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The Risky Cartography of Drawing Moral Maps: With Special Reference to Economic Inequality and Sex Selective Abortion¹

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During much of the 20th century the ranking of cultures, civilizations, and religions from better to worse was out of fashion in American cultural anthropology. “Mirror, mirror on the wall, which is the best way of life of them all?” was a question American cultural anthropologists stopped asking. In the first decades of that century Franz Boas (the father of the American version of the discipline) and his so-called relativistic thinking had displaced the so-called cultural evolutionary “white man’s burden” universal civilization thinking of an even earlier era. By the time I entered graduate school in anthropology in 1966 it was more or less unacceptably invidious to use expressions such as “primitive”, “savage”, “barbaric”, “heathen” or even “underdeveloped” to characterize cultural groups. As it turns out that displacement was only temporary.

In recent decades global moral mapping has become popular again, even in cultural anthropology. Moral mapping has been on the ascendency ever since the rise of global feminism and of various other

¹ I am grateful for the confidence reflected in the selection of the title for this book and for the conviction of the editors that the refrain “universalism without the uniformity” actually gives expression to some significant ideas. That motto was also used to name two roundtable sessions at the 2014 American Anthropological Association Meetings in Washington, D.C. where Julia Cassaniti and Usha Menon conspired to gather together some of my dearest academic friends, colleagues and former students - representing several generations of a lively academic moiety specializing in the comparative study of cultural mentalities - and invited them to react to a few of my favorite mantras: universalism without the uniformity; one mind, many mentalities; culture and psyche make each other up; seeing is not believing; reality testing is a metaphysical act; original multiplicity (that last phrase expressing the view that at birth we do not come into the world as blank slates and each of us is diverse and complex from the start, bearing traces of our history and prepared to selectively realize and add substance to potential capabilities developed over “deep time.”). I was honored and humbled by the celebration. And pleased as well to have had that opportunity to expound a bit on one of my favorite maxims for researchers in cultural psychology: namely, that the knowable world is incomplete if seen from any one point of view, incoherent if seen from all points of view at once, and empty if seen from nowhere in particular. Given that choice between incompleteness, incoherence and emptiness the study of cultural psychology more or less requires that you opt for incompleteness and then stay on the move between alternative points of view, which is one of the things I try to do in this essay on the equality-difference paradox and the morally provocative topic of sex selective abortion in India. I am also touched by the affections of my friends, colleagues and former students (including their roasts and toasts) communicated in entertaining and serious ways during our gatherings in the nation’s capital and for their scholarly contributions to the comparative study of cultural mentalities made manifest in the various essays in this book. If one were to draw a tree of academic ancestry in American cultural anthropology I believe one would discover that almost all the contributors to this volume (Paul Rozin is a fictive kin) were either students of the famous psychological anthropologist John Whiting (as was I) or students of students of John Whiting. Already out there in the profession are many students of students of students of John Whiting, many, perhaps most, of whom are probably unaware of their descent line from his eponymous spirit (and beyond Whiting to his teachers). My own contribution to this volume is an attempted demonstration of what I take to be some of the implications of the idea of universalism without the uniformity for cultural critique.

universalizing human rights and humanitarian projects in which global means universal and universal implies uniformity. It has been on the rise ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the emergence of a “Washington Consensus” premised on the view that “the West is Best and is likely to take over the world.” In light of this pendulum swing in attitudes towards the normative comparative analysis of cultural groups this essay explores ways to do so while avoiding ethnocentrism and the associated hazards of invidious global comparisons.

Two examples of normative comparative analysis will be the main foci of the essay. The first concerns economic inequality in the United States. Among liberal egalitarians in the United States these days there is a progressive’s sense of national crisis and a perception of decline associated with the belief that economic inequalities have been growing for the past fifty years and are greater today than in the decades prior to 1965. A dystopian picture of the country has gone viral, depicting a caste-like society increasingly divided between those who have and those who have not, or, alternatively, between those who own the country and those who don’t. (See for example Figure 1, taken from Saez and Piketty 2003; also Piketty 2014; for a critique see Furchtgott-Roth 2014). The topic has been a hot one for presidential candidates in the United States. Bernie Sanders talks about it all the time. The second example concerns sex selective abortion in India and the associated portrait of the Indian sub-continent as a patriarchal society where violence against women runs so deep that even the womb of Indian mothers is a dangerous place for a female fetus. I hope to illustrate the value of a cultural psychology of morality approach to comparison by complicating that picture of income inequality and by reframing that portrait of sex discrimination.

The Cultural Psychology of Morality: Are You Now or Have You Ever Been a Relativist?

There is an inviting aphorism formulated by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz which states: Relativism disables judgment; absolutism removes judgment from history. Geertz tried to find some kind of middle path between relativism and absolutism. He believed in normative judgment but only when it did not pretend to be context-free. Nevertheless, his adage, while true and important, is incomplete. It omits the fact that even a context-rich comparative normative judgment about the value (or shortcoming) of a way of life must be framed and ultimately justified by reference to moral absolutes.

Despite Geertz’s efforts to find a middle way I suspect it won’t surprise you to hear that “Are you now or have you ever been a relativist?” is an accusation often directed at contemporary cultural anthropologists and the discipline is sometimes portrayed as soft on superstition. Perhaps the label was reinforced by the decision of the members of the 1949 Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association to decline to endorse the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Man, which was a document designed to help save the world by identifying universal standards for making normative judgments about other societies.²

The AAA board members had several reasons for their skepticism, including the following: (1) That “the aims that guide the life of every people are self-evident in their significance *to that people*” [my

² Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association. Statement on Human Rights. American Anthropologist October-December, 1947, 49(4):539-543.

emphasis; their implication being that the UN Charter was a guide whose stated aims for an ideal life was largely ethnocentric and had an illusory air of self-evidence largely because its ideals were culturally familiar to its authors]; (2) that “respect for differences between cultures is validated by the scientific fact that no technique of qualitatively evaluating cultures has been discovered” [I interpret this terse and not entirely transparent comment about respect for diversity to be an endorsement of the emotive principle that when it comes to matters of taste about the valued ends of life they are subjective and beyond the scope of logic and science and hence there can be no way to rationally argue about them]; and (3) that “there can be no full development of the individual personality as long as the individual is told, by men who have the power to enforce their commands, that the way of life of his group is inferior to that of those who wield the power” [the implication being that the presumptively absolute and deceptively self-evident rights explicated in the UN Declaration are really part of a global project of Western cultural domination, and might actually be harmful to individuals who embrace alternative cultural traditions. [Of course that invocation of the principle of “harm” might suggest the existence of at least one moral absolute posited by the AAA Executive Board Members].

Nevertheless, despite the skeptical views of AAA Executive Board Members in 1949, there can be no doubt that qualitative (and quantitative) evaluative comparisons (including invocations of universal human rights violations), are quite prevalent today, not only in the media but all over the social science disciplines (including cultural anthropology). This is especially so when the topic turns to gender relations, economic inequality, undemocratic political structures, the raising, educating and disciplining of children, and various so called illiberal cultural customs (from arranged marriages to the reshaping of the genitals of both boys and girls).

To avoid misunderstanding let me acknowledge the following point from the outset: Whenever and wherever there really does exist a blueprint or objective moral charter for the design of the single best human society (and we can be reasonably confident we actually know what it is) then a refusal to use it as a global standard for morally mapping the world and promoting moral progress would be irrational. But that is a very big “if”, with respect to which doubts sometimes do legitimately arise in the minds of thoughtful people, such as the members of the American Anthropological Executive Board in 1949. Those who have such doubts fear that moral maps once drawn will get used to justify righteously-motivated but debatable save the world crusades. They harbor such anxieties because they suspect that the enterprise is often (not always but often) a high-minded form of cultural imperialism by those who are powerful or wealthy enough to mandate that everyone should see and value the world in only one way, namely according to the dominant group’s preferred (and quite possibly parochial) set of terms.

It is one thing to assert that there are universal objective truths about the physical world – for example, that force equals mass times acceleration everywhere you go on the globe. And I myself have no difficulty accepting that there exist some absolute and genuinely self-evident universal or undeniably valid rules of moral reason which command uncritical respect of the sort some 19th century and early 20th century philosophers called moral “intuitions.” For example, that one ought to give every person their due, treat like cases alike and impartially apply rules of general applicability (justice); protect those who are vulnerable and in one’s charge (beneficence); and respond to the urgent needs of others if the sacrifice or cost to oneself is slight.

Nevertheless it is quite another thing to assert that (regardless of history and context) the existing contemporary social norms and moral judgments of one's own group should be viewed as the best and most accurate representations of universal moral truths. One hopes (or at least I hope) that it still remains a basic methodological principle in cultural anthropology to be wary when those in possession of power and wealth assert that whatever they desire is the kind of thing that all morally decent and fully rational human beings ought to desire. So let me turn to some current cases, where you may find it very hard to bracket your own initial powerfully evaluative culturally shaped impulses. I can only hope you will be willing for the moment to suspend your initial sense of disbelief about some of the things I am about to say.

Brief Summary of the Two Examples of Comparative Normative Analysis

With regard to the first example I am going to raise some doubts about the way comparisons have been made in the economic inequality debates. These doubts initially arose in my own mind when I first learned that (when viewed from the comparative perspective of household income distributions) the poorest community in the United States is a vibrant culturally distinctive and expanding Jewish village in Upstate New York. Those doubts were reinforced when I began to read the literature on economic inequality. I realized that economics is a much softer social science than I had supposed, and that the problem of method variance in accounting categories, measurement procedures and designs for comparative research is a major problem. For example, I discovered that assessments of current income, assessments of current net worth and assessments of current spending/consumption patterns yield rather different portraits of the degree of economic inequality in the United States. To cite one example, utilizing an intra-generational comparative design Auerbach, Kotliff and Koehler (2016) recently discovered that "the top 1 percent of 40-49 year olds ranked by resources account for 18.9 percent of total cohort net wealth and 13.4 percent of total cohort current income, but only 9.2 percent of total cohort remaining lifetime spending."³ In other words a projected life-time spending measure revealed far greater economic equality in the USA than comparisons based on static cross-generational measures of net worth or current income. Here is one take home message from their study: Any picture of economic inequality based on either contemporary income distributions prior to taxation (the decision whether to measure income prior to or after taxation is itself a potential method various issue) or based on cross-cohort distributions of wealth at single points in time is probably going to be an inaccurate depiction of a person's standard of living and is probably not a good predictor of his or her life-course economic status as poor, middle class, or rich. The soft side of quantitative economic information become obvious once it is realized that the "hard data" may tell you more about the way realities are measured (measuring instruments used, comparative design properties, decisions about what to count and what not to count, etc.) than about economic realities per se.

When trying to picture economic realities even simple demographic facts can be eye-opening and complicate the scene: A substantial portion of American citizens in the bottom 20% of the annual earned income distribution are college students (whose future economic prospects are favorable) and retirees

³ Their estimate of remaining life-time spending/consumption included estimates of remaining life-time benefits from redistributive government transfers of wealth (Including progressive taxation).

(most of whom have financial assets and a spending capacity). Thus, comparisons of yearly income distributions comparing generations at two points in time, 1925 v 2005 for example, can be very misleading, especially if the demographics of a population have shifted – for example, with more young people in college now compared to then or with more unemployed retired people with assets but no current income (due to increases in longevity) now compared to then.

With regard to the second example examined in this essay – the practice of sex selective abortion in India - I critique a type of invidious comparison stunningly expressed by a senior Indian government official who looked me in the eye and said to me when I was last in New Delhi: “If it were not for the British, India would still be a land of barbarians.” This is a view shared by many members of the English speaking cosmopolitan elite in India. It is a view shared by many of my American friends. At issue will be a depiction of India as a place where parents don’t like girls and want to get rid of them by means of prenatal gender detection devices and subsequent selective abortion. The practice often gets interpreted as a measure of the backwardness of that ancient civilization compared to modern Western civilization. I going to deconstruct and then reconstruct that comparison. Mother India it turns out does a better job than Uncle Sam at keeping the womb safe for girls; and sex selective abortion in India is not part of a cultural war against women.

My overall aim however is to highlight some of the challenges that arise when one tries to morally map different ways of life. I hope to do this without totally rejecting the aims and possibilities of developmental analysis. Addressing that point towards the end of the essay I will suggest that robust cultural pluralism of the type defended by at least some cultural anthropologists (I am one of them) is not only compatible with a normative comparative analysis but actually must be grounded in some base set of moral absolutes which make comparison possible. But my main concern will be to caution against invidious comparisons, especially those that are so artfully done they seem obviously true and induce in us a spontaneous sense of moral superiority.

The Poorest Community in the United States Is Jewish

Jews are known to be the richest ethnic group in the country so when I discovered that the poorest community in the United States is Jewish that hamlet drew my attention. It is a community where 60% percent of the residents qualify for food stamps and live below the poverty line as defined by the official standards used in debates about income inequality. Not surprisingly there are Talmudic lessons being learned by the devout in that poorest of all American communities, where the men of the community spend much of their time in bible study. After a brief visit to the community I even engaged in my own Talmudic exercise: spending day and night trying to answer some doubt-ridden take-home questions about what’s real and what’s unreal in our current inequality debates.

Questions such as these: If the poorest community is Jewish could there be something wrong with the way we currently measure and portray the realities of income inequality in America? And by extension: What is the most sensible way to think about the shape of America’s income distributions in a complex multicultural society such as the United States, where promoting equality and embracing life-style diversity may not be harmonious goals; and where many individuals and groups are not terribly eager to

turn themselves into upwardly mobile high paid marketable assets in a global economy or to have an equal opportunity to sacrifice their distinctive way of life at the altar of Mammon? Could it be that income inequality comes with the territory and might even be a vital measure of the freedom of peoples in a multicultural society to live by different lights? What if income equality could be achieved by flattening out cultural variety, bleaching the country of its life-style differences and cleansing it of its group diversity? That has happened historically in some countries in Europe at various points in their history and appears to be a process in full force today, for example in France where even the modest clothing styles of Muslim women is increasingly viewed as a threat to national security and the social order. Even during the recent 2016 presidential election season in the United States there was a contentious debate over multiculturalism and immigration. It remains to be seen whether European style ethno-nationalism increasingly becomes an American way? As you can see even a brief visit to the poorest community in the land can be an assumption-questioning (and potentially frame shattering) experience for anyone caught up in the inequality debates.

Conversations about economic inequality in America do seem to be almost everywhere these days. Public policy forums are ablaze in partisan disputes about whether to raise the minimum wage and culture war quarrels about whether it is shameful to be in the top 1% or whether there should even be a top 1%. In academic circles there is much discussion about the obscenely rich leaving behind everyone else in the upper half of the yearly income distribution, largely provoked by statistical analyses showing a gradual increase in the high-end concentration of monetary earnings beginning in the 1960s and accelerating over the past twenty-five years (Bryan and Martinez 2008; Saez and Piketty 2003; Piketty 2014).

Many other voices have entered the conversation. For a while the well-known public television “News Hour” program conducted weekly interviews with members of Congress about their legislative proposals for closing the gap between the rich and the poor. Inside the Washington beltway the vision of middle class consumers disappearing from malls in the land of the free and the home of the brave to be replaced by oligarchs having fun at the expense of an impoverished underclass has gained political currency. Several prominent private foundations – the W.T. Grant Foundation, the Russell Sage Foundation - have redirected their research funding priorities so as to better understand the distribution of economic resources in the United States and to trace the consequences of income inequality for the overall well-being of American children, families and communities.

But what exactly is really real and what is unreal (or unrealistic) in this national conversation? A closer look at the way of life of the residents of the poorest community in the United States is unexpectedly eye-opening. We are not talking about a Lakota Sioux Indian reservation in North Dakota or Mexican-American border settlements in Presidio County, Texas, which are locations very near the bottom of our country’s monetary earnings hierarchy. We are talking about Kiryas Joel, an ultra-orthodox Yiddish speaking Hasidic village of 21,357 souls who carry forward their distinctive Jewish lifestyle in a one square mile incorporated region of the State of New York; who spend much of their time studying biblical texts (if you are a man) or raising a family (if you are a woman); who don’t really care if their sexual division of labor in the family does not maximize household income; and who (whether you are a man or a woman) expend a great deal of effort maintaining a holy community and sanctified family life

according to their understandings of divine law (including instructions for food preparation, ritual purity, modesty, dress and perhaps almost everything else).

That lifestyle does not place a high value on going to college in the service of mainstream upper middle class conceptions of career success. Very few of the adult members of the community (almost all of whom are native born Americans) have or have ever wanted a college degree. It is also a very youthful village where over 60% of the residents are under 18 years of age. This is understandable given the fertility rate in the community and the average number of persons living in a household (5.7), which are among the highest in the country.

The median household income in Kiryas Joel is record breaking too, on the low side (\$23,336 based on 2012 census records). The average per capita monetary income amounts to only \$6,948 per year. Yet the population of the village is expanding. Hasidic Jews keep moving into this suburban enclave, admiring its communal purity, and the average value of owner occupied housing units in the community (\$365,600) is above the median for the State of New York.

In 2011 the UCLA historian of Jewish life David Myers and the USC legal scholar Nomi Stolzenberg wrote about the origins of this residential community in the 1970s and the legal status of the now incorporated village. Kiryas Joel (the Village of Joel) was named after Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, a holocaust survivor and charismatic anti-Zionist leader⁴ who aimed to create a site of insular purity for Satmar Hasidim outside of New York City. If you visit Kiryas Joel, as I did a few years ago, you will encounter a distinctive village (although one no more exotic to the sensibilities of most New Yorkers than an Amish community) where language, dress, gender relations, dietary restrictions, family life customs and religious practices are reminiscent of Jewish life as one might imagine it in a 19th century Hungarian shtetl. Myers and Stolzenberg invite us to recognize that the creation of this Hasidic enclave is consistent with “a long-standing American tradition – a potent strain of communitarianism - which permits difference and segregation, not least religious difference and segregation.” (See for example, Fischer 1989) There are of course many long-standing American traditions, including potent strains of liberal individualism, but that is not what this particular community is about.

http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-n-myers/kiryas-yoel-theocracy-in-america_b_1124505.html

How Poor Are They?

Do the distressingly low household and per capita incomes of the residents of Kiryas Joel actually index a way of life that is poor, wretched, desperate, or devoid of self-affirming purpose? Clearly not, and that is a problem for anyone who thinks the official numbers that get analyzed and debated in discussions of rising inequality in the United States are true reflections of the actual standard of living of a person or a people, whether in Sioux County, North Dakota, Presidio County, Texas or Orange County, New York.

⁴ Rabbi Teitelbaum and Satmar Hasidim more generally view the aspirations of the Zionist movement as an arrogant abrogation of biblical prophecies about the timing of the creation of a Jewish homeland and State of Israel, which is scripted biblically to occur after the return of the Messiah. Hence Zionism is judged to be a transgression against divine will.

Speaking as an anthropologist interested in the way of life of actual peoples and communities one is tempted to say that in and of themselves the official quantified numbers on household income lack “ecological validity.”

Around the time Myers and Stolzenberg described the potent communitarian origins of the village, Sam Roberts, a correspondent for the New York Times, began wondering what the poverty numbers really meant in Kiryas Joel. How hard or soft were those numbers? Did they reveal very much about the actual well-being of members of the community?

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/21/nyregion/kiryas-joel-a-village-with-the-numbers-not-the-image-of-the-poorest-place.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Figuring that out and interpreting the numbers is a Talmudic exercise in and of itself. For it matters what you count, and how you count it. And the counting process is less straightforward and more inviting of interpretation than you might think. Roberts noticed several factors contributing to the overall welfare of this close-knit Jewish village, which extended far beyond the official measures. Income based statistical distributions may seem literal and up-close-and-personal to macroeconomists calculating and recalculating cutoffs for the top 1% and the poverty line on a computer screen. But the numbers are not really real in and of themselves. They are quite distanced from lived realities. They are so narrowly focused they overlook many relevant features of the local scene. Kiryas Joel turns out to be an existence proof of the hazards of using such data to draw strong inferences about the general welfare of a real community.

There are many hazards. Some are associated with the discretionary nature of accounting categories and procedures. Some are associated with decisions about what and how to compare. Some are associated with our limited capacity to measure the realities of “social capital.” For example, unattended to and thus unaccounted for in standard income based poverty numbers are the monetary earnings flowing into the Kiryas Joel communally owned non-profit butchery that sells lots of kosher chickens. Not counted is the income flowing into a successful matzah bakery owned by a local synagogue. Not counted are the public transfers (for example, food stamps, tax credits) which are available to many of residents of Kiryas Joel precisely because (on the basis of earned income data prior to transfers) they are officially classified as living below the poverty line. Not counted are the welfare benefits that flow from publically financed institutions in the village, such as a maternal care facility and a secular public school for disabled local children. Such factors are indicators of a community’s well-being (and of the individual benefits that accrue from this type of communitarian living) but they are not part of the calculation of yearly per capita or household income that are at the heart of the national conversation about increasing inequalities in America.

There are other types of welfare enhancing benefits to life in communitarian villages. One begins to notice these benefits once the unit of assessment is broadened, moving from personally earned monetary income to other less readily quantifiable factors. The Jewish people who live in Kiryas Joel spend much of their time engaged in spiritually meaningful, value-congruent activities expressive of their distinctive life-style, cultural inheritance and theological calling. Some of those activities (the

kosher butchery, for example) may produce economic benefits for the community as a whole. But not all welfare involves material resources. The devout in the community have the benefit of what our economists (with their primary focus on material wealth, economically productive activities, monetary income, and things one can buy, sell and consume) might classify as non-economic welfare enhancing “leisure time,” which enables the men to spend much of the day intensively engaged in the highly valued project of Torah study, while many of the women in the community undertake the equally valued “leisure time” project of raising Jewish families. In Kiryas Joel raising a family is not a “second shift.” It is not a “first shift” either; because it is experienced as a meaningful calling rather than a wealth producing job.

For the devout who are prepared to embrace this particular strain of communitarianism and its world-view there may even be a welfare enhancing value assigned to unpaid voluntary service or low paid work at private religious schools. And the most vulnerable members of the community seem assured of some local safety-net like protections, whether from local acts of charity, bartered exchanges or subsidized housing. In other words, the so-called social capital of this Hasidic village makes it possible to provision the basic needs of in-group members, while they go about their religiously motivated business of being reproductively successful in both the biological and cultural sense. It may take a village to pull this off; perhaps even a culturally homogenous village where the residents feel bound to each other by religion, ethnicity and common historical fate, and not just by happenstance or convenience.

Some of you may be inclined to harshly judge this entire life-style. That is a predictable response given the reality of ideological factions, lifestyle diversity, and variations in metaphysical beliefs and visceral attachments in a multicultural society such as the United States, but that is definitely not my intended message. Speaking as a cultural anthropologist (and with due respect for those economists who might argue otherwise) lifestyles differ in part because not everyone has the same hopes and aspirations or conceptions of the good life. The lessons I draw from Kiryas Joel are not moral judgments about the ideal way of life for all of humanity but rather some assumption-questioning thoughts and some additional questions about the character and future of American national values, especially equality and diversity.

Do the Numbers Match Reality?

The first thought is that current income inequality measures are not a mirror of inequalities in household standard of living or of general community welfare. They do not serve us well in current debates about the distribution of well-being in America, or about how best to identify and assist those who need it and really do lead desperate and impoverished lives, or about the most effective social policies for protecting the vulnerable. That thought – that the numbers don’t match reality - was fully anticipated by Kenneth Prewitt, former Director of the United States Census Bureau, when he wrote: “It will take decades of gradual re-engineering to match census statistics to demographic realities”. Prewitt had in mind problems with the way the government tries to map group diversity in the United States (counting, classifying and keeping genealogical records on our citizens using outdated, inadequate or misleading ethnic and racial classifications) but his point holds for the way we count, measure and portray economic inequality as well. He believed that rational social policy making in the United States

depends on the intelligent use of quantitative data yet he was aware that the current numbers are misleading.

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/22/opinion/fix-the-census-archaic-racial-categories.html?emc=eta1&_r=0

Numbers can be deceiving. Everyone knows this. Economists and survey researchers are well-aware of the enormous methodological difficulties of accurately measuring, evaluating and representing the overall poverty or welfare of a community. They have to make decisions all the time about what to count and what not to count, even in simply estimating household income. Should the value of those food stamps be counted as income? How about the tax credits or other transfers of wealth you receive? Are we talking about pre-tax or post-tax income? Should the value of your monetary earnings be adjusted to take account of regional differences in cost of living?

Economists also know that measures of household income, measures of household wealth (total net worth), and measures of overall welfare of persons and peoples do not always tell the same story about rising (or declining) inequality in the United States. As Kevin Bryan and Leonardo Martinez observe in their Economic Quarterly essay "On the Evolution of Income Inequality in the United States" "the increase in income inequality observed in recent decades has not been reflected in an increase in wealth inequality." They go on to point out that "...the only major change in the wealth distribution in the 20th century is a massive reduction in the wealth share of the top of the distribution between 1929 and 1945." Unlike the rising inequalities in the income distribution, the inequalities in the household wealth distribution did not accelerate in the 1990s and the national distribution of total wealth has remained relatively unchanged for nearly seven decades.

https://www.richmondfed.org/publications/research/economic_quarterly/2008/spring/bryanmartinez.cfm

To make matters even more complicated the economist Diana Furchtgott-Roth (2014) has shown that if one looks at spending/consumption patterns one discovers that current "Differences in per-person spending, from the lowest income fifth [the bottom 20%] to the highest [the top 20%] are not different from 25 years ago." As a way of explaining the apparent increase in income equality in recent decades she draws our attention to the demographic composition of households in the top and bottom 20% of the income distribution. In effect she suggests that the representation of growing income inequalities as an economic problem may be a mirage which keeps us from noticing demographic differences between those at the top of the income distribution and those at the bottom. She writes: "The lowest-income group contains at least three significant groups of individuals. Some have low incomes because of lack of employment and are searching for jobs or better paying jobs. A second group comprises elderly people who may have small amounts of retirement income, but substantial assets such as stocks and a house. A third group consists of students or recent graduates whose education level ensures that they will have a prosperous future. Clearly, the first group is a social problem in need of a solution, but not the other two."

Indeed, when economists turn their attention to estimating an individual's life-time spending capacity, adjusted for the realities of a progressive tax system and redistributive wealth transfers of various kinds, the picture of economic inequality changes again. Auerbach, Kotlikoff and Koehler (2016) adopt this approach. They conceptualize and estimate economic well-being in terms of what households are likely to spend over their remaining lifetime. As they note: "One can estimate remaining lifetime spending based on a) estimated lifetime resources – the household's current net wealth and its current and projected future labor earnings; b) the taxes it will pay and transfer payments it will receive, in present expected value; and c) assumed life-cycle consumption smoothing behavior subject to borrowing constraints." Their striking finding is that "the distribution of remaining lifetime spending, while still highly unequal, is considerably more equal than either net wealth or current income."

Nevertheless it is the income distribution that has been center-stage in the national conversation about inequality. The gap or dispersion in the upper quintiles of the distribution with its rising concentration of yearly income at the very high end of the distribution has become grist for the fertile imaginations of politicians, story-tellers and left and right-wing commentators who value simple master narratives that carry a moral or emotional punch.

Some Varieties of Spin: The Appeal of a Simple Master Narrative

There are many imaginative stories one can spin. This is especially so because the rising income inequalities pointed to today have been pointed to before in American history, for example in the decades just prior to WWI. Analogies abound. The period from 1870 to 1914 was an era when diverse peoples migrated to the United States and some of our citizens thought of America as a "world federation of nations." But the melting pot was abruptly turned off shortly after the First World War. In 1924 we sealed our borders. For the next several decades the United States became more culturally homogeneous and lo and behold incomes in the United States became more equal. In 1965 immigration policy was liberalized. Once again we welcomed the diverse peoples of the world to our shores. Is it just a coincidence that income inequalities began increasing just about the same time? Yet that 1870 to 1914 era also resembled the 1970 to 2016 era in other ways. It too was a period of rapid technological and industrial change, with all that implies for those who are entrepreneurial and have the social capital, the cultural capital and the financial capital plus the individual talent, luck and desire to cash in. So looking at the income numbers and the history of those numbers there are many types of stories to be told with different types of political spin.

In a sense all the current anxious attention to income inequalities per se is ironic because the annual incomes of the citizens of the United States are far more equally distributed than the distribution of their net worth or household wealth (including all holdings and assets). Of course, as noted, all estimates of income or wealth are the products of many debatable calculation decisions and they vary somewhat from study to study (and author to author). Perhaps it goes without saying that dispassionate analysis is at a premium these days and has not been the strong suit of partisan commentators. Nevertheless reading the literature it appears that over the past several decades the share of annual income taken home by the top 1% is somewhere between 10-20% while the share of America's wealth owned by the top 1% is about twice that amount (Auerbach, Kotlikoff and Koehler

suggest that the top 1% own 24.1 percent of all net worth, while there are others who might say that 35% is not a bad guess – there is fair amount of guess work in all these numbers).

So my first thought is that Kiryas Joel is a warning sign that something is wrong with the way we measure, compare, portray and debate the lived reality of economic inequality in America. Income based definitions of impoverishment classify the village of Kiryas Joel as the poorest in the land yet a broader assessment approach leads to a very different conclusion about the status of their welfare, standard of living, and overall well-being. It is not a squalid village, the basic needs of its residents are taken care of, and their way of life is thick with meaning and purpose. The sooner we move to a broader assessment approach the better, while taking into account the social capital advantages of a potent communitarian life.

The Equality-Difference Paradox

My second thought is that Kiryas Joel is not an outlier or a radically atypical case. Quite the contrary it is an ideal case for understanding a more general social process that some social scientists refer to as “the equality-difference paradox.” The equality-difference paradox refers to the tradeoff between the amount of economic equality and the amount of cultural (or lifestyle) diversity achievable within any particular society (see Shweder 2008). The basic idea is that promoting economic equality and expanding the legal and ethical scope for cultural diversity (of the sort seen in Kiryas Joel) are not harmonious goals. Witness the fact that those countries in the world with the most egalitarian distributions of income, such as Croatia, Slovenia, Denmark and even Rwanda, are also among the most culturally homogeneous. The tradeoff goes both ways – complex, multiethnic, culturally heterogeneous countries such as the United States, Brazil, India or Israel, tend to be relatively unequal in income distributions. Perhaps this is because egalitarian redistributive norms are more likely to gain popular support in culturally uniform populations where the members of the group have a visceral sense of kinship, trust and fellow feeling for one another (see Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote 2001; also Putnam 2007).

Michael Jindra (2014), the University of Notre Dame anthropologist, examines the paradox in a groundbreaking essay titled “The Dilemma of Equality and Diversity.” Reviewing the literature on lifestyle diversity in family life, the raising of children, time management, work and consumption he makes the point that for many individuals and groups in a diverse society such as the United States maintaining ones way of life is more important than the pursuit of economic gain. He writes that the high achievement pattern comes at a cost “so for many the sacrifices required for upward mobility are simply not thought to be worth it.” One should not be too surprised if the parents living in Kiryas Joel and in other potentially communitarian minority communities around the country don’t always aim to liberate their children from family, community and group history or insist that their children acquire those marketable skills or become the kind of “capitalist tools” that will make them upwardly and outwardly mobile and cosmopolitan in a global economy.

Some picture of America as a liberal pluralistic society where individuals and groups can be both different and equal is a moral ideal for many American academics (see Shweder, Minow and Markus

2002, 2002; Shweder 2008). It is thus understandable that the equality-difference paradox has long been a taboo topic in the social sciences. Both multiculturalists and egalitarians have preferred to keep it out of sight.

Multiculturalists don't like to acknowledge that income equality is most easily achieved in a society by flattening out its cultural variety (for example, by getting rid of Hasidic enclaves or Native American Indian reservations or Mexican-American border settlements). They fear that if the news gets out that the value of diversity is in tension with the value of economic equality diversity will lose out and egalitarian values will be put to nefarious political use by Anglo-American ethno-nationalists for whom "united we stand" or "make America great" implies cultural uniformity. Multiculturalists worry that the goal of achieving economic equality might then be used to justify an aggressive defense of the country against immigration and an aggressive assault on ethnic and religious diversity

Egalitarians too don't like to acknowledge that the greater the legal and ethical scope for lifestyle diversity in a society the more likely the resources of that society will be unequally distributed. They find it hard to believe (and nearly impossible to accept) that in the United States there are individuals and groups who actually reject East and Left coast upper middle class bourgeois notions of achievement and success, and do so by choice, spending most of their time doing something that is not wealth producing like studying the Torah or having babies and taking care of their children.

While it may be painful to acknowledge contradictions in ones way of life, the national moral conversation Americans ought to be having is about the irreconcilability of diverse core values. It is about whether one would rather be economically equal but culturally uniform or culturally diverse but economically stratified. It is about how best to strike a balance of values in a real world where economic equality and cultural diversity do not go hand in hand. The equality-difference paradox suggests that the more we lean towards tolerance and making space for robust cultural diversity the more we will need to accept that there will be economic inequalities between cultural groups by virtue of the differences in their lifestyles, the way they raise their children and what they think is of value; and the more we try to make all factions or cultural groups equally skilled and financially well off in the Davos world economic forum sense the more we will erode those institutions (such as the freedom of parents to control the education of their children) that keep us diverse. Unfortunately that is not the conversation we are having. In our ideologically divided society it seems to be much easier (probably more profitable, and possibly more fun) to just continue the culture wars and engage in an oracular national debate about the true meaning of numeric changes in the dispersion characteristics of a highly aggregated income distribution on the computer screen (See Figure 1). But that is a long way from the realities of the poorest community in America or the lessons we might learn about what is real and what is unreal in current debates about income inequality and the implications of economic inequality for social cohesion in a multicultural society such as the United States.

"If it were not for the British, India would still be a land of barbarians."

My second example is not a fraught and provocative morally-loaded normative comparison across periods of time in the history of an income distribution. Instead it concerns the invidious moral mapping

of ways of life. As noted earlier this type of normative comparative view goes in and out of fashion in the academic world and mainstream media: In during the heyday of British and French colonial expansion one hundred years ago when many Europeans acted as if they were the Chosen People bringing the light onto others; out during the waning years of European colonialism and the waxing of national independence movements in Asia and Africa; but back again with a vengeance since the fall of the Wall in 1989 and the rise of the “End of History” thinking among the Anglicized and Francophile cosmopolitan elites of the world. This type of “West is best” (and its ways will eventually spread throughout the world) thinking is especially manifest when, as I mentioned, the conversation turns to the topics of gender and global feminism, as for example in discussions of sex selective abortion in India, which is a specific example of normative comparative analysis upon which I shall focus.

According to that particular moral mapping the Indian sub-continent is a place where violence against women runs so deep in the local culture that even the womb of Indian mothers is a dangerous place for a female fetus. As noted earlier, the practice thus gets interpreted as a measure of the backwardness of that ancient civilization compared to modern Western civilization. How well does that normative comparison stand up to analysis? Is it true and just, or is it invidious?

I believe dispassionate comparative analysis actually suggests that Mother India does a better job than Uncle Sam at keeping the womb safe for girls? How can this be so, given the widely publicized depiction of abortion decisions in India as a tactic in a cultural war against women?

“Missing Girls”

First some background. Ever since the initial reports of a monstrous gang rape of a young woman in New Delhi in 2012 the global media has been relentless in its disparagement of gender relations on the sub-continent. Much of the coverage interprets the brutal criminal act as a symbol of South Asian cultural misogyny. Journalists, bloggers and letter writers have not only felt free to defame Mother India for everything from her social norms concerning female comportment in public spaces, to her customary family and status related constraints a woman’s choice in the selection of a marriage partner, to reports of sexual abuse in the extended joint family, to bride burnings and kitchen deaths attributed to insufficient dowry gifting. One of the barbarisms one hears much about is sex selective abortion. According to this depiction, South Asian parents don’t like girls and seek to get rid of them by means of prenatal gender detection devices and subsequent elective abortion, which is a source of “missing girls” in the Indian population and a measure of the backwardness of that ancient civilization when it comes to the protection of women.

There is one pretty fundamental problem with this particular horror inducing picture of the hazards of the womb for Hindu and Muslim girls in India. It does not stand up well to critical comparative analysis. Question: In which country is a female fetus at greater risk for her life due to an elective abortion – India or the United States? Answer: At least with respect to the risk of becoming a missing person due to an elective abortion the womb is a safer place for female fetuses in India than in most countries of the world, including the United States. How can this be so?

The obvious (but often overlooked) answer is that elective abortions in India are relatively rare compared to the United States, even if strongly sex selective under the rather special circumstances associated with their occurrence. I will have more to say about those special circumstances in a moment. But first let's compare the risk of an elective abortion for female fetuses in India and the United States. The elective abortion rate in India is approximately 3%. This is low compared to most countries. By way of contrast the elective abortion rate in the United States is approximately 22%. (The average global rate is 26% and there are countries in the world where over 50% of pregnancies are voluntary terminated). Consequently, despite differential fertility rates (higher in India) and a massive difference in population size (India's is four times greater) there are twice as many abortions annually in the United States (approximately 1,200,000 per year) than in India (approximately 600,000 per year).

Demographers who study population dynamics talk about "missing girls" in the Indian population due to elective abortions. Whether intended or not, this type of morally suggestive language invites us to think about the Indian fetus as a person in jeopardy of a particular type of harm, namely the denial of its rights to representation in the general population as defined and surveyed by demographers. A study published in *The Lancet* (<http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736%2811%2960649-1/abstract>) suggests that 4,500,000 is a cautious estimate of the total number of Indian females who are missing from the general population due to elective abortion over the first decade of the 21st century (2001-2011).

What would the results be if we tried to estimate the number of missing girls in the United States over that same period of time, relying on readily available demographic facts concerning elective abortions? Here one starts with the assumption that for the most part elective terminations of a pregnancy in the United States are sex blind and equal opportunity occasions governed by norms of gender indifference. Consequently it seems reasonable to assume that in nearly fifty percent of the cases it is a female fetus whose life will be terminated. Six million is a cautious estimate of the total number of female fetuses who were aborted between 2001 and 2011 in the United States.

Those numbers invite two conclusions. First, if you allow yourself to adopt the perspective of a female fetus (a potential missing girl) the overall risk of having your life terminated by an elective abortion is far greater in the United States than in India. Secondly, if you really believe that aborting a female fetus is a form of violence against women then there is far more of that type of violence in the United States than in India. In that regard the customs of Mother India provide better protection to girls than do the customs of Uncle Sam.

Such conclusions are provocative. I imagine most readers will grant that a decision by a mother to abort a fetus is more likely in the United States than India. And, upon a moment's reflection, it becomes evident that as a consequence of the discrepancy between a 22% abortion rate (of which almost 50% of aborted fetuses are female) and a 3% abortion rate (of which most are female) females fetuses are at greater risk of having their life voluntarily ended in the United States than in India. (I hope it goes without saying that male fetuses too are at greater risk in the United States than in India, and the male abortion risk differential between the United States and India is greater than the female abortion risk differential; American male fetuses are much more likely to go missing than their Indian counterparts).

Nevertheless, the global moral map of gender relations publicized by the media ever since the dreadful crime in New Delhi has not featured Mother India as a patron Goddess protecting female fetuses from harm. Moreover, given the popularity of the received image of Indian women as victims of cultural misogyny it would not be surprising if the reader was already skeptical in the face of the current challenge.

One can imagine the following objection. While it is instructive to learn that abortions are relatively rare events in India, the principle of gender indifference is a self-evident moral truth that ought to be universally binding when deciding which particular pregnancy to terminate. Even if only 3% of pregnant Indian females engage in sex selective abortion, those who do so are engaging in vicious gender discrimination expressive of a pervasive cultural hatred of women, which Indian women themselves have been culturally conditioned to perpetuate. The crime is their culture.

Montaigne's Wisdom: Be Slow to Judge Little Known Others

In offering a response to this retort I am going to follow the advice offered to posterity by the great 16th century ironist Michel De Montaigne in his famous essay "On the Barbarians."

(http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/world_civ/worldcivreader/world_civ_reader_2/montaigne.html)

Montaigne, who wrote during an earlier age of Western interventions into the lives of alien peoples, was reluctant to let the cosmopolitan elites of his own era make the world safe for European condescension. He designed his essay as a mirror in the face of which his Renaissance readers might notice, and reflect on, the uncivilized qualities in their own way of life and be more circumspect in their judgments about "the barbarians."

Montaigne's take-home messages later became standard recommendations for researchers in cultural anthropology. When judging other cultures beware of the illusory air of moral superiority that so naturally arises as you invest the popular acceptances of your own society with strong sentiment and experience them as familiar and hence self-evident truths. Rushing to judgment can be hazardous. Be slow to demonize the way of life of little known others. Distinguish facts from factoids. Try to see the world from the native point of view. Bracket your own impulsive emotional reactions. Have a closer look before arriving at strong moral conclusions.

Taking a closer look, what are the special circumstances associated with sex selective abortions in India? Who are the 3%? What are they thinking? Why do they do it? Unlike India, the vast majority of elective abortions in the United States result from choices made by unmarried women. They chose to abort their pregnancy because they do not want to disrupt the pattern of their personal lives (including their commitments to work and school); or because they feel they can't afford to have a child; or simply because they want to delay family formation or never form a family at all.

The circumstances are quite different in India and special in their own way. Local context matters. The 3% of pregnant women who elect to terminate their pregnancy are typically married mothers who are deeply embedded in family life and who already have one or two daughters. It is a highly significant fact that abortions in India, relatively infrequent as they are, are NOT sex selective for first born children? And if that first born child is a male there is no sex selection for the second born child or for the third

born child, either. Indian abortions are not motivated by a general hatred of women. Getting rid of girls is not a cultural custom, any more than getting rid of children is a cultural custom in the United States with its 22% gender indifferent abortion rate. Indeed females are worshiped, honored and empowered in many contexts in Indian society.

It is true that in general Indian women would prefer to have at least one son. In that respect they are just like many men and women in Europe and the United States. Unlike most women in Europe and the United States those few women in India who do abort a fetus are trying to have some control over that outcome for the sake of the well-being of the entire family (its females and males). In that respect they are corporate or communal in their aspirations, and primarily concerned about the welfare of the patrimony of which they are a part and in which they play a crucial part.

For a married Indian woman who is embedded in a thick family life and has already giving birth to one or two daughters the aggregate welfare effects of having at least one son can be substantial. There are effects on one's financial ability to arrange a suitable and status preserving marriage for the girls in the family. There are effects on one's ability to be an ancestral guardian and perpetuator of the kinship group and family line. There are potential effects on the mother herself, who, given the nature and details of residence, kinship affiliation and group formation in India is somewhat more likely to be dependent on her sons rather than her daughters for care, protection and shelter in old age.

And who are the 3%? Unlike the United States where there is a tendency for abortions to be more common among those who are poor, in India women who terminate a pregnancy tend to be relatively well-educated, financially well-off urbanites who have embraced the cosmopolitan values of family planning and population control, and have accepted the message of the ubiquitous Indian family planning posters which idealize a four person nuclear family consisting of a mother, a father, a daughter and a son. In other words, the 3% who elect to terminate a pregnancy in India are members of the emerging urban middle class who feel empowered by pro-choice and family privacy values to make use of modern technologies to exercise parental control over their reproductive life.

There may be wisdom in Montaigne's advice for feminist organizations. Drawing moral maps of the cultures of the world and seeking to be a light unto all others is a risky business. If the mirror on the wall tells you "you are the best of them all" insist on a waiting period before arriving at strong and emotion-laden moral judgments about the gender relations of others. Many feminists in the United States insist that the fetus is not a person, whether female or male; and ever since the 1973 *Roe v Wade* Supreme Court decision a fetus in the United States, whether female or male, does not have either an individual right or a gender-based group right to representation in the general population. Most feminist organizations are advocates of "family privacy," "doctor-client confidentiality" and "freedom of choice" with regard to terminating a pregnancy, as am I, and would reject the idea that an abortion is a form of violence against the fetus, whether female or male. Presumably they would reject as well any sweeping disparagement of American culture which interpreted the 22% abortion rate with its norm of gender indifference as expressive of an American cultural hatred of children.

All that changes when the feminist gaze turns its attention to the Indian womb. All of a sudden the fetus (or at least, or perhaps only, the female fetus) becomes a person and feminist organizations embrace a pro-life policy agenda demonizing and criminalizing the activities of doctors who are prepared to assist pregnant Indian women who wish to exercise freedom of choice in the service of the welfare of their families. In the eyes of some Indian women and their doctors that appearance of hypocrisy seems quite real.

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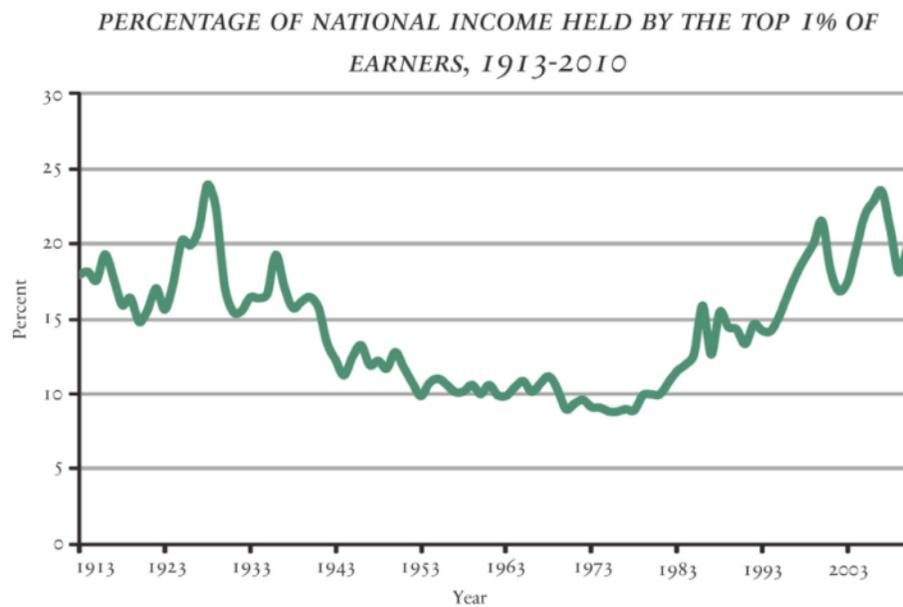
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Figure 1.



SOURCE: Emmanuel Saez and Thomas Piketty, "Income Inequality in the United States," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 118(1), 2003, 1-39. Data updated by the authors in March 2012. Income earners are defined by pre-tax income, including capital gains.