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**Review of *Declining Fortunes: The Withering of the American Dream*. Katherine S. Newman. Reviewed by David Stoesz, San Diego State University.**

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that claim that the interests of capitalists dictate the evolution of social welfare. Similarly it casts doubt on theories that accord primary explanatory importance to economic factors such as industrialization in the dynamics of welfare. Instead, Skocpol develops her previously articulated 'state centered' approach into a 'policy centered' approach in which underlying social conditions, political pressure and the autonomous actions of the state combine in a complex way to facilitate the introduction of social programs.

Theda Skocpol is already recognized as a distinguished academic. This book will further enhance her reputation and her account of the development of social policy in the United States will inevitably stimulate further debate. Her book is essential reading not only for those who wish to follow the debate, but for anyone studying comparative social policy today.

James Midgley  
Louisiana State University

Katherine S. Newman, *Declining Fortunes: The Withering of the American Dream*. New York: Basic Books, 1993. \$23.00 hardcover.

Anthropology, arguably the most American of the social sciences, is also the most poignant. In *Declining Fortunes*, Katherine Newman adeptly applies her anthropological skills to a most American topic: the prospects of the baby boom generation. Drawing on interviews with residents of "Pleasanton," a prosperous suburban community in the Northeast, Newman traces the generational identity of what could be the most influential cohort in the nation's history. But fortune has eluded the baby boomers. In her exploration of the context, the consequences, and the rationalization of generational failure, Newman integrates demographic and economic evidence with her interviews producing an account that is as satisfying as it is troubling.

Baby boomers, contends Newman, are products of a generation imprinted with the despair of the Great Depression. Having survived the Depression, the parents of the baby boom were able to assure their children a life style that was unimaginable given their up-bringing during the 1930s. The boomers of

American suburbia grew up amid unprecedented beneficence: expanding industry provided jobs for their fathers; increasing salaries batted the disposable income of their mothers; new housing tracts meant new schools, and these, in turn led to new childhood friends. Optimism prevailed and, as parents of the boomers recalled all too well, this stood in sharp contrast to the Depression. Parents of the baby boomers looked back in satisfaction at what they had wrought, and they looked forward to what their children would accomplish.

But Newman is not convinced that the post-War generation should be so smug. The parents of Pleasanton's baby boomers took ample advantage of a range of government benefits, such as the GI Bill, low-interest home mortgages, and construction of projects like the WPA, the TVA, and the interstate highway system. In forgetting the source of the prosperity and preferring an individualistic interpretation that accords them the credit, Newman observes that parents of the baby boom indulge in selective amnesia. "Most especially the hand of government—the country's national investment in the middle class—is subtracted from the moral tales they tell about how they became the prosperous citizens they are" (p. 89).

For boomers, the experience of diminishing opportunities has been more ambiguous than that of their parents. To advance her analysis, Newman divides the baby boomers into two cohorts: those reaching maturity during the 1960s and those who grew up a decade later. Because the 60's boomers rejected much of their parents' conformity in favor of idealism, their response to the decline in economic opportunity after 1980 has been muted. The more pragmatically minded boomers of the 70s, however, have found the decline baffling. After all, in search of security, the 70's boomers deliberately distanced themselves from the radical romanticism of the 60's cohort, to the extent that many became ideologically conservative. The younger boomers were playing by the rules, but they too were losing ground.

By the 1990s a convergence of circumstances began drawing both cohorts together. Boomers of both cohorts found it impossible on one income to replicate the success of their parents by measures that they had experienced as children—supporting a family, buying a home, taking summer vacations—and some

reported two incomes insufficient. Career advancement had been blocked by too many well-credentialed boomers in the labor market competing for fewer well-paying jobs. Boomer mothers were strung out, trying to meet dual obligations at home and at work.

Consistent with their tendency to personalize success, parents of boomers wondered what was wrong with their children, suspecting their kids were too materialistic and impatient. Unwilling to consider the broader context of the "declining fortunes" of the baby boom—the increase in temporary, lower paying jobs in the service sector; the federal deficit; international competition—the good people of Pleasanton found it easier to scapegoat affluent Japanese families who were moving into town and/or the welfare underclass living in a nearby city.

To her credit, Newman suppresses what must be an acute sense of frustration about the inability of baby boomers and their parents to deal with their plight. Apparently helpless in the face of conspiring social and economic forces, the boomers seem to have reconciled themselves to "the end of affluence" (p. 163). The absence of generational solidarity leaves boomers adrift in a sea of diminishing expectations. Political fragmentation leaves what could be the most powerful generation in the nation's history rudderless. As water rises higher in the boat, boomers grasp desperately for purchase. "This experience of downward mobility is terrifying," notes Newman. "The economic experience of the late 1980s and early 1990s is a recipe for frustration, envy, fury, and a growing sense of helplessness. No amount of deferred gratification, no amount of hard work is going to make it possible for these young boomers to lay claim to their birthright" (p. 199). Eventually the social contract, the unspoken agreement that bonds civil society, abrades.

In all this Newman is certainly correct. But one suspects that she, like the residents of Pleasanton, minimizes the magnitude of the problem. This may be, in part, a methodological artifact, a consequence of anchoring her analysis with the perceptions of Pleasantonians. Newman suggests the issue of generational equity is of some urgency, but she leaves the issue annoyingly unresolved. In fact, the circumstance has all the serenity of a powder room during an electrical storm.

The baby boom has yet to recognize that their parents left them with some of the most intractable problems in the nation's history: a suffocating deficit, mountains of nuclear and other noxious waste, inner-city neighborhoods that rival the Third World, utterly irresponsible deregulation of commercial financial institutions resulting in an enormous public bail-out, schools and other social institutions that fail to deliver essential services, among others. Paradoxically, while baby boomers must contend with deteriorating social and physical infrastructure, they are paying for benefits their parents consume. Boomers have yet to realize the most grotesque of inequities between the generations: while millions of boomers go without health insurance and worry about their pensions, they are paying for Social Security and Medicare for their parents.

Their patience exhausted, boomers have begun to act politically. The sanctuary movement, Earth First!, and Act-Up suggest that boomers are finding their voice. In each of these, boomers have rejected a premise of their parents' generation: fighting the cold war, expanding industrialism, and stamping out homosexuality. These events conspicuously reflect the more banal public policy issues with which the Clinton administration now struggles. In many respects, the test of his presidency will be the retrieval of the nation from the errors of the parents.

Thus, *Declining Fortunes* taps into a profound transformation in American culture, one few have so thoughtfully explored. The issue of generational equity will infuse our future discourse; in offering this incisive analysis, Katherine Newman has helped us as a nation continue this very important conversation.

David Stoesz  
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