CHAPTER I

PULLING APART: THE STATE OF DISUNITED AMERICA

Though many things change with time, some truths appear to be largely unaltered by the turning of the hands on a clock or the progression of a calendar. It has been more than two millennia, after all, since the Greek philosopher Plato gave voice to a social reality easily recognizable in each generation from his time to the present:

> Any city, however small, is in fact divided into two, one the city of the poor, the other of the rich; these are at war with one another.[1]

As with Plato, philosophers, novelists and poets down through the ages have made note of inequality. While the work of Dickens, mentioned previously, is perhaps the obvious referent here—and indeed we will come back to him—many others have written and spoken just as descriptively about the reality of class division. At the turn of the twentieth century, Theodore Dreiser described the divide with regard to New York City, in his novel *Sister Carrie*:

> Along Broadway men picked their way in ulsters and umbrellas. Along the Bowery, men slouched through it with collars and hats pulled over their ears. In the former thoroughfare businessmen and travelers were mak-

> ing for comfortable hotels. In the latter, crowds in cold errands shifted past dingy stores.[2]

Seventy-five years ago, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, novelist John Steinbeck described in visceral prose the way that economic division so often plays out, with the rich unaware of the strain and suffering felt by those struggling to survive:

> The fields were fruitful, and starving men moved on the roads. The granaries were full and the children of the poor grew up rachitic, and the pustules of pellagra swelled on their sides. The great companies did not know that the line between hunger and anger is a thin line. . . . On the highways the people moved like ants and searched for work, for food. And the anger began to ferment.[3]

James Baldwin, whose graphic depictions of America's racial divide were among the most searing ever produced, famously discussed the difference between Park Avenue uptown, in Harlem, and Park Avenue midtown, where the affluent and white caroused in a universe quite their own: one city but two worlds, separated by gulfs of race and class, as foreign to one another as persons living in lands divided by vast oceans:

> I still remember my first sight of New York. It was really another city when I was born—where I was born. We looked down over the Park Avenue streetcar tracks. It was Park Avenue, but I didn't know what Park Avenue meant downtown. The Park Avenue I grew up on, which is still standing, is dark and dirty. No one would dream of opening a Tiffany's on that Park Avenue, and when you go downtown you discover that you are literally in the white world. It is rich—or at least it looks rich. It is clean—because they collect garbage downtown. There

> are doormen. People walk about as though they owned where they are—and indeed they do. And it's a great shock. It's very hard to relate yourself to this. . . . You know—you know instinctively—that none of this is for you. You know this before you are told.[4]

Far from seeking to inspire the reader to rediscover great literature, my purpose here is to establish the way in which scholars, artists and public intellectuals have long recognized inequity as a serious social problem; and just as in their respective times, so too today the economic inequities to which these authors gave voice are as real as ever, and in some ways more deeply entrenched than before. This is not because such vast inequities are natural or inevitable—the commonly believed but altogether false assumption made by many—but because of decisions we have made within political and civil society, decisions that can be just as readily undone through collective action once we recognize the source of the trouble.

Don't misunderstand: a certain degree of inequality between persons is to be expected. We all have different talents and interests, after all; some can sing, some cannot; some are artists, some are not; some simply work harder than others. But the extremes between rich and poor to which we are being exposed today are unlike anything that can be written off to the normal distribution of abilities. It is not the simple fact of inequalities that concerns us, but the extremity of the gap, the shape of those disparities, and their increasing impermeability that should give us pause. There is nothing normal or acceptable about those things, however much we may allow for a reasonable range of talents and rewards based upon them. Not to mention the fact that what we have chosen to value in society—which work, for instance, is most amply rewarded in the market—has been the result of *choices* we've made, rather than some natural process. As such, the inequities we can readily see all around us reflect little about the individual worth of people at the top or bottom of the scale; rather, they reflect social power relationships that have elevated the work product of some above others, even when (as we'll see) many of those "others" perform work generally acknowledged to be more socially valuable than the work performed by the wealthy economic minority. So even if a certain degree of inequality is inevitable in any remotely free society, we should not extrapolate from that fact the notion that those inequities that currently exist are preordained.

To get a sense of the "two cities" nature of modern American life, consider the following: As of 2014, the stock market reached an all-time high.[5] Corporate profits as a share of the overall economy have risen to a level unseen since the late 1920s,[6] and as a share of all national income those profits are higher than at any point in recorded history.[7] For the wealthiest one percent of Americans (roughly three million people), incomes rose by about a third from 2009 to 2013, largely making up for whatever stock market–related losses they suffered during the recent Great Recession.[8] And yet, while corporate profits are at their highest level in the past eighty-five years, worker compensation as a share of the economy remains at its *lowest* point in the past sixty-five. For millions of average working people the recession never really ended, and far from a one-third increase in average wages, income for the bottom ninety-nine percent of us only rose four-tenths of one percent (0.4) from 2009 to 2013.[9] In other words, virtually all the income gains during the first few years of the recovery flowed to the nation's top one percent.[10]

Even those gains for persons who weren't one-percenters were received exclusively by the next nine percent. From 2009 to 2012, the bottom nine-tenths of the wage-earning population saw their incomes actually fall, meaning that a statistically improbable but nonetheless true *116 percent of all income gains* in the first years of the recovery went to the highest-earning tenth of Americans.[11] In 2013, hourly wages grew at only one-fifth the rate of corporate profits, barely staying ahead of inflation, suggesting that the economy is producing far higher returns at the top than in the middle and bottom of the distribution.[12] Although economists have pointed to recent Labor Department data to suggest that things are getting better—so, for instance, as of January 2015, wages seemed to be finally ticking upward—it remains to be seen whether this trend will last, and whether the wage gains will extend to the lowest rungs of the job ladder.[13] Despite claims of recovery, from January through April wage growth has bounced around from 0.5 percent down to 0.1 percent,[14] back to 0.3 percent[15] and finally to virtually no growth at all by late spring.[16] But even if higher gains manage to return, such that the annual growth of wages might reach as much as 2.2 percent per year, this would remain well below normal economic recovery targets,[17] and after inflation would only come to about one percent annually in real terms, hardly sufficient to reverse the slide of the past decade.[18]

Even more disturbing, there is good reason to believe that the job and wage recovery of the last few months (as of this writing) won't last long, if current rumblings from the Federal Reserve—the nation's central bank—are to be believed. Although the Fed has been holding interest rates down for years in the hopes of spurring businesses and consumers to borrow so as to boost consumption, production and economic growth, now that things are beginning to look up, the Fed seems concerned that more jobs and rising wages might push up prices. Recently, Fed chair Janet Yellen signaled the bank's intention to begin raising interest rates so as to keep inflation low by putting the brakes on borrowing a bit, and thus on economic growth. The thinking here is that if the labor markets tighten too much and employee pay grows "too fast" (a concept that must seem laughable to workers given the last two decades of wage stagnation), people will spend their increased earnings and inflation will spiral out of control, thereby damaging the economy. And this is feared, even as wage-related inflation has been largely nonexistent for several decades. Ultimately, if the Fed hikes interest rates (and this appears a certainty as of this writing), the result could be the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs that would otherwise have been created, as borrowing for the purpose of new job creation and business expansion becomes too expensive.[19] Such a move could easily choke off the job and wage recovery, long before it has time to filter throughout the ranks of the working class. In short, despite recent signs that things may be getting better for American workers, the long-term prospects for fundamental gains in wages and living conditions remain sketchy at best.

Joblessness and Underemployment in Post-Recession America

While the rich ride high, there are still millions of Americans whose economic situation is grim. As of April 2015, there were still about 8.5 million people who were officially unemployed (which means jobless and actively seeking employment), and several million more who say they want a job but have given up looking for one at present. On top of these there are about 6.6 million additional workers who say they desire full-time employment but are having to settle for part-time jobs.[20] So although the official unemployment rate is only 5.4 percent—a definite improvement since early 2013 when it was still hovering around eight percent, and far superior to the ten percent rate in 2010[21]—once we consider the plight of involuntary part-timers and discouraged workers, the true rate of joblessness and underemployment is likely to be nearly twice as high.

And even though recent reports suggest that jobs are beginning to come back to the private sector, it is worth noting how these jobs differ from those lost during the slowdown. Although jobs in lower-wage industries (paying less than $13.33 per hour) represented only twenty-two percent of job losses during the recession, they have accounted for forty-four percent of new jobs since 2010. Today, lower-wage industries are employing nearly two million more workers than they were in 2008. As for mid-range-paying jobs (paying as high as $20 per hour), these have actually slipped in the recovery, and now account for nearly a million fewer jobs than at the outset of the recession. And while higher-paying jobs (paying up to $32 per hour on average) represented more than forty percent of job losses in the recession, they have only accounted for thirty percent of recent job growth. As a result, there are nearly a million fewer higher-paying jobs now than in 2008 when the recession began.[22] In other words, even when people are finding work it is often at income levels well below that which they had been earning prior to the economic collapse. In the most recent jobs report as of this writing, there were only 1,000 new jobs created in manufacturing, out of 225,000 new jobs in all (this, after an actual decline in manufacturing positions during the previous month). Meanwhile, some of the biggest gains were in areas such as retail sales, low-paid health care jobs like physician's assistants and home health care aides, temporary services, and jobs in restaurants and bars. Indeed, more than half of all jobs created in the most recent month were in these categories.[23] On average, during 2014, new jobs created paid about twenty-three percent less than the jobs lost during the recession.[24] Unless the recent bump in wages and employment continues and accelerates, the hollowing out of the middle class will not likely be arrested, nor are we likely to see a diminution of rising income inequality.

Although the job picture has been bleak for Americans of all races and ethnicities, communities of color are having an especially difficult time. Latinos are about sixty percent more likely than whites to be unemployed (so much for the often heard refrain that they're "taking all the good jobs") and African Americans are almost two and a half times as likely as whites to be out of work: nearly ten percent unemployment for blacks as opposed to just a bit more than four percent for whites.[25] Even when only comparing whites and persons of color possessing the same degree of education, racial gaps persist. Latinos and Latinas with a diploma have an unemployment rate more than twenty percent higher than that of similar whites, while Latino/a college graduates are fifty percent more likely than comparable white graduates to be out of work. Meanwhile, black high school graduates are twice as likely as comparable whites to be unemployed, and even black folks with college degrees are seventy percent more likely than white college graduates to be out of work.[26] Things are especially troubling for recent black college graduates. Despite persistent cries about "reverse discrimination" from whites who seem to feel they are being bumped from jobs by less qualified African Americans, recent black college grads are more than twice as likely as comparable whites to be unemployed. For graduates between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-seven, unemployment rates for blacks are 12.4 percent, compared to only 4.9 percent, for comparable whites—a *quintupling* of the jobless gap between white and black recent college graduates just since 2007.[27] This pattern holds true for graduates in every possible category of academic study, regardless of their majors. Even black folks who obtained engineering degrees are nearly twice as likely as white engineering grads to be out of work.[28] Among millennials (ages eighteen to thirty-four), racial disparities remain stark: white, male, high school dropouts have the same chance of finding work as black males with two years of college.[29]

For many, their stint on the unemployment line is no brief interlude between jobs. Millions find themselves out of work for half a year, a full year, even two full years, no matter how hard they look for a job. As of April 2015, nearly thirty percent of the unemployed—about 2.5 million people in all—had been out of work more than twenty-six weeks, despite actively looking for a job the entire time, and forty-two percent had been out of work for at least fifteen weeks. Indeed, unemployed persons are just as likely to be out of work for twenty-seven weeks or more as they are to be unemployed for less than five weeks, meaning that long-term unemployment is now just as prevalent as short-term joblessness.[30] And while unemployment is always stressful, long-term unemployment is especially crushing. Those who suffer this fate will typically experience impaired emotional and physical well-being, significantly elevated rates of suicide, and substantial family dysfunction because of their job situations.[31] Even when the long-term unemployed finally do find work, it is usually at wages well below what they were earning previously, and often without the benefits available in their old jobs.[32]

Poverty, Wage Stagnation and Deprivation Amid "Recovery"

By the end of 2013, there were forty-five million Americans officially living below the poverty line—about one in every seven persons in the country.[33] To understand what this means in practical terms, consider that to be officially poor that year a single individual would have to have made less than $11,188; the threshold for a two-person household averaged $15,142; for three persons $18,552, and for a family of four $23,834.[34] In other words, if you made even $12,000 in 2013 as a single individual, you would not be considered poor in America despite how incredibly difficult it would be to live on such an income. Likewise, if you and your partner had one child and your combined income reached even $19,000, you would no longer be considered poor, despite your precarious economic station; so too in a family of four earning even $24,000 a year. So when we speak of poverty, we are talking about substantial financial insecurity. Worse still, a growing number of Americans are not simply poor but are living in extreme poverty, defined as income less than *half* the poverty lines above. As of 2013, nearly twenty million people lived in this state of destitution,[35] which is an increase of about eight million since 2000.[36]

While the national poverty figures are disturbing enough, the picture is even more distressing for persons of color. Although whites make up the largest group of people living in poverty at nineteen million, or forty-one percent of the total,[37] the rate of poverty is far higher for Americans of color. According to the Census Bureau, African Americans are nearly three times as likely as whites to be poor, and Latinos are 2.5 times as likely as whites to live in poverty. Approximately one in four Latinos and twenty-seven percent of blacks officially live below the poverty line.[38] Among American Indians and Alaska Natives, between twenty-five and thirty percent are poor, and in some indigenous communities—particularly reservation lands on which about a third of the nation's Indian peoples live—nearly half of the community lives in poverty.[39]

Although some have pointed to Asian American income as proof of equal opportunity in America—and to suggest that there is something wrong with blacks, Latinos and Indian folks who lag behind—the data marshaled for this purpose is misleading. To begin, as mostly voluntary migrants, Asian Americans are a more self-selected group than blacks, Latinos or indigenous persons. They include more persons who came to the country with middle-class status, had college degrees, or were in the process of obtaining those degrees upon arrival. So naturally, we would expect Asian Americans in the aggregate to therefore appear more "successful" than groups whose members represent more of a cross-section of class status and experience. That said, when we actually examine Asian American status relative to white status, we discover persistent evidence that Asian folk too, despite claims of their "success," are struggling and lag behind the dominant group. For instance, according to the most recent data on earnings, when we compare whites and Asians of the same age and with the same degree of education, whites routinely earn more than their Asian American counterparts. For those with high school diplomas only, white males between the ages of thirty-five and thirty-nine earn twenty-three percent more than comparable Asians—a gap that grows to a nearly fifty percent advantage between the ages of forty and forty-four. For those with undergraduate degrees, white males between thirty and thirty-four earn twenty-two percent more than comparable Asian Americans, and by the time those white men are in their mid-forties they are earning forty-six percent more than their Asian American counterparts—almost $30,000 more each year, on average.[40]

Additionally, claims that Asian American households are doing as well or better than even white households—because they have higher aggregate income than white households nationwide and poverty rates that are only slightly higher than whites'—rely on data that masks substantial disparities at the state and local level.[41] About half of all Asian Americans live in the higher-income (and higher-cost-of-living) West, with roughly sixty percent residing in just six states: California, Hawaii, New York, New Jersey, Illinois and Washington. As a result, they will tend to have higher incomes and lower poverty rates than members of other groups who are more geographically dispersed in much lower-income and lower-cost areas.[42] However, if we examine income and poverty data in the places where so many Asian Americans actually live, thereby comparing them to others who live in those same higher-income areas, things change dramatically. In cities with heavy Asian American presence like Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York, Asian American poverty rates are roughly double the rates for whites.[43] In other words, despite claims of Asian "success" and the attempts of some to cast them as a "model minority" to be emulated by other more presumably problematic ones, Asian Americans too are struggling relative to whites.

As with poverty in general, extreme poverty is a particular concern for people of color. In fact, blacks and Hispanics are more likely to live in *extreme* poverty than whites are to be poor at all: one in eight African Americans are extremely poor and one in eleven Latinos are living at half the poverty line or below, compared to only about one in twenty-five whites who are that impoverished.[44] Among the impoverished, people of color are also far more likely to live in high-poverty neighborhoods than are whites, further deepening the severity of their economic condition and limiting their ability to escape impoverishment. Impoverished African Americans are more than seven times as likely as poor whites to live in high-poverty neighborhoods, while poor Latinos are nearly six times as likely to do so.[45] Although deprivation is always stressful for those experiencing it, living in communities of heavily concentrated poverty magnifies those stresses many times over. Such communities have fewer hospitals per capita than other communities, are less likely to have access to healthy food, and are less likely to have adequately resourced schools, in part because school funding is so over-reliant on property taxes in most places. Residents in concentrated-poverty neighborhoods are also cut off from the job and opportunity networks that exist for middle-class families, and even for lower-income families who live in communities where middle-class families are still largely present. Additionally, impoverished urban communities are far more likely to be places where there are waste facilities that directly compromise the health of residents, particularly children and the elderly.[46]

An especially disturbing number of the nation's poor are children. About fifteen million children, or nearly one in five kids in the U.S., live in poverty,[47] and since 2013, slightly more than half of all children in the nation's public schools live in poverty.[48] Far from an abstract concept, poverty has long-term impact on child development. Research has found that children in poverty are significantly more likely than their middle-class and affluent peers to show signs of impaired brain development in the prefrontal cortex, which is critical for problem-solving and analytical skills.[49] Independent of other factors known to impact neural development, poverty appears to have a uniquely debilitating impact on kids, due to the stresses of life in a low-income family and the subsequent lack of opportunities to which such children are exposed. Additional research finds that growing up in poverty can result in an unhealthy level of stress hormones being released into the bloodstream, which can impair neural development and contribute to a number of health problems, including heart disease, hypertension and stroke.[50] The poor, and especially the extremely poor, are in many cases subjected to environments that produce a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) similar to that experienced by combat veterans.[51]

Even those who aren't "poor" are struggling to keep their heads above water. According to one recent survey, roughly three in four Americans live paycheck to paycheck, meaning they either have no savings or so little in savings that they could not withstand a layoff or medical emergency. Only one in four have sufficient savings to cover six months of expenses, half could only survive a three-month loss of income, and about twenty-seven percent have no savings at all.[52] When we include those who are no more than fifty percent above the poverty line, and are therefore intensely vulnerable to a layoff or economic downturn, more than seventy-six million Americans, or nearly one in four, are poor or near poor.[53]

Meanwhile, even as local papers across the country herald the beginnings of a new boom in housing construction and a rejuvenated real estate market, at least fourteen million Americans continue to face the real prospect of losing their homes, equity, and access to credit due to foreclosure.[54] They are unable to make their mortgage payments and have received little or no relief from the government, even as that government bailed out the very bankers whose actions helped to precipitate so much of the pain felt by homeowners. Additionally, rents in many areas have soared past the point of affordability,[55] and in other cases tenants are being evicted from apartments under cover of local nuisance laws, solely for calling police "too many times"—a practice that is forcing poor women facing domestic violence to live with their abusers rather than face being put on the street.[56] Having lost their homes to foreclosure, tens of thousands in the past several years have spent some portion of time without a place to live or in makeshift tent cities reminiscent of those that sprouted up with regularity during the 1930s,[57] and on any given night, more than 600,000 Americans are homeless.[58] Even as the nation's wealthiest often have the option of luxuriating in one of many homes, Americans without housing security are quite literally dying on the street from exposure to the winter cold.[59] As of 2013, 2.5 million children (an all-time record) were experiencing homelessness at some point in the year—approximately one of every thirty children in America.[60]

Despite assurances by billionaire investor Peter Schiff that "people don't go hungry in a capitalist economy"—this from the same guy who says "mentally retarded" people should be paid $2 per hour—food insecurity and inadequate nutrition persist for far too many Americans.[61] In the last few years there have been as many as seventeen million households composed of more than forty-five million people who faced real difficulties affordably meeting their nutritional needs.[62] As of 2013, there were about five million people living in households with such low food security that they had to substantially reduce their food intake, skip meals altogether on certain days, or in some cases even go several days at a time without eating, all because of the financial condition of their families.[63] Meanwhile, homeless Americans who rummage through garbage cans in search of food are subjected to arrest, as happened to homeless veteran James Kelly in Houston last year,[64] while McDonald's is counseling their employees to break food into smaller pieces so as to "keep them full," rather than paying them enough of a wage to allow them to buy more food.[65] As for health care, although the Affordable Care Act has removed millions from the ranks of the uninsured—with about ten million people added to the health care rolls just since 2013[66]—there remain millions more who are falling through the cracks of the system due to the refusal of mostly conservative governors to extend Medicaid in more than twenty states.[67] In a country where most personal bankruptcies are caused by a medical emergency for which patients have insufficient funds, to not ensure comprehensive and affordable care for all is to force too many of the ill into destitution.[68]

Still more worry about how, or if, they'll be able to send their children to college, especially as higher education continues its three-decades-long drift toward loan-based financing and away from grants, thereby burdening students with a crushing debt. Today's typical college graduates finish college with nearly four times the debt of their counterparts from the early 1990s—about $35,000 as compared to a bit more than $9,000.[69] In 1987, tax dollars covered more than three-fourths of the cost of operating public colleges and universities, but by 2012, states had slashed their support for higher education to such an extent that only fifty-three percent of such costs were covered by taxpayers, while the rest have been made up by tuition and fee hikes.[70] Average tuition and fees for both public and private colleges have more than doubled since the early 1980s, increasing the gap between the share of affluent kids and poor kids who are able to attend.[71]

Some of the problems that we can see so clearly in today's economy—especially wage stagnation—have been a long time coming. Ever since the early 1970s, real wages for average American workers have been largely flat.[72] This has been true, even as average worker productivity has roughly doubled in that period.[73] If workers' wages had kept pace with productivity and continued to grow along with wages at the top, as they had for the previous several decades, incomes for middle-class Americans would be about $18,000 higher than they are today.[74] While standard economic theory holds that wages and productivity should rise together as workers earn a commensurate share of the value they produce, this relationship between pay levels and productivity has been shredded over the past few decades. Likewise, wages have remained flat even as employees are working more hours today than ever before. From the early 1970s until 2007, the average annual number of hours worked rose by seventeen percent.[75] Workers are working harder than before and being more productive than ever, but they are making very little if any real gains in financial well-being.

Things have only gotten worse since the most recent recession. From 2007 to 2012, wages fell for the bottom seventy percent of the wage distribution despite productivity growth of 7.7 percent. When these data are combined with the wage stagnation that had already occurred since 2000, it is no exaggeration to say that for most workers, the first ten years of the new millennium was a lost decade for wages.[76] Median income today is $3,600 lower than it was in 2001, adjusted for inflation, and has fallen $2,100 just since 2009.[77] Things have been especially grim in terms of income stagnation for American men. In 1972, the median income for men between the ages of thirty-five and forty-four was equivalent to more than $54,000 today. But now, in large part because of the decline in manufacturing employment (a subject to which we'll return), the median for such men stands at just above $45,000.[78] The only reason that median income has been able to nudge up slightly for American families on the whole has been the entry of more women into the workforce; there are more two-earner families today than in the early 1970s. On the one hand, expanded opportunities for American women are obviously a positive and needed development. But on the other, if families today need two incomes to remain at the same level they enjoyed forty years ago with only one income-earner, something is clearly wrong with the larger economy.

Income and Wealth Inequality: Long-Term Trends and Current Realities

Among the things most Americans have long seemed to believe about our country is the idea that in some sense, we're all part of one big team. Nods to national unity are common, and surely it isn't hard to recall how, in the days following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, millions of Americans slapped bumper stickers on their cars sporting the slogan UNITED WE STAND. One part nationalistic and militaristic hubris, one part a genuine expression of emotional empathy with the victims and their families, the slogan and the concept behind it spoke to a deep-seated component of the nation's ideology: the notion of reciprocity, or, more simply put, the idea that "we're all in this together."

Of course, in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy not all Americans shared this sentiment equally, and there was a marked gap between the willingness of white Americans to adorn their vehicles in such a manner and that of people of color. Non-whites, more viscerally aware of the ongoing inequities between their own life conditions and those of most in the white majority, were not as likely to sport such stickers or engage in the flag-waving that became

CHAPTER II

RESURRECTING SCROOGE: RHETORIC AND POLICY IN A CULTURE OF CRUELTY

In 1843, Charles Dickens visited Cornwall, in Southwest England. There he encountered children laboring in the tin mines that were the centerpiece of local economic production. The deplorable conditions he witnessed, along with a recently released Parliamentary report that exposed the nationwide scandal of child labor, led him to begin work on a political pamphlet, the title of which was to be "An Appeal to the People of England, on Behalf of the Poor Man's Child." Dickens hoped that such a treatise might stir the conscience of the British and move the nation to end such practices as had by then become all too common.[1] While at work on the pamphlet, however, Dickens ultimately concluded that his point might best be made within the boundaries of a fictional story. Upon making the switch from political screed to novella, Dickens wrote to one of the Parliamentary commissioners who had issued the child labor report, exclaiming that the story he had in mind would "come down with twenty times the force—twenty thousand times the force—I could exert by following out my first idea."[2]

And so began the process by which Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* would come to be: as a call to charity and compassion in a nation turned hard and cold by the vicissitudes of Victorian working conditions and Poor Laws, intended to wring out every last drop of labor from those at the bottom of England's class structure, while greatly enriching those at the top of it. Beginning in October, Dickens's frenzied creative pace allowed him to finish the book in a mere six weeks. He self-published its first run in time for the Christmas holidays, shortly after which it became a literary sensation. To this day, it has never been out of print.

If you are familiar with it, you will doubtless recall one of the story's early scenes, in which two men enter the business of Ebenezer Scrooge and his former (and recently deceased) partner, Jacob Marley, hoping to procure alms for the poor at Christmas time. It is worth excerpting Dickens here, at some length.

> "At this festive season of the year, Mr. Scrooge," said the gentleman, taking up a pen, "it is more than usually desirable that we should make some slight provision for the Poor and Destitute, who suffer greatly at the present time. Many thousands are in want of common necessaries; hundreds of thousands are in want of common comforts, sir."
>
> "Are there no prisons?" asked Scrooge.
>
> "Plenty of prisons," said the gentleman, laying down the pen again.
>
> "And the Union workhouses?" demanded Scrooge. "Are they still in operation?"
>
> "They are. Still," returned the gentleman, "I wish I could say they were not."
>
> "The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then?" said Scrooge.
>
> "Both very busy, sir."
>
> "Oh! I was afraid, from what you said at first, that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course," said Scrooge. "I'm very glad to hear it."
>
> "Under the impression that they scarcely furnish Christian cheer of mind or body to the multitude," returned the gentleman, "a few of us are endeavouring to raise a fund to buy the Poor some meat and drink and

who provide him with visions that cause him to rethink his miserly and caustic manner, and to understand not only the plight and struggle of others but even the sources of his own cold and bitter heart. He is transformed.

Which brings us to the present, 172 years after Dickens. For if Scrooge were merely a fictional character, like so many others typically overdrawn and caricatured, we could perhaps leave him within the pages of his book, only to be dusted off during the holiday season along with other characters of Dickens's creation, like Tiny Tim. But sadly, the relevance of Scrooge goes beyond the confines of *A Christmas Carol*. Just as Dickens saw Scrooge, in part, as a representation of his own cruel father, and more broadly of the era's contemptible attitudes toward the poor held by so many among the affluent, so too must we interpret his more comprehensive meaning for a new era. Unfortunately, many of the calumnies heaped upon the Victorian poor and working class are not unknown in our time. In many ways they are making something of a comeback. And while Dickens himself was clear that Scrooge was the heel, the villain and the bad guy, it appears that in modern America there are some who have missed that small detail, and are essentially seeking to resurrect Scrooge as some great moral philosopher. Even worse, there are many who have institutionalized "Scroogism" as a predatory financial system that both disadvantages the poor and needy and aims to eliminate any real safety net to assist them when the money runs out.

Whereas Dickens intended for readers to be appalled by the cruel and callous soliloquies of Scrooge (and rest assured, they were), we can hear many of the same kinds of things being said in the United States today, which, although updated for modern times, signal a contempt for the poor no less certain than that which animated Dickens's famous character. And the judgmentalism on display regarding the have-nots goes hand in hand with a valorization of the wealthy, with which Scrooge would have been all too familiar. It is the new "Scroogism" and its historical antecedents to which I now turn.

means of warmth. We choose this time, because it is a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt, and Abundance rejoices. What shall I put you down for?"

"Nothing!" Scrooge replied.

"You wish to be anonymous?"

"I wish to be left alone," said Scrooge. "Since you ask me what I wish, gentlemen, that is my answer. I don't make merry myself at Christmas and I can't afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned — they cost enough; and those who are badly off must go there."

"Many can't go there; and many would rather die."

"If they would rather die," said Scrooge, "they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."[3]

For Scrooge, the answer to the problems of the poor and destitute was simple: ship them off to workhouses established during that time to allow the wretched of England to labor away their unpaid debts, imprison them if they would not work; but by no means should one extend to such human refuse compassion or charity of any kind. To Scrooge, the poor had it coming. In his estimation, their economic failings merely reflected their far greater moral ones; beggars were beggars for want of industriousness, or acumen, or drive and determination. They were, in the parlance of the modern era, "takers" not "makers," and as such should be left to their own devices. And if they died, well then, such passing would merely reduce the "surplus population" of persons greedily thieving all that oxygen from their betters, and especially from men such as Ebenezer Scrooge.

Of course, as Dickens unfolds the story, Scrooge learns the true importance not merely of Christmas but of compassion and kindness more generally. He is visited by Marley's ghost, who seeks to warn him of the moral error of his ways—ways that Marley himself had all too gladly practiced while alive—and then by three additional ghosts (of Christmas past, present and future) who provide him with visions that cause him to rethink his miserly and caustic manner, and to understand not only the plight and struggle of others but even the sources of his own cold and bitter heart. He is transformed.

Which brings us to the present, 172 years after Dickens. For if Scrooge were merely a fictional character, like so many others typically overdrawn and caricatured, we could perhaps leave him within the pages of his book, only to be dusted off during the holiday season along with other characters of Dickens's creation, like Tiny Tim. But sadly, the relevance of Scrooge goes beyond the confines of *A Christmas Carol.* Just as Dickens saw Scrooge, in part, as a representation of his own cruel father, and more broadly of the era's contemptible attitudes toward the poor held by so many among the affluent, so too must we interpret his more comprehensive meaning for a new era. Unfortunately, many of the calumnies heaped upon the Victorian poor and working class are not unknown in our time. In many ways they are making something of a comeback. And while Dickens himself was clear that Scrooge was the heel, the villain and the bad guy, it appears that in modern America there are some who have missed that small detail, and are essentially seeking to resurrect Scrooge as some great moral philosopher. Even worse, there are many who have institutionalized "Scroogism" as a predatory financial system that both disadvantages the poor and needy and aims to eliminate any real safety net to assist them when the money runs out.

Whereas Dickens intended for readers to be appalled by the cruel and callous soliloquies of Scrooge (and rest assured, they were), we can hear many of the same kinds of things being said in the United States today, which, although updated for modern times, signal a contempt for the poor no less certain than that which animated Dickens's famous character. And the judgmentalism on display regarding the have-nots goes hand in hand with a valorization of the wealthy, with which Scrooge would have been all too familiar. It is the new "Scroogism" and its historical antecedents to which I now turn.