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Why Fight Poverty?

Julia Unwin

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This very short and readable book tackles the criticism of those who say ‘well, the poor will always be with us’. Julia Unwin explains that such people badly quote from the New Testament ‘out of its original context’ (p. 59) and that they are being manipulated in doing so either from the ‘malevolent intent or benign ignorance’ (p. 32) of broadcasters and a society geared up to spread disgust about the poor, resulting in a public that can have their views quickly and easily altered. The suggestion is thus that there are great possibilities for us not to be so stupid in future.

The book begins with the sorry tale of how, between 1994 and 2010, the number of people in Britain who believed that poverty was caused by a personal weakness of character or by the feckless behaviour of individuals rose from under 1 in 6 to almost a quarter of the population in just 16 years (p. 9). Views on poverty are not entrenched; they can alter quickly. By 2011 two thirds of the British public blamed poor parents for causing their children to be poor, and British children were growing up with the view that welfare spending was bad, if not evil, resulting in young adults being the least committed of any age group to support for the poor (p.10).

Unwin, who is Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, claims that the only disagreement between the political right and left of Britain, when it comes to poverty, ‘... is about how minimal the provision for a life without work should be.’ (p. 3). She suggests policy makers are primarily concerned with just how poor should the poor be; and she has a point. She notes that the poor are rarely listened to. Yet there is an inconsistency in her claim that ‘Finding people who are poor and willing to speak publically about their position is hard, because the sense of shame is so widespread.’ (p.36). I would argue that it is not hard to get the poor to talk about their poverty, as Chanel 4’s *Benefit Street* programme recently showed. It is always much harder to get all but the most brass of the rich to talk about their riches.

The book is reminiscent of John Tropicman's *Does America Hate the Poor?* and Martin Gilens' *Why Americans Hate Welfare*. Julia Unwin is at her most convincing, illuminating and original when she explains that 'A deep anxiety about vulnerability, weakness and failure is translated into a sense of shame, of fear, of disgust and occasionally anger, which prevents rational discussion.' (p. 23). Many people don't like the poor, dealing with them or talking about poverty – including many of the poor themselves.

Where I think the book is weakest is in how it does not look outside of the UK and the USA for other models, attitudes and choices. At one point ancient Greece is mentioned and Plato's observation repeated that 'Wealth and poverty: the one is the parent of luxury and indolence, and the other of meanness and viciousness, and both of discontent' (p. 38); but at no point is the link between inequality and poverty otherwise made clear. Nor are lessons from more equitable countries with very low poverty rates, such as Japan, Scandinavia, and most of mainland Europe, learnt.

Many problems of inequality are discussed as if they are problems of poverty replete with graphs showing that between the richest and the next-most-rich there is just as great a gap as between the poorest and next most poor. Similarly, and on the same page, it is suggested that the poor commit the most crimes (p. 19). It could be argued that the most dangerous and frequent crimes in Britain are committed by the rich when they speed in their cars (which they do often). The poor are least likely to have a car. The most expensive of crimes are committed by the richest of all. Fixing Libor and Forex rates and other bankers' scams puts all of benefit fraud in the distant shade, as does tax evasion. For me this book is overly tolerant of the rich and the theory that you can fight poverty while the rich remain very rich.

In its preface *Why Fight Poverty?* asserts that in public debate a 'false polarization is created: poverty is either seen as simply a product of social and economic structure, or conversely as solely a matter of individual choice and circumstance.' (p. viii). However, little evidence is put forward to suggest why this polarization or representation of the debate is false. The book does not note that it is far harder to find high rates of poverty in affluent countries where the rich don't take that much. Later the book usefully explains that the 'skivers vs strikers' debate in the UK, which suggests that some choose poverty, is an imitation of an earlier US 'moochers' verses wealth 'creators' myth, and that most people in Britain have to rely on state provision for much of their welfare (p. 55), but this might be too little too late given the book's overall argument can appear to suggest that we have to be a little more concerned for the poor mainly because there is a little more to be got from them.

"Why Fight Poverty?" begins the suggestion is that we would all be better-off if we had a social contract that 'allows people to maximize their potential' (p. ix). The book ends with its very last words claiming that '...the greatest challenge facing social policy in the twenty-first century ... is to maximize the skills and contributions of all our citizens' (p. 76). In both cases the message is that we should be a little nicer to 'our' poor to get a little bit more out of them, but not to assume they are up to much more than their 'potential'.

This book is at its best when it explains how emotion, disgust, fear and inability to empathize help maintain high poverty levels. It is at its weakest when its own rhetoric reflects the establishment view that the poor do not have that much potential but that through being slightly nicer to them we could better tap into that little extra they have which is not currently being fully utilized. In expressing that view this book shows why we are so poor at fighting poverty, in both the UK and US. At the very least we should look for lessons in those places where poverty has been fought most successfully and where people have much surer answers as to why they should fight poverty. In more equitable countries it is easier to see others as more like you, because they are more like you, and poverty is both more rare and better fought. In more unequal countries we still have to ask why fight it?

References

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