

# William Finnegan's Cold New World: Grim conditions facing young people in 1990s America

**Esther Galen**  
**16 October 1998**

*Cold New World: Growing Up in a Harder Country*, by William Finnegan, Random House, 1998.

Journalist William Finnegan takes the reader on a journey across the United States to four communities--New Haven, Connecticut, San Augustine County in the heart of East Texas, the Yakima Valley in Washington state, and the Antelope Valley in northern Los Angeles County. In each community he finds hard-pressed people with whom he spends months; he lets them show him where their story is and what it might mean.

The result is a powerful record of the change in the US economy over the past 25 years and how it has affected sections of the working class, especially teenagers and young adults. For although the unemployment rate is at its lowest rate in a quarter-century, the median household income has fallen and poverty has risen. As Finnegan notes in the introduction, the growth of low-wage jobs has meant that 30 percent of the country's workers earn too little to lift a family out of poverty.

Poverty hits young people especially sharply in the US because of the huge contradiction between their experience and the lifestyles they see on the mass media (the average American child by the end of high school has seen more than 380,000 television commercials; youth are a prized market). Finnegan adds that widespread promotion of the 'American Dream,' the idea that anyone can achieve success through his or her own efforts, also intensifies the pain of poverty.

The Jacksons, a family described in the first section of the book, have lived in New Haven since just after World War Two. 'The family's experience with downward mobility has been unequivocal: each generation has been poorer than the one before it,' writes the author. Nationally, this decline in wages has produced ferocious stresses on children and families.

Yale University is the city's largest private landowner and largest employer. Surrounding this elite university exist some of the poorest ghettos, and very few black New Haven residents ever attend the university which is virtually in their backyard.

The city's black population began to grow after the Second World War, as workers moved up from the South to take jobs in the area's factories. A single plant, Olin, employed 6,500 people in 1954. By 1981, when the factory was sold to a local consortium, it employed under 1,000 people. The 1990 census found that in some sections of New Haven, poverty was 40 to 50 percent. Connecticut

has some of the worst ghettos, and yet has the highest per capita income of any state.

Terry Jackson was 15 years old at the time of Finnegan's visit. He was working folding boxes at a seafood restaurant for \$50 a week. Then a friend offered him a job where he could make \$1,000 a week (noon to midnight) and he became a 'work boy,' selling small capsules of cocaine for a gang called the Island Brothers.

Finnegan explains, 'To those who have already sensed that their own chances of entering the mainstream economy are effectively nil ... the reasons not to deal drugs must seem weak indeed.... In an age that celebrates entrepreneurial ardor above all, when the idea of the dignity of labor has come to seem quaint at best, washing dishes or flipping burgers for a risible wage becomes an act of either blind faith or sheer desperation.'

The book allows the reader to become intimately acquainted with its characters. But these are shown in context, as the author provides a historical picture of the social and economic conditions in these areas which have made these individuals who they are. Book Two relates the story of San Augustine County, Texas, with a history and conditions resembling those of the Deep South. White farmers and their slaves settled the area at the beginning of the nineteenth century. People had been leaving the area to look for jobs for a hundred years. But the cities to which they streamed (like New Haven) no longer needed cheap labor from the South. Finnegan was interested in finding out how people in San Augustine got by.

In the county, which had 8,000 residents, nearly 30 percent lived below the poverty line; the poverty rate for blacks was 50 percent. The civil rights movement had little impact on San Augustine: public schools were segregated until 1970. The principal of San Augustine High School describes the town as being where Jackson, Mississippi was 20 years ago. The county has no recreation for young people--no bowling alley, no skating rink, no swimming pool, no movie house--and many blacks and a few whites saw this as evidence of the white community's fear of teenage racial mixing. Jasper County, just south of San Augustine, was the scene of a horrible racial killing last spring, when James Byrd Jr., a local black man, was beaten, tied to the back of a pickup truck and dragged for several miles behind it.

The third community Finnegan visits is the Yakima Valley, one

of America's richest farming regions. The area was settled by tens of thousands of laborers from Mexico during the last 50 years. One first grade teacher told Finnegan that the longer the immigrant families have been living in Sunnyside, the more the families fall apart.

Rosa and Rafael Guerrero settled in the Yakima Valley in 1977 with their two small children. Finnegan first met them through their union, the United Farmworkers of Washington state. Juan, their oldest son, 18, seems to drift through the days with no interests or goals. He spends most of his days and evenings in his house because he is not interested in the gangs, but has been in several fights and has made enemies. He has been kicked out of high school, is not interested in sports, in work in the fields, or in the union. Juan could find no point of reference in society at large for his parents' dedication to the ideals of equality and opportunity.

The final section of the book describes the Antelope Valley in Southern California, which underwent a sudden transformation from desert to modern suburbia in the 1980s. By far the largest employer in the area was the Lockheed plant in Palmdale. At that time, a skilled aerospace worker (even without a college degree) could make \$60,000 to \$80,000 a year.

Then in the 1990s the Southern California economy entered a deep recession because of cutbacks in the aerospace and defense industries. Los Angeles County alone lost more than half a million jobs and *USA Today* called Palmdale 'the foreclosure capital of California.' As property values plunged, more blacks and Latinos could afford to buy or rent a house in the valley, and there was a lot of racial friction between the old and newer residents.

Finnegan described the area: 'Navigating the teen world of the Antelope Valley felt, at times, like wading through the sucking bogs of my own generation's crash site. Everyone close to my age seemed to have been divorced twice, had their mortgage foreclosed, maxed out their credit cards, lost custody of their kids, or been addicted to drugs or alcohol or gambling or sex or born-again religion.'

Here he finds youth involved in neo-Nazi skinhead gangs. Mindy Turner, 17, had first wanted to become Jewish, but finding that too difficult had been a Mormon. Then in the ninth grade she became addicted to crystal methamphetamine and joined a Nazi gang. After deciding she didn't hate blacks, she spent time with the Sharps, Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice.

Each area Finnegan visited is very different from the other, but alike in many ways--wracked by structural unemployment and undereducation in public schools. The youth have similar problems: drugs, gangs, dropping out of school, unemployment, racism, violence, police harassment, prison. Finnegan found a general malaise afflicting the youth, an oppressive sense of reduced opportunity.

What is refreshing and unusual about this work is that the author, who grew up in the 1950s with a sense of unlimited possibility, is conscious enough to recognize that the America he grew up in is very different from the America of today. His book is an attempt to document those differences and to understand why it is so difficult to grow up under contemporary conditions.

In the epilogue, the author tries to make an overall assessment of what he has discovered on his journey. He describes economic

globalization and writes that while its effects may seem ordained by the laws of nature, government policy 'drives what passes for necessary pain under capitalism.' He believes that the youth seem to be shopping for something to belong to, something to believe in.

In his final paragraph, he writes: 'What price are Americans willing to pay for social peace? We jail the poor in their multitudes, abandon the dream of equality, cede more and more of public life to private interests, let lobbyists run government. Those who can afford to do so lock themselves in gated communities and send their children to private schools. And then we wonder why the world at large has become harsher and more cynical, why our kids have become strange to us. What young people show us is simply the world we have made for them.'

William Finnegan, who works as a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, has previously written a book about Mozambique and two about South Africa. His knowledge of the contemporary world and of historical issues is unusual in an American journalist. In his epilogue he quotes Marx lamenting the 'everlasting uncertainty and agitation' of life under capitalism, a sentiment with which he believes most of the protagonists of his stories would agree.

He mentions several times that most Americans need a new ideology. Whether he includes himself in that category, and what that ideology might be, he does not say. Finnegan describes the failure of the Democratic Party (including Clinton) in the United States and the social-democratic parties in Western Europe to deal with the social crisis. He refers vaguely to the possibility of a revitalization of the labor movement, although without too much enthusiasm.

*Cold New World* is, in the end, a work of exposure, not of analysis or programmatic prescription. The real strength of the book is that it presents a true picture of how the economic changes over the past 20 years have proven to be a disaster for many people. Finnegan frequently contrasts the social reality, which he depicts so graphically, with the right-wing clichés and empty abstractions that dominate the mass media. His book stimulates the reader to develop a more thoughtful approach to social problems and, hopefully, to search out alternatives.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:  
**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**