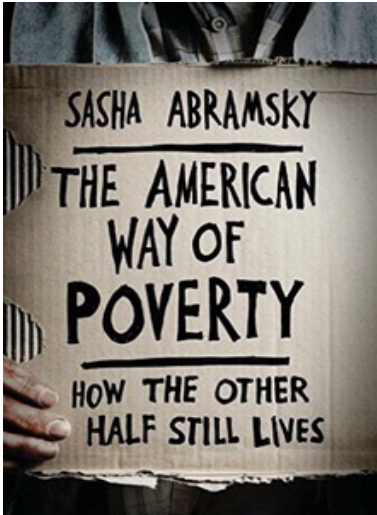


The American Way of Poverty

How the Other Half Still Lives

by Sasha Abramsky. New York: Nation Books (A Member of the Persus Books Group) 2013

Why is this book worth our time?



#1 – This book shows us something of a “long look” at poverty. Call it poverty then and now.

#2 – This book reminds us that fighting poverty is a matter of will; moral will; political will.

#3 – This book reminds us that brief moments of attention will not suffice for a chronic problem. Poverty is not a short-term problem, and a short-term moment of compassion accomplishes...nothing

Quotes and Excerpts from the book — the “best of” Randy’s highlighted passages:

1. Fifty years after the social critic Michael Harrington published his groundbreaking book *The Other America*, in which he chronicled the lives lived of those excluded from the Age of Affluence, poverty in America is back with a vengeance. It is made up both of the long-term, chronically poor and the newly impoverished, the victims of a broken economy and a collapsed housing market. 151
2. The saga of the timeless poor, of individuals immersed in poverty for decades, of communities mired in poverty for generations, is something of a dog-bites-man story: It’s sad, but it’s not new. 154
3. in reality the stories of the long-term poor and the newly destitute increasingly blend together, creating a common set of experiences that pummel the bodies and minds of those who live them; that corrode communities; and that, all too often, obliterate optimism. 158
4. “The other America, The American Way of Poverty, is hidden today in a way that it never was before. Its millions are socially invisible to the rest of us. . . . The new poverty is constructed so as to destroy aspiration; it is a system designed to be impervious to hope.” 163
5. In fact, The Other America hit a raw nerve at least in part because so many Americans, living comfortably in suburbias miles from the epicenters of hardship, thought their country had already solved the poverty conundrum. . . .that it could continue to exist alongside the Affluent Society, was a source of tremendous national embarrassment for many. 175
6. **After all, no society in human history has ever successfully banished poverty; and no polity with a modicum of respect for individual liberty has entirely negated the presence of inequality. 180**
7. Ronald Reagan was elected president on a platform of rolling back much of the Great Society. 185
8. Too poor to participate in the consumption rituals that define most Americans’ lives, too cash-strapped to go to malls, to visit cafés or movie theaters, to buy food anywhere other than dollar stores, these men and women live on America’s edge. 190
9. **All of these people share an existential loneliness, a sense of being shut out of the most basic rituals of society. 194**
10. . . .first is the sheer loneliness of poverty, the fact that profound economic hardship pushes people to the psychological and physical margins of society—isolated from friends and relatives; shunted into dilapidated trailer parks, shanties, or ghettoized public housing; and removed from banks and stores, transit systems and cultural institutions. . . .The poor live on society’s scraps 203

11. By the end of 2010, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 15.1 percent of Americans were living below the federally defined poverty line, an increase of approximately fifteen million people since the start of the century. Fully 34.2 percent of single mothers and their children were in poverty, up from 28.5 percent in 2000. ...Not surprisingly, in May 2012, UNICEF reported that of the world's developed countries, the United States had the second highest rate of child poverty, with more than 23 percent of its kids officially poor. Only Romania, still struggling to shed itself of the awful legacy left by Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship, had worse numbers. 294
12. The method is simple: defund public services, ensure that the government only delivers second-rate goods, convince the electorate that long-term societal investments such as Social Security and Medicare are Ponzi schemes unlikely to survive down the generations, and it becomes ever easier to convince ordinary people that taxes are a mugging rather than an investment. 875
13. "No one has an anti-poverty agenda." 3093
 - a. And one reason is they don't have that lobbying voice on the Hill... 3097
14. Absolute equality is neither possible nor remotely desirable; it is, in fact, a straw man. 3114
15. I want to show how, in redistributing a few hundred billion dollars per year of that \$16 trillion economy, through changes to the tax structure and changes in how we prioritize federal and state spending—or, to put it another way, in reprioritizing who receives and who spends about 2 to 3 percent of the vast national pot of wealth that is America, while leaving undisturbed the remaining 97 to 98 percent—we can create a set of vital anti-poverty initiatives that have the potential to dramatically improve the lives of tens of millions of Americans. 3122
16. Readers should come away from *The American Way of Poverty* with an understanding of the interconnectedness of these issues, of the complexity both of the world of poverty and also of anti-poverty strategies, and with a sense of the changes—both in political attitude and practical administration—that need to be embarked upon in order to reverse the increasing economic polarization that, more so by the day, is coming to define twenty-first-century America. 3131
17. Poverty is, after all, a web of problems enormous in their complexity. 3144
18. I wanted to make sure that my life attached itself to helping kids get a great education, or helping people living in poverty to get decent jobs, and be able to work and have dignity; to make sure that people didn't have to go to the emergency room to get healthcare. 3154
19. Adding a 1 percent payroll tax, divided between employers and employees, would allow for the creation of a huge public works trust fund that could be tapped during periods of prolonged recession so as to effectively put large numbers of unemployed workers back to work quickly, and on projects that benefit the public good. 3173
20. ...as the recent collapse has shown, almost nobody's job security can be taken for granted when the financial system wobbles. 3178
21. Since the 1960s, neither industry nor government had invested in what is called "The Commons." 5052
22. To cap off the indignity, tens of thousands of impoverished residents were living in homes without running water and without electricity. 5057
23. For the rest of their lives, they would be playing an unwinnable game of financial catch-up. 5086
24. "I cannot afford to go to the hospital; I can't afford the ambulance ride. I can't afford to feed my family." 5105
25. As I write this concluding chapter, we do not have the luxury of saying "We didn't know." For the truth is that we did. ...And we knew because, if we were honest with ourselves, as the twenty-first century unfolded we saw the effects of poverty on a daily basis: in the dilapidated trailer parks alongside freeways that we passed on the way to work or while traveling on family vacations, in the lines for free food that we routinely witnessed in our cities and suburbs, and in the stories of jobs lost and homes foreclosed on that we encountered every day in our newspapers and on our television news shows. We knew then, and even more so, we know now. 5115
26. We know why so many people are born poor, why so many people become poor, and why so many people remain poor. We know how different problems affect people's economic well-being at different stages of their lives. And, as I have detailed in these pages, we know if not how to entirely eliminate these scourges, then certainly how to limit their scope and mitigate their damage. 5119
27. The cost of such an effort would be large—many hundreds of billions of dollars—but for a nation as wealthy and as

bleamed with natural and human resources as is America, not unaffordable. ...The cost of inaction is far larger, in terms of potential wasted, lives truncated, and communities corroded. ...For raging levels of poverty have, once again, become the spanner in the American works. 5124

28. How do we generate the political will for such an overarching, and holistic, project? We educate. We empower people. We convince enough Americans that no matter how much money from big-dollar donors floods the political system, a democracy as vibrant as America's can, and should, respond to the fundamental needs of its populace. 5154
29. **Explain the connections between political democracy and economic opportunity, between empowerment at the ballot box and empowerment economically, and a host of previously out-of-reach goals suddenly seem reachable. 5162**
30. **If, in the year 2062, another journalist has to revisit this issue again, to comment on poverty's stubborn presence on the American landscape a century after Harrington's cri de coeur, it will be because of a failure of wills far more than a failure of intelligence or a lack of resources. 5169**
31. And now, knowing the challenges, and hearing the demands of conscience, our task is to act. 5172

Some of the Key Content and Ideas from the Book

It's been fifty years - five decades, a half of a century -- since Michael Harrington wrote *The Other America*. Since then, after some genuine initial progress in fighting poverty, the energy, the passion, the conviction to fight poverty has dramatically lessened. And greater poverty is upon us – back with a vengeance. This book calls for action; again; now...

The War on Poverty has gotten a terribly bad rap, given it did a hell of a lot of good; part of the Great Society dealing with health, beautification. ...Describing that condition of life as "poverty." It misses the critical moral, social resources that people draw on to survive and transform their conditions of life. It's injustice. It's people having to live in conditions of deprivation that are unjust. It takes a justice issue and turns it into a social engineering problem or a charity problem. Arguably, that's one reason why the original War on Poverty failed: Moral arguments, such as those detailed by Harrington, brought poverty center stage, but, once there, technocrats took control, essentially reducing a massive moral conundrum—poverty amidst plenty—into a set of scientific and statistical data. And once that occurred, the energy was sucked out of the process. Thus, even while a "poverty industry" grew up that developed ever more specialized knowledge about how to tackle particular manifestations of economic hardship, the political language about why we should do so dissipated.

- A snapshot of the reality of poverty:
 - "There are people with no high school education who are poor," he writes, "but there are also university graduates on food bank lines. There are people who are poor because they have made bad choices, gotten addicted to drugs, burned bridges with friends and family — and then there are people who have never taken a drug in their lives, who have huge social networks, and who still can't make ends meet."
...those "who have never held down a job, and others who hold down multiple, but always low-paying, jobs, frequently for some of the most powerful corporations on earth."
..."children whose only hot meals are what they are given at school"
- Let's see those on each part of the spectrum
 - o The chronically poor
 - o The struggling, multi-job poor
 - o The vulnerable, could-become poor...

- It's going to take money – serious money. We can use four major revenue sources:
 - o (1) A public works fund to protect against mass unemployment;
 - o (2) A new educational opportunity fund to dramatically expand access to, and affordability of, higher education;
 - o (3) A poverty-mitigation fund built up from the introduction of a financial transaction tax and energy profit taxes; and
 - o (4) Money to stabilize Social Security and start reducing the national deficit, made available from higher taxes on capital gains, high-end inheritances, and the income of the most affluent of wage earners.
- Let's think "Maslow"
 - o Start with the basics – food, shelter, health care
 - o Then add the tools, beginning with education
 - Some thoughts about college (or "trade school") for all

The Book:

Prologue:

Scandal in the Making

Part One:

The Voices Of Poverty

Chapter One

Poverty in the Land of the Plutocrats

Chapter Two

Blame Games

Chapter Three

An American Dilemma

Chapter Four

The Fragile Safety Net

Chapter Five

The Wrong Side of the Tracks

Chapter Six

Stuck in Reverse

Part Two:

Building A New And Better House

Introduction

Why Now?

Chapter One

Shoring Up the Safety Net

Chapter Two

Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

Chapter Three

Boosting Economic Security for the Working Poor

Coda

Attention Must Be Paid

Some Lessons and Takeaways

- #1 -- You accomplish what you pay attention to... if you don't pay attention, nothing is accomplished.
- #2 -- The "crisis" of the "wealthy" takes priority over the ongoing crisis for the poor. Seemingly every time.
- #3 -- The growth of the wealth for the wealthy takes priority over the alleviation of the suffering of the poor.
- #4 -- And so, again (and again, and again), the poor are "invisible," because of the much, much greater visibility, and influence, of the wealthy. (And, because of the "segmenting" of the poor from the rest of society).
- #5 -- The solution will require real agenda changes; policy changes; tax changes. Including much more robust estate taxes, a genuinely greater safety net, and "for-the-future" investments (e.g., education).
- #6 -- And, such policy changes are unlikely in the current political climate.
- #7 -- And, a warning for the "haves" regarding the decline in demand...

Randy Mayeux

214.557.8025

randymayeux@sbcglobal.net

Randy blogs about business books at

www.FirstFridayBookSynopsis.com

Follow Randy on Twitter: @Randy1116

Synopses available at www.15MinuteBusinessBooks.com

