Book Reviews

Poverty in Common: The Politics of Community Action during the American Century

Alyosha Goldstein

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012, $26.95 pbk, ISBN: 9780822351818, 392 pp.

Reviewed by: Patricia Hill Collins, University of Maryland, USA

Alyosha Goldstein's volume *Poverty in Common* examines the ways that divergent conceptions of the politics both of poverty and community shaped each other in twentieth century US social welfare policy. Goldstein contends that tensions within paradigms of self-help and self-determination as solutions to poverty, as well as varying understandings of community that emerge from these paradigms, shaped the political behaviour of state and grassroots actors alike. In essence, when the state and the poor claimed community action as a strategy for addressing poverty, they held different understandings of the causes of poverty as well as varying interpretations of the centrality of community in addressing it.

Two themes stood out for me. First, the analysis of the state and its regulation of poverty by incorporating dissent, in this case poor people's understandings of community, is first rate. The extensive coverage granted to how the state used community for its own ends shows the workings of hegemonic discourse. Via its careful historical analysis of how the state produces and manages hegemonic ideas – in this case, the notion of self-help – this volume provides a useful analysis of how the state swallows up both dissent and visionary thinking. Extending the analysis of *Regulating the Poor* (Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward), which still stands as a foundational text in explaining how state power manages the exigencies of capitalism, *Poverty in Common* presents a detailed and convincing case of how the deck has been stacked against poor people under capitalism. From the perspective of the state, poverty is a social problem and constitutes a field of political action because poverty is a problem for the state. Solving this social problem pushes the state toward self-help, a perspective on community development that evokes notions of individualism, voluntarism, free will, and independence. Poverty is alleviated when poor communities learn how to help themselves and become less dependent on the state. In this regard, self-help is inherently more complicit with the ideology of American social mobility than self-determination, a view of community empowerment that is not so firmly wedded to state perspectives on dependency. I certainly learned a good deal about how the state appropriated the language of community for its own purposes, primarily because the author clearly lays out this framework.

Second, throughout this entire book, I wanted to know more about how poor people functioned as independent social actors not only in analysing and grappling with issues of poverty but also their perspectives on the meaning of community in doing so. Because the book emphasizes the state as the primary social actor, *Poverty in Common* has far less to say analytically about the perspectives of poor people. I had to dig deeper to understand why grassroots organizations of poor people and their allies would embrace a language of community for their political ends. The author should be credited for doing a solid job of trying to

tease out these social meanings through extensive cases of different grassroots social movements. For example, Goldstein's cases from Puerto Rican and American Indian nationalists examine how, in late 1960s and early 1970, self-determination became translated into campaigns for community control. Chapter three's analysis of the Poor People's Campaign comes closest to the kind of analysis I sought, because it showed how poor people and their allies marshalled the construct of community as a powerful political weapon. Martin Luther King's arguments about 'beloved community' provided understandings of community that poor people and their allies felt were compelling enough that they launched a social movement that challenged multiple forms of oppression. Goldstein's archival analysis shows that a range of social groups all had a stake in political transformation and used the language of community in varying ways to move toward a King's 'beloved community'.

There is definitely a David and Goliath feel to the arguments presented in *Poverty in Common*, with the state power of Goliath holding more cards in deciding which narratives about poverty and community will prevail than the power of David's grassroots politics. Goldstein's efforts to recapture the state's incorporation of community involvement for its own agendas seem far better grounded than the point of view of community organizations. There may be solid empirical reasons for this seeming imbalance. Because this is an historical, document driven study, we are limited to existing written archives as well as what academic audiences deem to be legitimate evidence. In this case, because the state itself often *is* the repository of legitimated documents, we have far more evidence that upholds its agendas than written documentation provided by community groups. Such groups typically lack the resources and commitment to detailed record-keeping, with some seeing record-keeping requirements of the state as a burden. Moreover, progressive and radical grassroots groups may be convinced that keeping records may make them more vulnerable to state control and thus undercut their actual political agendas for community participation and action. *Poverty in Common*'s imbalance reflects its positionality within the very power relations that produce patterns that it uncovers, ignores and/or misreads, namely, the hegemonic nature of state discourse about poverty, contested views of what counts as convincing evidence for state and grassroots actors alike, and ironically, privileging of the state as the primary site of politics because it retains the lion's share of scholarly documentary evidence.

Despite this unfair fight of hegemonic state discourse juxtaposed to less accessible discourses of grassroots political organizations, I applaud the author's aspirations for a scholarly objectivity that stands outside prevailing power relations. Goldstein strives to avoid writing a history from 'above' or 'below', instead aiming for a neutral, non-aligned space that eschews these seemingly entrenched vested interests. Yet I was left wondering whether this quest for an objective space outside the contemporary politics of knowledge production is possible or even desirable. Despite the best efforts of Goldstein and similar scholars to find that elusive space of outside of politics from which to do their work, when it comes to analyses of the contentious politics of poverty, there may in fact be no such common ground.

Satisfaction *Not* Guaranteed. Dilemmas of Progress in Modern Society

Peter N. Stearns

New York and London: New York University Press, 2012, $35 hbk, ISBN: 9780814783627, 270 pp.

Reviewed by: Irem Ozgoren Kinli, Izmir University of Economics, Turkey

As the author himself notes, this book is about 'the key directions and the ways in which contemporary challenges flow from the broad process of modern social change' (p.5), or in other words: 'why the gains of living in modern, urban, industrial, affluent societies have not proved more satisfying than they have' (p.3). While this sounds like a large and ambitious project, and to a great extent it is, the principal aim of this book is to explore the partial gap between levels of modernity and levels of satisfaction.

Drawing primarily, but not exclusively, on a wide variety of secondary sources including polling data, guidebooks, etiquette books, self-help literature, business textbooks, newspapers, stories, radio and TV programs, particularly focusing on American experience of modernity and Americans' life-satisfaction levels, case studies in this book are comprehensive and inclusive by providing some comparative perspective when required. One of the methodological tools the author particularly relies upon is surveys to measure and evaluate life satisfaction and happiness. Although the difficulty of definition of happiness and the complexity of happiness measurement varying with personality differences, cultural divergences, individual success and social levels are acknowledged, problematic correlation between modernity and happiness are fully analysed throughout the book. Another conceptual gripe relates to the interchangeable use of term 'happiness' and 'life satisfaction' in various parts of this study at the expense of ignoring the traditional philosophical debates over theories of happiness concerning the choice between life satisfaction and hedonism.

The book is organised according to certain themes and structured into three distinct parts; each of them has its own three chapters. Part One addresses key problems as modernity advances. The second part of the book highlights the factors that caused serious erosion in the belief of inevitable progress and focuses on the adaptation problems to modern conditions in order to explore the gap between modernity and satisfaction. To what extent modernity's deficiencies influenced the outcome of overall satisfaction is explored in the first chapter of the second part. It remains to be investigated in the following chapter how promising changes in different aspects of modernity, especially visible in the case of gender, sexuality, aging and eating, generated misleading initial reactions and surprises inducing continuing divisions and adaptation requirements.

In the search for a better understanding of adaptation to emerging modern patterns, the author points out how the initial mistake that advanced the idea of women as fragile, and the theme of happy housewives, aggravated modern conflicts. Correlatively, he seeks to explain in great detail that sexual modernity, emphasising the widespread practice of recreational sex instead of procreative sex, raises issues as well with its ongoing debates and continues to generate new problems that constrains satisfaction even though the first false steps in modern sexuality were significantly modified. Additionally, this chapter explores how the increase in food production, and the improvement of food quality and variety, caused unforeseen disruptions and problems: eating disorders such as obesity and anorexia; different eating trends such as snacks and fast-food; new desirable body images. All these changes have significantly complicated adjustments to modernity and constrained personal happiness in the modern era.

The last chapter of the second part, entitled 'The dilemmas of work in modernity', provides a complementary explanation of the gap between modernity and happiness through its profound analysis of the modern experience of work as a special case, while dealing with the problems of disconnections and incoherencies between modern work and both conventional standards and progressive predictions. Stearns justifies his standpoint by claiming that the basic systematic areas of deterioration in modern work have been improved, but not really eliminated. The point of departure for the final part is established at the outset with a framework which centres on the significant improvements brought by modernity readily generated new expectations that similarly started to threaten to overshadow the real gains of modernity. The first two chapters in the third part deals convincingly with the new tensions between modern experience and hopes in the vital aspects of life, particularly referring to death and childhood, which create more challenging and troubling new patterns.

The argument that the decline of death rates and the exclusion of death from daily life make people happier, is broadly supported, though it is supplemented by the consideration that new types of tensions contribute to the happiness gap. First of all, the higher life expectancy and the lower infant mortality rate give rise to a sense of self-denial, disappointment, despair and injustice to those facing premature death. Secondly, the rupture between death and daily social life is noticeably painful due to this contrast. Moreover, despite the reduction of conventional ways of encountering death, modern life poses new threats like automobile or industrial accidents, and causes new rational and irrational fears, given the new alertness to dangers and new aspirations for precaution. Additionally, modern people have difficulty mentioning any kind of death references in their daily conversations and create various forms of mourning rituals owing to their desire to avoid unhappiness.

It is crucial to note that modernity generated new reasons for parental anxiety and concern about children which make good parenting more challenging and a difficult task to achieve. Indeed, modernity adds new expectations and resets the parental agenda by encouraging parents to be responsible for providing the child with reassurance, emotional support, happiness and guidance. As a result, childhood and parenting in modernity surprisingly reproduce the larger gap between modern gains and modern happiness. The last chapter sets out in a very clear manner the ways in which consumerism contributes to overcoming modernity's deficiencies. From this perspective, consumerism became the component part of modernity that offers various opportunities for self-fulfilment. Consumption could serve as a distraction from disturbing feelings of death and offer a proper environment for expansion of recreational sex (production, sales, and distribution of pornographic materials). To put it simply, Stearns argues that consumer goods and consumer-based activities provide, to a large extent, enjoyment, pleasure, happiness and fun.

All in all, this book demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of how modernity has evolved with its all gains and complexities including its impact upon overall satisfaction. Although the author admits, in the introduction, the risk of overgeneralisation within a modern society, he does not seem to incorporate into his analysis of modernity different social classes (there is too much focus on the middle class) and other common divisions, including various religions and subgroups. Comparing the findings of different factors such as social class and religion would have enriched the content of this study. Likewise, even though the author acknowledges the persistence of poverty, diseases, ethnic violence, exploitation of workers, and new kinds of subordination of women and economic challenges in modern society, he assiduously asks why modernity did not bring overall satisfaction. From this angle, it would have been better to take into account failures of modernity more in his interrogations. Clearly this does seem like a missed opportunity not to even mention the Frankfurt School theory/theorists while analysing the reductions in commitments to progress in the modern era.

From my point of view, Eliasian works and reflections could have been useful for the arguments in this book. Long-term figurational shifts might be helpful to explain modern tensions, the changing balance of power, and the relationship between psychic processes and social processes. In this sense, the parts dealing with emotion management, self-control, time, childhood, death and mourning rituals could have been explored through figurational conceptualisation. Despite these points, the book does achieve what it sets out to do. This is a well-researched, highly readable and instructive book. It provides rich empirical material that is scholarly and well-written.

Jokes and Targets

Christie Davies

Reviewed by: Jessica Milner Davis, University of Sydney, Australia

This book is both a new contribution to research in humour studies and a revisiting and reinterpretation of Christie Davies' previously published work on the sociology of the joke. Solidly based in its research methodology, *Jokes and Targets* also reflects the author's lively personality by being a rattling good read. It is extensively referenced to other leading relevant works (and to some other unexpected but illuminating fields), but surprisingly not fully cross-referenced to Davies' own earlier landmark writings (apart from *Ethnic Humour Around the World,* Indiana University Press, 1990). The reader is apt to greet several striking joke-examples and insightful conclusions as welcome old friends, but would also like to know where they were first encountered. Davies, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Reading University, is the recipient of a 2012 life-time award for his contributions to the International Society for Humor Studies: one day perhaps his many friends and students will honour him with the complete annotated bibliography of his works that he has been too modest to present here.

The book nevertheless functions very well as a standalone study. It explores why in many cultures some social targets are chosen as the subjects of large numbers of jokes while others are not (p. 269). Along the way, it documents the history and nature of those societies and cultures, displaying the extraordinary range of Davies' reading and research. Not just sociology, philosophy, political science and cultural studies, but also literary references (using the term broadly) sprinkle the book, ranging from Shakespeare to Barry Humphries' comic creation, the crass Australian Cultural Ambassador, (Dr Sir Colin) Les(lie) Patterson (seemingly dear to the author). Never one to shy away from controversial subjects, Davies challenges us with his dicta on topics like post-modernism, brain-sex differences, the true nature of Stalinism and the attraction of 'rough trade' for many gay men; but these are always related to the topic at hand. Jokes, as he repeatedly points out, are the funnier for being transgressive as well as cleverly constructed (p. 226) and their study entails the keeping of an open mind.

Since the orderliness or patterning of jokes is the result of spontaneity on the part of very large numbers of individuals, Davies makes the case that these patterns are worth studying for their social and cultural significance (p. 2) as well as on account of their persistence. The presence (and absence) of certain categories of jokes surely reflect aspects of the societies that produce and enjoy them. Thus, despite their apparent triviality, they deserve the respect of scholars and analysts such as Davies. Rejecting both any snobbishness in taste and sloppiness in methodology, he has inspired other humour scholars over three decades to look carefully to methods beyond linguistic analysis (although he acknowledges its importance) and also to cross disciplinary boundaries. His own work is exemplary in its painstaking detail of collection, dating, sorting and logical analysis.

While Davies' previous work on large bodies of jokes with common targets or butts is well known, here he presses further with his analyses of the cultural significance of such instantly recognizable conventional figures and of the benefits of including them in jokes. Targets are controversial, particularly in this day and age of political correctness, but it is evident that whether ancient (like the canny Scot) or new (like the Jewish American Princess, pp. 115–8), they are not dying out. Davies' rousing defence of targets in jokes is that they allow jokes to be constructed in such a way that 'they play both with incongruity and with forbidden speech and as such provide many of our best jokes' (p. 278). To buttress this view, Davies canvasses the popular but opposing points of view that stereotypical jokes (such as those about stupid or oversexed people, or about powerful controlling figures such as lawyers and dictators) are instrumental in influencing personal attitudes and events. The conventional view is that ethnic and other stereotypical jokes are bad for society as reinforcing hatred; and a view popular among some humour researchers is that they are good because they

further personal and political freedom. As in earlier studies (eg. *The Mirth of Nations*, Transaction, 2002; 'Humour is not a strategy in war', *Journal of European Studies,* 31(1), 2001, 395–412), Davies concludes that jokes do not persuade, they merely reflect existing attitudes. Political jokes describe political absurdities but do not bring down dictators. Chapter six, 'The Rise of the Soviet Joke and the Fall of the Soviet Union', examines the popularity and patterns of jokes about the socialist system, arguing that they were a predictor of but not a contributor to its demise: 'jokes are a thermometer, not a thermostat' (p. 248). A similar conclusion has been reached in a study of Chinese political jokes about another centrally controlled polity (X. L. Ding, 'Freedom and Political Humour: Their Social Meaning in Contemporary China', in *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture: Resistance and Control*, eds. J. Milner Davis and J. Chey, Hong Kong University Press, 2013, 231–253).

Nevertheless, as Davies observes, the thermometer gives not only an accurate reading on temperature but also a vignette of the whole problem. He quotes a single joke (pp.237–8) to sum up the entire history of the Soviet economic system. Surely this afforded its contemporary audiences the momentary relief of laughing at the absurd incongruity between official pretence and daily reality:

> The Soviet leaders Joseph Stalin, Nikita Kruschev, and Leonid Brezhnev are travelling in a train. Suddenly the train stops.
>
> Stalin tries to solve the problem. The engineer is shot for sabotage and the co-drive is deported to Siberia. The train doesn't budge.
>
> Now it is Kruschev's turn. He brings the co-driver back from the labor camp and tells him, 'I know you have been in exile a long time, but please try to remember how to get the train going.' He cannot and the train still doesn't move.
>
> Brezhnev now orders that all the blinds be drawn across the windows and tell the passengers to start rocking in their seats. 'Now,' he says, 'the train is moving.'
>
> (There is a sequel in which Gorbachev is also present and says brightly, 'Why don't the four of us get out and push.')

Excellent as is the production of this book, more careful proof-reading would have eliminated a few infelicities such as duplicate explanations of the Russian NKVD as being the 'ancestor of the KGB' (paras 1 and 2 on p. 225), or the occasional joke floating without explanation (e.g. p. 132). A brave editor might also have challenged a few of Davies' self-proclaimed (p. 18) inserts of ironic post-modern echoes and word-plays. Most are delightful, but a few rather self-indulgently reflect personal likes and dislikes (e.g. the gratuitous pun 'Where there's muck, there's Manet' (p. 101), in relation to Manet's 1882 picture, 'The Bar at the Folies Bergère'). Groan.

What is especially valuable and new in the present study is the re-testing of the author's earlier models explaining the widespread occurrence of ethnic and other jokes with targets. Here he adds a third model relevant to some groups of stupidity (and canniness) jokes that had not previously been satisfactorily dealt with. This is the 'mind over matter' schema – one which certainly resonates with a reviewer brought up on studies of stage comedy where the opposition of nimble intellect to clumsy physique is basic to many comic scenes and situations. Three overlapping models (pp. 262–3) have now been derived by Davies from his studies of large-scale data (folkloric archives, interviews, printed joke collections, the internet etc): the centre-edge model, the monopoly versus competition model and the mind over matter model. Davies can fairly claim that 'taken together, they explain more than any one does on its own'. This is a healthy reminder that a

scholar's research is never done. Continued intensive research has allowed a section of the book (pp. 254–262) that canvasses a new list of Countries and their Targets, extending his Table 4 (from Davies 1990) with a new Table 5.

Meticulous as always, Davies concludes by welcoming the prospect of more and further research which might differ in its findings from his, but his present laurels are securely based on collected data. His perceptive belief that a phenomenon as seemingly trivial as jokes might provide fascinating insights into human societies remains an inspiration to humour scholars, and this reviewer looks forward eagerly to his next book.

Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America

Jo B. Paoletti

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012, $25 hbk, ISBN: 9780253001177, 192 pp.

Reviewed by: Olivia Freeman, Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland

This book offers a comprehensive historical account of changing trends in children's clothing dating back to 1885. The book focuses specifically on how children's clothing has been and continues to be utilised to express gender distinctions. Paoletti provides very detailed descriptions pertaining to how the style, cut, detailing and colours of young boys and girls clothes have evolved over the course of more than a century, along with explanations for her observed changing trends. The book is presented as something of a labour of love for Paoletti, who states that the study began thirty years ago when she posed the question as to when we started dressing girls in pink and boys in blue. She was astonished to find that the rules around gender symbolism in American children's fashions have changed hugely over time, to the extent that the conventions of 2010 are almost the reverse of those evident in 1890. Paoletti asserts that she is aware the book might attract a diverse audience from dress historians to gender studies theorists through to interested parents and grandparents and acknowledges the difficulties of trying to 'satisfy everyone' (p. xiii). Overall I found the book a stimulating and insightful read which provoked my interests both as an academic reviewer and a mother of two children, a boy and a girl both under two years.

Pink and Blue is informed by a number of theoretical strands including material culture studies, history of childhood, consumer culture, developmental psychology and the psychology of dress. Empirical evidence is drawn from a vast array of sources including advice manuals and childcare literature, retail catalogues, advertisements and articles in fashion magazines, paper dolls, baby record books, surviving examples of children's clothing, trade publications for the garment industry and comments posted on blogs and through social media.

The book comprises seven chapters which Paoletti claims are intended to read as 'roughly chronological' (p. xvi). The first chapter offers a theoretical perspective on children's clothing and highlights work from key theorists in the history and culture of childhood (Philippe Ariès, Linda Pollock, Karin Calvert), children and consumerism (Grant McCracken, Daniel Thomas Cook and Gary Cross), and children and gender identity (Sandra Lipsitz Bem, Eleanor Emmons Maccoby and Susan B. Kaiser). Where conventional fashion research has understood fashion to be a 'linear or cyclical progression of women and men who continually adopt new styles and discard old ones' (p. 14), Paoletti argues her explorations into children's clothing have brought her to a different view, one which is based on a 'generational' approach. Her analytical insights suggest that children's fashion results from a 'complex interaction' (p. 14) between children, parents and grandparents.

In chapter two 'Dresses are for Girls and Boys', and chapter three 'Pants are for Boys and Girls', Paoletti argues that between 1890 and the end of world war II, childhood was 'transformed from a gender-free zone populated by white-clad cherubs to an era of emerging gender signifiers such as pink and blue' (p. 27). She argues there was a greater emphasis on 'masculinizing' boys than there was on 'feminizing' girls because the fear of 'sexual depravity' was 'focused almost completely on boys' (p. 24). These chapters are largely descriptive but Paoletti also examines the meanings behind increasingly gendered clothing trends and suggests that clothing manufacturers and retailers 'harnessed the expertise of child development professionals to provide material solutions to parental fears' (p. 58). Chapter four, 'A Boy is Not a Girl', elaborates on some of the ideas identified earlier in the book and provides a detailed historical analysis of how gendered dress developed first and foremost as a way of symbolising masculinity and providing a male child with an avenue to express masculinity while also ensuring the child was recognised as male. Paoletti's analysis demonstrates how an examination of boys' clothes over the course of a century can provide great insights into how ideas around masculinity were argued and shaped.

Chapter five, 'Pink is for Boys', sees Paoletti address that first question that sparked her research; the changing significance of colour in gender expressions in clothing. This chapter includes an interesting discussion of what she refers to as the 'unisex era' (1965–85) (p. 94). Here the generational emphasis in her research takes centre stage as she argues that many baby boomers (now parents) 'vehemently rejected pink' (p. 94) as a strong symbol of traditional femininity. Chapter six, 'Unisex Child Rearing and Gender-Free Fashion', expands on this theme and Paoletti makes a strong argument that in order to get a thorough understanding of the meanings behind children's fashions, researchers need to look back twenty years to explain 'dramatic changes' and forward twenty years to understand 'impact' (p. 115) as it is her view that children's clothing styles are largely dictated by parents.

'Gendered and Neutral Clothing Since 1985' presents the final chapter of the book and brings this historical journey right up to the present day. Here Paoletti includes a thought-provoking discussion around the technological changes surrounding pregnancy including birth control, pregnancy tests and ultrasound. She presents extracts from her social media dataset and revisits the 'pink-blue' theme around gendered children's fashions. The generational theme is again highlighted here with Paoleti concluding that 'Each wave of parents dress their sons and daughters in ways that represent their own memories and their present lives as men and women' (p. 138). While she acknowledges too that children also have agency when it comes to gendered fashion, and that they will 'twist and stretch' (p. 138) the rules as they mature, the emphasis on adult caregivers as key decision-makers regarding what children wear is a welcome antidote to some of the consumption studies literature, which emphasises children's agency as consumers to the point at which adults are barely visible at all in empirical discussions.

Paoletti describes the book at the outset as 'an initial foray into the topic' (p. xiii) [of gender symbolism in American children's fashion] acknowledging that the discussion is biased towards middle- and upper-class American consumers. She argues that up until the 1960s only 'white children' were depicted in most clothing advertising and only one of the eight hundred baby books she examined at the UCLA library clearly belonged to an African-American child. While this bias might be seen as a shortcoming of such an otherwise hugely detailed historical analysis of gendered clothing, I think it is clear that Paoletti needed to set some parameters to this extensive research project.

The detailed descriptions of how children's clothing has changed over more than a century is clearly one of the great strengths of this book. However, as the book was structured to a large extent thematically there was at times some chronological overlap which led to some repetition in substance across chapters. A little more discussion on the role of clothes designers, buyers, manufacturers and retailers would have been welcome particularly in the modern day context, as clearly while parents choose clothes for their children these

agencies play a central part in 'setting' trends. This is clearly just one potential area for parallel research. I think overall this book stands alone as a fascinating historical account of the gendering of children's clothes while also providing a great opportunity for other researchers to conduct comparative studies across the same timeline using different cultural and geographical parameters.