

Nels Anderson's The Hobo and other work

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Published in 1923, Nels Anderson's *The Hobo* was the first in the series of famous Chicago School texts to be written by students and associates of Robert Park, and according to at least one source formed the 'real origin' of the CSS (Andersson 2014: 92). It is in many ways a remarkable and timeless text that demonstrates both the intellectual shift that Park, Burgess, Thomas and others were engineering at Chicago as well as the limitations of their contribution to social science, and especially the study of cities.

Before arriving at the University of Chicago in 1920 – which he did by hopping or 'beating' a freight train – life had already qualified Anderson to write *The Hobo*. Born in 1889, just as the US frontier was disappearing and the term hobo was entering common usage, he came from a poor family that moved regularly across the Mid-West – he described his father as “a real hobo worker” (2014: v). Anderson seems to have embraced a life of adventure, travelling the backwoods and Indian reserves, worked in mining, logging, and road-gang communities, and as a mule-skinner (driver), track repairman, coal forker, field hand, railroad maintenance carpenter, timberman, grade school teacher, concrete former, millwright, peddler, and male nurse, eventually studying law at a college of Brigham Young university, before dropping out to join the army and serve in Europe during the First World War. At the University of Chicago he was far more experienced in life than his peers, with whom he had difficulty mixing, and through his student years was on the margins of the group, without money was obliged to sleep over the heating ducts and in stairwells of university properties.¹

Anderson's restlessness provided the motivation and intuition to conduct his research on 'the sociology of the homeless man'.ⁱⁱ The research was supported by Ernest Burgess – “my unobtrusive manager as well as my professor-father” - presumably at some reputational risk, as the university itself refused to condone a study that was “outside the zone of respectability”. The research drew from Anderson's innate interest in the life, and humanity, of people on the edge of society, its outcasts, and groups in decline. The essence of this disposition can be detected in his account of adolescence in Chicago, where he sold newspapers and became involved in petty crime.

“I was then peddling papers up and down Madison street, the Bowery of Chicago. The Daily News and Journal were the major sheets of the day. There were also the Inter-Ocean and the Tribune, but they were of lesser importance. We used to buy papers for half a cent and sell them for a penny, and some days I earned as much as twenty-five cents. I sold my papers in saloons. One time a drunken man in a saloon in Madison street where the Northwestern Station now stands bought a paper. He had no pennies but he gave me a nickel to get changed. The bartender was busy, so I went outside for the pennies. On a sudden impulse, when I reached the door, I ran. The man did not follow, and so I made four cents. I was so elated by my success that I repeated the trick on other occasions. I felt no pangs of conscience. Each time I ran with a nickel I gained four cents.....

After a while I began running errands for some prostitutes who were our neighbors. There were three of them in a flat across our alley. My mother never objected. Often when I was in their home I saw them drink and smoke. At first I was shocked, but that was only because I had never seen women use tobacco. The fact that they were fallen women had no meaning to me until several years later. The only difference I saw then

between them and the women at that mission was that the women at the mission didn't smoke. I liked them. They were generous and I never lacked for pennies to put in the contribution-box. On day one of them praised me for going to Sunday-school. On another occasion one of them strongly reproved her gentleman friend for using foul language in the presence of my sister and me" (1926: **).

From these experiences, Anderson crafted his study of the homeless men who he met in an area of West Madison Street, The Loop, and central-city parks, including Jefferson Park ('bum' park), Washington Square ('bughouse' square), and Grant Park. These areas he synthesised with the phrase Hobohemia – a term sometimes attributed to Park - describing the encampments as the 'largest labour market in the US'.

By the 1920s, studies of homelessness were hardly new. Urban outcasts and travelling people were the subject of Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903) and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). Nor, in many ways, was Anderson's proto ethnographic methodology especially well thought out: he noted that "I couldn't answer if asked about my 'methods'" (2014: xii). Nevertheless, extracts of Anderson's field notes held at the University of Chicago archive show his capacity to engage, empathise, and observe daily life on the streets and encampments. The notes describe, often verbatim, conversation with, activities and attitudes of street sleepers, male sex workers, including children, and drug addicts, with a close ear to vernacular terms and slangs. The *Hobo* is littered with terms such as Jungle Buzzard (a vagrant who eats leftover food), Jocker (teaches boys to steal or beg; aka a 'wolf' if sexually dominant), punk (discarded boy), a Wangy (disguised beggar) and the notes are reworked as vignettes often with little detailed contextualisation and more often no specific analysis.

What, then, did Anderson's research bring that was original and formative of an emergent school or sub discipline of urban sociology? The *Hobo* can be read as an experiment in categorisation. In this sense, it is an early contributor to the CSS promotion of typologies as analytic tools, although the archive shows Anderson's work owes as much to the work of Ben Reitman and James Moore as it does to Burgess, Park and Thomas (also Bruns 2001). The *Hobo* itself is one typology, distinct from the tramp, who Anderson describes as a hobo not looking for work and the 'bum'.ⁱⁱⁱ More broadly, Anderson also experiments with personality types, seeking to identify 'adventurers', the maladjusted, perverts and others. Despite such loaded terminology, and Anderson deploys the term 'social problem' throughout *The Hobo*, he is keen to question the stigma attributed to outcast groups. Thus, *The Hobo* and his later book *Men on the Move* explain the hobo as a response to the casualisation of work in both the agricultural and urban economy, leaving some men with the chance to satisfy an impulse to take-up a life 'on the road'. As he put it, some men:

"..want to go to sea, to fight Indians, to dig gold or be a cowboy or movie actor. He may only have visions of seeking work in the city. Whatever his ulterior motives may be, somewhere in his plans is the resolve to play to some degree the role of a tramp" (1923: 293).^{iv}

Nevertheless, Anderson was acutely aware that this life was precarious and once in the city would manifest as or threaten further social problems. In *The Hobo* he maps out conditions of health, alcoholism, drug use, predation, and antagonism to authority especially the police.

In describing these conditions, *The Hobo* adopts a scientific voice. Despite the occasionally rich vignettes, the tone is dry and cautious, and devoid of the 'life' inherent in the long quotes above. Occasional incisive comments, for example when noting "Life, to the average tramp, is a problem of 'getting by'", with its contemporary feel, do lead to a

discussion of attachments. The Hobo shows how men use folk tales, songs and poems – Anderson was a conscientious collector and regarded as formative of a sub-culture of protest (esp. pp194-214) – to construct bonds. He also attended closely to the role of sex and sexuality:

“The tramp body is such a womanless group, closed out from most ideal associations with women and without the funds to patronize the prostitute. Given the idea that men must have sex expression in order to be healthy, and this is not more generally believed among the tramps than some other strata of society, and add to this the fact of the absence of -women and we have a partial explanation of the practice”.

Anderson provides considerable attention to the salience of homosexuality and to sexual practice. In these passages his tone seems moralistic – and it reveals his normative preference for the family household - and is somewhat at odds with the sympathetic and positive accounts of how people as 'fakers', tricksters and grafters 'get by'.

And what of Anderson's contribution to understanding the city and urbanism? It is clear from his Preface to *The Hobo* that Park regarded Anderson's research as a contribution to a much larger body of work on urbanism. According to Park:

“It is assumed that the study here made of the "Hobohemia" of Chicago, as well as the studies that are being planned for other areas and aspects of the city and its life, will at least be comparable with the natural areas and the problematic aspects of other American cities. It is, in fact, the purpose of these studies to emphasize not so much the particular and local as the generic and universal aspects of the city and its life, and so make these studies not merely a contribution to our information but to our permanent scientific knowledge of the city as a communal type”.

In forwarding these remarks Park seems to have been projecting his own thoughts, going so far as to cast the hobo as a "bohemian in the ranks of common labor" whereas Anderson considered the hobo quite mundane (also Park 1925). Although *The Hobo* does offer some insightful accounts of Chicago's 'jungles' and the 'main stem' of hostels, with some descriptions of everyday life in saloons, restaurants, and welfare institutions this is not the text of an urbanist. Rather, it is to other texts that we must turn to understand Anderson's views on cities and urbanism. This writing is mostly consistent with the emergent ideas of the CSS but hardly refer to his research with homeless men.

Hence, in a paper entitled *The Slum: a project for study* Anderson refers to urban poverty as well as peoples' social disorganisation and low morale (1928: 87). Here too he outlines an argument of the city as a space of transiency, “the creature of movement and feeds upon it”, noting that “people are constantly being sorted and shifted, and segregated spatially according to one or another set of interests, but chiefly they are distributed to the blocks and streets according to their abilities to pay rent” (1928: 87). A chapter called *The Trend of Urban Sociology* again focuses on the slum, offers a few critical words on human ecology and the assumption that urban life has any tendency to 'equilibrium', highlights the strains caused by mobility that leads the city to be “active, alert, aggressive” and discusses 'social pathologies' without reference to the hobo but instead nods to Thrasher's work on the gang. Finally, in a paper that 'rips' Wirth's famous title, *Urbanism as a Way of Life*, Anderson notes that “urbanism is becoming global”, but that in many parts of the 'underdeveloped world' (Africa is singled out) people lack a “civic consciousness” but rather rely on families and tribal organisation instead of the “individuation” evident in the US (Anderson 1959). If

Anderson and *The Hobo* has anything to contribute to the contemporary study of the city it is as part of a CSS consensus and not for its originality.

Finally, how are we to assess Anderson's contribution of homelessness? Without doubt he contributed a significant study of a major social – and he would argue quintessentially 'American' - phenomena. Despite the dry prose, it is easier to see *The Hobo* as part of a body of work driven by a mission of social discovery, perhaps in this sense in line with Park, and of a piece with literature and investigative journalism that would continue with Clébert's *Paris Vagabond*, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and the songs of Woody Guthrie and Johnny Cash. What is lacking, however, is an attention to sociological theory; the bibliographies are devoid of references to theoretical works. By contrast to most contemporary research, therefore, *The Hobo* teases with the hint that Anderson observed urban life with a sharp eye without being able, or interested, in explaining what was before him. Hence, the hobo is a figure part caused by casualisation of labour and the pace of economic change but Anderson offers no reference or insight to class, class power or what researchers such as Philippe Bourgois, Teresa Gowan or Teun Voeten might understand as structural violence with their intense ethnographic depictions of suffering. Unlike this work, there is almost no attention to 'race', reserving to a footnote a mention that 7,000 of the estimate 35-60,000 homeless in Chicago were 'negroes', and without any evidence indicating to support a claim that some jungles had 'colour lines' but most were a 'melting pot of trampdom' (2014: 19). Similarly, to Anderson, while "Tramping is a man's game", considerations of gender and notions of masculinity are absent, again in contrast with work by, among others, Susan Ruddick or Emily Margaretten, or work on for example street youth by Kovats-Bernat or Jon Wolseth. The attention to transience does hint at a notion of mobility rather than the mobilities that informs work by Emma Jackson and the relation with institutions, especially but not only from the state, that emerges from the work of Caroline Knowles and Kristina Gibson.

ⁱ received his MPhil in 1925 two years after the publication of *The Hobo* – the committee had to be convinced to approve the book as the thesis - and received his Phd in 1930 [aged 40] from New York University for a thesis on the 'social antecedents of the slum', where a number of Chicago students were to make their careers.

ⁱⁱ *The Hobo* was not intended to be Anderson's MPhil thesis. Rather it emerged from an initial study proposed by Ben Reitman and William Evans for a field course at the university, and substantially extended when Burgess found funding through Juvenile Protective Association, concerned with homosexual relations between male tramps and boys, and from a larger commission from The Committee on Homeless Men formed by The Council of Social Agencies in Chicago.

ⁱⁱⁱ The term hobo has no accepted origin with claims that it is derived from the Latin 'homo bonum' (good men), a corruption of 'hello boy' or 'ho beau' used as a greeting among travellers, or a term to describe itinerant farm hands searching for work in the aftermath of the civil war, the 'hoe boy'.

^{iv} It is notable that many writers of 'hobo life' were themselves travellers or runaways, especially in early life. Relevant here, in addition to Anderson, are Reitman, London, Steinbeck, and Clébert.