



**Does America Hate the Poor? The Other American Dilemma: Lessons for the 21st Century
from the 1960s and the 1970s By John E. Tropman**

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Does America Hate the Poor? The Other American Dilemma: Lessons for the 21st Century from the 1960s and 1970s

John E. Tropman. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998.

Although, during the past thirty years, a major focus of social work, related human services, national social policy-planning, and state and federal large scale social programs, has been upon the plight of both the poor and the elderly, there seems to be a periodic need for a sharp reminder in the form of a re-discovery and reaffirmation of effort.

John Tropman's *Does America Hate the Poor?* is the third in a trilogy of wake-up calls in the spirit of Harrington's *The Other America* (Macmillan, 1962), which made the invisible poor starkly visible, and Ryan's *Blaming the Victim* (Vintage, 1971), critical of our defining policy failures as client failures.

Just when society and its helping professions are becoming comfortable with the humanitarian accomplishments, reality is once again brought into full daylight, and we are reminded that "the more things change, the more they remain the same."

The premise of Tropman's book is that the social ambivalence, or love/hate relationship, that the rich, the successful, and the achievers have toward the poor, the non-achievers, and the no longer productive, is not far different from the public attitudes at the time of the Elizabethan Poor Laws.

To his powerful, and at times blunt, restatement of the continuing crisis of the poor and powerless, "the status poor" and the elderly "life cycle poor," Tropman highlights an updated vocabulary which is certain to become incorporated fully into our professional language, re-energizing policy-planning, social work/human services practice, and social research. These renewed images include: poorfare, poorfare state, poorfare culture, poor hate, and anti-poorism.

Tropman's thesis is that America hates the poor and feels threatened by both the poor and the elderly. He identifies this hate in the withholding of the virtues of "approval, sympathy, empathy, and understanding." He sees the hate as derived from a sense

of fear and threat of "culturally dissonant states," causing nervousness about one's own place in the upwardly mobile social/economic ladder, along with the individual projections that the poor or elderly could be oneself.

Tropman identifies ten major "mechanisms" that underlie and sustain the phenomena of "poor hate" and "elder threat: 1) Value dualism (self-conflicting social ambivalence); 2) Subdominant values as threats (discomfort in the dominant culture); 3) Values of mobility and youth (pathways to success); 4) Hatred of dependency (stigma against the needy); 5) Blame the victim(individual fault); 6) The language of ambiguity (negative descriptors); 7) Disengagement and ghettoization (social distancing); 8) From center to periphery (increasing the invisibility); 9) The target of social policy attention (containment of the poor and the elderly); 10) Disesteem and stigma (definitional negativism). As an appropriate social commentary, Tropman reminds that "Perhaps the poor are always with us because we need them."

Tropman supports his thesis—that the poor and the elderly are the objects self-serving and continuous contempt and repression—by citing a range of national data and empirical studies, logically woven within a framework of current perspectives from sociology and psychology.

The book is destined to be a classic, not so much for its specific data (useful as they are for study and reference), but rather as another landmark that jolts us once again toward a new assessment and a renewed energy for immediate directions.

The book can be ordered directly from Praeger Publications, 1-800-225-5800.

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