

Lily Shive

Professor Peter Castro

1710

Apologies for a Late and Chonky Essay about Inequality

What should a citizen know about the issues of inequality in America? Excuse my use of quotations, but throughout the past unit, “the rich get richer” was a quote I kept writing on the readings. In America, the land of the free where capitalism reigns and we have “no” class-system, it has become harder than ever to rise past the economic class one is born into. The effects of higher education have gone from entering the middle class or a higher wage bracket, to maintaining a middle class status. The influx of power and wealth from rich people in America has allowed our politicians to be bought and bribed into prioritizing the wealthy man’s agenda rather than addressing systemic inequalities in the capitalist system towards race, gender and lower wage earners. Even in addressing and funding programs to attack inequalities, the right course of action is heavily contentious in politics with issues around raising minimum wage and expanding social welfare. Our duty as democratic citizens is to be educated on the systemic problems behind inequalities, and push for the voices of the people (not just millionaires and billionaires) to matter equally when addressing policies.

Throughout the United States’ history, high taxes on the rich or “socialism” as it’s called these days were common, and so were periods of high economic inequality where the average American family struggled to get by. Different administrations have tackled the problems of inequality in the economy through funding of federal programs, laissez faire approaches, trickle economics, and many other nuanced policies. The question every politician needs to address is

how influential they believe the government should be on the marketplace, and if so, who are they influencing it towards? In week eight's plenary, Reich illustrated the history of income inequality in the United States over the past century through the rising and lowering of taxes and the subsequent negative correlation to income inequality. Due to the middle class being the main stimulant of our consumer spending economy, Reich emphasized the negative effects of trickle down economics where a CEO pays less taxes than the average worker in their company. In the past couple decades, the economy has trended towards less government intervention which has left workers rights in the hands of CEOs and board of directors that usually do not have the same priorities or goals. From wage theft to harassment to a lack of voice on company decisions, Anderson demonstrates how a decline in unions and absence of government regulation in employee rights has harmed the average worker and negated the power of employment at will. A strong corporate pushback against existing and future unions has contributed to the stagnation of workers' wages with Reich asserting that as workers are unprotected, the economy will only become worse as the middle class shrinks and the wealthy abuse their power through lobbying.

The wealthy have become political players as corporations and influential donors pour millions into campaigns and super PACs each year. Since 2010 when money was declared "free speech," Lee illustrates how billionaires and millionaires have pumped ridiculous amounts of money into both parties to gain access and influence on politicians. When democracy is up for sale, the priorities of the government goes to the wealthiest bidder, and the current average American is more likely to be struggling than able to afford millions in campaign donations. With more people needing help more than ever, politicians should be prioritizing caring for our citizens; however, Page and Bartels research illustrated that the 1% are more interested in lowering budget deficits than increasing spending on education or safety nets such as a national

health plan or other programs to benefit lower economic classes. Rather than focusing on expanding benefits to create economic equity, the government has increasingly tipped the system towards the wealthy. Aside from cutting taxes on capital gains and the estate-tax relief which both directly positively affected the wealthy, Day points to the executive deferral and lack of employee-provided health care which have both harmed the working class, a unified insurance program even being “less expensive” for the government. When the government refuses to implement changes that would be beneficial to and supported by a majority of Americans, it is clear that politicians listen to dollar signs, not their constituents.

In my ECN 101 class, the second unit demonstrated the effect of taxes and government intervention and, assuming a free market, both will shrink the overall economic pie. Focusing on economic efficiency, the neoliberal model prioritizes eliminating government price controls and deregulating the market to increase the overall economic prosperity. Friedman asserts that government is necessary to protect our freedoms, yet it is equally as dangerous as political regulations on the market impede an individual’s economic freedoms and the only employee protection needed is that of freedom to choose employment. However, the idea that anyone is free to quit an unfair workplace is contended by Anderson who discusses the inability of many Americans to quit without leaving behind “human capital” or moving to a different industry as many work under non compete clauses. Most Americans agree on the problems that our nation faces, our differences come when we try to solve them. While many liberals will fight for the expansion of social welfare programs, Brooks asserts that the conservative social-justice agenda should include the push to morally transform the lower income classes towards faith and family, implementing welfare without dependency and increasing educational opportunities to lower inequality. While the first pillar of the agenda assumes that lower income people need a moral

“transformation” to develop satisfaction in life, issues of education are extremely important when discussing inequality. As discussed in the last unit, access to education (particularly college) is extremely important when it comes to one’s economic opportunities.

Discrimination based on race plays a large role in the economic pressures placed on people of color in the United States. Even though “separate but equal” laws were abolished half a century ago, its effects are still felt in African-American communities through disproportionate economic inequality and a government whose policies continue to encourage inequity. The systemic discrimination against African-Americans only aids to exasperate a racial achievement gap and keep them in a cycle of poverty. Coates argues that reparations similar to those the German people paid to make amends for the Holocaust are necessary as the United States hides from problems of white supremacy and the slave labor that built our nation. While there are many economic policies addressing overall inequality, Coates asserts that white and Black poverty are vastly different as roadblocks to education, healthcare and housing have influenced generations of economic inequality. Solutions to healthcare and generational wealth are discussed in “Ten Solutions to Bridge the Racial Divide” such as the increase in Medicare and higher taxes for the wealthy, as well as reparations in the form of baby bonds. The latter is a policy that would address Black poverty directly in shrinking the racial wealth divide, and the former being popular policies to lower overall economic inequality. Racial discrimination is seen in all aspects of life; Ellison describes how pollutants are disproportionately in or around Black and brown neighborhoods, causing serious health issues that only served to cause more damage to the communities, especially as COVID can be deadly for those with underlying conditions. The overall lack of access to quality healthcare for lower income brackets only serves to

aggravate racial economic inequality, the old one-two punch hitting harder with systemic health issues.

Although women are the providers of life and tend to handle childcare and other unpaid household labors, these are often the factors that cause employers to discriminate based on gender. In the plenary, Reich asserted that the second “coping mechanism” to the stagnation of the middle class was the mass entrance of women into the workforce, not necessarily because they wanted careers, but that they needed another income to provide for their families. Gendered inequality became apparent through the prevailing gender pay gap as well as the cultural attitudes and stereotypes towards women that can affect their place in the workforce. During Professor Pralle’s plenary, she discussed the reasons for the gender pay gap: half is explained by occupational choices as women are typically in lower paying “pink collar” occupations such as teaching and nursing. Women generally have less work experience, the “mother penalty” where women see a decline in earnings with each child, and race the remaining named reasons. However a large percentage of gendered discrimination is unexplained, Pralle pointing to subconscious decisions that lead to mothers earning less than childless women and fathers as well as the informal “second shift” of labor that women tackle at home be it child/elder care or other household chores. Whether it can be explained or not, there is clear evidence of discrimination against women often based on cultural stereotypes that negatively impact wages and employee rights. Men are still seen as the primary money makers in a household, Cawthorne emphasized how many women care for either or both children and the elderly unpaid which leads to a higher percentage of women working part time or not at all. After illustrating the reasons for gender inequality, Pralle emphasized the need for paid family leave and better enforcement of the anti-discrimination law to combat the workplace culture that sees men and women as unequal.

Inequality will affect everyone in America that is not a white male top 1% earner.

Whether in the position of economic inequality as a low wage worker, minority, woman, or any combination of the three, a large majority of Americans are unequipped with the economic or political tools to pull themselves out of poverty. Throughout this unit, I was faced with the reality that as an Asian American woman, I will encounter unconscious stereotypes and or blatant discrimination throughout my future workplaces, and there is little power I have as an employee other than quitting my job. The answer to economic, racial and gender inequality is both an accountability for the history of cultures that have caused roadblocks and inequity within the United States, and the exclusion of wealthy donors' influence on politicians who should be making policies that will benefit a majority of their constituents rather than the wealthy minority.