# SOCIAL INFOUNTY

Classical and Contemporary Perspectives

Second Edition



Edward G.Gn

# Theories of SCIAL NEQUALITY

Classical and Contemporary Perspectives

Second Edition

Edward G. Grabb

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## Theories of SCIAL INEQUALITY

For Denise

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### Preface

his book is the revised second edition of a work first published in 1984 under the title *Social Inequality: Classical and Contemporary Theorists*. In the first edition, my primary goal was to trace and document the major conceptions of social inequality to be found in classical and contemporary sociological theory. My research was based on a relatively close reading of what, in my judgement, were the most promising and prominent perspectives available. My hope was that the book would be of use to two somewhat different audiences: to students at various levels who might see some virtue in a concise assessment of how leading general theorists have dealt with the key conceptual problems in the field of inequality; and to certain colleagues who might share my own interest in, and surprise at, some of the parallels and common ground to be found in a wide range of theoretical approaches, many of which have typically been viewed as essentially distinct and at times even contradictory.

I cannot be an objective judge of whether the first book was completely successful in reaching either or both of these audiences. Perhaps it is fair to say that the decision by Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada to produce a second edition is one vote of confidence, and one for which I am genuinely grateful. With the helpful comments of many colleagues and students, I have endeavoured to make this second volume better than the first, by updating and expanding the presentation and by reassessing some of the analyses of classical and contemporary writers from the first edition. Even so, as I had anticipated in preparing the original version, there is truth in the adage that it is impossible to please everyone. Hence, I expect certain readers will

argue that too much has been attempted, while others will conclude that much more should have been done.

The changes and additions incorporated into the second edition have not altered the fundamental goals of the original book. I have once again placed considerable emphasis on outlining and clarifying the ideas of Marx and Weber, whose works continue to stand at the core of theoretical developments and debates in the study of inequality. As before, I have included Durkheim among the significant classical thinkers in the area, because of his unquestioned stature as a general theorist in sociology, his insightful and frequently overlooked observations on the particular issue of inequality, and his role as a bridge linking the early theorists' treatments of inequality and the more recent structural-functionalist approach. In this edition, the discussion of Durkheim is not combined with the analysis of structural functionalism but instead is examined in a separate chapter. A brief biographical sketch of Durkheim has also been added, to parallel the presentations of Marx and Weber.

As for the structural-functionalist perspective, it now falls somewhere in the middle of the chronology from early to modern theories, not exactly contemporary but not precisely classical either. Whatever its categorization, however, structural functionalism continues to be of some importance in tracing the main conceptual developments in the study of inequality. Most writers no longer view this perspective as a serious alternative to Marxist or Weberian approaches, and most have been quite critical of its conservative leanings and related difficulties. Nevertheless, several aspects of the structural-functionalist perspective are worthy of note, both in their own right and because of the critical reactions they have stimulated among other theorists. This critical response is illuminating to review, since it marked the start of the contemporary movement back toward Marx and Weber and a revival of interest in debating and reworking the ideas of these two central figures.

The debate over the views of Marx and Weber continues to dominate most current thinking in the study of social inequality and is the principal focus for the material presented in the latter part of the text. For obvious reasons, it is not possible to conduct a thorough assessment of all the contemporary writers who have made a contribution to this debate or to other relevant issues in the theoretical analysis of social inequality. Following the original edition, I have concentrated on a detailed discussion of six recent theorists in the field: Dahrendorf, Lenski, Poulantzas, Wright, Parkin, and Giddens. The initial selection of these writers was guided by the belief, which I continue to hold, that the key ideas embodied in their approaches effectively represent the essential flavour and direction of current views on how social

inequality is to be conceived and understood. Therefore, although there are other writers who rival these six and could be examined in their place, I have chosen to retain the original set of recent theorists in this edition. Of course, other analysts will also be considered at appropriate points in the presentation, even though their work is not assessed in detail.

The selection of certain writers, and the consequent exclusion of others, can produce misunderstandings about the intentions of any author who is faced with such choices. A reviewer of the first edition, for example, came away convinced that I was a Marxist, based on my selection of theorists and my interpretation of their writings. In fact, my views on social inequality are clearly more Weberian than Marxist, and I should think this would be apparent from my treatment of the main issues. For example, although the concept of class, which is typically identified as a Marxian concern, receives considerable attention in the book, it is the Weberian idea of power or domination that receives the greatest emphasis and that is used to tie the overall discussion together. Indeed, while some might contend that the concept of class is given undue attention, I suspect that other observers, especially some Marxist scholars, will feel that the opposite is the case, given my stress on the concept of power. In all events, I can only state my own position, which is that class inequalities are pivotal to any complete understanding of social inequality; in addition, however, I argue that class inequalities, like the other key forms of inequality that can be identified in social structures, should also be conceived primarily as consequences of differential access to the major sources of power in society.

It is the recognition of these other forms of inequality that is at the heart of a second point I wish to stress about my goals and intentions in writing this book. My choice of writers to review has been guided by a search for *general* approaches to the study of inequality, as opposed to theories that focus exclusively on *specific* forms or bases of inequality, such as those involving race, gender, region, age, religion, and so on. My contention is that the perspectives examined here are important precisely because they point us toward a more unified approach for analyzing *all* such forms of inequality. This approach centres, as has already been suggested, on the problem of power or domination. This may explain to some readers why I have not devoted space to a detailed exposition of feminist theories or theories of racial oppression, for example, given the specific focus of such analyses in most cases.

I should stress quite strongly, however, that my interest in more general issues does not mean that I believe these specific theories or the topics they address are unimportant or secondary. On the contrary, I would argue that, in certain societies or social settings, inequalities

based on gender or race are demonstrably more central than any other forms for understanding the overall pattern of inequality existing in those contexts. At the same time, however, I believe that it is an important and legitimate intellectual task to trace the common threads running through the leading general perspectives on the problem of social inequality, without having to provide a complete exegesis on the many notable issues arising in these more specific areas. A book should be a vehicle for conveying ideas and analysis, but any single book can and should carry only so much cargo. I would also suggest that there are some significant conceptual linkages between the general perspectives I have chosen to investigate, on the one hand, and leading examples of theoretical analyses of specific forms of inequality, on the other. I have tried to illustrate this common ground briefly in the concluding chapter and expect that it may come as some surprise to people working on these more particular concerns. The end product of these efforts is meant to be a more general and macroscopic depiction of how structured inequalities may be conceived in modern societies, incorporating a finite set of crucial themes and issues that most principal theorists, in varying degrees, have already identified.

My greatest reward in writing this book has been the opportunity to learn from and work with a number of outstanding people. I am grateful, first of all, to the support staff in the Sociology Department at the University of Western Ontario, particularly Veronica D'Souza and Denise Statham, for their assistance in preparing the manuscript. My research assistant at Western, Andrea Saunders, also deserves special thanks for her careful and efficient library searches and bibliographic work.

The people at Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada have once again provided their consistent support and editorial advice. Dave Dimmell, Heather McWhinney, Steve Payne, Graeme Whitley, and Marcel Chiera have been especially helpful and understanding throughout the process of producing the second edition. I am sincerely grateful to all of them.

Intellectual debts are the most difficult to acknowledge, for it is rarely possible to identify and mention all of those individuals whose work and ideas have helped shape your own. Certainly, the reviewers of the second edition — Lewis A. Coser, formerly of the State University of New York at Stony Brook; S. M. Lipset, Stanford University; Stewart Clegg, University of New England; Wallace Clement, Carleton University; Jill Bystydzienski, Franklin College; Muhammad Fayyaz, Queen's University; Donald Von Eschen, McGill University; Carolyn Howe, College of the Holy Cross; and Jim Curtis, University of Waterloo — are to be thanked for stimulating me to rethink and rework various sections of the manuscript. Equally important are several colleagues,

students, and friends, both at Western and elsewhere. These include Anton Allahar, Doug Baer, Sam Clark, George Comninel, Neil Guppy, Bill Johnston, David MacLennan, Kevin McQuillan, Jim Rinehart, Gloria Smith, and Cathy Thorpe. It is people of this calibre who help to ease the burdens of scholarship. Although not all of them will be fully satisfied with the final product, this book has been made immeasurably better by their contributions to it. Writing may indeed be lonely, as some would have it, but any writing worth reading is almost always a collective enterprise.

Edward G. Grabb London, Canada July 28, 1989

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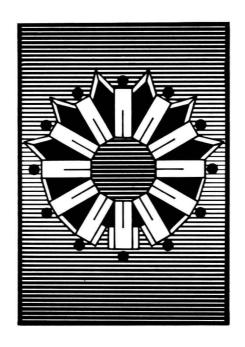
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### Chapter

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### Theories of Social Inequality: An Introduction



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