
Progress and Poverty: 1965 Version

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PROGRESS AND POVERTY—1965 VERSION

CARL FEISS*

Historical Note: This brief article is being written three days after President Johnson submitted to the Congress his message, "The Problems and Future of the Central City and Its Suburbs," March 2, 1965. At this moment the Administration's bill for the Housing Act of 1965 is being submitted, and HHFA Administrator Robert Weaver is holding his press conference on it. This is then the cut-off point in time for this paper. What happens to the substance of both the message and the bill prior to publication of this issue of *Law and Contemporary Problems* lies in the lap of the gods of Capitol Hill. It is hoped that the reader will have brought himself up to date and that what is said here may help him to evaluate the turn of events, whatever it may be.

A review by the reader of the President's several special messages to the Congress this year, including the ones on housing, the future of central cities, natural beauty, poverty, and Appalachia, is essential for an understanding of the comments that follow.

PATERNALISM AND REFORM

We do not apologize to the shade of Henry George for reusing his classic title. We might have modified it to read: Progress of Poverty, Progress against Poverty, Poverty of Progress, Progress with Poverty, Poverty despite Progress, No Progress against Poverty, Progress Conquers Poverty, Poverty Halts Progress, and lots of other ways. Undoubtedly we will use all of them in future articles, so we stake out our claim at once.

All of our housing and renewal programs stem from a sixty-five year old war on poverty beginning with the great work of Robert de Forest and Laurence Veiller, *Slums and Housing*, published in 1900. This and the impassioned pleas of Jacob Riis before World War I, the devoted lives of Jane Addams, Lilian D. Wald, Marie Simkovitch, the multitude of settlement house workers, child labor reformers, labor leaders seeking minimum wage laws and equitable working conditions, George Ford and Lawson Purdy fighting for minimum housing standards; these and countless more are among the precursors of the present attack on poverty. The history of these people and the movements they led are unsung in the school history books. Their battles for the poor, the unattended helpless ones, in a society of the great rich and the very poor, deserve the pen of a Barbara Tuchman. Her *Guns of August* deals with the very time in history when at the death of Edward VII and the beginning of World War I, the guns of social reform were turned for the first time on poverty. Civic muck, rather than Flanders mud, bogged down the battles for many more years, and the fighting has fluctuated back and forth throughout our country with varying success, sometimes resulting in great triumphs, other times producing only sad delays. The battle is still being fought, so far the longest and least successful war of our history.

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Some of us will remember with pain and pity the jeers and hoots at Eleanor Roosevelt when she single-handedly tried to help the starving West Virginia coal miners in her abortive Arthurdale and Red House experiments. They will remember with shame the crucifixion of Rexford Tugwell and the Resettlement Administration.

Appalachia, monolithic in its tragedy, is nothing new in the American scene. As late as the fall of 1954, the writer approached two different important national organizations, one a research institution and the other a private foundation, with a proposal for a study and action program for what he called the "Binghamton to Birmingham Axis," the eight-hundred-mile-long Appalachian region of economic distress and natural resources exploitation. Indifference was also monolithic, and the proposal was dropped for lack of support. The recent record shows a considerable change of heart on the part of both organizations and, happily, many others.

The philosophical crux to the whole problem of the poor in our society is the degree to which private and public leadership involves itself with benevolent paternalism. Private and public charity and charitable institutions have existed in our society since its beginnings. Churches of all denominations have a long history of care and housing for the aged. Medical and mental institutions have cared for the indigent poor with varying degrees of involvement and success. But the shadows of the county poor farm and the grim old folks home still exist.

Public relief and welfare programs during the Great Depression were so absolutely essential as emergency measures that their continued gigantic administrative structure, now operating at all levels of government, has become natural to our society. Public welfare programs, like public schools and all other public services, were developed through the years in the course of many reform movements. They are now fixed functions at all governmental levels and have been accepted as a concomitant to private benevolence. Questions now relate to type, method, degree, quantity, funding. The basic answer was made many years ago. Our democracy accepts its responsibilities to its less privileged.

With President Hoover's 1931 White House Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership came the first real question of government involvement in slums and housing. Valiant private housing efforts, particularly in New York City, had not succeeded in meeting the horrible housing conditions of the poor in either urban or rural areas. From the outset private enterprise, with no alternative method of its own in mind, personified by some business, real estate and home building interests, fought the idea of subsidized public housing for low-income families. Historically, private enterprise was responsible for building and maintaining all of America's slums. It still is. As a satisfactory custodian of the poor, it has been a failure. The least it could do in light of its willingness to accept government-sponsored mortgage insurance would be to become open-minded on housing the poor. In some part public enterprise, again historically, also as an entrepreneur in the rituals of *laissez-*

faire, connived in this tragedy for generations of Americans. The twenty-first century will look back with sadness at this period of our unenlightenment.

This article cannot and should not be a history of the American urban and rural housing and renewal efforts. That history is still to be written. But looking where we were thirty-six years ago and where we are now is cause for very moderate rejoicing. Public housing has as many enemies as friends. Few of the enemies live in the projects. Unlike welfare and relief, it is not considered universally as an essential. In fact, it does not yet solve the problems of the indigent in urban and rural areas, but for this and many design, financing, and management deficiencies we must be indulgent. The full role of benevolent paternalism here has not been clarified, and the system is still immature.

Urban renewal, a late comer, now eleven years old, an enlargement of the slum clearance program of 1949, is also suffering mixed attacks and praise. Within the philosophy of urban reform and benevolent paternalism the Congress set the superb goals contained in the Declaration of National Housing Policy of the preamble to the Housing Act of 1949. We are still some way from those goals. Naïvely or otherwise, the draftsmen of this charter assumed that all reasoning men were also reasonable, that research and planning could overcome indifference and opposition, and that good organization to combat the ills of bad environment for the poor could be quickly assembled and effectively run. This is still to come but is certainly a worthwhile set of objectives. In some places and some occasions we find excellent proof of ultimate feasibility.

In the continued extension of public responsibilities into the classical tradition of benevolent paternalism, we find that a movement of great magnitude is gradually evolving. The social revolution which began in America long before the American Revolution boils down to the basic philosophy that society should provide equal opportunity for a good life to all capable of achieving such a life by their own ability. Where such ability is lacking, for whatever reason, then society assumes the responsibilities necessary to provide the essential denominators that adequately maintain the less fortunate. The words "capable," "necessary," "essential," and "adequate" are fighting words, as are their definitions and the standards to go with them.

All of the Presidents from Hoover through Kennedy saw the reform movements related to poverty as spot programs, largely independent one from another. Although Eisenhower joined together Health, Education and Welfare, Housing remained apart, as have Labor, Commerce, and Interior. As the problems of housing the poor moved rationally to problems of their environment, slums and blighted areas with community planning and development, transportation and open space, and metropolitan and regional development coming into the forefront one by one, the expanding role of a benevolent government became evident and logical. Appalachia as a gigantic region has festered since the days of Daniel Boone. That is long enough. Negroes wandering helplessly in search of peace and welcome find one

slum like another. All of the old ethnic groups, the Irish, Jews, Italians, Poles, and the rest, are being absorbed bit by bit into the Anglo-American pattern, if not into socially acceptable Protestantism. But many remain in the slums and blight which is their inheritance. And the expanding role of a benevolent government, beginning with Herbert Hoover and remaining unchanged in the succeeding thirty-five years, has been to cross the borders into cities and to correct a whole series of national disgraces, ineptitudes, and wasteful practices with people and land. The social revolution by evolution did not and obviously would not or could not move rapidly enough to protect the coming generations from constant repetition of the worst patterns of the past. The pursuit of happiness, fouled up in the slums of all of our big and little cities, is vain and hopeless. We reap now in riot and mayhem the inevitable result.

THE START OF THE WAR ON POVERTY

As we have indicated, the War on Poverty, or at least the war on the problems of the poor—a very different thing—began a long time ago. Reform aimed at and still largely aims at proving a least common denominator of survival, physical comfort, health, education, and work. President Johnson has widely broadened the base. He looks squarely at poverty itself and sees it as the hard-core of the larger problem. All else treats the results.

Critics of the President's current housing and city development program, as for instance the *New York Times* editorial of March 3, called it "A Small Beginning." It cogently and eloquently claims that the budget requests do not correspond with the vision. By the time this article is printed, the pros and antis will be meeting on this subject. We tend to agree with the *Times*, but at the same time we are looking at all the other proposals in the new war on poverty and resource waste, their scope and their budgets. Actually, as of the moment, it is difficult to combine them in a total context. Federal mechanisms are primitive. There is no Pentagon for this defense other than the President himself. The traditional design of the President's Cabinet, even with an added Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, does not combine effectively the already assigned responsibilities of other Secretaries. Area Redevelopment remains presumably in Commerce. Certain transportation modes are divided between Housing and Commerce. Open Space and Recreation are split between Housing and Interior. Appearance of cities is both an interest of urban renewal in Housing and Urban Development and also is assigned to Interior. The new Office of Economic Opportunity cuts across many boundaries in the anti-poverty programs and presumably the Appalachian program.

The writer has vainly endeavored, before writing this article, to find the locus of studies of government organization or reorganization to meet the requirements of these major programs. Some years ago, for a transportation study for the Department of Commerce, he prepared a report recommending federal centers for urban

regions as incentives for metropolitan area cooperation and coordination similar to President Johnson's proposal in his "Central City and Its Suburbs" message of this last March 2. The writer's recommendations also were that the regional representative should report to the new Secretary of the new Housing and Urban Development Department. Indeed, he testified in behalf of the idea before the Government Operations Committee of the House of Representatives in 1957—a long eight years ago. In these intervening years he has suggested several times that studies be instituted to clarify the complex roles and complex responsibilities of the several agencies involved in urban programs. It is now clear that with the multiplex of the War on Poverty and all its essential collateral and supporting functions, including Public Housing, rent supplements for FHA and FNMA assisted housing and Urban Renewal, with the ARA, Appalachia, and other special programs, the compass of this coordinating and reporting system as originally conceived will be inadequate.

Some of us had approached President Kennedy for a White House Conference on Community Development. The Cuban crisis was, of course, a major diversion, and the subject was still being pursued at the time of the President's assassination. Such a conference would still appear to be an imperative if the Great Society is to be put into working clothes.

URBAN PROGRAMS AND PROGRESS AGAINST POVERTY

Progress against poverty has not yet been sufficient to alter the base of operations for public housing and urban renewal. While clearly the great agglomerations of institutional housing are imperatives of the moment, they are far from the ideal, and ultimately the program must change as our standards and objectives improve. Objections to such solutions do not mean that the public housing programs should be killed any more than objections to selected urban renewal actions and misfires warrant dismissal of that vital activity. The long-standing objections from the conservative right-wing of our society have not been accompanied by substitute positive alternatives. On the other hand, President Johnson's proposal for rent supplements is a positive recommendation for bridging the gap between private initiative (well insured), and public necessity. Further, it could go far in the area of open-occupancy housing and reduce, or even in time eliminate, the economic as well as the social ghetto.

But most important, when the War on Poverty is won, as it must be, then the Great Society starts one rung up on the economic ladder, regardless of the nature and amount of income subsidy that supplements may involve. This could eliminate the public housing program as we know it, substituting massive housing cooperatives as in the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. But clearance of slums is a first order of business, and the proper rehousing of displaced families a first concomitant of clearance in the reorganization of urban areas. Plans and planning for these actions must become a stronger part of local government as well

as of the state and national governments. All of these programs within Urban Renewal are still too slow and too cumbersome. They cannot keep up with the population explosion as they are presently designed. Here is where a new Hoover Commission or a new Kestenbaum report is badly needed. Perhaps a new permanent White House office on operations is needed to supplement the Bureau of the Budget.

The President's recommendations for an Institute of Urban Development in the new Department, not unlike certain recommendations made by a Presidential Advisory Committee on Housing in 1953, is an imperative, although it would be wise to attach his Temporary National Commission on Codes, Zoning, Taxation, and Development Standards directly to the Institute. The Institute would be working in these fields on a continuing basis. It could not do otherwise.

The recommended Institute is at a level that will vitally interest the academic world and all interested professions. It should be strongly supported.

THE DESIGN OF THE URBAN WORLD

What all of the new programs lead to is a redesign of our urban world. The appearance of the nation and its urban places is at last a matter of national interest and concern. The Secretary of the Interior, Stewart Udall, has played an outstanding role in calling this to our attention. Similar leadership is now belatedly coming from the housing and renewal sector where attention to the quality of the end results of these substantial programs is frequently below par. The American Institute of Architects in its Urban Design Program and War on Ugliness is contributing important inputs to our awareness of the problems and methods for the solution. We have seen enough of good design in other parts of the world to know that inexpensive things also can be beautiful. We know, too, that beauty is a symptom of good mental health. While it cannot cure the many ills of poverty, ignorance and prejudice, it can provide us with a pride and satisfaction of a permanent value to our civilization.

CONCLUSION

There is much work to be done. Our democracy will succeed in this warring world as a democracy only when it sets the example that our way of life should and can succeed. With our vast wealth, education, and capacity, no program is too hard to handle, no task is insoluble, no challenge unanswerable. The natural beauties we inherited, the society we have founded, the future we envisage are all part of a grand plan which is just now unfolding. If we did nothing else in our short lives but dedicate ourselves to the accomplishment of this new categorical imperative, we would be living the fullest life possible. Nothing would be more worthwhile.