

## Economists’ ideas uplift the human condition

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Grand ideas by a few “genius” economists have improved living conditions for billions of people around the world. The progressive change started in the middle of the 19th century and continues unabated, author Sylvia Nasar told the Tulane audience at her lecture in Jones Hall on Monday (Jan. 30).



Author Sylvia Nasar talks with a Tulane audience about her newest book on economic genius. She also is the author of *A Beautiful Mind*. (Photo by Ryan Rivet)

[Nasar](#) wrote *Grand Pursuit: The Story of Economic Genius* (Simon & Schuster, 2011), a book about the stories ? “the romance, the glamour” ? of the men and women economists who turned the “dismal science” into a force for hope.

The book is “about how economics developed as a tool for making the lives of ordinary people better through application of ideas,” said Nasar, whose talk was sponsored by the [Center for Inter-American Policy and Research](#) and several other Tulane organizations.

Life was a dreary existence for 90 percent of people everywhere prior to the mid 1800s, she said. Even nearly 100 years into the Industrial Revolution, people lived under conditions similar to those of livestock, “in small, dark, cold rooms.” Hunger and the chronic fear of death because of lack of food haunted most of the human race.

But then economists such as Alfred Marshall, the English author of *Principles of Economics* (1890), put forth new ideas that changed the world. “The notion that human beings might be creatures of circumstance was a new idea,” said Nasar.

Progressive economists said that the “poor were poor because the economy did not produce enough for everyone to have a life that did not include drudgery,” said Nasar. But if productivity could be increased, then living standards would rise.

Productivity is directly tied to per capita income, she said. For example, in China in A.D. 1, the per capita income was \$450. It was the same in 1990? \$450. But as China's productivity has exponentially increased in the last two decades, there has been a 10-fold rise in the standard of living in China.