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Securing Homes : Orphan Trains as a Way of Curing Ills of the Late 19th Century America

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The late 19th century was in America a time of change. Traditional agrarian society with its institutions, values and habits was giving way to industrial development, advances in communication, rapid rise of the cities. Unprecedented growth in population, fueled by massive migration from Europe, unbalanced social fabric and bred problems of smooth assimilation of newcomers in the USA. The pace of growth of New York City serves as the best proof to the speed, scope and nature of the changes. In 1820, total population of New York amounted to 123,706, out of this 5,390 inhabitants were foreign born. The number rose to 942,292 half a century later, while 419,094 residents were foreign born. In 1890, the city reported 1,515,301 inhabitants and 639,943 out of them were immigrants (NYC Department of City Planning). No wonder then that a lot of things could go wrong and pose a threat to the American status quo. Obviously, developing sectors required cheap manpower, yet immigrants flooding the country, mostly through the port of New York, were hardly a dream supply. This was a “bad” migration coming from the wrong countries of origin, predominantly poor and uneducated. On top of it, they professed improper religion, as most of them were Catholics. (O’Connor 168). Zones of poverty and crime which sprang in the lower Manhattan caused alarm among respectable citizens many of whom were involved in the works of charity. Stephen O’Connor remarks that

it was not that there had never been violence, drunkenness, or prostitution in the United States, only that such ills had never existed on so vast a scale – a scale that represented not merely an escalation in frequency but a transformation of their very nature. A few country thugs and burglars are a far cry from the powerful gangs that tyrannized Five Points. And a small-town tavern with an entrepreneurial waitress is nothing like block after city block after city block of women, girls, and, presumably, boys offering their bodies to anyone with coins to spare. (34)

Intervention was necessary. Most attention received the immigrant kids, “street Arabs” who, frequently deprived of a peaceful family home and means of subsistence, roamed the streets of the city and had a slight chance to turn into valuable citizens. No exact records as to their numbers exist but the estimates show that there were from 10,000 to 30,000 of uncared for kids in the cities of New York and Boston in the mid 19th century. (Trammell, 4)

One of the schemes devised by charitable organizations offering aid to children was to domesticate immigrant city kids by placing them out in respectable rural families in Midwest. Finding orphans and vagrants of the cities a home in the countryside was deemed an innovative and revolutionary project employing novel ideas about minors’ personality, upbringing and character formation. Truly, it recognized a child in its own rights, tried to pay attention to its needs and save it from the contaminating influences of the destitute environment, yet overall it cared more for the threatened American institutions unbalanced by the changes. The idealized concept of home as the proper site for development of a homeless immigrant minor’s character concerned in fact equally, if not more, a Midwestern farm suffering from a shortage of labor and a New York emerging bourgeois home threatened by the proximity of tenements. In this respect, the massive scheme of relocation looked for community based, self-help solutions which drew on the traditional American

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values of family, home and hard work and attempted to address new ills with well-established methods of indentured work to restore the equilibrium. The program belonged to the epoch that was slowly receding into the past in America when the scale of social problems exceeded the capacity of communal solutions. The paper is an attempt to look at the activities of the leading organization behind the placing out scheme, the Children's Aid Society of New York. It will try to grasp the idea of the project through the perspective of the main metaphor it employed, the home. Reading beyond its symbolic dimension and focus on alleviation of fate of the city orphans, the paper will try to show the project's purely practical level where American homes in need were supposed to be true beneficiaries of the work.

The Children's Aid Society (CAS) of New York propagated the familial discourse in the public sphere by its major emigration plan called Orphan Trains. The Orphan Trains Program was a massive relocation scheme carried out in the years 1854–1929. It aimed at removing the poorest immigrant children who were orphaned or abandoned by their parents (or so the ads and posters said), frequently homeless, alone in the streets of New York and placing them in Midwestern farms. The numbers differ depending on the source, but it is assumed that the program served from 100,000 to 250,000 children altogether. (Jalongo, 167) Between the years 1854–1890, under the leadership of a charismatic secretary, Charles Loring Brace, 90,000 kids were relocated West. (Gish, 121)

When we look at the work of CAS through the perspective of its “house/home” rhetoric what seems clear is that it was a multilayered plan which brought together various social needs and interests of the time. The story of the Children's Aid Society is in fact a story of three homes: tenement homes, bourgeois respectable homes of New York and farm homes of the Midwest. All of them, or rather their dwellers were bound together by the idea that each could be of help to the other. New York tenements supposedly should not appear here, since the program was advertised as benefitting mainly city orphans, yet, as it will be shown later, this was hardly the case. Besides, it would be interesting to add the fourth home, the one set up by grown up train riders as it would speak to the efficiency of the project. Nevertheless, a scarcity of data does not allow for the conclusive view on the matter. Separate discussion of the three earlier mentioned homes will reveal the logic of the program as well as the truly American thinking applied to alleviate social ills.

As for the New York tenements, charity workers and CAS reformers believed they did not deserve to be called homes at all because they did not perform their main roles. In terms of minors, they neither provided for them materially nor formed morally sound environment for character development. They were rather “dens of misery and crime,” “fever nests, and centres of ignorance, crime and poverty” (Brace 1872, 59). They exerted contaminating influence upon kids. As a result, tenement kids

are degraded, their clothes hang in tatters; they are dirty and ignorant, and they show, very many, the sad marks of other's brutality in diseased bodies, and in low animal features . . . The boys are thin, weak and with those old faces which are never found anywhere but in a city – the fruit of suffering and poverty before the time. (Brace, Apr 19, 1853)

Though revealing many despicable, even dangerous features, these kids were nevertheless viewed as victims and sufferers “contaminated” by their environment.

As such, immigrant children deserved attention and aid of charitable institutions. Philosophy of the day professed that they had their own needs rather than being instruments for advancing parents' wants.

Separation and removal, both physical and emotional, from the environment which precluded poor kids' development and maturation was deemed the best solution to save them from "the cycle of poverty endured by their parents" (Brown and McKeown, 17). Despite their degradation and misery, children were good and pure by nature. If handed properly, wretched souls could still get right and grow up as useful and respectful members of society. They had potential for becoming American: "mostly the children of foreign parents – poor Irish or German – yet they are in all their peculiar traits distinctively *American*: quick, keen, excitable and inquisitive, with nervous motion, and generally a native type of feature" (Brace, Feb. 17, 1854, 4). All they needed was placement at the "pure" homes of "good Christian families." Because "the American Life penetrates down into the cellars . . . The spirit of the American institutions is with us. . . . The spirit of the Bible, the general efforts by the best and most cultured of society, must at length accomplish something" (Brace, Mar. 21, 1854, 2). For the purpose of saving (and/or correcting) these vagrants, the Children's Aid Society was formed. Missionary zeal came to the fore to rationalize the main motivation of the association: "As Christian men, we cannot look upon this great multitude of unhappy, deserted, and degraded boys and girls without feeling our responsibility to God for them. We remember that they have the same capacities, the same need of kind and good influences, and the same Immortality as the little ones in our own homes . . ." (Brace 1872, 57). Positive reasoning focused on good, unspoiled nature of children (*tabula rasa*) which, if cultivated properly, will bring fruit of turning them into Americans (Holt, 15). Belief in distinctively American character and American institutions as valuable and able to perform wonders upon the immigrant poor proves a deep attachment to the American way of life of its holders, respectable citizens who devoted their time and resources to social work. Foreign orphans were believed to long for becoming Americans and if guided properly they could achieve it in their lives. Besides, Christian faith advised those more fortunate to look at the poor immigrants as their brethren and extend help rather than condemnation.

Yet, this was hardly a complete picture. Apart from altruistic concerns a parallel anxiety ran through the explanations of the works of the Society. So much as an immigrant kid was perceived an innocent sufferer, its potential for evil if left unattended was strongly underscored. The vagrant kids of New York could easily become delinquents and criminals when they remain in the tenements. This plausibility for wrongdoing alarmed mostly dwellers of the second home, respectable New York citizens who feared for their private safety and safety of their properties. "The class increases," wrote Brace in his work under a very telling title *The Dangerous Classes of New York*; "Immigration is pouring in its multitude of poor foreigners, who leave these young outcasts everywhere abandoned in our midst. For the most part, the boys grow up utterly by themselves. No one cares for them, and they care for no one" (1872, 57). Thus, despite benevolent assurances, the best solution would be simply to get rid of the problem. No wonder then that the mission statement of CAS read: "We hope too, especially to be the means of draining the city of these children, by communicating with farmers, manufacturers, or families in the country, who may have need of such employment. . . . We design, in a word to bring humane and kindly influences to bear on this forsaken class" ("To the Public,"

8). Humane influences were to be offered firstly, far from the city and secondly, in exchange for children labor. Such attitude was intensified by the awareness that welcome or not, these kids will become American citizens in the end and will participate in political life of their communities and the country at large. Thus, prospects for the future were all but optimistic: "These boys and girls . . . will soon form the great lower class of our city. . . . They will, assuredly, if unreclaimed, poison society all around them. They will help to form the great multitude of robbers, thieves, vagrants, and prostitutes who are now such a burden upon the law-respecting community" (Brace 1872, 58). And further, "ten years from now the influence of these boys will be felt. They will be voters then and have a share in the government of the country. And though you will not notice them now, they will have the same rights and privileges which you do, and they will exercise them for evil" ("Brooklyn City"). Not educated, or successfully settled, bound by no tradition and with nothing to lose, this class will reveal the potential for manipulation by the demagogues, similar to the one of *lazzaroni* of Naples. ("Begging Children") They would become "the feeders of the criminals, and the sources of outbreaks and violations of law" (Brace 1872, 5). So this was not only charity and mercy that directed the reformers but also fear for their own security and safety of their homes as well as concern for the financial burden immigrant problem will bring to the law-abiding community of decent Americans. *New York Daily Times* article listed a number of negative processes which needed attention and decisive countering. Among them the fact that these outcast street-children "force us to keep costly establishment for protection against them." Moreover, "they fill our dungeons" and "render property insecure" So, the threat was there, identifiable, physical, not imaginary. Two cities were contained within municipal borders. "The two urban worlds did not mingle or mix," as David Nasaw writes (8). When he relates H.G. Wells experience during his 1905 visit to America he says: "yet . . . the America of the immigrant and the working class, though out of sight, was just around the corner, just down the street, just over the hill." (8) Its menace was felt around : "They annoy and injure us in a thousand ways, all through their wretched and unhappy lives." Yet, "they save us right. They only fulfill the universal law of compensation, which affixes penalties to all neglects of duty. . ." ("Friendless Children of the City").

All in all, it was a very complex venture that the Children's Aid Society envisioned in taking care of the immigrant street children of New York. Charitable drives motivated it and to a large extent supplied its rhetoric, yet purely practical reasoning guided its actions. Protective and lifesaving hopes competed with coercive and reformative drives. In result, discrepancy arose between advertising the plan and implementing it in practice. Advertising posters told a different story than the Society activity reports, as we will see further on. Though both worked toward the ultimate goal to address the issue of massive immigration and to contain unruly, dangerous foreign elements. Placing out as a solution was considered "the surest, cheapest, and best way to save all who are worth saving" (Townsend). It was very cost effective. As the *New York Times* informed in 1886, "the average cost to the public . . . for each person [placed out] was \$10.80, yet any child placed in an asylum or poor house for a year costs nearly \$140" ("Helping Poor Children"). Yet, the first and most important advantage was that it located every underprivileged kid in the natural environment it belonged – a family, foster family for that matter but nevertheless a family.

Here we enter the third home in the scheme, that of a Midwestern farmer. Charitable institutions wholeheartedly embraced the idea of placing immigrant children there, claiming that “the poorest home of an honest and kind-hearted farmer is better than the most richly-endowed asylum” (“The State Board of Charities”). The years of practice and experience seemed to teach that asylum tends to breed passive and non-resourceful people, that it teaches dependence rather than self-reliance and motivation, “the institutional life weakens the vigor and moral power of a child, and often exposes him to much contamination” (“The State Board of Charities”). While in Midwest an array of factors apparently provided all that the poor kids of the city needed to “grow up as useful producers and members of society, able to inclined to aid it in its progress,” and get “the healthful use of all facilities of body and mind” (“The State Board of Charities”). Physical labor on a farm was viewed as the main reformatory tool for young characters, while fresh air of the countryside played also its role in enhancing health and fitness of the young bodies. This was in no way coincidental that the Midwestern farms were picked as destination for Orphan Trains. These farms suffered from a severe labor shortage at the time and teenage kids, boys in particular could alleviate the problem receiving room and board in return (Holt, 30–31). Megan Birk realizes that placing out children with farmers was a widespread practice in the second half of the 19th century. So much so that during that period “one-fifth to one-third of farm homes contained children who were not the biological children of adults in the home” (Birk 2015, 3).

Yet, the authors of the scheme conceived it to be much more than a market exchange. A “melodramatic script” followed the idea which elaborated greatly on the ameliorative potential of the rural home, both corrective and reformatory. Foster families were presented as guardian angels who rescued “waifs” and met their needs not only material but also emotional. Although the scheme at its core was based on the traditional system of apprenticeship, it was enriched with emotional involvement. It was “apprenticeship plus affection.” Foster families were supposed to play the roles of employers and guardians but also warmhearted caretakers:

Foster parents would provide for all of a child’s needs – not only food, shelter and education, but also affection – just as they would for their own children. In turn, a foster child – like a farmer’s biological children – would return the foster parent’s affection, obey the parent’s rules, work alongside the parent, and remain in the foster home until reaching adulthood. (Gish, 131)

Life frequently disproved idealistic assumptions. Charles Loring Brace partially got trapped in his own rhetoric. It was largely due to the discrepancy he and other charity workers created between the image of the enterprise and reality. Ads and posters talked mostly about sweet little orphaned creatures who “given a bath and a Bible” boarded the trains West to find loving families but the statistics contradict this image. While numerous photographs, romantically depicted mostly kind little kids at the ages of 3–6 years old waiting to be “taken in” as the song goes, loved and cared for, in fact the largest group of placed out kids (74%) were in the ages between 11 and 16. They were almost equally divided into two subgroups 11–13 (36%) and 14–16 (38%) years of age (Bellingham 1986, S47). Technically then they were hardly considered

children at all. As Bruce Bellingham writes in his article, “age 14 was a normative life-course transition point for leaving school at mid-century.” They were in what he calls a “stage of youthful ‘semi-autonomy’” (1986, S47). Most of them were boys. Girls, adolescent in particular, were the smallest fraction of the plan, only 5,3% (Gish, 130). They had better work opportunities in the city as domestic servants or in emerging factories (mostly textile industry). Besides, poor families in the city gained a lot from a considerable free work contribution to the household by daughters. Not without significance is also shared social anxiety that if left without closer family or institutional supervision, girls face more threats to go astray. (Gish, 130–131). All in all, both age and sex distribution was not much prone to developing emotional affection toward the new families. Even more so, that the receiving side acted predominantly in the capacity of an employer who declared to offer care and some education but no wages in exchange for labor. Megan Birk realizes that such arrangement caused dissatisfaction among the placed individuals: “Older children recognized that their labor had more value on the open market” (93). And adds:

A hired hand in the Midwest during this time period could make as much as twenty dollars per month plus room and board. . . . It would cost a farmer around one thousand dollars in hired hand costs to replace an indentured child who labored for ten years. . . . Bringing a dependent child into the home resulted in massive financial savings” (89).

In fact these young people were looking for the entry into the labor market and the scheme of placing out seemed an opportunity of smooth transition in this respect. Moreover, the program ignited their dreams of the frontier and attracted them with the lure of independence and possible riches. As Marilyn Holt remarks: “The frontier farmer was idealized, and it was held to be true that life in the west fostered independence and self-reliance.” (20) Many young people believed they could settle themselves up quite comfortably, yet not necessarily as part of the receiving families. These adolescent boys dreamt of a chance to start earning decent money and support themselves (which actually was not the case under the conditions of indenture) while the project organizers planned to ease the crowds of poor immigrants in the city of New York and instead of building a pauperized working class with potential for delinquency and disruption, channel them smoothly to assimilate into American society.

Just as most of the clients were hardly kids, similarly most of them were not orphans. Marilyn Holt in her book on Orphan Trains talks rather about a symbolic orphan who stood at the center of the program and argues that in this respect the definition of the orphan “expanded to include half orphans and destitute children having both parents living” (Holt, 23–24). When we consult Bruce Bellingham for numbers we get the following picture: About half (53%) of kids who rode the Orphan Trains had one or both parents with whom they lived in the city, another 12% remained under the household governance of adult guardians referred to as “friends.” While only 23% could actually qualify as orphaned, homeless street children (Bellingham 1986, S47). How was it possible that almost three quarters of the orphans were not orphans at all and were taken along on the Trains? Clay Gish provides the explanation identifying three groups of clients. Apart from the “proper”

orphans, he names two additional categories of beneficiaries: children who were placed with CAS due to temporary family crisis (17.1%) and youth seeking entry into the labor force (55.5%) (Gish, 124).

There is no agreement as to the degree of voluntariness in participation in the program. Two groups of researchers tend to embrace two different views on the matter. These who support the social benevolence approach view Brace as father of modern foster care and child saver. Others who are more prone to follow the social control theory blame him for “making family disruption as acceptable policy in social work.” The term “philanthropic abduction” applied to the Orphan Trains scheme seems to tune in with the contemporaneous view of poverty as the issue of character and moral decay rather than systemic failure (Billingham 1986, S48). As such it required radical means of action to stop it at the source. Breaking up the cycle of poverty assumed preventing its multiplication by taking away the kids from poor and destitute parents and bringing them up in a sound, healthy American environment. Under the ideal scheme, the original family ties would be severed for good and clients would never want to get back to the environment they were saved from. Kids would not return to their biological parents or rarely reunite with their separated siblings. Yet, this premise did not come true. The return to the places of origin of placed out kids was massive, especially among the group who had biological parents living. The statistics claim as much as almost half of the children returned to New York City, among them “70% of those who originally lived in natal households” (Billingham 1986, S50). Even more, a majority of them “did not maintain contact with placement families after their term ended . . . Overall, only one-fifth of the placed-out children surveyed remained in their placement community as adults.” (Birk 2013, 337). The agency left this fact unreported as it countered the assumptions and supposedly undermined the success of the entire enterprise. Again, the Society’s publicity thrived on a “fiction that placements were permanent” which guaranteed wider sympathy, support and more abundant donations from the respectable citizens (Billingham 1986, S51). While in fact, “the high proportion of children returning to their families of origin indicates that surrender of child custody implied an expedient, temporary delegation of parenting rights and functions, not a severing of the original blood tie” (Billingham 1986, S51). Blood ties were the hardest to break and frequently won over comfort and subsistence. Marilyn Holt quotes the ladies of Five Points Mission who could not understand kids’ desire to return: “In a vast majority of instances they [the children] cling to their own homes with a tenacity which is truly astonishing when we consider their wretchedness” (132). It seems that especially older kids whose relocation was arranged as a labor exchange viewed the scheme as temporary: “They saw their experience as just a phase of life that enabled them to earn a living not possible in the city” (Holt, 131). Extended rhetoric did not manage to embellish the outcomes. In fact, the program remained largely a market deal and led to antagonizing the sending and receiving parties. Farmers’ ability to smoothly correct city pathologies so attractively outlined by CAS did not necessarily hold true. The runaway rate seemed quite high, pedagogic problems in handling juveniles appeared and rarely new foreign members of the house developed familial affection for their hosts. As a result, practical premises came to the fore and triggered “fear among Mid-westerners that New York’s juvenile delinquents were being imported into their communities” (Gish, 132). Opposition toward the scheme slowly developed and the receiving states started enacting laws (in the 1890s) to prevent placing out.

While originally forty five states received the kids, by the end of the program operation they were welcome only in five (O'Connor, 308).

Yet, growing antagonisms and decrease in willingness to accept city kids on farms cannot serve as a proof that the program was a total failure. As in case of any such venture, there are stories in support both of its success and fiasco. Numerous kids found new homes and were saved from poverty and delinquency of the city tenements by foster families who took them in, but also many accounts prove that the cases of abuse, mistreatment and exploitation of young workers took place. It is not without merit that the scheme helped to set up financially a number of young males who, despite not finding a new family, found economic independence and used the opportunity they were offered in the West. Whether the train riders managed to internalize American values and morals and develop distinctively American character is hard to ascertain. Surely, some elements of the scheme aiming to obtain such results failed miserably. Nevertheless, the scheme performed many important functions on a couple of levels: individual, community, and society at large. No matter whether criticized or praised, the Orphan Trains have a lasting legacy in American society and seem to be a borderline institution which marks the closing of the entire epoch in American history.

The basic assumption of searching for solutions to social problems within a home reveals the traditional thinking about American society and family in particular which "in its multiple functions as a workshop, a church, an asylum, and a reformatory . . . included boarders as well as servants and apprentices and dependent strangers. The presence of strangers in the household was accepted as a normal part of family organization" (Modell and Hareven, 467). The Orphan Trains program was the last stage in the process of "familial mediation of proletarianization" (Bellingham 1986, S38), and Brace's vision "to heal the divisions between classes through CAS's social services" (Gish, 122). Belief in corrective potential of a good American Christian home and its ability to inculcate "American character" in young, underprivileged or destitute immigrant kids points to American idealism and trust in self-correcting social mechanisms. Yet, when we look closely, we will see that actually the enterprise marked the transition toward institutional solutions deemed necessary due to the scope of the crisis of massive urban immigrant poverty and destitution. Andrew T. Scull argues that it was the emergence of capitalist market system that "produced a diminution, if not a destruction, of the influence traditionally exerted by local groups (especially kinship groups) in the patterning of social life" (346). Disproportions and growing inequalities triggered by the new arrangements of work and life, not just sheer number of immigrants, separated and distanced the three homes discussed in the paper and made the intervention of the outside institutions inevitable to negotiate their unthreatening coexistence. At the end of the 19th century, lodging and boarding started being perceived as a threat. Partly due to the fact that privacy gained in value more than before. There is still no agreement as to the scope and severity of "philanthropic abduction" practiced toward the immigrant families who were not able to fend for themselves but the researchers of the period who embrace the social control perspective tend to support the view that

one of Brace's most enduring – and most problematic – legacies to modern social services is that he made it acceptable policy to intervene in the lives of the poor on the grounds of protecting their children. . . . Widespread

acceptance of the policy of family break-up has made it possible for social service workers to remove a child from a home whenever they determine that it is ‘appropriate’ (Gish, 137).

Yet, unquestionably, the Orphan Trains program contributed to the movement reinventing the position of a child within a family and society. Focus on child’s needs and individuality and underscoring public responsibility for the well being of minors is a part of Brace’s heritage cherished by the social benevolence interpretation proponents. All in all, he added considerably to the “developments in the field of social welfare, especially through his promotion of foster care and his stance against the incarceration of children in reformatories.” (Gish, 122) On the whole, Orphan Trains stand as a very apt metaphor of the era of passage in American social life. They failed in a way that it was impossible to ameliorate new era problems with the previous epoch methods of familial reformation. It will turn out quite soon that broader legislative and institutional tools need to be employed to cope with the problems of inequality and ensuing delinquency. Yet, they succeeded in thousand individual cases where they secured a home to a street child saving it from destitution and delinquency.

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