INEQUALITY AND STRATIFICATION

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Inequality consists of the uneven distribution of attributes among a set of social units: individuals, categories, groups, regions, or something else. Social historians interest themselves especially in the uneven distribution of costs and benefits -- goods, broadly defined. Relevant goods include not only wealth and income but such various costs and benefits as control of land, exposure to illness, respect from other people, liability to military service, risk of homicide, possession of tools, and availability of sexual partners. Like social scientists in general, social historians have paid little attention to the uneven distribution of other attributes such as genetic traits and musical tastes except as they correlate with the uneven distribution of goods in this broad sense. Goods vary in the extent to which they are autonomous (observable without reference to outside units, as in accumulations of food) or relative (observable only in relation to other units, as in prestige). On the whole, inequalities with respect to autonomous goods reach greater extremes than with respect to relative goods.

Estimating the inequality of any two social units presents three major problems: identifying and bounding the units to compare, weighing the importance of different goods, and deciding whether the weighted differences are "large" or "small". Generally speaking, all three judgments require a theory of the larger social structures in which the two units are embedded. The difficulty compounds with the summary measurement of inequality and its changes among many units, for example (as in many analyses of long-term change) among all households in a national population or (as in many world-system analyses) among all the world's states. There social historians usually adopt two linked strategies: 1) choosing a single criterion good (e.g. current income) they regard as correlating with a number of other inequalities, 2) comparing the actual distribution of that good with a standard of absolutely equal distribution; such widely-used devices as the Gini index and the Duncan dissimilarity index illustrate the combined strategy.

Although historians sometimes apply the term loosely to all sorts of inequality, stratification designates the rare form of inequality that clusters social units by layers, or strata, which are homogeneous with respect to a wide range of goods (both autonomous and relative), and which occupy a single well-defined rank order. A true system of stratification resembles a skyscraper, with its summit and base, its distinct levels, its elevators and stairways for movement from level to level, its array of multiple graded niches.

Large organizations, such as armies, sometimes stratify internally: They establish bands of homogeneous rank that reach across the whole organization, segregation among ranks, and rituals of succession from rank to rank. As a consequence, localities depending on large, stratified organizations (e.g. company towns, military bases) likewise sometimes fall into ranked strata. But no general population larger than a local community ever maintains a coherent system of stratification; even the so-called caste system of India accomodated great variation in rank orders from village to village. In general, rank orders remain inconsistent, apparent strata contain considerable heterogeneity, and mobility blurs dividing lines. Stratification is therefore a matter of degree.

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Inequality is likewise a matter of degree, but for the opposite reason: because it is ubiquitous. Whatever the criterion of equivalence, no two social units ever possess precisely equivalent arrays of goods for more than an instant. Possession of different sorts of goods, furthermore, couples loosely enough that the same social unit moves in several directions simultaneously; inequality is always in flux. Any unified, fixed model of inequality -- and, a fortiori, of stratification -- we impose on social life caricatures a dynamic reality. As with other useful caricatures, then, the secret is to sketch a model that brings out salient features of its object, but never to confuse model with reality.

Three main families of models purporting to describe and explain inequality vie for attention in social history: 1) societal, 2) individualistic, and 3) structural. Societal models of inequality assume the existence of an overarching ideology, culture, or value system that orders activities by their worth, and parcels out rewards accordingly. Such models include John Millar's 18th century vision of progress toward a democratic society rewarding merit and effort, Max Weber's definition of various "societies" by their dominant belief systems and Talcott Parsons' evolutionary model of functional differentiation.

Thus in 20th century America, runs one sort of societal argument, entertainers make more money than social workers because Americans collectively value mass entertainment more than professional help to poor people. Some societal models stress functions, suggesting for instance that doctors generally have greater wealth than janitors because doctors perform a more indispensable function rather than because they have managed, with state aid, to monopolize an expensive service and its clientele. Because they lapse easily into tautology, rest on the hazy entities called "societies", and yield few verifiable propositions, societal models of inequality have for some time been losing their appeal among social historians.

Individualistic models assume that the essential units of inequality are persons, and that inequality takes the form of placement in hierarchies. They range from Pitirim Sorokin's original popularization of a vertical-horizontal stratification space to contemporary human capital models à la Gary Becker which say that investment in job-relevant training pays off in location within hierarchies of income and occupational attractiveness. Many analysts in this tradition adopt a distinction between vertical and horizontal mobility; vertical moves change a person's rank, however measured, while horizontal moves change a person's group membership or geographic location. A major specialty within sociology and social history, the study of status attainment, builds on that geometric analogy; assuming that income, education, and occupation form closely correlated unilinear hierarchies, status-attainment investigators examine the relationship between some point of origin (often father's occupation) and some destination (often son's highest-ranking or most remunerative occupation), treating the essential problem as explaining the relationship between destination and origin through the effects of inheritance, education, experience, gender, nationality, and race.
Although the idea that every concrete change of social position has both rank-altering and locus-altering components is useful, the implication that each component reduces to a single dimension has caused a series of intellectual disasters, including the effort to analyze social mobility as if beneath all the disorder of observed inequality lay a true linear order of status, rank, prestige, wealth, or power. In fact, inequality forms complex lattices of division and interconnection, more like the structure of a molecule than that of a skyscraper.

Starting with precisely that observation, *structural* models of inequality à la Karl Marx or Harrison White begin with characteristic relations among individuals or other social units and derive from their compounding the complex configurations of inequality. In Marx, for example, we see the contrast between the schematic (and incomplete) portrayal of class structure in his *Capital* and the proliferation of classes in his writings on the French revolutions of 1848 to 1851. In both cases, Marx presented class structure as emerging from the relations of production, notably between landlords and peasants or capitalists and workers, but his political writings allow for fractionation, complexity, and coalition depending on organization and experience.

Contemporary structural analysts, many of them non-Marxist or anti-Marxist, typically treat inequality as an outcome of conflict, competition, and bargaining within well-defined limits set by existing relations among actors. Harrison White’s vacancy-chain analysis, for example, examines the way the opening of a vacancy within a connected structure (say the creation of a new job) cascades through the structure as occupants of other positions struggle to take advantage of the new opportunities offered by those who vacate their present positions to move into newly-opened places. Although they still lack a synthesis comparable to those available for societal and individualistic models, structural models of inequality offer the greatest promise for analyses in social history.

Positions often cluster so that large numbers of people have similar goods, and stand in similar relations to other clustered sets of people. *Social classes*, for example, bring together people who occupy similar positions with respect to the organization of production: peasants, industrial wage-workers, petty entrepreneurs, landlords, and so on. The classification male/female, on the other hand, builds a large set of social distinctions on anatomical, physiological, and reproductive differences. We can usefully place the principal kinds of cluster along a continuum between *self-reproducing* and *subdividing* extremes, considering the extent to which the cluster acquires new members through biological reproduction within the cluster or forms as a subdivision of biologically reproducing populations. The most prominent instances are:

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relatively self-reproducing: religion, class, imputed origin (race, ethnicity, nationality, slavery/freedom;

intermediate: party affiliation, patron-client network, state service;

relatively subdividing: gender, age, sexual orientation

To illustrate: Although socially-constructed categories and imputations of character unquestionably influence the division of populations by race, ethnicity, or nationality, once they exist marriage and birth commonly reinforce their boundaries; divisions by age, on the other hand, pervade every self-reproducing population. Strict segregation of whole rounds of life by race, ethnicity, and nationality is common, strict segregation by age quite rare.

The distinctions are obviously relative: The pair slavery/freedom, for example, becomes more subdividing to the extent that enslavement selects for gender (as in the Mamluk capture of boys for incorporation into their military order), while connected sets of women and their children (black Caribbean families being a prominent example) sometimes maintain themselves in substantial independence of adult males. Although every known large population has incorporated strong forms of gender inequality, furthermore, subdividing bases of inequality vary greatly in the extent to which they are explicit and precise. In western industrial countries, for example, only with the recent political mobilizations of homosexuals have divisions by sexual orientation become explicit, public, and legally sanctioned.

The distinction matters because relatively self-reproducing bases of inequality usually incorporate strong mechanisms of inheritance, which greatly increase the likelihood that inequalities will persist over generations. Theorists of gender, age, and sexual orientation have sometimes argued that ideology and socialization combine to make them more profound bases of inequality than religion, class, or imputed origin, but so far the evidence indicates that over a wide range of goods in large populations, inequalities usually run deeper with respect to self-reproducing divisions than with respect to subdividing divisions; institutions of inheritance play a large part in that difference.

All durable structures of inequality originate in the collective exercise of power -- including the power to label others as different -- by connected clusters of social units. Commonly a single cluster adopts a device that subordinates one or more other clusters, then the interaction among the clusters produces contested but durable social categories, power relations, and inequalities in entitlement to goods; in the case of relatively self-reproducing structures, however, both small-scale mobility across the crucial divisions and differential natural increase among them likewise affect the pattern of inequality. Often the more powerful clusters adopt an ideology of worthiness (for example, distinctions among the wealthy, the middle classes, the deserving poor, and the undeserving poor, with appropriate
ideas concerning differences in their moral and religious performances) that presumably justifies and explains their own advantages.

Such a sequence describes the imposition of theocratic power on ostensibly pagan peoples, the relegation of old people to poverty or reduced power, and the formation of proletariats under capitalism. In an Essex village, for example, Keith Wrightson and David Levine show how local propertyholders not only elaborated an ideology of religious respectability and disrespectability, but also subjected their own previously dissolute behavior to its requirements, as they instituted more controls over a growing and increasingly stigmatized group of landless laborers. In all forms of inequality, even where the goods involved are autonomous (e.g. wealth or income), relations among unequals rather than solo performances by members of one category or another underlie the system. Asymmetrically, victors and victims shape each other.

Analyzing English capitalist experience, for example, E.P. Thompson has forcefully argued that class is a continuous interactive process (in this case relating landlords and merchant capitalists to landless laborers) rather than a static structure given by the organization of production. The grand debates among social historians, indeed, concern the articulation and relative weight of belief and consciousness, on the one hand, and day-to-day relations of production, on the other, in that process of interaction among classes. At a materialist extreme we see complete determination of class by capitalist-worker relations at the point of production, mitigated (or obscured) only by false consciousness, while at an idealist extreme we see nothing but class discourse that causes itself. All realities lie somewhere in between.

Powerful social units often cement their control of goods, especially autonomous goods, by the establishment of property rights: enforceable prior claims to the disposition of specific goods. Property rights rest on the readiness of third parties in cases of dispute to intervene on behalf of one claimant; secure property rights most often depend on some sort of governmental authority, which is why widespread seizures of previously-protected property occur chiefly in times of rapid contraction or expansion of state power. Extensive property rights both sustain and magnify inequality, since they allow those who have acquired extensive authorized control over individual goods to enjoy that control while depending on a collective good -- state intervention -- to protect it to a degree that their own resources would not permit. When property rights extend to inheritance, they further reinforce self-reproducing forms of inequality.

The most powerful property rights are those that govern the production and reproduction of goods, as when landlords in an agrarian system exercise rights not only to most of the land but also to a portion of peasant household labor. To the extent that a small cluster of persons monopolizes such rights, inequality will be extensive. Even at the small scale of the household, the basic principle seems to hold: To the degree that women exercise autonomous ownership of property or generate larger shares of household income through

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activity unsupervised by other household members, they command greater power in a wide range of household decision-making.

Under capitalism, merchants monopolized control over the production and distribution of a wide range of services and manufactured goods. The short-run consequence was generally a sharp increase of inequality between capitalists and workers, which became general inequality to the extent that the entire population divided between the two classes. During the 1940s and 1950s, students of national income such as Simon Kuznets inferred, indeed, that aggregate disparities of income commonly increased in early capital-concentrated industrialization, then diminished as the benefits of industrialization spread within any particular population.

Subsequent historical work (e.g. by Hartmut Kaebble and Jeffrey Williamson) has generally confirmed increasing inequality during early industrialization, but has left uncertain the extent of leveling thereafter. The closely-related "standard of living controversy" has likewise produced some agreement among social historians that a wide range of workers experienced declines in real income during major periods of capital concentration without resolving under what conditions, how extensively, and how soon higher productivity (agricultural or industrial) resulted in real-income gains. On the overall course of inequality during industrialization, social historians still have their work cut out for them. Because it deals with what actually happened over long stretches of capitalist expansion, social history has much to contribute to general analyses of inequality. It also has much to learn from current debates. Social historians deal generally with the intersections between large-scale processes such as proletarianization or state formation, on one side, and small-scale social life on the other. Social historians formed their craft as a skeptical complement to political history and economic history -- skeptical about the straightforward determination of political action by economic organization, skeptical about the direct determination of social relations by political and economic position. Yet within the economic sphere social historians have remained surprisingly susceptible to simple technological determinism, to the assumption that owners of productive means choose the most efficient available technologies, that technologies determine the organization of production, that the organization of production causes the fundamental inequalities of wealth and income, that workers’ options therefore reduce to placing themselves somewhere on a continuum from enthusiastic commitment through grudging acquiescence and open resistance to revolution. Such a view denies workers significant influence over the organization of production except through revolution or sabotage.

This strangely prevalent perspective fosters the illusion of capitalist omnipotence in the face of widespread evidence that in early industrial capitalism employers acted primarily as merchants, exploiting their workers mercilessly, but doing so primarily by driving down prices for goods rather than prescribing or supervising the conditions of their production. It took a long time, for example, before owners of glassworks knew more about the production of glass than their skilled workers did, a long time before employers stamped out the

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subcontracting arrangements whereby foremen in metal production recruited and paid their own workers, a long time before miners started receiving an hourly wage with the supervision it implies rather than collective payment per ton brought to the surface, a very long time before labor unions became heavily involved in negotiating pensions, vacations, health benefits, and wages rather than the very conditions of employment and work. Even today the social organization of long-distance migration (e.g. from Korea, Mexico, or Turkey) profoundly affects the workers actually available to different groups of employers, hence the sharp segregation of jobs by gender, race, and national origin in all western countries.

The analysis of culture -- of shared understandings and their objectifications -- occupies an important place on the section of social history's agenda concerning inequality. Culture shapes the rituals by which people affirm or challenge specific inequalities, the interpretations they make of each other's intentions, the inferences they draw concerning the likelihood of future actions and consequences of action. Shared understandings strongly affect the relative valuation of different sorts of goods, hence the extent to which participants in a set of social relations interpret inequalities as large or inequitable. They likewise influence the ways in which people publicize their own positions and code other people's positions. Because so much social-historical analysis has suffered under the burden of stratification models, from the assumption of strict, unitary hierarchies, or in the grip of technological determinism, the cultural study of inequality promises to be a major field for new discoveries. Any good social history in this regard will contribute as well to our shared understanding of contemporary social life, not to mention its origins.
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