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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### THE WAR ON POVERTY

For centuries, poverty was widely perceived in the West as both natural and inevitable. The 19th century marked a turning point.

Swayed by a combination of factors, including industrialization, population growth, and the blossoming of social science, Western governments, led by Great Britain, began looking at poverty afresh and experimenting with new strategies for ameliorating the condition of the poor.

As Gertrude Himmelfarb points out in **The Idea of Poverty** (Knopf, 1983), the half centuries on either side of 1800 were times of ferment in social theory. In the preindustrial England of 1750, poet Thomas Gray could speak of the "short and simple annals of the poor"; by 1850, Himmelfarb writes, the poverty literature—its contributors included Thomas Malthus, Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, and Jeremy Bentham—had become "long and complicated."

Poverty came to be viewed as a product of powerful social forces—economic, technological, political, demographic. As such, its elimination became "a matter for social action rather than the exercise of private virtue."

Several volumes trace America's shifting attitudes (and policies) toward the poor, from colonial times through the Great Society. These include **Poverty and Policy in American History** (Academic Press, 1983, paper only), edited by Michael B. Katz, and James T. Patterson's **America's Struggle against Poverty, 1900–1980** (Harvard, 1981, cloth & paper). Marking milestones along the way are William Leuchtenberg's **Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal** (Harper, 1983, cloth; 1975, pa-

per), John Kenneth Galbraith's **The Affluent Society** (Houghton, 1958, cloth; New American Library, 1978, paper), and Michael Harrington's **The Other America** (Macmillan, 1962, cloth; Penguin, 1981, paper).

Lyndon B. Johnson was not the first U.S. President to proclaim the virtues of social engineering, but he proved the most ambitious in pursuing its elusive potential. Published assessments of LBJ's Great Society programs, from Headstart to Job Corps, from the Food Stamp Program to Operation Mainstream, run the gamut between mild praise and outright dismay.

**The Great Society** (Basic, 1974, cloth & paper), edited by Eli Ginzberg and Robert M. Solow, depicts the record as "one of successes mixed with failures, as any sensible person should have expected." The successes: in varying degree, civil-rights legislation, Medicare (but not Medicaid), and some of the educational, job-training, and housing programs. The failures: most of the programs explicitly aimed at eradicating poverty and bringing the poor into the mainstream. "The promises were extreme; the specific remedial actions were untried and untested; the finances were grossly inadequate."

Other studies dealing broadly with the Great Society and its aftermath include **Progress against Poverty** (Academic Press, 1975), by Robert D. Plotnick and Felicity Skidmore, and **A Decade of Federal Antipoverty Programs** (Academic Press, 1977, cloth & paper), edited by Robert H. Haveman.

Often more illuminating to the layman are a few good case studies of specific programs.

**Oakland's Not for Burning**

(McKay, 1968), by Amory Bradford, and **Implementation** (Univ. of Calif., 1973, cloth; expanded edition 1979, paper), by Jeffrey L. Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky, provide two contrasting snapshots, taken five years apart, of the work of the Economic Development Administration in Oakland, California. Bradford's book, published in 1968, depicted Oakland as a potential showcase for the War on Poverty, where federal plans to create jobs and rebuild the slums "may have made the difference" in preventing local mayhem.

Yet, by 1969, three years after the program got under way, only \$3 million of an authorized \$23 million had been spent; only 20 jobs had been created. The Pressman and Wildavsky account was subtitled in part: "How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland; or, Why It's Amazing That Federal Programs Work at All . . ."

Other case studies include Daniel P. Moynihan's **Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding** (Free Press, 1969, cloth; 1970, paper), which deals with the Great Society's troubled Community Action programs. **The Politics of a Guaranteed Income** (Vintage, 1973, cloth & paper), by the same author, describes the birth and death of the Family Assistance Plan (FAP), proposed by Richard Nixon in 1969 and rejected by Congress.

Economist Martin Anderson helped conceive the FAP. Anderson's **Welfare** (Hoover, 1978) and Blanche Bernstein's **Politics of Welfare** (Abt Books, 1982) coldly appraise the welfare system as currently administered. Anderson argues that the most effective weapon against poverty, now as in the past, is overall economic growth.

Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward see the welfare system's

chief purpose to be that of **Regulating the Poor** (Tavistock, 1971, cloth; Random, 1972, paper). Historically, they contend, relief measures have been "initiated or expanded" by governments only when economic ills threatened social chaos. When good times return, relief programs are kept in place in order to "demean and punish those who do not work" and thereby implicitly exalt "even the meanest labor at the meanest wages."

In **Unheavenly City Revisited** (Little, Brown, 1974, cloth & paper), Harvard's Edward C. Banfield sees hardcore poverty as stemming from a pervasive set of attitudes that render members of the underclass largely incapable of surviving unaided in a modern industrial society.

The idea that there exists a "culture of poverty," with its own self-perpetuating pathology, was first popularized by Oscar Lewis in **Children of Sánchez** (Random, 1961, cloth; Vintage, 1966, paper). Widely supported, it has also been widely challenged. For a critique, see Charles A. Valentine's **Culture and Poverty** (Univ. of Chicago, 1968, cloth & paper), Lee Rainwater's **And the Poor Get Children** (New Viewpoints, 1960, cloth; 1974, paper), and, most recently, Greg J. Duncan's report, **Years of Poverty, Years of Plenty** (Institute for Social Research, Univ. of Mich., 1984).

Daniel P. Moynihan's once-controversial study, **The Negro Family: The Case for National Action** (Greenwood, 1965, 1981), links the impact of the "startling" increase in welfare dependency among American blacks to "the breakdown of the Negro family." One-quarter of all black families, Moynihan noted in 1965, were headed by women, and one-quarter of all black children were born out of wedlock. (Both percentages have doubled

during the past two decades.)

Not all analysts have agreed with Moynihan. Some scholars, notably Joyce A. Ladner, in **Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman** (Doubleday, 1971, cloth; 1972, paper), and Robert Bernard Hill, in **The Strengths of Black Families** (National Urban League, 1971), have stressed the resilience of the slum family in the face of great obstacles. In William Ryan's view, implicating the female-headed family amounts to **Blaming the Victim** (Pantheon, 1971, cloth; Random, 1972, paper).

Has immigration exacerbated poverty in America? According to a recent study by Thomas Muller, **The Fourth Wave** (Urban Institute, 1984), an estimated eight million immigrants, legal and undocumented, entered the United States during the 1970s. Many of them were willing to take menial jobs for low pay, jobs that some labor leaders have argued would otherwise have gone to Americans at higher pay.

Looking closely at the situation in California, Muller finds that an influx of Mexican workers did depress wages locally—which helped create more jobs. It had little or no *negative* impact on employment, not even among black teen-agers. To what degree Hispanic and Asian immigrants simply fill low-wage jobs that unemployed poor whites and blacks now disdain, thanks to welfare, remains a

matter of controversy.

Perhaps the most spirited recent defense of Washington's health, education, job-training, and other social uplift efforts of the past two decades has come from John E. Schwarz, a University of Arizona economist, in **America's Hidden Success: A Reassessment of Twenty Years of Public Policy** (Norton, 1983).

In alleviating sheer misery, Schwarz believes, Washington's efforts have paid off. Taking into account income from all sources—including the unrecorded "private economic activities" that supplement many welfare checks—as well as in-kind transfers, Schwarz estimates the true number of Americans, young and old, living in poverty during the late 1970s at only between four and eight percent of the population—down from 18 percent in 1960. In Schwarz's view, "the post-Eisenhower era was in fact an age of distinguished public achievement."

The scholarly debate over the causes and cure of poverty continues. And yet, Gertrude Himmelfarb writes, "Whatever progress has been charted on the graph of 'progress and poverty,' it is poverty that still strikes the eye and strikes at the heart. It is as if the modern sensibility can only register failure, not success, as if modernity has bequeathed to us a social conscience that is unappeasable and inconsolable."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Interested readers may also wish to consult WQ's Background Books essays on *Money and the Pursuit of Plenty in America* (Autumn 1977), *The Public Schools* (Autumn 1979), *The American Family* (Summer 1980), *The New Deal* (Spring 1982), *Immigration* (New Year's 1983), *Crime in America* (Spring 1983), and *Blacks in America* (Spring 1984).