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## *Democracy without Decency: Good Citizenship and the War on Poverty.* William M. Epstein. Reviewed by Gertrude Schaffner Goldberg.

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Keynes and domestic theorists like William T. Foster and Waddill Catchings, was that consumption is the key to recovery and economic growth during a depression. Ignorance of the crucial role of demand threatens to turn our current Great Recession back into Depression.

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William M. Epstein, *Democracy without Decency: Good Citizenship and the War on Poverty*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010. \$65.00, hardcover.

American democracy, claims William M. Epstein, is “without decency.” Readers of this journal are unlikely to disagree that the level of poverty and inequality in this very rich country is indecent. Epstein reviews a prodigious number of programs: precursors to the War on Poverty; the brief war itself; social insurance and welfare; and charity and community organization (a strange mixture of auspice and method). He judges them all to be based on individualistic assumptions about the origins of poverty and thus doomed to fail.

Epstein is right that a War on Poverty employability program like the Job Corps did not result in more employment and higher wages for its enlistees. Head Start gains in cognition and educational achievement were not sustained, probably owing to the poor quality of subsequent schooling and persisting poverty of children’s families. Yet, assessment of Head Start could acknowledge that hundreds of thousands of poor children experienced the respect and resources regularly accorded to more affluent children. Medicare, Medicaid, Food Stamps, housing subsidies, legal services to the poor, comprehensive community health centers—all extended or initiated during the War on Poverty—decreased inequality although their cash value is not counted as income, and thus is not considered in determining the poverty rate. Nonetheless, poverty was cut in half—from 22% in 1959 to 11% in 1973.

In a rare admission that something worked, Epstein points out that clients on the Lower East Side got more from the welfare system as a result of welfare rights organization. Without evidence, he assumes, “this probably meant that clients in other

neighborhoods got less," (p. 32 ), clearly overlooking the huge increase in the welfare rolls and rise in benefit levels in New York City and elsewhere in the country during the 1960s.

Though he insists on strict, positivist standards for evaluating social programs, Epstein admits that "theories of social decision making are bedeviled by absence of proof" (p. xi). Nonetheless, he asserts that public policy in the United States expresses the "national will." Without discussion, much less proof, Epstein dismisses possible manipulation of the electorate or the idea that people are uninformed—e.g., "don't let the government take away my Medicare." Above all, he overlooks the political consequences of egregious inequality and that plutocracy or the rule of wealth is a closer description of the U.S. polity than democracy. *Plutocracy* "without decency" is no paradox, no surprise.

Most troublesome is Epstein's failure to distinguish between historical periods and social interventions: "The themes of heroic individualism and social efficiency have persisted through the history of American social welfare with the cold rigidity and indifference of an iron sculpture" (p. 215). Are we to equate the neo-liberalism following the "great U-turn" of the mid-1970s with a New Deal that was sometimes "tinged with social democracy," F.D.R.'s wartime embrace of an "Economic Bill of Rights," the War on Poverty, however short and insufficient?

Epstein's lack of historical distinctions shows in his well-nigh indecent treatment of the War on Poverty precursor, Mobilization for Youth (MFY). Does he recognize where social work was before we (self-disclosure, I was an MFY planner) began to determine what kinds of interventions would expand opportunities for delinquent youth? MFY planners were at odds with settlements in the area, including the famous Henry Street Settlement (Epstein wrongly houses us there physically and conceptually) that viewed delinquency as a mental disease and wanted to attack it with more of the same approaches. We devised programs to alter teachers' attitudes toward neighborhood youth and to increase the likelihood of better educational outcomes. We thought in terms of work programs and enabling neighborhood residents to assert their rights in relation to the institutions on which they depended; yet Epstein equates

these and community organization generally with non-structural, self-help interventions. By the end of the decade, some of us were engaged in the national organization for welfare rights; recognizing that neighborhood-based training programs didn't create employment opportunities, some advocated "new careers for the poor" and full employment or a guaranteed income. Angry about the project's confrontational approach to local institutions, Epstein refers to MFY's "*clamor for client and resident participation*" (p. 33, emphasis added). He further states that the author of a housing report "*moans about the complexity of the issues*" (p. 31, emphasis added), and its evaluations are deemed "*decrepit, self-serving*" (p. 52).

A professor of social work, Epstein offers no solutions whatsoever to the problems he analyzes. What can he possibly teach social work students except that their profession's commitment to improving social conditions *is doomed to failure*?

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Michael B. Fabricant, *Organizing for Educational Justice: The Campaign for Public School Reform in the South Bronx*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010. \$22.95, paperback.

Over the past two decades many community organizing groups have turned their attention to improving public schools in low-income urban neighborhoods. They have done so at the insistence of their members, but with some reluctance. Fabricant points out that education organizing demands the stomach and resources needed for protracted struggle, coupled with astute strategists, flexible tacticians, strong relationships, and most importantly, the hearts and minds of a committed base of parents. And still, decisive victories can be elusive. As an organizer remarked once, public education is the "Vietnam" of community organizing.

In *Organizing for Educational Justice*, Fabricant provides a fine-grained account of the Community Collaborative to Improve School District 9 (CC9), an organizing coalition with the goal of improving classroom instruction through a Lead Teacher program. Fabricant's work adds to the case studies