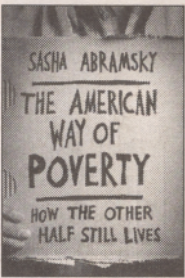


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Journalist Sasha Abramsky's latest book, "The American Way of Poverty: How The Other Half Still Lives," includes many interviews with people experiencing poverty. You can listen to those interviews at www.thevoicesofpoverty.org.

overambitious in the language, it set the stage for backlash.

So by the '80s, a politician like (Ronald) Reagan could use public anxiety about the amount of money that had been spent on the War on Poverty and use it to carve a very reactionary political rhetoric.

One of ways Reagan built a coalition in 1980 was by bashing welfare.

J.T.: *Nixon had done the same thing.*

S.A.: Nixon had talked the talk into wedge issues. When it actually came to poverty, Nixon was actually fairly good. Nixon proposed universal health care. At one point, Nixon embraced Milton Friedman's idea for a basic income guarantee. No president before or since has embraced that idea. It didn't go anywhere, but in many ways, Nixon was a continuum of Johnson. He expanded food stamps, he expanded the free breakfast and lunch program for low-income kids at school. But once Reagan comes to power in the '80s, there really is a dismantling of most of the safety-net infrastructure.

J.T.: *And Welfare to Work requires that there are jobs.*

S.A.: One of the things we saw in the worst recession since the Great Depression, in 2008 and the years following, in many, many states, the number of people on welfare actually declined. That didn't mean that single women and kids were suddenly getting affluent. It meant that the state was

rolling back its responsibilities. I talked to people all over the country who weren't eligible for benefits and their lives were extraordinary. They had literally no access to cash. People were surviving on food stamps, which is noncash benefit, or on charity, people scavenging anything they could. I talked to a family who literally had nothing. Nothing.

They didn't have bank accounts. They didn't have savings. They didn't have money in their wallet and they didn't have food in their fridge. They lived lives entirely on or outside the margins. And I think that that happens gradually. You don't suddenly go from a war on poverty to the kind of extraordinary lack of empathy that we see across the spectrum. It took years and years in which the political rhetoric shifted and the understanding of poverty in a sense was dumbed down. We came to think of it almost as an individual disease. If you were poor,

you were poor because you had done something wrong or you were somehow morally unworthy. In some ways it's a very 19th-century understanding of poverty: the idea of an undeserving underclass.

One of the consequences is that as a society views it as a tragedy, but not as something we can do anything about. I concluded that calling it a tragedy is too easy. That what it is, is a scandal. This is the most affluent country in the world. This is a country with more resources than any other country in human history. And yet, one in four of our kids lives below the poverty line. Fifty million Americans live below the poverty line. And many, many millions live below half the poverty line. We have a level of poverty and a level of inequality that no other first world democracy comes anywhere near matching. And to my mind that becomes a scandal. It seems to me that we've made a series of political choices and economic choices that have built up this well of poverty at the bottom of the economy.

And it isn't just the unemployment. It's also the working poor. These are working families. They're playing by the rules. They're doing what they can to get ahead. And they're getting swept backwards.

Over the course of the years while I was doing this book, I meant so many people who had these stories that were just extraordinary. People who were told they were ineligible for Medicaid because they bought themselves a burial plot for when they finally died. I spoke to people who bought houses that were massively underwater, and then they lost their jobs in the recession. And these guys were doing everything they could to get ahead and instead they were swept back. They were selling their household possessions in garage sales so that they could just enough to pay their next bill.

J.T.: *The thing that scares me, with the Tea Party mentality, is that poverty is worthwhile: That it's a means of social control, that the poor are not deserving and they deserve to be dismissed.*

S.A.: We've always been far more than one coherent country. We've always been at the very least two distinct cultures, and that goes all the way back to the pre-Civil War years. The aspirational North and the institutionalized immobility of the South. Everything about the Southern structure was designed to create a group at the bottom that was immobile. In many ways the Southern model has begun to percolate more generally into the national economic model and political culture. So today the language around food stamps and the language around welfare, in which conservatives are going off on a nutritional supplement as a something that breeds laziness. That in my mind, historically comes out of the South. I think it's an

extremely dangerous development. Putting things like food stamps in the crosshairs; that used to be immune. In the conversation about welfare, they usually kept silent about food stamps. Now you see a significant part of the political process trying to find ways to not just marginally cut food stamps but to massively cut them. We're not talking about abstract numbers. We're talking about real people.

Real people like a woman I met in L.A. She had worked for the state and then she was laid off. She had three kids, and the only thing that was keeping her and her kids fed was food stamps. I met another woman whose husband ran a business, and he died of cancer, and even though they had medical insurance, the bills bankrupted them. She was now a widow and on food stamps and she had nothing. When we talk about cutting food stamps, there are real people who get hurt when that happens. I think it's an extraordinary indictment that we're even at that point where we can have so many people living so precariously, and yet the conversation is about how to cut their benefits.

J.T.: *Did you get a sense that the inside-the-beltway mentality makes people indifferent to the needs of people?*

S.A.: One of the things that I find encouraging in the past few months is this series of labor actions at Walmarts and fast food outlets around the country. These are workers making 7 or 8 dollars an hour. These are usually part-time workers with almost no benefits for their work.

MacDonalds, KFC, all of these fast-food places have been seeing walk-offs. And it actually gives me hope, even though this political culture is beset by this lack of empathy. If you actually get people one-on-one, and you start talking with them, most people will sympathize with someone if they're making pizzas or flipping burgers or standing on their feet all day long. At the very least they should be able to buy their own food in the evening, or put gas in their car or buy a bus pass. For me, this actually gives me tremendous hope, that even though there's a stalemate federally, on the ground that's a precursor from any activity in D.C. It's not going to come from the top down.

J.T.: *We recently celebrated the Poor People's March of 1963, and that was a case of people from the ground up, pushing Kennedy and the administration to acknowledge the needs of black folks.*

S.A.: You saw hundreds of thousands of people coming into Washington to push for social justice. They made a tremendous impact, first on John Kennedy, and then on Lyndon Johnson, and then later in the decade on Bobby Kennedy. I think it is a

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