

Social Inequality

Patterns and Processes

Martin N. Marger





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Preface

At the outset of the twenty-first century, nothing has detracted from the historically consistent observation of social scientists and philosophers on the ubiquity of inequality in human societies. This book is intended to serve as an introduction to the patterns and processes of social inequality in its major forms—class, racial/ethnic, gender, political—in the United States and other contemporary societies. Its objective is also to help develop an awareness of how inequality impinges on virtually all facets of individual and group life. It is designed primarily for an undergraduate student audience and assumes little prior exposure to the social sciences.

Inequality has long been a staple of sociological inquiry but has held an important place among the topical concerns of other social science disciplines as well. In recent years its traditionally prominent status among the foci of social scientists has been raised higher. In the United States, issues of economic inequality, particularly the widening gap between rich and poor and the stagnating wages and incomes of working- and middle-class families for the past two decades, have not only become standard points of social science discourse but are also an increasingly salient part of political debate. Racial/ethnic inequality has always served as a focal point of American sociology, but it has grown even more compelling with the emergence of several ongoing societal trends: a persistent economic gap between Euro-American groups and racial/ethnic minorities, a public debate that has arisen in response to efforts to deal with that gap (namely, measures subsumed under the rubric of affirmative action), and the influx of new immigrants who have created a more pluralistic ethnic *mélange*. Gender issues are a fundamental component of the social inequality mix, and particular attention in recent years has been paid to the manner in which they impact on class and ethnic issues. The political dimension underlies all other forms of social inequality, and the ability of citizens to hold leaders accountable and to affect public policies is an abiding concern in all contemporary societies, regardless of the presence of democratic institutions.

In teaching an interdisciplinary undergraduate course in social inequality during the past decade, I have discovered that most texts either narrowly focus on one or another form of inequality or they analytically conflate these forms, making it difficult to distinguish them. Although the

major dimensions of inequality are obviously interwoven, they do not fall neatly together in a coherent package, either for individuals or for whole societies. Accordingly, I have treated different forms of inequality in self-standing chapters, although the interrelationships among them are discussed throughout. I do consider the class dimension to be most basic, however, and it is there that the book is primarily focused. In discussing racial/ethnic, gender, and political inequalities, emphasis is placed on how they relate to and overlap with class inequalities.

Perhaps no other area of inquiry in the social sciences better lends itself to an interdisciplinary approach than does social inequality. Although sociology has usually taken the lead, economics, political science, and anthropology all focus in various ways on this universal phenomenon. As social scientists have acknowledged the interweaving and overlapping nature of the major dimensions of social inequality, courses in this field have become more integrative and comprehensive. I have tried to design this book to conform to such an interdisciplinary and inclusive perspective.

I also believe that American students of social inequality can acquire a more profound understanding of patterns and processes in their own country through comparative analysis. Too often undergraduates enter social science courses with an inflated view of the United States vis-à-vis the rest of the world; unfortunately, they often leave with a similar view. One of the objectives of this book, therefore, is to inform readers of how the nature of social inequality in the United States is both distinct from and common with social inequality in other contemporary societies. Although all chapters emphasize conditions in American society, each contains discussions of U.S. inequality in a cross-national context, drawing illustrations and data from other comparable societies.

Chapter 1 sets the tone of the book, exploring the unique ways in which sociologists deal with issues of inequality and establishing a lexicon of key terms and concepts utilized throughout the book. It also explains the extant forms of inequality in modern societies and provides a preview of succeeding chapters.

Chapter 2 describes the American class system, presenting a bird's eye view of the class hierarchy and an examination of the distribution of income and wealth. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 deal with the three major class divisions—the poor, the rich, and the classes in the middle—emphasizing socioeconomic issues and patterns. Chapter 5 also discusses the power elite and the ways in which power relates to wealth. Chapter 6 begins with a description of the major systems of stratification, explaining the provisions for mobility in each, and then looks at the nature of social mobility in the United States.

Chapter 7 examines the ways in which government affects the distribution of wealth and power. An underlying assumption of this chapter is that public policies play a fundamental role in determining the shape and depth of inequality in all modern societies. Much discussion centers on how the U.S. welfare state differs from those of other post-industrial societies.

Chapter 8 explores theories of social inequality, particularly those that seek to explain social class. Theoretical issues are discussed here rather than nearer the beginning of the book for two reasons. First, in my own classroom experience I have found it more effective to move sequentially from a description of class systems to an explanation of those systems, framed within different theoretical perspectives. Some instructors, I am sure, will prefer a converse order of coverage, discussing theory antecedent to describing class systems. The order of Chapter 8, as well as most others, can be easily rearranged to accommodate different pedagogical approaches. Second, much theoretical discussion is contained in other chapters that deal with particular issues, such as poverty, the elite structure, and mobility, or with racial/ethnic, gender, and political dimensions of inequality. The purpose of this chapter is to examine class theories in a more general context.

Chapter 9 is devoted to ideology and the legitimation process. The basic objective is to explore the function of ideology in solidifying and sustaining social inequality. The features of the prevailing American ideology are discussed along with the role of major institutions in communicating that ideology.

Chapters 10 and 11 focus on issues of racial/ethnic inequality. Chapter 10 describes the ethnic makeup of American society and the development of its ethnic diversity as a prerequisite to explaining the U.S. ethnic hierarchy in Chapter 11. Over the years I have discovered a disturbing lack of awareness on the part of U.S. students, as well as the general public, of the most elemental features of the American racial/ethnic system, particularly the historical processes of its formation and the demographics of specific groups and categories. Essential to a meaningful analysis of racial/ethnic inequalities is a basic understanding of the concepts of race and ethnicity and of the society's racial and ethnic composition.

Chapter 12 focuses on the gender dimension of inequality. With the enormously wide range of issues that today comprise gender studies, coverage of gender as part of a comprehensive introduction to social inequality must be selective. Among gender issues, it is changes in the occupational role of women, in my view, that have rendered the most far-reaching societal effects during the past several decades. Much of this chapter, therefore, concerns patterns and processes of gender inequality in the workplace, though other institutional areas are discussed, including politics and the family.

Chapter 13 examines political inequality. The first part of this chapter covers the more prominent theories and debates about the U.S. power structure and the role of political elites. The second part deals with the role of masses, exploring how and to what degree they can effectively impact the political system.

Accompanying Test Bank

Kevin Everett of Radford University, who served as an academic reviewer of the manuscript, has written a test bank to accompany the text. The test bank includes multiple-choice, true–false, and short-answer/essay questions.

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An Introduction to the Study of Social Inequality

[F]or centuries and over almost the whole of the globe, it has been a basic assumption in societies of any size or complexity that some men are born to power and luxury, others to toil and poverty.

PHILIP MASON

Equality would be a heaven, if we could attain it.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE

In 1989, Malcolm Forbes, the publisher of *Forbes* magazine, celebrated his seventieth birthday by gathering his friends at Kennedy Airport in New York and flying them to Tangier, Morocco, for the weekend. There they dined in Arabian tents erected on terrace gardens overlooking the sea. Luxury also extended to the portable sanitary facilities, which were designed with black-and-white tile floors, sinks, and toilets that flushed. Forbes's date for the affair was Elizabeth Taylor.

Just a few miles from where the Forbes party was getting ready to board three chartered jets (including a Concorde) to attend the birthday party to end all birthday parties, a husband and wife and their four children were living in two small rooms at the Kenmore Hotel, a run-down apartment house where the toilets did not work, the mice ran free, and the hallways were used by prostitutes and drug dealers.

Although the contrast in these two cases could not be more stark, it is not one that is particularly uncommon or surprising. The gap between rich and poor in the United States is wide and in recent years has been continually expanding. In this, however, the United States is far from unique. Although there are relative differences among them, all contemporary societies have a significant disparity between those at the top of the social hierarchy and those at the bottom. Moreover, the gap between whole nations, rich and poor, is also great and in most cases shows little sign of closing.

How can we explain these inequalities? Are inequalities within and between human societies natural and inevitable? Is equality ever more than a chimera, an ideal that can never be realized? Social scientists have been wrestling with those questions since the nineteenth century. This book is

about social inequality: its origins, its scope, the ways in which it is sustained, and the ways in which humans seek to reduce it.

No sphere of inquiry is more fundamental in the social sciences, whether we are studying sociology, economics, or political science. Each of these disciplines deals most basically with human inequalities, specifically, differences in income and wealth, differences in social standing and prestige, and differences in power. In one way or another, all questions and issues in the various social science disciplines ultimately involve, directly or indirectly, matters of inequality. Indeed, we would not be stretching the matter to declare quite simply that inequality is the transcendent issue of all social science.

Major Issues in the Study of Social Inequality

Our concern is with different types of social inequality. This entails the exploration of many specific questions and issues. We can summarize our investigation of inequality, however, by posing a few very basic and broadly conceived questions, which form the essential structure of the chapters that follow.

Key Questions in the Study of Social Inequality

1. *What is social inequality?* In pursuing this question, we will look at how social inequality is conceived by sociologists and other social scientists and how they go about studying this phenomenon. Social inequality, it is clear, has been one of the central concerns of sociology from its very beginnings. We will then look at the various forms of inequality and the dimensions of society in which inequality is most evident and deep-seated. We will also see how social inequality is structured, that is, built into the culture and institutions of the society and not the result of chance or even entirely of individual actions.

2. *Why is there social inequality? Is inequality inevitable in all societies? And what, if any, functions does inequality serve?* These are interrelated questions that compel us to investigate different theories that have been developed by sociologists. Inequality is surely one of the most primary, if not the most basic, issues of sociology. As a result, it is a phenomenon that has been dealt with extensively by the major sociological theorists. Karl Marx and Max Weber, two of the most prolific and influential, have left a gigantic legacy of thought on issues of social inequality, and much of our attention will focus on their theories.

3. *What is the nature of economic inequality today in American society and in other societies like it?* One of this book's central objectives is to present a picture of the actual condition of social inequality in the United States and in advanced capitalist societies of the contemporary world. Differences in economic standing constitute only one dimension of inequality, but it is, arguably, the most significant and consequential. The essential query here is