

Social Inequality

Forms, Causes, and Consequences



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Charles E. Hurst

SOCIAL INEQUALITY

FORMS, CAUSES, AND CONSEQUENCES

CHARLES E. HURST

The College of Wooster



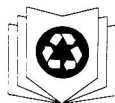
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To Mary Ellen
with love always for who you are

PREFACE

Whether it is in the relationships between groups of different income or power, or in those between different races or sexes, social inequality is all around us and infiltrates our lives in innumerable ways. Fluctuations in the economy and government policy, experiences revolving around race and gender, and even the occurrence of international events all impress the consequences of social inequality on each of us. Because of this pervasive impact, it should not be surprising that many of the earliest and most pivotal issues in the social sciences have involved questions of inequality. This makes it important for students of society to understand as much as possible about social inequality, its various dimensions and extent, sources, consequences, and related public policies.

This book is intended as an introduction to the study of social inequality, and its content and organization reflect changes that have occurred in my own thinking after having taught courses on this topic for over twenty years. I have made several fundamental assumptions in developing the manuscript.

1. Social inequality is multidimensional, but not in any simple static or nonrelational way. Class, status, power, race, and sex are each significant segments in the spectrum of inequality, but at the same time are interlinked in a variety of ways. As a result, the book contains several separate chapters on the extent and explanation of these forms of inequality.

2. An understanding of the roots of inequality is crucial to our abilities to deal with its effects on an everyday basis as ordinary citizens and to develop effective policies aimed at curbing its negative effects on our lives. Thus, in contrast to most texts on the subject, three chapters on explanations of social inequality are included, but they are placed at a point in the manuscript where students might be more receptive to reading about them.

3. Consistent with C. Wright Mills's dictum, an understanding of what happens to us as individuals depends heavily on the histories and structures in which we are enmeshed. An understanding of the impact of social inequality on individuals must be embedded in a broader social and cultural framework. Consequently, discussions of the extent and causes of economic, racial, and gender inequality are enlightened by historical summaries and frequent references to social-structural conditions that shape the system of inequality. In addition, while the focus in the text is on inequality in the United States, there are frequent comparisons with conditions in other societies.

4. There are some crucial omissions in many past treatments of the subject. I have tried to rectify this. The most significant addition is discussion of Appalachia as an area where not only social status but economic and political dimensions of social inequality come to bear. Too frequently among scholarly circles, Appalachia is an "other America," that is, it is ignored despite the fact that it constitutes an almost ideal example where many dimensions of inequality have converged and impinged upon the lives of ordinary people.

A second subject that is frequently omitted revolves around questions of fairness, justice, and equity. Despite the association of this topic with philosophy and ethics, an examination of these questions is a legitimate area for social-scientific inquiry. Unavoidably, if social inequality is extensive, and the evidence indicates that it is and that it has real consequences for individuals and groups, then inquiries about the fairness of the system and an individual's position in it almost inevitably arise. These questions come more frequently to the foreground as economic inequality increases, as it has in recent years. In light of these developments, I have included a chapter on the issues of justice and legitimacy in the system of inequality.

A third topic concerns the relationship between social inequality and various social movements. Social movements often are intimately linked with problems associated with being on the low end of the inequality hierarchy, are often central historical events, and are sometimes consequential for the extent of social inequality. Chapter 13 is devoted to a discussion of the working class, civil rights, and women's movements as related to corresponding dimensions of inequality. Finally, an in-depth treatment of social policies aimed at reducing economic inequalities is needed even though an exhaustive discussion of every policy connected to one or more dimensions of inequality is beyond the scope of this book. Consequently, two chapters discuss contemporary income-maintenance programs and alternatives to them.

In addition to these assumptions and beliefs, I have tried to be evenhanded in my discussions, including a variety of both qualitative and quantitative information and a relatively full breadth of theoretical approaches, including some from economics and anthropology. At the same time, I have drawn conclusions about their adequacy. With respect to the placement of theory in the book, it has been my experience that students are not automatically drawn to it, but that their curiosity must first be whetted by demonstrations that the topic of study is worth understanding and that it is important in their own lives. This belief is reflected in the organization of the book, which includes theory only after showing the extent and consequences of inequality in society.

After a brief introduction focusing on an elaboration of several issues that have been at the heart of the study of inequality since its inception, and summaries of U.S. approaches to the subject, the text is divided into four parts that could be moved around depending upon the preferred approach in the class.

Part I deals with the extent of several forms of inequality, including economic, status, racial, sexual, and political inequality. Consequently, most of the statistics are found in this section of the book.

Part II offers a discussion of how inequality affects us intimately as individuals and in the broader society. Central to this discussion is an emphasis on social inequality's implications for basic life chances: physical and mental health, food, shelter, and family relationships. The social phenomena of crime and collective protest also are addressed as related to inequality.

Part III is an in-depth treatment of various theories of economic class, race, and sex inequality. While the emphasis is on sociological theories, a sampling of important anthropological and economic theories also is included, along with comments on each of them. Theories covering a breadth of political perspectives are present, ranging from conservative neoclassical economic explanations to broadly Marxian and feminist explanations.

Part IV deals broadly with the issues of stability and change in the system of social inequality. Mobility and legitimation help to stabilize the system, while social movements and policies attempt either to change or rectify the problems associated with it. This part begins with an overview of social mobility and attainment and then moves to address the thorny question of whether people view the extent of inequality as just or not, and what factors contribute to their viewing the present system as just or unjust. Those groups who view the system as unjust frequently generate movements aimed at changing it, which is the subject of the next chapter. Finally, the last two chapters also deal with the issue of tampering with the system of inequality, but through the development of effective public policies.

I am grateful to a number of colleagues and friends who made valuable comments and suggestions about the manuscript. Most significantly, I appreciate the support, advice, and motivation provided by friends at The College of Wooster. Bob Blair, Terry Kershaw, Karen Taylor, Jim Hodges, Eric Moskowitz, and Dave Guldin provided insightful evaluations or suggestions on various parts of the content. The manuscript is stronger because of their perceptiveness. Haithe Anderson also took the time to read and comment on my discussions of sex and gender.

Outside reviewers provided further detailed and invaluable comments on the manuscript. They include Pranab Chatterjee, Case Western Reserve University; Stephen Green, North Adams State College; Rogers Johnson, College of the Holy Cross; Alice Abel Kemp, University of New Orleans–Lakefront; and Michael Miller, The University of Texas at San Antonio. I took their comments on content very seriously and, in some cases, drastically revised sections because of their suggestions. I hope all of these individuals know how I feel about their assistance and I hope I have done justice to the quality of their comments.

Thanks also go to my research assistants, Robin Cordell and Yalman Onaran, along with Carolyn Rahnema, who did much of the word processing. I also would not have been able to complete this project without support from the

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I am also grateful to my dear wife Mary Ellen for serving as a general sounding board and providing specific suggestions on my treatment of health care in the book. Her own work as a hospital social worker has exposed her to much of the fallout that inequality has on health care. In addition to making my work easier, she and my children—Katie, Brendan, and Sarah—have made the world a better place for me.

SOCIAL INEQUALITY

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CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

It can be argued that the debate over social inequality formed the basis for the emergence of sociology as a modern discipline.

—Bryan S. Turner

Social inequality is not merely an intellectual issue to be debated upon by academics and theoreticians. It is a social fact that impinges on the concrete lives of everyone. In their everyday lives, people are surrounded by social, political, and economic differences that directly affect their feelings and living conditions. Mike Bellamy, for example, works on commission for a small company in Phoenix cleaning sewers and drains ("The Hard Choices" 1987). His monthly income varies greatly since the work is seasonal. In 1986, his annual income was \$15,000. Mike and his wife, Vickie, live with their four daughters in a small two-bedroom apartment where the monthly rent is \$325. Most months, their expenses for rent, food, medicine and so forth exceed their income, and hard choices have to be made about how to use their money. During a recent Halloween season, Vickie was troubled for days trying to decide whether to purchase a large pumpkin for \$1 which she could use later for cookies and bread. She decided not to make the purchase. The family has no medical insurance; Mike's job does not provide any fringe benefits, yet he says, "It's the best job I ever had." Despite debts and obvious needs, Mike and Vickie hate to ask for help. Vickie explains, "I was taught that you don't ask for help. You do for yourself or you go without."

Joe Mendoza is an ambitious working-class youth living in "Cityville," a densely populated city outside Boston (Steinitz and Solomon 1986). His father works in the insulation business, a dirty and tiring job, and Joe feels that his family has little control over their lives. He hopes to go to college and continue pursuing work in the electronics field. At the same time, Joe is angry because he feels that teachers at the high school treat the "college kids" better than those who are in the "general" course of study. He recognizes clear and large differences between classes and believes that large corporations control much of the political life of the country. People, he feels, who commit crimes but have "money and political pull" get off "scot free," but "if you're a poor guy and can't afford a lawyer, you're going to be spending the rest of your life in jail." "Middle-class people have more of a chance at stuff" than poor individuals, who are "probably getting screwed out of something" by the Congress.

Joan Leahy, a resident of the same community as Joe, has applied for entrance into a top-notch private university that is close by, but has decided that she will not go because she feels that she would not fit in with the types of students she thinks she would find there. She says she hates "snobs." Like Joe, she feels that those who have

money are better off in a variety of ways. "If you've got money you've got a lot better chance at getting ahead. Your father or your relations back you." But she is still confident about her own prospects. "And if you *don't* have money and connections, well—I'm not going to be a failure. I'll be a success to myself!" Despite their belief in the advantages of the rich, these working-class youth believe in the value of hard work and individual effort.

John Apostle has worked at Trans World Airlines for twenty-six years while leading a middle-class life with his family in their three-bedroom ranch home in Chicago (*Akron Beacon Journal* 1988). He and his wife Bev have lived comfortably, raised three children, had some exciting vacations, and accumulated many wonderful memories. In his job, John has been a workaholic, thinking TWA was family. But times at TWA have gotten worse, and John's wages have been cut by a third and his benefits have been reduced, the result being that John, instead of looking forward to a comfortable retirement, is experiencing downward mobility. He and his wife have had to change their lifestyle and tighten their belts, and John wonders why. "I ask myself, 'what could I have done to prevent this?' and I always come up empty-handed. 'Was I so blind that I couldn't see what was happening to the company? Should I have gotten out? Am I trying to put the blame on someone else? How much of what's happened is my fault? Was it my lack of college education?' Sometimes I stand out in the driveway and I ask myself, 'Where did I go wrong?' " (ibid., p. 5).

While John sees himself falling, the salaries of many chief executives have spiraled upward. "Lee A. Iacocca made enough money last year (1987) to buy a fleet of more than 1,500 Chrysler Le Barons, while his company lost market share to rival automakers and its profit fell 7 percent. Put another way, a worker toiling at minimum wage for 40 hours a week since the birth of Christ probably wouldn't have earned as much as the \$38.43 million Iacocca collected in the last two years from salary, bonuses, and exercised stock options, AFL-CIO economists have calculated"

(*Wooster Daily Record* 1988, p. 4). Among the thirty companies that make up the Dow Jones industrial average, pay for CEOs sometimes doubled, even though the Dow Jones fell over 22 percent on Black Monday, October 19, 1987.

A SNAPSHOT OF SOME CORE ISSUES

Why are some people so well-off while Mike and Vickie struggle to make ends meet? How much inequality does exist and to what extent do education and background account for these differences? Is one's position due primarily to individual efforts as some of these persons suggest, or is it due more often to the class into which one was born? Are people right in blaming themselves for their own economic failures? Are the discrepancies found between individuals fair or justified? Is this inequality inevitable? Why does Joan Leahy feel the way she does about students from other social classes? How does one's position in the system of inequality shape perceptions and attitudes about others and society? Does inequality in one area lead to inequality in others? The short vignettes raise some interesting issues about inequality, a number of which will be explored in subsequent chapters. Many of these have been a source of controversy among scholars, and a few are briefly outlined in the following sections.

Capitalism versus Democracy

Can free competition, with its resultant inequality, and political equality exist simultaneously? Can capitalism and democracy effectively co-exist? Pure capitalism demands that markets be open and free and that individuals be able to freely pursue their economic goals, competing with others within the broad framework of the U.S. legal system. Capitalism's ideal conditions assume *equality of opportunity*, regardless of sex, race, or any other categorical characteristic. Presumably, individual talents and motivations are the prime determinants of how far a person goes in the system. This is how many would explain the high executive salaries noted previously. "My

view of executive compensation is like all compensation, it's market driven. The company pays what it has to pay to recruit and retain a person. . . . A person is worth what the market is willing to pay for him" says Charles Peck, an analyst for The Conference Board (*Wooster Daily Record* 1988, p. 4). A system like this presumably would result in the best people being in the highest positions, with the consequence being an efficiently run economy. But if this type of competitive capitalism operates in the United States, then economic inequality is unavoidable, since the talents and motivations of individuals and supply and demand for them vary. There is a potential for economic concentration under these circumstances with a few having much while many may have little.

Alongside this capitalistic economic system exists a political democracy in which everyone is supposed to have a vote in the running of the government. One person, one vote is the rule. *Equality of result* is expected in the political arena in the sense that power should be equally distributed. The question is can equality of political power and inequality in economic standing exist at the same time? Or does economic power lead to inordinate unequal political power, thereby making a mockery of political equality? Can open economic capitalism and political democracy coexist? John Adams, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, expressed concern that "the balance of power in a society accompanies the balance of property and land. . . . If the multitude is possessed of the balance of real estate, the multitude will have the balance of power and, in that case, the multitude will take care of the liberty, virtue and interest of the multitude in all acts of government (Adams 1969, pp. 376-377). Writes Bryan Turner, "Modern capitalism is fractured by the contradictory processes of inequality in the market place and political inequality at the level of state politics. There is an inevitable contradiction between economic class and the politics of citizenship" (B. Turner 1986, p. 24). Obviously, Joe Mendoza is convinced of the link between economic and political power.

How do individuals who lack economic resources react politically to this situation? Does the contradiction generate resistance?

Is Inequality Inevitable?

The preceding comments are closely linked to another issue, that is, the inevitability of inequality. 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" argues Cauthen (1987, p. 8) in a recent 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. Certainly, we will have to discuss these and other explanations of inequality in detail.

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 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 earnings. 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. "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 Joe Mendoza and John Apostle suspect that their situations may be at least partially determined by forces beyond their control. If the conditions that generate social inequality 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.

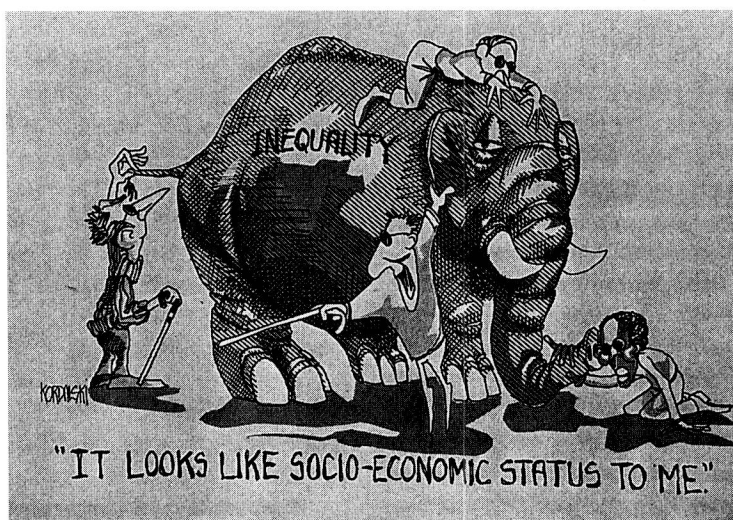
Are There Classes in the United States?

While we can easily recognize that economic differences exist between families and individuals, does it mean that social classes exist in the United States? The value system stresses the centrality of individualism, liberty, and equality for society. Following these values, it is inconsistent to have

group inequalities in which a person's fate is largely determined by the group (e.g., sex, race) he or she belongs to, 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 in U.S. society is undergirded by a variety of traditions rooted in its historical heritage. The beliefs that they are all one people, that underneath they are all "common folk," that they have no formal titles (e.g., lord, duke, etc.), that mobility is open to all, help to reinforce the basic notion that all Americans are equal. In this view, individual differences in wealth may exist, but underneath 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, while 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 differences in lifestyle and status between different occupational groups, but these differences are not class-based. Much of the traditional research in the field of inequality, in fact, has focused upon social lifestyle differences between groups rather than on economic-class differences. The focus of research is, of course, conditioned by the historical context in which it occurs, the cultural milieu, and events of the times. As we shall see, this is clearly the case in U.S. research on social inequality.

Some argue that social classes as full-fledged groups antagonistically related to each other do not fit the American condition today,



Social scientists often have called different aspects of inequality by different names. There is always danger that we may mistake one part of inequality for all of it.

while others suggest that fairly distinct classes exist at the extremes of the inequality hierarchy but not in the middle, which is considered largely a mass of relatively indistinguishable categories of people. A third position is that distinct classes have always existed and continue to exist in the United States, and that *class* conflict has not been absent from its history and continues to this day. Joan Leahy, the young woman cited earlier, seems to feel that there are clear class differences between categories of people.

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 governmental pressures keep the lid especially tight on the upper class's wealth and movement, while at the same time they aid 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 noted earlier 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 different classes come to subscribe to the same value system, 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, class differences *within* racial groups may be more significant than those existing *between* such groups. Similarly, as women move increasingly into the labor market, their status moves closer to that of men, and