

# Why America hates its poor

Nico Lang, The Daily Dot

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I grew up walking in the road instead of on the sidewalk. We lived in a trailer park inconveniently situated over the highway that divided our conservative Ohio town, and the sidewalk was raised much higher than the road, by a good three feet. The added elevation made you easily visible to the passing cars below, and I didn't want them to see me in my thrift store jeans and hand-me-down sweaters, which were usually about two sizes too big. But more than that, I feared the thought of being associated with my own neighborhood, a place where the local government came to drop off welfare lunches to us every day, white bread bologna sandwiches with a side of fruit cocktail.

Famed economist Milton Friedman once promised that there's no such thing as a free lunch, and he was right. In high school, we moved to a neighboring home after my mother's divorce, a dilapidated old shack of a trailer with a caved in roof that leaked everywhere when it stormed. Our pots spent more time collecting rust-colored summer rain than they did on our stove. The previous occupant's husband died in the front room, and she left the chair for us as a souvenir. When I invited friends over to my house, I could tell they were as embarrassed by my address as I was, even when we were too shy to say why.

The real cost of a free lunch isn't just for the taxpayers who help pay for it but for those who eat it, the looks in the eyes of those around you. You never forget it, as if they're seeing you for the first time.

That look reminds me of a crucial moment in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*, when Sarah Jane, the film's secret protagonist, faces her worst fear: Her boyfriend discovers she's half black. From a young age, she learns to deny her racial identity as a means of survival. When Sarah Jane is young, she and her mother move in with an aspiring actress (played by Lana Turner) and her daughter, Susie, both of whom are almost shockingly blond. As a means of bonding with her new housemate, Susie gives Sarah Jane one of her dolls, a black doll her mother recently bought. Sarah Jane immediately rejects the gift—because that's not the way she wants the world to see her.

Extremely light-skinned, Sarah Jane spends most of her teens struggling to fit into a white world, and she insists that perception is reality. "I am white," she tells anyone who tries to warn her of the costs of passing. However, the altercation with her boyfriend reminds her of the reality: He beats Sarah Jane for her "deception," sending her back to her mother with a bloodied, teary-eyed face. This pattern is repeated throughout the film, as she's routinely "unmasked" and spit upon for it. It speaks a grim truth: No matter how much Sarah Jane spends her time running from her social position and despising the fact of her birth, she doesn't hate herself nearly as much as others do.

That “unmasking” is behind two recent bills that caught the Internet’s attention this week. Kansas and Missouri’s legislatures are working to target the social services provided to the state’s welfare recipients, limiting how people on welfare can use their assistance. In Missouri, a bill awaits Gov. Sam Brownback’s approval that would ban soda, energy drinks, cookies, and chips. Curtailing spending on snacks and soft drinks might be defensible from a public health angle (former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg would be a fan), but the state is also targeting steak and seafood—which speaks, ironically, less to concerns about welfare and more about policing what poor people do.

If the latter point is not clear to you, Kansas is going further: The state plans to limit not only the amount of money that TANF recipients can withdraw from their benefit card each day but also the types of entertainments they’re allowed to enjoy while doing so. As well as prohibiting visiting swimming pools, gambling or getting tattoos, Kansans on welfare would not be able to spend money at a “theme park, dog or horse racing facility, parimutuel facility, or sexually oriented business or any retail establishment which provides adult-oriented entertainment in which performers disrobe or perform in an unclothed state for entertainment, or in any business or retail establishment where minors under age 18 are not permitted.”

In Kansas, this bill is tied to a widespread rollback in the state’s welfare program. From 2011 to 2015, the number of Kansans receiving TANF benefits has plummeted from 38,000 to 15,000; if you think that’s a victory for the war on poverty, think again. According to Kansas Action for Children, the number of children living in poverty has skyrocketed over the same period. Further statistics from the organization show that in 2012, 19 percent of children in the state were living below the poverty line, with a slim majority of schoolchildren statewide receiving free or reduced lunches based on need. That problem is particularly pronounced in densely-settled rural areas, according to KAC, where 60.15 percent of kids receive lunch assistance.

While few—aside from the one-percenter who didn’t want to give Halloween candy to poor kids—would fault a pre-teen for eating a free white bread sandwich on a grassy knoll, our society has a more difficult time extending empathy to their parents. An anonymous DataLounge post from 2013 sums up our feelings about the impoverished nicely. Titled “I HATE POOR PEOPLE,” the original poster laments: “Poverty is the only social disease a person can fix on their own. Why do they insist on making their plight my problem?”

As the many responses in that comment thread point out, no one chooses to be poor. I lived in Chicago for nearly a decade, and down the street from my apartment in the Wilson section of Uptown, I often passed a woman whose hair hadn’t been washed or groomed in so long that it was knotted down her back in a single violent mass, and her teeth were nearly unrecognizable as teeth. I saw her often and she never recognized me; I looked into her eyes for a light or even a flicker to tell me anyone was home, and I saw nothing. A person of such circumstances is not born. They must be created.

In a 2012 essay for the Guardian, Suzanne Moore points out that the poor are often treated like addicts, the “author of their own misfortune.” “Poverty is self-inflicted,” Moore bitinglly writes. “All these hopeless people: Where do they all come from?” Statistics show there’s an answer for that—it’s a product of the growing divide when it comes to wealth and privilege in modern America.

In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan’s self-titled economics program began to drastically rollback social programs established by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. Between 1979 and 2012, workers’ wages have stagnated...rising just 5 percent,” reports AlterNet’s Leo Gerard. “Workers are more productive. Their labor is creating record profits. But they’re not benefitting.” Who does benefit? In 2013, EPI.org reported that the average CEO made 295 times the average worker, although it’s unlikely that they did 295 times the work. In 1978, that figure was just 29.9.

As Barbara Ehrenreich memorably argued in the seminal *Nickel and Dimed*, it’s those low-wage workers who are essentially paying for everyone else’s prosperity with their cheap labor:

When someone works for less pay than she can live on—when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently—then she has made a great sacrifice for you, she has made you a gift of some part of her abilities, her health, and her life. The “working poor,” as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else.

But despite those noble sacrifices, our view of the poor, particularly those who receive public assistance, fails to be nearly as generous. According to Joshua Holland, the author of *The Fifteen Biggest Lies About the Economy*, much of that has to do with two staples of stereotypes about American poverty: “the infamous, Cadillac-driving welfare queen and the ‘strapping young buck’ who lived large on T-bone steaks purchased with food stamps.” These images were popularized by Reagan in his famous arguments against “nanny state,” which worked to blame those less unfortunate for their place in the American caste system of wealth.

Instead of Johnson’s “War on Poverty,” Reagan waged a war on the poor. As *Affluence and Influence* author Martin Gillens explains, demonizing people of color was key in shifting the rhetoric around poverty. “The media started to portray those programs much more negatively as being abused by people who didn’t really need them, as being inefficient and so on,” Gillens argues. “And it’s really right at that time—and it’s a very dramatic shift in the media portrayal—that the imagery shifts from poor white people, positively portrayed, to poor black people, negatively portrayed.”

Whereas the 1920s had the Joads of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* to put a face on the saintly white poor, struggling with dignity, Sirk's *Sarah Jane* shows there's little sympathy for black folks in America. Both of Reagan's famous examples were implicitly coded as black, and even a sympathetic 1996 cover from the liberal magazine *The New Republic* portrayed the welfare mother as African-American, smoking a cigarette while her infant nurses on bottled milk beside her. For the mag, it might have ironically commented upon an unfortunate cliché, but for others, it was simply a representation of the truth.

Although Americans don't like the impoverished in general, the cases of Walter Scott and Eric Garner show it's particularly easy to deny the black poor humanity. During the infamous 2014 water shutdowns in Detroit, *Common Dreams*' Kim Redigan spoke to waiters who worked downtown, and she heard a common refrain: "If they can't pay their bills, too bad." Instead of relying on the common decency of their fellow citizens to offer solidarity, it was the United Nations who had to issue a declaration on the shutoffs. "This is what it's come to: appealing to an international body to uphold the basic human right to water," Redigan wrote.

In an essay that went viral in 2013, Virginia Commonwealth University sociology professor Tressie McMillan Cottom argued that behind all of these cases isn't just a hatred for poor people but a need to separate them from ourselves. When two Barneys customers were racially profiled that year while purchasing expensive luxury goods, it was easy to tsk-tsk not just at structural racism but at their own decisions. On Twitter, New York journalist Errol Louis tweeted: "#SFMH over a not-filthy-rich-person spending \$2500 on a handbag."

In response to his tweet, McMillan Cottom writes, "At the heart of [such] incredulous statements about the poor decisions poor people make is a belief that we would never be like them. We would know better. We would know to save our money, eschew status symbols, cut coupons, practice puritanical sacrifice to amass a million dollars."

It's easy to "expose" the poor for their own failures and much harder to look behind that mask to see the person gasping for breath inside it. Why would someone living in poverty want to go to the movies or a theme park? For the same reasons that everyone else does: to enjoy a momentary escape from real life. However, Kansas and Arkansas seem to serve the same purpose of *Sarah Jane*'s assailant, reminding her that no matter how far she runs, she can't run far enough. *Sarah Jane* spends her entire childhood trying to be someone else, the kind of person who would have, in fact, starred in a movie with Ronald Reagan.

But eventually, we all have to grow up and see things for the way they are. If life forces you to walk in the road, someday you have to ask why.

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