Reckoning with homelessness

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book would be much stronger if it included an analysis of the larger political-economic context in which social capital theory and practice are embedded and for which they are proposed as an alternative.

Robert Fisher
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On June 12, 2003, in preparation for writing this review, I logged on to amazon.com, directed the search engine to “books,” entered the key word “homelessness,” and hit “go.” Of the 730 hits from this search, the large majority have been published since 1980. One might wonder, with more than seven hundred books on the topic already in print, whether there is anything left to say. Kim Hopper’s Reckoning with Homelessness makes it plain that there is plenty left to say, that the last chapter in this sad, sorry history is still forthcoming.

For those who have not followed the literature on homelessness these past decades, Hopper is an anthropologist whose writings on this “random, visible suffering” date back to the late seventies. (His 1981 report with Ellen Baxter, Private Lives/Public Spaces [New York: Institute for Social Welfare Research], good bits of which make their way into the present volume, is the first piece of research that I ever read on the homeless.) Few of us who have written on homelessness can claim a longer tenure in the field. Reckoning with Homelessness is less a research report than a retrospective, taking stock of the products of a long, compassionate, and accomplished career. In the process, Hopper also takes stock of applied anthropology as a discipline, of the history of advocacy on behalf of the homeless, and of policies tried and found wanting. The result is a tour de force that demands (and amply repays) attentive reading, a stunning piece of reflection and self-examination, as good a book on the subject as has ever been written.

Readers unfamiliar with the terrain will find Hopper a more than capable guide who calls attention to all the usual landmarks: madness and dislocation, housing shortages, hostile communities, a distorted labor economy, how people come to survive on next to nothing, how a life, or a passing semblance of one, can be knitted together from the waste spaces and products of the modern postindustrial city. Those for whom all this is now old hat will learn a different but no less important set of lessons: how science and advocacy can coexist in a single corpus, neither subordinate to the other; how an inquisitive mind can spend 3 decades in the trenches yet remain lucid in its moral purpose; above all, how the grittiest material imaginable can be expressed in lyrical prose. (Quite contrary to Hopper’s own characterization, there is far more poetry than plumbing to be found in these pages.) This is probably not something to take along for an afternoon at the beach (what work of scholarship is?) but it has to be among the best-written, most elegantly expressed works of urban anthropology ever.

Hopper’s gratifying meander starts as autobiography, spends most of the journey revisiting his prior ethnographic works, and ends with an abrupt, “So what?” For all the splendid description that homeless ethnographies have produced, all the fine detail, all the painstaking accounts of toils and troubles, there is, Hopper admits, the dread possibility that none of it has anything to do with solving the problem. What, he asks, are the “practical implications of our parasitic
texts?” (p. 205). He argues that “ethnographic work is essentially unfinished if it pulls up short at description and commentary. Engagement must be the complement to witnessing” (p. 205). No idle chatter, that. In addition to his accomplished scholarly career, Hopper is also a cofounder of both the New York and National Coalitions for the Homeless. He has proven a tireless advocate for the disenfranchised and the oppressed, and there have been victories along the way, “some noteworthy—if limited—accomplishments” (p. 207). But Hopper asks whether the small victories even repay the compromise required to achieve them or the effort required to sustain them, and he has the courage to consider that the answer may well be no. “We gave them names, showed you their faces, ransacked our fieldnotes for arias of heartbreaking tragedy and quiet heroism,” and yet in the process “homelessness became domesticated, routine, an all-but-expected feature of the urban landscape” (p. 193). One failure is of special note: “Advocacy’s neglect to build the broader alliances that could have moved the enlarged agenda” (p. 194). “We manage,” Hopper laments, “high-handedly and with great regularity, to annoy our friends and exasperate our constituency” (p. 198). The wonder, then, is not how little has been accomplished, but how much.

Hopper’s ethnographic ramble through the makeshift haunts of the world’s richest city is inevitably ironic, bitterly painful, unfailingly informative. “Emma’s Story” (pp. 12–13) is an elegant recounting of the “but fors” that keep marginal people housed. “For the eight years I knew her, Emma lived a hair’s breadth away from homelessness. But for the kindness of our building super . . . ; but for the solicitousness of the neighbors who would look in from time to time . . . ; but for the rent-controlled apartment she had inherited from her mother; but for the sure sanctuary she found in that ramshackle tenement—she could have wound up one of the city’s rag-wrapped street dwellers” (p. 13). More than most, Hopper recognizes that homelessness is ultimately not about mental illness, drug addiction, or hopelessly inadequate supplies of low-income housing, although all these are important contributing factors. For most people most of the time, it is kith and kin who “ease the bite of misfortune” (p. 40), and only when these support networks fail is homelessness the result. Social dislocation, not individual pathology, lies at the heart of the problem.

Bums, tramps, hobos, beggars, bag ladies, gutter punks: these are the modern stereotypes, the customary bigotries of the homelessness discussion. Useful correctives are to be found on nearly every page. Perhaps my favorite is a quotation from a homeless woman: “You have to understand that this is a condition, this homelessness. It’s not who we are” (p. 142).

Remarkably, “for a substantial portion of shelter users in cities for which figures are available, the institution [emergency shelter] appears to work. . . . For these users, that is, either through their own efforts or those of officials charged with relocation, it adequately serves as a way-station en route to stable rehousing” (p. 184). This is one of the great secrets of the homeless assistance system, namely, that for most homeless people, the system works. Quite contrary to widespread opinion, for most homeless people, homelessness is a brief, transient bout between the last stable housing situation and the next. It is not a chronic, year-in, year-out descent into abjection. Why isn’t this hopeful fact better known? “Once people manage to escape from the streets and shelters, they typically prefer to pick up their new lives as ‘neighbors,’ ‘workers’ and ‘citizens’—and not as tagged specimens of the ‘formerly homeless’” (p. 184). Thus, “the evidence of successfully resolved homelessness—although all around us—is bound to be difficult to detect” (p. 184). Undetected, it is not cited as evidence of the value of our collective investment.

This brief review cannot do justice to the sheer delight one experiences in
reading an engaged and seasoned ethnographer at the top of his game. Those who know Hopper personally know his passion for jazz music and will not be surprised that he has donated half the proceeds to the Jazz Musician’s Emergency Fund. About 50 pages in, it occurred to me that I was not really reading a book so much as savoring a tone poem written in the key of life lived on the outside. And if one is sometimes lost in the complex improvisations of Hopper’s hot licks, there is no mistaking the main theme, one recently expressed by an official from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: “Save us from weak resignation to the evil we abhor.”

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The Selected Papers of Jane Addams is the most recent product of the Jane Addams Papers project, a superb archival effort based at Duke University since 1976. While your library may not own the project’s 82-reel microfilm edition of Addams’s papers and its award-winning guide, you will want to immediately make sure that it purchases this second-best option.

The editors of the Selected Papers set out to “present Jane Addams in the context of the time in which she lived and worked” and to provide “compelling evidence primarily from first-person sources created at or near the time that the events took place of Addams’ ideas, activities, relationships, and achievements” (p. xxviii). They have succeeded masterfully in volume 1, which documents the first 21 years of Addams’s life in Cedarville, Illinois (1860–77) and her 4 years at Rockford Female Seminary (1877–81).

It is remarkable that Jane Addams should come to life in this thick volume filled to overflowing with archival material, footnotes, biographies, and genealogies. Perhaps it is because the editors’ purpose was not to compose Jane Addams, as a biographer might, or as even she herself did in the classic Twenty Years at Hull House. Rather, her life unfolds in pieces and, in that way, seems truer to our experience of our own lives. I found the footnotes (and this is a book for those of us who love footnotes) particularly absorbing. The editors’ energy is palpable in them, as they track down family and social connections and the intellectual rivers that connected young women in rural Illinois with thinkers around the country and world.

Jane Addams emerges in her grade school and high school years as a quiet child, ordinary in a comforting, and to me familiar, Midwestern way. As her childhood letters illustrate, she was not an exceptional student, particularly in spelling. The exception to the ordinary was of course her father, John Huy Addams. An Illinois state senator who knew Lincoln, and whose own active intellectual interests marked the family’s life, John Addams founded the village library and housed it in the Addams’s home. I was surprised to find that, as a girl, Jane loved stuffing animals and recording facts of nature. This devotion to “accuracy” (p. 429), as she called it, stayed with her throughout her life. But the overriding impression that comes through the documents, photos, footnotes, and a detailed introduction is of a precise child, looking out onto the world