

# How're We Doing? Reflections on Moral Progress in America

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We were born in 1951/1952, grew up in the suburban northeast during the great post-war boom, and entered Yale College in 1969/1970. This was the Yale of Kingman Brewster and Inky Clark, '57, who moved admissions past the prep schools, opened the university to women in 1969, and found a larger place for African Americans, as well as Jews and Catholics.

This more democratic Yale was part of a more confidently democratic country. We were born into a WASP-dominated America, with open racial apartheid, vast differences in the status of men and women, rigid sexual expectations, and unembarrassed class differences. Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma* (1944) underscored the tension between American democratic ideals and violent, legally-imposed racial subordination. But the stark conflicts between fact and norm were hardly confined to race.

By the time we came of age, the country was no longer the world of our fathers. The civil rights movement had ended legally-imposed racial apartheid, the women's movement had placed the system of gender inequality under sharp and sustained attack, Stonewall (1969) had just announced the opening of a long-term struggle against a dominant heterosexism, and the country's much greater prosperity was more widely shared.

We count this as remarkable moral progress, and that is how it felt as we lived through it. It was as if a powerful moral sensibility had been unlocked, and moved with commanding power against a whole range of longstanding hierarchies and exclusions. As Martin Luther King had often warned, progress did not "roll in on wheels of inevitability." It came through intense political struggle, animated by moral-political conviction, and even claiming ultimate sacrifice—from Medgar Evers; Carol Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Rosamond Robertson and Addie Mae Collins; Michael Schwerner, James Cheney, and Andrew Goodman; and then King himself. Still, there was powerful resonance in King's hopeful accompanying assertion—echoing the abolitionist Unitarian minister Theodore Parker—that the arc of the moral universe, while surely long, bends towards justice.

Of course there was still great economic inequality, but prosperity was an escalator, moving everyone up, and inequality

itself was less extreme. There was a shameful war to end, but a large movement to end it. And while we all understood the world of difference between political principle and political practice, we also witnessed the powerful stirrings to fulfill the promise of large political principles. The demonstrated success of public engagement—of the power of politics to achieve

aims well beyond the reach of separate episodes of individual decency—gave confidence and a will to do more. Indeed, with sufficient time and work, and enough debate, engagement, and organizing, almost anything seemed politically possible.

The world feels different now. To be sure, many of the gains in tolerance and inclusion achieved during the earlier period have deepened. In these respects, today's America is a vastly more decent place than the one we were born into: as we write this essay, an African-American man is competing with a woman for the Democratic

presidential nomination. But our democracy is not in good shape, and its troubles prompt concerns about the future. A decently functioning democracy provides a favorable setting for moral progress. It is of particular importance now, as we confront a range of problems—the collapse of the employer-based welfare state at home, global poverty and destitution, potential environmental catastrophe, and non-state terror—that we demand more honest, informed, and focused political argument and a more engaged citizenry than are now characteristic of our democracy.

## Moral Progress

At Gettysburg, Lincoln said there that the country was conceived in an idea—liberty—and dedicated to a proposition—that we are all moral equals. The country's promise, expressed in the Declaration and very imperfectly realized in the Constitution, was to be an association of free and equal persons. We treat this founding ideal as a basis for assessing moral progress, not *because* it is this nation's founding ideal—as if justice consisted in fidelity, and moral progress in fulfilling a national promise—but because we find it independently compelling.

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To be sure, the ideal of a society that treats its members as free and equal is highly abstract. No surprise then that its implications are contested by more egalitarian and more classically liberal Americans, even as they take it as common ground in argument. We have our own views on the ideal's implications, which we will try to clarify as we proceed.

Reflecting on the period between 1951/52 and the present, we are struck by large if uneven and clearly incomplete moral progress on three dimensions. We moved to a society with greater *racial inclusion*, greater *gender equality*, and increased *tolerance* along many dimensions of attachment and conviction. There have also been stunning improvements in standards of living. We are not counting the last improvements as forms of moral improvement, but they are elements of progress in a broader sense, and did arguably foster moral improvement, for reasons we will discuss below. We start with them.

Any way you look at it, despite dismal recent economic performance and a disturbing and unprecedented increase in economic inequality, we are much richer, healthier, and more schooled than we were in the early 1950s. Real median family income today is better than twice when it was then, with real wages for men twice and wages for women nearly four times as high. Average life expectancy has grown by nearly a decade since 1950; since 1960 alone death rates have been more than halved for heart disease, strokes, accidents, and influenza; and health and mobility in later years has vastly improved ("80 is the new 60"). While we all rightly complain about school quality, Americans are arguably better educated. High school graduation has doubled for both men and women since 1960, and quintupled for blacks. College completion has tripled for men (from 10 to 29 percent), more than quadrupled for women (from 6 to 26 percent), and quintupled for blacks (from 3 to 17 percent). As for mundane domesticity: when we were born, a third of American homes were without full plumbing, a fifth did not have telephone service, fewer than two in five had refrigerators; only one in three had a clothes washer; one in a hundred had a dishwasher; home air conditioning barely existed. Today, all these things are virtually universal, home ownership is up (from 55 to 67 percent), and average home size has more than doubled.

Now consider racial inclusion. In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court condemned legally enforced racial school segregation. Some analysts argue that the Court was simply codifying a set of changes in racial attitudes that would, in the fullness of time, have transformed legal relations through legislative channels. Whether that speculation is right or wrong, the change was fundamental. In 1967, when the Supreme Court overturned laws against miscegenation, they remained on the books in 18 states. Changes in housing laws, and laws barring racial discrimination in all kinds of publicly supported programs and services were parts of a legal revolution, and any story about

progress in the country since 1951 must give a central place to the elimination of legally enforced racial inequality.

The picture on progress since is mixed, with more progress in education than incomes, more in life expectancy and health than residential segregation. But the story is not one of unbroken backsliding. In 1950, the percentage of "non-whites" over the age of 25 who reported having completed at least four years of high school was less than two-fifths that of whites; today it is upwards of 95 percent. The percent reporting completion of four years of college had been a third of whites; now it is just under two-thirds (63 percent). Residential segregation in our major population centers remains severe, but declined 12 percent over 1970–80, and has declined another 12 percent since. Black women's life expectancy has increased 15 years since 1950, while black men gained a bit over a decade. From a much lower starting point, both gains exceeded those of whites.

Gains in black/white income equality are notably less impressive. Since 1950, the ratio of "non-white"/white family income has risen modestly, from 54 to 63 percent. But all this gain was made before mid-1970s, with regression since. Black income gains also appear less robust across generations, with black children less successful than whites in exceeding their parents' income, and more prone to sharp downward mobility. Over the 1974–2004 period, among children of middle-class (third income quintile) parents, 45 percent of black children fell to the lowest quintile, as compared to 16 percent of whites.

There is more bad news in other areas. Stunning increases in incarceration since the early 1970s have fallen overwhelmingly on blacks. Even before test gaps started growing again, black educational progress often underscored lower black returns to schooling. Health advances have been unequally distributed, increasing racial disparities. Black infant mortality, for example, is both much lower than when we were born and much worse relative to whites: 2.5 rather than 1.5 times as great. And despite our civil rights laws, all sorts of discrimination remain: in hiring, credit, housing availability, and the sale of everything from used cars to household appliances.

So black/white experience remains very different in America, and we are still leagues from judging each other by the content of our character. But there is also no denying that racial attitudes have tremendously improved in America. As a society, as two Secretaries of State and a possible black President might suggest, we are far more open to rewarding talent regardless of race. And in personal relations, we accept each other's humanity more readily. Consider (recalling those miscegenation laws in place at the time of *Brown*) intimacy. In 1958, when Gallup started asking the question, only 4 percent of Americans approved of interracial dating and marriage. Today, 77 percent of them do, and among young people the question has almost no meaning.

The revolution in gender relations has in many ways been more profound. Legal barriers here played a less central role than a mix of law, culture, and sentiment, with gender expectations reinforced by millions of daily smirks, insults, and threats, and plenty of brute force. Much remains to be done to ensure that we live in a society of equals, in which sex does not fix a person's fate. But measured against previous history, the gains are considerable. In 1950, median earnings of full-time year round women workers were only 37 percent of men's; today they are 77 percent. Back then, the college completion rate of college completion among women was 70 percent of men; today it is 92 percent. Earnings of college educated women were 44 percent of men's in 1950; today they are 61 percent. And women have dramatically improved their position in law, medicine, and other professions.

The country has also grown more tolerant on a variety of dimensions. Consider religion. While this may not be the most comfortable time to be a Muslim in America, and religious conviction still regularly emerges as a source of political division, our public institutions and everyday interactions are far less segregated by religion. The admission of middle class Catholics and Jews to Ivy League universities is no longer news. But it would be news if public institutions showed any preference for one or another faith. Perhaps the most striking gain in toleration is on sexual orientation. In 1951, and still in 1971, gays and lesbians were largely in the closet, excluded by law, culture, and emotion from public life. Gay marriage was not even a gleam in anyone's eye. And in 1986, in the depressing case of *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the US Supreme Court found nothing constitutionally amiss with legal sanctions for same-sex conduct. The Court rectified this awful decision in 2003 (*Lawrence v. Texas*) and there is now broad public sentiment in support of some form of officially recognized unions for gays and lesbians. Nearly 60 percent of Americans now think that consenting homosexual relations should be legal; 89 percent think that gays should have equal job rights; and while only 45 percent of those over 55 think homosexuality is an "acceptable alternative lifestyle," 75 percent of 18–34 year olds do.

### Moral Regress

The record is less happy on three other dimensions. First, greater income inequality. The importance of economic inequality in the ideal of a society of equals is deeply contested: classical liberals see economic inequality as an inevitable and unobjectionable part of a society in which people are free to choose. We belong to the tradition of Marx, Mill, Rawls, and Dworkin: in a society of equals, economic inequalities require especially compelling justification, both because they are of questionable fairness in themselves and because they raise doubts about equal opportunity and equal citizenship. So we are troubled

by the great increase in inequality that began in America roughly thirty years *ago*, accelerated in the 1980s, was briefly slowed in the late Clinton years, and has since accelerated again.

The net of those years is a sharp increase in income inequalities, and a still-greater increase in wealth concentration. Over the past few years, wage compensation took a smaller share of GDP than at any time on record, with records going back to the 1950s. Last year, the top 300,000 Americans (.001 of our population) claimed the same share of national income (22 percent) as the bottom half of 150 million. The top 10 percent of Americans, in turn, now own 70 percent of all national wealth, while the wealthiest 1 percent own more than the bottom 95 percent. But while real GDP *per capita* increased by 83 percent over 1973–2005, and productivity in the business sector rose by 87 percent, earnings of non-supervisory workers have stagnated since, and today are still well below their 1973 peak. Worker compensation—counting benefits like health insurance or retirement pensions—has increased since that time, but at only half the rate of productivity growth and with far less secure coverage. The benefits of productivity growth have simply bypassed most workers.

Second, the continued failure of social protection and substantive "equal opportunity." Aside from old age programs like Social Security and Medicare, the United States has tied social protections and benefits—health insurance, most retirement insurance, vacation time, minimum income—to employment status. With the collapse of the employer-based welfare state, the absence of such general social protections has been pressed into sharp relief. There is disagreement about just what and how much is essential to realizing the ideal of a society of equals, but most would agree that some assurances against market contingencies are required, and ours are strikingly limited. Nor has America addressed critical sources of inequality in education, so important to assuring fair chances in life. Everyone agrees that human capital is needed for success in today's economy. Everyone knows there is a huge achievement gap between poor and especially of-color children and middle class whites, and deplorable differences in the quality of urban ghetto and suburban schools. But we have not summoned the collective will to do something serious about it.

And then, third—and in our view, not unrelated—there is political democracy itself. In a vital democracy, we expect to see institutions of government with some measure of accountability to equal citizens, a widespread use of rights of association and participation in influencing those institutions, and a sense of public-political morality animated by the view that some problems are really worth worrying about, accompanied by a sense of political possibility, expressing a confidence that we can, through collective decision and action, do something about these problems.

Here, too, we see troubling regression since our bright college years, on several dimensions: the persisting dominance of private money, the sharp partisan polarization of political elites (and an associated degeneration of norms of political argument), and, perhaps most importantly, a decline in the range of civic organizations that have traditionally played a role in integrating citizens of limited means into politics. Union decline is a particularly striking example. Private sector unionization when we were born stood at 33 percent of the labor force; now it is just over 7 percent. These deficiencies in contemporary democracy are disturbing both in themselves, and for what they suggest about the future of moral progress in the United States—an issue we return to.

Reflecting on this sweeping history, we still judge the country a morally better place than when we came in. While there are very troubling issues of economic inequality, lack of decent social protections, and democracy, they do not strike us as on balance worse than the early 1950s, even if they have worsened since 1970. At the same time, the gains on social inclusion—along lines of race, gender, and sexual orientation—are undeniable and of very large importance.

### Self-Congratulation and Delusion

Of course, large assertions about moral progress are bound to provoke disquiet, and we feel considerable disquiet ourselves. But we think the gains that we have just sketched in social inclusion can be acknowledged and ought to be embraced even by people who are skeptical about celebratory attitudes toward this country in particular or ideas of progress generally.

On the first, we share the concern about American self-congratulation, and recognize the limits of present political accomplishments. But our on-balance judgment of progress does not depend on an objectionable form of American exceptionalism, or blindness to the work remaining. It depends instead on the convictions that racial exclusion, gender subordination, and intolerance are all great evils; that progress toward their elimination is of correspondingly commanding importance; and that some considerable progress has been made.

On the second, critics of ideas about progress often point to a range of dark sides that accompany it as not-entirely-accidental correlates. (As Nietzsche said, it is nice to praise freedom and responsibility, but what should we think about all the lacerating shame, guilt, blame, and punishment that accompany them?) They worry about the mix of hubris and social discipline associated with the intellectual and practical mastery of nature that drives material improvement; about the

loss of important virtues, including civic, as a result of the banal distractions that accompany mass consumption; and about the diminished concern for the higher goods of human life associated with the flattening of social life ingredient in mass democracy.

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There are real concerns here, but we find it hard to feel their force as applied to what we have claimed here. Whatever measure of hubris and social discipline may have accompanied massive improvements in living standards over the past half century, we think the price is pretty small. As for banal distractions and a diminished appreciation of higher goods: we like high culture as much as the next person, and find popular obsession with Britney Spears's many humiliations pretty tiresome, but are skeptical that affection for worthless distractions has appreciably grown since the early 1950s, and very skeptical that any growth can be laid at the doorstep of social inclusion and toleration. And if—just to face what some traditionalists think is the hard question—greater equality of men and women has sexualized the public culture, if it distracts men from their noble callings, that strikes us as a very small price to pay for eliminating the intolerable exclusion of women from public life.

### Democracy and Progress

An account of progress is not the same as a list of improvements. What distinguishes them is that an account of progress also describes some mechanisms that explain the improvement, and arguably give them some staying power. That certainly was the aspiration of the classical “progressive” theories of history, from Smith to Marx.

Two recent accounts of American moral progress in the period we have been discussing share this ambition, and we comment on them briefly to help focus our own view. Brink Lindsey's *The Age of Abundance* finds the foundations of moral progress the combination of prosperity and Maslow's need hierarchy. Material well-being shifts our concerns from more mundane physiological needs to concerns for safety, love and belonging, self-esteem and respect of others, and finally self-actualization. Applying this to the US (and other countries), Lindsey's argument is that the mass prosperity issuing from postwar economic growth triggered such concern for self-actualization, and that basically explains almost all we have described as progress: the black civil rights and women's movements, gay liberation, increased toleration. (We will not dwell on this point here, but we reject this conflation of concerns for justice with concerns for self-actualization, and think that Maslow would have seen

aspirations to mutual respect, not self-actualization, at work in the movements described earlier).

Benjamin Friedman's *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth* advances a different theory of the relation between economics and moral improvement. He focuses less on prosperity *per se* than economic growth, which he defines as "a rising standard of living for the clear majority of citizens" (4). His microfoundations rest in our psychological need to assess our own progress, which requires some comparison of our present state with some other. But there are two kinds of comparisons that might be made. We can compare ourselves to others, or we can compare ourselves to our own past. Economic growth encourages us to do the latter, and diminishes the salience of comparisons to others. Cheerful judgments of personal improvement foster tolerance of diversity, social mobility, increased opportunities, commitment to fairness, and democracy. By contrast, stagnation, even at reasonably high levels of prosperity, encourages comparison to others, and this inevitably excites envy and resentment, destructive keep-up-with-the-Joneses social competition, and jealous protections of existing privilege.

But while Lindsay and Friedman rightly emphasize the material bases of moral progress, what is striking to us is their treatment of democracy. Both treat democracy largely as one of the attractive outcomes of material development. We are strongly inclined to a less economistic view: that a well-functioning democracy is not simply a product of growth or prosperity, but itself helps to promote moral progress—that it is, in short, both autonomous and important. It is hard to make a compelling social-scientific argument for this conclusion, and this is certainly not the venue for making that argument, even if we could. But it strikes us as a natural conclusion to draw from the role of mass politics in each of the areas of greater social inclusion and toleration described earlier. Along with whatever favorable structural conditions, those were all clearly also the product of, and required, autonomous, concerted political action, animated by democratic ideals.

To be clear: by a "well-functioning democracy," we mean not only a system of electoral competition with widespread suffrage: a mix of, as Dahl says, contestation and inclusion. We also mean, integrated with that, a system that has strong protections of political speech and associative liberties, and the use of those protections, through public argument and political movements, to contest ruling ideas and entrenched privileges, to consider alternative courses of action, and to act both inside and outside formal political arenas. The autonomous democratic action that we think was critical to the movements of the 1960s and 1970s depended upon such a system. Without it, they would not have been nearly as effective, or perhaps not effective at all.

## Back to the Future

Because we think a well-functioning democracy is so important, we are concerned about the future of moral progress in America.

We do not particularly fear *regress* from the gains in inclusion and toleration of the past generation. In *Achieving Our Country*, Richard Rorty worried that if America does not do something soon about inequality it risks a new revanchist and sadistic fascism: "Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion. The words 'nigger' and 'kike' will once again be heard in the workplace.... All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet." This concern seems misplaced. Living standards for working Americans have been stuck for a long time now, but tolerance continues to grow. Even popular response to the human catastrophes of US immigration policy has been—compared to what might have been expected a generation or two ago—considerably less tainted by racism.

But we have less confidence that American democracy is now prepared, to invoke Lincoln again, to work through "the great task[s] remaining before us." Prominent on the current list of great tasks are: the lack of a decent system of health insurance; growing income and wealth inequality at home; an inhuman, often-brutal immigration policy; concentrated and sustained central city poverty (with its powerful racial inflection, and associated issues about mass incarceration); global climate disruption; global poverty and associated problems of global health; and the security issues associated with non-state terrorism (particularly nuclear terrorism). Imagine an essay on the same topic as this one, written in 50 years, that could not report real headway in addressing these issues. We think it would have to conclude that moral progress in America had stalled.

There are both recent and longstanding sources of concern about the ability of our democracy to address these large concerns. The recent sources lie with the Bush administration. Among its many impairments of democracy, we note the administration's (1) hostility to science and evidence in making public policy; (2) associated centralization of policy in an executive branch dominated by political concerns; (3) invasion of Iraq; (4) appointment of a broadly anti-democratic majority at the Supreme Court. The first two of these are subject to change with a change of administration. The third and fourth will have more enduring effects. Iraq will almost certainly eventually recede as a distraction from constructive policy, but is likely to dominate American politics well into the next presidency. And the Roberts Court, just finishing its warm-up swings, will likely be with us for a generation. It is already clear that the court has no interest in relieving inequality and exclusion. What is less clear is just how far it is prepared to go in limiting federal or state and local

efforts to do so (as it already has in campaign finance, state consumer protection, and local experiments with racial balance in schools). Put otherwise, we know this is not a Warren or even a Burger Court. We do not know if it aspires to be a *Lochner* one (though we have some pretty strong suspicions).

Our principal concern here, however, is with longer-standing weaknesses of our democracy. These might be telegraphed as concerns about representation, organization, and public reason.

The representation problem refers to the almost-universally acknowledged fact that our present system does not provide anything close to the full and fair representation of the people's interests. Such representation is limited and thwarted by the central role of private money in the finance of elections, the dominance of two parties with limited threats of exit for disappointed voters, the many pathologies of our "winner take all" system of voting, and the destructive lock-ins in representation produced by a highly partisan reapportionment process.

The organization problem refers to the troubling decline in associational life, particularly the decline in membership organizations with some involvement in politics. Such organization can help redress power imbalances by giving ordinary citizens, lacking individual resources, the power that comes of pooling them. It can also give individual citizens greater civic knowledge, competence, and sensibility. Regrettably, present associational life in the United States, at least in the political realm, is overwhelmingly unequal on the power front, and overwhelmingly fragmented and particularistic on the civic consciousness one.

The public reason problem refers to the effective absence of democratic deliberation—understood as a use of public reason to guide and discipline the exercise of public power—from much of our politics. To see the force of the concern, notice that the politics of the "task[s] before us" are different from those of the previous generation. In the fights over exclusion and oppression, the excluded and oppressed were among us, and they could use ordinary tools to command attention and redress. Their demands for respect and inclusion were only secondarily about material redistribution or changes in economic governance. At bottom, their claim on justice was also relatively simple—to be allowed the same ordinary rights and respect accorded others—and capable of being met, at least in law, by existing institutions.

Our present tasks are different. Addressing them will commonly require recognizing the interests of persons not present in our society: the future generations most affected by climate

crisis; the foreign peoples whose cooperation is needed to address global poverty and health concerns, or a response to non-state terror. It will often require very substantial redistribution and changes in economic governance. While it often involves essentially simple moral principles—that every child deserves an equal start in life; that all lives, wherever led, are equal—often it does not. And the problems it will have to solve often involve multiple causes, multiple strategies of solution, high interdependence, and an absence of institutions responsible for addressing them.

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*Along with political will, addressing these problems in democratic ways thus demands a higher standard of public discussion. We need serious, evidence-based, rational discussion of problems; a capacious view of the interests at stake in those problems and their solution; and an organized debate about solutions that is focused on a defensible view of the public interest.*

of problems; a capacious view of the interests at stake in those problems and their solution; and an organized debate about solutions that is focused on a defensible view of the public interest. For some time now, however, standards have been very low, and the American media have contributed much to keeping them down. Our public discussion is also marked by extreme and strategically exaggerated political polarization that allows embarrassing rituals of playground insult to pass for political debate and from which the public and its interests are almost wholly absent.

Among students of American politics there is much debate about the sincerity of this polarization, and whether it grips the masses as much as the elites. Our own view is the public remains much less divided than its leaders, but also lacks the means (and perhaps sufficient will) to discipline them. What is indisputable, however, is that present public discussion fails to come close to the standards suggested above.

This failure has real moral consequences. The point of politics is not to entertain, but to solve consequential and conflictual matters of public concern. The perversion of our public discussion undermines any democratic capacity to do so. We agree with Ronald Dworkin's observation, in his bracingly entitled *Is Democracy Possible Here?*, that "Public political discourse must have a decent argumentative texture if we are to treat it as an exchange between mutually respectful partners who disagree. Our degraded politics are not only insulting and depressing; they are not even democratic. That is in some ways our most consequential failure because we might hope that we would do better in other ways if our politics were of higher quality."

Moreover, considering the tasks we face, the consequences of this failure are only likely to grow in prominence. At least on good days, we can imagine some resolution of health care coverage

through something like sheer political force. Opponents of serious health insurance reform may finally be defeated, with the acquiescence of at least some of their business colleagues, by an angry citizenry. But it is much harder to imagine success in writing and executing a new social contract for shared prosperity, or addressing central city poverty and mass imprisonment, or finding a humane way to manage immigration, or repairing global climate disruption, or addressing global health, poverty, and security, without a more deliberative democracy as well as a fairer (in election systems and voting) and more engaging (in civic organization) one.

Today, then, perhaps more than ever, a well-functioning democracy is an essential condition of moral progress. If we build such a democracy in America, there is good reason to hope for further moral progress. If we do not, the prospects for a morally better future are depressingly dim.

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