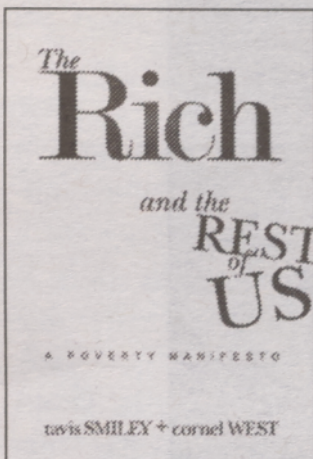


A history of poverty and what America can do about it



The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto, by Tavis Smiley and Cornel West

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There are plenty of different ways to portray history. Many historians focus on nations, conflicts, and famous men. Alternative histories map feminism and Marxism, or the experiences of minorities (Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present" and Juan Gonzalez' "Harvest of Empire" among them).

A new book by Tavis Smiley and Cornel West maps a history of poverty in America. It tracks American poverty on its travels through the years, through politics and social progress. Yet Smiley and West aren't historians, and they don't claim to be. Nor do they claim to be policy wonks. Rather, they self-identify as "democratic intellectuals with public platforms to address issues that matter."

The authors of "The Rich and the Rest of Us" cite America's anti-poverty stalwarts who they've spoken with during radio broadcasts or during their Remaking Broadband Symposium (including Barbara Ehrenreich, Michael Moore, Robert Reich, Roger Clay, and Jeffrey Sachs). This builds the platform from which they deliver a first-person plural address — we the people, we the authors.

Smiley is a talk show host and West is a Princeton professor of Religion and Philosophy. Both are steeped in the rhetoric of the pulpit and the alarmist prose of community organizing. Theirs is a full-throated attack on the unequal holdings of the 1 Percent and the poverty of the 99 Percent. Fueled by slick graphs and updated numbers, they give an unequivocal manifesto made up of "12 Poverty-Changing Ideas." They are:

1. Fundamental Fairness
2. Women and Children First!
3. The Jobs, Jobs and More Jobs Plan
4. Home Is Where the Heart Is
5. Universal Food Delivery System
6. Prisons and Mass Incarceration
7. Privatization Versus Public Investment
8. The Fundamental Fairness Lobby
9. Equitable Progressive Tax Codes
10. Recession Restitution Act

11. Health Care Assurance
12. White House Conference on the Eradication of Poverty

Of course, the authors do not endorse high incarceration rates nor pervasive privatization, they critique them. Each of these 12 ideas are explored twice in the book, once in a slimmer executive-summary style, then in greater detail. One shortfall is how they lack any real refutation or disagreement within their own arguments. For example, they say poverty is caused by a lack of money. This may be true in a literal sense — as a lack of oxygenated blood to the brain ultimately kills each of us, though we might call it cancer. And whereas more jobs and housing and health care are unimpeachable steps, some may wonder whether the hasty construction of this book (imagined this January) doesn't smooth away the nuisance of nuance.

Yet perhaps their strategy may be to declare their manifesto from a place of certainty and self-assurance—knowing that presidential decrees and legislative actions tend to become watered-down. Additionally, the book's confidence and clarity reflects a burgeoning vocabulary in our culture. Besides the terms 1 Percent and 99 Percent, the New Poor, the Near Poor and the Working Poor are common-sensical, if not already well-known. We might fit into one of these groups, and we didn't even know it.

This book also takes on the issue of power as it relates to language and identity, how the poor are blamed and berated, the wealthy idealized, and how so many Americans aspire toward and self-identify with the middle class — even as it shrinks into near-oblivion. Smiley and West include a number of stark statistics in their book. Here are just a few they note:

- 150 million persistently poor and near poor people in America.
- Children make up 36 percent of the nation's poor (21.6 percent of all children are poor).
- "What does it say about the priorities of a nation that allows 53 percent of its children — the most vulnerable and valuable — to live in or near poverty?"

- One percent of the nation's richest individuals controls 42 percent of the country's wealth.
- The Great Recession marked the fourth period of consecutive annual increases in poverty in 52 years."
- The number of Americans who had been unemployed for six months or more in 2009 reached 6.3 million — the largest number since 1948, when the government began counting the long-term unemployed.
- "More than 67,000 veterans are homeless on any given night, but about 1.5 million are considered at risk of homelessness due to poverty, lack of support networks, or dismal living conditions and substandard housing."
- According to government criteria, a family of four, living off less than \$22,400 annually, fits the poverty standard.
- The number of people behind bars has grown from 300,000 in the 1970s to more than 2.5 million today.
- 6 million people rely on food stamps as their only source of income.
- The United States has lost a staggering average of 50,000 manufacturing jobs every month since 2001.

"The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto" is worth a read if you want to learn about the history of poverty and the poverty our nation is currently experiencing. The book may not be elegantly written, though it is extremely clear, and at 210 pages, it is exceptionally approachable. Besides, poverty doesn't need elegant solutions, it just needs solutions — and anyone using their platform to call attention to this epidemic deserves our respect, especially these witty and incisive authors.

They write, "Gone are the days of 'bootstrap' lore when we were encouraged to get tough, get out in the workforce, and aggressively grab our slice of the American pie. Profits have overruled the slogans, the boots are made in Asia, and the straps can be found only online ... we can no longer judge someone who is living poor in America as someone who is lazy or who has made a series of avoidable bad choices."

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