

## *Middle Class Crisis: Blaming the Victims for System Failure*

*Squeezed: Why Our Families Can't Afford America*, by Alissa Quart (HarperCollins, 2018)

reviewed by Sarah Dowd

In this book Alissa Quart aims to document the shocking reality that daily struggles to make ends meet are now increasingly common in this country. The author is the editor-in-chief of the Economic Hardship Reporting Project<sup>1</sup> whose earlier books include *Branded* and *Hothouse Kids*. Her articles have appeared in newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Atlantic*, *Sunday Review*, *The Nation*, *Newsweek*, *Mother Jones*, and *Marie Claire*. *Squeezed* is her first attempt at writing on the American economy and the country's shrinking middle class

Through her interviewees' personal accounts, Quart shows that our proclivity for individualism blinds many Americans to the fact that much of their economic distress is rooted in the country's institutional failures. All ten chapters of the book cast doubt on this individualistic view of worsening inequality. Her varied but intertwined subjects range from the costs of pregnancy and childcare, to being hyper-educated and poor, to the midlife do-over myth or "second act." Each chapter centers around the struggles of those who are not visibly poor, but are struggling to make ends meet all the same.

*Squeezed* was published in 2018, well after Donald Trump's polarizing election, and Quart shows no love for him. But this book focuses less on politics and policy and more on the everyday lives of Americans and their inability to afford a moderate lifestyle, whether it be in New York City or in small towns all over the country. The Great Recession, devastated people's chances for success in the near future. Professions such as law, journalism and teaching became devalued and garnered less respect than in the past with significant cuts to their pay. More and more "low-skill" jobs are becoming automated, leaving countless Americans unemployed indefinitely. Having and caring for children costs a fortune. Though it's no surprise that care work continues to be devalued in America, this book brings it to the forefront of the narrative. Quart discusses the emergence of 24-hour daycare, the stresses of being pregnant and out of work in America, and the rise of co-parenting and co-habiting. The book does not focus on those in *visible* poverty, rather it sheds light on the lives of those who may have beautiful homes and nice cars, but still struggle to make ends meet. Even those at the "bottom of the top" feel the strain<sup>2</sup>.

Quart uses personal narratives to show that, instead of seeing flaws in the system, people often believed the mistakes were all theirs. That is what led each of them who told their story to feel like the country's mistakes were their own.

As powerful as the stories are, Quart's analysis is lacking. Without substantial discussion about the implementation of policies that led to where we are today, she leaves her reader feeling as if the country has been this way always and will always be this way. If Quart had sketched America's recent economic history, the reader could see a way forward. The rise of neoliberal policies in the United States in the early 1970s is a good place to start. While many blame Ronald Reagan for the rise of neoliberalism in the U.S. in the 1980s, a conservative Democratic President, Jimmy Carter, got the ball rolling in the late 1970s by deregulating trucking, banking, and airlines. These policies encouraged outsourcing and offshoring, and the decline of industrial jobs. America's economy was in a period of stagflation after the 1973-1975 recession<sup>4</sup>. Carter set a precedent for the next six presidents after him.

When telling of the struggles of childrearing and childcare, Quart does not discuss falling birth rates<sup>5</sup> within the Millennial generation. Nor does she discuss the increase in mental health problems among those who are unemployed<sup>6</sup>. Without a secure job, more and more Americans experience depression and addiction<sup>7</sup>, in turn increasing rates of suicide over the past half century. By discussing only the present, Quart leaves out important parts of the story she is trying to tell.

The book is also weak when it comes to intersectionality<sup>8</sup>. In Chapter five, she focuses on the story of Blanca who has worked as a nanny in America for most of her adult life to support her son and mother in Paraguay. Quart recalls her own Polish and Russian grandparents' migration to America and to their belief they could settle here successfully. Why then, she asks, doesn't Paraguayan Blanca share that dream today? This question would require confronting whiteness, and the revival of xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment (especially targeted at Central and South Americans) in the US today. But Quart does not provide this analysis. Blanca was always destined for a rougher path than white immigrants from eastern Europe in the twentieth century.

Quart disappoints, as well, in the conclusion. Instead of drawing on the rage from her own *squeezed* life to offer radical ideas for fixing America's "system failure," she tells the reader to rely on existing infrastructure<sup>9</sup> to solve individual problems. She suggests that readers re-evaluate care, rethink gender roles within domestic partnerships, and to talk more openly about social class. These issues have been the backbone of social movements since the 1960s. Yet Quart asks us, simply, to rethink them, even as she does not provide the analytical tools to do so.

While Quart's book often misses the mark, it is sometimes spot-on. It takes the experiences of ten different people and contextualizes them well. Readers may therefore realize that they are not alone in their struggle to make it with what little they have. The middle class is shrinking as the rich are getting super-rich. Even those in formerly high-status occupations must sometimes work two jobs, our nannies are underpaid and

sending money back home, daycare centers can barely afford to keep their doors open, and too many adjunct professors are living out of their cars. *Squeezed* is not an inspiring, feel-good book that tells us we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps like our parents and grandparents once assured us. *Squeezed* forces us to see the reality of our dire situation, how many people are affected by it, and the scope of the challenges to remake it.

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## NOTES

1. The Economic Hardship Reporting Project is where a majority of the information of the book is cited, stated by Quart on page 9 of the Introduction.
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6. "Mental Illness: NAMI Report Deplores 80 Percent Unemployment Rate; State Rates And Ranks Listed—Model Legislation Proposed." *National Alliance on Mental Illness*, (1/1/2014): [www.nami.org/Press-Media/Press-Releases/2014/Mental-Illness-NAMI-Report-Deplores-80-Percent-Unc](http://www.nami.org/Press-Media/Press-Releases/2014/Mental-Illness-NAMI-Report-Deplores-80-Percent-Unc).
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10. Murphy, Meg. "Why Millennials Refuse to Get Married." *NowUKnow*, Bentley University, (10/4/2019): [www.bentley.edu/impact/articles/nouwknow-why-millennials-refuse-get-married](http://www.bentley.edu/impact/articles/nouwknow-why-millennials-refuse-get-married).