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The Great Divergence

America’s Growing Inequality Crisis and What We Can Do about It

By Timothy Noah

A dynamic, brilliant exploration of income inequality in America, and the dangers it poses to our democracy, based on Timothy Noah’s award-winning articles from *Slate*.

How did “the 1 percent” pull away from “the 99 percent”? A probing and provocative exploration of income inequality in America, and the dangers it poses to our democracy.

For the past three decades, America has steadily become a nation of haves and have-nots. Our incomes are, increasingly, drastically unequal: the top 1 percent of Americans collect some 21 percent of the nation’s income—more than double their share in 1973. We have greater inequality of income than Venezuela, Kenya, or Yemen.

What economics Nobelist Paul Krugman terms “the Great Divergence” has until now been treated as little more than a talking point, a club to be wielded in ideological battles. But it may be the most important change in this country during our lifetimes—a sharp, fundamental shift in the character of American society, and not at all for the better.

The income gap has been blamed on everything from computers to immigration, but its causes and consequences call for a patient, non-partisan exploration. In *The Great Divergence*, based on his award-winning series of articles in *Slate*, Timothy Noah delivers this urgently needed inquiry, ignoring political rhetoric and drawing on the best work of contemporary researchers to peer beyond conventional wisdom. Noah explains not only how the Great Divergence has come about, but why it threatens American democracy—and most important, how we can begin to reverse it.

Coming fast on the heels of the Occupy Wall Street movement and at the start of a presidential election year when inequality will be front and center, *The Great Divergence* is poised to be one of the most talked-about books of 2012: a vitally necessary primer, history, and manifesto that will inform and drive a long-overdue political debate.

Read an excerpt:
Praise for *The Great Divergence*:

“*[The Great Divergence is] an instant classic and I’ve quoted it many times. Essential reading.*”—*Arianna Huffington on Twitter* (@ariannahuff)

“Superb ... Noah is our unpretentious Detective Columbo, walking us through theories of the case.”—*The American Prospect*

“Comprehensive, fair-minded, and lucid ... Noah makes a convincing and passionate case for why rising inequality harms a working democracy.”—*Publishers Weekly* *(starred review)*

“Essential background reading for the coming elections.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Noah successfully explains complex economic trends in common parlance. In this presidential election year, his book provides an excellent introduction to the hot topic of income inequality. Recommended for the 99 percent and anyone else concerned with the future of America’s middle class.”—*Library Journal*

“Well written, and ... a useful survey.”—*Tyler Cowen, Marginal Revolution*

Advance praise for *The Great Divergence*:

“This book is profoundly fascinating and important. The growth of income equality over the past three decades has caused a contentious partisan debate based more on ideology than fact. Timothy Noah provides a clear, dispassionate look at what has (and has not) caused this trend and what we can do about it. Everyone who cares about the future of America's middle class should read it.”—*Walter Isaacson, author of Steve Jobs, Einstein, and Benjamin Franklin; president of the Aspen Institute*

“This may be the most important book of the year. Timothy Noah explores the most significant long-term trend in our country, and he writes with an ease and clarity that makes reading this book a pleasure. Buy it now and read it. You’ll probably end up buying more copies for your friends and colleagues.”—*Thomas E. Ricks, author of Fiasco and The Gamble*


**Take Action**

- [RSS Feed](#)

Your Guide to Meaningful Action

**Tell Your Senators to Pass the Rebuild America Act**

*Nation Action on April 6, 2012 - 2:50 PM ET*

In his recent column, Alexander Cockburn highlighted “America’s number-one problem: a huge chunk of the population barely survives on starvation wages” and identified those few politicians fighting for the most vital economic issue in American politics today. One of them, longtime populist Senator Tom Harkin, is aggressively trying to do something about wage stagnation in the US.
One key provision of Sen. Tom Harkin’s (D-IA) Rebuild America Act calls for raising the minimum wage to $9.80—a 35 percent hike—and pegging the wage to inflation. The legislation would also ensure that all workers have access to paid sick days, establish a Wall Street trading and speculators tax, end tax breaks for companies shipping jobs overseas and help protect pensions. Tell your elected reps to vote in favor of the Rebuild America Act. It's about both fairness and reinvigorating our economy. After making your voice heard, share this info with friends, family, Facebook friends and Twitter followers.

Center for American Progress Fellow David Madland's deep analysis of the Rebuild America Act shows how the Iowa Senator’s bill could help rekindle the US economy.

A recent study found the distribution of wealth in the US is among the most unequal among industrialized nations. The United States ranked in the bottom five on a combination of issues including poverty prevention, health and access to education—ahead of only Greece, Chile, Mexico and Turkey.


Sacrifice Zones are those areas in USA that have been exploited in the name of profit, progress, and technological advancement, in text and drawings showing what life looks like where the marketplace rules without constraints, where human beings and the natural world are used and then discarded to maximize profit.

A guide to Marx’s theory and politics

Alex Callinicos
The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx
The worldwide public realizes there is something deeply wrong with today’s world economic system. The truth is that the neo-liberal consensus, with its promise of economic “freedom,” has failed to deliver.

Average workers in most of the major rich economies...have seen the real value of their wages shrivel away, as they have found themselves in competition not just with their neighbors, but with workers many thousands of miles away. Yet if the system fails the average worker in the west, it fails even in its own terms, because it undermines consumer demand, and chokes off economic growth.

As we sift through the wreckage of the Great Recession, perhaps it’s finally time to heed Marx’s words, and stand up for workers everywhere.

SO WROTE Britain’s Observer newspaper in an editorial published at the end of January. As the global economic crisis has deepened and refused to go away, it has become increasingly common for mainstream commentators to declare that it may be necessary to revisit Karl Marx’s critique of capitalism (although Marx advocated not simply standing up for workers, but for workers themselves to unite in opposition to the status quo).

Even more importantly, Marx’s ideas are finding a new audience among those fighting against the current system. In Egypt there is a growing audience for a Marxist analysis of why the revolution has stalled and how it can be pushed forward, while here in the United States, teach-ins on the Communist Manifesto were held at many of the Occupy encampments around the country in the fall.

Given this background, the republication of Alex Callinicos’s introduction to Marx’s life and thought—originally issued in 1983 for the centenary of Marx’s death—could not be more timely. As Callinicos notes in his introduction to this new edition of The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx, “Marx is getting a more favorable hearing at a time when anticapitalist politics have been reviving.”

There are so many myths about Marx and misinterpretations of his ideas that returning to the source is absolutely essential if we want to know what he actually advocated. Callinicos’s book begins with a lively account of Marx’s life, showing how his ideas developed and emphasizing “the unity of Marx’s life and thought as critical theorist and revolutionary activist.” Marx, in other words, was interested in understanding the world not as an abstract intellectual exercise, but in order to change it.

He was born in 1818 in the German Rhineland and later became a student in both Bonn and Berlin, where he came under the influence of radical young followers of the philosopher Hegel. They embraced Hegel’s view that history is characterized by contradiction and change but rejected his claims that this process had culminated with the Protestant reformation and that the Prussian state was the embodiment of reason. Instead, the Young Hegelians wanted to fulfill the promises of the French Revolution by promoting democratic forms.

After completing his doctorate in 1842 and being forced to make a living as a journalist, Marx came to see the limitations of the Young Hegelians. They saw “their task as the purely intellectual one of refuting error,” particularly religion, which they viewed as the main obstacle to social change. By contrast, while reporting on a new law that prevented the poor from gathering fallen wood, Marx became aware that their oppression was based not on reason, but on the material interests of the...
industrial capitalists and feudal landowners who controlled the state. Investigating the dire poverty of peasants in the Moselle region led him to the conclusion that only if private property was abolished could genuine freedom and democracy be achieved.

As Marx’s collaborator Friedrich Engels recalled many years later, “I heard Marx say again and again that it was precisely through concerning himself with the wood-theft law and with the situation of the Moselle peasants that he was shunted from pure politics over to economic conditions, and thus came to socialism.” The key remaining question was how the abolition of private property was to be achieved. It was Marx’s encounter with workers’ organizations in Paris, and the 1844 rebellion of Silesian weavers in Germany, that convinced him that workers were not simply victims, and that the development of capitalism would give them the power to transform society.

Over the next few years, in collaboration with Engels, Marx developed a set of ideas to explain the course of human history, the necessity for a socialist revolution, and the key role that the working class would play in such a struggle. After examining Marx’s political and intellectual influences, Callinicos turns to an exposition of his mature views on history, economics, and revolution, paying close attention to Marx’s own words.

Marx was a materialist in the sense that he believed that material conditions, and in particular the way in which production was organized in a society, explain the way in which ideas, laws and customs develop. He also noted that for all of recorded history, human society has been divided into exploiting and exploited classes—a minority that controls society’s surplus wealth (that is, resources not needed for immediate consumption) and a much larger group that actually produces it. This is why “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.”

Different forms of society are based on different relations of exploitation. In slave societies, the direct producers are literally owned by members of the exploiting class. In feudal societies, peasants are not owned by lords, but they are controlled by political and military means. In modern capitalism, control over workers is mainly exercised through more subtle economic means. Workers are free to leave a job if they choose, but the vast majority of workers can only make a living if they submit to exploitation by someone.

But there have been different forms of class society due to the fact that as changes accumulate in an economy, contradictions begin to develop at the base of society, altering the balance of class forces, and producing major crises. These crises can result “in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”

Marx spent much of his adult life developing an account of how capitalism works and why it too cannot avoid periodic and devastating crises. One of the strongest sections in Callinicos’s book is the chapter on capitalism, which is the best short introduction to Marx’s economic ideas that I know. It is worth buying the book for this chapter alone.

The subsequent chapter on workers’ power, explaining how the working class has the power to change society and the radically democratic alternative to capitalism that Marx envisaged, is also essential reading for anyone who wants to transform the world today. Among other things, it makes clear that Marx’s vision of socialism had nothing in common with one-party dictatorships like the former Soviet Union that declared themselves to be socialist or communist. For Marx, the key question was not whether the economy was controlled by the state, but which class controlled the state. A society can only be socialist if power is in the hands of workers themselves.
Callinicos describes his book as “a contribution to the struggle against capitalism, and for socialism.” By presenting Marx’s ideas in a clear and accessible way, he has made it easier for a new generation of activists to see their relevance for the political battles facing us today.

Citizen Action Monitor

Ecosocialism: Viable and necessary alternative to capitalism?
Posted by fjwhite on October 11, 2011 in ecosocialism, political action, scientific & scholarly counterpower, social movements

No 296 Posted by fw, October 11, 2011

“[E]liminating profit and accumulation as the driving forces of the economy will eliminate capitalism’s innate drive to pollute and destroy. While mistaken policies and ignorance have caused some very serious ecological problems, the global crisis we face today isn’t the result of mistaken policies and ignorance – it is the inevitable result of the way capitalism works. With capitalism an ecologically balanced world is impossible. Socialism doesn’t make it certain, but it will make it possible.” Ian Angus

The above passage is from Ian Angus’ keynote address to the Climate Change Social Change conference in Melbourne, Australia, October 2, 2011. Angus, a Canadian and editor of Climate and Capitalism, put forward the case for ecosocialism as a viable and necessary alternative to capitalism, “a force for destruction, decay and death.”

Below is my slightly modified version of Ian’s own edited text of his address, How to make an ecosocialist revolution, which was published on his website on August 7, 2011. You can watch a 45-minute video of his address here and video clips from the question period here.

Juxtaposing Ian’s ecosocialist viewpoint next to Michael Portillo’s Capitalism on Trial Part 2 – Capitalism on the Brink is instructive in the sense that it explores an aspect that Portillo didn’t touch on and, in my view, should have – capitalism’s devastating impact on the Earth’s ecological systems.
Owing to the length of this transcript (over 5,600 words), I have added my own Contents list to facilitate browsing for the main ideas and for jumping from section to section.

*How to make an ecosocialist revolution* by Ian Angus, published on August 7, 2011

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1. *Capitalism has become “a force for destruction, decay and death”*

Meetings such as this play a vital role in building a movement that can stop the hell-bound train of capitalism, before it takes itself and all of humanity over the precipice. Building such a movement is the most important thing anyone can do today – so I’m honored to have been invited to take part in your discussions.

One hundred and fifty years ago, **Karl Marx** predicted that unless capitalism was eliminated the great productive forces it unleashed would turn into destructive forces. And that’s exactly what has happened. Every day we see more evidence that capitalism, which was once the basis for an unprecedented wave of creativity and liberation, has transformed itself into a **force for destruction, decay and death**. It directly threatens the existence of the human race, not to mention the existence of the millions of species of plants and animals with whom we share the earth.

Many people have proposed technological fixes or political reforms to address various
aspects of the global environmental crisis, and many of those measures deserve serious consideration. Some of them may buy us some time, some of them may delay the ecological day of reckoning. Contrary to what some of our critics claim, no serious socialist is opposed to partial measures or reforms – we will actively support any measure that reduces, limits or delays the devastating effects of capitalism. And we will work with anyone, socialist or not, who seriously wants to fight for such measures. In fact, just try to stop us! But as socialists, we know that there can be no lasting solution to the world’s multiple environmental crises so long as capitalism remains the dominant economic and social system on this planet.

We do not claim to have all the answers, but we do have one big answer: the only basis for long-term, permanent change in the way humanity relates to the rest of nature is an ecosocialist revolution.

If we don’t make that transformation we may delay disaster, but disaster remains inevitable. As the headline on Climate and Capitalism has always said: “Ecosocialism or barbarism: There is no third way.” But what do we mean by ecosocialism? And what do we mean by ecosocialist revolution?

For the full article go to: http://citizenactionmonitor.wordpress.com/2011/10/11/ecosocialism-viable-and-necessary-alternative-to-capitalism/