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Book Review: THE VISIBLE POOR: HOMELESSNESS IN THE UNITED STATES by Joel Blau

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Book Review

THE VISIBLE POOR: HOMELESSNESS IN THE UNITED STATES *Joel Blau* New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. \$22.95 hardcover.

One might think that the plethora of recent articles and books on the many faces of homelessness had covered all of the bases. Not so. *The Visible Poor: Homelessness in the United States*, provides a refreshing departure from mainstream analysis of the poor, the homeless and the poorly housed. The book is a well documented examination of the multiple and complex causes of homelessness and an interesting analysis of the various public and private responses to several heterogeneous homeless populations.

The author, after establishing a position that the phenomena of homelessness cannot be meaningfully understood apart from political and economic forces in both public and private arenas, ventures into a more penetrating analysis. Well documented throughout, the discussion ranges from the social construction of homelessness as a political category to an historical overview of homelessness and to the recent reluctant welfare responses to homelessness found in the United States.

Blau examines the causes of homelessness in four chapters on the economics of poverty, social welfare and the principle of less eligibility, housing and mental illness. Here the author is careful to delineate the homeless as consisting of several complex and heterogeneous populations not necessarily socially or conceptually linked together. Indeed, Blau includes several instances of how politically motivated definitions of homelessness and various lumping strategies have shaped recent multi-level public and private responses and policy options.

In the middle chapters the author details reactions to homelessness including social movements to organize and politically involve homeless persons, legal cases and key court decisions and specific municipal responses from several cities throughout the United States.

Blau finds that cities tend to respond to locally relevant homeless problems based not only upon the number and distribution of homeless people (visibility) but just as importantly upon the local political system and the pervasive power of business communities to shape system wide municipal responses.

Two chapters are given over to the special problems of the homeless and the multiple audiences who have responded (or failed to respond) in New York City. To some this section of the book may seem like Big Apple overkill, but this reviewer found these chapters to be an impressive presentation of the relationship of homelessness to private business concerns, to political coalitions, and to public sector pressures. Lessons are there to be learned.

Examined next is the social policy response in which Blau characterizes the homeless as having been largely written off in the 1980's:

Instead of trying to ensure that the vast majority of poor people have a minimally adequate standard of living, it (social policy) has reduced social welfare funding and encouraged a form of national triage.

In the final chapter on human needs Blau lays his cards on the table by making a case for large scale changes in the welfare system, new funding for affordable housing, a higher minimum wage and other changes in a political and economic system currently dominated by the profit motive. Emphasis is given to macro political and economic reform rather than to solutions at the micro level. Joel Blau's wide ranging proposals to help resolve homelessness as a social problem will strike some as politically left leaning as there is no discussion of the success of the trickle-down economic policies of the past two administrations in Washington. On the other hand and in keeping with Blau's analysis, those leaning in the other direction would be unlikely to undertake serious macro analysis of homelessness to begin with.

The book is easy to read and, while well documented with forty pages of citations and notes, is intended for the general audience. It would be appropriate for graduate and undergraduate courses on social policy and social problems.

It will be welcomed by those seeking a single source for the study of homelessness and welfare responses. The book will likely make an important contribution to the discussion of long term solutions as Professor Blau makes a strong case for throwing more and larger lifelines what are quickly becoming America's boat people.

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