

4 Is equality the goal?

Challenging economic inequality in the US and UK

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Oppositional movements and challenges to hegemonic capitalism and economic inequality have long histories in many parts of the world. In particular, for centuries, reform movements, labor movements and populist revolts have periodically rallied to denounce the unequal distribution of income and wealth in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Most recently, the emergence of the Occupy Movement—beginning in September 2011 with the Occupy Wall Street protests in New York City, USA and quickly spreading to cities throughout the world, ranging from brief rallies and marches to long-term encampments—has refocused public attention on these issues. The proximate cause of the Occupy Movement protests was the extended economic recession of 2008, triggered in part by corporate maleficence abetted by lax government regulation, yet for many challengers these were merely the most visible and recent indicators of deep, structural problems. The Occupy Movement's encampments received considerable media attention with stories and commentary expressing a wide range of opinions: from support and solidarity to contempt and ridicule. In story after story, journalists, pundits and politicians struggled to make sense of these protests. During the months following the initial encampments a dominant media storyline emerged. This storyline pitted protestors against local authorities in a “free speech v. police repression” tale; it highlighted the heterogeneity of demands within the movement (which was caricatured either positively as “an inclusive, non-hierarchical, democratic model” or negatively as “a rag-tag collection of malcontents who don't know what they want”); and it repeated what would become the identifying rally cry and unifying feature of these diffuse events—“We are the 99%!”

The long-term impact of these protests and the actions of the broader movement are yet to be seen, but there is reason to suspect that the framing efforts of the Occupy Movement have gained traction within broader civil discourse and have reinvigorated debates regarding questions of economic inequality and justice. However, the question remains whether these protests will translate into meaningful change. When these events are placed in a broader historical context it is difficult to be optimistic regarding the long-term impact and efficacy of these challenges. In particular, since the 1970s, the dominant political discourse and resulting policy formation in the US and UK has repeatedly minimized the

structural causes of economic inequality in favor of narratives that locate the causes of inequality (and related social ills such as poverty) in individual and personal choices.

In this chapter, I bring together sociological and philosophical literatures to provide a framework for examining how the arguments and rhetoric employed by those challenging economic inequality are connected to philosophical perspectives of distributive justice. This approach is designed to refocus attention on the normative and ideological dimensions of social movement activity within an era of contested democracy. The chapter unfolds in three stages. First, I use the conceptual apparatus of frame analysis, commonly employed in the sociological study of social movements and social problems, to identify the framing, or “meaning-making” activities, of movement activists challenging economic inequality and describe how the diagnostic, prognostic and justificatory frames raise philosophical questions of distributive justice and fairness. Next, I present a brief overview of major philosophical approaches towards questions of distributive justice and economic inequality and identify the central questions guiding each perspective. Finally, to illustrate how competing philosophical notions of distributive justice are invoked (or rejected) by activists and reformers challenging economic inequality, I briefly analyze a highly influential book, Wilkinson and Pickett’s (2009) *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, by identifying the normative, ethical principles that guide this work and the implications for public policy. This analysis serves as a heuristic to explore the linkages between social scientific and ethical examinations of economic inequality and raises additional questions about the future of contentious politics.

Framing economic inequality: Challengers and reformers

Economic inequality, both within and between nations, has risen considerably since the early 1970s. While the growing gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” during this time has fueled anger and frustration towards dominant economic and political systems these issues have not, until recently, received sustained public attention. The recent global financial crisis and recession, along with the recent world-wide emergence of the Occupy Movement has brought questions of economic policy and inequality issues back into the spotlight. Pundits, politicians and citizens in both the United Kingdom and United States are raising important questions regarding the merit, method and potential of this global protest movement. Scholars and public intellectuals have joined the fray with detailed treatments of the causes and consequences of economic inequality (Bartels, 2008; Grusky *et al.*, 2013; McCall, 2013; Reich, 2012; Stiglitz, 2012).

The Occupy Movement’s meme, “We are the 99%” can be interpreted as signifying a battle, i.e., “us versus them,” while simultaneously expanding the category of “us” well beyond historically familiar calls to arms invoking “workers,” “labor,” or even the amorphous appeals to the “middle class” (particularly common in the United States). The framing efforts of Occupy activists seek to draw attention to structural inequalities and the vicious negative externalities

produced by unregulated markets. Additionally, embedded in the meme is an implicit appeal to a sense of justice: the current distribution of income, wealth and power in society (where “99%” of us are shortchanged) is not *fair*. Political philosophers and theorists have long been interested in the relationship between fairness, distributive justice and democracy. In non-totalitarian states, the legitimacy of the state is maintained by ensuring that basic democratic institutions are perceived to be fair and just. Therefore, the rally cries of the Occupy Movement and other activists challenging economic inequality are fundamentally invoking philosophical questions of distributive justice. Attempting to disentangle the ideological underpinnings and arguments against economic inequality is a difficult task—especially in heterogeneous and non-hierarchical movements. The proliferation of online activism and intramovement communication (see Part IV of this volume) further challenges the outdated conception of a single, unified “movement message.” Therefore, in order to critically examine the ideological and rhetorical content of the messages produced by challengers, it is useful to do so using the techniques of frame analysis.

Frames are “schemata of interpretation” that enable individuals to “locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large” (Goffman, 1974: 21). Collective action frames are produced through interaction and are subject to change as individuals and groups interpret their experiences, identify the sources of their problems, and develop responses to these problems (e.g., Babb, 1996; Benford, 1997; Fitzgerald, 2009; Diani, 1996; Johnston and Noakes, 2005; McCammon, 2009; Noonan, 1995; Snow and Benford, 1988, 1992; Snow *et al.*, 1986). Snow and Benford (1988) introduced the term *framing* in order to conceptualize the ways in which frames are produced. In particular, one of the central tasks of social movement entrepreneurs and organizations is signifying and interpreting “events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists” (Snow and Benford, 1988: 198). At the heart of these symbolic packages are the frames (i.e., words, ideas, values, arguments and rhetoric) that actors employ to interpret experiences, identify the sources of problems and develop responses to these problems (e.g., Fitzgerald and Rubin, 2010; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Gamson and Stuart, 1992; Stryker *et al.*, 1999).

The framing efforts of social movement entrepreneurs, participants and organizations have the potential to mobilize new participants, create awareness and sympathy from the broader public, shape the parameters and content of public discourse and influence public policy formation—both by affecting public opinion and by creating elite allies. These frames are produced, refined, reinvented and negotiated both through the interactions of movement participants with each other, but also through interaction with oppositional actors through political and media discourse in the public arena (e.g., Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Gamson *et al.*, 1992; Gamson and Stuart, 1992). When issues enter the public discourse they are shaped by “symbolic packaging” attempts made by diverse actors in various institutional settings.

By most measures, economic inequality, both within nations and between nations, has been steadily rising during the past four decades resulting in a growing gap between the haves and the have-nots. One of the most common ways to evaluate economic inequality, the Gini index, provides a useful starting point. When the Gini index is used to measure the distribution of income within a population a coefficient of 0.0 would indicate complete equality whereas a coefficient of 1.0—or 100 percent—would indicate that a single household possesses all of the income. A recent report indicates that the United States' Gini coefficient of 40.8 is the highest of any advanced industrial nation. In comparison, the coefficient for other countries is: UK 36; Spain 34.7; Ireland 34.3; Canada 32.6; Sweden 25; Norway 25.8; and Denmark 24.7 (United Nations 2010: 151). Recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data document that, when compared to other OECD countries, the US and the UK have both experienced dramatic increases in economic inequality since the mid-70s. Other studies have shown that the level of inequality within countries is dramatically more pronounced if we measure wealth rather than income—in terms of net worth the UK's Gini coefficient is 66, Canada's is 75, and the US's is 81 (Hills *et al.*, 2010).

In light of the economic and political developments since the 1970s, a growing number of scholars, activists and politicians have called for immediate and collective responses to reverse the trend of growing inequality (e.g., Leicht and Fitzgerald, 2007, 2014; Reich, 2011; Stiglitz, 2012). In the United States, this includes advocacy groups and social movement organizations (SMOs) such as: Citizens for Tax Justice, Wealth for the Common Good, United for a Fair Economy, Democratic Socialists of America, Sojourners, Occupy Wall Street—and many variations including Occupy Oakland and Occupy Wall Street South. In the UK, this includes: Anarchist Federation, Dissent Network, 38 Degrees, Socialist Workers Party, Solidarity Federation, Occupy London and various others. There is tremendous variation in the size, strength, tactics and demands of various advocacy groups and SMOs engaged in challenging issues of economic inequality. Further, an examination of these organizational websites and publications reveals that while there are many competing ideological perspectives and collection action frames, there are also important commonalities. Specifically, while there is variation regarding the specific diagnostic frames (i.e., framing efforts that identify and define the problems) one common diagnostic framing focuses attention on economic inequality as a symptom of broader structural forces and specific policy choices. The prognostic frames (i.e., framing efforts that identify possible solutions) range from “third-way” policy proscriptions seeking to find a middle ground between unbridled capitalism and the extant limited welfare state to calls for political and economic revolutions. The justification frames (i.e., framing efforts that provide the reasons why others should care and act) are consistently built on appeals to fairness, justice, and democracy. In the next section, my focus is on the normative (i.e., ethical) assumptions and implications of viewing (in)equality as a question of distributive justice. In other words, what ethical principles animate collective action frames that challenge economic inequality and subsequent policy responses?

To answer this question, we must shift from the language and method of social science, which seek to establish empirical facts and causal explanations, towards questions of “what *ought* to be”? Questions of this type are foundationally normative (i.e., inherently value-laden judgments regarding the desirability of the distribution of social and economic benefits) and, as such, are the purview of philosophical ethics.

Philosophical perspectives on distributive justice

Theories of *distributive justice* are concerned with explaining, and/or providing normative guiding principles towards the distribution of valued resources within society (cf. *retributive justice* and *procedural justice* which focus on punishment and process, respectively). There are many competing social scientific and philosophical perspectives that may be used to assess whether certain distributions of resources are to be considered just or unjust. Adapting Sabbagh’s (2001) classification, I divide the vast literature on distributive justice into four distinct areas based on two key distinctions: normative vs. empirical and micro- vs. macro-level. The normative vs. empirical distinction is fundamentally about whether a theory or argument about how people *should* evaluate questions of distributive justice is being offered rather than explaining how people *actually* do make evaluations. Macro-level perspectives focus on the overall distribution of valued resources whereas micro-level perspectives address whether individuals receive just rewards. As Sabbagh (2001) notes, some perspectives (e.g., Jasso’s theory of justice) transcend the boundaries of this rigid classification by explicitly developing both micro- and macro-level accounts of distributive justice. By way of introduction to this literature, I will briefly identify key empirical perspectives on distributive justice and then explicate three prominent normative philosophical perspectives: egalitarianism; welfare-based principles (utilitarianism); and philosophical liberalism (e.g., Rawls’ “difference principle”). While most challengers of economic inequality do not formally connect their framing efforts to specific philosophical treatise, the ideas embedded in these three normative perspectives are consistent with many of the ideological and rhetorical arguments they employ.

The micro-level, empirical perspective is focused on providing theoretical accounts of how individuals make justice evaluations (Markovsky and Younts, 2001). Jasso (2007: 338) identifies four central questions explored by justice researchers:

- 1 What do individuals and societies think is just, and why?
- 2 How do ideas of justice shape determination of actual situations? (3)
- 3 What is the magnitude of the perceived injustice associated with departures from perfect justice?
- 4 What are the behavioral and social consequences of perceived injustice?

These central questions are deeply connected yet much empirical work focuses on developing explanations of particular components. For example, Jasso’s

“justice evaluation function” is a logarithmic-ratio specification representing justice evaluations as a function of the actual reward and the just reward (Jasso, 1999, 2007) and is designed to answer the third central question. Jasso (2005) identifies similar fundamental functions of justice analysis for the remaining three central questions. In addition to this distinctly social-psychological literature, there is a micro-economics literature that asks similar questions but offers different theories. The macro-level empirical work is dominated by economists, and some sociologists, who typically examine within or across country inequality and assess whether the distributive patterns or outcomes are “just.” In this context, particularly for many economists, “just” is used synonymously with “efficient” (Pareto optimality). This literature will generally choose a single well-being outcome variable (e.g., income), but some studies will use multiple indicators of well-being. Within the fields of economics, there is a fairly clear distinction between “welfare economics” (which is empirical economics coupled with attention to normative concerns) vs. traditional economics which is purported to focus solely on empirical questions.

These empirical approaches to studying distributive justice used by social scientists have provided much insight into how justice evaluations are made and how the levels of inequality across time and place may shift and be transformed. In contrast, the normative ethical frameworks used to examine distributive justice developed and promoted by philosophers seek to provide a coherent and logically consistent set of propositions that identify an ideal distribution of benefits and costs within societies. Egalitarianism, utilitarianism and political liberalism represent three competing perspectives on both how we should think about distributive justice and what a fair and just economic system would look like.

Egalitarianism is, perhaps, the most obvious place to begin when reviewing normative ethical frameworks for examining distributive justice. The central principle is that every person should have the same level of material goods and services (Arneson, 2013). In non-academic contexts the guiding principle of egalitarianism is one that has strong intuitive appeal—the terms “justice,” “fairness,” and “equality” are not only intimately linked in most people’s minds but are often used interchangeably. The philosophical basis of the egalitarian perspective is that all human beings are of equal moral worth and the best way to affirm this is to ensure that all human beings receive an equal share of societal goods. Societal goods are generally defined to include money, food, housing, healthcare, education and political voice. In large, complex, modern societies it is difficult to imagine a system that could both create and manage the distribution of societal goods in a purely egalitarian manner. Assuming, as egalitarians do, that equality is morally desirable, how exactly would we ensure that every member of society receives an equal amount of societal goods? What would a purely egalitarian society look like? Does equal mean identical? Would every individual be required to maintain an identical level or type of each societal good?

There are two basic egalitarian responses to these questions. The first proposes that we might produce “bundles” of goods that would, on the whole, be comparable. So rather than requiring that all people have identical housing,

incomes, educational experiences, etc. the goal would be to provide “bundles” that would compensate individuals (e.g., greater income or higher quality education) for receiving less desirable goods in another domain (e.g., limited housing options). The second proposes that because capitalist economies are thoroughly embedded within modern societies, providing equal incomes may be sufficient to ensure an egalitarian distribution. Money is a unique societal good in that it can be used to acquire most, if not all, of the other societal goods. Therefore, as long as individuals have equal monetary resources, we need not worry about what they choose to spend these resources on—that is, we do not need to worry about the distribution of the other societal goods. One difficulty emerges when we acknowledge the sociological realities associated with intergenerational transfers. What happens when parents choose to spend their money in different ways? Imagine one family that invests their money in enriching activities that develop their children’s intellectual and social capital while another family does not. What happens as these children grow up? How will this differential investment affect their performance in school and future career opportunities?

Welfare based principles have been developed both by philosophers and economists. The central unit of concern from this perspective is societal satisfaction (or utility). In other words, questions of distributive justice hinge not on how a particular arrangement will affect any specific person, but rather on how this arrangement will affect all individuals in that society. Utilitarian conceptions of distributive justice are derived from broader sets of ideas advocating the “greatest good for the greatest number” as the primary guiding principle of morality (e.g., Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill). For utilitarian philosophers an examination of ethical questions surrounding the distribution of scarce resources begins and ends with an examination of aggregate effects. Many economists working from this perspective take this one step further, in terms of specificity, and offer particular functional forms (equations) that are believed to maximize utility. The debates within this particular literature are focused on critiquing and refining the equations that best represent a “just” system. This perspective gives primacy to the collective rather than the individual and requires careful and accurate calculations of negative and positive outcomes for all those affected. Therefore, in practice, this perspective often reinforces power inequities as the majority is able to benefit at the expense of the minority.

Finally, in contrast, *political liberalism* offers an approach towards distributive justice that attempts to address structural inequalities while also giving primacy to the individual. John Rawls’ (1971) *A Theory of Justice* and subsequent elaborations (1993, 2001) represents the most complete explication of this perspective and has been the subject of massive academic attention. As Freeman (2003) notes, ten years after *A Theory of Justice* was published a bibliography of articles on Rawls contained more than 2,500 entries—a number that has certainly grown considerably in the subsequent three decades. At the heart of Rawlsian philosophical liberalism is an assumption that evaluations of justice should be based on a process of “reflective equilibrium” where citizens engage in an ongoing process of moving back and forth between abstract principles and

empirical evidence gained from careful observation of the social world. The result of this process can be reasoned judgments that provide lexical ordering of values that we should pursue and then evaluations of how close the reality is to the ideal. Rawls argues that valid conceptions of distributive justice must not be beholden to dominant views or tradition—such conceptions will simply reflect the extent of power inequities and, by definition, exclude minority viewpoints. To address this concern Rawls introduces the “original position” as the basis of a thought experiment designed to develop our conception of what a just society would look like. Rawls asks that we imagine ourselves coming together to discuss and create a brand new society where we would collectively determine the form and function of all major societal institutions (e.g., economy, education, government, family, religion, etc.). The focus on institutions is necessary because these institutions determine the distribution of what Rawls calls social primary goods: rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth, and self-respect. To prevent self-interest from undermining the collective pursuit introduced into such process by the self-interest Rawls introduces the notion of a “veil of ignorance” into the thought experiment. Behind the veil of ignorance participants in this hypothetical discussion would be aware of certain basic social facts—such as the existence of inequality and variation in human skills, motivation and intelligence—but remain unaware of their own particularities. We are to imagine participants developing the basic institutions of society that will distribute primary goods without knowledge of where we will end up in the hierarchy once the veil has been lifted. Colloquially, this demands that we be willing to walk in another’s shoes and by doing so would produce a vision of a just society that was not tarnished by self-interest.

Egalitarians might argue that participants in the original position, behind the veil of ignorance, would create institutions that provided all members with equal rewards. From this perspective, if we take seriously the notion that all people have equal moral worth and the best way to demonstrate this is to ensure equality in the distribution of valued resources, then surely we would create a society where this happened. Rawls, however, disagrees and writes: “All social values—liberty and opportunity, income and wealth and the bases of self-respect—are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone’s advantage” (Rawls, 1971: 62). Due to a variety of factors—including differential motivation, market efficiencies and societal needs—Rawls claims that *some* forms of inequality are beneficial. For example, incentives need to be in place to encourage people to devote the time and energy necessary to perform vital social functions, as well as to encourage innovation. Rawls claims that while there are a near infinite number of societies that could be imagined in the original position they would all, *de facto*, follow two guiding principles, including one that specified that social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all.

In sum, each of these perspectives provides a different approach to answering questions of distributive justice and fairness. Egalitarians focus on the equal

distribution of goods and services to individuals within a society. Welfare-based perspectives argue that collective, rather than individual, well-being is of central importance and claim that a distribution system based on egalitarianism would not produce the greatest good for the greatest number. Philosophical liberals incorporate both of these critiques to develop a framework that attempts to balance individual freedom and autonomy with concern for collective outcomes. To what extent are these perspectives connected to the framing efforts of activists challenging economic inequality?

Framing and distributive justice: Analyzing *The Spirit Level*

A detailed analysis of the framing efforts of the hundreds of prominent individuals and organizations that have gained media attention during the past few years challenging economic inequality is beyond the scope of this chapter. Further, as discussed earlier in this chapter, there is tremendous variation within and between organizations in terms of the diagnostic, prognostic and justification frames offered, making attempts to identify representative texts or speech acts highly problematic. Therefore, in this section I analyze a single text to demonstrate the ways that notions of distributive justice animate framing efforts challenging economic inequality—even those efforts produced by social and natural scientists.

At the forefront of the calls for greater equality are Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett who in 2009 published *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* and established The Equality Trust in order to broadly disseminate their findings and publicly advocate for equality. According to The Equality Trust, over 75 MPs in the newly elected UK Parliament have signed the “Equality Pledge”:

Compelling new evidence presented by The Equality Trust shows that more equal societies—those with a narrower gap between rich and poor—are more cohesive, healthier, suffer fewer social problems and are more environmentally sustainable. In view of these findings I am committed to making the UK a more equal society as the most effective means of building a better society. I will therefore actively support the case for policies designed to narrow the gap between rich and poor; and engage with the debate on which measures should be implemented to achieve that aim.

(www.equalitytrust.org.uk/pledge/signatories)

There are many important assertions, assumptions and implications embedded in the wording of this brief pledge. I highlight three. First, there is a presumed causal relationship between inequality and negative social outcomes (and, inversely, equality causes positive social outcomes). Second, it implies that while equality is the goal, simply reducing the current levels of inequality is a desired outcome (“a more equality society” “narrow the gap between rich and poor”). Third, it suggests that there are a variety of possible public policy

responses that might achieve this goal. Rather than adopting a particular political position, individuals and organizations committed to the goals outlined in the pledge may pursue various strategies designed to achieve these goals—pragmatism rather than ideological purity and partisan politics is the name of the game.

While the debate continues regarding the data, trends and interpretations that provide the basis of The Equality Trust's conclusions,¹ this work serves a useful heuristic purpose in that it explicitly tackles questions of economic inequality in ways that invoke both political and philosophical debates.

How do advocates for equality, such as Wilkinson and Pickett, frame the issue? To what extent do they draw from normative theories of distributive justice? Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) offer arguments rooted in pragmatism and welfare-based principles of distributive justice. The central premise of the book, based on hundreds of studies on inequality within and between countries, is that early stages of economic development correspond with improvements in general health and well-being. However, "as countries get richer, further increases in average living standards do less and less for health." The diminishing return to economic development creates a situation where high performing economies do not necessarily provide increased positive outcomes for society. So what explains the variation in mental illness, violence, social isolation, illiteracy, death rates, educational performance and other social phenomenon within high performing economies? Wilkinson and Pickett argue that higher levels of inequality within nations produce negative effects on average well-being:

We do not argue that everyone in a more equal society does better than everyone else in less equal one. We are not saying that even the lowest social class or the least well paid or educated category in a more equal society does better than the highest category in a less equal society. Rather we show that when people in the same social class, at the same level of income or education, are compared across countries, those in more equal societies do better [...]. The conclusion is that greater equality usually makes the most difference to the least well off, but still produces some benefits for the well-off.

(2009: 275)

Does philosophical egalitarianism inform this general argument? Despite the oft-repeated phrase "equality is better for everyone," Wilkinson and Pickett do *not* develop arguments for strict egalitarianism as the preferred guiding normative principle of distributive justice.

In order to understand this counterintuitive point it is useful to examine the context in which the larger debate on economic inequality takes place. The frames developed by social movement entrepreneurs and organizations never develop in isolation. The Equality Trust, founded by Wilkinson and Pickett in 2009 to coincide with the release of *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, draws from the evidence presented in the book to publicly advocate

for greater equality. It could be that Wilkinson and Pickett adhere to egalitarian principles. As discussed above, the philosophical basis of the egalitarian perspective is that all human beings are of equal moral worth and the best way to affirm this is to ensure that all human beings receive an equal share of societal goods. A fair and just society is one where “social goods” (i.e., money, housing, health, education, etc.) and “social bads” are distributed *equally* across members of society. The strict egalitarian position argues that equality is a strict distributive principle and cannot be violated based on other criteria (e.g., effort, abilities, performance). The strict version of egalitarianism is considered problematic by many philosophers and citizens alike and it is unlikely that equality advocates are drawing directly from this normative principle. Rather, it is more likely that the rhetoric of equality is a *strategic framing choice*, rather than a philosophical commitment, designed to appeal to strict egalitarians and populist notions of justice and thereby broaden the support base for the nascent movement. In this sense, equality is not the goal, but rather the symbolic meanings associated with equality are used to encourage social change that reduces, rather than eliminates, economic inequality.

In the writings of Wilkinson and Pickett the symbolic packaging of inequality as a social problem is developed in a way that invokes notions of egalitarianism, but is rooted in welfare-based and philosophical liberal principles of distributive justice. From a welfare-based perspective the reason that inequality should be viewed a moral bad—a question of justice—is because greater inequality produces more “social bads” than less inequality does. On average, people living in more equal societies are better off than those living in unequal ones. From this perspective, more equal societies have a higher utility function and greater equality should be the goal for that reason alone. Utility functions rather than equality are the litmus test of a just society.

There also appears to be support for interpreting the arguments of Wilkinson and Pickett as consistent with at least some parts of a Rawlsian perspective. Wilkinson and Pickett’s work focuses on the effects of more or less equality (rather than a dichotomy of equality vs. inequality) and this is consistent with the theory of justice developed by Rawls which clearly allows for some forms of inequality. However, in contrast to Wilkinson and Pickett, the Rawlsian perspective demands that we examine the structure of inequality rather than simply compare the outcomes of different levels of inequality. Specifically, Rawls writes that inequality is allowable as long as inequalities are “arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all” (Rawls, 1971: 60). The first requirement invokes a much stronger claim on individual rights than developed from welfare-based perspectives and the latter requirement demands an open and fair labor market with high levels of class mobility.

This brief analysis of *The Spirit Level* demonstrates that conceptions of justice and fairness are embedded in critiques of economic inequality and that the ethical arguments developed do not correspond with any single philosophical perspective of distributive justice. Rather, as is likely the case with most

non-philosophical treatises, it indirectly drew from multiple perspectives. Philosophical inconsistency and ambiguity is apparent in the writings and speeches of many activists speaking out against economic inequality. However, this does not necessarily indicate a lack of understanding or clarity regarding the causes and consequences of economic inequality. Defenders of the status quo and advocates for further unbridled capitalism demonstrate similar levels of philosophical inconsistency and ambiguity which suggests a broader disconnect between the rigors of philosophical systems and everyday practice and politics.

Important practical and academic questions remain regarding the promise and peril of this movement strategy. First, what implications does this framing strategy have for mass mobilization and elite support? Calls to make “the UK a more equal society as the most effective means of building a better society” can be viewed as radical departures from the status quo and provide incentives for a wide range of activists to engage in these efforts. On the other hand, if the case is made *too* strongly, the movement runs the risk of losing the cross-party support it has been carefully cultivating. Future research should examine how these framing strategies compare to other movements, such as the labor movement, Poor People’s movements, and welfare-rights campaigns. Under what conditions has the symbolic packaging of economic equality as a movement goal been successful? Finally, additional work is needed to examine how and to what extent the framing of other activists, organizations and challengers of economic inequality align with particular normative philosophical perspectives of distributive justice. The normative and ethical issues surrounding economic inequality provide the motivation and passion that fuels collective challenges, but these issues are often ignored or downplayed by standard social scientific methods and theories. Greater attention to these dimensions will provide more robust explanations and deeper understandings of contentious politics and policy formation in democratic nations worldwide.

In conclusion, the past four decades have been marked by increased and sustained economic inequality in both the United States and United Kingdom. Challenges to this rising economic inequality have been met by neo-liberal and “third-way” policy choices in both countries that have tended to downplay the severity of this inequality and to offer solutions based on shifting government responsibility and appeals to market forces. Examining the underlying concepts of distributive justice that inform our visions of economic justice can play an important role in encouraging citizen engagement and public discourse and, ultimately, identifying crucial avenues for re-legitimizing the democratic state.

Note

- 1 Please see critiques and authors’ responses on www.equalitytrust.org.uk/resources/response-to-questions.

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