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Wretched of the Earth

Poor People

by William T. Vollmann.
Ecco, 450 pp., \$29.95

Understanding Poverty

edited by Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee,
Roland Bénabou, and Dilip
Mookherjee.
Oxford University Press,
443 pp., \$35.00 (paper)

Nicholas Kristof

No interview haunts me more than a conversation with a Cambodian peasant, Nhem Yen, in 1996. She was forty years old, though she looked much older, and was living with her family in a clearing in the Cambodian jungle. The area was notorious for malaria, but the family members were ambitious and industrious and figured that it was worth the risk to make more money by cutting wood for sale.

Nhem Yen's eldest daughter, who was twenty-four and pregnant with her second child, promptly caught malaria. There was no money to get medical treatment (effective drugs would have cost less than \$10), and so she died a day after giving birth. That left Nhem Yen looking after five children of her own and two grandchildren.

The family had one mosquito net that could accommodate about three people. Such nets are quite effective against malaria, but they cost \$5—and Nhem Yen could not afford to buy any more. So every night, she agonized over which of the children to put under the net and which to leave out.

"It's very hard to choose,"

Nhem Yen told me. "But we have no money to buy another mosquito net. We have no choice."

That is the real face of poverty: it is not so much the pain of hunger or the humiliation of rags, but the impossible choices you face. If you can only afford school fees for some of your children, which do you send? If you must choose between medical treatment for Dad, the breadwinner, or for Daughter, the A student, which is it? Do you use your savings to provide a good dowry so Eldest Daughter can get a decent husband, or do you settle for the drunkard who will beat her and instead invest the savings in a food cart that may help provide an income to send the younger ones to school?

One measure of the ubiquity of these tradeoffs is that today, as every day, 30,000 children will die of hunger, disease, and other consequences of poverty, according to UNICEF. In many cases, those will be daughters, because parents (particularly in South Asia) don't have the resources to keep all their children alive, so they put a finger on the scales on the side of their sons. In India alone, among children aged one to five, girls are 50 percent more likely to die than boys—meaning that 130,000 Indian girls are mortally discriminated against each year.

Poverty both in the US and around the world remains a central fact of twenty-first-century life; a majority of the world lives on less than \$2 a day,

one common measure of who is poor. Yet we manage, pretty successfully, to ignore it and insulate ourselves even from poverty in our own country. When it pops out from behind the screen after an episode like the Watts riots of 1965 or the New Orleans hurricane of 2005, then we express horror and indignation and vow change, and finally shrug and move on. Meanwhile, the world's five hundred wealthiest people have the same income as the world's poorest 416 million.

These days, however, something interesting is stirring in the world of poverty. People like Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett have made it almost as prestigious for philanthropists to underwrite vaccinations as

tions. Mostly, it's a pointillist description of poor people he has encountered and interviewed extensively in Thailand, Russia, China, and elsewhere. Vollmann asks them questions like "do you consider yourself poor?" Or "why are poor people poor?" Or "are men and women equally poor?" Or "why are you poor?" Or "why are some people rich and some poor?"

The problem is that the answers often aren't very interesting, persuasive, or authoritative. It's useful to ask poor people about poverty, but after wading through three hundred pages of their equally impoverished answers, unleavened by some larger context or theme, I think Vollmann would have been better off spending some of his time asking such questions of a panel of Ivy League professors. (Granted,

the 1960s and of many foreign aid programs didn't work out as well as hoped partly because they ended up treating poverty essentially as a redistribution issue—and it's far more than that.

The best nonfiction book on American poverty I have ever read is Jason DeParle's brilliant *American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation's Drive to End Welfare*.¹ It's a close-up look at three poor women and the impact of the effort to end welfare "as we know it." It's far too rich and complex a work to offer simple solutions, but in the end it suggests that there are real benefits to pushing some families out of welfare into work—but that those benefits are modest and still leave little hope of resolving the challenges of poverty. Still, DeParle (a colleague at *The New York Times*) does examine at the end of his book some programs to combat poverty and suggests that in the 1990s we began to learn what works and what doesn't in alleviating its worst forms in the United States.

There is, I think, a liberal squeamishness about confronting the reality that one important element that sustains poverty is culture: a self-destructive pathology that arises from poverty and then entraps the poor in it for generation after generation. The culture varies with the society, and it is different for Dalits (or Untouchables) in India and for villagers in Congo and for the homeless in the US. Often, though, this culture involves elements of hopelessness, substance abuse, underinvestment in education, self-fulfilling expectations of failure, and squandered resources.

Less vivid but more insightful in depicting poverty is a recent scholarly article in *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*. Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo have written a fascinating—and troubling—examination called "The Economic Lives of the Poor," based on surveys of people living on less than \$2 a day in thirteen countries.² The surveys found the respondents to be undernourished, with 55 percent of poor adults in Udaipur, India, suffering from anemia (which also limits their ability to work and earn money). The poor also invest negligible sums in education (about 2 percent of their income), even though more investment in schooling might offer their children a way out of the cycle.

Yet it's much too simple to conclude that their lack of spending on adequate food and education is solely because they don't have the money. Part of it is the way they spend money—7 percent of their spending went for sugar. As the authors write:

A common image of the extremely poor is that they do not get to

¹Viking, 2004; reviewed in these pages by Christopher Jencks, December 15, 2005.

²See *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Winter 2007). The article can be found at http://econ-www.mit.edu/faculty/download_pdf.php?id=1346.



A group of teenagers living in the flood-control chambers under Mexico City, 1998; photograph by Sebastião Salgado from his book *Migrations* (2000)

to underwrite the ballet. Bono and Angelina Jolie have made Africa almost sexy. And several Democratic presidential candidates have real expertise and interest in the issue, particularly domestically: Barack Obama worked as a grassroots antipoverty organizer in Chicago; Hillary Rodham Clinton has long labored on child poverty; and John Edwards has spent the last few years assiduously studying poverty and speaking out about it. On the Republican side, Sam Brownback is also very serious about poverty and related issues, including prison conditions and recidivism.

So we now have a wealth of interest in poverty. A fruit of that, or perhaps a beneficiary of it, is William Vollmann's new work, bluntly titled *Poor People*. Vollmann is a terrific reporter and writer who won a National Book Award in 2005 for his novel *Europe Central*. He also comes across as an exceptionally nice guy, not only handing out money to people right and left but also allowing homeless people to squat next to his house in California. He gets a little testy when they use the area as a public toilet, but he still earnestly takes his daughter with him to chat with the homeless and has her shake their hands to show respect. Then he takes her inside to scrub that hand.

Vollmann's book is difficult to describe. It's not a systematic examination of poverty, and it's certainly not a treatise on how to respond to poverty—he barely discusses possible solu-

I'm being unfair in asking for a book that Vollmann apparently didn't want to write.)

Vollmann has written something that is perhaps closer to travel literature than poverty literature. His book is a bit like one of Paul Theroux's—but a compassionate, warm Theroux—with its finely drawn characters who are interesting in themselves but whose comments don't suggest some larger truth. The first person Vollmann sketches is a Thai woman named Sunee, a drunkard and probably a former "entertainer" in Japan. She has a daughter to whom Vollmann sometimes gives money (which Sunee periodically confiscates). Sunee rings true to me, as do all the other figures in the book. But the interview with her doesn't illuminate the challenge of poverty or suggest how to resolve it.

The most moving evocations of poverty have been fictional: Zola's *Germinal*, or Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. Those novels have heroic characters, and you want to reach into your pocket and solve their problems by handing them a pile of cash. But in the real world, many tales of poverty are less moving and more nuanced, with a dash of self-destructiveness thrown in. It may not be entirely Sunee's fault that she is a drunkard, but it does make you less likely to react sympathetically when you read of her decline. In that sense, Vollmann's work is a useful reminder that poverty is often a shortage of more than cash. The optimistic efforts of the antipoverty campaigns of

his thin lips smiled ironically. For ten years he stood with folded arms, by a column, by a tree on the boulevard, in drawing-rooms and theatres, at the club and, an embodied veto, a living protest, gazed at the vortex of faces senselessly whirling round him.⁹

David Cromwell brings this minor but vital figure to life, in a performance of astonishing grace and understatement. Richard Easton does the same in his moving portrayal of the dedicated Polish revolutionary Count Worcell, whose passion and ready self-sacrifice Herzen deeply admired.

Ethan Hawke powerfully portrays the unquenchable energies and appetites of Bakunin, as Herzen knew him: "He argued, lectured, made arrangements, shouted, decided, directed, organised and encouraged all day long, all night long."¹⁰ Josh Hamilton deftly brings out the dissolute sweetness of the poet Ogarev—the one adult character on stage, again and again, to take a serious interest in the thoughts and welfare of the Herzen children. And Billy Crudup embodies the passionate, awkward Belinsky.

Stoppard's inspired dialogue and Crudup's inspired slapstick unforgettably convey the spirit of this brilliant, tormented man. Belinsky, Herzen recalled, found parties terrifying. He could not escape an awkward social situation without knocking over a table, spilling a bottle of red wine on his neighbor's trousers, and running all the way home:

Dear Belinsky! For what a long time he was angry and upset at such incidents, with what horror he used to recall them, walking up and down the room and shaking his head without the trace of a smile!

But when it came to a matter of taste, in literature or life, Herzen's standards were inviolable and his courage absolute:

But in that shy man, that frail his body, there dwelt a mighty spirit, the spirit of a gladiator! Yes, he was a powerful fighter! He could preach or lecture; what he exceeded was a quarrel. If he met with no objection, if he was not stirred to irritation, he did not speak well, but when he felt stung, when his cherished convictions were called in question, when the muscles of his cheeks began to quiver and his voice to burst out, then he was worth seeing; he pounced upon his opponent like a panther, he tore him to pieces, made him a ridiculous, a piteous object, and incidentally developed his own thought, with unusual power and poetry.¹¹

Crudup makes us feel what it meant to have a calling for criticism, in literature and society alike, so powerful that it could overcome his own terrible weaknesses.

In the end, of course, the historian's point of view is the wrong one. Stop-

pard's trilogy is a work of theater. Its correspondence to particular texts and facts matters less than its effectiveness at giving an audience a world to contemplate—a world coherently made, humanly populated, with profound stories going on. That is, as always in the theater, a matter of collaboration, as actors, director, scenic and lighting artists, musicians, and others make of the playwright's original vision something rich and strange. And the results here are mixed. Stoppard has written a linked series of intimate dramas. Yet Scott Crowley and Bob Pask's often beautiful sets, flown in from the heights and raised from the bowels of the Vivian Beaumont Theater, do little to set one scene off from another. The miserable office in which Belinsky lived, slept, and edited his magazine does not look terribly different from Herzen's houses in Geneva and London.

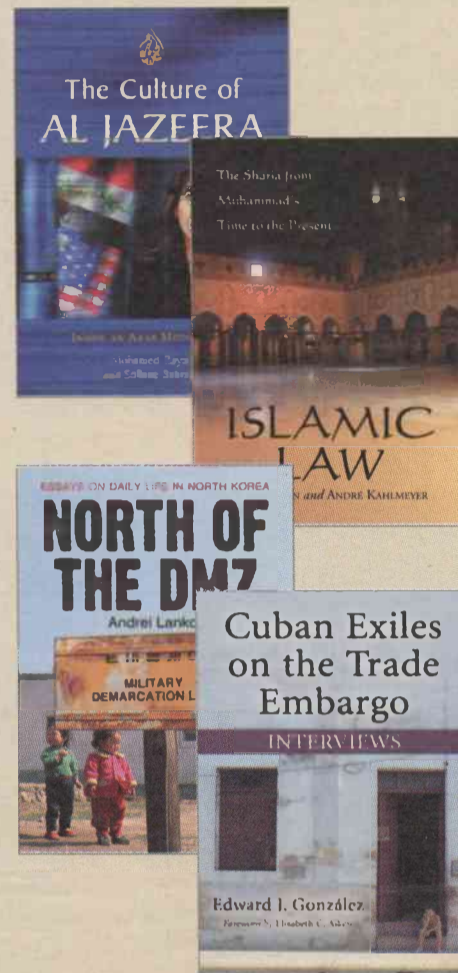
Worse still, the settings sometimes break forth into visually stunning but dramatically irrelevant pastiche. The forced-perspective boulevard and exploding statues that identify Paris in *Shipwreck*, the second play, look more like the sets for a road-show production of *Les Misérables* than a shrewd way to convey what Herzen and the other Russians experienced as they sat indoors, their windows tightly shut, and listened to the rifle fire in the streets. At least once—in the dream sequence that begins the third play, and that resembles an ill-judged revival from the Theater of Shock, vintage 1968—writer, director, and designers conspire to embarrass everyone in the theater. Individual effects dazzle. The drops and the living and mannequin serfs that form the background to the Bakunin family estate at Pryamukhino beautifully suggest the dream world in which the young anarchist and his family lived. They seem as unaware as sleepwalkers of the suffering of the serfs who made their pursuit of love and culture possible, even when they themselves inflict it. But the sets as a whole, for all their splendor, seem ill adapted to the core of the stories Stoppard wants to tell. So, indeed, do the vast stage and auditorium of the Vivian Beaumont.

And yet, and yet: in theater the audience's judgment leaves little room for appeal. To watch these three plays in one day—to witness Herzen's terrible life, Stoic courage, and passion for justice, to learn something of the thought and fates of his extraordinary friends and contemporaries, to live through voyage and shipwreck and salvage—is to undergo a temporary transformation, a revolution of the sensibilities. In the age of *Blink* and *Blahnik*, when the stupidity of a radio shock jock inspires a fit of moral indignation in the American press but the destructive ineptitude of the American government does not, Stoppard has made us see what it was like to love ideas with a whole heart, to fight for a better world with all one's strength, to write for readers who waited for days for each new article, to hurt the people one loves most, and to insist that no ends, however good, can justify immoral means. *The Coast of Utopia* brings us face to face with complex, articulated characters, doing their imperfect best to solve the hardest problems with which existence confronts us. Whatever its flaws, it is an extraordinary achievement. □

⁹Herzen, *My Life and Thoughts*, Vol. 2, p. 519.

¹⁰Herzen, *My Life and Thoughts*, Vol. 3, p. 1358.

¹¹Herzen, *My Life and Thoughts*, Vol. 2, p. 411.



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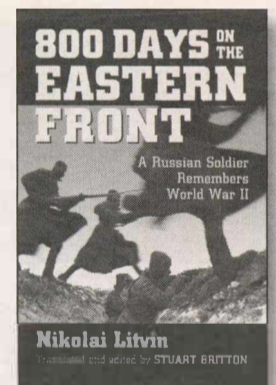
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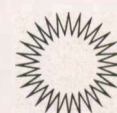
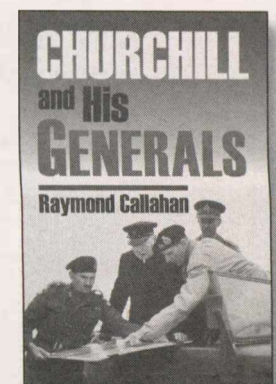
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make many real choices... Yet among the non-food items that the poor spend significant amounts of money on, alcohol and tobacco show up prominently. The extremely poor in rural areas spent 4.1 percent of their budget on tobacco and alcohol in Papua New Guinea, 5.0 percent in Udaipur, India; 6.0 percent in Indonesia and 8.1 percent in Mexico...

Perhaps more surprisingly, it is apparent that spending on festivals is an important part of the budget for many extremely poor households. In Udaipur, over the course of the previous year, more than 99 percent of the extremely poor households spent money on a wedding, a funeral, or a religious festival. The median household spent 10 percent of its annual budget on festivals. In South Africa, 90 percent of the households living under \$1 per day spent money on festivals. In Pakistan, Indonesia, and Cote d'Ivoire, more than 50 percent did likewise.

Festivals are one way for the poorest and most degraded families to gain dignity for a day. But the best single investment to gain long-term dignity is education, and that's the way to break the cycle. As the authors of this article note, one reason for the underinvestment in education is that illiterate parents can't judge what investments in education will pay off.

The pattern of misallocation of resources is confirmed by what I've seen in poor countries. It's routine to visit a family with a severely malnourished

child (with consequences for the child's cognition if it survives), and find out that the family has some meager savings—but Dad is off drinking them up at a nearby bar. And this is dispiriting for a man to admit, but it's typically that way: abundant research shows that in poor families, women invest money in food, children, and small businesses—and men squander funds on cigarettes, alcohol, video halls, and prostitution.

We should be clear: one smart way to fight poverty is to empower women (by educating girls, by giving daughters legal rights to inheritance, by promoting banking institutions that give women control over the accounts). Once mothers control family spending rather than fathers, family resources are invested more productively, and some families can rise out of poverty very quickly. This makes the fight for gender equality in the developing world not only a moral imperative but also an economic one. Aid groups recognize this and are adjusting their strategies. For example, Helene Gayle, the new head of CARE, is making empowerment of women—including microfinance—a major strategy because of its implications for fighting poverty.³

Whether in the US or abroad, I always find grassroots antipoverty workers much more useful than "experts" in Washington. At the local level you see all the frustrations and complexities of overcoming pathologies of misplaced priorities, drugs, alcohol, broken families, violence, and vast webs of self-destructive behavior—including simply acquiescence.

One of the great canards of modern life is that the poor are particularly grasping, always demanding entitlements. In fact, one of the problems in combating poverty is the opposite: the poor are far too willing to acquiesce. Vollmann writes that one of the characteristics of poverty is its invisibility—and he's right, because by and large the poor have been conditioned to retreat to the margins.

When I was covering the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, I spent my days in shelters with poor people who had lost everything while spending my nights with the family of a well-to-do doctor whose lovely home had been barely damaged (because it was well built and in a neighborhood located above the flood line). That's always the pattern. In a Bangladeshi cyclone, the hovels of the poor are swept away so that poor families lose their children and everything they ever owned—while the wealthy sit tight in concrete homes on higher land. In the Kobe earthquake in Japan in 1995, it was the poor who were crushed to death when their old houses collapsed; one rich family I visited at the epicenter had suffered little harm other than the destruction of its wine collection.

Even when middle-class or wealthy families were displaced in, say, New Orleans, they mostly figured out how to get what they needed. For a start,

they demanded it. Loudly. Insistently. But the people stuck in the shelters, black and white, were typically not only poorer but also less demanding, less assertive, less skilled in negotiating their way through the system. Poor families in the shelters were neglected precisely because they were suffering so patiently. After that experience, I caught myself thinking that the problem is not that the poor riot, but that they don't riot enough.

The complexities of poverty have major implications for health care reform. A leader in emphasizing this is Dr. Irwin Redlener, president of the Children's Health Fund, a passionate advocate for medical care for the poor, who also was my guide in New Orleans. I had thought that the obstacle for poor people—and the reason they die as a result of deficient health care—was that they couldn't afford it. But that's only one factor.

What we've seen over and over is that even if there is a free clinic, the poor family may depend on a single mother who doesn't have a car or driver's license and so can't get there. Or she can't afford the gas. Or her car doesn't have insurance. Or she doesn't understand how serious the symptoms are. Or she is working at a low-level job where she can't just ask for time off to take a child to the clinic. Or she doesn't speak English. Or she's illegal and is worried that INS agents may look at the clinic's records. Or she's got three other small children and can't leave two at home while she takes her sick child on a series of bus rides to the clinic. Or... the possibilities are endless. The point is that

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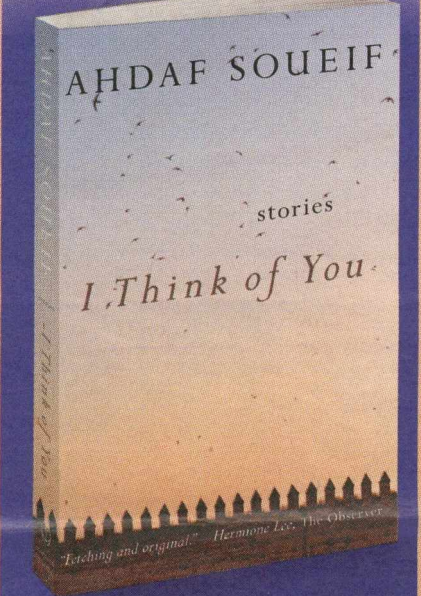
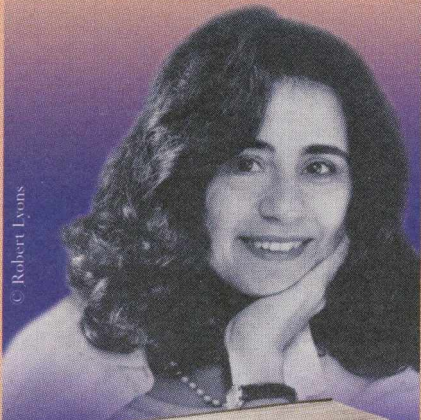
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making medical care accessible to the poor requires much more than making it free.

Poverty is connected, of course, to race. But in recent years we've learned that it's not exactly race, because blacks from the West Indies and newly arrived immigrants from Africa have often thrived in the US while traditional African-American descendants of slaves are more likely to be stuck in the whirlpool of poverty.

There is, I think, a parallel with the minority of Japan, the burakumin, sometimes called the Untouchables of Japan. The burakumin are not a racial minority but an occupational one: they are the descendants of those who worked with leather, with dead bodies, or with dead animals. But they were no less shunned and discriminated against than American blacks, and when I lived in Japan I sometimes heard Japanese friends tell me that the burakumin "are not real Japanese." A few decades ago, burakumin were rarely invited into ordinary people's homes, they could never work in restaurants, they had little hope of marrying a non-burakumin, and they were almost universally ostracized. Even today, parents sometimes hire private detective agencies to research the backgrounds of their children's fiancés to make sure that burakumin blood does not creep into the family.

The upshot was that burakumin felt excluded from the Japanese social compact, and they fell disproportionately into alcohol, drugs, divorce, and crime. The yakuza, Japan's criminal network, is overwhelmingly composed of burakumin and another ostracized minority, ethnic Koreans. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that when a society excludes a group and treats it as second-class citizens, then the result can be not only poverty as such but also self-destructive cycles of culture and behavior that make escape from poverty all the more difficult.

Yet the story of global poverty is, in spite of what most people think, in some ways a surprisingly successful one. We focus on those who are still poor, but in the last quarter-century far more people have been pulled out of poverty than ever before in the history of the world. Largely that's because of the economic success of Asia, and it should give pause to critics of globalization. In fact, it's precisely because of globalization that hundreds of millions of Chinese, Indians, Indonesians, and Malaysians are moving into the middle class.

Another new book on the subject, *Understanding Poverty*, a collection of essays by scholars, has both the depth and the data that Vollmann's book lacks. It's the kind of book that you can put down, but it's a serious examination of where we stand and what we need to do. An excellent opening chapter by the three editors—Abhijit Banerjee, Roland Bénabou, and Dilip Mookherjee—notes that in the period from the early 1980s to 2001,

poverty rates fell by almost half: approximately 400 million people crossed the \$1 threshold during this time [\$1 a day is often used as a measure of extreme poverty; \$2 a day is also often used]. This amounts to a fairly dramatic re-

duction in poverty. There is thus no basis for views, often expressed by protesters against globalization and privatization, that these trends have coincided with a rise in global poverty. Most of the poverty reduction happened in Asia, and particularly in China, which has experienced growing integration into the world economy and a rise in market forces.

It's also worth noting that the part of the world that has most withstood the forces of globalization (or simply been ignored) is Africa, where the number of poor people doubled.

The common perception of rising global inequality is true in a sense—but this is largely because entire nations have prospered while others have not; it is not because of rising inequality within poor countries. The gap between the world's wealthiest and poorest people is overwhelmingly accounted for by inequities from one country to another. In contrast, most nations appear to have reduced inequality within their borders (although this is not true of the US).

The decline of poverty is not some gimmick or statistical ploy. Anybody who has traveled regularly in Asia has seen it. My wife, Sheryl WuDunn, is Chinese-American, and when we first visited her ancestral village in 1987, it was dirt poor and consisted mostly of illiterate peasants with fantastically crooked teeth (China then apparently had one orthodontist in the entire country). Now it has a paved road, the children go to school and aspire to college, the adults have cell phones and television sets, and people are starting to look plump. And the children's teeth are straight.

The same transformation is evident across China, and in South Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, and elsewhere. It is now taking place in Vietnam, Cambodia, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Africa has been left out, but even Africa has some countries with exceptionally strong economic performance, like Botswana, Rwanda, Mozambique, and Mauritius.

After the fall of communism, there was a period when the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were spiraling down into penury. A few countries, like Moldova, Belarus, and Turkmenistan, are still wretched. But Russia, in large part thanks to its mineral resources, is booming. So are other parts of the former empire like Georgia, Armenia, and especially the Baltic Republics. Estonia is one of the most dynamic countries in Europe. Even in the US, for all the despair about poverty, the mid- and late-1990s saw remarkable drops in poverty rates. (The progress stopped in 2000.)

So we should approach poverty with real hope. The last fifty years have shown that these problems have solutions—and that's why it's a bit frustrating that Vollmann is strictly a tour guide of the slums, without pointing more directly to the policies that will help.

There's no magic bullet, but health interventions have been very successful. The US spent \$32 million to fight smallpox over ten years, achieving eradication in 1977. Now we save that sum every two and a half months in reduced spending on vaccines and health

care. Total savings have been \$17 billion, plus 45 million lives around the world, and as an investment that \$32 million has yielded a return of 45 percent per year. That's why we need similar campaigns against other diseases, including malaria, elephantiasis, and of course AIDS.

Education has also proved an excellent investment, and we now know that the most cost-effective way to keep children in school isn't to ban child labor, to pass laws requiring school attendance, or even to build schools. Rather, it's to bribe parents with cash grants for keeping kids in school. *Understanding Poverty* cites improvements in school attendance rates of 20 percentage points by such programs. A large-scale Indonesian program to spread primary education in the 1970s is estimated to have paid returns equivalent to 10 percent per year. Likewise, microfinance was justly recognized as an outstanding anti-poverty tool by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and its founder, Muhammad Yunus. Partly that's because microfinance often targets women, raising their status within societies and giving them more control over the family spending.

In the US as well, we have a clearer sense of what policies work. Large-scale income distribution programs, such as welfare and public housing, weren't very successful, and that fed a cynicism and resignation about anti-poverty efforts. But in more recent years we've learned that in the US education is a critical path out of poverty. Early childhood education and intense schooling and tutoring make all the difference. Job training helps. After-school programs help. The earned-income tax credit raises incomes of poor families. These approaches aren't easy or cheap, but they work—and these costs of empowering poor people are cheaper than the alternative of incarcerating them in large numbers.

The upshot is that we now have a much richer understanding of poverty than we did at the time of the launch of the War on Poverty, and a much better hope of success if we try again. We know that it's not just about more equitable distribution of assets, but that there are also crucial cultural issues to be addressed. We also have a better understanding of the tactics and policies that work, both in the US and in poor countries abroad.

The remaining question is whether we have the will. Perhaps books like Vollmann's may at least remind us of the poor, removing them for a moment from invisibility, and help replace our current resignation with policies that would make a considerable difference. We are not going to eradicate poverty in our lifetimes, but we could make a much bigger dent in it—and that's important if you're one of the poor. As Albert Camus said in 1948: "Perhaps we cannot prevent this world from being a world in which children are tortured. But we can reduce the number of tortured children."

In the meantime, today another 30,000 children will die of the consequences of poverty. And as dusk falls in Africa and Asia, aching parents will struggle to decide which of their children to put under the mosquito net and which to expose to malaria. □