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Inequality: Trump's Challenge, Trump's Failure?

By David Rosen
May 1, 2017

March 5th, Pres. Donald Trump championed a pep rally at Detroit's American Center for Mobility, chortling, "it's also wonderful to be here with the leaders, workers, engineers and suppliers of Ford, and Fiat-Chrysler, and General Motors, and many others."

He then asserted:

... Since my election, Ford has announced 700 new jobs coming back to their plant in Flat Rock, Michigan. (Applause.) Fiat-Chrysler has announced that they will create 2,000 new jobs in Michigan and Ohio. (Applause.) And just today — breaking news — General Motors announced that they're adding or keeping 900 jobs right here in Michigan, and that's going to be over the next 12 months. And that's just the beginning, folks. ...

... Seventy-five years ago, during the Second World War, thousands of American workers filled this very building to build the great new airplanes — the B-24 Liberator. At peak production — listen to this — it's not the country that we've been watching over the last 20 years — they were building one B-24 every single hour. (Applause.) ...

... I'm asking all of the companies here today to join us in this new Industrial Revolution. Let us put American workers, American families, and American dreams first once again.

Ten days later, Trump issued an executive order cutting U.S. vehicle fuel-efficiency standards put in place by the Obama administration. It was a victory for the auto industry and – like his order promoting “clean” coal – strengthening his anti-environmental stance.

Trump received 62,979,636 votes in the 2016 election — 46.1 percent of the total. His election proved one dire fact – many Americans no longer believe in the myth of upward mobility. Many, if not most, of his supporters shared one sense or another of his religious-like incantation, “make America great again.”

Many of those who voted for Trump *knew* the game was over, that the nation’s “great” days were in the past. Because they knew it, they backed a politician who claimed to also know this historic truth, but promised to reverse history and make the nation “great” again.

This promise is nothing more than a shared fiction for, as everyone knows, to make the U.S. “great” again, Trump must not simply make Americans believe in the promise of upward mobility, but deliver renewed prosperity to the new — and ever-growing – proletariat. Their lives — and that of their children’s – must get better materially, financially and health-wise to fulfill the great American vision of upward mobility.

Trump has repeatedly sought to deliver on his campaign promise with strategic press conference at industrial sites across the country. He’s appeared at the Carrier plant in Indianapolis, IN, an air-conditioning and heating systems maker; at Boeing’s South Carolina aircraft production facilities; and at Snap-on Inc. facility in Kenosha, WI, promoting his “Buy American-Hire American” executive order. How long he will continue to hold such rallies promoting his campaign of shared fiction of American greatness is anyone’s guess.

On March 13th, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) released its official “scoring” of the failed Republican replacement – some dubbed it “wealth” — plan for Obamacare, the American Health Care Act. Unfortunately, most media reports failed to follow the legendary bank-robbler Willie Sutton’s advice: “follow the money.”

[Forbes](#) noted that “the results are not pretty.” It detailed this in the following staggering terms: “An \$883 billion tax cut, \$274 billion of it going to the richest 2%. \$880 billion stripped from Medicaid. And 24 million fewer insured individuals over the next ten years.” Since then, Trump and the Republicans have added to that total, including the defunding of Planned Parenthood.

The CBO’s scoring of the Republican’s health care plan followed a revealing August 2016 report, “Trends in Family Wealth, 1989 to 2013.” It paints a pretty bleak portrait of the economic state of the nation:

In 2013, families in the top 10 percent of the wealth distribution held 76 percent of all family wealth, families in the 51st to the 90th percentiles held 23 percent, and those in the bottom half of the distribution held 1 percent. Average wealth was about \$4 million for families in the top 10 percent of the wealth distribution, \$316,000 for families in the 51st to 90th percentiles, and \$36,000 for families in the 26th to 50th percentiles. On average, families at or below the 25th percentile were \$13,000 in debt.

Trump proposed new tax plan calls for cuts in the top rate for corporations from 35% to 15% and, according to [CNN](#), “could reduce revenue by nearly \$4 trillion in the first decade.” Backed by the Republican-controlled Congress, it will likely lead the greatest re-distribution of wealth in American history. The budget will most likely admit to the troubled state of the nation in terms of job, infrastructure and military preparedness, blaming Obama for the failed situation. He will propose a budget that will not address the nation’s underlying concerns, but, if successful, will transfer hundreds of billions of dollars from the public purse of all Americans, their tax dollars, to the 1 percent and the big corporations they control. This likely unprecedented transfer of wealth will only compound the deepening crisis over inequality gripping the nation.

The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) paints a grim picture of real income crisis gripping the nation. “Since 1973,” it found, “hourly compensation for the vast majority of American workers has not risen in line with economy-wide productivity.” It stressed, “In fact, hourly compensation has almost stopped rising at all. Net productivity grew 72.2 percent between 1973 and 2014. Yet inflation-adjusted hourly compensation of the median worker rose just 8.7 percent, or 0.20 percent annually, over this same period, with essentially all of the growth occurring between 1995 and 2002.”

The Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) website, [Inequality](#), offers a revealing snapshot of the distribution of household wealth for the quarter-century between 1989-2013. The nation’s “wealth holdings” grew to \$76 trillion from \$67 trillion, and the relative share controlled by the richest 10 percent jumped two-and-a-half fold, to \$51 trillion from \$20 trillion. The top-10’s relative share of household wealth increased to 76 percent from 67 percent. And the 50 percent of Americans identified as the poorest, their paltry share of household wealth remained flat at \$1 trillion for a quarter century.

The shape of early-21st century wealth distribution is that of a pyramid with the wealthiest segment – whether the 10 percent, the 1 percent or the 0.1 percent – clustered at the very top, breathing the freshest air and having the grandest views. The weight of America’s social-wealth pyramid bears heaviest on those at the bottom, on those with the least. White families control 10 times more wealth than Latino families and 13 times more than African-American families. The wealth pyramid a visual metaphor illuminating the structure of social oppression.

In the decades after WW-II, many Americans embraced a shared ideology that hard work, debt and white skin privilege would guarantee them – and, more importantly, their children – a better tomorrow. And it worked, the proletariat or working-class of old became the new middleclass. City life of struggle became suburban existence of indulgence, even if it required ever-mounting levels of debt. Unfortunately, the great postwar recovery died in the early-1970s and Americans have dwelled in a twilight-zone state of income stagnation – and disbelief – ever since.

The twiddle-dee, twiddle-dum tendencies of the two establishment parties has long been clear. They both seek to further the interests of the 1 percent – whether called “robber baron,” “ruling class” or “special interest” — under the fictitious guises of the “free market” and “democracy.” Democrats from Clinton to Obama sought to further the free market, but in a more “rational”

manner. Traditional country-club Republicans saw themselves as part of the landed gentry, believing they did good by having a local black man shine their shoes.

Trump's imperial ego now captains the ship of state. Trump and his Republicans collaborators couldn't care less about the social good, moral order or the plight of the less fortunate. They are out for themselves and their backers for the quickest billions-of-bucks – and nothing else really matters. They suffer the glee of the psychopathology of power.

The American Dream promised a life – at home and at the workplace — with meaning, a life fulfilled. For more than a quarter-century after WW-II, Americans enjoyed the fruits of a higher standard-of-living and the consumer revolution; debt became the major addiction required to perpetuate prosperity. Similarly, all American workers were to be respected, no matter whether a factory worker or teacher, a local retailer or homemaker, banker or politician. Those days are over.

Perhaps most important, the American marketplace required the acceptance of the great consumer fiction – that one's life is made better by spending money and accumulating stuff. Americans have been culturally conditioned to work to live — and live to consume; they have been cultural educated to know how to shop, to negotiate the purchase and look for a bargain. Once upon a time, a person's profession or livelihood defined him/her (e.g., doctor or mechanic, teacher or housewife); today, one's job continues to define one's personal identity, but it's an identity shaped by how one shops and what one purchases, of how one represents oneself as an expression of the commodity spectacle.

Simply having a job — of just paying the bills — is no longer enough; with few exceptions, not many jobs offer a sense of personal fulfillment or meaning. Workers want more, but, sadly, as social respect declines, workplace disillusionment mounts.

A 2016 Conference Board [report](#) found less than half of U.S. workers (49.6%) were satisfied with their jobs. It notes, “overall job satisfaction is at its highest since 2005.” Yet, this was the ninth year in a row when less than half of American workers reported being dissatisfied with their jobs. The Board has conducted annual job satisfaction surveys for decades and found the country hit bottom in 2010 when just over two-in-five (43%) Americans reported workplace satisfaction and, in the report's words, “well below the historical level of 61.1 percent in 1987.”

Working Americans know that mobility is over and inequality is deepening — three-in-ten rely on food stamps and get supplementary food from a charity. Add to this the growing proportion of the elderly — the aging WW-II and postwar generations who Tom Brokaw once celebrated as the “greatest generation” — who can't get by on their meager savings, government support (e.g., Social Security, VA benefits and Medicare) and handouts.

Since the days of the Roman empire, rulers have known that they needed both “bread” and “circuses” to pacify their restive subjects. Trump has made grand – if incoherent – promises for both bread and circuses. His presidency is haunted by a scary question: How will the new proletariat – especially those who brought him to power, the old white working class — react if he fails to deliver on his promises?

In terms of “bread,” he’s promised to bring back good-paying jobs to heartland industrial Americans, invest \$1 trillion in dubious infrastructure upgrades and increase by \$50 billion the already-bloated military budget now at \$600 billion. These and other initiatives will likely amount to little more than scams at the public trough as Republicans push to decrease the national debt and offer deals to private hucksters (i.e., “private-public partnerships”) that will bleed taxpayers.

Equally troubling, this celebrated TV showman can be expected to provide numerous diversionary “circuses.” One surely will be modeled after the HUAC and McCarthy anti-communist witch-hunts of the post-WW-II era, likely targeting whistleblowers and publishers of “classified” government information (e.g., Julian Assange). Such ideological prosecutions will target a false scapegoat, whether alleged jihadist “terrorist” or African-American “law breaker.” These tales of threats, whether real or imaginary, will help distract Americans from their own suffering. Among Trump’s earliest “circus” acts are the false bombing campaign in Syria and false deployment of a Navy warship group to North Korea.

Trump voters seem willing to collectively hold their breath as the great historical roulette-wheel is spun. They have placed their bets and Trump has begun to roll the dice. How long the growing and increasingly disillusioned new proletariat is willing to suffer in the rigged game of Russian roulette will determine Trump’s presidency – and the nation’s future.

Occupy Wall Street exploded at New York’s Zuccotti Park in the financial district on September 17, 2011, and lasted only a brief two months, forcefully suppressed by the NYPD — working closely with the FBI and DHS – on November 15th. The Occupy movement focused national attention on the deepening inequality that is an endemic feature of globalizing capitalism, as wealth migrates tyranny adjusts. It may have been a brief historical action, but it caught the imagination of radicals around the world. Local Occupy initiatives took place in nearly 1,000 cities across the U.S. as well as helped fuel the Arab Spring. The issue of inequality drove the 2016 Sanders campaign, becoming today’s defining economic and social issue.

The U.S. is living through a great historical counter-revolution, turning back the gains garnered by working people over the last century. Suffering through a First World War, Depression and Second World War, Americans were rewarded with postwar prosperity, the consumer revolution. Those days are over.

A vast re-distribution of wealth is underway, with the rich – and their slavish political, corporate and media minions – appropriating an ever-greater share while the lives of ordinary Americans stagnate. Reversal of this reallocation of wealth – the theft of social wealth for private gain – requires increasing the taxes on the 1 percent. This is not going to happen. They control the game – and everyone suffers.

As Leonard Cohen memorably wrote:

Everybody knows that the dice are loaded

...

Everybody knows the fight was fixed
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich
That's how it goes
Everybody knows

Yes, everyone knows.