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Categorical and Gradual Inequalities

Sociology has always been critical of social inequality and viewed it as a disturbing reality in need of change; not only as a social pathology threatening the integration of society, but also as normatively questionable.

Neither of these views is sociologically self-evident. The former appears to be invalidated by the observation that modern societies are capable of tolerating remarkable degrees of (say, income) inequality without necessarily endangering their stability. The latter view is problematic even at the conceptual level as sociology, being an empirical (i.e., positive) discipline, lacks the theoretical means needed to support such a view, should one wish to defend it. So while there may be reasons to be critical of certain forms of inequality, sociology is most likely not going to supply them. Moreover, inequalities are ubiquitous, exist in many forms that often cannot be addressed simultaneously because there are numerous tradeoffs between them. Thus, even if we had sound reasons for being critical of inequality, we would still have to set priorities, rank the various inequalities in terms of their relative importance vis-à-vis one another.

The present paper will focus on the difference between categorical inequalities on the one hand, and gradual inequalities on the other, and it will argue that, while gradual inequalities are in principle compatible with the structure of modern society, categorical inequalities are not. This negative observation gives us a clue as to what sociologists might contribute to ongoing debates about priority setting in this field. Given that any proposed or chosen priority will ultimately reflect value commitments which are bound to be controversial among sociologists no less than within any other social group, the contribution that sociologists can make qua sociologists can only be a modest one. But even a modest contribution is more than nothing.

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