

THE CHALLENGES OF INEQUALITY

(Adapted from an article in ON TRACK: Transition Honesdale Newsletter, October 2013)

Let me state this explicitly at the outset: I am by no means an egalitarian. I don't expect, or even desire, that everyone should enjoy exactly the same kind of economic situation. I understand that society, at any level, will always have some degree of stratification. I accept that some folks – those who take on particularly great responsibilities, for example, or skilled and highly trained professionals like doctors, lawyers, and teachers – will have, and rightfully deserve, a greater level of compensation than, say, a mere first-line manager and part-time scribbler such as myself.

But let's face it: when it comes to economic inequality in the United States, things are starting to get out of hand.

I won't go through the laundry list of statistics. It's easy enough to find any number of sources, from the US Census Bureau to the Institute for Policy Studies to the excellent website for Robert Reich's critically-acclaimed film *Inequality for All*, that will illustrate the extent of the problem, and how quickly it is growing. Let it suffice to say that the distribution of wealth and income in the

United States is now the most imbalanced since – well, 1929.

And we all know how *that* turned out.

The general effects of this imbalance on our political and economic landscape are widespread and well-known. Members of the lower socioeconomic classes lose power and gain debt, and find themselves working harder while facing increasing insecurity. From the specific point of view of the “Transition Towns” movement, though, inequality poses additional challenges, particularly if we consider its effects on community cohesion, a key factor of community resilience.

The Transition philosophy takes as one of its starting points the notion that business-as-usual will not – indeed, *cannot* – continue much longer. At some point, we believe, the fundamental underpinnings of our society will begin to give way (whether gradually or catastrophically), to be supplanted by a different and more sustainable way of life. In this new economy, the ethos of excess, individual accumulation, narrow self-interest, and competition will be replaced by one focused on lower consumption, community well-being, mutual aid, and cooperation.

But if we have a class of people accustomed to always having the “best of the best,” we have to wonder whether they will be able, not to mention willing,

to make that transition gracefully. We may see the well-to-do withdraw into their own heavily guarded and well-supplied enclaves, leaving the rest of us to squabble over their leftovers, or they may try to keep the status quo in place through increasingly coercive measures.

As wealth and power continue to concentrate at the top, the spirit of community splinters – not just between classes, but between and within different groups, as they struggle to secure their share of a dwindling supply of resources and opportunities. Tensions between groups are likely to be manipulated to protect sheltered interests.

Even now, inequality is undermining community – right out from under our feet, in fact. As society becomes more stratified, we see casual contact and meaningful communication between members of different classes becoming more and more uncommon. Suspicions, resentments, and fears increase, as stereotypes and prejudices blossom. Eventually, we might end up with something like a caste system, where social mobility is strictly regulated.

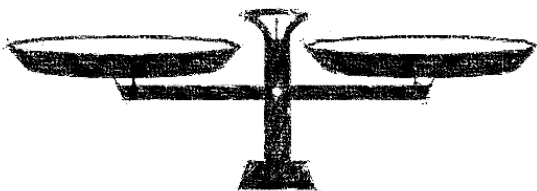
And worst of all, in my opinion, inequality undermines two of the main foundations of American society. One is the ideal of “equality before the law.” As inequality increases, it becomes harder for poor defendants or litigants to get the legal assistance they need – and much

easier for wealthy miscreants to avoid detection or punishment, particularly for financial crimes.

The other is the sense that every human life has an innate dignity and value – what some might call the notion of “equality before God.” Studies have shown that as income disparity increases, the rich find it easier and easier to dismiss not only the complaints and sufferings of the poor, but eventually their very humanity.

But such nightmarish scenarios can be avoided. The primary challenge is for all of us, in all sectors of the community, to understand that in the long run, too much inequality harms everyone. Then we can begin to explore how we might work together to create and sustain shared prosperity. This process starts simply, locally, through pilot programs and economic experiments designed to embody the values of a more sustainable society.

As soon as we can, we need to begin that process, and bring our lives, our relationships, and our communities back into a better sense of balance.



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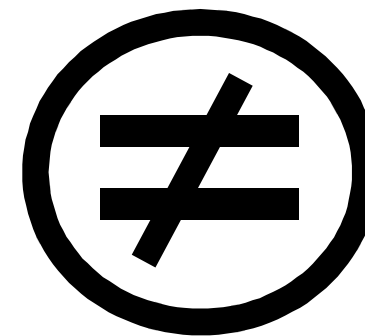
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