

difficult for the majority to get its way, or even to know what its way is. The politics of restraint stops politicians from taking things that don't belong to them. It protects people from the abuse of political power. It doesn't empower politics to protect them from economic injustice.

The result is that liberal democracies can allow large structural inequalities to build up over time. Modern democratic citizens have plenty of ways to complain about politics, but they often lack the resources to turn their personal dissatisfactions into collective action. It usually takes a disaster to trigger structural change. The United States only moved to a welfare system that could provide for its poorest citizens after the Great Depression, which threatened the country with collapse. Europe only moved to its relatively egalitarian welfare states following the calamity of the Second World War. Without a disaster, liberal democracies have a tendency to drift towards unfairness. Citizens who are protected from political concentrations of power are left exposed to economic concentrations of power. This is what happened in an accelerated fashion after 1989. The absence of any serious threats to democracy allowed the democracies to slide into a new gilded age.

What can we do about this? One option, though not a very attractive one, is to hope for a fresh disaster to shake up the system. The crash of 2008 was bad, but so far not bad enough to bring about structural change. (In 2013 the megarich are relatively even better off than they were in 2007.) So we would need something worse. Something worse than 2008 would have to be very bad indeed. Who

wants another global depression or a world war? Nothing seems worth that. We need to consider alternative remedies.

Since the 1970s, two possible answers to the problem of inequality have presented themselves. The first comes from political philosophy. In recent decades philosophers have devoted extraordinary amounts of time and energy to thinking up schemes of justice that might be consistent with liberal democracy but able to plug its gaping holes of unfairness. The best-known of these schemes is the one associated with the philosopher John Rawls, who argued that in a democracy everyone should be able to recognise the essential fairness of a broadly redistributive economic system – one that works, as he put it, to the advantage of the least advantaged. Rawls constructed a thought experiment to make his case. Imagine if you didn't know if you were rich or poor. What political system would you want? Rawls thought we would all choose to insure against being very poor, even if it cost us the chance to be very rich. The point of this thought experiment was to get people to think about democratic justice in impersonal terms. The problem is that it was only a thought experiment. Actually existing democracies encourage people to think about justice in highly personal terms: personal abuses, personal complaints, personal remedies. That's why it can be so hard to get even the most disadvantaged citizens to see their predicament in the round.

Rawls published his best-known book, *A Theory of Justice*, in 1971. It has dominated American political philosophy ever since. Yet over the same period American democracy has moved in the opposite