

THE SHADOW OF
Poverty in America

Poverty in a Gilded Age

Annette Fuentes interviews Frances Fox Piven

In 1971, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward wrote *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*, a definitive study of welfare policies in the United States. Their radical approach cast public-relief programs as forms of social and labor market control, served up at times of unrest and mass organizing and retrenched during upswings in the economy. This analysis of 30 years ago was an uncanny predictor of the 1996 demise of welfare and the rise of punitive measures such as workfare.

Since then, Piven and Cloward have published five other works, including *Why Americans Don't Vote* (1988) and *The Breaking of the American Social Compact* (1997). Their latest collaboration, *Why Americans Still Don't Vote*, will be published this September by Beacon Press. Piven currently teaches at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

In the three decades since you first wrote about the poor, what have been the most significant changes in the nature of poverty?

For one thing, there are more poor Americans today than there were in 1970, so poverty has worsened in the United States. And extreme poverty has worsened in the last few years as the number of people living at half the poverty level has grown.

The official poverty line is \$13,000 for a family of three. The poverty line was invented by a woman named Mollie Orshansky, who worked for the federal government in the '60s. She estimated the cost of a basket of basic foodstuffs, multiplied it by three, and added estimates of what rent, transportation and other necessary things cost.

Now, we still do that, take the cost of a market basket and multiple it by three. But what has changed are rents and

medical costs, for example, which have inflated more than food has. So if you want to match the real poverty level today, you'd have to multiply by five. It would have to be \$19,500 to meet the real need, and that raises the number who would be [counted as] poor if you adjusted line.

The most alarming trend is the increase in the number of poor children. Even with a roaring economy, one fifth of children are poor.

In the '80s, the term "feminization of poverty" became the catchphrase to neatly identify the exponential growth of poor women heads of households. What's the current trend?

The new phrase is "the working poor," the discovery that even though a two-parent family is working some 300 hours more a year than they did 20 years ago, they're still poor.

The working poor explode the myth that the answer to poverty is always and simply a job, don't they?

We've witnessed serious changes for people at the bottom of the labor force. There are many more temporary or contract workers, and all workers are worried about their jobs, making them less able to use their bargaining power.

What Richard and I have argued for three decades is that there's a relation between income support programs and public policy. When income support is more generous workers have more leverage and are not as worried. When income supports expanded in the '70s, they were the most generous in their history. But since then, they've been rolled back. Culturally and symbolically, the most important has been the rollback in welfare programs.



In Evansville, Indiana, Crystal Love works an all-night shift as a dishwasher, then returns home for a few hours sleep, rising around midday to spend time with her two children.

The campaign against welfare has created heated rhetoric about the damage welfare did—leading people into dependency, encouraging young women to have children out of wedlock—and held women up as images of derelict people. The rollback makes people more miserable in a material sense and also makes the status of being a pauper much more horrifying.

It's a campaign that bubbles. It never disappeared from American political culture. There were always efforts to attack welfare recipients and welfare, usually on the same grounds: that welfare caused poverty, that welfare caused laziness, that welfare caused sexual immorality. The same sorts of arguments were made in England in the 1830s.

But these arguments became much more shrill and loud in the 1990s, primarily because President Clinton jumped on the bandwagon. Welfare practices also became much more degrading. In New York, when they first introduced workfare, they made the welfare recipients who were assigned to carry garbage cans around the city and pick up trash wear orange Day-Glo jackets, which bears an eerie similarity to the branding of paupers at the close of the Middle Ages.

Or to prison work crews, which often wear orange jumpsuits and do road work. I'm sure that many workfare participants do feel like prisoners.

Welfare recipients are in an excruciatingly difficult position. On the one hand, they are very politically and culturally vulnerable. And there is a tendency for them to accept, at least on the surface, the definitions deployed against them. They need support to assert what they also believe, which is that the work they do, taking care of their children, and sometimes disabled family members, is worthwhile. And when everyone is against them, they shrink from those arguments, and instead tell reporters that they're really glad for workfare.

At least those are the quotes reporters use in their stories. How do you rate media coverage of poverty and related issues?

I don't think there is any coverage. If you watch television, the issue has completely disappeared and that's where most people get their news. It's because the poor are quiet, and when the poor are quiet nobody pays attention to them. The reason they're quiet is that they were so isolated by the campaign against welfare, which was also a campaign against poor women. And people sensed their own vulnerability. The other reason they were quiet is that the attacks on welfare had been occurring sporadically for 25 years. I suppose that a lot of women had come to believe [the dismantling] would never happen, although the program had been steadily worsening in those years because grant levels were whittled away by inflation. They didn't know whether to believe it.

The reason for the relative lack of activism among poor women in the last couple of decades is this sense of vulnerability and isolation. Under those conditions, when you feel the political system has really turned against you, women opt for individual strategies of survival. But maybe that will change.

In Regulating the Poor, you identified cycles of government relief programs that waxed and waned in response to civil unrest and protests, with welfare regulations becoming more stringent during cycles of relative economic prosperity. It certainly seems we're at the pinnacle of the draconian stage with the kind of workfare rules that operate in New York, for example.

New York is pretty terrible, but it's true across the country. It's even worse in places like Mississippi, where welfare recipients are thrown into the chicken and catfish processing plants and the welfare department is paying most of their wages. When I was down there about a year and half ago, the manager of a catfish processing plant announced to the press that he was happy to say the welfare department had assured him they would not give welfare to anyone who was fired from the plant. The welfare department is working hand-in-hand with low-wage employers.

I think we are at the pinnacle—or the trough—of the repressive cycle, and there are some signs that women are coming together and organizing. It's happening in localities. The big change in welfare law is that the federal government defaulted on responsibilities it had acquired over 50 years for supervising state and local administration. Much of the organizing at state and local levels involves women trying to get modest improvements that would, for example, allow them to go to college or finish high school. Now they can do that, but there's a one-year limit. Also, they are trying to organize against the cut-off. And they've had some modest success in New York organizing against workfare. They want jobs, not workfare.

When everybody else is quiet, poor women are reluctant to be out front because they're so exposed and vulnerable. But a lot of things are happening now. The campuses are really boiling. There were the big demonstrations in Seattle and Washington, D.C. The street demonstrations in New York over police brutality. In that kind of environment, women take courage and think they can find allies.

It was interesting that during the April protests in Washington against the IMF and World Bank, global poverty was one of the key issues activists articulated.

If you puzzle over whether there's an issue that unifies these diverse protests, the issue you come to again and again is the economic injustices generated by corporate domination. Students on campuses quickly connect labor conditions of people working on their campuses—the janitors—with their sweatshop campaigns. The moral connection is very similar. They also see how sweatshop labor in the Third World is used against the American poor, especially the working poor.

You can't talk about poverty without talking about wealth, and today that is pretty much all that we hear about: soaring incomes for all. Who wants to talk about poverty?

We've been through periods like this before in the United States in the 1890s and the 1920s, when dominant images of the American economy and society were golden images of champagne and jazz, the lush life of the Fitzgeralds. But at the same time that was happening in the '20s, for example, entire industries were devastated by downturns in employment in the coal and textile industries. Lots of people were desperately poor even in the Roaring '20s, but nobody paid attention. That changed overnight with the crash of 1929. People tried to organize coal workers in the '20s, but they didn't succeed. Once the cultural understandings of what was going on were reversed, they succeeded big time. It's true we haven't paid much attention to poverty in this particular gilded age, but it is changing. ■

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Out of Sight

In many cities, being homeless is against the law

By Kari Lydersen

When the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) released an intensive, three-year study on homelessness in December, it proved what the homeless themselves have long known: Homelessness will continue to plague this country as long as cities fail to provide adequate shelter and social services.

The study, which involved the efforts of 12 federal agencies and thousands of interviews, showed that approximately 2 million people are homeless at some point during any

offering drug and alcohol treatment and job counseling, a large percentage succeed in finding permanent housing. "Homeless people are locked out of America's prosperity, but we have the key that can let them in," HUD Secretary Andrew Cuomo said. "Assistance programs can replace the nightmare of homelessness with the American dream of a better future."

The "key" to helping the homeless rests in the hands of city governments. But instead of looking for real solutions, politi-

cians all over the country are more concerned with maintaining an image of prosperity. Playing down the homeless problem means finding new ways to "clean up" the homeless, whether by police action or through more subtle maneuvers.

New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani has become infamous for his overzealous prosecution of "quality-of-life" violations, ranging from jay-walking to public drinking. Even tourists and wealthy residents have been arrested in the crack-down, but it is the homeless who bear the brunt of Giuliani's law-and-order mentality. In November, he threatened to arrest anyone sleeping in the street, say-

ing "Streets do not exist in civilized societies for the purpose of people sleeping there. Bedrooms are for sleeping."

Giuliani is far from alone. San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, who promised to address homelessness in a meaningful way in his first campaign in 1995, has earned scathing criticism for his attempts to evict the homeless from Golden Gate Park. Last summer the city budget passed with an extra \$250,000 allotted for prosecution of quality-of-life offenses. These funds will be used against homeless people charged with infractions like sleeping or urinating in public and possessing open containers of alcohol. Police harassment of the



Unable to pay rent on the meager wages he earns as a day laborer, Larry Barnes spends his nights on the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority's Route 22 bus. The only bus in the county that offers 24-hour service, No. 22 is a warm place for many homeless people.

given year, a third of whom had slept on the street or in some other public place within the last week. Families are the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population, and more working people are becoming homeless because of rising housing costs and a lack of living-wage jobs. Two-thirds of the homeless suffer from chronic or infectious diseases, and 39 percent are mentally ill.

HUD offered one positive spin on the information: When the homeless do hook up with social service organizations