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Inequality: The Cudgel of Progressives

By Jon N. Hall

Just about every issue that progressives fulminate about is dressed up in the garish garb of equality. Progressives -- so-called "liberals," a.k.a. "the Left" -- invoke equality as though there were no arguments against it, as though no decent, sane person could possibly have a beef with equality. After all, equality is so -- American.

"All Fords are created equal, it's your dealer that makes the difference," proclaims the Bob Allen Ford dealership of Overland Park, Kansas.

For progressives, equality is an end in itself, and a higher value than freedom, happiness, or prosperity. This is especially the case with progressive economists. For them, *inequality* explains all evils. Here's economist Paul Krugman in a recent [column](#):

But the more important point is that *inequality* is a major reason the economy is still so depressed and unemployment so high. ... Today, Washington is marked by a combination of bitter partisanship and intellectual confusion -- and both are, I would argue, largely the result of extreme income *inequality*. ... For the past century, political polarization has closely tracked income *inequality*, and there's every reason to believe that the relationship is causal. [Italics added.]

Could a more important major reason for high unemployment perhaps be globalization, [offshoring](#), productivity gains, or automation? And could high taxation, out-of-control government spending, unsustainable entitlements or massive sovereign debt more fully account for the depressed economy? No, inequality explains it. In any event, I didn't know that inequality causes confusion. But I'd wager that polarization and partisanship is caused not so much by inequality itself as by progressives like Krugman using inequality to stir up class envy and resentment.

Another progressive economist, Joseph Stiglitz, began a recent [column](#) with this: "The United States is in the midst of a vicious cycle of inequality and recession: Inequality prolongs the downturn, and the downturn exacerbates inequality." Like other Keynesians, Stiglitz doesn't approve of fiscal austerity; living within our means isn't for him. So he urges the feds to double down on the very policy that has worked so poorly, and manages to work equality into his prescription: "Fortunately, well-designed spending can lead simultaneously to more employment, growth and equality." (Unfortunately, Stiglitz forgot to include "more debt" in his list.)

Progressives' fixation on equality is as daft as Obama's campaign slogan of "change." Change is something that's inescapable; it will always exist. Whereas equality is a condition that can never exist in the real world we inhabit.

If that's so, why then do progressives drone on and on about a condition that cannot be realized? The answer is precisely *because* it can't be realized -- progressives can beat their ideological enemies over the head with the "cudgel of inequality" until the end of time, it will always be there for them.

What progressives don't address, and offer no proof of, is whether material equality is even desirable. Were it possible to attain, material equality would actually be a very undesirable condition. Also, it couldn't exist for very long before things went right back to being unequal. Indeed, it may even be desirable for some people to be poor for a time, so that the rest of us will have an example to avoid. If that seems wacky to you, how much more wacky is it to aim for equality?

According to a [recent report](#) by the Cato Institute's Michael Tanner, over the last 48 years the feds have spent [around \\$15T](#) in the War on Poverty. That sum happens to be about \$3.7T *more* than the current [debt held by the public](#). And yet, inequality is still with us.

In Obama's America, what absorbs many Americans isn't inequality, it's dashed hopes and a blighted future. They don't fret about inequality; they worry about things never getting better (or perhaps getting even worse). They see a government that doesn't listen to them and then crams things down their throats, like ObamaCare. But where's the opportunity, where're the jobs? They look across the Atlantic at once-great nations that are reeling under a debt crisis, and yet their own government refuses to do anything about the debt crisis heading to America. For these Americans, worrying about inequality would be a luxury.

Because progressives are so bereft of ideas, they hold up the impossible as what America should be striving for. Rather than something attainable, progressives aim for the "ideal." Inequality has become an excuse. Progressives who really want to

help Americans would focus on *improving* folks' lot in life, not making everyone materially equal. And the way to start doing that is to dispense with the idiotic rhetoric.

Progressive values are not the values that built America, nor any great nation. The values that make for greatness include competence, merit, and excellence. By definition, none of those values involves equality.

Come on, America. We were once a creditor nation. We were once a space-faring nation. We once dared to dream great dreams. But now, by so many metrics, America is in decline. And what do progressives harp on and on about?

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