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# Two Nations: Homeless in a Divided Land (1992)

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## Two Nations: Homeless in a Divided Land

Husband: "Home is the place where, when you have to go there,  
They have to take you in."

Wife: "I should have called it  
Something you somehow haven't to deserve."

—Robert Frost, "The Death of the Hired Man"

We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only  
solution is love and that love comes with community.

—Dorothy Day

In *The Big Money*, the bitterly titled final volume of *U.S.A.* (1936), John Dos Passos decided "we stand defeated America." His Depression-era epic of America in crisis climaxes with the hopeless journey of Vag, a young man on the road, heading west. Cars whip past as Vag winces with hunger. Overhead, a transcontinental plane flies in the bumpy air, while a passenger vomits half-digested steak and mushrooms into a paper carton. "No matter, silver in the pocket, greenbacks in the wallet, drafts, certified checks, plenty restaurants in L.A." Below, Vag continues to walk as more cars head west. "Eyes seek the driver's eyes. . . . Head swims, belly tightens, wants crawl over his skin like ants."<sup>1</sup> Juxtaposition here is a method of shock, a mode of understanding.

Lisa Ferrill's contemporary record of life among the homeless, *A Far Cry from Home*, begins with similarly contrasting images. First: "Broadway plays, exquisite views, tantalizing meals served in plush surroundings . . . New York City, city of luxury, city of thrills." Then: "Lines of people waiting to get into a soup kitchen, men, women, and children panhandling on the street, bodies lying over subway grates to keep warm . . . New York City, city of despair." In Dos Passos's example, the rich speed past or fly away while Vag trudges along; in Ferrill's example, the rich consume culture and food behind thick glass barriers, leaving the poor out in the cold, begging, seeking warmth, looking at only their own reflections in the windows. "Often, if we do not *feel* the problem . . . we are not moved to seek solutions." So Ferrill, a social worker at a shelter for homeless women, determines to "walk you," the reader,

“through some experiences” so that “you will come to feel as I do—that we cannot afford to keep walking by.”<sup>2</sup>

Much of the literature on the homeless is an assembly of parables—the lives of the homeless, with names changed to protect their identities—designed to shock and move the reader into corrective action, personal and collective. In 1991, a nameless, homeless person once again became the representative citizen of the republic, only now this figure is more likely to be a young woman of color, trapped in a shelter with her children, as she is in Jonathan Kozol’s *Rachel and Her Children*, or wandering alone on the streets of the indifferent city.

Ferrill tells us nothing new about New York; since Jacob Riis wrote *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) and *The Children of the Poor* (1892), the problem of homelessness has only compounded. Riis, an immigrant from Denmark who became a police reporter for the *New York Tribune*, stunned America with reports on the conditions of the urban poor, particularly the miserable state of tenement children on the Lower East Side, in the Mulberry Street area. (Some one million Irish, German, and Jewish immigrants, it is estimated, were crowded into approximately thirty-seven thousand tenements in 1880.)<sup>3</sup> Riis’s still-striking accounts tell a story of New York’s decline from gentility and community. The tenements of the poor, he noted, were sectioned out of some of old New York’s finest homes, “the decorous homes of the old Knickerbockers, the proud aristocracy of Manhattan in the early days.”<sup>4</sup> For Riis, a bucolic wholesomeness characteristic of old New York had been violated. An ancient cow path became the Mulberry Street “Bend,” the “foul core of New York’s slums. . . . Echoes of tinkling bells linger there still, but they do not call up memories of green meadows and summer fields; they proclaim the home-coming of the rag-picker’s cart. In the memory of man the old cow-path has never been other than a vast human pigsty.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, a larger pastoral American innocence has been lost. Homelessness, then, is the inevitable by-product of urbanization, where the gap between haves and have-nots is most severe. Though Riis indulged in demeaning ethnic stereotypes, he also balanced moving portraits of misery with angry complaints against those who benefited from inequity. He showed the poor to be victims of conditions, and therefore not responsible for their plight.

“As a one-man band of social reform, Riis altered the outlook of the whole city, and eventually the nation,” in the words of Luc Sante.<sup>6</sup> Riis’s photographs, anticipating those of Lewis Hine, were shocking, but they framed the poor, particularly the children of the slums, with dignity. In a chapter called “The Reign of Rum,” Riis wrote: “The rum-shop turns the

political crank in New York. The natural yield is rum politics.”<sup>7</sup> In such conditions, the city was turning its young men into toughs and its young women into exploited workers and prostitutes, the very models Stephen Crane incorporated in his novel of slum life, *Maggie, Girl of the Streets*. The role of the writer, Crane must have concluded from reading Riis, was to expose the truth of the social situation to readers, who had been conditioned by romantic literature—a literature that would rather have them avert their gaze from authentic misery, and awaken the conscience of the nation.

In “An Experiment in Misery,” Crane portrayed a nation whose callous indifference toward the down-and-out was symbolized by New York’s arrogant buildings. They were “emblematic of a nation forcing its regal head into the clouds, throwing no downward glances; in the sublimity of its aspirations ignoring the wretches who may flounder at its feet.” Crane’s prose registered the shock of an outsider in a language of select, symbolic details. “The roar of the city to him was the confusion of strange tongues, babbling heedlessly; it was the clink of coin, the voice of the city’s hopes were to him no hopes.”

But Crane, the outsider, strained to identify with the “other half.” A young man wonders what it feels like to be poor and homeless, so he assumes their tattered garb and lives among the lowly. “Perhaps I could discover his point of view or something near it,” concludes the young man. The omniscient narrator then underscores the point: “From those words begins this veracious narrative of an experiment in misery.”<sup>8</sup>

In “Curious Shifts of the Poor” (1899), Theodore Dreiser called attention to the destitute who stood in abject contrast to the flashy rich along Broadway. He, too, traced a representative man of New York, “The Captain,” in his route to a flophouse. Dreiser described the line of poor outside a mission on Fifteenth Street during a cold January day, a sketch that owes much to Crane’s “The Men in the Storm.” But Dreiser went out of his way to mute his readers’ sympathies. The parade of the poor “before us should not appeal to our pity, but should awaken us to what we are—for society is no better than its poorest type. . . . Wealth may create an illusion, or modify a ghastly appearance or ignorance and error, but it cannot change the effect. The result is as real in the mansions of Fifth Avenue as in the midnight throng outside a baker’s door.”<sup>9</sup> Throughout his columns for *Ev’ry Month*, Dreiser praised Herbert Spencer’s application of Darwin’s survival of the fittest theory to social success and failure. “It is only the unfit who fail—who suffer and die,” wrote Dreiser, in “The Prophet,” in 1897.<sup>10</sup>

However, Dreiser’s acceptance of the harsh ways the other half lived

was rare; from the era of the literary naturalists, beginning with Crane, through the Great Depression realists, Dos Passos and Steinbeck in particular, attention has been paid to the poor and the homeless as a way to indict the excessiveness and the callousness of American capitalism. In the Ronald Reagan era, Americans were told that economic “trickle down” would benefit all members of the society; in Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street* (1987), a junk bond raider, fittingly named Gordon Gekko, insisted that “greed is good!” the credo of the Reagan era. So in the 1980s the rich got richer and the poor increasingly became the homeless. As a result, in the 1990s the homeless person has replaced the slick merchant of greed as a representative American. For Luc Sante, who examined New York’s persistent and lurid lower depths in *Low Life* (1991), things have grown far worse since Riis’s day, with the introduction of new miseries: drugs and AIDS. The New York poor still are, as they were a century ago, invisible men and women, living in a parallel universe, on the other side of a one-way glass.

To its floating population, New York was a parallel construction, a map of hiding places and safety zones unknown to the general mass of people. To the drifters, the great squares and avenues might scarcely exist, their central place in the city’s scheme taken up by back courts and alleys and vacant lots and wharves and the terra incognita in the north of the island before it was urbanized. Their history generally consists of what was seen of them by institutions, charities, police, and journalists; their own lore remained secret or became useless as soon as anybody else learned it. Knowledge of the city’s hiding places remains dormant for decades at a time, until it is learned all over again by those who have need of it. Today we can see the destitute finding the niches in railroad tunnels, the abandoned cuttings, the caves of Inwood, and the alcoves under bridge supports that were left for them by previous occupants.<sup>11</sup>

New York, as usual, only dramatizes a pervasive national problem. In the fall of 1991, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, just across the street from Harvard Yard, the Harvard Bookstore offered a large window display of books about the problem of homelessness. Beneath the display, crouched on the sidewalk, hunched one of the many homeless beggars who station themselves along the major streets around Harvard Square, like guards at the entrances to a walled city, making passage difficult for shoppers and students.

Begging had become an American occupation, just as it had been in the Britain of George Orwell. In *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Orwell noted that begging is “a trade like any other; quite useless, of course—but, then, many reputable trades are quite useless.”<sup>12</sup> But is it a job, like any other, that calls for certain skills? The novelist Lynne Sharon Schwartz, writing on New York City’s beggars in *Harper’s Magazine* in late 1991, thought not. For Schwartz, beggars mirror our own natures. “Who we are is revealed in our response” to their pleas. Responses vary widely, but for Schwartz, in the end it is quite simple: “Either we are our brothers’ keepers or we are not. The government’s answer has the virtue of being cruelly clear: It is no one’s keeper but its own.”<sup>13</sup>

However, the nation’s compassion was being tested by the increasing number of the homeless in 1991. From sea to shining sea, new techniques and technologies were being developed to “handle” the homeless issue. Manhattan’s Port Authority police were removing the homeless from the Eighth Avenue bus terminal and placing them in shelters. “We’re going to take the terminal back to its original purpose: a regional transportation facility,” said Deputy Inspector Edward Forker. “We’re offering the homeless services in a very humane way.”<sup>14</sup> The “humane” choices for new shelter sites in New York City were being assisted by an IBM 3090 computer, which surveyed the city for desirable shelter locations. Each section of the city should bear its “fair share” of the problem. Frederick A. O. Schwarz, Jr., chairman of the Charter Revision Commission, said fair share “forces politicians and the public, including the affluent communities, to think about the fundamental social pathologies causing the problems and not, like Pontius Pilate, to wash their hands of these problems by hiding them.”<sup>15</sup> Yet many of those homeless who had been removed from the Port Authority terminal could be found improvising their own shelters, that is, living in boxes on nearby streets!

Across the land, in Santa Monica, California, where vagrants heading west can go no farther, debate raged over the treatment of the homeless who congregate in alarming numbers in Palisades Park. Santa Monica has long welcomed the homeless. There transient residents were not prosecuted for what city Attorney Robert Meyers calls “crimes of status.” But now so many homeless are present that some permanent residents say the smell of their urine is sharp in the air. One drop-in center serviced forty-five hundred homeless in this city of ninety thousand. David Kingsley, cochairman of the city’s Task Force on Homelessness, said, “There’s absolutely no way a city of this size can handle all of the homeless on its streets.”<sup>16</sup> Was there any way a nation of this size could “handle” the vast number of homeless on its streets? Republican

presidential candidate Pat Buchanan struck a national nerve when he proposed stricter enforcement of vagrancy laws as a means to contain homelessness. The aggressive homeless were taking over our cities, he said, driving away women shoppers who were frightened of panhandlers!<sup>17</sup>

The Cambridge beggar was disheveled, wrapped in layers of mixed-up clothing; he was red-faced, swollen, unshaven, and he stank. “Any spare change?” he asked in a tone of bleak expectations. He was another Vag—now more delicately called one of the homeless—a representative man of the early 1990s. Most pedestrians looked away and passed by. Other walkers in the city gave him some change. Still others slowed, but overlooked him, taking in the texts displayed over his head—those books about the homeless: analysis and compassion under glass. Tolstoy had asked about the Moscow poor a century ago, “What should a man do?” Who knew?

The creative writers of the early 1990s were doing what they could. Two of the books on display in the Harvard Bookstore window were anthologies of short stories contributed by many of the nation’s best fiction writers. *Louder Than Words* and *Voices Louder Than Words: A Second Collection*, both edited by William Shore, were collections of stories donated to Share Our Strength, an organization established in 1984 to raise funds for hunger relief, “now the largest national private hunger relief foundation in the United States,” which distributed over \$3 million in two years.<sup>18</sup> These stories do not set out to portray the homeless, though many depict a sense of vulnerability, as does Anne Tyler’s “A Woman Like a Fieldstone House,” the first story in the first collection, which describes the anxieties a woman suffers every seven years, beginning in 1936, when locust swarms reappear. Perhaps the locust swarms symbolize a condition of precariousness that even the solidly entrenched middle class cannot shut out.

Charles Baxter’s “Shelter” is unusual in its depiction of a direct encounter, in Ann Arbor, between a homeless man and an ordinary citizen, here a twenty-eight-year-old baker. Christine, a cold lawyer, describes Cooper, her husband, as “a latent vagrant.” Cooper is frustrated by his inability to do something about the street people he encounters. When Cooper becomes a volunteer in a shelter, he meets twenty-three-year-old Billy Bell, a wanderer who wants to heal people. When Cooper brings Billy first to his bakery and then to his home for a beer, Cooper’s son becomes anxious and Christine, annoyed at her husband’s “guilty liberalism,” dismisses Billy: “Back you go. Good-bye. Fare thee well.” After a break-in at the bakery, Christine tells Cooper, “I told you so.”

When his son hides his coin bank so his father will not give away the boy's money, Cooper, vulnerable himself and spreading his anxieties to others, turns to his wife and begs, "Shelter me."<sup>19</sup>

This fine story, rich in ambiguities, shows how far the homeless have worked their ways under the skin and into the conscience of some Americans. There but for the grace of something-or-other go I—a realization on which one may cast a cold eye, like Christine; from which one may hide, like their son; on which one may try to act, however fecklessly, like Cooper. Lynne Sharon Schwartz's statement haunts: "Either we are our brothers' keepers or we are not."

William Shore cites Robert Coles, who learned from poet and doctor William Carlos Williams that a life's worth must be measured in conduct, not in writing alone. Such an impulse also moved a number of writers to deliver a benefit reading, also titled "Voices Louder Than Words," in Sanders Theater, Harvard University, in late November 1991. Stephen King, Jamaica Kincaid, and John Edgar Wideman read in the event hosted by Jonathan Kozol. In Cambridge and throughout the land, American writers used their talents to testify, to raise money, to make a difference in the lives of the homeless.

Jonathan Kozol's *Rachel and Her Children* is an impassioned examination of homelessness in America. "Homeless people are poor people," says Kozol, enlarging the context of examination.<sup>20</sup> Kozol's strategy of conscience and consciousness appeals to the core American value of the family by suggesting that economic inequities *and* patterns of institutionalized reform have encouraged the breakdown of family units. (In that model of didactic fiction, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe appealed to the hearts of Americans by showing how slavery sundered the Christian family.) Homelessness for Kozol results from the increasing economic inequities, which derive from policies of the Reagan era, a proposition that ignores historical patterns of homelessness and over focuses blame on one source, though it does highlight a clear public policy position of neglect in the Reagan regime. David Stockman, Reagan's candid budget director, said, "I don't think people are entitled to services. I don't believe that there is any entitlement, any basic right to legal services or any other kind of services. . . . I don't accept that equality is a moral principle."<sup>21</sup>

"*The cause of homelessness is lack of housing,*" insists Kozol.<sup>22</sup> This apparent tautology actually leads him to his central concern: the condition of housing for the homeless in New York City. It has developed into an "institution . . . of our own invention, which will mass-produce pathologies, addictions, violence, dependencies, perhaps even a longing



for retaliation, for self-vindication, on a scale which will transcend, by far, whatever deviant behaviors we may try to write into their past.”<sup>23</sup> Kozol estimated that there were 1.5 million homeless in America in the late 1980s. He projected 400,000 (in a population of 7 million) in New York City by 1990. The homeless are usually marginal citizens who operate with low skills and no family net; often they are young, exploited, people of color, who find they cannot meet the monthly rent. Typically, they are women, often ill or drug dependent, alone with their children—like “Rachel,” a woman who both lives in a “shelter” and in constant fear of having her children taken from her by the state.

In 1987, New York City spent \$274 million to provide emergency shelters for its homeless population. For Kozol this public policy choice never addresses the real causes of homelessness; rather, public money supports a system that *creates* an underclass. A sheltered person can wait for eighteen years to enter a public housing project! So the city chose to pay some \$20,000 a year for a homeless person to live in the Hotel Martinique (at Herald Square, at the intersection of Broadway, Sixth Avenue, and Thirty-second Street) as a temporary shelter. The city paid some \$72 million (nearly half the \$150 million it spent on the homeless) for three thousand families to stay in hotels. (The Martinique received \$8 million.) This “disciplinary agenda” of a “regressive public policy” keeps the city from erecting sufficient low-income housing, even when it would be cost efficient to do so! This, then, “is an agenda of societal retaliation on the unsuccessful.”<sup>24</sup>

Three years after Kozol’s *Rachel* was published, little had changed in New York City. Writing in the *New York Times*, Dennis P. Culhane estimates that there are now “23,000 shelter beds, which includes 14,000 beds for homeless families” in the city, yet “the shelter has failed as a remedy for homelessness.” Shelters only illustrate the deeper problem: an inadequate national public policy to deal with housing, poverty, mental health, and substance abuse. For Culhane, “the government’s war on poverty [has been] transformed into a war on the poor in the last decade.”<sup>25</sup>

For all that, what is the alternative to these “temporary” shelters? Kozol reports that the unsheltered homeless sleep, as they did a century ago, in the streets, though now they do not remain decorously removed from middle-class gaze in shantytowns; now the homeless are found in subway tunnels, on street hot-air grates, in train stations, everywhere. In Chicago a man sleeping inside a trash compactor was “compressed into a cube of refuse.”<sup>26</sup>

Yet an ever-increasing number testify against such outrages. Kathleen

Hirsch, in *Songs from the Alley*, takes her inspiration and her mission from Robert A. Woods, the founder of Boston's South End House, who wrote in his book with Albert Kennedy, *The Settlement House* (1922), "Only those who can go among men and women with affection can understand the tissue of objective causes and inward motives which bind people together."<sup>27</sup> Hirsch admires not only what Woods did, but the eloquence and influence of what he wrote. "If [Jane] Addams [founder of Hull House in Chicago] was to become the most prominent practitioner of the settlement house movement, Woods would be its leading apologist." Together Addams and Woods set out to renew the national covenant of community, which reached back to the Plymouth settlement.<sup>28</sup>

America needs to be reminded of the nation's original ideal of community, best expressed by John Winthrop in "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630), a sermon he delivered aboard the *Arbella* before the settlers arrived in the bay of what they called New England. "We must delight in each other, make each other's' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together: always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body. . . . For we must consider that we shall be like a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us."<sup>29</sup> During the Reagan-Bush era, the homeless have been excluded from the American covenant, shunned, and persecuted, thus revealing the darker side of American puritanism: the impulse to expel or punish those who are unable to affirm the common faith.

In *Songs from the Alley*, Hirsch not only juxtaposes the lives of two women who are homeless, but she plays off the stories of these women, in alternating chapters, against the history of the social worker and settlement house responses to the condition of the homeless, particularly in Boston, where it has long been a major social concern. Hirsch, as a volunteer, an observer, and a journalist, worked for two years in Boston's Pine Street Inn, "one of the nation's oldest, and Boston's largest, shelter for the homeless." Her experiences separated her from her familiar world. "Stripped of life's sustaining illusions, I saw how easily any one of us can become lost in America."<sup>30</sup> It is, of course, Hirsch's literary goal and human intention to strip any remaining illusions about the lives of the "other half" by offering a personal record, which is amplified by scholarship. In every respect her book is a great success.

At its narrative center, *Songs* tells the stories of Amanda and Wendy, two women whose lives include disabilities, psychic and sexual abuse, serious misjudgments, and sustained social rejections. Alas, for all of Hirsch's care in narration, these individual stories of misdirected lives blur

into an ur-narrative of misery. A few women recover, many more die, and the rest continue to live on the edge, joined by still more recruits to this other country. “The culture of homelessness is a closed circle that begins in constricted personal lives and completes itself in shortsighted policies.”<sup>31</sup>

In the 1980s, Governor Michael Dukakis set out to eliminate homelessness in Massachusetts. In 1984, the Massachusetts legislature passed an omnibus homeless bill, Chapter 450. “Emergency Service” shelters were set up. “By the fall of 1986, Massachusetts’ expenditure for emergency assistance had increased from \$6.7 to \$28.5 million in three years. An additional \$8.3 million was being spent on fifty-two family shelters across the state.”<sup>32</sup> Further, the state spent some \$500 million on housing projects for low-income citizens. Mayor Raymond Flynn of Boston, where the homeless population stood at some five thousand, became the chairman of the U.S. Conference of Mayors’ Task Force on Homelessness and Hunger, demonstrating his concern for the homeless. However, by 1991 all that seemed long ago. Though Flynn was still an activist mayor, the city’s resources were limited and strained. The number of homeless in Boston had grown. Massachusetts had elected a Republican governor, William Weld, a rigid libertarian who believed in reducing government’s commitments to public services. As government at the federal and state level cut its public services, turning away from promises that had been in place since the New Deal, voters wondered what good all that money spent on the homeless had done. The poor and the homeless will always be with us, apparently, so why throw good money after bad? A new callousness had entered the land under Ronald Reagan and hung on through George Bush’s first term.

Peter Rossi’s *Down and Out in America: The Origins of Homelessness* provides the broadest conceptual framework for the discussion of the topic. Though his book grew out of research into the homeless of Chicago, Rossi sets the homeless in the wide context of governmental policies and national values. For him the condition of homelessness is not defined by a lack of shelter. “Homelessness is more properly viewed as the most aggravated state of a more prevalent problem, *extreme poverty*,” a broad, national malady.<sup>33</sup> Rossi concludes that “there are 4 to 7 million extremely poor people, persons whose income is below two-thirds of the official poverty line and who are thus at high risk of becoming homeless.”<sup>34</sup>

Rossi’s methodology leads him to examine the literature on homelessness, to weigh the statistics for implications, and to include history as well as case histories, collected through interviews. Like others

who write on the homeless, Rossi is determined to help the homeless and help prevent further homelessness. His conscious model is Orwell's *Down and Out in London and Paris*. "To be extremely poor or homeless is to be outside the American mainstream: it is unpleasant, unhealthful, and full of pain."<sup>35</sup>

Rossi's broader perspective makes it clear that homelessness was intensified but not invented during the Reagan-Bush era. In the nineteenth century, "transient homelessness became institutionalized and segregated in American cities."<sup>36</sup> Skid rows developed. In the latter quarter of the nineteenth century, homelessness became "masculinized," when migrant workers were mainly men. The peak for skid rows occurred in the early twentieth century, but the hobo and the tramp had largely disappeared in the 1940s. When the Great Depression increased homelessness, the New Deal's Federal Emergency Relief Administration set up camps for transients; then the Works Project Administration provided work for men. World War II reduced homelessness, as did postwar prosperity, but skid rows persisted. Urban renewal of the 1960s and 1970s reduced the housing stock for the poor in cities, but senior housing and Social Security increases protected much of the elderly population against homelessness. Thus, by the end of the 1970s, homelessness had taken on a new character: more people were literally homeless because many of them were less likely to be arrested for public drunkenness and drug abuse; also, deinstitutionalization swelled the ranks of street people. As a result of all these forces, the "new homeless" are far worse off than their earlier counterparts.

Homelessness is everywhere, no longer confined to skid rows. A larger percentage of women (25 percent) compose the homeless. Now there are many more homeless families on the street. (Young women of color with children are, here again, seen in disproportionate numbers among the homeless.) Many more young (under thirty) have joined the homeless, reflecting the "baby boom" swell. People of color are disproportionately represented in the homeless population. (In Chicago in 1980, blacks made up one third of the population, but they composed 53 percent of the homeless, while whites, who make up 55 percent of the general population, add up to 29 percent of the homeless. Similar patterns are reflected nationally.)<sup>37</sup>

The new homeless are poorer. Mental illness and drug and alcohol abuse drive people into homelessness, of course, but disability is the single dominant trait among the homeless. "The disabled are least able to negotiate successfully the labor and housing markets, to use the welfare system, or to obtain support from family, kin, and friends. Among the

destitute, the disabled are the most vulnerable.”<sup>38</sup> Rossi’s only optimistic comment on this condition is that advocates for the homeless are more visible and active than ever before. Rossi calls for a series of government-activist solutions—access to welfare, job training, subsidized housing—with little hope that they will be applied. “The presence of homeless persons is a disgrace in a society that claims to be humane.”<sup>39</sup>

## II

All right we are two nations.

—John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*

**P**ublic policies and the popular will combine in a high tide of indifference running against the homeless in the early 1990s. David Duke, running for governor of Louisiana and then for president of the United States, along with other political opportunists, railed against welfare recipients, in transparent code language for people of color, who disproportionately receive those services. Jonathan Kozol reminded us of the apologists of the new selfishness, like Charles Murray in *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980*, who argued that government policy should establish a “stigma” for single-parent families. Some are just more deserving than others, wrote Murray. “Why is it,” asked Kozol, “that views like these, so alien to our American tradition and Judea-Christian roots, should have received acceptance in this decade?”<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps America no longer *has* a Judeo-Christian consensus. Perhaps instead we have become a nation of warring tribal factions. Certainly the plight of the homeless, like other national maladies, cannot be understood without a discussion of national values. If a nation divided cannot long stand, then a nation at war over its identity and its beliefs cannot muster the will to confront its basic problems. A nation sundered cannot provide for its citizens what Franklin Roosevelt, in January 1941, called the Four Freedoms: freedom of speech and worship; freedom from want and fear.<sup>41</sup>

It is the contention of James Davison Hunter, in *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, that “the contemporary culture war is ultimately a struggle over national identity—*over the meaning of America*, who we have been in the past, who we are now, and perhaps most important, who we, as a nation, will aspire to become in the new millennium.”<sup>42</sup> Our current divisions may be the most serious crisis the nation has faced since the Civil War. We *are* two, if not more, nations.

Hunter’s study allows us to set such problems as the crisis in homelessness in the broadest context of the national debate over those

basic values which either join us as one people or set us at each other's throats. Of course, as mention of the Civil War reminds us, such divisions are not new in the republic. But the cultural discords of the nineteenth century, expressed most dramatically in religious hostilities, have apparently been healed or ignored by twentieth-century tolerance or indifference, so the suggestion that we are now undergoing an intense culture conflict may seem odd. However, Hunter's fine book makes it clear that this new cleavage cuts across the lines of old religious divisions, which had previously balanced out in the Judeo-Christian consensus of tolerance. At odds now are "*the impulse toward orthodoxy*" and "*the impulse toward progressivism*."<sup>43</sup> Conservative or moral traditionalists oppose liberals or moral progressives. This, then, is a struggle for power and a battle for the minds and heart of America.

Within the ranks of America's well-established religions, ideological differences have grown into orthodox and progressive wings, new alliances most dramatically seen in the debates over abortion, gender roles, and the definition of what constitutes a family. "The new ecumenism, then, represents the key institutional expression of the realignment of American public culture and, in turn, it provides the institutional battle lines for the contemporary culture war."<sup>44</sup>

The orthodox are, on the whole, politically conservative and the progressives are usually politically liberal, "but those tendencies . . . are merely the *political manifestations of still deeper commitments*. In reality orthodox and progressive alliances do not operate on the same plane of moral discourse. . . . What ultimately explains the realignment in America's public culture are *allegiances to different formulations and sources of moral authority*."<sup>45</sup> Each side tries to marginalize the other and claims for itself the mainstream American tradition. Each side is intransigent in its righteousness. Exacerbating the problem, media coverage tends to fix upon extremes rather than seek a center. "Among the weaknesses in both orthodox and progressivist alliances, then, is an implicit yet imperious disregard for the goal of a *common life*."<sup>46</sup>

For Thomas Byrne Edsall, writing with Mary D. Edsall, in *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*, America also lacks a common life. "The overlapping issues of race and taxes have permitted the Republican party to adapt the principles of conservatism to break the underlying class bias of the Roosevelt-Democratic coalition and to build a reconfigured voting majority in presidential elections." Race has been the wedge used by Republicans to divide the Democrats, with the issues surrounding taxes used to remind whites of the costs of Democratic "fairness" programs. All of this creates a

“chain reaction—a point of political combustion reached as a linked series of highly charged issues collide,” impacting, in particular, “two key swing voter groups, the white, European ethnics, often Catholic, voters in the North, and the lower-income southern white populists.”<sup>47</sup>

The Edsalls trace this political reorientation back to the radical, racist Dixiecrat movement of 1948; down through Barry Goldwater and George Wallace, who lost elections but showed that there were votes to be gained by playing the black card; finally, to the Southern strategy of Richard Nixon, a successful appeal to white Southerners (and Northern laborers), a solicitation then utilized by Reagan and Bush. This Republican strategy neutralized the Democrats by tying them to those who can be portrayed as “marginal interest groups”; Republicans claimed the center of the electorate—increasingly white, suburban, those concerned with “family values,” leaving the inner cities (sites of crimes increasingly identified with racial minorities) to the Democrats and their “special interest” groups—that is, those, in one way or another, without “traditional” family orientations. This chain reaction formed a potent political fusion, blowing Democrats out of presidential elections.

In their fine study, the Edsalls nicely depersonalize politics. They do not, for example, dwell on the persuasive powers of Ronald Reagan’s charisma, but rather they properly see him as the front man for a conservative movement that preceded and succeeded him. The Edsalls are less concerned with character and more concerned with context. As did Hunter in *Culture Wars*, the Edsalls see a nation at war over conflicting visions of itself: “one of individual initiative and equal opportunity (Republican), the other of welfare dependence and anti-egalitarian special preference (Democratic).”<sup>48</sup>

The Democratic Party has lost five of the last six presidential elections and in 1992 faces an electorate in which largely white suburban voters constitute a majority. But more is at stake than the future of the two-party system in presidential politics: “At stake is the American experiment itself, endangered by a rising tide of cynicism and alienation, and by basic uncertainties as to whether or not we are capable of transmitting a sense of inclusion and shared citizenship across an immense and diverse population.”<sup>49</sup>

Certainly there were other ways in which American divisions, the nation’s culture wars, were accounted for, some silly, some searching, but none that conveyed much cheer about the state of the nation. On the trivial pursuits side of analysis, P. J. O’Rourke’s *Parliament of Whores* ranks high. O’Rourke describes himself, in his subtitle, as “A Lone Humorist [Who] Attempts to Explain the Entire U.S. Government.” A fair example

of what he calls humor is captured in the title, set in screaming capital letters, to one of his book's sections: "OUR GOVERNMENT: WHAT THE FUCK DO THEY DO ALL DAY AND WHY DOES IT COST SO GODDAMN MUCH MONEY?"<sup>50</sup>

O'Rourke—a bush-league H. L. Mencken and Hunter S. Thompson clone, a *Rolling Stone* contributor who writes pop rock-and-roll prose, a wise guy who makes simplistic, sweeping, and cynical judgments—writes from a reactionary, antigovernment point of view. "I have only one belief about the political system, and that is this: God is a Republican and Santa Claus is a Democrat."<sup>51</sup> It is a sign of the times that O'Rourke's crude rants have made him a popular author. O'Rourke's guide to the national political system constitutes a parody of the kind of civics-and-government courses we once took in high school. "The three branches of government number considerably more than three and are not, in any sense, 'branches' since that would imply that there is something they are attached to besides self-aggrandizement and our pocketbooks."<sup>52</sup> It is difficult to see what O'Rourke is attached to beyond self-aggrandizement and the swelling of his own pocketbook by writing columns and books that pander to the fears and suspicions of Americans through his personification of government as the nation's problem rather than the potential source of solutions. *Parliament of Whores*, high atop the best-seller lists, exemplifies the dumbing-down of discourse in America.

Of course our high school civics-and-government classes do need considerable reconsideration if we want to understand how some things work in Washington and why others do not. Suzanne Garment's *Scandal: The Culture of Mistrust in American Politics*, also written from the politically conservative point of view, describes our "culture of mistrust" with more searching and sustained powers of analysis, though with her own curious conclusions.<sup>53</sup> Her book focuses on several political scandals of the recent decades, suggesting, amazingly enough, that most were much ado about very little, even Watergate! Scandals, Garment implies, are mere theatrical distractions from the true systemic problems of the republic. Scandals allow us to moralize rather than analyze. Sexual misadventure and money grabbing present characters of concupiscence and cupidity in a national soap opera—*The Days of Our Lives* as a political passion play. In the 1970s and 1980s in particular, "sex-related political scandals mesmerized us with their lurid dramas of passion and weakness, crime and punishment."<sup>54</sup> From revelations about John Kennedy's infidelities to John Tower's womanizing, sex scandals have titillated and distracted, but they have not enlightened the political process.

In the end, Garment is far more interested in attacking *scandal*



*mongers*, particularly the press, than in criticizing those who commit deeds that are the focus of scandals. The culture of mistrust for Garment rose out of the Vietnam War protest era, *not* out of any measurable increase in the corruption of its public officials. “Today’s ethics police practice scorched-earth warfare of a sort readily recognizable from Vietnam days,” days when antiwar activists, in Garment’s view, were indifferent to the pains caused by their protests.<sup>55</sup> Strangely, Garment writes as though there had been no just cause for protest over American involvement in Vietnam. For her, a post-Watergate press (which hides in the bushes to track Gary Hart’s sexual escapades) and the presence of special prosecutors (later renamed independent counsels) by Congress—as in the case of Raymond Donovan, Reagan’s secretary of Labor, who was investigated for six years with inconclusive results—have unleashed a new Puritanism in the land.

As Nicholas Lehman, writing about *Scandal* in *The New Republic*, rightly says, for Garment “the real issue is not ethics, but ideology. She sees the rise of ethics scandals in the 1970s as a byproduct of the rise of an elite of left-wing journalists, intellectuals, lawyers, and bureaucrats, who shared a ‘conviction that the people governing this country were fundamentally illegitimate in their claims to authority and criminal in their behavior.’”<sup>56</sup> No doubt, as she further argues, some of those subject to scandalous revelations were indeed publicized by disgruntled liberals who were motivated to attack Nixon, Reagan, and Bush because Republicans so firmly held control of the White House. However, it does not necessarily follow from this, as Garment seems to imply—as it did not follow from Richard Nixon’s assertion that he was not a crook—that occasions worthy of scandal do not occur (or that Richard Nixon was not a crook). That is, as paranoiacs sometimes have real enemies, scandalmongers often have real corruptions to uncover, as they did in revealing the secret maneuvers of Richard Nixon and Oliver North. In any case, whether the problem lies in those who perpetrate or publicize scandals in government, as these books by O’Rourke and Garment indicate, a divided America is reflected in an increasingly angry, disenfranchised, suspicious electorate.

However, E. J. Dionne, Jr., in *Why Americans Hate Politics*, offers a broader range of evidence and a far more searching analysis of the problem, which Jimmy Carter once called our national malaise. Dionne examines thirty years of political history in “an attempt to trace how we got here and why liberalism and conservatism have become obstacles to a healthy political life.”<sup>57</sup> America, for Dionne, is suffering from “a false polarization” of issues, a division shaped during the 1960s in the argument

between liberals and conservatives. With the decline of a “politics of remedy” and an increasingly alienated electorate—made up of those who think individually rather than those who identify with groups—campaign issues have become polarized.<sup>58</sup> Like Hunter in *Culture Wars*, Dionne in *Why Americans Hate Politics* sees a divided land. “War” and “hate” have now become the revealing terms in which we discuss the state of the nation.

The New Left “polarized American life around false issues and false choices. In ways it did not intend, the New Left also played a decisive role in undermining liberalism’s influence on American life.” Also: “Conservatives need a politics of false choices. . . . Conservatism badly needs the failed old liberalism; without such an enemy, conservatism could fall apart.”<sup>59</sup> Dionne, in his plague-upon-both-houses approach, seeks a point of resolution beyond these simplistic alternatives. At his best he reconceptualizes polarizing political rhetoric and urges each side to heed the other seriously, as he does when he talks about the Republicans’ exploitations of “traditional values” during the 1988 presidential campaign. “Michael Dukakis spoke contemptuously of the Republicans’ campaign of ‘flags and furloughs.’ But flags and furloughs spoke precisely to the doubts that many Americans developed about liberalism from 1968 onward. In the eyes of many of their traditional supporters liberal Democrats seemed to oppose the personal disciplines—of family and tough law enforcement, of community values and patriotism—that average citizens, no less than neoconservative intellectuals, saw as essential to holding society together.”<sup>60</sup>

In his drive to discover a new consensus, Dionne brings a rare understanding of the noble motives of those who hold conflicting positions; this is apparent in his discussion of the debate over abortion. “Prolife and prochoice women had different values; they therefore made different life choices; and they thus developed different resources and different economic interests. In the abortion debate, each side defends not only a heartfelt position on a difficult moral question but also an entire way of life. Thus did a war over values become a class war. The class war was made even more bitter by a religious war, since very religious people were much more opposed to abortion, on the whole, than others.”<sup>61</sup> So, then, reasonable Americans disagree because they live in universes of quite different values. The result is a society divided by uncivil warfare.

In his final chapter, “The Politics of the Restive Majority: Healing Public Life in the Nineties,” Dionne recaps and turns to solutions. His study demonstrates the false alternatives offered by the Left and the Right. As a result of being forced to decide between these stark options, the

American electorate has soured on the political process. What is needed is a will to compromise and a more complex vision of *problems*, which can be solved, not issues, which merely position candidates in their debates. Thus the book takes a positive turn, as it of necessity must, lest Dionne join those who perpetuate the politics of exaggerated options.

But his optimism seems unfounded, given the more than three hundred pages of detailed discussion of willful misrepresentations that precede his final chapter. His solutions, as well, are unconvincing, for they assume good will and a high-minded commitment to the public good on both sides of the debate, qualities nowhere else in evidence in the text. “For both the Sixties Left and the Eighties Right, politics became the arena in which moral and ethical questions could be settled once and for all.”<sup>62</sup> Both sides were driven by a moralism that blinded each faction to complex realities and cheapened the motives of their opponents. Real problems—the loss of industry to Japan and Germany, the declining standard of living for Americans, increased racism, neglect of the nation’s children, an inadequate health care system, and the increasing presence of the homeless—were not dealt with; such problems of public policy were acknowledged but not debated in the 1988 presidential campaign. (Before the New Hampshire primaries in 1988, nearly all the Democratic presidential candidates accompanied Boston’s mayor, Raymond L. Flynn, to a city-run shelter for the homeless. Before the New Hampshire primaries of 1992, though invited by Flynn, no Democratic candidates came.)<sup>63</sup> “Thus, when Americans say that politics has nothing to do with what really matters, they are largely right. . . . Americans hate politics as it is now practiced because we have lost all sense of the public good.”<sup>64</sup> This, then, is Dionne’s call to common citizenship, for “a nation that hates politics will not long survive as a democracy.”<sup>65</sup>

“America has traveled a long way from the days of the late 1940s when Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., proclaimed his *Vital Center*,” adds Dionne. “America, as it turned out, had a lot of fighting to do over the fundamentals, from war and peace to race and feminism.”<sup>66</sup> No one realizes this better than Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., whose brief book *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* eloquently described and analyzed the bifurcated state of the nation in 1991. Schlesinger’s impassioned essay begins and ends with the question posed by Hector St. John de Crevecoeur in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782): “What then is the American, this new man?” Schlesinger celebrates Crevecoeur’s answer: “The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles. . . . *Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.*”<sup>67</sup> The purpose of Schlesinger’s essay, then, is to

reaffirm the commitment to the idea of America, as a whole—unity through the “pursuit of happiness” by individuals rather than groups. Crèvecoeur’s words constitute “still a good answer—still the best hope.”<sup>68</sup>

To develop his thesis about the persistent promise of American life, Schlesinger asks for one rhetorical concession. In responding to Crèvecoeur’s question about “a new man,” Schlesinger suggests “twentieth century readers must overlook eighteenth-century male obliviousness to the existence of women.”<sup>69</sup> Of course, it is just this that many modern readers will *not* willingly “overlook.” Feminists are more likely to heed Abigail Adams’s injunction to her husband John, who was helping to frame the Constitution, to “remember the ladies.” However, we should recall that she was urging that the framers include women in the polity of the republic, not that they receive preferential treatment. Still, Schlesinger’s argument flies in the face of much politically correct thinking, which emphasizes gender, race, ethnic, and other minority exploitation from the American consensus. But Schlesinger holds that such concerns, while understandable in a nation that has exploited and suppressed, by groups, its citizens, has gone too far, that too many Americans have lost a sense of national identity and purpose: what Gunnar Myrdal called the American Creed of democratic union of diverse peoples.<sup>70</sup>

Franklin Roosevelt, rallying patriotism in 1943, said, “Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race and ancestry. A good American is one who is loyal to this country and to our creed of liberty and democracy.” Schlesinger grants that these ideals in practice “applied only to white people,” yet, sustaining his dialectical mode of argument, he reminds us, as Myrdal has previously pointed out, that these ideals of the “American Creed,” however compromised, were the basis of hope for exploited and disadvantaged peoples, the “huddled masses” who came to America in search of a new life.<sup>71</sup> Now conflicts over civil rights—anew emphasis on racial, gender, ethnic, and other minority rights—have turned many Americans away from this bonding creed. A new interest in roots, racial and ethnic pride, has developed. “The rising cult of ethnicity was a symptom of decreasing confidence in the American future.” For Schlesinger, the new “cult” of ethnicity “threatens to become a counter-revolution against the original theory of America as ‘one people,’ a common culture, a single nation.”<sup>72</sup>

Schlesinger reminds us that, despite our newfound nativism and ethnocentrism, “for better or for worse, American history has been shaped more than anything else by British tradition and culture.”<sup>73</sup> He singles out the Irish and the Jews as representative groups who first suffered in

America but finally succeeded. Schlesinger sympathizes with the special condition of American blacks—who did not come to America willingly, who have been here longer than the Irish and the Jews, and who have been continuously stigmatized and oppressed—but he believes that some blacks have gone too far in advocating “Afrocentricity.” Schlesinger is particularly critical of the revisions made in the New York State school system’s history curriculum, which “takes no interest in the problem of holding a diverse republic together. Its impact is rather to sanction and deepen racial tensions.”<sup>74</sup> Schlesinger believes that American blacks, like other groups before them, are inventing a flattering history to compensate for injustices inflicted on them. But this is “*bad* history.”<sup>75</sup> “Let us by all means teach black history, African history, woman’s history, Hispanic history, Asian history. But let us teach them as history, not as filiopietistic commemoration.”<sup>76</sup>

Schlesinger characterizes the proponents of multiculturalism as self-serving chauvinists, as distorters of the historical record, as cultural fragmenters who undermine the cohesive idea of “America” as one people. “Multicultural zealots reject as hegemonic the notion of a shared commitment to common ideals. How far the discourse has come from Crèvecoeur’s ‘new race,’ from Tocqueville’s civic participation, from Emerson’s ‘smelting pot,’ from Bryce’s ‘amazing solvent,’ from Myrdal’s ‘American Creed!’”<sup>77</sup> For Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who once described America’s “vital center,” Crèvecoeur’s uniting vision is still vivid: “Americanization has not lost its charms.”<sup>78</sup>

For most of the commentators on the state of the nation, though, America had lost far more than its charms: it had lost its vital center of coherence and cohesion. “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” Seventy years after Yeats wrote those lines, in response to an Ireland in a time of civil war, America too seemed to be “turning and turning in the widening gyre.”<sup>79</sup>

### III

**D**uring a cold snap in early December, I was again rushing past the Harvard Bookstore in Cambridge. I noticed that the window display on the homeless had been changed to an array of Christmas gift books, all on the subject of food. The *Joy of Cooking* and other texts offered bright covers with bright pictures of sumptuous repasts. The homeless beggar who had stationed himself on the ground beneath that display window in November was also gone. Had he moved to a better location for donations? Had he retreated from the cold into a shelter? Was he dead? Who knew? Who, in

America, cared? On Christmas Day 1991, the *New York Times* called attention to “the virtual disappearance of homelessness from the political debate” of the 1992 election campaigns. With the worsening economic conditions of the nation, callousness toward the homeless, whose number is increasing at an alarming rate, was also increasing at an alarming rate.<sup>80</sup>

Yet many Americans *do* care. Just before Christmas, writing in the *New York Times*, Anna Quindlen called her readers’ attention to one affluent New Yorker, Harold Brown, a vice president in futures and options at Dean Witter, who grew so distressed at the sight of the homeless who were huddled on subway grates for warmth that he and his wife did something about it. They opened a shelter in a church basement in Queens. Some, like the Browns, do what they can. Others, like Quindlen, testify.

The important thing to remember about Christmas is not closing time at Macy’s; it is the *story* of a pregnant woman and her husband who turned up looking for a bed for what some still think was the most transformative event in history and were told to get lost. The irony of the fact that there is no room at the inn for millions in this country is potent at this time.<sup>81</sup>

Despite such heroic actions and such eloquent testimonies, the irony is lost on our leaders. As Lynne Sharon Schwartz put it, the government “is no one’s keeper but its own.” As America has further divided against itself, the homeless have been largely shut out of the shining city upon a hill.

## Notes

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  22. *Ibid.*, 11.
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  26. Kozol, *Rachel*, 175.
  27. Kathleen Hirsch, *Songs from the Alley* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), ix.
  28. *Ibid.*, 64.
  29. John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," in Perry Miller, ed., *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry* (New York: Anchor Books, 1956), 83.
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  31. *Ibid.*, 403.
  32. *Ibid.*, 205.
  33. Peter Rossi, *Down and Out in America: The Origins of Homelessness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 8.
  34. *Ibid.*, 81.
  35. *Ibid.*, ix.
  36. *Ibid.*, 20.
  37. *Ibid.*, 124.
  38. *Ibid.*, 195.
  39. *Ibid.*, 210.
  40. Kozol, *Rachel*, 137. Charles Murray published a May 1985 essay in *Commentary* titled "Helping the Poor: A Few Modest Proposals," a title which alludes to Swift, but takes the narrator of Swift's "A Modest Proposal"—who

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81. Anna Quindlen, "Room at the Inn," *New York Times*, December 11, 1991, A-27.