

# *Saturday Review*

May 23, 1970/50c

## **WELFARE** **Time for Reform**

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## IF YOU WERE ON WELFARE

by RICHARD M. ELMAN

*I pity the young ones. They still want things. With me it's different. You know, it never seemed as if I had the right to expect anything. I remember when I wanted to visit my niece in Lake George. I had to ask them for the money, and they made it seem like they were doing me such a favor. Ever since then I have always felt that they have been doing me these favors, and I don't want to ask for anything more than I need. . . . At my age there isn't much you need; so I always say, "No, thanks," as nicely as I can. It's better that way because, if they can say yes, they can also say no. Why start trouble?*

*When I was young, people were talking then of eliminating poverty. It didn't do me any good. I've seen three big depressions in my life and three or four wars, and I've known a lot of people on Welfare. They are just like everybody else except they are different. You know what I mean? They don't have anything . . . anything at all except Welfare.*

*—The Poorhouse State.*



—Schlack (Monkmeyer).

**I**n a fat, rich country such as this proposals about doing something for the welfare poor generally fall into two distinct categories: either hypocritical or else niggardly and grudging. The poor are believed to be a social problem. Something must be done about them, for them, with them. The poor exist. They demand sustenance. Will \$1,600 a year sustain? To the urban black or Puerto Rican, or any of the declassed workers of the current recession, the proposed guaranteed sum of \$1,600 a year simply guarantees that they will continue to be impoverished. In Alabama or Mississippi, on the other hand, such a sum may be a vast improvement over the absolute starvation amounts of \$50 or \$60 per family which is presently being doled out each month.

*My mother gets \$7.10 a month for gas and electricity. She pays about \$30 [every two months]. You want to know why? I'll tell you why. We use the stove to heat the rooms. We burn the lights at night so the rats won't go near the baby. Also, it's dark where we live, even during the*

*day. So if I am reading or sewing or studying from a book, I've got to burn the lights. The Welfare knows all this, and they are supposed to do something about it, but they never do. Every month we get this bill, and my mother pays it with the food money. Then she has to prove to the Welfare that she has used the food money to pay for the lights. . . .*

*I can remember the last time they turned off the lights. It was winter. My mother was so cold she started to cry. Then we all started to cry because it was so dark. We had to eat cold food out of tin cans until the Welfare called Con Edison and they turned the lights back on again. When he comes, my mother is angry with the man. "Pray to God you have not hurt these children. Believe me." Afterwards my little sister was sick for a week.*

The poor suffer from our complete incapacity to imagine them. They are not us. They are not rich. Who are they?

One might presume to answer that they are ourselves with \$1,600 a year or less. Imagine yourself living in a family with an income of \$3,200. You will, of

course, probably not be able to afford *Saturday Review*. You buy few books, not very many records (except, perhaps, for 45 rpms). You do not take vacations. The great questions of our time do not interest you.

A good part of your life is spent worrying. You have been afflicted with this terrible blight, and you wish to survive, make the most of it—that is, if you still feel human. Then you worry if there is enough food, if your children have the right clothing, about the rent, or the habits of your neighbors. You worry about the mail and if your check will arrive on time. Perhaps you worry what your children will be like ten years from now, or what you will be like. Or perhaps you are so far gone from a life of bare and bitter caring that you have begun to worry abstract-

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ly: about baseball averages, Diahann Carroll, or the problems of Mrs. Onassis.

At this point you may be saying it sounds just like my own life, just like me, myself, and I when we are all finally alone together in one room, after a day at the office or spent in housewifery. There is this major difference: The administration proposes to pay the poor \$1,600 to do what the Establishment pays off the middle classes to do at \$7,000 or \$10,000 or \$15,000 or \$20,000 or more a year, and we do not usually ask for ourselves, as a condition for such a benefice, that we worry about worrying ourselves out of our livelihoods.

*I wish I could remember when I got this sickle-cell anemia. . . . I got two sick kids like me and another in the Kennedy homes in the Bronx . . . and sometimes you get pretty tired, but you just got to do certain things. After all, they say, if you don't take care of these kids, who will? They got a point.*

*But every time you want something extra from them it's a whole nuisance. Like carfare. Sometimes I got to spend 90 cents carfare for me and the kids to go off to Belle-*

*vue, because you can't leave them alone if you got to go there for some reason. And when I come back from Bellevue clinic I got to rush over here to Twenty-eighth Street for that carfare money or else I'm going to run short on food.*

*Well, even so, they don't just give you your money like that. Sometimes they want proof. Sometimes they say they will owe it to you. You got to be careful about the ones who say that. I learned you got to insist right then and there you want that carfare or else you don't get it. So you just got to sit there and wait for the man until he gives it to you. Sometimes I think I spend half my life waiting somewhere for 90 cents.*

Nor do we ask ourselves to surrender the various "inalienable rights" of Americans that are foreign to the poor. Although Americans are "free" to cross state boundaries and choose residences to their liking, for example, special residency laws have been enacted by many states denying this guarantee to the person who applies for public assistance after coming from another state. And although all Americans are supposedly guaranteed freedom from fear of illegal searches and seizures or the arbitrary violation of their privacy, if you are on public assistance or living in a low-income public housing project, you can protect yourself against such actions only at the risk of disqualification or eviction. Large families are penalized with lower benefit levels; small families—such as a mother and one child—often are denied access to public housing.

For more than a hundred years all Americans presumably have been protected against "involuntary servitude," yet functionaries in city and state offices of "employment rehabilitation" do not interpret this to mean that their clients have the freedom to accept or reject work, even if they happen to be husbandless women with families. And if you as a beneficiary of a public assistance program appeal some violation of your rights, some new affront to your dignity, you are not guaranteed an impartial trial by a jury of peers but are brought before an administrative tribunal that can function with only the most perfunctory regard for due process of law.

*You want to know how they close a case? I'll tell you. They know the mail is always late for people like us. If the investigator writes a letter to come for an appointment the day after tomorrow and he mails it tomorrow, you will not get the let-*

*ter in time to come for the appointment. Then he closes your case just like that. It's punishment—you know. Sometimes it takes three months before they write all the papers again to put you back.*

Fear dominates your life—fear that the check will be delayed in the mail, fear that your mailbox will be rifled, fear that your caseworker will be replaced (or that he won't be), fear that your landlord may harass you in any of hundreds of large or small ways, fear of violence, fear of life itself. You have no reason to hope for dramatic improvement. The reasons you are on welfare in the first place assure that. You have no education, or no mate, or poor health, or all of these handicaps. The concept of upward mobility is an abstraction. You may still hope your children can escape your fate, but not if you examine their situation with detachment.

*The apartment was exploding with heat. It was so hot that one expected to see the thick paint bubbling against the moldings. As she escorted me down the hallway toward her sitting room, Mrs. Escobosa explained in a mixture of Spanish and English that others in the building had filed a complaint last year with the City Rent and Rehabilitation Administration when the building was on rent strike because there was no heat; now her landlord was getting even with her by refusing to turn off the valves, which he controlled from the cellar, even though it was midsummer.*

*"You see the things I have," Mrs. Escobosa said. She moved on to show me a bedroom with its stained mattresses on the dusty floor, where her children slept. Then she padded about in the heat toward her kitchen, showing me the darkened refrigerator, its door ajar because it no longer worked, the window box in which she kept a little food, the sweating copper pipe in the tin sink, which gushed cold running water over a half-filled bottle of milk. The kitchen was swarming with flies, which clung to the sweat on my face. I said, "You try to do your best, I see. . . ."*

The poor do not always work. Most of the rest of us spend our time pretending that what we do with a day is work. We ask only that they pretend like us, and we punish them with more poverty when they don't. Perhaps we should stop kidding ourselves that their enforced leisure is at our expense. It

may be that it is at *their* expense, if we truly believe in the value of work. It may be that *we* exist at *their* expense, if we truly do believe in the value of a human life.

One wonders what kind of brutes are prepared to pay out \$1,600 a year in welfare to the so-called poor when, at the same time, they say they are perfectly satisfied if only 3.5 per cent—rising to 4 or 5 per cent—of the population is unemployed over the next decade? What sort of men are prepared to issue food stamps and order roast beef?

You and I are that sort of man, I'm afraid. We are as dissociated from the humanity of those we call the poor as we often are from our own humanities. If one could only imagine a President or a Congressional leader or an urban affairs adviser getting \$1,600 a year, one could begin to believe that these proposals could do something. Then the poor themselves might be credible to us. But just as we and the governmental leaders of this era do not wish to live under terms of such enforced prudence, so, it seems, the poor do not also. They would like to be more beautiful, as in the Clairol ads; more mobile, with a Maverick; or more virile, with a large family. Ask yourself how much of this kind of behavior you can afford on \$1,600 a year—\$133 a month, \$30 a week, \$4.40 a day.

*Two things I would like from the Welfare are the telephone and movies. I don't care for the TV, but I love movies. Now I know I am not supposed to spend the money [for the children] on such things; so I don't go very often, and when I do go, I worry. They ought to let us go to movies. If I had the right clothes, I would go sometime to see the mayor and tell him. . . . Maybe they ought to have a movie here for all the people on Welfare. It would be like the clinics. . . .*

*I would like the telephone to speak with my brother, who lives in Queens. Also, sometimes, when the children are sick, it would be nice to have a telephone because now I have to take them with me to a neighbor's house. . . . If it is late, I must send somebody to use the booth on the corner. If only they would put a [pay] telephone in our building it would be better, but the Welfare is the landlord, and they don't want to do it.*

When I was writing *The Poorhouse State* in 1966, the welfare mothers of New York City were beginning to organize themselves to pressure a liberal bureaucracy into granting entitlements of approximately \$100 a year to purchase sorely needed winter clothing for

their schoolchildren. Some simply were hoping to use these extra stipends to help themselves to live. They were extremely successful. They exerted sufficient pressure, and winter coat checks began to pour through the mails. The response of the welfare bureaucracy was to cut back on the number of persons admitted to the welfare rolls, and to raise welfare budgets in general and cut out winter coat entitlements in particular. Since then, three years or more have skittered past; the cost of living for an urban family rises about one-half per cent a month. Boondoggle, anybody?

*I never knew anybody who made a living on Welfare. Some people say we cheat a lot. Maybe some people like to think they do, but they are poor just the same. Welfare is for poor people. It's not right to say those things about people because only the poor can collect it. You know what I mean? If it is for poor people, how can people say we are cheating?*

We have dissociated ourselves as a responsible middle class when we are really in the same boat as the poor and do not care to know it. We tax them with loutishness for taxing us with their needs, though we tell those who are better off than we that they need to be where they are. I believe

that any welfare reform that does not begin to address itself to the question of equalizing wealth in this country is simply a way of creating new poverty. It may be poverty at \$3,200 a year; it will be poverty just the same.

If we are serious about reform, we should guarantee employment for life to those who must work. The questions of income maintenance and personality adjustment should be made entirely distinct before the law, and work should be considered an option, not a necessity, along with schooling, travel, or other leisure activities. What I am saying is that we ask the poor to join with us in helping to discover a good life for all of us, though I recognize that we do not trust them, nor they us; and that our lives in this country—on this planet—are threatened by problems larger than the poverty of a numerically small number of weakened and deprived persons. If I am being utopian, it is because realistic solutions have simply been the time-honored excuse for more and more brutalized prescriptions for the poor.

*In those days I had this man for an investigator, and don't you think he didn't think so? You know what he asked me? He said, "Can't your wife help out?" So I thought I*  
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—Sam Falk (Monkmeyer).

**"You may still hope your children can escape your fate, but not if you examine their situation with detachment."**

## On Welfare

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*knew what he meant by that. I said, "You don't really mean that. You don't mean your wife peddle herself?" And this guy he just grinned at me. . . .*

*Now what kind of a question is that to ask? My wife don't peddle anything. She got the kids to take care of. What kind of a question is that anyway?*

The trouble with celebrating the fact that we may now be prepared to give an entitlement of \$1,600 a year to every poor family is that it allows us to evade once again the question of what the good life should be. Unless we are prepared to face that question with the poor through the poor, we are dooming ourselves once again to suffer the rage of the poor; we are dooming ourselves, moreover, to visit our own rage on the poor. We are dooming ourselves to more of this same apartness through which we all suffer and rage on, and suffer others to suffer with us.

When I wrote *The Poorhouse State*, some 600,000 New Yorkers were on welfare, and, except for the aged and disabled, they were mostly all black or Spanish-speaking. All were poor, and none of them thought of it as a boondoggle. Today, I am told, more than a million are being subsidized poorly. The cry is that the rolls must be reduced. But perhaps our only hope is that the other seven million citizens also will be granted their entitlements so that the word welfare can become more than just an ironic way of referring to what we visit on some people at minimal expense to ourselves.

We have got to teach ourselves to share. If we don't, we will continue to destroy each other.