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Separate But Unequal

Do Race, Gender, and Class Still Matter?

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Within the last decade, an African American was elected President of the United States and a woman entered a presidential election as the presumptive nominee of a major party. Activists occupied Zucotti Park and succeeded in creating a national debate on income inequality; several years later, another protest movement sustained a long national reflection on racial inequality. The Supreme Court has recognized the right of same-sex couples to marry and has determined that religious beliefs allow a corporation to opt-out of providing contraception to their female employees. These developments suggest that a nation committed to the proposition that all men are created equal has both demonstrated an advancement of that principle and thrown into stark relief the difficulties that remain. That leaves observers of inequality in North America to wonder: in the United States, do race, gender, and class still matter?

Yes they do. Though the passion of the Occupy Wall Street protests has faded, lingering resentment over wage stagnation and a lack of economic opportunity for the middle class fuel the campaign rhetoric of populist political campaigns. The deaths of unarmed African Americans at the hands of white police officers sparked protests in several states. Those initial protests have transformed into the Black Lives Matter movement, whose persistent presence at campaign rallies seems to have shifted the policy positions of several presidential candidates. Similarly, the growing awareness of sexual violence in the United States sparked a campaign on college campuses to protect female students from sexual assault, which has in turn resulted in a counter-movement claiming that institutional overreach has resulted in the criminalization of straight male sexuality. These three distinct and intertwined social movements show that the lived experience of American citizens is still deeply impacted by factors of race, gender and class.

This chapter intends to explore the central questions policymakers face regarding inequality in the United States. Do gender and racial inequalities deepen pre-existing class divisions within American society, or do they distract the public from acknowledging the deterioration of the middle class over the past forty years? Are these inequalities a natural side-effect of a democratic free-market system, or symptoms of structural problems that threaten to undermine the stability of the United States? What mechanisms exist to address these inequalities in a meaningful way within the confines of a representative majoritarian government? This chapter will develop a framework to address these and related questions to facilitate the formulation of policies to address the worst effects of inequality.

I. The Growing Divide Between Haves and Have-Nots

As the dominant force in the global economy, the United States has an enormous amount of aggregate wealth. For all the talk of its relative decline, the United States retains the highest per-capita household income in the world.[1] Yet within some of these broader indicators of robust economic health and high standards of living are troubling signs that significant inequalities are being lost amidst the data. The Gini coefficient, a measure which represents a country's economic inequality on a scale from 0 (most equal) to 1 (least equal), has risen steadily in the United States since the 1980s.[2] According to the World Bank, the U.S. Gini coefficient has risen from .37 in 1986 to .411 in 2010, an 11 percent increase.[3] The Occupy Wall Street movement highlighted this significant and growing disparity in the distribution of wealth, but the movement has so far failed to achieve any significant political victories. Partly as a result, the economic recovery from the financial catastrophe of 2007 has failed, as of this writing, to increase wages.[4] The current economic system seems skewed so that the benefits of growth go to those who already enjoy considerable wealth. Incomes for the top 1 percent grew 138 percent from 1979 to 2013, compared to 15 percent for the bottom 90 percent. Even worse, the hourly wages of the lowest earners actually fell 5 percent over the same period.[5]

Americans might take some solace if social and economic mobility allowed today's poor to become tomorrow's rich. Recent data suggests, however, that prospects for socioeconomic advancement remains relatively low. A 2014 study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that a child's future income is strongly predicted by his or her parents' income.[6] For every 10 percentile points higher their parents ranked on income, the child gained 6.4 percentile points in income. The child's chances of going to college, getting married, and holding high-paying jobs were also correlated to parental income. These issues tend to compound. Low-income children tend to be raised by a single-parent lacking advanced education, setting in motion a potentially self-perpetuating cycle of poverty.[7]

The service-sector jobs that replaced manufacturing as the major source of lower-class employment have failed to produce the level of wages required to sustain a robust middle class. The effective tax rate fell precipitously from its height during the 1970s,[8] which, coupled with a sharp decline in union membership and a generation of financial deregulation, allowed those with capital to reward themselves handsomely while most Americans were left out in the economic cold. New economic developments driven by technology—such as the much-touted "sharing economy"[9]—have done little for those on the lower end of the economic spectrum. The competition between services like Uber and taxis, for instance, makes transportation cheaper and more convenient, but at the expense of reliable income, health care, and insurance for drivers.[10] Opportunities for those who were not born into wealth seem increasingly limited. Stratification of economic classes risks creating a permanent underclass within the United States.

II. Race and the Permanent Underclass

Racial identity continues to be one of the greatest predictors of being trapped on the lowest rungs of society. The United States has been divided along racial lines since before its founding as a nation. Conflict between European settlers and Native Americans began shortly after the arrival of Columbus, and the social upheaval of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia led to a strict caste system separating even the poorest free whites from their enslaved African neighbors.[11] The stark economic disparities wrought by slavery have lingered in the modern era. African Americans have lagged behind their counterparts by virtually every measure, from education to income, with the depressing exception of incarceration rates.[12]

Following the election of Barack Obama in 2008, commentators described the moment as the beginning of a "post-racial" United States. These views now seem tragically short-sighted. The events surrounding the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown suggest a disparity in how African Americans are treated by police compared to whites. Data seem to bear out this suggestion. A recent article by *Mother Jones* finds that African Americans suspected of committing a crime are four times more likely to be killed by police than their white counterparts.[13] A vast difference in incarceration rates between whites and minorities over time has created a society where one out of every six Hispanic men and one out of three African American men will be imprisoned, as compared to one in seventeen white men.[14] Though it is unclear to what degree this disparity reflects a difference in crime rates in minority communities or a bias in policing, this difference in incarceration rates accounts for the 1.5 million African American men "missing" from their communities, a situation that radically destabilizes black family structures and limits long-term economic growth.[15]

African Americans who avoid prison still face major disparities in education, employment, and other key economic opportunities. Education is closely associated with future earning potential,[16] and it is often difficult for minority students to overcome the deficit imposed by sub-par schooling. Degree completion rates for African Americans remain much lower than their white peers, and those who complete their degrees find that they have double the unemployment rate of their similarly-educated white counterparts.[17] Even when African Americans are able to enter higher education and find white-collar employment, they are often segregated into minority-majority residential areas where schools, services, and property values are much lower than areas where the majority of residents are white. While the formal systems of neighborhood segregation that existed before the civil rights movement have been struck down by legal action, the lingering effects of long-term segregation of races, combined with the self-segregation of whites leaving areas that are perceived as having too large of a minority presence, has created a *de facto* divide in residential areas across the United States.[18] This phenomenon was researched as early as 1971, when Harvard economist Thomas Schelling found that the individual choices of rational actors, compounded over time, could lead to extreme racial segregation.[19] Given that whites as a population are more educated and earn more than their minority counterparts, they are far more likely than minorities to leave inner-city communities for the greener pastures of all-white enclaves in the suburbs. Whites' movement away from cities takes with it vital resources, from tax dollars needed to fund public school programs to connections and social capital that might generate employment opportunities. Conversely, the trend of gentrification has seen affluent, educated whites migrating to some American cities, bringing much-needed capital but also raising housing prices and thus pushing poor minorities into suburbs. When whites seem stunned by the events unfolding in minority-majority residential areas of the United States (such as in Ferguson, Missouri in 2015), it is often because their social networks are homogenously white.[20] This lack of a common reference for understanding difficult, divisive issues bodes ill for the future of racial politics in America. Ta-Nehisi Coates has recently suggested that taking American exceptionalism seriously requires that we grapple with our inability to address these deep-seated racial inequalities.[21]

African Americans are not alone in feeling the burden of race in America. Despite their increasing clout as a voting bloc, Hispanics still face significant prejudice and harassment. Asian students have protested the enrollment policies of prominent universities, echoing the historically white argument that they face reverse-discrimination in the name of diversity.[22] All non-white races face a significant gap in government representation compared to their white peers. The 114th Congress, for instance, ranks as the most diverse ever: 17 percent of its members identify as minorities. But this still lags far behind the nation as a whole, as 38 percent of the U.S. population consists of minorities.[23]

The military is the only major governmental institution where the membership roughly approximates the percentage of racial minorities in the nation at large. This is the result of a deliberate system of recruitment within the enlisted ranks. The officer corps, however, is another story. In the upper ranks of the U.S. military, white leadership is the norm and minority involvement in key command structures is the rare exception.[24]

III. The Gender Gap

Even after attempting to control for other variables that influence wages, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that women are paid less than their equally qualified, equally educated male counterparts. The White House claims that women receive $.77 for every dollar earned by men.[25] Minority women fare even worse, with African-American women earning $.64 and Latina women earning $.59. These differences are found across both blue-collar jobs and the most elite corridors of business and academia. The Pew Center finds that over time the wage gap is narrowing.[26] Indeed, the disparity seems much smaller than it was when measured in 1980, but it might be too early to declare a victory for gender equality just yet. Many of the major life events that alter the career trajectory of a woman (or even cause her to drop out of the workforce altogether) happen mid-career, such as getting married, becoming pregnant, and starting a family. Thus over time the initially small pay gap will tend to widen. The expectation that men occupy positions of leadership within various fields can also distort social views. A recent study showed that when students enrolled in an online course believed that their professor was a man, they gave the instructor a higher rating than if they thought the instructor was a woman.[27]

Women are also considerably more likely to face sexual harassment and sexual assault than their male counterparts.[28] Over a third of all rape victims in the United States are 18 to 24 years old when the attack occurred, and the rising awareness of sexual assault on college campuses has roiled institutions of higher learning. While the emphasis on protecting the victims of assault and preventing sexual violence are admirable, institutional tools have struggled to meet the challenge. Using Title IX structures to punish suspected predators in the absence of a criminal investigation can lead to legal complications when young men and women are in sexually ambiguous situations. The case of Drewe Sterrett, a student at the University of Michigan falsely accused of sexual assault, shows the perils of zealous administrators presuming guilt without the due process of law.[29]

One of the key terms to emerge recently in the debate over the causes of sexual violence is "rape culture," a pervasive social construct where being male is considered the norm and women are treated as lesser, valued as sexual and reproductive objects but not as people.[30] While the terminology seems harsh, Kate Harding argues that it is necessary to draw attention to the numerous ways in which women are discriminated against on a daily basis. The cumulative effect of these cultural slights adds to the difficulty in finding education, employment, and broader economic opportunities. These disparities are seen even at the highest levels of society. Only 19.4 percent of the 114th Congress is female compared to over half of the U.S. population.[31] This gender gap is prevalent in most public and private institutions, with a recent study finding that women were less likely to find full professorship and leadership positions across all specializations in medical schools.[32] No matter the field or profession, women face more challenges than men in terms of getting ahead.

IV. Intersectionality

Each of these three streams of inequality poses a significant policy challenge on its own, but they rarely manifest in distinct, pure forms. Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to describe how different systems of discrimination interacted with one another, both to maintain the status of the majority and limit the power of the discriminated groups.[33] This dynamic can be seen in many of the most recent issues of inequality. Race is obviously a key factor in understanding the protests in Ferguson, but it was also compounded by a noted absence of adult African American men to serve as models for the community and a deep sense of economic disenfranchisement. The wage gap continues to limit the opportunities of women to break into the upper tiers of the American economy, but the wage gap is even wider for women of color. Poor whites lack the social mobility of their peers, often finding themselves as the last hold-outs in diverse urban enclaves, trapped in the same failing public school systems as their minority peers.

For policymakers to address inequality in a meaningful way, they must be able to use the lenses of race, gender, and class to examine various issues while acknowledging these variables interact in ways that make the problems even more challenging, and thus necessary, to solve.

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