

Newsday (New York)
May 9, 1990, Wednesday

Can the Underclass Reach Middle Class?

Only if we press, through schools and legal jobs, to save thousands of young people

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VIEWPOINTS; Pg. 67
LENGTH: 1124 words

ALMOST EVERY DAY brings another news report highlighting the deepening economic and social class divisions that characterize 1990's America.

One recent morning, photographs of Harlan County, Ky., depicted rural white poverty and hopelessness that seemed visually unchanged from photos of 1930. The following day, newspapers reported research data showing that 23 percent of all American children under the age of 6 live under the poverty line, a large increase from the 1968 figure of 17 percent. (And the "poverty line" standard, \$ 11,611 for a family of four in 1987, indisputably understates the proportion of children - and adults - who live in economic privation.)

After six months of justifiably celebrating the political revolutions that have swept Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and Romania, Americans need to devote more thought to the economic circumstances of our democracy here at home. Whether the virtual dissolution of the Warsaw Pact will allow such a reduction in U.S. defense spending as to generate a multibillion-dollar "peace dividend" is but the most obvious question to ask.

In particular, the rapid decline of the long-standing Cold War division of the world suggests that the 1990s can be the first time since before the Vietnam War that Americans will focus first and foremost on issues of economic freedom and opportunity within the United States.

So far, neither the Bush administration, blessed with fortuitously high popularity ratings because of the positive developments in both Eastern Europe and Central America, nor the Democratic Party, lacking any clear policy agenda, foreign or domestic, has put forward even the beginnings of an approach to America's pressing challenges at home.

Such passivity and disorganization ought to be particularly surprising, for no small number of Americans - rural as well as urban, white as well as Latino or African-American - clearly realize that questions of the quality of public schooling, of training for meaningful jobs, of the availability of safe and affordable housing, stand at the top of today's U.S. agenda.

One of the most pointed lessons of Eastern Europe's political revolutions is that the absence of modest but significant reforms in a society will, over the long run, eventually result in truly radical, sweeping alterations when widespread pressure for change finally is vented.

It is a lesson that in no way is foreign to America's own even recent history, for the southern civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s reflected exactly the same motif: Decades of

unbending segregationist repression, during which even the most modest, non-integrationist black initiatives were resolutely blocked, led in time to the collapse of the entire edifice in a few quick years.

In 1990, America faces two extremely pressing and intertwined questions: whether even middling-quality public education will be provided for all children, regardless of family circumstance or neighborhood conditions, and whether meaningful employment, legal jobs that pay a family-support wage and offer some potential for upward mobility, will be available for the high school graduate - or dropout - who does not go on to college.

Either we tackle this challenge with serious efforts to improve classroom education rather than issuing an endless plethora of study commission reports, or we can look forward to an increasingly fast expansion of our burgeoning population of 18-year-olds who foresee little chance of upwardly mobile legal employment.

Twelve years from now, those tens of thousands of under-6 children who comprise that 23 percent of the population growing up in poverty will be young adults. They will be educated or uneducated; they will need either employment or something less productive around which to build their lives.

An energetic young population that sees no meaningful future for itself within the normal bounds of society can be destructive as well as self-destructive. The impact of the growing disappearance of blue-collar jobs in big cities is persuasively explained in academic studies such as William Julius Wilson's 1987 book "The Truly Disadvantaged." But the grim reality of the life-choices faced in such circumstances by undereducated young people is powerfully illuminated by two commentaries on New York City youth: Terry Williams' portrait of a Manhattan drug gang, "The Cocaine Kids," and Samuel G. Freedman's "Small Victories," an account of the 1987-88 school year at Seward Park High School on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Williams' work convincingly demonstrates that the values that motivate gun-toting drug trafficking - a desire for economic upward mobility, for challenging and exciting lives and for the accumulation of material possessions - are exactly the same values that underlie within-the-system efforts of the upper-middle class. Freedman's look at the day-to-day reality of high school education in a perpetually underserved and poverty-stricken neighborhood likewise forces us to ponder what sort of a future today's American economy offers a non-college-bound young person with marginal if not minimal English language skills.

Only if public schools and large-scale employers make a very extensive and extremely energetic effort to reverse the path down which we now are headed will those economically deprived 6-year-olds of today face better prospects 12 years from now than those pictured in Williams' portrait of entrepreneurial cocaine merchants.

A second pointed lesson of both the recent upheavals in Eastern Europe and the black freedom struggle in the American South is that calculations of long-term self-interest are always the most powerful incentive toward persuading the privileged to support changes that will assist those who previously have been excluded from meaningful political participation.

In town after town in the South, the first whites to accept and support the necessity of extensive racial change were businessmen calculating their economic prospects, and not clergymen or educators. Throughout Eastern Europe, many members of other old regimes,

making similar calculations based only on self-interest, have overnight become supporters of reform, just as one-time segregationists such as Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.) are now supporters of black voting rights.

This lesson applies as well to the challenges of public schooling and employment opportunity that confront us today. Even Americans who think such growing "underclass" issues have no immediate relevance to their own lives or prospects should think again, for longer-term American self-interest bids us to confront these issues squarely if they are not to become even larger and harder to remedy.

PHOTO-**David J. Garrow. Newsday** Illustration by Anthony D'adamo-Man climbing a ladder made of books