

# Sasha Abramsky and poverty — American style



PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

A homeless woman on the streets of Portland, Christmas, 2013

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The title of author Sasha Abramsky's new book, "The American Way of Poverty," might sound a bit patronizing to patriotic ears, given that Abramsky was born in Great Britain and attended Oxford University. But living now in his mother's homeland of America, which he has traveled and documented in such publications as *The Nation*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Salon*, *Slate*, *Rolling Stone* and the *Village Voice*, Abramsky's admiration for the American backbone — and its responsibilities — is unquestioned.

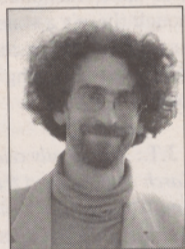
Nonetheless, he explores the issue with critical eyes. His describes what he calls the scandal of poverty in the world's wealthiest nation. While that might not be news on the face of it, Abramsky dives into understanding the machinery of how we got here and, more importantly, what we can do about it. It's not as hopeless as it might seem if people agree to change, and the United States has a proud legacy of making that change. The book's foundation are the interviews with people experiencing poverty, and the circumstances surrounding their situation, making each tragedy both highly personal and sadly universal. (Many of the interviews on which this book is based are accessible on the audio archive, [www.thevoicesofpoverty.org](http://www.thevoicesofpoverty.org).)

Abramsky and his family live in Sacramento, Calif. In 2000 he was awarded an Open Society, Crime, and Communities Media Fellowship, and he is currently a Senior Fellow at the New York City-based Demos think tank.

**Jay Thiemeyer:** How did this book come about?

**Sasha Abramsky:** I'd been doing an awful lot of reporting, going all over the country, driving, flying, going to these out of the way communities and talking to people about their everyday lives, and about the ways in which they were making ends meet

or not making ends meet. And I became fascinated by the fact that in the middle of boom times, when the stock market was



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Abramsky

going up, when housing prices were going up, when unemployment was fairly low, a huge number of men, women and kids that I spoke who were finding they couldn't feed themselves. I would see families waiting in line for free food. And when I talked to them, it wasn't just that they couldn't feed themselves, it was that everything was becoming precarious. People were finding it harder to pay mortgages or rents. They were finding it harder and harder to pay for insurance, or buy medicines if they had no insurance. And at every level, their daily lives were becoming more of a challenge, more of a sense of daily instability.

And then, after 2008, all of those things that had already been going on during the boom years. They magnified, so you started seeing a level of poverty spread all over this country that we haven't seen for years. It wasn't that it was concentrated in one area, it was everywhere. You could find it in the cities, but you also found it in suburban track housing.

It seemed to me we were witnessing an emergence of a new shape of society. That the America that was emerging was something that looked unfamiliar.

**J.T.:** Your book has been called a successor to Michael Harrington's "The Other America." Does that parse with you?

**S.A.:** I'm very honored by the comparison. Michael Harrington has always been one of my journalistic heroes because he did something extraordinary. He took the narrative that America had entered the

age of affluence; that everyone was participating in this extraordinary growth, and the country was becoming almost 100 percent middle class. Harrington had worked for years with people who were homeless, who lived in slums, who didn't have enough money to buy food for their kids. He knew that the story was incomplete, that millions of Americans were being rendered invisible, that their voices were going unheard. The challenge to himself was how to make visible the invisible. And the broader challenge was to hold up a mirror to America, because here is a country that is espousing great ideals about opportunity, aspirations and freedom. Wonderful ideals but they aren't always lived up to.

Harrington holds up a mirror and says, look, this is part of our image that we don't like looking at. What are we going to do about it? And it triggered a huge national conversation. It resulted on the War on Poverty, so when Lyndon Johnson gets up and delivers his state of the union address in 1964, he turns the War on Poverty into a moral challenge. The *defining* moral challenge.

One of the things I write about is that from the 1980s onward, we lost that moral energy, and there are many reasons for it. As a society we began to move away from a commitment to limit inequality and limit poverty. The two are very much part of the same story. Over the past 35 years what you see is at the top of the economy, things have never been so good. We have more billionaires than we ever had. We have more people with extraordinary luxury in their lives on a daily basis. But on the other end, on the bottom of the economy, people are increasingly unstable, increasingly precarious.

**J.T.:** You underline in your book the lack of empathy today compared to 1962, especially with the Civil Rights movement sort of cueing people to the fact that there was a great deal of injustice. Talk about that difference, between

now and then?

**S.A.:** One of things I always tell my students is to be careful not to put rose-colored glasses on. Don't romanticize the past. I think it's too easy to say everything's gone to hell in a handbasket today, and things used to be so much better, because the past was by no means rosy. There were tremendous problems in the structure of our society of the late 1950s and early 60s. There was endemic racism. There was an extraordinary sexual hierarchy. There were all kinds of unpleasant hierarchies and poverty was very prevalent in the early 1960s. But I do think that there was a moment, a period in the 1960s, when as a culture, we were willing to confront a lot of the problems in society and look for very creative solutions. And that partly came from the bottom up, from tremendous grassroots organizing projects, from Cesar Chavez organizing farmworkers to Stonewall in the late 1960s defining gay rights. So there was this moment where the language of empathy was allowed to flower from the grassroots up. But we also had a political leadership who really thought the sky was the limit, that anything that America set its mind to do, it could accomplish. That went all the way from the moonwalk to the War on Poverty, where Johnson could use the moral platform of the presidency to say we are going to end poverty in America. Not just limit it, but end it.

In hindsight, I think that was a mistake, because I think it set in motion the backlash. It's very hard to end poverty. All societies are going to have a level of poverty; it's a question of how much.

The War on Poverty did a tremendous amount of good. It took millions and millions of Americans who were poor at the start of 1960s, and by the mid '70s, they'd been raised out of poverty. By many measures, what happened in the '60s and '70s was a tremendous success, but because it was