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A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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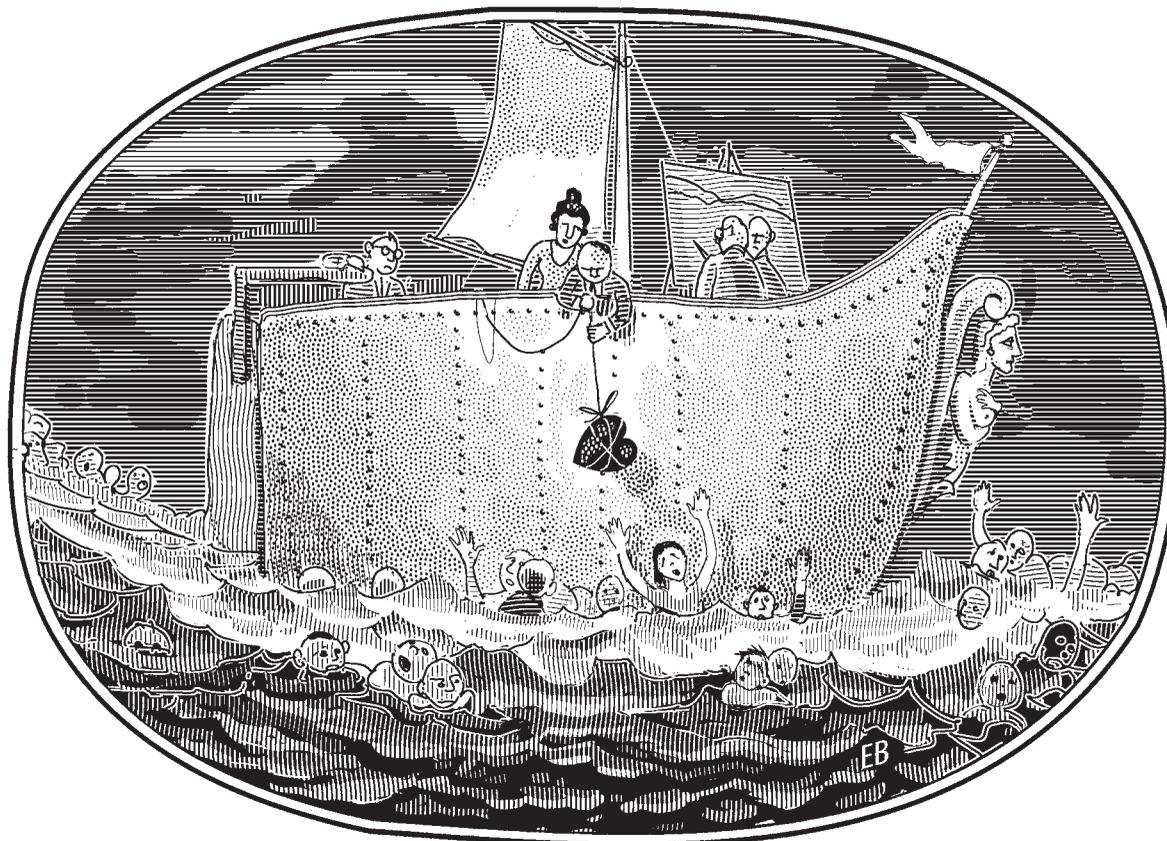
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Book Review by R. Shep Melnick

POVERTY AND POLICY

\$2 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America, by Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer.
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 240 pages, \$28



USS Compassion

THE PRIMARY PURPOSE OF *\$2 A DAY* IS to summon the reader's compassion for America's poorest families. The authors do this superbly, portraying industrious but poorly educated single mothers who struggle to raise children on annual cash incomes that work out to less than \$730 per person. (Two dollars a day in *total* income is how the World Bank defines "extreme poverty.") Johns Hopkins professor Kathryn Edin is a skilled ethnographer whose work exposes the grim details of daily life for such families: their struggle to find minimally decent housing; their often fruitless efforts to land and hold jobs; their bouts of depression and sometimes mental illness; and the constant threat of domestic violence and abuse. The saddest part is learning how these conditions affect young children. "Toxic stress," as it is now known, not only makes it hard for them to keep up in school or form healthy relationships with adults and peers, but also adversely affects brain development.

A CRITICAL READING OF *\$2 A DAY*, though, shows that compassion alone is not nearly enough to address the problem the authors describe so well. Clear thinking about policy is also imperative, and largely absent from this book. Edin and Luke Shaefer, a professor in the University of Michigan School of Social Work, repeatedly blame the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, the welfare reform law enacted in 1996, for deep poverty. They condemn the law for turning the old, cash-based Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC) into the new employment-based Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), focusing entirely on the hardship produced by the reduction of cash benefits and completely ignoring the extent and advantages of increased employment. The authors repeatedly assert that "welfare is dead," even using that idea in a chapter title. "Who killed welfare?" they ask. Their answer: a coalition of misin-

formed, misanthropic Republicans and cowardly Clinton Democrats.

One can compare this "welfare is dead" rhetoric with the following description of post-1996 income maintenance programs:

Other means-tested income supports have grown considerably, most notably SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps] and EITC [Earned Income Tax Credit, a negative income tax for the working poor], along with other refundable tax credits for low income families. SNAP eligibility requirements have been relaxed in some ways since the 1990s, and the value of EITC benefits has been increased in a number of ways since the early 1990s. SNAP caseloads increased from an average of 25.5 million recipients per month in 1996 to 47.3 in June 2013. The number of families claiming EITC rose from

19.5 million in 1996 to 27.8 million in tax year 2010.

Who described this rapidly expanding welfare state? It turns out to have been Edin and Shaefer, in a 2013 journal article. The “welfare is dead” claim rests entirely on their idiosyncratic, tendentious stipulation that any sort of government assistance apart from benefits paid immediately in cash is not “welfare.” Through this prestidigitation they are able to eliminate SNAP, EITC, housing subsidies, and Medicaid from the welfare state. Welfare is dead; long live welfare!

THIS STRANGE UNDERSTANDING OF “welfare” informs the book’s misleading title. Unlike the hundreds of millions of people around the world who live in extreme poverty, none of the families profiled in *\$2 a Day* actually lives on...\$2 a day. One mother and her daughter who feature prominently in the book receive \$370 per month (about \$6 a day per person) from SNAP alone. Before losing her job the mother received \$5,700 in SNAP and EITC. Some of these families lived in subsidized housing. Others shared housing with people receiving Supplemental Security Insurance and Social Security disability benefits. Almost all were eligible for Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program.

Edin and Shaefer’s real argument is that these families don’t have much *cash*, which limits their ability to participate in ordinary American life. They make that point convincingly, but feel compelled to turn this sober assessment into an overheated attack on the 1996 welfare law.

The families Edin and Shaefer describe are troubled in many ways. Few of the parents graduated from high school. Their children struggle in school. Parents and children alike suffer from multiple physical and psychological afflictions. Their lives are so disorganized that they have a hard time finding and retaining jobs.

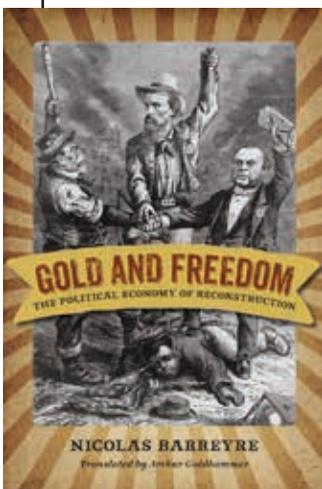
Most disturbing is the conduct of the men who live on the periphery of these families. The women who receive most of Edin and Shaefer’s attention—Modonna, Jennifer, Rae, and Martha—are single mothers who get neither financial nor parental support from their children’s fathers. Even worse, there are repeated incidents of serious abuse by boyfriends and male relatives. Cliff, the father of eight of Alva Mae’s 13 children, is a drug addict whose occasional appearances create more hardship than his prolonged absences. Several mothers were abused or abandoned when they were young, and the same thing is now happening to their children. The tales Edin and Shaefer tell are simply horrible.

How representative are these appalling stories? One of the book’s problems is that we have no way to know. A major theme is that these women really want to work, and they work hard when they have a job. That is no doubt true of many adults living in deep poverty. But others (some of whom make cameo appearances in the book) are alcoholics, drug addicts, abusive parents, schizophrenics, and petty criminals. The group now known as “disconnected” single mothers is diverse, and the authors make no attempt to provide us with a random or representative sample.

THIS IS NOT TO DENY THAT THESE STORIES provide a number of illuminating details. One is the debilitating effect of inadequate housing. Most of the families in *\$2 a Day* share a dwelling with another poor family or relative, and sometimes more than one. They lack privacy and control over their lives. Drunken arguments and sexual abuse are commonplace.

Another revelation is the enterprising way some families make ends meet. One woman ran an informal taxi service, another a small store from her apartment. Many sell food stamps on the black market. At times, entrepreneurship turns degrading: “only three parents out of the eighteen families we followed admitted to engaging in sex for pay, but two

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Gold and Freedom
The Political Economy of Reconstruction
Nicolas Barreyre
Translated by Arthur Goldhammer
\$39.50 | CLOTH | A NATION DIVIDED

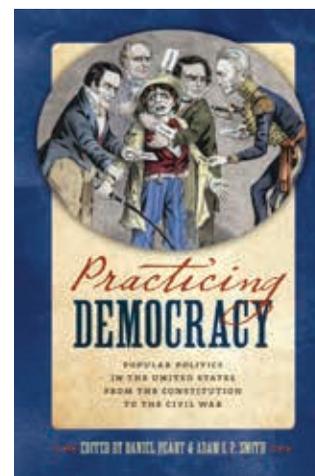
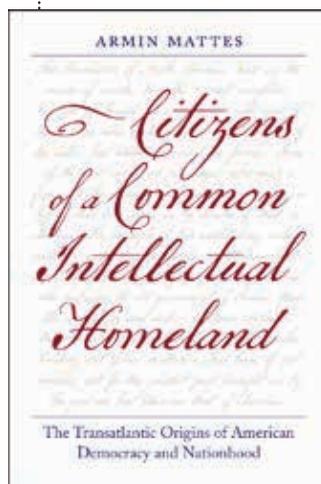
“Nicolas Barreyre’s *Gold and Freedom*

is a brilliant piece of work. None of the previous studies of economic policy making have tied those disputes so integrally to the evolution of federal Reconstruction policy as Barreyre does here. The book will make a splash with students of the Civil War/Reconstruction period as well as with specialists.”—Michael Holt, Williams Professor of American History Emeritus, University of Virginia

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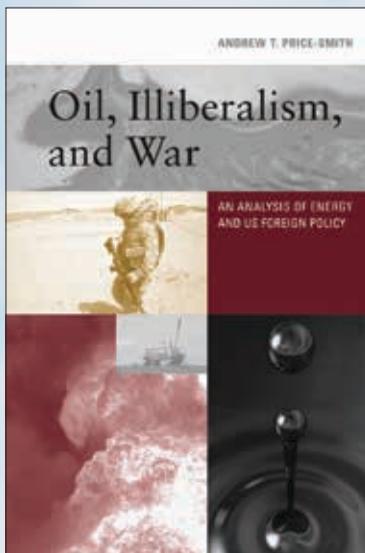
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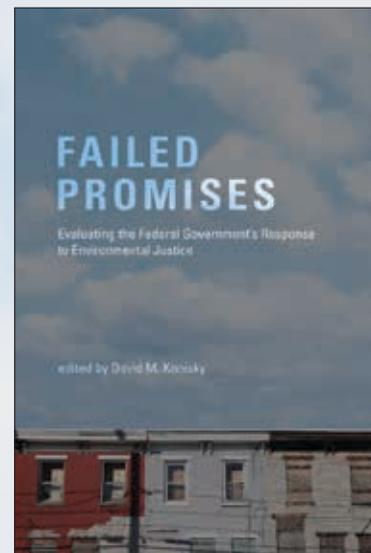
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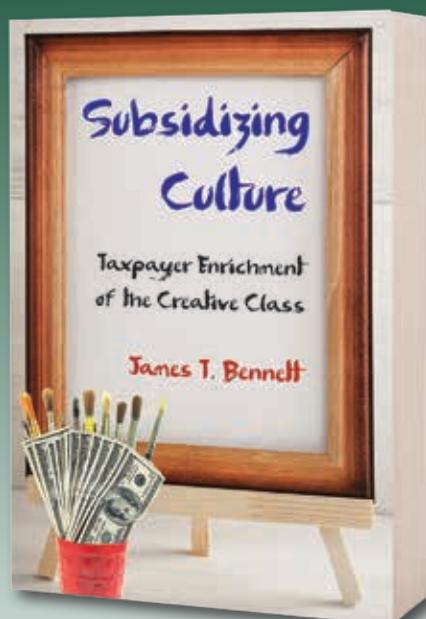
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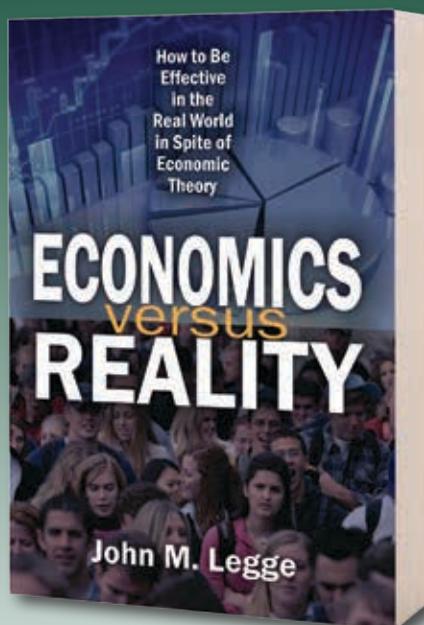
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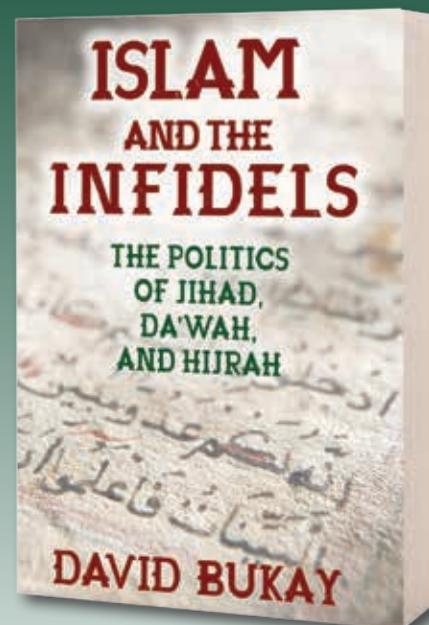
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had teenage daughters who had done so in an effort to help the family survive.” Edin and Shaefer’s studies help us understand why surveys of poor families’ expenditures indicate that they have more money than do surveys of their reported income. The reader is no more inclined to condemn these actions than to censure Oliver Twist for being a pickpocket. But once again we see how misleading the “\$2 a day” claim has become.

The authors assert that the number of families living in deep poverty has increased since 2000, but they don’t defend this controversial argument in this book. Other studies have indicated that the percentage of children living in deep poverty remained relatively constant during and after the Great Recession. More importantly, studies that take into account the value of government benefits indicate that poverty levels among children fell dramatically in the 1990s, and have remained below the levels of the pre-welfare-reform era, despite the bad economy of the early 2000s and the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

For single mothers able to find and keep jobs, welfare reform has generally worked well. They have more income than they did before the transition, and are more connected to the rest of the world. There was always the danger that those who for some reason could not work regularly would end up worse off. That is Edin and Shaefer’s claim, and for some families it might well be true. But how many? Might our efforts to show compassion for a few undo the gains achieved by a much larger group? That is the big question, one they make no effort to address.

EDIN AND SHAEFER ARE SO INTENT TO avoid “blaming the victim” that they say little about the bad choices most of these women have made—and admit to having made. The Brookings Institution’s Isabel Sawhill has shown in her book *Generation Unbound* (2014; reviewed in the Fall 2015 CRB) that poverty is extremely rare among Americans who do three crucial things: fin-

ish high school, work 40 hours a week, and delay childbearing until they are over 21 and married. If you don’t do the first, it becomes harder to do the second. If you don’t do the third, it is very hard to do either the first or the second.

For that reason, Sawhill places great emphasis on urging at-risk young women to use effective contraception. The key event that sent most of the women in *\$2 a Day* spiraling downward into deep poverty was conceiving a child at a young age with a man either unable or unwilling to become a decent father. The good news is that teenage pregnancies have been declining. The bad news is that more and more children live in single-parent homes. And the worse news is that we don’t know what to do about this. Edin and Shaefer choose simply to ignore it.

\$2 a Day concludes with some recommendations on how to make the lives of these families more bearable. Some are sensible, such as increasing government wage subsidies, encouraging employers to make their work rules more family-friendly, and focusing government benefits more on housing than on food. Others are more dubious. Edin and Shaefer argue for an increase in the minimum wage, despite the fact that they have shown that the employers of these women tend to be so economically marginal that higher wages are likely to put them out of business. They call for New Deal-style public works projects to rebuild our infrastructure, implying, unpersuasively, that single mothers with few marketable skills have bright futures holding down construction jobs at national parks. Their recommendations just don’t fit with the problems they have chronicled.

ODDLY, *\$2 A DAY* NEVER MENTIONS one promising experimental program that addresses precisely the problems the authors describe: the New Hope program first developed in Milwaukee. New Hope combines additional work incentives with counseling, subsidies for childcare,

and community service jobs. One suspects it was omitted because it was a product of the same reform movement that brought us the 1996 welfare reform law (which was largely based on the Wisconsin experiment) and is run through the state’s TANF office. Edin and Shaefer’s insistence that the 1996 law is responsible for deep poverty blinds them to the ways the new regime can be adapted to help those who have the hardest time finding stable employment.

For decades, the debate over welfare policy has resembled the old Miller Lite beer commercials: competing shouts of “Tastes great” and “Less filling!” Among welfare analysts, one side yells, “Better benefits!” and the other, “More family values!” For the Left, welfare is entirely about economics; for the Right, it’s solely a question of social norms and individual character.

The point of the commercial, of course, is that the lucky beer drinker doesn’t really have to choose. In dealing with persistent poverty, however, we don’t have the luxury of choosing. We need all of these things: jobs and benefits, norms and family structure. They reinforce one another, which is precisely what makes the problem so hard to solve.

After finishing *\$2 a Day*, the newly compassionate conservative and the increasingly indignant liberal should take a look at the recent Brookings/American Enterprise Institute report, “Opportunity, Responsibility, and Security: A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream.” In it an impressive array of experts on the left and the right try to address both sides of the equation. Their sensible reply to Edin and Shaefer’s attack on the 1996 welfare reform law recalls a phrase from the Clinton Administration: “Mend it, don’t end it.” Kathryn Edin and Luke Shaefer have helped us understand the problem of deep poverty, but we need to look elsewhere for thoughtful solutions.

R. Shep Melnick is the Thomas P. O’Neill, Jr., Professor of American Politics at Boston College.

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