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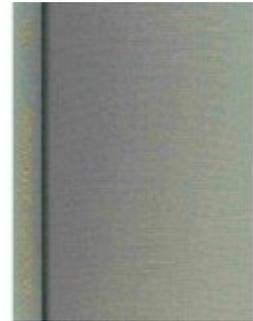


Daniel R. Kerr. *Derelict Paradise: Homelessness and Urban Development in Cleveland, Ohio*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011. xii + 295 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-849-5; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-848-8.

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Not long after moving from West Virginia to Cleveland, Ohio, as a teenager at the end of World War II, Ralph Pack decided that factory discipline was not for him. Itinerancy and alcohol abuse preceded a series of robberies that landed him in the city workhouse. Despite his criminal record and alcoholism, Pack managed to avoid homelessness throughout much of his life. “At one time a guy could be a dishwasher or have any other low-paying menial job and have his own apartment and stay drunk half the time” (p. 2). But by the 1980s, something in the city had changed. “At one time downtown Cleveland was a haven, almost a utopia, for lower income people,” Pack recalled (p. 5). Decades of urban redevelopment schemes wiped away affordable housing options, pushing the marginalized onto the city’s sidewalks and underpasses.

Pack’s memories join the voices of nearly two hundred other homeless people in *Derelict Paradise*, historian Daniel Kerr’s case study of Cleveland’s “unhoused” population since the Gilded Age (p. 2). Their questions and insights led Kerr to local archives, where he drew on the records of politicians, charities, urban development corporations, and newspapers to evaluate their suspicions about the political economy of homelessness. Kerr’s narrative extends beyond the familiar boundaries of the postwar urban crisis narrative, beginning with the 1877 railroad strikes and continuing with today’s “new urbanism” trend. He taps into a potent set of questions that will find an interested audience among historians, urban planners, and sociologists. To be homeless in an American city, Kerr argues, means surviving within a nexus of institutions that profit the political and corporate elite and close down opportunities for the working poor to

retain independence. Overcrowded shelters, downtown redevelopment plans, neighborhood triage programs, the criminal justice system, and agencies that contract out day laborers “benefit some at the expense of others” (p. 3).

By 1920, Cleveland had become the fifth-largest city by population in the United States. As the city grew from a steel town to a manufacturing hub during the late nineteenth century, a business elite emerged with a common agenda for organizing the city’s landscape and labor supply. The migrant and immigrant workers whose cheap labor made Cleveland’s heavy industries competitive also threatened their employers with the spectacle of disorder during the perennial economic downturns of this era. Employers tried to stifle labor unrest by eliminating the public welfare institutions that, in their view, underwrote indolence and gave workers the resources to withhold their labor.

In chapter 1, Kerr argues that elite efforts to organize charity “scientifically” through private organizations were an attempt to teach labor a new ethic that denied public obligations for welfare as a social right. Steeped in free labor ideology, late-nineteenth-century public officials only gradually adopted this lesson. For example, the first commissioner of Ohio’s public employment office had previously served as the secretary of the iron workers’ union, and his agency initially held a laborite perspective that demanded payment of “the true cost of labor” (p. 19). Likewise, Cleveland Mayor Tom L. Johnson, a leader in the Progressive movement, opposed privatization as inefficient and insufficient, criticizing efforts by the city’s Chamber of Commerce to consolidate

charitable giving under a private bureaucracy that would screen and monitor recipients and coordinate relief activities. But the Chamber's efforts to centralize power were unrelenting. By 1922, the city's outdoor relief program had been transferred wholesale to private auspices.

While charities assumed greater control over the least fortunate, public officials seemingly expanded their role as mediators in the labor market. Contrary to the national trend, Cleveland's public employment bureau built alliances with local business elites, cutting out fee-charging labor agents to become a conduit for black and white migrants from Appalachia and the South. Employers and public officials shared an interest in keeping Cleveland's labor market low-waged and flexible. This common viewpoint, Kerr contends, limited the willingness of City Hall to listen to the complaints of the growing ranks of the unemployed in the 1920s.

By the Great Depression, organized laborers, panhandlers, shantytown dwellers, and residents of the city's Wayfarer's Lodge had widened their protests of the city's employers, charities, and use of public space. In recapturing examples of public protest and everyday resistance, chapter 2 presents a rich panorama of daily life in a Depression-era city. For example, Kerr follows the unemployed, many of whom were evicted from their homes and unwilling to live under the make-work regime of Wayfarer's Lodge, to the camps along the lakefront and riverside, where, he argues, "the homeless reclaimed the commons," attempting to live outside the rent-paying, wage labor system through subsistence farming, fishing, hunting, and scavenging (p. 52).

While some 1930s city leaders tried to reshape Cleveland's second-tier image by clearing out squatter camps and building tourist infrastructure and a massive stadium, others targeted Cleveland's neighborhoods for rehabilitation. What began as a clean-up campaign accelerated into an early example of New Deal-financed slum clearance and segregated public housing construction. In chapter 3, Kerr argues that these redevelopment schemes attracted a broad coalition, from planners longing for center-city gentrification to Italian immigrants and African Americans who hoped that they could stay in their neighborhoods in better housing. But the strongest advocates may have been representatives from the construction and banking industries. As evictions and foreclosures spiked in the early 1930s, popular resistance to displacement became common and was often organized by the city's Communist Party-affiliated Unemployment Councils. The "eviction riot" at the home

of John Sparenga brought "between 6,000 and 20,000 people" in protest (p. 92). In response to these uprisings, local sheriffs and judges halted foreclosures and evictions. Banks and landlords then looked to the federal government for help in liquidating these troubled assets: compensated takings were preferable to uncollectible debts.

World War II brought a different kind of housing crisis to the city, as its booming war industries absorbed the unemployed and drew migrants to Cleveland. In chapter 4, Kerr points out that the wartime housing shortage was joined by a *decrease* in homelessness. Although little new housing had been built since the Depression, landlords, finally seeing an opportunity for profit, began subdividing homes with the tacit consent of city inspectors. The homeless preferred illegal sublets and flophouse hotels to the humiliations of the workhouse, and by war's end, the Wayfarer's Lodge had become vestigial. Despite wartime prosperity, the slum and suburbia grew together: some property owners, Kerr suggests, used this rental income—or the proceeds of exploitative "land contract" sales to African American buyers—to help finance their moves out of the city.

Decentralization took on many forms in postwar Cleveland. Chapter 5 explores the efforts of city leaders to reverse suburban sprawl and deindustrialization and turn downtown into a model city "to an extent surpassing any other city in the country" (p. 129), and the resistance of African American residents to urban renewal and police brutality, which culminated in the 1966 Hough Riots. The chapter also incorporates a parallel decentralizing trend left out of the "urban crisis" literature: the deinstitutionalization of state psychiatric hospitals, which pushed many elderly and disabled people into the informal housing market. Chapter 6 examines the contested tenure of Carl B. Stokes, the first black mayor of a major American city, and establishes the structural changes, from shifts in federal priorities to industrial flight to a significant expansion in policing, that set the stage for the return of homelessness as a political issue in the 1980s. Kerr pays close attention to the "triage" policies—divestment, withdrawal of police and fire services, controlled burns, and finally arson—that decimated many inner-city neighborhoods that, during the 1950s, were racially integrated. Between 1970 and 1980, the Hough neighborhood lost nearly 40 percent of its housing units and more than half of its population.

These dynamics took their toll on the city's working-class population. By the early 1980s, the plight of the unhoused returned to the public's attention. In chapter 7,

Kerr shows how social service providers sought to ameliorate the problem by expanding the city's inadequate shelter system; "Unwittingly," he argues, they exacerbated the crisis by allying with the city's business leadership, which was "aggressively" reshaping downtown into a corporate center by demolishing much of the remaining affordable housing (p. 201) and escalating the "war on drugs" (p. 214). The expansion of the prison population benefited the politically connected: Cleveland mayor George Voinovich's brother headed an architecture firm that earned about \$100 million as Ohio embarked on the nation's fifth-largest prison construction campaign in the United States between 1980 and 2000. Privately run day labor agencies, which took the place of Cleveland's publicly financed employment bureaus, also became enmeshed in the shelter system, which increasingly housed workers made unemployable by criminal records. Although the Cleveland region retained a manufacturing base, its employers relied on a low-wage, low-benefits strategy to stay competitive. Homeless people, pushed out of an increasingly parsimonious welfare system, became integral to this industrial strategy. Kerr concludes this final chapter by describing how some of the city's homeless organized against these interlocking forces. "Far from being ungrateful or insane," he writes, "they demonstrate by these efforts a refusal to accept the exploitative and abusive institution of homelessness" (p. 249).

As this brief summary suggests, *Derelict Paradise* ranges outside the boundaries of a social history of the homeless. Scholars of housing, labor, poverty, and urban development may find Cleveland's experience to be

a confirmation of or a challenge to national narratives. Why, for example, did Cleveland's leaders embrace the privatization of charity much earlier than other major industrial cities? Kerr's too-brief discussion of Cleveland's post-World War II "land contract" sales also provokes comparative analysis. Chicago's segregated housing market set the stage for predatory lending practices against the rising black middle class in the postwar period. As historian Beryl Satter argues in *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America* (2009), land contracts were designed to fail by combining usurious interest rates with strict forfeiture terms. Kerr identifies similar practices in Cleveland's changing postwar neighborhoods, suggesting that the profits of land contracts "provided a source of capital used to fuel the construction of suburbs" (p. 125). This claim stands on anecdotal evidence, and the historiography of postwar suburbanization and urban crisis would benefit from closer investigation of capital flows from urban landlords to the suburbs.

A century ago, Cleveland's Chamber of Commerce connected the city's low cost of living and generous welfare benefits with "the unenviable reputation of being a paradise for derelicts and undesirables" (p. 32). As American cities reinvent themselves as havens for the so-called creative class, Kerr's book reminds us of the deep roots of this panacea and its social cost.[1]

#### Note

[1]. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community And Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

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