BOOK REVIEW


Why are there more homeless families in New York City today than at any time since the Great Depression? And what are the differences between family poverty and individual poverty? Public and private organizations have taken different approaches to alleviating the problems of the poor since colonial times, a facet of history seldom explored. *The Poor Among Us* studies the ways in which economic, institutional, and intellectual forces have impacted the poor. Alternating between a macro view and the individual tales of how people fared in times gone by and even today, the book illustrates the impact of shifting interpretations about the causes of poverty, and shows how these theories have affected the poor over time.

*The Poor Among Us* describes the experience of poverty in New York City during the different eras of the city’s history, and reveals just how similar the experiences of poor families, past and present were and still are. During cycles of boom and bust, recession and depression, various theories have been offered to account for the fate of families who cannot work and find decent wages. Early on, experts believed that poverty was caused by some inherent failure of the individual’s character; later many believed that poverty was caused by the system of dependency, that is, public assistance programs.

Theories fail, new themes arise, and yet poverty remains unsolved, so institutional and political players fall back on the theories of the past. A good example is the theory of how best to deal with the children of poor families. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries families without shelter were sent to the poorhouse by city leaders, and by the 1850s it seemed like a good idea to remove children from such families. The Children’s Aid Society relocated thousands of such children to the western states. “Orphan Trains” sent more than 120,000 children from East Coast cities between 1853 and the early years of the twentieth century. During the economic crisis of the 1870s families were even encouraged to place their children in orphanages, if they were too poor to care for them. During the Great Depression, the pendulum swung to the notion that families should be kept together, intact; consequently, charitable organizations stepped in to help evicted families receive public support. However, by the 1960s child welfare agencies were once again removing children from the care of low-income families. During the 1980s policies changed again, and children were encouraged to stay with their families. But soon after the election of Ronald Reagan, the era of liberal government begun under the New Deal came to an end, and welfare “reform” was first passed in 1988, and again in 1996.

Welfare reform was based on the notion that social policy created “dependency” among the poor and that this “dependency” on government support “sapped the public coffers” and prevented poor families from becoming self-sufficient. The results of welfare reform have been mixed. The number on welfare has declined, but for many people it only made their desperate situation more frantic, as families have been subjected to increased scrutiny lest they “cheat the public.” In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008, the number of homeless families in New York City climbed to new heights. By the end of 2012 there were more than 10,000 families in transitional shelters at any one time. Focusing on New York City, the eight chapters in *The Poor Among Us* are organized chronologically beginning with colonial New York. Da Costa Nunez and Sribnick carry the reader along, zooming in on the details of individual personalities, engaging the reader in the story, and then zooming out
to reveal the social, political, and economic forces at work. The quality of “the read” is enhanced by over 100 photographs, etchings, and maps. Originally I was assigned to review this work as a pdf file, but through a technical difficulty ended up with a printed version; what a bit of good luck! While the images of poverty are often sad, overall this is a very attractive publication.

Chapter 1 takes us from the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, which fell to the English in 1664. The churchwardens originally provided “outdoor relief”—money and/or food—which was distributed to families in their homes. The alternative to “outdoor relief” was “indoor relief,” that is, a trip to the poorhouse. The poorhouse, or almshouse, was a working institution; both individuals and families had to stay there because they had lost the roof over their heads. Residents of the almshouse were forced into regimented schedules and work details, producing goods for sale to support the program. Poor families in the colonial era were treated little better than criminals, and were even subject to being housed together with criminals at the almshouse. Often this meant mixing single mothers with male criminals. This was also the era of indenture, a contractual agreement in which the master agreed to care for and train a child in return for his or her labor. Orphans, abandoned children, and children whose parents could not afford to care for them were bound out as apprentices and servants.

The transformation of work and home life during the period 1790 to 1930 is the topic of Chapter 2, “Child Poverty in a Manufacturing City.” As the population increased, so did the rate of industrialization, and the tradesman who formerly plied his trade from a home-shop was forced out of business by mass-produced goods. Wages fell because immigration supplied far more workers than there were manufacturing jobs to be had, and the economic distance between the rich and poor increased. This was the era of the orphanage, as new benevolent institutions formed around the belief that all children had the potential to become upstanding and successful citizens. But the primary means used to “rescue” children were asylums, developed to care for children by categories (vagrant, delinquent, half-orphan), all segregated by race. Chapter 3 covers the aftermath of the financial panic of 1837 through the beginning of the Civil War and the bloody draft riots of 1863 which resulted in the destruction of New York’s Colored Orphan Asylum. We meet not only the theorists who shaped policy (Ezra Stiles Graham, chaplain of the public almshouse; Isabella Graham, who believed that Christian morality was the key to lifting widows out of poverty; and Charles Loring Brace, founder of the Children’s Aid Society) but also the poor themselves through first-person accounts. These include the stories of Abigail Dougal, a mother who was denied aid and had her children taken away on suspicions about her character, and Maggie, a little girl selling match sticks and buttons on Twentieth Street to support her family.

Following the Civil War, New York City enjoyed its own great “Age of Unrest” (Chapter 4), as fear and mistrust festered along religious, ethnic, and class lines. The pace of immigration quickened. By 1870 the counties which would become the five boroughs together already had a population of more than one million, and by the turn of the century New York (after consolidation of the counties) would become the second largest city in the world. This period featured the rise of the urban political machine, which provided services to the poor and the working class in return for their votes. Substandard tenement housing proliferated, undercutting the health and safety of families forced to live there.

Chapter 5 begins with the period following the Depression of 1893 and focuses on the experience of poor immigrants living in the tenements. The time period prior to the Great Depression of 1929 is considered the Progressive Era for three reasons. First, settlement houses, the precursors of the community action agencies of the 1960s, were established and run by middle-class, mostly college-educated young men and women. While the social programs offered by the different settlement houses varied, all aimed at helping poor and immigrant families build a sense of community. Second, this was the era of housing reform, led by Jacob Riis and Lawrence Veiller. Finally, the settlement house workers came to be inspired by the new progressive belief that poverty was caused by social and economic factors, not individual failings. Progressives came to focus on the problem of child labor, resulting in the Child Welfare Act of 1915.

Family poverty during the Great Depression (Chapter 6) had drained the private and public resources of New York City by 1931, when then New York State Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt
stepped in with temporary relief. Later, as U.S. president, Roosevelt oversaw the enactment of long-term reforms which fundamentally changed the face of poverty in the United States. Another individual with enormous impact during this period was New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, elected in 1934. As Mayor for more than a decade, LaGuardia ended the cronyism and corruption of the Tammany Hall system, and utilized the new federal policies to reshape both the physical character of the city and its government. Among his many notable accomplishments was the founding of the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), tasked with the clearance, replanning, and reconstruction of the slum districts. When LaGuardia took office there were still 350,000 old-law tenements standing. Of these, 30,000 buildings had no bathing facilities, 23,000 had only shared toilets in the halls, and over a thousand still had outhouses. NYCHA opened its first public housing in 1935. During the early years, public housing was strictly racially segregated, with more “projects” created for the white poor than for the black poor. Meanwhile the black population of New York mushroomed, and the Great Depression had a much more severe impact on blacks, as whites competed with blacks for jobs as janitors and doormen. Housing remained especially expensive in Harlem, because so many black families were forced to compete for limited places in one of the limited number of communities where they were allowed to live. The industrial build-up required to fight World War II brought an end to this period of unprecedented suffering, in part because LaGuardia pressured Roosevelt to locate over 200,000 jobs to New York City.

New York’s manufacturing sector continued to grow in the 1950s and early 1960s, attracting immigrants from the U.S. South and, increasingly, from Puerto Rico. However, beginning in the mid-1960’s low-skilled jobs in the apparel, printing, and shipping industries began to disappear. Between 1950 and 1970 the black population of New York City grew from 728,000 to 1.5 million (or one-fifth of the city’s total population) and the Puerto Rican population grew from 187,000 to 847,000 during the same period. Chapter 7 is called “Family Poverty in the Age of Deindustrialization” and covers urban renewal and the War on Poverty. By 1977 urban blight in New York City had grown so severe it finally attracted national attention. At the same time, the city’s politics took a sharp turn towards the political right with the election of Ed Koch as Mayor.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected president (Chapter 8), ushering in the “Age of the Market.” While the nation’s economy entered a period of economic prosperity, the number of homeless families in New York (on any one night) receiving public assistance (usually single women with children), reached Depression-level heights (4,500 families in 1986). Koch responded with a two-pronged approach by developing affordable housing and expanding transitional housing shelters. Koch’s policies met with wide resistance, but by 1989 had shifted 2,000 families into permanent homes. However, Koch was not re-elected, and his progress was short-lived. By 1993 there were 5,500 families in shelters, including 1,159 still living in notorious welfare hotels. During the Reagan administration the notion that the welfare system itself contributed to poverty achieved growing acceptance. In fact many liberal social welfare experts began to frame their research around the concept of dependency. Bill Clinton was elected president in 1992 on the promise to “end welfare as we know it,” and in 1996 signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Act.

While the 1996 welfare reform effort reduced the numbers on welfare (in the program now called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, TANF), many of the single mothers who found jobs remained at or near the poverty level and the number of homeless families in New York City continued to increase. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s welfare reform efforts reduced the number of families in shelters from 5,692 in 1996 to 4,558 in 1998, and the courts gave the city the right to reject families’ requests for shelter; 7,747 such families were rejected in 1997. When Michael Bloomberg became Mayor in 2002, 6,992 families resided in city shelters, and by April 2003 the number had risen to 9,482.

The epilogue briefly covers the effects of the Great Recession of 2008. By 2011, 46.2 million Americans lived below the poverty line, the highest number since the Census Bureau began keeping records 52 years ago. In New York City at the end of 2012 about 10,000 families resided in the transitional shelter system.

Family poverty has primarily been the tale of the single mother, usually widowed or abandoned, and remains essentially the same as in colonial times. The most important “takeaway” from this
useful volume is that social critics and their theories will continue to dominate the way New York and other cities assist poor parents struggling to provide housing and care for their children. Some will point to past times when neighbors cared for one another without the need for public assistance, and others will idealize time periods when the state took an interest in the well-being of its citizens. Some may even conclude that it is best to remove the children. Da Costa Nunez and Sribnick achieve their goal of providing a fresh historical perspective with *The Poor Among Us*, and give us all a lot to think about as we resolve to address the root causes of homelessness and family poverty.

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