

Fifth Edition

Social Inequality

FORMS, CAUSES, AND CONSEQUENCES

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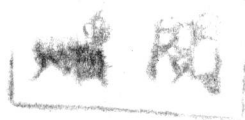
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SOCIAL INEQUALITY

FORMS, CAUSES, AND CONSEQUENCES

FIFTH EDITION

CHARLES E. HURST

The College of Wooster



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*To Mary Ellen
with love always for who you are*

PREFACE

Although the twenty-first century has just begun, we have already seen wrenching economic and political changes within and between nations. Economic conditions in the United States have been shaken and destabilized by unprecedented acts of violence and corporate scandals. International terrorism has made us more aware of how vulnerable we are to outside forces. For better and for worse, Internet communication has created wider and more complex networks of contact throughout much of the world. Progress in technology has made possible advances in medicine and education. The United States is at the forefront of these expanding developments. Yet it is still an open question as to who will be able to benefit fully from these changes. Some things change, while others remain the same. Technology marches on, but many of our society's more fundamental and seemingly intractable problems remain intact. Widening gaps in wealth and income, continued racial and sexual discrimination, persistent child poverty, hunger, and homelessness continue to tear at our social fabric. The number of billionaires has increased at a record pace, but in 2000 over 31 million people were still poor. International competition, corporate outsourcing, and the quest for corporate efficiency have left increasing numbers of both white-collar and blue-collar employees unemployed or in new temporary positions. Racial and ethnic tensions have resurfaced with an often brutal face as people try to assign blame for their threatened statuses and try to compete for a better life in a society in which the distant but constant glow of the American dream has dimmed. Women continue to push for greater equality in earnings and occupational opportunities. Gays and lesbians fight for social respect and equal treatment under the law while they contribute to the political and economic strength of the nation.

Like earlier versions, this fifth edition of *Social Inequality: Forms, Causes, and Consequences* is intended as an introduction to the study of social inequality. It is still based on the assumptions that (1) social inequality is multidimensional; (2) theoretical understanding is necessary to be successful in grappling with inequality's undesirable consequences; (3) couching a discussion of inequality in its broader historical and social-structural context provides a fuller understanding of inequality's nature and role in society; and (4) an evenhanded approach covering the gamut of perspectives on inequality is most appropriate, especially for undergraduates being exposed to this material for the first time. My goal is to convey as simply, but as compellingly, as I can a sense of the pervasiveness and extensiveness of social inequality within a comparative context, to show how inequality can be explained, how it affects all of us, and what is being done about it.

Following advice from students and colleagues, I have made numerous changes in this fifth edition of *Social Inequality* that I hope will add some new dimensions to the material, make coverage of topics more complete and up to date, make discussions clearer and more provocative, and engage students more deeply. While I have added new and updated old material, I have continued to keep in mind that students are the book's principal audience. Consequently, I have added Nutshells that include biographical excerpts so that students can more fully sense the impact of inequality on their neighbors' lives. At the suggestion of reviewers, I have also added more critical-thinking questions for students to ponder. The core emphases on breadth of coverage, theoretical understanding, and current data in the

text remain, but there are many significant changes that distinguish this edition from earlier ones, namely:

1. Fuller discussion of the measurement and extent of wealth inequality in the United States.
2. Expansion of the discussion on the social, economic, and political-historical context within which the variety of inequalities developed in Appalachia.
3. Expansion of Chapter 5, which examines status inequality based on sexual orientation. Specifically, I have added a section on the discrimination that occurs in the legal system because of the confusion and stereotyping surrounding the concepts of sex, gender, and sexual orientation. By incorporating national and more reliable data, I have also revised and strengthened the discussion on the socioeconomic status of gays and lesbians.
4. Inclusion of more information on the forms of inequality experienced by women in different parts of the world.
5. Addition of important explanations of social inequality. This includes a discussion of Herbert Spencer's perspective in Chapter 9. Spencer's views are added because his ideas are often at least implicit in popular understandings of the poor and inequality in the United States, and in governmental policies aimed at dealing with poverty. At the suggestion of reviewers, I have also incorporated a discussion of social constructionist theory in Chapter 10. Given the central role that definitions and categories of race and gender play in creating social inequities, and how conceptualizations of "crime" affect the relationship between class position and crime rates, this addition seemed to be especially appropriate.
6. In-depth discussion of environmental racism/justice as a growing, and significant, social consequence of social inequality. As the United States grows in size and diversity, and as desirable areas become more coveted, the competitive battle for attractive land will be determined heavily by the distribution of economic and political resources. Moreover, as the dilemma over what to do with hazardous waste becomes more urgent, the question of whether the residential neighborhoods of those with less power and fewer resources are more likely to be the sites of such waste needs to be more fully examined.
7. More discussion of corporate crime, its perpetrators and sources, along with how it is treated in the justice system compared to ordinary street crime. In light of recent corporate scandals, this is an important addition to the section on inequality and crime.
8. Addition of research data concerning the effects of the 1996 welfare-reform legislation on the economic conditions of the poor, and more discussion on the effects of the tax system on economic inequality.
9. Addition of new websites, critical-thinking questions, and Nutshells to draw students into the material more fully.
10. Updating of statistics on income, wealth, earnings, poverty, occupational distribution as well as inclusion of new statistics on economic and political inequality among racial/ethnic and gender groups.
11. Inclusion of new research studies on different forms of inequality.

While I am convinced that these changes strengthen the book, its organization remains the same. After a brief introduction to some core issues in Chapter 1, the book is divided

into four major parts. The chapters in Part One survey the *extent* of inequality along a variety of dimensions: economic, status, gender, sexual orientation, racial and ethnic, political, and comparative. Each also addresses *specific explanations* associated with a specific form of inequality. Not surprisingly, these theories draw upon sociology, anthropology, political science, and economics, and include conservative, liberal, and more radical orientations. Part Two covers an in-depth discussion of *broad explanations* of inequality, which have been espoused over time by many adherents. The first of the two chapters included in this section reviews the classical arguments of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Spencer, while the second chapter analyzes and assesses more contemporary functional, social constructionist, reproduction, and labor-market theories. The chapters in Part Three demonstrate how inequality affects our personal lives as well as society. The *effects* of inequality reach inwardly into our most private mental and physical selves as well as outwardly into cultural and social conditions in society. Inequality's effects are pervasive. Finally, Part Four addresses *stability and change* in the structure of social inequality. The extent of social mobility and perceptions of the fairness of our system of social inequality affect the relative stability of that system, as do its social-psychological and institutional underpinnings. Attempts to change and redress inequities in U.S. society are dealt with in the last two chapters. Historically, these attempts have included broad-based social movements and more specific governmental programs and reforms.

Although any shortcomings in the book are my own responsibility, any improvements in this edition are due in large part to the suggestions of colleagues, both anonymous and known, and to the students in my social inequality class at The College of Wooster. Jeff Lasser and Andrea Christie at Allyn and Bacon were there when I needed a question answered or a manuscript problem solved. I am grateful to those who read over and commented upon the entire fourth edition, so that I could make the fifth one stronger. These include Roberto De Anda, Portland State University; Martha E. Gimenez, University of Colorado at Boulder; Donald Gregory, Reinhardt College; and Dr. William Housel, Panhandle State University. I kept their detailed reviews in front of me as I worked through this new edition and incorporated many changes that reflect their suggestions. While no book can fully satisfy every reader, I have tried to make changes that correspond to the major and recurrent comments of reviewers. I have also been aided by sporadic but incisive comments from colleagues using the book at other schools. More personally, I am grateful for our three wonderful children—Katie, Brendan, and Sarah—and for their providing me with occasional articles and photos that brought home the concrete reality of inequality in its many guises. Finally, and as always, I am deeply indebted to my wife, Mary Ellen, for her continued love, moral support, sense of humor, and help in preparing the final manuscript. She is one of the real heroes in my life. In an unequal world, she is without equal.

CONTENTS

PREFACE ix

1 AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY 1

- Some Controversial Issues of Substance 3
- Issues of Methodology 8
- Organization of the Book 10
- Critical Thinking 11
- Web Connections 11

PART ONE

FORMS OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

2 ECONOMIC INEQUALITY 12

- Technology and the Shaping of the U.S. Class Structure 14
- Structure of the U.S. Class System 16
- Income Inequality 20
- Is the Middle Class Shrinking? 23
- Wealth Inequality in the United States 26
- Summary 33
- Critical Thinking 34
- Web Connections 34

3 STATUS INEQUALITY 35

- The Theory of Social Status 35
- Bases of Status in the United States 39
- Inequality in Appalachia 51
- Summary 58
- Critical Thinking 58
- Web Connections 59

4 SEX AND GENDER INEQUALITY 60

- The Status of Women in the Early United States 60
- Present Occupational and Economic Conditions for Women 62
- Microinequities in the Treatment of Women 70
- General Theories of Sex and Gender Inequality 73
- Summary 87
- Critical Thinking 87
- Web Connections 88

5 SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND INEQUALITY 89

- The Complexity of Sexuality and Gender 89
- Public Opinions on Homosexuality 91

	Homosexuals as a Status Group	94
	Discrimination, Legal Confusion, and Sexual Orientation	96
	A Socioeconomic Profile of Homosexuals	99
	Negative Consequences of Stigmatization	104
	Summary	106
	Critical Thinking	106
	Web Connections	107
6	RACIAL AND ETHNIC INEQUALITY	108
	Race, Ethnicity, and Inequality in the United States: A Brief History	108
	Racial Inequality Today	112
	Microinequities in the Treatment of Racial and Ethnic Minorities	117
	The Intersection of Class, Race, Sex, and Gender	120
	Theories of Racial and Ethnic Inequality	125
	Summary	133
	Critical Thinking	134
	Web Connections	134
7	POLITICAL INEQUALITY	135
	Portraits of National Power Structure	135
	Distribution of Political Power	140
	Interlinkage of Economic and Political Power	145
	Ruling-Class Unity	149
	Summary	153
	Critical Thinking	154
	Web Connections	154
8	U.S. INEQUALITY IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE	155
	Industrialization and Globalization	155
	Differences in Quality of Life	157
	Economic Inequality	158
	Gender Inequality	164
	Racial/Ethnic Inequality	169
	Summary	174
	Critical Thinking	175
	Web Connections	175

PART TWO

GENERAL EXPLANATIONS OF INEQUALITY

9	CLASSICAL EXPLANATIONS OF INEQUALITY	176
	Karl Marx (1818–1883)	176
	Max Weber (1864–1920)	185
	Emile Durkheim (1858–1917)	193
	Herbert Spencer (1820–1903)	196

Summary	200
Critical Thinking	202
Web Connections	202
10 MODERN EXPLANATIONS OF INEQUALITY	203
Functionalist Theory of Stratification	204
Theories of Social Construction and Reproduction	207
Labor-Market Theories of Income and Earnings Distribution	213
Summary	222
Critical Thinking	223
Web Connections	223

PART THREE

CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

11 THE IMPACT OF INEQUALITY ON PERSONAL LIFE CHANCES	224
Basic Life Chances: Physical Health	225
Basic Life Chances: Psychological Health	231
Basic Life Chances: Food and Shelter	240
Summary	243
Critical Thinking	245
Web Connections	245
12 DEVIANCE, PROTEST, AND INEQUALITY	246
Violence in the Family	246
Inequality and the Measurement of Crime	249
Street Crime and Inequality	250
White-Collar Crime, Corporate Crime, and Punishment	260
Hate Crimes and Inequality	265
Structured Inequality and Collective Protests	266
Social Inequality and Environmental Equity	270
Summary	272
Critical Thinking	273
Web Connections	273

PART FOUR

STABILITY AND CHANGE IN THE SYSTEM OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

13 TRENDS IN MOBILITY AND STATUS ATTAINMENT: OPENNESS IN U.S. SOCIETY	274
Questions Concerning Openness	274
Methodology in the Study of Mobility	275
U.S. Mobility over Time	275
Comparative Studies of Mobility	280

	Status Attainment: What Determines How Far One Goes?	282
	Mobility and Attainment Process among African Americans	288
	Patterns of Mobility and Attainment among Women	290
	Some Observations on Studies of Status Attainment	295
	Summary	296
	Critical Thinking	296
	Web Connections	297
14	JUSTICE AND LEGITIMACY: ASSESSMENTS OF THE STRUCTURE OF INEQUALITY	298
	U.S. Attitudes about the Distribution of Income and Wealth	299
	What Is a Just Distribution?	301
	Bases for the Legitimation of Structured Inequality	304
	Summary	314
	Critical Thinking	314
	Web Connections	315
15	SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS	316
	The Early Labor Movement	316
	The Civil Rights Movement	326
	The Women's Movement	335
	Inequality, Context, and Social Movements: A Synthesis	344
	Critical Thinking	347
	Web Connections	347
16	ADDRESSING INEQUALITY AND POVERTY: PROGRAMS AND REFORMS	348
	Addressing the Problem of Inequality	348
	The Conundrum of Defining Poverty	352
	Levels of and Trends in Poverty	354
	Perceptions of the Poor	355
	Poverty Programs	362
	Flaws in Pre-1996 Assistance Programs	367
	Welfare Reform	369
	Suggestions for Reducing Inequality	371
	Summary	373
	Critical Thinking	375
	Web Connections	375
	GLOSSARY OF BASIC TERMS	376
	REFERENCES	381
	INDEX	429

CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Was there, or will there ever be a nation whose individuals were all equal, in natural and acquired qualities, in virtues, talents and riches? The answer in all mankind must be in the negative.

—John Adams

Several years ago, a student approached me to say how much she resented her wealthier acquaintances. What upset her was not merely the BMWs and Acuras some of the students drove, or the quality of their clothes, or their expensive computers, but the fact that they had not really earned these things; rather, they had been given to them by their parents. She herself had grown up with working-class parents who lived on a farm and who did not particularly value a seemingly nonpractical liberal arts education. She had been taught that one had to work for and earn the kinds of goodies other students had in abundance. This experience is not an isolated one. Over the years, knowing of my interest in social-class issues, numerous students have spoken to me about their discomfort of being at an elite liberal arts college where the fees are well above \$25,000 per year. Some learn to accommodate themselves to their unusual and somewhat foreign situation, while others continue to wrestle with their marginality among students who are better off than they are, and some simply transfer to another school.

The same experience is felt by some faculty whose backgrounds are dissimilar from those of their colleagues and many of the students they

teach. Recently, I interviewed faculty at several highly selective liberal arts colleges. Some expressed their lack of ease, even though they had been at their institutions for years. One, for example, who came from a background where his father had not graduated from high school and had worked in a factory, told me, “I have always felt a little bit of an outsider to the general social class here, certainly the students.” He went on to say that he “felt sort of intimidated.” Keep in mind that these feelings were expressed by a full professor with a Ph.D. in a natural science—not a person one would expect to have a shaky sense of self-confidence. The theme of not fitting in or being unsure of oneself occurred often among the faculty I interviewed whose class origins were below the middle. Consider your own situation. Imagine that you had come from a family of noticeably different wealth or from a different region or nationality, or that you were of a different race or sex. How would your experiences, perceptions, and opportunities be different?

Inequality is present and affects us at all stages of our lives. Think of your own experiences. Even when young, we hear people speak of others as being from the “wrong side of the tracks,” as being

not “our kind,” as being “above” or “below” us. We hear about racism and sexism. As youths, we notice that because of the way others dress, where they live, and who their parents are, some are treated differently and have greater opportunities than others. We are also smart enough to see that there are class differences associated with different neighborhood elementary schools.

The statistics confirming this inequality are extensive. In 2000, over 31 million people were classified as poor by the U.S. government. A disproportionate 37 percent of these were children under 18 years of age. For a single person under 65, poverty meant that he or she had a total income (before taxes) of under \$8,959. For a family of two parents and two children, it meant a family income of under \$17,463. In the population as a whole, the median household income in that same year was \$42,100 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, September 2001b). These numbers contrast sharply with the incomes of those at the top of the income ladder. *Business Week* reported, for example, that while 2001 was not as good a year for CEOs as the years immediately preceding because of declines in the value of their stock options, the average compensation for CEOs was still \$11 million (“Executive Pay” 2002). That amount is several hundred times the compensation received by the average factory worker. Many social, political, and economic forces are behind these statistics, and we will explore them later.

Also behind the statistics are the faces of real individuals whose lives have been drastically affected by those forces over which they have little immediate control. Consider the Schabows and the Bartelles, two hard-working couples caught on the treadmill of trying to keep up. Lawrence Schabow has worked as a truck driver for a firm that was bought out by a larger company that proceeded to cut wages and insurance benefits for its employees. In 1996, he earned 22 percent *less* in real terms than he did in 1983, and he had to pay for his own eye and dental insurance. Despite working full time, the family could not pay their debts and had to enter bankruptcy in 1992. Lawrence’s own conclusion? “I’m supporting us and our three kids and

going under more and more every week” (Bernstein 1996, p. 91).

But while Lawrence feels like he’s sinking, others more than prosper. Katie Couric, the popular down-to-earth host of NBC’s *Today* program, received a contract in 2001 that will pay her \$65 million over a four-and-one-half-year period. “If you have a star you pay them star money,” argued a former NBC news boss (“Top of the Morning” 2002). Regardless of what one might think about the reasons and legitimacy for it, the result is that her compensation allows Couric to live a lifestyle in a multimillion-dollar Park Avenue apartment beyond the reach of most others—like, for example, Jeff and Tina Hobbs of Beattyville, Kentucky. The Hobbses lived for years in a house without indoor plumbing, insulation, and a safe foundation. “We could feel air coming through cracks in the walls,” they say, and “hear animals in the walls” (Reeves 2002, p. 15). And they are not alone in being unable to afford better housing. Twenty-six Appalachian counties have median incomes that are less than half the national median income (Reeves 2002, p. 15).

Ernst and Anna Bartelle, both of whom are Mexican American, find the going tough as well, even though both of them work. They want the best for their children and they pay a psychological price for not being able to give it to them. Ernst confided, “And that’s what hurts. The kids know it. In their minds, when the kids are gone, it’s going to be, ‘Oh, the parents were always scratching and scraping.’ That’s a hell of a legacy to leave them.” In the past, Anna blamed Ernst for not being able to find a well-paying job. But now she feels that they have really been like hamsters on a wheel, running and working hard but getting nowhere (Schwarz and Volgy 1992, pp. 25–31).

Or consider Derrick White, a young African American living in an 850-square-foot apartment with his mother and five half-siblings in the Hurt Village housing project in Memphis (Kilborn 1993). Derrick’s mother, one of 18 children born to a maid and sharecropper in a small Arkansas town, had worked full time until Derrick’s birth, and is now working toward her high school degree. Pres-

ently, the family relies heavily on welfare for income. A quiet, unassuming person, Derrick graduated third among the boys in his high school, but has been in and out of college because of financial problems. He would like to be a doctor because he could then help people and make enough money to help his mom, his church, and his children when he has them. His mother supports his efforts and believes in pushing children to do their best. Derrick figures he can make it by “‘getting people behind me’ and playing by the rules.”

The injurious impact of inequality is not confined to the working class and poor, however. In recent years, the effects of social and economic forces pushing people into different economic circumstances have been increasingly felt by those in the white-collar ranks as companies downsize to meet competition and maintain profits. Steven Holthausen, once a bank loan officer, is now a tourist guide because his job was eliminated in 1990. Since then, his wife has left him and his children avoid him, blaming him for his economic decline. He feels he has lost respect in the community. While part of his anger is directed at himself, he also blames the company and the government for his predicament. “The anger that I feel right now is that I lost both my family and my job. That is not where I wanted to be at this point in my life” (Uchitelle and Kleinfeld 1996). Unfortunately, Steven’s story is not unique. In 2001 alone, almost 2.5 million workers became unemployed because of mass layoffs in the private sector. About 42 percent of the layoffs were in manufacturing (U.S. Department of Labor, January 29, 2002). Between January 1997 and January 2000, 3.3 million workers lost jobs they had held for at least three years because their positions were eliminated, or their plants closed or moved (“Worker Displacement During the Late 1990s”).

The streamlining and downsizing of businesses have left millions of experienced, specialized workers with temporary part-time jobs or without jobs, and frequently the immediate response is like that of Edoardo Leoncavallo, a middle-aged recently unemployed architect who knows the family problems that result from downward mobility: “I think my wife initially felt resentment. I think she felt,

Why can’t you bring home the bacon?” (Labich 1993, p. 42).

At the same time, advances in computer and information technologies have created opportunities for others to become phenomenally rich. Five years ago, few people had heard of Jeffrey Bezos. Yet, in 1999, at age 35 and the moving force behind Amazon.Com, an Internet bookseller whose stock has skyrocketed, Bezo’s wealth is estimated to be over \$10 billion (Brown et al. 1999).

SOME CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES OF SUBSTANCE

Inequality and its effects are all around us. Consider the breadth of inequality’s impact one is likely to see during a lifetime involving differences in possessions, places, wealth, experiences, bodies, races, genders, and power. The extensiveness of it is almost overwhelming. And yet, there is a great deal of controversy about social inequalities. Are social inequalities inevitable, especially in a capitalist society that stresses competition and individual success? Why do some have more than others? Is this natural or unnatural? Are Steven and the Bartelles right in having doubts about their own abilities and then turning blame on themselves if they do not succeed? Does hard work always pay off or are the positions that people occupy due largely to factors having little to do with personal motivation and effort? Is Derrick right in placing such importance on his own efforts or is he likely to be disappointed? Can inequality be lessened or not? Are economic and other resources becoming more or less equally distributed in the United States? Is inequality really a social problem? Is it desirable or not? Do we really have classes in the United States or merely individuals and families who happen to have different amounts of scarce resources? Can equality in political power exist even if economic resources are distributed unequally? Or does the Golden Rule operate—those with the gold rule? These are among the most intriguing and consequential of the questions that have been raised in the study of social inequality. We now examine some of these in more detail.

Is Inequality Inevitable?

Perhaps the most basic issue relates to the inevitability of inequality. It is important to clarify that reference is being made here to *institutionalized* rather than *individual* inequality (i.e., structured inequality between categories of individuals that are systematically created, reproduced, legitimated by sets of ideas, and relatively stable). We would not be studying this phenomenon if it was not a prominent feature of contemporary society with significant consequences. To ask whether it is inevitable is to address discussions of its origins (i.e., whether it is caused by natural or artificial factors). If social inequality is directly linked to conditions inherent in the nature of groups of individuals or society, then little might be expected to eliminate it. On the other hand, if such inequality arises because of the conscious, intentional, and freely willed actions of individuals or the structures they create in society, then perhaps it can be altered.

One side argues that inequality is always going to be present because of personal differences between individuals. If there is an open society and if people vary in their talents and motivations, then this would suggest that inequality is inevitable, a simple fact of society. "Some inequalities come about as a result of unavoidable biological inequalities of physical skill, mental capacity, and traits of personality" argued Cauthen (1987, p. 8) in his treatise on equality. Some early philosophers also argued that there are "natural" differences between individuals, and some people, in fact, still maintain that there are differences of this type separating the sexes, resulting in the inevitability of inequality. Aristotle took the position that "the male is by nature superior, the female, inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled" (in Kriesberg 1979, p. 12). More recently, Goldberg (1973, p. 133) argued that male dominance and higher achievement are probably inevitable because of the biological differences that he says exist between males and females. An unbroken thread running through several of the vignettes at the beginning of the chapter is the belief that it is differences in individuals that account for inequality between persons. These and

other explanations of inequality will be discussed in detail later.

Other theorists have argued that inequality is inevitable because as long as certain kinds of tasks are more necessary for the survival of the society than others, and as long as those able to perform those tasks are rare, social inequality of rewards between individuals is needed to motivate the best people to perform the most difficult tasks. Under these conditions, the argument goes, inequality cannot be eradicated without endangering the society.

On the other side of the fence are those who argue that economic inequality is largely the by-product of a system's structure and not the result of major differences in individual or group talents, characteristics, and motivations. Rousseau, for example, linked the origins of inequality to the creation of private property (Dahrendorf 1970, p. 10). It is the characteristics of the political economy and the firms and labor markets within it that are primary determinants of differences in income and wealth. Where a person works and in what industry have a major effect on income. Certainly, the job changes resulting from downsizing would suggest this. Essentially, then, this argument states that it is not human nature and individual differences but rather structural conditions that determine where an individual winds up on the ladder of economic inequality. Discrimination is another of those conditions.

The theories that say...that women are "naturally" disadvantaged are of use to those who want to preserve and strengthen the dominant political and economic interests... Contrary to the claims of biological determinists, studies of the contributions that biological factors make to human behavior can at most give only very limited information about the origins of present differences in human behavior and probably no information about the origins of present social structures. (Lowe and Hubbard 1983, pp. 55-56)

Clearly, both Steven Holthausen and the Bartelles suspect that their situations may be at least partially determined by forces beyond their control. If the conditions that generate social inequality

ity are artificial creations of human actions, then they can be changed, and economic inequality is not inevitable, nor is it necessarily beneficial for the society and all its members. We will examine this controversy more thoroughly in later chapters.

Is Inequality Increasing or Lessening?

Another issue revolves around whether socioeconomic differences between classes, races, and the sexes are increasing or decreasing. One position is that the United States is largely a middle-class society and that government exerts pressure to limit the growth of the upper class's wealth, while at the same time it aids the lower classes through various social programs. The result is a *structural* tendency for most groups to move toward the middle—a class system with an ever-increasing bulge in the middle. This argument is related to the classlessness position in that if, ultimately, the pressure results in a largely middle-class society or middle mass, then in effect there is virtually only one large class. In *cultural* terms, this argument says that all classes are moving in the direction of the same values, and specifically, that lower classes adopt the values of those above them. This has been particularly stressed in some discussions of the working class, which, it is said, takes on the values of the middle class as its economic fortunes improve.

Another version of this homogenizing scenario suggests that race may be becoming less important as a determinant of life chances and that the differences between the races are diminishing. In fact, it is suggested that class differences *within* racial groups may be more significant than those existing *between* such groups. Similarly, as women have moved increasingly into the labor market, their status has moved closer to that of men, and many argue that women have made great strides in reducing the socioeconomic differences between themselves and men.

In sharp contrast to these images of decreasing differences and merging groups, others have argued that polarization is occurring with respect to the social classes, with the gap between the top and bot-

tom increasing. They cite the number of poor, homeless, and an “underclass” as evidence for this trend, along with changes in governmental tax and poverty policies. In essence, they are saying that the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. The same general kind of argument has been made regarding race and sex, stating that not only have race and sex continued to be important determinants of life chances but also there has been little reduction in the extent of differences that exist between the races and sexes in the United States. We will examine these issues closely in the next and succeeding chapters. If what is happening to Steven Holthausen and the salaries of chief executive officers is fairly typical of what happens to many as the economy shifts, then perhaps the gap is increasing between the top and the bottom. On the other hand, if African Americans and women are breaking through the walls of discrimination and moving up, then perhaps some of the gaps are closing. We shall see.

Equality or Inequality: Desirable or Undesirable?

A variety of studies have asked Americans how they feel about equality and inequality, and it is clear that they are ambivalent in their feelings. In some ways, they are attracted to equality; in other ways, they view inequality as justified.

Part of the problem here is that people think about different things when they think about inequality, and people feel differently about the various kinds of equality/inequality. Moreover, there are numerous inequalities/equalities; thus, the meaning of equality/inequality is not self-evident. “Trying to think clearly about equality,” wrote Cauthen (1987), “is indeed like being tossed naked into a tangled thicket in the midst of a briar patch” (p. 2). For example, Bryan Turner (1986) cited four basic kinds of equality: (1) equality pertaining to all as basic human beings—that is, the notion that basically we are all the same and equally worthy as persons; (2) equality of opportunity—the idea that access to valued ends is open to all; (3) equality of condition—that is, that all start

from the same position; and (4) equality of results or outcome, or equality of income. The latter is the most radical of the four and the one most likely to incite controversy.

Studies suggest that most Americans are against limiting the amount of income an individual can make, but at the same time they feel that many in high-paying occupations receive more than they deserve (Kluegel and Smith 1986). Americans feel quite differently about equality of opportunity than they do about egalitarianism, and groups feel differently about the fairness of the system. A study of over 2,700 leaders in various areas, for example, showed that they feel any fair distribution of goods should be based on equality of *opportunity* rather than equality of *result*. At the same time, however, African American and feminist leaders are much less likely to consider the free enterprise system fair, and are more likely to consider poverty to be caused by problems in the system rather than by deficiencies in the individual (Verba and Orren 1985). We will examine the tangle of American beliefs about inequality and its fairness more fully in Chapter 14.

Are There Classes in the United States?

The economic differences that exist between families and individuals can be easily recognized, but does that mean that social classes exist in the United States? There is much to discourage the belief in classes. The value system stresses individualism, liberty, and equality. The belief in individualism and liberty would work against the development of stably reproduced social classes in the United States. Following these values, it is inconsistent to have group inequalities in which a person's fate is largely determined by the group to which he or she belongs, nor is it legitimate to have individual liberty curtailed by the application of structural constraints (e.g., laws, admission requirements) to some groups and not others. Finally, the value of equality—that we are all one people, that, underneath, U.S. citizens are all “common folk” without formal titles (e.g., duke, lord)—helps to reinforce the basic notion that all Americans are equal.

In addition to some central U.S. values, other conditions moderate the belief in the existence of classes. First of all, as we will see later, there is a great deal of disagreement about the definition of *social class*. This lack of agreement in conceptualization makes it more difficult for there to be agreement on the existence of classes. Second, the lack of belief is further strengthened by the fact that in contrast to race and sex, there are far fewer reliable and clear-cut physical clues to class position. Walking down the street, it is much easier to tell accurately if someone is Black or White and male or female than it is to tell what class he or she is in. Class is often invisible, and therefore we seem to be less often confronted by it. People do not always wear their class positions on their sleeves, so to speak. Think about it: Can you reliably and accurately tell the class positions of your classmates simply by their appearances?

Third, this very invisibility makes it much easier to create and manipulate ideas about the existence of classes in society. It is much easier to say that classes simply do not exist. Finally, the increasing concern for privacy and personal security in U.S. society, which isolates people from each other, enhances the belief in the absence of classes. It is hard to recognize classes and the predicaments of others if we live in shells. In this view, individual differences in wealth may exist, but basically Americans are all the same and equally worthy, and classes based on group or categorical differences do not exist. Any individual differences in wealth would be viewed as a continuum along which all individuals and families could be located. Here, the image of a system of inequality is one of a tall but narrow ladder. Discrete, wide, separate layers would not be a part of this perspective.

In fact, some social theorists have argued that the term *social class* has no relevance for the United States, at least in its Marxian definition. Social classes, as unified class-conscious groups with their own lifestyles and political beliefs, do not apply to the United States in this view, whereas they may still fully apply to European countries that have a tradition of class conflict. Frequently, part of this position is the conviction that there are dif-