Abstract: Scott T. FITZGERALD

Movements, Policy and Protest: Challenging Economic Inequality in the U.S. and U.K.

Economic inequality, both within and between nations, has been steadily rising since the early 1970s. While the growing gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” during this time has fueled consistent anger and frustration towards dominant economic and political systems these issues of have not, until recently, received sustained public attention. The recent global financial crisis and recession, along with the recent world-wide emergence of the Occupy Movement has brought questions of economic policy and inequality issues back into the spotlight. Pundits, politicians and citizens in both the United Kingdom and United States are raising important questions regarding the merit, method and potential of this global protest movement. Drawing from political philosophy and empirical sociology, this paper seeks to contribute to this debate by theorizing how political and economic trends since the 1970s in the U.K and U.S. set the stage for the current crises and how public policy responses to prior citizen-based challenges to economic inequality will ultimately influence nascent policy responses to the current wave of activism.

I begin with a brief overview of key economic and political trends in the United States and United Kingdom during the past 40 years that have contributed to the current state of affairs. Particular attention is given to deregulation, social welfare and fiscal policy, and the impact of the rising influence of corporate interests on government policy. Next, drawing from sociological studies of framing, I identify prominent themes in the collective action frames produced by key political leaders and activists challenging inequality. I then present an overview of major philosophical approaches towards questions of distributive justice and economic inequality in the U.S. and U.K. and assess to what extent prominent collective action frames correspond with particular normative approaches to distributive justice. Finally, I link these framing efforts to the development of “third way” politics in both countries and theorize how the continued significance of powerful economic and political interests forces impact both the form and content of policy formation in contemporary democracies.

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