

Still Hungry in America

Sandy Feldheim

1969

a review of

Still Hungry in America, text by Robert Coles, photographs by Al Clayton, introduction by Edward Kennedy. \$2.95, 115 pages. World Publishing Co.

Still Hungry in America may be considered a sequel to Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, published in 1962. Harrington's book described the America most middle and upper-middle class whites never see.

He described the misery, hunger and despair rarely, if ever, mentioned in public school textbooks.

It is difficult to decide the exact value of *The Other America*. Michael Harrington is not a radical by any means, and he offered no radical analysis, cited no political leaders, business interests or our economic system as the creator and perpetuator of the other America. Rather, he assumed that Americans would be moved towards action once they were aware of the unnoticed poor.

And there was soon some action; if there wasn't any, America's self-image would crumple. What the action accomplished, and whether it was praiseworthy or negligible, depends on your political perspective.

President Kennedy cited *The Other America* as a major force behind his declaring war on poverty. The result of the scrimmage was that some people were fed, some got jobs, some children went to pre-school etc. Millions more were promised a decent, fulfilling life, and poverty became a conversation piece.

A later result was that millions, especially blacks, got angry after losing their new jobs, having programs cut, and discovering they were often lied to by the social workers whom the poverty program seemed to benefit the most.

Because nothing fundamental was changed, nothing could be done to eliminate poverty. Big business remains exploitative, oranges are still dumped into the Pacific to keep the prices up, wealthy farmers still receive subsidies for not growing food while their poor neighbors are out of luck if they don't have the money to buy food stamps.

Robert Coles is attempting to draw national attention back to poverty. For the last few months he has been citing names and high incomes of congressmen who thwart anti-poverty legislation. Coles has testified before Congress and was probably instrumental in getting food stamps free for people who can't afford them; and that's good in itself.

The revolution isn't going to be this month, and the less starving people, the better. Food stamps don't reconcile people to this system; they are part of the indignity the poor are faced with.

Coles' perspective as shown in *Still Hungry in America* is very similar to Harrington's. He believes Americans will act when they see pictures of the conditions and results of starvation; no medical attention, and an unstimulating environment.

Besides photographs by Al Clayton, he juxtaposes the peoples' (black and white) descriptions, a text combining his sympathetic commentary as a middle class outsider and doctor with sociological and medical jargon. The people are Southern rural and urban poor of all ages.

Like Harrington, Coles doesn't provide reasons for poverty in the most materially prosperous country. In articles in *The New Republic*, he points out, that greed is the cause.

It can only be the greed and inhumanity that is fostered by capitalism that allows businessmen, government officials and millions of Americans to allow poverty to exist.

Strip-mining is profitable—never mind that it destroys the land and contaminates the water. Black babies may die, but it is too expensive for many white controlled Southern hospitals to enlarge the “colored” section. And industry needs the poor who are forced to do the shit-work of America to stay alive.

When the need for ever-increasing profits is combined with racial and class myths, it is easy to ignore the poor.

“Blacks are inferior,” or “welfare is creeping socialism,” or “poor whites like living like that” are easy rationales for the principle that profits are more important than people.

Unfortunately, Coles’ book will have the same results as Harrington’s in achieving fundamental efforts to eradicate poverty. Perhaps more people will receive medical care and adequate diets; perhaps more will have jobs and clothing. But until poverty becomes unprofitable, it will always exist in a capitalist system such as ours.

Coles’ approach is reformist; he wants change within the system. And when people are starving and dying mentally and spiritually, I think immediate measures are necessary and more vital to the people who will benefit from them than are political philosophies that view any relief measures as co-optation.

This book is a humanitarian effort, and that’s more than most people are doing.

I’m not putting Coles down. *Still Hungry in America* was done in honesty and sincerity, without condescension. And Coles has joined with others in establishing the Committee to Aid Hungry Americans that will turn donations into food. (The address is 5 Forsyth St., Atlanta, Georgia 30303.)

The government doesn’t give enough for that, and the people are too oppressed to begin thinking of making revolutions.

fifth Estate

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Fifth Estate #79, May 15-28, 1969

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