

In the epilogue, she admits that the backlash did not succeed in putting women back in their place. She believes, however, that it has set them back, and laments, above all, the fact that women have been trying to achieve their private goals on their own: "To instruct each woman to struggle alone was to set each woman up, yet again, for defeat."

Faludi points out that when women did mobilize, as in the surge of pro-choice activism in 1989, they scored big victories. Yet perhaps the example is instructive. An attempt to ban abortion is a political act that warrants political action with a clear purpose. When it comes to career choices or child-care arrange-

ments, most women, I think, still regard these decisions as essentially private—and rightly so. Susan Faludi and Eleanor Smeal may wax rhapsodic about what would happen "if women all got together on the same day, on the same hour," agitating, of course, not just for equal opportunity or reproductive freedom but for "a real governmental investment in social services." Those of us who cherish true diversity, who believe that women have rights as individuals and not as a gender, can only say: Please, ladies, start the get-together without me.

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such as existed in several dozen U.S. cities in the late 1980s, many individuals from even the underclass can be drawn into the workforce, and at good wages.

No sane person, however, would prescribe the labor market conditions of, say, late-1980s Boston (which Osterman examines) as a healthy way to eliminate the underclass nationally. Labor shortages create serious problems in their own right. And even as antipoverty devices they aren't reliable: At the peak of the Boston labor crunch, 12 percent of all families in the city remained officially "in poverty."

This brings us to the behavioral issues. As Christopher Jencks shows, in 1968 only about a quarter of the people in poverty were "undeserving" (or lacking what he describes as "socially acceptable reasons for being poor"—for instance, old age, physical disability, or low wages in spite of steady work). Today, more than half of all poor people fall into that category. Simple idleness among young, able-bodied persons, he points out, has gone up dramatically since the mid-1960s.

Greg Duncan and Saul Hoffman present findings from their study comparing the economic fortunes of women who completed high school and avoided having a child as unwed teenagers to those of women who either dropped out or had a baby or did both. Not surprisingly (except to social scientists who never thought to measure this until Charles Murray brought it up), they learn that "teenagers who followed the rules" had much lower chances of subsequent poverty.

What's more, they find that the likelihood of a teenager becoming an unmarried welfare mother corresponds in a statistically significant way to the level of welfare benefits available to her—another Murray contention that has caused an outbreak of hives and indignation among members of the poverty-study industry.

Duncan and Hoffman conclude their contribution with this impassive sentence: "Our descriptive work on the consequences of teenage behavior shows... that schooling and delayed childbearing are sufficient conditions for most women, black and white, to avoid poverty as

When You're a Ghetto Child

BY KARL ZINSMEISTER

The Urban Underclass, edited by Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson
Washington: Brookings Institution, 450 pages, \$34.95

There Are No Children Here, by Alex Kotlowitz, New York: Doubleday, 324 pages, \$21.95



Does the neighborhood fail Lafayette and Pharoah Rivers or are they betrayed by the people closest to them?

The authors of *The Urban Underclass* start with a paradox: Despite big jumps in wages and income since the mid-1960s and a public mobilization that ratcheted welfare spending from 5 percent of GNP then to 10 percent now, the poor are still with us. In wrestling with this reality, the contributors' most interesting discussions center loosely around the question of whether it is primarily faults in the nation's economic structure

or faults in human character that account for the most enduring and damaging forms of modern poverty.

There is wide agreement that continued economic growth is important to reducing persistent poverty. (Unemployment, it is pointed out, falls about twice as fast among blacks as among whites during economic recoveries.) Richard Freeman and Paul Osterman both show that in unnaturally tight labor markets,

adults." Despite its bland tone, that statement represents a dramatic revision of the poverty research and advocacy of the previous decade. The existence of free will and the importance of lifestyle factors in influencing social condition are at last beginning to be acknowledged among certain of the poverati.

If the Brookings volume looks at the behavioral roots of poverty in abstraction, Alex Kotlowitz's book *There Are No Children Here* is all flesh and bone. The documentary tale begins with a Chicago woman who gives birth to her first child at age 14 and then has another at 15. After some personal turmoil and then a third birth, the father, Paul Rivers, marries the mother, LaJoe, and moves in with the family. About that time he starts a drug habit. He downs cough syrup. He takes barbiturates. He begins a 20-year addiction to heroin.

He doesn't lack for good jobs, however. He works for eight years as an upholsterer. He gets a decent-paying city-patronage position, then works as a garbage collector, then as a municipal bus driver. Meanwhile, the mother also has a job as a clerk in a medical center. "Though the two had their problems, money wasn't one of them," writes their chronicler.

The parents promise their children a house in a secure neighborhood, but they never fulfill that promise. Father takes to hanging out on a corner in front of a liquor store and drifts in and out of home life. He spends his pay on dope. His employer sends him to rehabilitation clinics, but he remains a junkie. He loses his job. He steals his children's television set and pawns it. By this time the couple has eight children. Meanwhile, the mother has left her job and been on public aid for many years. The welfare department supports the family by giving them a cash stipend and food stamps worth about \$1,000 a month and renting them an apartment for \$122 a month.

The children, all of whom still live with the family in public housing, have their own problems. The first three have each dropped out of school, spent time in jail, and gotten involved with drugs. The

eldest daughter, in her early 20s, works as a prostitute off and on to support her narcotics habit. She is herself the unmarried mother of three, her last baby addicted *in utero* to karachi, a smokable mix of heroin and amphetamines. The second child, a son, has served time in state prison for burglary. The thirdborn begins selling drugs at age 11 and has fathered three children by different mothers and been arrested 46 times on various charges by the time he is 18.

Hangers-on of all sorts pass through the family's apartment, with more than a dozen people frequently living off its refrigerator and bedrooms. Some are addicts. One works every day at O'Hare Airport selling fake-gold jewelry to tourists. The family is convicted of welfare fraud and the mother makes ends meet during the month or so they are off the rolls by card sharpening, a late-night hobby through which she sometimes wins considerable sums. In a generation of cousins, there are 12 high-school dropouts and just two graduates (one, the family success story, is a girl weighted down with four out-of-wedlock children on commencement day).

The younger family members have more childlike problems. An 11-year-old son misses 35 out of 180 school days. The boys extort money from car owners who park at a nearby stadium and break into some vehicles when rebuffed. Neither the children nor anyone else in the household keeps regular hours. The mother is sometimes not yet home when the children leave for school. They do much of their own clothes washing and ironing. Cereal is a 24-hour, self-served meal. The kitchen is often piled high with dirty dishes and food scraps and trash. Clothes overflow onto bedroom floors.

Beyond the inner sanctum of family is a neighborhood equally drenched in self-damaging disorder and destruction, plus brutality. A benevolent merchant who sometimes gives mothers free diapers is run out of business by robberies and shoplifting in his two-aisle store. A kindly hot dog peddler who befriends local children is shot in a stick-up.

The family can't easily visit with a

jail-confined son because inmates have permanently ripped the phones out. The bathrooms in the home apartment are fetid because residents have stolen their building's ventilators. A pool opens nearby for the children to enjoy, but the night of the ribbon-cutting ceremony it, too, is crippled by theft of its ventilation fans. The self-immolation runs across all groups: Resident children smash whiskey bottles on their own playground and tear down the basketball hoops that are their own best entertainment.

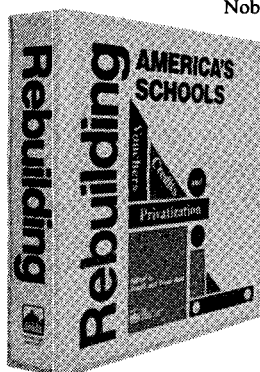
Meanwhile, the gangsters and drug dealers who control the housing project enjoy a kind of folk-hero status among some residents. The gangs never hesitate to use terror to get their way, but they also enjoy a certain measure of voluntary collaboration in setting up their gun and drug dens, and they can generally rely on community silence against the police and the housing authorities. A confidential crime hotline draws a total of 21 calls from Chicago public-housing residents in crime-snarled 1986.

Growing up within this family and the surrounding milieu of violence, cruelty, and utterly wasted lives are two smart, sensitive pre-teenage boys: middle sons Lafayette and Pharoah Rivers. The author got to know the youngsters well over a four-year period, and he spent considerable time interviewing the relatives, neighbors, and local authorities around them as well. This book is the story of their days. In its grim outlines, the tale will be depressingly familiar to observers of the modern urban scene, but only rarely do we get a picture of underclass life this affectingly personal in its detail. There is real humanity and some masterful journalism in this book.

Unfortunately, the book's sympathy and personalism becomes its weakness as well as its strength, leaving the reader with an uneasy fuzziness as to how all these innocent and likable people could end up in such a nightmarish world. Kotlowitz's villains are all distant, impersonal abstractions: the housing authority, the police, gentrifying developers, the cigar-chomping owner of a sports stadium that dominates the neighbor-

"a splendid job!"

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hood, Reaganites in Washington, Mayor Richard Daley Jr., the gangs (though not the gangsters). It is a sanitizing touch that makes the degraded narrative bearable—amidst this leprous inhumanity, all the evil has been banished to institutions.

Certainly there is ample blame to be shared. The innocent children at the heart of this book have been badly let down by many institutions: the criminally inept bureaucracy of the Chicago Housing Authority; liberal fatuities such as the various programs that have "adopted" street gangs, giving them official responsibilities, city grants, publicly supplied buildings, and other resources (all soon pillaged); a criminal-justice system that is neither swift nor sure (25,000 accused criminals were released onto the streets of Cook County in 1988 alone simply because city fathers provided no jail space in which to hold them); a public-school system that allowed four teachers' strikes in five years and provides perhaps the worst education in the United States.

The economic inducements prevailing in places like inner-city Chicago also corrode healthy family life and social relations. LaJoe Rivers's \$12,000-a-year welfare package, the separate welfare package of her resident daughter La-Shawn, the off-the-books income from fake-jewelry sales, drug sales, card-game winnings, prostitution, video-game robberies and other thefts, the boys' car-park shakedown money, an older son's occasional gypsy shoeshine earnings (of up to \$100 a day), Paul Rivers's paycheck and unemployment benefits, Medicaid benefits, and other entitlements mean that an alternative existence in market-rate housing and unskilled paid employment would very likely not pay off for the family. Our social-welfare system tells the Rivers to stay put.

The quality of housing, schooling, and medical care, the physical fabric of their dependent existence, is often abysmally low. But then no sweaty drudging or nagging responsibility are required either. Their demoralized, goal-less lives have been bought and paid for with public funds, and as an economic proposition there is no incentive for them to leave the projects and the dole for independent toil.

Nor is there anything in our current welfare system that expects or demands any more of them, a scandalous indictment of the warped encouragements and apologies our society presents to its least proficient members. We are, at a minimum, responsible for anesthetizing many of these families in their squalor.

But if welfare traps, inept bureaucracies, crummy schools, and weak law enforcement are ways that American society has failed children such as Lafeyette and Pharoah Rivers, more fundamental failings lie closer to home. Kotlowitz makes much of an incident in which Paul Rivers rages at a hustler who has introduced his son Terence to the drug trade. The confrontation is without effect, and the boy eventually becomes deeply involved. The family, Kotlowitz says, "lost Terence to the neighborhood."

A more detached observer might suggest something else: that Terence was less lost to others than converted, rather predictably, to the example of his own father. Had the son of the 20-year junkie grown to view drugs as anything *other* than commonplaces of commerce and consumption it might have surprised us more.

Kotlowitz freely admits his emotional involvement with his informants, and one can easily understand his shying from conclusions so acid. There is no pleasure whatever in wagging fingers at the pitiful adults and kinfolk who ring his child protagonists. Just the same, we will never accurately understand why those youngsters have suffered so horribly unless we face the implications of the personal and family behaviors that occur all around them. By many free choices the boys' guardians set courses for lives other than their own. Time after time they badly let down the innocents whom they had more reason to protect than anyone.

That is the broader calamity depicted in this poignant book. It is bad enough the Rivers family is beset from without; what is more wrenching is that it first collapsed within. Virtually no member respects even society's most elementary rules of personal obligation. One can hardly be surprised that under such conditions there is no social success and little individual

satisfaction. No amount of human love, no mobilization of public concern, no teetering mountain of funds can reliably protect the vulnerable young in the face of moral decay as pervasive as that which blights the Rivers family. So long as a Hobbesian world of exploded families and suspended ethics pertains in our worst ghettos, every resident child will be gravely endangered; any who escape untwisted must be considered gifts.

Life's most damaging hurts are unquestionably the betrayals. At one point in this book the mother of Lafayette and Pharoah, referring to a perceived police

injustice, rues the occasion when "what you thought would protect you, you found out that you couldn't trust." That statement, applied even more to people than institutions, could be this opera's anthem. For Lafayette and Pharoah, and their underclass siblings everywhere, it is the trusts broken by those most naturally relied upon that cut most deeply.

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simultaneously, can vastly increase individual freedom.

This much is historical fact: Charles Babbage (1792-1871), a fellow of the Royal Society, devoted most of his life to the conception and construction of computing machinery, first his Analytical Engine, and later his Difference Engine. The Difference Engine was nothing less than what we now call a von Neumann machine. That is, it was a computer, complete with memory, instruction set, and output devices. Naturally, even electricity was then a novelty, and electronics inconceivable: Babbage's machines depended on mechanical devices—gears, rods, and cams taking the place of vacuum tubes or microchips.

Alas, historically, the machine tools of the day were unable to produce parts to Babbage's demanding tolerances, and the device was never realized. To contemporaries, the Babbage machine must have seemed an imaginative failure; with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Babbage, like da Vinci, was a genius out of his time. Equally brilliant was Lady Ada Lovelace, the daughter of Lord Byron, who worked with Babbage and developed algorithms to be used with the never-completed Engine. She invented many of the basic principles used in modern software—the subroutine and the iterative loop, for example—and must be considered the world's first programmer, although none of her work ever ran since the hardware for which it was designed was never completed.

The story is a compelling one for a science-fiction writer: What would have happened if Babbage had been able to complete his machine? One readily imagines enormous steam-powered computing engines, rods and gears clacking away.

This astounding technology is one of *The Difference Engine's* strengths. The image of the Central Statistics Bureau's great brass engines, serviced by punch card-bearing technicians in "clean-room" lab coats whizzing about on roller skates within an enormous rococo Victorian pyramid is one that sticks in the mind.

The story itself is a fairly plebeian one:

Computers in Steam and Brass

BY GREG COSTIKYAN

The Difference Engine, by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling
New York: Bantam/Spectra, 429 pages, \$19.95



Sterling (left) and Gibson: compelling storytellers with selective memories

William Gibson and Bruce Sterling are the founders and foremost practitioners of "cyberpunk," a recent and much-debated movement in science fiction. *Cyberpunk* as a word has now passed into general usage, in two rather contradictory ways. In entertainment media, it refers to a style of downbeat, hard-bitten, and violent science fiction; in the computer field, it's used by hackers operating on the sometimes-illegal leading edge of technology.

But in the transition from self-conscious literary movement to mass acceptance, the word has lost its original

intellectual baggage—for make no mistake about it, Gibson and Sterling have a definite intellectual, even political, agenda. Central to their work, and indeed to literary cyberpunk as a whole, are two essential ideas: First, that we are in the throes of the information revolution, a sea change quite as important and powerful as the industrial revolution, and that very little thought has been given to what that means for society. Second, that humanity as a whole is in the grip of forces we do not understand, forces that revolutionize both technology and culture every generation, and that unless we begin to grasp that fact, we may be heading for a grim and rather unhappy smash-up.

The Difference Engine has been touted as a drastic change in approach for these two writers, and in a sense it is. Their previous work has been Chanderlesque; this book reads more like Trollope or Dickens (albeit with a level of sex that the Victorians would never have accepted, at least other than anonymously). Gibson and Sterling's previous work has dealt with the future; this deals with the past. But the central theme remains unchanged: Computers can make it far easier for society to control individuals—and,