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Joanne Meyerowitz, *A War on Global Poverty: The Lost Promise of Redistribution and the Rise of Microcredit* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2021)

### Author Background:

- ◇ Arthur Unobskey Professor of **History** and Professor of **American Studies** at Yale University since 2004 (before: University of Cincinnati and Indiana University), B.A. from the University of Chicago, M.A. and Ph.D. from Stanford University
- ◇ Served as chair of LGBT Studies, chair of the American Studies Program, and interim chair of the Department of History at Yale + co-director of the Yale Research Initiative on the History of Sexualities
- ◇ Books: *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (1988), *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (2002), *A War on Global Poverty: The Lost Promise of Redistribution and the Rise of Microcredit* (2021), *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (as editor, 1994), and *History and September 11th* (as editor, 2003)
- ◇ Fellowships & awards: American Council of Learned Societies, John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, National Humanities Center, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Social Science Research Council, and Graduate Mentor Award in the Humanities
- ◇ Elected member of the Society of American Historians + Organization of American Historians (past)
- ◇ Main fields/areas of interests: 20<sup>th</sup>-century history, gender & sexuality, global poverty.

### Sources & Methodology:

- ◇ Books (mainly by economists such as Barbara Ward, Michael Harrington, or Ester Boserup, but also by psychologist David McClelland) and journal articles (e.g., *Journal of Peace Research*, *American Economic Review*, ...)
- ◇ Presidential/political speeches and addresses (e.g., J. F. Kennedy’s “Inaugural Address,” Robert McNamara’s “Address to the Board of Governors,” ...)
- ◇ Newspapers articles (*New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Guardian*, *Washington Post*, ...)
- ◇ Interviews, (conference) reports

### Key Terms:

Global poverty, inequality, foreign aid, humanitarian argument, big push, mutual gain thesis, basic (human) needs approach, achievement motivation, debt, microcredit, (women as the) deserving/virtuous poor, financial imperialism, social business

### Main Themes and Arguments:

- ◇ **Chapter 1 (1960s-early 1970s):** industrialized nations (mainly the U.S.) attempt to reduce global poverty and counter communism by fostering modernization projects in developing countries. **Poverty becomes a global concern but foreign aid help maintain colonialism and the poor are blamed for their impoverishment** (see development economist Peter T. Bauer). Foreign aid initiatives are mainly launched by economists who have Catholic roots (e.g., Barbara Ward).
- ◇ **Chapter 2 (1970s):** foreign aid is in decline, and so emerges the New International Economic Order (NIEO) in 1974, which “position[s] **the poor as neglected people left behind in a modernizing world**” (55) and shifts the balance of power between poor and rich nations (56). **The Carter Administration turns to the approach of “basic needs”** which also includes redistribution among nations through the World Bank. Economic growth through this approach is not a measure of success but a way of overcoming poverty, but it is also seen as threatening the environment (see the *Club of Rome*). The basic needs approach shows that **foreign aid was never solely a humanitarian issue and was supported as long as it benefited American business to counter competition in the Cold War.**
- ◇ **Chapter 3 (1970s-early 1980s):** Gender equality and structural change are seen as necessary to end global poverty. Women are seen as those who could shape their children’s personalities and lead the next generation of men to achievement (see David McClelland’s idea of “achievement motivation”). Dominance needs to be dealt with so as to create a new generation of achieving sons, which gives a role to women in biopolitical economy. There is a focus on population growth and family planning which

obscures and obstructs efforts in development aid. Ester Boserup, a Danish economist, helped launch the WID (“women in development”) movement, rejecting population control movements and positioning women as economic actors and not child rearers or bearers (also promoted in the 1972 Percy amendment). Leftists, however, see the Percy amendment as a sign of American imperialism that does not include women from developing countries. Inequality in the household mostly persisted and these approaches remained mainly imperialistic in the 1970s.

- ◇ **Chapter 4 (1980s):** Foreign aid becomes privatized through the channels of some NGOs. In the Reagan era, **the poor begin to be seen more as owners and builders of businesses rather than as workers.** NGOs position **women as critical to the global antipoverty movement**, since they are more responsible economic actors than men. Besides, **the Global South is viewed as “the new frontier,”** a new land to be conquered through modernization. Home-based and local production, generation of income, entrepreneurship are part of this **new informal economic strategy.** Funding for foreign aid was also deeply cut in the 1980s, NGOs though governments were corrupt and sought funding from donors. There is a consensus for **a new position for women too insofar as programs for women would increase productivity, alleviate poverty, help children, and lower birth rates.** Women are also the key suppliers of basic needs in developing countries, are farmers and are supplying the household with food—they **became the “deserving poor”** while men were not to be trusted with money or children.
- ◇ **Chapter 5 (1980s-early 1990s): Microcredit** developed in the era of neoliberalism and market oriented Reaganism. It helps cleanse debt by calling it credit, which sounds more positive. In the mid-1980s, it did not work in African countries and threatened them of economic collapse. Microcredit projects and the IMF are critiqued as **imperialist financial disciplines that impeded autonomy in developing countries,** including in Cheryl Prayer’s 1974 book *The Debt Trap*. The IMF was never designed to help the Third World or end poverty (see Dauson L. Budhoo’s resignation). “The very thing that made women appealing as microcredit borrowers—that they seemed to spend on their children and not on themselves—also made them troublesome for microcredit programs. When women used their loans for family consumption, they withdrew funds that lenders wanted them to invest in their businesses” (215). Microcredit was supported by Clinton and became popular in the 1990s, but it did not address the causes of poverty including the protectionist trade policies of the United States and Europe. It just treated women as entrepreneurs without addressing basic needs.
- ◇ **Epilogue:** “Microcredit programs sidelined **poor men in the global South not as criminal but as selfish and unreliable. Poor women were now expected to combine unpaid care labor with income-earning businesses** that might support their children, and impoverished men were increasingly written of” (228). Her leads are socialist-communist approaches such as the global international taxes (and global redistribution of wealth) promoted by French economist Thomas Piketty.

### In conversation with...

- ◇ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (2004) (// neoliberalism-free market economics, gender inequalities)
- ◇ Thomas Piketty, *Le Capital au XXIe siècle (Capital in the Twenty-First Century)* (2013)
- ◇ Thomas Piketty, *Une brève histoire de l'égalité (A Brief History of Equality)* (2021)
- ◇ Destin Jenkins, *The Bonds of Inequality: Debt and the Making of the American City* (2022) (// indebtedness and inequity)

### Discussion Questions:

- ◇ Since foreign aid never truly aimed at ending global poverty, can the West still be its driving force (*especially if the governance/economic system does not drastically change first and/or if it has another agenda that may be political, economic, or religious*)? Is “decolonized aid” an oxymoron (see <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/podcast/2022/10/19/Degan-Ali-decolonising-aid> — “what we need to do is leaving people to their own devices” – Degan Ali, DA Global) / Is international aid inherently bad?
- ◇ Isn’t Muhammad Yunus’ idea of “social business”—which would provide services such as healthcare and education, merge business and philanthropy, and counter “financial imperialism”—too unrealistic/idealistic (// Piketty’s global taxes)?
- ◇ Isn’t the West/(the U.S.) projecting its own understanding of labor onto developing/poorer countries in which men and women have a different relationship with work (e.g., the assumption that all women can and should be entrepreneurs to survive)?