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# WHY POVERTY AND INEQUALITY UNDERMINE JUSTICE IN AMERICA

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### **Introduction**

In recent years there has been an increasing awareness and concern with respect to rising levels of economic distress and inequality in the United States. There is a sense that America is moving away from its middle-class roots, and transforming itself into a society of haves and have-nots. The rise of the Occupy Wall Street movement in the fall of 2011 was emblematic of these feelings and frustrations. Much of the recent concern has been upon the fact that a small group of Americans appear to have been doing exceedingly well economically, while a majority of households have been struggling. There is a sense that growing poverty and economic insecurity amidst extreme levels of plenty and wealth appear to be fundamentally wrong.

Yet why might this situation be unjust? In and of itself, economic inequality and poverty need not be unfair. This essay explores why high levels of poverty and economic inequality undermines America's sense of justice. Three questions are examined. First, how has the concept of justice been interpreted from an American perspective? Second, what is known about the current levels and depth of poverty and economic inequality in the United States? And third, why do high levels of U.S. poverty and economic inequality undermine American justice?

### **Justice in an American context**

We begin by discussing several aspects of justice that would appear critical in understanding the manner in which social justice has generally been interpreted within an American context. While there are a number of components of justice that could be discussed (Reisch, 2002), we touch on four that are particularly critical in thinking about how justice has largely been interpreted within the United States.

### ***Entitlement and protection of rights***

A first key component of American justice is the premise that there are certain fundamental rights that all citizens should be entitled to. These would include a number of basic political and human rights such as voting, trial by jury, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and so on. Many of these rights were specified in the Bill of Rights. Over time, additional rights have been added and others have been strengthened through amendments to the Constitution and through various decisions handed down by the Supreme Court.

The general understanding has been that a society that fails to guarantee such basic rights to its citizens represents an unjust society. Only in a few cases might the denial of such rights be justified, such as the situation where an individual was incarcerated. But other than these very narrow circumstances, all citizens should be entitled to these rights.

In looking back over our history, the denial of people's basic political and human rights has been a major force for change. It was the argument for why the colonies felt justified in declaring independence from Great Britain (e.g., the issue of taxation without representation). Because of the denial of certain basic rights laid out in the Declaration of Independence, the colonists proclaimed the right to secede from the mother country. In a sense, the nation was created in order to rectify the injustice of Great Britain's disregarding the rights of the colonists.

This notion of certain inalienable rights belonging to all Americans has continued across our history, for example through various rights movements. Nearly all of these movements have sought to increase the number and groups of people who are entitled to particular rights. The most blatant denial of rights was of course slavery, which led to the abolitionist movement. The women's suffrage movement at the turn of the 20th century was premised on correcting the injustice of women being denied the right to vote. Or for example, the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s was based on the idea that Black Americans were being denied certain basic rights, and that this was a blatant violation of the concept of justice.

Other rights movements have also been largely built on the idea that particular rights were being denied, and therefore the country was in violation of its sense of justice. These have included the women's movement, gay and lesbian rights movement, persons with disabilities movement, and so on.

One right that has been discussed within this justice context is the idea that there should be a basic economic floor that no one should fall below—that in a wealthy country everyone should have a right to a minimum standard of living. President Franklin Roosevelt introduced this idea within his economic bill of rights in 1944 (Sunstein, 2004). However, this concept has had much less traction than many of the other rights movements.

In sum, the protection and enforcement of certain fundamental rights is generally viewed as an essential component of American justice. The principle has been that every citizen should be entitled to the full protection and enjoyment of those rights.

### ***Equality of opportunity***

A second component of justice within the American context has been the strong emphasis upon the importance of equality of opportunity. A just or fair society is seen as providing access to opportunities to all of its citizens. Individuals who work hard should be able to achieve success by taking advantage of the opportunities available to them. This is certainly one of the key ideas behind the 'American Dream.' President Johnson talked about the meaning of America in his inaugural address of 1965,

Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish. First, justice was the promise that all who made the journey would share in the fruits of the land. In a land of great wealth, families must not live in hopeless poverty. In a land rich in harvest, children just must not go hungry. In a land of healing miracles, neighbors must not suffer and die unattended. In a great land of learning and scholars, young people must be taught to read and write.

Equality of opportunity basically means that everyone should be entitled to a fair shot at achieving success and the American Dream, and that certain things that enable one to do so, like

a good education, should be available to all. Furthermore, equality of opportunity includes the notion that individuals should be judged and rewarded on the basis of their abilities. Robert Haveman (1988) notes in his book *Starting Even* that

it has to do with having the same chance to run the race for economic success as others with similar talents and drives. Equality of opportunity exists if a black youth and a white youth have the same access to education, training, jobs, earnings, and incomes according to their abilities.

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The idea is that of a level playing field, upon which there are certain key opportunities that are open to all. What you then do with those opportunities is up to you. As a result, America has never felt that equality of outcome was just, only equality of opportunity. It is therefore a fair and just society that strives for equality of opportunity amongst all of its citizens.

### ***Balance***

A third critical component of how justice has been interpreted in America has been the notion of balance. For example, when someone works hard and plays by the rules, we often hope that he or she will receive their “just rewards.” Or when a crime is committed, justice is seen as being served if the criminal is sentenced to a punishment that fits the nature and severity of the crime.

On the other hand, if an individual commits a serious crime and is neither apprehended nor punished, the feeling is that an injustice has occurred. Thus, in cases where individuals experience outcomes and consequences that are congruent with their prior actions and behaviors, the world is seen as just. Conversely, in situations where individuals experience outcomes and consequences that are incongruent with their prior actions and behaviors, the world is viewed as unjust.

This concept of balance can be visually seen in the symbol of justice found from local courtrooms to the United States Capitol—that of Themis or Lady Justice. Here one finds a woman, often blindfolded, holding a measuring scale in one hand and a sword in the other. In this image, justice is being portrayed as impartial and not beholden to special interests (hence the blindfold). The fact that she is holding the scales has a double meaning. They first imply that evidence should be weighed carefully in deciding how justice will be delivered. But they also connote that justice is served by balance. That is, prior actions and future consequences should be in balance and congruent with one another. Furthermore, the sword gripped in her right hand represents the strength and authority of justice, and acts as a balance to the judgment derived from the scales held in her left hand.

Consequently, a third element of how justice has often been interpreted within an American context is that it should reflect a sense of balance—that, for example, an individual’s current economic situation should be roughly in balance with their prior actions and behaviors.

### ***Deservedness***

Deservedness is a final important component of justice within an American context. This idea follows from the notion of balance and is closely connected to it. The basic concept is that within a just society, what you deserve in life should reflect your prior efforts, actions, and talents.

The concept of deservedness has often been applied to the poor. This criterion has been used over the centuries, particularly since the English Poor Laws of 1601, to divide the poor into the categories of deserving and undeserving (Katz, 1989). The deserving poor are individuals deemed worthy of our compassion and assistance because they find themselves in poverty through little

fault of their own. Consequently, an injustice has occurred. Such persons would include those who have suffered from an unavoidable illness or accident, children, widows, and so on.

On the other hand, individuals falling into the undeserving poor category are seen as meriting neither our compassion nor our assistance. Such poverty is perceived as being brought on as a result of a lack of initiative, laziness, bad decisions, or some other failing, and therefore impoverishment is a just and deserving consequence of prior behavior.

The concept of deservedness has been applied to many other behaviors in American life, including particular health outcomes, financial success, or academic failure. The notion of deservedness is therefore a fourth important component of what constitutes justice from an American perspective.

In summary, these four components are essential to understanding an American sense of what is meant by justice. A just society ensures certain basic rights to all, supports the idea of equality of opportunity, and strives to make sure that prior actions and behaviors are in balance with current outcomes and consequences, so that in the end, people basically achieve what they deserve in life.

### **Extent of poverty and economic inequality**

We now turn to how widespread are the conditions of poverty and economic inequality in the United States? We can examine this question in several different ways.

#### ***Poverty***

The most common approach to measuring poverty in the United States is to estimate how many people are poor in any given year. Each year, the Census Bureau calculates how many Americans fall below a certain annual income level that is considered the poverty line. In 2011, the overall U.S. poverty rate was 15 percent, which translates into 46 million individuals, or about one out of seven Americans (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012). For children, 21.9 percent of those under the age of 18 fell below the poverty line last year, and 25.1 percent of children under five were in poverty.

It should be pointed out that the official measure of poverty is a fairly conservative indicator of economic hardship. For example, for a family of four in 2011, the poverty line was drawn at approximately \$23,000 dollars. Households earning less than that amount would be considered in poverty, while those making more than that would not be counted as officially poor.

As a result, poverty researchers often estimate the percentage of the population that fall below 150 percent of the poverty line. This measure captures a sense of the poor and near poor. Using this metric, 24.8 percent of the population fell into poverty in 2011.

Finally, it should be noted that 44.3 percent of those who were counted in poverty last year were actually living below one-half of the official poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Consequently, instead of a family of four living below \$23,000, such a family would be living below an income level of \$11,500. By any standard, these are extreme economic conditions for families to be operating under.

A second way of understanding the extent of poverty is to calculate the lifetime chances of experiencing poverty. Consequently, what is the likelihood that an average American will directly encounter poverty at some point during his or her lifetime? It turns out that the number of Americans who are touched by poverty during adulthood is exceedingly high. My co-author, Thomas Hirschl, and I have estimated that between the ages of 20 and 75, nearly 60 percent of Americans will experience at least one year below the official poverty line and three-quarters will experience a year either in poverty or near poverty (below 150 percent of the poverty line). Perhaps even more surprising is the fact that two-thirds of Americans between the ages of 20 and 65 will use a social welfare program such as Food Stamps or Medicaid; 40 percent will utilize such a program in at least five years scattered throughout their working age adulthood (Rank, 2004).

Children are at a particularly high risk. A recent analysis found that half of all children between the ages of one and 20 would at some point during their childhood find themselves in a household using food stamps (Rank & Hirschl, 2009). By definition, households receiving food stamps are experiencing significant economic distress.

Finally, the life course risk of poverty appears to be increasing over time. An analysis by Sandoval, Rank, and Hirschl (2009) has shown that for individuals in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, the life course risk of poverty has increased significantly from the 1970s through the 1990s.

A third way of measuring the extent of poverty in the United States is to ask how we compare with other countries. In this case, the measure often used is the percentage of the country's population that falls below one-half of the median income. It turns out that by using this measure of poverty the prevalence and depth of impoverishment in the United States is among the highest within the Western industrialized nations. Whether we look at poverty within the working-age population, for the elderly, single parent families, or children, the story is basically the same (Alesina & Glaeser, 2004; Gornick & Jantti, 2012; Smeeding, 2005)—the United States has exceedingly high rates of poverty in comparison with other nations.

For example, a study several years ago from UNICEF showed that out of 24 OECD industrialized countries, children's rates of poverty were highest in the United States. The U.S. rate of poverty for children was 21.7 percent, the next nearest country was New Zealand at 16.3 percent, while the overall average was 11.3 percent (UNICEF, 2007).

What this body of work tells us is that the United States has extremely high levels of poverty among adults and children in comparison with those in other developed countries,.

### ***Economic inequality***

We turn now to the levels of income and wealth inequality in the United States. Just as with poverty, there are several different ways of measuring this. One frequently used indicator of overall income inequality is called the Gini index. It ranges from 0 (no inequality) to 1 (extreme inequality). Over time this measure has been slowly rising in the United States. In 1974, the Gini index was 0.395. By 2011 it had risen to 0.477 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The current U.S. figure is higher than in nearly all other highly developed countries that track the Gini index (United Nations, 2011).

We can also look at the share of income that different quintiles are receiving as another measure of inequality. If we examine what has happened to this distribution over time, during the past 40 years income inequality has consistently widened. The only group to have increased their piece of the income pie has been the top 20 percent of the population, and particularly the top 5 and 1 percent. These are where almost all of the gains in the U.S. economy have gone over the last three or four decades. Consequently, in 2011 the top 20 percent of the population received 51.1 percent of the total income generated in the United States, while the bottom 20 percent received 3.2 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Again, these percentages tend to be much more skewed when compared to other industrialized nations.

For the bottom 80 percent of the population, their economic position has either been static, or has declined. For example, the median earnings of men working full-time in 1973, adjusted for inflation, were \$50,613. By 2011, their median earnings stood at \$48,202. In other words, the typical male worker in the United States has actually lost ground over the past four decades in terms of their wages (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Another way of seeing the increase in income disparity is in the following manner. The noted economist, Paul Samuelson, writing in the first edition of his introductory economics textbook in 1948, observed that if we were to make an income pyramid out of a child's play blocks, with each layer representing \$1,000 of income, the peak would be somewhat higher than the Eiffel

Tower, but almost all of us would be within a yard or so of the ground. By the time of Samuelson's 2001 edition of the textbook, most of us would still be within a yard or two of the ground, but the Eiffel Tower would now have to be replaced with Mount Everest to represent those at the top (Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2001).

Another illustration would involve comparing what has happened to the distance between the average worker's salary and the average CEO's salary. In 1980, the average CEO of a major corporation earned around 42 times that of the average worker's pay. Today, it is well over 400 times.

Finally, if we look at patterns of income mobility from one generation to the next, we also find that the United States has less mobility than many other developed countries. Research by Miles Corak (2010) and Markus Jantti (Jantti et al., 2006) demonstrates that economic mobility appears to be more constrained in the United States than in many other countries. Researchers have commented on the "stickiness" at the bottom and top of the U.S. income distribution (Isaacs et al., 2011). In particular, individuals growing up in the bottom 20 percent of the U.S. income distribution have a much harder time pulling themselves out of poverty and near poverty than their counterparts in other developed countries.

Focusing on patterns of wealth inequality shows an even more skewed picture than income. We find that the top 1 percent of the U.S. population currently holds 42.7 percent of the entire financial wealth in the country (stocks, bonds, savings, etc.), while the bottom 60 percent of Americans are in possession of less than 1 percent of the country's financial wealth (Wolff, 2010). In fact, the bottom 40 percent of the population are actually in debt. In 2007, the Gini index for financial wealth was a staggering 0.908. Once again, the extent of wealth inequality in the United States is higher than in nearly any other developed industrialized country.

What this array of data tells us is that the United States has extremely high rates of both poverty and economic inequality. Whether we compare ourselves to other industrialized countries today or we examine trends over time, the United States is becoming a more unequal and impoverished society.

### **Why high rates of poverty and inequality undermine justice**

Given this situation, the argument presented here is that these economic conditions significantly undermine the earlier notions of justice that were discussed. The four major components of justice mentioned earlier were the entitlement and protection of rights, equality of opportunity, balance, and deservedness.

#### ***Differential ability to engage in rights***

Let us begin with the entitlement of fundamental rights for all citizens. With such high levels of poverty and inequality, the basic argument can be made that although everyone may be theoretically entitled to certain legal rights, in reality, the fulfillment of those rights is strongly affected by one's economic position.

Just to give one example, Derek Bok (1996), the former president of Harvard, writes,

Surely there is no other nation where the nature of individual freedom has been elaborated in such detail, or any other society that is so well organized to ensure that essential liberties are defended and preserved. At the same time, freedom in the United States may be more limited by other forces than it is abroad. For example, the government in America often makes less effort than others to make sure that all or most Americans have the means to exercise important rights they formally possess. To choose but one example, it is impressive to grant everyone accused of a serious crime the right to qualified counsel, but the right

may not be worth much in practice if the lawyers assigned turn out to have so little time that they can scarcely do more than hastily agree to exchange a guilty plea for a slightly reduced sentence. Yet this is the situation that exists in many jurisdictions of this country.

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We can think of many other situations where poverty and economic inequality undermine a person's ability to fully partake in their legal rights and freedoms, or on the other hand, where having substantial resources allows one to take much greater advantage of such rights. One obvious example would be participation in the political process. Here we find that there is a direct relationship between voting and household income. For various reasons, the process of voting for lower-income Americans is much more cumbersome than for middle- and upper-income Americans (Beeghley, 2009). Furthermore, those with greater amounts of income are more likely to exert their influence into the political process and to have their particular issues paid attention through lobbying and other means.

Consequently, the notion that everyone is fully and equally entitled to certain basic rights, in reality, falls far short because those with lower levels of income are often not able to take full advantage of those rights, while those at the higher end of the income distribution are able to exert considerably more influence through those rights.

It is in this sense that the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen has argued that the central meaning of impoverishment is captured by "poverty as lack of freedom" (1992, p. 152). Europeans also refer to poverty with terms such as social exclusion or disenfranchisement. Poverty and a lack of income constrains individual's abilities to take full advantage of certain basic rights that they are theoretically entitled to, and in so doing, undermines this aspect of American justice.

### ***Reduced equality of opportunity***

A second major component of American justice is the importance of equality of opportunity. A just and fair society is one which ensures equality of opportunity to all of its citizens. The argument made here is that equality of opportunity is significantly skewed with the presence of large economic differences in the population as well as large amounts of poverty. In a sense, the argument is that inequality of outcomes produces inequality of opportunities.

Let us consider two examples—education and health. Public education began in the 19th century as a way of ensuring that all children would have access to this important tool. It was viewed as an important avenue to providing everyone equality of opportunity.

Yet in order to compete effectively for economic opportunities today, the quality and the quantity of education are critical for getting ahead. On both counts, poverty and lower-income status stunt the educational process.

One reason for this is that public education is funded largely through local tax dollars. The United States is one of the few industrialized countries in which this is the case. Those growing up in poor households are likely to be living in lower-income areas. And these lower-income communities, in turn, are severely limited in the amount of financial resources that they can devote to their school systems, the quality of teachers that they can attract, and so on.

This results in a significant reduction in the quality of education that each student receives. One has only to compare the facilities and personnel at any inner-city public school with those at an affluent public suburban school or private school to observe this process. Consequently, children in different socioeconomic settings have greatly different odds of being able to achieve a quality education that will allow them to compete in the labor market. All are American students, yet not all are entitled to a first rate education. The same process continues in terms of students going on to the college and university level.

A second example of how economics can profoundly impact life chances and therefore the notion of equality of opportunity has to do with health. In order to effectively compete in the labor market, one must have reasonably good health. Yet lower socioeconomic status and poverty have a negative impact on health status. Adults who are poor are more likely to have higher rates of heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and virtually every other major illness and cause of death (Kaler & Rennert, 2008).

Children in poverty are especially more likely to suffer from various health ailments, such as lead poisoning, asthma, and injury from accidents and violence (Aber et al., 1997). Non-White children in particular are routinely exposed to high levels of neighborhood poverty when growing up compared with their White counterparts (Drake & Rank, 2009). Exposure to such levels of poverty can have a profound impact upon one's life chances. For example, children growing up in neighborhoods marked by high poverty are much more likely to encounter a variety of environmental health and social hazards. These include elevated exposure to toxic pollutants, greater likelihood of being victimized by crime and violence, dropping out of school, higher arrest rates, increased risk of substance abuse, and greater exposure to sexually transmitted diseases (Evans, 2004). All of these can detrimentally affect a child's health, which in turn, can have a profound impact upon that child's health and economic well-being as an adult.

Furthermore, mobility out of such neighborhoods, particularly for racial minorities, is limited. For example, Quillian (2003) has shown that for Black residents living in high poverty census tracts (40 percent or more poverty), nearly 50 percent were still residing in a high poverty census tract 10 years later. In addition, Sharkey (2008) has found that 72 percent of Black children who grew up in the poorest quarter of American neighborhoods remained in the poorest quarter of neighborhoods as adults. Consequently, the effects of neighborhood poverty upon children of color are typically prolonged and long lasting with respect to health and well-being.

In addition, these illnesses and conditions are less likely to be attended to through the health care system. As a result, health deteriorates, again leading to reduced opportunities. In the end, Americans in the top 5 percent of the income distribution can expect to live approximately 9 years longer than those in the bottom 10 percent (Jencks, 2002).

What these examples illustrate (and there are many others as well), is that the American ideal of equal access to opportunities is undermined by the existence of poverty and economic inequality. The poor and those at the lower end of the income distribution simply do not have the same chances and opportunities that others in our society do. To argue that everyone is starting at roughly the same point, and therefore equality of opportunity exists, is simply not the case.

### ***Lack of balance/deservedness***

Let us now turn to the third and fourth criteria of justice, and that is the importance of balance and deservedness between current circumstances and prior behavior. The question becomes, is poverty and economic destitution deserved and in balance with prior actions? I believe that the answer in the vast majority of cases is no.

A relatively straightforward way to see this is if we simply examine the demographic composition of the poverty population. Thirty-five percent of the poor are under the age of 18. I would challenge anyone to make the argument that an eight year old child deserves to live in poverty as a result of his or her prior actions. That argument simply cannot be made. An additional eight percent of the poor are over the age of 65, a category that we generally feel is deserving of some kind of assistance. A further 9 percent of the poor are between the ages of 18 and 64 and suffer from some type of disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Therefore, simply looking at the demographics, we see that slightly over half of the poverty population fall into categories that most people would argue are not deserving of impoverishment. For the remaining half of the poor, research has shown that much of their poverty is the result of failings at the economic and political levels, such as the lack of enough decent paying jobs to support a family (Rank, 2004; Brady, 2009). Ethnographic research has also shown that with respect to work attitudes and motivation, those in poverty exhibit similar behaviors and attitudes as the overall population (Rank, 1994; Rank, Hirschl, & Foster, in press). Consequently, the basic conclusion is that for the vast majority of the poor, impoverishment cannot be justified in terms of prior negative actions.

In summary, a strong argument can be made that large amounts of economic inequality and poverty have a distorting and undermining effect on the American sense of justice. These conditions undercut our country's overall notion of fairness and justice. They erode the idea that all citizens have full access and entitlement to certain rights, they damage the principal of equality of opportunity, and they create conditions that are neither deserved nor in balance with prior actions. In order for America to live up to its own standard of justice, the conditions of poverty and economic inequality must be addressed.

### Closing comments

The question that I believe this discussion ultimately challenges us to think about is: What kind of society do we want to live in and create for our children? There are at least two paths that can be chosen. The first is the route that we appear to be on now. This path will likely lead to an increasing division between the haves and the have-nots. The top of society will continue to prosper, the middle will struggle, and the bottom will fall further behind. The ongoing concentration of wealth and income will escalate into the future, fueled by government policies largely slanted towards the well-off, with the democratic process being largely a tool that provides for the needs of the wealthy and powerful. The privileged top of society will physically separate themselves from the middle and bottom of society as the social and economic conditions for the bottom two thirds stagnate and deteriorate.

Such patterns can be seen right now in the rise of gated communities, growing economic residential segregation, increased prison construction, rising private school enrollments, increased expenditures on private security, and so on. The United States will begin to reflect the bifurcation patterns more typical of third-world nations. While at the same time, we will continue to blame the less fortunate for their economic and social woes, arguing that government should do less and less in order to provide the necessary incentives for them to get ahead. In addition, the numbers of the poor and economically vulnerable will simply continue to grow in the future. Equality of opportunity will be nothing more than an empty slogan and democracy will simply be a hostage to those with the biggest wallets.

This appears to be the path that we are traveling on now. We can choose to remain silent, go about our daily business, and continue down this slope. Alternatively, we can decide that this is not the course that we choose to follow. We can begin to recognize and act upon the fact that poverty and extreme economic inequality are undermining our core principles of a just and fair society, and set about to rectify these conditions.

The argument in this essay is that it is time for a new vision and a new reality for America, rather than the road we have been traveling down: One that understands that the judgment of a society depends not on how it treats its most wealthy and privileged, but rather on how it treats its most vulnerable; one that places the concerns and needs of everyday Americans, rather than those of special interest groups at the top of its policy agenda; one that insists that there must be enough money to provide for the educational needs of low-income American children, rather than passing that money out to huge banking institutions with few strings attached; and one that realizes that investing in all Americans is both a smart and effective approach to

building a productive and thriving society. It is time for us to wake up and put America on a more humane, livable, and yes, a more just and fair direction.

Let me end my thoughts on a historical note that I believe is relevant for us today. The week before he was killed in March of 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a final Sunday sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. The Cathedral sits on the highest part of the city, and is visually quite an impressive and inspiring place. The title of his sermon that Sunday was “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution.”

He began by recounting the well-known story of Rip van Winkle. Everyone, of course, is familiar with the tale. But what many people forget about the story is that Rip slept through a revolution. Before going up the mountain, a picture of King George the Third had hung in the local tavern. When he returned after his 20 year sleep, a portrait of George Washington had replaced that of King George. Rip was thoroughly lost, because he had slept through a revolution and never knew it.

Perhaps we are also guilty of sleeping through a revolution. Only in this case, it is a revolution that has been leading us backwards. It is a revolution that is threatening to undermine the very fabric of the United States. We need to awake from our national slumber and begin the process of halting the widening inequality and economic insecurity that this nation has been heading towards.

When Dr. King got to the end of his sermon that morning, he mentioned the Poor People’s Campaign that was to arrive in Washington a few months later. People were gathering from around the nation to demand that the United States begin to address the issues of poverty and economic inequality. Dr. King remarked,

Let me close by saying that we have difficult days ahead in the struggle for justice and peace, but I will not yield to a politic of despair. I’m going to maintain hope as we come to Washington in this campaign. The cards are stacked against us. This time we really will confront a Goliath. God grant that we will be that David of truth set out against the Goliath of injustice, the Goliath of neglect, the Goliath of refusing to deal with the problems, and go on with the determination to make America the truly great America that it is called to be.

*Quoted in Carson & Holloran, 1998, p. 222*

So let us challenge ourselves to think deeply about where this country should be going today and in the future. We are at a crossroads to challenge the injustice of poverty and widespread economic inequality, and to put forth the evidence and vision for a more sustainable America. As in social movements of the past, effective organizing is a viable strategy for beginning to change the current conditions and trends. Of course, it will not be easy, and there are powerful forces working against such change. But, as Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

It is time for us to awake from the 40 years of slumber that has been going on. It is time to venture down a new road, to a country where not just some children, but every American child receives a first rate education. We need to create a country where if you work full-time, you won’t have to worry that your family will still be living in poverty; a country where democracy is not simply a hostage to the highest bidders; and a country where we respect and take to heart the principles, not of liberty and justice for some, but of liberty and justice for all.

## **Note**

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