

Book Review

Jon D. Wisman

The Origins and Dynamics of Inequality. Sex, Politics, and Ideology

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John Komlos [Professor Emeritus, University of Munich]

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Most readers will agree with Wilkinson and Pickett that inequality has reached “grotesque levels” (2022). The scholarly use of such an extreme adjective is indicative of the extent to which the distribution of wealth, income, and privilege has become a severe socio-economic, political, and cultural obstacle to a good life for a goodly share of the population. Moreover, it poses a threat to the future of democracy as a viable political system. Put another way, it has become an all-encompassing cancer on Western Civilization. Jon Wisman, recipient of the the 2023 Veblen-Commons Award, of the Association for Evolutionary Economics, recognizes that the Gini coefficient is not a benign economic parameter; instead, beyond a critical level it can become a most destructive socio-economic force, discharging an immense amount of venom into the social and political system (Komlos 2023a). Thus, inequality should not be treated cavalierly as it was in my graduate-school days at the University of Chicago. In fact, Wisman suggests that it is a main driving force throughout history and rightly so, since inadequately controlled accumulation of wealth, income, and privilege has created so many confrontations and conflagrations within and across societies. Many revolutions were about poverty and coveting the neighbors’ garden also led to many wars as we are witnessing in Ukraine. The political implications of inequality is one of the main leitmotifs of the book.

Another is that economic and political inequality began with the rise of the state and civilization in Mesopotamia. This innate tendency of human societies toward inequality has been recognized as far back as Plato — and is a recurring critical issue in political philosophy. But Wisman’s book is novel in that it grounds inequality in the dynamics of evolutionary biology, or more specifically, in the dynamics of sexual selection, to be discussed below.

The state arose in wake of the Neolithic agricultural revolution as metallurgy and military organization enabled a warrior elite to take ownership and control of productive wealth, mostly in the form of land, forcing all others to work with their property. The slaves, serfs, indebted peasants, and wage workers did so. The surplus beyond subsistence was expropriated by elites. Religion evolved to legitimate this extreme inequality, presenting the rulers as possessing divine rights to rule or even being demi-gods themselves. Sacred doctrines depicted the prevailing world as it must be. So, deprivation, including relative deprivation, is as old as history itself: in some societies the haves included the aristocracy of birth that was replaced in capitalism with the Robber Barons and by the Lords of Wall Street. The half-century

reversal of this trend in the U.S. sandwiched between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan—when income inequality receded because the “ideology of the elite [was] adequately delegitimated”—should be considered an anomaly (p. 453).

The fundamental driving force behind the persistence of inequality, the author stresses, is the biological processes associated with evolution because having more of everything was simply adaptive and a distinct advantage in sexual competitiveness. From a neo-Darwinian perspective, the author argues convincingly that evolution selected those who were competitively successful as more likely to survive, reproduce, and succeed in passing on their genes to their offspring.

However, for the first 97 percent of our species’ history, humans did not compete for status by amassing economic and political power and thus such inequality cannot be viewed as socially necessary. Such competition was proscribed because it would be destructive of these societies’ collective well-being. Instead, their rules of the game compelled them to compete in other manners beneficial to the community, such as by being good warriors, good hunters and gatherers, being generous, kind, smart, and artistic. That is, competition was channeled into expressions beneficial to the community. However, with the rise of the state, reproductive success and the aphrodisiac properties of status, wealth, and power through sexual selection came to hold the keys to the understanding the tendency of societies to become economically and politically unequal. Reproductive success meant that the heritable traits to be competitive were adaptive through natural selection. With the rise of the state, power and wealth provided high status that enhanced the individual’s chances to survive and pass on their genes. Since these genes were heritable, the genes that governed the acquisitive nature of the human species became dominant in human populations. Status made a person more attractive to potential mates because those with power, status, and wealth were much more likely to withstand the vicissitudes of life and care for their offspring. Evolution selected for greed in human populations.

Obviously, sexual competition would have torn societies asunder if social institutions – the rules of the game – did not constrain competition within manageable limits. That is, stable societies required constraints, i.e., institutional and cultural guardrails. Nevertheless, extreme inequality could exist within these guardrails. And a narrative, an ideology was needed to provide an intangible glue to make the people feel that they belong together and are willing to sacrifice some of their natural freedoms for the advantages afforded by the safety of living peacefully within a community. Ideology played a major role in inculcating the idea that the norms, laws, and expectations in the society were fair and just, because it explained to those at the lower end of the distribution of wealth, income, and privilege why those at the top belong at the top: “Manipulating humans’ innate sense of fairness is the essence of ideology. Ideology hoodwinks the losers into seeing conditions that are contrary to their best interests as fair and just” (p. 450).

Thus, the dominant ideology maintained the system that produced the inequality by affirming a narrative that legitimized the distribution of income, wealth, and privilege by convincing the lower echelons of the society that the system was fair and inculcating them to exercise “deference to the views held by elites” (p. 4). That narrative is currently so powerful that even the 2008 financial crisis, that clearly falsified the contemporary ideology of neoliberalism, compelling even archconservative Alan Greenspan to admit that he had “made a mistake” in

believing in it, did not lead to a substantial challenge to this ideology, much less to its universal refutation (Komlos 2023b, p. 1).

Luckily, evolution also selected for another human characteristic, namely the sense of fairness. That trait was also adaptive from an evolutionary perspective because insofar as the dominant ideology was considered fair those who failed to observe the laws, norms, and rules prescribed by that narrative were ostracized and ejected from the community. Thus, those who adhered to the rules of fairness were more likely to survive and to pass on their genes to their offspring. Consequently,--and this is another important point,--humans are hardwired for both status seeking and for having a sense of fairness. Thus, both Charles I and Louis XVI considered it unfair that their divine rights were being questioned and were willing to sacrifice their lives rather than concede to the alternative narrative. History is replete with such examples of strong adherence to the current narrative.

So, politics was born in order to adjudicate between these two competing human characteristics—a sense of fairness and the propensity to acquire as much as feasible within the institutional framework—and the way this worked itself out through the ages is the essence of history as well as our present dilemma. Inequality vs fairness is the fundamental and persistent problem of humanity. The acquisition of power on the one hand and the communal limits on that power on the other is the role of politics and the institutions that it begets in order to regulate that competition. The political system provides some limits on competition and the adherence to these constraints is considered fair. Thus, the human specie’s moral codex was also adaptive. The Code of Hammurabi, nearly four thousand years ago specified that the king’s task was to “to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak,”¹ even if that is precisely what they have done ever since.

In sum, our biology condemns the human race to be competitive and acquisitive and only with concerted effort to build institutions that can fine tune the impact of its innate nature could it succeed in containing rent-seeking and creating a more “egalitarian future”. These interdisciplinary arguments are presented in great detail with many innovative ideas. This large-vision book deserves to be read by anyone interested in the nature and rise of inequality; in other words, it should be on all of our bookshelves in easy reach.

References

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¹ Wikipedia, “Code of Hammurabi.”

Author contact: john.komlos@gmx.de

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