
Those Society Has Abandoned

From Pariahs to Partners:

*How Parents and Their Allies Changed New York City's
Child Welfare System*

By David Tobis

New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 250 pp., \$29.95, hardcover

To the End of June:

The Intimate Life of American Foster Care

By Cris Beam

New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014, 313 pp., \$26.00, hardcover

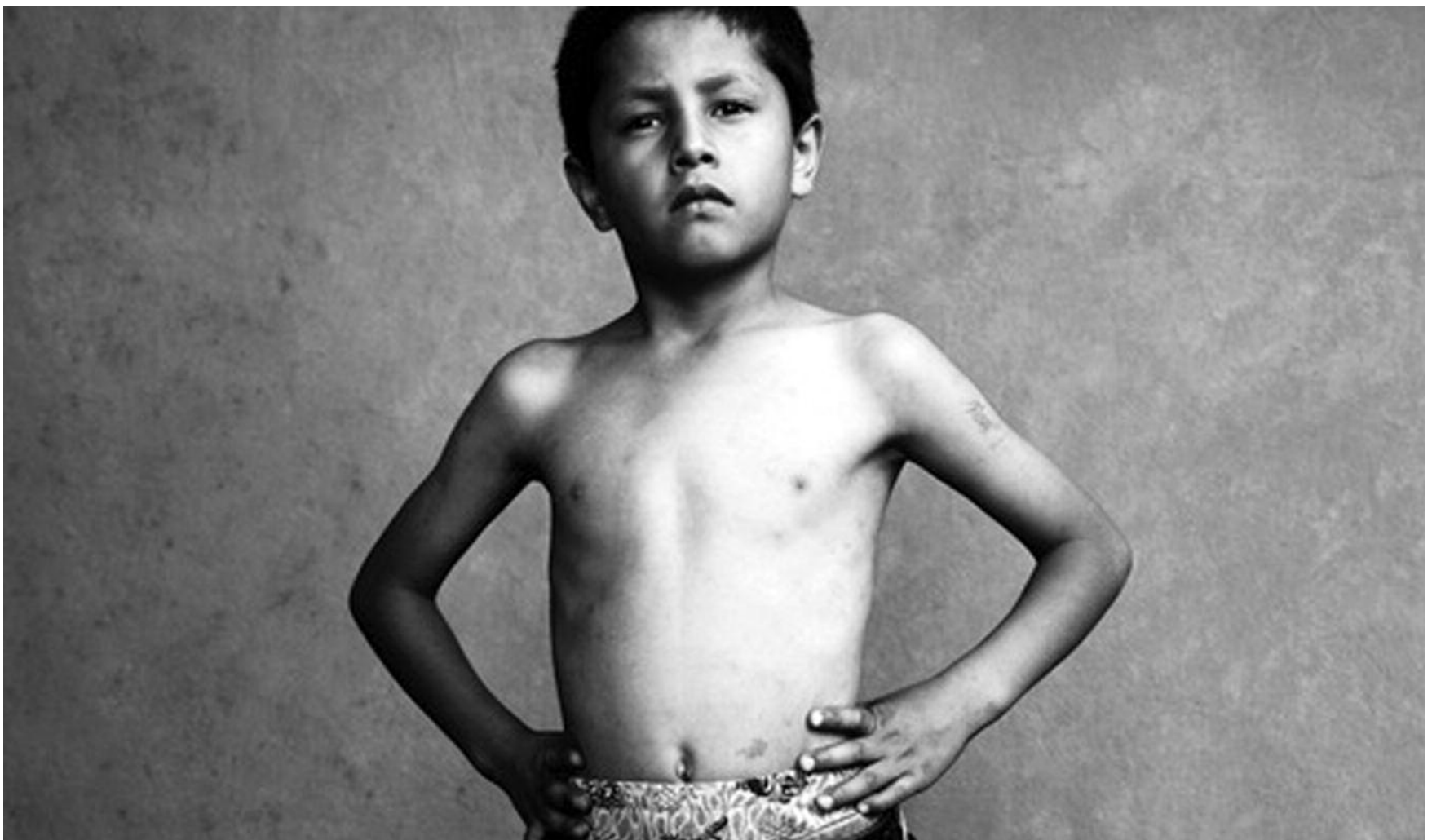
Reviewed by Ruth Sidel

On March 20, 2014, Shanesha Taylor, a mother of three children, had for the first time in several years an interview for a good job, one that offered both a salary that could support her family and the possibility of advancement. Once lower middle class, she had been on a downward spiral during the recent recession: she had lost her home, worked at low-paying jobs, applied for food stamps and Medicaid, and struggled to care for her children. On the day of

Taylor's story, recounted in an article in the *New York Times* (June 22, 2014), drew widespread attention, for it dramatically illustrates the struggles of many parents, especially single mothers, as they attempt simultaneously to financially support and care for their children in a society that provides, at best, fragmented and inadequate human services.

fault or that of an unjust society? During the nineteenth century, poverty was widely perceived as moral failure. Today's decision makers often seem to agree: so should society be punitive or giving?

From Pariahs to Partners tells the dramatic story of how mothers whose children were placed in foster care fought to become respected advocates and stakeholders in a system that had previously viewed them as outlaws. The author, David Tobis, a



her interview, she could not find child care, and she left her two younger children, ages two years and six months (the third was in school), in her car in the parking lot with the windows cracked, while she went into the interview. She said the interview coincided with their nap times. When she came out of the building feeling that the interview had gone very well, she found her car surrounded by police. Within hours, she was posing for mug shots, charged with two counts of felony child abuse, each carrying a maximum sentence of seven years. She was not permitted to see her children again for more than two months.

Americans' attitudes toward child welfare have been complex and conflicted for centuries. From the Poor Laws of the 1600s, to the almshouses of the 1800s, to the orphanages of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, our response to the poor, including poor children, has been a mixture of hostility and concern, punishment and care. The American Dream proclaims that if you "work hard and play by the rules" you can make it—so who is to blame when families fall by the wayside? When they face unemployment, homelessness, health crises, even dissolution, what should be the attitude of the state? Are the problems of the poor their own

consultant to UNICEF and the World Bank on children's issues and the former executive director of the Child Welfare Fund, which spearheaded the effort to involve parents in their children's placements, vividly recounts the decades-long struggle to have the mothers of foster children accepted as part of the team making decisions about their children's lives.

Stereotypes and negative attitudes toward poor people, people of color, and single mothers have been central to the child welfare system—even though the vast majority of the children in it are poor and a disproportionate number are children of

color. In New York City in 2007, writes Tobis, 96 percent of the children in foster care were children of color, and many of the families enmeshed in the system were headed by women. It has always been extraordinarily rare for a white, middle- or upper-middle-class family to get caught up in the complex maze of child welfare. Once families become entangled in the system, according to Tobis, “Too many children are removed from their families, too many children remain in foster care too long, and too many children end up severely damaged or homeless when they leave foster care.”

The child welfare system in New York City is a \$2 billion enterprise that employs approximately 14,000 people and is involved in the lives of roughly 100,000 children and their families. Until the early 1990s, parents were excluded from the process that investigated them, provided them with services and, in some cases, removed their children and placed them in foster care. In 1991, Tobis, with the aid of an anonymous donor, created the Child Welfare Fund, which aimed, through grant making, “to end the exclusion of parents from child welfare decision making,” writes Tobis. He recounts stories of mothers whose children were removed from their homes who later became parent advocates, recognized and respected by child welfare professionals.

A second goal of the Child Welfare Fund was to change the public’s and the professionals’ perceptions of the parents involved in the child welfare system. Due in part to the demonization, by politicians and the media, of people of color and single mothers, the public and child welfare professionals alike tended to blame mothers—rather than widespread conditions such as poverty, unemployment, substandard housing, and racism—for their families’ problems. He and the organizations he supported believed that involving the families most affected by the system would reveal them as complex individuals, struggling to deal with a multitude of problems, rather than as stereotyped stick figures. Their involvement would humanize the system or at very least bring parental concerns into consideration when life-altering decisions were being made. The fund developed new publications that both criticized child welfare policies and revealed their effects on the lives of the families. With the help of some of the leaders within the system and some remarkably dedicated colleagues and parents, Tobis and the fund were able to institute significant reforms into a highly punitive and discriminatory system. Since many states report problems and abuses similar to those Tobis found in New York, such reforms clearly need to be put in place throughout the country.

Cris Beam, in her absorbing and moving book, *To the End of June*, analyzes the issues from a different perspective. A foster mother herself, Beam follows a few families for several years in their struggles with an often-capricious foster care system and analyzes its impact on the people involved.

The rationale for the foster care system is the problem of abuse and neglect within families. However, Beam astutely notes that definitions of “abuse” or “neglect” are mutable and inconsistent. For example, corporal punishment, once common, is no longer considered appropriate by child welfare workers—yet many subcultures in the US still believe in and utilize it. Beam also stresses that race

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and class often determine which families become involved in the foster care system. Poor parents’ behavior is far more likely to be scrutinized and monitored than that of affluent parents, and to be found wanting. In addition, families of color have disproportionately high levels of unemployment, poverty, homelessness, teen parenthood, and incarceration, stressors that make them vulnerable to family instability and scrutiny by the authorities at all levels.

Beam movingly discusses the emotional cost of foster care. She points out that many of the children in foster care are bereaved and grieving the loss of their primary parent. She describes a “foster girl” who had tattooed “Matthew 27:46” on the inside of her arm. The passage describes the moment Jesus is nailed to the cross, and “he cries out to his father, ‘Why hast thou forsaken me.’” While the foster child is grieving for the lost parent, he or she is expected to relate warmly and constructively to a substitute parent—who is in all likelihood undertrained and underpaid for an exceedingly difficult and demanding job. The adult survivors Beam interviews—such as the woman who remembered by name the eight group homes plus a psychiatric unit in which she lived before she was sentenced to twelve years in prison for burglary—recall their grieving childhoods. This grief is all the more poignant because young people, who may lack understanding of the complexities of life and the world outside of their own experience, may believe that what is happening to them is their fault—that if they were somehow better and more lovable, they would not be perpetually abandoned.


Loss is the overwhelming theme of these stories: mothers who have lost their children; children who have lost their parents and often their siblings as well; foster parents who become attached to their foster children, only to watch them removed and sent elsewhere; foster parents desperately eager to adopt their foster child, only to have the birth mother change her mind.

The emotional toll of the system extends to the workers as well. If a child known to the child welfare system is not removed from the home and is injured—or even killed—by the parent, the child welfare worker is blamed. If children are repeatedly moved from foster home to foster home and therefore have problems bonding with caregivers, the worker is blamed. Yet these workers, like foster parents, are often grossly undertrained and

underpaid, and are burdened with far too high a caseload and far too little respect. They too may feel they have been abandoned.

Both of these important books describe and analyze central problems within the child welfare system and more specifically within the foster care system, and demonstrate reforms that can and indeed in some cases have been enacted to make caring for families in need more effective and more humane. But until the United States as a society addresses our massive and growing economic inequality, the families who have least will continue to suffer. In addition, as the economist Joseph Stiglitz wrote in the *New York Times* (Sunday Review, June 29, 2014), “With almost a quarter of American children younger than five living in poverty, and with America doing so little for its poor, the deprivations of one generation are being visited upon the next.”

Hostility, or at the least ambivalence, toward the poor makes US political leaders reluctant to provide adequate benefits for those in need. Access to a job, an affordable, decent place to live, adequate food, accessible health care including treatment for addiction and mental illness, and parenting support would go a long way toward keeping families together and out of the foster care system. Virtually every other developed country has a comprehensive family policy that eases the burdens of poverty and provides crucial services to parents and children. Until the US develops a truly humane family policy that meets the basic needs of its people and helps them to cope effectively with the extraordinarily difficult problems they face, families will indeed continue to feel abandoned and alienated.

Shanesha Taylor was trying to find a way to grasp a small piece of the American Dream. She was a good mother trying to achieve a better life for herself and her children. Instead of punishing her, American society must find a way to help her and millions like her to earn a decent living and care for their children. We can do no less. 

Ruth Sidel is professor of Sociology emerita, Hunter College. She has written widely on the role of women, the care of children, and family policy in the US and in other countries. Her most recent book is *Unsung Heroines: Single Mothers and the American Dream* (2006).