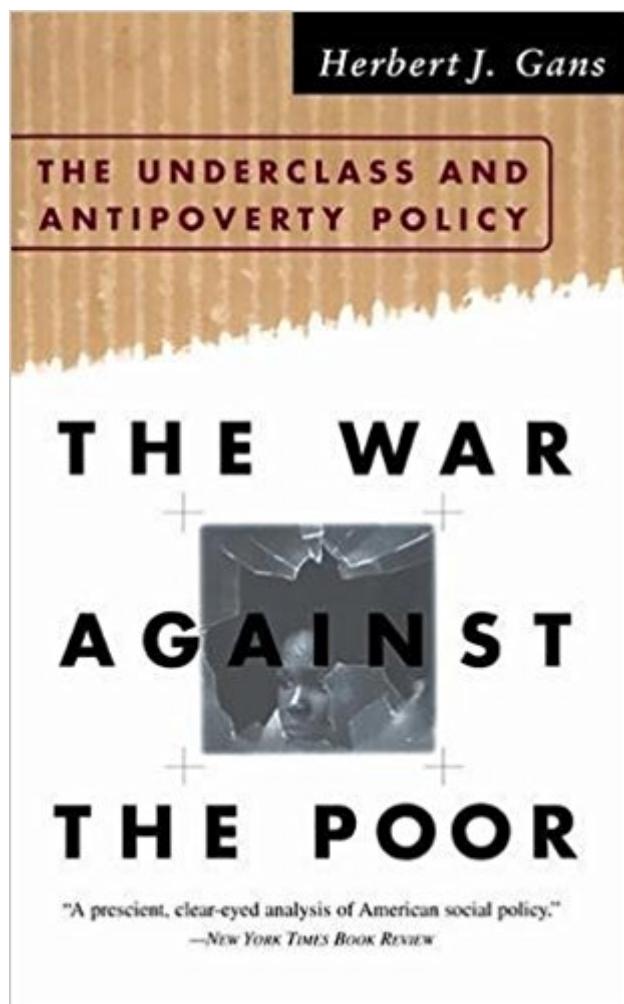


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# The War Against The Poor: The Underclass And Antipoverty Policy



## Synopsis

In his withering dissection of the origins and misuse of the term "underclass" to stereotype and stigmatize the poor, Herbert J. Gans shows how this ubiquitous label has relegated a wide variety of people—welfare recipients, the working poor, teenage mothers, drug addicts, the homeless, and others—to a single condemned class, feared and despised by the rest of society. Probing the deep psychological, social, and political reasons why Americans seek to indict millions of poor citizens as "undeserving," Gans calls for a cease-fire in the undeclared war against the poor. He concludes with a set of innovative, job-centered policy proposals and a multifaceted educational plan to stop the endless flow of new recruits into America's untouchable caste.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Noted Columbia University sociologist Gans (The Urban Villagers) offers a dry but forceful critique of current attitudes and policies toward the poor. First, he probes the rhetoric that stigmatizes the poor as undeserving, showing how the term "underclass" was curiously transformed from Gunnar Myrdal's economic term to a common code word for minorities that ignores the economic sources of their out-of-the mainstream behavior. Though some of the poor threaten society with street crime, Gans argues that we magnify that in comparison with other threats to safety, the economy and our values. Labeling the poor as undeserving has many larger functions, he notes, including supplying jobs for those who control and guard them (e.g., "police, judges, lawyers, court probation officers,

guards"). Gans's proposals to combat recidivism with job training and to offer universalistic, race-blind job programs may attract attention, but his recommendation of an income security grant seems out of sync with today's politics, as are his musings about a future economy that shares jobs and flattens incomes. But his proposal that the media and foundations act to debunk stereotypes about the poor, showing "how much their life consists of coping with frequent crises," seems an urgent prerequisite to any policy change. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Gans, Columbia University professor, author of such classic sociological studies as *The Levittowners* and *The Urban Villagers* (both 1982), makes his contribution to work on "the language of poverty" (See Michael Katz's *Improving Poor People* ) with this brief, meaty book. He traces the history of stigmatizing the poor, probes the roots of "the underclass" and other labels, explores why so many nonpoor Americans find those labels convincing, and proposes elements of a thoughtful antipoverty policy. The people we label "the underclass" are perceived by more fortunate citizens as a threat--partly real, but also imagined, exaggerated, and displaced. In addition, poor people serve various functions for the larger society: among them, economic, political, normative, microsocial and, most important, macrosocial roles--specifically, passing the stigma of "undeservingness" to future generations and ensuring that the poor will remain excluded from the labor market. Jobs are central to his policy prescriptions, but Gans holds that, after the turn of the century, absent government action, middle-class Americans will have as much trouble finding and keeping decently paid full-time jobs as the very poor today, so our ideology and policies must change soon. Stimulating, enlightening food for thought. Mary Carroll --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Professor Herbert Gans is an esteemed and reputable sociologist who first gained prominence with his absorbing study of the effect of urban renewal in the metropolitan Boston area for ethnic Americans in "The Urban Villagers" in the early 1960s, and also for his interesting description of the rise of suburbia in "The Levittowners". In the decades since Gans, now a professor at Columbia University, has gained a reputation as a careful, deliberate and thorough sociological investigator in a number of other notable studies and articles. With this recent book he now explores the nature of the connections between the rise of the permanent underclass as an entity in late 20th century American society and the kinds of federal, state, and local public policy that have facilitated the rise of the underclass and led to its establishment as a permanent feature of contemporary

society. Thus, although this book is fairly brief, it is extremely well written and contain a virtual cornucopia of vital facts related to the nature of the human beings that comprise the underclass as well as how public policy feeds into the nature of the social, economic and political dilemma the members of the impoverished lower reaches of our society are afflicted with. Regardless of the professional tone to the language Professor Gans so skillfully employs, the reader can immediately sense the degree of empathy and compassion this bespectacled and now elderly academic holds for the human beings he is writing about. While tracing the history of the poor in this country, he illustrates how they have come to be stigmatized and blamed for their situation, a clear case of what fellow academic William Ryan described in detail in the now classic book, "Blaming The Victim". Indeed, many more affluent Americans find such labels convincing, and by not recognizing that such ignorance makes for public policy that turns such self-serving nonsense into a self-fulfilling reality, have contributed to the staggering dimensions of the social problem. In what is easily the most frightening portion of the book, Gans shows how the existence of the underclass serves the more affluent sectors of the society, in a multitude of ways not only facilitating the passing on of social myths that continue to afflict the poor but also passing on the degree to which the rest of us seem to be collectively deaf, dumb, and blind to the consequences of such a labeling process. Poor people have their social functions, and many of these serve the interests of the more affluent while at the same time exacerbating the problems of the poor. In this respect, more enlightened public policy can serve to ameliorate these wrongs and aid individual human beings caught in the grinding grip of ignorance and poverty. Not surprisingly, Gans focuses on the critical importance of providing jobs to help such individuals rise to more full participation in the society, and warns that without such active governmental intervention, the problems now afflicting the lower reaches of society may find their way into a much wider sector of society, and that many middle Americans may find themselves slipping as they strive to maintain their place in a rapidly changing social, economic, and political environment. What we now bravely call a technological revolution was once referred to in less glowing terms as 'automation', and at that time it was better understood by the average working person to have many more negative connotations for them in terms of their ability to gain and keep themselves employed than seems to be true in today's hyped-up world of media bally-hoo. Gans is warning us of more stressful times to come, and asks us to reconsider our priorities to become more fully human. As John Kennedy once said, if we cannot save the millions who are less fortunate, then surely there is little hope for the few who are rich. Perhaps it is in our own interests as citizens and as human beings to begin to behave more responsibly.

This book is a great way to look at how many labels are put on people without allowing them to change who they are because of the labels. If we choose to label everyone we put them in a box and sometimes they feel like they can only stay in that box. This book helps us see the different aspects of poor to rich and how we as the people are the ones making life harder.

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Truth does exist and Mr. Gans is one who sees it. Forget about greed, selfishness, and vacuous pursuits of bling and more bling. Mr. Gans tells us what we must do to raise our country from the filth of conservatism. I wonder if Mr. Gans carries in his mind the image of a little girl picking through a garbage dump to eat while the rich play games on their yachts. His book says he does.

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