**Week 2 Case Study:**

**Poverty in America…. Q:1 and Q:5**

By: Matthew Ferry

May 13, 2011

**Poverty In America:**

Question: Does the existence of poverty imply that our social and economic system is unjust? Does the concentration of poverty in certain groups make it more unjust and would be otherwise?

 The existence of poverty does not imply that our social and economic system is unjust. Poverty has existed since the beginning of time. There have always been and will always be a less fortunate group of people within society. At least so long as societies base their economic and social systems off any type of monetary or bartering system, and so long as there are members within society that feel that they are better than other members of society based on their economic status.

This is not a fault of “Society” but a fault of human nature. There will always be people willing to take advantage of the shortcomings of others to further their own cause, and there will always be people willing to ignore these injustices under the pretense, that as they are not directly affected by these actions, that it is none of their concern.

 As for the concentration of poverty in certain groups, again I don’t see this as a fault of society as whole, but again as a fault of the individual. While society may have a larger role in these types of situations the overall issue, still boils down individual decisions. Society does not dictate that some people must be poor. People’s actions dictate the status that they find themselves in.

 Another factor of poverty being concentrated in certain groups is that they have been in that situation for so long that they fail to realize that their situation is one that will not change within a single generation, but will never change if they don’t do anything at all.

 Again, this is not societies fault, because in the end, it comes down to the decision of an individual. If someone is part of a community that refuses to change, then the individual that disagrees should move on, and it may be generations for that individual’s decision to come to fruition. A completely broke family decides that they cannot survive in their current location because they do not see the local community or situation changing, so the difficult decision is made to move, and work hard towards a better life. The kids of that family grow up with an extremely hard life, but pay attention. The children do a little better than their parents and so forth and so on, and that is what forms the true nature of society, in that we try to improve the world for the coming generation, but that doesn’t happen on a society level.

 Society’s only real influences on the individual are legal and social norms that may influence the individual’s decisions, but in the end the decisions made are still those of an individual.

Question: How would a libertarian like Nozick view poverty in the United States? How plausible do you find the libertarians preference for private charity over public assistance?

 Nozick would look at poverty, and see it as an acceptable outcome of free capitalism, as the rich people earned their money fairly, and are under no obligation to the less fortunate.

 The “Under no obligation to the less fortunate” phrase is of course the key difference in the libertarian view between “private charity” and “public assistance”. At a glance the libertarian view matches the majority of today’s society, on both corporate and individual levels, thus it is moderately plausible.

 The majority of people across the United States would agree that a person that has earned for example money or food legitimately is free to do with that money or food, as they so desire.

However, this plausibility begins to show cracks when you consider extreme scenarios.

 You and a homeless person find yourselves in a locked room with a vending machine that is stocked with both of your favorite foods. The homeless person has a few coins that they found before finding themselves in this room, but not enough to pay for anything from the vending machine. To make matters worse for the homeless person, the vending machine only accepts debit cards or credit cards. You check your pockets and find that you still have your wallet, and your debit card and credit cards are still there. You can easily afford anything that you want and anything that the homeless person may want.

 Under the libertarian view, it would be perfectly ethical for you to purchase whatever you wanted from the vending machine for only yourself and eat it in front of the homeless person while they watch you salivating and hungry. Because under the pretense of “Private Charity vs. Public Assistance” because you legitimately earned the money on your debit cards and credit card limits, you are free to do with that money as you wish, and that it would be wrong for you to be forced to buy the homeless person anything if you didn’t want to.

 The crack in this plausibility is that under these circumstances the majority of society would not back this particular libertarian concept, because they would feel obligated to buy food for the homeless person as well (which violates the view of the libertarian). If not because the homeless person couldn’t afford it and is clearly just as hungry as you, then on the basis that they would probably feel extremely uneasy about eating in front of the homeless person, without sharing, especially if this particular scenario was a prolonged scenario.

 Of course the chances of this extreme situation happening are almost zero, unfortunately this leaves an opening for the majority of society to exit the scenario with a fairly clean conscious.

 Instead of being in a locked room, you exit your favorite restaurant with a carry out bag onto a busy street. There is a homeless person walking down the street, and you see them gaze longingly into the restaurant. You can tell by looking at them that they probably go hungry most nights. You could easily give them your carry out, but instead you decide to continue to leave and get in your car.