an SRO setting—from hotel staff as well as residents—can help one adapt to precarious personal circumstances while retaining a measure of independence and dignity. Those who opt for this lifestyle rarely fit skid row stereotypes; the survey data show them to be more normal than deviant, and a diverse lot economically and demographically. The income diversity of an SRO's clientele is especially significant. Without the substantial premiums charged higher-income weekly ratepayers, which in turn are used to subsidize lower-income tenants who pay by the month, the continued viability of SRO-style lodging would be in doubt.

As the foregoing synopsis suggests, the approach taken in *New Homeless and Old* is refreshingly eclectic, weaving together historical materials, survey evidence, and intimate knowledge of the local scene. Though the authors' choice of research venue is hardly novel—urban scholars have gravitated to Chicago's "urban laboratory" for decades—it makes good sense. Both a rail hub and industrial center, the Windy City has long housed a large transient labor force in SRO hotels; as a result, many of the classic studies of skid row and homelessness (by Anderson, Bogue, and others) have been conducted there. Hoch and Slayton build on this tradition but avoid the temptation to overgeneralize. Rather than assume that the story of the homeless elsewhere is writ large in Chicago, they note points of contrast as well as similarity between their case and the experiences of cities in all regions of the country.

These interurban comparisons lend credibility to the corrections to conventional wisdom the authors offer. One popular myth debunked by their analysis is that homeless people, through a lack of talent or effort, are somehow responsible for their predicament. Like many contemporary researchers, Hoch and Slayton place the blame on external forces over which most of us have little control. However, they take issue with the notion, much in vogue in the recent literature, that the forces of primary importance are medical in nature (mental illness, alcoholism, physical debilitation) and that the homeless constitute a special group because of such vulnerabilities. Instead, what should be stressed are the numerous characteristics that homeless individuals and the domiciled poor have in common. Hoch and Slayton regard the distinction between the two categories as largely artificial: the homeless, they contend, represent that segment of the poverty population that has been pushed across the "threshold of minimal shelter security" to date. More are likely to follow, given the persistent structural contradiction caused by too many low-wage service-sector jobs and too few affordable housing units in our nation's cities.

Not surprisingly, the authors' proposal for halting the spread of homelessness emphasizes provision of housing rather than wholesale economic restructuring. The former enjoys greater political feasibility and seems the more direct solution to the long-term decline in low-cost lodging documented throughout the book. Yet Hoch and Slayton warn that housing the homeless in a satisfactory way must involve more than simply putting a roof over their heads. In a devastating critique of advocates' ameliorative efforts, they show how both compassion- and entitlement-based appeals have encouraged "shelterization," thus threatening to institutionalize the homelessness problem. The real need, according to the

authors, is for a type of residential environment very different from the usual shelter, one that offers the urban poor an alternative to dependence and isolation. The central message of *New Homeless and Old* is that SRO housing has done just that for the past century. Consequently, the portion of the SRO stock still in existence should be strictly protected, and additional units with similar virtues created, if the ranks of the homeless are to be kept from swelling further.

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Eight Years of the AEC

Atoms for Peace and War, 1953–1961. Eisenhower and the Atomic Energy Commission (A History of the United States Atomic Energy Commission, vol. 3.) RICHARD G. HEWLETT and JACK M. HOLL. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989. xxx, 696 pp. $60. California Studies in the History of Science, vol. 4.

In 1962, Richard G. Hewlett and Oscar E. Anderson, Jr., offered a comprehensive and revealing account of the dawn of the nuclear age in the first volume of the official history of the Atomic Energy Commission, *The New World, 1939–1946*. In a second volume published in 1969, Hewlett and Francis Duncan continued the story through the end of the Truman years. Now Hewlett and Jack M. Holl have written the third volume in the history of the AEC.

Like its predecessors, *Atoms for Peace and War* has both the virtues and the vices of institutional history. With privileged access to classified materials, the authors are able to bring to light many controversies and policy debates that took place behind closed doors. Yet their evident loyalty to the organization for which they worked makes them hesitant to criticize the often flawed decisions they chronicle. To their credit, however, they lay out the full story and enable discerning readers to reach their own conclusions.

As with the earlier volumes, the coverage is impressive, ranging from the debates over how to use nuclear power to generate electricity to the development of the deadliest weapons in human history. Along the way they provide one of the best concise accounts of the Oppenheimer affair, a clear history of Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace initiative, and a balanced rendering of the partisan battle over the development of nuclear power, with Democrats insisting on a major role for the government while the Republicans championed a free enterprise approach. Although their principal concern is with policy issues, the authors still offer interesting insights into the personalities involved, providing a revealing contrast between the manipulative and devious Lewis Strauss and the more open if equally overbearing John McCone.

In the nearly 600 pages of text, three themes stand out clearly. The first is the close connection between the two seemingly different concerns of the AEC—atoms for peace and atoms for war. With the Cold War at its height in the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration sought to win the race with the Soviet Union in both areas. In making his Atoms for Peace speech at the United Nations in 1953, the President was seeking a way to force the Russians to divert some of their relatively scarce fissionable material to peaceful uses. And as the decade advanced, American leaders worried that the Russians might be taking the lead in developing large-scale nuclear power. Senator Estes Kefauver warned in 1956 that the United States had "fallen woefully behind" the Soviet Union in harnessing the atom for peaceful uses, while his Tennessee colleague Albert Gore termed such an outcome "catastrophic" (pp. 342 and 343). The greatest irony of all was the belated realization that Atoms for Peace could lead directly to the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The AEC sought to place stringent safeguards on the nuclear fuel supplied to reactors overseas, since in just a year the generation of 100 megawatts of electrical power produced 100 kilograms of plutonium. By diverting only a small portion of this deadly by-product, another country could make several atomic bombs a year.

A second theme lies in the conflict of interest the AEC faced over the issue of nuclear testing. Fallout from both the atomic tests conducted in Nevada through the 1950s and the H-bomb explosions in the Pacific raised a new and serious threat to public health. The continental tests produced local fallout that killed sheep on western ranges and exposed citizens in communities such as St. George, Utah, to serious levels of radiation. Yet the AEC, intent on continuing the Nevada tests, which were far cheaper and more convenient than those in the distant Pacific, kept a tight lid on the relevant data while insisting that there was no public danger. The AEC was even more guarded about the problem of global fallout from both Russian and American H-bomb tests, delaying the release of a report on the radiation hazard from testing until forced to make it public and then minimizing its ominous implications.

Congressman Chet Holifield of California, chairman of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, focused on the essence of the problem when he asked, "Is it prudent to ask the same agency to both develop bombs and evaluate the risks of fallout?" (p. 455). As the authors point out, there was a clear conflict in having the AEC responsible for conducting the weapons tests and for providing both the administration and ultimately the American people with the facts about fallout. Desire for perfecting new and more effective weapons took precedence over public disclosure. Led by commissioner Willard Libby, the AEC kept minimizing the potential dangers from both local and global fallout. Failing to see radiation as a serious threat to public health and safety, Strauss and his fellow commissioners treated it as a public relations issue; they seemed concerned only with reassuring the American people in order to permit testing to continue unabated. Thus in 1955 Strauss stated flatly that the radiation hazard in Nevada had been confined to the test site and that the highest dose at an off-site community was only one-third of what he termed the AEC's "conservative safety standards" (p. 286). Yet one of the 1953 Nevada tests exposed the citizens of St. George, Utah, to an estimated 6.0 roentgens of fallout, far beyond the 3.9-roentgen limit the AEC had set for this series.

The third and most explicit theme that Hewlett and Holl develop is the central role played by Dwight D. Eisenhower in shaping American nuclear policy in the 1950s. They argue that Eisenhower grasped the moral dilemma inherent in relying on nuclear weapons to preserve the peace and worked hard both to perfect peaceful uses of atomic energy and to restrain the race for more deadly weapons. Citing his statement to aides "that nobody can win a thermonuclear war" (p. 335), they claim that the President was personally responsible for the decision to seek an end to nuclear testing as a first step toward meaningful arms control. When Adlai Stevenson made a unilateral test ban a campaign issue in 1956, Eisenhower was forced to oppose it, but he never wavered in his search for a way to negotiate an end to nuclear testing with the Soviet Union despite the continued resistance of the AEC under both Strauss and McCone. Declaring that he would not be "crucified on a cross of atoms" (p. 401), Eisenhower finally endorsed the findings of the new team of scientific advisers brought into the White House after Sputnik and entered into a moratorium on testing with the Soviets that ended all further nuclear explosions during his presidency.

While correct in giving credit to Eisenhower for refusing to be bound by the parochial arguments of his own advisers, the authors neglect the equally important role played by private citizens in forcing the