

# Confronting Poverty and the Poor

a review of five books

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)

a review of

*Food Not Bombs: How to Feed the Hungry and Build Community*, C.T. Lawrence Butler and Keith McHenry, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, 1992, 120 pp., \$8.95.

*Street Lives: An Oral History of Homeless Americans*, Steven Vanderstaay, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, 1992, 244 pp., \$14.95.

*Hunger 1993: Uprooted People*, Bread for the World Institute & Development, Washington DC, 204 pp., \$12.95.

*The Art & Science of Dumpster Diving*, John Hoffman, Loompanics Unlimited, Port Townsend WA, 152 pp. \$12.95.

*How to Steal Food from the Supermarket*, J. Andrew Anderson, Loompanics Unlimited, Port Townsend WA, 67 \$10.95.

The mere listing of the above titles almost constitutes an essay in itself regarding the existence of extreme poverty in the midst of a nation which officially bills itself as the "richest country in the world." However, since the inception of the political state 8,000 years ago, all critical observers have known that its cardinal function is the governance of unequal distribution of wealth in a given society.

The state has always been a mammoth racket constructed of armed men and cultural mystifications. The latter's purpose is to make those on the lower rungs believe the wealth/poverty duality is a natural occurrence in human affairs. Doesn't the torturous religious document of an armored people state, "The poor will always be with us?"

Nothing in the first three volumes reviewed here will surprise most *Fifth Estate* readers, but nevertheless, the statistics of misery compiled in the Hunger 1993 volume are staggering. These figures come alive in the *Street Lives* book and one is heartened by the efforts of the Food Not Bombs feeding program.

Although a well-fed person has hardly room to challenge the motivation of food providers for the poor and hungry, it is quite evident that most church, soup kitchen, hunger, and social welfare organizations participate in the institutionalization of the destitute by their programs of maintenance which never challenge the reasons for such abject misery amidst plenty.

In this regard, the Food Not Bombs group is commendable for combining an anarchistic structure with political activism in its feeding programs. Distribution of literature explaining the reasons for poverty accompany every meal set out for the hungry (though pamphlets should not be placed close to the soup kettle, their how-to-section warns).

The book is a manual for operating a Food Not Bombs feeding program and its perspective of connecting this to radical social criticism is not without difficulties. Once you move from an operating base of charity to one of activism, the authorities no longer look kindly on your "humanitarian" efforts. For example, the San Francisco Food Not Bombs group has been arrested repeatedly and often attacked by the police.

*Street People's* eloquent self-accounts give a human face to the homeless, and their stories make one aware of the incredible diversity among those who have literally wound up out in the cold. Here, in the relatively low cost-of-living Detroit area, four of five renters spend at least half their income on housing, making it easier each day to slip from society's margins and over the edge.

In the urban area surrounding the Fifth Estate office, there is a surfeit of homeless panhandlers who, having been kicked off the welfare rolls in 1991, find begging to be their last resort. More and more of the destitute prowl the streets in search of deposit bottles and the odd quarter obtained from passing strangers.

While *Street People* articulates the humanity of the poor, reality often presents more paradoxes and ambivalences when one is actually confronted with them. Most people find it somewhere between uncomfortable and frightening to be approached by beggars. The local food co-op, for instance, is hiring a security guard to shoo away the homeless from its entrance in the belief their presence deters shoppers.

Recently, as the Fall weather began to announce the harsh Winter to follow, I was leaving an area restaurant where I had consumed an inexpensive lunch of Middle-Eastern food. Upon entering the street, I was approached by beggars twice, but gave nothing and was walking away absorbed in thought. I heard a woman's voice ask for a quarter, but shook my head no without even looking up. I was startled to hear her growl, "You cold son-of-a-bitch!", as she turned away, child in arms. She was black and poor; in her estimation, I am white, rich and uncharitable.

I began to think about how a compassionate person deals with the differentials in income between us and the underclass. It often seems humiliating to either give or to refuse the poor. Practically, you can't give to everyone, so who receives your beneficence? Rough men who you suspect of drug or alcohol abuse are low on the giving list, women with children, the highest, but an individual can't accommodate everyone.

So, how do you choose who to give to? Is there a standard that can be suggested? Perhaps a certain number of gifts per day or week, a set tithing to the poor or just situational decisions? However, even if one or all of these is involved, won't you still be a "cold son-of-a-bitch" to the person you refuse? Reader comment is welcome.

The remaining two books will probably be more of interest to those who choose a downward lifestyle than who have it forced upon them. Hoffman's book is an amazing compendium of how-to, but also illustrates the immense amount of waste present in what Americans consider discardable. So much so that the author is able to "alley-pick" a livable life-style.

He describes the mountains of packing that clog our trash receptacles, testimony to the power of advertising and public anxiety which demands a hyper-sterility surpassing any actual sanitary or health need. Also, the amount of food discarded in the U.S. (as in all countries of the world including Somalia and Ethiopia) would meet the needs of everyone if it was distributed fairly.

Hoffman's anecdotally-written text is presented humorously as he guides us through the alleys and trash bins in search of dumpster treasures. And, his techniques (lean into the bin; don't put your whole body inside) reap a surprising amount of re-usable items, some shown in an array of "trophy" photos.

The book features illustrations by Ace Backwards, the cartoonist who is often featured in both left and right-wing publications. Hoffman's politics are right-wing libertarian which provide several good anti-government raves, but they suffer from an ideology of rugged individualism and naive confidence in "the market" that these silly folks usually express.

The Anderson book is all nuts and bolts (did you know most supermarket security cameras are fake?) so the publisher must assume the high price for such a small book will be made up by the savings realized by employing the techniques described. Shoplifting always seems real keen to me until the protective arm of the commodity appears.

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Fifth Estate #341, Spring 1993

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