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The New American Poverty

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defined—are closer to the reality of the physical and biological world of no-thing than words with sharp and clear boundaries. These fluid characteristics provide clinical power. The sharply bounded words “thing” and reflect a socially constructed world we think, especially so the constructed world favored by logical scientists.

Rosenthal is aware of metaphorical utilities of words. It would have made, I think, a better book if her precision in tracing root meanings and her ideological critique could have been balanced by a portion of the book devoted to the functions of the fluid uses of these words, as in love, in sweet nothings (read it as unbounded “no-thing”) whispered in a lover’s ear—and in clinical work.

The New American Poverty, by Michael Harrington. New York: Penguin Books, 1984, 271 pp., \$7.95 paper.

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In 1962, a book was published that awakened the social consciousness of many in this nation to the existence and plight of the poor and moved a young presidential hopeful to make poverty a major issue in his campaign. John Kennedy was assassinated before he could bring his idealism into fruition, but his successor, Lyndon Johnson, launched an attack on poverty that rivaled the New Deal in potential if not reality. The book was *The Other America*; the author was Michael Harrington.

Harrington’s most recent book, *The New American Poverty*, is not, by the author’s own account, “The Other America Revisited.” It is just as well. There is no knight to hear a call to arms. Camelot’s round table is gone and in its place sit the representatives of corporate America whose goal is maximizing profits for an increasingly entrenched elite. The poor, if considered at all, are an unnecessary expense. In Harrington’s words, his most recent book deals “not with an ignorant indifference that makes the poor invisible, but with a sophisticated and ‘scientific’ attempt to define them out of existence” (p. 7). The books differ in other respects as well.

The 1962 book can be described as “the shaming of America.” In it, Harrington described those Americans untouched by and outside of an affluent society. Hungry, without adequate housing, education and medical care, they lived, for the most part, in the hidden recesses of the richest country in the world. They included the unskilled workers, the migrant farmworkers, the aged poor, minorities, and society’s rejects: the disabled, the retarded, and the disturbed. That two nations, one affluent and the other impoverished, could live side by side in a society dedicated to the ideal of equality, was for Harrington not only unconscionable but unnecessary. The author was and is a writer with

considerable talent. Those who read that book walked, for a time, with the poor and were forced to recognize and acknowledge them.

Harrington's latest book can best be described as "the warning of America." In 1962, the author was like the child in the fable who pointed out that the Emperor was naked; this time the author is concerned with the Emperor himself. This time he points a finger not at the invisible poor, but at middle-class America itself, a class dangerously close to becoming part of that impoverished world. Harrington no longer shames us into sharing with our brothers and sisters; he is warning us that without drastic structural change, we will join that other America.

Harrington's warning and the arguments on which he bases his warning are reason enough to recommend the book. This is no mere political diatribe, no good-guy/bad-guy polemic, no play in journalistic histrionics. Rather, it is a thoughtful essay, well documented, on what has happened, is happening and can (will?) happen to the poor, the near poor, and those American workers who are only a job away from becoming poor. The author makes a political statement that I hope will be heard, but the book is more than a political statement.

Harrington presents a well-documented historical account, the best I have seen, of the events leading up to the War on Poverty, the beginning efforts and the problems encountered. The War on Poverty was not a failure. It never really began, for it was usurped by the war in Southeast Asia. This book substantiates with national figures what those of us who worked in the field at the local level saw. Given the small amount of money allocated, remarkable advances were made. Harrington exposes the cruel use of this "failure" by conservatives to make the poor a scapegoat for the economic crisis of the 1980s. Contrary to the conservative line, the "cheats" who drain our country economically are not welfare recipients; they are the very rich who hide behind tax shelters to amass huge profits. The first book described the poor; this book describes the techniques used by the elite to pit the middle-class against the poor and the poor against other poor, e.g., unskilled underemployed workers against undocumented aliens.

Regardless the new emphasis, the reader is once more transported into the homes of the poor, the streets on which the homeless loiter, and the shelters in which the displaced live or rather exist. Harrington is no arm chair philosopher; he walks the streets and he carries his readers with him. His coverage of the poor is probably not exhaustive, but it is explicit. He is certainly open to suggestions to other categories of poor. In his first book, he was sharply criticized for not including the most impoverished American minority, the Native Americans. His inclusion of this group in this book, and his description of his first encounter with them, should serve as an example to all of us who work with or plan programs for those in need that those in greatest need often touch our lives, yet remain unseen.

It is Harrington's description of the working class caught between a corporate world interested in profits not jobs and developing nations with a labor force willing to work for low wages that makes this book a must for both the practitioner and the activist. The notion of a middle-class that lives only one crisis away from being poor is not new. Billingsley (1968) introduced the term "precarious middle class" to compare blacks and whites in the 1960s. Harrington, however, is not comparing the middle-class with a minority; he is describing working-class America, the class that pays the greatest proportion of the nation's taxes. It is this category of people that must be included in the liberal's concern for fair play and as part of any coalition for social action.

In focusing on this group of people, however, Harrington ignores those who work in social service rather than production-oriented jobs. He points out, and rightly so, that closing a factory or plant results not only in personal tragedy, but in national loss in tax dollars as well. Much has been said in the liberal literature about the myth of the so-called safety net. Unfortunately, little attention has been given to those who worked in service agencies and lost their jobs as a consequence of the budget cuts. For many, such as senior aids or outreach workers, this job was their first step out of underemployment. For others for whom the job was an additional income in the family, loss of job meant return of a family to lower class status. As with the factory workers, the loss was both personal and national. These workers paid taxes. Too often we see social services as benefiting only those who receive the service, and ignore those who render it. Social programs create new jobs just as much as building factories. I would not expect the Reagan administration to admit this even if they recognized it, but I wish Harrington had.

My other disappointment with the book is not Harrington's fault. Despite the misery described in his first book, it was a joyous book, full of hope. *The New American Poverty* is different. This is a foreboding book. It is an important book, however, perhaps even more so than the earlier one. Harrington is an astute critic, not just of the conservative, but of the liberal view as well. Analyzing facts and figures for himself, he cuts through both the lies and myths of the right and the unrealistic dreams of the left. This book is a must for all who claim "to care."

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