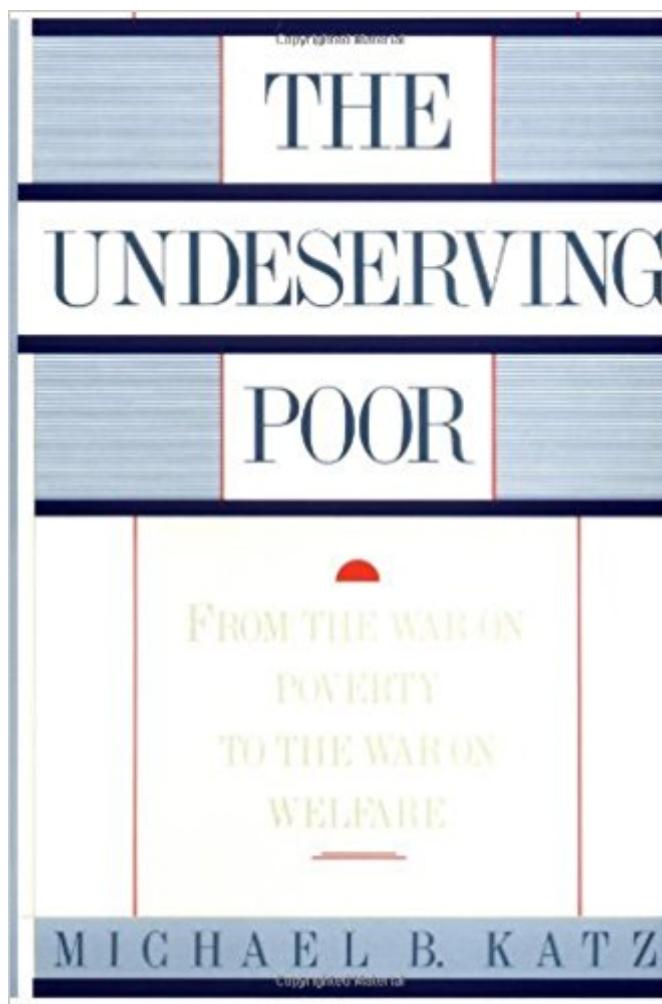


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The Undeserving Poor: From The War On Poverty To The War On Welfare



Synopsis

For the first time in over twenty-five years, the issue of poverty -- and our failure to deal with it -- is back at the top of the policy agenda and on the front page of the news. In this magisterial overview social historian Michael B. Katz, examines the ideas and assumptions that have shaped public policy from the sixties War on Poverty to the current war on welfare. Closely argued and lucidly written. The Undeserving Poor transcends the barriers that have channeled the American discussion of poverty and wealth into a narrow, self-defeating course, and points the way to a new, constructive approach to our major social problem.

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Customer Reviews

Katz (*In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America*) here meticulously fashions a battery of statistics into a cogent rebuttal to the "culture of poverty" theory--the idea that poverty is inherited and transmitted in the form of cultural maladaptations (such as what LBJ termed "the breakdown of the Negro family structure"). Katz persuades that this patronizing paradigm "offered the poor social work and therapy when they needed economic justice and political mobilization." Instead, argues Katz, economic stagnation, a disproportionate rise in low-paying jobs and a declining minimum wage have exacerbated urban poverty. He deconstructs the "underclass" and the age-old categorization of the poor into "deserving" (e.g., widows) and "undeserving" ('80s welfare mothers), and concludes that domestic poverty has "always . . . been a necessary result of America's distinctive political economy." Copyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text

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Buttressing his analysis with excerpts from other prominent social and political observers, Katz traces the U.S. government's political and financial policies vis-a-vis the least affluent U.S. citizens from the 1960s through the Reagan administration. He argues that the overwhelming tendency historically has been to identify "the poor" as a culturally defined sub-unit of society, lacking ambition and moral standards, undeserving recipients of public assistance. Stereotyping has obscured evaluation of the control and distribution of political and economic power in America, and of the overall community benefit were every individual to be assured the minimum condition of human dignity at least in the economic sphere. A thoughtful work for academics and professionals.- Suzanne W. Wood, SUNY Coll. of Technology, AlfredCopyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In the United States in 1960 there was significant poverty. Twenty percent of the population had not seen a doctor and there were some areas in which people did not have enough to eat. Kennedy and Johnson after him instituted programs aimed at combating these problems. These involved the development of a medical system for the poor and other programs aimed at increasing the disposable income of some of the poor. These programs were reasonably successful and dropped the infant mortality rate by 35% and pretty much ended hunger. The Democratic Party had never been a Labor or Socialist Party and the author suggests that these programs were in part an attempt to gain the black vote. During the Nixon years it was briefly proposed to end administered welfare programs and to replace them by case payments for people whose income fell below a defined amount. The policy was a suggestion of Milton Friedman. The advantage of such a policy is that it is cheap to administer and gives the recipients more freedom. In the end this change was not enacted. From that time on there has been tremendous pressure on welfare that over time has seen a reduction in the scope of programs. The American system is different to a large number of wealthy industrial countries. America has a social security system that provides assistance to the aged and some relief to the unemployed. For those who have not contributed to this scheme there exists "welfare" which provides targeted aid involving some income supplements in the form of food stamps and medical assistance. Welfare is limited to a narrow range of people generally single mothers. The payments are low and require the recipient to be in some paid employment. This climaxed in the 1980's with the election of Reagan. America had been going through difficult economic times with foreign competition decimating the manufacturing sector. Surveys show that

most workers who were displaced from manufacturing jobs never retained the wage levels they experienced before being made redundant. Most welfare dependants were black single mothers. It was easy to attack them as a group suggesting that their dependant position was based on their morals rather than anything else. The Democratic Party conceded the contest and made no attempt to argue for a just and fair society. At that time a number of nutty right wingers published a number of books suggesting that welfare was bad for the poor and should be abolished as a favor to them. These gave some semi intellectual justifications for what went on. The book is very much a literature survey of the various periods. It has some figures and describes the mechanics of programs but basically describes texts that deal in general theories rather than facts. In reality it is a rather poor polemic rather than anything else. It is not the sort of thing which would challenge the belief of the right and it provides not the avalanche of statistical material which might get the uncommitted thinking. It is a book for the already converted. A far better book is "It takes a Nation" by Rebecca Blank.

The book was very helpful in gaining shedding light on the war on the poor vs. the war on poverty.

Michael Katz is a social historian who traces the intellectual history of poverty and social policy in the U.S. from the 1960s-1990s. He provides superb insights into the intellectual discourse during the War on Poverty era which left us with many of our current programs: Headstart, Foodstamps, Legal Aid, to name a few. He covers a variety of theoretical perspectives, from left to right, thus enabling the reader to understand policy debates over the role of government in the provision of a social safety net. Excellent for understanding why our public policies on poverty differ so much from other Western developed countries. This book sets the context for the eventual dismantling of welfare (AFDC) in the 1990s. To understand this historic shift in social policy, readers should follow this book up with his later volume "The Price of Citizenship". It is ironic today (2010) that while many criticize the War on Poverty, it gave us food stamps, which is what keeps many Americans from going hungry in the Great Recession.

This is a clear-headed and compelling look at recent ideas about poverty and the policies they helped spawn. Katz is probably the nation's leading expert on the history of poverty, and he writes with clarity that is (unfortunately) too rare among professional historians. A landmark work, still relevant, alas, after 25 years.

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