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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Vic George and Irving Howards. *Poverty Amidst Affluence: Britain and the United States*. Aldershot, England: Edward Elgar Publishers, 1991. \$15.95 papercover. (Obtainable from Ashgate Publishing, Old Post Road, Brookfield, VT 05036).

William W. Goldsmith and Edward J. Blakely. *Separate Societies: Poverty and Inequality in American Cities*. Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1992. \$49.95 hardcover, \$19.95 papercover.

Lawrence M. Mead. *The New Politics of Poverty: The Non-working Poor in America*. New York: Basic Books, 1992. \$23.00 hardcover.

The problem of poverty is once again receiving public attention. Images of riot-torn urban ghettos, homeless people, unemployed youth, the lack of medical care for poor children, dilapidated schools, and the prevalence of drugs and crime in poor neighborhoods pervade the news channels, reminding suburban middle-class America that a substantial proportion of the nation's population is living in conditions of appalling deprivation.

Although many believe that something must be done, there is disagreement about which policy options should be adopted. Many conservatives continue to believe in the Reaganite maxim that the curtailment of state intervention in economic and social affairs and the liberation of free market forces will, of itself, generate high rates of economic growth and bring prosperity for all. Liberals counter that a decade of radical right economic and social policies have in fact exacerbated the problem and that the culture of individualistic acquisitiveness which was so assiduously cultivated by the right has caused social devastation on a massive scale. While many liberals are critical of conventional anti-poverty programs, they retain a firm belief in the virtues of the welfare state. Others have sought to replace conventional poverty programs such as AFDC with new policy proposals. Currently, debates about the virtues of alternative approaches, ranging from asset based individual development ac-

counts to workfare and enterprise zones continue apace. These approaches offer very different perspectives on the poverty problem as well as policy prescriptions for its alleviation.

The three books reviewed here also embrace different policy approaches for the amelioration of poverty. These reflect the different academic backgrounds of their authors as well as their different ideological preferences.

George and Howards approach the problem from a conventional social administration perspective, emphasizing the role of income maintenance programs in addressing poverty. Noting that the incidence of poverty is highest among certain sections of the population such as the elderly, single women with children and other deprived groups, they discuss the merits of four programs which seek to enhance the welfare of low income families through income guarantees and transfers. These programs include the 'benefits as of right approach', 'negative income tax', the 'basic income scheme' and the 'start even' scheme. The discussion of these approaches is informative, providing a useful guide to recent thinking about the role of income programs in poverty alleviation. The book also contains a useful comparative account of the incidence of poverty in Britain and the United States, and of different theoretical approaches to causation.

As urban and regional planners, it is to be expected that Goldsmith and Blakely will approach the problem of poverty from a spatial perspective. However, despite their focus on urban conditions and particularly on poverty in the inner-cities, this is a wide ranging book which will appeal not only to planners and human geographers but to all concerned with the study of poverty. The book begins with a detailed examination of the incidence and distribution of poverty, appropriately linking an analysis of poverty to broader questions of social and economic inequality, employment, trade and economic development. Its broad focus, meticulous use of factual information and lively critical style makes for rewarding reading. The final chapter offers an excellent account of the role of national urban policies in poverty alleviation. These policies seek to mobilize large scale resources to restore the cities so that they can once again participate fully in the nation's prosperity.

Lawrence Mead's work has attracted widespread attention for its audacious view that poverty is the consequence of individual moral and personal inadequacy, and that the solution to the poverty problem lies in reforming the character of poor people. These views are forcefully re-stated in his new book which deals with the 'non-working poor'—those who are able to work, and for whom jobs are available but who choose not to work either out of defeatism or idleness.

Mead claims that the problem of poverty in America is overwhelmingly a problem of non-work. The majority of poor people do not work and they outnumber the working poor by a significant margin. The costs of non-work are considerable. In addition, many of the non-working poor subsist on government welfare programs contributing to the decline of the nation's economic prosperity and social well-being. Mead emphatically rejects the idea that poverty is a function of declining employment opportunities, de-industrialization and falling wages. Low pay does exist, particularly in the service sector, but many people in low paying jobs are not poor. In addition, the service sector has many highly paid executives and opportunities for advancement are good. The argument that there are many obstructive barriers to employment has also, he contends, been overstated. There plenty of jobs. The problem is that the non-working poor choose not to work or believe that they cannot work. The solution to poverty, he insists, lies in policies that require the poor to work. Although Mead predicts that policies of this kind will be branded as authoritarian, he describes them as 'authoritative' since they give direction, and help those who will not help themselves.

Mead's policy prescriptions are distilled from a wider set of arguments. He contends that social policy in the United States has traditionally been associated with progressive politics which have sought to apply the resources of the state to enhance opportunities for social and economic advancement. With the popularization of the view that racism, de-industrialization and similar problems have effectively obstructed opportunities, progressive social policies have been replaced with dependency policies. These policies have effectively trapped the poor in

conditions of perpetual deprivation, and need to be replaced with radical alternatives which reinstate the progressive ethos. A return to progressivism offers the only means of escape from the morass of dependency and deprivation.

Although Mead's conceptual framework seeks to package a simplistic analysis of the nature and causes of poverty within a sophisticated theoretical analysis, his approach can readily be reduced to a set of crude postulates which have their roots in popular puritan attitudes and in the harsh heritage of the poor laws. For Mead and his supporters, the Elizabethan injunction to 'set the poor to work' offers a quick and easy remedy.

It may be inconceivable that social policy will return to the heyday of the poor laws, but the appeal of Mead's ideas should not be underestimated. His previous fulminations against the poor have been well received in political circles, and among those constituencies that advocate the adoption of coercive policy prescriptions as a solution to a variety of social problems. In this austere climate, one can only speculate about the future of those who now struggle to survive in conditions of deprivation and despair.

James Midgley
Louisiana State University

Mickey Kaus, *The End of Equality*. New York: Basic Books, 1992. \$25 hardcover.

From 1981 to 1986 I lived on the west side of Baltimore. Half of the houses were boarded up; my neighbors were poor; the great majority were black; by far, the largest licit source of income was welfare. Callender Street was grim; violence was random; life was short. My neighborhood was what journalists, then sociologists, would come to call "underclass." In the Summer of 1992, I returned for two months, and the neighborhood had noticeably deteriorated—if that could have seemed possible.

What happened? In *The End of Ideology*, Mickey Kaus contends that "Money Liberalism" has destroyed the character and institution-building capacity of poor neighborhoods. By relying

almost solely on a cash-payments strategy to help the poor, liberals have inadvertently—and tragically—left many of the poor mired in the underclass. In place of income redistribution, Kaus argues for “Civic Liberalism,” social policies that promote mixing of the disparate classes of American culture. Instead of cashing the poor out of poverty through increased welfare payments, Kaus suggests limiting AFDC to a one-time, two year grant, at the end of which Mom would be offered a public service job. At this point Kaus would give those on welfare a simple choice: accept a public service job that would lift her family out of poverty—or get nothing.

The consequences of this would include more discretion on the part of poor women in becoming pregnant, enhanced status of welfare as perceived by taxpayers, and more constructive behaviors on the part of those dependant on public assistance. To his credit, Kaus understands that for his “work ethic state” to be credible, those who are poor and work must be advantaged more for their efforts, than those remaining on welfare. Hence, he is eager to supplement the wages and benefits of poor workers. Once expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit and day care for low-income workers is included, once job-training for welfare recipients is factored in,, once a compulsory national service is paid for, Kaus costs his Civic Liberal agenda at between \$43 and \$59 billion/year above existing appropriations.

Welfare state advocates will find Kaus’s treatment marginal at best, dystonic at worst. Poverty programs have lost significant value due to inflation; the poor are poorer; minority kids have borne the brunt of Reaganomics. Urban neighborhoods, in particular, have decayed. The solution to such egregious social injustice, goes the liberal litany, is more money for the poor. “Wrong!” counters Kaus, far better to encourage the poor to work their way out of poverty. Disconcerting though this may be, Kaus is right—and in ways even he may not appreciate.

Beneath the surface of his argument, Kaus has provided an analysis welfare advocates could put to good use. Fundamentally, Kaus analyzes the *social economy* of American culture, and he clearly favors the social. The primary error in liberal welfare state theory, he argues, has been in assuming that the economy is paramount—ipso facto, optimal solutions

to poverty are by way of cash payments. While recognizing that the cash payment strategy applies well for workers, it fails when applied to the non-working poor. For them, Kaus prefers social engineering.

What, it may fairly be asked, is more in the province of sociology and social welfare than social engineering? Yet, in adhering to Money Liberalism, students of social phenomena have largely conceded the welfare reform debate to economists. In proposing Civic Liberalism, Kaus in affect has invited social scientists back into the debate about poverty.

Accepting Kaus's invitation may take some practice given its atrophy among welfare advocates. Certainly it warrants imagination, considering the perverse way in which conservatives have manipulated "reciprocity" to punitive ends. Still, there is fertile ground to be tilled here. Some examples? Summer camperships for poor kids who do well in school, job guarantees for low-income high school grads, mandatory community service for human service professionals as a condition of licensure. . . The list goes on.

Thus, Kaus not only writes a provocative books about the relationship between work and welfare, but he also offers welfare professionals something for which they are particularly well-suited: the opportunity to get back into the welfare debate—smack dab in the middle of it.

Are welfare advocates up to it? I hope so—and I suspect my neighbors in west Baltimore do, too.

David Stoesz
San Diego State University

Joel F. Handler and Yeheskel Hasenfeld. *The Moral Construction of Poverty: Welfare Reform in America*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1991. \$48.00 hardcover; \$21.95 papercover.

Before discussing what *The Moral Construction of Poverty* is, it is important to look at what it's not. For one, it's not a light book written in a popular vein. This book is a complex and well-researched treatise on the causes, effects, and the social engineering designed to rectify poverty.

The Moral Construction of Poverty is divided into six chapters. In the first chapter, the authors lay out their theoretical framework for interpreting the activities and programs of the American welfare state. Handler and Hasenfeld argue that welfare policy can be understood as a composition of two prime ingredients—symbols and regulations. They conclude that while the concept of welfare is ambiguous (a function of the myth and ceremony that make up its symbolic aspects), its programmatic implementation is mediated by economic and political units of administration that try to make sense out of the policies. Chapters 2, and 3 are basically historical chapters. They trace how the themes of this book—industrial discipline, family policy, and race and ethnicity—have formed the ideological foundation of the American welfare state. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 discuss welfare and work. In particular, they examine the changes in the demographic and legal aspects of AFDC and the current emphasis on work participation as a prerequisite for benefits. Chapter 6 examines the 1981 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of the Reagan Administration, and various works demonstration projects. In the last chapter the authors present their views about current efforts in welfare reform.

The theme of this book centers around two major arguments. First, social welfare policy cannot be fully understood without recognizing that it is basically a set of symbols that differentiates the deserving from the undeserving poor. According to Handler and Hasenfeld, this differentiation is important in terms of upholding such dominant values such as the work ethic, family, gender, race, and ethnic relations. In that sense, welfare policy is also targeted at the nonpoor since it conveys important messages about what is acceptable social behavior. Because of the ambiguousness of these symbols, welfare policy is fraught with contradictions and the administration of social programs is only loosely connected to welfare policy. Since greater emphasis is placed on the symbolic rather than the substantive consequences of welfare policy, its implementation often focuses on affirming distinctions between the worthy and unworthy poor. Handler and Hasenfeld refer to these features as “myths” and “ceremonies” because their main function is to confirm cultural norms about the poor. Handler and Hasenfeld’s second

major argument is that federalism is used to control social deviants (the undeserving poor) and to manage the conflicts generated by this control. The authors argue that occasionally the disjointedness between the symbols and the administration of welfare policy become important enough to threaten the legitimacy of the symbols themselves, a situation that can lead to welfare reform.

Despite its complexity, *The Moral Construction of Poverty* is well-written and interesting. Moreover, Handler and Hasenfeld should be commended for shaping a broad topic into a coherent and readable tract. The depth of the research and the thought that went into this book is obvious. Moreover, it is refreshing to read a scholarly and sophisticated treatise on social policy that also reflects commitment and passion on the part of its authors.

Apart from its strengths, the book also contains certain weaknesses. For one, *The Moral Construction of Poverty: Welfare Reform in America* is a somewhat misleading title. Although the book deals with welfare reform, it leans more toward the area of workfare. While this emphasis gives a clear focus to the book, it also unbalances it. Although workfare has been an important welfare strategy through several presidential administrations, other components of welfare reform are equally important, including health care, housing, etc. These welfare programs are unfortunately given short shrift as the authors focus on the inadequacies of forced workfare as the primary mainstay of welfare reform.

A second major problem is the argument about the centrality of the work ethic. While this ethic clearly retains importance for large numbers of people, it is being rapidly replaced by an emphasis on consumption over production. In that sense, the 19th century Protestant ethic of hard work and savings has been replaced by an emphasis on consumption, especially of the conspicuous kind. Handler and Hasenfeld unfortunately fail to address the implications of this changing work ethic for workfare programs.

Despite these weaknesses, *The Moral Construction of Poverty* is a sound piece of scholarship and a major contribution to the field of social welfare policy. Apart from its usefulness as a supplementary textbook for graduate courses in social policy,

it is also a valuable addition to any social work or social science library.

Howard Jacob Karger
Louisiana State University

Jones, Jacqueline. *The Dispossessed: American Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 1992. \$25.00 hardcover.

It is not an easy task to tell the story of the poor and restore it to a central place in U.S. history. Jacqueline Jones has done it after seven years of research on how people become marginalized. In the first part she deals with the black and white labor conditions during the Civil War and Reconstruction. The conditions imposed by the white landowners on black slaves not only through Black Codes (vagrancy laws, passes, fines) but also through labor contracts effectually enslaved them back to their masters. The ruinous fines imposed for breaking a "contract" by absence from work would be as high as \$1.00 a day when wage was about 52 cents a day. Subsequent violations would increase fines and deprive them their share of the crops. White field workers had to sign similar contracts.

Legislation throughout the Black Belt restricting both white and black laborers' access to forests, streams, guns and hunting dogs prevented them from achieving food self-sufficiency. These actions combined to assure low wages, chronic unemployment, and wretched housing for the poor of both races.

The second part deals with the emergence of the rural working class in the South from 1870 to 1990. Domination of the emerging proletariat was achieved through an ideological definition of work. Only time-oriented and supervised hourly wage work was defined as *work*. Foraging, fishing, and hunting was condemned as non-productive although these activities rescued many poor families from starvation. Mobility to seek better opportunities was interpreted as a morally lacking, self-defeating behavior: "irresponsible," "restless disposition," and "aimlessness". Use of convict labor in the South further worsened the condition of the working classes by lowering wages

and increasing unemployment while violating the human rights of the convicts who were largely black.

The collapse of the cotton share-cropping system in the 1930s due to farm mechanization, federally funded crop reduction, and declining prices transformed a million croppers to agricultural migrants—"the army of the dispossessed". These migrants had no political voice and not even permanent addresses to claim Social Security benefits. The landed elites tried to block Work Progress Administration jobs in the 1930s to ensure a supply of cheap labor.

Jones describes the plight of Southern migrants of both races in the North and Midwest between 1910 and 1960, when 9 million people left the South. In the northern cities, blacks faced institutionalized racism and discrimination. White flight from inner cities led to the ghettoization of places where blacks lived thus promoting stereotype of a black underclass.

Throughout American history, groups of black and white workers had found themselves side by side—working together in a seventeenth century Virginia tobacco field, or later as cotton choppers, phosphate miners, or bean pickers; or applying for entry level jobs at wartime defense plants. . . . The preoccupation of middleclass white America with the pathology of the black ghetto only served to hide the plight of people who knew all too well that whiteness was never an absolute, or final, advantage. (p. 265)

Evidence from 1990 census data confirm that poverty was not solely black, Northern, or urban. Poor whites outnumber poor blacks by a ratio of over 2:1 (21 million to 9 million); black people constitute a minority of (39%) of AFDC recipients; a majority of the poor live outside the inner city in rural areas, small towns, and suburbs. Texas, South Dakota, and Missouri together account for the half of the 150 worst hunger counties.

Jones successfully demolishes the popular media and liberal myths of poverty and the poor, namely, 1) that poverty is primarily a black, "underclass" urban-ghetto phenomenon while the white people are middle class; 2) that the poor are lazy, wandering, and leisurely; and 3) they adopt a culture of poverty, matriarchy and family disorganization. She also makes the point that ideologically-hegemonic definition of work as waged work

has been applied not only to the women's work at home but also to non-waged work such as foraging.

In addition to overt class exploitation, Jones cites effects of the market, national economies, technological progress and business efficiency as causes of marginalization. However, I would observe that it is difficult to separate these from class exploitation itself. The de-skilling of jobs by mechanization, throughout the Industrial Revolution and continuing in the 1990s with computerization and robotization, has led to substantial loss of control over the production process by the working classes and alienated the working class from work itself.

Jones argues that there is a "deep malaise" affecting the national will to eradicate poverty. But perhaps she overlooks the deeper question of whether capitalist states ever act in the interest of the working classes and the poor. In the absence of strong working-class movements or parties, they rarely do. Welfare, and perhaps inner city enterprise zones, as Piven and Cloward have argued, essentially enable the privileged to regulate the poor.

The book is well written; in addition, it is well documented through an extensive archival records, oral histories, research reports and newspapers. If you are looking for a historical-materialist perspective to understand the poor and poverty in the U.S., this is your best source.

Henry J. D'Souza
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Beverly Stadum, *Poor Women and Their Families: Hard Working Charity Cases* Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992. \$49.50 hardcover, \$16.95 papercover.

In this historical analysis, Beverly Stadum utilizes case records from the Minneapolis Associated Charities society to examine the lives of poor women and their families from 1900 to 1930. In the recent tradition of history "from the bottom up," Stadum focuses on poverty as it was experienced by the poor themselves, rather than as it was perceived by charity workers and the broader public. The result is an absorbing

picture of poor women pursuing multiple strategies for survival in a world which seriously circumscribed their options for change.

The Associated Charities, Minneapolis's version of a Charity Organization Society, was founded in 1884 to cure poverty and dependence through the use of an enlightened and scientific charity. From the agency's archives, Stadum has randomly selected the case records of 300 applicants for aid; the records include both married and single women—whether divorced, separated, widowed, or deserted by their husbands. All had children, ranging from youngsters to adolescents and young adults. In examining these records, Stadum's major focus is on "the multiple roles of poor women and the hard work they did in both public and private sectors in order to care for their families." (p.x)

Stadum sets the stage for her analysis by describing the cases of three women and their families in some detail; while the three differ in their commitment to hard work and the propriety of their behavior (at least as perceived by their charity visitors), all are pictured by Stadum as locating and using a variety of resources and strategies to cope with economic and other crises. Applying for help from the Associated Charities was only one of the strategies pursued. Others included working, most often at a low-paid job, to supplement a husband's wages or to provide sole support in the case of single-parenthood; sending children to work; sharing resources with neighbors and friends; using creativity in the home by stretching scarce food supplies and making clothes; asking relatives for aid or sending children to board with family members; and taking in boarders. Stadum then pursues these themes and several others in her analysis of all 300 cases. In separate chapters she discusses the difficulties and challenges faced by women as homemakers, wage-earners, wives, and charity recipients. The chapter on wives describes the effects of abusive and drunken behavior by husbands on marital relationships and paints a pessimistic picture of how "marriages shifted, dissolved, and were reformed in a hostile environment" (p. 120) The chapter on women as charity recipients notes the often judgmental, insensitive approaches of the charity visitors as they sought to influence women's decisions and behaviors involving their families.

This is a sound book, well-grounded in the historical and policy literature. One wishes at times that the use of case histories was more systematic, in order to provide clearer and more convincing documentation for assertions such as those regarding the poor quality of most of the marriages in the case histories and the widespread resistance of clients to unsympathetic and controlling charity workers. However, the overall picture, carefully built up, of the day-to-day struggle of poor women is both convincing and enlightening. As a reminder that "clients" and "victims" struggle for autonomy and control over their own lives and those of their families, Stadum's study shows the power of history from the ground up in highlighting the strengths of ordinary people in dealing with adversity.

Leslie Leighninger
Louisiana State University

Allison Zippay, *From Middle Income to Poor: Downward Mobility Among Displaced Steelworkers*: New York, Praeger, 1992. \$39.95 hardcover.

Although deindustrialization transformed the economy in every part of the United States, its effects were perhaps most sweeping in the states that extend from Pennsylvania to Illinois and make up the industrial heartland. There, in less than a decade stretching from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, deindustrialization obliterated a way of life whose economic and social roots extended back nearly a century. The social and economic costs of this transformation are the subject of Allison Zippay's new book.

The focus of Zippay's study is the Shenango Valley, and particularly Sharon, its main town, with a population of 18,000. Located in western Pennsylvania near the Ohio-Pennsylvania border, the Shenango Valley was once a center for steel manufacturing and fabrication. In the early 1980s, however, the drive for higher profits by seven local companies resulted in the layoff of 6700 workers. In addition to precipitating a sharp decline in the workers' standard of living, these layoffs shredded the community fabric and gave rise to a host of troublesome social problems.

As Zippay emphasizes, factory workers were not like other groups whom the economic transformation affected. Farmers and the homeless at least stirred some charitable impulses. Displaced steelworkers, however, evoked neither romantic attachments to the land nor the good feelings that came from giving to a beggar on the street. Perhaps that is because the work they did was hard to romanticize—dirty, dangerous, and unpleasant. A country with claims to industrial preeminence might need this work to be done, but when the economy changed, few people who were not steelworkers spoke up to mourn its passing.

The strength of Zippay's book derives from her immersion in the life of the community. She knows the social networks that grew up among workers in heavy industry, and she writes knowledgeably about the interconnectedness of their lives. Others might look down upon Sharon—a 1985 Rand McNally survey listed it as the "least cultured town" in the United States, but at least those who lived there before the plant closings had a decent standard of living and the emotional satisfaction borne out of a life among caring families and friends.

While Zippay's analysis of deindustrialization is a little formulaic, the 102 steelworkers she interviewed clearly show the effects of the shift from an industrial to a service economy. Four years after the plants closed, thirty-five percent of the workers were unemployed, and eighty-seven percent reported a drop in household income, with the median income falling from \$25,000 to \$14,500. As a result, social welfare agencies were swamped: demands for public assistance rose by two-thirds, and the caseload of the local battered women's center doubled in just one year.

These statistics are damning, but they are not nearly as damning as the sense of personal betrayal that Zippay captures. Economies change, occupations flourish and then disappear. But when an economic transition occurs without adequate social supports, the people who are most affected feel discarded and embittered. As this useful case study shows, that is the real human tragedy of Shenango Valley.

Joel Blau

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