Cambridge 02138

Tuberculosis, space and time, military matters

INCOME INEQUALITY
“Unequal America” (July-August, page 22, by Elizabeth Gudrais) suggests that some obviously bright, talented Harvard scholars are proposing a solution and are earnestly in search of a problem to justify their solution. The solution they propose is a system of redistribution of wealth, and the problem they seek to posit as justification is the gap between the most wealthy citizens and the least affluent.

The evidence they offer in support of their contention that this gap poses a serious problem ranges from slim to none. Nor do they offer much support for their solution. They basically ignore the absence from the Constitution of any indication that it contemplates such redistribution as a goal, or that it has vested Congress with such power. They do candidly imply that the proposal would hardly be embraced by George Washington.

The best evidence they can muster in

SOCIAL-SCIENCE SOLUTIONS
Harvard has formidable strengths in the social sciences (see “Harvard by the Numbers,” page 58). In this issue, we highlight some of that expertise, inviting two senior faculty members and a colleague to illuminate pressing current issues.

Eliot University Professor Lawrence H. Summers offers a synoptic overview of the economic challenges facing the next president of the United States (“The Economic Agenda,” page 27). Drawing on a range of current data and research, and his own experience at the World Bank and U.S. Department of the Treasury, Summers vividly illustrates the value of the broader, longer-term perspective that the academy can lend to policymakers—even as he suggests priorities, ranging from updated regulation to the embrace of globalization, that may discomfit public leaders from across the political spectrum.

Morris University Professor Dale W. Jorgenson and Mun S. Ho, a fellow of the Institute for Quantitative Social Science, address China’s severe air pollution. Their article is the latest fruit of the University Center on the Environment’s interdisciplinary China Project. That multiyear effort, involving American and Chinese scholars, aims to understand China’s atmospheric environment, to quantify pollution and health effects, and to find solutions. Jorgenson and Ho’s essay (“Greening China,” page 32) showcases the use of current social-science and public-health techniques to devise efficient pollution-control policies—with clear implications for the larger problem of global warming as well.

~The Editors
support of their proposal is the experience of the Scandinavian countries, yet they do not mention that these countries have in recent years tried to step back from their extreme cradle-to-grave welfare systems.

The proposal for redistribution of wealth is in effect a proposal to soak the rich, a populist approach that most of us probably don’t get very excited about. Unfortunately, experience teaches that soaking the rich never brings in enough revenue to satisfy the ever-expanding, insatiable needs of a tax-and-spend government—eventually the taxing authority reaches ever deeper until it punishes all of us, just as is the case in Scandinavia.

It’s a pity these learned Harvard scholars don’t seem to be applying their considerable skills to the solution of some of the more obvious causes of inequality, and of poverty, in our society: dysfunctional parenting; abuse of alcohol, illicit drug use; and our 25 percent illegitimacy rate (it seems axiomatic that having children without the benefit of a partner to help pay the bills is in most cases a virtual guarantee of poverty). I pretermit altogether such issues as crime, which is said by some to be the cause, and by others the result, of poverty; prematurely dropping out of school, which, while crippling, in some cases can itself be due to poverty; and a welfare system that many believe is frequently an enabler and perpetuator of poverty and inequality rather than a rescue.

In sum, one has the feeling that what is being proposed is not a solution for an identified problem, but a political movement built around the notion that someone, presumably the Congress, should decide what each of us is worth. I hope it will lead to much less inequality of wealth in the United States.

The article did offer some ways to level the playing field: more college opportunities for the poorer group and more living locations that are more inviting than “inner cities.” It did not touch on two more that I would advocate, even though I am a graduate of Harvard Business School. One is the inefficient inheritance tax that permits children to acquire wealth without any effort on their part. I can’t go so far as to eliminate inheritance tax, but I agree with Warren Buffett, of all people, that inheritance taxes should be large enough to prevent instant multi-millionaires, with a minimum tax of 35 percent. This will reduce considerably the wealth inequality.

The other correlates with the above: an increase in the top levels of federal income tax from the present 36 percent up to 50 percent in step stages. I remember when President Reagan reduced the higher levels of income tax considerably. A multimillionaire friend of mine could not believe the lovely bonanza he was handed. Very wealthy people do not need any largess, as their tax accountants will invent many ways to reduce their taxes.

Proceeds from these two tax increases can go toward the improved education and nicer living areas for poorer people. I expect and welcome much debate about these changes, so let’s have at it!

David E. Walling, M.B.A. ’40
Two Rivers, Wis.

Elizabeth Gudrais’s article reflects Harvard’s institutional bias for engineering equal individual outcomes regardless of the effect on long-term economic performance. (The “hurt feelings” argument of relative deprivation, in particular, does

“Unequal America” dissects a growing problem that badly needs dissection! I hope it will lead to much less inequality of wealth in the United States.

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not seem to be a compelling basis for eco-

But as long as Harvard is promoting “fairness,” why stop at support for redis-

tributing personal income? Maybe Har-

vard should encourage a compassionate government to redistribute the income from Harvard’s own endowment (if not the actual principal) to all those poor stu-

dents and institutions that would other-

wise be doomed to a life with less.

In the same spirit, maybe all Harvard students should be given the same grades, and all faculty tenure, regardless of the quality of their work. I’m sure lower achievers have hurt feelings. Shouldn’t Harvard have the integrity to support “fairness” above academic excellence?

Kathleen Bybee ’78
West Windsor, N.J.

Thank you for addressing the issue of “Unequal America.” As someone who has worked on both sides of the growing gap, I can attest to how deep it is. I was fortu-

nate enough to attend Princeton and Har-

vard Business School and then work for McKinsey and a high-tech company in Silicon Valley. Six years ago I joined the nonprofit Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula in Menlo Park, where we serve disadvantaged kids in the poorest neigh-

borhoods on the Bay Area peninsula.

The achievement gap between our di≠erent schools and populations is a persist-

ent, widening, and complex problem. While media attention has been largely on “failing schools,” the key to closing this gap is first closing the “opportunity gap.”

To reduce the achievement gap, we must look beyond the schools, teachers, and curriculum to understand the different worlds students grow up in and the different opportunities available to them. Cash and culture both play a part.

Many kids on the right side of the op-

portunity gap take three years of preschool to prepare for kindergarten. Their parents are college-educated, often with advanced degrees, and highly en-

gaged with school. Here in Silicon Valley, some schools raise $2,000 per student for supplemental instruction.

For kids on the wrong side of that gap, kindergarten is their first exposure to or-

ganized instruction. Their parents are re-

cent immigrants, often with only elemen-

tary-school education, who work several

Age | Rate
---|---
60 | 5.8%
65 | 5.9
70 | 6.2
75 | 6.9
80 | 8.0

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jobs to pay rent and struggle to navigate the complexities of the educational system. They come from cultures where parents are not expected to engage with schools. A clear path to success is not laid out for them; they cannot simply follow in the footsteps of those before them.

After school, students in advantaged neighborhoods participate in enriching programs like sports, music, art, science and chess. They receive assistance with homework and tutoring if their grades falter. They have a quiet room in which to study. In the summer, their love of learning is enhanced through inspiring camps and travel. Students in disadvantaged neighborhoods too often end up watching TV, taking care of younger siblings, or just hanging out. They don’t get adequate exercise and their health suffers. Often multiple families live in one house without a private space to study.

For some teens, gangs and guns exist in a pretend world, cool to see on TV. For other teens, gangs and guns are a real part of their everyday lives, a daily temptation to resist.

Academic expectations vary tremendously as well. For many kids, attending college is a given. They have teams of advisors, coaches, and consultants to prepare them. Others are told college is impossible because it is too expensive. No one monitors their classes and grades to ensure they will have the opportunity to attend college.

All kids need to feel a sense of belonging—to be surrounded by peers who appreciate the importance of education, to be part of a reinforcing community of learners. They need to maintain the attitude of “I can” that all children begin with. And this is only possible through positive relationships.

If we truly want to close the achievement gap, we need to address social-policy issues beyond education. We need to
invest in programs that partner with schools to provide opportunities for all of our students after school and during summers. It is impossible, we are finding out, to reduce the achievement gap while the opportunity gap is increasing.

Peter Fortenbaugh, M.B.A. ’94
Palo Alto

If 42 percent of children of parents in the bottom quintile are still there as adults, then 58 percent are not. Maybe those adults and millions of other Americans would prefer not to have their income redistributed against their will. And maybe a large portion of those still in the bottom quintiles would prefer not to receive income taken from others; and would prefer, instead, to earn it themselves. The academics quoted seem to have no concept that liberty is fundamentally valuable to all citizens, e.g., keeping the fruits of one’s creativity, labor, and savings.

Robert Carr, M.B.A. ’72
Lexington, Mass.

The article seems to have largely ignored one significant factor in the pronounced trend towards growing economic inequality in America: the decline of organized labor since the 1970s. Despite the rhetoric of an “ownership society,” America remains, as it has been since before the Civil War, a society of wage earners. The decline of union density in the economy has been a disaster not only for union families but for the working class as a whole. With the decline of union strength we have seen the decline of a social force broadly supportive of income redistribution and social equality. Harvard academics might well benefit from talking with the average union shop steward who, from my experience (having been raised by one), has a fairly clear grasp that the promise of American life for the wage earner lies not in the dream of striking it rich, but in working together to achieve goals that cannot be realized individually.

Thomas N. Ciantra, J.D. ’87
New York City

Virtually every paragraph in “Unequal America” bristles with a “gimme, gimme” entitlement mentality and hostility toward American capitalism. This paean to the gods of income redistribution ignores the incredible and tangible benefits of capital.

(please turn to page 80)
TUBERCULOSIS

The map on page 40 of “A Plague Reborn” (by Jonathan Shaw, July-August) indicates that Taiwan shares China’s elevated tuberculosis rate. The map is unsourced, but I assume that it is based on World Health Organization (WHO) statistics. Taiwan is no longer a member of WHO (due to pressure from China), and WHO recognized China’s sovereignty over Taiwan. But Taiwan is widely reported to have an excellent healthcare system. Therefore, I question whether the map accurately reflects Taiwan’s situation, or is merely an artifact of WHO politics.

JAMES COLE ’66
New York City

Jonathan Shaw replies: The map, created in house, is based on one generated by WHO’s on-line map-making tool. TB is the leading killer among communicable diseases in Taiwan, although the mortality rate has dropped sharply during the past six decades. There are 15,000 new cases each year, and aboriginals are particularly susceptible. Taiwan belongs in the dark yellow, rather than orange, category on the map, but the incidence of the disease there is 14.5 times the rate in the United States.

TIME TRAVEL?

The “pillars of creation” photograph taken by the Hubble telescope (“Eye on the Universe,” July-August, page 30) shows the pillars as they were 7,000 years ago, because that’s how long it took for the picture to get here. The caption says “recent discoveries indicate these pillars...were destroyed...some 6,000 years ago.” How did these discoveries get here so fast? How did we learn of their destruction so soon?

VINCENT M. JOLIVET, M.B.A. ’54, D.B.A. ’57
Kenmore, Wash.

P.S. The issue, with “Unequal America,” the Hubble photos, the Gorky Vita, and the tuberculosis article, is by far the best ever for Harvard Magazine.

Jonathan Shaw replies: In January 2007 a team led by Nicholas Flagey of the Institut d’Astrophysique Spatiale in France announced that it had seen a destructive cloud of interstellar dust, possibly from a supernova, advancing on the “Pillars of Creation.” An infrared image from the Spitzer Space Telescope showed this de-
structive shockwave was about 1,000 light years from the “Pillars.” Since the infrared light revealing this impending drama had taken 7,000 years to reach Earth, that meant the “Pillars” were actually destroyed 6,000 years ago—but they will nevertheless appear intact to human eyes for another thousand years.

**FInance VS. Human Service**

I was very disheartened to read in “Flocking to Finance” (May-June, page 18) about the tremendous percentage of Harvard undergraduates entering finance-sector jobs upon graduation. Many of my own former roommates and friends are now consultants and investment bankers, but I had not realized the trend was so widespread. In this field, the majority will be promoting further wealth among corporations and affluent individuals, increasing the disparities between rich and poor, while the number of students entering law and medicine dwindles.

In the article, Professor Claudia Goldin compares this to the shift away from the clergy that took place 100 years ago. This comparison is ridiculous, however, since the current shortage of physicians and subsequent lack of access to healthcare among our nation’s poorest and middle classes is a far more serious concern than a shortage of spiritual shepherds. Rather, this trend mirrors that taking place within the field of medicine itself; an increasing number of students at top-tier medical schools, including at Harvard, are entering “lifestyle specialties such as dermatology or ophthalmology. In doing so, they opt for less lucrative and fewer hours than their colleagues in primary care who are working in the trenches to improve public health for all.

I am disappointed in those individuals who make such self-centered decisions. We are a privileged group, and with great power comes great responsibility. I also hold Harvard itself responsible, for failing to impart the values of social consciousness to students, whether through coursework on poverty and disparities or by promoting a culture of humanitarianism.

**Matters Military**

I was disappointed, though not surprised, as I scanned the ballots for the Board of Overseers and Harvard Alumni Association (HAA) directors. Not one of the nine Board candidates or nine HAA hopefuls noted military service. Nor were any military leaders among the professors, doctors, lawyers, NGO executives, and CEOs of the 30 current Overseers. None graduated from a military academy. (The HAA ballot had less information for sitting directors, but still no indication of any military affiliates.) Perhaps none of the candidates have served; alternatively, a few may have, but don’t believe that service will enhance their electoral prospects, even in wartime, so remain in the closet.

Whichever is true, the Harvard community reiterates that it does not value service, following the lead of the University’s four-decade desertion of ROTC (the exile, a concession to undergraduate Jacobins in ’69, predated the current sexual-preference controversy and will most likely endure beyond Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell’s inevitable denouement). Either Harvard has decided that it can no longer influence our nation’s war fighting, or that our nation (or at least the portion at war) is no longer worth its concern. The former suggests a humility uncharacteristic of Harvard. The latter confirms the suspicions of those in uniform and much of the nation—the Ivy Tower prefers perfect abstinence to uncertain sway over an imperfect fight.

Shift your rudder, Crimson. Alums,
This recent change in our psychology and the July-August issue began writing for example, Frazier ob-

I was disheartened much from each other. University and the military could learn the country battles for a seventh year, the commitment to the pursuit of truth.

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2008]. Implying that our current wars, too late to report then.

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Henry Nuzum ’99, Lt., U.S. Naval Reserve Washington, D.C.

I was disheartened to read President Faust’s speech made at the ROTC cere-

mony on June 4 [http://harvardmag-

azine.com/web/commencement/comm-

2008]. Implying that our current wars, arguably illegal, “are supporting and de-
fending the United States Constitution,” she glorified military service as the supreme accomplishment of the Emanci-
pation Proclamation and women’s suffrage. Moreover, in an America that now witnesses a resurgence of xenopho-
bias, her assertion that the military has served immigrants as a “foundation for citizenship” gives pause. This amounts to prededicating our democratic ideals upon blind obedience to authority, an efface-

of my thumb.” A couple of pages later, he notes that “anyplace I move, I ruin. Look at the north side of Chicago. Look at SoHo. I move in, the rents go up, co≠ee shops become French restaurants, useful stores close. Don’t ask me how I do it—
it’s just a talent I have.

Very soon, we are driving eastward from Glacier National Park in Montana with Frazier and a West Indian friend (Jamaica Kincaid, now a visiting lecturer at Harvard) who had never seen the American West, apart from California:

SERIOUSLY FUNNY

(continued from page 43)

textured portrait of a tribe that can claim Crazy Horse and Black Elk, but whose current situation embodies some of the worst fallout of the settlers’ genocide of Indians. “Most everybody wants to be rich, millions want to be famous, but no one wants to be mistaken for a hero,” writes Frazier near the beginning of On the Rez; “This recent change in our psychology is baffling to me. It is also profoundly un-

Indian….For many tribes, life revolved around heroism.” So he locates a heroine at the center of his story, “a girl athlete who died just before she turned eighteen. She starred for the Lady Thorpes, the girls’ basketball team at Pine Ridge High School, from 1987 through 1991. I have only heard about her and read local news sto-
ries about her, but words fail me when I try to say how much I admire her. Her name was SuAnne Big Crow.”

In addition to his prodigious field re-

search, Frazier’s books build on volumi-
nous reading, much of it done in the main reading room of the New York Public Li-

brary, a building he loves and spends ends-

less hours inside. “He showed me his call slips from the New York Public Library for his Siberia book,” says an awed Singer. “The pile was as thick as a couple decks of cards.”

A signature element of a Frazier book is the way the big picture dissolves smooth-

ly into an anecdote from the author’s own experience, and back. In the first chapter of Great Plains, for example, Frazier ob-

server’s that “America is like a wave of higher and higher frequency toward each end, and lowest frequency in the middle.” This comes shortly after we have learned that at his sister’s wedding reception in Cleveland, to entertain the bridesmaids, Frazier ate “a large black cricket the size of my thumb.” A couple of pages later, he notes that “anyplace I move, I ruin. Look at the north side of Chicago. Look at SoHo. I move in, the rents go up, coffee shops become French restaurants, useful stores close. Don’t ask me how I do it—it’s just a talent I have.

Very soon, we are driving eastward, and at the turn of each switchback an-

other mountain range would disappear, like scenery withdrawn into the wings, while the sky that re-

placed it grew larger and larger. We left the park and turned onto U.S. Highway 89. A driver coming down this road gets the most dramatic first glimpse of the Great Plains I’ve ever seen. For some miles, pine trees and foothills are all around; then, suddenly, there is nothing across the road but sky, and a sign says HILL TRUCKS GEAR DOWN, and you come over a little rise, and the horizon jumps a hundred miles away in an instant. My friend’s jaw—her whole face, really—fell, and she said, “I had no idea!”

In secondary school at the all-male Western Reserve Academy in Ohio, Fra-

zier and his friends were “addicted to being funny.” He told his family as a young boy that he would go to Harvard. “We were like swamp Yankees,” he says. “I always aspired to Shaker Heights.” Watching the televised Young People’s Concerts hosted by Leonard Bernstein ’39 was what pulled Frazier toward Harvard: “I thought Leonard Bernstein was the coolest guy I ever saw.”

In Cambridge, he studied little and moved from classics to English, graduating with honors in general studies, but found a home at the Harvard Lampoon, where he befriended a fellow Midwesterner, James Downney ’74, who went on to become the paterfamilias of comedy writers at Saturday Night Live. (“The Lampoon had been a preppy, raccoon-coat thing,” Frazier ex-

plains, “but then some Midwestern guys got on.”) For three years, Frazier drew car-
toons for the Lampoon, then began writing material for its parodies of Cosmopolitan and Sport Illustrated. The work was fun, exciting, and highly collaborative, but “when it was time to say who did what, I didn’t like that part,” Frazier says. “I wanted to know what I had done, to be a voice myself right from the get-go. For me, writing is a soli-

tary thing.”

He soon got his chance to practice that solitary craft professionally. Right after college, Frazier got in touch with New Yorker editor Robert Bingham ‘48, who had much enjoyed a Lampoon parody of a Pauline Kael film review that Frazier

AMPLIFICATION

Joanna aizenberg, the July-August Harvard Portrait subject (page 59), is both McKay professor of materials science and professor of chemistry and chemical biology and Wallach professor at the Radcliffe Institute, where she is a fellow this fall. Harvard Magazine re-
grets omitting her Radcliffe professor-

ship; her fellowship was announced too late to report then.

ERRATA

Professor of physics and astronomy Christopher W. Stubbs was correctly identified in “Eye on the Universe” (July-

August, page 30), and then improperly awarded a new middle initial later in the same story. He knows who he is.

Harvard Divinity School advises that Elizabeth Siwo-Okundi (photograph, July-August, page 47) earned a master of theology degree, not the M.T.S. it re-

ported earlier.

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