

The Dynamics of Inequality

John E. Sawyer Seminar
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
Program Proposal

Submitted by

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We live in an extraordinary period in which the structure of social inequality is changing in unusually rapid, complicated, and sometimes mystifying ways. Whereas scholars in some disciplines, such as sociology, are seemingly entranced by the possibility that class-based inequalities are weakening, scholars elsewhere attend to unprecedented increases in income inequality, wealth inequality, and a deepening spatial divide between rich and poor. The fields of race and gender inequality likewise reveal a tension between scholars who emphasize the rise of formally egalitarian attitudes and institutional practices and those who emphasize the persistence of discrimination and segregation or the emergence of anti-egalitarian backlashes that may undo gains of the past. Even as these backlashes play out, the relentless march of egalitarian sensibilities serves to expose and delegitimize “new” inequalities that, not so long ago, were taken for granted, rarely discussed, or even barely seen (e.g., inequalities based on sexual orientation, disability, citizenship).

The purpose of the proposed Sawyer Seminar is to bring together leading scholars in the humanities and social sciences to consider this complicated, seemingly baffling constellation of trends and ask whether any unified understanding of the forces making for equality and inequality is feasible. Is the jumble of developments on the inequality front the natural and understandable result of a large number of causal forces operating all at once? Or are these developments, when viewed through the right prism, suddenly understandable in terms of a relatively small set of forces playing out?

Scholarly importance

The foregoing questions are in the end all about the viability of the grand narrative. Although a single reductive narrative may seem far-fetched in the contemporary context, the claim that a relatively small constellation of unifying forces are at work cannot as readily be ruled out, no

matter how unfashionable that claim may be. The three main developments that have to date militated against a narrative-constructing enterprise are (a) the relentless academic specialization by discipline and type of inequality (e.g., gender, ethnic, race, class, income, sexual orientation), (b) a continuing fascination with proximate sources of change rather than more distal and potentially unifying ones, and (c) an intellectual rejection of the narrative-constructing enterprise that may be traced to early postmodernism but has lived on even after postmodernism became increasingly spent.

The first of these three forces, that of academic specialization, has played out principally in the form of specialization by type of inequality (e.g., racial, gender, ethnic, class, income, sexual orientation) rather than specialization by discipline. Although disciplinary boundaries of course remain important, one now typically finds an interdisciplinary community of scholars working within such topical areas as gender inequality, racial inequality, class inequality, or income inequality. The literatures within these topical areas have, however, developed quite separately and independently of one another, making it difficult to identify processes and forces that potentially cut across them. This balkanization has been organizationally realized in the form of topical academic centers that overlay the usual disciplinary structures (i.e., centers focused on gender inequality, racial inequality, or poverty and income inequality). In many cases, these centers have succeeded spectacularly in breaking down disciplinary barriers within their respective topical areas, but now there is much work to be done in bringing together these topical communities and asking whether a more broad-gauged understanding of the forces making for equality and inequality is possible. The ideal setting within which to begin this admittedly daunting task is a John E. Sawyer Seminar.

It is not, however, such “topical balkanization” alone that is to be blamed for our piecemeal and narrow-gauged understanding of ongoing developments in inequality. Additionally, most of the topical literatures focus quite obsessively on proximate sources of trend (e.g., a presumed decline in

overt discrimination), whereas the larger forces that underlie these disparate proximate sources (e.g., competition, egalitarianism, rationalization) are either assumed or ignored. This conventional approach can lead to incomplete analyses that beg the more fundamental question of why the proximate mechanisms are themselves undergoing change. It is not entirely satisfying, for example, to explain declines in gender inequality by simply noting that employer discrimination now occurs less frequently or that the gender gap in occupational aspirations is declining. To be sure, it is crucial to understand the proximate mechanisms at work, and indeed much fundamental research is oriented toward precisely that task. However, once the proximate mechanisms have been established, one should then ask *why* discrimination is abating, *why* women are increasingly aspiring to hold formerly male-typed occupations, or *why* the household division of labor has changed more slowly than other forms of gender inequality. These types of questions require us to consider the macro-level forces that affect inequality via proximate mechanisms. When one moves to this macro-level, it is altogether possible that seemingly disparate trends within each of the topical areas will prove to flow from similar sources, thus potentially bringing a unified narrative within reach.

The final source of our characteristically narrow-gauged approach to understanding inequality is more intellectual than organizational. Namely, the rise of postmodernism was not just about a rejection of particular grand narratives (especially Marxian ones), but was also about a grander rejection of the narrative-constructing enterprise itself. Although some variants of postmodernism amounted in the end to new narratives, the dominant intellectual effect was to instill in many of us a distrust of all narratives. The proposed John E. Sawyer Seminar is not intended as some meta-theoretical discussion of the viability of narratives and the virtues or limits of the postmodernist experiment. Rather, the proposal here is to go forward boldly with the task of constructing narratives of equality and inequality, the test then being the concrete one of whether any of these provides a credible characterization of the empirical trends.

It has to be allowed that this effort may prove fruitless and that seminar participants will be forced to conclude that inequality unfolds in largely “disorganized” and domain-specific ways and that topical specialization is accordingly warranted. The only claim here is that the question should be asked and that a negative answer be reached not by default but because it is merited. It was not so long ago that grand narratives were immensely popular. Have they died merely for reasons of excessive academic specialization, an unwarranted obsession with proximate causes, or narrative-discrediting changes in intellectual fashion? Or have they instead died for good reason?

The rationale, then, for proposing a John E. Sawyer Seminar on *The Dynamics of Inequality* is that the extreme specialization and consequent narrowing of our explanatory accounts might be resisted and overcome by having representatives of the various disciplines and topical literatures come together. If one hundred and fifty years ago a transformative grand narrative could be spun by a single scholar, our premise is that, if ever a convincing one is to be spun now, it will take a seminar with leading specialists who have mastered their own fields but are prepared also to venture beyond them. This task is, it might be added, surely one in which the humanities and social sciences have no choice but to join forces.

Central questions

The preceding approach is fruitful in identifying many of the puzzles that have emerged in the field. Although one obviously cannot anticipate entirely the direction that the seminar will take, there are four main classes of orienting questions that at the outset seem crucial. These four lines of questioning, as reviewed below, all speak to the promise and limits of grand narratives in understanding how equality and inequality are evolving.

An egalitarian logic? The first line of questioning pertains to the usefulness of treating egalitarianism, understood here as an Enlightenment concept, as a master dynamic that underlies some of the proximate forces affecting trends in equality and inequality. This leads to subquestions

of the following sort: Might we understand the ongoing diffusion of egalitarian values as a grand Hegelian logic that explains a diverse array of proximate changes (e.g., the spread of bureaucratization, the rise of antidiscrimination law)? Are all forms of inequality being delegitimized? Or are some forms more resistant to delegitimation than others? Do essentialist stories about gender, for example, have a greater resonance and continuing legitimacy among the public than essentialist stories about class or race? Does the egalitarian logic come to be modified in any important respect as it diffuses to “newer” divides (e.g., sexual orientation, alienage, citizenship, disability)?

Overlapping narratives? The fall of older grand narratives might be understood, at least in part, as arising from problems of evidence and an associated disenchantment with the increasingly elastic formulations of those narratives. The obvious alternative to such flexibility as well as to narrative-free characterizations of history is to admit to the possibility that multiple narratives might be at work. This possibility raises the following types of questions: How do the grand logics of egalitarianism, rationalization, and marketization interact with one another? Are they reinforcing? Or inconsistent? Are these logics playing out in fundamentally different ways in states with different political traditions and institutions (e.g., social democratic versus liberal regimes)? In less-developed and more-developed countries?

A structure to the backlash? The third set of questions pertains to whether any common structure or organization underlies the various anti-egalitarian “backlashes” that have played out across many types of inequality. This line of questioning, which is formally analogous to the first line (as reviewed above), now speaks to the structure of anti-egalitarianism rather than egalitarianism. The following subquestions emerge here: In which domains are anti-egalitarian backlashes most likely? Are the sources of these backlashes much the same for all forms of inequality? Does a “functionalist” logic, for example, underlie contemporary support for pro-inequality tax breaks,

contemporary opposition to affirmative action, and contemporary outbreaks of anti-feminist ideology? Or are each of these instances of anti-egalitarianism best understood in their own terms? Should we worry about grand disequilibrating events that might set the current logic of egalitarianism permanently on its head (e.g., a War on Terror)? Or should WWII be understood as a definitive history-resolving event on the question of egalitarianism?

A unified policy? The final set of questions pertain more explicitly to amelioration and the possibility of developing a unified approach to it. If a grand logic underlies how inequality unfolds across the various types of inequality, then presumably a grand logic might likewise inform amelioration. Moreover, even if an overarching evolutionary logic cannot be identified, it is still possible that a general logic should inform amelioration. We are thus led to questions of the following simple sort: To what extent should social policy address the various dimensions of inequality as a piece? Is it feasible or desirable to develop a comprehensive policy on inequality? Or is each form so distinct in its underlying mechanisms and so different in its ethical implications as to require separate and special remedy?

Types of comparisons

Clearly, many different types of comparison will be featured in our discussions, but the most crucial will be comparisons over time. We will be asking how equality and inequality have evolved in the recent past and, by implication, how they are likely to evolve in the future. The contrast between different types of inequality will of course be crucial as well: We will be asking whether a common dynamic underlies all forms of inequality (e.g., race, class, income, gender, citizenship, sexual orientation) or whether one must instead understand recent developments as expressing logics that are specialized by type of inequality. For purposes of illustration, a few examples are provided below of the types of questions that might be confronted when comparisons of this sort are attempted,

our objective here being merely that of demonstrating the kinds of problems that narrativists will inevitably face.

The spread of egalitarianism

The simplest question that might be posed, and hence a revealing starting place for us, is whether each inequality dimension (e.g., race, gender, disability, citizenship) may be understood as a vehicle for fundamentally egalitarian processes and forces. Of course, many problems immediately emerge with such a simplistic formulation, far too many to review here. It will have to suffice to explore one subclass of problems that emerge when such a formulation is applied to the trajectory of gender inequality.

The main way in which the egalitarian commitment appears to have been modified in its application to the case of gender is that it is overlaid with powerful essentialist assumptions (e.g., Charles and Grusky 2004). In effect, the modern “solution” to gender inequality is to offer a formal commitment to equal opportunity, but without any corresponding commitment to ensuring that women and men will be similarly oriented toward taking up such opportunities. That is, a narrow commitment to formal guarantees of equal opportunity leaves much room for essentialist ideologies to flourish, ideologies that regard women and men as fundamentally different, having very distinctive skills and abilities (e.g., the “nurturant” women, the “technical” man), and therefore likely to avail themselves of the formally equal opportunities in very different ways. The presumption that men and women have fundamentally different tastes and capacities is reinforced in various social settings, not just in families (with their gender-specific socialization practices) and work organizations (with their discriminatory hiring practices) but in other institutional contexts as well. By way of trivial example, consider the practice among American fast-food restaurants of providing gender-specific toys to children, a practice of interest only because it is widely diffused and evidently unobjectionable to all but a small minority of gender progressives. If these same restaurants

distributed toys on the basis of racial or class standing, the practice would be deemed racist or “classist” at worst and absurd at best. It was of course once the case that essentialist interpretations were crucial to understanding racial inequality (e.g., “subhuman” African-American slaves) and class inequality (e.g., “subhuman” serfs). However, the essentialist interpretation of these forms is evidently weakening, seemingly at a qualitatively different rate than is the case with gender. This imparts a quite fundamentally type-specific dynamic, it might be argued, to the evolution of egalitarianism.

The same conclusion is reached when one considers how occupational ghettos are formed. Obviously, one of the distinctive features of gender inequality is its expression in essentialist forms of occupational segregation, whereby women are relegated to (a) major occupational categories that involve nurturant or service work (e.g., clerical work), and also to (b) particular specializations within major categories that are likewise nurturant or service oriented (e.g., pediatrician, family lawyer, personnel manager). Although there is also much occupational segregation by race and class origins as well, it takes on a far less essentialist form. The relevant comparison in this regard involves identifying stereotypical pairings of a particular occupation with a particular ethnic group (Japanese gardener), racial group (African-American jazz musician), or class background (upper-class investment banker). This thought experiment yields, it would seem, relatively few pairings of these kinds. To be sure, one finds ethnic typecasting during periods of extraordinary immigration, but it tends to attenuate as assimilative forces play out and ethnic enclaves dissipate. Likewise, racist occupational stereotypes were once legion in the United States (and other countries), but now are largely discredited and live on mainly in weakened and delegitimated form. Finally, class-based stereotypes are exceedingly well developed in the caste systems of certain societies, but elsewhere are only found in residual or weakened form, typically for a small number of elite occupations that are presumed to demand long and intensive exposure to the requisite cultural capital (such as art critic).

This is all to suggest that gender inequality is, quite possibly, a unique form that rests especially heavily on essentialist processes.

Marketization and rent-destruction

As a complementary example of the leverage gained by comparing different forms of inequality, consider next the question of whether “rent,” understood as excess remuneration beyond what a competitive labor market would provide, is becoming less legitimate in the U.S. case. In a classically liberal welfare regime of the U.S. type, such a dynamic is certainly plausible, at least under the assumption that change is largely path-dependent and accordingly takes the form of better realizing the market logic upon which any given system is built (see, e.g., Esping-Andersen 2001). This hypothesis does indeed cast light on ongoing skepticism in the U.S. with welfare, union contracts, minimum wage laws, guaranteed minimum income, and all other manner of rent that cannot be directly justified by a simple market logic. Can we therefore conclude that, within such classically liberal systems, the long-standing tendency will indeed be toward an ever purer realization of market-generated inequality and a growing delegitimation of all departures from the “pure” market wage (see Sørensen 2001)?

The problem that immediately emerges with such a formulation is that it cannot be easily reconciled with the persistence and, in some cases, flourishing of rent in the context of other forms of inequality. If the focus shifts, for example, from individual income inequality to inequality across “class” groupings (i.e., occupational inequalities in income), there is no evidence that the legitimacy of rent is under similar attack. Here, rent takes the form of control over labor supply via licenses, credentials, training requirements, and certification, all of which allow high-skill, professionalized occupations to restrict entry and hence provide lifetime earnings well beyond what is required to compensate for training costs. Moreover, occupationalization can raise the wages of incumbents not just by controlling the supply of labor, but also by reducing competition from other potential

providers of the product or service and therefore monopolizing demand. For example, the American Bar Association is not only involved in establishing certification requirements, but is also involved in ensuring that lawyers, rather than representatives of other occupations (e.g., paralegals, accountants), maintain as much control as possible over the dispute-adjudicating niche in the labor market. The labor market is rife with exclusionary tactics of this sort. Is there any evidence that the legitimacy of these tactics, all of which subvert a narrow market logic, are being called into question? As best one can tell, there are no serious deprofessionalization or anti-occupationalization movements underway, and one might accordingly be hard-pressed to represent rent-destruction and market expansion as a master dynamic of our time.

It is not all that satisfying in this regard to simply cite the functionalist justification for occupationalization of this sort. The larger question is whether there is any rhyme or reason to why functionalist accounts are invoked to justify some types of departures from market wages (e.g., occupational ones) but not as readily others (e.g., minimum wage requirements). Could it conceivably be argued that cross-societal differences in the mix of justifications are being exposed to market test (i.e., a marketization dynamic)? Or is culture deeply involved in ways that generate largely non-competing systems? If the latter, then the market dynamic is partly converted to a cultural one, and the analytic task devolves to that of understanding the dynamics by which particular brands of egalitarianism develop and evolve (i.e., a cultural egalitarianism narrative).

Caveats

These examples are of course purely illustrative and cannot do justice to the many complexities that will likely surface when other types of inequality and other narratives are considered. Although the foregoing discussion might be read as suggesting that grand narratives of the simplest sort fall short, it has to be appreciated that (a) the two narratives considered above, those of cultural egalitarianism and marketization, hardly exhaust the large number of narratives on

offer (e.g., narratives of bureaucratization, rationalization), and (b) our analysis of these particular narratives is admittedly shallow and does not, in particular, consider various generalizations that might accommodate apparent inconsistencies. The objective, then, is merely to pique interest by signaling the types of questions at stake, not to pretend to anything definitive.

Institutional resources, governance, and selection procedures

The support for this initiative among Stanford University faculty in the humanities and social sciences is broad and deep. So far, dozens of faculty have committed to participating (see appended list), many emphasizing its special importance in light of President Hennessy's new initiative to engage Stanford University in addressing key social problems, including poverty and inequality. The main organizational home for the proposed seminar series, the recently formed Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality (CPI), is an important part of this new commitment within Stanford University. If funded, the Sawyer Seminar will serve as one of the kickoff events for CPI.

The seminar series will also be cosponsored by the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity (CCSRE), the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences (IRiSS), and the Stanford Center on Ethics (SCE). Additionally, the Stanford Humanities Center (SHC) has encouraged us to apply for an SHC Research Workshop, which would run in tandem with the Sawyer Seminar and provide yet more visibility for the project. If supplementary funds are successfully raised (from, for example, the Russell Sage Foundation), a conference and edited book will also come out of this effort.

The appended list of participants draws widely from the humanities, the social sciences, and the relevant professional schools. Also, many UC-Berkeley faculty have expressed interest in participating regularly, as indicated in the appended list. The interest in the proposed series has in fact been so broad and extensive that one might be concerned that the group could be too unwieldy to do real work. In light of this concern, our approach will be to open up the visiting lectures to the

entire group and University community, but then reserve the follow-up roundtables for (a) a handful of local experts on the topic at hand, and (b) a core working group that has committed to the enterprise in a sustained way. The organizational structure of the roundtables is described in more detail in the following section.

The budget for the seminar series will be managed by the staff of the Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality and, as necessary, the more substantial staff of the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences. Once the post-doctoral fellow and dissertation students are selected, they will join with the faculty organizer, David Grusky, and representatives of the cosponsoring organizations (i.e., CPI, CCSRE, IRiSS, SCE) to form a steering committee. The post-doctoral fellow will participate fully in all lectures and roundtables and, additionally, will likely teach two courses during the year, with at least one of these being directly linked to the topic of the proposed seminar series.

The post-doctoral and dissertation fellows will be selected by an ad hoc faculty committee spanning the many disciplines and schools represented by the participants. The advertising for the post-doctoral fellow will take place in all the usual disciplinary outlets, and the advertising for the dissertation fellowships will take place in all the usual internal Stanford University publications and websites.

Thematic threads and organization

The proposed seminar series will be organized in two halves. In the first half of the year, the lectures and roundtables will focus on four core topical areas (e.g., income inequality, racial inequality, citizenship), with the objective being to clarify the developments, trends, and puzzles that then become the explicandum for the narratives. The second half of the year will be organized around lectures and roundtables that proceed through a list of core narratives (e.g., cultural egalitarianism, rationalization, marketization), asking where they succeed and where they fall short, how they might be revised and combined, and to what extent they account for the data in each of

the topical areas reviewed in the first half of the seminar series. The visitors will be asked to deliver a formal lecture on their assigned topic, whereas the roundtables that follow each lecture will be an open and informal discussion of how the lecture revised, reinforced, or otherwise affected the current thinking of the group.* The vision, then, is that of a highly structured series based on the explicit objective of identifying the promise and limitations of narrative-based explanation of inequality trends.

References

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- Esping-Andersen, Gøsta. 2001. "Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies." Pp. 830-45 in David B. Grusky, *Social Stratification: Class, Race, and Gender in Sociological Perspective*. Boulder: Westview Press.
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* The proposed speakers are in most cases academic stars of the highest order and will likely require more substantial honoraria than those listed in the budget. If necessary, the Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality (CPI) will supplement its commitment by another \$10,000, thus allowing us to increase the size of the honoraria and bring in the top scholars that are so important to the mission.