

The Un/deserving Rich:
American Beliefs about Inequality, Opportunity, and Redistribution

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Thinking about Income Inequality

In the past decade, we have witnessed one sensational event after another connected in some way to rising income inequality. As I write, it is the Occupy Wall Street movement, which is not only demanding greater economic and social equality for the bottom ninety-nine against the top one “percenters” but coining a new set of class categories in the process. Almost a decade ago, when I began research on American beliefs about rising inequality, it was the scandals surrounding Enron that were making front page news, with the pension funds of workers and retirees evaporating into thin air as the coffers of executives mysteriously survived. In between Enron and Occupy Wall Street, there is no shortage of occasions to reflect on the state of income inequality in the U.S. –the Bush tax cuts of 2001 and 2003, the outsourcing of middle class jobs to Ireland and India, Hurricane Katrina, the financial crisis and the Great Recession. At each turn in the road, reporters and commentators concerned about rising income inequality but dismayed by the lack of political attention given to the issue declared that finally it would be taken seriously. And this says nothing of the events prior to the 2000s, several of which pointed the finger at rising inequality just as vehemently, as I show in my analysis of media coverage of income inequality in chapter 3.

Yet nothing has changed. Income inequality continues its rise to heights unfathomable just a few generations ago. The late public intellectual and eminent Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell wrote in 1973 that earnings inequality “will be one of the most vexing questions in a post-

industrial society.” He said this even as he identified the existing differences in pay between “the head of a corporation and a common laborer” to be “30:1,” a paltry disparity by today’s standards in which the figure hovers in the hundreds to one. Equally astonishing for reasons I detail below, Bell wrote about these disparities in pay as a matter of both equal opportunity and economic efficiency. He feared that America’s vaunted status as the land of opportunity and economic abundance could be in jeopardy if extreme disparities went unchecked as “economic decisions become politicized, and the market replaced by social decisions.” An “unjust meritocracy” would ensue in which “distinctions [are] invidious and demean those below” while “those at the top convert their authority positions into large, discrepant material and social advantages over others.” All this he wrote while criticizing affirmative action in higher education and the workplace on the grounds that it too violated the principle of equal opportunity. Thus Bell’s deliberate, and as we will see unique, description of inequalities of rewards as part and parcel of the structure of opportunity was not the position of a strident liberal.¹

How then did we end up here from there, especially given all that has transpired in the intervening decades to insinuate if not catapult economic inequality into American society? One of the most resounding answers from the halls of academia to the corridors of the capitol to the press rooms of the media is that Americans really don’t care much about income inequality. Counter to Bell, Americans dwell resolutely if not always happily in the land of opportunity, a territory far removed from the land of inequality. The rich reap the rewards they deserve for being smart, working hard, and producing prosperity for the rest of us. Meanwhile, the poor get what they deserve for not availing themselves of the opportunities America lavishes on all who are willing to persevere through thick and thin to bequeath a better life to their children. Known as the American dream, this set of beliefs is always trotted out to explain why Americans go

¹ Bell 1973: 451, 453, 454. See also Young 1958.

along with the massive gulf in earnings between the top and bottom, as well as why they fail to demand more from government to ease their economic insecurities when inevitably they arise. According to the American dream, the solution is within our grasp if only we try harder. If my neighbor can move up, then so can I.²

So stated, the American dream is both a genuine article of faith and an embarrassingly easy target to poke holes in. This chimeral aspect of the American dream is why it appears nowhere in the title of this book or in the titles of the chapters. It is obfuscating as both popular ideology and academic construct.³ Yet I open with it because its familiarity to lay and expert observer alike helps translate the three-headed, two-layered conundrum at the center of this book into a straightforward question: why do “we” (commentators) think that Americans think that opportunity is available, inequality is okay, and redistribution is bad, despite a good deal of evidence to the contrary? The three heads refer to beliefs about opportunity, inequality, and redistribution, and the two layers to “our” opinions of what Americans think about these issues on the one hand and to Americans’ actual beliefs about them on the other. On what basis do experts and everyday observers assert that Americans believe in the American dream as defined above? And how does this accord with what Americans *really* believe? Finally, why does this matter for answering the question of how we got from there (Bell’s era of seemingly small ratios between executive and worker pay) to here (our era of seemingly gargantuan ratios) without

² The opening sentences of a 2006 *Economist* cover story on inequality in the U.S. nicely distill these ideas: “the gap between the rich and poor is bigger than in any other advanced country, but most people are unconcerned. Whereas Europeans fret about the way the economic pie is divided, Americans want to join the rich, not soak them. Eight out of ten, more than anywhere else, believe that though you may start poor, if you work hard, you can make pots of money. It is a central part of the American Dream” (“The Rich, the Poor, and the Growing Gap Between Them,” *Economist*, 6/17/2006:28). The 2007 *New York Times Magazine* cover article on the income gap similarly observed that “the U.S. has a pretty high tolerance for inequality. Americans care about ‘fairness’ more than about ‘equalness’. We boo athletes suspected of taking steroids but we admire billionaires” (“The Inequality Conundrum,” *NYT Magazine*, 6/10/2007:11). As I show in my analysis of media coverage in chapter 3, however, there is a more nuanced coverage of inequality in the media than these quotations suggest.

³ Hochschild (1995) provides a thorough dissection of the contradictions inherent in American dream ideology.

much apparent resistance, until the Occupy Wall Street movement, and where we might be headed in the future?

First, where did the idea that Americans don't care about income inequality come from? The unfortunate reality about this part of the American dream is that there has been scant data upon which to evaluate how widely it is held or why it is held. This is true for beliefs about income inequality as well as for the question of whether the dream is impervious to transformations in the structure of opportunity, inequality, and redistribution. Ingenious scholars in economics and political science have gone to considerable lengths to ascertain how Americans are adapting to high levels of inequality by studying everything from self-reported levels of happiness to support for progressive tax policy and partisan political leanings, all seemingly unresponsive in the expected ways to escalating inequality. To explain these puzzling findings, scholars often resort to the contrast between Americans' unflinching faith in hard work as the surest route to success and Europeans' proclivity to say that luck is more important for getting ahead. Americans, unlike Europeans, are inoculated against anxieties about inequality by their belief in the possibility of upward mobility. Also influential are the ideas that Americans are either ignorant or dooped into having great admiration for the rich and thinking that someday they too will be rich, driving their antipathy toward heavily redistributive policies (as well as their antipathy to the undeserving poor). In short, the scholarly record shines on many surfaces related to the American dream but it skirts the issue of beliefs specifically about income inequality.⁴

⁴ For example, in an important article, Alesina, DiTella, and MacCulloch (2004:2035) use happiness as an indicator of tolerance for inequality across countries and conclude that "Americans are willing to tolerate quite large disparities in wealth as long as they perceive that wealth is the result of effort and that everyone can make it if enough effort and talent is devoted to the task." They rely on the best available report, at that time, of American attitudes about inequality and related issues in the era of rising inequality by Ladd and Bowman (1998) to draw this conclusion. Bowman later wrote in an op-ed that "there's little evidence that rising income inequality ever captured

This shortcoming is due almost entirely to the paucity of public opinion data directly on income inequality, as well as on the social groups like the rich which are potentially implicated in beliefs about inequality. By contrast, there is plenty of data on the social issues and groups which predate rising income inequality and predominated in public policy debates during the proliferation of modern public opinion polling in the 1970s and 1980s, such as welfare, racial and gender inequality, equal rights and opportunities, and the poor.⁵ Although I build on the many excellent studies alluded to above, and especially on the most in depth investigations of beliefs about inequality conducted prior to the era of rising income inequality, I refocus the lens.⁶ I place beliefs explicitly about income inequality, from the data that *are* available on the topic, in the center without losing sight of their crucial relationship to beliefs about opportunity and redistribution. In fact, I began this project looking *only* at beliefs about inequality in order to avoid inferring them from beliefs about opportunity and redistribution as is so often done out of necessity. Only after some time did I realize how interdependent the three views were, that understanding beliefs about inequality required an engagement with beliefs about opportunity and redistribution. As important, with opportunity at the heart of the American dream, it too

the public's imagination" (Bowman, 2000). Schlozman et al. (2005: 28) similarly conclude that "although Americans support a high level of equality among social groups and favor equality of opportunity, they appear to be less concerned about inequality in economic outcomes. For example, there is little public support for a massive redistribution of income or wealth." See also Piketty 1995; Benabou and Ok 2001; Haskins and Sawhill 2009. On the unexpected relationship between inequality, tax policy preferences, and partisanship, see Bartels (2008) and Kelly and Enns (2011). Lamont (2000), however, shows persuasively that Americans do not generally like or respect the rich in a moral sense. And evidence presented later shows that most Americans do not in fact think they will eventually become rich.

⁵ For research on attitudes about these issues, see DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo 2000; Feldman and Zaller 1992; Gilens 1999. Also, the American National Election Studies (ANES) has a battery of questions on equality dating back to 1984. These questions focus mainly on equality of opportunity (e.g., equal chances to succeed and equal rights) rather than equality of outcomes. Regarding social groups, the American National Election Study included "rich people" and "business people" (as opposed to "big business") for the first time in 2002 its time series of "feeling thermometer" questions, which has included a long list of other social groups since the 1960s and 1970s, including the poor (1972), welfare recipients (1976), and big business (1964).

⁶ See especially Hochschild 1981; Kluegal and Smith 1986; McCloskey and Zaller 1985; Verba and Orren 1985.

begins to take on an altogether different hue when held up to the light of beliefs about inequality. Thus the bigger picture of what “we” think about what Americans think changes as a consequence of widening the view.

The second way that I try to alter our approach to understanding how Americans think about inequality involves, in some respects, a narrowing of the field of vision rather than a broadening. By this I mean that I focus on the U.S. case alone. There is no denying that some of the most convincing conclusions about American beliefs about opportunity and redistribution to date come from cross-national comparisons. Certainly, for instance, Americans appear both more optimistic about their chances for upward mobility through hard work and less supportive of redistributive policies than Europeans.⁷ But one can also gain comparative leverage by studying changes in beliefs over time and differences among individuals *within* a country. Indeed, the American Political Science Association’s Task Force on Inequality concluded that “studying changes [over time] in political behavior and public opinion is essential to evaluate the impact of rising economic inequality.”⁸ This approach can furthermore help to weaken the grip that static ideas of American exceptionalism continue to have on our theoretical frameworks and popular discourses. In chapter 4, I analyze the only available time series of data directly on income inequality, stretching over two decades from 1987 to 2010. As a compliment to the public opinion data, I explore media coverage of inequality systematically in every year from 1980 to 2010 in chapter 3. This enables me to situate changing beliefs about inequality within the context of those major economic events related to rising inequality that I mentioned in the opening paragraph. Media discourses also provide a window into how economic phenomenon other than

⁷ Lipset 1996; Benabou and Tirole 2006; Sawhill and Morton 2007.

⁸ Jacobs and Skocpol, 2005: 215, 218. In addition, my re-reading of the foundational studies of beliefs about inequality in the 1980s is that these scholars expected that Americans would respond to changes in social reality but were not able to evaluate them because of the lack of time series data.

the business cycle help to shape American perceptions of fairness and public policy on economic issues.

If we change the way we go about studying American beliefs about inequality, opportunity, and redistribution in these ways, how does that change the story we tell about what Americans think? Far from not caring about income inequality, the small number of questions that do exist on this topic reveal that a substantial share of Americans have long desired less inequality in the United States, and sometimes much less. This is something that specialists in the field have been documenting since at least the 1970s. On the lower end of estimates, 41 percent of Americans said in 1980 that they desired “more equality than there is now” or “complete equality of income”; 41 percent disagreed in 1987 that “all in all, economic differences in this country are justified”; 55 percent agreed in 1987 that “personal income should not be determined just by one’s worth. Rather, everyone should get what they need to provide a decent life for their family”; and between 38 and 58 percent from 1987 to 2010 disagreed that “large differences in income are necessary for America’s prosperity.”

On the upper end of estimates, 60 percent agreed in 1987 that “it would be better for everyone if the distribution of wealth in this country were more equal”; between 71 and 86 percent from the 1970s to the present said that heads of corporations are overpaid; between 58 and 77 percent from 1987 to 2010 agreed that “income differences in America are too large”; and between 66 and 83 percent desire a gap in pay between executives and unskilled workers that is lower by 20 percent or more than what they think the gap is (which is much lower than the actual

gap). I can confidently say that no question has been asked of Americans in which the responses fall outside this range of opposition to inequality.⁹

Although these data are not widely known, few among those who are familiar with them dispute the contention that many if not most Americans are dissatisfied with the degree of income inequality in their country. And as I said above, this is not a finding of recent vintage; it goes at least as far back as the halcyon days, at least as regards levels of income inequality, of the 1970s. What is in dispute is the strength and consistency of these attitudes, the extent to which Americans comprehend the trajectory and scale of trends in inequality over time, and their consequences and policy implications (though one could say this of just about any political attitude). But with so much deflection from the issue of income inequality in the broader discourse and in existing social surveys and public opinion polls, these debates are still inchoate. They continue to beat around the bush of *whether* Americans know and care about rising income inequality. In this book, I examine these questions too, but I extend the inquiry to what would appear to be a pivotal question that nevertheless is obscured by both present and longstanding debates. This is the question of exactly *why* Americans might be concerned about income inequality. Asking the “why” question side steps the polarized debates about whether Americans care or not and instead seeks to determine the parameters under which they do and do not.

There are, of course, many potential explanations for why income inequality would matter to Americans. They may be concerned about their own financial situation if their earnings have declined in relative or even absolute terms, and realize that they would be better off with more redistribution, as suggested by median voter theories. They may be concerned about matters of procedural justice, whether opportunities and rewards are doled out fairly to those at

⁹ See Kluegal and Smith 1986; Feldman 1987; Kelley and Evans 1992; Osberg and Smeeding 2006; and analyses in chapters 4 and 5. For the results of public opinion polls on executive pay since the 1970s, see chapter 6. Chapter 2 also reviews public opinion data on these topics from previous studies.

the bottom, middle, and top, as discussed by numerous psychological studies. They may be concerned about the adverse effect of income inequality on other social spheres, such as crime, politics, education, residential segregation, or health care, as documented by scholars across the social sciences. They may have fuzzy norms of fairness in which some level of distance between the rich or poor and everyone else is seen as unsavory, as alluded to by theories of class resentment and envy of the rich. They may be concerned about those who are in need through no fault of their own, as suggested by theories of humanitarianism, reciprocity and deservingness. Or they may fear that income inequality has adverse effects on the economy itself, not just for themselves but for all Americans, as debated by economists who study the relationship between economic growth and income inequality.¹⁰

Ideally we would possess data on each of these propositions and the policy solutions associated with them. However, no such data exists. In this book, I examine as many as possible with the most comprehensive data available on public opinion about inequality, opportunity, and redistribution. My data come mainly from the General Social Survey but also from the American National Election Studies. In Chapter 2, I also mine the historical and theoretical record, going as far back as the 19th century, to ascertain the social conditions under which the reigning assumptions about American beliefs regarding inequality, opportunity, and redistribution became crystalized. I conclude from a wide range of evidence that concerns about income inequality are best understood as fears of narrowing opportunities. While this argument draws from several of the perspectives above, in particular studies of the relationship between economic growth and

¹⁰ On median voter models, see Meltzer and Richard 1981; norms of procedural justice and fairness, see Miller 1991; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Verba and Orren 1985; the negative consequences of inequality, see Neckerman 2004; views of the rich, see Lamont 2000; norms of humanitarianism, reciprocity, and deservingness, see Hochschild 1981; Gilens 1999; Feldman and Steenbergen 2001; Fong, Bowles, Gintis 2004; economic theories of inequality and growth, see Benabou 2000; Andrews et al. 2009; Voichovsky 2009; Roine et al. 2009.

income inequality, its inspiration comes from a somewhat unlikely source: previous research on attitudes about racial and gender inequality.

One of the lesser appreciated observations made by James Kluegal and Elliot Smith in their definitive study of beliefs about inequality was that Americans appeared to become more intolerant of racial and gender inequality in the 1970s and 1980s as their awareness of the issues was informed and ignited by the civil rights movements. From my perspective, the most interesting aspect of this dynamic was that even though Americans favored equality of opportunity over equality of outcomes for minorities and women (e.g., in the form of quotas), much of the *evidence* for whether opportunities were unequal rested on whether *outcomes* were unequal. Unequal pay or unequal educational attainment between racial and gender groups functioned as signals of unequal opportunities. James Coleman in “The Coleman Report” and John Roemer in *Equal Opportunity*, among others, went further in the public policy arena. They sought to measure, and thereby define, unequal opportunities as unequal outcomes.¹¹ The intuition was that restrictions of opportunities are often difficult to observe whereas inequalities of outcomes are less so and yet represent the cumulative effect of differential opportunities over time. It was exactly this substitution of equal outcomes for equal opportunities that unnerved Bell and provoked his opposition to affirmative action on the grounds that it overreached the public mandate for equal opportunity. If not borne in this cauldron, the misleading opposition between opportunity and outcomes at the root of the American dream (i.e., that Americans care about the former and not the latter) was at least fortified, as I discuss in further detail in chapter 2.

Yet when applied to the issue of income inequality, Bell endorses the interdependence of outcomes and opportunities in his formulation of an “unjust meritocracy” described in the

¹¹ Coleman 1966; Roemer 1998.

introduction to this chapter. This approach has never been fully adapted to the study of inequalities of opportunity and outcomes related to class, however, even by Bell. Doing so requires a better conceptualization of what opportunity and inequality represent within the context of income inequality (as opposed to in the context of racial and gender inequality). With regard to opportunity, for example, I develop five “tropes” of what equal opportunity means to Americans in chapter 5. These tropes go well beyond the role of individual hard work in getting ahead, which I refer to as the “bootstraps opportunity” trope. In addition, I define the availability of jobs, the assurance of fair pay, and the equal treatment of individuals from different class backgrounds as central but distinct elements of a full opportunity society. I term these the “rising tide,” “just deserts,” and “equal treatment” opportunity tropes. With these examples, I illustrate how Americans have a much more encompassing understanding of what opportunity means, and how it can be unfairly restricted, than is commonly thought. Similarly, I expand on the conceptualization of income inequality to include views about the rich in chapters 4 and 5, and on the conceptualization of redistribution to include views about the kind of labor market redistribution, such as a fair distribution of pay in a “just meritocracy,” that would result in greater work opportunities for ordinary Americans in chapter 6.

With this broader conceptualization in mind, I turn the predominant explanation of why Americans *don't* care about income inequality on its head. Instead of inferring that Americans don't care about income inequality from their belief that opportunity is widely available, I contend that Americans can construe income inequality as itself a restriction of economic opportunity. This occurs when *everyone* does not appear to be benefiting from economic growth or suffering from economic troubles. When the rich stand out as unscathed by economic turmoil, for example, they are potentially deemed undeserving for two reasons: they are prospering when

others are not (a violation of norms of fairness) and their own poor stewardship of the economy may be a principal reason for the turmoil (a violation of “just deserts” opportunity if their compensation remains stratospheric, and a violation of “rising tide” opportunity if inequality adversely affected economic growth). In this view, it is not how the rich attained their position that is unsettling, which is a matter of intergenerational immobility (“equal treatment” opportunity), but rather what they did with their position, which is a matter of “just deserts” and “rising tide” opportunity. Moreover, it is the *equitable distribution* of income that is desired rather than simply the *growth* of income. This means that the rich can be perceived as undeserving even during expansions in the business cycle, as I demonstrate in chapters 4 and 5. This approach builds on but also significantly modifies influential theories that link political attitudes to the rhythms of the business cycle and other macroeconomic indicators.¹²

If at times Americans believe that income inequality restricts economic opportunity, it follows that those with such concerns would seek policies that expand opportunities rather than redistribute income through the tax system as a response to their concerns. This is because it is distortions in the *private sector* allocation of opportunity and rewards precipitated by income inequality that is most distressing. Americans care about their own economic livelihood, to be sure, but they see it as linked to the economic health of the economy overall. This kind of “sociotropic” orientation is found in studies of voting behavior as well, in which assessments of the national economy are more influential than assessments of personal finances in the choice of candidates and parties.¹³ Consequently, the causes of restrictions of opportunity that have to do with income inequality, such as distortions in pay at the top or the use of unfair social advantages in getting ahead, become causes for action in expanding opportunity. Policies plainly associated

¹² Hetherington 1996; Erikson et al. 2002.

¹³ Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007.

with producing equitable economic opportunity are favored while government redistribution, the focus of nearly all previous scholarship on the politics of income inequality, is not. This is not because government redistribution does not affect growth and opportunity, but because it is not *associated* with creating growth and opportunity.¹⁴ When it is, such as when it is linked to shoring up access to education that enhances economic opportunities, it should be met with higher approval.¹⁵ Thus my approach is discerning: it does not group the usual grab bag of popular progressive social policies under the umbrella of policies that expand opportunity and reduce inequality.

Despite the focus on income inequality, then, all three of the social norms of inequality, opportunity, and redistribution are central to the story told in this book. Each is reconceptualized as having multiple dimensions that go beyond current definitions in public opinion and survey research and that are more consistent with the new era of rising inequality, as well as with prior eras (in theory, as I argue in chapter 2). These dimensions are then brought together in a framework that theoretically identifies the mechanisms that bind them together. The connections that underlie these mechanisms, in turn, are examined empirically to avoid to the extent possible drawing inferences across a long chain of beliefs. The upshot is that Americans turn out to be much more critical and coherent in their views than anyone would have predicted, including

¹⁴In fact, Republicans often pitch tax cuts as necessary for increasing economic growth and tax increases as retarding economic growth (Lupia 2007; Smith 2007). Similarly, journalists often oppose tax policy with economic growth: “The political consensus, therefore, has sought to pursue economic growth rather than redistribution of income, in keeping with John Kennedy’s adage that ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’” (*Economist* 6/17/2006:28), and a Democratic pollster said that he found “little appetite for policies that would redistribute income as his party has advocated over the years...Instead, people were looking for pro-growth policies that were neither traditionally Democratic nor Republican” (“Pockets Half Empty or Half Full,” *New York Times*, 9/3/2006).

¹⁵ The *New York Times Magazine* (6/10/2007) cover story on income inequality cited in footnote 2 implied that Americans supported redistributive policies that enhanced education (“Some redistribution is clearly good for the entire economy—providing public schooling, for instance, so that everyone gets an education. But public education aside, the U.S. has a pretty high tolerance for inequality”), but it is unclear whether Americans make such a connection between redistributive policies and spending on opportunity enhancing programs, something I test empirically in chapter 6.

those who have usefully argued, in different forms, for the complexity, ambivalence, and inconsistency of American beliefs, the lack of information about the issue, or the priority of other issues that are more pressing and concrete, such as economic insecurity.¹⁶ In short, this book aims to replace the dominant narrative of American tolerance for inequality with a coherent alternative that also incorporates American beliefs about opportunity and redistribution.

THE UN/DESERVING RICH

With sufficient *prima facie* evidence that a significant share of Americans care about income inequality in hand, my primary purpose in this book, as I said above, is to transition to thinking carefully about why Americans have the views that they do and the implications of this for politics and public policy. I outlined a number of alternative explanations and then offered the view that I have come to hold in the process of conducting the research for this book. But it is worth expanding on some of the alternative explanations further and then sketching a more precise account of the perspective that I develop and which I organize around the concept of the “undeserving rich.”

An explanation that is perhaps the most often associated with criticisms of inequality is that those from advantaged backgrounds are given preferential treatment in education and the labor market by dint of the better preparation their parents’ money can often, though not always, buy. This is the problem of the unequal starting gate, and it is the justifiable focus of much social science research on intergenerational *immobility*. To the extent that the playing field can be leveled, particularly for children in their access to quality education, a genuine meritocracy will flourish. This is *the* definition of equal opportunity (i.e., a level playing field as measured by

¹⁶On ambivalence, see Hochschild 1981, 1995; Kluegal and Smith 1986; Page and Jacobs 2009; Newman and Jacobs 2009. On ignorance, see Bartels 2005, 2008; Campbell 2010. On insecurity, see Hacker 2006. For a detailed discussion of these positions, see chapter 2.

intergenerational mobility) that is said to justify inequalities in outcomes as both fair and economically functional, allocating talent more efficiently than a system that squanders the talents of the disadvantaged.¹⁷ As a normative matter, most everybody is on board with this depiction of both the problem of inequality and its solution, though putting the solution into practice is often a different and more contentious matter.

This approach has an unintended and unfortunate consequence, however. It tends to focus attention only on the starting gate because it assumes that any resulting distribution of outcomes is fair if the starting gate is equal. Inequities in the allocation of pay, another avenue through which opportunity can be derailed, is brushed over or not even contemplated as a problematic aspect of inequality. But both Bell in his “unjust meritocracy” and the ironic originator of the term “meritocracy,” Michael Young, recognized that the distribution of outcomes can itself lead to the corruption of a meritocracy. In his 1958 classic dystopian novel *The Rise of Meritocracy*, Young tells the story of greedy technocratic elites hoarding resources and crushing the souls of the meritless masses. Ultimately this is dysfunctional for the economy as well as for the society.

The undeserving rich is a conceptual intervention that follows from Young and Bell and identifies the actors that are involved in the making of an unjust, and inefficient, meritocracy. It is meant to include not only unfair inequalities in preparation and access but unfair inequalities in pay. Pay disparities are unfair when earnings exceed the contribution and performance of those in the driver’s seat of the economy, those who are seen as economic leaders and are expected to deliver economic prosperity for all. Conversely, pay disparities are unfair when earnings fall short of the contribution and need of hard working Americans further down the ladder. The deserving rich, by contrast, corresponds to a scenario in which the rich are extolled for their ingenuity and contribution to equitable growth. Under these conditions, the *amount* of

¹⁷ For a nuanced discussion of this position, see Jencks and Tach (2006).

inequality in pay between those at the top and bottom is not the primary consideration; the tolerable level of income inequality is any level that is compatible with widespread opportunities for a good job with fair pay for the majority of Americans. Thus another common explanation of beliefs about inequality—that they reflect abstract considerations of fairness pertaining to the absolute level of inequality—matters less than practical considerations about the availability of opportunities, in the broadest sense of the term, and the role of the rich is securing or subverting those opportunities.¹⁸

I trace in chapter 2 the relationship between the reality and perception of inequality and opportunity across iconic eras of U.S. history, identifying when equitable growth fostered a virtuous harmony of inequality and opportunity that was historically specific yet underwrote trans-historical theories of Americans' indifference to inequality. Writing about economic attitudes in *The Affluent Society* in the late 1950s, for instance, John Kenneth Galbraith opined that “few things are more evident in modern social history than the decline of interest in inequality as an economic issue...[and] in one way or another [the decline is] related to the fact of increasing production.”¹⁹ To Galbraith, this was not a cause for celebration but a call to arms to reverse the “social imbalance” between private wealth and public restraint in social spending. Like Bell, Galbraith saw high levels of inequality even in an era of historically low levels, a sign that context matters at least as much as absolute levels in shaping norms about inequality. Galbraith also observed *changes* in attitudes about inequality and their origins. A massive

¹⁸ Many suggest that if Americans only knew how high inequality was, they would object, thus assuming that attitudes are based mainly on abstract fairness criteria (Krugman 2008; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Norton and Ariely 2011).

¹⁹ Galbraith 1958: 82,97. On the idea of economic growth and abundance in the private sector in the U.S. fulfilling demands for social rights associated with the welfare state in Europe, see Strasser et al (1998). This does not mean that the economy grew equitably for racial and gender groups, however (see, e.g., MacLean 2005).

increase in well-being, spurred by “increasing aggregate output” had displaced “redistribution or even the reduction of inequality” as a social demand, he complained.

I adopt Galbraith’s general logic in this book but prefer to use the label of redistribution more flexibly so that equitable growth in the private sector and the labor market represents a different but no less potent form of redistribution in the public mind than progressive taxation and social spending do. By this definition, concerns about inequality in an era of *inequitable* growth or contraction, as in the 1980s and subsequent decades, would prompt demands for greater labor market redistribution through cuts in pay at the top, job growth, and fair pay for the majority, for example, rather than for taxing the rich, unless progressive taxation is transparently linked to a fairer *economy* as well as to a fairer *society*.²⁰ This should be the response if Galbraith’s logic regarding beliefs about inequality is applied to the conditions of inequitable growth in the “New Gilded Age.” The prevailing assumption that Americans are tolerant or indifferent to inequality is therefore a relic of a bygone era, a supposed postwar paradise that Galbraith attempted to demystify. Although we cannot expect American beliefs to change on a dime with the onset of the New Gilded Age, my purpose here is to integrate historical conditions into our theoretical models of American beliefs and to use these insights to better understand how such beliefs evolve over time and particularly how they do so in our day and age.²¹

In the same vein, then, that scholars have connected perceptions of the poor to Americans’ tolerance for poverty and social policies related to poverty, I argue that perceptions of the rich are connected to Americans’ tolerance for inequality and social policies related to inequality. The frame of the “undeserving rich” is derived from the concept of the “undeserving

²⁰ On trends in equitable growth in the postwar period and inequitable growth in the period from 1980, see Kuznets 1955; Goldin and Katz 2008; Piketty and Saez 2003; Ellwood 2000.

²¹ Louis Uchitelle used the term “New Gilded Age” to describe the era of rising inequality (“Richest of the Rich: Proud of a New Gilded Age,” *New York Times*, 6/15/07). For an analogous argument on the long term embeddedness of postwar ideologies in beliefs about the welfare state, see Brooks and Manza (2007).

poor,” which describes public antipathy toward the poor under particular conditions and the resulting implications for redistributive policy preferences (i.e., if the poor are not hard working or belong to a minority group, then they are undeserving of welfare).²² In an analogous fashion, the “undeserving rich” describes public antipathy toward the rich under particular conditions and the resulting implications for redistributive policy preferences. Beyond this analogy, however, the framework I develop in this book erects a stricter analytical separation between inequality and poverty than is common in the literature. This separation is necessary in the new era of inequality in order to put important but under-scrutinized and under-theorized social groups under the microscope, such as the rich, and to avoid questionable assumptions about how Americans think about inequality in ways that are similar to the way that they think about poverty.

METHOD

But how realistic is it to attribute such a seemingly sophisticated outlook to ordinary Americans? Readers well-versed in political science debates on citizen competence may be skeptical. According to some, the best we can expect is for Americans to tune into the big issues of the day and digest elite messages with little information and a (sometimes large) dose of partisan bias that taps into a more general ideological orientation. Because it is often presumed that income inequality is an issue of little salience, and is complex and obscured by elite interests and maneuvers, American ignorance should only be accentuated in this territory. For instance, Larry Bartel’s *Unequal Democracy*, surely one of the most important books of our time, posits that low and middle income Americans engage in “unenlightened self-interest” and “myopia” in their support of inequality-enhancing policies, such as the Bush tax cuts, and inequality-promoting

²²Katz 1989; Gilens 1999.

parties, such as the Republicans. He found that even those who comprehend that income inequality is much larger than in the past and proclaim it a “bad thing” are no more likely than others to oppose tax cuts for the rich. If Americans can’t square their opposition to rising income inequality with tax cuts for the rich, how can we expect them to adopt the gestalt of the undeserving rich?²³

From the very start of this project in the early 2000s, I was sympathetic to this possibility. My intuition was that neither the trend toward rising income inequality nor its connection with redistributive tax policy was particularly transparent to the American public. As Americans we are not routinely schooled in the virtues of redistributive politics, either as I described them above under the “undeserving rich” rubric or as they are described by conventional welfare state models in which the median voter (in capitalist societies) follows her self-interest in endorsing income redistribution. Instead, there is either a void in media and political discourses on these matters—though it is much less of a void than commonly assumed, as I show in chapter 3—or redistribution is vilified as anti-growth.²⁴ My conjecture is much the same when it comes to discourses of hard work and luck. These concepts purportedly draw the line between Americans and Europeans in beliefs about inequality and redistribution, but the concepts are not articulated with equal force on both sides of the Atlantic. As economists Alesina, Glaeser, and Benabou, among others, argue, beliefs about luck and hard work are themselves endogenous to society.²⁵ They are what need to be explained rather than what should be doing the explaining. Consequently, in an American culture with almost no ideology or folklore of luck, as far as I can ascertain, we should not expect luck’s complicated implications for social policy to orient beliefs

²³ Bartels 2005, 2008: chapters 5, 6. But see debates in Hacker and Pierson 2005 and Lupia et al. 2007.

²⁴ On Republican discourses of progressive taxes as anti-growth, see Zelizer 2003; Smith 2007.

²⁵ Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Benabou and Tirole 2006.

about distributive justice.²⁶ Bartels' findings and skepticism are justifiable in this context, as is his attribution of much of the blame for American "ignorance" and American inequality to political elites.

All this may be true while nonetheless a quite different sort of question remains apropos: has American culture nourished other interpretations of unfairness in economic matters, and other avenues of distributive justice? And how would we know if it did? In trying to answer this question, my goal is to fully excavate, to the extent possible with available data, beliefs in and around the single issue domain of income inequality. This is a more modest objective than resolving long standing debates about American political competence. In the end, beliefs about inequality do manifest more opposition and coherence than the prevailing theories of tolerance and ignorance predict, but the main lesson I draw from this is that our theoretical models specifically about beliefs about income inequality need to be revised and not that Americans are fully and always competent or that partisan and material biases are irrelevant. An accumulation of studies with similar conclusions on different issues may contribute to these broader debates about the consistency of American political beliefs, but as important, I think, is the development of methodological approaches that open mindedly explore fine-grained structures of belief in circumscribed issue domains. These in turn may lead to new theoretical models in these domains as well as to insights into broader theories of political knowledge.²⁷

²⁶ Among these complications is the question of what we as commentators think counts as luck, what Americans count as luck, and which among these are justifiable determinants of outcomes (e.g., ability) and which are not (e.g., race). I take up this discussion in chapter 5.

²⁷ As Lupia et al. (2007: 779) argue, "instead of characterizing people as misguided, it may be more instructive to conduct scholarship that attempts to better fit our analyses into their rationales—including the likelihood that they approach political problems from varying ideological perspectives and with different values in mind." They focus on what can appear to be reasonable rather than ignorant and irrational differences in tax policy preferences, but also demonstrate that the relationship between knowledge, awareness, and policy preferences can vary across issue domains. Druckman's (forthcoming) review of motivated reasoning (i.e., partisan biases in information gathering and preference formation) also describes several individual and contextual factors which minimize partisan biases,

The methodological approach I pursue in this book is aimed at this level of analysis. On the one hand, my approach follows standard protocol in survey research by analyzing available questions in well-respected nationally representative social surveys. I am especially indebted to the social scientists who had the foresight to design the Social Inequality Modules of the International Social Survey Program beginning in 1987 and replicate them in 1992, 1996, and 2000. In 2008 and 2010, I was involved enough in the analysis of these items to request that they be included and to obtain support from the General Social Survey Board and the National Science Foundation to do so. My rationale was that the questions about income inequality on the Social Inequality Modules were the only ones that were repeated over time, asked specifically about multiple dimensions of income inequality, and did not conflate the issue of inequality with government policies (i.e., did not include language about the government's role in reducing income inequality).

These questions presented a unique opportunity to examine American beliefs about income inequality in an historic era of rising inequality. In conjunction with the General Social Survey's (GSS) core battery of questions about social spending priorities and a few additional questions about opportunities to get ahead in both the GSS core and the Social Inequality Modules, these data also enabled an investigation of the implications of beliefs about inequality for social policy preferences, as well as the role that beliefs about hard work and upward mobility play in this relationship. The GSS data permitted, in short, an investigation of the three-headed conundrum stated at the outset of this chapter: whether Americans do indeed think that opportunities are available, inequality is okay, and redistribution is bad despite what appears to be *prima facie* evidence to the contrary.

such as having weak, ambivalent, and uninformed attitudes (i.e., not being a strong partisan); being exposed to competing messages over time and issues that are less contentious or are new and less likely to be aligned with prior ideological orientations; and having to account for your position on an issue.

On the other hand, my investigation of these questions led in a number of surprising directions. The emphasis of the book on answering the “why” question, based in significant degree on leveraging changes over time in such beliefs, necessitated a methodological stance more akin to that of qualitative researchers in comparative historical and cultural sociology than of quantitative researchers in survey research.²⁸ Because of the relatively small number of time points of attitudinal data, in chapter 4, I use qualitative methods of comparison and contrast among concurrent macro-level trends to rule out alternative explanations of changes in beliefs over time (e.g., do beliefs about income inequality follow the trend in the business cycle, actual levels of income inequality, political party dynamics, media coverage, etc. ?). Chapter 3 also incorporates a thick description of the cultural and historical context of discourses of class and inequality in a detailed content analysis of media coverage of these topics over the last three decades. Finally, chapter 3 provides a theoretical probing of the meaning of and relationship between the concepts of inequality, opportunity, and redistribution over the past two centuries and across the disciplines of social science. In short, the survey analysis is situated within a broader historical, cultural, and theoretical framework rooted in real world dynamics and historical conjunctures in a single society regarding a single constellation of issues long central to American culture.

Although I found that attention to the macro institutional and cultural context of income inequality in the United States was essential to interpreting why Americans care about inequality, it is my hope that these explanations will function in turn as hypotheses for future research. In particular, it will be valuable to subject these hypotheses to stricter causal tests than is possible with existing survey data; this can be done through experimental research, for instance. New questions and instruments ought to be designed that accord better with the nature of beliefs about

²⁸ Ragin 1987; Pierson 2004; Newman 1988, 1992; Lamont 1992, 2000; Young 2004.

inequality in American culture that I propose in this book. I discuss the possibilities for further causal as well as cultural and survey analysis in the concluding chapter, where I map out a new research agenda for research on beliefs about income inequality, economic opportunity, and social and economic policy.

Focusing on the “why” question also required a somewhat different approach to survey research than is common in much of social science research on attitudes, beliefs, and values. On the one hand, best practice in social psychology typically entails working with multi-item scales which have robust reliability properties derived from psychometric testing. Social psychologists are admirably precise in their articulation of both concepts and mechanisms and how these are and should be operationalized in laboratory experiments. The large and impressive literature on meritocratic beliefs in a just world and other justice beliefs is a testament to the scientific value and payoff of this approach.²⁹ On the other hand, best practice in the more macro-level studies of political beliefs in political science focus less on mechanisms in concept-specific domains. Yet, like psychology, these studies entail the bundling of multiple items into broader issue categories (e.g., economic and cultural values or political ideology) and the tracing of them over time and across space to arrive at powerful stories of aggregate swings in mass political preferences. Similarly, with respect to voting preferences, a few aggregate indicators carry all the weight, such as the state of the national economy and the party of incumbents.³⁰

By comparison to the venerable traditions of research in social psychology and political science, the survey questions at my disposal are rich in combining questions about beliefs in all three areas of interest in this project—income inequality, economic opportunity, and redistribution—but they are relatively few and varied within each area and were not custom

²⁹ In psychology, see, e.g., Jost and Major 2001. In sociology, there is a related and significant literature on justice beliefs that also inspires my work in this book. See Jasso and Rossi 1977; Shepelak and Alwin 1986; Jasso 1999.

³⁰Page and Shapiro 1992; Erikson et al. 2002; Kelly and Enns 2010.

designed to answer the questions about mechanisms across areas that I put to them. In some respects, this gives me greater confidence in the validity of the findings that I do uncover than if I had inadvertently tipped the scales in my favor in the design of questions. But it also means that my approach must of necessity combine deductive reasoning about mechanisms with inductive analyses of the items that are available to me. Ultimately, the interpretative approach I adopt in analyzing single items and the interrelationships among them will be judged by its potential to illuminate beliefs about income inequality in the real world of rising inequality. Thus my goal is to fuse the social psychologist's careful attention to concepts and mechanisms and the political scientist's careful attention to real world, macro dynamics. Perhaps the middle ground I chart is not surprising given my training in sociology.

Finally, all of these methodological considerations lead me to revisit the second layer of questions that underlie this study, the layer that asks how we come to know what we say we know about American beliefs toward income inequality. I am as engaged with this question as I am with the question of what Americans themselves say about income inequality, in dialogue as much with academic and popular discourses of inequality and opportunity as with the attitudes of individual Americans. This book examines how we came to hold the theories and discourses we do as well as the nuances of beliefs among Americans.

My primary goal, then, is to reduce the considerable arc of inference that now exists between what we say Americans believe and the instruments we use to draw such conclusions. I do this by taking both theoretical models of lay perceptions of the social world and lay perceptions themselves and calibrating them to historical conditions and a wider range of data

and evidence than is typically considered in studies of beliefs about income inequality.³¹ The moment we inhabit now, with Occupy Wall Street and its sister movements having already galvanized worldwide attention to the issue of income inequality, is as much a part of the history and context I unearth and unravel in this book as is the post-World War II period of equitable growth, and the period of rising income inequality that began in the 1970s and 1980s. I hope the narrative I develop about how Americans think about inequality, opportunity, and redistribution helps put events such as Occupy Wall Street in long term perspective, informed by and contiguous with long held desires for abundant and equitably distributed opportunity, and consequently with whatever level of income inequality that is compatible with this elementary but profound American demand.³²

ORGANIZATION OF BOOK

The book proceeds in the next chapter to examine the historical and theoretical development of what I refer to as the three main perspectives on American beliefs about income inequality: the tolerance, ignorance, and ambivalence perspectives. I pull together the disparate strands of research in economics, sociology, political science, history, and social psychology into these three perspectives and then show how each perspective articulates or assumes a particular relationship to beliefs about opportunity and redistribution, as well as to historical conditions. The alternative framework presented above and in greater detail in the next chapter draws on all three perspectives to craft an approach that is adaptable to multiple historical conditions, and

³¹ I am thus sympathetic to Lupia et al.'s (2007:780) "constructive way forward" which "entails rethinking the relationship between the people who study social phenomena and the people who are being studied." I am grateful to Jamie Druckman for bringing this similarity of approaches to my attention.

³² This more encompassing and radical approach to the definition and centrality of opportunity in theories of distributive justice is also consistent with the groundbreaking "capabilities" approach developed by Amartya Sen (1999, 2010).

most importantly, goes “beyond the opposition between inequality and opportunity” (as the title of the next chapter puts it).

The following four chapters consist of empirical analyses of the different components of the theoretical framework developed in chapter 2. In the first empirical chapter, chapter 3, I provide a systematic analysis of media coverage of class and income inequality in the top three newsweeklies (*Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report*) in every year from 1980 to 2010. The analysis reveals the “cultural supply side” of discourses of class and income inequality in the United States, showing for the first time when rising inequality emerged as a new social reality (in the early 1990s), how it was portrayed as a new social problem, and why it followed a nonlinear pattern, ebbing and flowing over a time period of three decades when income inequality itself continued to grow.³³ Contrary to expectations, news articles traversed a complex and varied terrain and were often nuanced in alluding to the problematic ways in which income inequality functioned as a restraint on opportunity for the middle class as the economy expanded for those at the top but not for the rest of Americans.

Each of the following three chapters examines public opinion about income inequality (chapter 4), economic opportunity (chapter 5), and redistribution and other social policy preferences (chapter 6). The first of these chapters focuses exclusively on beliefs about income inequality, changes in these beliefs over time, and alternative explanations of these changes over time. The analysis shows that concerns about income inequality grew over the period of rising income inequality, contrary to arguments about the development of more permissive social norms.³⁴ But it also shows that concerns grew in a nonlinear pattern, contrary to the natural

³³ I take the idea of the “cultural supply side” from Michele Lamont (1992, 2000).

³⁴ Both Krugman (2002) and Piketty and Saez (2003) suggest that increasingly permissive social norms fostered the increase in income inequality.

expectation that outrage should erupt transparently with the rise in inequality itself.³⁵ In order to answer the “why” question by accounting for changes over time in beliefs, the chapter examines compositional shifts in a wide range of factors, such as education, income, demographic characteristics, and political orientation, as well as changes in the intensity of beliefs among different groups. As mentioned above, it also examines aggregate trends in actual income inequality, real median wages, unemployment, consumer confidence, and electoral dynamics. After considerable testing, I conclude that the trend in beliefs is most consistent with trends in media coverage of the issue, which peaks at the same time as widespread and mainstream opposition to income inequality in the early and mid-1990s, even relative to the recent period of financial crisis and Great Recession.

Chapter 6 then takes up the relationship between beliefs about economic opportunity and beliefs about income inequality directly, as this relationship is implied by the trend in opposition to income inequality, the content of media coverage, and the historical and theoretical development of beliefs about income inequality. I develop several new ways of defining what equal opportunity means to Americans and then show how Americans draw coherent and logical connections between *particular* violations of equal opportunity and *corresponding* problems with income inequality. To take just one example, an overwhelming majority of Americans will say that hard work matters more than luck or help from others in getting ahead, but these beliefs have *little to no* bearing on beliefs about income inequality, belying a nearly universal arc of inference from faith in hard work to tolerance of inequality attributed to Americans. But there is more. Based on rarely used data, I find that a substantial minority of Americans say that social advantages, such as knowing the right people and having educated parents, *are* important barriers to getting ahead, and that these *do* lead to more critical attitudes toward income

³⁵ Page and Jacobs 2009; Newman and Jacobs 2010.

inequality. Few scholars acknowledge that Americans make such connections, however, and thus believe that research ought to focus on showing how social mobility has stalled in recent decades rather than how income inequality has increased. This chapter shows that Americans grasp that the two go hand in hand and no such choice is necessary.

The political consequences of these and other findings are then explored in chapter six, where I take up the relationship directly between beliefs about income inequality and a wide spectrum of social policy preferences. Increasing concerns about income inequality in the 1990s, for example, were not accompanied by increasing support for assistance to the poor and progressive taxation. Instead, they were accompanied by preferences for more spending on education, a policy domain associated centrally with expanding opportunities. Even support for other policies that scholars associate with expanding opportunities or limiting inequality, such as health care and social security, did not rise in tandem with concerns about income inequality. Moreover, the chapter 5 showed that Americans object to social advantages in getting ahead by the well off and the well-connected, as well as to the overpay of executives and the underpay of workers. Importantly, Americans view these distortions in compensation as limiting access to good jobs and fair pay for Americans as a whole. This chapter therefore reconceptualizes policy preferences related to income inequality in terms of curbing the excesses of the undeserving rich and expanding the opportunities of deserving workers. Americans appear to desire opportunities for education and redistribution in the labor market more than government redistribution (conventionally understood) as a way to counteract rising inequality.

This book relies upon existing data sources to formulate a new perspective on how Americans think about inequality, opportunity, and redistribution. Although existing data sources were sufficient for this purpose, and even help to validate the findings by the very fact that they

were not constructed with this perspective in mind, the findings of this book suggest that there may be better ways to divine American attitudes on these topics. The concluding chapter summarizes the main findings, discusses the recent shift toward identifying values, beliefs, and social norms as important factors in the policy formation process, and proposes a new agenda for studying beliefs related to these central tenets of American culture. This will point the way forward as more surveys seek to include questions related to income inequality, a movement that is already underway, and more students of cultural, historical, and comparative social science seek to resolve the many puzzles that remain with in depth qualitative and contextual analysis.

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