

Now Is the Time for The New Enlightenment

During the Enlightenment, people imagined and acted on a vision of a radically more just world

The original Enlightenment period in the 18th century was a time when many people in Europe, and later in the American colonies, shared a vision of a transformed world. The more widespread use of printing presses, more extensive roadways, and newly created postal services to distribute periodicals and other print media allowed their means of mass communication, print media, to dramatically increase public awareness of societal issues. There was an explosion in the number of books and other publications. Literacy rates increased greatly, and debating societies and other public forums were used to discuss the important issues.

As a result, many people were able to imagine the possibility of a fundamentally more just world order than the one in which they were living. An order based on reason, the ideals of equality for all, democracy and basic individual human rights. More importantly, they also acted on their new and radical vision. During this period of revolutionary transformations, the powers of monarchy, the privileges of the nobility, the political power and authority of the Catholic Church were overturned. There were also dramatic revolutions in science and philosophy. The American Revolution (1775–83) was an integral part of the Enlightenment period.

Enlightenment revolutionaries strove to create more egalitarian societies

The awareness of the importance of economics to politics was a fundamental part of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment revolutionaries experienced the injustice of a tiny fraction of the population controlling the majority of the wealth of their society. This tiny minority used their vast wealth to control the political and social order. So Enlightenment revolutionaries formed more egalitarian societies where political leaders were accountable to the majority, and they designed governments with the intention to ensure that public policy served the ideals of democracy, equality for all, reason and basic individual human rights. America was one of these societies.

America was the most egalitarian society in the world

In America's early years it was the most egalitarian society on the planet, and our Founders were proud of these conditions. In a [letter from Monticello dated September 10, 1814, Thomas Jefferson wrote](#):

"We have no paupers The great mass of our population is of laborers; our rich, who can live without labor, either manual or professional, being few, and of moderate wealth. Most of the laboring class possess property, cultivate their own lands, have families, and from the demand for their labor are enabled to exact from the rich ... such prices as enable them to be fed abundantly, clothed above mere decency, to labor moderately and raise their families Can any condition of society be more desirable than this?" Jefferson contrasted these conditions with an England of paupers and plutocrats: *"Now, let us compute by numbers the sum of happiness of the two countries. In England, happiness is the lot of the aristocracy only; and the proportion they bear to the laborers and paupers you know better than I do. Were I to guess that they are four in every hundred."*

George Washington, nine months before his inauguration as the first president, [predicted that America](#) *"will be the most favorable country of any kind in the world for persons of industry and frugality, possessed of moderate capital, to inhabit ... it will not be less advantageous to the happiness of the lowest class of people, because of the equal distribution of property."*

After Alexis de Tocqueville's famous journey to America in the 19th century, he returned to France and [wrote that nothing](#) *"struck me more vividly ... than the equality of conditions. It was easy to see the influence of this basic fact on the whole course of society.... Men there are nearer equality in wealth ... in other words, more nearly equally powerful, than in any other country of the world or in any other age of recorded history."*

[Early America was the world's most egalitarian society.](#) Today, we are the outliers in the other

direction—we are the most unequal of all the developed countries.

During America's early years England's 1% were so rich that the country's average national income was nearly as high as that of the colonies, despite the much greater prosperity of the majority of Americans. Today, America's 1% are taking a greater share of national income than the old English aristocracy did, and a far larger percentage of the country's income and wealth than any other advanced country.

The Enlightenment era's ideals were far from fully realized: The tolerance of the atrocity of slavery and the near extermination of Native Americans

The Enlightenment era ideals of freedom and equality for all, democracy, basic individual human rights and using reason to determine action, advanced societies greatly. But they had (and we still have) a long way to go. Many Enlightenment era Europeans' and Americans' understanding of who was fully human was tragically deficient. Racist atrocities during the Enlightenment era resulted from faulty information and evil people, not Enlightenment ideals.

Slavery pre-existed the Enlightenment era, but the large Transatlantic slave trade was facilitated during the era by advancements in weaponry and their production processes, the ability to travel, and to produce ships that could carry large numbers of people. Unfortunately, advancements in science and technology, a major characteristic of the Enlightenment era, have always resulted in advancements in the abuse of science and technology.

The Enlightenment transformations were imperfect and incomplete advancements, as have been all others. Basic individual human rights were not extended in the U.S. and Europe to races other than the white race, and to women, until well after the Enlightenment, and even in the 21st century this extension is far from complete.

Social orders dominated by elite powers of monarchy and nobility were inhumane, and eliminated based on Enlightenment philosophy. We now are in period where a kind of aristocracy is again dominating our social order. This book will describe some of the resulting dysfunction and injustices.

So we need a New Enlightenment, one where all people independent of race and sex share in its benefits. But these benefits will be largest for those currently most disadvantaged by the unjust social order now.

If African Americans were justly compensated for their labor as slaves, what would the assets received then be worth today? Also, a hundred years of Jim Crow laws and economic oppression from other forms of discrimination followed the theoretical emancipation of the slaves. The result is that African Americans now have 1/20 the per capita wealth of whites.

Although not targeted to benefit any specific race, New Enlightenment reforms will reduce disparities between the races. But to what degree should we further correct disparities resulting from injustices of the past? This will best be answered after the true democracy and other social reforms of the New Enlightenment.

We have moved far from our founding ideals

We are now far from the degree of egalitarianism that existed at our founding, of which Jefferson was so proud. The inequality and injustice in our society are extreme and its extent is not commonly reported. Important parallels exist to our conditions now and those that existed prior to, and that motivated, the Enlightenment revolutions.

Wide agreement exists that some degree of economic inequality is necessary and just, and that there is a limit on how extreme it should be. But most people are not aware how extreme economic inequality is now, and that it is beyond this limit. Its degree is not economically or morally justifiable, and is economically, politically and socially harmful.

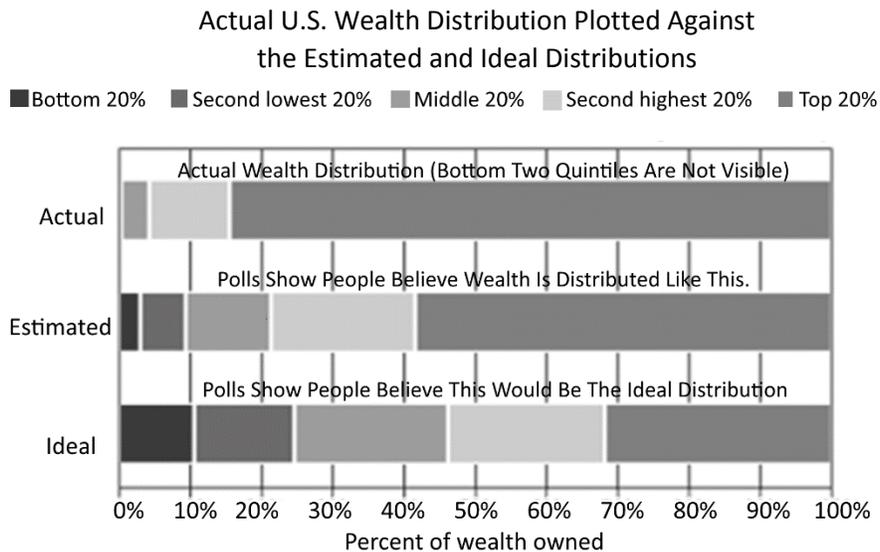
Although most people, both on the left and the right, feel that some things are fundamentally wrong in the country now, most do not know the extent and seriousness of the wrongs. Whether you already knew them or learn of some here, we hope you will join us in imagining a more just world order and in acting on this new vision. Together, we can accomplish the institution of the innovative solutions of the New Enlightenment, just as those of the original Enlightenment acted by instituting visionary and innovative solutions needed for their time.

Most Americans greatly underestimate our economic disparities

The chart below, [created using national poll data](#), well summarizes important information on how our country’s wealth is distributed and how little most people know about it. It is worth exploring.

The bottom bar, labeled “ideal,” represents what most people believe would be the ideal wealth distribution—different colors represent the different quintiles (fifths of the population). The chart shows that the average American believes it is justified for people to have different levels of wealth. Average Americans believe that people who contribute more to the welfare of the country deserve more than an average amount of the country’s wealth. People in the bottom quintile, on average, contribute less and therefore deserve less, in their view. (But as we will see later, at the extremes of the wealth distribution, wealth and degree of societal contribution may not be positively correlated.)

As you can see, the average opinion is that people in the bottom quintile deserve about half of what they would have if wealth were distributed equally into each quintile or about 10% instead of 20% of the country’s wealth. The opinion is that people in the top quintile justifiably or ideally should have about 60% more than what they would have if wealth were distributed equally into each quintile (about 32% instead of 20%).



The middle “Estimated” bar shows the average of what people estimate is the actual distribution of wealth. It expresses awareness that inequality is far more extreme than is considered ideal. People estimate the bottom 20% to have only about 2% of the country’s wealth—a small fraction, one-fifth, of what would be ideal, and the top 20% have almost double what they consider ideal.

Now look at the top bar, which expresses the facts of the wealth distribution. It seems there has been an error because only three quintiles are showing, so two quintiles are missing. But as I mentioned in the introduction, the total wealth of the poorest 40% of Americans is negative. The bottom two quintiles are invisible because they are negative or too small to appear on the chart. [The bottom 20% has -1.4% of the country’s wealth \(has debt greater than assets\), and the next 20% has 0.3% of the country’s wealth, so the bottom 40% has -1.1% of the country’s wealth.](#) They are in a condition worse than having no wealth at all.

In 2013, the wealthiest 400 people had over \$2.3 trillion (not counting the amounts hidden in tax havens, which just for these 400 is likely in the hundreds of billions). Using Federal Reserve data for the rest of the population, this is more than the total wealth for the bottom 60% or 190 million Americans—a level of inequality far worse than most people imagine could exist. It is almost incomprehensible, so if you would like a better sense of how vast this disparity is, consider the analogies in Part 4, Note 10.

If you have only one penny and have no debts, you have more wealth than the total wealth of the 128 million poorest Americans. Most people would consider that someone with more wealth than the total wealth of 128 million Americans to be very wealthy. So if you have a penny and no debts, congratulations; now you are considered wealthy. But likely not as wealthy as any of the 400 Americans with total wealth that exceeds the total of all the GDPs of 121 of the 189 nations for which the World Bank records GDP. Wealth disparities result from, and contribute to, income disparities, which are also very large and growing.

The majority of Americans are not aware of how concentrated wealth is because the extremely wealthy generally live isolated from the rest of society; most people will have no contact with this small economic elite, nor will they ever have any sense of what that elite controls. Also, our mass media do not express many facts related to this issue, either at all or with emphasis, detail or repetition that many far less important issues receive.

As part of a recent international study by scholars at the Harvard Business School and Thailand's Chulalongkorn University, a U.S. survey revealed that Americans estimate that the ratio of CEO pay to median worker pay is about 30 to 1. In reality, the average S&P 500 company CEO earned 354 times what the median U.S. worker did in 2012. Americans said that ideally that gap would be 6.7 to 1. Performance bonuses, stock options, and exorbitant salaries are tax deductible, so taxpayers are subsidizing the CEO pay gap. And CEOs routinely receive performance incentives even when they fail to hit the productivity targets that were supposed to trigger the bonuses. How does this happen? The corporate CEO compensation process in public companies CEOs commonly strongly influence, directly, or indirectly, through allied board members. Also, dozens of the largest American corporations routinely set performance targets for huge bonuses [so low that they're effectively meaningless](#).

Media “pundits” often express the view that American voters care little about inequality, but to the degree this is true it is mainly due to the fact most Americans don't realize how extreme inequality is. Today's public policy rests on a foundation of ignorance.

**For more information: the new enlightenment,
Part 1 and Part 4**

**For solutions: part 2, “the way to prosperity for all” &
Part 3, “the way to a government of, for, and by the people.”**