

## *Poverty, by America* Roundtable

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Matthew Desmond (ed.), *Poverty, by America* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2023, £10.99). Pp. 304. ISBN 978 0 1419 9879 4.

It is a bleak house, this place where poverty lives. In fact, it is a place that raises profound societal questions about the existence and persistence of poverty. Matthew Desmond's latest book, *Poverty, by America* asks, first, why poverty persists in the world's richest nation, and second, who benefits from its persistence? In answering these questions, Desmond argues that poverty could be dismantled, if those who participate in and profit from the systems that perpetuate it were held accountable, and those who want to see poverty's demise actively participate in its abolition.

To further these important discussions, *JAS*, in collaboration with the Lighthouse Bookshop in Edinburgh, organized a virtual event, "*Poverty, by America* Roundtable: A Conversation with Matthew Desmond" in October 2023. The event placed Desmond in conversation with contributors to our 57, 2 special issue *Food, Health, and Welfare in the Long Twentieth Century*. We are delighted to publish their reflections on Desmond's book, its dialogues with the *JAS* special issue, and the state of poverty and scholarship on poverty today.

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### WHOSE PROBLEM IS IT ANYWAY?

In the prologue to *Poverty, by America*, Matthew Desmond states, "Books about poverty tend to be books about the poor" (7). What might seem like a tautology is in fact central to the purpose of the book, and to the shift in perspective that the author asks his readers to perform: to discuss the problem of poverty itself and not the poor. As he points out, in the United States, images of poverty have largely been influenced by pictures from the first half of the twentieth century, whether one thinks of the immigrants portrayed by Jacob Riis in *How the Other Half Lives*, or even more famously of the photographs of poor farmers and sharecroppers taken during the Great Depression by Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, Walker Evans and many others. While one cannot deny the power that lies in those images, they have two important effects that lead to a specific vision of the poor in the minds of the viewers: on the one hand, although in some cases they recognize the dignity of the people they portray, they tend to deprive them of agency by showing them as victims, either of their own shortcomings or of circumstances that are beyond their control. On the other hand, they enact a process of othering whereby viewers are implicitly invited to distance themselves from these pictures,

either by pitying those they depict or by admiring them. In all cases, the people who look at the pictures, because of the perspective that is adopted (*we* look at *them*) and the medium itself (a relatively expensive book), become different from those who are in them.

While “the poor” have thus been othered, “poverty” in the United States, its characteristics and specificities compared to other industrialized countries, has been accounted for through a variety of factors: the failings of the welfare state, systemic racism, the power of the rich or the supposed impact of immigration on jobs and the economy. These factors, although they deserve to be studied and analyzed, also participate in the process of othering the poor and poverty as a social phenomenon. In the past decades, the development of social history, and the history of racial and ethnic minorities, has given agency back to the poor, recognizing the struggles they have waged and the organizations they have created to obtain economic and social rights, thereby lifting them out of the position of victims to which the collective imagination had confined them. The recent issue of *JAS* on *Food, Health and Welfare in the Twentieth Century* participates in this attempt to study the agency of the poor both in social movements and in their interaction with government institutions. My own work on the 1910 meat boycott sought to address how bread-and-butter issues such as the price of meat enabled working-class men and women to mobilize, sometimes outside organized institutions, and make their voices heard on questions that affected their everyday lives. They did so during a period, the Progressive Era, when “the poor” were constructed as a social problem by government policies and charitable institutions alike; focussing on mobilizations from below and on food as a political object is a way through which agency can be given back to the people themselves. Nevertheless, one could argue that the issue of othering is not solved by this perspective, which maintains a necessary distance between the historian and their object of analysis and gives back to the poor an agency which they have always possessed.

What is particularly thought-provoking about Desmond’s book is precisely the attempt to do away with the framework of othering, by forcing readers to alter their perception, to consider themselves as actors in the question of poverty rather than as dispassionate or benevolent observers of “the poor.” Rather than a book of history or sociology of economics, it is an intervention. The author writes about his own experience growing up in a family that had to learn “to fix things [themselves] or do without” (4), then focussing his studies and his research on poverty, always in close quarters with those whose plight he not only understood but wanted to transform. Knowing that poverty is not only due to a lack of money but also to a lack of choice, and a lack of opportunity (to switch jobs, to move houses, to get a loan ...), he shows in the first chapters of the book the various ways in which poverty endures, and in some ways is maintained – nurtured even – by the United States’ economic and social system. In doing so, he forcefully argues that far from being an issue that concerns the poor, poverty is the responsibility of the affluent, a group in which he places himself as well as his readers. He analyzes the welfare state as benefiting the middle class, through tax deductions of various kinds, or programs like TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) which can be redirected by state officials away from the poor to other political issues. College loans, child tax credits, homeownership subsidies – all of which Desmond calls the “invisible welfare state” (96) – benefit the middle class and upper middle class rather than the ones who would need public money the most, and who often fail to apply for the help they are entitled to.

By shifting the perspective in the study of poverty from the poor to the affluent, Desmond does away with othering and brings the issue of poverty on his readers' turf. In doing so, he also displaces agency; his book does not seek to give agency "back" to the poor but to create a sense of collective agency, and action. In the roundtable discussion of the book, Desmond forcefully asserted that his work should be seen as part of an ongoing social movement, to which he belongs, and which has bolstered his own perspective and engagement with the issue. He also stressed that while his proposal – the abolition of poverty – might seem utopian, the conditions for this abolition, particularly for child poverty, did exist during COVID, through the relief measures put in place by the government. This comment goes to the heart of the book, which is characterized by a combination of radical thought and pragmatic solutions, pointing out the importance of demanding action from public authorities as well as from ourselves:

If enough of us took some responsibility for this problem in our personal lives and began mobilizing our workplaces and faith communities and schools to do likewise, a commitment to poverty abolition would spread, sparking a national moral reckoning and pressuring the most exploitative actors and agencies to divest. (159)

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## THE CONSCIOUS CREATION OF POVERTY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Matthew Desmond's *Poverty, by America* synthesizes the literature from historians, economists, and political scientists over the past two decades explaining the persistence of poverty in our nation of plenty. What's more, he does this in a highly readable format aimed at the general public, eschewing academic jargon in favor of pithy anecdotes. The message he shares is urgent and important: poverty is not just a problem of the poor. Instead, poverty is part of a larger system where wealth is created through various modes of exploiting the poor.

This exploitation is evident in the divided markets for housing, banking, and labor, where in each case Desmond convincingly shows how different markets safeguard the affluent and exploit the poor. Where government fails to regulate and protect less affluent Americans, Desmond shows how government policies support the creation and maintenance of wealth for those who already have means. Many of these benefits are "submerged," making them less visible than welfare for the poor. Some of these hidden programs include homeowner mortgage interest deduction on taxes or employer's write-off for costs associated with employee health insurance expenses.<sup>1</sup> Desmond goes further, showing how programs that appear to benefit the working poor actually enrich the affluent. The earned-income tax credit (EITC) acts as a wage subsidy for the working poor;

<sup>1</sup> Credit for the idea comes from Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

something the business-friendly Chamber of Commerce has pushed to expand (58). In addition, welfare programs, including Medicaid and food stamps, allow employers to pay their workers less while corporations also reap the benefits in greater sales for their bottom line. Food stamps, my area of expertise, subsidize the grocery, retail, and service industries more broadly. A 2020 report commissioned by Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) found that many Walmart and McDonald's workers were eligible for Medicaid and food stamps. And in the case of food stamps, food retailers take in increased sales from food stamps. In 2020, estimates suggested that food stamps accounted for around 12 percent of all grocery sales in the US.<sup>2</sup> Sanders said, "U.S. taxpayers should not be forced to subsidize some of the largest and most profitable corporations."<sup>3</sup>

As a historian, I appreciate the way Desmond, a trained sociologist, uses the past to show that ending poverty can be done. He describes how the Great Society programs of Lyndon Johnson's administration cut poverty in half and how Congress enacted this legislation during a moment of polarized politics, much like the present (184). More recently, he discussed how the expanded Child Tax Credit cut child poverty in half during the COVID pandemic.<sup>4</sup> In addition, some of his suggestions, for example reviewing the minimum wage on a regular basis, were part of other antipov-erty programs in the 1970s (140). Food stamps were indexed to inflation, meaning that their purchasing power held steady in the face of rising food costs, until the Reagan administration slowed indexing in 1981.<sup>5</sup> Successful antipov-erty programs and mea-sures have made significant dents in poverty in the United States in the past. So, as Desmond writes in the first sentence of this book, "Why is there so much poverty in America?" (3).

Answering this question becomes Desmond's core argument – welfare for the poor is a pittance while hidden welfare benefits support those who already have the most. This idea is likely novel to readers in the general public, the target audience for this book. Desmond provides solid policy suggestions and draws on a diverse array of literature to make the case that we *could* end poverty if we chose to. Some of my favorite parts of the book were where he questioned policymakers' imagination, drawing on theologian Walter Brueggemann to push readers to "allow ourselves to imagine, to marvel over, a new social contract, because doing so expresses both our discontent with, and the imper- manence of, the current one" (135). Following on the heels of his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Evicted*, I think Desmond saw an opportunity address a wide audience on the pos- sibility of ending poverty. That being said, while this could be an eye-opening read with

<sup>2</sup> "Biden's Food Stamps Boost Could Be Good News for Amazon and Walmart eGrocery," 16 Aug 2021, at [www.pymnts.com/news/retail/2021/biden-food-stamps-boost-amazon-walmart-e-grocery](http://www.pymnts.com/news/retail/2021/biden-food-stamps-boost-amazon-walmart-e-grocery).

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Miao, "Walmart and McDonald's Are among Top Employers of Medicaid and Food Stamp Beneficiaries, Report Says," 19 Nov 2020, at [www.cnbc.com/2020/11/19/walmart-and-mcdonalds-among-top-employers-of-medicaid-and-food-stamp-beneficiaries.html](http://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/19/walmart-and-mcdonalds-among-top-employers-of-medicaid-and-food-stamp-beneficiaries.html).

<sup>4</sup> Dave Davies, "Private Opulence, Public Squalor: How the U.S. Helps the Rich and Hurts the Poor," *National Public Radio*, 21 March 2023, at [www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/03/21/1164275807/poverty-by-america-matthew-desmond-inequality](http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/03/21/1164275807/poverty-by-america-matthew-desmond-inequality).

<sup>5</sup> USDA, "From Food Stamps to the Supplemental Nutrition Program: Legislative Timeline," at <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/timeline.pdf>.

new information and potential solutions to poverty, academics with an interest in poverty and welfare are not likely to find many surprises.

For example, at the University of California – Santa Barbara where I completed my graduate training, there has been a course on the books for at least fifteen years called “Wealth and Poverty in America.”<sup>6</sup> This course, taught by historians of public policy Mary Furner and Alice O’Connor, tracks the interconnections of wealth with poverty from the early republic through to the present day. One of Desmond’s key points is that bifurcated markets lead to the exploitation of the poor through a lack of choice. History shows us that wealth has long been built on the backs of the exploited. In early America, indentured and then enslaved people experienced this exploitation, as did freed people following the Civil War, while industrial workers in the late nineteenth century provided the labor that led to massive capital accumulation by factory owners. This pattern persists into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>7</sup> The question Desmond asks and the solutions he describes are not new. However, the way he presents this information to a general audience is an important contribution to broadening the conversation about ending poverty.

Academics have written at length about the ways in which policymakers have created an unequal welfare state, and it is uncommon in these works for the author to offer a way for the reader to work to end poverty, right now. Another contribution Desmond makes is a clear call to action for readers to become “poverty abolitionists”: “wherever we stand, we can leverage the specific influence we have – in our congregations and military units and companies and school boards – to instigate change” (158). However, I felt some tension behind this call to action. On the one hand, Desmond describes poverty as entirely solvable, given the historical analogy he draws to the passage of Great Society legislation of the 1960s. But at the same time, “it will cost something. How much it will cost is not a trivial affair” (173). It was this discussion of costs versus costlessness that I found confusing. And further, his call for poverty abolitionism feels like a bandage on a larger wound.

Many suggestions on being a poverty abolitionist center on individual consumer actions. Desmond suggests getting to know the labor practices of stores where you shop and divesting your stock portfolio from companies that exploit workers (183). There is a place for individual consumer actions to create change, but poverty is a systemic problem that requires systemic reform. Why put the solution on the shoulders of individuals when bigger changes are needed? Nevertheless, *Poverty, by America* is an approachable read for nonspecialists interested in learning about the structures undergirding inequality in the present. Poverty is not without consequences for the nation – it dims productivity, hinders innovation, and minimizes goodness. Desmond does much to make a rational as well as moral argument for ending poverty in America. Unfortunately for scholars of wealth and poverty, there is nothing in his book we have not read before.

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<sup>6</sup> “General Catalog, 2022–2023,” University of California – Santa Barbara, at <https://my.sa.ucsb.edu/catalog/current/CollegesDepartments/ls-intro/hist.aspx?DeptTab=Courses>.

<sup>7</sup> For example, in the twentieth-century section of this course, students read John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958) and Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

## NO SIMPLE FIXES

Matthew Desmond has written an urgent, engaging book calling for a mass movement to end poverty in America. Using numerous personal stories to reveal the daily workings of poverty, he walks readers through the ways poverty intersects with and worsens other challenges – it is, Desmond writes, “a relentless piling on of problems” (13). He highlights the great economic and social costs of living while poor, be it through punitive overdraft fees, buy-now-pay-later schemes, the need for those without bank accounts to pay a cut of their wages to access their wages, or the lack of time for life outside work. Though systemic racial inequities worsen its effects, a web of familiar problems drives poverty: these include exploitation through rent and where poor people can live at all, punitive penalties for minor infractions through the legal system, and wages that do not provide enough to live in dignity. Desmond contends that poverty is “a tight knot of social maladies,” and “is connected to every social problem we care about – crime, health, education, housing” (23).

He takes pains to highlight bipartisan failures in antipoverty policy. With antipoverty spending per capita more than tripling from the Reagan to Trump administrations, the problem stems not from a lack of money, but rather from ineffective – or even misused – antipoverty spending. Signed into law by President Clinton in 1996 to replace the long-running and much-maligned Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is a case in point, with only 22 percent of program funds nationally going to the poor themselves in 2020. Likewise, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) serves more as “a generous handout to corporations” (58) rather than as a scheme that brings workers out of poverty. Desmond’s overall claim about bipartisan failure holds up, but he might have found it useful to bring in the concept of “workfare” here. As Eva Bertram’s *The Workfare State* has demonstrated, a key feature of late twentieth-century welfare policy was the shift in focus from using welfare to bring able-bodied poor people out of poverty to instead ensuring first that they work as a condition for receiving aid, a development that all too often did not recognize childcare as work. Bringing this historical background into his discussion would help explain why and how EITC and TANF came about; rather than Republican and Democratic labels being most useful, Bertram shows the key driver of this change coming from conservative southern Democrats. By the 2010s, such politicians were practically extinct, with conservative Republicans typically succeeding them.<sup>1</sup>

Desmond argues that antipoverty advocates need to face up to the reality that many people – not just the wealthiest – benefit from this degrading situation, be it through increasing 401(k) funds thanks to a rising stock market, cheap consumer goods, or the near-immediate access to food and other consumer products. In short, richer Americans benefit from exploiting poor Americans. For that reason, “everybody wins’ arguments” for ending poverty “ring false because they are” (118). Desmond is correct, but that does not necessarily make such arguments unhelpful for antipoverty advocates. As I note in my April 2023 special-issue article, in the late 1960s and the 1970s antipoverty southern US Senators privileged economic arguments when promoting antihunger spending to potentially skeptical constituents. Rather than

<sup>1</sup> Eva Bertram, *The Workfare State: Public Assistance Politics from the New Deal to the New Democrats* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

emphasizing the morality of antihunger interventions, Democrats like South Carolina's Ernest F. "Fritz" Hollings and Virginia's Williams B. Spong contended that this spending would reduce welfare costs in the future.<sup>2</sup> Addressing the politics of antipoverty advocacy in the October book discussion, Desmond reiterated the importance of embracing "big-tent" approaches, with antipoverty outcomes far outweighing the rationales used to get there.

Beyond the material benefits that wealthier Americans gain from poorer Americans' exploitation, another obstacle to reducing poverty stems from the visibility of benefits to poor Americans versus the invisibility of the significantly more generous benefits given to wealthier Americans. Helping to reinforce the stigma around receiving assistance, poor Americans apply for EITC, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other antipoverty measures, whereas mortgage deductions, aid related to higher education, and the like remain hidden.

As a historian, I find Desmond's arguments about *how* to tackle poverty particularly interesting. He does not see a universal basic income (UBI) as a panacea; rather, he notes that such schemes – touted recently by writers such as Rutger Bregman – have temporarily raised living standards for poor Americans, before rents and other prices caught up.<sup>3</sup> In the October online book discussion, Desmond praised the COVID-era child allowance as a UBI (or at least UBI-adjacent) success story, but stressed that UBI should only be part of a broader program addressing exploitation rather than proposed as a cure-all. He also voiced concerns about UBI's cost implications and reiterated the value of work in and of itself. Desmond's skepticism toward guaranteed-income schemes echoes some of the debates around President Nixon's Family Assistance Plan (FAP), proposed unsuccessfully in 1970 and 1972. In the early 1970s, Senator Hollings, himself an advocate of greatly expanded antihunger spending, opposed a guaranteed-income scheme on similar grounds: he claimed that giving money without tackling other structural factors was no long-term solution to poverty. For most antipoverty southern US Senators in the 1960s and 1970s, a guaranteed-income program was politically unfeasible: it offended many constituents' convictions that welfare should be tied to work, would greatly increase the numbers of welfare recipients in their states, and was expensive to boot.<sup>4</sup>

Finding the money to end domestic poverty in the present day, Desmond contends, would be as simple as enforcing the collection of unpaid income taxes from the wealthiest 1 percent of Americans. Likening existing welfare provision to "a treatment designed to make poverty less lethal, not to make it disappear" (137), he opposes investing further in existing measures like EITC and the Housing Choice Voucher Program.

<sup>2</sup> David T. Ballantyne, "Moderate Southern Senators, Hunger, and Welfare in the Long 1960s," *Journal of American Studies*, 57, 2 (2023), 253–74, 264.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Rutger Bregman, "General Interest – Don't Believe in a Universal Basic Income? This Is Why It Would Work, and How We Can Pay for It," *Pakistan & Gulf Economist*, 10 June 2018, 30–33; Bregman, *Utopia for Realists* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> David T. Ballantyne, "'A Public Problem ... Rather than a Question of Social Welfare': Ernest F. 'Fritz' Hollings and the Politics of Hunger," *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, 8, 1 (2015), 75–98, 89; Ballantyne, "Moderate Southern Senators," 271–73.

Instead, Desmond's multipronged policy proposals focus on "the many forms of exploitation at the bottom of the market" (138): legislation to make unionization easier, increasing and regularly updating the minimum wage, enabling poorer Americans to secure mortgages on low-cost housing, outlawing exploitative financial practices, and increasing poor Americans' access to credit. He also stresses the importance of women's access to birth control and abortion in reducing long-term poverty and notes mournfully the future impact of the Supreme Court's recent reversal of *Roe v. Wade*.

Another part of the answer lies in celebrating ongoing antipoverty work: Desmond notes ruefully that the Biden administration's hugely successful Emergency Rental Assistance Program only gained "scattered applause" (134). The program remained temporary. "When we refuse to recognize what works," he writes, "we risk swallowing the lie that nothing does" (135). Small interventions matter too, from factoring businesses' working conditions into shopping decisions to leveraging influence to make our own institutions less exploitative. In doing so, he hopes that "poverty abolitionists" will advertise their activism to shift cultural norms around exploitative labor practices.

The final key piece of the poverty puzzle, Desmond stresses, is tackling residential segregation by passing new zoning laws. He repeatedly, and provocatively, deploys the term "segregation" to highlight even antipoverty Americans' inattention to this centrally important issue: "We cannot in good faith claim that our communities are anti-racist or antipoverty if they continue to uphold exclusionary zoning – our politer, quieter means of promoting segregation" (165–66). Achieving this goal, he contends, will require interventions from above in the form of threatened federal funding cutoffs, and from below through antipoverty activists engaging in local planning board meetings.

This book serves as a call to action. All too often, major societal challenges – from climate change to economic inequality to racism – appear too thorny to combat meaningfully at an individual level in the absence of major national and international governmental interventions.<sup>5</sup> As Caitlin Rathe identifies above, the structural obstacles to ending poverty today are significant, but Desmond invokes the 1960s as a cause for hope. Echoing earlier mass social movements, the day-to-day activism of the millions of nonpoor Americans could bring meaningful improvements to their own communities, and push politicians to act more boldly to end domestic poverty.

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<sup>5</sup> For other examples, see the UN's seventeen Sustainable Development Goals. See United Nations, "The 17 Goals," at <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>. My university also runs a lecture series around "Global Challenges." See Keele University Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences, "Global Challenge Programme," at [www.keele.ac.uk/ilas/globalchallengeprogramme](http://www.keele.ac.uk/ilas/globalchallengeprogramme).



## CHILD POVERTY, BY AMERICA

At the very start of Matthew Desmond's *Poverty, by America*, the author acknowledges that he "began paying attention to poverty" when he was a child. Mostly, he blamed his father but a part of him wondered "why this was our country's answer when a family fell upon hard times" (3–4). Just as poverty was apparent to Desmond in his youth, it has been apparent to so many other young Americans. For example, in 1933, twelve-year-old Adam Schmidt wrote to President Roosevelt in a desperate attempt to halt his family's impending eviction from their Trenton, New Jersey home: "The man is going to sell our house and make an auction of the furniture because my father can't pay."<sup>1</sup> In 1984 twelve-year-old Oglalia-Sioux boy Little Beaver Canoe wrote to President Reagan to see if he could help his father out of unemployment. He challenged the President, "do you like Indians?" adding, "I never hear or read about you trying to help our people."<sup>2</sup> Both boys received the help they solicited from the White House; both administrations likely sensed a good publicity opportunity. Not every child fearing eviction or experiencing familial unemployment is lucky enough to have had their hopes, pleas, or prayers for help answered in their moment of need. One of the most striking threads running through *Poverty, by America* is the issue of child poverty.

The scale of child poverty in the United States is huge – as Desmond reports, almost one in eight American children lives in poverty (6). Poverty afflicts children from every racial group in every American region, though not proportionately. African American children in the South are the most at risk. The zip code where a child is born has a statistically significant influence on their life prospects (163). Child poverty is a global problem but child poverty in the United States has a distinctly American flavour. Preachers at "down-at-the-heels churches do more funerals than weddings" (36). Most poor children are born to single mothers. It was not always like that. In 1959, 70 per cent of poor families included a married couple. And it does not have to be like that. In a study of eighteen rich democracies, single mothers outside the United States were not poorer than the general population (36). The poverty of American single mothers and their children is thus *by America*. Whilst there has been an erosion of the traditional nuclear family in America's urban centres, there is no need for this to mean that children are condemned to poverty. It should also be acknowledged that in cases of abusive or unhappy homes, a single-parent household is in the best interests of children. Education is not the answer. Americans are much more likely to have a college degree than Germans are but the child poverty rate in Germany is half of what it is in the United States (52). One can point to various potential factors – universal health care, disability support, and unemployment benefits. But the important point is that child poverty is *by America*.

Desmond looks at the same problem, which so many before him have studied, with a new approach. His focus on poverty is not restricted to the impoverished. As Desmond points out, in 1872 Charles Loring Brace studied the "dangerous classes." In 1890 Jacob Riis investigated "how the other half lives." Between 1906 and 1918 Lewis Hine photographed child labour across the country. In 1909 Jane Addams

<sup>1</sup> "Boy, 12, Writes President and the Family Home Is Saved," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 28 Oct. 1933, 1.

<sup>2</sup> "Indian Boy writes 'Mr. President' Letter, Gets Job for His War Veteran Father" *Orlando Sentinel*, 3 Jan. 1984, 4.

examined the “spirit of youth” in urban America. In 1926 Emory Bogardus examined “the city boy and his problems.” Often studies of child poverty studied the impoverished child as if they were a specimen, a pitiful thing without agency of their own, which it may be possible to help. This encouraged sticking-plaster solutions rather than wholesale systemic reforms, ameliorating the worst of the symptoms but never treating the problem. Dorothea Lange’s famous *Migrant Mother* photograph is an iconic image of the Great Depression – though the woman in question, Florence Owens Thompson, pictured alongside two of her children, at times expressed regret at allowing Lange to photograph her.<sup>3</sup> The poor, epitomized by the *Migrant Mother*, were treated like curiosities for academics to boggle at. Rather than boggle at the poor like those before him, Desmond studies everyone else’s contribution to and profiteering from poverty.

A study of working children in Cincinnati in 1908 noted that a thirteen-year-old boy rose at 5 a.m. on Saturday to work until almost midnight, manning a fruit stand to earn his family three dollars.<sup>4</sup> But it did not, could not, convincingly answer the question of why society made it that he had to. This is because the focus was only on the poor. Desmond puts the rich under the microscope. Children’s poverty is shown to be a political choice, even a source of profit for the wealthy and influential. Desmond persuasively argues that studying only the poor will not by itself help to end child poverty. Instead, we must ask who has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Just like Barry Goldwater complained in 1961 that he did not like that “his taxes paid for children born out of wedlock” (85), some people are opposed to helping the poor, even poor children. Others, ranging from landlords who make money from renting shabby accommodation, to poor families, to the payday loan industry, depend on poverty to enrich themselves.

The truth is that more money is not the answer. The money is already there. A particularly galling section of *Poverty, by America* details how dollars allocated to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) go unspent, misspent, or even stolen. Only twenty-two cents per dollar of funding make it to poor families. Mississippi, which has the same child poverty rate as Costa Rica, spent TANF dollars on Ford F-250 trucks. Arizona funded abstinence-only sex education. In 2020, Hawaii had \$380 million unspent TANF dollars – enough to give every poor child in the state \$10,000. Tennessee sat on \$790 million (28–30). Children are living in poverty there because others are choosing for them to do so, choosing not to spend the money that has already been designated to help them.

Some have made this point before. Though John Steinbeck focussed his reportage in the “Harvest Gypsies” and “Starvation under the Orange Trees” on giving voices to

<sup>3</sup> Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York, and Twenty Years’ Work among Them* (New York: Hallenbeck, 1872); Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1890); Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (New York: Macmillan, 1909); Emory S. Bogardus, *The City Boy and His Problems: A Survey of Boy Life in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: The Rotary Club of Los Angeles, 1926). For Hine see Oenone Kubie, “Reading Lewis Hine’s Photography of Child Street Labour, 1906–1918,” *Journal of American Studies*, 50, 4 (2016), 873–97. For Lange see James C. Curtis, “Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, and the Culture of the Great Depression,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, 21 1 (1986), 1–20.

<sup>4</sup> E. N. Clopper, *Child Labor and Social Progress: Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the National Child Labor Committee* (Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1908), 113–23, in James Marten, ed., *Childhood and Child Welfare in the Progressive Era* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s), 69.

the poor, he placed the blame for their plight on policy, governance, and the structures of society: “the state is much more interested in how you die than how you live.”<sup>5</sup> Desmond’s analysis is refreshingly unforgiving and convincing, and lays bare how some people have an immense vested interest in the continued suffering and marginalization of others, including the very young.

I am not sure that this was the author’s objective, but *Poverty, by America* made me think “wow, America really does hate its own children.” Poverty relief intended for them is spent elsewhere or not spent at all. Child poverty is only one part of what I see as a picture of a structurally childist state. American states are stripping away already lax child labour protections. In other states, like Mississippi and Oklahoma, child marriage is still legal. Gun violence surpassed cancer and car accidents to become the leading cause of death of American children and teenagers in 2020, accounting for 19 percent of deaths among those aged one to eighteen in 2021, yet meaningful gun reforms remain a pipe dream.<sup>6</sup> The United States is an extremely wealthy nation where 30 million children cannot afford their school lunch, culminating in \$262 million of “school lunch debt” (an awfully Dickensian phrase) each year.<sup>7</sup> Desmond’s *Poverty, by America* explains how all of this child poverty is by choice, inflicted by design, and that someone somewhere is probably making money from it.

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## THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

In 1969, Mollie Orshansky, a Social Security Administration (SSA) researcher who helped to design the Poverty Thresholds (the calculations that define today’s “poverty line”), wrote,

Counting the Poor is an exercise in the art of the possible. For deciding who is poor, prayers are more relevant than calculation because poverty, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder. Poverty is a value judgement; it is not something one can verify or demonstrate, except by inference and suggestion, even with a measure of error ... [But] [t]here is no particular reason to count the poor unless you are going to do something about them.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>5</sup> John Steinbeck’s “Starvation under the Orange Trees” originally appeared in *Monterey Trader*, 15 April 1938, n.p. It was subsequently published by the Simon J. Lubin Society as the eighth chapter of the pamphlet *Their Blood Is Strong*. See John Steinbeck, *Their Blood Is Strong* (San Francisco: Simon J. Lubin Society, 1938). For analysis of the specific analysis see Jack Hodgson, “Californians and Others: Children’s Health, Nutrition, and Welfare in Depression-Era Migrant Camps,” *Journal of American Studies*, 57, 2 (2023), 230–52.

<sup>6</sup> Annette Choi, “Children and Teens Are More Likely to Die by Guns Than Anything Else,” *CNN*, 29 March 2023, at <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/29/health/us-children-gun-deaths-dg/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Cecilia Nowell, “Stop Penalizing Hunger’: The Push to Cancel US School Lunch Debt,” *The Guardian*, 6 Oct. 2023, at [www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/oct/06/us-cancel-student-lunch-debt-legislation](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/oct/06/us-cancel-student-lunch-debt-legislation).

<sup>1</sup> “How Poverty Is Measured”, *Monthly Labor Review*, 92, 2 (Feb. 1969), 37–41.

What Orshansky highlighted over sixty years ago – that, when it comes to poverty, subjectivity, accountability, and action matter – is restated and expanded upon in Mathew Desmond's *Poverty, by America*, a straight-talking, hard-hitting, and meticulously researched exposé of poverty in the United States today. The same message is succinctly encapsulated by the wounding preposition in the book's title: it is America which *makes* poverty – or rather, as Desmond tells us, it is wealthy and well-off Americans who enable and benefit from impoverishment. Most books about poverty are really, Desmond argues, “books about the poor” (7), the best of which not only *count* the poor, but make the poor *count*.

Drawing on extensive research and his own reporting career, Desmond is attentive to the nature, scope, and inhumanity of impoverishment in the US; an entire chapter is devoted to the problem of defining poverty, whether through statistical analysis or the lived experiences behind the statistics. But in *Poverty, by America* Desmond attempts to do something different. Subsequent chapters detail how state and federal spending targeted towards poor Americans, contrary to the assumptions of many on the political left and right, has not decreased, but increased, with large amounts of funds never reaching those they were designed to help; how workers are underpaid, overworked, and disempowered; how the poor are taxed for being poor, especially through exploitative systems of debt repayment; how the rich are “dependent” on government spending through subsidies and tax breaks; how politics at local and national levels is corrupted by the interests of the “haves”; and how housing segregation breeds further poverty. It is across these chapters that Desmond provides not only an analysis of the reasons for poverty, but a range of approaches to abolishing it.

As Desmond is at pains to stress, the most obvious solutions to eradicating poverty (such as reforming the benefits systems and properly taxing the rich) are hardly “radical” when compared either to measures already adopted by other wealthy countries, or to policies previously implemented in US history. Desmond's vision at times resembles what many Europeans would consider “mild” social democracy and harks back to the central themes of Roosevelt's New Deal and Johnson's Big Society. Calls for amplified sectorial bargaining (141–3) or new solutions for the housing crisis like “commoning” (146–8) are not dramatic challenges to capitalism (even if such proposals are tantamount to socialism in much of the US media). If these robustly researched answers to the problem of poverty are, as Desmond outlines and evidences through extensive endnotes (a highlight of the book), eminently actionable and potentially transformative, what, then, is stopping the wealthiest nation in the world from abolishing poverty? A throughline in Desmond's argument is that a reckoning is required of the uncomfortable fact that well-off Americans *benefit* from poverty – and not only the “one per cent.” Desmond excavates the subtle routes by which the American middle class, through its consumer choices, opposition to social housing, and investments and retirement funds, enables the exploitation of the poor.

How do poverty abolitionists change the hearts and minds of those who *benefit* from poverty? As climate activists are well aware, efforts to influence consumer, investment and voting choices are difficult when those actions can seem like relative drops in the ocean. A more subtle thread which Desmond returns to throughout the book is the stories we (should) tell about poverty. Desmond's flipping of the language of dependency on its head, for example, is a powerful reconceptualization. It is the *rich*, Desmond illustrates, who are “dependent” on or “addicted” to welfare, while the poor do not even claim the meagre share they are currently entitled to.

Desmond's work implies that to tell that story, social scientists, scholars, and poverty abolitionists must do more to study (or "count") the rich, much as they have studied the poor.

A topic given less attention in *Poverty, by America*, but which chimes with Desmond's focus on storytelling, is that of old-age poverty. The US has some of the highest old-age poverty rates in the global North; over-sixty-fives are one of the few demographics with poverty rates that have *increased* in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Why are Americans still failing their elders? The answers to that question are diverse and complex, though the confluence of an ageing population and a piecemeal, failing health care system are clearly undergirding factors. History is incisive here in how attempts to "abolish" old-age poverty can help shift wider narratives about why poverty matters – and what can be done about it. In the early to mid-twentieth century, especially in the wake of the Great Depression, a wave of social movements, including the American Association for Old-Age Security and the Townsend Plan, not only forwarded plans for old-age pensions, but drew attention to the societal shame of old-age poverty. These movements were major, if historically marginalized, influences on the passing of the Social Security Act (1935), a wide-reaching piece of legislation that benefited Americans of all ages.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, in the 1940s and 1950s, the bargaining of the United Auto Workers and United Mine Workers of America for better workers' pensions was a driving force in securing subsequent amendments to expand and improve upon Social Security.<sup>4</sup> Whether the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), one of the largest lobbying groups in the US today, or the nation's predominantly nonunionized workforce have the willpower or capacity to take on such challenges is unclear.<sup>5</sup> Desmond, for his part, does occasionally make appeals to the needs of the aged poor, whose strife taps into a similar sense of collective moral shame awoken by child poverty. "In Milwaukee," he writes, in words reminiscent of the speeches of Dr. Francis Townsend or United Automobile Workers president Walter Reuther, "I met grandmothers living in trailers without heat. They spent the winter under blankets, praying that the space heater didn't give out. I once saw an apartment full of kids, just kids, evicted on a rainy spring day" (5). These kinds of stories do much to unsettle convenient, if simplistic, narratives currently told about generational conflict between wealthy baby boomers and impoverished young people.

There is also much to learn from the history of Social Security, a topic which *Poverty, by America* engages with, though perhaps not as much as one might expect. Beloved by progressives, loathed by conservatives, and long identified as a "third-rail" issue in US politics, Social Security is the lens through which many Americans interact with and so understand welfare. As Social Security enters its ninetieth year,

<sup>2</sup> "Latest Census Bureau Data Shows Americans 65+ Only Group to Experience Increase in Poverty," National Council on Aging, 13 Sept. 2022, at [www.ncoa.org/article/latest-census-bureau-data-shows-americans-65-only-group-to-experience-increase-in-poverty](http://www.ncoa.org/article/latest-census-bureau-data-shows-americans-65-only-group-to-experience-increase-in-poverty) (accessed 18 Jan. 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Edwin Amenta, *When Movements Matter: The Townsend Plan and the Rise of Social Security* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> John Barnard, *American Vanguard: The United Auto Workers during the Reuther Years, 1935–1970* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Charles R. Morris, *The Aarp: America's Most Powerful Lobby and the Clash of Generations* (New York: Times Books, 1996).

the time has perhaps come for poverty abolitionists not only to reckon with Social Security's failure to entirely abolish poverty – and its historic limitations and exclusions – but also to reflect on what lessons might be learnt from its real-world impacts, popularity, and longevity. For all its faults, Social Security undoubtedly helped to lift millions of Americans out of poverty over the twentieth century; a major factor in the drop in overall poverty over the late twentieth century was the drop in old-age (or “senior”) poverty – from around 35 percent in 1960 to 10 percent in 1995.<sup>6</sup> When Social Security was expanded in the 1960s, it was the Social Security Administration's active campaigning – including public-service announcements featuring celebrities – that helped to bring new members of the public onto its rolls (an instructive story given Desmond's point about how much welfare for the poor lies unclaimed).<sup>7</sup> Desmond, to be fair, does give time to the long shadow of Social Security, noting, for example, that it was an SSA bureaucrat, the aforementioned Orshansky, who created the definition of poverty still in use today (11). Yet there are surely more lessons to be learned: even Desmond's adoption of the term “poverty abolitionism” harks back to mid-century SSA discourse.<sup>8</sup> Born during a time of deep national crisis, and a survivor of President Ronald Reagan's attacks in the 1980s, Social Security has become, as Desmond writes, one of the nation's “most treasured public institutions” (111). It may well provide instruction for how best to “sell” some of the proposals made within *Poverty, by America* to policymakers and citizens.

Responding to this *JAS* panel's questions at the Lighthouse Bookshop event in October 2023, Desmond demonstrated his ability to fluidly communicate his ideas. Most impressively, Desmond was keen to share with his audience real-world examples of the active researchers, activists, and organizations across the US – many of whom he has either met or collaborated with – whose work sits at the vanguard of poverty abolitionism. A particularly interesting topic worthy of further discussion concerned the contributions to poverty abolitionism of people who, like Desmond, can draw from their own experiences of economic hardship. The impression I took from that conversation was that, while tokenism should be avoided, those who are (or have been) living on the breadline, in serious debt, or without a fixed abode have powerful and valuable insights that may shine new light on some of the blind spots of contemporary poverty discourse. As Desmond reflected, the question of what role “lived experience” should play in poverty abolitionism is a complex one, but nonetheless something which the charities, media outlets, and higher-education institutions that study poverty – yet all the while disadvantage and exclude individuals from economically deprived backgrounds – should think about more carefully.

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<sup>6</sup> Gary V. Engelhardt and Jonathan Gruber, “Social Security and the Evolution of Elderly Poverty,” Working Paper, May 2004, National Bureau of Economic Research, available at [www.nber.org/papers/w10466](http://www.nber.org/papers/w10466) (accessed 18 Jan. 2024).

<sup>7</sup> For a historical overview of the SSA's PSAs see “The Shine Bright on SSA's Public Service Announcements,” *OASIS*, Feb. 1983, 2–5.

<sup>8</sup> Wilbur J. Cohen, “A Ten-Point Program to Abolish Poverty,” *Social Security Bulletin*, 31, 12 (Dec. 1968), 3–13.