Alissa Quart's 'Squeezed': Middle-class working folks feel the pressure

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Squeezed
Why Our Families Can't Afford America
By Alissa Quart
HarperCollins. 312 pp. $27.99.

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

These days, millions of hardworking people are concluding that the American Dream is unattainable. After the Great Recession of 2008, for the first time since pollsters asked the question, fewer than half of respondents (44 percent) said they were members of the middle class. With household incomes eight percent lower in 2014 (adjusted for inflation) than they were in 1999, many Americans no longer expected they would be better off than their parents. Instead, they are desperately trying to preserve their standing in the middle classes.

In Squeezed, journalist Alissa Quart (the author of Branded, Hothouse Kids, and Republic of Outsiders, and executive editor of The Economic Hardship Reporting Project) draws on the life stories of teachers, lawyers, nurses, and nannies to document the struggles of middle-class Americans to make ends meet amidst skyrocketing costs for homes, apartment rentals, higher education, health care, and daycare.

Squeezed is at its best when Quart specifies the new challenges middle-class families face. Consider, for example, an established aspect of many people’s work lives: just-in-time scheduling, which involves little- or no-notice calls to employees to work early-morning, after-
hours, or weekend shifts. Quart indicates that although widespread in certain sectors of middle-class working life, just-in-time scheduling wreaks havoc with family life, personal schedules, and child care.

To cut costs, colleges and universities have increasingly hired adjunct professors or lecturers, who are paid often appallingly low salaries and receive slim or no benefits packages, creating an entire subclass of second-class, struggling postsecondary educators. Employers’ wide-scale move away from benefits in general has forced many supposedly middle-class workers to shoulder more and more of the costs of health care and other benefits, forcing many to work harder to stay in the class into which they were born, while they and their children enjoy fewer and fewer of the once-promised benefits of being in that class.

That said, Quart sometimes exaggerates the degree to which things are getting worse. She claims there has been a rise in “pregnancy prejudice.” She does not indicate that parental leave is more available than in the past or that some types of jobs — think scribe and TV — repairman — have always appeared and disappeared. Although she acknowledges “we’ve been to the automation rodeo before,” Quart rants, “Why shouldn’t we be Luddites” against “scabs in robot clothing,” yet she doesn’t set all this within a discussion of the impact of previous technological innovations. Most important, perhaps, Quart does not adequately address the role of single-parent households in squeezing the middle class. She does examine such families, a couple of them, but surely the rise of these families stands tall among the causes of the middle-class squeeze she is depicting.

Quart, I should also note, does not hide the ideological assumptions that undergird her analysis. She insists the assumption that those experiencing economic insecurity are not resilient or lack grit or the will to succeed constitutes blaming the victim. “You just can’t do better,” she wants to tell her subjects. “It is a system failure. It’s bigger than you.”

And her proposed solutions — universal basic income; student debt forgiveness; rent stabilization; child care subsidies; workplace protections; prekindergarten for all; a robot tax — depend on “state-based or federal policy fixes that would free us from our exhausting and often unsustainable independence.”

Quart knows, of course, that her political views do not now command a majority. A good reason, perhaps, for her to press them before more middle-class Americans “get squeezed like fruit, until there is only rind left.”

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