

Unit 1: Video 3 Transcript

Q10: Tell us about your more recent work on inequality?

A: My recent work is about inequality, inequalities of income and in wealth. Where did these come from? How were they understood in the past? And it's important to know that this subject does have a past. It has a history. It's a hot topic these days. The recent increase in gaps between rich and poor has attracted a lot of attention among scholars, but also the general public.

I mean, a few years ago we had a big international protest movement, Occupy Wall Street, that was focusing on precisely this question: inequality. And we know that income distributions have been widening in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere since some point in the 1980s. So it's become a hot topic. But it's not a new topic. In fact, it's an old topic. In Canada I study, for instance, the discovery of inequality as a social problem a century ago, in the early 20th century. It was a topic widely discussed in the newspapers, in the universities, among Canadian economists of the time, and some of the best known books by well-known Canadian authors were on that subject. The well-known political economist at McGill, Stephen Leacock, also of course very well known as one of Canada's greatest humorists, wrote a book in 1920 called *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice*. And that book was entirely about the problem of inequality, and it offered his solutions. And he was just one of many who were writing books and articles about the problem of inequality and how it should be dealt with, or sometimes not dealt with. So they proposed solutions. They analyzed the problem. They proposed solutions. Those solutions may indeed in part have worked. We don't know. So it's important that we study this. That we study how our ancestors discovered the problem, what solutions they applied, what solutions did work, what did not work. And to the extent that there was a lessening of inequality, as there was in Canada by the 1950s and 1960s, we need to know much more about why that happened in order to understand why that shrinking of inequality ended in the 1980s and the gaps continue. It's a very important and very urgent problem for today and also then for historians.

The subject of inequality reminds us that there are often old problems that resurface in our own time. They are changed, they are different, but in order

to address them today we have to understand why and how they were different in the past. Inequality, at least a century ago, was framed as not just an economic problem but a moral issue, a compelling moral issue. And that's the grounds in which much of the debate was occurring. And I think that's a difference from today. I don't see quite the intense discussion of the ethics of inequality today, as perhaps we ought to have. And so that's just one example of where looking at the past can help us to reframe the way in which we look at a particular problem today. It also relates I think to the wider value of history.

I'm often asked "what is history for?" And I do talks in high schools, for instance, and I often meet with parents of high-school students. And I know high-school students today are often asked by their parents, "Why would you want to take a course in history? What's the use of that?" Well, the answer is of course that without history, you don't have a very well-informed society. It's like if you don't have history. Imagine what it's like if you don't have history. That would be like having amnesia. An absence of history is a social amnesia. If you have that level of amnesia, you don't know where you've been. You don't know where we are in the present because you don't know how we got here. And therefore, you don't know where you're going in the future. It's not that history gives you specific lessons about how we should behave or how we should change this or that. It's much more important than that. If you don't have history, you don't have any memory, and you don't know where you came from. You don't know who you are, and you don't know where you're going. That's the value of history, and I think the subject of inequality is just one example of that. If you don't know anything about the subject as it existed in the past and the reality of inequality, you're not in a very good position to deal with it in the present and the future, are you?

Q12: What types of sources do you use in your research? What are the strengths, limitations, and challenges of these sources?

A: Well, one of the sources, of course, for the study of inequality, inequality of income, and wealth, is the census again. And now today we've got much richer census resources in Canada than we did in the 1990s. On my little computer there, for instance, I have the entire population of Canada in 1881 as it was enumerated, 4.3 million, as it was enumerated in the Census of 1881.

It's not a sample. It's the entire population. That's thanks to work done in the United States, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, popularly known as Mormons. They're busy collecting the names of everybody from censuses. So they put in their computers the entire population of the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom for 1881. And they're going on and they're going to do the entire populations of these countries from other censuses. We also have for Canada samples from the Census of 1871. They're working on earlier censuses, 1871, 1891, 1901, 1911, and then the really big census project that occurred in the first decade of this century, the Canadian Century Research Infrastructure Project, which prepared national samples of the censuses of Canada from 1911 through 1951.

Now you have to understand that we have a 92 rule of access to census information in Canada. Personal information cannot be released until after 92 years. So what we did was we prepared these databases, which in effect anonymize the personal information for the more recent censuses. Today now, since the rule—the 92 years has elapsed, we can see the 1911 Census in its original form. We can also see 1921. The 1931, 1941, 1951, we prepared national samples that are usable by historians. But the individual identifying information is protected for reasons of privacy and confidentiality.

But these are enormously powerful resources, which means that you can study change in the Canadian population over time. And you can study such things as income and wealth inequality. So that's an essential source. It's not the only source, of course, because if we wish to understand what people said about inequality, how they tried to solve the problem, we have to look at a lot of other sources. We have to look at a range of government documents, government Royal Commissions. We have to look at what politicians said, what political economists said, what journalists said. Hopefully trying to get a picture of the entire national conversation around these issues. Because it was at some level a national conversation, at least among the elites, the literate elites of our society. Politicians, academics, journalists, educators it was a very substantial conversation. And we really need to know about it.