

# Political Inequality, “Real” Public Preferences, Historical Comparisons & Axes of Disadvantage

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*Abstract: The essays in this issue of Dædalus raise fascinating and urgent questions about inequality, time, and interdisciplinary research. They lead me to ask further questions about the public’s commitment to reducing inequality, the importance of political power in explaining and reducing social and economic inequities, and the possible incommensurability of activists’ and policy-makers’ vantage points or job descriptions.*

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The essays in this issue of *Dædalus* are fantastically provocative and informative. That is no surprise. They are written by many of the Western world’s leading scholars of inequality; they have germinated and developed over many years and many drafts; they combine moral passion with empirical and analytic rigor. The three dominant themes – integrating scholarship across disciplines, taking time seriously as an explanatory force, and directly connecting three levels of analysis with one another – are important, innovative, and revealing. Although I venture no predictions about economic inequality itself, I confidently predict that scholars, students, and even policy analysts will be reading and discussing this issue of *Dædalus* for years to come.

Before burrowing into the academic’s favorite habitat of critique and query, let me embody that praise by pointing to particular arguments in each essay that seem to me to get at the heart of their

innovation. Each of these arguments is a direct progenitor of one or more of my comments below. David Grusky, Peter Hall, and Hazel Markus, in “The Rise of Opportunity Markets: How Did It Happen & What Can We Do?” develop the rich concept of opportunity markets, showing when and how individuals and institutions can create and reinforce trajectories of inequality while simply going about their usual, essentially benign business. Americans endorse public education, meritocratic rules, a family’s right to help its children, markets, and equal opportunity: all perfectly defensible norms and practices that nonetheless culminate in a new “inequality regime that functions so smoothly that its many interlocking components can be invisible.” The idea that I found most compelling was almost a throwaway line:

Our instinct is that present-day Americans likewise lack the stomach to deal directly with the causes of unequal opportunity . . . but that is not reason to despair. It only means that we must find another way.

And they do find another way, a relatively small and targeted policy intervention that “could trigger a norm cascade that would counter the rise of opportunity markets and lead to a substantial increase in social mobility.”<sup>1</sup> What liberating ideas: that social scientists need not tether themselves to tight causal explanations of important problems in order to think incisively about effective solutions, and that seemingly small solutions may under the right conditions have big effects.

In “‘Superstar Cities’ & the Generation of Durable Inequality,” Patrick Le Galès and Paul Pierson also produce a depressingly compelling structural explanation of rising inequality.<sup>2</sup> The concept of agglomeration perfectly captures an individual, organizational, and economic

process: how many department chairs have done what I am now doing, enticing a job candidate and her partner to accept a job offer from my university in part by pointing to so many other exciting scholars in the vicinity, so many job opportunities for the partner, so many cultural amenities and good local schools? The movement from country to city is centuries old, has never been voluntarily reversed, and is perhaps reaching its inevitable climax. And yet, Le Galès and Pierson, like Grusky, Hall, and Markus, point us toward policy interventions that can ameliorate if not eliminate the most harmful or inegalitarian features of the trajectories they so convincingly depict.

“Membership without Social Citizenship? Deservingness & Redistribution as Grounds for Equality,” by Irene Bloemraad, Will Kymlicka, Michèle Lamont, and Leanne Son Hing, directly targets an issue that many left activists have evaded for some decades: can a society effectively engage with more than one major dimension of inequity at a time? That is, can intersectionality move beyond being an important academic trope into being a sustainable focus for political mobilization and policy intervention? Bloemraad and her coauthors worry that full-fledged attacks on multiple axes of disadvantage cannot be, or at least so far have not been, sustained. As the authors put it:

Whereas national membership has expanded [to incorporate women, ethnic or racial minorities, and immigrants – and I would add people with disabilities and individuals with unconventional sexual orientation or gender identity], the segment of the population seen as deserving of redistributive support has arguably shrunk.<sup>3</sup>

That is, to put the point more crudely, as leftist positions on race, gender, and nonnormative behavior have gained ground, leftist positions on class and

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material distribution have lost ground. There is no logical reason for that seesaw, but there is plausible empirical reason to fear its occurrence.

Son Hing (again!), Anne Wilson, Peter Gourevitch, Jaslyn English, and Parco Sin explore, in “Failure to Respond to Rising Inequality: Processes That Legitimize Growing Disparities,” an updated version of Werner Sombart’s classic question: “Why no socialism in the United States?” Just as many of the essays in this issue move across levels of analysis, so does the issue as a whole, with this essay focusing substantially on the micro, Jane Jenson and her colleagues on the meso, and Le Galès and Pierson on the macro. Son Hing and her colleagues answer Sombart with arguments not about the structure of capitalist production, but rather about the many ways in which people in the bottom half of the economic distribution experience what the old Marxists would have called false consciousness. There are a surprising number of ways in which rational self-interest – which in a majoritarian democracy should lead to downward redistribution in response to rising inequality – gets deflected. The authors wrestle those ways into an analytically coherent catalog of how psychological processes that should lead to calls for less inequality in fact “activate the very psychological processes that stifle outcry, causing people to be blind to the true extent of inequality, to legitimize these disparities, and to reject redistribution as an effective solution.”<sup>4</sup>

Possibly the most frustrating of all the explanations for inequality presented in this issue of *Dædalus* lies in “The Difficulties of Combating Inequality in Time,” by Jane Jenson, Francesca Polletta, and Paige Raibmon. In none of the three cases that they describe – disparate and fascinating – was there inegalitarian villains to persuade or override; all actors

avored greater equality for groups that all saw as being unfairly disadvantaged, with the only question being how best to promote equality. Nonetheless, the outcome at best was ambiguous and at worst harmed the people ostensibly being granted their just desserts. Jenson and her colleagues show vividly how difficult it is to grant genuine recognition, balance the equally compelling claims of sameness and difference, and put ideological commitments of passionate advocates through the meat grinder of a political system. Time is an active force in this essay as both a cause of deep structural inequality and a challenge to efforts to overcome it, joining perhaps inevitably conflicting perspectives of judicial systems, bureaucratic standard operating procedures, and politicians dependent on election. As the authors put it: “pitfalls emerge.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite the near despair of their authors, the quality of the essays in this issue makes them exhilarating to read. That quality also spawns observations and questions.

First, a particular complaint with larger ramifications for the goal of ameliorating inequality: As a card-carrying political scientist, I was disturbed not to see more attention in these essays to the issue of *political* inequality.<sup>6</sup> The authors addressed ways in which a political system has tried, can try, or should try to alleviate social, economic, educational, psychological, or cultural inequality; a few analyses even invoked power. But none discuss felon disfranchisement, registration and voting restrictions, gerrymandering, geographic imbalances of the Electoral College and Senate, the rich-tilting elements of campaign finance law, descriptively unrepresentative legislative bodies, the wealth of members of Congress, the costs of judicial redress, imbalances between interest and advocacy groups,

undocumented migrants' statelessness, or equivalent inequalities in the design and practice of purported democracies outside the United States. This list represents more than the solipsistic wish that my own issues mattered as much to the authors as they do to me. Although some of these issues might individually be too narrow in scope for this issue of *Daedalus*, collectively the list points to an inequality of human dignity that arguably matters as much as do failures to recognize and redistribute in the society and economy. The list might even point to an underlying inequality of power that *causes* failures to recognize and redistribute. If the United States and other Western nations were more truly democratic, might elected officials be more easily pushed into finding ways to offset structural, economic, and recognition failures?

Perhaps not; these authors provide many explanations for why the pursuit of greater equality could readily be derailed even in a more democratic polity. But the issue of political inequality and its manifestations points to three questions about the relationship between citizens' activity and policy outcomes.

First, what if policy-makers in Western countries *are*, roughly speaking, democratically responsive, and the real issue is that a majority of voters do not want more equality, or at least not as much as they want something else? That is, the authors in this volume assume that reducing inequality is normatively and empirically necessary (as do I), and that the failure to do so is what needs to be explained. But what if the failure to reduce inequality has a straightforward explanation: even left-leaning voters care as much or more about something else? In one recent survey, almost as many Democrats want their party's top priority to be making gun laws stricter (34 percent) as combatting economic inequality (37 per-

cent).<sup>7</sup> In another, Democrats' highest priority for the nation is improving the health care system (31 percent), followed by reducing economic inequality (21 percent) and reducing discrimination (18 percent).<sup>8</sup> As many or more young adults identify health care (37 percent), racism and education (23 percent each), terrorism (19 percent), the environment and climate change (18 percent), immigration (18 percent), or gun control (17 percent) as a more important problem for the United States than taxes, the national debt, or income inequality (14 percent each).<sup>9</sup>

Scholars have given us many reasons to discount survey results and even election outcomes, and the essays in this issue add powerful new reasons. I do not want to claim that surveys report "real" opinions or that electoral totals reflect "real" voter preferences – never mind the fact that deep structural forces can swamp any set of opinions, votes, or policy preferences. Nonetheless, we need to engage seriously with expressed opinions and cast votes if we are to claim democratic legitimacy for the fight against inequality. After reading these essays, I am left wanting more direct wrestling (by these or other authors) with the assumption that the disadvantaged ought to place a very high priority on redistribution and recognition, or that they do hold those priorities but are always thwarted.

This wish for more direct wrestling with expressed views and political actions points to my second question about the relationship between citizens' activity and policy outcomes. The essays in this issue of *Daedalus* all focus on explaining rising inequality. Yet, at various points over the past century, residents of Western nations *have* sought and their policies *have* promoted a diminution of inequality. These essays could give us more help in understanding the circumstances under which inequality has been reduced.

Can we simply take the theories and explanations proffered here and add a “not” to them to explain those opposite trajectories? Surely not. Alternatively, were the forces that promoted equality at some point in the past unique and nonreplicable? Perhaps, but it would be useful to see those analyses. Thus, ironically, I wish that some of these essays were even more historically oriented than they are already, so that they gave readers a greater understanding of when, how, and why inequality might decline as well as increase.

To focus on only one example: Bloemraad and her colleagues point out that “one of the striking successes of the last half-century is the struggle against exclusionary definitions of national membership. . . . The formal rules for acquiring citizenship or nationality have become more open. . . . There are also changes in public perceptions of cultural membership” for women, racial and religious minorities, LBGTQ individuals, and people with disabilities.<sup>10</sup> These were momentous reductions of inequality, attained only after intense and sometimes murderous conflict. And although the authors do not so characterize them, these changes manifest a dramatic lowering of the barrier of deservingness. People with disabilities are no longer warehoused; gays and lesbians must no longer hide; racial apartheid is no longer legal; women can no longer be sexually assaulted with legal impunity. These are indicators of newly recognized deservingness. Furthermore, many members of these groups have been incorporated economically in a way that they were not a half-century ago; arguably more than half of the population in many Western countries who had been denied Marshall’s “right to a modicum of economic welfare and security” can now lay claim to social rights.

None of that is to deny continuing denigration, discrimination, inequality, in-

justice, or the fact that citizens of many Western nations are less willing to redistribute downward and more willing to blame the poor for their plight compared with some years or decades ago. My point is rather that we would learn a great deal if Bloemraad and her colleagues, as well as other scholars of inequality, paid attention to when societies *do* promote greater recognition, redistribution, and social rights as well as to when they do not.

It is useful to bring in the essay by Son Hing and her colleagues here. They do such a fine job of showing why people do not seek redistribution (or recognition) when basic theory suggests that they ought to that we are left with an incomplete understanding of when they do demand social citizenship. As the authors note, there have been periods of “public outcry in the face of rising income inequality” – under what conditions, and through what dynamics, does that occur?<sup>11</sup> Perhaps perceptions of the level of inequality change, or people reverse their understandings of what constitutes a just world or merited advantage, or routinely accepted inequities come to be seen as intolerable. Political scientist Ira Katznelson once commented that the most important question in social science is “under what conditions?” I interpret that to mean, “the stronger an explanation, the more essential it is to set boundary conditions.” These authors hint at those boundary conditions, but it would be illuminating if they spelled them out more clearly.

I can make the same point more briefly in reference to two other essays in this issue. As Grusky and his coauthors point out, the “cultural and institutional commitment to allocate scarce goods and services through markets” promotes “the rise of opportunity markets” in schools that “create the perception that merit just happens to coincide with money.”<sup>12</sup> That dynamic now makes schooling in

the United States, and presumably elsewhere, an engine for reinforcing economic inequality and inhibiting upward mobility. And yet, as the authors also point out, in earlier eras, Americans vastly increased the number of schools, children's access to grade school then high school then college, and public commitment to (if not usually the practice of) equal educational outcomes for all. Schools were, at least sometimes, the engine of upward mobility. When, and why? The huge expansion of high schools, for example, occurred in the early decades of the twentieth century: not an era with less commitment than the present to allocating scarce goods and services through markets, or less commitment of wealthy parents to opportunity hoarding. So, what was different then, and can any of those historical forces be reinvented and newly harnessed? Perhaps not, but knowing that too would be illuminating.

Finally, on this point, as Le Galès and Pierson observe, in the latter third of the twentieth century, "analyses typically . . . dealt with urban decline: New York's bankruptcy, massive deindustrialization, or low quality of life." Now, the largest cities are so vibrant, wealthy, and exciting that their very success is an engine of inequality for countries, regions, and individuals. The authors' depiction of how cities are "extraordinary agglomerations of wealth" is so compelling that it makes one wonder why they have not always been so, and whether we can learn anything from eras in which "urban" and "nonurban" did not connote what now seems like an irreversible gulf between doing better and doing worse.<sup>13</sup>

My last question about the relationship between citizens' activity and policy outcomes is more speculative: is it ever possible to mediate different visions of equality, or to reduce simultaneously multiple dimensions of inequality? Or is

politics always and inevitably a struggle among incompatible goods as well as between good and evil? Bloemraad and her colleagues argue that as recognition of ill-treated groups rose over the late twentieth century, so that categories of citizenship and inclusion expanded in law and became more generous in spirit, willingness to redistribute to the needy shrank in policy and became more mean-spirited. My brother claims that there is a conservation of bustedness, such that if you repair your dishwasher, your refrigerator will break. Perhaps there is (also?) a conservation of social rights, such that if a polity shrinks one dimension of inequality, it enables another to expand. The logic here, beyond my brother's excuse for home-repair inaction, is that the well-off and powerful can be induced or pressured to yield only so much of their advantage. If recognition becomes so widespread as to threaten meritocracy and prestige, and if redistribution becomes so extensive as to threaten economic hierarchy, those with power will ensure that one or another change is curtailed or even reversed. Bloemraad and her colleagues do not say that, but their analysis points in the direction of the conservation of social rights.

Jenson, Polletta, and Raibmon point even more explicitly to the struggle among incompatible goods.

Categories meant to ameliorate inequalities may become the basis for evaluating group members in ways far beyond the arena originally targeted. . . . Each reform [analyzed in the essay] ultimately reproduced rather than surmounted tensions between sameness and difference.

The authors explain the frustrating outcomes for African Americans in American health research, European women in EU regulations, and Indigenous peoples in Canada's constitutional law through the lens of time: "Each policy 'victory'

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failed in the end to account for the processual nature of the originating and on-going causes of inequality.”<sup>14</sup> Different actors operated from a different sense of the relevant historical trajectory and appropriate goals for the future. Seldom has time been portrayed as such a vivid and impelling causal force.

All of this is richly described and analyzed, but I see a simpler, perhaps even deeper, incommensurability in these cases. Policy actors view the world, and behave, differently from advocates and activists; the two groups need dissimilar resources to do their jobs and follow different imperatives to achieve their goals. In the Canadian case, for example, “the policy world preferred short temporal horizons and ‘rights fixes,’” and had no incentive to upend repeatedly several centuries of practice and law around government sovereignty. That is neither surprising nor nefarious, given the vantage points and constraints of public officials and agencies. In the Indigenous population, in contrast, “each organization’s position shifted over time, as did relations between membership and leadership.... The path forward was unclear and contested.”<sup>15</sup> That too is neither surprising nor reprehensible, given the vantage points and constraints of morally driven activists venturing into new terrain. But even setting aside their different temporal horizons and definitions of equality, the two sets of actors were almost inevitably on a collision course.

A similar tension between imperatives of policy-making and activism holds for biomedical research. Even though all actors understood that U.S. federal racial and ethnic categories are “administrative, not biological,” agencies and corporations had to have *some* fixed categories with which to do their work from day to day. They also needed stable categories to be able to fund and regulate research

or develop new drugs over many years. Researchers and reformers, in contrast, could more readily change or dissolve categories as appropriate in their work, and in fact they often want to do so: promoting fluidity and reinvention may be an intrinsic part of their mission of rectifying inequities in health care and, more broadly, in group recognition. But the tension here is deeply embedded in the structures of governance and reformist activism – neither nefarious nor, perhaps, correctable.

In the third case, on gender issues in EU policy-making,

as social movements’ approaches to identity and equality diversified, the feminist movement itself divided . . . shifting focus toward a multiplicity of diversities and their intersections. . . . By the late 1990s, there was no standard social movement narrative motivating claims for gender equality and equal treatment.

Reformers focused variously on the gendered division of labor, racism, intolerance for normative sexual orientation, or religious and cultural disrespect. That array may make good sense to activists and researchers, who can specify historical dynamics, future trajectories, contemporary evidence, and policy proposals as warranted for each narrative. But it is something of a nightmare for policy-makers who, among other things, needed to develop consensus for innovation among fifteen (and later more) disparate countries. No wonder that the EU “bundl[ed] multiple differences together under a diagnosis of the need for equal treatment” – and that many aspirants to equality were disappointed.<sup>16</sup>

Both Jenson and her colleagues and Bloemraad and her colleagues assert that there is no necessary conflict between equality and difference, among types of equality, or between recognition and re-

distribution. But there are certainly tensions – across time, activists, norms, and institutional imperatives – and perhaps clashes among actors with different priorities are inevitable. What comes through most strongly to me as a scholar of public policy is that egalitarian commitments that feel essential to intense policy demanders may feel impossible or irresponsible to policy officials who must try to implement any new program. It would be fascinating to see how a legislator, regu-

lator, or judge would analyze Jenson and her colleagues' cases, or would adjudicate among the dynamics that promote inclusion but weaken interclass solidarity.

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To repeat: these are fascinating essays on a crucial subject. The cross-cutting themes are important; the idiosyncratic analyses are intriguing; and the commitment to greater equality is inspiring. I hope this issue of *Dædalus* has the lifespan it deserves.

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> David B. Grusky, Peter A. Hall, and Hazel Rose Markus, "The Rise of Opportunity Markets: How Did It Happen & What Can We Do?" *Dædalus* 148 (3) (Summer 2019): 20.
- <sup>2</sup> Patrick Le Galès and Paul Pierson, "'Superstar Cities' & the Generation of Durable Inequality," *Dædalus* 148 (3) (Summer 2019).
- <sup>3</sup> Irene Bloemraad, Will Kymlicka, Michèle Lamont, and Leanne S. Son Hing, "Membership without Social Citizenship? Deservingness & Redistribution as Grounds for Equality," *Dædalus* 148 (3) (Summer 2019): 78.
- <sup>4</sup> Leanne S. Son Hing, Anne E. Wilson, Peter Gourevitch, Jaslyn English, and Parco Sin, "Failure to Respond to Rising Income Inequality: Processes That Legitimize Growing Disparities," *Dædalus* 148 (3) (Summer 2019): 105.
- <sup>5</sup> Jane Jenson, Francesca Polletta, and Paige Raibmon, "The Difficulties of Combating Inequality in Time," *Dædalus* 148 (3) (Summer 2019): 136.
- <sup>6</sup> Another complaint: Lamont and Pierson's portrayal, in the introduction to the issue, of quantification as a culprit in rising inequality seems overdrawn. They are surely correct that quantitative measures of performance "can reinforce inequalities. They may devalue criteria that might have favored the disadvantaged." However, the tool of quantification can be deployed for many purposes, including redress of unfairness. After all, the foundation of each essay in this issue is quantification of economic or some other form of inequality, and the authors use numerical data to analyze inequality and propose ways to combat it. Michèle Lamont and Paul Pierson, "Inequality Generation & Persistence as Multidimensional Processes: An Interdisciplinary Agenda," *Dædalus* 148 (3) (Summer 2019): 8.
- <sup>7</sup> CBS News Poll, "Public Divided on Whether the Country Would Be Better Off with a Democratic Congress," conducted March 8–11, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/public-splits-on-whether-things-would-be-better-or-worse-with-democratic-congress/>.
- <sup>8</sup> Washington Post–ABC News Poll, January 21–24, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/polling/washington-postabc-news-poll-jan-2124/2019/01/25/411bc1f2-20cf-11e9-a759-2b8541bbb2e0\\_page.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/polling/washington-postabc-news-poll-jan-2124/2019/01/25/411bc1f2-20cf-11e9-a759-2b8541bbb2e0_page.html).
- <sup>9</sup> "Young adults" in this survey includes oversamples of African Americans, Latinxs, and Asian Americans. NBC News and GenForward at the University of Chicago, "November 2017 Toplines Survey," conducted October–November 2017. Opening the Pandora's box of votes and opinion surveys reveals another puzzle. We must ask not only, as these authors do, "What's the matter with Kansas?" such that relatively poor people frequently do not seek redistribution, but also "What's the matter with Connecticut?" such that the well-off frequently do. (See Andrew Gelman, *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State: Why Americans*



*Vote the Way They Do* [Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 2009]). In the 2016 presidential election, as many voters with incomes over \$100,000 voted for Hillary Clinton as voted for Donald Trump. Were they motivated by the view that market values should not drive educational opportunity, that cities should not belong only to the rich, that the poor are in fact deserving, that a just world requires redistribution, that disadvantaged groups warrant policies to promote true equality, or by something else? In other words, I urge these authors to apply their analyses to advantaged entities that do, as well as those that do not, seek to reduce inequality.

<sup>10</sup> Bloemraad et al., “Membership without Social Citizenship?” 75–76.

<sup>11</sup> Son Hing et al., “Failure to Respond to Rising Income Inequality,” 105.

<sup>12</sup> Grusky et al., “The Rise of Opportunity Markets,” 22, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Le Galès and Pierson, “‘Superstar Cities’ & the Generation of Durable Inequality,” 48, 47.

<sup>14</sup> Jenson et al., “The Difficulties of Combating Inequality in Time,” 137, 158.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 157, 152.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 148–149, 149.