

**BOOK REVIEW**

**The New Poverty**, by Stephen Armstrong. London, New York: Verso, 2017. \$35.99 CAN, Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-78663-463-4. Pages: xiii-232.

Reviewed by Carol-Anne Hudson<sup>1</sup>

After nearly forty years of social progress, the issue of poverty has re-emerged in the United Kingdom (UK), as elsewhere across the Global North. During the post-war era, the British government responded to poverty, inequality and social exclusion with comprehensive and universal social plans. Stephen Armstrong argues that these structures of support, based on the principle of citizen-entitlements, have been abandoned over the past three decades due to the lack of political will. While he acknowledges that weak political effort is also a consequence of economic and policy changes, Armstrong argues that social abandonment or disentanglement primarily reflects the change in broader social attitudes, which have been wilfully manipulated by the media.

As Armstrong demonstrates, the media has played a central role in shattering post-war unity about the evils of poverty into a divisive narrative that is increasingly de-humanizing. According to Armstrong, the media has accomplished this through artificially narrowing the policy debate. Specifically, the public has been deceived into believing that there are only two kinds of people: those who are work shy and those who are hard working. Armstrong's argument implies that this flattening of the social sphere into "worthy" and "unworthy" has influenced both the broad outlines and specific elements of the British welfare state in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This book seeks to set the record straight on the re-emergence of poverty in the UK and to alert readers to how the media reports and interprets social policy and facilitates a conservative ideological orientation. In the *New Poverty*, Stephen Armstrong resurrects the 19<sup>th</sup> century practice of social mapping to meticulously demolish the myth that individuals are responsible for their low-income or marginalization, and thus are undeserving of public social supports. He draws out the complexity of poverty in the new millennium by telling the stories of diverse populations who have been shut-out of opportunity and trapped in poverty, through no fault of their own.

Armstrong is a journalist. The book emerged from a set of articles he wrote for Unreported Britain, a project run by the Orwell Foundation and the Joseph Roundtree Foundation. Armstrong begins by reminding (British) readers of the origins of their welfare state – the Beveridge Report - which, on the one hand, was a culmination of decades of social mapping by individuals such as Seebohm Roundtree and Fabian socialists Sydney and Beatrice Webb that established the systemic nature and extent of poverty and, on the other hand, recognized that a strong welfare state enables a strong economy.

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<sup>1</sup> Carol-Anne Hudson is completing her PhD in the Department of Political Science at McMaster University. Her main research interests focus on empirical investigations of urban poverty, inequality and social exclusion, including barriers to social mobility for the working poor and marginalized groups, the depoliticization of social reproduction, grass-roots efforts to renew social policy and business influence in welfare reform.

Armstrong is concerned that the good work done on Beveridge's Five Giant Evils – want, squalor, disease, idleness and ignorance – since the end of the second world war are in grave danger of being entirely undone. Armstrong uses the Five Evils to organize and enrich his account of the re-emergence of poverty and to add detail to his descriptions of media activity. Armstrong, following Orwell's highly regarded pre-war poverty report published in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, travelled Great Britain for several years to investigate and record the impact of Britain's collapsing social safety net on individuals and communities.

In his book, Armstrong brings to the reader's attention not only the bleakness of the lives of those excluded from the severely diminished welfare state, but the increasing number of "new poor". "New poverty" refers to the growing number of households where there is someone in work, yet they are living in poverty. It also refers to the rising number of middle-class families whose lives more closely resemble poor families: precarious employment, rising cost of living and falling wages. As Armstrong emphasizes through-out his reporting, the economic changes which have brought many families to the brink of destitution is a direct result of neoliberal policy-making in the name of global economic competition.

The real strength of this book is to be found in the interior chapters. Here Armstrong puts each of the five elements of poverty under a microscope. His objective is to methodically build-up a powerful and layered counter-narrative to the relentless poor bashing and pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps narratives smeared across British newsprint, television programs, and evening newscasts. With singleness of purpose, Armstrong constructs a story of the new poverty around impeccable data, attention to lived experience, and heartening examples of resilience. The result is a narrative that is factual, consistent and unvarnished: people are not poor by their own choosing nor by lack of effort; a severely weakened welfare state and ruthlessly competitive labour market has trapped many in work in poverty; and, the middle-class is no longer secure.

Armstrong's approach is admittedly journalistic, he does not pretend to be breaking new theoretical ground. He is a reporter who believes that the British media is no longer an honest broker. The mainstream media has demonized poor people and looked past the systemic causes of poverty. The main theme running through-out this book is that the media's assault on poor families has serious consequences for all of society. Misreporting has polarized the public and resulted in a loss of social cohesion, sense of belonging and community breakdown. Armstrong concludes with a warning: the welfare state is fragile and must be defended. That is, citizens must do the work and uncover the root causes of social problems in their communities and fight for a fairer system.

In an era of "fake news", this book provides an important counterpoint to the distorted media-driven image many have of poverty. Armstrong's vignettes enable the reader to place themselves in the story. From this more intimate perspective we are reminded that, wherever we live in the Global North, policymaking that decouples economic growth from social welfare puts us all at risk of falling into poverty. This book will be of great interest to undergraduates exploring

social policy and poverty issues for the first time and will serve as a handy reference work for academics, journalists and non-profits interested in poverty and the welfare state in the UK.