

Virtue and Poverty | PeterBerkowitz.com

 peterberkowitz.com/articles/virtueandpoverty.html

The Public Interest, June 22, 2001

Virtue and Poverty by Peter Berkowitz

A review of *Fighting Poverty with Virtue: Moral Reform and America's Urban Poor, 1825-2000* by Joel Schwartz.

UNTIL recently, for many intellectuals and policy experts, virtue was more than a suspect concept bound up with a bygone era and an outmoded worldview. Virtue, for them, signified a crude, blame-the-victim approach to reform, a code for the exercise by the Haves of social control over the Have-Nots, a hypocritical cover under which smug moral scolds and self-righteous religious enthusiasts diverted attention from the root causes of poverty in America, material deprivation and discrimination. To such critics, arguments from virtue demonstrated moral and intellectual vice.

Yet today, as Joel Schwartz observes in *Fighting Poverty with Virtue: Moral Reform and America's Urban Poor, 1825-2000*, virtue has regained some of her loveliness. Schwartz, a program officer at the National Endowment for the Humanities, asserts that it is now widely accepted that public policy should promote diligence and familial responsibility, the only question being by what methods. In Schwartz's informed and thoughtful view, this represents great progress in the debate over welfare reform. Adroitly combining historical scholarship, philosophical reflection, and policy analysis, Schwartz places current controversies about the relation between virtue and social justice in the context of the history of moral reform in the United States. He shows that the fight against poverty can be neither just nor effective unless it tends to the qualities of mind and character of those it seeks to help. But he also finds that while a successful fight against poverty must always include moral reform, that is never enough in an advanced industrial, even postindustrial, state.

Leading moral reformers in the nineteenth century displayed a complex understanding of poverty. They openly and consistently articulated the view --- principally thought of as conservative today --- that poverty was to be overcome by teaching the poor how to help themselves. But Schwartz also shows that little-chronicled but influential activists such as the Reverend Joseph Tuckerman, Robert M. Hartley, Charles Loring Brace, and Shaw Lowell were under no illusions about the powerful social and economic forces that threw families and communities into a devastating tailspin. For this reason, the moral reformers felt no compulsion to choose between practices designed to inculcate virtues and those aimed at providing material support and enacting structural reforms. They created industrial schools, helped the poor find employment, promoted temperance, built savings institutions, and advocated women's education and self-reliance. They believed their efforts would instill

diligence, thrift, sobriety, and familial responsibility. Though they tended to view these virtues as part of a larger religious understanding, the reformers argued for them on the grounds that they were essential to enabling the poor, just as they enabled the nonpoor, to succeed. At the same time, the reformers recognized that even the disciplined, able-bodied poor could not advance without basic material support, and therefore they also championed housing projects, the enactment of old-age pensions, and the unionization of labor.

THE good intentions and impressive coherence of the moral reformers' views, however, did not guarantee the success of their endeavors. Schwartz reports that their results were mixed, and discusses several reasons why. As comfortable and secure members of the elite, the reformers could not always avoid delivering their message in a haughty and patronizing manner that antagonized those whom it was supposed to inspire and instruct. The cultural and religious heterogeneity of the poor made it difficult for the moral reformers to craft a message to which all would be receptive. And the general intractability of adult behavior, its resistance to education and change, meant that moral reform would always be an arduous uphill battle.

Moreover, toward the end of the nineteenth century, as the ideology of laissez faire began to wane, the virtues that the moral reformers championed came under increasingly severe criticism. The poor were not poor because they lacked bourgeois virtue, a new generation of reformers argued, but because the economic structure and moral values of American society were flawed. Settlement-house leader Jane Addams criticized what she called the "industrial virtues" --- diligence and thrift --- and instead championed the "social virtues." She argued that rather than learn to be competitive and self-reliant, the poor should learn to cooperate and to depend on each other. Along similar lines, Walter Rauschenbusch, a leading figure in the Social Gospel movement (and maternal grandfather of Richard Rorty), attacked the moral reformers for inculcating selfishness and rational calculation. Like Addams, he offered an alternative understanding of virtue. What was needed, argued Rauschenbusch, was an ethic that placed selflessness and Christian charity at its center. Although Schwartz takes pains to point out the complexity of their positions, he concludes that by questioning the efficacy and indeed the morality of the individualist virtues, Addams and Rauschenbusch unwittingly conspired to de-moralize the fight against poverty.

THE moral revolution they set in motion reached its culmination in the 1960s and 1970s, when critics attacked not merely the particular virtues the moral reformers sought to teach but the very idea that teaching virtue was a valid response to poverty. Influential works such as William Ryan's *Blaming the Victim* and Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward's *Regulating the Poor* placed responsibility for poverty exclusively on structural causes. To do otherwise, they argued, was an elitist attempt by the powerful to impose one-sided and parochial values on the powerless. As Schwartz indicates, such arguments carried the day at the very moment that real structural reforms involving the creation of the institutions of the welfare state made it more viable than ever for the poor to escape poverty by exercising the traditional virtues.

What accounts for the dramatic change in attitude from the nineteenth-century moral reformers to the reformers of the 1960s and 1970s, who rejected policies with any admixture of morality? In part, according to Schwartz, it was the experience of the Depression, which made vivid to many Americans the devastation that impersonal economic forces could wreak. But to explain why virtue was not merely demoted in the fight against poverty but eventually banished as an explanation and a remedy, it is necessary to take into account the spirit of the times. Invoking Daniel Bell's seminal exploration of capitalism's cultural contradictions, Schwartz observes that the comfort and luxury brought about by increased prosperity erodes the virtues on which prosperity ultimately depends. As Adam Smith noted in *The Wealth of Nations*, the moral looseness of the affluent elites, which they can afford, proves ruinous to the poor, whose lives leave little margin for error. One might add that the situation is even more serious than Schwartz acknowledges. For it is not only the affluence created by capitalism but also a democratic skepticism toward authority and the liberal devotion to autonomous individual choice that weaken the claims of virtue.

YET as Schwartz effectively documents, hopeful signs are on the rise in America today. Moral reform is more ecumenical and more democratic than ever, and the fight against poverty has developed what he calls a "liberal-conservative synthesis." Social scientists such as John DiIulio (recently appointed by President Bush to head the new White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives), Glenn C. Loury, Lawrence Mead, and James Q. Wilson have explored the empirical evidence that suggests the efficacy of inculcating virtues as an approach to fighting poverty. In his 1991 book *Liberal Purposes*, political theorist William Galston argued compellingly that liberal principles permit and at times even require government action in support of virtues necessary for the exercise of the basic requirements of citizenship. Black ministers such as former congressman Floyd Flake in New York City and Eugene Rivers in Boston have demonstrated the success of aggressive intervention by churches in the lives of young people in impoverished, crime-ridden neighborhoods. Governors across the nation have followed former Wisconsin governor Tommy Thompson's lead in finding ways, typically at increased cost to the state, to reduce welfare rolls by linking welfare to work --- the approach embodied by the bipartisan welfare reform bill of 1996.

It is premature to draw any conclusions about the staying power of the new "liberal-conservative synthesis." Yet no reader of Schwartz's book can come away doubting that bourgeois virtue, vulnerable as it is to criticism, is good not only for the bourgeoisie but also for the poor. And it is now clear that any public policy, however well-intentioned, that neglects the part that virtue plays in improving the lives of the poor will fail.

In his conclusion, Schwartz writes that "if we want to encourage diligence, sobriety, thrift, and familial responsibility among the poor (as we should and must), it would be no small thing for us to act as if we believed in those virtues by practicing them ourselves." And if we want to encourage scholarship that can serve the public interest, it would be no small thing to

act as if we believed in the virtues of intellectual inquiry. We may start by conducting our studies, as Schwartz has conducted his, with respect for facts, rigor in argument, a keen eye for partial truths, and a refined appreciation of the larger questions.

PETER BERKOWITZ teaches at the George Mason University School of Law and is a contributing editor at The New Republic.

Copyright 2001 Gale Group, Inc. ASAP

Copyright 2001 The National Affairs, Inc.