

## **Small Causes, Large Structures. A New Look at the Roots of Social Inequality in Human Societies**

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**ABSTRACT:** Theoretical discussions of the causes of social inequality still rely largely on frameworks first formulated in the 19th century by Marx, Spencer and Durkheim. For very different reasons these authors arrived at similar conclusions which influenced much subsequent theorizing: inequality structures in human societies were believed to arise from single causes, to impose themselves inevitably on human affairs, and to follow predictable developmental pathways. This paper proposes a new theory which explores elements missing from conventional theories: the role of contingency and chance in the growth of inequality structures, self-reinforcing dynamics and processes of intentional social control which consolidate them, and the indeterminate historical pathways of the evolution of distributive structures. These characteristics also suggest the need to explore alternatives for social change and distributive justice.

**KEYWORDS:** Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Sociology, Inequality

This paper assumes that social inequality is one possible outcome of a fundamental social dilemma: how to distribute the results of collective, cooperative activities among the contributors. Distribution can range from equal to highly unequal. Unequal distributions employ socially constructed limitations to prevent some individuals or groups from having access to collectively achieved results which are available to others. Of particular importance are

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strategic resources which have the inherent potential of becoming self-reinforcing: material wealth, specialized knowledge, command and authority and social inclusion or exclusion. Where differential access is enforced by coercion, legal or cultural norms it can lead to the emergence of enduring structures such as social classes. The sociological problem is then to understand how inequality-generating processes begin and what strengthens or weakens them over time.

Sociological research of inequality over the past three or four decades has taken some rather erratic turns. One major change has been a move from the study of the distribution of material wealth to more segmented areas such as inequalities of gender, ethnicity or 'race'. A quick survey of articles during the past six years in major American sociology journals (e.g. *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociology Review*, *Sociological Theory*) shows that publications in these areas outnumber studies of inequalities of income and wealth by a ratio of 3 to 1. Such thematic variations are of course not unusual. Ever since the new forms of inequality in the industrializing societies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century dominated the agenda of early social theorists from Marx to Durkheim, from Spencer and Sumner to Weber, from Pareto and Mosca to Nietzsche, LeBon and Veblen, social inequality has remained a controversial and politically charged topic. In the past, however, sociological interest usually waxed and waned in step with social changes caused by the two world wars, the Great Depression, or when in the 1970s the U.S. government's vision of a Great Society brought a cornucopia of funding to the social sciences. The last two decades offer a more paradoxical picture. On one hand, material inequality in the U.S., and to a lesser extent in Canada, has risen to levels not seen since the Great Depression. By 2016, the top 1 percent of earners received 23.8 percent of all income in the U.S., a slow but steady increase since 1989. During the same period, the share of the lowest 90 percent fell from about 60 percent to 49.7 percent. Wealth and asset ownership shows a similar picture: the top 1 percent increased their share from 30 percent in 1989 to 38.6 percent in 2016 while that of the bottom 90 percent fell from 33.2 percent to 22.8 percent (Bricker et al., 2017). Worldwide a few dozen people now own as much wealth as the lower half of the world's population (Fuentes-Nieves Galasso, 2014). At the same time, sociological interest in distributive inequality declined.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This trend is not limited to sociology. In 2012, economics students at the University of Manchester formed the Post-Crash Economics Society (now called Rethinking

The minority of recent studies which did examine inequalities of wealth focused on short- and mid-range causes such as economic rents and the growing financialization of capitalist economies (Tomaskovic-Devey and Lin, 2011; Lin and Tomaskovic-Devey, 2013; Dencker and Fang, 2016), globalization (Alderson and Nielsen, 2002), union strength (Jacobs and Myers, 2014; Brady, Baker and Finnigan, 2013) or power resources (Jacobs and Dirlam, 2016). A few studies also traced the effects of such causes on the distribution of income and wealth over several decades (Wodtke, 2016; Mouw and Kalleberg, 2010; Volscho and Kelly, 2012). Most research also tended to look only at inequalities of income rather than wealth. A notable exception is Piketty (2014).

This work shed light on proximate causes of recent inequality structures but stayed well clear of considering more general dynamics that give rise to the growth of inequality structures in its many historical and cultural forms. When it comes to such broader theoretical questions, sociologists tend to retreat to a few conventional and often unexamined paradigms: that social inequality is the result of domination, of functional-rational necessity, or of biological imperatives.

These paradigms were first formulated more than a century ago. The search for general causes of social inequality was the primary preoccupation of 19<sup>th</sup> century social theorists. Marx and Veblen, Comte and Durkheim, Spencer and Sumner were not only trying to make sense of the structural changes brought about by the industrial revolution but drew sweeping historical scenarios which depicted the development of inequality as a universal process moving from the earliest societies to the new industrial order.<sup>3</sup> The root causes they saw behind these processes varied widely, but all early authors shared common theoretical assumptions which profoundly influenced later sociological research. First, they believed in the proportionality of cause and effect: since inequality was obviously a significant and apparently ubiquitous social structure it also had to have single causes. The theoretical task was therefore to explain

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Economics) in protest against the complete neglect of inequality in their courses which “wasn’t mentioned in our lectures and what we were learning didn’t seem to have any relevance to understanding it. We were memorizing and regurgitating abstract economic models for multiple choice exams”. (Earle et al., 2017)

<sup>3</sup> These ideas influenced not only the social sciences but continue to provide templates for current public debates and political decisions. Spencer is rarely mentioned, but his prescriptions for social policies (celebration of individual fitness, privatization, and reduction of state services) were revived by neo-liberal economists.

the universal necessity which calls forth stratification in any social system (Davis and Moore, 1966, 47). Second, they assumed that these causes were impersonal, and that inequality arose in societies more or less independent of the behavior of their members. Social or historical laws propelled social classes through successive modes of production independent of individual will, ensured that the most qualified persons rose to the most important social positions, or guaranteed the survival of the fittest. Third, the historical course of inequality structures followed predictable and progressive developmental pathways. Their endpoints varied from author to author, but were either already reached by the society in which they lived or would be attained in the foreseeable future.

Why was there such a broad consensus among theorists who had very different views of the new industrial inequality structures? The answer lies in the social and historical environment in which they worked. Their century was a period of extraordinary political and social upheaval. Popular ideologies for and against the new inequality structures proliferated, turning on the question who created the new wealth and who should therefore be its chief beneficiary: the worker or the capitalist. The still fresh memory of the French Revolution, the waves of strikes and popular uprisings from 1848 to the Paris Commune of 1871, and the growing size and power of the working class seemed to the wealthy to threaten their position and portend the end of civilized society. Others, such as Marx and Engels, welcomed the same turbulence as harbinger of a future communist society. Both sides were keen to garner 'scientific' support for order and predictability in the social events they witnessed. They found a seductive template in the many laws discovered by the natural sciences. Comte was the first to call for a "science of society" which could prove that beneath all the apparent chaos and conflict social systems were orderly and law-governed, and that their most controversial structure, social inequality, was either natural or beneficial, or was necessary stage on the way towards a better, egalitarian society. Since then inequality has lost none of its divisive and conflictual character. In these continuing tensions, rather than in the inability of sociologists to come up with better ideas, lies a major reason for the reluctance to reexamine the causes of inequality.

The foundational theoretical paradigm emerging from this environment eventually pervaded all social sciences, from sociological positivism and rationalism to economics, behaviorist psychology and Neo-Darwinist evolutionism. It implicitly followed Newton's laws of motion. Like Newton, social scientists assumed that their world was fully determined and predictable.

The normal state of social systems was equilibrium or constant movement along ascending developmental trajectories or progressive stages. Change in these states could only come from external or internal constraints, not from spontaneous change or independent agency. A hidden legacy of fear of the power of the uncontrolled rabble - or even worse an organized working class - led social and economic theorists, behavioral psychologists and evolutionists to stay away from looking at internal, subjective causes of social change. Even Marx who emphasized the role of conscious intent in human history always reassured his readers that “this cannot change the fact that the course of history is governed by internal general laws” (Marx and Engels, 1968, 296). Non-Marxist social science reduced human behaviour to rational, calculable choice. Giddens aptly described the result: in sociology “recognizably human actors seem to escape our grip: the stage is set, the script is written, and the roles are handed out, but the actors strangely never reach the scene” (Giddens, 1979, 253).<sup>4</sup>

Newton’s second law stated that the change caused by an external force was proportional to the magnitude of the force itself. The sociological equivalent was to assume that small effects had small causes while large effects such as structures of inequality had large ones. Third, Newton argued that for every action there was an equal and opposite reaction. Action and reaction were reversible and repeatable. The corresponding sociological assumption was that cause-effect relations were parts of a universal social mechanism. It was therefore irrelevant what part or period on that mechanism one chose to examine. Place and history did not matter. Sociological research, however small or large in scope, would gradually illuminate and eventually reveal the mechanism in its entirety.

Why does this matter for our understanding of social inequality? We often see theories as abstract constructs which are validated by a process of rigorous testing that ensures that only their ‘true’ variants survive. The reality is messier. Theories matter because they are the first step in our research. They are conjectures about what evidence we should collect and what questions we should ask of it. They can reveal hitherto unseen features of the social world but can also obscure our view. If one thinks that the growth of inequality is governed by universal laws or causes, one is unlikely to see the causal role of chance in

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4 The brief sociological foray into the subjective dimension of agency by constructivism and symbolic interactionism went to the other extreme: the denial of a causal role of external structures in social behaviour.

human affairs. If one presumes that human actions are shaped by external determinants or rational constraints one will not have much interest in the role which autonomous, non-rational or creative behavior plays in the genesis and maintenance of inequality. If one assumes that the long-term evolution of inequality follows a line of predictable advancement one will see harmful outcomes as transient and unimportant and dismiss the search for more egalitarian social structures as pointless.

Early social theorists were not unaware of such blind spots in their theoretical landscape. Most of them read widely and were familiar with the complex social history of their own societies, and in the wake of European colonial expansion also with the diversity of cultural practices in other parts of the world. These facts were not easily compatible with their deterministic views. The result was a number of contortionist efforts to force a disorderly social world into an orderly theoretical framework. Herbert Spencer divided historical details into “deep-seated and really-important” facts which supported his theory, and “superficial” and “trivial” ones which “hide from us the vital connexions and the vital actions underneath” (Spencer, 1887, 96). He dismissed the latter as mere variations around an underlying “law of rhythms”. The other major social Darwinist, William Graham Sumner, acknowledged the importance of “aleatory” factors such as chance and error in human history but thought they affected only primitive and not modern enlightened societies. The work of Marx and Engels, both keen observers of history, contains numerous references to contingent causes and unintended outcomes of social events. Engels, in a warning that continues to apply to current concerns over global warming, noted that every human victory over nature at first brought the expected result, but could then be cancelled out by different, unforeseen consequences. In order to make such insights compatible with their view of history he and Marx insisted that “the internal laws which pervade and regulate such chance events ... remain invisible and incomprehensible to the individual agents of production” (Marx and Engels, 1968, 171). Laws shaped societies “only in a very complex and approximate manner, as a moving average of eternal variations” (Ibid, 836). They determined history only “ultimately”, “in the long run”, “in the last instance” or “more or less”. Discrepancies between a predictive theory and a recalcitrant reality also plagued early functional theories. Durkheim declared that the gravitation of societies towards equilibrium was “a cosmic law”, while Parsons called it “the *first law of social process*” (Parsons, 1964, 205). Dysfunctional inequalities which burdened subordinates with heavy and

unpleasant work while enriching their superiors could only be episodic results of abnormal anomie or external disturbances (Parsons, 1964, 252). Human rationality would soon bring an end to such states. Inequality structures based on error, lies or force could not last.

Discrepancies between causal determinism and social complexity continue to plague our understanding of inequality. Let's just pick one dogma about the causes of inequality which is part of public ideological folklore but is also shared by many economists and sociologists: the belief that social inequality ultimately reflects differences in inherited or acquired ability. In this view elites are products of rational or natural selection processes taking place in markets which ensure that the most talented individuals assume the most important social and economic positions. High incomes and wealth serve as incentives or rewards for acquiring superior skills and assuming burdensome responsibilities. They then create trickle-down benefits for their society in the form of job creation and economic growth. As a result,

“...the dominant theory of hiring in sociology portrays employers' decisions as driven by estimates of candidate's human capital, social capital, and demographic characteristics; the residual is typically attributed to error or discrimination...Non-rational hiring criteria are portrayed as undesirable intrusions into systematic estimates of productivity, in the form of error, noise, or discrimination via racial animus” (Rivera, 2015, 1341).

In reality, non-functional and non-rational factors routinely enter modern hiring, promotion and salary decisions. Examples are presumed or known social background (Baldus and Tribe, 1978), the type of school or university attended (Burris, 2004), physical attractiveness, markers of “chemistry” or “cultural matching” (Rivera, 2012), signaled by comportment, speech, accent, behavior or ‘opaque’ dress codes (Kraus and Mendes, 2014). A recent British study showed that, in addition to strong preferences for applicants with public school, Oxford and Cambridge background, “some senior investment bankers still deem it unacceptable for men to wear brown shoes with a business suit” (UK Social Mobility Commission, 2016). In two of the few comprehensive studies of factors that influence life-time mobility, Jencks (1972, 1979) estimated that unearned chance factors such as family background,

schools attended, or unanticipated turns of events or luck accounted for as much as 80 percent of earnings and occupational status attained by American men by the age of 65. Similar evidence shows that many individuals in high positions keep their jobs even when their performance is suboptimal, incompetent or criminal and inflicts material or psychological harm on those around them. This evidence clearly contradicts the standard view that non-rational choices could never go “beyond the irregular hiring of an incompetent or the rejection of a superior applicant”, and would inevitably be corrected by “market forces” (England, 1994).

There is no space here to review such processes in detail (for a more extended analysis see Baldus, 2017). Suffice it to recall that most of the individuals responsible for the 2008 financial crisis have returned to multi-million dollar jobs in financial corporations, and most recently to the Trump government. More generally, empirical evidence shows that the causes of inequality are not uniform and that it is not a “ubiquitous feature of all human societies”. It tells us that autonomous human action, independent of either rational or genetic constraints, is intimately involved in the creation, maintenance and change of such structures. It also shows us that ways in which societies have distributed collectively achieved wealth have varied greatly across time and cultures and differ substantially even in modern capitalist societies.

We may try to ignore this conclusion by avoiding theory altogether, by publishing only statistically significant results, or by convincing ourselves that unexplained variance will eventually be clarified by additional research or better measurements. Such avoidance techniques are no different from Spencer’s distinction between real and unimportant facts. They can hide but not bridge the gap between what we know about the reality of inequality and what sociological and neo-liberal economic theories tell us about it. There is no quick fix for the Newtonian paradigm. Instead, we have to fundamentally rethink the nature of social systems, the causes of social inequality and the role of human agency in its origin and maintenance, and in its long-term historical evolution.

The first step is to recognize that societies are not clockworks or mechanisms, but complex, variable and always only partially predictable systems. Among early sociologists Max Weber recognized the theoretical implications. He remained a lifelong critic of any notion of general social laws because they ignored the “truly infinite variety of successively or simultaneously appearing and disappearing processes” (Weber, 1968, 212) in social life. He also saw the danger that facts which did not fit such laws would be dismissed “either



as a scientifically not yet explained residue which will be incorporated into the 'law-governed' system as it is perfected further, or (as) 'accidental', and for *this very reason* scientifically insignificant and marginal" (Ibid, 213), a prophetic view of the direction which much modern positivist and functional/rational sociology would take. As for prediction, Weber thought it amounted to little more than what "seems probable, so far as our weak eyes can penetrate the dense mist of the future course of human history" (Weber, 1958, 62). The complexity of social life could be reduced to heuristic ideal types but social science could offer no certainties. New ideas could acquire their own independent power and like "switchmen" steer history into different directions. On other occasions, a fortuitous confluence of circumstances such as the rise of Protestantism and the growth of capitalist markets could accelerate historical change.

Weber's recognition of the ubiquity of contingent events is a first step toward a better understanding of the evolution of inequality structures. If we follow his suggestions we must assume that the normal state of social systems is an unstable variation between stability and disorder. The central theoretical question now becomes "why and how, given the potential for radical discontinuities in system behavior, do some systems seem to evolve away from the extremes of complete order, inertia, and stasis on one hand, and complete randomness and chaos on the other. (Matthews et al., 1999, 446).

The second step is to see that in complex social systems cause and effect are typically not proportional. Small changes in initial conditions may cause disproportionately large effects, and intentional human actions often have unanticipated consequences. Cause-effect relations in social systems are therefore typically indeterminate and unpredictable. Unpredictability is not just a transient problem that we can eliminate by improved research methods, but a generic feature of social complexity. This implies, furthermore, that social cause-effect sequences are irreversible and time-dependent. In complex social systems, successive events or individual actions always stand in a context of changing environments. We cannot expect that over time the same causes will have the same effects, or that the same effects will lead us back to the same causes. Instead of being controlled by ultimate determinants, the growth of inequality structures is a path-dependent process whose current state depends on shorter or longer event sequences that immediately precede it and can change its direction at any point. Historical social evolution is therefore likely to be irregularly cyclical and to shift unpredictably between periods of stability and disruption.

What are the implications of these principles for understanding the

origins, consolidation and change of inequality structures in human societies? At first glance, we seem to have jumped from the frying pan into the fire; from the maybe somewhat dodgy but comforting hope to find orderly social mechanisms to a world full of small causes and unanticipated consequences. The way out of this apparent dilemma is to take a closer look at the causative process. I like to think of the causes of inequality (and more generally the evolution of social structures) as lying along two fundamental fault lines of social life. Like their tectonic equivalents which do not allow us to predict the precise time or magnitude of an earthquake, but whose underlying geological dynamics we understand quite well, social fault lines are shaped by opposed disruptive and order-creating forces which we can investigate further (Balduš, 2017). Distributive choices are located in this field of tension. Whether they move toward greater equality or greater inequality, their general dynamics consist of the instability created by chance events and the ambiguity relations of trust and cooperation, and the consolidating power of social control.

Along the first fault line we find the contingent, chance events we encounter in our material and social environments. We experience them every day although they have been studiously ignored by sociologists. A windfall gain may improve our finances, new neighbours may make our life unpleasant, a passing encounter may lead to our first job or to the person we marry, an illness may incapacitate us or eliminate a competitor, global warming may crack the foundations of our house in Nunavut or grant us an early spring in Toronto. The destabilizing effects of such occurrences come on one hand from the frequency and unpredictability of external events, and on the other from our own and other people's subjective responses which can be highly original and creative, but are also prone to misjudgement and error. From this perspective social life, rather than being a series of rational choices, is an inventive muddling through an uncertain world with frequently unforeseen results.

Fortunately for the study of inequality, this does not condemn us to trolling through a potentially limitless series of accidents. Their unpredictable effects are curtailed by structuring dynamics. Not all accidents are alike. Kingdoms may indeed be lost for want of a nail, but nails do not figure prominently among the causes of inequality. Instead we can find clusters of contingent changes which are particularly likely to trigger the onset of inequality. Timing is often crucial: on many occasions in human history initial settlements along rivers of fords generations later became strategic locations which allowed their owners to exact labor services and monopoly rents. Gilman

(1981) describes how in Bronze Age Europe populations investing in long-term assets such as cleared fields, olive groves or fishing boats created attractive opportunities for take-overs and protection rackets by powerful outsiders. Products which achieved early acceptance often maintain their market dominance long after later, better products or technologies become available. Professional monopolies or winner-take-all competitions multiply the opportunities opened by chance gains, just as inherited wealth, no matter how it was initially obtained, has time and again facilitated access to wealth, power, entry into 'elite' schools or opportunities for meeting 'suitable' marriage partners. Such early accidental advantages are not likely to be lost again as quickly as they were gained because they have compounding, opportunity-enhancing effects. Self-reinforcing dynamics appear more often where one or more participants receive large initial windfalls or chance gains which are not available to others, where they acquire monopolies of expertise or control of intellectual, political or economic coalitions or technical synergies, or where prestige and halo effects create self-fulfilling status or power expectations. Such advantages grow particularly fast if they lock other participants into a position of dependence from which they can withdraw only at considerable cost (Arthur, 1994, 94).

The second fault line, cooperation and trust, is just as basic an element of social life as chance and opportunity. Like contingency and chance, it can generate destabilizing and ordering social dynamics. Trust permits us to extend our relationship with others beyond short-term tit for tat self-interest. Trust in turn is indispensable for cooperation which allows us to achieve many times what we could accomplish by ourselves. Even many biologists now accept cooperation as one of the crucial adaptations in the evolution of the human species. Trust and cooperation can give stability to social relations but can also create opportunities for defection and deception which lead to inequality. Trust assumes that others will act in ways that correspond to our values and expectations. But the confidence we place in them also gives them freedom from scrutiny and facilitates abuse of our trust. Similarly, in cooperation we assume that others will do their part in a joined project that creates value beyond what each partner alone could achieve. But that added value also creates the temptation to defect and to walk away with our work without doing theirs. Such vulnerability weakens intimate personal relationships as much as formal arrangements such as the recent agreements by oil-producing countries to cut back oil production. Neither guarantees unconditional loyalty.

Here, too, we can identify areas where breaches of trust and defection from cooperation have particularly frequently in human history initiated pathways to inequality. When we look at transformations of early relatively egalitarian societies we find, for example, that kinship ties and institutions of sharing and generalized reciprocity were especially vulnerable to subversion of trust and cooperation. Sharing can be used to build up prestige and bands of clients, and initially communal offices frequently opened opportunities for the rise of chiefs, kings and ruling classes. At the same time, these beneficiaries face their own limitations. They must maintain the pretense of working for the common interest and claim to be selfless cooperators because not doing so would kill the goose that lays the golden egg.

Theories should be judged by the guidance they provide to our research. What lessons can we draw for the study of inequality from the shift from determining causes to the role of contingency and unpredictability in social life? The first is that we have to pay much more attention to accidental changes in natural and social environments which start pathways to social inequality. Similarly, we want to understand when and how trust is converted into deception, and cooperation into defection. Identifying such starting processes which offer social actors opportunities to increase their fortune at the expense of others significantly narrows our search for the origins of inequality structures. At the same time, there is no guarantee that people will actually see these opportunities or exploit them in what would seem rational in light of their interests. Human actors never have perfect knowledge of the parameters of their choices. Errors, mistakes and long-lived incompetence abound on all levels of social behaviour. Failure is common, and the reason why it is often overlooked this is that losers tend to walk away quietly while winners embellish their success. All claims to the contrary, there is no universal mechanism that ensures that only the best and the brightest arrive at the top. This insight leads not only to a better understanding of the empirical origins of social inequality. It also deflates the claim that privilege is earned and wealth is a sign of superior ability, ideological tools used to defend inequality structures throughout their history. Sutton describes what an actual pathway to power looks like when we remove its ideological cover:

“...most professions resemble a rich snob whose family fortune was founded many generations before by a horse-thieving or bootlegging ancestor. The road to respectability – from

journeyman practitioners to cosmopolitan professionals – was likely to be littered with episodes of greed, prejudice, intellectual foolishness, and political manipulation that today’s professionals would just as soon forget. For any profession, the first item on the agenda is to gain jurisdiction over a chosen field. There is no second item on the agenda” (Sutton, 2001, 275).

No social structure has given rise to more obfuscation and ideological distortion than social inequality. The reason is obvious: there is much at stake, and people are willing to go to great length to justify and defend privilege and wealth as meritorious and deserved. A more accurate understanding of the pathways to inequality is an important tool for revealing the true sources of social power.

The second lesson from our theoretical reorientation is that the inherent ambiguity of chance, trust and cooperation can shed light on how inequality may start, but not on why and how it grows, consolidates and turns into a lasting social structure. In order to understand that process we have to separate the causes that trigger pathways to inequality from the social dynamics which explain its endurance and change over time. These typically appear after the path towards inequality has begun. Three clusters of processes affect the longevity of inequality structures. One is self-reinforcing dynamics such as the compounding and leveraging potential inherent in initial shifts of material wealth or fortuitous advantage. Control over strategic, self-enhancing resources such as wealth or political power allow their owners to convert crises into opportunities (Stoney and Krawchenko, 2013) and to legitimate and strengthen their position through force and ideology. This is usually done by disguising their own interests as the common good, by making inequality look normal and natural, and by portraying demands for greater equality as absurd or dangerous.

There is a huge field here for sociological research on historical and current ideological constructs, their transmission and dissemination through concentrated media, and their use in entrenching social and economic power. Little sociological knowledge exists about why and how such processes succeed and why they are able to endure over often long periods of time. Secrecy and fraud in the manipulation of markets, insider trading or clandestine political actions are important feeder operations in modern inequality structures (Fligstein and Roehrkasse, 2016) but,

“...with the occasional exception, we as sociologists have not made a practice of studying such things, which means we have turned away from society’s dark regions in order to search for whatever may be conveniently discovered under the light. That has left us ill-equipped to assist in the discovery of secrets that need to be exposed, and—though this is more controversial—in the protection of those that need to be safeguarded” (Gibson, 2014, 303).

There is a third dynamic which stabilizes inequality structures, and it is much less often noticed: behaviors of subordinate or exploited people which inadvertently strengthen the social position of ruling elites or classes. There are many forms of such behaviours, ranging from outright rejection of equality-increasing policies (Carriero, 2016) to political ignorance, apathy or self-blame, or to the gradual accommodation to the stresses and costs of boring and, nowadays, increasingly uncertain jobs, precarious incomes, or poverty. Inequality gives its beneficiaries the leverage to use such accommodation in order to consolidate their positions without incurring additional costs. The support for Trump by what Clinton dismissed as “deplorables” is an indication how complex political reactions to social inequality are, but also how easily they can be overlooked.

The final major lesson from theorizing societies as unstable, indeterminate systems is that the long-term evolution of inequality structures does not take a predictable linear or stepwise course. The sociologist Robert Michels who wrote early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century used a more fitting image of waves of equality and inequality constantly washing against the shores of human societies. If we follow these processes back to earlier times we may arrive at nodal historical points where events and decisions conspired to decide whether we read the time clockwise or counter-clockwise, whether we drive on the left or the right side of the road, or whether a 19<sup>th</sup> century court decides that corporations are legal persons and sets U.S. society on a path to unparalleled corporate dominance leading to the recent Citizens United supreme court judgement that opened the door to unlimited contributions to political campaigns. However, reconstructing such ancestral lines does not lead us back to predictive causes, nor can we assume that similar subsequent events will have similar consequences.

This has two important implications for sociological research. One is

that we need to know more about the transitions between relatively equal and unequal social structures, whether in the past or in our time. It is now widely accepted that cooperative and relatively egalitarian social relations were typical of early societies. Inequality eventually penetrated most of them, but historical evidence does not suggest that such transitions resulted from universal social, biological or functional needs for inequality. As well, when we look at early societies such as Mesopotamia, Rome, Greece or Central and South America, we see that even when inequality is fully developed, demands for more equality never disappear. The beneficiaries of inequality structures need the cooperation of their subordinates to replenish their fortunes, just as they must maintain their support or at least their acquiescence in order to enjoy the fruits of their position without the fear of trouble from below. By doing so, however, they also keep the potential for demands for greater distributive justice alive. The social history of inequality is a history of irregular periods of stability and decline, the result of a constant tension between cooperative egalitarian social interests on one side, and inequality-increasing ones on the other (Potter, 2012).

By the same token, and that is the second implication, inequality is not our inevitable fate. Instead its many forms are historical products of human actions. This means on one hand that as sociologists we can and must subject existing distributive structures to critical scrutiny, especially where gains for some come at the expense of harm and costs for the majority of those whose work produces these gains. We cannot simply assume, as so much sociological and economic literature does, that inequality structures are natural functional or economically efficient meritocracies.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand it means that we can think of alternative forms of distributing collectively achieved results. This, too, is a largely uncultivated field of sociological research. What is needed is a careful exploration of alternatives to capitalist distributive structures, starting with existing practical examples from cooperatives and worker-owned companies to the large-scale co-management system in Germany or the living wage experiments (McBride and Muirhead, 2016; Wells, 2016) tried out in several countries. Moreover we find extremely interesting international variations in economic and social policies in the distribution of collectively achieved wealth:

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<sup>5</sup> There is some irony in the fact that in sociology the concept of meritocracy was first used in Michael Young's "Rise of the Meritocracy" (1958), a scathing satire of a future society where rich enjoy their fortune safe in the knowledge that the lower classes blame themselves for their fate.

from the six weeks paid holidays in most European countries to the US, the only industrialized country without legislated paid vacations, from the high-tax, high equality distributive structures of Scandinavian countries to Trump's impending tax reductions for high incomes and corporations, from social security and health insurance which provides reliable support in case of illness or unemployment, to a barely disguised neo-liberal social Darwinism which leaves those without resources to fend for themselves. We also know that these differences are accompanied by parallel differences in public satisfaction and happiness. These existing experiences in achieving greater equality offer important practical lessons for more far-reaching reorganizations of the distribution of wealth and power in current and future societies.

Back in 1959, the sociologist C. Wright Mills outlined three public roles for sociologists. The first was to pose as philosopher-kings who looked for the laws of social life, aloof from the mundane world of politics but trusting that the sheer weight of their insights would make it inevitable for those in political power to let sociology chart an optimal course for social affairs. That was the dream of Comte. From the start it was woefully naive, but it continues to sustain the hope of some sociologists that their discipline will some day match the prestige accorded to the natural sciences.<sup>6</sup> The second posture was to act as advisor to the king, "to become involved in those many trends that make the individual a part of a functionally rational bureaucracy, and to sink into (a) specialized slot ...without being explicitly concerned with the structure of society" (Mills, 1959, 180). Although he saw this as the most common role of social scientists, Mills did not accuse. What he pointed to was rather the often-imperceptible integration of sociologists into systems of resources and rewards that reflect the preferences and priorities of dominant inequality structures. The third stance was to be a critic of the king's actions and their consequences for the public, and to suggest alternatives which are better than the king's policies. This once was, but is no longer a subject of discussion in many sociology departments. In a world of growing inequality and of ever more sophisticated

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<sup>6</sup> The modern version of Comte's dream is a vision of sociology which excludes the "lay public" from knowledge production, defines what is "legitimate" research, standardizes "cognitive orientations and criteria for defining intellectual problems" and allocates prestige and reputation accordingly, and creates "hierarchical bureaucratic structures" which control resources and research networks and "dominate policy and decision making" (Turner, 1994).



ways of disguising the exploitation of people and the destruction of environments as service to the common good, Mills' recommendations are more compelling than ever.

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