

Lakshman Yapa

Introduction

My current research project, *Rethinking Urban Poverty in the United States*, is an academic program that combines teaching, research, and service learning in West Philadelphia. We move away from conventional economic and welfare approaches of poverty by defining it as a substantive question related to access—to transport, housing, nutrition, health-care, and so on.

This project is expanding to a new initiative called the *Philadelphia Semester of Public Scholarship*, which involves the development of courses on campus that respond to needs of inner-city communities such as small business development, nutrition and health, and so on. I am coordinating this inter-college effort to train about 20 students each semester doing service learning in residence in Philadelphia.

My research combines theories of economic development, postmodern discourse theory, and Geographical Information Systems (GIS). Despite our massive efforts at economic development, statistical evidence shows a troubling persistence of poverty and increasing inequality of income (both within and between nations). Reminiscent of a Kuhnian "crisis in the paradigm", development economists (and their principal Marxist critics) are not able to offer us a satisfactory explanation of the failure of development.

Using the writings of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Richard Rorty, I argue that postmodern discourse theory provides a way out of the impasse of the crisis of development. First is the claim that economics and Marxism cannot help us to eradicate poverty because these discourses are deeply implicated in the creation of the problem. Second is the view that the material deprivations the poor experience are a form of socially constructed scarcity, a process that is concealed by the conventional discourses on development. Third is the notion that substantive solutions to poverty can be found through a new contextual place-based approach to resources. I have found GIS to be an invaluable tool in implementing the third part of this argument.

Research Interests

- Post-modern discourse theory
- Third World
- theories of poverty
- community development
- GIS applications
- public scholarship and service learning

Education

- Ph.D. Geography, Syracuse University, 1969
- B.A. Geography, Sri Lanka

Courses Taught

- GEOG 123U
- GEOG 126

Publications

"What is Scarcity?" *A Dictionary for the Twenty-First Century: The Ambivalent Future of Knowledge and Culture* edited by A. Nandy and V. Lal. In press.

"Globalization and Poverty: A Post Structural View." A book chapter in *Globalization, The Third World, and Poverty Alleviation in the 21st Century* edited by Bernard Logan, Ashgate Publishing, Burlington, VT, 2002.

"Rethinking Poverty in Sri Lanka." A book chapter in *South Asia in a Globalizing World: A Reconstructed Regional Geography* edited by R. Bradnock and G. Williams. Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 2002.

"How the Discipline of Geography Exacerbates Poverty in the Third World." *Futures: the Journal of Forecasting and Planning*, Vol. 34, 2002, pp 33-46.

"Integrating Teaching, Research, and Service—A Philadelphia Field Project." *Bulletin of Science, Technology, and Society*. Vol. 20, 2000, pp. 175-177. Introduction to a special issue.



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