



©Bob Adelman

Michael Harrington addresses a meeting of the Congress of Racial Equality in the early 1960s. ©Bob Adelman

50 Years Later: Poverty and *The Other America*

MAURICE ISSERMAN

When Michael Harrington's *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* first appeared in bookstores in March 1962, its author had modest hopes for its success, expecting to sell at most a few thousand copies. Instead, the book proved a publishing phenomenon, garnering substantial sales (seventy thousand in several editions within its first year and over a million in paperback since then), wide and respectful critical attention, and a significant influence over the direction of social welfare policy in the United States during the decade that followed. By February 1964, *Business Week* noted, "*The Other America* is already regarded as a classic work on poverty." *Time* magazine later offered even more sweeping praise, listing *The Other America* in a 1998 article entitled "Required Reading" as one of the twentieth century's ten most influential books, putting it in such distinguished company as Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* and Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*.

Harrington's own knowledge of poverty was, for the most part, acquired secondhand, as he would recount in two memoirs, *Fragments of the Century* (1973) and *The Long Distance Runner: An Autobiography* (1988). Born in 1928 in St. Louis, the only child of loving and moderately prosperous parents of sturdy Irish-Catholic lineage, educated at Holy Cross, Yale Law School, and the University of Chicago, he moved to New York City in 1949 to become a writer. In 1951, he joined Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker movement as a volunteer at its soup kitchen; there he got to know a small subset of the nation's poor, the homeless male alcoholics of New York City's

Bowery district. Within a few years he left the Catholic Worker (and the Catholic church) and joined the Young People's Socialist League, the youth affiliate of the battered remnants of the American Socialist Party, a party then led by Norman Thomas. A tireless organizer, prolific writer, skillful debater, and charismatic orator, Harrington succeeded Thomas as America's best-known socialist in the 1960s, just as Thomas had succeeded Eugene Debs in that role in the 1920s. Socialism was never the road to power in the United States, but socialist leaders like Debs, Thomas, and Harrington were, from time to time, able to play the role of America's social conscience. In the years since Harrington's death from cancer in 1989, at the age of sixty-one, no obvious successor to the post of socialist tribune in the Debs-Thomas-Harrington tradition has emerged.

Harrington's most famous appeal to the American conscience, *The Other America*, was a short work (one hundred and eighty-six pages in the original edition) with a simple thesis: poverty in the affluent society of the United States was both more *extensive* and more *tenacious* than most Americans assumed. The extent of poverty could be calculated by counting the number of American households that survived on an annual income of less than \$3,000. These figures were readily available in the census data, but until Harrington published *The Other America* they were rarely considered. Harrington revealed to his readers that an "invisible land" of the poor, over forty million strong, or one in four Americans at the time, fell below the poverty line. For the most part this Other America existed in rural isolation and in crowded slums where

middle-class visitors seldom ventured. "That the poor are invisible is one of the most important things about them," Harrington wrote in his introduction in 1962. "They are not simply neglected and forgotten as in the old rhetoric of reform; what is much worse, they are not seen."

That was then. Fifty years since the publication of *The Other America* the poor are still among us—and in a testament to the lasting significance of Harrington's work, not at all invisible. Whether or not the poor exist is thus no longer a matter of debate; what if anything can be done to improve their condition remains at issue.

In September 2011, the United States Census Bureau reported that over forty-six million Americans—nearly one in six—were living below the officially established poverty line in 2010, as defined by an annual income

of \$22,314 for a family of four. In absolute numbers it was the greatest number of Americans living below the poverty line since the Bureau began keeping such records in 1959, three years before the appearance of *The Other America*. The report revealed that some groups of Americans were particularly hard-hit: For blacks, the poverty rate was 27 percent, for Hispanics, 26 percent. Residents of Rust Belt cities in the old industrial heartland of the Northeast and Midwest also suffered disproportionately: Reading, Pennsylvania, had the nation's highest poverty rate of 41.3 percent followed by Flint, Michigan, at 41.2 percent. Age was also a factor, with young families over-represented: according to census data, 35 percent of American children were being raised in poverty. The recession that began in 2007-2008 exacerbated poverty, but so did the "welfare reform" measures, enacted in the prosperous 1990s, restricting federal and state cash aid to poor families.

If the extent of poverty is no longer debatable, explanations for its tenacity as a social problem as well as possible solutions remain controversial. Harrington's own explanation in *The Other America* for the tenacity of poverty, ironically, would lend ammunition both to those who sought to expand federal spending on the nation's social welfare safety net—and, in time, to those who wished to cut back such spending.

Harrington lived a life of more or less voluntary poverty in the 1950s, eking out a meager living as a freelance magazine writer for such publications as *Commonweal* and *Commentary* (it was in the latter, then a magazine of bracingly liberal sentiments, that an early version of what became *The Other America* first appeared in 1959 as a two-article series). In his career as a freelancer, he proved a gifted borrower and adapter of others' ideas, a kind of intellectual jack-of-all-trades who could write knowledgeably on topics ranging from contemporary literature to civil liberties, from ballet to Bolshevism. He read widely and proved a quick study in mastering and translating into an easily accessible prose the sometimes esoteric concerns and language of a variety of disciplines. And in an act that proved that ideas truly do have consequences

Leave a legacy of ideas...

A bequest of any size can be of lasting benefit to Dissent and help ensure that the ideas and beliefs you hold dear will continue to have a public forum. Our legal name is the Foundation for the Study of Independent Social Ideas. We ask you to consider one of the following options:

1. You can leave a specific amount or a particular asset. "I bequeath \$ _____ to the Foundation for the Study of Independent Social Ideas."
2. You can leave a specific percentage of your estate. "I bequeath ____ percent of my estate to the Foundation for the Study of Independent Social Ideas."
3. You can leave the remainder of your estate. "After distributing the specific bequests listed above (to others in your will), I leave the remainder of my estate to the Foundation for the Study of Independent Social Ideas."

For more specifics on this or other information on gift planning, feel free to phone or write Dissent, 310 Riverside Drive #2008 New York, N.Y. 10025 (212) 316-3120 editors@dissentmagazine.org

(although not always or only the ones intended), in the late 1950s he picked up the theory of the “culture of poverty” from anthropologist Oscar Lewis.

Lewis, whose ethnographic study of Mexican slum-dwellers, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*, was published in 1959, contended that being poor was not simply a condition marked by the absence of wealth; rather, poverty created “a subculture of its own.” However different their places of origin, he argued, poor people in Mexico might have more in common—in terms of family structure, interpersonal relations, values systems and so forth—with their counterparts in Puerto Rico or New York City than with other, better off people from their own countries.

Echoing Lewis, Harrington argued that American poverty constituted “a separate culture, another nation, with its own way of life.” Poor Americans were not distinguished from their affluent counterparts simply by their lack of adequate income. Rather, they were

people who lack education and skill, who have bad health, poor housing, low levels of aspiration and high levels of mental distress....Each disability is the more intense because it exists within a web of disabilities. And if one problem is solved, and the others are left constant, there is little gain.

Poverty would not be solved automatically by the expansion of the economy (as in “a rising tide lifts all boats,” the belief of many liberals at the time), and it certainly would not be ended by exhortations to the poor to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps (the remedy that appealed to conservatives). “Society,” Harrington concluded, “must help them before they can help themselves.” America needed to undertake a broad program of “remedial action” on behalf of the Other America—a “comprehensive assault on poverty.”

In the introduction to *The Other America*, Harrington wrote that the poor needed “an American Dickens” to make them visible to better-off citizens, although quickly hastening to add that he was no Dickens. There is,

however, significant evidence of literary craft in the book, notwithstanding the informal and almost conversational tone that Harrington adopted in his prose. His creative achievement involved not only the sympathetic description of the lives and problems of the poor, but the creation of his own authorial persona.

The voice Harrington adopted throughout *The Other America* was calm and reasonable, but also idealistic and impassioned. Unlike many left-wing pamphleteers, he had the ability to convey moral seriousness without lapsing into moralism. There is no hint in his writing of the sanctimonious bullying of the better-off that pervaded so much of the radical style to come later in the decade. His tone suggested that the reader was a reasonable person, just like the author, and reasonable people, once apprised of the plight of the Other America, would agree on the need to find solutions. The enemies he identified in the book tended to be distanced abstractions like “social blindness” or “the vocabulary of not caring” rather than identifiable individuals or political groups.

Harrington often illustrated points with his favorite literary device, the use of paradox. The “welfare state benefits those least who need help most,” he wrote, because social security pensions and unemployment benefits were more likely to be available and more generous to those with good and steady employment. Poverty was “expensive to maintain,” because poor communities required extensive public spending on fire, police, and health services.

Paradox was combined in *The Other America* with revelation, the bringing of hidden evils to light. “Beauty can be a mask for ugliness,” he wrote of Appalachia, because the wealthy tourist passing through West Virginia’s mountain ranges might miss the desperate quality of life of the rural poor in that state. “America has the best-dressed poverty in the world,” thanks to inexpensive chain store clothing, allowing the poorly housed, fed, educated, and doctored to blend in with more affluent fellow citizens when they mingled in public spaces.

To peer beneath the deceptive surfaces of affluent America, Harrington suggested, it was

necessary to enrich individual observation with social measurement. He made extensive use of statistics in *The Other America*, but he found ways to present them that prevented the non-public policy specialist's eyes from glazing over. "Sometimes in the course of an official Government report," he wrote, "a human being will suddenly emerge from the shadow of statistics and analyses." Or, in another passage, "Sometimes the statistics of poverty can be read like a detective story." The technique made author and reader allies in the struggle to come to grips with a vast—but understandable and thus solvable—social ill.

Harrington did not imagine the poor as finer, more authentic, or more generous human beings than their better-off brethren, as Beat novelist Jack Kerouac had recently done in *On the Road* or as John Steinbeck had done a generation earlier in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The lives of the poor as portrayed in *The Other America* were generally nasty, brutish, and short, precisely because they lacked such amenities of middle-class life as decent housing, education, nutrition, and medical care.

Harrington did not hesitate to present the seedier side of the Other America, including domestic violence, sexual promiscuity, and substance abuse. In his view this was all a part and product of the culture of poverty, a judgment not on the poor as individuals, but on a society until now indifferent to their plight.

The Other America was a book about poor people, but it was not a book written for poor people. The readers Harrington was speaking to were themselves citizens of the affluent society, whose consciences he sought to stir. And among those readers, reputedly, was President John F. Kennedy, although whether he actually read the book, or just the lengthy and favorable review by Dwight Macdonald that appeared in the pages of the *New Yorker* in February 1963, remains in dispute. Either way, according to James Sundquist, a political scientist who was involved in early discussions of anti-poverty legislation, *The Other America* brought to an end "piecemeal" thinking about social problems in the Kennedy administration. As Sundquist noted in a 1969 essay on the origins of the war on

poverty, the Kennedy administration had been considering proposals

dealing separately with such problems as slum housing, juvenile delinquency, unemployment, dependency, and illiteracy, but they were separately inadequate because they were striking only at some of the surface aspects of a bedrock problem, and that bedrock problem had to be identified and defined so that it could be attacked in a concerted, unified, and innovative way. Perhaps it was Harrington's book that identified the target for Kennedy and supplied the coordinating concept: the bedrock problem, in a word, was "poverty." Words and concepts define programs; once the target was reduced to a single word, the timing became right for a unified program.

Following Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, his successor, Lyndon Baines Johnson, took up the issue, and in his State of the Union address in January 1964 pledged his administration to waging an "unconditional war on poverty." Sargent Shriver, Kennedy in-law and director of the Peace Corps, headed up the task force charged by the new president with drawing up anti-poverty legislation, and he invited the author of *The Other America* to Washington as a consultant in February 1964.

Harrington's success, symbolized by that invitation to lend his expertise to the federal anti-poverty effort, would have ironic consequences. *The Other America* popularized the phrase "culture of poverty," which went on to shape the main thrust of Johnson's war on poverty. But a close reading of Harrington's book reveals an ambiguity in his employment of that term. Throughout the book he used "culture of poverty" interchangeably with another term, "vicious circle," a staple of reformist literature since the Progressive Era. "Here is one of the most familiar forms of the vicious circle of poverty," Harrington wrote in a typical passage:

The poor get sick more than anyone else in the society. That is because they live in slums, jammed together under unhygienic conditions; they have inadequate diets, and cannot get decent medical care. When they

become sick, they are sick longer than any other group in society. Because they are sick more often and longer than anyone else, they lose wages and work, and find it difficult to hold a steady job. And because of this, they cannot pay for good housing, for a nutritious diet, for doctors. At any given point in this circle, particularly when there is a major illness, their prospect is to move to an even lower level and to begin the cycle, round and round, toward even more suffering.

Harrington sought to convince his readers that poverty was a condition not easy to shed. Everything in the lives of the Other Americans conspired to keep them in poverty. Outside intervention by the federal government was necessary to improve their condition. But nothing in the “vicious circle” he sketched above was culturally determined in the sense that Oscar Lewis had meant when he talked of the culture of poverty as a normative system at odds with the values of the larger society, an ingrained and unchanging way of life passed down from generation to generation. No part of the circle Harrington described was related to a low level of aspiration, a tendency to indulge in immediate gratification, a propensity for violence, or sexual promiscuity. Poor nutrition, poor medical care, poor housing, and the resultant frequent and lengthy illnesses were a result of lack of income, not of cultural traits or behaviors. Everything that Harrington described in this particular example of the vicious circle could be improved through the simple expedient of additional household income.

Harrington’s prescription for combating poverty was a broad federal jobs program, putting the unemployed to work, in essence a return to the New Deal’s strategy for coping with the Great Depression. But the war that the federal government fought against poverty in the 1960s did not use that strategy.

Harrington had indeed succeeded in focusing Washington’s attention on the “invisible land” of the poor. But, as Sundquist noted, “words and concepts define programs.” And the concept that caught the attention of policymakers, thanks to *The Other America*, was “the culture of poverty.” And if the problem was one of culture rather than simply lack of income, policymakers reasoned that federally financed jobs were not the appropriate solution.

The policies eventually adopted by Shriver for the war on poverty were intended to help the poor to improve themselves, so that they could take advantage of an expanding economy—a “hand-up, not a handout” as he put it at the time. That meant an emphasis on measures such as pre-school enrichment and job training programs, along with the establishment of community action agencies in poverty-stricken neighborhoods. Compared to job programs, these were relatively inexpensive initiatives, which was part of their political appeal. Johnson had made it clear to Shriver that appropriations for his “unconditional war” had to be fought on the cheap. Thirty years earlier, at the height of the New Deal, Congress had appropriated five billion dollars for public works programs; in the first year of the war on poverty, the appropriations for Shriver’s programs were held to under a billion dollars (which, given the rate of inflation in the meantime was more like a tenth than a fifth of the original sum).

Underfinanced and not always well targeted, the war on poverty was still not the utter failure of later conservative legend. Community action agencies proved a controversial and short-lived experiment, soon abandoned. But other programs, like the pre-school program Head Start, were more successful. The poverty rate declined sharply during the course of the decade, from 22.4 percent in 1960 to 12.1 percent in 1969. The decline in poverty among the elderly was particularly

FOLLOW US ON TWITTER!
www.twitter.com/dissentmagazine

striking, thanks to the creation of Medicare and increased Social Security benefits (not strictly speaking part of the war on poverty, but sharing the same sponsors and goals); over the years since, older Americans have remained underrepresented in the ranks of the poor as a result of those federal programs, with only 9 percent falling below the poverty line in 2010.

So if Johnson's social welfare programs established a record of, at least, modest successes, why have they fared so poorly in popular memory of the 1960s? "We fought a war against poverty," President Ronald Reagan once famously quipped, "and poverty won." If so, it's hard to understand why the poverty level has never returned to the levels of the late 1950s, neither in the economically troubled 1970s nor during the Great Recession that began in 2008. In politics, however, perception not infrequently trumps reality. Americans like their wars, actual and metaphorical, to deliver swift and unconditional victories, and that kind of victory was beyond the capacity of the war on poverty.

Harrington had been drawn initially to the concept of the culture of poverty because he thought it would serve as a prod to federal action on many fronts: providing the poor with better housing, better medical care, better education, as well as job creation. What he did not anticipate was that the theory could cut in other ways, antithetical to his own values and policy preferences. In the 1970s, the "neoconservatives" (a term coined by Harrington in 1973 to describe former liberals who had grown disaffected with government social welfare programs), would use the notion of the culture of poverty to argue for abandoning the federal war on poverty. Harrington had argued that structural barriers to social mobility helped create and perpetuate a set of symptoms—low aspirations, petty criminality, and the like—that distinguished those living in the culture of poverty from the mainstream.

Neoconservatives, in contrast, described such attitudes and behavior as the operative causes of poverty. And federal social welfare programs, they argued (sometimes in the

pages of *Commentary*, which had by this time moved decisively into the neoconservative camp) were actually counter-productive, encouraging the spread of single-parent families and of a culture of dependency.

That argument, much more than Harrington's views, would determine the fate of social welfare policy in the United States in the decades that followed. For Ronald Reagan, it was axiomatic that "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." Reagan was a conservative Republican who had consistently opposed social welfare spending since emerging as a political contender in the mid-1960s. There were those, including Harrington, who hotly contested such views during Reagan's administration; his book *The New American Poverty*, published in 1984, challenged those who blamed the poor for their own condition and argued for a resumption of bold anti-poverty initiatives. But when Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton ran for office in 1992 pledging to "end welfare as we know it" and later proclaimed that "the era of big government is over," it was clear who had won the political argument on the merits and liabilities of social welfare spending. The poor never returned to the invisibility that had been their fate in the 1950s, before the publication of *The Other America*; but concern over their condition never returned to the list of national priorities, not even in years of Democratic political ascendancy.

How relevant does *The Other America* remain today, as the poverty level creeps back up from its low point in the late 1960s and early 1970s? As social theory, the book shows both the signs of age and the imperfections of its central concept. Harrington's culture-of-poverty thesis was at best ambiguous, at worst an impediment to making the case for what he regarded as the real solution to poverty, federal spending on jobs programs. (In later books, he made no use of the term.)

But what remains vital in *The Other America* these many years later is its moral clarity. In the final chapter of the book, Harrington asked his reader to make use of their "vision"—and to do so in two senses. First, he

asked them to “see through the wall of affluence” and recognize the true dimensions of poverty in the United States and its cost in human dignity. Second, he declared that they need to deploy their vision “in the sense of purpose and aspiration.” Harrington summoned his readers to “war on poverty” not just for the sake of the poor but for their own sakes. Americans, he felt, should be unwilling to live in a society that, having the resources to provide everyone a decent standard of living, was instead divided into two nations. “The fate of the poor,” he concluded, “hangs upon the decision of the better-off. If this anger and shame are not forthcoming, someone can write a book about the other America a generation from now and it will be the same or worse.”

The Other America can be read as a jeremiad, a lamentation about social wickedness, an attempt to inspire “anger and shame” in its readers. But it is, in the end, an optimistic book, less an indictment and more a reminder to Americans to live up to their better instincts, and in doing so redeem the promise of equality enshrined in the national creed. In May 1989, Harrington gave his final public address, to a group of labor journalists in New York City. Dinah Leventhal, a young socialist activist then working for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers’ Union, was in the audience. After the talk, she and Harrington spoke for a few minutes. Knowing

his days were numbered from the cancer that would kill him less than three months later, he was in a reflective mood. He reminisced about his own days as a young socialist activist, hitchhiking around the country in the late 1950s and gathering material that he would use in *The Other America*. As Leventhal recalled the conversation:

He said that he had felt an incredible degree of freedom and learned so much in those years. He said I should make the most of it, being an organizer and traveling around, getting to see the country and getting to know what the country was all about. He really loved this country and thought that you had to love the country to be a radical, to be a socialist, and to want to change it.

Among all the ways it can be read, *The Other America* is Michael Harrington’s love letter to the United States, a country he believed in enough to want to see it change for the better.

Maurice Isserman is the Publius Virgilius Rogers Professor of History at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, and the author of *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington* (2000). This article is adapted from the introduction to *The Other America* by Michael Harrington. Copyright © 2012 by Maurice Isserman. Excerpted with permission by Scribner, a Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

