

The Impoverished Debate on Poverty

Herbert Gans's book would take liberals in the wrong direction in the welfare debate

BY DANTE RAMOS

The War Against the Poor

Herbert J. Gans, *Basic Books*, \$22

When Phil Gramm visited Louisiana this past July, he stopped off in Metairie, a well-appointed white-flight suburb of New Orleans, to woo local Republicans and plug a tough welfare-reform bill. He drew cheers with his now-familiar soundbite: Welfare recipients should get out of the wagon and help the rest of us pull.

For most journalists and public policy analysts, speeches like Gramm's are just political boilerplate. Yet Herbert J. Gans imputes much darker motives to politicians who attack welfare dependency. In *The War Against the Poor*, Gans interprets such attacks as part of a centuries-long conspiracy to demonize the poor and keep them from improving their situation.

Gans, an eminent Columbia University sociologist, has chosen his title and central metaphor to tweak the War on Poverty. He also has chosen it to claim a patch of moral high ground in the current welfare-reform debate. After all, a politician who would actively plot against poor people seems much more disreputable than one who merely argues that public aid erodes work incentives. And, in truth, Gans's style of attack on welfare critics has been a standard device in social policy debates for more than three decades. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, reviled as a racist in the late 1960s for his report on the black family, was the first victim.

Hysteria is a terrible way to defend welfare programs—especially when other defenses would be more sensible and more effective. Take Gramm's stump speech, for example. He depends implicitly on at least two specious propositions: All poor

families are able to help pull the wagon, and welfare is a bigger drain on the budget than corporate subsidies, the mortgage-interest tax deduction, freeloading cattle ranchers and so on. Unless these issues are engaged, defenders of anti-poverty programs will be powerless in the face of treacly anecdotes about Gramm's once-destitute momma, who always told young Phil that welfare checks never got anyone out of poverty. You can hear the voters now: "Gramm's not evil. He's just folksy!"

Gans does make some strong points. Most employers are *not* clamoring for new workers. Welfare recipients *are* less morally suspect than defense contractors who grossly overbill the government. And some critics of welfare—Gramm comes to mind—who insist they want to *help* the poor are very clearly disingenuous.

It's also quite obvious that the biggest difference between poor people and rich people is money—not some weird disdain for social norms. As Gans writes, "There are no middle class muggers." Welfare critics are often right for emphasizing the role values play in perpetuating poverty. But they too seldom acknowledge the simple truth that it's easier to devote attention to education and child rearing if you have some financial security.

Unfortunately, Gans is much less convincing on the central thesis of his book—that conservative critics of welfare are waging a "war." If people are plotting a campaign against the poor, Gans needs to document the battles, body counts and strategy meetings. Instead, he talks only about name-calling. Labels such as "welfare dependent," "substance abusers," and "the homeless," he says, char-

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acterize the poor as indifferent to the values of society at large. But would Gans prefer “crack fiend” or “bum”? Often the terms he vilifies are efforts to describe certain behaviors in a way that’s value-neutral, or even kind.

The label that galls Gans the most is “the underclass,” a term that exploded in popularity during the late eighties. Gans calls the term vague, and he’s right. For some, it means all low-income individuals. Others use the term for poor people who show certain characteristics and behavior: long-term welfare receipt and poor work history, for example. But to Gans, this is all just criticism of behavior, society’s way of calling the poor undeserving—and therefore a weapon of war.

Gans portrays anything and everything predicated upon “the underclass” as dangerous—“even a thoughtful underclass policy.” This will come as a shock to Henry Cisneros, Robert Reich, Donna Shalala, and other Clinton Administration officials who have tried to give poor people housing, education, health assistance, and substance-abuse counseling in one package. The idea behind this “coordinated approach to poverty” is that certain people suffer from a complex of related problems that result from factors such as poverty, neglectful parents, and lack of education.

“Because ‘underclass’ is a code word that places some of the poor *under* society and implies that they are not or should not be *in* society, users of the term can therefore favor excluding them from the rest of society without saying so,” Gans writes. Read that last sentence again. Gans says that recognizing that there are poor people is the same as wanting to keep them poor and excluded. He elides the difference between a preacher who implores congregants to help the disadvantaged and, say, a hopelessly callous businessman.

“Above all,” Gans writes, “everyone has to realize that insisting on the harmfulness of divergent behavior is a way of asserting the cultural and political power of one’s own values.” This is true, and unwed high school dropouts should have every legal right to father or mother as many children as they want. But *The War Against the Poor* is not about legal rights. It is about social welfare policy, which involves the use of scarce tax dollars. In this context it is unfair—and politically obtuse—to scold taxpayers for decrying pregnancy rates among teenagers who can’t afford to feed their own children.

The strange thing is that Gans doesn’t take advantage of opportunities to score easy points off Newt Gingrich and his ideological progenitors. He could begin with the Republican attack on the Earned Income Tax Credit, a budget cut that very nearly crosses the line separating garden-variety political cynicism from unmitigated evil. Gans should have dealt at length with Ronald Reagan’s infamous “welfare queen” speeches—perhaps using evidence from high-level strategy meetings. Perhaps he would have found that some politicians *do* begrudge poor people a warm meal.

Gans’s book is well-intentioned, certainly. But he misses the point. The tragedy is not that politicians and voters are waging war on the poor, but that they usually don’t think about the poor at all. Gingrichism is political genius: It buys off the vast middle class with tax cuts by cutting government services that benefit poor people, not corporate subsidies that benefit the well-off. Because the people who vote for this brand of conservatism live in the vast insulated swaths of suburbia, there is no downside, at least not for the time being. Residents of Metairie—the wealthy community where Gramm pitched welfare reform—do not wake up at 4:30 a.m. to the sound of burglars spiriting compact-disc players from their bedrooms. And most suburbanites probably think they’re doing right by the poor: As Gans reports, polls show that many or most non-poor people still support some form of public assistance.

It does feel odd to criticize Gans’s book at a time when the cuts moving through Congress would cost the lowest fifth of American families more than \$1,500 in aid. Republicans are systematically eliminating the federal guarantee to care for this country’s neediest people. And taxes are being cut for millionaires and raised for many working stiff. There is no doubt that the poor will suffer from these cuts, particularly children. Meanwhile, necessary anti-poverty programs—such as the neo-Rooseveltian jobs project most forcefully proposed by Mickey Kaus—aren’t even on the table.

The seriousness of this moment in history is all the more reason why criticism from the left needs to be passionate, but also reasoned and intelligent. Instead of criticizing Americans for recognizing the presence of the poor, how about criticizing policy that worsens inequality? To rekindle a faith in liberalism, we need to appeal to people’s hearts—and their heads. □

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