

***Banishing Equality:
Poverty, Plenty and Exclusion in North
Carolina***

by

Gene Nichol

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***Banishing Equality:
Poverty, Plenty and Exclusion in
North Carolina***

by

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Theme: Moral Economies



Convener: Dr. Akin Ogundiran

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Questions and Answers session, is available at:

www.africana.uncc.edu.

I am much honored to be here, to be part of a remarkable set of discussions. Although in this distinguished and international company, I cannot help feeling a bit like the local yokel. Talking about economic justice in North Carolina, I am almost hideously parochial. I hope you will forgive me.

And let me begin with a sign of the times. Stating the obvious, I work for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but I do not speak for the institution. If I did, it would be saying very different things. But the university I love likes it when I give it broad opportunity to distance itself from me. So I do that now. I do not speak for UNC Chapel-Hill, and the university does not speak for me.

Let me also note here that this year Charlotte lost its most accomplished citizen, and my law school lost the most accomplished alumni in its history. [Julius Chambers](#) said repeatedly, “all of us are interested in an equal chance in life. We achieve this when we ensure that all people, whatever their differences, are respected and provided the same opportunities we seek.” These are my marching orders for this lecture.

I am glad, though, to have the opportunity to discuss with you North Carolina’s largest problem, it’s greatest transgression – intense poverty amidst plenty. It is an important topic, even a trying one. But, at this

stage in my life, I'm happy with trying topics. You see, for most of the last 30 years I have been either a dean or a university president. And I was surprised during those tenures how frequently deans and presidents are called upon, not to speak of important matters, but to give what I came to think of as “warm and mindless remarks...”

We gather at an astonishing time. You know there's the old Chinese curse – “may you live in interesting times”. To be honest, I'm to the point where I could do with a little less ‘interesting’ as far as the times go. But these things are not up to us. Right now, in the richest nation on earth, the richest nation ever, we have more poor people (in total number) than at any other [time in record](#). More poverty in the nation, more in North Carolina, more in Charlotte, more in Mecklenburg County. Fifty million nationwide: 16% of our fellow citizens. Nearly a quarter of our kids, and almost 30% of all African-Americans, Latinos and Native Americans live in poverty.

[Poverty numbers in the U.S., especially child poverty, are far higher than any other advanced western democracy](#). We add to that, now, the greatest gaps between rich and poor since we began collecting data five decades ago. [This gap is now documented to be one of the highest in the advanced world](#). We have also become the [least economically mobile](#). [So, if you are](#)

born poor you are more apt to stay that way than in other advanced countries. And, of course, if you are born rich you are more likely to say that way.

And since my talk is taking place in the South, let us bear in mind that this is where we have more poor people than any other region of the country. This is also the place where we have more political leaders that are utterly untroubled by this situation than the rest of the land. Ten of the country's poorest 12 states are southern. Though about 15% of Americans live in poverty generally, in Mississippi its 23%, Louisiana 22, Arkansas 20, Georgia 19.1, South Carolina 19, Texas 19. The former confederate states set the gold standard in American economic deprivation.

We also lead the nation in those without health care coverage of any kind. Here, Texas paves the way — with an astonishing 25%. But Louisiana (21), Florida (21), South Carolina (20), Georgia (almost 20) and Mississippi (19) give the Longhorns a spirited run for their money.

To add insult to injury, the Pew Foundation just released a new study of economic mobility. The states with the lowest economic mobility are Louisiana, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina and Texas. You get the point.

Still, oddly, we are the states most strongly opposed to stimulus funding, to health care reform, to the expansion of Medicaid. We would benefit the most from such programs, of course. But I guess maybe not the right ones of us would benefit.

That's a mouthful, I know - bums you out. Sorry to start with the hard blows. But I don't want you to think it is all bad news. There's a different lens, a different cast. I [wrote](#) in 2011, citing a *New York Times* report, that during the harder throes of the recent recession, Gucci high-end sales rose 24%. Yves St. Laurent came close behind at 23%. BMW more than doubled its quarterly profits. Sales of BMW's s-class sedan – that apparently cost over \$200,000 – jumped 15%. Porsche's overall six-month market improved by a mere 59%! Saks 5th Avenue's full year net income rose 57%. And, sadly, Neiman Marcus flatly sold out nation-wide of something called '[Christian Louboutin Bianca platform pumps](#)' at thousand dollars a pair. But at the very same time, Walmart began selling smaller packages of toilet papers because its shoppers did not have enough cash on hand to buy multipacks of this necessity.

And we read recently of a new explosion of [food banks on American college campuses](#) - an avalanche in the last two years, now over 120 across the country. New ones have opened at NC State, at Central,

Durham Tech, Meredith, and Guilford campuses. They serve not only economically distressed students, but also massively underpaid staff and adjunct faculty.

[The U.S. Census Bureau](#) reported that 93% of all increases in income in 2013 went to the top one percent. The richest 400 of us – not 400 thousands – have more wealth than the bottom 150 million put together.

And, to remind, all of this occurs in the nation that brags the most – in its Declaration of Independence, its Constitution, its daily Pledges of Allegiance – brags the most about equality, justice and dignity for all. It brags the most and does the least, among the advanced nations. Hence, despite all our promises, boastings and self-congratulation, we have in fact become the richest, the poorest and the most unequal advanced nation in the world.

In North Carolina, it is worse. Eighteen percent of us, some 1.7 million, are officially poor. Over one in four of our children; 41% of our children of color live in poverty. Think of that. Over four in ten of our babies, our middle-schoolers, our teenagers of color are constrained by the intense challenges of poverty. In one of the most economically potent states (North Carolina) of the strongest nation on earth, over 40% of our kids of color live in wrenching poverty. This is a

simple declarative sentence that should shame us as a people.

As I wrote in 2013, [North Carolina has one of the country's fastest rising poverty rates](#). A decade ago, we were 26th – a little better than average. Now we are 11th, speeding past the competition. We have also seen, over the same period, one of the steepest increases in the ranks of the uninsured – so, naturally, we kicked 500,000 people off Medicaid.

Two million of North Carolinians are classified by the federal government as hungry – over 20 percent, the nation's fourth-highest rate. Nearly 622,000 of our kids don't get enough to eat. Greensboro is the country's second-hungriest city; Asheville is ninth. [Feeding America®](#) reports that for children under five, North Carolina has the country's second-highest food insecurity rate, just a shade behind Louisiana. A 2011 study deemed Winston-Salem America's worst city for childhood food hardship. Though I pay close attention to these matters, I've never heard these facts mentioned by our political leaders. What would it take for this to become a priority? These are not isolated cases. A national report three months ago named Roanoke Rapids and Lumberton two of the three poorest cities in the nation. Robeson County has America's third-highest food stamp participation rates. The number of homeless K-12 students in North Carolina rose dramatically between 2010 and 2012.

We have, statewide, over 9,000 homeless veterans, many fresh from our nation's battlefields.

Here in Charlotte, [the great banking center](#) and our richest city, pockets of concentrated economic distress mushroom. Over the last decade, the child poverty rate in Charlotte's distressed census tracts rose from 38 to 54%. The Charlotte/Mecklenburg school district reports almost 5,000 homeless students enrolled. In 2011, [the U.S. Conference of Mayors concluded Charlotte had the third-steepest increase in family homelessness in America.](#) Hundreds line up every morning at Crisis Ministries – uptown – hoping to avoid the ravages of homelessness.

And, a recent [massive study by researchers at Harvard University, University of California, Berkeley and the Treasury Department](#) found that Charlotte had the worst economic mobility of any major city in the United States - ranking 50th out of 50. If you are born poor here, you are more likely to stay that way than anywhere else. If you are born poor here, I guess, the recommendation is that you move.

But even these statistics are only that – dry, bloodless numbers. They don't convey the face, the reality of wrenching poverty in a land of great wealth. It's not like talking, through the evening, with scores of the 1100 or so Tar Heels, waiting all night long, outside

the Fayetteville civic center, to receive free dental care in a remarkable medical mission three months ago. These are folks who had travelled, often from great distances, to have their teeth extracted – teeth that had long caused intense pain. When asked when they had last seen a dentist, the disproportionately black throng would answer “ten”, or “twenty” or “thirty” years. “Sure it hurts, it hurts a ton, but who can afford to see a dentist?” Still, hundreds had to be turned away. And, although in 2013 eleven such free clinics were held across Carolina, organizers could only afford five in 2014!

And it’s not like meeting with some of the 250 or so wounded souls, unable to be accommodated by the overburdened local shelter, living in the otherwise bucolic woods of Hickory, in makeshift lean-tos, cardboard shanties and ragged tents. At least until the police push them along, shredding their tents - their only possessions - as deterrent. And this place was only a few hundred yards from sprawling mansions and churchyards in a scene Dickens would have neither the gall nor the imagination to invent. A young woman explained through tears: “I know I have to get used to this, but I’ve never even been camping before.”

Speaking candidly with health care workers in Rocky Mount, they explained that they bend the rules to place oxygen in the homes of their impoverished and

incapacitated patients in order to make it tougher, under state law, to shut off the water and power these less privileged citizens cannot afford.

A seventy-year-old black woman from Winton, NC explained that she drives the school bus, morning and afternoon, every day, in order to get needed resources to pay for medicine and therapy her physically disabled husband requires. You know her. She's one of the lazy poor.

Or, visit with the young brilliant black mother, from Halifax County, who graduated from UNC, moved back home, lost her job, eventually lost her housing, and sense of hope. But, she explained, she feared losing the far more important battle with her young son, against peer pressure, about the importance of going to school. Because, as the son said, "how can you prove... (the importance of education) by what's happened to you, mom?"

Meet the daughter in Wilson who frets for her 62 year-old father, with heart disease, who cannot see a doctor unless he can come up with the \$400 he owes. But the family cannot come up with this money. So she fears, every day, the call. And I couldn't decide who carried the greater burden, the daughter or the father.

And, let us listen to the thirty year old woman from

Colerain who lost her husband, her aunt and her house in the flash of the tornadoes two years ago. Since she couldn't afford insurance, she now lives in financial as well as personal ruin.

Visit the Beloved Community Center of Greensboro, where folks line up at 3:30 in the morning to get a shower when the doors eventually open at 6:00am. This was where four homeless clients died on the streets in a single week this last winter just before we arrived. Down the road at Greensboro is Urban Ministries where 500 meals are served, three times a day, seven days a week, and they can't meet demand in a city where some of our leaders want us to believe that poverty is no big deal.

Do not forget hundreds of Latino women and men, working long, brutal hours, in agriculture, across eastern North Carolina, for \$45 a day except on the days that they received nothing, because their employers decided to steal their wages as part of the business plan.

In East Spencer, a small, ancient, mostly black town, over 40% of the community lives in poverty. East Spencer has no library, no school, no grocery store – in what the scholars call a food desert. Even though the national corporate headquarters of the massive Food

Lion grocery chain is located a few hundred yards over the bridge in Salisbury. And a huge food distribution center is located right in the middle of East Spencer, sending loaded trucks across the region, except the town in which it resides.

In Hendersonville, we learnt about the police chase for an unarmed black man, alleged to have stolen a computer game. Over fifty bullets were fired by these law enforcement officers into a half dozen houses, even the church where we met a few days later. A grandmother explained, weeping, that if she and her four-year-old granddaughter hadn't hit the floor quickly enough, shots coming through the window would have killed them both. This is something, of course, that would never occur in a white neighborhood. Never! In the opinion of a young mother who lived through this incident: "when they shot into all those houses, they wounded the whole community because they said our lives didn't matter." How else could this incident be understood?

And, for me, finally, in what would be a perfect allegory, if only it weren't true, is the experience of a disabled, impoverished, homeless man who wanted to silently protest, on the corner he claims, when President Obama came to town. But the Secret Service moved him blocks away so the president would not see him. This man was edited out of the president's

picture, deleted from his field of vision. He was made to disappear, not to be counted, heard, or helped. He was not to be given a meaningful chance to be seen in Washington or in Raleigh.

And, of course, this occurs in a state and a country where huge numbers of us, and most of our political leaders, claim that we have so much poverty because we are too generous with welfare benefits. If generous aid perpetuates poverty, we ought to have fewer poor people than other advanced nations. But we have the most.

The frank truth is if the exclusions and indignities of American race and poverty are right, the Constitution is wrong.

If the debilitations of those locked at the bottom are acceptable, our scriptures are wrong.

If these denials of equal citizenship and humanity are permissible, we pledge allegiance to a cynical illusion, not a foundational creed.

And I think we know it. Like LBJ said, "we may not know everything, but we know (the) difference between chicken-shit and chicken salad."

Johnson wasn't always crude, just almost always. I spent much of my youth, as probably some of you did, protesting against him. He was a big, complicated, hypocritical, outrageous, inconsistent, contradictory Texan. [I'm from Mesquite Texas]. He hollered at you, waved his arms, sort sweated and spit on you. I don't know why I'm drawn to him.

[But he also taught that American poverty touches our personal conscience and national mission.](#) Under circumstances not that different from our own, he said this:

“Rarely in any time does an issue lay bare the secret heart of America itself. Rarely are we met with a challenge, not to our growth or abundance or our security, but rather to the values and the purposes and the meaning of our beloved nation. And should we defeat every enemy, and should we double our wealth and conquer the stars, and still be unequal to this task, then we will have failed as a people and as a nation. For, with a country as with a person, what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his soul.”

This work – addressing the yawning chasm between our words and our deeds – is, not to put too grand a point on it, the work of our national soul, the measure of our national character. Meeting the challenge that

Dr. King constantly laid before us – “all we are asking is be true to what you put on paper.” That is, of course, particularly true in North Carolina where an unprecedented, and unforgivable war on poor people is being waged with determination.

We could wish it weren't as challenging, or as lonely, or as uphill, or as unappreciated as it is. We could wish there weren't such powerful forces arrayed against our common interest. And even if not arrayed against it, we could wish there weren't such massive numbers of our colleagues who prefer to sweep the whole matter aside, under a giant, concealing, burden-relieving, rug.

But sometimes, under daunting challenge, it is helpful to think of those who have gone before. I'm guessing that Fannie Lou Hamer didn't do an opinion poll before she started the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and Rosa Parks didn't conduct a focus group before she sat down for freedom. Cesar Chavez didn't ask if it would be convenient or lauded or universally embraced when he launched his famous hunger strike, saying, instead, 'si, si se pueda.' This isn't the first time people of good heart, in the south, in the nation, have been called to struggle for justice against the odds. We are called to it.

We are called because somewhere we read ...

1. Somewhere we read “We hold these truths to be

self-evident that all are created equal.”

2. Somewhere we read of “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

3. And somewhere we read “history will judge us on the extent to which we have used our gifts to lighten and enrich the lives of our fellows.”

4. Somewhere we read, injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

5. And somewhere we read, “all we’re asking you to do is be true to what you put on paper.”

6. And somewhere we read, “we have to believe the things we teach our children”, believe them and make them real.

7. And somewhere we read ‘the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.’”

8. And somewhere we read, “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”

9. And somewhere we read not to “lay up our treasures on earth, where moth and rust corrupt, and thieves steal ... but lay up your treasures in heaven, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

10. And somewhere we read, that “whenever you did these things for the least of these, you did them for me.”

11. And somewhere we read, “You reap what you sow.”

12. And somewhere we read that the pursuit of justice and the pursuit of happiness can be as one. They march not in opposite directions, but hand in hand.

13. And somewhere we read, “no, we are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters & righteousness like a mighty stream.”

Thank you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gene Nichol is Boyd Tinsley Distinguished Professor and Director of the Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity at the University of North Carolina, Chapel-Hill where he also teaches courses in constitutional law and federal courts. From 2005 to 2008, Nichol was the 26th President of the College of William and Mary. He was Burton Craige Professor and Dean of the Law School at UNC Chapel-Hill, 1999-2005; Dean at University of Colorado's School of Law, 1988-1995; and James Cutler Professor and Director of the Bill of Rights Institute at William & Mary, 1985-1988. Nichol founded the Byron White Center of Constitutional Law at the University of Colorado and the Center for Civil Rights at UNC Chapel-Hill. He has published articles and essays in the *Supreme Court Review*, and the *Harvard*, *Yale*, *Chicago*, *Michigan*, *Pennsylvania*, *California*, *Duke* and *Virginia Law Reviews*. In 1998-1999, he served as a political columnist for the *Denver-Rocky Mountain News*. He has been a monthly op-ed writer for the *Raleigh News & Observer* for over a decade; and he is author of "Seeing the Invisible", a year-long series on North Carolina poverty for the *News & Observer* appearing throughout 2013. A leading public scholar and public servant, Professor Nichol has received numerous awards for his distinguished career as a teacher, scholar, administrator, and advocate for the underprivileged. In 2005, Governor Michael Easley of North Carolina inducted Nichol into the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, North Carolina's highest civilian honor. And in 2013, the University of North Carolina gave him its prestigious Thomas Jefferson Award.

SYMPOSIUM PARTICIPANTS





PAPERS PRESENTED AT THE SYMPOSIUM

DAY 1: April 2

9:15-10:45

Session I: Theorizing and Rethinking Moral Economies

Chair: Dr. Felix Germain, Africana Studies, UNC Charlotte

Olivia Saunders

Professor, School of Business, College of The *Bahamas*,
New Providence, Bahamas

Moral Economics

Joseph Winters

Assistant Professor, Department of Religious Studies, UNC Charlotte

The Tragic Ambivalence of Hope

Edward Sammons

Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Brooklyn College

Re-Tuning Thompson: Moral Economy and Moralization in

Paul Gilroy's Darker than Blue

10:45-11:00

Coffee/Tea Break

11:00-12:30

Session II: Globalization and Africa

Chair: Dr. Tracey Thompson, College of The Bahamas

Olayiwola Abegunrin

Professor, Department of Political Science, Howard University

Moral Economy and Unequal International Economic Relations:

Africa as a Victim?

Eric Amah Kouevi

Ph.D Candidate in Economics, University Jean Moulin Lyon 3,
France & Visiting Scholar, Department of Economics, UNC Charlotte
*The Imperatives of Moral Economy Considerations for Designing
Industrial Policies in sub-Saharan Africa*

Emmanuel Babatunde

Professor and Chair, Sociology, Criminal Justice and Anthropology,
The Lincoln University
Immoral Economy and the Destabilization of Nigeria

12:30-2:00

Lunch

2:00-3:00

Session III: Moral Economies of Health

Chair: Dr. Oladimeji Aborisade, Africana Studies, UNC Charlotte

Aderemi S. Ajala

Associate Professor, University of Ibadan, Nigeria
*HIV/AIDS, Panic and Moral Economy of Health Care
in southwestern Nigeria*

James Battle

University of California President's Postdoctoral Fellow, 2013-2015,
University of California, Santa Cruz
*Bioethical Constriction: Ascriptive Inequality, Categorical Inclusion
and the Moral Economy of Participation*

3:00-3:15

Coffee/Tea Break

3:15-4:45

Session IV: Screening of *The Line* ("Poverty in America") &

Conversation with Film Producer, Linda Midgett

Moderator: Dr. Debra Smith, Africana Studies

5:00-6:30

Session V: Round Table - Organizing Academics to Speak

Out: Scholars for North Carolina's Future

Moderator: Dr. Veronica Hilliard, Africana Studies

Stephen Boyd

J. Allen Easley Professor and Director, Religion & Public Engagement,
Wake Forest University

Robert Korstad

Professor of Public Policy and History, Duke University

Lisa Levenstein

Associate Professor of History, UNC Greensboro

DAY 2: April 3

8:00-9:00

Registration and Continental Breakfast

9:00-11:30

Session VI: Ethical Considerations for Global Capitalism

Chair: Dr. Oscar de la Torre, Africana Studies, UNC Charlotte

Michael Franczak

Doctoral Candidate in History, Boston College

*Political and Moral Economy at the Bretton Woods Conference:
Perspectives from the Global South*

Sophia G. Brown

Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership, Nova Southeastern
University

Tourism Industry in Jamaica: A Viable Pathway to Development?

Isaac Olawale Albert

Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies

Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan

The Moral Economy and China's Strategies for Winning Hearts and Minds in Africa

11:30-1:00

Lunch

1:00-2:30

Session VII: Moral Economies of the State and Society in Africa

Chair: Dr. Peta Katz, Anthropology, UNC Charlotte

Teferi Abate Adem

Research Associate, Human Relations Area Files at Yale

Morality of Partisan Leadership in a Northeast Ethiopian Village

Ralph Callebert

Lecturer, Department of History, Saint Mary's University, Halifax

Dualism and Popular Economies in South Africa

Samuel O. Oloruntoba

Post-Doctoral Fellow, Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute,

University of South Africa, Pretoria

***Capital-Society Relations in a Neoliberal Global Order:
Towards Re-Engagement with Karl Polanyi's Thoughts***

2:30-2:45

Coffee/Tea Break

2:45-4:45

**Session VIII: Moral Economies of Race, Citizenship
and Democracy**

Chair: Dr. Dorothy Smith-Ruiz, Africana Studies, UNC Charlotte

Jamal Turner

Independent Scholar and Community Activist, Charlotte

The Rise of Corporative Fascism Amerikan Style

Gregory Mixon

Associate Professor, Department History, UNC Charlotte

*Black Militiamen and the Militia: An Instrument of Citizenship
in the Nineteenth-Century Western Hemisphere*

Tekla Ali Johnson

Assistant Professor of History, Salem College, NC

Un-Random Acts: Three Synchronized Repressions

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