

‘A Little Crow in the Tree’: Growing Inequality and White Working-Class Politics in the U.S.

Lawrence M. Eppard, Shippensburg University

Arlie Hochschild, University of California, Berkeley

Richard Wilkinson, University of York

Abstract

There have been troubling trends in economic inequality, deprivation, and insecurity in the U.S. since the 1970s. This inequality and insecurity has left the American social fabric ‘fraying at the edges,’ in the words of Joseph Stiglitz. Scholars have recently begun focusing their attention on phenomena which are reflective of and associated with this fraying social fabric: the increasing economic insecurity and emerging ‘politics of resentment’ of the White working class in the U.S. This piece contains excerpts from interviews that Lawrence Eppard conducted with two important scholars, Arlie Hochschild and Richard Wilkinson, who have explored these issues in their work in different ways. The interviews touch on a variety of topics, including growing inequality and its social consequences, the role of government in addressing inequality, White working-class resentment, the impact of racism and sexism on White working-class attitudes and politics, the 2016 U.S. presidential election, political polarization, and dominant American notions of freedom. Much of the discussion focuses on Hochschild’s work in *Strangers in Their Own Land* and Wilkinson’s work with Kate Pickett in *The Spirit Level*.

Keywords

Economic inequality, white working class, politics of resentment, political polarization

Introduction

There have been troubling trends in economic inequality, deprivation, and insecurity in the U.S. since the 1970s. Today, these trends have resulted in levels of economic inequality not seen since the 1920s, with the top ten percent taking in almost half of all income and owning over 70 percent of all wealth (WID 2018). It was recently documented that the top one percent of income earners will earn 40 percent more in just one week than the bottom fifth will earn over the entire year, while the top 0.1 percent will take home more in less than two days than the bottom 90 percent earns in a year (Stiglitz 2013, p. 5). In addition to this grim reality, scholars have observed other troubling trends such as increasing extreme poverty, decreasing intergenerational social mobility, and stagnating or falling wages for many workers—despite an economy that grew over that same time period. The U.S. is now the most unequal country in the wealthy world, and ranks poorly relative to other wealthy countries on a variety of other related measures including overall poverty, childhood poverty, social mobility, and welfare generosity.

Signs of strain from this increasing inequality are showing up across many groups in American society including the much-talked-about White working class. Many working-class Whites live in areas that have experienced the ‘trauma of a simultaneous economic, social, and political collapse’ (Gest 2016, p. 10) over the last few decades. Many find themselves falling behind in an economy that has shifted toward more service- and technology-based jobs and requires more educational attainment, made worse by the decline of labor unions. Because of all of this, their wages and benefits have declined and they are experiencing more economic insecurity. A variety of negative consequences are associated with these strains, including declining labor force participation, lower marriage rates, troubling morbidity and mortality rates, and less social mobility, among others.

We focus on the White working class in this piece not because they have fared the worst—indeed, many non-White working-class Americans continue to fare much worse. Our focus on the White working class stems from their unique reaction to their growing economic insecurity. Growing inequality, in the words of Joseph Stiglitz, ‘has left the American social fabric, and the country’s economic sustainability, fraying at the edges’ (2013, p. 2). The reaction of working-class Whites is reflective of this social fraying. In the face of considerable economic challenges and in the midst of a significant demographic shift, a ‘politics of resentment’ (Gest 2016, p. 11) has emerged among this group. Many working-class Whites have scapegoated other groups for Whites’ perceived loss in status, placing blame on racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and women, among others. In addition, many have blamed the government, which leaves this population in a precarious position. Few other social actors or institutions possess the power and resources of the government to combat the negative impacts of forces such as globalization, deindustrialization, automation, and neoliberalism.

In this piece, Lawrence Eppard discusses growing inequality in the U.S. and its impact on the well-being and politics of the White working class with scholars Arlie Hochschild and Richard Wilkinson. This piece is based on excerpts from separate one-on-one interviews that Eppard conducted with these two scholars, rather than a conversation between all three. The interviews were conducted by phone during the spring of 2017 and have been edited and spliced together for this piece.

Growing Inequality and the Great Paradox

Lawrence Eppard: Richard, your book *The Spirit Level* that you co-authored with Kate Pickett touches on many of the most important themes running through your career of work on the impact of economic inequality on societies. Can you talk about what that book was able to demonstrate?

Richard Wilkinson: Our work in that book looks at the scale of income differences between rich and poor in different rich developed societies. We found that those income differences closely correlated with things like the level of violence in societies, the overall life expectancy of populations, child well-being, measures of the strength of community life, levels of trust, the proportion of the population in prison, and so on. A whole range of problems of that kind were worse in societies with bigger income differences between rich and poor.

That of course explains why the United States, which has the biggest income differences between rich and poor in the developed world, has amongst the lowest life expectancy among the rich developed countries, the highest imprisonment rates, the highest homicide rates, and the highest obesity rates. There is a whole raft of these problems which are not only more

common the lower you go on the social ladder, but also worse in societies with bigger income differences. The countries that do well, that have smaller income differences, are Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, The Netherlands, and Japan.

Lawrence Eppard: Arlie, your recent work in *Strangers in Their Own Land* really helps us to understand how growing inequality is playing out for the White working class in the U.S. Can you talk about what drew you to this project?

Arlie Hochschild: Americans are now more divided than we have been since the Civil War. We now live in geographic bubbles, in media bubbles, and in electronic bubbles. We look at the screens of our computers and, in a way, see our own selves reflected back. So we only talk to people who agree with us and mainly watch those TV channels with commentators who reaffirm our beliefs. And those on the liberal left are more enclosed in their own political bubble than those on the right.

I spent five years going into a cultural, economic, and political bubble that is as far right as the University of California, Berkeley is left—and in particular I was interested in trying to understand the world view of those who embraced the Tea Party. I wanted to go where the right-wing Tea Party had grown the fastest, and that was the South. And within the South, I wanted the ‘super South.’ In the entire region of the South in 2012, only a third of Whites voted for Barack Obama. In Louisiana, it was 14 percent. So that was the ‘super South,’ and that is why I landed there.

What brought me there was curiosity about the red state paradox. How could it be that across the nation, the poorest states—the states with the worst educational outcomes, the worst health outcomes, the most disrupted families, the lowest life expectancy, the states that receive more money in federal aid than they give to the federal government in tax dollars—how could it be that they also revile the federal government? That was the red state paradox.

Louisiana turned out to be an exaggerated version of that. At the time, Louisiana was the second poorest state in the union, with 44 percent of its state budget coming from the federal government. Yet there was widespread enthusiasm for the Tea Party and Donald Trump. So I thought to myself, ‘This is exactly where I need to be, because this is something I don’t understand.’

Going there was not just going to a different region, but also going to a different social class, the White working class. That’s who I found were the most enthusiastically in favor of Trump.

The Coming Storm

Lawrence Eppard: Arlie, you were witnessing the coming storm of White working-class resentment before a lot of other people realized what was happening. How aware were you of this development as it was happening, considering that you seemed to be in the midst of it?

Arlie Hochschild: In 2011 the Tea Party was on the rise and determined to block President Obama at every turn. Sometimes I felt like a little crow in the tree, you know? ‘Danger coming!’ It wasn’t hard to see in 2011. There was absolute gridlock in Congress. Already at that point the rhetoric was escalating. So it wasn’t hard to see.

I didn't foresee that Donald Trump would get elected. I did see the movement, and I could see it was growing, and right-wing resentment was not well understood. I didn't understand it. So in some sense I was a crow in the tree, seeing the storm getting bigger and closer, but not fully understanding the resentment. I was reading the *New York Times*, which was telling us all he wouldn't get elected [laughter]. I was in my media bubble.

Lawrence Eppard: When you were at the Donald Trump campaign rallies that you describe in *Strangers*, how did you think about them in the moment? Did you feel like they would turn out to be a historical footnote?

Arlie Hochschild: I did sense the excitement of those in attendance, like [Trump] was the match that lit the dry kindling that I had been studying all of this time. I did think it would start a movement, but I didn't foresee that the movement would take over the White House.

Lawrence Eppard: Richard, you have been examining inequality for a long time. For many of those years, economic inequality did not seem to be an urgent issue for many people. Then of course inequality exploded into the public consciousness with the Great Recession and the resulting social unrest. Can you talk about your experience as somebody who has been along for the entire ride, watching as the issue of inequality moved from the shadows into the spotlight?

Richard Wilkinson: I remember very well that, when talking about policy in relation to the problem of reducing the huge class differences in health, people would suggest inadequate policy responses—things like having less salt in school meals, and other nitpicky proposals. The Blair government established a lot of policies to reduce health inequalities. But they were nearly all policies that they obviously hoped would protect the poor from the health effects of being poor, but not deal with poverty itself. I used to feel almost rude in raising issues like income inequality. Compared to the fine detail of policy issues people usually thought about in relation to health, it was too big and crude an issue to talk about. Civil servants didn't feel it their job to think about things like that.

But I suppose the financial crash led to a much greater awareness of the scale of income inequality. It led to a greater awareness of what the bankers and CEOs were getting, and the knowledge that they often avoided taxes. That began to raise concern about inequality. The financial crash also undermined the idea that these people were brilliant and somehow deserved high salaries. The next major change was the Occupy movement. Both of those things have led to an enormous growth in the amount of attention that inequality gets in the media.

The Working-Class Squeeze

Lawrence Eppard: Let's talk a little bit about the problems facing the White working class—with the caveat of course that Whites are not the only working-class Americans struggling, or even struggling the worst. Some of the main problems highlighted by scholars who study this group have been the negative impacts of growing inequality on health and mortality rates, wages, marriage rates, social mobility, labor force participation, and a variety of other measures of well-being.

I think part of the resentment felt by White working-class Americans stems from the social mobility measures, the reality that the American Dream is stalling for many people and that inequality plays a role.

Richard Wilkinson: There are now two or three data sets which show that social mobility is lower in more unequal societies. The measure of social mobility used is almost always intergenerational income mobility, so it is really asking if rich fathers have rich sons, and if poor fathers have poor sons. What studies show is that in more unequal societies your father's income is much more important as a determinant of what happens to you than it is in more equal societies.

Lawrence Eppard: Arlie, so much of the 'deep story' you discuss in your book seems to be related to the stalled American Dream, stalled social mobility. Can you talk about the deep story?

Arlie Hochschild: The 'deep story' is a story that feels true about a salient situation. So you take information out of the deep story, you take moral beliefs out of the deep story, and what is left is just how a salient situation feels to you.

In the right-wing deep story, you are standing in line, as in a pilgrimage. At the top of the hill in front of you is the American Dream. You have been standing there a long time, your feet haven't moved, and you're tired. You feel a sense of deserving for that American Dream. You're middle-aged or older, you've worked hard, and you feel you have played by the rules.

Then, in another moment of this deep story, it looks like people are cutting ahead of you in line. And you think, 'Well, who are they?' And they are African Americans. There are women cutting in line. There are undocumented immigrants and refugees. You feel like you have been moved back in line, and that something unfair has been done to you.

In another moment you have Barack Obama, who you believe should be impartially supervising the line, but who is instead waving to the line cutters. He is sponsoring them and pushing you back. You've been forgotten.

In the final moment of this right-wing deep story, somebody ahead of you in line—someone from, say, New York or Los Angeles, who has a higher education than you—this person is ahead of you in line and turns around and says, 'You ill-educated, backward redneck.' And that is the last straw. Now you feel like a subgroup, yourself, like an ignored minority group, yourself. You feel that you have been stripped of honor, and in that state, you are looking for a leader to deliver you from this.

Lawrence Eppard: How much do you think this deep story resonates with White working-class Americans beyond the far-right folks you spoke with in Louisiana?

Arlie Hochschild: Well, there was a 39-point margin by which Whites without college degrees voted for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton. That's pretty large. And in all my wanderings, I didn't talk to a White blue-collar person who favored Hillary Clinton. They just didn't feel spoken to.

Richard Wilkinson: Greater inequality makes status and class more important. It makes people lower on the social ladder feel even more disrespected and looked down on. Typically, groups deprived of status sometimes try to regain it by asserting their superiority to any more vulnerable group or minority.

It used to be said that the U.S. never had a strong socialist party partly because the White working class preferred to identify with other Whites than with poorer African Americans. My guess is that as income differences in the U.S. have widened further, poorer Whites have felt abandoned, and older ones have felt this as a loss of status. I think this may explain the rise in death rates among the less well-off and less well-educated older White population, a rise which is dominated by a rise in suicide and drug- and alcohol-related deaths. These causes speak of a sense of hopelessness.

My impression is that Trump was liked because he did not fit into the cultural Washington elite that people felt belittled by in class terms. Trump scored points because his language and what he said offended that elite. It was as if he managed to make people feel, falsely, that in class terms he was one of them, one of us made good.

Similar things happened in Britain during the Brexit vote, and I think that would not have happened if inequality had not increased so much.

Race and Gender

Lawrence Eppard: It is clear that racism and sexism play a central role in White working-class politics, as they do in the politics of all social classes. Whites' growing resentment is surely strongly associated with their negative reactions to reductions in racial and gender inequality, to Whites' perceived loss in status.

Arlie Hochschild: I think race is very fundamentally tied in with the belief that these people are being asked to give their hard-earned dollars to support people who aren't working, and are having too many children. That's been there for a long time. And I would often say, 'Well, didn't Bill Clinton dismantle welfare as we know it? Isn't there workfare now?' They would draw a blank on that. In fact, in Louisiana food stamp usage has gone up. Their focus was on those beneath them in social class, not on the one percent or Wall Street. They had some resentment about the one percent and Wall Street. But 99 percent of their resentment was focused down, not up.

Lawrence Eppard: Is this a uniquely American problem? Do you see differences between how the White Americans you spoke with react to economic inequality and view the government's role in addressing it, compared to, say, working-class Europeans?

Arlie Hochschild: I see two differences. One, Americans don't believe in government as fundamentally as Europeans do. So in the Norwegian right wing, for instance, they may say they love their government benefits, they just don't want them for Muslims coming into Norway or for immigrants in general. Whereas in the U.S. the right wing really doesn't want the government at all. It never has served us, we have the church. Just circle the wagons around family and church and we can do without government largesse. So that's a fundamental difference.

A second fundamental difference, with the people I came to know, is that they felt threatened by people born in the U.S., by 'insider intruders,' so by African Americans and women. Whereas in Europe it is much more about outsiders, the non-Christians, the Muslims. So there is overlap, but those are the two main differences I think between the European deep story and the American one.

Lawrence Eppard: The folks you talk to in the book, their understanding of racial inequality is certainly extremely flawed in many ways. Yet this doesn't really make them unique among Whites. There is a deep misunderstanding of racial inequality across American society, whether working class or not.

Arlie Hochschild: I know! It's very true. That's immediately apparent when we look at the premises implied in the deep story. In the story, Whites feel that African Americans are 'cutting in line' ahead of Whites. But throughout history, the very opposite has been true.

Those I wrote about—people like Lee Sherman or Mike Schaff, for example—they aren't mindful of the true history of African Americans. The whole conversation about race, as well as gender and sexuality, seems to have stopped a long time ago.

A conversation I had with Mike Schaff serves as a good example. Mike was born on a sugar plantation. His father was a plumber. He was the fifth of seven Catholic Cajuns. He worked putting boards down in a mosquito-ridden bayou that was used for platforms for oil drills. That's what he was doing at 15 and 16 years old.

I would ask him about race and how race enters into his feelings about politics. And he told me that he is a reformed bigot. I asked what a bigot was, and he said somebody who hates Blacks. And he said he never hated Blacks. And he said it is someone who uses the N-word. And he said he used to use the N-word but he doesn't anymore, and if somebody uses it on his Facebook page he unfriends them. Don't want that, insulting. 'But I don't like the R-word used,' he said, meaning redneck.

So I asked him what it was like in his school when it was integrated in the 1960s. And he said, 'Well, my first year of high school, there were two Blacks in the class, and the last year half the class was Black.' I asked him, 'So, did you make any new friends?' And you know what his answer was? There was a very long pause. We were out fishing, and there was this big long pause. And then he said, 'You're making me think.' And I thought, 'Wow, you haven't thought about this before?' It is as if the South sort of stayed where it was, while the rest of the country changed culturally.

Lawrence Eppard: In reading not only about the 'deep story' in *Strangers*, but throughout the rest of the book as well, I was overcome with this notion that, in addition to racism, sexism plays a crucial role as well. There seems to be a sort of crisis in masculinity in terms of the perception of where men fit into the modern economy, where men fit into a world concerned with reducing racial and gender inequality.

Arlie Hochschild: I came to feel that the people who were clinging to faith in Donald Trump and the right-wing generally were in an honor squeeze. They were facing up the hill in their deep story, and wondering how they were going to feel honor. Wondering how they were going to feel good about themselves. Thinking, 'Well, I have a job, but I haven't gotten a raise in two decades. Good jobs are closing down. Female-dominated, low-paid service jobs are the only kinds of jobs I could get if I am laid off at the plant.' So they weren't going to look for honor there.

Maybe they are the deacon at the local Pentecostal church, but religion isn't honored in the larger American culture. More and more people are secular. Then they look at region, maybe they are proud to be born in the South. Well, the rest of the world is saying that the South is

backward. So then they might look at race as something to feel proud of. But they say, 'Well if you say I am proud to be White, you are clearly a Nazi.' So you don't do that. They haven't gone to college, they haven't done that well.

In addition to all of these things, for men, there is this notion that, 'We're not needed.' Our partners don't need us for procreation, or even for sexual contact. New trends are making these men more dispensable. So what is there to be proud of? They felt that the spheres in which they can claim honor are declining. So they identify with a man in Donald Trump who seems to be restoring some honor associated with being a man, being tough, being a protector. Many of these people speak very highly of the military; there is something about that role of the man as protector. They very much yearn for some source of honor.

If you look at them holistically as a group of people looking for honor, they were kind of running out of it.

Inequality and Social Corrosion

Lawrence Eppard: Richard, you call economic inequality 'socially corrosive.' Could you expand upon that idea?

Richard Wilkinson: I think one of the most fundamental impacts of inequality is the damage it does to social relations. You can see that in measures of involvement in community life, the sort of measures that Putnam uses in *Bowling Alone*. You can see it in measures of trust. Community life weakens in more unequal societies and people trust each other less. The differences are actually quite large. In more unequal developed countries, levels of trust fall to about 15 or 20 percent of people who feel that they can trust most other people. Whereas in the more equal of the rich developed societies it rises to 60 or 65 percent of people feeling that they can trust most other people. It makes a huge difference.

There are also now papers which show that people are less willing to help each other in more unequal societies. Less willing to help neighbors, less willing to help the elderly, or people with disabilities. You also see the rise in violence, a very well-established pattern in violence. This is usually measured by homicide rates, which are higher in more unequal societies. One paper which looks at homicide rates in American states and Canadian provinces finds a tenfold difference in homicide rates per million population. This is closely related to inequality. There are now close to 60 papers looking at that relationship in different parts of the world.

So what inequality does most fundamentally is make that transition from trust, community life, and people's involvement with each other, to violence and fear and mistrust. It is a very clear pattern. Instead of a sense of shared identity, a shared well-being, you move to everyone being out for themselves. Life becomes a matter of getting as much as you can for yourself.

So that's what I mean when I say that inequality is divisive and socially corrosive.

Lawrence Eppard: When you talk about the impact of inequality on trust, you often mention the ability to feel safe in public, feel safe walking down the street. Can you talk about your own personal experiences with this, say walking in a city in the U.S. versus a more equal country?

Richard Wilkinson: I remember a time very clearly when I had been invited to dinner at a house near Boston. When I got there and knocked on the door, there was no answer. I wondered if maybe I had come on the wrong day or at the wrong time or something like that. And this was before mobile phones, or at least I didn't have one. Well, there was a kid playing in the yard in the house next door, and I asked, 'I wonder if I could use your phone?' I thought maybe I could ring up these people who had invited me. I remember the kid withdrew as I came towards him, even though I was in shirt sleeves and clearly not carrying anything that might be a weapon of any kind. And he went indoors, and his mother opened the door just slightly ajar. So I talked to her, and I explained to her my predicament, and she then handed me the phone outside rather than inviting me in to use the phone. All things that I thought very clearly expressed fear.

In the U.S., when you ask people for something on the street, you know they are fearful about what on Earth it is you want. In some societies, when you ask, 'Can you tell me the way to get to such and such a place?' you feel almost as if people are glad to have the opportunity to help. In other societies, there is an apprehension. You know, 'What's this person want with me?' A kind of worrying. I have noticed a number of times that people will sort of take a step back to slightly increase the distance. Things like that.

This fear, this mistrust, I think people know this for themselves.

America Divided

Lawrence Eppard: Many scholars have noted that the rise in political polarization has occurred concurrently with increasing inequality. What is your take on this development?

Richard Wilkinson: It does look as if greater inequality increases political divisions. Paul Krugman, in *Conscience of a Liberal*, points to research showing that. There used to be quite a big overlap in voting between Democrats and Republicans, and now in Congress there is almost no overlap at all. And I think the same thing was true early in the 20th century, in the 1920s and 1930s. Periods of high inequality are also periods of political polarization.

And it isn't just the right, it is the left as well. Some people suggest that Bernie Sanders might have won the last election had he been the Democratic candidate instead of Hillary Clinton. The support for somebody like Sanders, who calls himself a socialist, would be unimaginable in the ideology of the 1990s or the first ten years or so of this century.

This polarization is a reflection, I suppose, of how a majority of the population is dissatisfied with politics. And they turn both ways.

The long-term trends in income distribution in most rich developed countries in the 20th century follow a fairly standard pattern. You get high inequality in the 1920s, it starts to come down in the 1930s, and it goes on coming down until sometime in the 1970s. Then it bottoms out, and then you get a rise in inequality from 1980 onwards. So we are back to levels of inequality last seen in the 1920s. That is substantially related to the rise and then the fall of trade unions, the labor movement, social democratic parties, the fear of communism, and things like that.

There was a time when there was a strong countervailing voice in society—a belief that things could be run differently, that society could be qualitatively better for all of us. All of that collapsed, and the ideology of neoliberalism took over internationally and reigned almost

unchallenged. Although maybe we are beginning to see it being challenged again, it may take quite a while before any alternative vision and ideology has any chance of dominance.

Lawrence Eppard: Certainly a major part of the story in *Strangers* was about increasing political polarization.

Arlie Hochschild: In a way, I feel like I began my inquiry with the red state paradox but ended up with a blue state paradox. How could it be that the Democratic Party, the party of the working man and woman, isn't actually all that appealing to working men and women? There isn't a deep story that feels true to them.

To people in Rust Belt towns, to people in rural middle America and farming towns, to many people in the South, the impact of global capitalism has been very different than it is, say, for people across the bay here where I am in Silicon Valley. In Silicon Valley, all of those forces have been very positive and have provided many people in this area with an extraordinary amount of affluence and excitement. Here, jobs are plenty. That's very different from the experience of living in oil territory with highly automated plants. In those areas, unless you are an MIT chemist, you aren't going to get a job.

So class divisions, which have always been with us, have been exacerbated. People that have either already suffered, or who see that people in their social class are going to suffer, they're the ones who are the most anxious, and they are reaching for right-wing solutions. They feel that they are in trouble.

The Need for Government

Lawrence Eppard: Arlie, for many of the problems facing Americans, and certainly for many of the problems your participants in Louisiana face, government is an important part of the solution. Yet a government which plays a really active role in addressing social problems seems like a non-starter for your participants.

Arlie Hochschild: Yes, absolutely. Take belief in government with regard to pollution. When you ask people, 'Are the companies going to protect the environment from pollution?' They say no. I say, 'Okay, well what about individual groups?' And they say no. So I ask, 'Well, what would do it?' And they say 'government.' So there is a fundamental understanding that you do need government to get stuff done. But they have been exposed to a corrupt government [in Louisiana]. And this at least partly influences their view of government in general.

In Louisiana, oil dominates the politics in the state. The owners of oil companies are so rich they have basically bought the politicians. So they have the environmental agencies doing the moral dirty work of pretending to protect the people, but not really protecting the people. So people there are really angry at the government for taking their money but not doing anything with it. They feel that the state government is a model for the federal government. They don't think it is gonna help them. That's one piece of the problem.

The other piece of the problem is that the White men feel competitive with African Americans and with women. They feel, from their point of view, that the government has and will continue to misallocate funds to redress historically-caused inequities. They aren't at the bottom, but they fear they are heading to the bottom.

Lawrence Eppard: Richard, assuming a stronger social safety net is a major part of the answer to reducing inequality in the U.S., do you see any cultural barriers that would prevent such policies?

Richard Wilkinson: I think the spread of the neoliberal ideology, or free market fundamentalism if you like, has been so widespread that opposition to the state has become strong in a number of countries. And I think it has become stronger with inequality. People not only trust each other less, but they also trust government and institutions of different kinds less.

Expanding Our Notions of Freedom

Lawrence Eppard: To move forward, for all Americans to truly recognize the sources of our most pressing social problems and identify their possible solutions, I think we need a deeper cultural understanding of what true freedom means. Freedom not just in the negative sense of the government off our backs, but the positive sense as well, creating the conditions which enable people to fully develop their capabilities. Can you talk about this idea of expanding our idea of freedom, and how you conceptualize freedom?

Richard Wilkinson: I suspect a great many people think about freedom as if it is about freedom from government regulation. But things like health inequalities deprive large swathes of the population of more than ten percent of life expectancy. The effects of poverty and inequality are forms of structural violence and limitations on true freedom. These things affect the quality of life very deeply.

Crucial to human well-being is the nature of social relations, but inequality weakens community life and increases violence and mistrust. That affects us very intimately. There are studies that show if you are given the same exposure to infection, people who have more friends are much less likely to catch a cold. Wounds heal more quickly among people who are well-integrated socially. Studies of happiness show just the same thing—that people involved in community life with good relationships are happier.

So bigger income inequalities are huge restrictions on freedom. You not only see the consequences of inequality on measures of social cohesion, violence, and mistrust, but it has also been shown that more unequal societies spend more on what has been called ‘guard labor,’ on security staff, on prisons, and on police—people needed to protect us from each other. The higher levels of violence also mean that people fear walking home alone at night in big cities in more unequal societies. That’s an appalling and fundamental restriction on freedom that has little to do with the fear of bigger or smaller government as conventionally conceived. It is instead about the effects of inequality, the powerful restrictions on freedom caused by an unregulated ‘free market.’

We live closer to each other than ever before, and yet suffer so much from loneliness and the breakdown of social cohesion. We need to reduce inequality to tackle these problems. If Americans went to countries like Sweden and Norway they would feel more rather than less free.

We use our governments, or we should use them, for things that are in the best interest of our society. The British National Health Service is a popular and much loved example. So is the BBC. Examples accepted everywhere include the provision of education, sewerage, and roads.

Arlie Hochschild: We need to expand the symbol of freedom. We need to make red and blue understand freedom in a much fuller way. How free are we really if we are an extremely unequal society? I think inequality—whether it is class inequality, racial inequality, or gender inequality—makes us less free. I think work like Wilkinson and Pickett’s really raises the issue of how unfree we are if we come to tolerate inequality.

For me, it all became clear when I heard General Russel Honoré talking to a bunch of business people in Lake Charles. General Honoré is a four-star general, a hero of Louisiana. He is retired now, but he has become an ardent environmentalist. So he is talking to these business leaders and they are talking about ‘freedom, freedom, freedom.’ You know, freedom from regulation, freedom to start a business, freedom to make money. But they wanted nothing to do with environmentalism. So speaking to this group General Honoré said, ‘I saw a man in a boat on Lake Charles this morning. He had his line out and his bucket ready to pull out a fish. But that man is not free to pull out an uncontaminated fish.’ And I thought to myself, ‘This is brilliant.’ The General stretched the notion of freedom, which they had only applied to economic life, over to a different area of life: the environment. ‘Hey, you are free if you have renewable energy,’ or ‘You are free if you clean up the lake,’ or ‘You’re free if you have great schools,’ or ‘You are free if you have a trustworthy government.’

We are living in a dark moment in which the very idea of democracy, of a free press and independent judiciary, are being strongly challenged. Progress in defending democracy is not going to happen automatically. If you want to get involved, now would be the time.

Author Bios

Lawrence Eppard is an assistant professor of sociology at Shippensburg University, and his work explores American inequality beliefs and their social consequences.

Arlie Hochschild is professor emerita of sociology at University of California, Berkeley, and her recent work has explored current developments in right-wing politics in the United States. Hochschild’s scholarship is widely-read, and includes the now classic *The Second Shift*.

Richard Wilkinson is professor emeritus of social epidemiology at University of Nottingham, honorary professor at University College London, and a visiting professor at University of York. His scholarship explores the impact of economic inequality on societies. Wilkinson’s work is also widely-read, including the best-selling *The Spirit Level*.

This article is based on excerpts from separate one-on-one interviews conducted with Arlie Hochschild and Richard Wilkinson that have been edited and brought together for this piece. These interviews, along with interviews with several other leading scholars, will be included in a forthcoming book, *Poverty Insights*, by Lawrence M. Eppard and Mark R. Rank.

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