Below is a pie chart—two to be precise. Each one measures the severely unequal distribution of economic resources in the United States. The first measures the “net worth” of various percentages of the population distinguished by how much of the total net worth they have. The second pie tells us how much financial wealth each group has. The reason we often measure wealth instead of simply income is that income measures what people earn for their labor while wealth is what people own regardless of their labor. As sociologists Oliver and Shapiro explain, “Wealth signifies command over financial resources that a family has accumulated over its lifetime along with those resources that have been inherited across generations. As you can see, by 2007, the top one percent had almost as much as the bottom 99%, and the top 5% had almost three times as much wealth as the bottom 95%. Stark inequalities indeed.

But what do these numbers really mean? A Sociological imagination leads us to ask questions about such pie charts. Of course, a sociological imagination might ask other questions such as who eats pie and why? Pierre Bourdieu’s famous work on the sociology of culture and taste would lead us to investigate things such as who eats pie and is there a class distinction between those who eat pie and those who don’t. We might survey restaurants to see if the “highest end” restaurants even have pie on the menu, versus upscale restaurants which seem to, middle class restaurants which always have them on the menu, and working class joints that have them in glass cases for all the customers to see. We might also survey patrons and sales to see how much pie gets eaten. Our first sociological imaginative instincts might suggest that pie is more of a working class food and gets eaten less and less as we travel up the economic food chain.

Pie is also a fairly simple food and also high in fat. Bourdieu and others would argue that simply cooked foods with high calorie contents are also usually foods made and consumed by working class people. It’s not that most people don’t like a good rhubarb pie, but that most pies consist of simple crusts with a simple filling comprised of meats, vegetables or fruits. Pies became primarily middle and working class foods as the pie crusts substituted for dishes, and made easy storage containers so that food might be kept longer. As industrial society sent its workers into the mines and mills and urban society into its factories and department stores, tarts and pasties and turnovers were simple and transportable foods. Pies have remained a dessert for the middle and upper class (but not necessarily for the ultra wealthy). But they remain food staples for everyone from the lunch bucket brigade to those who “love to see their husbands take a Huckleberry Purrrie pie pop to work.” Everyone may love pies, but few in the upper crust actually eat them.

But enough about pie itself—back to the pie charts. How can we accept this inequality and continue to live in a society where a few have so much and so many have so little? We could argue that the “god-given” skills and talents of some engage a marketplace that naturally rewards them while the abilities of others are either limited or just not values by the marketplace? We could further argue that in a “free” society with a “free” market, people compete from an equal position and whoever wins the race gets the spoils? While both these argument seem dubious given that many people with more talent earn less than others with more (ask almost anybody) and few people start at the exact same spot on life’s racetrack, let’s suppose they are correct. A sociological imagination would suggest that, just because this inequality seems natural, doesn’t mean we should value it. In other words, if we know that such inequality is bad for most of society—at least 80-90 percent of it, shouldn’t we do something about it even if it is natural? Sickness is natural, catastrophic weather is natural, hell—death is natural, but our society doesn’t value them and we use all of our scientific advancements to help ward them off. Might we not do the same for such economic inequality that in perhaps even more devastating ways is destroying our society?

Most sociologists have marshaled great amounts of evidence to show that inequality is not, in fact, natural and that economically and politically powerful people use their power to create public policies that skew the life chances of most people in very narrow paths. The children of pie eaters remain pie eaters most of their lives. There were moments and even generations where some pie eaters left the factories and became doctors or lawyers with nicer houses, but for this and the next generation, many of those houses are owned by banks and the middle class is living paycheck to paycheck also. Why is it that that we continue to accept policies that benefit such a small majority while leaving most of the rest of us to “eat pie?”

Perhaps it is that the domination of those in power is both obscured, yet almost complete in its reach. Such was the crux of the argument made by Sociologist William Domhoff in his book, Who Rules America? First Published in 1967, then updated in 1983 as Who Rules America Now? Domhoff continues to be one of the most insightful sociologists studying just how the rich and powerful maintain their control over the major institutions in our society. His work demonstrates that, essentially, “large corporations and wealthy foundations, research institutes and policy discussion groups support the individuals” that hold the most powerful economic and political decision making positions in the United States. These groups buttress an institutional structure that maintains a stranglehold on the most powerful positions in government, business, and media. And these people generally come from the same powerful families and larger institutional networks and interlocking boards of corporate directorates. There is a good reason why it sometimes feels like corporations run the world. And surely they own and control the biggest slices of the pie. I invite you to watch this video of an interview with Domhoff from almost 25 years ago and consider how much of his ideas hold true today.

In the end we have to return to the questions of why we continue to live day to day within such an unequal and ultimately destructive society so rife with inequality and suffering. Perhaps it’s because we get some pie. In fact we want pie and we like pie and as long as we get pie (and a beer and a flat screen and iPod with iTunes and an internet connection to Facebook to play Farmville or find cheap porn, we tend to be happy as pigs in mud (or people with pie). But the current situation is making even the upper middle class uncomfortable. The loss of jobs, the demise of credit, the costs of food and health care and dwindling retirement and loss of weekends and summer vacations is now infringing more and more pie eaters every day. Even relatively comfortable middle class people are living paycheck to paycheck and stressing about “making ends meet.” As our individual pieces of pie get more narrow and no longer meet our wants OR even our NEEDS, we may find the need to bake a new pie and slice it up more equitably for the sake of all of us.
The story of America was always a story of progress.

Between 1873 and 1973 the wage earned by the average working American increased by more than 600%. Year after year, things got better and better for all Americans. There were short recessions that temporarily threw people out of work, and one Great Depression in the 1930s in which wages fell 10%, but for the most part living standards changed in only one direction: up. Even the Great Depression lasted just ten years.

Today, things are different.

Since 1973 the wage earned by the average working American man has declined by 7.5%. Wages for the average woman have increased, but only because many more women work today than did in 1973. For women working in the same job (comparing teachers today to teachers then, retail workers today to retail workers then, etc.) there have been no wage increases for women either. American families only feel richer than in 1973 because now they usually have two wage-earners, not one.

That's not to say that the economy hasn't grown. With a recession raging in America for the past three years, it's easy to forget just how successful the American economy has been over the years. Total national income per person today is about twice as high as in 1973. The money is there. It just doesn't filter down to ordinary Americans like it used to.

How is it possible that the average job pays less than it did in 1973 (adjusted for inflation) when the economy has doubled? The answer is income inequality. Economists usually focus on total income levels for the country as a whole while sociologists usually focus on the distribution of income by social class. Since 1973 total income has grown, but the distribution of income by social class has changed dramatically.

Since 1973 poor and working class Americans have seem massive declines in income. The minimum wage in 1973, adjusted for inflation, would be equal to $8.14 per hour today. Since overall per person income in America has doubled since 1973, an equivalent wage today would be $16.28 per hour. The fact that the minimum wage instead is just $7.25 per hour means that poor and working class Americans have fallen behind relative to other Americans.

Wages for middle-income Americans (median wages) are about the same as in 1973 (or slightly less). Again, if wages for middle-income Americans had risen at the same rate as income overall, middle-income Americans should be earning twice as much as middle-income Americans did in 1973. In other words, you should be doing twice as well as your parents. If you and your parents have roughly average incomes, you're probably making the same as they did or a little less.

It's mainly gone to two places. Wages for top professionals and executives -- people like investment bankers, corporate lawyers, and company chief executive officers (CEOs) -- have increased dramatically. There are no good statistics for these small groups, but most sources estimate that CEO pay has risen by 800% or more over the past forty years. The highest-paid employees in America are very well-paid indeed.

The second place all the money has gone is to company profits. American corporations and proprietors earn 140% more in profits today than they did in 1973. In fact, American corporations recorded record profits in 2010 -- in the midst of serious recession and unemployment for everyone else. The American economy as a whole is doing just fine. It's the distribution of rewards in that economy that is all askew.

You may or may not be worse off than your parents were at your age. For the vast majority of people, however, if they are better off it's not by much. You should be much better off than your parents were. After all, your parents were incredibly better off than your grandparents were. Life should be getting easier for each generation. For the first 200 years of American history, it was. Today's problems go back only 40 years. America is a democracy, and if Americans want to change the distribution of income we can. It's up to us.

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