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## Poverty in America 50 Years After Michael Harrington's *The Other America*

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Fifty years ago this month Michael Harrington wrote a book, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* - a haunting tour of deprivation in an affluent society - that inspired Presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson to wage a war on poverty. This slim, 186-page volume became a best-seller and became required reading for social scientists, elected officials, college students, members of study groups sponsored by churches and synagogues, reporters and intellectuals, the new wave of community organizers and the student activists who traveled to the South to join the civil rights crusade. Harrington was soon in great demand as a speaker on college campuses, union halls and religious congregations. Reporters and television talk-show hosts wanted to interview him.

Harrington wrote that the poor were invisible to most Americans because they lived in rural isolation or in urban slums. Once they become aware of the situation, Americans should be ashamed to live in a rich society with so many poor people.

"The fate of the poor," he concluded, "hangs upon the decision of the better-off. If this anger and shame are not forthcoming, someone can write a book about the other America a generation from now and it will be the same or worse."

It is now a generation later and, thanks in part to Harrington, the poor are no longer invisible. The policies adopted as part of Johnson's war-on-poverty (including Medicaid; subsidized housing; Head Start; legal services; raising the minimum wage; and, later, food stamps) -- in combination with a strong economy -- significantly reduced poverty. The nation's poverty rate [was cut in half](#) -- from 22.4 percent in 1959 to 11.1 percent in 1973. The decline in poverty was particularly dramatic among the elderly, thanks to Medicare and cost-of-living increases for Social Security.

The nation's poverty rate has never returned to the level Harrington described in *The Other America*. But Harrington lamented that the level of spending for antipoverty programs (less than 1 percent of the federal budget) was never sufficient to make a larger dent in the problem. Since the 1970s, the poverty rate has fluctuated, but has persistently been two or three times higher than in most European societies, which have much more generous social welfare policies and stronger labor unions. Even Canada -- which has a similar economy and distribution of wealth to the United States -- has a much lower poverty rate and does not permit the level of sheer destitution and misery found in the United States, including hunger, slums and the growing army of homeless people sleeping on park benches and in vacant buildings.

In 2010, 46 million Americans -- over 15 percent of the population -- [lived in poverty](#). Almost as many poor people live in the suburbs as in cities -- a phenomenon that was unthinkable 50 years ago. About one-quarter (22 percent) of America's children now live in poverty. The poverty rate [is much higher](#) for blacks (27.4 percent) and Latinos (26.6 percent) than for whites (9.9 percent).

Even more startling is the fact that 100 million people comprise what the U.S. Census calls the poor and the "near poor," based on a new definition of poverty that measures living standards, not just income. Almost one-third of the nation, in other words, can barely make ends meet.

In the early 1960s, many Americans were ready to enlist in a war on poverty because the standard of living was improving for most families, inequality was shrinking and people felt hopeful about the country and its future. A growing number of American families were able to afford to move to the suburbs, buy homes, install air conditioners, purchase a new contraption called a television, pay for a new car every few years, take a yearly vacation (and stay at a new phenomenon called a "motel") and even fly on an airplane. They could send their children to college and save money for a comfortable retirement.

But those optimistic and generous attitudes began to change in the 1970s, as conservative politicians and pundits began their assault on government regulations, taxes and social programs. That steady drumbeat of anti-government blame-the-victim invective has contributed to public skepticism that anti-poverty policies can work. The most famous one-liner in this arsenal is President Reagan's statement, in his 1988 State of the Union address, "My friends, some years ago, the Federal Government declared war on poverty and poverty won." That cynical remark was intended not only to disparage government efforts to uplift the poor, but also to justify major cuts in social programs, which contributed to a significant increase in poverty during the 1980s -- a trend repeated in the first decade of the 21st century, even before the current recession, while George W. Bush occupied the White House.

Today, concern about the poor is a harder sell not only because of the ideological attack on government as an instrument of economic reform, but also because ordinary Americans have experienced over a decade of declining wages, rising joblessness and an epidemic of foreclosures. It is difficult to elicit generosity of spirit among economically squeezed middle-class families.

But it is possible, that the country is now going through another political wave in which the fate of the poor is linked to the concerns of the broad middle class. The growing concentration of wealth and income has shifted attitudes and may have set the stage for a movement of middle class and poor Americans to find common ground.

Indeed, even many Americans who don't agree with Occupy Wall Street's tactics or rhetoric nevertheless share its indignation at outrageous corporate profits, widening inequality and excessive executive compensation side by side with the epidemic of lay-offs and foreclosures.

In a [November 2011 poll](#) from the Public Religion Research Institute, 60 percent agreed that "our society would be better off if the distribution of wealth was more equal." A [survey](#) conducted by psychologists at Duke and Harvard found that 92 percent of Americans preferred the wealth distribution of Sweden over that of the United States. In Sweden, the wealthiest fifth of the population have 36 percent of all wealth, compared to the United States, where the wealthiest fifth has 84 percent.

A Pew Research Center [survey](#) released in December 2011 found that most Americans (77 percent) -- including a majority (53 percent) of Republicans - agree that "there is too much power in the hands of a few rich people and corporations." Not surprisingly, 83 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds share that view. Pew also discovered that 61 percent of Americans believe that "the economic system in this country unfairly favors the wealthy." A significant majority (57 percent) think that wealthy people don't pay their fair share of taxes.

In a December 2011 speech in Osawatimie, Kan., President Barack Obama sought to channel the growing populist outrage unleashed by the Occupy movement. He criticized the "breathtaking greed" that has led to widening income divide. "This isn't about class warfare," he said. "This is about the nation's welfare." Obama noted that the average income of the top 1 percent has increased by more than 250 percent, to \$1.2 million a year. He returned to those themes in his January 24 State of the Union address. He called on Congress to raise taxes on millionaires. "Now, you can call this class warfare all you want," [he said](#), adding, "Most Americans would call that common sense."

Thanks to the Occupy movement, the rhetoric of describing the nation's widening economic divide as a gap between the "rich and the poor" has been replaced by outrage at the gap between "the rich and the rest of us" or, more precisely, the richest 1 percent and the "99 percent." Whether the plight of the poor gets included or forgotten in that calculation will depend on what legislative remedies activists and policymakers push for in the coming years.

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The commercial success of *The Other America* was a result of Harrington's graceful writing as well as good timing. The book struck a nerve because America was ready to hear its message.

*The Other America* challenged the conventional wisdom that the nation had become an overwhelmingly middle-class society as a result of postwar prosperity. Harrington reported that almost one-third of all Americans -- between 40 million and 50 million people -- lived "below those standards which we have been taught to regard as the decent minimums for food, housing, clothing and health."

Harrington's writing style -- informal, accessible and morally outraged, but not self-righteous -- appealed to readers. Rather than relying primarily on statistics to make his argument, he told stories, humanizing the poor as real people trapped in difficult conditions not of their own making. He described people living in slum housing, people who got sick and lived with chronic pain because they could not afford to see a doctor, who did not have enough food for themselves or their children and lived with constant hunger.

"Until these facts shame us, until they stir us to action," Harrington wrote, "the other America will continue to exist, a monstrous example of needless suffering in the most advanced society in the world."

Harrington wanted the book to tug at people's consciences, to outrage them and to push them to action. He wrote that poverty was caused and perpetuated by institutions and public policies, not by individuals' personal pathologies. Although Harrington was a committed socialist, he did not argue that it was caused by capitalism or that the solution was socialism. The solution, he wrote, was full employment, more funding for housing and health care and better schools and job training. This, he believed, would create job opportunities for the poor, who were disproportionately African Americans, and rebuild the nation's troubled cities without being as politically divisive as a federal program identified primarily as serving poor blacks.

As he campaigned for president in 1960, John F. Kennedy was shocked at the suffering he saw in West Virginia, where the poor were mostly rural whites. The southern sit-in movement, which began in February 1960 in Greensboro, N.C., put a spotlight on the intertwined realities of racism and poverty. As president, JFK was concerned that the exposure of widespread poverty and racism would embarrass the United States in the Cold War race with the Soviet Union for the hearts and minds of the world's people.

JFK's economic adviser Walter Heller gave a copy of *The Other America* to the young president. (Kennedy may have read the book or a 50-page review of the book by Dwight Macdonald, called "Our Invisible Poor," in the Jan. 19, 1963, issue of *The New Yorker* -- historians tell both versions.) As Maurice Isserman recounts in his biography of Harrington, *The Other American*, three days before he was assassinated, Kennedy told aides that he wanted to do something about poverty.

On taking office after Kennedy's death, LBJ wanted to build on JFK's unfinished agenda. He told Heller that abolishing poverty was the kind of big, bold program he could get behind. He appointed Peace Corps Director Sargent Shriver (Kennedy's brother-in-law) to head the new Office of Economic Opportunity. Shriver invited Harrington to join its war on poverty planning committee.

In 1964, Harrington, his friend Paul Jacobs (a labor activist and writer) and Labor Department official Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who later became a U.S. senator from New York, wrote a background paper for the committee. The memo urged, "If there is

any single dominant problem of poverty in the U.S., it is that of unemployment." The remedy, it said, was a massive public works initiative similar to the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Civilian Conservation Corps programs.

It was on this point that Harrington parted company from Johnson's aides. Jobs programs were expensive; the WPA had cost \$5 billion in 1936. Johnson insisted that the "unconditional war on poverty" had to cost less than a billion dollars a year. His strategy was to help the poor improve themselves -- a "hand up, not a handout." War on poverty legislation, passed in August 1964, included funds for preschool education, social services through community action agencies and legal services, but no major jobs programs and no major direct cash grants to the poor.

Harrington complained to Shriver that America could not abolish poverty by spending "nickels and dimes." Shriver responded, "Oh really, Mr. Harrington. I don't know about you, but this is the first time I've spent a billion dollars."

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Nobody was more surprised than Harrington about his sudden and growing fame and influence. In his early 20's, he spent several years living in voluntary poverty in New York City as a member of the Catholic Worker movement, sharing living space with homeless men and winos in the Bowery district and writing for the movement's newspaper. After several years, Harrington left the *Catholic Worker*. Instead of ministering to the poor, he wanted to abolish the system that produced so much misery.

Working for the Young People's Socialist League, a group with no more than a few hundred members, Harrington traveled by bus and thumb across the country, speaking to small groups of students on college campuses about the emerging civil rights movement and the crusade against nuclear weapons, while talent-scouting for budding activists. Student activist Tom Hayden called him "easily the most charismatic of the political intellectuals" he'd met in the 1960s. In New York, he spent many evenings at the White Horse Tavern in Greenwich Village, hanging out with poets, writers, bohemians, folksingers and radicals. He began writing for small-circulation magazines about war and politics, as well as about movies and novels.

Harrington would have been content in this role of being America's "oldest young socialist," as he often called himself. But after he'd written a few articles about poverty, an editor at Macmillan suggested that he expand his ideas and reporting into a book. Harrington initially resisted the idea, but he was broke and the offer of a \$500 advance helped change his mind. The book changed Harrington's life and changed the country. It took him from the White Horse to the White House.

Though Harrington's stint as an adviser to the Johnson administration lasted only one month, it gave him a platform as America's leading poverty expert. Not since Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) about the appalling conditions in New York's Lower East Side -- which inspired progressive era activism to clean up slums and sweatshops -- had a book drawn so much attention to the plight of the poor.

For the quarter-century after *The Other America* appeared, Harrington mesmerized audiences, especially on college campuses and in union halls, with his eloquent, funny and morally uplifting lectures. When he talked about democratic socialism, he made it sound like common sense -- rational, practical and moral at the same time. He was also a talent scout, recruiting young activists and plugging them into different movement activities.

Harrington did not believe that the achievement of socialism was inevitable or around the corner. In fact, he told audiences, "you must recognize that the social vision to which you are committing yourself will never be fulfilled in your lifetime." In the meantime, he said, socialists, radicals, progressives and liberals had to fight today for what he called the "left wing of the possible."

Harrington admired the strengths of European social and economic programs, but he knew that Americans had to find their own way. Thus, on the lecture circuit in the 1980s, when France's socialist government was tripping over its own errors, Harrington was fond of telling audiences that "any idiot can nationalize a bank." Socialism had to be democratic, human scale and with as little bureaucracy as possible.

None of Harrington's subsequent 11 books were as successful as *The Other America*. No matter how many books he wrote, he was always introduced as "the author of *The Other America*" or as "the man who discovered poverty" or as "America's leading socialist," or all three.

Unlike Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas -- his predecessors as the nation's leading socialists -- Harrington never thought it was possible to create a radical third party that could succeed in electing candidates and gaining power. The task of socialists was to keep the flame of socialism alive while building coalitions among labor, civil rights, religious and intellectual liberals and others to form a left flank within the Democratic Party.

With his friends Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph, he flew to Alabama to join Dr. King's march from Montgomery to Selma in 1965. He worked closely with the leaders of the United Auto Workers, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Service Employees International Union and Machinists unions. He wrote speeches for Ted Kennedy and Martin Luther King, drafted a Poor People's Manifesto for King in 1968 and influenced King's growing radicalism.

Harrington pulled together the socialists and radicals within the labor, feminist, peace and environmental movements, to challenge mainstream Democrats to offer bolder solutions to underlying economic and social problems. In the early 1960s, that meant working with his union friends to mobilize support for King, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Later in the decade, it meant opposing U.S. involvement in Vietnam, but encouraging (without success) young radicals to wrap their opposition in an American flag and avoid a naïve and self-defeating hero worship of third world revolutionaries.

In 1968, Harrington campaigned for the antiwar candidates -- particularly Robert Kennedy -- against LBJ and Hubert Humphrey, and helped found the New Democratic Coalition to unite the antiwar and anti-poverty forces within the Democratic Party. In the 1970s, he pushed his labor allies to support environmental and feminist policies, like the Clean Air Act and the Equal Rights Amendment. In 1980, he organized progressives to support Ted Kennedy's challenge to President Jimmy Carter.

In 1973, Queens College (part of the City University of New York system) hired Harrington as a professor of political science, a position he needed to obtain a secure income and health insurance for his family. It was the first and only "real" job he ever had.

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Since Harrington's death -- in 1989 of esophageal cancer, at age 61 -- there has been no significant socialist movement in this country. Harrington, who followed in the footsteps of Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas, did not groom a successor. Today, only a handful of visible public figures -- including Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont, theologian Cornel West, sociologist Frances Fox Piven and writer Barbara Ehrenreich -- publicly identify themselves as socialists. (Indeed, Ehrenreich's 2001 exposé about the working poor, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, is the closest book in spirit, style and influence to *The Other America*.) Democratic Socialists of America the nation's largest socialist organization, which Harrington founded in 1973, has only 6,500 dues-paying members.

Ironically, after Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, the word "socialism" started making a comeback. But it wasn't because the socialists were gaining momentum. It was because Obama's opponents -- the Tea Party; the right-wing blogosphere; the Chamber of Commerce; conservative media gurus like Glenn Beck, Ann Coulter, Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh; and the current crop of Republican presidential candidates -- have labeled anything Obama proposed, including his modest health care reform proposal, as "socialism."

But perhaps the conservative echo chamber's attacks on Obama as a "socialist" have backfired -- at least among young Americans. The Pew Research Center [survey](#) released in December 2011 uncovered this startling finding: More 18- to 29-year-old Americans have positive views of socialism than of capitalism. Among that millennial generation, 49 percent had a positive view of socialism, while 47 percent had a positive view of capitalism in a survey conducted in early December last year. Similarly, only 43 percent had a negative view of socialism, compared with 47 percent who had a negative view of capitalism. Moreover, support for socialism actually increased in the past two years. In 2010, 43 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds registered positive feeling for socialism. (This put it in a dead heat with capitalism.)

Today, Harrington is almost a forgotten figure. Contemporary historians and sociologists still cite Harrington in their studies of poverty, but few Americans under 50, including most activists with unions, community organizers and civil rights groups, have heard of him.

But his legacy endures. The past decade has witnessed successful campaigns for "living wage" laws in more than 150 cities and widespread opposition to Walmart's employment practices. Polls reveal that most Americans think that people who work full time shouldn't live in poverty. Today, Harrington would have been heartened by the upsurge of protest that began at Zuccotti Park, quickly spread throughout the country and changed the nation's conversation.

Were Harrington still alive, he would inject himself into the public debate, clarifying what socialism is and isn't and explaining that Obama is far from a socialist. Then, he'd urge liberals, progressives and real socialists to push the Democrats to be bolder, give Obama more room for maneuver and fight hard for the "left wing of the possible."

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