

‘Inequality has been the dominant trend in modern history.’ Discuss

Before inequality in the context of modern history can be discussed, it must first be determined what ‘modern’ history is. For the purposes of this essay, modern history can be taken to mean from the late 1800s (so to explain actions taken in the early 1900s) onwards. Inequality, meanwhile, refers to ‘a lack of equality’¹, however, inequality as a state of being means it is more a form of existence than a trend. Despite this, the movement of societies in relation to a state of equality classifies as a trend, so inequality can be defined as a dominant trend in relation to its effect on changes in society. Inequality can be also more precisely divided into terms of gender, race, wealth and class, although in the cases of class and wealth (and to a certain extent class and race), they are linked enough to be referred to in the same article. Therefore, when looking at specific instances of inequality and its effect on change, it becomes visible as a major factor throughout the British Liberal reforms and women’s suffrage movement, and is found extensively in communist ideology and expansion, and in the US civil rights movement.

In the case of the Liberal reforms, their aim was to reduce poverty in Britain, poverty being the consequence of inequality of wealth. When, in the 1906 General Election, the Liberal government won 400 seats², the ‘third biggest landslide achieved in any twentieth-century election’³, they were able to usher in reforms that not only affected the inequality between classes, but also went against popular opinion: the prevalent view being that the government should adopt a policy of non-intervention. Prime Minister William Gladstone, speaking on the role of government in 1884, captured the mood of the time when he said, ‘The spirit of self-reliance should be preserved in the minds of the masses of the people, in the minds of every member of the class.’⁴ The new Liberal government rejected this view, however, and passed reforms such as those to help children: the Provision of Meals Act (1906) and the Administrative Provisions Act (1907) led to free school meals and free medical inspections, respectively. This led to a reduction in the different standards for children of different classes, thereby reducing the inequality between them. Furthermore, Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George heavily endorsed the Pensions Act of 1908, which gave a weekly fund of 5s (7s 6d for married couples) to those over 70 who met the specified conditions (including citizenship and employment history)⁵, and helped reduce wealth inequality between the elderly of different classes. Lloyd George was also the driving force behind the National Insurance Acts (1911 and 1912), which aimed to prevent poverty resulting from illness and from unemployment, respectively, and therefore resulted in a reduction of wealth inequality due to circumstance. Nevertheless, the desire to reduce poverty was not the only reason behind the Liberal reforms, so can be seen as not being the dominant force behind change towards equality during the period. When the Boer War began in 1899, three out of five volunteers for the army were rejected as medically unfit⁶, causing a recruitment crisis and

¹ Oxford English Dictionary

² Searle, G. (2001). *The Liberal Party*

³ Searle, G. (2001). *The Liberal Party*

⁴ Watts, D. (2004). *Whigs, Radicals and Liberals, 1815-1914*

⁵ Watts, D. (2004). *Whigs, Radicals and Liberals, 1815-1914*

⁶ Ppu.org.uk, n.d.

bringing public and parliamentary attention to the general health of the nation. This crisis was especially influential as, during the lead up to the First World War, the countries of Europe took increasingly militaristic stances (including a naval race between Britain and Germany), and that the British army was too unfit to fight was inconceivable, causing reform out of the desire to rectify this problem. Additionally, the work of the social reformers investigating poverty in Britain (most notably by Charles Booth and Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree through their published works⁷) helped cause the reforms, as their investigations, along with the opinions of renowned academics, resulted in 'New Liberals' in the party believing the state should take a larger role in the lives of the people, as summarised by New Liberal Herbert Samuel in 1909: 'It was realised that the conditions of society were in many respects so bad that to tolerate them longer was impossible, and that the laissez-faire policy was not likely to bring the cure.'⁸ However, while the effect of the Boer War and the work of the social reformers played a large role in the creation of the reforms, they also brought attention to the disparity between different classes, and that of Britain's military compared with the rest of Europe, making the impact of inequality the dominant cause of the Liberal reforms. This prevalence is also apparent in other welfare reforms throughout the century, such as Roosevelt's New Deal in 1930s USA, which was driven mainly by the desire to reduce the inequality of wealth (compared with pre-Depression figures) caused by the Wall Street Crash, again showing inequality was the driving force behind welfare reform during the period.

In parallel with the Liberal reforms, work was also done by suffragists and suffragettes in Britain to gain voting equality with men and a reduction in societal double standards between them. While work had been done before the turn of the century to increase women's rights, in education, medicine and law⁹, they still were denied the right to participate in parliamentary elections, and most of the jobs a woman could get were not enough to live on, better-paid positions being mainly barred to women¹⁰. In 1897, female suffrage groups joined together to form the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), or suffragists, under the leadership of Millicent Fawcett, and used peaceful methods, such as petitions and public meetings, as well as lobbying parliament, to keep women's suffrage in the public eye. This was in contrast to the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), or suffragettes, a breakaway faction of the NUWSS led by Emmaline Pankhurst that used Direct Action to raise publicity for women's suffrage, such as breaking windows, heckling cabinet ministers, and burning the Prime Minister's golf course¹¹. These violent actions often led to the arrest of the suffragettes, and once in jail the protestors would go on hunger strike, which led to the government introducing the force-feeding of prisoners. Not only brutal and embarrassing, force-feeding also served to highlight the class inequality between the treatment of prisoners (as proved by Lady Constance Lytton¹²), although this inequality was also partially reduced

⁷ *Life and Labour of the People in London, 1886-1903; Poverty: a Study of Town Life, 1901*

⁸ Watts, D. (2004). *Whigs, Radicals and Liberals, 1815-1914*

⁹ Watts, D. (2004). *Whigs, Radicals and Liberals, 1815-1914*

¹⁰ Rowbotham, S. (1999). *A Century of Women*

¹¹ Rowbotham, S. (1999). *A Century of Women*

¹² Lytton, when released due to her weak heart, disguised herself as a working-class protester. She was rearrested, and subsequently force-fed

during the period, as women of different classes worked together for female suffrage. After the war, the aim of the women's suffrage groups was partially achieved, with the Representation of the People Act of 1918 giving middle- and upper-class women over 30 the right to vote. However, the inequality between women of different classes was not redressed until 1928, which was also when women gained equal voting rights to men with the Equal Franchise Act¹³. Gender inequality notwithstanding, women were also given the vote due to their role in helping with the war effort (most obviously during the munitions crisis of 1915), as well as to bring the British Empire back to its leading place in world affairs and not be behind other countries (such as New Zealand in 1893, and Finland in 1906¹⁴) in granting female suffrage. However, the help women gave the war effort placed them on an equal standing to men in regard to supporting the country during wartime (while also disputing an argument used to deny women the vote), and in bringing Britain to a standard shared by other countries, made it equal to them in terms of women's rights, therefore making inequality the dominant cause of female suffrage reform in Britain. Also during the pre-war period, similar reasons made gender inequality a prevalent cause of the policies of the National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA), although continued attempts to gain the support of white southerners meant that racial inequality was also a factor, if one working away from racial equality. Therefore, gender inequality had the dominant effect on the changes regarding women's suffrage during the period, also supported by class and racial inequality.

Communism is 'a theory or system of social organization in which all property is owned by the community and each person contributes and receives according to their ability and needs'¹⁵, which by its very nature calls for the eradication of class inequality. Due to its communist ideology (as well as attempts to remove the lingering autocracy of Tsarist rule, with varying success), inequality dominated the politics of the USSR for the duration of its existence. When the USSR became a world superpower after World War Two, it (and its communist ideology) had a greater influence on world affairs, most obviously gained by expansion throughout the Cold War. In the case of Eastern Europe, by the end of the 1940s it had become entirely composed of communist one-party states, with the exception of Yugoslavia (which was expelled from Cominform in 1948). This was partially due to the threat of using the Red Army, and from support for the native communist parties after their resistance against the Nazi occupiers, which was then consolidated using 'Salami Tactics'. Communism also spread across Asia, with China becoming communist in 1949, and the Korean War leading to a North Korean communist state in 1953. Furthermore, Vietnam became communist after the fall of Saigon to Viet Cong forces in 1975, a consequence of the lack of support for the South Vietnamese government (after unpopular measures including the repression of Buddhists started by Christian President Ngo Dinh Diem) and the loss of US support after the War Powers Act and the Watergate Scandal in 1974¹⁶. Meanwhile, in the western hemisphere, revolutionary Fidel Castro overthrew US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista in Cuba in 1959, and became communist by 1961. Even before becoming communist

¹³ Ipu.org, n.d.

¹⁴ Ipu.org, n.d.

¹⁵ Oxford English Dictionary

¹⁶ Wiest, A. (2002). The Vietnam War 1956-1975

(driven to the USSR by American economic sanctions¹⁷), Castro's actions were driven by the desire to remove Batista's corrupt and repressive regime (evident in rigged elections and embezzlement from Cuba's economy¹⁸). However, expansion was not the only policy that helped increase the global impact of class inequality: the USSR was also embroiled in an arms race with the USA. While most apparent in terms of nuclear missiles (such as the USSR shattered the atomic monopoly of the USA in 1949), it also manifested through the 'Space Race', the launch of Sputnik in October 1957 making the USSR seem capable of delivering nuclear payloads to the continental USA. However, despite the arms race (which was also an inequality of weapons), the most prevalent Soviet policy was expansion, which was most impacted by class inequality, especially in the affected countries.

The global spread of communism also had an effect on American civil rights, leading to reforms aimed at redressing the inequality between blacks and whites in America. As historian Mary L Dudziak argued, 'how could American democracy be a beacon during the Cold War, and a model for those struggling against Soviet oppression, if the United States itself practised brutal discrimination against minorities within its own borders?'¹⁹ The first half of the century had been frequently marked by 'brutal discrimination', with 'Jim Crow' laws promoting racial segregation, the ever-present lynching, and the resurgence of the Klu Klux Klan (KKK), even amidst steps towards equality with the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909²⁰. Caving to pressure for reform, President Harry Truman authorised the creation of an investigative committee for American race relations. Its 1947 report (*To secure these rights*) decried discrimination as wrong on moral, economic, and political grounds, and offered 'over 35 recommendations for action'²¹. While not applicable in the immediate term, race relations nevertheless backed the focus of Truman's 1948 election campaign, and made racial inequality impactful during his tenure. This awareness of racial inequality marked much of 1950s and 60s America, apparent in the introduction of desegregation (after both cases of *Brown v. The Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas*²²). However, the effect of racial inequality was present in how desegregation was not always followed: in the case of Little Rock, Arkansas, Governor Orval Faubus attempted to prevent desegregation (starting by denying the enrolment of nine black students to the Little Rock Central High School in September 1957) until 1959, when his actions were deemed unconstitutional, and desegregation was enforced. Furthermore, activists such as Dr Rev Martin Luther King Jr helped to raise awareness of America's racial inequality, increasing its impact on American policies. King first rose to public awareness during the Montgomery bus boycott campaign²³, and when President John F. Kennedy proposed the 'most comprehensive civil rights bill in American history'²⁴, King proposed a mass protest to win it congressional approval. In August 1963, 250,000 marchers²⁵ descended on Washington

¹⁷ Painter, D. (2001). *The Cold War*

¹⁸ Encyclopedia Britannica (2012)

¹⁹ Field, R. (2007). *Civil rights in America, 1865-1980*

²⁰ Rowbotham, S. (1999). *A Century of Women*

²¹ Field, R. (2007). *Civil rights in America, 1865-1980*

²² Riches, W. (2004). *The civil rights movement*

²³ Field, R. (2007). *Civil rights in America, 1865-1980*

²⁴ Dierenfield, B. (2008). *The Civil Rights Movement*

²⁵ Field, R. (2007). *Civil rights in America, 1865-1980*

to support Kennedy, and to protest the racial income divide and continued segregation in public schools. To this crowd, King delivered his famous 'I have a dream' speech, raising enormous publicity for the civil rights movement and leading to continued attempts for equality in American policy. The prominence of racial inequality throughout the period, therefore, makes it the dominant cause behind the civil rights movement in the USA.

To conclude, it is clear that throughout the twentieth century inequality has been the dominant force behind the trend of societies shifting towards universal equality. Even with the prevalence of militarism (seen in arms races before World War One and during the Cold War), inequality has had a further-reaching impact throughout the century, making it more important. Furthermore, within the different forms of inequality, class inequality has been most dominant, as the most widespread to greater effect (from the Liberal reforms to the expansion of communism), as well as intersecting with both inequality of wealth, and to an extent, inequality of race. Therefore, the dominant trend in modern history has been a shift to more equal societies, with class inequality being the dominant force behind it.

(2500 words)

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