

Is inequality an inevitable feature of contemporary society



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Contemporary western societies do claim to be meritocratic and to offer equal opportunities for all, but is this really the case? For the purpose of this assignment, it is my intention to examine social class, gender, wealth and education and try to determine whether inequalities do, indeed, exist in these areas. Studies of social mobility are designed to show the likelihood of the son or daughter of a working-class father, such as a dustman, entering a middle-class occupation (e. g.

solicitor). In an ideal meritocratic society, the social position of an individual's family of origin need not necessarily bear any relationship to that individual's social position, since he or she should really move up or down the ladder of success according to merit. However, according to the first inter-generational study conducted by Glass in 1949 – 48. 5% of men interviewed in status category 1 (professional and high administrative) still ended up in the same category as their fathers – which is more than 13 times greater than chance, suggesting that a person's background does play an important part in influencing their life chances. The next major inter-generational mobility study was the Oxford Mobility Study, carried out by Goldthorpe et al in 1972.

Although this study does show that the chances of improving one's status became easier in the post-war years, it does also show, along similar lines to the Glass mobility study, that it is easier to maintain high status when a person is born to it than it is to achieve it. Indeed, Goldthorpe's figures show that 45% of those men with a father in Class I were also in that class.

Although it may be argued that a true comparison can-not be made, since Glass's classifications were based on the prestige of the occupation, while <https://assignbuster.com/is-inequality-an-inevitable-feature-of-contemporary-society/>

Goldthorpe based his categories on the market rewards of the occupations; I would suggest that it is still true to say that both studies do still show that the likelihood of a son with a Class I father are still 3 times greater than chance that the son will also end up in Class II. Indeed, Kellner and Wilby, in an article in the Sunday Times in January, 1980 refer to this likelihood as the “1: 2: 4 Rule of Relative Hope”, which they say states that whatever the chances are of a working-class boy reaching the service class, then an intermediate class boy has twice the chance while a service class boy has four times that chance. In effect, what these studies seem to be suggesting to me is that there seems to be little chance of the everyday working-class man ending up in the service class.

Even if he were to win the lottery and become a millionaire overnight, it is my opinion that the degree of closure at the higher levels of the class system would be too great for him to break through just because he has suddenly become wealthy. The mobility studies that I have referred to above only used males to obtain their data, which feminists argue produce misleading figures since they do not apply to the population in general. However, a study conducted by Heath in 1981 showed that women are excluded from both high paid managerial and professional jobs and skilled manual labour. Indeed, his figures show that while 10% of women from working-class backgrounds are employed in lower professional jobs, they do only have a 1.5% chance of working in a top professional occupation. I would argue that gender has played a leading role in creating inequality in society.

During the First and Second World Wars, women were encouraged to go to work in the munitions factories or the steel works, obviously because of the <https://assignbuster.com/is-inequality-an-inevitable-feature-of-contemporary-society/>

absence of male labour. While it is true to say that the government of the time attempted to make life easier for those women who wanted to work, by providing nurseries and crèches; it must also be said that once the wars had ended, the majority of these facilities were withdrawn and the women were, instead, encouraged to “return home where they belonged” – this in spite of the fact that most of them wanted to continue working! More recently, the new Labour government, under the leadership of Tony Blair, seem to have been trying to encourage wives and mothers to return to the work force – which in some ways does look promising for decreasing gender inequality. However, with regard to pay, working conditions or opportunities for promotion, I would argue that there is only a slight reduction in the inequalities between men and women in the workplace in the respect that the majority of women are still employed in low-paid, part-time jobs. Could this not be because, in spite of the introduction of the Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act, that the government does not actually do anything to enforce these policies? I would certainly argue that this could well be the case! Yet another form of social inequality is that of wealth, i.

e. those material possessions valued in certain societies and which may include such things as land, livestock, and buildings as well as money. Indeed, it does seem to be the case that in Britain, there is still a vast inequality in the distribution of personal wealth, so that although, in theory, everyone has the right to become a millionaire, the skewed distribution of personal wealth throughout society means that few individuals actually achieve it! It was Karl Marx who suggested that society was composed of two groups – the proletariat or working-class, who were oppressed and exploited

by the other group – the ruling class or capitalists, whose political and economical power came from the fact that they owned and controlled the forces of production in society. Whilst a present-day criticism of Marx is that ownership and control are now separate because many business owners employ managers to run their businesses; Baran and Sweezy in their book “Monopoly Capital”, argue that many of these managers hold substantial shares in the companies they manage, and are, themselves, often members of the dominant class.

Indeed in an article in the Observer, dated 12 January, 1997, Michael Meacher suggested that the pay difference between an average British chief executive and that of an average worker is now 28 to 1, although in some cases the difference is actually as much as 150 to 1. Along the same lines, Fothergill and Vincent (1981) found that 99% of company shares were held by approximately 48% of the adult population. In contrast to Marx’s suggestions, Max Weber argued that status did not always depend on economic life chances and he illustrated this by making reference to the Indian caste system, where a person’s status depends on religious purity and not wealth. According to Weber, certain groups in society have more power which they can use to their advantage.

I would suggest that a classic example of such a group was the coal-miners who, through their ability to control the supply of fuel to power stations, caused financial difficulties for many businesses who were limited to 5 days electricity consumption from 16th to 30th December, 1973 and to three days a week in January, 1997. This power which the miners had was used to their advantage, because they eventually brought about an election which, in <https://assignbuster.com/is-inequality-an-inevitable-feature-of-contemporary-society/>

effect, installed a government which gave them the pay rise they wanted. While it may be true, in that particular instance, that the miners were able to use their power to their own advantage, I feel it may be true to say that, in general, ownership of the means of production is still the basis for economic power and wealth, with the wages of workers still being very low in comparison. Similarly, the state itself may be said to contribute towards social inequality. While helping the needy with the provision of such benefits as Income Support, Family Credit, Child Benefit etc.

, I would argue that the benefits provided are insufficient to ensure that people are lifted above the government's official "poverty line". While it may be fair to say that there are some individuals who feel humiliated and embarrassed at accepting what they see as charity; it is also fair to say that there are just as many people who do not know just what benefits are available – while on the other hand, there are some benefits that are not widely publicised by the Benefit Agencies. It is certainly true that wealthy families are able to pass on both material and social advantages to their descendants, which in turn, enables those better-off to obtain privileges to develop whatever talents they may already have and so progress higher up the ladder of success. Wealth and membership of a social class certainly affects many aspects of our lives. Such an example is in the field of education which, in theory, now grades children in terms of their ability.

However the American sociologist Christopher Jencks suggests that even when working-class children attain similar levels of achievement as service-class children, this still does not improve their chances in terms of higher education, wealth or career prospects. Along similar lines, data from a study <https://assignbuster.com/is-inequality-an-inevitable-feature-of-contemporary-society/>

conducted by Halsey, Heath and Ridge in 1980 shows that boys from a service-class background had 40 times more chance of attending a public school and 3 times more chance of attending a grammar school than a boy from a working-class background. They also found that the number of intermediate and service-class boys attending university had increased by 6% and 19% respectively, compared with a 2% increase for working-class boys. Could the reason for this be, as Sir Keith Joseph suggested in the Guardian newspaper (18 July, 1979) that it is because “.

.. there is some more choice in some range of activities given by the ownership of money than by not owning money...”? I would certainly suggest that this is true.

In conclusion, I would suggest that people with wealth are able to use this wealth to preserve and protect their privileged positions and that, although many people think we may live in an opportune society whereby any individual can reach the top of the ladder by virtue of their own efforts – society is not as opportune as everyone seems to think. Certainly, I would argue that inequality has been and will continue to be, for the foreseeable future, an inevitable feature of contemporary society.