

## ***Symposium:***

# **Johnson's War on Poverty**

**On November 6, 1964 NEW POLITICS sponsored a forum on Johnson's War On Poverty in New York City, attended by over 300 people. The speakers were Hyman Bookbinder, Special Assistant to the Director, Office of Economic Opportunity; Michael Harrington, author of *The Other America*; Charles Silberman, author of *Crisis in Black and White*; and Robert Theobald, author of *The Challenge of Abundance*. What follows is the text of the meeting, omitting Michael Harrington's participation. Mr. Harrington requested that his discussion not be printed.**

### **HYMAN BOOKBINDER:**

DESPITE POLITICAL ARGUMENTS THAT RAGE about the issue, American society and government are dedicated to the "promotion of the general welfare." Poverty, in the last year, has become a consuming American interest; one that is not confined to lecture halls. The most important thing about Johnson's war on poverty—"The Economic Opportunity Program"—is the fact of its existence. This is clearly a case to confound the mathematicians; the whole is really greater than the sum of its parts.

What we have done in less than a year since the late President Kennedy first discussed the importance of this program is to put on the statute books a commitment, a general blueprint, a frame of reference, a course of action which certainly equals in importance any major political revolution in this country in recent times.

For the past few months, we've been hearing a lot about a Triple Revolution. I like to think of another Triple Revolution which has characterized the past 30 or 40 years of this nation. What we've just done is to pass the third part of this Triple Revolution.

Back in the early Thirties, in the midst of a drastic economic crisis, one third of all the people were totally unemployed, and many others worked part time at horribly low wages. Under the pressure of economic chaos, Congress passed a series of acts which constituted a revolution; the New Deal was born. It is hard for many of you to believe that 35 years ago we didn't have minimum wages, Social Security, Federal Deposit Insurance—a whole series of economic and welfare measures calculated to minimize the economic hazards in a society which did not pro-

vide adequate economic security. We provided some protection against unemployment, against old age, against bank failures. These measures did considerable good. Sad to say, when the war started in Europe in 1939, although our economic situation had improved, there were still nine or ten million people unemployed. There was still great hardship. We had solved neither our unemployment nor economic crisis problems. But, soon after the war ended, this nation did enact the historic Employment Act of 1946. The New Deal measures minimized the hardships which occur when the economic system is not working properly. What prompted the 1946 measure was a desire to do more than we had done in the past to reduce the frequency and intensity of economic difficulties. It was our pledge never again to allow this country to have the kind of depression we had in the Thirties.

The whole evening could be spent demonstrating the fact that the Act has not been fully successful. What must be remembered, however, is that the Act was not a program of action, but a commitment to, and frame of reference for, a series of fiscal and public works programs. Despite our complaints about five, six or seven percent unemployment, and recessions every three or four years, we have never since had the kind of economic depression, the total hopelessness that characterized the Thirties.

Gross national product figures, average weekly wages and national income pointed to basic economic health at the beginning of the Sixties, and we felt good. We were beginning to grow again at a fairly rapid rate. Average weekly wages exceeded \$100. We were measuring gross national product by the \$600 billions. We could make a good case for saying we were doing well. But then, it was pointed out that precisely because we were doing so well, generally, it was unforgivable that at least one fifth of the American people were not even in the economic mainstream of this country. Full employment had no meaning for them; anti-recession activities had no meaning; unemployment insurance had no meaning. They weren't even in the economic system we were trying to improve. They were outside the pale of American economic life, and something had to be done about that. The late President Kennedy, just a little over a year ago, read Michael Harrington's book, among others. Walter Heller was asked to outline a program.

Perhaps the most dramatic single fact calling the attention of the Administration to this problem concerned Selective Service. About a third of our young men of military age were rejected for service due to educational backwardness, mental deficiency and physical disabilities. The root cause? Poverty.

As the Administration tried to understand the problem, certain things became clear. First, poverty and unemployment are not the same problem. They are related, of course, and a solution for one will con-

tribute to a solution for the other. But the problems are not identical. There are nine and a half million families in this country with annual incomes under \$3,000, averaging \$1,800 a family—\$35 a week. An analysis of the heads of these families shows that four million of them are simply not even in the labor force. Some of them would be in the labor force if there were great demands for labor, but by and large they are not. They may be mothers of fatherless children; people who are 50 and functionally illiterate; people who don't even dream of being able to get jobs. Another four million *are* working, but at very low wages. Only 600 thousand heads of families were technically unemployed, as we measure unemployment today.

While this country has a great challenge in meeting unemployment, the poverty problem will not be automatically solved by solving the unemployment problem. The poverty problem demands working in a whole range of special programs that include "motivation," "training," "education," "counseling," "psychological rehabilitation"—a whole series of things.

Earlier this year, a number of people like Mike Harrington were giving advice to the government. There were hundreds of magnificent suggestions for things to be done. Most must be done to a greater or lesser extent, but some order of priorities had to be set up. It was necessary to decide on the nature of the program and the size of the initial investment needed to attack the roots of poverty. Investment deals not only with finances but with people and resources. It was not an easy program to devise, but a program did emerge. Its dollar cost was something under a billion dollars. There was criticism of a program that costs only a billion dollars.

We have made a good beginning, I am confident. It does permit us to start a series of programs that touch upon several of the important aspects of poverty. You know the program basically—the youth employment features, community action, special rural features, small business, aid to dependent children, domestic peace corps. While different in organization and specific target they all have this in common: *this is not a welfare program*. When I say that, of course, I'm not deriding or decrying welfare. There is a great need for better, more liberal and enlightened welfare programs in this country. But this one is not a welfare program. It is not designed to make poverty less unbearable, to ease the suffering of the poor. Of course, it will ease the suffering of poor people, even in the short run, but that is not its purpose.

The purpose of this initial program is to provide some additional exits from poverty for some of the poor. The basic truth about our poor population today is that the great majority of them did not *become* poor—they were *born* poor. It's an important distinction. Most poverty is inherited; it's something you're born with and relatively few escape.

Most do not, and cannot, unless we provide these additional exits. We must change some of the conditions which contribute to poverty and that is what we mean to do with this program.

The "Economic Opportunity Program" is not the whole war against poverty. It is the first legislative installment in that war authorized by Congress and it is important to place this program in the context of the whole government commitment. We may have coined the phrase, "The War on Poverty," but we didn't start the war, and we do ourselves a disservice if we overstate the importance of this one program. It is good enough not to need overstatement. Such things as federal aid to education, the three-year-old Manpower Training Program, Area Redevelopment—all of these are part of the general war on poverty. Health care and a series of other proposals before Congress which were not passed last year all relate to this war. Improved housing and the attack on the basic problems of the central city have an impact.

America has accepted this challenge although not all of the American people have been fully convinced. The organs of public opinion, by and large, have accepted the challenge and are beginning to *believe* there is a poverty problem. Local and state governments have been persuaded that there is a problem. The intellectuals are with us. We have a lot going for us. But a recent Gallup poll still tells us that 51% of the American people still feel that most people who are poor are lazy, that they have only themselves to blame. Therefore, we have the tremendous job of persuading many people that there is, in fact, the disgraceful situation of 40 million Americans living in families with a total family income averaging \$1,800 a year—\$35 to feed, clothe and house a family; for health care, saving for the bright future, educating the kids, and all the rest.

Everything considered, I think this first year has been a success if only in terms of achieving a degree of understanding and starting to awaken the conscience of America. We made a start, but the job is not finished and I think that we will find in the years ahead that the *fact* of the poverty program will make possible a series of achievements which will contribute to ultimate success in the war on poverty.

Early last year, for example, a series of youth employment bills was pending before Congress. These bills could not get anywhere. Now, incorporated in the Economic Opportunity Act, they are law. We had a National Service Corps proposal, a domestic Peace Corps. It got nowhere in Congress. Placed in the framework of the Economic Opportunity Act, it has become law. I believe that Johnson's War on Poverty has won its first round. That first round was to get the country, the government and then the people of America committed to this very important third step of the Triple Revolution.

## CHARLES SILBERMAN:

THE MERE EXISTENCE OF A PROBLEM is no proof of the existence of the solution. Poverty may well be such a problem. More to the point, perhaps, the existence of this particular problem provides no proof of the existence of any simple or one-shot or over-all solution. The problem is not simple; it is inordinately complex. Poverty is not one problem, but a lot of quite separate and only partially overlapping problems. I think that Mr. Harrington was over-stating it a bit in *The Other America* when he argued that "there is a language of the poor, a psychology of the poor, a world view of the poor. To be impoverished is to be an internal alien, to grow up in a culture which is radically different from the one that dominates the society." I think we do the poor an injustice in insisting that they are all alienated, that they are all living in a separate culture of poverty. A growing body of research, most notably the studies of the Negro family in Washington, D.C. by Hylan Lewis, suggests that urban Negroes, and poor white families as well, do in fact share in middle class values and aspirations. They too value financial success, they want their children to be educated, they are ashamed of illegitimacy, and so on. Their problem to a very considerable extent is that their poverty gets in their way. Their daily struggle for existence drains them of the energy they need to achieve their aspirations. In Hylan Lewis' phrase "they are frustrated victims of middle class values." It is very easy for these people to become alienated and many of them do become alienated very quickly, but not inevitably. And one of the main operational conclusions coming out of Hylan Lewis' work is that if help is given at the right time, if it is given, in medical terminology, before the problem becomes clinical, a relatively small amount of help enables the individuals involved to master their problem and their environment. Let me give an example in an area that I've studied fairly closely. The main thrust of the poverty program is in Title One, providing for the work training program and work study program for teenagers. This strikes me as an effort to lock the barn door after the horse has been stolen. I don't think that there can be any doubt that the dropout problem with all its concomitants in unemployment, delinquency, alienation and so on, begins, not at age 16, the age at which youngsters become eligible under Title One, not even at the onset of adolescence, but at age 3 or 4 at the latest. In fact it begins in the womb, but we cannot deal with it at that age. If we set up pre-school programs—not nursery programs, but pre-school programs of the sort developed by Martin Deutsch in New York, Montessori programs, there are any number of variations of these—if we begin at age 3 or 4 we can radically change the whole life prospects of the child. Beginning at age 16 may be too late. I am not in any sense suggesting that we do nothing, that