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The Myth of the Working Poor

Two Americas? The scaremongering bestsellers that say so are economically illiterate.

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Forty years ago a young, radical journalist helped ignite the War on Poverty with his pioneering book *The Other America*. In its pages, Michael Harrington warned that the recently proclaimed age of affluence was a mirage, that beneath the surface of U.S. prosperity lay tens of millions of people stuck in hopeless poverty that only massive government intervention could help.

Today, a new generation of journalists is straining to duplicate Harrington's feat—to convince contemporary America that its economic system doesn't work for millions and that only government can lift them out of poverty. These new journalists face a tougher task than Harrington's, though, because all levels of government have spent about \$10 trillion on poverty programs since his book appeared, with disappointing, even counterproductive, results. And over the last four decades, millions of poor people, immigrants and native-born alike, have risen from poverty, without recourse to the government programs that Harrington inspired.

But brushing aside the War on Poverty's failure and the success of so many in climbing America's economic ladder, this generation of authors dusts off the old argument for a new era. Books like Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* and David Shipler's *The Working Poor* tell us that the poor are doing exactly what America expects of them—finding jobs, rising early to get to work every day, chasing the American dream—but that our system of "carnivorous capitalism" is so heavily arrayed against them that they can't rise out of poverty or live a decent life. These new anthems of despair paint their subjects as forced off welfare by uncompassionate conservatives and trapped in low-wage jobs that lead nowhere. They claim, too, that the good life that the country's expanding middle class enjoys rests on the backs of these working poor and their inexpensive labor, so that prosperous Americans owe them more tax-funded help.

Though these books resolutely ignore four decades' worth of lessons about poverty, they have found a big audience. The commentariat loves them. Leftish professors have made them required course reading. And Democratic candidates have made their themes central to the 2004 elections. So it's worth looking closely at what these tomes contend, and at the economic realities that they distort.

To begin with, they follow Harrington's 1962 classic by seeing the poor as victims of forces over which they have no control. From the hills of Appalachia to the streets of Harlem, Harrington had found a generation of impoverished former sharecroppers whose jobs had been replaced by mechanization. For them, the advances that enriched everyone else spelled disaster: "progress is misery" and "hopelessness is the message." Unprepared for life off the farm, many could never find productive work, Harrington argued, and would need perpetual government aid.

But the new thinkers quickly veer to the left of Harrington, following some of his more radical acolytes whose theories produced the War on Poverty's most spectacular disasters. Harrington had seen the poor as victims because they could find no work; his more radical allies, especially a group associated with Columbia University's social-work school, argued that compelling the demoralized inner-city poor to work or take part in training that would fit them for work, instead of giving them unconditional welfare, was itself victimization. Richard A. Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, for example, argued that America's poverty programs—"self-righteously oriented toward getting people off welfare" and making them independent—were violating the civil rights of the poor. Journalist Richard Elman claimed that "vindictive" America was

"humiliating" welfare recipients by forcing them to seek entry-level work as taxi drivers, restaurant employees, and factory laborers, instead of giving them a guaranteed minimum income.

Sympathetic mayors and welfare officials responded to Cloward and Piven's call, boosting benefits, loosening eligibility rules, and cutting investigations of welfare cheating. Welfare rolls soared, along with welfare fraud and illegitimate births. The result was a national backlash that sparked the Reagan administration's welfare spending cuts.

But the Columbia crew left its enduring mark on welfare policy, in the principle that welfare, once a short-term program to help people get back on their feet, should be continuous and come with few restrictions and no stigma. A welfare mother, screaming at New York mayor John Lindsay (responsible for much of the city's rise in welfare cases), expressed the system's new philosophy: "It's my job to have kids, Mr. Mayor, and your job to take care of them." It was a philosophy that bred an urban underclass of non-working single mothers and fatherless children, condemned to intergenerational poverty, despite the trillions spent to help them.

Like communists who claim that communism didn't fail but instead was never really tried, Barbara Ehrenreich made her public debut with an attempt to brush aside the War on Poverty's obviously catastrophic results. The 46-year-old daughter of a Montana copper miner-turned-business executive, she joined Cloward and Piven to co-author a 1987 polemic, *The Mean Season: The Attack on the Welfare State*. The War on Poverty had failed so far, the book claimed, not because of its flawed premises but because the government hadn't done enough to redistribute the nation's wealth. America needed an even bigger War on Poverty that would turn the country into a European-style social welfare state. Pooh-poohing the work ethic and the dignity of labor, the authors derided calls for welfare reform that would require recipients to work, because that would be mortifying to the poor. "There is nothing ennobling about being forced to please an employer to feed one's children," the authors wrote, forgetting that virtually every worker and business owner must please someone, whether boss or customer, to earn a living. Welfare's true purpose, the book declared, should be to "permit certain groups to opt out of work." (The authors never explained why all of us shouldn't demand the right to "opt out.")

The Mean Season's argument gained little traction, but as the nineties dawned, Ehrenreich found a way to bring Cloward and Piven's socialistic themes successfully into the new decade and beyond. Her 1989 book, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, blamed poverty's continued existence in America partly on the Me Generation, which Tom Wolfe had so brilliantly made interesting to the nation. America's emerging professional middle class had started out hopefully in the 1960s, Ehrenreich claims, the inheritor of a liberating cultural revolution. But because that class depended on intellectual capital to make its living, rather than on income from property or investments, it felt a sharp economic insecurity, which by the late 1980s had made it "meaner, more selfish," and (worse still) "more hostile to the aspirations of the less fortunate," especially in its impatience with welfare.

The book vibrates with Ehrenreich's rage toward middle-class Americans. The middle class, she sneers, obsessively pursues wealth and is abjectly "sycophantic toward those who have it, impatient with those who do not." To Ehrenreich, "The nervous, uphill climb of the professional class accelerates the downward spiral of society as a whole: toward cruelly widening inequalities, toward heightened estrangement along class lines, and toward the moral anesthesia that estrangement requires." Ironically, Ehrenreich's economic prescription for a better America was for government to create one gigantic bourgeoisie: "Tax the rich and enrich the poor until both groups are absorbed into some broad and truly universal middle class. The details are subject to debate." *Time* magazine, the voice of the bourgeoisie, made her a regular columnist.

If the Reagan era could provoke Ehrenreich to such anger, it's no surprise that the 1996 welfare reform heightened her fury. Passed by a Republican-controlled Congress and signed into law by Democratic president Bill Clinton, the legislation ended welfare as an automatic federal entitlement and required states to oblige able-bodied recipients to work. The law put a five-year limit on welfare (the average stay

on the rolls had been 13 years) but exempted 20 percent of the cases—roughly equivalent to the portion of the welfare population believed too dysfunctional ever to get off public assistance. After President Clinton signed the bill, Ehrenreich claimed that she had seen the betrayal coming: she'd presciently cast a write-in vote for Ralph Nader in 1992's presidential election. She castigated the Left for its muted response to the new welfare law, though she later praised National Organization for Women president Patricia Ireland's hunger strike protesting the bill.

Ehrenreich's anger propelled her to write *Nickel and Dimed*. Beginning life as a piece of "undercover journalism" for *Harper's*, the 2001 book purports to reveal the truth about poverty in post-welfare reform America. "In particular," Ehrenreich asks in the introduction, how were "the roughly four million women about to be booted into the labor market by welfare reform . . . going to make it on \$6 or \$7 an hour?"

Nickel and Dimed doesn't fuss much with public-policy agendas, messy economic theories, or basic job numbers. Instead, it gives us Ehrenreich's first-person account of three brief sojourns into the world of the lowest of low-wage work: as a waitress for a low-priced family restaurant in Florida; as a maid for a housecleaning service in Maine; and as a women's-apparel clerk at a Minneapolis Wal-Mart. In her journeys, she meets a lively and sympathetic assortment of co-workers: Haitian busboys, a Czech dishwasher, a cook with a gambling problem, and assorted single working mothers. But the focus is mostly on Ehrenreich, not her colleagues.

The point that *Nickel and Dimed* wants to prove is that in today's economy, a woman coming off welfare into a low-wage job can't earn enough to pay for basic living expenses. Rent is a burden, Ehrenreich discovers. In Florida, she lands a \$500-a-month efficiency apartment; in Maine, she spends \$120 a week for a shared apartment in an old motel (she turns down a less expensive room elsewhere because it's on a noisy commercial street); in Minneapolis, she pays \$255 a week for a moldy hotel room. These seem like reasonable enough rents, except perhaps for Minneapolis, judging from her description of the place. But with her entry-level wages—roughly the minimum wage (when tips are included) as a waitress, about \$6 an hour as a maid, and \$7 an hour to start at Wal-Mart—Ehrenreich quickly finds that she'll need a second job to support herself. This seems to startle her, as if holding down two jobs is something new to America. "In the new version of supply and demand," she writes, "jobs are so cheap—as measured by the pay—that a worker is encouraged to take on as many as she possibly can."

What's utterly misleading about Ehrenreich's exposé, though, is how she fixes the parameters of her experiment so that she inevitably gets the outcome that she wants—"proof" that the working poor can't make it. Ehrenreich complains that America's supposedly tight labor market doesn't produce entry-level jobs at \$10 an hour. For people with no skills, that's probably true in most parts of the country; but everywhere, the U.S. economy provides ample opportunity to move up quickly. Yet Ehrenreich spends only a few weeks with each of her employers, and so never gives herself the chance for promotion or to find better work (or better places to live).

In fact, few working in low-wage jobs stay in them long. And most workers don't just move on quickly—they also move on to better jobs. The Sphere Institute, a California public-policy think tank founded by Stanford University professors, charted the economic path of workers in the state from 1988 to 2000 and found extraordinary mobility across industries and up the economic ladder. Over 40 percent of the lowest income group worked in retail in 1988; by 2000, more than half of that group had switched to other industries. Their average inflation-adjusted income gain after moving on: 83 percent, to over \$32,000 a year.

The workers who stayed in retail, moreover, were usually the higher earners, making about \$10,000 more a year than the leavers. They had already started improving their lots back in 1988, in other words, and probably elected to stay because they rightly saw further opportunity in retailing, though the study doesn't say what happened to them. The same dynamic occurs in other industries where low-wage jobs are concentrated, the study found: those who do well stay and watch earnings go up; those who feel stuck often depart and see earnings rise, too, as they find more promising jobs. In total, over 12 years, 88

percent of those in California's lowest economic category moved up, their incomes rising as they gained experience on the job and time in the workforce, two things that the marketplace rewards.

Such results are only the latest to confirm the enormous mobility that the U.S. economy offers. As a review of academic, peer-reviewed mobility studies by two Urban Institute researchers put it: "It is clear that there is substantial mobility—both short-term and long-term—over an average life-cycle in the United States." Perhaps most astonishingly, mobility often occurs within months. The Urban Institute report points out that several mobility studies based on the University of Michigan's Panel Study of Income Dynamics, which has traced thousands of American families since 1968, show that about 20 percent of those in the lowest economic quintile rise at least one economic class within a year. If Ehrenreich had given herself 12 months in her low-wage stints, instead of a week or two, she might have worked her way into the lower middle class by the end of her experiment.

This mobility explains why poverty rates didn't soar in the 1990s, even though some 13 million people, most of them dirt-poor, immigrated here legally. In fact, the country's poverty rate actually fell slightly during the nineties—which could only happen because millions already here rose out of the lowest income category.

Confidence in the American economy's capacity to foster income mobility helped impel the 1996 welfare reform in the first place. Most former welfare recipients entering the workforce, reformers believed, would over time improve their lives—at least if other handicaps such as drug or alcohol addiction and serious mental deficiencies didn't hold them back. Everything we've subsequently learned about welfare reform shows that the reformers were right, rendering Ehrenreich's book oddly dated from the outset.

Since welfare reform passed, employment among single mothers who'd never previously worked has risen 40 percent. More important, child poverty in single-mother households fell to its lowest point ever just three years after welfare reform became law. Except for a hiccup at the end of the last recession, the poverty rate among those households has continued to drop, down now by about one-third. The *New York Times* recently reported that "lawmakers of both parties describe the 1996 law as a success that moved millions of people from welfare to work and cut the welfare rolls by 60 percent, to 4.9 million people." Those results belie the hysterical warnings of welfare advocates, Ehrenreich among them, that reform would drastically worsen poverty.

Given that such data subvert Ehrenreich's case against the U.S. economic system, she unsurprisingly puts statistics aside in *Nickel and Dimed* and instead seeks to paint the low-wage workplace as oppressive and humiliating to workers forced by reformers to enter it. But given the author's self-absorption, what the reader really gets is a self-portrait of Ehrenreich as a longtime rebel with an anti-authoritarian streak a mile wide, who can't stomach the basic boundaries that most people easily accept in the workplace.

At Wal-Mart, for instance, she's "oppressed by the mandatory gentility" that the company requires of her, as if being nice to customers and co-workers were part of the tyranny of capitalism. (I suspect that most customers, if they encountered a snarling Ehrenreich as a clerk while shopping, would flee for the exit.) Told to scrub floors on her hands and knees by the maid service, she cites a "housecleaning expert" who says that this technique is ineffective. Ehrenreich then theorizes that the real reason that the service wants its employees down on their hands and knees is that "this primal posture of submission" and "anal accessibility" seem to "gratify the consumers of maid services." Never has the simple task of washing a floor been so thoroughly Freudianized.

In Ehrenreich's looking-glass world, opportunity becomes oppression. Hired by Wal-Mart shortly after applying, she weirdly protests that "there is no intermediate point [between applying and beginning orientation] . . . in which you confront the employer as a free agent, entitled to cut her own deal." Though she admits that in such a tight labor market, "I would probably have been welcome to apply at any commercial establishment I entered," she still feels "like a supplicant with her hand stretched out."

Unable to understand why her fellow workers don't share her outrage, this longtime socialist and radical feminist turns on the very people with whom she's trying to sympathize, imagining that they can only accept their terrible exploitation because they've become psychologically incapable of resisting. Why are the maids so loyal to the owner of the cleaning service? she asks. They're so emotionally "needy" that they can't break free, she speculates. Why do Wal-Mart workers accept their place in "Mr. Sam's family" instead of rising in a tide of unionization against the company? The Waltons have hoodwinked them, she surmises, misunderstanding completely the appeal to employees of Wal-Mart's opportunity culture, where two-thirds of management has come up from hourly-employee store ranks and where workers own a good chunk of company stock.

Responsibility for America's shameful economic injustice rests not only with exploitative businesses like Wal-Mart, in Ehrenreich's view, but also with the rich and—you guessed it—the middle class. Going beyond even *Fear of Falling*, *Nickel and Dimed* hangs a huge guilt trip on the middle class. Actually, guilt "doesn't go anywhere near far enough," Ehrenreich says. "[T]he appropriate emotion," she claims, "is shame—shame at our own dependency, in this case, on the underpaid labor of others." After all, Ehrenreich tells us, it's the middle class and its irritation with the poor that led to the catastrophe of welfare reform. "When poor single mothers had the option of remaining out of the labor force on welfare, the middle and upper middle class tended to view them with a certain impatience, if not disgust," she maintains.

Like some of Ehrenreich's earlier work, *Nickel and Dimed* is contemptuous of ordinary Americans. Cleaning the homes of middle-class families, she snoops in bookcases and finds mostly writers on the "low end of the literary spectrum"—you know, Grisham, Limbaugh, those kinds of authors. "Mostly though, books are for show," she clairvoyantly concludes. A woman whose home furnishings suggest that she is a Martha Stewart "acolyte" comes in for particularly withering scorn. "Everything about [her home] enrages me," Ehrenreich snaps. She's only slightly less condescending toward the lower middle class. She mocks Wal-Mart's customers for being obese—or at least the "native Caucasians" among them. Ehrenreich doesn't say what she thinks about the body types of middle-income blacks, Latinos, or Asians.

Ehrenreich's disparagement of the middle class, Wal-Mart, Martha Stewart, and various other targets of the Left these days doubtless has a lot to do with *Nickel and Dimed*'s remarkable success. The book rode the *New York Times* hardcover bestseller list for 18 weeks and has been on the paperback bestseller list for nearly two years now. So far, it has sold upward of a half-million copies in the U.S.

The left-leaning professoriat is helping drive the sales. *Nickel and Dimed* is standard fare in many freshman-orientation reading programs, in which schools require an entire incoming class to read one particular book. Among the 20 or so schools that have picked *Nickel and Dimed* for such programs are Ohio State (14,000 freshmen), the University of California, Riverside (nearly 20,000 freshmen), and Ball State (8,000-plus freshmen). Some of the schools, including Mansfield University in Pennsylvania (freshman class, about 1,600), have bought the book for students, just to ensure that the kids don't miss out on its wisdom. Since the book's publication, Ehrenreich enthuses, she's lectured at more than 100 universities.

Not everybody is taking this force-feeding of leftist propaganda sitting down. Conservative students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill protested the freshman-orientation reading committee's choice of *Nickel and Dimed*, bringing in local conservative groups and state legislators to try to force greater ideological balance on the school's reading program. What students objected to, explains Michael McKnight, a UNC grad who helped lead the protest, was the book's biased and misleading depiction of the American workplace, along with UNC's failure to provide any counterweight, such as critical reviews of the book. Says McKnight, "The freshman-orientation package of resources on the book included nothing but glowing reviews of it and lists of Ehrenreich's awards."

There's other evidence that students aren't buying Ehrenreich's pessimistic line on the U.S. economy. Professor Larry Schweikart, who teaches U.S. economic history at the University of Dayton, assigns his

students *Nickel and Dimed* along with other books that paint a brighter picture of the American economy. Schweikart says that many students quickly grasp what's wrong with Ehrenreich's book. "Many of these kids have worked in the low-wage marketplace, so they are more familiar with it than their professors or media reviewers. They tell me that there are better jobs out there than the ones Ehrenreich stuck herself with, that those jobs aren't long-term, and that they understand that she didn't give herself any time to find better work or advance."

If the holes in Ehrenreich's argument are clear even to some college kids, the logical gaps gape even wider in the 2004 book that hopes to succeed *Nickel and Dimed* as the definitive left statement on the oppressiveness of low-wage work: *The Working Poor*, by former *New York Times* reporter David Shipler. To his credit, Shipler, unlike Ehrenreich, cares enough about the workers who are his subjects to try to give a comprehensive account of their struggles to make it, delving into their lives and addressing important economic and cultural issues head-on. Following Ehrenreich, however, Shipler wants to blame an unjust U.S. economy for the plight of the poor. Yet his own evidence proves a very different, and crucial, point: it's often dysfunctional behavior and bad choices, not a broken economy, that prevent people from escaping poverty.

Consider some of the former welfare recipients Shipler profiles in his chapter called "Work Doesn't Work." Christie, a day-care worker, describes herself as "lazy" for never finishing college (her brother, who did, is an accountant, and her sister is a loan officer). She has had several children out of wedlock with various men, and now lives with one of them—Kevin, an ex-con—in public housing. Christie can't make ends meet, but that's partly because, having never learned to cook, she blows her \$138-a-month food-stamp allocation on "an abundance of high-priced, well-advertised snacks, junk food, and prepared meals."

Then there's Debra, who had her first illegitimate child at 18. Forced to work by welfare reform, Debra actually lands a job in a unionized factory—the holy grail of low-wage work to the Left. Unfortunately, she can't adjust to work in the shop, has nightmares about the assembly line, and imagines that the bosses prefer the Hispanic workers to her, since she's black. Shipler understands that with such attitudes, she is unlikely to move up.

Or how about Caroline, who spent years on welfare and has worked various jobs, including at Wal-Mart? She actually owns her own house, though, as Shipler ominously mentions, "it is mostly owned by the bank." (Welcome to the club, Caroline.) Caroline is a victim of the "ruthlessness of the market system," Shipler informs us, because she can't seem to land a promotion. We eventually learn from her caseworkers, however, that she doesn't bathe regularly and smells bad, that when she first divorced she refused her in-laws' offer of help, that she then married a man who beat her (she later left him), and that she keeps managing to get hired but then loses one job after another.

How has the U.S. economy let these workers down? In each of these cases, bad choices have kept someone from getting ahead.

Shipler's grim chapter headings are often wildly at odds with the stories he tells. One chapter, "Harvest of Shame," describes Hispanic seasonal farmworkers, who toil long hours for little money, often live in substandard temporary quarters, yearn for their families, and—because many are here illegally—don't qualify for government benefits. Again, though, is the U.S. economic system really exploiting these workers, as Shipler thinks? We soon learn that many of the illegals have come here to support families back in Mexico. They send home 70 percent of what they earn and plan to return south when they've amassed enough wealth (by Mexican standards).

True, since they're illegals, they can't get mainstream jobs with the potential for promotion and benefits. Yet for them, this low-wage work pays off. Pedro earns nine times more working illegally on a North Carolina farm than he did toiling in a Mexican slaughterhouse. He sends from \$300 to \$500 a month home to his folks. If he works just two more years on the farm, he figures, he'll have enough to build a house in Mexico, and it'll be time to go home. Like many of his countrymen, Pedro is temporarily using

America to make up for the Mexican economy's deficiencies. This hardly represents a failure of our economy. Shipler nonetheless finds puzzling the "absence of anger" among these immigrants.

Pointing to illegals like Pedro, who can't take advantage of the larger opportunities that our economy offers, or to people like Debra and Christie, who, every time they start to climb the economic ladder, do something self-destructive that causes them to fall back a few rungs, Shipler claims that economic mobility is vanishing from the United States. Today, he says, low-wage workers can only better themselves if they benefit from a "perfect lineup of favorable conditions."

The Tran family is just such an exception, Shipler thinks. Everything works for these Vietnamese immigrants. Within four months of arriving in the U.S. in 1998, three family members were working, earning \$42,848 in their first year in the country. Within five months, the family had earned enough to buy two used cars. Within two years, two children had registered for college. This is a "heroic" success story, in Shipler's view, because for low-wage workers in today's America, "there is no room for mistake or misfortune—not for drugs, not for alcohol, not for domestic violence."

But what the Trans have done, admirable as it is, isn't heroic—or even unusual. In 1990s California, where the Trans did so well, recall that nearly nine out of ten low-wage workers moved up, presumably avoiding the drugs, alcohol, and violence that Shipler wrongly sees as endemic to poverty. The average real income of the low-wage workers in the Sphere Institute study doubled over that time to more than \$27,000 a year. Nor is there any evidence, statistically or anecdotally, that such mobility is disappearing from the U.S.

For Shipler, as for Ehrenreich, the U.S. always shortchanges the poor. Education is a prime example, he says. He tours Washington, D.C.'s public schools, where student scores are abysmal and dropout rates are inexcusably high, and—noticing the classrooms' shortages of supplies and books and the nonexistent computers—says that lack of money is to blame. But the notorious failure of D.C.'s public schools has nothing to do with money. Those schools spend some \$13,500 per pupil a year—not as much as rich suburban districts, true, but far above the national average and well above what many private schools spend to educate kids effectively. As for the missing supplies and computers, blame a corrupt, dysfunctional system that wastes the more-than-adequate funds. There's no hint of this ongoing scandal in Shipler's book, even though for years the local papers have chronicled it extensively and, in desperation, Mayor Williams and the U.S. Congress have set up a voucher plan to address it.

Shipler's obliviousness to the real causes of poverty also characterizes the latest addition to the "working poor" canon: Joanna Lipper's *Growing Up Fast*. A sometime documentary filmmaker, Lipper traveled to the once-thriving industrial town of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in order to chronicle the lives of a generation of teenage unwed mothers. Because many of these young women are daughters of blue-collar workers who lost their jobs as General Electric gradually pulled out of Pittsfield during the 1980s, Lipper blames G.E. and, more broadly, globalization for the social pathology evident in the town today—not just the teen pregnancies but also the rising crime and drug-abuse rates that she says followed G.E.'s departure. The town's youth "have been excluded from the American dream," she writes.

Yet as the tale of Pittsfield and its teens unfolds, a different story emerges, even if Lipper—like Shipler in this regard—seems not to grasp the meaning of her own evidence. We learn, for example, that the town's drug problem actually began in the early 1980s, before G.E. left, after social-services providers opened government-funded drug-treatment centers in the area and imported hundreds of addicts from New York City and elsewhere to receive treatment. Many of these addicts, released from the programs but not fully detoxed, stayed on. They then brought friends and relatives to town and started dealing drugs around local fast-food joints and other spots where teens hung out. Not that all the buyers were kids, let alone "excluded" ones. Fueling the market, we learn, were "doctors from Williamstown and well-to-do people."

The teens get pregnant, as Lipper tells it, because they've got nothing better to do. They feel trapped, because "the major institutions of American life," the job market heading the list, "are not working for

them," Lipper says. "[H]ope is the ingredient missing" from their lives. Yet one teen mother, Jessica, confides: "I had so much going for me before I got pregnant." Another, Shayla, herself born to teen parents long before job woes came to Pittsfield, says that she wanted to attend college but didn't work hard enough in high school to get in.

It never occurs to Lipper that teen pregnancy doesn't naturally flow from economic status. After all, millions of impoverished immigrants came to America from Europe in the early twentieth century without illegitimacy getting out of hand, thanks to strong religious traditions that stigmatized illegitimacy. What's really missing from the lives of Pittsfield's unwed mothers isn't hope; it's shame about teenage sex or out-of-wedlock pregnancy. The teens talk openly of early sexual escapades, and matter-of-factly pose for book photos with their illegitimate kids—unsurprising in a culture that glorifies sex and in which movie stars and rock musicians proudly flaunt their out-of-wedlock offspring. The demise of shame is a far more plausible explanation for Pittsfield's teen-pregnancy problem than is economic distress.

Like Shipler, in other words, Lipper has reversed cause and effect. She sees social dysfunction in Pittsfield and blames it on poverty. But it typically is personal failure and social dysfunction that create poverty. To stay out of poverty in America, it's necessary to do three simple things, social scientists have found: finish high school, don't have kids until you marry, and wait until you are at least 20 to marry. Do those three things, and the odds against your becoming impoverished are less than one in ten. Nearly 80 percent of everyone who fails to do those three things winds up poor.

That's a crucial truth that left-wing social thinkers have tried to deny from the earliest days of the welfare-rights movement. And as these books show, even after the conclusive failure of the War on Poverty and the resounding success of welfare reform, they are still at it.