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## *Kristin S. Seefeldt and John D. Graham, America's Poor and the Great Recession*

Konstantinos Blatanis

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- 1 In this concise yet highly informative study, Kristin Seefeldt and John Graham examine the multiple ways in which the Great Recession of the period from December 2007 to June 2009 and its aftermath affected the lives of low-income Americans. Appropriately enough, the authors set out to explain the terms in which poverty is defined in contemporary U.S. before they can first consider the efficacy of federal anti-poverty programs and then conclude the work with their own suggestions on how the governmental safety net for the poor should be protected and strengthened. Based on a white paper Seefeldt and Graham had prepared with a group of doctoral students at Indiana University for Tavis Smiley's project "Poverty Tour" in 2010-11, the book offers a general nonetheless candid overview of these issues as the authors conduct their interrogations primarily by inspecting carefully data and statistics they efficiently select from local, state, and federal reports and briefs. To a much lesser extent, the argument is implemented by references and responses to recently published books and articles on current policy analysis.

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The research is handled in an uncomplicated mode and an entirely unaffected prose which render the material accessible to all different types of readers. It is indeed one of the authors' accomplishments that they manage to attract attention to the question of poverty in such a direct and clear tone for a socio-cultural context where middle-

class identification has perennially proven nothing short of a collective ideological fetish. At the same moment, it is also important to underline that Seefeldt and Graham consciously strive to retain a neutral political stance which might be mistakenly seen even as an apolitical gesture. Yet, as the writers' analysis testifies—often almost against its own self—the effort to discuss poverty and the social welfare system in the U.S.—or in any other country for that matter—, in a purely detached mode is in essence an impossibility. And although these two researchers favor no particular sociological theoretical standpoint and similarly endorse no specific model of economic analysis, the points they make are by no means voiced in a political vacuum. Rather, they desire to secure that their findings will attract the attention of both Democrats and Republicans. This is evident throughout the work, whether they try to define the period or attempt to discuss different types of poverty and new phenomena of social marginalization.

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Despite the fact that on a surface level the two researchers may appear to be content with the teleology of the cycles of capitalism—recessions, both minor and major ones, are outlined as almost indispensable to the health of the system—, intriguingly enough the pressure of political questions cuts through the analysis, even if momentarily, as they focus on information of the following type: “The United States made no progress in reducing poverty from 1980 until 2007, despite the fact that the U.S. economy and the stock market took some of the largest strides upward in modern American history” (28). Needless to say, that this type of evidence may easily invite even a third grader to, simply yet pointedly, ask “how come?” Furthermore, Seefeldt and Graham highlight pressing issues of political agency when, for example, they openly inform their reader that a present-day American worker who is employed full time and receives the federal minimum wage will remain “under the official poverty level for a family of three” (32). Attention is thus briefly given to thorny political issues which evidently demand further research. However, these questions are not pursued here at length, since the aim of the authors is to offer a factual account of the manifestations of relative and deep poverty at present, to document statistically the experience of the new poor and to study how the safety net responded, in terms of figures and percentages, to the “brutal forces of the Great Recession” (42). On this plane of inquiry, their brief review of private philanthropy during the targeted period allows them to support the argument that a valid anti-poverty

policy should always depend upon a carefully organized set of governmental programs. Thus, they proceed to clarify what each individual component of the safety net is designed to achieve and catalogue the actual results these programs have produced over the past five years or so. Always loyal to their neutral tone, the authors insist nonetheless that this is a sphere of public management where a lot more needs to be done and convincingly argue that the safety net faces the greatest dangers during the phase of slow recovery.

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In their effort to clarify this position, Seefeldt and Graham review the following programs: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid and Child Health Insurance Program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Supplemental Security Income, Housing Assistance, Unemployment Insurance, Earned Income Tax Credit. This is an assessment which offers them the chance to voice their own contribution to the current, multileveled discussion on poverty in America and thus they clearly state:

Our thesis is that a big risk for low-income families—possibly bigger than the risk faced in the 2007-2010 period—is during the slow recovery through the end of the decade. As we shall see, there are already some signs that elected officials may begin to reduce financial support for the safety net before the economy has fully recovered. (90)

- 5 Furthermore, they provide their reader with insights which evidently invite further examination when, for example, they stress that “[t]hese programs are also vulnerable to being placed under the auditor’s microscope because their beneficiaries are not politically potent” (94). The chapter on the risks the safety net currently faces adequately serves as an introduction for the sixth and concluding one in which the authors present their ideas for improvements and implementations to the different programs.

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On the whole, they organize their recommendations around two main axes: “(1) indexing the federal minimum wage for inflation and (2) finding efficiencies in the safety net” (103). In principle, they aspire to outline measures and solutions that are, first and foremost, “palatable” (104) to the two major political parties and as a result in the process “could become politically feasible” (105). It is also important to underline that the researchers instructively discern identified cons and pros of these programs. Thus, for instance, they insightfully explain “that the structure of the TANF program seems to have been designed for a booming economy rather than the Great Recession and its

relatively jobless recovery” (122). Similarly, they warn policy makers that UI “is not well designed to reflect the realities of today’s labor market” (123). Thus, they note that “[t]he average duration of tenure in a job is declining, women are working outside the home, and low-paying service sector jobs are proliferating” (123). Finally, in their favored, direct mode, they defend the underlying principle of their recommendations when they argue that “putting more money in the hands of low-income Americans is one of the best stimulus strategies” (128).

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All in all, Seefeldt and Graham fulfill their primary goal since they do manage to present a book which can be used as a “readable [...] supplementary text in undergraduate and graduate courses” (xiv) on poverty and social policy in the U.S. at present. Moreover, precisely because the work offers substantial evidence and thoroughly systematized data about these social phenomena but also provokes questions and debates on these pressing political issues, it may well serve as a guide for future research and may equally prove instrumental in triggering novel responses by both researchers and policy makers.

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