

D. McLeod U.S. Poverty Trends and PBS Film review questions Spring 2009

Required video: PBS documentary “In This Affluent Society” [Part 1 \(10 minutes\)](#) [Part 2 \(12 mins\)](#) [Part 3 \(20 mins\)](#) [Part 4 \(10 minutes\)](#) If you have trouble viewing these videos online, please ask me for a DVD or go to the EIC Walsh Library and use a computer there.

1. **a)** The official U.S. poverty rate fell from about 33% in 1945 to 22% in 1959 and to about 11% in 1971. Then it started to rise peaking at almost 15% in 1991 only to fall back to 11% again in 2001. The official 2007 poverty rate is 12.5%. List these poverty rates, explaining briefly why each is important. How many Americans live in poverty today ([the Census has this number](#) or see the review sheet for quiz 4). **b)** Briefly discuss how unemployment rates, demographic trends (single parent families) and poverty measurement issues affect U.S. poverty (see the David Wessel [WSJ article](#)). From 1945 to 1971 poverty fell from about 33% to about 11.4% but then stagnated in the 1970s and rose in the 1980s. Why poverty rates for children under 18 rise sharply in the 1980s? **c)** Poverty among the elderly was well above the national average in the 1960s but fell rapidly to under 10% in 2001. Why? **d)** The 1950s and 1960s (and the 1990s) were period of rapid growth, full employment and falling poverty rates. The PBS documentary claims nearly a million Americans escaped poverty and entered the middle class during this period. *From 1945 to 1960 poverty fell from about 33% to 22%, assuming a U.S. population of about 180 million does the film over or understate the annual fall in the U.S. poor population during this period?*
2. What were the main programs Kennedy and Johnson’s were willing to use to reduce poverty (recall what Johnson says about welfare)? In the late 1960s, mainly after Johnson left office, the U.S. congress passed food stamps, WIC, public housing and Medicaid programs and welfare participation rates rose sharply, do these programs reduce poverty? (war on [poverty lecture notes](#), Ellwood Chaps 1-2 and the U.S. poverty measures readings on the [Quiz 4 review sheet](#)).
3. In the 1950s, as in the 1990s, globalization (trade & technical change) had negative impacts on some industries and regions. **a)** In the 1950s the U.S. began importing cheap oil from the Middle East (Iran). How cheap oil imports affect workers in Appalachia? **b)** Senator Kennedy won the 1960 West Virginia primary partly because he made West Virginia poverty and unemployment a political issue. Once elected, what did President Kennedy do to help West Virginia’s poor? Did it work? How did most residents of Appalachia end up escaping poverty?
4. Hamish Sinclair, radio reporter and community organizer interviewed in the PBS film “In this affluent Society” describes 1950s Appalachia as a developing country within the U.S. **a)** What in particular shocked Hamish and Senator Kennedy about the poor in Appalachia? Do we still have this sort of poverty in the United States today? What type of jobs did the poor in Kentucky and Mississippi typically have? One mother says she had to leave Kentucky so her “six boys could attend school and get skills to earn a living” so she packed up her “nine kids” and headed to Chicago. What 1950s American reality does her statement reflect? **c)** Did any government agency help her family leave Appalachia? What sort of reception did “hillbilly” families get in Chicago? Why do governments generally discourage people from moving long distances even when that may be the best road out of poverty?
5. President Kennedy’s, later to become President Johnson’s “war on poverty” was triggered by a book (*The Other America*) and violence that turned regions of the U.S. into a “war zone.” **a)** What groups triggered this early 1960s wave of shootings, bombings and arson? What key issue precipitated this violence? Has this problem been solved today for the poor or non-poor? **b)** The U.S. government spent hundreds of millions trying to revive Appalachia’s economy. Did this strategy work? How did most Appalachia residents eventually escape poverty? How might tax dollars spent on Appalachian development programs been put to better use? **c)** What leads governments to boost local “development” spending even in areas where economic prospects are bleak?
6. The film “In this Affluent Society” mentions two major U.S. post-WWII South to North migrations-- each involving over a million people. **a)** Which groups moved into particular Chicago ghettos? What were these neighborhoods called? Why did so many migrants go to Chicago? What happened in Chicago (and in Detroit, NY, Newark and Philadelphia) during late 1950s the early 1960s? **b)** Many of the more affluent looking people in the film in fact returned to the South their parents fled in the 1950s. Why? What changed since their parents left—economically and politically? **c)** Why did the South grow faster than the North during the 1960s and 1970s? Where are many of those same auto and other factory (textiles) jobs going now? This exodus of industry due to globalization accelerated in the 1990s, did U.S. poverty and unemployment rise or fall during this period? Why are light manufacturing jobs so important to poor workers leaving rural areas, here or in China?