

Is it fair? Wealth and responsibility: Wealth and responsibility

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To worry publicly about the increasing disparities of wealth and income in this country is to invite the charge of fomenting “class warfare.” Nevertheless, consider: Top CEOs earn 1,000 times the pay of an average worker—a ratio that has increased exponentially in the past three decades. Over the past 20 years the income of the top 1 percent of Americans rose 157 percent, that of middle-income families rose 10 percent, and that of people in the bottom fifth fell slightly. Forty-three million Americans, including 30 million in families headed by a worker, lack health care insurance.

Meanwhile, the focus in Congress continues to be on more tax cuts for the wealthy, and the centerpiece of the effort is the drive to permanently repeal the estate tax—a tax on the money that the wealthiest people leave to their heirs.

These facts point to a deep injustice. Yet this issue mostly simmers beneath the surface of public life, rarely provoking serious political or cultural discussion about what a more just society would look like.

Not that the shape of a “just society” is obvious. Questions about the true nature of justice are as old as Plato and as current as the latest family quarrel. For example: Is a fair society one in which everyone is treated equally, or one in which each person is treated appropriately given a larger vision of the personal and social good?

In the particular case of the estate tax, the issue can be framed this way: Does fairness consist in allowing people with great wealth to pass it on to their heirs without government interference or in requiring a portion of that wealth to be used for the common good? According to one view, a just society is one in which government keeps its hands off people’s hard-earned money—the multimillionaire’s as well as everyone else’s. But according to another view, a just society is one that restrains the intergenerational buildup of wealth in families, and one in which individuals who prosper have some responsibility to the community in which they

have flourished. (It is significant that the estate tax encourages the wealthy to avoid taxes through donations to charitable causes, thereby also ensuring that their wealth serves the common good.)

Abstract definitions (“You deserve what you earn,” or “Treat everyone the same”) are rarely adequate for answering questions about justice, even in very narrow cases like the estate tax. Those questions always relate to larger concerns about what kind of people we are meant to be and what kind of society we want to live in—precisely the questions that need to be kept alive in public life.