

UHON395: The Idea of Poverty
Fall Semester 2009

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Class meets Wednesdays from 2:30-4:50 in room 2109, Neihardt Residence Center.

Course Description

In his *Essay on Population* (1798), Thomas Malthus argued that the British poor laws were futile because assistance to those in poverty would only lead to population growth that would leave the poor worse off as their numbers grew beyond the nation's limited food supplies. In 1959, Oscar Lewis suggested that the poor have developed a culture of poverty to cope with the inequalities inherent in capitalism. Others interpreted this concept to mean that the behavior of people in poverty, their culture, is actually the cause of their poverty. These debates continue today. Are the poor responsible for their own plight and, if so, are there ways to change the behavior at the root of their difficulties? Are the poor victims of economic systems that foster poverty and inequality and, if so, what policies and institutional changes might remedy the situation? What are the obligations of the non-poor to those who are poor and does it make any difference if the poor in question are fellow citizens or foreigners? The purpose of this seminar is to explore the nature, extent and consequences of poverty in the United States and the rest of the world through reading original sources, class discussions and other activities designed to enhance understanding of the problem of poverty and public policies to alleviate it.

The seminar is organized around a fairly large set of readings (five short books and 18 articles or papers). The specific readings for each session are listed in the Course Outline. Discussion of these readings will be led by students participating in the seminar. In addition to readings and discussions, students are encouraged to engage the issues related to poverty and hunger in a more direct and practical way through participation in World Food Day observations on October 16, attendance of the E. N. Thompson Forum lectures, and involvement in Lincoln and Lancaster County efforts to deal with local poverty problems.

In addition to leading discussions of the readings, there are two writing assignments. The first is a comprehensive review of one or more books or articles due in class on November 18. Examples of well-written book reviews that can serve as models for this exercise are included in the course packet distributed at the first class. The second writing exercise is a short "op-ed" piece that might be sent to the Lincoln Journal-Star or a home-town newspaper for publication on the editorial page due in class on December 2. Students will present their op-ed pieces at the last class on December 9. Students may choose whatever books, literature or topics related to poverty to address. Further instructions for these assignments will be given as the term progresses.

Discussion of each of the five books (see below) required for this seminar will be led by teams of three or four students. Each of the books will be discussed over two class sessions and the way in which the discussion is organized and conducted is entirely up to the responsible team. In addition to participating in one of the teams charged with leading the discussion of a book, each student will also lead discussion of one of the shorter articles. Sign-up lists for the book teams

and individual articles will be circulated at the first class session.

Although my background is in economics, I have tried to find a wide range of reading material and wish to encourage students to bring in additional information and ideas from different perspectives. Of the five books, only one is written by an economist (Paul Collier). Although Muhammad Yunus has a degree in economics, he is more of a philanthropist and businessman than an academic economist. William Julius Wilson is a sociologist and Peter Singer is a philosopher. Thomas Malthus was the first economist in England (or in the world for that matter) but is best known for his particular contribution to the study of population and poverty. The students participating in this seminar come from a wide range of backgrounds and this diversity will add significantly to the quality of our deliberations. All points of view are welcome.

Required Reading

The five books required for this course should be available at the University Bookstore. They are:

1. Malthus, Thomas R. (1798/2004). *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, New York: Oxford University Press.
2. Wilson, William Julius (2009). *More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*, New York: W. W. Norton and Company.
3. Collier, Paul (2007). *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About it*, New York: Oxford University Press.
4. Yunus, Muhammad (2007). *Creating a World without Poverty: Social Business and the Future of Capitalism*, New York: Public Affairs (Perseus Group).
5. Singer, Peter (2009). *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty*, New York: Random House.

Shorter papers and articles are either available through Blackboard or in a course packet that will be handed out at the first session.

– Rosenberg, Tina (2008). “A Payoff out of Poverty?” *New York Times Magazine*, December 21. (Blackboard)

– Lewis, Oscar (1966). *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty*, New York: Vintage Books. Pages xlii-lii. (Course packet)

1. Hirschman, Albert O. (1991). *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Belknap Press). Pages 1-42. (Course packet)

2. Beatty, Brian (2009). “The Bell Curve,” at: <http://www.indiana.edu/~intell/bellcurve.shtml> (Blackboard)

3. Bouchard, Thomas J. and Donald E. Dorfman (2009). “Two Views of the Bell Curve,” available at: <http://felix.unife.it/Root/d-Mensa-files/d-Intelligence/t-Bell-curve-reviews> (Blackboard)

4. Foster, George M. (April 1965). "Peasant Society and the Image of the Limited Good," *American Anthropologist*, 67-2: pp. 293-315. (Blackboard)
 5. Lamont, Michèle and Mario Louis Small (2008). "How Culture Matters: Enriching our Understanding of Poverty," in *The Colors of Poverty: Why Racial and Ethnic Disparities Persist*, Ann Chih Lin and David R. Harris, editors, New York: Russell Sage Foundation. (Course packet).
 6. Daniel Gross "Today's 'Culture of Poverty': The Overclass is Better Connected than the Underclass, and it can Cause More damage," *Newsweek*, April 7, 2008. Brink Lindsey "Culture of Success," *The New Republic*, March 12, 2008. Robert Samuelson "The Culture of Poverty," *Newsweek*, April 30, 1997. (Blackboard)
 7. Stephens, G. Ross (2009). "Public Policy, Income Distribution, and Class Warfare," *Poverty and Public Policy*, 1-1, Article 3 at: http://www.bepress.com/pso_poverty/vol1/iss1/art3 (Blackboard)
 8. Mayer, Susan E. (1997). *What Money Can't Buy: Family Income and Children's Life Chances*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Chapter 9. (Course packet).
 9. Nussbaum, Martha C. (2006). *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality and Species Membership*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Belknap). Pages 69-95. (Course packet)
 10. Collier, Paul (2008). "The Politics of Hunger: How Illusion and Greed Fan the Food Crisis," *Foreign Affairs*, 87-6 (December): 67-79. (Blackboard)
 11. Smith, Steven C. (2005). *Ending Global Poverty: A Guide to What Works*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Pages 31-45. (Course Packet)
 12. Lowenstein, Roger (2007). "The Inequality Conundrum: How Can You Promote Equality without Killing Off the Genie of American Prosperity?" *New York Times Magazine*, June 10. (Blackboard)
 13. Westover, Jon (2008). "The Record of Microfinance: The Effectiveness/Ineffectiveness of Microfinance Programs as a Means of Alleviating Poverty," *Electronic Journal of Sociology* at http://www.sociology.org/content/2008/_westover_finance.pdf (Blackboard)
- and Zeller, Manfred and Richard Meyer (November 2002). "The Triangle of Microfinance: Financial Sustainability, Outreach and Impact," IFPRI Food Policy Statement No. 40 at <http://www.ifpri.org/pubs/FPS/fps40.htm> (Blackboard)
- Also short article from The Economist (July 18, 2009. Course packet).
14. McCloskey, Deirdre N. (2007). *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Pages 1-21. (Course packet)

15. McCloskey, Deirdre N. (2007). *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Pages 22-53. (Course packet)

16. Pogge, Thomas (2007). "Severe Poverty as a Human Rights Violation," in *Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right: Who Owes What to the Very Poor?* Edited by Thomas Pogge, New York: Oxford University Press for UNESCO. (Course packet)

17. Easterly, William and Tobias Pfutze (2008). "Where Does the Money Go? Best and Worst Practices in Foreign Aid," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 22-2 (Spring): 29-51. (Course packet)

18. Deaton, Angus (2008), "Income, Health, and Well-being Around the World: Evidence from the Gallup World Poll," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 22-2 (Spring): 53-72. (Course packet)

Course Outline

I. Introduction.

Session 1 (Aug 26): Introduction of the Seminar.

Assignment: If possible, read Rosenberg (available through Blackboard) before the first session. A short piece by Oscar Lewis will be handed out as part of the course packet.

- 2:30 to 3:40: Introduction to the course. Seminar organization, requirements, discussion leader sign-ups and introductions.
- 3:40 to 3:50: Break.
- 3:50 to 4:50: Discuss the idea of poverty (Rosenberg and Lewis), definitions of poverty and inequality, and measurement issues.

Note: In many courses, I distribute statistical data as background. Statistical information related to this seminar may be more meaningful if students collect it themselves. The course packet includes a page of instructions about the kind of statistical information to be collected and internet sources where those data can be found. Students will report on the results of this research at the second session and, again, later in the term (Sept 30) when US poverty is discussed.

II. The Idea of Poverty: What Causes Poverty?

Session 2 (Sept 2): Why Malthus thinks we will never escape from poverty.

Assignment: First half (at least) of Malthus and notes on Condorcet and Godwin. Collect statistical information on poverty.

- 2:30 to 3:40: Discuss Malthus.
- 3:40 to 3:50: Break.
- 3:50 to 4:50: Report on and discuss statistical data on poverty gathered from the internet.

Session 3 (Sept 9): Malthus (continued).

Assignment: Rest of Malthus and Hirschman.

- 2:30 to 3:40: Finish discussion of Malthus
- 3:40 to 3:50: Break.
- 3:50 to 4:50: Discuss Hirschman. How important is population growth as a cause of poverty?

Session 4 (Sept 16): The Bell curve and the Image of the limited good.

Assignment: Read Beatty, Bouchard at al., and Foster.

- 2:30 to 3:40: The Bell curve (Beatty and Bouchard et al.)
- 3:40 to 3:50: Break
- 3:50 to 4:50: The Image of the Limited Good (Foster)

Session 5 (Sept 23): TBA

- 2:30 to 3:40:
- 3:40 to 3:50: Break
- 3:50 to 4:50:

Session 6 (Sept 30): Poverty in the United States: Does culture matter?

Assignment: Read Wilson (first half, at least) and Lamont and Small, Gross, Lindsey and Samuelson. Use the internet to collect data on poverty and inequality in the US.

- 2:30 to 3:40: Discuss Wilson.
- 3:40 to 3:50: Break
- 3:50 to 4:50: Discuss Lamont and Small, Gross, Lindsey and Samuelson. Student reports on poverty statistics for the U.S.

Session 7 (Oct 7): Does US poverty result from discrimination and other structural factors?

Assignment: Wilson (second half) plus Stephens and Mayer. Also visit the internet site of the Lincoln Food Bank at <http://www.lincolnfoodbank.org/> (The “poverty tour” is instructive).

- 2:30 to 3:40: Finish Wilson. Discuss Stephens and Mayer.
- 3:40 to 3:50: Break
- 3:50 to 4:50: Scott Young and Jennifer Bauman of the Lincoln Food Bank will join us for a discussion of hunger, poverty and inequality in the US. Who is right about US poverty (particularly African-American poverty)? Wilson, Lamont and Small, Stephens, Mayer, Samuelson, Lindsey, Gross, all of the above?

Session 8 (Oct 14): International poverty: traps.

Assignment: Read Collier (first half, at least) and Nussbaum.

- 2:30 to 3:40: Discuss Collier.
- 3:40 to 3:50: Break
- 3:50 to 4:50: Discuss Nussbaum on capabilities.

III. Solving the problem of poverty.

Session 9 (Oct 21): International poverty: solutions?

Assignment: Read the rest of Collier (Bottom Billion) and article by Collier on food crisis.

- 2:30 to 3:40: Discuss Collier’s solutions to poverty.

- 3:40 to 3:50: Break
- 3:50 to 4:50: Discuss poverty and the world food crisis (article by Collier)

Session 10 (Oct 28): Social business and microfinance.

Assignment: Read Yunus (first chaps) and Smith.

- 2:30 to 3:40: Discuss Yunus.
- 3:40 to 3:50: Break
- 3:50 to 4:50: Discuss Smith.

Session 11 (Nov 4): Social business and microfinance (cont.).

Assignment: Continue Yunus plus Lowenstein.

- 2:30 to 3:40: Finish Yunus.
- 3:40 to 3:50: Break
- 3:50 to 4:50: The problem of incentives. Discuss Lowenstein.

Session 12 (Nov 11): The problem with social business.

Assignment: Read Zeller/Meyer, Westover, and the Economist article plus McCloskey

- 2:30 to 3:40: Is the Grameen Bank really all that great? Discuss Zeller/Meyer, Westover, Economist article.
- 3:40 to 3:50: Break
- 3:50 to 4:50: Is Capitalism really all that bad? Discuss McCloskey.

IV. Poverty Ethics

Session 13 (Nov 18): What do we owe the poor?

Assignment: Read Singer (first half, at least) and Pogge.

BOOK REVIEWS DUE

- 2:30 to 3:40: Do we have a moral obligation to assist the poor? Discuss Singer.
- 3:40 to 3:50: Break
- 3:50 to 4:50: Is freedom from poverty a human right? Discuss Pogge.

Session 14 (Dec 2): Is foreign aid any good?

Assignment: Read the rest of Singer plus Easterly and Deaton

OP-ED PIECES DUE

- 2:30 to 3:40: Finish Singer. Discuss Easterly on foreign aid.
- 3:40 to 3:50: Break
- 3:50 to 4:50: How important is income for human well-being? Discuss Deaton

Session 15 (Dec 9): Wrap-up. Students present op-ed pieces and free discussion

- 2:30 to 3:40: Students present op-ed pieces.
- 3:40 to 3:50: Break
- 3:50 to 4:50: Free discussion.

Additional Sources

I. Useful Internet Sites. Note that there are many internet sites that deal with poverty. Major

religious and charitable organizations working on poverty all have internet sites as do national government agencies and international organizations. What follows is just a sample.

<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/poverty.htm> – US Census Bureau data on poverty and inequality.

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/0,,menuPK:336998~pagePK:149018~piPK:149093~theSitePK:336992,00.html> – World Bank PovertyNet (may be easier to google world bank povertynet).

<http://www.undp.org/poverty> – Poverty reduction, United Nations Development Program.

<http://www.poverty.com> – privately run site not affiliated with official organizations or religious groups. Related site on hunger: <http://www.freerice.com/>

<http://www.globalissues.org/> – links to articles on global issues. See poverty links at: <http://www.globalissues.org/issue/2/causes-of-poverty>

<http://www.irp.wisc.edu/> – site of the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin, one of the best known poverty research groups.

<http://www.makepovertyhistory.org> – anti-poverty advocacy group.

<http://www.poverty.org.uk/> – The Poverty Site. United Kingdom site on poverty in the UK and in the European Union (EU).

<http://www.poverty.developmentgateway.org/Community-Home.9272.0.html> – Development Gateway is a private non-profit that has internet-based resources to increase the effectiveness of assistance for development and poverty reduction.

<http://www.nlchp.org> – National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty.

<http://aspe.hhs.gov/POVERTY/> – US Dept. Of Health and Human Services guidelines on poverty, poverty measurement and research.

<http://sedac.ciesin.columbia.edu/povmap/> – Global distribution of poverty from Columbia University.

<http://www.lincolnfoodbank.org/> – Information on hunger in Lincoln.

II. Books and Articles

Card, David (2009). “Immigration and Inequality,” National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) Working Paper 14683 at: <http://papers.nber.org/papers/w14683>

Copestake, James, Sonia Bhalotra and Susan Johnson (2001). "Assessing the Impact of Microcredit: A Zambian Case Study," *Journal of Development Studies*, 37-4 (April): 81-100.

Danziger, Sheldon H. And Robert H. Haveman, editors (2001). *Understanding Poverty*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dasgupta, Partha (2001). *Human Well-Being and the Natural Environment*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Dreze, Jean Amartya Sen and Athar Hussein (1995). *The Political Economy of Hunger: Selected Essays*, WIDER, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Easterly, William (2009). "Can the West Save Africa?" *Journal of Economic Literature*, XLVII-2 (June): 373-447.

Fogel, Robert William (2004). *The Escape from Hunger and Premature Death, 1700-2100: Europe, America and the Third World*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Glover, Jonathan (1999). *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Griffith-Jones, Stephany and José Antonio Ocampo (2009). "The Financial Crisis and its Impact on Developing Countries," Discussion paper at:
http://www.undp.org/docs-propoor/PG-2009-001-discussion-paper-financial-crisis-Griffith-Jones_Ocampo.pdf

Harrington, Michael (1962). *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, New York: Scribner.

Harrington, Michael (1984). *The New American Poverty*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Iceland, John (2006). *Poverty in Azmerica: A Handbook*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lear, Jonathan (2006). *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Lewis, Oscar (1959). *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*, New York: New American Library.

Lewis, Oscar (1979). *Children of Sanchez*, New York: Vintage Books.

Lin, Ann Chih and David R. Harris, editors (2008). *The Colors of Poverty: Why Racial and Ethnic Disparities Persist*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Massey, Douglas S. And Robert J. Sampson, editors (2009). *The Moynihan Report Revisited:*

Lessons and Reflections after Four Decades, New York: Sage Publications.

Molla, Rafiqul Islam, M. Mahmudul Alam and Abu N. M. Wahid (2008). "Questioning Bangladesh's Microcredit," *Challenge*, November-December.

O'Connor, Alice (2002). *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Office of Policy and Research (1965). *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, DC (also known as the Moynihan Report).

Payne, Ruby K. (2005). *A Framework of Understanding Poverty*, New York: aha Process, Inc.

Peterson, E. Wesley F. (2009). *A Billion Dollars a Day: The Economics and Politics of Agricultural Subsidies*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Pogge, Thomas, editor (2007). *Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right: Who Owes What to the Very Poor?* New York: Oxford University Press for UNESCO.

Runge, C. Ford and others (2003). *Ending Hunger in Our Lifetime: Food Security and Globalization*, IFPRI, Baltimore: Johns-Hopkins University Press.

Sachs, Jeffrey D. (2006). *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for our Time*, New York: Penguin Books.

Schiller, Bradley R. (2004). *The Economics of Poverty and Discrimination*, Ninth Edition, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Selinger, Evan (2009). "Ethics and Poverty Tours," *Philosophy and Public Policy Quarterly*, 29-1/2 (Winter/Spring): 2-7.

Sen, Amartya (1984). *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sen, Amartya (1997). *On Economic Inequality*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sen, Amartya (1999). *Development as Freedom*, New York: Alfred A Knopf.

Tazul, Islam (2008). "Microcredit and Poverty Alleviation: The Grameen Bank in Focus," *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, 10-1 (January-June): 33-49.

The Economist (2009). "Spare a Dime? Special Report on the Rich," *The Economist*, April 4.