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A Brief History of Equality:

Reflections on the State of Our Democracy

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With Election Day coming up soon, I want to invite us to reflect on the state of our democracy. After all, the practice of democracy is central to our UU movement, central that we made it our Fifth Principle: “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” And more than a decade before President Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” **the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker coined the phrase “A democracy—of all the people, by all the people, for all the people”** (Wikipedia).

But here’s the thing about democracy: it is a valuable *method* for governance, but it’s not a guarantee of good outcomes (Gershberg and Illing, *Paradox of Democracy*, 2). In a democracy, people are free to choose, and sometimes their choices are out of alignment with our UU values.

And we need to be honest that globally today, there are a number of corrupt authoritarians in power who either reject or seek to undermine the established rule of law, separation of powers, and current electoral processes. Some of the most prominent examples include Orbán in Hungary, Erdoğan in Turkey, Kaczyński in Poland, Putin in Russia, Modi in India, former President Trump here in the U.S., and the recently elected Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni (Müller, *Democracy Rules*, 3).

But it's important not to miss the good news. Despite desperate and dangerous attempts at election denial—including the horrifying and treasonous January 6th attack on the U.S. Capital—our forty-fifth president lost the election in 2016 and was forced to leave office. And only days ago, the Brazilian authoritarian Bolsonaro lost the presidential election. His opponent, Lula, barely won with 50.9% of the votes, but it was nonetheless a notable defeat for authoritarianism ([Reuters](#)).

For now, I want to invite us to focus on two ways of protecting our democracy by preventing some of the causes and conditions that often allow authoritarians to come to power: (1) *decreasing* wealth inequality and (2) *increasing* voter turnout (Gershberg and Illing 250).

Let's start with closing the wealth gap, which allows the ultra-rich who financially support both parties to have undue influence on politics, and to create resentment among the poor, marginalized, and undereducated, whom cynical politicians easily manipulate.

As our guide to understanding the wealth gap, I will be drawing from the incredible work of the French economist Thomas Piketty. Over the past two decades, Piketty has written three vast tomes that weigh in at around a thousand pages each. Picketty's most well known volume is *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, an allusion to Marx's famous book *Das Kapital*.

Piketty wisely decided to distill these more than three thousand pages into a more accessible two-hundred page summary titled *A Brief History of Inequality*. Unfortunately, I don't think this book is quite as accessible as he intended it to be (vii). I mean, I am a really big nerd—one who has waded through one of Picketty's earlier thousand-page tomes—and in researching today's summary, I was still, at a few points, like, dude, bring it down a few notches. Seriously, though, please do check it out if you are interested, but I give you permission to skim through the boring parts.

At the same time, let me underscore that the less-technical parts of this book are *really* interesting and really important, and I want to share a few highlights with you. To start out with good news, even though there are many serious threats to democracy today, we humans have also made remarkable progress of late in taking care of “we the people.”

If we look at the history of change over the past two centuries, there is, overall, significant movement around the world in terms of race, gender, equitable distribution of wealth, access to education, health care, life expectancy, and more (10).

I'll limit myself to two representative examples of progress mentioned by Piketty: health and education. Over the past two centuries, average life expectancy worldwide has increased by a remarkable 46 years from 26 years in 1820 to 72 years in 2020. During that same two hundred year period, literacy rates for adults worldwide have increased *sevenfold*, from 12 percent to 85 percent (Piketty, [slide 6](#)).

Next, since Piketty is an economist, let's tighten our focus to the twentieth century and switch to one of Piketty's favorite topics: show me the *money*! Between 1914 and 1980, in both the U.S. and in Europe, there was a tremendous redistribution of wealth that significantly *increased* equality ([Figure 29](#)).

This great redistribution happened for two major reasons. First, we significantly strengthened the social safety net—to catch people, and to prevent them from falling down too far. Second, we paid for this social safety net through a progressive tax on both income and inheritance (Piketty 120). At the risk of being too flippant, he recommends a pretty basic strategy of **“tax the rich because that's the where the extra money is!”**

Let me hasten to add that no one—or at least not me—is saying we all need to be absolutely equal. There is convincing value in the profit motive: money and prestige can motivate people to work harder. And people who work harder and bring unique value to society should be compensated accordingly. But profit should not be the only bottom line in the decisions made by good governance.

We need what is sometimes called the “triple bottom line,” that adds *people* and *planet* to the equation. Focusing on profit alone has led to cruel exploitation of people, as well as the destruction of our planet, both of which often lead to dangerous political backlash and revolutionary conditions which often bring populist authoritarians to power. To have a more sustainable future for all, we need to factor into our economic calculus both the wellbeing of *all* human beings and the impact of all people on the environment.

And despite the allusion to Marx in Piketty's most famous book title, neither he nor I is proposing a communist revolution. No one—certainly not me—is saying that we should become Bolsheviks. And I'm definitely not interested in any form of totalitarianism. But I am saying that both in this country and around the world, we might all be a lot better off if we started trending our politics much more toward the social democratic models of, for instance, the Nordic countries.

So how do we get there? The thing is, we already know the way: the way we—and many other countries—once created greater citizen wealth equality during a significant portion of the twentieth century was through progressive taxation. Specifically, here in the U.S., “The top tax rate for federal income tax—that is, the rate applicable to the *highest* incomes—rose from 7 percent in 1913 to 77 percent in 1918. From 1932 to 1980, nearly half a century, the average top rate was 81 percent” (Piketty 131, [Figure 20](#)).

Starting in 1980, however, we began eliminating progressive tax policies that targeted the rich, and predictably, the wealth gap between rich and poor began widening with the same vigor with which it had previously been closing (Piketty 152-153).

Some of you may be wondering, what would the ideal wealth gap be? I don't know exactly, but we humans have been asking that question for a long time. In ancient Greece, the birthplace of democracy, the philosopher Plato was deeply concerned about the potential for demagogues to manipulate people's emotions and prejudices.

To prevent the unequal, unfair conditions in which demagogues often have the most influence, Plato thought the wealth gap should be no more than 1:4—that is, the richest person in society should be no more than four times wealthier than the poorest person. Or—if we had a minimum wage of \$15/hour in the U.S., then we would also need to have a maximum wage of \$60/hour (Piketty 4).

Today in the U.S., [the average CEO rate](#) is around \$387/hour, which is more than *fifty* times our federal minimum wage of \$7.25/hour. That's more than *thirteen* times the maximum threshold that Plato thought wise. If he were alive today, Plato would be unsurprised by the anti-democratic and inequitable results this wealth gap has

wrought. Mix in some racism and xenophobia, and the many desperate people become powder kegs primed to explode.

I don't know if any of you saw the recent *New York Times* article inviting us to reflect on just how much money is controlled by billionaire Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon. Here's a few comparative examples: for an Amazon warehouse worker to reach Bezos's level of wealth, they "would have had to start working in the Pliocene Epoch (4.5 million years ago, when hominids had just started standing on two feet!)." Or—if we were to compare the median U.S. household net worth of \$118,200 to Bezos' net worth of \$172 billion, that comparison would be equivalent to the difference between:

- The weight of a single peanut and almost one ton of peanut butter
- The size of a single white blood cell and the length of a finback whale
- The size of a speck of fingernail dust and the size of a man who is 5'7"

(The New York Times)

There is a mind-bogglingly vast wealth gap between the richest in our society and the rest of us. And it is truly a cancer on our body politic. And we haven't even gotten into billionaire Elon Musk buying Twitter.

One possible takeaway of all this uncomfortable data is: sharpen your pitchforks! There are even serious calls for a movement to *ban billionaires*. Again, no one is saying we all have to be equal, but maybe there is a point at which the tax rate should be 100%, such that no small set of wealthy individuals can amass an unfair influence on our democracy. (I promise Jeff Bezos and his fellow billionaire could get along just fine with a few hundred million.)

The reason Piketty has taken the time to explicate the historical data is to remind us that the way things are is not the way they always have been, nor the way that they always have to be. We humans made remarkable strides toward equity on multiple fronts over the past few decades, and although that progress has been rapidly reversing in recent decades, we the people have the power to reverse it back again—toward creating a more level playing field for everyone.

Responsibly, regulated, democratically-planned capitalism can be a healthy part of the economy. But as many of you have heard me quote before from the science

fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin, "We live in capitalism; its power seems inescapable—but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings." And it's not a coincidence that the two hundred years of progress toward equality for we the people began around the time of the American and French Revolutions—which explicitly rejected the divine right of kings. And we don't need billionaires who act functionally as monarchs to take their place.

For now, I want to invite you to imagine one other social change that could help we the people enjoy more accountable and representative governance as a result of our efforts toward increasing our democratic processes—especially since far too many politicians are currently seeking to undermine many citizens's access to voting. This proposal—*universal* civic duty voting—is particularly resonant with the *Universalist* half of our Unitarian Universalist heritage. If you are curious to learn more, I recommend the short and accessible book *100% Democracy: The Case for Universal Voting* by E. J. Dionne and Miles Rappaport. Dionne is a longtime Washington Post columnist and Georgetown University professor, and Rappaport is a fellow at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

In the 2020 election, voter turnout was 67% of eligible voters, "the highest in 120 years" (xviii). In anticipation of our upcoming Election Day this Tuesday, UUs—through #UUtheVote—along with many other groups across the country—have been engaged in "get out the vote" efforts for months. I'm really proud of what we've accomplished, but we really shouldn't have had to work so hard to secure good, democratic governance for ourselves. Dionne and Rappaport invite us to consider a paradigm shift. **What if voting were a civic duty like "jury duty, registration for Selective Service, the census, schooling for minors, and paying taxes" (68).** To protect individual liberty, an option to vote for "none of the above" could be added to the ballot (69).

If this proposal sounds vaguely familiar, in 2015, President Obama proposed that we consider voting to be our civic duty (99). Importantly, this ideal isn't theoretical. Civic duty voting has already been practiced for years in more than two dozen countries, most prominently in Australia. In most of these countries, voter turnout is in

the 90 percent range (53). That's impressive, especially since the penalty for not voting is the equivalent of \$20 (52).

Instead of being a burden, most Australians have found that universal civic duty votes have made Election Day a can't-miss event. In the words of one *New York Times* article on civic duty voting in Australia, it's "like a party. There's a BBQ at the local school. Everyone turns up. Everyone votes. There's a sense that: We're all in this together. We're all affected by the decision we make today" (39).

Regardless of the election results on Tuesday, our work to build a more perfect union must continue. In the words of Michelle Alexander, author of *A New Jim Crow*:

A new nation is struggling to be born, a multiracial, multiethnic, multifaith, egalitarian democracy in which every life and every voice truly matters. In recent years, we've seen glimpses of this new nation at Standing Rock, in the streets of Ferguson, in the eyes of the Dreamers, in the voices of teenagers from Parkland and Chicago, as well as at L.G.B.T. pride celebrations, the Women's March and the camps of Occupy Wall Street. Confederate statues are coming down as new memorials and statutes are going up ... honoring victims of lynching as well as the courageous souls who fought for the abolition of slavery and the end of Jim Crow. ([The New York Times](#)).

Good results from the democratic experiment were never guaranteed, but I am grateful to be on this journey with all of you, this shared journey of working together to build the better world we dream about: a world of peace, liberty, and justice—not merely for an elite few—but truly for *all*.