

Sociological explanations of ethnic inequality essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Social inequality is viewed by functionalists as a way of ensuring that most talented people receive the highest rewards in society. Patterson and Banton tend to argue that it is functional for society to have ethnic minorities who are in a disadvantaged position. Ethnic minorities are seen to take on the worst occupations, that members of the dominant group do not want, based on need through social disadvantage. There are also seen a threat to scarce social values and cultural responses.

Being at the lower end of the stratification system enables the dominant group to feel better in realizing they lack the talent and ability for high achievement in an equal opportunities society. Functionalism has influenced the New Right Perspective whom adopt a cultural argument to the position of ethnic minorities. Peter Saunders argues that it is correct that the most talented individuals should receive the highest rewards. To The New Right, Equality of opportunity ensures that individual ability is rewarded, but this also means that lack of ability results in lack of rewards.

Charles Murray argues that the USA had developed a black underclass in that increasing numbers of young blacks were unwilling to work and that this underclass was distinguished by their behaviour. Murray denied that such changes were the result of poverty and lack of opportunity he says the real reasons for the changed in the behaviour lay in the welfare benefits. Some sociologists have argued that there is a British underclass composed mainly or exclusively of ethnic minorities who are in a disadvantaged position in the labour market.

As well as lacking the skills and qualifications, they may well also have to face prejudice and racial discrimination. Giddens argues that as long as Asian and Indians are well concentrated in low paid, low skilled jobs then there will be an underclass. Weberians suggest that although members of minorities may be distributed across a number of social classes, they are mainly concentrated in lower economic groups and may even constitute as an underclass. They also describe them as members of status groups or communities. John Rex and Sally Tomlinson, feel that 'The underclass' is a suitable term for describing ethnic minorities in Britain.

That said that immigrants simply came to Britain to fill in the unattractive low skilled jobs in the manufacturing industry as well as the low skilled service industries when Britain was experiencing a shortage of labour. Rex and Tomlinson believe that there are two distinctive labour markets in Britain, they support the dual labour market theory. The two markets are the primary and the secondary. The primary market consists of jobs with high wages, good working conditions, job security and opportunities for on the job training and promotion.

These are highly skilled jobs as skilled workers are crucial to a companies success and so are encouraged with high wages and promotion. The secondary market appears opposite to the primary market with low wages, poorer working conditions and are less skilled jobs. Asian and west Indian immigrants were usually recruited to jobs in the secondary labour market because such jobs offer few promotion prospects or opportunities for training, they have tended to remain in the disadvantaged position in the

labour market and so for this reason ethnic minorities an underclass in Britain.

Rex and Tomlinson offer evidence to show that ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented in such jobs. Dahrendorf and Saunders described the types of characteristic features of the underclass in terms of multiple deprivation, social marginality, culture of fatalism and despair and welfare state dependency. Dahrendorf and Saunders described the underclass as suffering from social ills including low income, unemployment, poor housing and education. (multiple deprivation) In the case of black people, their disadvantage is more severe as they experience racial discrimination also.

The underclass is marginalized in terms of power and so is unable to organise effectively to improve its situation. Rex and Tomlinson argue that minorities may be members of 'traditional' working class institutions such as the labour party or trade unions but these bodies do not represent or promote their interests. This means they are denied the normal channels for expressing and resolving grievances. Rex developed the idea that the underclass is excluded from full citizenship rights in the welfare state.

Historically class conflict in Britain was resolved by a means of post war 'truce' or 'welfare' deal which guaranteed the mainstream working class fundamental citizenship rights, but black people have not been cooperated to the same extent and tend to get a raw deal from the welfare state.

Members of the underclass feel alienated from the wider society and they

lack a sense of purpose in life. They feel suspicious of police and feel they receive the worst treatment. Young and Lea argue that urban riots can be partly explained by the political marginalisation of black people.

Saunders describes the underclass as almost entirely dependent on welfare provisions and Dahrendorf fears that members of the underclass may lose the work habit as they become accustomed to life on the dole. Young black people have tried to get jobs but fail due to racial discrimination. It makes little sense, then to regard ethnic minorities as a whole underclass although the concept is useful for showing how certain groups are trapped in situations where they face a high risk of becoming poor, unqualified or unemployed.

There are important socio-economic differences between ethnic groups and a wide range of circumstances within each group. For example there are substantial numbers of well qualified persons within the black community and so 'average' levels are misleading. Rex and Tomlinson admitted there was a considerable overlap between black minorities and the white population. Most people are members of the exploited working class and it is this rather than their racial or ethnic features, which largely dictates their fate in British society in other words if we didn't have capitalism we wouldn't have racism.

Economic conflicts are primary and the ethnic and racial problems which they create are merely secondary. Milliband argues that white workers resort to racial discrimination in a desperate attempt to improve their bargaining

power in the competitive climate of a capital economy. Consequently, the problems endured by black people will only be resolved when capitalism is finally overthrown and replaced by a classless, egalitarian society.

There are three main Marxist models of stratification, these are the unitary working class, the divided working class- a reserve army of labour and racialised class fractions. The unitary working class model is described by Westergaard and Resler, it has the simple message that class is the key division in society and that race is really not important. Westergaard and Resler treat race as a distraction from the main issue which is the grossly unequal character of capitalism. It is this that condemns all members of the working class to an exploited and deprived existence.

This model has been criticised on two counts, it neglects racial conflicts within the working class and it ignores the existence of middle class blacks. The divided working class by Stephen Castles and Godula Kosack- a reserve army of labour proposes similarly to the previous one that class location is the most dominant influence in the lives of black people. However Castles and Kosack break from the unitary model by conceding that racism does make some difference: objectively, black people tend to fill the less desirable jobs and subjectively they are ranked lower in status than white workers.

They regularities internal racial division as a major factor in preventing the working class from mounting effective opposition to capitalism. In a study of immigrant workers in France, Germany, Switzerland and Britain, Castles and Kosack found that immigrants faced a number of problems in the labour, In

these four European countries immigrants were found to be concentrated in low paid jobs or in jobs with poor working conditions. Castles and Kosack claim that in Britain this situation is mainly due to racial discrimination.

The poor treatment of immigrants derives from the need in capitalist societies for a reserve army of labour: it is necessary to have a surplus of labouring order to keep wage costs down, since the greater the overall supply, the weaker the bargaining position of workers. As Marxists, Castles and Kosack believe that capitalist economies are inherently unstable. They go through periods of boom and slump, and a reserve army of labour needs to be available to be hired and fired as the fluctuating fortunes of the economy debate.

After the second world war capitalist countries in Europe therefore turned to migrant labour and immigration to provide a reserve pool of cheap labour which could be profitably exploited. Castles and Kosack do not believe that such workers form an underclass outside and below the main class structure, they regard them as being part of the working class. However they so believe that immigrant and migrant workers are the most disadvantaged groups within the working class and as such they form a distinctive stratum.

This situation is beneficial to the ruling class in capitalist countries. Ethnic minorities are blamed for problems such as unemployment and housing shortages. Attention is diverted from the failings of the capitalist system. The working class is divided and cannot unite, develop class consciousness and challenge ruling class dominance. The racialised class fractions are described

by Annie Phizaklea and Robert Miles who have also advanced a Marxist analysis of the position of the ethnic minorities in the labour market.

They agree with Castle and Kosack in that ethnic minority workers form a distinctive stratum within the working class, however deny that immigrant and migrant workers have actually created divisions in the working class. They point out that the working class can also be seen as divided by gender and level of skill. Working class women sell their labour for a wage in the same way as working class men, but unlike men they have other unpaid domestic responsibilities.

To Phizaklea and Miles, the working class is not divided into two but is split between a considerable number of class fractions based upon gender, skill and ethnicity. Immigration did not divide a united working class; it just added an extra dimension to existing divisions. We may question whether the term 'migrant' is still appropriate now that so many of Britain's black population were born in this country. Despite the differences between the Weberian and Marxist theories on ethnicity, they share a good deal in common.

Pilkington believes that Weberian and Marxist theories are not supported by empirical evidence, he quotes figures that showed that, amongst West Indians and Guyanese, 32 percent of men and 63 percent of women were found in non manual occupations. Among Indians the figures were 59 percent for men and 62 for women and among Pakistani/Bangladeshis they were 40 percent for men and 64 for women. Pilkington fully accepts that ethnic minorities are not overwhelmingly concentrated in an underclass.

Indeed, certain ethnic groups have been extremely successful in the labour market such as Chinese and African Asians.