

Compare and  
contrast two major  
theories of social  
inequality – can  
inequality be ...

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A major theory of inequality is the one propounded by Karl Marx who argues that social inequality is not natural but stems from the construction of the unfair capitalist system. Marx sees the workers or the proletariat as being exploited for their labour by those that own the means of production

Marxists see social inequality as manifested in the fact that workers do not benefit from the wealth that their labour produces instead Marx claims that they are 'pauperized'. The poorer working classes get poorer whilst the rich enjoy getting richer this is illustrated by income inequalities all over the world; the poorest 20% of people in the USA have seen their incomes fall by 19% whilst the top 5% saw their incomes rise, in Australia the richest ten per cent of the population owns about half the nation's wealth in the USA its over two thirds.

A limitation of Marx theories on inequality is that it only focuses on economic inequality. Many sociologists would agree with Marx that economic inequality is the most significant form of inequality at the moment whilst acknowledging that economic inequality and social inequality, as we live in a modern multi-cultural capitalist country are inextricably linked and are affected significantly by gender, racial, religious and ethnic inequality. Ethnic background is both an indicator and factor of social inequality.

In Australia for example, Aborigines are over represented in the working class as well as underclass and under-represented in the top stratification of earnings and class. Social inequality thus seems to be a consequence of ascribed status: of the status that our skin colour our gender and/or our social class confers on us. Arguably there is scope for social mobility in our

current system as our ascribed statuses can be overshadowed by our achieved status especially as we are not generally ascribed to a lower caste iron status at birth that prevents social mobility (unlike the untouchables in the caste system in other cultures) Theoretically we can ascend the social ladder, however low we start, as there is equality of opportunity. This is the view propounded by functionalists such as Davis and Moore. Our achievements in our meritocratic system determine the social position that we hold.

Davis and Moore acknowledge that there are perhaps socially unequal jobs yet they are all important for society to function. Thus to maintain society each role needs to be filled so 'effective role allocation' is an essential functional prerequisite. However as some jobs require more skills and training than others there is a need for differing social and financial incentives to entice people to undergo extensive training and take up such jobs. Davis and Moore assert that role allocation and thus people's socio-economic status is fair as it is based on merit, those in the top roles earning the most are those that are best equipped for their role. Whilst Marx sees the current system as exploitative Davis and Moore see it and the inequality that accompanies it as legitimate and functionally advantageous to society.

Such a theory though, does not take into account gender and racial inequalities or concepts such as culture capital old boys club and the glass ceiling

The culture capital theory suggested by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explains that the education system prizes and is geared toward the culture of the

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middle and upper classes thus those from a working class background find that the skills and knowledge derived within their culture is 'devalued' and they therefore do not have equal opportunities to excel academically which of course restricts their employment choices and socio-economic position in the future. We can see therefore that inequality is institutionalised, as Marx alludes to in the labour market, and that education is perhaps the first agent of stratification.

M. Tumin has also criticised Davis and Moore by condemning their notion of functional importance as questionable and too vague. It ignores the differential of power. According to Tumin differences in pay and prestige will be affected by, and often reflect differences in the relative power of groups and individuals in the labour market rather than the job's actual functional importance. Therefore differences in pay can actually be more a reflection of the relative strength of the workers' union and bargaining potential rather than of functional importance e. g. coal miners and farm labourers.

Davis and Moore suggest that inequality is universal as it can be identified in all societies. Such views would suggest that inequality is not eliminable.

Marxists ideas contradict this view. Marx claimed that inequality could be eliminated with the development of class consciousness and the abandonment of capitalism however the Soviet communism model proved that in the modern world this was untenable. Equality came at a high price- by the collapse of communism in 1989 equality had come to mean people simply had equally low living standards. Economic and social equality came at the expense then, of basic human rights, the sociologist Peter Saunders

stated socialist societies are<sup>2</sup> 'always more repressive than the capitalist ones since they must get people to fulfil their role without the incentive of economic rewards.'

However it is clear that the Soviet system was successful in reducing and even eliminating inequality in many spheres of life. Even if it didn't respect human rights in all cases, it guaranteed basic needs such as housing employment education medical care and even holidays.

<sup>3</sup>The satellite states had embraced capitalism after communism expecting to reap the economic benefits of a capitalist system in fact, living standards actually fell. Russia, after communism rapidly transformed from an almost standardized society to one that was plagued by socio-economic polarisations, according to Goskomstat, the income ratio between the wealthiest 10% of the population and the bottom 10% was about 4: 1 in 1990 by 1996 it had sky rocketed to 13: 1. Women's rights have also regressed significantly in Russia currently approximately 80% of the unemployed in Russia are women.

Such evidence seems to support a Marxist framework of inequality as not inevitable but sustained by a capitalist system.

Marxists claim that a capitalist society is maintained through divide and rule. Thus when a class 'stopped being a class in itself and started being a class for itself' then the group could recognise their inferior social position, class solidarity would develop as the class recognised their shared interests and goals and they would then act together to displace the bourgeoisie.

However because inequality is so multilayered class divisions are easy to maintain as differences in gender and race also generate inequality thus even if class differences were eliminated these would persist and perhaps increase.

Blackness has historically been classed as inferior, perceived inferiority has been harmful since those who see themselves as superior usually hold the legal power and status in the society and can therefore cement in law the inferiority of the blacks or other ethnic groups. Loury calls for 'major structural remedies to speed up progress toward racial equality' which will in turn reduce the economic inequality that ethnic minority groups face.

The New right perspective argues that social inequality has persisted throughout the ages; Saunders states that 'there has never been a completely egalitarian society'. Every society has its male and females, rich and poor it's big and small and it's old and young. In this absolute sense there is some truth to the assertion that some degree of inequality is inevitable.

However inequality itself is unequal it varies with time and culture which validates the theory that inequality is socially constructed and thus can be eliminated. In Britain granted we have moved from the stark extremes of inequality of slavery in imperial Britain but only to an 'acceptable' economic and social inequality that is institutionalized within our capitalist system, unequal access is built into the structures that support and maintain our contemporary society.

It can be argued that the current degree of inequality is not advantageous to society and a reflection of unequal talents in society as Davis and Moore claim nor is it an inevitable product of the capitalist system as Marxists argue; it is a matter of choice. Through the lax way we regulate corporations compared with the harsh regulations placed on workers unions, how we distribute the tax burden and how we set wages. We limit the power of workers thus limiting their socio-economic position.