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Review of *A Very Short Introduction*. Philip N. Jefferson

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Wolff to explain a bit more of how this happened. I have already mentioned the possibility of wage stagnation, but that would be a precipitating cause of middle class over-indebtedness. Why such stagnation, and why was it tolerated? Why was there such a failure of the culture of the Greatest Generation to be transmitted to subsequent generations of Americans?

John Tropman
University of Michigan

Philip N. Jefferson, *Poverty: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press (2018), 176 pages. \$10.73 (paperback).

Poverty is a global issue. Every country in the world makes some effort to reduce poverty, and especially in developing countries great strides have been achieved. The proportion of people in the developing world living in poverty fell from about 50 percent to around 14 percent between 1990 and 2015. Franklin D. Roosevelt's adage expresses a common view, that the "test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little." This implies that poverty is an obstacle to progress. Why then do many people live in poverty? What kinds of public and private actions have societies taken and are currently taking in the struggle against poverty? Jefferson's book explores these problems and seeks to find the answers. He focuses on four dimensions of poverty, including the meaning and characteristics of poverty, the methods of measuring poverty, the causes of formation and resolvable measures of poverty. Although explicitly intended to be a very short introduction, the book is a helpful beginning point for building a comprehensive understanding of poverty.

The first chapter analyzes the achievements of poverty reduction by using time-series data and cross-sectional data. Jefferson indicates the importance of taking contextual aspects into account when we define the poverty in countries on different economic development levels. This is followed by a chapter describing the historical development of anti-poverty philosophy and programs. Governments explicitly responded to poverty first in the 16th and

17th centuries. The famous English Poor Laws guided approaches to poor relief as an answer to poverty. As global trade developed, income inequality became ever greater, and with it the problems of increasing poverty. By the late 19th century and on into the 20th century, social security programs were established to fight poverty.

The third chapter takes on the task of defining just what poverty is. Defining poverty includes several key features. First of all, it is a measurement of well-being, that is, establishing a poverty line. The traditional resource-based measures of well-being including income, consumption and wealth, however, fail to capture qualitative aspects well-being, such as life expectancy, infant mortality, and educational opportunity. In contrast, the Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations utilizes a capabilities approach to summarize well-being, taking into account life expectancy, years of schooling, and per capita income. The assumption is that creating opportunities to pursue a good life is more effective than providing financial resources directly. Compared with an absolute poverty line, a relative poverty line requires additional resources as a society becomes wealthier. In practice, most countries adjust the poverty line upward to keep pace with inflation. An adjustment to the poverty threshold is dependent on the size of the household and various equivalence scales are used to make these adjustments. Tax and transfer systems also have been established to determine counting resource against the poverty threshold. Statistical approaches, such as a headcount index, are designed to assess the effectiveness of public policies. The depth and severity of poverty is more effective and convenient to measure poverty gaps.

The main section of the book is devoted to exploring the major causes of poverty. Poverty is an unavoidable social problem, attributable to family and social causes, as well as more strictly economic causes. Jefferson suggests that poverty is strongly associated with family structure. This is the case in both developed and developing countries. Health and education are crucial to the ability of people to compete actively in the social environment. Inferior education, like inferior health, transmits poverty across generations. Asset transfers can help people living in poverty pay for significant anticipated expenses. People living in poverty are also more vulnerable to climate

change, which increases the incidence of diseases and reduces current and future earning capacity.

Jefferson then focuses on the economic factors of poverty. Poverty is associated with weak or no attachment to the labor market and low earnings. Barriers to strong labor market attachment include low education attainment, social stratification, and discrimination. Minimum wage and the living wage policies, conditional tax credits, and job training can play a role in lifting individuals and families out of poverty, while factors including unemployment and underemployment, low educational attainment and low-skill job, racial, sexual, age or disability discrimination are associated with an increase in the poverty rate. Social mobility is critical for people living in poverty. The longer the household has been living in poverty, the lower the probability that it will escape poverty in the future. Higher income inequality is associated with less intergenerational income mobility. It is encouraging to note that immigration fosters economic mobility, an antidote to poverty.

The final chapters cover another core issue of anti-poverty programs. What measures have been effective in the struggle against poverty? The main factors involved in the decline of poverty globally are economic growth, mild (not extreme) inequality, inclusive institutions, international trade and commerce, a strong social protection system, investment in infrastructure and aid projects. Economic growth, good governance, and well-developed financial sectors are the basis for poverty reduction. Women especially face unique challenges based on gender, and key social norms imposed on them need to be changed in order to alleviate the poverty of women. Through evaluating the effectiveness of anti-poverty programs and policies by the means of randomized control testing, natural experiments, comparisons of pre-transfer and post-transfer statuses, and various historical approaches, we can promote the optimal allocation and efficient use of limited anti-poverty resources.

As Jefferson suggests, the “targets of poverty eradication in the future will be areas or peoples where it may be far harder to make progress with respect to better schooling and health, gender equality, democracy, rule of law, peace, environmental sustainability, and all of the other concomitants of shared prosperity” (p. 136). Though global resources are limited, we should utilize these finite resources to improve the health and skills of

the poor and promote the social and economic development of the fragile states. While poverty may never disappear entirely, it is imperative we remain focused overcoming poverty.

Yan Shen
Hubei Normal University

James D. Wright, Amy Donley, and Sara Strickhouser Vega, *Hunger in the Land of Plenty: A Critical Look at Food Insecurity*. Lynne Rienner Publishers (2019), 183 pages, \$65.00 (hardcover).

Food insecurity refers to the lack of consistent access to enough food for a healthy life. Food insecurity has been drawing attention among researchers and policy stakeholders due to its increasing prevalence and its impact on population health in the U.S. and globally, especially after the financial recession. While most books on health and nutrition only briefly mention food insecurity as an emerging social issue, this book is the most recent and one of the few that specifically focus on food insecurity as an independent topic.

Using findings from previous research and their own projects, the authors of this book provide an insightful discourse on food insecurity, including its social and historical context, risk factors, health consequences, current community strategies and policies, and future solutions. The book opens by contextualizing food insecurity from a multidisciplinary perspective and argues that food insecurity is not a production problem but rather a distribution problem. This is supported by empirical evidence on the risk factors of food insecurity in the U.S., including income, mobility, age, gender, race, household composition, marital status, geography, food assistance participation, and coping strategies, and comparing those with data from Canada and Australia.

The authors summarize empirical evidence on the impact of food insecurity on physical and mental health, including obesity, self-rated health, diabetes, mental well-being, cognitive function, and malnutrition, and discuss the concept of food deserts and availability-related issues. They acknowledge the influence of income and racial composition on neighborhood