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Seminar, Fall 2018
Thursdays, 3:30 – 6:30, HIS 304
Office Hours: T: 11:00–12:15, and
Th: 11:00–12:15, 2:00–3:15 & by appt

HI526 – Poverty and Democracy

Modern India and the United States in Comparative Perspective

Introduction

In a landmark 1964 decision, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart was famously unable to define obscenity, resorting to an ineffable workaround: “I know it when I see it.” It is similarly difficult to define poverty. Quantitative metrics are useful, but limited in their ability to capture nuances of circumstances and context. Poetry and prose hint at the experience of being poor, but trade analysis for emotional and affective connection. One can have access to resources or capital, and still be “poor”; the converse may also be (infrequently) true. Yet poverty is often quite clear to us when we are confronted by its deprivations: like obscenity, we “know it when we see it.”

Its slippery definition aside, poverty is perhaps more vexing in the context of democracy. Political scientists posit an inverse relationship between democratic institutions and indicators of human welfare, yet abundant evidence contradicts these theorems. This course will thus focus on the two largest democratic projects in history: the United States, and the Republic of India. Both share the lofty democratic ideals of universal suffrage, electoral representation, and freedom of expression. Yet both countries’ democratic ventures, in the late twentieth century, are marred by growing levels of inequality and pockets of abject poverty alike. While radically different in many ways, they share enough core features to be considered something of a “natural experiment.”

In this advanced seminar, students will read accounts – historical, empirical, and journalistic – of poverty in India and the United States in the twentieth century. The reading will be quantitatively substantive, and most weeks will see students reading the better part of a monograph and a short opinion piece or article. We will eschew the theoretical explanations favored by political scientists or economists – and available for exploration in other departments – and will instead root ourselves in the material that is central to the historian’s craft, rooted in the careful and textured analysis of qualitative (and occasionally quantitative) evidence.

We will pay close attention to the work of journalists – liberal, conservative, and contrarian – aware of the unique role that a free press plays in democracies. Attentive to the differences between a historians’ and journalists’ approaches, we will augment our academic reading with journalistic selections, including long-form investigative reporting and opinion pieces. In place of a research paper, students will develop, workshop, and produce two versions of a short opinion piece, drawing from their own research and varied forms of expertise. One version will be a short, 1000-word version designed to be submitted to a popular venue for publication; the other will be an annotated version which footnotes relevant research, explains why given examples were chosen, and expounds upon research and writing undertaken over the course of the semester.

Logistic Information

Reading

Most weeks, our reading will comprise part of a monograph, alongside one or two additional pieces which complement the selection. It would be a good idea to purchase hard copies of the following seven monographs, which we will read in whole, or close to it:

- Katherine Boo, *Beyond the Beautiful Forever: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (New York: Random House, 2011)
- Diane Coffey and Dean Spears, *Where India Goes: Abandoned Toilets, Stunted Development and the Costs of Caste* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2017)
- Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Crown Books, 2016)
- Sujatha Gidla, *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017)
- Seth Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013)
- Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright, 2017)
- Christine J. Walley, *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013)

The books listed here may be purchased used or new from a bookseller of one's choice or from the BU Bookstore, and will be available on reserve in Mugar; all other readings are online or available via Blackboard.

Deep knowledge of Indian or United States history is not required to make sense of these texts, which are all more or less self-contained accounts, but you may find it helpful to consult one of the many excellent survey volumes available on each subject. In the Indian context, these include Ramachandra Guha's *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (New York: Ecco, 2008), the latter sections of Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal's *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 2017) or Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf's *A Concise History of Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). A good, one-volume take on United States history is Glenda Gilmore and Thomas Sugrue, *These United States: A Nation in the Making, 1890 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015).

In the first class meeting, one or two students will be assigned as discussion leaders for each week of class. In addition to leading class discussion, these session leaders will e-mail around five provocations, or probing questions, to the class to guide our thinking about the week's readings; if there is more than one discussion leader, students will collaborate on the provocations and discussions. These questions should be mailed out by 5:00 PM the day before our class is to meet.

Grading Rubric

Assignments are detailed below, and class grades will be based on the following rubric:

Class participation (35%)

- Good faith participation in class discussion: 25%
- Discussion leadership and provocation submission on assigned week: 10%

Short class exercises (10%)

- One-page definition of poverty (9/6): 2%
- Family photograph exercise (10/4): 2%
- Selection of experts for interview (10/18): 2%
- “Cheap” object exercise (11/8): 2%
- Evidence exercise (11/15): 2%

Opinion piece development and writing process (55%)

- One page proposal for opinion piece (10/11): 5%
- Interview notes and pull quote submission (10/31): 5%
- First draft of opinion piece (11/29): 15%
- Thorough peer reviews of other students’ opinion pieces (12/6): 5%
- Final submission of opinion piece (12/16): 25%

Students who submit their opinion piece to a previously agreed-upon publication venue prior to the last day of study period will be offered 3% extra credit on their final grade (i.e., the difference between a B+ and an A-). The venue – Boston-based, national, or online – must be discussed in office hours prior to December 1 so that the professor can offer help in drafting a pitch letter).

Resources/Support

I am available at my regular office hours, Tuesdays, 11:00 AM to 12:15 PM, and Thursdays, 11:00 AM to 12:15 PM and 2:00 PM to 3:15 PM; booking an appointment online at <http://benjaminsiegel.youcanbook.me> is preferred to ensure a good block of time to speak, but not required. I encourage you to make regular use of these office hours for questions about the readings, your assignments, or for more general concerns. I do not use e-mail for anything other than scheduling purposes and do not check it outside of working hours; substantive questions are to be discussed in person.

We will pay close attention to your writing and editing skills; further writing assistance, you may wish to consider the resources at the Educational Resource Center (<http://www.bu.edu/erc>), the CAS Center for Writing (<http://www.bu.edu/writingprogram/the-writing-center>), or the COM Writing Center (<https://bu.mywconline.com>).

Class and University Policies

Individual and collective success in this class is contingent upon every student's sustained and engaged presence in the class; the relatively stringent attendance and classroom policies here are designed to facilitate this learning environment.

Attendance

Attendance will be taken at the beginning of each class. Missing two classes for any reason will result in a failing grade for the class. The only exception to this policy is for religious observance (with classes to be missed to be detailed by e-mail in the first week of class) or documented illness.

Late Work

No late work will be accepted for credit, nor will makeup assignments be given. All assignments must be submitted digitally via e-mail prior to class, and brought in hard copy where indicated.

Classroom Technology

This course makes use of Blackboard and other digital resources, but the classroom itself is a space where personal technology is not to be used. Use of cell phones or laptops in the classroom will result in your being asked to leave the classroom, with your absence counting against the classroom attendance policy, above. An exception will be made for accessibility needs.

Access

If you have a disability that will require accommodation, please be in touch with BU Disability Services (<http://www.bu.edu/disability/>) as early as possible; students experiencing worry, distress, or other circumstances which might adversely affect their well-being or classroom performance are encouraged to reach out to the Behavioral Medicine division of Student Health Services (<https://www.bu.edu/shs/behavioral-medicine/>).

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism is a serious offense and, if suspected, will be referred to the Dean's Office; a copy of Boston University's code of conduct at <http://www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code/>, and a copy of the GRS Academic and Professional Conduct Code at <https://www.bu.edu/cas/files/2017/02/GRS-Academic-Conduct-Code-Final.pdf>.

Weekly Schedule

Introduction

Thursday, September 6, 2018

IN CLASS: We will read selections from James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941), Pritwis Chandra Ray, *The Poverty Problem in India* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1895), Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), and other short early accounts of poverty in India and the United States.

Unit 1: Writing Poverty and Democracy

Thursday, September 13, 2018

- Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Crown Books, 2016), prologue, chapters 1 to 12.
- Andrea Elliott, "Girl in the Shadows: Dasani's Homeless Life," *The New York Times*, December 9, 2013.

Discussion leader(s): _____

ASSIGNMENT: Come to class with your own one-paragraph definition of poverty, printed on a piece of paper without your name or any other identifying information.

Thursday, September 20, 2018

- Desmond, *Evicted*, chapters 13 to 24, epilogue.
- Charles J. Skyes, "Let Them Eat Lobster," *Commentary*, April 14, 2016, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/let-eat-lobster/>.
- David French, "The Myth of the Virtuous Poor," *National Review*, February 6, 2017, <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2017/02/06/poverty-morality-conservatives/>.

Discussion leader(s): _____

On Monday, September 24, 2018, the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies is hosting a book launch discussion for my new book, *Hungry Nation: Food, Famine, and the Making of Modern India*; the event will be held between 4 and 6 PM at the Weatherhead Center, 1737 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, in room K262; 2% class bonus will be offered for attendance.

Thursday, September 27, 2018

Scheduling note: this week's class will end slightly early (c. 5:30).

- Katherine Boo, *Beyond the Beautiful Forever: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (New York: Random House, 2011).
- David Brooks, "The Underlying Tragedy," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/15/opinion/15brooks.html>.
- Anand Vaidya, "The Journalist and the Poor," *n + 1*, issue 15 (Winter 2013), <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-15/reviews/on-katherine-boo/>.

ASSIGNMENT: Bring to class a print-out of an opinion piece on poverty that you *disagree* with and be prepared to speak about your objections.

Discussion leader(s): _____

Unit 2: Outcast(e)s

Thursday, October 4, 2018

- Christine J. Walley, *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), introduction, chapters 1, 2, 3, and conclusion.
- Sam Roberts, "A Village with the Numbers, Not the Image, of the Poorest Place," *The New York Times*, April 20, 2011, A1, <https://nyti.ms/2k0hLOH>.

Discussion leader(s): _____

ASSIGNMENT: Come to class with four or five family photographs (or objects) that say something you feel is important in your own story of class over time. (If they are photographs, please print them out.) Ideally, these photographs and objects will be multi-generational: i.e., they speak to different periods in your family's history. Spend some time thinking about these photographs or objects in preparation for the second half of our class.

Thursday, October 11, 2018

Scheduling note: on October 11, I will be in Madison, Wisconsin, to present at the annual Conference on South Asia there; we will need to reschedule this class. I propose a 5:00 to 8:00 PM meeting (with pizza!) on either Tuesday, Oct. 9, Monday, Oct. 15, or Tuesday, Oct. 16.

- Sujatha Gidla, *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*, 2017 (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and afterward.
- Gopal Guru and Anuradha Chakravarty, "Who are the Country's Poor? Social Movement Politics and Dalit Poverty in Social Movements in India: Poverty, Power, and Politics," in *Social Movements in India: Poverty, Power, and Politics*, eds. Raka Ray and M.F. Katzenstein (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 135-160).

Discussion leader(s): _____

ASSIGNMENT: Complete a three- to five-paragraph proposal for your opinion piece. Identify the subject / problem that you will discuss and the course of action you want your audience to take. Identify your target audience, and suggest five or six venues (local papers, national papers, online venues) where you might publish this piece. Why is this subject important to you? What are some sources that you might use to find qualitative / quantitative evidence? What historical factors might you bring in? E-mail the proposal to the instructor and the class, and bring a printed copy for each class member.

Unit 3: Historical Inheritance

Thursday, October 18, 2018

- Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Penguin, 2017), chapter 1 ("Taking Out the Trash"), chapter 6 ("Bad Blood, Half-Breeds, and Clay-Eaters"), and epilogue ("America's Strange Breed")
- Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: New Press, 2018), chapter 14 ("The Fires of History: The 1860s and the 1960s").
- Steven Stoll, *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2017), chapter 1 ("Contemporary Ancestors") and chapter 4 ("Mountaineers Are Always Free").

ASSIGNMENT: Come to class having prepared a list of ten to twelve people who you would like to interview for your opinion piece, alongside contact information for each. Identify a range of people you would like to speak with – experts, activists, politicians, professors, and so forth – and consider the different perspectives that different genders, ages, or backgrounds might bring to your own understanding. For each person, consider – and write down – what evidence you hope to receive from an interview with them.

Discussion leader(s): _____

We will not meet Thursday, October 25, 2018. Instead, you are to conduct three expert interviews, with questions covering material “on background,” as well as questions tailored directly to a person’s expertise and experiences. At least one interview must be conducted in person; the others may be conducted by Skype or phone call. No more than one interview may be conducted by e-mail. Before Friday, October 24 at 5:00 PM, send your notes to the professor by e-mail; before Wednesday, October 31 at 5:00 (Happy Halloween!), please send one “pull quote” paragraph for each interviewee by e-mail to the entire class.

Thursday, November 1, 2018

- Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* (New York: Scribe US, 2018), preface, chapter 1 ("The Looting of India"), chapter 5 ("The Myth of Enlightened Despotism"), chapter 7 ("The (Im)Balance Sheet"), chapter 8 ("The Messy Afterlife of Colonialism").
- Tyler Cowen, "Legacy of British Rule Is Still Holding India Back," *Bloomberg Opinion*, April 12, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-04-11/legacy-of-british-rule-is-still-holding-india-back>.
- Alex Tabarrok, "Don't Blame the Empire," *Pragati*, July 28, 2017, <https://www.thinkpragati.com/opinion/1863/dont-blame-empire/>.
- Prashant Bharadwaj et. al., “Perverse Consequences of Well Intentioned Regulation: Evidence from India's Child Labor Ban,” *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 19602*, October 2013, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w19602> (skim this, and look most closely at the abstract. What is the central claim and what evidence do the authors marshal to support it?).

Discussion leader(s): _____

Interlude: Bodies and Borders

Thursday, November 8, 2018

- Seth Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), chapter 1 (Introduction: “Worth Risking Your Life?”), chapter 3 ("Segregation on the Farm: Ethnic Hierarchies At Work"), chapter 4 ("How The Poor Suffer': Embodying The Violence Continuum"), chapter six (“Because They’re Lower To The Ground': Naturalizing Social Suffering").
- Kelefa Sanneh, “Untangling the Immigration Debate,” *The New Yorker*, October 31, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/31/untangling-the-immigration-debate>.

Discussion leader(s): _____

ASSIGNMENT: Come to class with an object that you love and use every day. (For purposes of this exercise, we will exclude phones, tablets, and computers).

Unit 4: Bureaucracy and Structural Violence

Thursday, November 15, 2018

- Diane Coffey and Dean Spears, *Where India Goes: Abandoned Toilets, Stunted Development and the Costs of Caste* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2017), parts one (“Causes”) and three (“Responses”); in addition, pick *one* chapter from part two (“Consequences”) to read.
- Akhil Gupta, “The State and the Politics of Poverty,” in *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 41-74.
- Pratap Bhanu Mehta, "Breaking the Silence: Why We Don't Talk About Inequality – And How to Start Again," *The Caravan*, October 1, 2012, <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/essay/breaking-silence>.
- Ellen Barry, "How to Get Away with Murder in Small-Town India," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2017, A1, <https://nyti.ms/2vaFuJl>.

Discussion leader(s): _____

ASSIGNMENT: Prior to our class session, prepare a written sheet with five pieces of information that you plan to use as “evidence” in your opinion piece. Two of these items should be quantitative (offering numerical or statistical evidence for your case), two should be qualitative (offering non-quantitative support), and at least one should be historical (showing change over time). Each should be accompanied by a footnoted reference to the source of the information.

Thursday, November 29, 2018

- Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright, 2017), prologue, chapters 1 to 7, 10 to 12, and epilogue.
- "A Brand New Boston, Even Whiter Than The Old," and "Lost on Campus, as Colleges Look Abroad," Boston.Racism.Image.Reality web series, *Boston Globe*, December 11, 2017, <http://apps.bostonglobe.com/spotlight/boston-racism-image-reality/series/seaport>.

Discussion leader(s): _____

ASSIGNMENT: E-mail the full first draft of your opinion piece to the class by the evening of Wednesday, November 28, and bring one printed copy of your piece (Times New Roman, double-spaced, name and provisional title at the top) for each class member.

Conclusions: Scaling Up

Thursday, December 6, 2018

- Anthony B. Atkinson, *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), pages 1-6, 45-81, 237-239, 302-308.
- David Graber and David Wengrow, "How to Change the Course of Human History (At Least, The Part That's Already Happened)" *Eurozine*, March 2 2018, <https://www.eurozine.com/change-course-human-history>.
- Samuel Moyn, "Human Rights Are Not Enough," *The Nation*, March 16, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/human-rights-are-not-enough/>.
- Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), introduction, chapter eight ("Two Worlds"), chapter 13 ("A Social State for the Twenty-First Century").

Discussion leader(s): _____

ASSIGNMENT: Bring to class your marked-up copies of each student's opinion piece.

Sunday, December 16, 2018

Final opinion pieces due by e-mail at 5:00 PM on December 16, 2018, the last day of study period. The unannotated version is to be e-mailed to the entire class; the annotated version is to be e-mailed to the instructor alone. If you wish to send a copy to a venue for publication – and 3% extra credit in the class – the deadline to do so is at noon on Monday, December 17.