

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

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### **Inequality: Humanity's Curse**

As used here, "inequality" refers to the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and power among different groups of people. The thesis of this essay is that the mind-set and actions that generate inequality derive from the hard-wired, universal human propensity to place greed and self-interest above almost all other values. Where:

**Greed:** the grasping at all levels of effort and passion for wealth, power, income, and status.

**Self interest:** a complex consisting of many forms. That is, the need to feel better than others; the competition for attention; comparing oneself with others; jealousy. And: discrimination against other races, ethnicities, skin color, and gender.

#### **A genetic basis of inequality?**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the cultural anthropologist Franz Boas and some of his students espoused the idea that human behavior is essentially culturally determined. And that, given the enormous variations in human circumstances, equally great variations in behavior are to be expected over time and across the planet. Boas did not believe that innate biological differences accounted for the differences between human groups. Later in the century that theory was challenged. The counter argument is that human behavior is an amalgam of genes and nurture-culture. I am convinced that some genetic traits are universal, even though overall behavior is indeed an amalgam of many factors. Observing consistent behavior across time and cultures provides solid evidence that certain characteristics are inherent in all of us, but present in varying degrees in each of us.

These drives are so built-in that we are seldom aware that they inform so much of our behavior socially and economically. The only explanation I can conjure is that all humans are infected, at their core, by the genes of greed and self-interest. Built into these instincts is the passion for power and status. The ubiquity of these traits helps to account for the inequality, discrimination, and exploitation across cultures and ethnicities across the centuries. Humans are complex, of course, made of many interacting strands--a mix of negative and positive. Our values are malleable when self-interest is at risk

#### **Examples and effects of inequality**

**Socio-economic hierarchies.** People seem automatically to sort themselves into hierarchies: a few at the top, some in the middle, but most on the lower rungs. For most of history, social mobility has been a rare option for those at the bottom, and only somewhat better for those in some categories of a "middle class." Every social hierarchy carries with it distinct places on the economic and wealth pecking order of its inhabitants. An extreme case is modern India which has at least 3000 castes, with Brahmins at the top and untouchables at the bottom. Needless to say, members of a high caste enjoy far more wealth and opportunities, while members of a low caste perform menial jobs.<sup>1</sup> And while modern societies have moved toward less elaborate and more flexible class structures, the new forms are almost

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equally exploitable. The hustlers now employ money and political power to order how societies function and determine who gets what.

**Wealth & power.** Historically, except for pillaging and conquest, land was the basis of wealth, and only the few top social categories (and the church) could own land. Their socio-economic protections included feudalism, military force, serfdom, slavery, strict adherence to socio-economic classes, and castes. The ground shifted when wealth became based upon “money,” a medium of exchange in the form of coins, notes, precious metals, or traded goods. As forms of money became the basis of economic exchange, trade blossomed, a middle class grew, and urbanization took off.

These changes set the stage for the Enlightenment, secularization, and capitalistic practices, which seems to have emerged from the expansion of trade, urbanism, and the rise of the middle/merchant class. Over the years, **capitalism** became the dominant economic system in the world. Its power derives from the simple fact that it is the greatest wealth creation system in world history.

The problem with wealth creation is its side effects, due ultimately to human greed and self-interest, including our competition for attention, that our needs are attended to, and that those of others come after ours. The takeaway from this is that by surrendering to the power of material goods and wealth, we have embraced a more powerful influence on our behavior than any concern for attracting attention, however influential that might be.

**Results.** It is no exaggeration to assert that commercial interests have hijacked the political and governance process to ensure their ability become ever wealthier and more powerful as a societal force. Their “partners” are those elected officials and jurists who benefit from the commercial interests which provide massive infusions of money and support to get and keep them in office. By heavily influencing policy making and governance, commercial interests ensure their ability to become ever wealthier and powerful.

As of 2021, the richest 10% of the global population took 52% of the income, while the poorest half earned just 8%. And, when it comes to wealth (valuable assets and items over and above income), the gap is even wider. The poorest half of the global population owned just 2% of global wealth, while the richest 10% owned 76% of all wealth. Moreover, the average income gap between the top 10% and bottom 50% of individuals within countries has almost doubled over the last two decades.<sup>2</sup>

### **A sample of the mechanisms used by the wealthy and commercial interests**

There are many, including: Killing unions; Cutting worker benefits and getting rid of regular employment and income (e.g., “gig” worker arrangements); Gutting the federal tax and regulatory policies and agencies; Cutting back on competition through buyouts, consolidation, and monopolies; Buying favor with political contributions, lobbying, commercial and social media; Manipulating the legal and court system in support of commercial and wealthy interests; Making it harder for less conservative voters (including people of color) to vote; Preventing a fair and rational immigration policy in order to exploit cross-border, temporary workers; Seeking to cut back on social welfare programs (Medicare, Social Security, child tax credits) in order to cut taxes on the wealthy; Creating tax havens, shell com-

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panies, complex trusts, and other tax loopholes; Designing the varieties of social media and commercial advertising to steal individual privacy, while making little effort constrain hate messages and conspiracy theories. Designing social media to intrude on personal privacy as a major source of profit; and Ignoring Global Warming in order to continue the production of fossil fuels.<sup>3,4</sup>

### **The racial and other side-effects of greed and self-interest**

The human capacity to discriminate against others takes many forms, based upon differences in language, beliefs, practices, religion, socio-economic class, culture, education and, of course, gender. And, to get ahead, it pays to deprive the weak of wealth, education, and status.

Prejudice has often been based on color, but not always. For example: Japanese contempt for Koreans; Korean “discomfort” with dark skinned Americans; Arab Egyptian’s low regard for dark-skinned Nubians; the prejudice among Americans and many European countries towards immigrants; and not least the historic and near universal prejudice against Jews. Recall also the way Americans have treated the Native Americans, the Chinese railroad workers, and the interment of the Japanese-Americans (but not Italian- or German-Americans) in WWII.

As noted my, perhaps cynical, view is that discrimination on the basis of skin color or race is not, in effect, a race problem per se. The underlying causes go far deeper. In fact, the practice of inequality has many facets that go beyond discrimination based on skin color or race. Often ignored as a social issue over the centuries, racism in the US came to the fore as an issue in the Civil War, then again during the so-called Freedom Riders period in the Sixties. Oceans of ink and talk devoted to the general topic of inequality have been focused on this topic throughout the ages.

More recently, the issue has become a non-stop topic of discussion, with ubiquitous coverage of Black Lives Matter activism, and calls for action by people of color and their liberal champions. As suggested, any idea that color-based racism will go away due to Black Lives Matter marches, yard signs, and vocal supporters is delusionary. As noted, racism is built-into every society in some form. The only advances for people of color will come via them accepting the ineluctable reality of these abuses, and doing whatever is needed to move up the socio-economic ladder.

### **A paradox of inequality**

The paradox is that some of the most strident supporters of commercial interests and their political collaborators are those who are most egregiously and systematically exploited by them. I am thinking here of those elements of American society who feel left behind financially, socially, and politically neglected. This especially includes the poor whites who live in economic backwaters, many of whom lost jobs and opportunity as the commercial interests sent their well-paying jobs overseas. These aggrieved whites are also worried that white-dominated America is being turned over to an invasion of immigrants, especially those of color.

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It is hard to know what to make of this paradoxical behavior, although a possible explanation comes to mind. Throughout history people everywhere--especially the aggrieved and those concerned about their welfare--have been manipulated by self-styled leaders who promise to protect them from the bad guys, and propose simple solutions as their "savior." Think of Hitler. However, it is also fair to point out that even the more "liberal" of America's two political parties--historically known to be more supportive of the working class and less affluent--has done little or nothing to minimize the sending of good jobs overseas, reducing the decline of government control of commercial misbehavior, and are better known as the party of urban/sub-urban elites.

### **"What is to be done?"**

*Blocking almost any conceivable improvement strategy is the ineluctable fact that the problem is us, all of us; and it is built in. To the degree that this is the case, any sweeping solutions will not be feasible. The only conceivable melioration would be for concerned citizens to seek out, help finance and vote for those, perhaps few, political and socio-economic leaders willing to forgo bribery, intimidation, and self-interested manipulation. If a critical mass of such people could be elected to high office and governance posts, we *might* have a chance to create regulatory and other rules that could reduce the current patterns of inequality.*

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1. Wikipedia

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste\\_system\\_in\\_India](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste_system_in_India)

2. World Economic Forum, report, December 10, 2021. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/12/global-income-inequality-gap-report-rich-poor/>.

3. Debra Satz, review of "Davos Man, How the Billionaires Devoured the World," by Peter S. Goodman, *Washington Post*, March 6, 2022

4. Evan Osnos, "Trust issues," *The New Yorker*, January 2023, 30

