

Harold Meyerson: Thank you, and it's certainly a pleasure and an honor to be here today.

The poor, my mentor Michael Harrington wrote 45 years ago, are invisible in America. And today, 45 years since he wrote that, after all the tumult and all the War on Poverty and all the rhetoric and all of the retrenchment in the War on Poverty, that statement is -- in some ways -- still true. Or, if not true exactly, I think it's fair to say that the poor remain alien to America and its media and its journalism.

There are moments, in fact, when suddenly the existence of a new class of poor people can come upon you like a revelation. New Orleans, Katrina was some version of that, but the revelation also, of course, was the non-existence of the Federal government when it was needed most.

One such moment for me, and I should say that I'm speaking here with the background of somebody who has spent most of his life in Los Angeles, and who was the Executive Editor of the L.A. Weekly from 1989 to 2001, which is a very interesting period in the transformation of America's Second City -- no offense to Chicago.

One such moment for me came late at night in 1988 when there was a fire in the tallest high-rise in Los Angeles -- the tallest high-rise, actually, west of Chicago, then called the First Interstate Building -- but from the point of view of local TV news, the fire very fortuitously started at around 10 p.m., so that for breaking away from Channel 11 news, this was all to -- eleven o'clock news -- this was all that anyone covered, it was great footage, it was relatively a happy ending -- nobody was seriously hurt, structural damage was very small -- but it was great footage, the tallest building in L.A. burning at the top, the janitors pouring out of there, and who are those janitors?

Now, L.A. -- particularly then, downtown has had a resurgence since -- but particularly then was a city where a relatively small fraction of Angelinos actually went downtown, and when we did, you know, to the extent that people think about such things, you had an image of the janitorial workforce -- and in L.A. as in most major American cities during that time, it was disproportionately African-American. So, here are the news crews, here come these janitors coughing and covered in soot in some cases, great footage, they're all relative recent arrivals from Central America and Mexico. They are there because there's been civil wars and conflicts in Central America and it's a bad place to be. They're there because there's been this debt crisis in Mexico, and that's a bad place to be.

And there they are, on television, and you can see the TV reporters going slightly batty with frustration, because they can't interview them because the number of them who speak English is very small indeed.

This is spot news -- it has no context, nobody follows up, nobody in the print or electronic media actually asks, When did the ethnic composition of this work force change, and why and how? And I myself really didn't put this story fully together until quite a number of years later, when it had become apparent that in response to this influx of immigrants, the janitorial contractors and building owners of Las Angeles had decided simply to flat-out lay off their existing janitorial work force -- with which they had just signed a contract for an hourly wage of a little over seven bucks -- and hire this new

workforce which they were paying, I figured at the time, about 44 percent of what they had been paying the previous workforce.

In the shifting panoply of different kinds of poverty and of the abysmal race to the bottom that sometimes exists not only in the global, but the national, economy this isn't an isolated story. It's emblematic of a lot of things that happened in Los Angeles. There's a recent report -- I just want to go through a little on this because I think it gets to the larger story that I think journalism is often missing -- Los Angeles County, remember, is the largest county in the United States, it's home to 10 million people, so it's roughly the size of Illinois.

And a very good group out there, the California Budget Project, which is kind of the California equivalent of the Economic Policy Institute or the Center on Budget and Public Policy -- both national groups here in Washington -- recently came out with a survey looking at race and poverty in Los Angeles in 1979, and 2005. It's statistical, and dry and hugely, hugely depressing.

In those 25 years, in that quarter century, the median worker's wage in Los Angeles decreased -- decreased -- by six and a half percent. And of course a decline was worse within individual racial minority groups.

In 1979, they took the Latino worker, made 67 cents for every dollar made by a white worker. In 2005, he or she made 50 cents for every dollar made by a white worker. So, you can see immigration being an issue, particularly for that population.

But there are other things going on, too. The median wage for African-Americans in Los Angeles in 1979 was about 80 cents to a dollar earned by a median white worker. In 2005 it had shrunk from 80 to 65 cents. The middle was being pulled out of the Los Angeles economy when I was writing about it, and in many ways -- if you look at the economic statistics in the United States today, or the very largest economic trends we have -- the middle, not the bottom, is falling out of the American economy as well.

Which gets to what I think are some of the fundamental differences between the America in which the Kerner Commission authored its famous report, and the America today. We are two nations, the Kerner Commission wrote, separate and unequal. In many ways we still are, but in some ways we are more than two, at this time. And our class structure is more complex.

The Kerner Commission, let's remember, wrote really during the height of the post-war boom, as did the above-mentioned Michael Harrington when he wrote *The Other America*. There was in this time a more broadly shared prosperity in this country, and the emotional outrage was the exclusion of a particular group of people, in particular, African-Americans, from that prosperity -- the outrage heightened by the fact that it was a time when real gains were definitely being made. This is a period economists referred to as *The Great Compression*. Between 1947 and 1973, productivity and median wages both rose by the identical percent, by 104 percent.

Then that snapped, then that stopped. Productivity gains became de-coupled from wage gains. They weren't being passed on and some influential work by economists recently had pretty much concluded that productivity gains, the new prosperity in America went entirely to the wealthiest 10 percent of Americans.

So, we have a different kind of reality, we have different kinds of poverty, we have a kind of broad economic stagnation, which people who are fortunate -- as I was -- to grow up in the decades following World War II find strange and new and disquieting in America, and which makes all of the changes that the Kerner Commission was pointing to, ultimately all the harder to realize.

There are still cultures of poverty, but we also have the culture of underpayment in American business that is pervasive, and that is, I think, something that is hard for most mainstream journalism to come to grips with.

We have a Wal-Mart economy, we have an immigrant economy -- and those of us who, as I do, champion immigrants and are appalled at the fence, and want to legalize the immigrants here -- still do a disservice to our cause and our case, I think, if we say that immigrants only take jobs that Americans won't do. I would suggest look at the work force in building services, look at the work force in hotels, and it's hard to conclude that anything other than what I described in Los Angeles in the high-rise fire isn't taking place.

There are only, there's finally I think enough realization of this problem that you begin to get people grappling with it imperfectly. For years the economic establishment of both parties has basically said, Well, the solution to these changes is go and better educate yourself. And of course, it's always better to go and educate yourself.

But no one can argue -- as Bill Clinton repeated time and again during his 1992 campaign which I had the genuine pleasure of covering -- that what you earn is the result of what you learn. You can't tell that to software writers in the Silicon Valley these days with much plausibility since there are engineers and computer scientists by the score being turned out in China and India who have learned what they learned, and can make much less doing it, and that's where the money is going.

So, there are distinct new kinds of poverty today alongside the old kinds of poverty that were virulent when the Kerner Commission wrote, and that pose a real challenge for the media. I think Laura has dealt well with the challenge posed, and Jay has dealt well too, with the challenge posed by, covered, the great gap between where we and the media are and the realities of inner-city African-American life and those working-class and poor neighborhoods.

There are other issues, too, on which I think the media is missing. Even today with these major buyouts of contracts, for instance, at Ford and General Motors and the unionized workforce shrinking tremendously in those cities -- all right, we're all used to the decline of Detroit, we know it, you know, you drive through it and you wonder where the other half of the city went -- but even today there really hasn't been much ink spent and much media time devoted to what it means to eliminate the decently paid blue collar job in America -- for American workers generally, and African-American workers most particularly - #NAME?

I think we've also, do miss some of the stories on what we have in the way of successes in our hit and miss war on poverty. Right now there, recently completed, was a successful unionization campaign of almost entirely immigrant workers in Houston who, after a long organizing campaign and a strike were able to win a contract, wage increases, health insurance that really will transform the lives of thousands of workers there.

I mention this because in addition to its trouble getting reporters with a voice who can relate to, who can speak to the kinds of issues that we've talked about here, there also aren't any reporters on union beats anymore.

Now, God knows, I don't need to be told that the union movement has shrunk to nothing, I know this, but the only papers that have full-time union reporters right now, so far as I can see, are the New York Times, the L.A. Times and the Chicago Trib. When Frank Forbota retired in this city from the Washington Post, he wasn't really replaced. Tom Edsall was put on the politics on union, and then when Tom Edsall took the buyout, nobody even has replaced Tom Edsall on the politics of unions.

This matters, though, in those sectors, in the service #NAME? remaining place that organizing is going on, and where the poverty and dealing with poverty is a real issue.

I won't even get to what I consider to be the class bias of editorial pages and most unions on the whole issue of globalization. There was some story I saw somewhere today about someone is making a movie and has rediscovered this language that an old Native American tribe spoke in the Washington area that no one has heard for centuries, but is being recreated -- I think a distinct language is being spoken in the Washington area right now -- on issues of the global economy that no one else in the United States from any part of the ideological spectrum will recognize. That language just flourishes, and particularly on editorial pages of newspapers -- I don't know quite who they're writing to, except themselves -- but this benign view that globalization as in its current form does not entail a kind of downward convergence of wages is a mystery to me.

It is possibly the case that my colleagues are experiencing now a new economic insecurity. Being a print reporter in this day and age suddenly isn't quite the secure job that many of my colleagues thought it was when they went into it. Will that lead to a broader awareness of class issues, as well as race issues? Not necessarily, but a little shared nervousness if it goes high enough in journalism circles wouldn't be a bad way of connecting my profession back to the actual America.

But we remain a little bit surprised that there were populist victories in the last election, we remain surprised at things we should not be surprised at. And with this existing mindset, it shouldn't really be a rule.

So how long can we go on as a nation, in a nation where the discovery of poverty comes as it did in the First Interstate Fire as a shock and as a surprise?