

States of the Union

DOWN AND OUT IN AMERICA

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

IT WAS IN the summer of 1965 that my friend at the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) gave me a vocabulary lesson, courtesy of the War on Poverty. He had asked me to write a report on rural housing conditions; now, sitting behind a cluttered desk, he was cheerfully red-penciling my first draft. "You shouldn't call these people poor," he admonished as he deleted. "You may call them 'low-income families' or 'families down on their luck,' but you mustn't call them 'poor families.' That would destroy their self-respect, don't you see?"

Although I didn't then, I think I do now. One of the things we Americans suffer from is an embarrassment of wretches: Something there is that doesn't love the poor. So pervasive is our distaste that even professional befrienders of the poor prefer euphemisms to straightforward labels—just as many liberal Christians a few decades ago had trouble saying "Jew," a once-accessible word that social prejudice had rendered off-limits. (A favorite substitute was "of the Hebrew persuasion.") What might be helpful here is a Paupers' Anti-Defamation League a "PADL" for people up a creek.

For openers, our new organization (my fledgling fantasy) could spread the word about two recent books that stick up for the poor. In *America's Struggle Against Poverty, 1900-1980* (Harvard, 268 pp., \$17.50), James T. Patterson, a Brown University historian, chronicles our attitudes toward poor people—one part compassion, nine parts contempt. In *Poverty in Rural America: A Case Study* (Westview, 257 pp., \$17.50), Janet M. Fitchen describes some consequences of those attitudes, zeroing in on a single benighted community. These works suggest that the "Hoosier Philosopher" was on target when he observed a century ago that in America "It's no disgrace t' be poor, but it might as well be."

Poverty in Rural America is an anthropologist's telling, oddly tender analysis of life in an upstate New York slum, a place Fitchen calls "Chestnut Valley." The name has been carefully chosen, for the author believes the residents there suffer from the depredations of long-term economic and social decay, a blight that "proceeded unrelentingly, with much the same inexorable sweep as was the case in the chestnut blight, which struck the same re-

gion and wiped out whole hillsides of stately and useful trees."

After World War I, when food prices plummeted, prolonged depression in the region wiped out whole hillsides of small farms and villages. Most people eventually managed to flee the devastation, but some were left behind. These and their heirs are Fitchen's subjects—the so-called "rural nonfarm poor"—folks with no place to go and no prospects to boast. They shuttle uneasily between work and welfare, applying for the latter whenever barred from the former.

But "being on welfare is no picnic," as one Chestnut Valley resident remarks. Fitchen adds, "It is clearly a stigma . . . Families . . . are sensitive about it and do not talk about it . . . Even on the school bus children occasionally taunt each other about being on welfare, repeating derogatory comments and allegations they have heard at home."

We can count on the American poor, it seems, to internalize society's work ethic as well as its anti-pauper suspicions. From this study I gained new esteem for the advice my OEO friend had given me. The poor, writes Fitchen, "do not want to be identified with poor people" and do not themselves wish to be considered "poor." Like antipoverty warriors of old, they have grown adept at inventing euphemisms: "We're from the low-income group . . ." "Late-ly I've been down on my luck . . ." "I'm not looking for status . . . What I'm looking for is my self-respect . . ."

The picture that emerges here is not pretty: The families are debt-ridden, with little chance of getting out from under; the men are at once docile and angry, the women depressed and often ill. Worse, the children seem doomed to repeat the travails of their parents. A child from a "poor white trash" family, notes Fitchen, "inherits a reputation, finds it waiting for him when he enters school . . . In a relatively small community, it is difficult to outdistance the stereotype."

Fitchen, though, does precisely that at times by placing her subjects in a softer light. Their lives may be poor (and relatively short), but they are

neither nasty nor brutish people. We observe much love and sacrifice in Chestnut Valley, especially on behalf of the children, and a good deal of openhearted sharing. A mother says plaintively of helping her offspring, "The older ones—we try to protect them, to soothe their hurts."

A father tells Fitchen: "I always said that if I ever had kids I would give them what I didn't have when I was a kid. We really gave up ourselves because of the kids. If we only had a little bit of food in the house, they got it and we went without. I've seen the time we've had two crusts of bread in the house and the two boys got it. We went without. We've gone without clothes to give to our kids."

A neighbor explains: "When you're down and out, you don't have anybody. You're rejected by the larger community. But you still have the neighbors to visit with. When it comes to down-and-outness, there's a real bond between us. We can depend on each other in that way."

After reading this finely tuned study of entrenched poverty, it is difficult to blame the victims. The fault seems neither in the stars nor in Chestnut Valley. As Fitchen concludes, "The human problems found in rural poverty-stricken areas are societal problems, societally generated, rather than individual problems caused by individual pathology."

THAT FITCHEN's point is exact—the one most Americans have continually denied is made distressingly clear by James T. Patterson. The "struggle" in his title is less the poor's than our own; at bottom it is a struggle of conscience.

And from Patterson's history we learn that conscience keeps losing. In the first place, he writes, Americans have always felt that "most of the destitute are undeserving," which is one way of saying that they deserve what they get. The idea that people are to blame for their own poverty represents more than middle-class mythology: From the beginning it has captured the country's best minds and most charitable hearts.

Even so humane a commentator as Robert Hunter, a turn-of-the-century pioneer poverty warrior, was capable of damning the destitute: "[They] have lost all self-respect... are aimless and drifting... have no thought for their children and... live more or less contentedly on alms."

According to Patterson, social workers in those times believed that "some of the needy... were 'paupers,' [i.e.] improvident people dependent on relief. Other people, they thought, belonged to the 'dangerous classes.'" He thinks Veblen was unfair in describing social workers as "young ladies with weak eyes and young gentlemen with weak chins fluttering confused among heterogeneous foreigners, offering cocoa and sponge cake as a sort of dessert to the factory system." Yet there was truth in Veblen's vehemence; for as Patterson elsewhere observes, reformers from Jane Addams to Sargent Shriver have been ever eager to rehabilitate the poor while remarkably reluctant to challenge either the rich or the system that assured their wealth.

Second—to continue Patterson's praxis—in habitually failing to confront poverty and its consequences, America too often allowed its sense of optimism to overwhelm its pangs of conscience. After 1900 (with the single exception of the Depression years), reformers felt bullish about the economy: "...it seemed that the bad old days of heavy work, hard times and labor strife were fading away." One result was that progressives in the 1920s and liberals in the 1960s "contented themselves with reforms to improve efficiency and prevent dislocation, in the expectation that a modest amount of social engineering would soon put matters right." More cocoa and sponge cake, in short.

Besides, what was the point of getting all worked up about poverty when one's political leaders kept prophesying its imminent demise? "We shall very soon, with the help of God, be in sight of the day when poverty will be banished in the nation," declared Herbert Hoover in 1928. "We intend to win this war [against poverty] before the decade is out," declared Sargent Shriver in 1966.

"Push ahead full-tilt on this project," declared Lyndon Johnson. (The poor, of course, knew better. Patterson supplies a characteristic pauper's view from the 1920s: "Always going to be more poor folks than them that ain't poor... I ain't saying that's the government's fault. It's just down right truth, that's all.")

Though modest in his theoretical claims, for a historian Patterson is bold in his presentation; he takes us all the way through the Nixon-Ford and Carter years and leaves us teetering on the very brink of the Reaganomics Era. The recent decade gets mixed reviews. It was marked, he says with seeming approval, by an unprecedented "welfare explosion," as well as by two feeble attempts (Nixon's and Carter's) to establish minimum income programs for poor Americans. Nonetheless, suggests Patterson, those efforts may signal the beginnings of a radical change in American attitudes toward poverty, away from prevention and rehabilitation and toward income maintenance. In other words, it seems possible that we are getting ready at last to assist poor people simply by providing them with more money.

It is probably unwise to read the Patterson and Fitchen books in tandem, as I did. I came away with my sympathies intact but my optimism impaired. For in the sufferings of Chestnut Valley there appears to be no redemption, either for the victims or for us. In the face of their agonies our prejudices persist. Only the euphemisms have changed—from "paupers" to "welfare cheats," from the "deserving poor" to the "truly needy." Could it be that our reigning ideology, which borrows in equal parts from the theories of Herbert Spencer and Vince Lombardi, is proof against compassion?

"If people would only recognize that we are trying," pleads an impoverished Chestnut Valley resident, "that we are struggling with everything we've got. If they would encourage us when we're doing something to better ourselves, instead of faulting us for the way we have to live."

What ever happened to empathy?