

>> Welcome. You are listening to the UC Davis Center for Poverty Research seminar series. I'm the center's director, Anne Stevens. This series brings scholars and policy experts from around the country to discuss the work on poverty, and poverty research. In October 2013, we hosted Sasha Abramsky, a Center Faculty Affiliate, and lecturer in the UC Davis University Writing Program.

Abramsky has spent 20 years as a journalist, with work appearing in *The Nation*, *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian*, and others. In 2011, he founded *Voices of Poverty*, a web-based project that chronicles hardship in 21st century America. Abramsky joined us to talk about his new book, *The American Way of Poverty: How The Other Half Still Lives*.

>> First of all, thank you so much for the Center, for hosting me again, and as you had just told, two years ago, I did come and speak here. And I spoke at the beginning of a project, in which I was basically going around the country, seeking to make visible and tell the stories untold, the stories of people at the bottom of the economy.

The invisible poor in this country. And it was a project that has taken me to at least 25 states, I think, over the past few years, and has introduced me to hundreds of people along the way. People in all different walks of life, people in all different geographic regions.

Of all different ethnicities, ages and so on. If you've been following the news for the last couple of weeks there's been this minor thing of a government shutdown. And if you've been following it for the last few days the increasingly frantic rhetoric around the possibility of a government default.

And there's also been this increasingly bizarre narrative. Which is being peddled by some within the political process that, none of this matters. That, somehow, when you shut parts of the government down, large parts of the government down, nobody gets hurt. That it's a Kabuki game that, is designed to scare people, but in reality has no consequences.

And, a minority, but a not insignificant minority, is saying the same thing about the debt default. That we could quite easily just stop paying the bills of the largest government of earth. Stop paying for basic services, and default on a whole bunch of obligations, and somehow nobody's going to get hurt.

And one of the ways we're gonna preserve America's credit rating in the event of a default, according to this narrative, is, well maybe we'll have to just juggle where we spend our money. And one of the theories out there is, well maybe we can just suspend payments for I don't know, Social Security, or Medicare for a few weeks and prioritize debt repayments.

Now, all of this conversation in addition to being completely insane, which it is. Also speaks to a much larger problem in the political process, which is the invisibility of people at the bottom of the economy. If you've been reading the newspapers and listening to Fox News let's say, over the last couple weeks, you would be excused for thinking that the biggest impact of the government shutdown is national parks and memorials being shutted.

Now, admittedly that's an inconvenience, and having been to many national parks, I know if I had planned a holiday this week or last week, I'd be mighty upset if I couldn't go to The Grand Canyon or Yosemite or any of the other closed parks. But, I also know from studying what's been going on the last few weeks.

That actually there's been some far more significant, damaging impacts. I'll give you a few examples. Nobody knows the exact number, but anywhere up to 19,000 children have had their Head Start access shuttered in the last couple of weeks, because in places like central Florida the day the shutdown went in to effect had stopped clothes.

In North Carolina, if you're applying for WIC. Well if you got there before last October 9th, a few days ago, you were okay. If you try to apply for WIC after October 9th, they're not distributing any more WIC until the shutdown is resolved. If you were on TANF in Arizona, and you were expecting your check, and we're not talking a large check, we're talking about a small check designed to keep a relatively few people out of absolute destitution, those checks weren't sent out.

Arizona was the one state, that at the beginning of the shut down stopped TANF. Now they actually reinstated it a few days later. But they created this vast uncertainty for the poorest of the poor residents in Arizona. Number of Meals on Wheels programs have said that if the shut down goes on much longer, they will have to stop feeding elderly clients, or start charging elderly clients who can't afford food, which is why they're on Meals on Wheels, for their food.

Even food stamps, the biggest intact part of the safety net. I was speaking to an anti-hunger advocate yesterday in Sacramento. I think she might have come here before, Jessica Bartholow, Central Western War on Poverty, and she said that on October 15th, if the shutdown is still in place, California is going to have to make a decision.

Will it fund food stamps for new applicants come November 1st or will it not? If it does, it's \$600 million on the hook. If it doesn't, there's an awful lot of hungry people. So this idea that you can just roll back government and nobody gets hurt. It seems to me speaks to a larger crisis in our body politic, in our narrative.

And it's the invisibility of the poor. Now 50 years ago, there's a guy called Michael Harrington, I'm sure you've all heard of him or if you haven't you certainly should have. Harrington's a social activist, a chronicler of American society. Spent a lot of time working with homeless men and so on.

And he's getting increasingly frustrated. Because in the late 50s and early 60s, there's a dominant narrative which says that America has entered the age of affluence. And in the age of affluence, nobody's poor. Poverty is this quaint remnant of a bygone era. In the age of affluence, everybody sharing an economic growth.

People might remember poverty from the bad old days of the great depression. If they are a little bit older they might remember poverty from the turn of the century when Jacob Rhesus photographing slums in New York. If they are really, really, old, they might remember the stories of the pioneers going west in wagons, and living in unspeakable hardship on the frontier.

But all of that is the distant past, and now everybody's rich in 19, in the early 1960's America, and Harrington looks at this narrative, he says absolute nonsense, and he knows it's nonsense. Not because he's some abstract theoretician, he knows it's nonsense, because he's spent time actually exploring the underside.

And he's spent time talking with people who live in SRO's. He's spent time exploring modern day slums, he traveled around the country, he's spent time in areas like the Mississippi delta, where in the early 60's, there's not just food and security, but there's actual hunger, there's malnourishment. There are kids with distended bellies.

He's gone into Appalachia and talked to some of the poor communities there trapped in this intergenerational poverty. So he knows poverty is alive and well. And he comes out with this notion that it's been rendered invisible by the general tide of affluence. That it's surviving, but it's surviving amid the crevices and cracks of a broadly affluent society.

So he writes this book, it's a book called the Other America. And it's designed to open the curtains on this crisis. Designed to pull back the veneer. And say look, here's what's really going on. If you want a complete vision of the American story, in addition to the narrative of affluence.

You've got to have a competing narrative of poverty. Because an awful lot of people live their daily lives in poverty. He writes this book, and it creates a fervor. All over the country, people are talking about his book. And not just in the universities, but also in the halls of power.

It becomes a national embarrassment. That amiss so much opportunity, and amiss so much affluence, and amiss so much success, that nevertheless tens of millions of Americans are dropping below that story. It shames the country into action. And Harrington's work combined with the work of people like Edward R Morrow at CBS.

Combined with the increasing interplay of civil rights and the poverty narrative that Martin Luther King brings to the table, combined with the increasing awakening of a small group centered around Bobby Kennedy in particular. This all

triggers a massive national focus on poverty. In 1964 President Johnson, new President Johnson.

He's only been in office two months. Gets up on the State of the Union day, I think it's January 8th, 1964, and he addresses not just Washington, maybe not just the country, arguably the world, because he's a, he's speaking in front of mass media. And he uses that incredibly powerful podium, to push all of the moral energy of the federal government of the United States, into what he calls a war on poverty.

He gets the phrase wrong at first. He calls it a war on human poverty, and then his speech writers probably tell him that's redundant. So he comes back in and he comes back with much more catchy phrase, war on poverty. And a tremendous amount of moral and economic energy, and intellectual energy, is devoted to creating an infrastructure of institutions that cumulatively are designed to take millions of Americans who were in poverty.

Out of poverty and to keep them out. Does pretty well for about ten years. Even though I don't like Richard Nixon very much, you can actually pair together the Johnson/Nixon years in many ways. Because under both of them there's a fairly intense, energetic, and creative effort to reduce poverty.

And by the mid 70s poverty's down to about 11% of Americans, which is lower than it had ever been. But here's the rub, the way Johnson frames the war on poverty is an all or nothing deal. He frames it in the kind of utopian language of the 1960s.

In the same way Kennedy said, we're gonna send a man to the moon, Johnson says we're gonna end poverty. Now, sending a man to the moon really is an all or nothing venture. You either do it or you don't. The moonshot either gets where it's supposed to go or it fails.

Ending poverty, never was gonna be an all or nothing venture. Doesn't matter what kind of a society you live in, some people are gonna be poor. We see this throughout history. The communist revolutions ostensibly were aimed to create egalitarian societies. You'd still see the occasional drunken homeless person in Moscow, probably more than the occasional homeless person.

The Scandinavian social democracies, which arguably are the most successfully modern institutional effort to counter poverty. They don't have wholesale poverty, but I've been to Copenhagen. I've been to Stockholm. You occasionally see somebody in poverty on the street. No society has ever worked out a way to 100% eliminate poverty.

And here's the floor in Johnson's rhetoric, in making it an all or nothing proposition. He sets himself up for failure. If you're walking about the streets in mid 70's America, you know that tens of billions, maybe hundreds of billions have been invested cumulatively in this war on poverty, and you still see people on the streets, clearly in poverty.

You still see distressed neighborhoods clearly in poverty. You still see economic and educational indicators suggesting not everybody is making it. Well, increasingly, if you don't understand the statistics you say, it's all a failure. We promised to end poverty and we've still got poverty. We must be throwing good money after bad.

And rhetorically, you start seeing a backlash. Backlash is used, and is furthered by Ronald Reagan, who uses a language, not of anti-poverty, but of anti-poor. There's a critical difference. If you use a language anti-poverty. You recognize it's a systemic problem. You recognize it's a huge societal problem, which has to involve massive, across institution, societal responses.

If, on the other hand, your rhetoric is about welfare queens, well, you've made it an individual problem. It's about individuals who are morally unworthy, or morally inadequate. Individuals who just through fault of their own aren't making it. And in not making it are becoming hucksters, and trying to cheat the rest of the tax paying American population.

The linguistic rhetoric for backlash is put in place by the early 80s. Now lets fast forward. I'm a journalist. I've spent 20 years going around this country reporting on issues that interest me. Temperamentally, I'm most interested in issues that are under reported. It's easy to report on celebrities, because everyone's doing it.

It's easy to report on business success stories, because everybody's doing it. Those aren't the most interesting stories for me. The most interesting stories are the exceptions. So what happens to the person who isn't making it? What happens to the person who is on a food bank line? What happens to the person who is working three jobs and still can't make rent?

What happens to the single mother when she has to make a choice between buying food for her kids, or putting gas in her car to drive to an \$8 an hour McDonald's job? and those are the stories that seem to be increasingly fascinating. Now, one of the things that happens in the wake of the Reagan backlash and picks up steam, slows down a little bit under Bill Clinton, but basically from the 80's onwards picks up steam, is massive increases in inequality.

And the stories of inequality and poverty in America are absolutely intertwined. We don't have a crisis of lack of resources in this country. Nor do we have a crises of natural disaster collapsing the economy. We don't have wholesale famines, we don't have floods that have wiped out our crops.

We don't have the natural disasters inherit in poverty. What we have is a crisis of allocation of resources. Now, from the 40s to the 70s, how many of you have seen the movie Inequality for All, Robert Rice movie? If you haven't, it's great, came out last week. But, it has a series of visuals, and I'm a Luddite, I don't, I don't use visuals, but every so often i wish I did.

Here's one of the visuals he has. He shows the contraction of inequality. Inequality before the great depression peaks, in 1928. So many people have so little because so few people have so much. That the broad basis for prosperity disappears. It's one of the triggers of the collapse of 29 of the Great Depression.

In the aftermath of that, inequality contracts. Contracts and contracts and contracts into the 1970s. And then there's a tipping point. Mid 70s it starts expanding again. Hourly wages for most workers start going down in real terms or staying stagnant. Benefits right at the top of the economy start skyrocketing, and it starts peaking, and peaking, and peaking again until 2007.

When you have levels of inequality roughly equivalent to 1928. The way he does it visually is a suspension bridge. These two peaks, 1928 and 2007 and the trough in the middle. During that trough, you have less inequality than America has ever had before. You have a broader share of prosperity, you have more economic growth.

By most economic measures, the country is healthier. As inequality increases again, you have what Jacob Hacker at Yale calls a great risk shift. Increasingly, the burden of risk for daily life, is pushed onto vulnerable individuals. Workers no longer backed by trade unions and negotiating power being a key example.

So you see hourly wages plummet at the bottom of the economy. You see a roll back of health insurance benefits. So, you end up with the current crisis which may or may not be resolved by the affordable care act, where tens of millions of American families with at best, fragile access to health care, and at worst, no access.

You see the collapse of the defined benefit pension, which in the middle part of the century, became the norm. As the inequality takes off, becomes the exception. At the same time, you see corporate remuneration go through the roof. Both the amounts of money, that the corporate leaders have, and also at the same time, a rollback in their tax obligations.

One of the most extraordinary pieces data in Rice documentary. He analyzes the very top of the economy. Not the 1%, not even the 0.1%, but 0.01, and even beyond that. And he concludes that 400, the 400 wealthiest families in America today, control the assets of the 150 million poorest Americans.

There's no other western country with that level of inequality. Our social structures increasingly resemble Brazil, India, some of the other countries with a few billionaires and many, many deeply impoverished insecure people at the bottom of the economy. So as this happens. As in the quality gets more and more the norm rather than the exception.

For tens of millions of American families, the ability to live a modest economically secure life ends up being an absolutely unattainable aspiration. Now this is all before the crash of 2008, mind you. So I'm driving around the country and flying around the country in 2003, 4, 5. That's when the stock markets doing well.

That's when GDP growth is pretty good, robust. When unemployment's fairly low, and it's when the housing market has gone way, way, way up. But I'm talking to people who are telling me their stories of struggle. And they're masquerading it to a degree that borrowing off their homes if they have homes.

They're borrowing off their credit cards if they don't. And if they don't have credit cards and they're at the bottom of the economy they're resorting to this incredibly nefarious loan system that takes off in the early 2000s called payday loans. Where you basically borrow small amounts of money against your next paycheck or your next government tax rebate.

And the problem is you are paying monthly fees, it's not even called interest. You're paying these vast monthly fees, which would work out to about 500% a year interest. So you are at the bottom of the economy, you are earning 2 or \$300 a week. You borrow a small amount, 3 or \$400 over the course of a year you owe \$2,000 on that.

There is no way in hell you are paying that off. It's a 5th of your annual income. So you end up trapped in these cycles of debt. You also, if you're a student, one of the byproducts of the great risk shift is as the tax base is diluted, as we lower, and lower, and lower the taxes paid by the people right at the top.

We see a complete decline in the ability and willingness of states to fund higher education properly. So you guys, many of you are gonna be burdened with a level of debt that no generation of public school university students before you in America has had to bear. And it will profound impacts on your ability to lead secure middle class lives.

And this is one of the reasons it's been so much unrest on campuses across America in the last few years. So this is as I said all before 2008. After 2008 all of those trends are massively exacerbated. Because, we're not just in a cyclical recession at that point, we're in one of those, once in a generation or once in a century moments, where the basic fundamentals of the economy are in jeopardy.

So the banking system ceases to work, effectively. Credit system ceases to work effectively. The circulation of money starts bottling up. The housing market completely collapses, doesn't just have a correction. But the bottom falls out of the housing market. Millions of families who'd borrowed against the houses, we're now under water.

Millions of families start heading toward foreclosure. And as the credit markets freeze in the wake of that, the employment market, the labor market, collapses. And so within a relatively short period of time, a few months, many, many millions of families, which involves many tens of millions of individuals, end up bearing the consequences of unemployment and then joblessness.

Because after a while if you're unemployed for years and years, many people just drop out of labor market altogether. So you end up in this situation where poverty numbers just start going up, and up, and up, and up. About 1 in 6 give or take Americans now officially live below the government defined poverty line.

That's the sort of impressionistic measure at the best of times anyways, a statistical mirage. It's designed to imply a level of certainty that isn't there. It's a guess game. How much do you need to avoid poverty? Well according to Mollie Orshansky, the statistician who develops the poverty line, it involves a basket of goods.

You need a certain percentage of income available for food, for housing, for healthcare and so on. And if you can couple all of that together, you can just about be above the poverty line. And if you can't, you are gonna be just about below. And the more you can't, the further below you are.

But there is no exact science there. There are plenty of economics who tell you, well actually far more Americans who are in poverty than the official line measures. There's recently been flurry of data that actually about California. Which tries to work out what the poverty line is in California based on fact that California has a far higher cost of living than

most states.

And according to those measures, and I know they're controversial and they're not universally accepted, but according to those measures California now has the highest poverty rate in the country. Now, regardless of whether or not you want to fiddle with the measures, clearly a large number of people are living in profound economic insecurity on a daily basis.

By government measure it's just shy of 50 million Americans. 47 million Americans are on food stamps. Now food stamps is a great program to approximate poverty against, because it's an automatic entitlement. If you fall below a certain income level, if you're a citizen, you auto, or a legal migrant, you automatically are entitled to food stamps.

The exact amount depending on the size of your family, and the level of your poverty. But because it's automatic, unlike welfare which has not expanded during the recessions of the last five or ten years, food stamps have. So when the Republicans say that Obama is the food stamp president, in one way they're right, he is the president at the moment when poverty is so large.

The scale of poverty is so large that 47 million in America are on food stamps. Now why that's the case that's another story. If you're Obama the obvious retort is well yes, 47 million Americans are on food stamps, because when you guys were in charge you collapsed the economy, and we're still dealing with the aftermath.

Regardless of the reasons, 47 million people on food stamps means that there are at least 47 million Americans in this country who would go hungry without food stamps. Well that's an extraordinary piece of information in the richest country in the world. Some other poverty data. 6 million Americans have absolutely no access to legitimate forms of cash.

They have no bank accounts. No savings accounts, no income, and no cash government benefits. 6 million Americans, including several million kids, with no access to cash. 22.5% of American children, 1 in 4 nearly, of American children, now lives in poverty. Nothing inevitable about that, some people say well it's just because of globalization, it's just because of the tragedies of the moment, absolutely nonsense.

The only other industrial nation with an equivalent level of child poverty is not England, or France, or Germany oh, yes Romania. Romania is the only other country, industrial country, which lets 1 in 4 of its children live in poverty. Another measure, no other country, no other industrial country, has a higher rate of what's called deep poverty.

People living at less than half of the poverty line. If you're less than half the poverty line as a single adult in this country. Means your annual income is about five and a half thousand dollars. Family of four, they're less than half the poverty line, means your annual income is about 11 or \$12,000.

Vast numbers of Americans live in that pocket, below the deep poverty line. Now again, nothing inevitable about that. People often compare America, conservatives often compare contemporary America to Greece. They say we gotta slash our public benefits, or we will become like Greece. A bankrupt beggared nation. Well, Greece certainly has its problems, but one problem it doesn't have is the level of deep poverty that America has.

Even in bankruptcy, Greece, Spain, Portugal Island, all the troubled nations on the periphery of the Euro zone. Even in bankruptcy, those countries have fewer percentage of their population in deep poverty. And a far lower percentage of their child population living in poverty. So what's going on here? Well this is one of the thesis of my book.

What's going on is a series of political choices, not an inevitability. Poverty on the scale of its existence in America, exists because we are making the choices or not making choices around what we tax, and who we tax, and how much we tax. What kind of money we put in reserve for basic public infrastructure, or for the commons.

And when I say the commons I'm gonna include programs such as redistributed education policies that, for example, put a lot of energies into educating low-income kids. Or things like nutritional programs. We have them, we just have them partially. Or things like the earned income tax credit, again we have it, we could do more with it and at a state

level especially in the south we could do far more with it.

South's important here, because by every measure, poverty is worse in the south. Those states that have recently refused to expand healthcare access let's say to their near poor population. That population that's too poor for government subsidies of a private marketplace healthcare system, but deemed to be too affluent for automatic inclusion in Medicaid.

About 8 million Americans. Most of them are in southern states. In Texas, 1 in 4 Texans lacks any access to health insurance. By every measure, life expectancy, chronic disease, educational attainment, income level, child poverty, high school graduation rates, you name it, that area of the country, in the deep south produces a disproportional amount of poverty, with all the adverse impacts that come with that.

Unfortunately the South increasingly has exported its political model onto a national stage. If you look at the debates around how we understand poverty. How we understand taxation. How we understand the role of government in our lives. And you look at those, the languages used to describe those over the last three and a half to four decades.

It is a southern rhetoric. It comes out of the southern history of economic, and of course racial segregation. It comes out of a cased model of the economy. A model of the economy that's perfectly content with a few families, individuals, corporations at the top, and with a massive amount of insecurity at the bottom.

That was always the southern economic model. Increasingly, that's the national economic model. It's doing tremendous collateral damage. In my book, my book's twofold. One is about solutions, but the first part of the book is the stories of people in poverty. Because I want my readers to understand, not the abstract concepts.

I can talk about those until I'm blue in the face. I want my readers to understand what it means on a daily basis. So, for example, Mary Vasquez, she's a 67 year old Wal-Mart worker, just outside Dallas. Before taxes, she earns less than \$2000 a month. She's got diabetes, heart conditions, she's had cancer, she has high blood pressure.

Back problems, you name it, she has it. She answers telephones eight hours a day at Wal-Mart. She can't afford to retire. She's burdened with years of medical bills because the health insurance at Wal-Mart is so appalling. She's a member of an organization that's been trying to unionize Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart's policy whenever any group tries to unionize a Wal-Mart is to either shut down that Wal-Mart or shutdown the group with in Wal-Mart trying to unionize. Notoriously, when a group of meat packers in Wal-mart tried to organize in Texas a few years back, they shut down the meat packing departments in six states.

And Wal-Mart will say they did that because they are a family. And they treat their workers like a family. Maybe, when my child who is ten years old, does extra chores beyond her regular chores, I might give her 5 or \$6. I think that's perfectly reasonable, she's ten year old.

Paying a 67 year old woman \$8 an hour is not how you treat family. That's how you treat indentured servants. And that's increasingly the economic model. Another example of what poverty in America and the absurdities of it. Young woman I met in Albuquerque. And she was married had couple kids.

And they moved to California for a while her husband worked for a trucking company. Moved to California for a while and at the time, they were all Medicaid, whole family was on Medicaid. And he gets a \$1 an hour pay raise. And that \$1 an hour pay raise means they're now too affluent for Medicaid, the housing assistant, and any other form of government benefits, but he has no health insurance.

Her appendix ruptures, and the family has \$96,000 in medical bills. It's going to be in poverty for the rest of it's existence. Another example, man I met in Stockton, middle aged steelworker, a guy called Michael Joseph. Who's unlucky enough to buy a house during the up years when the economy's going up, up, up and the housing market's going up, up, up.

And then to lose his job during the recession at the same time as his, value of his house collapses. And he's borrowed against his house, this house was once worth nearly 500,000, it's suddenly worth 160,000. And he tells me I'm middle aged, I don't know how I'm going to provide for myself and my wife, I go home, I curl up in a fetal position and I cry.

Well, on one level, you could say that's just the sort of vagaries of the market. But millions of families went into that experience, and we made almost no effort as a country. We've made belated efforts to the mortgage settle national mortgage settlements and so on. But as a country in 2007, 8, 9, as the housing market is collapsing, we made no effort to keep people in their homes.

We could have, we made no effort to keep people in their jobs, or only a marginal belated effort. We spent this huge amount of money. On a stimulus act that only indirectly provided employment, and I think the estimates are it might have provided about three million jobs. Well we could have done what the Scandinavian countries do.

They build up public works reserve funds so that they can keep people employed when there is an economic crisis. And I talk about this in my book, how we would build up a public works fund in this country. Well, it would involve recalibrating taxes. It would involve some people paying a little bit more, some companies paying a little bit more.

We could socialize the risk of higher education, through a line item tax on our income. Same ways we've had a line item tax for social security. We can have a small line item tax for an educational opportunity fund. One quarter of 1% on taxable income would generate enough money to put \$5,000 into every child's education account when they were born in this country.

18 years later, that \$5,000 will be worth 15, 20, it won't pay for higher education, but it will do a good chunk. If you don't go to higher education, you don't go to college, well you're gonna earn less over your lifetime. So why don't we stabilize the pension system at the back end by setting that \$5,000 is just gonna stay in grow and when you're 65 if you haven't gone to college, it will be added to your social security, so everybody has buy in.

But it would involve rethinking about the costs and the benefits of taxation. It would in, involve acknowledging that every so often a government program not only can work, but can work a whole lot better than the vagaries of the marketplace. Federal government could do what California's just done.

It could raise the minimum wage to something more, more closely approximating a living wage. Now California's done something great, it raised it minimum wage over the next couple years to \$10 an hour. But that's still several dollars an hour less than what the minimum wage nationally was worth 50 years ago, before it became a political football.

But it's a start. There's no reason the federal government or congress at some point couldn't get its act together to say, most economic studies show that raising the minimum wage to 9 or \$10 an hour actually wouldn't result in cascading unemployment. Where that minimum wage has been raised to \$10 an hour in cities like Santa Fe, New Mexico or Santa Cruz.

Well Santa Monica. It hasn't resulted in massive unemployment. We could have that conversation but it would involve rethinking national assumptions about the inherent badness of regulations. The inherent badness of attempts to manipulate the market, and these assumptions have been built up over the last 40 years. And engrained deeply in our political rhetoric, our political narrative at this point.

So, it seems to me that coming back to what I was saying about the invisibility at the very start of this talk, for 40 years as the great contraction in inequality has been replaced by a great expansion in inequality, it's become ever easier for those who benefit from that expansion and inequality, to ignore the stories of those at the bottom.

And not just to ignore the stories but to pretend they don't exist. It's become ever easier to say that you can tread government programs and nobody gets hurt. It's become ever easier to say that you can denude the tax base of vital dollars, and somehow the public infrastructure will remain just the same as it was before.

It's become ever easier to say, well, people I'm talking to in Washington, DC, don't want their taxes raised, so why should I raise taxes? Of course the people who are being listened to and talked to in Washington DC tend to be lobbyists, and lobbyists tend to work for people who have lots of money.

And the more money that's accumulated right at the top, the more those lobbyists are able to help craft a political agenda that disproportionately benefits only those at the top. So the challenge is, how do you make visible Mary Vasquez's story? How do you make visible the story of the young woman who goes bankrupt because of a ruptured appendix?

How do you make visible the story of a middle-aged suburbanite who ends up fearing homelessness because of economic forces over which he had no control? Seems to me the conversation is shifting. It's not shifting in congress, necessarily. But around the country, this is becoming a part of the national conversation.

About what kind of a country we are. What kind of a country we're becoming. And what kind of a country we want to be. And I think it's a fascinating conversation, I'm very happy to be a part of it. And I'm very happy you guys invited me here to start talking about it.

So thank you very much.

>> I'm Ann Stevens, the director of the Center for Poverty Research at UC Davis. And I want to thank you for listening. The center is one of three federally designated poverty research centers in the United States. Our mission is to facilitate non partisan academic research on domestic poverty.

To disseminate this research, and to train the next generation of poverty scholars. Core funding comes from the US Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the center, visit us online at Poverty.UCDavis.edu.