

Michael Harrington (1928-1989)

Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962) is credited with the "discovery" of poverty in "affluent" America and as being the stimulus for the so-called "War on Poverty." But just as the war in Vietnam buried even a chance of fighting a war on poverty, it buried Lyndon Johnson, and it confounded Michael Harrington's hopes for a "left-wing of the possible." In the tradition of Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas, Michael Harrington was America's foremost socialist, consistently Marxist in his analysis of capitalist society and consistent in his belief that socialism could be achieved only democratically.

Edward Michael Harrington was raised in a middle class family in St. Louis. He went exclusively to Catholic schools and then to Holy Cross University. After a year at Yale law school and a year at the University of Chicago, he joined Dorothy Day's *Catholic Worker*, going "as far left as you could go within the Church." A 1952 essay, "Poverty—U.S.A." attracted little attention, but its conclusion suggested what his approach would be: "It goes without saying that the incomes structure must be changed." Putting his commitments to the Church behind him—in later years he identified himself as "an Ethnic Catholic," he joined, in 1953, the Young People's Socialist League. This began for Harrington a life-long struggle with sectarian radical politics, first with the Socialist Party, and then, over the politics of the Korean war, with the Young Socialists League, then with the Independent Socialist League and their anti-communist "drift to the right," and then with the Students For a Democratic Society (SDS) over what a sound anti-war policy should be. To put the matter as briefly as possible, Harrington found himself caught between an "Old Left" which had become neo-conservative and a revolutionary "New Left" which had little sympathy with his life-long commitment to the Democratic party with a strong labor movement at the center. (His 1972 *Socialism* is an excellent introduction to the issues as he saw them.)

In 1962, President Kennedy, who had read Dwight Macdonald's long review of *The Other America*, asked Walter Heller to look at the poverty problem. After President Kennedy was assassinated, Johnson proclaimed that his administration "today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America." Harrington and Paul Jacobs joined the President's Task Force. They ended their memos: "Of course, there is no real solution to the problem of poverty until we abolish the capitalist system." But a memo to Sargent Shriver which was not utopian put the matter squarely: "if there is any single dominant problem of poverty in the U.S., it is that of unemployment." Secretary of Labor Wirtz agreed, but when he raised this idea at a cabinet meeting, Johnson ignored him. How could he offer tax cuts, reduce government spending, fight a war *and* create jobs. Instead, the poor would get job training, which they could use in the hoped-for expanding economy.

Harrington has been wrongly remembered as being identified with the idea of a "culture of poverty." As his biographer writes, "throughout the book, 'culture of poverty' is used interchangeably with another term, 'vicious circle'." Harrington's point was that the structure of institutions, labor markets, slums, and schools made it quite impossible for the poor to get a good job and to find good housing where schools were good. Within a decade, neo-conservatives like Edward Banfield would explain that the typical "other American" does not care where he lives or whether the schools are good: "indeed, where such things exist he destroys them by acts of

vandalism if he can." Nathan Glazer added that liberal policies had created a culture of "welfare dependency." It was a straight line to Clinton's program "to end welfare as we know it."

Harrington could not have anticipated this, but he did argue, in 1964, that Johnson had chosen the correct terrain to fight for approval for the Economic Opportunity Act: "If, for example, Johnson had approached democratic America in terms of the trade union vocabulary—full employment, minimum wage, shorter work week—that would have set of all kinds of class antagonisms, real and imagined, on the part of business...But the American pattern of speech does not allow the same fury against the 'poor' who are traditionally seen as victimized, unorganized and not menacing." Sadly, it allows for considerable fury, especially when racism is part of the picture.

Harrington was correct that no socialist revolution was on the agenda in the US. And he was not alone in suffering from the deep difficulty of reconciling a radical vision with the means available in American electoral politics. But it was not just socialism and the war on poverty that took a beating in the 70s and 80s. So did liberalism and perhaps also democracy.

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