



# EQUALITY AND ENTITLEMENT

In Florida, during the fall of 2013, the state's unemployment insurance system was bedeviled by computer failures and bureaucratic confusion, which resulted in delays, often of many months, in the distribution of benefit checks. Since both houses of the legislature as well as the governor's office were controlled by Republicans, the left-leaning *Tampa Bay Times* was only too pleased to publish a series of blistering articles on the subject. Perhaps it was only coincidence that the bumbling rollout of the Affordable Care Act was occurring simultaneously.

On January 8, 2014, the *Times* ran a story on the "jobless system's daily human costs." As is often the case in the popular news media, the story's focus was a particular individual, a certain Tina Cash, a woman "with wavy blond hair and brown eyes," a twenty-month-old daughter, and "a pregnant belly" that "peeked noticeably through her zebra print blouse." At the time of the story, Cash had received a total of three unemployment benefit checks of \$217 each after filing on the first of October 2013. Nine more claims were on hold, apparently as a result of computer problems and the loss of her identity in the labyrinth of electronic record keeping.

She had been evicted from her apartment and was living day to day, depending on the

help of such people as a former voice teacher, who had wired Cash \$150 from her new home in Texas. Cash had "inquired about hundreds of jobs," according to her account: "That morning alone, she'd applied to be an office assistant for a home health agency, a receptionist at a real estate office, a front desk coordinator at a construction firm and a unit clerk at a hospital. But no one called back."

You will be relieved to know that this will not be a discussion about improving the efficiency of the computer systems of government bureaucracies at either the state or federal level. Their effective operation is of course important, because the delays and frustration occasioned by their failures are a source of genuine distress to many citizens. Nevertheless, the problems of Tina Cash and numerous others in her circumstances will not be solved by improving the efficiency of bureaucracies and their computer systems.

Consider the all-too-cursory account of Tina Cash's situation that the *Tampa Bay Times* reporter offers: "She'd lost her job as an administrative assistant at a sausage-manufacturing plant in June and gotten pregnant." And a few paragraphs further on:

Cash's support system was limited. She'd never known her father and was

estranged from her mother, who is a registered sex offender. She said she'd been raped by family members as a young child. She had two older children who lived with her aunt. She seemed like a conscientious person who had lived a troubled life and hadn't always made the best decisions, including a driving under the influence conviction in 2011. But she seemed determined to get through this.

Does anyone seriously think that the sufferings of Tina Cash—and her name is Legion—will be dispelled by an improvement in the delivery of unemployment insurance checks?

There is too much here to unpack in these brief remarks; consider only the largest pachyderm in the parlor that the reporter neglects to discuss: although there are four children in this story—one in the womb, one in the crib, and two more living with an aunt—there is no mention of a father—or fathers. Tina Cash had “lost her job . . . and gotten pregnant.” It is as if pregnancy were a bit of bad luck, like catching the flu, and “driving under the influence” merely not one of “the best decisions.”

It will not do simply to dismiss Ms. Cash as a woman of weak character, whose problems are her own fault, although this is, doubtless, in large measure true. She is also undeniably a victim of our society. She is not, however, a victim—at least not in a direct way—of the capitalist greed of the notorious “one percent.” Judging from her picture in the paper and her current circumstances, one may guess that she was born a few years before or after 1980. This would make her the offspring of my own Baby Boomer generation, the generation that ushered in “free love,” widespread recreational drug use among the children of respectable people, and a general flouting of convention, propriety, and middle-class morality.

In practical terms this did not work out too

badly for those who secured a college degree, achieved success in business or a profession, and established reasonably stable families, which in turn propelled their children on the path to a secure, prosperous adulthood. With sufficient education and resources, the disaster that accompanied promiscuity and indulgence in various intoxicants could be managed. I am acquainted with a number of academics, to take one professional cadre as an example, who look back through a nostalgic haze at their Woodstock-inspired youth with smug satisfaction.

Of course it didn't turn out so well for what used to be called the “working class,” since they lacked what the *Tampa Bay Times* reporter calls a “support system.” Tina Cash is an example in the next generation of the casualties of the moral revolution of the sixties. “She'd never known her father and was estranged from her mother, who is a registered sex offender.” It seems a good bet that her children will never know their father(s). How does society help Tina Cash and her children?

For a number of years now, income inequality has dominated public discussion and elicited no small degree of indignation among commentators, politicians, and writers of letters to the editor. Anger about *inequality* would seem to imply that *equality* among citizens is a desideratum and ought to be the goal of government policy. Indeed, if inequality is an injustice, then presumably we are all *entitled to equality*. But how is Tina Cash to become *equal*?

First, it is rather difficult to specify what equality among citizens *is*. Equality before the law is a fairly straightforward proposition, although achieving it is difficult and maintaining it even more so. Equality of condition, which would seem to be the goal of the progressive left, has never occurred in history and—I say this without even a flicker of uncertainty—never will.

Then there is equality of opportunity. Despite the outrage of the progressive left, it is clear that equal opportunity has almost nothing to do with income equality. From Charles Murray's *Coming Apart: The State of White America* (2012) on the right to Robert Putnam's *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (2015) on the left, numerous studies have demonstrated that the malaise represented by Tina Cass is a matter of morality more than economics. As Oren Cass puts it in "The Inequality Cycle" (*National Review*, October 5, 2015), "Children born into the lowest income quintile have almost exactly equal chances of arriving in any of the five income quintiles as adults. There is only one catch: Their parents must be and stay married." Poverty in America may, then, be largely attributed to the four "Ds": Drink, Drugs, Divorce, and Depravity in general.

Income inequality nonetheless remains the preferred topic of breathless outrage. As I was writing this introduction, an issue of the *TLS* arrived featuring accounts of no fewer than five new books on the subject in two separate (and very thoughtful) reviews by Paul Collier and Edward N. Luttwak (September 25, 2015). On the basis of the reviews, I suspect that none of these books succeeds in explaining the real significance of income inequality lucidly and sensibly. Nevertheless, inequality is an important problem, and needs to be grasped in its actual relation to poverty and general social dysfunction.

We are therefore very pleased to offer Patrick Garry's "Conservatism and the Real Problems of Income Inequality," our lead essay. Professor Garry reconceives the dilemma by treating inequality not as a cause of the decay of the middle class but rather as a symptom of a general cultural malaise that has distorted our economy along with other important social institutions, especially in our diminishing respect for work.

In "The Varieties of Burke in Contemporary American Conservative Thought," Steven Ealy suggests that the founder of conservatism as we understand it in modern times might best be appreciated as an exemplar of prudent political practice rather than just a source of conservative principles. Burke's political philosophy is, after all, embodied in a series of ad hoc responses to bitterly contentious and apparently intractable controversies of his own day. His determined and yet even-tempered approach to such issues ought to serve as a model for our confrontation with the kind of problem embodied in the plight of Tina Cass.

Her situation, which evokes the subject of equality, brings along with it the issue of freedom. The extreme inequality of many men and women may be reasonably attributed, in part at least, to their abuse of freedom; or, in terms enunciated by Alexander Rosenthal-Pubúl in "Reflections on Ancient and Modern Freedom," their excessive indulgence in the "negative" freedom characteristic of modernity, while eschewing the freedom to embrace the good extolled by the ancient world. In a searching interpretation of V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, Jeffrey Folks considers a powerful fictional representation of the ideological threats to freedom, also characteristic of the modern world. Finally, Ken Grasso's review essay takes up two books on the current peril to religious freedom in the United States.

I close on a sad note: as I was finishing up this introduction, news came of the death of Robert Ellrodt at the age of ninety-three in Paris. In the course of the past several years, Robert offered us a previously unpublished letter from T.S. Eliot as well as a number of fine poems of his own. We shall miss him as a valued contributor, an exemplar of scholarly integrity and imaginative excellence, and a wise and generous friend. —RVY