

Review

## *Poverty Safari*

*Understanding the anger of Britain's underclass* by Darren McGarvey

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**H**igh Victorians talked of the “residuum”, Karl Marx of the “lumpen proletariat, Tony Blair of the “underclass”, and Jesus Christ of “the poor, who will always be with us”. Darren McGarvey writes about deprivation. However, he does not make the mistake of Nick Cohen or Owen Jones by assimilating, or seeming to assimilate the entire working class into the ranks of the poor or socially excluded. Darren McGarvey clearly understands that he is writing about ‘the poor’, a distinct minority of the working class grievously shunned and neglected by the rest of us.

© Don Milligan, ‘Review of Darren McGarvey, *Poverty Safari: Understanding the anger of Britain's underclass*’, November 7, 2018, posted on [www.donmilligan.net](http://www.donmilligan.net)

*Poverty Safari* is composed of 32 short chapters all interlaced with Darren McGarvey's memories of his family and the neighbourhoods he's lived in or passed through. He writes about the battles fought with his personal political convictions, about his class prejudices, and the social struggles waged to make a dent, however small, in the disregard which frames the lives of poor people. McGarvey writes movingly of the world in which those condemned to live in areas of deprivation strive to survive and of their often ruinous and self-defeating responses.

He writes about the Gorbals and Pollok, about tower blocks – the dystopian realities of utopian schemes – realised by architects with budgets as limited as their understanding of the communities they were rehousing. Despite McGarvey's tight focus on the deprived edges of Glasgow there is nothing parochial about this book. We know it could just as easily be about Salford, Lambeth, Bideford, or Gloucester. Desperate times and deprivation can be found in capacious pockets scattered widely across Britain.

What to do about it? Here the book is full of welcome surprises – instead of blandly blaming 'The Tories' or 'Capitalism' McGarvey talks about the apparently intractable problems and challenges involved in attempting to improve the lot of those who find themselves at the bottom of the heap. He thinks we should refuse solutions that remove agency and responsibility from the poor – people should not be regarded as defenceless victims – but engaged with as individuals and communities capable of learning to contend with their complex and manifold problems.

Of course, 'capitalism' is a factor in the generation and reproduction of deprivation, and the Labour Party is no more capable than the Tories of dealing with the widespread neglect and penury that leads so often to addiction, abuse, bewilderment, and to a rank inability to distinguish the numerous elements that need to be

disentangled before any bespoke solutions can be tailored or offered.

This is why McGarvey argues that all concerned – the deprived and the well-heeled – need to reflect much more personally about how they stand in relation to poverty and deprivation. He is withering about those seeking revolutionary disorder as a route to social transformation. Consequently, the book argues frankly against the view that widespread revolutionary violence and economic dislocation could make poverty a thing of the past.

McGarvey does not believe that either of the main political parties are able to deal with deprivation – he believes that an enormous effort is required, engaging the entire society, both left and right. This means that it is necessary to eschew leftist conceptions of class struggle and class war, in favour of a much more subtle and multifaceted approach. One that accepts that the poor can be their own worst enemies, as they strive to cope with the emotional, psychological, and economic distress of lives disfigured by neglect, addiction, and abuse.

*Poverty Safari* is articulate about the way poor people are displaced – displaced by representations and plans designed for them and their blighted neighbourhoods – which take little or no account of how the people wrestling with the difficulties of deprivation might think about anything. The solutions so often come from the well-heeled whose very externality deprives them of real or comprehensive understanding of what needs to be done.

Reading this book strengthened my distrust of those on the left who appear to have cornered the market in human sympathy for “those less fortunate than themselves”. The mass of superannuated youth who’ve recently crowded into the Labour Party appear to imagine that their inability to raise a mortgage gives them some kind of affinity with the poor, resulting in a Labour movement that when it is not obsessing over

the crimes of Jewish nationalists, appears to be gripped by the predicament of the low paid and the poverty stricken. These Momentumtypes appear to be convinced, in defiance of all previous experience, that they can run capitalism in a manner that sweeps away deprivation simply because they are not Tories.

Darren McGarvey is notably less sectarian than myself and does not wade in against the Labour left, but he doesn't endorse their approach either, preferring instead to stress the importance of individual agency:

A systemic analysis does not account for the subtleties of poverty at ground level; the link between false belief and self-defeating action that keeps so many of us trapped in a spin cycle of stress and thoughtless consumption.

But these problems, as banal as they seem, are as fundamental to tackling poverty at the root as any critique of an economic system. Yet, rather than integrate this truth into our analysis, we have allowed right wing movements to monopolise the concept of personal agency and the notion of taking responsibility. Worse, we vilify anybody who implies that poor people may sometimes play a role in their own circumstances, whether they be desirable or adverse. We've forgotten that not every problem or issue can be ascribed to broader social problems or power dynamics. We deny the objective truth that many people will only recover from their mental health problems, physical illnesses and addictions when they, along with the correct support, accept a certain level of culpability for the choices they make. Yet such an assertion has become offensive to our ears despite being undeniably true. When was the last time you heard a prominent left-wing figure speak of the power inherent within each of us to overcome adversity and transform the conditions of our own lives?

McGarvey is not saying that policy and government action doesn't matter, but he is saying that grappling with the problems thrown up by neglect, deprivation, and exclusion, requires a deeper level of involvement than is canvassed by any of the country's major political players.

His text is marred only by the breathless wonder McGarvey adopts when he considers that he's actually written a book, because it is blindingly obvious by the quality of his writing and modes of expression that whatever his other troubles have been, verbal and literary fluency have not been among them.

Read *Poverty Safari*, it's full of surprising insights concerning those who Jack London, more than a century ago, referred to as *The People of the Abyss*.