RESEARCH REPORTS

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"Recent Trends in Economic Inequality in the United States: Income vs. Expenditures vs. Material Well-Being."

Paper delivered at a conference on poverty in America, sponsored by Bard College's Jerome Levy Economics Institute, June 18–19, 1991.

Authors: Susan E. Mayer and Christopher Jencks

The late 1970s and '80s are widely seen as hard times for poor families. While the average American family's real income rose by 11 percent between 1979 and '89, for example, the real income of families in the bottom fifth fell by four percent. The poverty rate increased from 10.5 percent to 11.4 percent.

But all these figures are misleading, contend sociologists Mayer, of the University of Chicago, and Jencks, of Northwestern University. While the cash income reported by poor families was stagnant (after adjustment for inflation) during the 1970s and '80s, their reported expenditures jumped.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics surveys indicate that between 1973 and '85, average consumer spending by the poorest tenth of American households went from \$2,829 per person (in 1987 dollars) to \$4,545—a whopping 60 percent increase. Meanwhile, similar households were reporting to the Census Bureau an average per-capita income in

1984-85 of only about \$1,400—virtually the same as it had been more than a decade earlier. (According to different, and dubious, Bureau of Labor Statistics data, the income of the poor plummeted by half, down to only \$900.)

The gap of more than \$3,000 is partially explained by the fact that Census Bureau researchers did not ask people to report certain kinds of income (e.g., from savings, loans, payments by boarders, or even illegal drug sales). Even so, the poor clearly did not give a full account of all the money they received from licit or illicit employment, family members, and other sources.

"There may be a few households getting by on such amounts [the reported \$1,400 annually per capita], especially if they live in subsidized housing, get food stamps, and have Medicaid," Mayer and Jencks acknowledge. But they note that researcher Kathryn Edin, who interviewed 50 mothers receiving welfare (as well as food stamps and other aid) in

Chicago in 1989, found that none of the women spent less than \$500 per month in cash. Not one of the mothers was living entirely on her welfare check—and not one was reporting all her outside income to the welfare department. The average mother's unreported cash income amounted to as much as her welfare check.

This hardly means that the poor are rolling in money. Still, Mayer and Jencks note, there are other indications from decennial census data that belie the image of worsening poverty. In 1980, at the end of a decade in which their real per-capita income supposedly did not increase, poor families were less likely than in 1970 to live in crowded housing and more likely to have a car, a telephone, an air conditioner, and a "complete" bathroom.

Available statistics on income, the authors conclude, do not provide an accurate picture of how the poor are faring. That throws into question all assessments of government programs to aid them.

"Watching America: What Television Tells Us About Our Lives."

Prentice Hall Press, 15 Columbus Cir., New York, N.Y. 10023. 322 pp. \$24.95. Authors: S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, and Stanley Rothman

Television dramas, movies, and sit-coms, once "the servant of the status quo," in recent decades have become "an agent of social change," contend the Lichters, directors of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, and Rothman, a

Smith College political scientist. Their study of 620 primetime shows broadcast between 1955 and '86 indicates TV "now fosters populist suspicions of traditional mores and institutions."

The way in which business-

men are portrayed is a case in point. Before 1965, there were twice as many "good guys" as "bad guys" in TV's version of corporate America. In the ensuing decade, however, the proportion was reversed. Now, the men in gray flannel suits

are villains, responsible even for much of the violent crime in TV-land. (And it is a violent place: Since 1955 the murder rate has been 1,000 times higher, per 1,000 inhabitants, than in the real world.) Next to professional criminals, in fact, businessmen commit the largest share of TV crimes, including one-third of the homicides. That gives new meaning to the term "hostile takeover."

Sex is another realm in which TV entertainment has challenged traditional views. In TV-land today, "sexual repression [is presented] as a barrier to human fulfillment."

No pre-1970 program the authors studied justified extramarital sex without qualification, but of the subsequent shows, 41 percent presented "recreational" sex as perfectly okay. "On the TV screen," the authors note, "sex is usually without consequences, without worry, and with rarely a bad experience." In part, they acknowledge, television is just following society's changing mores. "But [it] also seeks to accelerate these changes, by championing causes like gay rights, which the mass audience still opposes."

Given the "left populist

themes" of recent TV entertainment, it should come as no surprise that the authors' survey of 104 leading TV producers and other creative types reveals them to be very liberal in their political and social views. "On such issues as abortion, homosexual rights, and extramarital sex, they overwhelmingly reject traditional restrictions." Despite TV's portrayal of businessmen, however, most of the creators favor free enterprise and think people with greater ability should earn more. They certainly do: Twothirds make more than \$200,000 a year.

"Exploring the Moon and Mars: Choices for the Nation."

Office of Technology Assessment, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402-9325. 104 pp. \$5.

President George Bush has proposed sending Americans back to the Moon to establish a permanent lunar base, and then mounting a mission to Mars by the year 2019, the 50th anniversary of the Apollo Moon landing. Congress' Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) is skeptical: "It is far from clear what the United States would gain from demonstrating leadership in human exploration" of Mars.

Bush's idea is reminiscent of President John F. Kennedy's 1961 pledge to land a man on the Moon. But times have changed. The United States then was in the midst of the Cold War. Today, there is no race to send humans to the Moon or to Mars. The European Space Agency has expressed an interest in explor-

ing Mars—but with robots. The Japanese plan to send unmanned craft to the Moon.

The cost of Bush's proposal, according to very tentative estimates, could reach \$300–550 billion. Human exploration of such extremely harsh environments, OTA says, may cost 10 to 100 times as much as unmanned exploration.

In the Apollo era, the state of automation and robotics technology was primitive, and the astronauts went to the Moon with little robotic support. Today, specialists believe it will soon be possible for robots, acting largely on their own, to carry out many space exploration activities. Small "rovers," for example, could move about on Mars, making observations and collecting and analyzing soil samples.

Sticking to Bush's timetable, however, may mean giving short shrift to these new technologies, OTA notes, if resources are channeled into technologies to support the human crews.

Future decisions about space exploration, and about the relative roles of humans and robots in it, may have an important impact on the economy. "The experience gained in applying [automation and robotics] technologies to tasks in space could assist their development in other parts of U.S. industry and help the United States to compete . . . in the world economy," OTA says. Given Washington's budget woes, putting men on Mars may not seem as urgent as putting a man on the Moon did 30 years ago.

COMMENTARY

We welcome timely letters from readers, especially those who wish to amplify or correct information published in the Quarterly and/or react to the views expressed in our essays. The writer's telephone number and address should be included. For reasons of space, letters are usually edited for publication. Some letters are received in response to the editors' requests for comment.

What Schools Cannot Do

The articles by Chester Finn ["The Ho Hum Revolution", WQ, Summer '91] and Patrick Welsh ["A Teacher's View"] are interesting when viewed against the backdrop of the school reform initiative, America 2000: six national goals to be measured by tests and attained by the year 2000.

Welsh focuses on what Finn (and America 2000) ignore: cataclysmic shifts in the moral fiber and supportive infrastructure of the culture surrounding schools. For Welsh, the answer lies in a culture that makes students work harder.

Finn's answer is to hold schools accountable for performance, presumably on the tests envisioned for America 2000. Are such schools to create the work ethic in a culture that will then produce students who work harder in schools? Caution is warranted when a major remedial role in the health of a nation is proposed for schools.

Regarding the role of schools in the economy, Finn mentions Lamar Alexander's argument for reform: "Better schools mean better jobs...." I am more persuaded by those specialists who strongly dispute the presence of a direct link between excellent schools and a continuing robust economy. The links with most other elements of a culture are even weaker—especially in a culture such as ours where so many disparate forces teach, as Welsh documents.

The two pieces cancel each other. Together they pose the agenda: simultaneously addressing the curricula and instructional core of schools and the conditions in the surrounding culture needed to sustain them. To believe, however, that the six national goals and a system of tests will put our schools and our nation—in that order—right again is to assume the most mythical and mystical relationship in our long and misguided history of pretending for schools what they cannot do.

John I. Goodlad, Director Ctr. for Educational Renewal Univ. of Wash.

Parents Who Care

Perhaps we are asking too much of our schools and not enough of ourselves, the parents of the students. If my local school board were to call a parents' meeting to discuss the "philosophy of education," or the "theoretical impact of education," there would be no one in attendance. However, if the Taylor School Board were to announce "no football in 1991–92," the board office would be jammed with angry parents.

I believe that we, the parents, educators, principals, and ordinary taxpayers, have not really asked ourselves, "What do we want the schools to do?" Nor have we asked, "What *exactly* is education?"

Robert D. Hatfield Taylor, Mich.

Asking the Wrong Question

"Why Our Schools Still Don't Work" is the wrong question to ask. Instead, we must ask, What makes our schools work? And, we must understand that our public school system is the engine of our democracy and a vibrant economy.

The National PTA has discovered that parent involvement is the difference between mediocre schools and great ones. More importantly, parent involvement in schools is the link between lessons and learning. It has been proven to increase academic achievement in spite of socioeconomic conditions and across racial/ethnic barriers.

Our schools today must try to educate all who appear at the classroom door. This was not always the case. Our competitive, information-based world requires an educated citizenry. The impediments to obtaining this education are many. Now, students come to school with all the problems that society refuses to address—they are hungry, homeless, abused, neglected and ignored, angry, and scared. These children may live in violent innercity communities or in rural isolation.

The problems of our schools are, in reality, the problems of society. Now is not the time to replace the educational engine that drives our society simply because it needs a tune-up. Yes, our schools need to improve. Established in the 1800s, our public schools desperately need to adapt to the 21st century. And, they definitely must have more parents involved. These are challenges to be overcome; not reasons for abandonment.

Pat Henry, President The National PTA Chicago, Ill.

The Naming of Hinduism

It is clear from "Hinduism and the Fate of India" [WQ, Summer '91] that the nominalist controversy still flourishes, at least among Indologists, historians of religions, and other students of "Hinduism." Yet the adversaries in this longstanding debate continue to formulate their differences in ways that are not terribly productive, and it would seem they are talking past each other about two rather different "Hinduisms," or rather, about two very different paradigms of Hinduism.

For all its longevity and original interest, this debate has been fairly sterile for some time, and the current situation in India demands something better. Ideally, I should like to see a rethinking of how nation, state, and religion have interacted throughout Indian history, which could help us to understand how a religion that was constructed for the nation by the colonial state, has now come to serve as the most important instrument through which much of that nation is mobilizing itself, not just for another round of a seemingly interminable conflict with other religious groups, but also in opposition to the workings of a neo-colonial state and the westernized elites that have dominated that state since its inception.

The struggles that wrack India have never been simply and straightforwardly sectarian, and nationalism in the Third World is always complex, with social, political, and economic dimensions to it, however much these may be inflected by religious concerns. Those in the West who feel their interests to be threatened by such movements often dwell on their religious character in alarming and even lurid terms as a way to tilt public opinion against them. In light of such propagandistic excesses, it seems to me all the more important that we exercise the most critical judgment when talk turns to "Hinduism and the Fate of India."

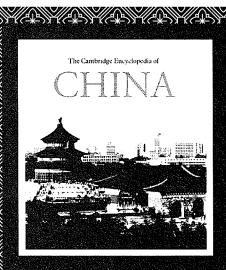
Bruce Lincoln Prof. of Comparative Studies in Discourse & Society Univ. of Minn.

Correction

In the article "Who Killed Hollywood" [WQ, Summer '91], the "total national population" is given as approximately 79½ million in 1946. The U.S. population in 1940 was 131.7 million; in 1950 it was 150.7 million.

David S. Croyder Bethesda, Md.

Editors' Note: We should have said that the 1946 population was approximately 141 million.



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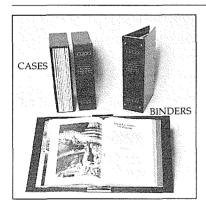


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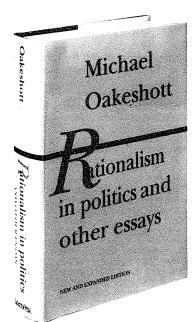
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