Metagraph: Innovations in Form and Content

Review Essay

Editor's note: *The* Journal of American History *recently introduced Metagraph, a series of feature reviews and original research articles that highlight the evolution of the monograph in an age of digital media and methods. The works published and reviewed as part of Metagraph conform to high standards for scholarship while also challenging us to consider how we document, interpret, and narrate the past. This section will be especially concerned with works that combine the traditional formats of the research article and the book with dynamic content that is difficult and perhaps even impossible to replicate on the printed page.*

We ask Metagraph reviewers to evaluate all facets of the project under consideration—including any digital archives, media, research methods, performances, and exhibits—as well as whether and how these enhance the project's text. The resulting reviews evaluate both the persuasiveness and significance of a project's argument to relevant subfields and the value of the project's form and content to the profession more broadly. As with JAH *book, exhibition, movie, and digital history reviews, we invite our reviewers to offer their own perspective and commentary.*

Growing Apart: A Political History of American Inequality, http://scalar.usc.edu/works/growing-apart-a-political-history-of-american-inequality/index. Created by Colin Gordon. Reviewed July 2014.

Growing Apart is an ever-changing, highly interactive Web site that charts, graphs, tabulates, and narrates American economic and social inequality during the last several decades. By linking users to a vast array of additional sources, this innovative site is a portal to many people and organizations that have generated a vast array of essays, statistics, maps, and graphs that purport to explain, chart, and historicize a phenomenon of great contemporary interest. If continuously edited and enhanced, *Growing Apart* will never become stale or out of date.

Published by *Inequality.org* (a project of the left-liberal Institute for Policy Studies), the site is largely the creation of the well-respected and tech-savvy Colin Gordon, whose previous historical works include the provocative and insightful *New Deals: Business, Labor, and Politics in America* (1994) and *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (2008), which used the latest digital mapping techniques of that day to generate a stunning series of color maps and images that traced the decay and racial segregation of the St. Louis housing stock over virtually the entire twentieth century.

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Gordon provides a skeletal narrative divided into four sections: an introduction, which lays out the basic dimensions of American inequality by tracing patterns of wage, income, and wealth disparity across most of the last half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. The second section, "Usual Suspects," is where Gordon examines conventional explanations for American inequality, including the rise of globalized production and trade during the last half century; new technologies that have eliminated and downgraded labor; demographic changes, including greater immigration, that have increased competition among workers; and educational deficits that have made American firms and workers less competitive in the global race for productivity and profit. As Gordon's titling of this chapter implies, he finds much of this kind of thinking off target and unpersuasive. Other nations faced many of the same problems, but the growth of inequality abroad has almost always been far less pronounced than in the United States.

The heart of the site, including its thesis, is in the section that Gordon labels "Differences That Matter." Like Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz, and other liberal Keynesians, Gordon argues that "inequality is forged by public policy" and demonstrates his assertion with a series of case studies, many comparisons between the United States and Western Europe, on a variety of tax, labor, and regulatory issues. In eight subsections he explores a set of policy regimes that explain the regressive drift of public policy over the last four or five decades. Among them are those changes in law and policy that account for the weakness of American unions, the decline in the minimum wage, the erosion of job-based benefits such as pensions and health care, lower taxes on the rich, the financialization of much of the economy, and the systemic rise in executive pay and in chronic unemployment.

According to Gordon's large schema, the growth of inequality since the 1970s has proceeded in two stages. During that decade and the next a substantial decline in the value of the minimum wage, combined with union weakness especially impacting blue collar men, dropped wage and income standards for millions of Americans—a conclusion recently substantiated in Jake Rosenfeld's important sociological study *What Unions No Longer Do* (2014). This collapse in working-class bargaining power was soon compounded by the erosion of the U.S. welfare state, public and private. Thus, the end of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program in 1996 was matched during these decades by a corporate determination to shift onto employees as much of the cost of the firm-specific health care and pension programs that in earlier years had given at least a portion of working-class, white-collar employees a de facto welfare state that approached European levels.

While this erosion of income and benefits was taking place at the bottom two-thirds or three-quarters of the income spectrum, the later turn in tax policy under Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, financial deregulation, and corporate governance opened the door to a vast increase in wealth and income at the highest strata of the American class hierarchy. This became apparent in the 1990s and has been reconfirmed in the most dramatic fashion by the rapid recovery of the top 1 percent from the shock they temporarily experienced when the financial crisis of the 2007–2009 period liquidated trillions of dollars held as bonds, stocks, or financial instruments of a far more exotic character.

Readers might justifiably ask what relationship Gordon's site bears to the French economist Thomas Piketty's celebrated *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014). Gordon's work arose independently of Piketty's, although the latter could hardly be ignored. When I first visited *Growing Apart* in the early spring of 2014 there was just a brief mention of

Piketty's work there, but since Gordon updated the site in late May of that year, the first illustration visitors encounter now is the iconic "suspension bridge" graph, which Piketty uses to replicate the key U.S. inequality and policy trends that he traces in his book. It shows that between the late nineteenth century and the decades following the end of America's post–World War II boom the graphed path of U.S. economic inequality resembles the cables on the Golden Gate Bridge, with towers of inequality prominent during the early and late decades of the twentieth century. The prominent placement of this image at the introduction to *Growing Apart* does not mean that Gordon's Web enterprise is but an extended footnote to Piketty's work, however. Although Piketty and Gordon agree on the shape and dimensions of late twentieth-century inequality, there is much divergence in their understandings of causation and remedy.

Piketty finds the decay of the social safety net and the widening of income differentials a symptom—not a cause—of the power of capital and the historic tendency, in a slow-growth environment, for the returns from capital to exceed those from labor. Thus, in the nineteenth century and in the early twenty-first century inherited or accumulated wealth—not mere income—is the rock upon which massive social inequality has been anchored. Significantly, Piketty argues that the great income compression of the middle decades of the twentieth century, which both he and Gordon highlight in text and graphs, had its origins not in domestic and foreign progressive social policy but in a set of disasters, including two world wars and a depression, which liquated the wealth of the top 1 percent and gave unusual leverage to working-class income earners.

Growing Apart makes no sustained critique of the Piketty thesis, but clearly Gordon thinks that the "shocks to capital" idea elides the twentieth-century history of social policy, certainly in the United States. Gordon writes in the conclusion to the site,

> The consensus, at least among the institutional economists upon which Growing Apart leans so heavily, is that Piketty underestimates the importance of politics and policy in widening (or narrowing) inequality. One can easily imagine a wide array of policies beside a global wealth tax that stand a chance of dampening capital's returns – either by bolstering the bargaining power of those at the bottom of the wage and income spectrum, or by constraining the rent-seeking of those at the top.

Like most Americans who look askance at contemporary wealth and income inequality, Gordon is a New Deal social democrat.

The most consequential virtue of *Growing Apart* does not lie in any formal argumentation, with Piketty or any other historian or economist. Instead, a remarkable set of graphics are the value in the Gordon enterprise. These innovative and interactive graphs, charts, and maps do not in themselves constitute an argument or even much of a narrative, but they illustrate in the widest and most inclusive fashion the stark dimensions of American inequality as it has manifested over the last several decades. There are a total of eighty-three images, as of July 2014, fifty-five of which are interactive, often in a most illuminating and seductive fashion. They are perfect for use in the classroom.

For example, in a chart titled "Inequality Trends, 1947–2012" and subtitled "share of income going to the top 1 percent," Gordon demonstrates two sets of overlapping statistics. The first is an unchanging, upward-sloping area of shaded gray bars, denoting the steady rise in real gross domestic product. The shaded space looks a lot like the profile of a steep mountain. Meanwhile, a red line traces the slow fall and rapid rise in the share of income going to the top 1 percent of the population. Since this graphic, like many others, can be manipulated by readers, the click of a mouse generates a different configuration. Users can choose among six other "inequality measures," which alters the position and slope of the red line in relation to the gray shaded area: the share of income going to the top 5 percent; the share of income going to the top 10 percent; the average hourly earnings of a production worker; labor's share of nonfarm income; the share of income to capital (rent, interest, dividends); and a Gini ratio for family income. Such a graphic cries out for deployment in the classroom and much discussion. Indeed, this much information packed into one visual provides the basis for an entire lecture.

Another example of an excellent interactive graph combines state-level data with the educational level of those who earn a wage that is at or below the poverty level at two points in time, 1980 and 2010. Gordon took the data from a 2012 Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) brief by Janelle Jones and John Schmitt ("Low-Wage Workers by State") that plotted four levels of education (less than high school, high school graduate, some college, and college graduate) against the percent of workers in each state earning at least $10 an hour in inflation-adjusted 2011 dollars. In contrast to the dense and forbidding statistical table generated by the CEPR study, with 208 data points laid out in nearly unreadable tiny figures, Gordon offers a colorful dot-filled graphic in which users can toggle back and forth between 1980 and 2010 to see how each of the state-specific educational cohorts have shifted their relative positions.

What becomes immediately clear is that educational payoff has slowed in recent years, and the rewards of pushing beyond high school can no longer be taken for granted. In 1980, 40 percent of low-wage workers had not completed high school, and just over 25 percent had completed some college. By 2010 these numbers had been nearly reversed: fewer than 20 percent of low-wage workers came from the "less-than-high-school" cohort, and more than 43 percent had at least attended college.

This graph reveals even more, however. Between 1980 and 2010 the proportion of all workers in the low-wage category has declined—a surprising statistic given the erosion of the minimum wage and the proliferation of low-wage retail and service-sector work during those same years. Moreover, in 1980 the cluster of dots representing workers with less than a high school education and those with a high school diploma were thoroughly intermingled, but by 2010 they were now two distinct groupings, with the high school graduates actually at a decided wage disadvantage in relation to those without such a secondary school degree.

What can explain the seemingly improbable wage phenomena illustrated in Gordon's "Smarter but Poorer" image? He offers no guidance on this particular peculiarity and, indeed, I think the absence of an explanation begins to get at one of the systemic problems inherent in *Growing Apart*. The site does contain a thesis: public policy is largely responsible for the rise in U.S. economic inequality over the last forty years. The existence of such inequality is demonstrated in utterly convincing and attractive fashion in a host of illustrations, but the explanatory narrative is skimpy or absent—certainly not in a form and with the kind of texture and nuance familiar to historians of political economy. There are a few documents—including an amusing World War II cartoon by the Walt Disney Company ("Taxes to Beat the Axis"), and the celebrated 1971 probusiness memo authored by Lewis Powell—but this kind of textured ideological dimension is largely missing. Moreover, once visitors click on one of the hyperlinks embedded in the text they will encounter a welter of voices claiming priority for their explanatory schema.

I do not think it a justification to argue that such Web-based projects are by their nature nonlinear and postnarrative or that the raw material for a more systematic and coherent analysis is present. The function of a historian is to make judgments about the relative importance and salience of a variety of causal factors. For all the fabulous and attractive material available at *Growing Apart,* I ended my journey through this site without a coherent sense of the author's priorities. I have no doubt that many students will be able to profitably mine some of the data packaged by Gordon, but I would imagine that the guidance of a knowledgeable instructor would be essential for others.

A larger critique might consider whether so many historians, economists, sociologists, and politicians are on the right track when they frame the overriding problem of our age as one of economic inequality. It is a stark reality, but one might ask if such inequality is more of a symptom than a cause of contemporary anxiety. The real question is one of societal power—that held by the banks and corporations, on the one hand, and that lost by the labor movement, government regulators, and the democratic polity, on the other. Tracking the resultant inequalities is most important, but a more efficacious analysis would deploy the tools of historians who study politics, ideology, and the structure of capitalism to fathom why our greatest inequality is that of power rather than income or wealth.

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