

Matt Yglesias

Jul 15th, 2009 at 12:56 pm

Income Inequality is Just Part of Inequality



Trilingual apartheid beach sign from back in the day (wikimedia)

I'm not in agreement with the overall thrust of Will Wilkinson's [paper on inequality](#) for the Cato Institute, but one point that I think is in the spirit of what he's saying was brought to mind by a question at last night's event. The way I would put the point is that it's a mistake to think of the world as composed of, on the one hand, "economic issues" in which we worry about wealth or income inequality and then on the other hand, "social issues" in which we worry about racism or sexism. Progressives ought to be concerned with a general issue of justice and social inequality, of which gaps in money income or wealth may be part.

And you *really* don't want to find yourself suggesting, as I think people sometimes do, that we ought to be monomaniacally focused on the income gap question. After all, consider an African-American woman working as a nurse in North Carolina in the late 1950s relative to a white male executive at North Carolina's largest bank. There would have been a substantial gap in their incomes. But if you flash forward to today and compare an African-American woman working as a nurse in North Carolina to a top executive at Charlotte-based [Bank of America](#) you'll find a much larger gap.

Thinking about the issue more comprehensively, though, it's of course clear that the overall gap in social equality between two such people is *smaller* today than it was in the days when the African-American woman would be explicitly excluded from a wide range of social practices and opportunities open to the banker. I don't think there's any reason to believe that the decline of Jim Crow caused income inequality to grow thus forcing us to make an explicit tradeoff, but it's still worth understanding which aggregate sets of social changes have and haven't been for the better. What's more, I have heard credible arguments that the successes of feminism in the late 60s and 1970s did play a role in increasing income inequality. I'm not sure

whether or not that's right, but if it *is* right you'd still want to say that feminism was an egalitarian force.

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17 Responses to “Income Inequality is Just Part of Inequality”

1. *kid destroyer* Says:

[July 15th, 2009 at 12:59 pm](#)

To be fair, Wilkinson's paper was specifically looking at the income inequality divide, IIRC. I think it's fair to look at a subset of problems in a research paper...

2. *Mr Lynne* Says:

[July 15th, 2009 at 1:01 pm](#)

Any thoughts on this as it relates to the idea of class-based affirmative action?

3. *shooter242* Says:

[July 15th, 2009 at 1:07 pm](#)

Would somebody give a quick briefing on the putative benefits of income equality? Why wouldn't that mean making everyone equally poor.

4. *rea* Says:

[July 15th, 2009 at 1:27 pm](#)

a quick briefing on the putative benefits of income equality?

A typical rightwingnut false dilemma. Nobody is calling for absolute income equality—but that does not mean we ought to be comfortable seeing the very rich use their political power to pull a reverse Robin Hood, which is what we've been seeing in this country since '80 or so.

5. *ron* Says:

[July 15th, 2009 at 1:41 pm](#)

John Maynard Keynes from “The General Theory” in 1936:

“The outstanding faults of the economic society in which we live are its failure to provide for full employment and its arbitrary and inequitable distribution of wealth and income.”

6. *Brett* Says:

[July 15th, 2009 at 1:48 pm](#)

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