THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Anthropological Perspectives On Housing and Homelessness in the United States

Anna Lou Dehavenon

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Anthropological Perspectives on Housing and Homelessness in the United States

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For Janet M. Fitchen

whose untimely death deprived anthropology of
one of its most ardent, gifted fieldworkers.

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Kim Hopper

> "The housing industry trades on the knowledge that no western country can politically afford to permit its citizens to sleep in the street."
>
> Anthony Jackson, *A Place Called Home*, 1976

No doubt every age has its roster of "unbreakable" rules that some future era proves to be no such thing. When it comes to attitudes toward the poor in the United States, however, the cycle appears to be quickening. Jackson's study of low-cost housing in Manhattan is, after all, less than twenty years old but already it seems hopelessly dated, even quaint. The same applies to the "decent provision for the poor" that Samuel Johnson once put forth as the true measure of a civilized society. Five centuries of poor relief are enough to make one skeptical of the idea that any capitalist society (even one aspiring to the status of "civilized") has ever seriously followed that dictum.[1] Still, the moral legitimacy and force of the claim remain undeniable. Why else would the U.S. delegation have felt compelled to insist that footage of American homelessness be omitted from a 1987 United Nations film commissioned as part of the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless? The Reagan administration's objection? The film neglected to mention the distinctive "individual rights element" of homelessness in this country (*New York Times* 1986).

But embarrassment at our failure to keep the indigent off the streets at night is not just political posturing. Something much deeper is at stake, as a moment's consideration of the misery *not seen* will attest. Official relief aside, a vast makeshift array of "shadow shelter"—stemming for the most part from the claims of kinship and friendship—has traditionally made (and continues to make) the difference between a place on the street and a berth among familiar faces for most people on the margins. That being so, the scale of the visible homelessness apparent today is even more remarkable and the need for credible accounts of what went wrong more pressing. Violating core moral codes is customarily viewed as

"unthinkable"; exceptions take shape not through the granting of dispensations but through reconsideration of whether an infraction has actually occurred (Edgerton 1985).[2] Elemental claims of belonging, of solidarity, may be one such value.[3] When kinship fails, the burden shifts to the modern state, and it is not one that can be denied or disposed of lightly. But complications may arise that effectively negate the burden. If potential objects of assistance "refuse" standing offers of help, for example, one can hardly say that they have been abandoned to their own devices. And if such refusals can be shown to be both habitual and commonplace, then little wonder our streets, alleyways, and parks are encamped with ersatz bedouins.

Now, a skeptic might be moved to wonder whether just such strategic logic might explain the extraordinary amount of resources and preachment devoted to depicting the street-dwelling poor as, alternatively, willfully self-destructive, hopelessly addicted, or hapless victims of pathology.[4] Among the merits of the reports and analyses gathered here is that they are further makings of an ethnographic corrective to such a view, which has been taking shape for a decade or so. Implicit throughout the volume (explicit in its recommendations) is the conviction that fundamental breaches of social contract will not be patched by local charity and informal assistance.

Rule-breaking is not only the precipitating occasion for a volume on homelessness; it is also, as its editor notes, a consistent theme in the anthropology of disorder it displays. Trespassing, squatting, misuse of public facilities, unauthorized doubling-up, misappropriation of properties not intended for habitation, illegal siting of trailers, misrepresentation of circumstances: in all of these we detect evidence of widespread contempt for the niceties of property rights when "necessity" demands otherwise. Coupled with these acts of disobedience are varieties of complicity making ordinary citizens (and some stray officials) accomplices to such crimes of poverty. This includes not only those who give direct aid and comfort to the scofflaws but those who quietly turn a blind eye and deaf ear to infractions of rules, who tolerate forbidden activities, who inject a little slippage into their rounds of surveillance. Such complicity warrants closer anthropological attention than we have given it up until now. Official apologetics and repressive measures notwithstanding, the stories recounted here make it clear that for some ordinary people the sense of moral failure provoked by visible homelessness continues to haunt them and prompt action.[5]

Take the account of the park dwellers in Orange County and, even more striking, that of the Mad Hatters in Atlanta. Like the shanty structures cobbled together by displaced urban dwellers elsewhere (Balmori and Morton 1994), their huts are *lumpen* constructions. An outlaw band of architects and builders, together with their homeless collaborators, manages to wrest habitable spaces into being using limited means, the necessary stealth, and energizing infusions of solidarity. Impressive as the accomplishment is, it is not entirely unprecedented. As Mike Robertson reminds us, religious organizations have been the mainstays of unofficial shelter for over a hundred years; some, like the Catholic Workers, share their

own living space. Nonreligious groups, like ACORN, have successfully worked to merge active squatting with political organization. Rural makeshifts that fall far short of building codes, as the late Janet Fitchen spent a quarter of a century demonstrating, can be a way of life.

Such resourcefulness deserves note because more than a refusal to succumb to despair is at stake. There is counsel to stewardship. There is celebration of vernacular craft. There is hard work and genuine play. There are traces of pain (evident here in the continuing stories of the occupants of Mad Hatter huts). But above all, it seem to me, such efforts serve as gentle rebukes to those of us whose habit it is simply to pity their homeless creators.

None of this should be taken to suggest that the dirty, detailed work of politics can be circumvented. Structural change rarely comes from such fresh local experiments. And if some of the recommendations made here have already been overtaken by events, that says more about the depressing temper of our times than it does about the shortsightedness of those who made them.

In closing, let me admit to being tempted to view at least some of the species of insubordination chronicled here as contemporary versions of the "social banditry" that Eric Hobsbawm (1981) found at other times, in other places (specifically, peasant societies). Surely, there is at least suggestive evidence that some of these miscreant activities enjoy local popular support. But it would be a stretch to classify them as social banditry, if for no other reason than the pettiness of the crimes usually involved.[6] At the same time, these working affiliations and cooperative ventures do suggest alternative ways of doing what has traditionally been seen as "charity" work.

So, as a tribute instead to the *spirit* of social banditry that wafts through this volume, here is Bertolt Brecht's salute, in his fable *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, to the mischievous judge Azdak. His tenure on the bench, riddled though it was with decidedly wacky interpretations of jurisprudence, had helped to inaugurate a new era of freedom for the local populace. Misrule may have been his element, but it had had a strategic purpose.

> And he broke the rules to save them.
> Broken law like bread he gave them,
> Brought them to shore upon his crooked back.
>
> (Act IV)

That spirit lives and thrives in the acts of refusal documented here. And they, in turn, point to the need for a politics that would render them no longer necessary. Anthropologists have a role in both endeavors.

NOTES

1. As historians of social welfare policy from Elizabeth I through Chadwick, Bismarck, aid to widows and orphans, and the WPF and OEO (see Brennan's majority opinion in *Goldberg v. Kelly*, 1969) have repeatedly shown, the real question has been how stringently one can trim provisions and still pass them off as decent enough. Just as surely, common folk have traditionally proven quite suspicious of both poor relief and its official (often disciplinary) rationale (see, e.g., Kusmer 1987): owing to the elective affinities of uncertain livelihood, it is not hard for them to catch glimpses of their own possible future in the sorry spectacle of their neighbors' plight.

2. If permitting the poor to sleep in the street seems too ambiguous, think instead of historical debates over the worth of a slave for apportionment purposes, Roman Catholic deliberations over the grounds for annulment, or contemporary abortion debates about fetal viability. In each instance, whether an infraction is justified yields to the prior question of whether something counts as an instance of the alleged inviolate entity at stake—a person, a union, a life.

3. See Walzer (1983) on "membership," and Ignatieff (1984) on the claims of strangers.

4. A 1988 State Department memorandum on the subject concludes that public homelessness is "not a function of poverty but rather of disorientation and the toleration of American society for such aberrant behavior"—a tribute, as it were, to the rule of liberty. For further discussion and documentation for the case of New York, see Hopper (1991).

5. For a compendium of repressive local efforts, see National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, *No Homeless People Allowed: Anti-Homeless Laws, Litigation and Alternatives in 49 U.S. Cities* (Washington, D.C.: December 1994).

6. In a postscript to the revised edition, Hobsbawm is clear that while dodging customs inspectors or parking illegally carry little social opprobrium today, their practitioners are not—unlike social bandits—"people of whom their society could be proud" (1981:148). Admittedly, acts of solidarity undertaken out of compassion for the disenfranchised are less clear-cut. Clearing out illegal squatters, even when done for future public benefit, may generate protest by people with no direct stake in the property, as reactions to a recent eviction in New York City illustrates (Kennedy 1995; Sante 1995). Competing interests (and support for eviction) are more apparent when the outlawed use is suspect (alleged drug trafficking) and the local benefit is immediate (return of park space).

Acknowledgments

Preparing this book was a labor of love, but a long one. Without the encouragement and support of a number of people, beginning with my co-authors, it would not have been completed. I would also like to express my gratitude to Roy A. Rappaport. Under his guidance as president of the American Anthropological Association, Delmos Jones and I first convened the Association's Task Force on Poverty and Homelessness in 1988. Rappaport was convinced that anthropologists could make an important contribution to the greater understanding and amelioration of domestic social problems. The Task Force presented a number of panels at the Association's annual meetings. Some of the essays in this volume were presented first on these panels.

To Marvin Harris, my mentor and teacher, I owe a profound debt of gratitude for his teachings and his encouraging me to become an anthropologist. (Marvin, each of the co-authors had to listen more than once to my expounding on the critical usefulness of the emic/etic distinction in direct observation and collecting data on politically sensitive issues in one's own culture.)

I am also especially grateful to my friend, Estellie Smith, for her faithful—if sometimes cajoling—support. It was she who first suggested that the book be done and that I do it. (Estellie, I hope you were right and that it was worth it.)

In the political climate of 1995, it took time for housing as a human right to be revealed in the conclusion as the only logical framework for the summary analysis of the authors' policy recommendations. In general, Americans seemed to be growing less and less sympathetic to the deprived and destitute and more and more concerned about their own individual economic futures—not without reason. The comments of the experienced legal advocates, Steven Banks, Jane Sujen Bock, Andrew Scherer, and Justice Rajindar Sachar, helped reassure me that we were on the right track even though we might appear—for the moment—to be out of step. I thank each of them. I thank them all.

Finally, anthropologist Stephen L. Mikesell, Ph.D. deserves a gold medal for his work on the final editing and preparation of the manuscript. Once again, thanks Steve.

Anna Lou Dehavenon

Introduction

Anna Lou Dehavenon

This book shows that shelter—one of the most basic elements of human adaptation—is lacking for substantial numbers of people in the United States, the world's wealthiest, most advanced industrialized nation. That not all of a society's members realize that society's shelter norms shows that its social organization fails to meet a basic human need—for the shelter they require to live in aggregated rather than isolated, atomistic groups.

When a society's standard approaches to securing shelter fail, people with the fewest social resources are forced to break the rules in order to survive. These chapters explore some of the rules and behavior patterns that evolved after the middle 1970s when different groups of Americans could no longer secure stable housing for themselves and their families. Essentially, what these new rules and behaviors demonstrate is a conflict between human and legal rights. This book is also about health and disease, since many of those whom American society fails to shelter are failed first when their chronic medical problems are not adequately cared for.

The idea for this book emerged from two symposia organized by the Task Force on Poverty and Homelessness of the American Anthropological Association for the association's annual meeting in 1988. One of the primary goals of the task force was to look more closely than others had yet done at the causes of the poverty and low-income housing shortage associated with U.S. homelessness. It seemed to the task force members that the methods anthropologists use are particularly well-suited to examining the impact of the lack of stable housing on the daily lives of low-income people.

This book's chapters also reflect two other goals: documentation of the experiential and geographic diversity of U.S. homelessness and articulation of policy recommendations based on the analysis of primary data collected using ethnographic methods. As a result, this book examines the homelessness of both adults with children and adults without children in three different settings: rural, urban,

suburban. Furthermore, each chapter includes its author's data-based recommendations on homelessness prevention.

Homelessness results when a household fails to maintain stable shelter for all its members. The reasons for this failure are found on the macro, middle, and micro levels of sociological phenomena. For example, on the macro level after the early 1970s, federal decision makers failed to confront major changes taking place in the world economy and the structure of U.S. society. These changes included slowed economic growth worldwide, the increase of speculative over-productive economic activity in the global market, deindustrialization, technological change, and the exacerbation of the cyclical crises of capitalism as more people than ever before became integrated into the global economy. The vulnerability of the United States to world economic cycles had never been so great.

During the 1970s and 1980s, these trends contributed on the middle level to cutbacks in federal funds for community development and the construction of subsidized housing and the failure of government to maintain the purchasing power of minimum wage and public assistance payments in the face of high inflation after the oil embargo of 1973. In the 1980s, other middle-level consequences included further federal cutbacks in subsidized jobs and job training programs, and the failure of local governments to maintain the low-cost rental housing they inherited through private landlord tax default and abandonment driven largely by inflated fuel costs. By the decade's end on the micro level, growing numbers of individuals and families lost—or could no longer afford—housing of their own because of increasing unemployment, low levels of public assistance and minimum wage payments, higher rents, drastic shrinkage of the livable low-income housing supply, rising discrimination, and drug, domestic, and other violence.

THEMES AND STRUCTURE

Four themes wend their way through the nine chapters of this book:

1. The inability of U.S. society to adapt effectively to the global socioeconomic changes that are increasingly linked to impoverishment and homelessness;
2. The need for the new behavior patterns the destitute and near-destitute develop to survive and the creativity of these patterns;
3. Public and private efforts to address the emergency needs of the homeless; and,
4. The development of the authors' data-based recommendations.

The conclusion summarizes the policy recommendations in the earlier chapters. This analysis reveals four specific categories of actions needed to prevent homelessness: providing emergency shelter, enabling people at risk to remain in their own housing, helping homeless people access existing housing, and increasing the stock of new low-income housing. The recommended actions in each category are presented as to whether they should be undertaken in the long-term,

midterm, or short-term future and at which level of government. Also analyzed are a number of recommendations relevant to the stable income and good health needed for maintaining one's own housing once you have it. This chapter concludes with a discussion of some of the consequences for U.S. society if these kinds of actions are not taken.

In Chapter 1, Janet Fitchen shows that the problem of homelessness is not just urban, but rural too, and society-wide. She views homelessness in upper rural New York state as the result of inadequate resources and insufficient housing reserves. Both conditions are closely linked to poverty and lack of work. Irene Glasser conducted research sponsored by the U.S. Census Bureau in a small New England city. As she describes in Chapter 2, her experiences as a former social worker surfaced when she became a housing expert in order to fill a void left by local social agencies. She transported homeless individuals to important appointments and helped them apply for public housing and look for permanent housing. This chapter documents a wide range of adaptations to survival used by people with no shelter, from sleeping outside, living in shelters, living in marginal single-room occupancy hotels, to the ubiquitous doubling-up.

In Chapter 3, Rory Bolger explores history on a micro level. He explains how the urban crisis since the 1970s has affected Detroit, Michigan, a city well known for its strong blue-collar population and the once widespread availability of housing for it. His material on the rise of poverty and homelessness covers a longer time span than any of the other studies in this book.

In Chapter 4, Anna Lou Dehavenon focuses on doubling-up as the strategy that most homeless families in New York City pursue before asking the city for emergency shelter. She draws upon a cultural materialist approach to document the hardship these families face when they try to perform basic domestic functions in severely overcrowded, doubled-up housing conditions.

Andrew Maxwell also looks at the inner city, in Chapter 5. He views "squatting" in public housing projects as a response to the government's failure to provide "decent, safe, and sanitary housing" for people who cannot afford market-level rents. By keeping apartments empty when demand far exceeds supply, government avoids responsibility for people in need of low-income housing.

In Chapter 6, Amy Phillips and Susan Hamilton take up a low technology solution for homeless adults in Atlanta, Georgia. Social agencies give priority to sheltering homeless families with children, so there are few housing options for adults who do not have children with them. The "Mad Housers," a group of youthful volunteers with middle-class jobs, provide "huts" made of sturdy plywood to supply shelter for about $60 per person.

Like Chapter 6, Michael Robertson's Chapter 7 describes an attempt to solve some of the more immediate problems of the homeless. He finds that both fundamentalist and mainstream Christian groups who care for Albuquerque's homeless perceive poverty and homelessness in terms of food and shelter rather than the larger issues of inequality. Fundamentalists prefer to work with the "able-bodied"

rather than the chronically homeless. Mainstream churches offer their volunteers personal religious growth through service to God in a ministry to the chronic homeless.

In Chapter 8, Talmadge Wright and Anita Vermund examine a marginalized population that resists institutional power and challenges mainstream definitions of the "proper" use of public space in southern California. The city government sees park dwellers as "out of place," "out of control," and a potential threat to other people's property. The workers at the neighboring welfare center view the homeless as the "undeserving poor," displacing the structural dimensions of homelessness onto individual responsibility and avoiding the larger issues of wealth and power.

In Chapter 9, Brett Williams views gentrification and displacement in Washington, D.C. within the broad context of the political economy. She sees baby-boomers as consumers rather than agents of gentrification. Williams sets out to correct a failure in her previous work—not seeing the brutality in the displacement of low-income African Americans in the gentrification process.

CONCLUSION

This book documents a lack of national will in the United States to confront and solve the low-income housing crisis, and, more broadly and fundamentally, its root cause, poverty. There is thus a lack of consensus and cohesion among Americans, even with respect to certain basic values. When social will is absent, social organization is more likely to fail at the margins—in an economic sense—where the homeless now live. When social will is present, as in most of the industrial nations of Western Europe, not as many people at the margins are forced or encouraged to behave illegally as many now are in the United States.

The "illegalities" described in the chapters of this book can be ascribed to both the homeless *and* the government. However, there is a substantial difference between the two. The illegalities of government are on a much grander scale, backed by physical force and usually hidden from public view. Examples cited by the authors include: political patronage (Maxwell, Williams); corrupt and inadequate management of public facilities (Maxwell); fraud in housing (Maxwell, Williams), nonenforcement of housing codes (Fitchen, Dehavenon), and illegal housing conversions (Fitchen, Williams); inadequacies in providing emergency shelter and permanent housing for the impoverished (Dehavenon, Phillips and Hamilton), and public health protection (Dehavenon, Fitchen); manipulation of the social service delivery systems depriving the homeless of the welfare and Supplemental Social Security Income to which they are legally entitled (Dehavenon, Robertson, Wright and Vermund, Robertson); unnecessary removal of children from the home (Dehavenon, Fitchen); racial discrimination and segregation (Bolger, Glasser, Williams); discrimination against families on welfare (Dehavenon, Fitchen); obstruction of the enumeration of the homeless and displaced (Williams); systematic and abusive

police surveillance of the homeless (Wright and Vermund); and eviction, sometimes brutal, and theft by the police (Maxwell).

By comparison, the illegal activities of the homeless are largely public and controlled easily by a government which uses force. Illegalities include doubling-up (Bolger, Dehavenon, Fitchen, Glasser), working in the street-level underground economy (Bolger, Dehavenon, Fitchen), squatting (Phillips and Hamilton, Maxwell), petty theft (Bolger, Maxwell, Williams), use or street-level sale of drugs (Bolger, Maxwell, Williams), bathing in showers intended for tennis players and sleeping in park bushes (Wright and Vermund), and begging for food (Bolger, Robertson).

Few of the recommendations proposed by the authors would tap any private sector resource or initiate any new government program not already in place as a result of the public housing and Social Security laws enacted during and after the Great Depression of the 1930s. Therefore, they are not radical. What *is* radical is the notion of ensuring that the law and human rights protections pertain to all U.S. citizens.

We already know what is needed to end poverty and homelessness. What is lacking is national consensus about what to do and the political will to act upon this consensus. As Aidan Southall writes, this contemporary crisis of political will "is the product of material causes, the high level of collective consumption, and the net outcome of all the production relationships of those involved in it. . . . The most fundamental element of the crisis is inequality. . . . The essence of inequality—or the gross relative lack of access to resources—is coming to be seen as an injustice. . . . The injustice of inequality has now become scandalous. . . . The present crisis can only be solved by changes which have an ineluctably moral character" (1994).

As anthropologists have always done, the authors in this book searched for explanations of specific sociocultural phenomena, that is, impoverishment and homelessness, in the observation of low-income people's daily lives. We hope that this portrayal of their experiences researching the causes and consequences of these conditions in the world's wealthiest nation will contribute to building the political will needed to ameliorate them.

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