

Inequality, Shared Outrage, and Social Change

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Inequality stands at historic levels in the United States and around the world. This is an ominous sign because scientific research documents that inequality is a driving force behind many of our most profound social ills. The Equality Trust reviewed thousands of studies conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, the World Health Organization, the United Nations, and the World Bank. Consistent patterns emerged, both between and within countries. Inequality is associated with diminished levels of physical and mental health, child well-being, educational achievement, social mobility, trust, and community life. And it is linked to increased levels of violence, drug use, imprisonment, obesity, and teenage births. Of particular note, most members of society, not merely those on the socioeconomic ladder's lowest rungs, experience these adverse consequences either directly or indirectly.

Of course, recognizing this problem is a far cry from solving it. There are no quick fixes for reversing today's extreme inequalities and repairing the harm they cause each day. Change of this magnitude will require an unyielding and broadly embraced commitment to greater equality as a moral necessity. Bangladeshi Nobel Laureate and micro-lender Muhammad Yunus explained, "Poverty is not created by poor people. It has been created and sustained by the economic and social system that we have designed for ourselves; the institutions and concepts that make up that system; the policies that we pursue." Much the same can be said about the stubborn roots of inequality.

Adopting a psychological perspective, I argue that one frequently overlooked and misunderstood catalyst for the needed transformation is shared outrage. Indeed, when shared by the disadvantaged and oppressed on the one hand, and by those with greater security and resources on the other, collective moral outrage can spur the concerted action required to alter the systems, policies, and attitudes that foster inequality.

Recent work by social psychologists such as Emma Thomas, Craig McGarty, and Kenneth Mavor highlights why this is so. Outrage, which unites groups that differ from each other in significant ways, creates a

common ingroup and a shared identity, thereby breaking down more familiar ingroup–outgroup boundaries. The resulting solidarity is vital for forcefully challenging a destructive status quo. Outrage over inequality can merge the direct victims of discrimination with those who find discrimination morally repugnant even though they themselves have not experienced it. Similarly, outrage can bring together people struggling to make ends meet and those who, while better off, are convinced that it is simply wrong for anyone to go without adequate food, shelter, or healthcare.

What also makes shared moral outrage an especially potent emotion is its collective action orientation. It pushes for sustained engagement against the individuals, groups, and institutions that benefit from inequality and seek to perpetuate it. As a political force, shared outrage goes beyond the mere acknowledgment of regrettable circumstances in the world. It insists on explanations for what is wrong, and it seeks accountability for the wrongdoing. And the chorus of voices rising up in shared outrage prevents any single group from becoming an isolated target for condemnation or retribution from powerful entrenched interests.

Compelling and well-known examples where shared moral outrage was harnessed to spur social progress serve as important reminders of what is possible: emerging from the horrors of World War II, the United Nations adopted the groundbreaking Universal Declaration of Human Rights; sustained and inclusive political movements advanced the civil rights of African Americans and women in the United States and ended apartheid in South Africa; populist campaigns curtailed the exploitation and abuse of farm and factory workers; and churches and local communities created sanctuaries that offered protection for immigrants and refugees. These efforts, and others like them, were aimed at promoting greater equality, and all recognized that inequality could not be meaningfully reduced without improving the circumstances of society's most vulnerable and marginalized members.

Looking at the United States today, appropriate targets for similar shared outrage uniting “haves” and “have nots” are not hard to find. Wall Street banks have turned taxpayer-funded bailouts into billions of dollars in bonuses for their highest-paid employees while millions of working people have lost their jobs and their homes. Health insurance giants have added to their bottom lines by denying life-saving treatment to sick children, dropping policyholders when they become too ill, and aggressively raising premiums despite the economic hardship facing so many. Profit-driven global polluters, and their lobbyists and political defenders, have blocked effective responses to climate change while the poor suffer disproportionately from environmental disasters and devastation. Unethical politicians have protected the privileged and the wealthy by embracing falsehoods and obstructionism to prevent legislation that could address inequality in arenas such as preschool programs, student

aid, worker rights, and the minimum wage. With support and funding from powerful elites, hate-mongers have taken to the airwaves and the print media. They condemn, ridicule, and arouse fear and hostility toward minority group members already disadvantaged by prejudice, discrimination, and infringements of their civil rights.

It is important to note that shared outrage is by no means the only prosocial emotion we experience in response to human suffering. Compassion is another common and important reaction—but evidence suggests that alone it is insufficient to promote meaningful and lasting social change. As demonstrated by research psychologists such as Paul Slovic, Ilana Ritov, and Tehila Kogut, part of the problem is that our natural tendency to experience compassion is quite limited in breadth. We tend to respond most strongly to the misfortune of a single identified individual. Unfortunately, these feelings of care and concern quickly diminish in strength as the number of victims increases. So even though compassion can lead to crucial short-term efforts to help the needy, it does not readily translate into a sustained movement. It does not truly unite groups in common purpose over time.

Reinforcing compassion's limits, psychological research by Adam Galinsky, Gerben van Kleef, and others also documents that powerful individuals have difficulty with perspective-taking, and tend to display less compassion than those who have less power. This difference is not entirely surprising when one considers that those in positions of relative power are not as dependent on others for having their needs met. As a result, high-power individuals need not be as conscientious in monitoring the feelings and circumstances of others, or be as motivated to respond to signs of others' distress.

It is also problematic that compassion felt toward those less well-off can actually highlight differences between groups rather than effectively transform multiple groups into one. In contrast to moral outrage, which can be fully shared, compassion is a feeling experienced only by the "outsider"; a disadvantaged group does not feel compassion for itself. Moreover, compassion too often finds expression in patronizing gestures. A "we-know-better" attitude can inadvertently intensify group boundaries by failing to fully recognize the capabilities, resiliency, special knowledge, and equal humanity of those to whom help is offered.

Just as important, compassion does not search for, identify, and hold accountable those responsible for conditions of inequality. In short, feeling bad for those less fortunate is simply not enough. Shared outrage goes further. It combats illegitimate attempts to blame victims for their plight. It prioritizes the need for long-term change beyond emergency assistance alone. And it demands accountability for the failure to use power and influence for the greater good.

But if moral outrage shared by the disadvantaged and advantaged alike offers such promise for positive social change, what stands in its way? Why, for example, is inequality growing on so many fronts rather than receding? Far too often, the emergence of such shared moral outrage is cut short by the powerful self-interested beneficiaries of the status quo. Here I am reminded of the words of Lord Brian Griffiths, Goldman Sachs international adviser, when he spoke at London's St. Paul's Cathedral during the height of the current financial crisis: "We have to tolerate the inequality as a way to achieve greater prosperity and opportunity for all."

In my own research and writing with colleagues, I have found that efforts aimed at defending a course of action, such as preserving the status quo, are often built on appeals to five core concerns—revolving around the issues of vulnerability, injustice, distrust, superiority, and helplessness—that profoundly influence how individuals and groups make sense of the world. I will briefly consider each of these five in turn.

For most of us, nothing is stronger than the desire for safety and security. Rarely do we knowingly make choices that endanger our loved ones or ourselves. Powerful entrenched interests can therefore prey on vulnerability concerns by promoting alarmist accounts of new perils associated with change: a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants will bring economic disaster; same-sex marriages will start us down the slippery slope toward a cultural wasteland; importing less expensive prescription drugs is too risky and will jeopardize lives. Inequality defenders also compound fears by claiming that we live in a "zero-sum" world where improving the circumstances of those less well-off (through increases in the minimum wage, for example) will inevitably diminish the well-being of everyone else. In this way, potential allies are encouraged to see each other as adversaries instead, which undercuts the formation of broad coalitions in support of greater equality.

We often react to perceived mistreatment with anger and resentment, and an urge to right wrongs and punish those we hold responsible. Powerful defenders of today's inequality frequently exploit sensitivity to issues of injustice by presenting themselves as victims rather than perpetrators. Thus, some politicians rail against the estate tax on inherited wealth, or cry foul over regulatory requirements that limit corporate profits, or argue that class action lawsuits are frivolous and abusive. But these same influential individuals and groups often respond quite differently when confronted with the grievances of the less fortunate. Then they claim that addressing these concerns (such as the need for labor and environmental protections in "free trade" pacts) will create even greater injustices and larger numbers of innocent victims. In short, they lament that altering the status quo will do more harm than good.

We tend to divide the world into those who are trustworthy and those unworthy of our trust in an effort to avoid harm from people with hostile

intentions. Distrust creates divisions and thereby stifles collective action. Beneficiaries of current policies that promote inequality therefore often work to foment suspicions within the ranks of those disadvantaged by the status quo. Union organizers are painted as wanting only to line their own pockets with membership dues. Universal healthcare advocates are characterized as a socialist vanguard bent on undermining capitalism. Organizations focused on immigrant welfare are vilified as secretly pursuing the Hispanic “re-conquering” of the American Southwest. And because perceptions of difference often foster distrust among groups that actually share common interests (such as workers of different ethnic backgrounds), status quo defenders highlight and exaggerate any differences they can find.

We are frequently motivated to see ourselves as better than others in some important way—perhaps in our accomplishments, or our morality, or our destiny. Defenders of today’s inequality are adept at portraying America as a land of almost limitless opportunity. Which rung of the ladder we stand on is entirely up to us, and we are free to climb as high as we want. It therefore follows that those at the top possess superior personal qualities, and those nearer to the bottom are manifestly inferior. These arguments that ultimately blame the victim are nothing new—only the targets change. The individuals most devastated by Hurricane Katrina suffered primarily from their own “failure of citizenship.” Rising personal and family bankruptcies are merely evidence of the debtors’ irresponsibility. The ravages of poverty and homelessness only befall those unwilling to work hard. These narratives undercut efforts aimed at mobilizing for change by encouraging the view that people facing hardship are contemptible and disgusting. These negative emotional reactions lead to avoidance rather than engagement. This psychological distancing is further accomplished by promoting stereotypes that cast particularly unsympathetic individual cases as exemplars of disadvantaged groups as a whole.

We strive to avoid the experience of helplessness, and instead do our best to control the important events in our lives. Indeed, perceived helplessness has a paralyzing effect on both individual and collective action. Most of us will not even try if we think nothing can be done. Often, the beneficiaries of the status quo maintain their privileged positions simply by creating the impression that current circumstances cannot be changed due to powerful forces beyond anyone’s control. They therefore argue that the obstacles are too large, too complex, or too expensive to address, and that specific alternative proposals are unrealistic and ill-conceived. In this narrative, destroyed livelihoods are an unavoidable consequence of unstoppable economic globalization. Draconian cuts in much needed social programs are the price we must pay for burgeoning defense expenditures that ensure our survival.

Those who seek to defuse shared outrage over inequality for self-interested reasons do not represent the sole barrier to effective mobilization on behalf of greater equality. Such efforts are also hampered by individuals who,

although sympathetic to the goals, fail to become movement participants because they view outrage as an undesirable, inappropriate, or ineffective response to inequality. Regrettably, this stance ultimately serves to help society's wealthiest and most powerful status quo defenders avoid the full force of broadly supported and insistent demands for meaningful change. Recall Martin Luther King's deep disappointment over "moderates" in confronting the racism and segregation of the 1960s:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action;' who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

Of course, even more destructive to social change is widespread apathy, which allows severe inequalities to persist and grow with little popular resistance. When potential partners in reversing these trends instead act as bystanders in large numbers, the challenges can be insurmountable. In their work, psychologist John Jost and his colleagues have documented a pervasive tendency for people to hold "system-justifying" beliefs. That is, we are motivated to see the status quo as desirable and legitimate because doing so reduces anxiety and uncertainty—even when the consequences of the current social order are personally disadvantageous. Unfortunately, these convictions are obstacles to the moral outrage that encourages greater support for redistributive social policies.

Compounding the problem, many "inequality bystanders" are also disinclined to take action because they fail to realize that they themselves are worse off as a result of these extreme disparities. As I noted in the introduction, research by Richard Wilkinson, Kate Pickett, and others shows conclusively that social ills are more prevalent in societies where inequality is more extreme. But if members of the middle-class are oblivious to the reality that their own lives are being harmed as well, they are less likely to experience the outrage they might share with the less fortunate, and they are more likely to maintain an "us–them" stance toward those farther down the inequality ladder.

The forms of shared moral outrage I have discussed here are often inadvertently misunderstood or intentionally misrepresented. It is therefore important to be clear about what this outrage is not.

First, shared outrage over inequality is not the same as irrational anger. Rather, it can be an entirely reasonable response to an outrageous situation. Likewise, effective strategies for pursuing real change linked to moral outrage can be bold and discomfiting while still being purposeful and carefully planned. To always prize civility and decorum (and “bipartisanship”), even when doing so aids the powerful defenders of an unjust status quo, is either foolish or deceitful.

Second, the shared outrage I am extolling does not glorify violence in the pursuit of its aims. In fact, historically, such outrage has been the source of many transformative movements around the world that have promoted non-violent means to achieve their ends. At the same time, the manner in which shared outrage is expressed can indeed reflect the recognition that timid stances are too often ignored or dismissed by the mainstream media, the centers of power, and those who are comfortably insulated from life’s daily hardships and injustices.

Third, this shared outrage over inequality is not populist anger manufactured and promoted by corporate-funded groups that represent more dollars than people. Such efforts have very different underlying goals and often include an agenda that would expand rather than diminish inequality. Research polls have found, for example, that “Tea Party” activists in the United States are predominantly male, higher-income, college-educated, and conservative (in one poll, 87 percent supported the Republican candidate for Congress in their district). That is not the profile of a broad and diverse coalition of “haves” and “have-nots” fighting the systemic injustices that do particular harm to the least fortunate among us.

Finally, shared moral outrage should not be mistaken for the anger displayed by representatives of powerful interests responding to attempts to alter the status quo. Such big-budget political theater is strategically designed to subvert the efforts of groups pursuing change that will benefit the disadvantaged. Outrage fueled by distortions, misrepresentations, and lies must be discounted as well.

It is clear that the obstacles to a broad movement promoting greater equality are considerable. In general, people tend to be biased in favor of the status quo, and those in privileged positions usually resist appeals to relinquish their power or advantage. And yet, the abstract idea of a more equal society has wider support than we might think. In a 2005 survey, for example, Michael Norton and Dan Ariely found that Americans not only dramatically underestimated the degree of wealth inequality in the United States, but also felt that wealth should be distributed considerably more equally than they thought it currently was.

Findings like these reveal an under-appreciated opportunity for building a broad movement, especially if more people become aware of the gaping

divergence between their own personal views of the “good society” and the circumstances in which we actually live today. At the same time, recognizing that something is profoundly wrong is not enough. As Frederick Douglass argued more than a century and a half ago: “If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.”

In the 1976, Oscar-winning film *Network*, deranged TV news anchor Howard Beale implores his viewers to open their windows and scream, “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore!” Although his message and emotion may be on target, positive social change is far more likely through organized efforts that bring together inspiring leaders, dedicated advocates, and inclusive coalitions of diverse supporters all committed to reducing inequality and its injustices. The key is collective action driven by shared moral outrage that simultaneously nurtures and finds sustenance in a common group identity linking disadvantaged and advantaged alike.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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