

BOOK REVIEW

A Proposal to Curb Social Inequality

THE END OF EQUALITY, by Mickey Kaus. A New Republic Book/Basic, 293 pp., \$25.

By Jim Sleeper

MICKEY KAUS is in a race against time. He wants to brake a spiral of deepening social inequality that's undermining the kind of America that most citizens would *like* to believe in but find too risky to defend in daily life. As the affluent scramble to insulate their kids from a rising underclass, their flight from cities speeds the decay of public spaces, schools and common citizenship; and that decay, in turn, hastens their flight. The decent, struggling people left behind become ever more resentful of both the affluent and the underclass, but they lack the skills, contacts and clout to draw suburbanites back to a social contract strong enough to dissolve the underclass itself.

Two more generations of this, Kaus warns, and we'll have a sheltered, inbred elite, smug in its superiority but menaced by surly, often self-destructive "losers." Even if America could find an ideology to legitimate such a bleak social structure, who'd want to live in it?

Kaus, a senior editor at The New Republic, writes that Republican demagoguery cynically inflames class and racial resentments on both sides of the growing divide. But the burden of his argument is to show that leftists and liberal Democrats who champion economic equality haven't helped either. By touting income redistribution, including welfare, Kaus says, they've violated an American vision of justice that values not *money* equality — even the poor overwhelmingly support anyone's right to get rich — but a fluidity of economic opportunity and an accompanying sense of *social* equality that Americans have nurtured even amid great disparities of wealth.



Mickey Kaus

Diana Walker

Americans have done that, Kaus says, by sustaining a public sphere — electoral politics, the military draft, public spaces and schools — where money is less important than access to the benefits, as well as the responsibilities, of citizenship. In these realms, people of all classes rub shoulders and learn from personal experience that they or their kids can change places, depending on luck, effort and public investments in education. They come to despise class pretensions, not wealth itself. At the same time, they worry less about having modest incomes if their local parks and schools are safe and sound. Kaus insists that taxpayers fed up with income redistribution *will* support programs that promote such social equality.

He calls that vision "civic liberalism," and his elaboration of it is a sequel of sorts to E. J. Dionne's "Why Americans Hate Politics." Dionne showed brilliantly how both left and right have framed false public choices — for instance, between '80s elitist greed and an equally fatuous politics of victimization and compassion.

Now Kaus wants us to join him in a "thought experiment" in breaking out of that political paralysis: He wants us to think in an older, "American," civic-liberal way about the social equality that can coexist with a capitalist society in which private property and discipline — and, yes, some money inequality — remain important to people's aspirations.

But hasn't the public sphere eroded, and an underclass emerged, precisely because economic inequality has grown? On the contrary, Kaus insists, income inequality has increased only slightly since 1973, and, despite that slippage, Americans are far more nearly equal in income now than they were in, say, 1947. Yet their sense of social equality and personal security in public places is far weaker than it was in the more income-stratified 1940s. That's especially puzzling given the degree to which racism and sexism compromised civic life in the '40s, though, even

then, many women and blacks participated vigorously in starting movements for social justice.

What's gone wrong, then? To oversimplify Kaus' multifaceted, sometimes eccentric analysis, two things: the rise of a meritocracy that increasingly links high income to hereditary "smarts" and high-tech skills (there will be many fewer well-paid auto workers) and the troubling preference of "money liberals" for income redistribution over programs and incentives that mix classes and link economic survival to work.

Kaus worries — excessively, in my view — that an increasingly "pure" meritocracy will create a society of permanent winners and losers as a skilled elite becomes more inbred and socially isolated. Wisely, he concentrates his attention on how to promote class mixing, and he proposes to revive social equality in three stages. First, he'd use measures such as compulsory national service and strong public campaign financing to deepen personal and political dialogue among citizens and reduce money's sway over public life. Second, agreeing with thoughtful conservative welfare analysts such as Lawrence Mead, Kaus would phase out welfare for the able-bodied in favor of guaranteed, mandatory jobs with day care. Third, as these reforms reduce social stratification and fear, he'd extend zoning and tax provisions for moderate-income housing in suburbs to curb the economic segregation of schools and neighborhoods.

ALL THIS WOULD cost billions, Kaus admits, but it wouldn't "level" private economic gains through endless income transfers to the poor and ever-higher taxes to fight crime and social disintegration. It certainly wouldn't cost as much as the multibillion-dollar S & L bailout. (One of civic liberalism's virtues is that it never forgets that America has a multi-problem, pathological "overclass" in addition to the deserving rich.) Taxpayers who won't pay more for welfare would pay to *end* welfare through jobs, Kaus argues. And while suburbanites aren't about to move back to cities, urban America still produces new middle-class citizens, including the children of recent immigrants; they might pay to stay in urban neighborhoods with good parks and schools if social inequality could be curbed.

Kaus' vision of capitalism with a human face will be ham-

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pered by leftists, racial activists and money liberals eager to expose yet another naive, typically American "mystification" of oppressive, racist social relations. But have their own social prescriptions proved any less naive? The yearning for a program emphasizing pragmatic civic duty has propelled many Americans, sick of both mean-spirited conservatism and munificent bureaucratic liberalism, toward Ross Perot. He offers them civic liberalism's perfect idiom, but none of its substance. Kaus offers a political program worth arguing about — and perhaps worth trying. / ■

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