

Attacking “Sinful Inequalities”

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Post–World War II political science in America has been described (by me, that is) as an excuse, concocted by college professors, for avoiding actual political engagement while not actually achieving science. Too much work by too many colleagues over too many decades deserves that dismissive characterization, but not so for the report penned by the professors who led the American Political Science Association Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy. Theirs—ours!—is arguably the most important and timely report ever produced by APSA. As I told the task force when I served as one of its discussants, the report is terrific and makes me proud to be a card-carrying member of APSA.

So, I am less inclined to nit-pick over this or that point in the report than, in my own Roman Catholic vernacular, to restate its core ethical questions, reinforce its key empirical findings, and spotlight several inequality-reducing community-serving programs with which I have been intimately associated. I will end by briefly addressing the need for forthright research and policy agendas on reducing inequality in America.

Ain't It a Sin?

Early in the report, the task force asks, “How concerned should we be about persistent and rising socioeconomic inequalities?”¹ There are many practical reasons to be deeply concerned, but let me emphasize the essential moral reasons as I see them through the lens of my faith.

Earlier this year at Sunday Mass, I found in my pew a 19-page *Voter's Guide for Serious Catholics*, published in 2004 by an organization called Catholic Answers. The *Guide*

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endorsed no particular politician but advised Catholics that they were morally obliged to deny support to any candidate who was wrong on one or more of “Five Non-Negotiable Issues”: abortion, homosexual marriage, stem-cell research, euthanasia, and human cloning. In discussing “The Role of Your Conscience,” the *Guide* emphasized: “The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is an excellent source of authentic moral teaching.”

There is no question that both the *Catechism* and other sources of Church precepts (papal encyclicals and the dozen-plus official documents that together represent Vatican II, for instance) teach Catholics, “serious” or not, that all life is sacred and otherwise endorse, at least in broad outline, the *Guide's* take on the five issues cited. But why are these the only or the prime non-negotiable issues? What about, say, Catholic politicians who strongly support the death penalty? In his masterful biography of Pope John Paul II, *Witness To Hope*, George Weigel elucidates the pope’s eleventh encyclical, published in 1995, *Evangelium Vitae*:

The striking development . . . was on capital punishment. . . . Now, John Paul narrowed the criterion of societal self-defense in cases of “absolute necessity” even further, suggesting that “today . . . as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent.” The *Catechism* was subsequently revised to cohere with the encyclical’s teaching.²

Some Catholic thinkers still insist that the pontiff did not mean precisely what he wrote on capital punishment. But nobody can credibly deny what Pope John Paul II and the Church have always taught about the poor. No biblical moral injunctions, including those conveyed in Jesus Christ’s own words, are more common than the commands to love, honor, share with, and serve the poor—not the deserving poor, not the bootstrap-pulling poor, but the just plain poor.

The *Catechism's* first index entry under “Poverty; the poor” is “active love of the poor,” followed by “moral responsibility of wealthy nations.”³ Those “who are oppressed by poverty,” it teaches, “are the object of a *preferential love* on the part of the Church which, since her origin and in spite of the failings of many of her members, has not ceased to work for their relief, defense, and liberation . . .”⁴ Thus, what the *Guide* terms the *Catechism's* “authentic moral teaching” includes numerous passages such as the following:

There exist also *sinful inequalities* that affect millions of men and women. These are in open contradiction of the Gospel . . . God blesses those who come to the aid of the poor and rebukes those who turn away from them . . . The decisive point of the social question is that goods created by God for everyone should in fact reach everyone in accordance with justice and with the help of charity.⁵

The *Catechism* also teaches that rich nations have “a grave moral responsibility,” both domestic and international, toward those who, for whatever reasons, including “tragic historical events” and social injustice, are impoverished, disadvantaged, or afflicted.⁶ America is the world’s richest nation, but, as the task force report makes clear, we confront “rising economic inequalities in the United States” due in part to public-policy decisions that have deepened, not diminished, “socioeconomic disparities.”⁷

Rags-to-riches stories do not mitigate our individual and collective moral responsibility for those here and abroad who remain in rags or lag badly behind; besides, the hard empirical fact is that socioeconomic mobility in America is far less common than many of us care to admit. The subtitle of a recent Century Foundation “Reality Check” report states flatly: “The American dream is less common in the United States than elsewhere.”⁸ Charting some 6,000 individuals in households where children were born between 1942 and 1972, the report finds that 42 percent “born into the bottom fifth of the income distribution . . . end up where they started—at the bottom . . . Only 7 percent of those born into the bottom fifth end up in the top tier—providing the relatively rare rags-to-riches stories that Americans celebrate.”⁹

Democracy and You

I am with the task force in stressing that our democratic norms and institutions need to be strengthened: increase political participation; get more interest groups and both major political parties to take the truly disadvantaged more seriously; lower new and old barriers to equal citizenship; and more. “Renewing American Democracy,” as the task force phrases it in the final subheading to its report, is a noble and worthy civic goal, and I would in no way wish to diminish or deride what the report says in this regard. Likewise, I would agree that there is no reversing the adverse socioeconomic trends or closing the persistent income and other gaps without concerted efforts to change public policies, up to and including the adoption of major new national antipoverty programs, or the expansion and full funding of existing programs (Medicaid and the State Childrens’ Health Insurance Plan, for starters), or both.

At the same time, however, we need to remind ourselves that democracy is as democracy does, starting always with actions taken—or not taken—and with positions advocated—or not advocated—by individual citizens. Political democracy, like private charity, begins at home—and starts when you look in the mirror.

Another recent Century Foundation report suggests that we college professors and the institutions we serve, especially if we work at the most selective schools, are part of the problem: “The income for high school graduates between 1975 and 1999 was flat, while the income of those with bachelor’s degrees rose substantially and the income of those with advanced degrees skyrocketed . . . The underrepresentation of low-income students in higher education is particularly pronounced at the nation’s [146] most selective colleges” where “74 percent of students come from the richest socioeconomic quartile and just 3 percent come from the poorest quartile.”¹⁰

What is to be done? Let every member of the task force, and every reader of the report that agrees with its basic conclusions, make an effort to investigate where his or her own college or university is in terms of equal opportunity, to push for policies that promote greater equality in admissions, and—walk the talk—to help university development and other officials raise funds as needed to make it happen.

More broadly, recognize that there are many things that we mere academics can do to affect public policies, effect positive social change, and light a single candle or two rather than curse (or overanalyze) the darkness.

For example, a few years ago, Mark Alan Hughes noticed that the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) program had retroactive provisions that made it possible for eligible low-income working persons with children who had failed to apply in previous years to claim their credits (and get their money). Research had shown that many EITC-eligible working mothers and others failed to apply for the simple reason that they did not know about the program, or had heard that it was highly complicated to get “hooked up” with the money, or for other reasons. Some EITC-eligible citizens got their money, but only after using for-profit tax preparation firms that kept a big slice of the funds for themselves.

Hughes discussed the problem with a former antipoverty community activist and Philadelphia deputy mayor, Michael DiBerardinis. Working out of a few Penn offices and supported by a small foundation seed grant, DiBerardinis, Hughes, and a group of students and volunteers created “The Campaign for Working Families.” Through local churches, public libraries, public service announcements, and other means, they identified and got the word out to hundreds of EITC-eligible low-income Philadelphians. They set up contacts with the Internal Revenue Service (which proved very cooperative and helpful), which, in turn, helped the campaign’s staff figure out easy ways to set up bank accounts for prospective beneficiaries, many of whom had never had a checking or savings account.

After just a year, the campaign netted over \$10 million for EITC-eligible citizens, spun the program off to a free-standing nonprofit group, got the *Philadelphia Daily News* to sponsor and advertise the program for free, and was on the way to netting \$20 million for EITC-eligible citizens in year two. (Hughes estimates that as much as \$50 million in

EITC benefits are being “left on the table” in Philadelphia alone each year, and that the figure is even greater in some other big cities.)

Or consider the work of Mary Summers, an expert on food politics and agricultural policy. With a small USDA grant and a minion of students, Summers has developed a small but significant program to help eligible Philadelphians get their food stamps. Her efforts have been successful enough to attract the interest of many, including a visit to campus last spring by former Ohio congressman and present U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Agencies for Food and Agriculture Tony P. Hall.

Or Joe Tierney, an expert on youth development programs and evaluation research. Several years ago, Tierney and I helped launch a program for mentoring the most severely at-risk group of children in America—the low-income urban children who have an incarcerated father or mother (or both). Research by Tierney and others had shown that getting a loving, caring nonparental adult into the life of an at-risk urban child could significantly brighten the child’s otherwise dim educational and other life prospects.

Tierney’s effort to mobilize mentors specifically for the children of incarcerated parents was supported by Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA), which in turn mobilized mentors through partnerships with scores of local churches. By 2001 the program was led by former Philadelphia mayor, the Reverend W. Wilson Goode Sr. By 2004 the program had catalyzed the largest mobilization of mentors in BBBSA’s hundred-year history; engaged AmeriCorps volunteers; received both local and federal government funds; and—with high-profile political supporters ranging from Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton to President George W. Bush—spread to dozens of other cities and won additional private foundation support. Former Mayor Goode, himself the son of a father who did prison time, estimates that the effort, which began with a few hundred “matches” in Philadelphia in 2000, will be helping over 50,000 children a year nationally before the decade is out.

And there is Jane Eisner, nationally syndicated columnist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and resident fellow at Penn. Eisner’s new book, *Taking Back the Vote*, is a lively account of the decline in voter participation, focusing in particular on what can be done to increase turnout and civic engagement beyond voting among socially conscious college-age citizens. But, like Hughes, DiBerardinis, Summers, Tierney, and Goode, Eisner practices, not just preaches, democracy. She is working with a host of student organizations, senior citizens groups, and others on practical strategies to increase levels of voter participation in both national and local elections.

Be Not Afraid

Naturally, many academics, in particular, favor informed general policy advocacy short of such concrete local or

community-based program efforts. Some, like myself, have done both. During 2001 I served as the first director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. I have written elsewhere about that experience and about the spiritual and civic motivations that brought me to it.¹¹ For present purposes, I want to highlight the fact that I was (by academic standards) a conservative Democrat serving in (by any standard) a conservative Republican White House. Often finding myself in the odd role of “in-house liberal” (or, my preference, “pro-poor Catholic”)—or as close as anyone there could come to playing that role, I enjoyed debates about social policy and, when I could get anyone to suffer the term, “social justice.” Though I lost nearly every battle, the administration’s “compassion” agenda, however anemic some (myself included) deemed it to be, would have been even less muscular had I and a few others, inside and outside the administration, not taken stands (both publicly and privately) in good faith.

The task force report is clearly a report that few, if any, libertarian conservatives, and only some religious or cultural conservatives, would be inclined to embrace. Political science, like most academic fields, is dominated by Democrats, and political science professors as a group are far more liberal than the public at large. So be it. The ethical and empirical question remains: *By what, if any, objective measures has inequality increased in America over the last half-century; under what, if any conditions can growing inequality in America be slowed or reversed; and how, if at all, can and should we foster positive conditions by public policies and other means?*

Bible-believing Christians are supposed to heed the call to “be not afraid” of any worldly challenge. Whether you are a person of whatever faith or of no faith, if you believe that inequality is a moral problem, and you are convinced that it is a real problem in America today, you should not be afraid to say so—and not be afraid to recommend whatever policies or programs you believe might make a real and lasting difference. In the post-1980 debate over inequality, at least as I have experienced it, it is liberals, not conservatives, who have normally lacked the courage of their true convictions, some for fear of being accused of favoring “big government” or having other thoughts out of season.

The Catholic principle of “subsidiarity” urges that, to the extent possible, families and then other civil institutions must take responsibility for the young, the old, the sick, the handicapped, and the poor. It thereby sets limits on government, prohibits excessive state intervention, and calls forth personal freedom and initiative. The self-same principle, however, urges that, when civil institutions cannot fulfill their responsibilities, larger communities, up to and including national political communities acting through their democratic governments, do so. My *Catechism* teaches: “The equal dignity of human persons requires the effort to reduce excessive social and economic inequalities. It gives urgency to the elimination of sinful inequalities.”¹² To the task force

report and its urgent message about inequalities in this one nation under God, I say “amen.”

Notes

- 1 American democracy 2004, 651.
- 2 Weigel 1999, 758.
- 3 Konstant 1994, 788.
- 4 Ibid., 588, emphasis in original.
- 5 Ibid., 470, 587, and 590, emphasis in original.
- 6 Ibid., 586.
- 7 American democracy 2004, 651.
- 8 Wasow 2004, 1.
- 9 Ibid., 1, 2.
- 10 Kahlenberg 2004, 2, 9.
- 11 DiIulio 2003a; DiIulio 2003b.
- 12 Konstant 1994, 472.

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