

Talk Radio, Bogosian's previous play, or less diverse than his previous one-man shows, that may be because it is a considerably more ambitious effort, involving nine mouths rather than one. He has always shown a remarkable capacity to encapsulate cultural moments through single-character portraits in assorted places. He is now attempting to stretch his canvas by focusing on numerous fig-

ures in a single landscape. That is an important and necessary development for his art. And his vision of the depressed suburban circumstances that foster violence and racism is often searching and true. There is a potentially strong, gritty playwright here, another David Mamet or David Rabe, who deserves a warm salute despite the structural imperfections of his play. •

Helter Shelter

BY DEBORAH STONE

The Homeless by Christopher Jencks

(Harvard University Press, 161 pp., \$17.95)

Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women by Elliott Liebow

(The Free Press, 339 pp., \$24.95)

Not long ago, a story in my hometown newspaper caught my eye: "Family Homeless After Sunday Fire." Without reading another word, I knew that what people mean by homelessness in rural New Hampshire is not what they mean by it in cities, or what is meant by the authors of the now large literature on homelessness. Sure enough, the family in question was staying at a local motel (at whose expense the article doesn't say), townspeople were supplying them with clothes and had started a fund, and teachers at the children's school were collecting household goods, food and money to get this family back on its feet.

This family was indeed homeless in the sense that they had no place to live. Like many of the homeless described in scholarly literature, they could not move in with their adult children, because (according to the newspaper) those children either lived out of the state or didn't have enough room. Unlike the urban homeless, though, this family had a community that wanted to keep them and that mobilized an intensive social aid effort.

The juxtaposition of this family with the urban homeless takes one quickly to the quandary at the heart of the homelessness literature. What is homelessness, anyway? Christopher Jencks and Elliott Liebow, social scientists both, mean very different things by the question. For Jencks, whose book begins with a section

titled "The Numbers," the question means something like, "How does one know whom to count as homeless?" For Liebow, whose first section is called "Problems in Living," the question means, "What is it like to be homeless?"

Jencks's book is an incisive and succinct digest of the policy literature on homelessness; indeed, Jencks began the book as a review essay for *The New York Review of Books*, which recently published a substantially similar version. Liebow's is a down-and-dirty portrait of homelessness, a sort of documentary that is part raw tape recording, part analytical montage, assembled from years of hanging out at three shelters for homeless single women in and around Washington, D.C. From Jencks one gets a synthetic overview of the problem—the size of the population (about 350,000 in an average week, he says); a rough sense of its composition (about 18 percent are families with children, about one-third are mentally ill and about one-third of the single adults are probably crack users); and an appreciation of how unemployment, drugs, mental illness and deinstitutionalization, housing prices and policies and the decline of marriage have all contributed to the increase in homelessness.

Jencks sets himself the task of estimating how much homelessness increased in the 1980s, why it increased and what can be done to reduce it. To measure an increase, one has to know what one is counting, and so Jencks begins with a fascinating reflection on what counts as

a home. Before 1960 having a home apparently meant having a family. A person who lived alone and seldom saw his kin was deemed homeless. (One can't help but think of Robert Frost's line, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in.") After 1960, when living alone and away from family had become more common, a homeless person was someone with no fixed address. After 1980 our definition became, as Jencks puts it, less demanding. A home is any place intended for sleeping, and the homeless are those who have no private sleeping space of their own.

Even this minimalist definition raises a host of almost philosophical questions. People who sleep in doorways and bus stops, places not intended for sleeping, should just as clearly be counted as homeless. But what about those who sleep in shelters, places most definitely intended as sleeping quarters, albeit for the homeless? What about those who live in welfare hotels at the expense of social welfare agencies, whose entitlement to the hotel rooms is based entirely on their homelessness? What about people in mental institutions, jails and detox centers who have no other place to sleep when they get out? What about people doubled up in other people's homes, whose right to stay rests precariously on the whims of their hosts? What about children in foster care, many of whom, Jencks says, are far more homeless than kids in shelters? ("We were wards of the state," a homeless woman told Liebow about her own childhood in foster care. "Imagine belonging to the state? What the hell is that? How can you belong to something so big and vague? Can you come home to the state? Can it hold you and make you feel safe?")

Why, Jencks wonders, do we generally consider people in shelters and welfare hotels as homeless, but not people in various other institutions, people doubled up or children in foster care?

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Jencks knows the answer: "we" count as homeless only the "visible homeless—people whose presence on the streets upsets the more prosperous classes." Here is the first of many moments of political equivocation that make this book puzzling: Jencks pointedly un-masks the power relations behind the scientific construction of the concept of homelessness, yet on the same page buys in to that scientific status quo by announcing his intention to count only "the people whose existence most worries the public," the people on the streets and in shelters and welfare hotels.

By coming to that decision so quickly, Jencks cuts short a worthwhile analysis of homelessness. How much is homelessness about shelter and how much is it about relationships? Frost managed to get the duality just right—home entails both a "there" and a "they." The women Liebow studied tended to place a lot of emphasis on relationships in their accounts of why they are homeless. "If I had friends, would I be living in a shelter?" asked one. In a revealing debate about who was really homeless, Louise claimed that status for herself exclusively:

"What about Betty?"

"Betty has relatives. She has a daughter."

"But her daughter won't let her live with them."

"That's her own fault," said Louise. "She would have had a home if she'd acted differently. Like Judy. Judy isn't homeless. She just can't get along with her mother."

A social scientist who is interested in counting almost has to commit himself to focusing on shelter instead of relationships, because different types of shelters make for nice, discrete, countable units. To define home even partly as having certain kinds of relationships requires one to engage in deep, extended conversations and to observe phenomena that don't stay within neat boundaries. To define and understand home relationally, one has to engage in relationships.

Jencks's and Liebow's books represent the great divide in contemporary social science, a divide that recapitulates the split between science and art described decades ago by C.P. Snow as "two cultures." The split is now sometimes simplistically labeled quantitative vs. qualitative knowledge, but it goes much deeper than method. Jencks came to know homelessness by looking at data at least three times removed from himself. He reanalyzed surveys, for example, that were organized by other researchers, such as Peter Rossi and Martha Burt, who themselves never walked the streets

counting homeless people but paid others to do it or borrowed data from government agencies, who in turn acquired their data from questionnaires filled out by shelter managers or census-takers. Liebow came to know homelessness by getting steeped in it, observing, acting as volunteer staff, befriending homeless women, helping them with their tasks of living and often committing the cardinal sin of science—changing how his "subjects" thought and behaved by his own presence, talk and actions.

In choosing their methods, social scientists also choose assumptions about and conceptions of the thing they are studying. Jencks was guaranteed to write a book mostly about physical living places because that's what is countable. And because he started with a concept of home as a sleeping place, his work necessarily turned out to be about where people spend the eight or so hours a day they are inert, rather than about how people spend their time when they are awake, the time most of us think of as our living time. Liebow was guaranteed to write a book mostly about how homeless people think and live because that's what you learn in relationships, and relationships happen when people are awake. For Liebow's subjects, who are by definition already in shelters, the key problem is not finding a place to sleep, but rather how to kill time during the day, with no job and no place to go, and how to keep going in the face of profound boredom.

In the end, a relational concept of home may be truer to human experience and even more desirable as a guiding light for policy, but shelter is much easier to provide than homelike relationships. In that sense, Jencks has chosen a concept that makes the homelessness problem more amenable to policy response, while Liebow has chosen one that will almost certainly show up any policy effort as deficient.

Why, one might ask, does anyone want to know the number of homeless people? Why does it matter that we have an accurate count? A good count is necessary for calculating how much it might cost to reduce the number of homeless people. A good count and a good method of counting can enable us to make comparisons over time, to tell whether the problem is getting worse, or whether remedial policies are working. Used intelligently in conjunction with other measures, such as indicators of housing stock or unemployment, good counts can help determine the causes of the problem.

Jencks uses counts in all these ways, with nuance and exceptional clarity,

though it is fair to say that most of his analyses of the causes of homelessness became part of the standard wisdom about three years ago. (John DiIulio came to many of the same conclusions in a 1991 review essay in these very pages.) The increase in homelessness in the '80s was not caused by a Reagan administration cutback in federal housing; Reagan lowered appropriations for future construction, but outlays for public housing actually increased during his term. There was, however, a sudden decline in single-room-occupancy hotels, caused in part by zealous application of local building codes and in part by urban renewal. Some homelessness was caused by deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, but even more resulted from the failure of state and local governments to provide community-based housing and other assistance to people who earlier would have been in hospitals. Much of homelessness seems to be caused, too, by a decline in unskilled jobs that pay a living wage.

If the findings aren't particularly new, why all the numerical analysis? Why go to all the effort of disputing the advocates' numbers of 1 to 3 million homeless people, as Jencks does, when the best social science had already reduced the count to something very close to Jencks's estimate of 350,000? (In 1989 Peter Rossi put the number at about 300,000.) Jencks wants to replace what he calls political numbers with scientific numbers. He faults the late Mitch Snyder for using big numbers politically and for lacking any scientific basis for his counts of 2 million to 3 million. Yet, Jencks acknowledges, since the scientific counts are based on the number of homeless people on streets and in shelters on any one night, the number of people who are homeless at some point during a year might well be over 1 million—he guesses there were about 1.2 million per year during the late 1980s—and that's not counting the people who avoid shelters, soup kitchens and other gathering places where they would be counted. So here is another puzzle: Why does Jencks want to pick a fight with Mitch Snyder and his ilk?

Jencks knows that advocates use big numbers to provoke a social response, and that "if you want to hold the attention of the mass media, breaking the 'million barrier' is important." He appears to want a political response to homelessness—he calls for one in the last chapter—but he is not willing to use big numbers or to leave others' political numbers alone. (Small numbers could be used to argue for the tractability of a problem—for example, to persuade

politicians that it won't cost so much after all to house the homeless—but this is not an argument Jencks makes.) How, then, does he, or anyone who wants to replace political numbers with scientific numbers, motivate a political response? He must know that his relatively small numbers might well be used to justify complacency. Such ambivalence pervades the book.

When big numbers aren't available to motivate political action, and even when they are, blame is a very good vehicle. Thus, in virtually every social policy issue, there is a struggle over whether to blame the victims themselves for their predicament or to blame somebody or something else. Are people homeless because they made bad choices or should we blame politicians, policies, programs and impersonal economic forces? Obviously, how we answer these questions will determine what we think we ought to do to alleviate homelessness, so these are more than academic exercises.

Every social scientist knows that to argue for individual behavior as the central cause of a social problem is to undermine support for political action. Jencks, Liebow and most social scientists think homelessness has both individual and structural causes. Jencks is more likely to see individual choice and character as causal factors in homelessness. Liebow, while not denying agency to homeless women, is more attentive to the ways in which poor women are genuinely powerless and therefore less likely to perceive and have real choices.

Here the two books illustrate another aspect of the great divide in contemporary social science. On one side are those who think there is a more or less universal rationality to the human psyche. We can explain and predict people's behavior by comparing their decisions to a universal standard of rationality, and we can find that standard by looking inside ourselves at how we think. On the other side are those who believe that power structures shape whether, and to what degree, people conceive of their lives in terms of decisions, and who believe that to understand anyone's internal thought processes, we need to look inside their particular situations.

Jencks occasionally infers individual preferences and values from aggregate data, such as figures on where people sleep, a kind of inference that depends on an assumption of universal rationality. Liebow assumes that what might appear irrational or capricious to a well-housed middle-class person might be quite rational for a homeless woman, if only we could see all the parameters of

her choice. Many women are homeless, he thinks, precisely because women are the weakest members of working- and lower-class families and the most likely to be pushed out when conditions get rough. Even more striking, Liebow says that many homeless people simply cannot and do not order their lives around decisions: "You can't decide what to do [when you leave the shelter in the morning] because it doesn't matter what you do. You're not needed anywhere, not wanted anywhere and not expected anywhere. Nobody cares what you do."

While assessing the contributions of crack addiction to the problem of homelessness, Jencks constructs this purely

economic portrait of a homeless person's choice:

A bed in a New York or Chicago cubicle hotel currently costs about \$8 a night. Most people who have enough money to buy substantial amounts of crack could therefore afford to rent a cubicle instead. A large fraction of the single adults in the New York shelters who test positive for cocaine presumably think that a crack high, however brief, is worth more than a scuzzy cubicle.

That is a big presumption about how homeless people think, and Jencks can make it only by first narrowing the homeless person's needs and alternatives to a roof and some crack.

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Almost any three pages from Liebow's book speak to the wrongness of Jencks's reduction. One of the central problems for single homeless women is storage—where to keep their belongings. Some of their belongings are mementos from the past, like photos or letters, that keep a woman connected to family, personal history and her own sense of who she is. Other belongings are things that will be useful in the future when she becomes a homemaker once again—things like pots and pans and linens—and these things, utterly useless now, sustain a woman's hopes and ambitions for escaping homelessness. Liebow's acquaintances sometimes pay \$50 to \$150 per month for storage, and are often preoccupied with raising the cash to meet these bills, as well as finding places for their belongings when they can no longer pay for commercial storage. It is as if these women, lacking a home for themselves, devote their energies to making a home for their possessions instead.

Storage, so central to homeless people's life choices, doesn't figure in Jencks's calculus. He doesn't even seem to know it's in their budgets, though his failure to account for the importance of storage is puzzling since Liebow's book is one of those he reviewed for *The New York Review of Books*. Finding out what is in people's mental and real budgets is something a social scientist ought to do before constructing a picture of their choices and making inferences about their values from observations of their behavior. Jencks is right when he says that what people are willing to spend on rent depends on "how much they value shelter relative to other things and how adept they are at getting other things free." But he goes astray when he includes among "other things" only the things a middle-class person can imagine homeless people worrying about: food, clothing, medical care, transportation and stimulants. What if they crave some belongings and a place to store them?

Liebow tells of a woman who wouldn't accept a higher-paying job because her current employer allowed her to store her things in the workplace attic. The new job would have paid enough so that she could easily afford commercial storage, but she wouldn't have had ready access to her belongings. He tells of shelter residents who treat themselves to a night in a motel and a bottle of wine once a month. Such expenditures might seem foolhardy and shortsighted to us, but, Liebow notes, if your wages are so small you can't hope to save enough to move out, it doesn't much matter how

you spend your money.

Jencks is quite sure that "a significant proportion of today's homeless will spend any additional cash they receive on drugs and alcohol." He says he has no idea how many homeless receive their drugs for free or in exchange for menial labor, and he says we badly need more reliable information on how the homeless get their money and spend it. But the only way to get that information is to "spend endless hours with the homeless," and that is "disagreeable" and only for the "adventurous." We can certainly respect anybody's choice not to do field research with the homeless, but we must also be on guard for stereotyped conclusions that result from a deliberate decision to exclude certain forms of knowledge.

A prominent feature of the rational-choice brand of social science is its predilection for casting all life experiences as choices. If people are free to choose, they can also be held to account for the results of their choices. Without leaning explicitly on these underlying assumptions about choice, Jencks nevertheless uses them. One of his major arguments is that the decline of marriage played a major role in the increase of homelessness among women and children in the 1980s. "It is the fact that unskilled women not only married less but continued to have children that pushed more of them in the streets." This subtle formulation of women's agency in causing homelessness—their decisions not to marry yet to have children—is more explicit in *The New York Review of Books* version:

Few unskilled women can earn enough to support a family on their own. For many, therefore, the choices are stark. They could work, refrain from having children and barely avoid poverty, or they could not work, have children, collect welfare and live in extreme poverty. Many became mothers even though this meant extreme poverty.

Do women themselves really view their worlds and their lives this way? Liebow's portrait of women's relationships to their families, especially to their children, suggests otherwise. Having children seems to be a form of wealth, something that gives richness to a woman's life no matter how down and out she is. For homeless women with children, ties to their kids are their most intense relationships, their most preoccupying concerns and their major motivation for finding a permanent place to live. Young or grown, nearby or far away, dead or alive, children are so powerful in mothers' emotional lives that Liebow refers to them as family "ghosts."

With some sense of the emotional meaning of children to women, it is harder to imagine that unskilled women, any more than other women, contemplate their futures as such a stark choice between economic well-being and having children. For most women, poor or rich, having children is not so much a decision as something you do in life. Women of any economic class no doubt bring many considerations into their thoughts about having children, but few probably perceive the whole enterprise as quite the cost-benefit calculus that Jencks suggests. Framing childbearing by unskilled women as a conscious trade-off with economic well-being verges on casting homeless women as makers of their own cots.

Though Liebow did not set out to write a call to political action, his book illustrates another form such calls can take. Without numbers, without crisis-mongering, without blame-heaping, simple description can draw people in and rouse their passions. Liebow's descriptions are not undigested; they are sorted and packaged to answer questions about homelessness and to reveal both individual experience and the operation of the homelessness "system." But how to get from description to prescription? Liebow's call to action in the last chapter is at once more grounded in the reality of homeless people's everyday lives and yet more vague and underdeveloped. Designing policy is not what ethnographers do, but still one wishes Liebow had been matched with a designer who could translate his thick knowledge into a list of concrete dos and don'ts. For example, how might we provide storage facilities in a way that gives homeless people access to their belongings without depleting their potential savings and without locking them in low-paying jobs?

Not surprisingly, both books call for housing as the most important first step. Both would improve the quality of shelters as a temporary solution to the lack of affordable housing. While Jencks is not optimistic that shelters can be made orderly, safe and still attractive to users, Liebow thinks shelters can work well if we learn from the users what qualities make shelters more habitable. The women he studied had definite preferences, and generally favored one shelter that gave them most privacy. Privacy, in turn, was not so much a matter of separate space, but rather, a matter of how many questions the staff asked of residents and whether they "let you alone." Based on the shelters and women he observed, he believes shelters provided by nonprofit agencies are much more likely to be acceptable than

those run by municipalities or by private firms contracting with government.

Jencks, too, thinks homeless people value privacy above all else, but his concept of privacy is more physical than social. Because he believes that cubicle hotels would provide a kind of privacy the homeless value, Jencks can bring himself (though barely, one senses) to advance them as the most feasible way to increase the supply of temporary housing. As he describes them in Chicago in the 1950s, they housed people in

five foot by seven foot rooms, furnished with a bed, a chair, and a bare light bulb. Rooms were separated by wooden walls and ventilated through wire mesh near the ceiling and floor. Because of the wire mesh, such places were popularly known as cage hotels. They were always noisy, usually verminous, and frequently smelled of urine, vomit, or both.

"Nonetheless," he concludes, "almost all skid row residents preferred these hotels to the free missions run by evangelists." He offers precious little evidence for this alleged preference, save for a couple of sentences about how the cubicle hotels were cleaner than missions, afforded more privacy, allowed patrons more freedom to come and go, and didn't try to reform their character.

Jencks promotes a cleaner, more habitable version of cubicle hotels, probably located in nonresidential neighborhoods in order to be politically feasible. Otherwise the neighbors would protest. Liebow doesn't discuss the location or even the design of his ideal shelter, but no reading of his book would condone a form of housing that so isolates people from each other and from people with homes. He describes a shelter that was forced on a Maryland neighborhood in exchange for the government's promise to bus the men to and from the shelter, so they wouldn't roam the neighborhood. Just that simple description forces one to ask whether we have provided a home when we house people in places where no one else lives, or forbid them to walk to and from their proverbial front door. (Yes, if home is purely shelter; no, if home is also relationships.)

Both Jencks and Liebow think jobs are an important part of the solution to homelessness. Both exhort no one in particular to provide more jobs for unskilled workers at truly living wages. Jencks gets more specific with the idea of a publicly operated day-labor market. Some of his ideas about work have an uncanny resemblance to nineteenth-century British Poor Law. Jencks would first sort the homeless into categories of fam-

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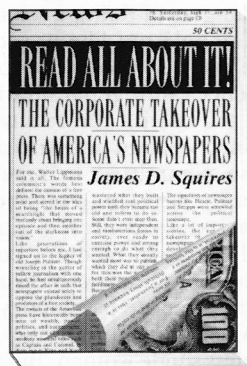
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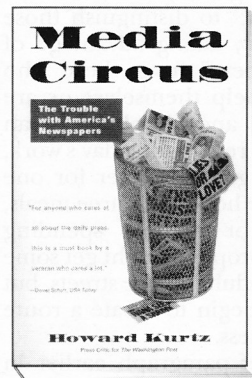
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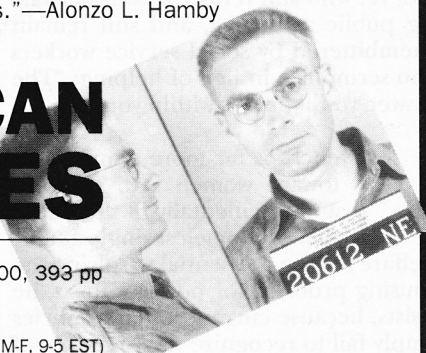
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ilies (really women with children), single adults capable of working, and the mentally and physically disabled. Those able to work should be subject to willingness-to-work tests through a public day-labor market. ("Offering everyone work is the most obvious test" to distinguish those who "act selfishly, taking advantage of those around them" from those who "either cannot help themselves or are trying to do so and simply need an opportunity.") In return for a day's work, a person would get a voucher for one night in a cubicle hotel and three meals, plus "a dollar or two for spending money." Such a proposal might get some homeless single adults off the streets, but surely wouldn't begin to create a route out of homelessness.

Despite a brief paragraph earlier in the book pooch-pooching the idea that a decline in the work ethic caused the increase in homelessness, Jencks's work-test proposal and the composite psychology that emerges from his portrait of homeless people's choices suggest that the trouble with a lot of homeless adults might be a deficiency of moral character. Liebow, by contrast, is adamant that a deficient work ethic is not the problem. He devotes a whole chapter to the many single homeless women who toil in dreary jobs, but for whom work simply can never be a way out of homelessness, both because the pay is so low and because jobs for homeless people are never secure. "It is not the worker but the workplace that undermines the work ethic," he concludes. "Unemployment undermines the work ethic. So do jobs that are dirty and hard and boring and low status and lead nowhere. But the real killers of the work ethic are those jobs that do not pay enough to live on." Liebow finds a certain moral fortitude in the women who go to work every day, come home to a shelter, sometimes pound the pavement looking for new jobs they know will not pay enough to get them out of the shelters, endure the disdain of co-workers and employment agencies simply because they are homeless, yet who still refuse to consider taking public assistance, and still remain unembittered by social service workers who sermonize in lieu of helping: "The answer, you'll find, is within you."

Jencks is far more sympathetic toward women with children and the mentally ill than he is to most homeless single adults. Welfare reform is essential to solving the housing problem for poor mothers, he insists, because current welfare policies simply fail to recognize the high cost of child care and the consequent economic value of caring for one's own children. He calls for expanded Earned Income

Tax Credits for the working poor, and for lower per-family subsidies in the HUD rent-subsidy program so that the same pot of money can help more families. He would also restore some of the former power of doctors to commit the mentally ill to institutions, and he would vastly increase the money and services available to the mentally ill and their families.

Jencks and Liebow offer two visions of social science, one emphasizing the science and the other emphasizing the social. We need them both. Jencks's book, widely acclaimed as exemplary hard-nosed social science, suggests as well the twin dangers of doing a science of "others," of people not like us social scientists. One can become so preoccupied with science and generalization that one loses touch with the reality of how others think, feel and act. And one can become so committed to science that one forgets or gets confused about the political messages conveyed along with any social research. Liebow's book reveals far more about homelessness and provides a more accurate psychology of homeless people, notwithstanding its focus on homeless single women. But for all the clarity of its political message, all the persuasiveness of its passionate engagement, it suggests limitations of

another kind—the difficulty of translating humanistic social science into next steps.

In small-town New Hampshire the next steps are easy. Neighbors and friends know what to do: they have rehearsed barn raisings, church suppers and other fund-raisers for two centuries. More importantly, when someone is made homeless, there are neighbors and friends who go into action. Liebow's book, while not in any sense nostalgic, is profoundly rooted in the same impulse that makes a newspaper in New Hampshire do a story on a homeless family. What Liebow is really up to is turning some homeless women into our neighbors and friends. He is not fool enough to seek a restoration of small communities as a solution to homelessness. He is smart enough to know that we—we who profess to be so disturbed by the sight of people sleeping on the sidewalk, we who hold the power to give people homes—we will not be moved to act unless we come to regard homeless people as our neighbors.

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The Troublemaker

BY C. VANN WOODWARD

Mencken: A Life by Fred Hobson

(Random House, 672 pp., \$35)

Another biography of Mencken? And this one seventy years after the first, with a couple of dozen books about him between the first and the last, most of them either biography or to some extent biographical. Not to mention Mencken's numerous memoirs and autobiographical works, the last of which was published only last year. What possible justification, then, for another biography in 1994, and this one the largest of all?

Fred Hobson, the new biographer, and the author of an earlier book on Mencken and the South, offers some persuasive answers to that question. Put briefly, Mencken planned it this way. He spent most of the ten years before his incapacitating stroke in 1948 "preparing to die," and much of that went into sort-

ing his enormous hoard of unpublished private papers and manuscripts so as to have them released posthumously by categories at specific intervals. In 1971 there was the opening of his correspondence over half a century with the major American writers of his time. In 1981 his most secret manuscripts were released, including the 2,100-page diary of the eighteen years before his stroke. In 1991, right on schedule, came still more unpublished manuscripts, including "My Life As Author and Editor," which was published last year.

Each of these decennial revelations, some more than others and the diary most of all, was the occasion of a Menckonian resurrection. If he had planned a literary life after death, he could hardly have done better. "A posthumous revival," as Hobson says, "is indeed an