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A Child's View of the Great Depression

BY IRVING LOUIS HOROWITZ

Economic depressions are usually measured in the adult world by increasing unemployment, declining stock-market prices, business bankruptcies, and assorted ailments all too well known to require repetition. Children have a far less grandiose view of such catastrophic matters. My childhood in Harlem during the so-called Great Depression of 1929–1939 gave me a less scientific, and certainly a far less hygienic, view of a depressed economy—an experience I pray that neither I nor anyone else will need to repeat over the coming decade.

There were three distinct characteristics of poverty in the old Harlem. Much better than the economic barometers are levels of not-having. First, one is denied a dime for a full Saturday at the movies (it sometimes cost a little less at the Sunset and a little more at the RKO and Loews's outlets at 125th Street). Second, scrambled eggs were substituted for chicken for the Friday evening meal—the central meal of the week, even for secular and socialist Jewish families. Third, there was unanticipated movement at the end of the month from one apartment flat to another in order to escape rent payments.

Losing movie money was a serious matter: films were a critical escape hatch from a world of grinding poverty to one of divine, if momentary, affluence. They were all-day affairs. Each week included a Western in which the good uniformly triumphed over evil, alongside a feature film, often second- or third-run affairs more than one year old. Then there were the “chapters” run in weekly “serials,” ranging from Dick Tracy and twentieth-century crime fighting to Buck Rogers and twenty-first-century space travel. These usually went on for fifteen weeks. Each segment ended in looming tragedy to be miraculously resolved in triumph at the start of the following week. This

was the hook to get us back to the movies on a rigorous and regular basis. So not being able to go to the film theatre regularly was a painful reminder that joy has a price. It was also a heavy price paid by the parents—who appreciated the care-taking assurance of eight hours of security for their children in the darkness of the movie theatre, not to mention eight hours of time alone for these hard-working people.

Just how important movie money was to us is suggested by the lengths to which I went to get the coin of the realm. On any number of occasions, I picked the pocket of my father's pants. Invariably he caught me before Saturday. The penalty was substantial: being tied to a hot water pole in the kitchen area. I howled in pain for many hours, or at least until my mother worked up the courage to defy my father's stern punishment and release me. She always reminded me of how terrible the penalty for theft is when left to the devices of my father. Part of me—all of six or seven years "old"—did not resent punishment, but rather considered it as proper payback for transgressions. Good guys were always being tied up at hitching posts in the Westerns, so why not endure the punishment for the ultimate value, beyond good and evil, going to the movies on Saturday?

Forced vegetarianism in place of the far more enjoyable chicken or meat meal was another matter. To start with, it made for a grim table, not just exposing our poverty, but the inability of the parents to provide for my sister, Paula, and me. And being a "good provider" was a special quality of being a proper parent. An egg supper does not carry the same desperate message. Norms change as do expectations. But however dandied up, what we ate was a sure reminder that norms can shift into a downward direction. Since the meatless Fridays were a prelude to a movieless Saturday, the dismay of the evening stretched into a weekend of sorrows.

My mother tried every trick in the trade to overcome the food problem. She would purchase a live chicken, kill it, and then pluck the poor chicken at home. It seems like a perfectly ghastly act, although I did learn from her how to pluck a young chicken with amazing rapidity. Keep in mind that a self-plucked chicken was nine cents per pound, and the fully prepared chicken cost nineteen cents a pound or more. Beyond that, there was Cushman's Bakery, where wonderful breads and cakes were sharply reduced after five p.m. I never wondered why, I simply stood in line with other poor people, mostly black women, in search of the same savings. In any event, dunking breads and cakes in milk and tea the following day or even two days later

was not bad. Sweets were sweet however old! They made up in part for the meatless Fridays. My sister and I never starved, we never went hungry. We took for granted that “things” were much tougher for more than people. There is a distinction between being poor and being entirely without food. This was not a lesson that I easily forgot for the remainder of my life.

The more punishing lesson was moving on the final day of a month, for lack of rent money, and carrying one’s possessions, from mattress to clothing, on one’s back. The greater shock was seeing so many other people doing the same thing, moving in deathly silence on the streets as well as on the sidewalks, moving from one tenement to another, one set of unfurnished rooms to another, from one five-story walk-up to another. In Harlem this was the litmus test defining poverty. It converted the invisible man to the invisible family. It was hard to establish residence, hard to receive mail, hard to inform friends, neighbors, and relatives of the shift in address. The difficulty was not simply logistical, but in that sense of being at the bottom of the rung, one step away from the streets.

Petty business sometimes thrives in the midst of grand poverty. There were local vans perfectly capable of moving families in matters of minutes. The very poor managed to carry their belongings from one apartment to another as a family act. But the ritual of voluntary moving was well established. On those occasions—three in all for our family that I recollect—we came face to face with harsh realities that were far beyond the decline of the gross national product. After all, we did not move every month to avoid paying rent. There were relatively good times, and stability in a place to live was part of that experience. The current fears about missing mortgage payments remind me of the importance of ecological stability. Losing a job, and even a loss of savings, is unpleasant. But somehow, the breakdown of a place to live, the collapse of belonging, struck me then as the harshest experience in growing up poor.

Adding this footnote to my childhood memoir makes me understand the difference between being poor and feeling poor. We all experienced a sense of poverty, but neither my parents nor my sister nor I every really felt poor. We had each other, as well as friends in similar straits, even in more bitter situations. We all survived a world of racial warfare on Morningside Heights, savings measured in nickels, monetary reserves measured in weeks, animosities from poor Catholics in the Irish extremities of Harlem for being poor Christ-killing Jews who

after all deserved no better. And finally there was embattled America, raging to the beat of would-be Hitlerite storm troopers coming up against dedicated believers in the irreversible march of history whose pinnacle was Stalin's Moscow. All of this took place in the world of Father Divine and Daddy Grace, promising salvation, if not in Harlem, then in parts of Africa largely unknown and mysterious to any of us. Hard times engender the search for utopias as well as the faith in ideologies—especially in a cosmopolitan ghetto.

The Great Depression played out in a dance macabre against a background of a Harlem world that displayed its own strange interior mixture of economic blues and theological joys. Whatever may be the economic indicators of wealth and poverty, the social sense of such extremes was barely evident to us, largely because people of wealth were few and far between in the Harlem of the 1930s. We all had time for sorrow, but little patience for pity. We all had time for divine love even as we spewed cheap hate. Perhaps walking the thin line, and talking the thick talk, was the best equipment for survival, and gave me a sure sense of better things to come—and they did. Some did not survive, but many others lived to tell the story of a sad depression of the soul as well as the wonders of the big system.