

John Lennon, *Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in US Culture and Literature 1869-1956*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014. 232 pages. ISBN: 978-1-62534-120-4.

The once prolific image of the hobo is still recognizable in present day culture, often appearing as an elderly, work-shy man with his belongings in a handkerchief tied to a stick carried on his shoulder, as in *The Simpson*. John Lennon's excellent *Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in US Culture and Literature 1869-1956* takes this caricature apart and re-establishes the hobo as a transient worker crucial to the operation of late nineteenth and early twentieth century capitalism. Thus, *Boxcar Politics* illustrates how the invention of the train and the construction of the transcontinental railroad created new opportunities for travel between the agricultural southwest and the industrial northeast and the two complementary economies that fueled these regions.

Lennon's material consists primarily of literature and biography, and positions these in relation to crucial historical incidents and developments. Lennon convincingly argues that hoboing was "a distinct form of resistive politics" (2). By "hopping trains, hobos, both symbolically and practically, offered their bodies as resistance to the progress of an expanding capitalist society that the transcontinental railroad promised" (4). At the same time, as Lennon acknowledges, they fed the same society through making their bodies available for work across the US. In this way, the hobo was a crucial component in the development of late nineteenth and early twentieth century capitalism, and also a revolutionary figure left out of many histories of the US working class and its politics.

The highly readable first chapter describes the historical conditions that produced the hobo, and also accounts for the many divergent views that existed of them. The hobo was often considered parasitical "homeless bodies" that needed to be "snubbed and put down" (18) as argued by *The New York Times* in 1875. The very appearance of the hobo challenged the notion of a continually progressive US. At the same time, as Lennon observes, the hobo was sometimes able to escape the panoptic gaze of US society. By stepping into the boxcar, the hobo broke away from history itself and from the gaze that attempted to discipline the paying passengers on the train. Hidden and yet mobile on the train, the hobo thus "interrupts the rhetorics of progress embodied by the railroad" (43).

How this happens in history and literature is illustrated in the chapters that follow, some of which focus on individual hobo writers and their poli-

tics, some on the hobo's political history, and some on the fiction and culture that tried to understand this character. The second chapter discusses the politics of Jack London, an author who understood his own hoboing as an essentially a Darwinian struggle. In chapter 3, Lennon discusses the more radical politics embraced by hobo writer Jim Tully in *Beggars of Life*. In chapter 4, the need for the hobo to organize, and the many forms such organization took, is further explored with the help of John Dos Passos's trilogy *U.S.A.* This chapter describes the complex and often troubled relationship that existed between the hobo, the various political movements that wanted to protect or transform the hobo's interests and needs, and the brutal ways in which capitalist society dealt with the hobo.

Throughout the book, Lennon challenges the established image of the hobo as male and white. Women were also hobos even if the conditions on the trains and in the workplace often forced them to disguise themselves. In addition to the gender dimension, Lennon importantly considers the racially diverse nature of the boxcar hobo. Chapter 5 discusses the infamous Scottsboro trials of 1931 in Alabama and shows both how the hobo boxcar sometimes housed racial hierarchies, and how it could be a transracial space where unemployment and poverty united rather than separated black and white migrant workers.

In the final chapter, Lennon moves on to the post WW II era and Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*. During this era the car challenged the train as a mode of transportation while the economic boom, and competition from the Mexican border, made hoboing across the US for work impractical. The replacement of the train with the car caused the end of the boxcar politics of the hobo and replaced it, in Kerouac's work, with a sense of spiritual loss.

Boxcar Politics is a highly interesting and readable book that probes deep into US transracial class history. Lennon successfully and fluently combines historical record, representations in fiction by seminal writers of transient hobo life, and previous historical and literary scholarship on the hobo. In the process, he rethinks and repositions a number of influential writers who have attempted to understand the hobo, making new and crucial sense out of their writing. This is a convincing and important contribution to the understanding of the rise of capitalism and the hobo as a figure that concurrently fueled and attempted to disrupt this development and as such it deserves a wide readership. Its elegant and accessible prose makes its contents accessible both to the scholarly community and to the general reader.

This is not to say that the book does not have its problems. The chapter on Jack London is repetitive and the chapter on Jack Kerouac is strangely devoid of history context, a history that instead appears as something of an afterthought in the final “afterword”. A more serious complaint is perhaps that the book describes the hobo as both highly visible – even revolutionary – and as furtively hidden. The existence of these two concurrent images is highly interesting, but their divergence could have been theorized in more detail.

However, these complaints are minor and rather painstakingly recorded by this reviewer. For anyone interested in the hobo figure in history and culture, in the history of the US working class, or in the writers of the hobo, this is essential reading. In fact, during the present era of economic depression, the train (alongside the boat) has once again become a crucial vehicle for migrant workers. When reading this book from a European perspective, it is impossible not to consider the migration of labor-seeking people from all over the world into Europe, and of migrations across Europe, and the role the train plays in this process. At the present moment, trains are boarded by jobless and impoverished migrants seeking work in various parts of Europe. These migrant communities may be more difficult to describe as a form of subculture, but they are certainly depoliticized and disenfranchised in ways very similar to US hobo, and pursued by state agencies in strikingly similar ways. It is a mark of good scholarship when a book manages to also make the reader consider similar developments outside its temporal and geographical framework.

Johan Höglund

Linnaeus University