

**‘Natural Law’ column 20, by Michael E. Price (uncorrected proof)**

**For Global Custodian, Summer plus 2013 issue**

## **Is equality boring?**

Last week I was in Miami for the annual meeting of the Human Behavior and Evolution society, and I saw two excellent talks about economic inequality. One, by the great evolutionary psychologist Martin Daly, was titled “Is it really inequality that drives variability in homicide rates”? His answer was an unequivocal yes: in social environments in which inequality (not poverty, but inequality specifically) is higher, people kill each other more. In the second talk, anthropologist Aaron Blackwell presented evidence that across different villages of the Tsimane (a small scale Amazonian society), higher inequality is linked to increases in depression, levels of cortisol (a stress hormone), social conflict, and failed pregnancies.

Both of these studies, together with a great deal of previous research (reviewed in the 2009 book *The Spirit Level*), associate increased economic inequality with diverse forms of negative social outcomes, from drug addiction to teenage births to obesity to murder. As is typically the case with scientific research—especially if it has political implications—many people have disputed the evidence for a positive relationship between inequality and social dysfunction. I’m not one of these people; I find the evidence for this relationship to be very convincing. There are also good evolutionary reasons to expect this relationship: because success in the competition to survive and reproduce is measured in relative rather than absolute terms, negative outcomes like stress, anxiety, aggression, and general within-society conflict should tend to increase as inequality grows. I spend less time now wondering whether and why this relationship exists, and more time wondering why, given that it does exist, people aren’t more concerned about it.

Of course, a lot of people are concerned about it. The worldwide “occupy” protests of 2011-12 were largely reactions to inequality, and in a 2013 Pew 39-nation survey, a majority of respondents from most countries regarded income inequality as a “very big problem”. However, other evidence suggests that people are somewhat blasé about inequality. The same Pew survey also found that “nearly every public surveyed wants the government to focus on creating jobs or taming inflation as a top priority, rather than on reducing economic inequality”. This attitude seems particularly prevalent in the USA (which has much greater

income inequality than most other Western nations): in a 2012 Gallup poll, only 2% of Americans named income inequality as the most worrying national economic problem.

Why don't Americans care more about income inequality? Researchers from the U.S. National Bureau of Economic Research explored this question in detail in a 2013 paper. They report that as inequality has been rising fairly dramatically in the USA since the 1970s, Americans' support for increased income redistribution has not been rising and, if anything, has been falling. (However, less surprisingly, this support seems to have remained consistently lower among wealthier Americans). The researchers suspected that if Americans had more information about the extent of inequality and how it affected them personally, then they would become more supportive of redistribution, so they performed an experiment in which they provided this information to half of their participants. But while this better-informed group did become more convinced that inequality was a serious problem, their attitudes about redistribution didn't change much. In other words, although being educated about the effects of inequality made them more likely to say that there was some kind of problem, it didn't increase their conviction that anything should be done about it.

So why, then, aren't Americans more concerned about inequality, even when they possess some knowledge about its negative effects? Here's an explanation that, while admittedly superficial, is still intriguing (to me anyway): they think equality is boring. Inequality is dramatic: high stakes and big risks, dazzling successes versus bankrupt failures. Life is thrilling when soaring fortunes can be won or lost, even more so if you believe that people who become wealthy are being rewarded for their skill, hard work, initiative, and ingenuity. People want to side with and emulate the winners in these contests, not the losers, and redistribution policies are perceived as strategies for coddling the losers and tearing the winners down. Americans' respect for competition and financial success reflects some of the core values that energize them and give meaning to their lives, and if these values lead to dysfunctional levels of inequality, that is a price that they currently seem willing to pay. What remains to be seen is whether the harmful effects of inequality will ultimately significantly damage American global competitiveness. The USA remains the most powerful nation in the world, but if more Americans believed that they could continue to maintain this position only by reducing economic inequality, then I suspect they'd start perceiving inequality as a much more serious problem.