Class Activities for **Chapter 5: Poverty and Inequality**

**Class activity #1**

Find out what the average monthly benefits are in your area for SNAP, TANF, and/or SSI. Provide those figures to the students and break them up into theoretical “families” of three or four people. Ask them to create a budget for themselves based on the benefit levels provided by those programs. Remind them to consider rent, utilities, groceries, clothing, transportation, recreation, and anything else they may consider a necessity (cable? Internet service?). Emphasize that they should come up with realistic numbers--$50 for food for a family of four for a month isn’t even enough to live off of instant noodles three meals a day, for example. What would be the first things in their current lives they’d have to cut if they were trying to survive on welfare benefits? Have each group share their budget with the rest of the class for comparison’s sake.

**Class activity #2**

Have the class discuss the idea of the “culture of poverty”—the theory that the poor in America often engage in activities that seem functional or logical in the short term, but which serve to keep them poor. For example, the poor may reject the values and norms of the upper class. They may isolate themselves from upper- and middle-class people. They may have an emphasis on instant gratification—that is, when they have a bit of extra money, they’re more likely to spend it on something that makes them happy now than to save it up to eventually advance a bit. Ask the groups to identify how else people in poverty may exhibit the behaviors associated with this theory.

After explaining those points, ask them to discuss these questions:

1. Does it seem like this theory has merit?
2. Are these behaviors we typically see the poor exemplify?
3. Why might these behaviors develop?
4. Is this just another example of blaming the victim?

**Class activity #3**

Sociology teaches us that if there is an element of society that has no purpose or function, eventually that element will cease to exist. However, not only is poverty not ceasing to exist, it’s become more entrenched. Income inequality is widening all the time.

This being established, split the class into groups. Ask them to brainstorm some of the functions the poor serve for the rest of society, and perhaps why the middle and upper class don’t actually want to solve the problem of poverty. Walk around to provide hints or guidance if necessary.

Additionally, after the class has discussed this first question for a bit, introduce to them the idea that the poor absorb the costs of change—that is to say, when there is a major cultural shift (economic, legislative, technological), the poor often experience the brunt of the negative impact. For instance, when we moved from having mostly full-service gas stations to mostly self-service gas stations in America, the poor took the brunt of that shift. Many low-paying jobs were lost, and the upper class benefited from that due to having fewer expenses for their staff. Can the groups come up with additional examples of the poor absorbing the costs of change?

After this is done, have all the groups share with the class.

Possible examples of the functions of poverty: staffing the military, creating cultural artforms that get appropriated by the other classes, serving as symbolic political opponents, being cautionary tales to middle- and upper-class children, allowing the rich to “do their charitable duty,” buying low-quality goods in stores owned by middle- and upper-class people, creating jobs for others (e.g. social workers), staffing unpleasant jobs that are necessary for the society to function (janitorial and maintenance work, for example), etc.

Other examples of the poor absorbing the costs of change: outsourcing, automated cashier lanes at the grocery store, automated tollbooths and open-road tolling, ATMs, deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, and more.