
Pro Rege

Volume 45
Number 4 June 2017

Article 8

June 2017

The Divide: American Injustice in the Age of the Wealth Gap (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Wearne, Bruce (2017) "The Divide: American Injustice in the Age of the Wealth Gap (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 45: No. 4, 42 - 44.

Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol45/iss4/8

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A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

read, in part because the story he tells is, as always, as captivating as it is, sad to say, unconscionable. But his telling is deliberately nuanced. His retelling of what happened at Wounded Knee in 1890, more than any description I've ever read, features the duplicity of Big Foot's people as a motivating cause of the massacre that resulted. Not by any means does his recounting make the Sioux bands gathered there that December night somehow guilty of their own deaths; nor does he argue for the innocence of the Seventh Cavalry.

For years, a sign at the Wounded Knee creek called what happened there a "battle." For years that word was crossed out and the word "massacre" hand-printed over it in red paint. Cozzins doesn't directly engage the question implied by that edit. He simply uses the description that the Sioux use to describe the place it happened: "The Place of the Big Killings." In a sense,

that's what he does throughout *The Earth Is Weeping*: he covers the wretched history of the 19th century out here in detail that makes it more than "an Indian story of the American West."

He doesn't change the story—and can't, as he well knows. But he can and does nuance its featured complexity.

For decades, most white Americans have stumbled awkwardly between seeing Native populations as heathenish savages on one hand, or peace-loving, saintly environmentalists on the other. Some picture them as wielding tomahawks, some with peace pipes, as saints or as sinners—always as one or the other.

The truth—as it is for any of the sons and daughters of Adam—is less convenient and far more human. *The Earth is Weeping* is Peter Cozzins' attempt to bring us there.

The Divide: American Injustice in the Age of the Wealth Gap. Taibbi, Matt. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014. 448 pp. ISBN: 978-0812983630. Reviewed by Bruce Wearne, Port Lonsdale, Australia.

About two years ago, the editor of a local Christian magazine asked me to review American journalist Matt Taibbi's new book, *The Divide*. I did so for a primarily Australian readership, explaining in my review that we "out here" in Australia should certainly be developing our understanding of what is taking place in the USA. And Taibbi's book is a good resource for doing so, the results of his journalistic investigations of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, which affected the entire world. Not only does it explore the effects of that crisis in the US, but it also documents what the author has uncovered of the besetting problems of what can best be described as the American "underclass." Rough estimates suggest that today's "underclass" accounts for about 10-12% of the US population, and these days that means over 40 million people.

Intellectually, *The Divide* is the author's continuation of a project that has occupied American commentators and academics since the 1940s. The efforts of scholars to expose America's "underclass" is said to have been inaugurated by Gunnar Myrdal in studies funded by the Carnegie Corporation. Taibbi's background, though, is intriguing for this project. He is a contributing editor of *Rolling Stone*, and his writings and MP3 interviews on the internet demonstrate his journalistic credentials. Taibbi is making his contribution here in the face of the vilification of

journalists and "the media" that has become a feature of recent US politics.

The Divide is worth reading because Taibbi is a leading journalist who draws attention to the demands that are upon all journalism these days. He sets a course that challenges any "post truth" journalistic perspective. He is concerned about the future contribution of journalism to open democratic politics. This work, then, is a documentation of a relentless investigative effort to draw attention to scandalous ambiguities and grossly unjust inconsistencies that cling to the public-legal order of the wealthiest country in the world.

The author begins his book by telling us how his project began: in a few brief paragraphs, Taibbi tells us that it was his reading of published statistics that began his "field work" into the financial crisis. The figures simply don't conform to the usual way of understanding the relationship between crime and poverty. As he says,

Over the course of the last twenty years or so, America has been falling deeper and deeper into a bizarre statistical mystery...[.] violent crime has been dropping precipitously for two decades...[.] poverty rates largely declined during the 1990s... [then] rose sharply during the 2000s...[.] a rise that makes no sense ...[.] during this same period of time, the prison population in America has ex-

ploded ... [with] more black men in jail right now than there were in slavery at its peak. See if this syllogism works, then. Poverty goes up; crime goes down; prison population doubles. It doesn't fit unless some sort of alternative explanation comes into play (xv-xvi).

Taibbi's book is his attempt to come to some kind of explanation of this anomalous state of affairs.

Elsewhere I have read a Taibbi interview in which he says that he is an atheist; for him, religion is generally a retreat from facts, a load of subjective nonsense. Nevertheless, it would certainly be worthwhile for Christian students of political economy, or those seeking to develop journalistic skills, to note this book and examine how he deals with the "facts." He tells us that to be a *responsible journalist*, he must be not only a persuasive and good writer but also a researcher who considers official statistics and what they can tell us. As a journalist, he must find a way to coherently interpret the reality facing him. *The Divide* is an exploration of this structural anomaly, and he laments that this anomaly is being maintained as a basic feature of American society.

At just this point, where Taibbi explains why he decided to investigate this anomalous statistical reality, I was reminded of the six economic paradoxes listed over 20 years ago by the economists Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange in their book *Beyond Poverty and Affluence* (1995). Readers of *Pro Rege* who are acquainted with that work may recall the first two of these structural paradoxes: our society of unprecedented wealth experiences unprecedented scarcity; poverty rises sharply in the midst of the wealthiest societies. Taibbi's attempt to trace rising poverty rates and exploding prison populations might therefore be a good place for Christian journalism students who are attentive to Goudzwaard's economics to begin their own involvement in this public project, exploring the American "underclass."

Taibbi plunges into the strange and bewildering stories of a wide cross section of people, Americans and immigrants, black and white, getting to know the real life of those who inhabit the "back story" of the official statistics, the flesh-and-blood people caught in vicious cycles of a many-sided everyday absurdity. Taibbi not only gets people's stories but deepens his own appreciation of the context in which their stories are being told.

The Divide also records Taibbi's visits to courtrooms to learn how vulnerable and poor citizens experience the arbitrariness of the US court system. He has frequented prisons to carefully and patiently interview inmates, documenting bamboozling stories about how it was that they found themselves repeatedly at odds with law enforcement officers. He describes the way in which a new managerialism dominates policing in lower class areas of America's big cities, how management strategies improve the weekly stats sheets that have to be filled out and given to line-managers so that they can be sent further up the bureaucratic line to city, state, or federal department officials, even as crime figures overall decrease. In this sense, he explores the "trickle-down" effect of managerialism. In so doing, he aims to obtain a global picture of the wealth gap in relation to the public-legal order and explains himself in these terms:

As a very young man, I studied the Russian language in Leningrad, in the waning days of the Soviet empire. One of the first things I noticed about that dysfunctional wreck of a lunatic country was that it had two sets of laws, one written and one unwritten. The written laws were meaningless, unless you violated one of the unwritten laws, at which point they became all-important But the instant people were permitted to think about all this and question the unwritten rules out loud, it was like the whole country woke up from a dream, and the system fell apart in a matter of months. That happened before my eyes in 1990 and 1991, and I never forgot it.

Now I feel like I'm living that process in reverse, watching my own country fall into a delusion in the same way the Soviets once woke up from one. People are beginning to become disturbingly comfortable with a kind of official hypocrisy. Bizarrely, for instance, we've become numb to the idea that rights aren't absolute but are enjoyed on a kind of sliding scale. (xvii-xviii)

This, in general terms, describes Taibbi's intention to provide a vivid sketch of the state of America's democracy and its capitalism, particularly after the 2007-2008 global financial meltdown. Public life, law enforcement, the impact of the justice system are all compared and contrasted at both ends of the socio-economic status scale.

If what I have written whets your appetite for this

book, good: go out and get it and read it. But keep in mind that the author is sleuthing his way around the murky and convoluted corridors of world-wide corporate mergers, Wall Street speculation, and the ways in which some, by now notorious, companies, via their senior executives, were all too ready to make a criminal stock-market killing as their own company was going down. We learn these things thanks to brave whistle-blowers. But in the wake of repeated and widespread frauds that brought on the 2007-2008 crisis, the court system was incapable of calling a spade a spade by identifying and punishing criminal activity. The crooks at the top-end of town simply got off scot-free, not just occasionally but repeatedly, systemically. That's Taibbi's considered judgement.

Also focusing on the bottom-end, Taibbi describes the desperate situation in various American states bordering Mexico with the many confusing layers of border troubles: migration, refugees fleeing for their lives, those caught up in Latin American drug syndicates, and all manner of dodgy schemes to contain, prevent, or make an extra buck from those fleeing or those who, having arrived with no papers, are in a vulnerable legal no-man's land. Two full chapters detailing the results of his investigations are indeed gripping reading. According to Taibbi, 396,906 people were deported from the US in 2011, and tens of thousands were jailed for petty crimes, many of which were minor traffic offenses. (Just how serious the situation has become can be seen from the official figures for the 2015-2016 financial year when almost 60,000 South American *unaccompanied children* crossed over the Mexican border into the US!)

But back to the ubiquitous tsunami of the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, with its seeming anomalous statistical trends up and down. Taibbi

brings us up-to-date with a characteristic comparison of inequitable US justice:

... not one employee of any foreign bank—not one banker from Barclays, Deutsche Bank, RBS, Dexia, Société Générale, or numerous of the other numerous foreign banks that have been caught up in the many serious fraud and manipulation scandals in recent years—has yet been deported or jailed for any crime connected to the 2008 financial crisis. (207)

That summarizes Taibbi's description of how the well off, let alone the obscenely overpaid, live in the midst of, and too often as a consequence from, gross criminality, as well as his summary of the legal system's failure to deal properly with the growing poverty for the "underclass."

I close this review by noting Taibbi's implicit challenge in this book to those of us who would develop authentic Christian journalism. I mentioned *en passant* the American project in political economy that has persisted in investigating the "underclass" since the 1940s. Having reviewed Taibbi's book, I hope that those who take it up and read it may be provoked to continue the "reformational" contribution to that ongoing project (as with the work of Goudzwaard and deLange 20 years ago).

In the film *Amazing Grace*, John Newton deflects his youthful protégé, William Wilberforce, away from a life of solitary contemplation: "Wilber, you have work to do!" As I read this book, I imagine I can hear Newton say to us all, and particularly to Christian students seeking a path of service in investigative journalism, "Young Christian journalists, you've got work to do!"