

Good essay about the pervading problem of poverty in america

[Sociology](#), [Poverty](#)



America has a poverty problem, but it is a problem that it is reluctant to admit to. As the research that will be cited in this reflection shows, it is a growing problem. Part of the ideals that define America is the idea that anyone who works hard can be prosperous. Barbara Ehrenreich's experience working jobs with the working poor suggest that the hard work they must do to survive is so demoralizing, that it will become difficult to see jobs available to the working poor as anything other than poverty traps. Charles Murray in his article "The New American Divide" shows by example how the upper class that has never worked in working class jobs are out of touch with what are the symptoms and what are the causes of the growing gap between rich and poor in America. Murray brings to the conversation the fact that it is not just about differences in paychecks, benefits and living conditions. There are a growing culture and value gap between the rich and the poor. Ehrenreich's experience with the poor could lead one to conclude that this trend of the working poor away from institutions like marriage could be fueled by the same fires that are lighting the working poor's cigarettes. Ehrenreich sees the allure of smoking in the working class as having something to do with its "element of defiant self-nurturance that makes the habit so endearing to its victims - as if, in the American workplace, the only thing people have to call their own is the tumors they are nursing and the spare moments they devote to feeding them" (Ehrenreich, n. p.). Though the essay "Serving in Florida" does not paint a positive picture of working conditions, and Murray's solution to the problem he saw is a shallow optimism, this leaves the silver lining of hope to be found not in hope in a dramatic change to the political and social conditions of a large portion of Americans, but the hope that even in these

corralled lives there is beauty and things to live for.

Bambara's short story "The Lesson" is an example of understanding the living conditions into which some people, even today, are born into in the United States. The narrator explains, "And then she gets to the part about us all poor and live in the slums that I don't feature." The context of this conversation is a college-educated black woman, Miss Moore, has moved into a poor neighborhood and taken it upon herself to repay her own good luck by instructing children in the neighborhood with skills that will allow them to better navigate through the hidden rules of the middle and upper classes. The narrator is reluctant to receive these lessons. What most frightened the author of "Serving Florida" about her experience living and working a dead end, low wage job was not a struggle for survival. Her biggest woe was the struggle of her ego, her sense of self, her individuality in its bid of survival against a totalitarian and illogical authorities. The bosses of these jobs occupy a position in a neo-feudal system in which workers are easily replaceable, but any lost wages for workers are felt with pain. Most of Ehrenreich's live paycheck to paycheck. The only ones with enough stability to only work one full-time job are the ones that have spouses or partners able to contribute to share living expenses. Ehrenreich tells her story in a vivid first person voice. She writes like one might write from prison, where choices are limited, and things happen to a person, as opposed to a person happening to things.

On the surface, Charle's Murray is writing about the poor in America. But it seems his overall agenda is to defend the decaying values of America and then implies that this is part of the reason that people are poor. This is not

surprising, since The Wall Street Journal is frequently considered the media voice of right-wing politics. He begins with the bold, and frightening proclamation that “ America is coming apart.” From the statistics he includes as noteworthy, he believes that the reason for this is because of declining marriage rates in lower income brackets, increased rates of single parenthood, declining industriousness and increased secularism. The consequences of this, which Murray notes only affect lower income brackets are an increased crime rate and increased poverty. Murray believes he is kind to the poor, but in reality he is interpreting them from a very narrow lens. He is seeing the poor as a function as a decline in what he considers values instead of considering that the opposite interpretation is at least equally as plausible—that decreased economic conditions and advancement prospects has led to an abandonment of rigid values enforced by the elite. But neither of these polarized interpretations is complex enough to interpret a dynamic as in depth as poverty. Poverty is a function of many things. Poverty in America is also much different than poverty in other countries. In “ Serving in Florida” conditions are bad, but they are sustainable. The service force of waitresses, housekeepers and dishwashers have wages that keep them locked in their socioeconomic position. On top of that, their jobs are corrosive to their health yet do not offer health care. They live under a political system where their government does not offer them health care. This leaves them out of the system, which the United Nations considers a basic human, right. Early on in “ Serving in Florida” the author loses her journalistic lens and becomes lost in the daily battles rather than focusing on the larger picture and the context of this work in her life. She feels that if

there was some test in her situation, she has failed the test.

In “ The Lesson” writers can empathize with a formative, fictional narrator into an economic bracket that if we are to believe Murray’s data she is unlikely to break out of. In this story, Miss Moore plays the role of activist attempting to level the playing field by showing the children that they need not be stuck into the poverty traps which they were born into. As Ehrenreich learned, the greatest danger of the poverty trapped is getting caught in a nihilistic, self-defeating perspective. Miss Moore tells the narrator, “ But it don't necessarily have to be that way, she always adds then waits for somebody to say that poor people have to wake up and demand their share of the pie and don't none of us know what kind of pie she talking about in the first damn place.”

Miss Moore can be seen to represent the vocal mouth piece that demands the playing field between rich and poor be leveled so that at least the principles of equal opportunity can be upheld in a country that enshrines this valley. This is the reality that Americans are slow to realize. Part of the reason for the lethargy is likely because it is contrary to the values Americans have been taught to value as their own—that hard work will lead to prosperity. In “ Serving in Florida” the reality seems to be that all hard work will give a person is back pain, apathy, and a defensive instinct of self-preservation that prevents one from getting emotionally involved in the injustices being inflicted upon others. After all, what is the point of feeling sorry for others when you do not have the time to feel sorry for yourself?

Works Cited

Bambara, Toni. "The Lesson." Bambara's "". N. p., n. d. Web. 23 Oct. 2014. .

Ehrenreich, Barbara. "Serving In Florida ." Online. N. p., n. d. Web. 24 Oct. 2014. .

Murray, Charles. "The New American Divide." The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, n. d. Web. 24 Oct. 2014. .