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PubPol 580: Reading Notes for Class 20 (November 17, 2009)

On Tuesday we'll talk about exploitation. This is the first time I've included this topic on the syllabus. As I was reading articles this summer to make selections for the syllabus, I was struck by how often the term exploitation was used, particularly in quotations in news articles, op-eds, letters to the editor, and things like that (as opposed to academic articles). So I decided to try out the topic and see what happens. I'm not sure how often someone has used the concept in class discussions this term, but I recall it coming up more than a few times when we talked about clinical trials in developing countries. And it certainly arises in debates about markets in organs.

The question is whether exploitation is (1) an analytical concept that can do important work in evaluating policy, (2) just a substitute for injustice and we'd be better off sticking with using justice as our analytical concept, (3) something like the term pornographic (sort of analytical but with similar limitations due to its "I know it when I see it" nature), or (4) just an epithet used to demonize something one doesn't like.

The reading for the day is by Alan Wertheimer, who wrote a book length treatment of the subject. He tries to deliver on (1). He sets aside the Marxist connotation of the term and I suggest we follow his lead—let's see how term is used in liberal discourse. Along the way he suggests distinguishing among harmful exploitation, mutually advantageous exploitation, nonconsensual and consensual exploitation, and so on. Some might not be immoral at all and some might be more immoral than others. Do they help you see a useful analytical structure to the term?

So the task for Tuesday is to see how much analytical power we think there is to the term exploitation. Presumably if we think it can be used analytically it provides grounds for a very strong moral condemnation of an activity. Does it work like a right—do we have a right not to be exploited? Or is like a claim of injustice on steroids? The question is whether we can agree sufficiently on its meaning so that it has this power.

I'd like the presenters to each pick an example of something that might be claimed to be exploitative (in a sense other than (4) above) and work through the analysis of what that would mean in this case and how compelling and how useful the concept of exploitation is in this case.

In addition to the examples that Wertheimer begins with, here are a few more instances to get you thinking. If you think of others, send me an email and I'll send around a list before we meet:

- Sweatshop labor
- International clinical trials
- Japan's hostess culture:
<http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/11/womens-work-and-japans-hostess-culture/>
- State run lotteries that pump money disproportionately out of low income

communities

- Prostitution
- Pornography
- Higher prices for food in low income, inner city, neighborhoods
- Unpaid summer internships:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2009/jul/31/mps-graduate-interns-pay>
- U-M non-tenure-track lecturers (PhDs who make less money, have less job security and higher teaching loads)