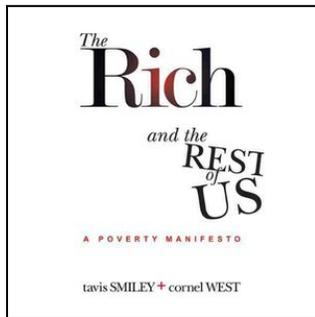


Professional Book Review

Smiley, T., & West, C. (2012). *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*. New York: Hay House. 232 pp., ISBN: 978-1401940638 (pbk). \$12

Reviewed by James Gambrell, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, U.S.A.



“No matter how successful those who were raised in poverty become, they are haunted by the fear of reliving it” (p. 7).

In 2011, authors Tavis Smiley and Cornel West traveled the United States, raising awareness of poverty and collecting personal stories of its impact. This poverty tour inspired the authors to write *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto* (2012) with the purpose of increasing awareness of—and putting a human face on—poverty. In the book, they argue that the persistent poor, near poor, and new poor have been rendered invisible by politicians and media pundits who ignore or marginalize their struggles in public discourse, making it taboo to even mention the words “poor” and “poverty.” Smiley and West define *Old Poor* as those who were poor before the Great Recession started in 2007, while the *New Poor* are those who have fallen into poverty since 2007. According to Smiley and West, in 21st century America, even the middle class are only “one grave illness, one serious accident, one termination, or one lost salary away from joining the low-income ranks” (p. 183). The theme of this book is that, while we have the capacity to eliminate generational poverty and hunger, we lack the political will.

In order to encourage readers to think about the pervasiveness of poverty and its causation, Smiley and West document the history of poverty in the United States. Although their book addresses policies that impact poverty in the United States, readers in other countries will identify with the overarching theme of how public policies, especially austerity measures, profoundly impact the lives and education of poorer citizens. The authors explain that, during the American industrial revolution of the 19th century, poverty was associated with personal flaws like immorality, alcoholism, criminal behavior, and dishonesty. The poor held the same status as prostitutes, thieves, and the criminally insane. Smiley and West report that 1900-1920 saw a shift in public opinion inspired by religious convictions and a sense of moral obligation. U.S. President Franklin and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt championed the cause of the poor during the Great Depression of the 1930s. In the Great Depression, working class people saw how quickly they could become poor, which helped the Roosevelts stimulate political support for eradicating poverty. Consequently, poverty throughout the United States fell dramatically from the 1940s to the 1960s. In the 1960s Johnson declared a “War on Poverty,” creating programs like food stamps, Head Start, Job Corps, Medicaid, and Medicare. The authors state that Johnson’s “Great Society” legislation used education, health care, and other federal programs in hopes of reducing poverty.

The following decades saw an increase in poverty, however. Smiley and West maintain that the increase in the 1970s was due to inflation. Because cost of living increases outpaced salary increases, it became necessary for most families to have two incomes to stay above the poverty line. In the 1980s, according to the authors, President Ronald Reagan's "trickle-down economics" caused further increases in poverty, raising it to Great Depression levels. The authors state that Reagan came into office with a mandate to reduce federal spending. However, federal spending increased due to a growing military budget, while programs that supported poor and working class Americans decreased. Reagan cut so-called "entitlement programs" by 60%. According to Smiley and West, Reagan also created backlash against the poor through anti-poor rhetoric, associating welfare with immorality, dishonesty, and criminality, calling for subsequent legislation that stereotyped and punished poor Americans. As Smiley and West assert, Reagan did not simply "wave the white flag of surrender in the War on Poverty; he actually initiated the 'War on Welfare'" (p. 63).

Smiley and West equally criticize every U.S. president since Reagan, both Democrat and Republican, for continuing and intensifying Reagan's war on the impoverished. Post-Reagan era policies have caused poverty to increase, while the income gap between "the rich and the rest of us" has grown at exponential rates. About half of Americans now live below or near the poverty line. Twenty-first century neighborhoods are becoming increasingly vacant as homes are foreclosed upon, while homelessness increases. According to the authors, the New Poor have had their identities radically transformed, as they find themselves in the welfare office, food kitchen, or thrift store along with people they used to denigrate, disregard, dismiss, and despise.

In *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*, the authors declare that education is one of the areas most impacted when incomes suffer, as education is typically funded by local property and state income taxes. In addition, Smiley and West argue that colleges are becoming a place of the elites because tuition and student loan interest rates are consistently rising: "Ironically, if students had access to interest-free loans like big banks do, many young people would flourish with less debt" (p.108). In a poignant vignette from the book, Dr. West asks Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education for President Obama, "What is it like to be the head of the United States Department of Education when you live in a nation where the value of a poor child's life is less than that of a rich child's life" (p.117)? West further argues that poverty is associated with problems that feed the achievement gap, like lead poisoning, low birth weight, frequent school changing, underfunded schools, and low parental involvement. Arne Duncan responds by claiming that the Obama administration created the *Race to the Top* education program to close the achievement gap between wealthy and poor students. West bluntly counters, "I know you are break dancing over this \$4 billion initiative, but Afghanistan gets \$4 billion every day. So, militarism trumps any case of poverty and poor children. That's the country's priorities and how warped our priorities are" (p.119)! West argues that the poorer a child is, the more likely that child is to be malnourished, misdiagnosed, and poorly educated. "How can America be 'first' if the least among us are our last concern" (p.55)?

The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto brilliantly addresses a significant problem, the faceless poor. Two of the authors' underlying assumptions deserve examination, analysis, and critique, however. First, throughout the book there is little distinction made between the different types of government programs that address poverty; the authors do not address whether some attempts to limit or end poverty are more or less successful than others. Second, Smiley and West powerfully put a face to American poverty, but the book is limited in providing realistic solutions. Although possible solutions are outlined in the last chapter, only some are pragmatic, while others are radical and implausible given current political and economic arenas. For example, practical solutions include more equitable tax codes, government jobs aimed at improving infrastructure, a White House summit on eradicating poverty in America, and strengthened extant programs like Head Start. Less realistic, though exciting, alternatives to the status quo include a universal food delivery system, a complete overhaul of the mass incarceration system, universal healthcare, and a recession restitution act wherein banks repay damages imposed on mainstream Americans. The authors address the concern of implausibility by stating, "Many of the ideas may seem far too radical for our socio-political environment. We offer them as an appetizer for all who hunger for radical, systemic change" (pp. 181-182). Although Smiley and West may not see the realization of the more comprehensive changes outlined in their solutions chapter, they did transform my philosophies of social reform, my willingness to discuss, and my desire to act to eradicate the issue of poverty throughout the world. Although this is clearly a book about poverty in the United States, readers in other countries will identify with the overarching global theme of how public social policy deeply impacts the daily lived experiences of "the rest of us."