

The message of "Inequality Matters" is that inequality is a man-made phenomenon, especially egregious in the United States, that demands to be redressed through public policy.

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There are several questions at play here. Is the observed inequality a result of moral failings – greedy rich or lazy poor – or simply of the way society functions? Are inequalities inexorably tied to issues of minority status? Is it peculiar to the United States, or is it a theme that plays itself out, albeit with different nuances, in every society? Was Jesus' observation that "the poor will always be with you" simply a reflection on the dynamics of the way society works? Have public policy solutions been tried, and how have they fared?

Inequality can be observed in every ethnically diverse society worldwide. The caboclos of Brazil, the criollos of Argentina, the North African immigrants of the French banlieus, the Turks in Germany, and the West Indians in Great Britain manifest the same kind of economic inequality as Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans in our society. Though the authors do not attempt to do so, it might be more instructive to analyze societies in which there is relative equality.

Tribal peoples experience equality in material goods. There are very few to go around. However, any time a source of revenue such as oil, casinos or tourism appears, inequality seems to rear its head. Chiefs get rich. It has happened all over the Americas and Africa where westerners have introduced money to pay local people for resources.

The Europe of the fifties and sixties was quite socialist and egalitarian. There were, of course, the rich, but the social safety net provided adequately for the poor. That safety net has frayed, as has the societal consensus, with the influx of immigrants and the observation that the taxes of the Caucasian rich were flowing to social benefits for the non-Caucasian poor.

America has elevated individualism, or rather, narrow self interest, to be acknowledged as our greatest virtue. Perversely, these writers see self-interest to be a virtue in those who do not succeed but a vice in those such as the owners of Wal-Mart, everybody's whipping boy, who do. They cheer the Horatio Algiers as they rise from the slums, but condemn them for being rich.

It is no surprise to me that on average the groups within society who do better than mine, namely the Jews and the North Asians, have longer histories of civilization than mine. They learned (or evolved) to succeed in highly complex societies. Today, members of every traditional society on earth are being asked to play the Western European economic game. Is it any surprise that we, with thousands of years' practice, do a bit better than the newcomers? The tragedy is that the world is too connected for Africans and Native Americans to remain tribal. An anthropologist friend laments that missionaries in the Amazon are training "princes of the forest to be peons in Manaus." But they are, and the

Indians voluntarily emigrate to Manaus. For what it's worth, New York Times' science writer Nicholas Wade provides an insightful account of how the tribes of mankind have evolved since the dawn of agriculture in his recent "Before the Dawn." It is also worth mentioning Amy Chua's analysis in "Worlds on Fire" of those minorities such as the Chinese and Jews who seem always to do better than their host societies.

Communism was relatively egalitarian. Chinese all wore Mao jackets. Most people were poor. Walt Kelly had his Russian character claim "the shortage will be divided among the peasants" and his Castro character say "they will dine on the Cuban delicacy, azucar y tobacco."

Marxism, European socialism and our own Great Society were valiant attempts to curb social inequality. Marxism failed everywhere it was attempted, Europe is becoming more polarized by inequality, and a Democratic President signed legislation to undo America's welfare state in 1994. Why is inequality so intractable? This book touches on a couple of these.

The poor assume the burden of children more often and at earlier ages. Given that in every society these fecund poor are more likely than others to be minorities, some degree of inequality is built in. This isn't "blaming the victim." It is an observation of fact.

Free people operate in a free labor market. The level of compensation a person's labor will command is a function of that person's education, ability, and personal attributes such as congeniality and attractiveness. Race, class and gender may also play a role, but such a role could only be statistically proven by controlling for the first-mentioned factors. Liberals have not attempted this statistical analysis, and conservatives who have (not surprisingly) find that race, class and gender play little role.

Education is supposed to be the great equalizer, the facilitator of social mobility. Bill Moyers is certainly correct in his observation that the schools that the poor attend are certainly worse than those of the affluent. They are worse materially, as he acknowledges. Their teachers have less preparation. As almost any teacher will tell you, there is more to the story. Poor kids more often don't want to be in school, are disruptive, are violent, and don't learn. They are served by a legion of teachers whose skills are not adequate to get them transferred to better schools, and a handful of saints who feel a social mission. I know many of those saints. They labor long and savor their few victories, kids rescued from poverty. And I know saints who have left disillusioned, scared and physically injured. The collapse of school discipline (read "Judging School Discipline" has done the poor inestimable harm. The great disruptions of school busing (read "Forced Justice") and decades of bipartisan programs in the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act, the latest incarnation of which is NCLB, have made almost no statistically measurable impact. New York City is now throwing billions of dollars at the problem. Will it work? History says, probably not.

The bottom line is that the inequalities documented here are very real. They are certainly not unique to America. They are probably a function of how complex societies work, certainly not the mere result of a malign self-interest on the part of the rich.