

amiss," Eberstadt writes.

A very different picture emerges when government researchers ask people about what they spend rather than about their income. Household expenditures for the poorest fifth of the population have increased greatly since 1973, even accounting for inflation. In 1960, the poorest quarter of the population spent 12 percent more than their annual income; by 2002, the poorest fifth were spending double their reported annual income.

How can this be? Are poor Americans sinking deeper and deeper into debt? Eberstadt says the more likely explanation is something economists call "transitory variance." Nine out of 10 people are poor only temporarily. Like other people, they base their consumer behavior on the long, not the short, term, and they spend accordingly. "Transitory variance" better fits the growing discrepancy between spending and income because year-to-year income variability is rising.

Eberstadt notes that criticizing the official poverty measure is sometimes taken as proof of indifference to the poor. To say that Americans are incontestably better off "is not to assert that material progress for America's poverty population has been satisfactory, much less optimal," he says.

The nation's official measure of poverty is biased, flawed, and inconsistent with almost every other gauge of well-being, he writes. It fails the test of common sense.

PRESS & MEDIA

Covering Corruption

THE SOURCE: "The Corruption Eruption in East-Central Europe: The Increased Salience of Corruption and the Role of Inter-governmental Organizations" by Alexandru Grigorescu, in *East European Politics and Societies*, Summer 2006.

CORRUPTION IS DRAWING more news media attention around the world than it did only a couple of decades ago, but in no region has there been so radical an increase as in east-central Europe. Between 1996 and 2004, the number of stories on political and economic corruption rose seven-fold in the region's six countries.

"Today all of the major newspapers from the area run, on a regular basis, multiple stories about everyday corrupt practices, high-level corruption scandals, or governmental and non-governmental declarations regarding the fight against corruption," writes Alexandru Grig-

orescu, a political scientist at Loyola University in Chicago. About seven percent of the region's print and broadcast news stories in 2004 that were included in his study dealt with corruption. And there has been action: tougher prison sentences for bribery in the Czech Republic, civil service reform in Poland, and many other measures. High officials accused of illicit activities in Bulgaria and Slovakia have lost their jobs.

Yet Grigorescu isn't about to rhapsodize about the glories of a free press. News media coverage of corruption in other parts of the world has not increased since the mid-1990s, even in areas where the problem is more severe, such as East Asia and Latin America. Nor has there been much change in global media, such as *The New York Times*. A few local factors explain the performance of the east-central

European news media, including the special concern with fairness in these countries after decades of communist egalitarianism. But Grigorescu thinks the decisive factor was the role of the European Union. It's no mystery why. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia were all slated to join the EU in 2004; Bulgaria and Romania will enter in 2007.

In part because of fears of a contagion effect introduced by new members, the EU has zealously promoted anticorruption efforts. Its annual country progress reports have been especially effective in drawing attention to the problem, Grigorescu says, and it made membership contingent on certain systemic reforms. About 80 percent of the region's news stories on corruption mentioned the EU.

With the region's accession to the Union now nearly complete, Grigorescu worries that the EU will take its eye off the ball, and that the news media will consequently lose interest. The region's track record—a score of only 3.8 on Transparency

International's 10-point corruption scale—is hardly sterling, and surveys show that little more than a third of its people express confidence in their national governments. A public that perceives its government as ineffective and riddled with corruption, Grigorescu writes, is a public ripe for arguments that the weaknesses of democracy itself are the problem.

PRESS & MEDIA

Democracy in a Sentence

THE SOURCE: “Rejected by *The New York Times*? Why Academics Struggle to Get Published in National Newspapers” by Douglas A. Borer, in *International Studies Perspectives*, Aug. 2006.

NOTHING IS QUITE AS GRATIFYING to the Ph.D.-animated ego as hearing the phrase, “I loved your op-ed in the paper.” Two impulses spur academics to submit opinion

pieces to the brutal cursor of newspaper editors. One is disgust with published pundits, and the second is celebrity, according to Douglas A. Borer, associate professor of defense analysis at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. The chances of making it into one of the big four—*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The Wall Street Journal*—are only somewhat better than the odds of winning the Powerball lottery. Even so, some intrepid scholar breaks the barrier every week.

Academics must speed up, tighten up, and keep trying, Borer writes. Get an idea and deliver a finished product in 24 to 36 hours. Keep even the most profound topics to 700 words—



“We do not usually acknowledge unsolicited manuscripts, but we want you to know that we tore yours into tiny pieces. Yours sincerely, The Op-Ed Page.”

newspapers have to cede much of their space to advertisements that pay the bills. Avoid long definitions. “We know that use of that ever-loaded term ‘democracy’ in a journal article entails a commitment of four or more pages of literature review in order to dodge the finely honed machetes of peer reviewers,” Borer writes. “In an op-ed you can explain democracy in a sentence.”

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Why Be Reasonable?

THE SOURCE: “The Morality of Human Rights: A Problem for Nonbelievers?” by Michael J. Perry, in *Commonweal*, July 14, 2006.

THOUGH THE 20TH CENTURY witnessed some of the worst instances of man’s inhumanity to man, it also saw the birth of the human rights movement. As German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has noted, the language of human rights is now the only one

“in which the opponents and victims of murderous regimes and civil wars can raise their voices against violence, repression, and persecution.” But on what authority does that language rest? If human rights, as some have suggested, have their foundation only in religious teachings, how long, as the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz asked, “can they stay afloat if the bottom is taken out?”

According to Michael J. Perry, a professor of law at Emory University, the three documents that make up what is informally called the International Bill of Rights—the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966)—are “famously silent” on the question of why we should live our lives in a way that respects human dignity. Perry says that “a number of contemporary thinkers have tried to provide a nonreligious ground for the moral-