The Blackwell Companion to Social Inequalities

Edited by

Mary Romero and Eric Margolis
The Blackwell Companion to Social Inequalities
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Contents

List of Figures viii
List of Tables ix
Notes on Contributors x
Acknowledgments xv

Introduction 1

PART I. CONCEPTUALIZING INEQUALITIES 13

1. Historical Perspectives on Inequality 15
   Charles Tilly

   Ronaldo Munck

3. Unequal Nations: Race, Citizen, and the Politics of Recognition 50
   Sallie Westwood

4. Intimate Citizenship in an Unjust World 75
   Ken Plummer

5. Domination, Resistance, and Subjectivity 100
   Barry D. Adam

PART II. EPISTEMOLOGY, METHOD, AND INEQUALITY 115

6. Conceptualizing a Critical Race Theory in Sociology 117
   Tara J. Yosso and Daniel G. Solórzano

7. Environmental Racism: Inequality in a Toxic World 147
   David Naguib Pellow
8. Labor-market Inequality: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Class
   Irene Browne and Joya Misra

   Malcolm Williams

PART III. FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND EDUCATION

10. Children and Inequality
    Julia Wrigley and Joanna Dreby

11. Parenting and Inequality
    Rachel Grob and Barbara Katz Rothman

12. Migrant Networks: a Summary and Critique of Relational Approaches to International Migration
    Steven J. Gold

13. Race, Education, and Inequality
    Caroline Hodges Persell and Giselle F. Hendrie

PART IV. POLICY RESPONSES TO INEQUALITIES

14. Beyond Dependency: Welfare States and the Configuration of Social Inequality
    Lynne Haney and Robin Rogers-Dillon

15. Inequalities, Crime, and Citizenship
    Nigel South

16. Disability and Social Inequalities
    Mark Priestley

17. The Culture of Medicine and Racial, Ethnic, and Class Disparities in Healthcare
    Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Cara James, Byron J. Good, and Anne E. Becker

18. The Nervous Gaze: Backpacking in Africa
    Claudia Bell

19. Origins and Contours of the Population Debate: Inequality, Population Politics, and NGOs
    Tulsi Patel and Navtej Purewal

PART V. MEDIA, TECHNOLOGY, AND INEQUALITIES

20. Selling Images of Inequality: Hollywood Cinema and the Reproduction of Racial and Gender Stereotypes
    Norman K. Denzin
CONTENTS

   Chris Barker

22. Minding the Cyber-gap: the Internet and Social Inequality 523
   Wenhong Chen and Barry Wellman

23. New Global Technologies of Power: Cybernetic Capitalism and Social Inequality 546
   Stephen Pfohl

Index 593
6.1 CRT’s family tree. 120
6.2 Community cultural wealth (adapted from Oliver and Shapiro 1995). 130
13.1 Differences among five- and six-year-olds, using infant health and development program data. 287
13.2 Asian and White eighth-graders read about the level of Black and Hispanic twelfth-graders. 288
13.3 More parity in college attendance than in obtaining degrees. 288
13.4 Proposed model for explaining racial differences in educational achievement. 293
13.5 Explanatory power of SES (socioeconomic status) vs. model including historical racial inequalities. 297
13.6 Economic differences by race. 298
13.7 As racial inequality grows so does education gap. 301
13.8 Pedagogy: time and words taught. 306
13.9 School processes: Discipline (African Americans’ twelfth-grade test-score performance relative to that of Whites, by disciplinary perception). 307
13.10 Homework by race. 311
13.11 TV viewing by race. 312
14.1 Dependence: Reliance on the state. 330
14.2 Independence: Labor-force participation. 331
14.3 Independence: Reliance on private, family networks. 332
14.4 Interdependence: Resource flows. 336
19.1 Fertility differentials: Births per woman (richest fifth to poorest fifth of population, by region). 451
19.2 Infant mortality differentials: Average deaths (per thousand live births, richest fifth to poorest fifth of population by region). 452

Figures
Tables

1.1 Indicators of welfare for selected countries, 1970–2001 16
4.1 The matrix of inequalities 78
4.2 Two kinds of citizenship 79
4.3 Intimacies in high- and low-income societies? 85
4.4 A preliminary paradigm for the analysis of intimate citizenship: “The Intimate Citizenship Project” 92
8.1 Median annual earnings among individuals employed full-time, full-year, by gender and race or ethnicity, 2002 171
8.2 Earnings gap, by gender and race or ethnicity, 2002 172
9.1 The capture-recapture model 200
9.2 Cases recorded at more than one enumeration in Plymouth 203
9.3 Cases recorded at more than one enumeration in Torbay 203
13.1 Indicators of how race/ethnicity are related to various educational achievements, without controls 289
13.2 Measures of relational stratification and various forms of capital that are related to educational achievement by race/ethnicity 299
19.1 Population size and growth 457
20.1 The gendered cinematic racial order and American theories of race relations, 1900–2000 (representative films) 474
21.1 Global television households 506
22.1 Number of people and percentage of population using the Internet in 1999, 2001, and 2002 in selected countries 526
22.2 An integrative framework for the digital divide 527
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Undertaking the project of editing The Blackwell Companion to Social Inequalities has been extremely challenging, at times overwhelming, but always intellectually engaging. We are fortunate in the number of leading scholars who agreed to accept our invitation to contribute to the project. We are most grateful for their willingness to rearrange their schedules in order to meet our various deadlines. We appreciate the collegial responses through the various stages involved in pulling together a volume of this size and diversity. Although we have never met Ken Provencher, Blackwell’s editor for this project, we want to thank him for responding to all our inquiries, understanding changes in academic resources, and life’s unpredictable ups and downs that take their toll on well-intentioned deadlines. We are grateful for Mary Fran Draisker’s editorial assistance. We acknowledge the contributions we received from the Publication Assistance Center in the College of Public Programs in the early stages of this project.
The discipline of sociology that arose in nineteenth-century Europe was in very large part developed as an inquiry into the persistent inequalities the founders perceived as the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism decimated the medieval world. Marx saw the increasing emiseration of the proletariat and the monopolization of wealth and power in a few hands as the inevitable contradiction of capitalism. Weber’s dialogue with Marx’s ghost separated class from social status, and power. He also investigated the economic inequalities of Catholic and Protestant societies in his most famous work (Weber 1958 [1906]). Durkeim, though less interested in inequality than in the basis for social solidarity, was also concerned that increasing conflict between capital and labor threatened the social order: “the working classes are not really satisfied with the conditions under which they live, but very often accept them only as constrained and forced, since they have not the means to change them” (1964 [1893]). It is curious, then, that a recent “Dictionary of Sociology,” promising definitions for everything from “Anomie to Zeitgeist,” has no entry for “inequality” and the only entry for equality defines it as “Equality of Opportunity” (Jary and Jary 1991). This is very much in keeping with the American sociological view that was developed in the (in)famous “debate on equality” that took place in the American Sociological Review, beginning in the 1940s and continuing into the 1960s (Davis 1942, 1953; Davis and Moore 1945; Tumin 1953, 1963; Wrong 1959). In the continuing attempt to refute Marx and demonstrate, as George Homans sanctimoniously quipped, that the proletariat had no intellectual or moral right to demand his money or his life, American sociologists vigorously attempted to reduce the issues of inequality to social stratification; and then they sought to demonstrate the inevitability – in fact, the benefits – of stratification in any advanced technological social system. Every human quality came to be ranked on a scale: income, wealth, intelligence, education level, status, and so on. The individuals’ relative position on these different dimensions – and mobility in the great social race – then boiled down to “equality of opportunity,” as competitive individuals lined up at the starting blocks. All of this intended to create a science demonstrating that
Western democratic capitalist societies had developed into meritocracies, and that the few examples of illegitimate inequality were on their way to being eliminated.

However, the alternative sociological view, inherited from Marx – that capitalist society was riven with persistent and illegitimate inequalities – refused to die a natural death. Sociologists and political economists continued to deeply examine structural inequalities in social class (Mills 1959; Kolko 1962; Baran and Sweezy 1966; Lundberg 1968). Books like Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* (1962) brought the issue of generations of poverty-stricken Americans to the fore. W. E. B DuBois – who defined the problem of the twentieth century as the problem of the color line – explored the inequalities of caste-like racial hierarchy (1986). While his prolific work was all but ignored by the mainstream Structural Functionalists, in the 1960s it was amplified by many critical sociological studies. Sociological investigations of racism and the effects on African American inequality spurred similar sociologies of Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, American Indians, and other racial/ethnic groups caught in the webs of racial caste and class (Johnson 1934, 1941, 1943; Galarza 1964; Deloria 1969; Brown 1970; Galarza et al. 1970; Blauner 1972; Maldonado-Denis 1972; Piore 1979). Similarly, second-wave feminist sociologists investigated the inequalities experienced by women in the home and in the workforce (Mitchell 1971; Oakley 1972, 1974; Rowbotham 1974; Millman and Kanter 1975; Eisenstein 1979). International scholars like Frantz Fanon (1963), Noam Chomsky (1969), and Paulo Freire (1973) described the deep gulfs of imperialism and international inequalities. All this research sought to name racism, sexism, and neocolonialism and expose the systematic and structural sources of persistent inequality over which the notions of “equality of opportunity” glossed. This book follows in the footsteps of those pioneers.

The following chapters, written at the beginning of a new century, revisit inequalities within the extensive normative and technological changes the world is experiencing. Some developments have resulted in reducing inequalities – in parts of the developed world, at least, inequalities of gender, ability, sexual orientation, and even race have been mitigated but not eliminated. Others have exacerbated and extended inequalities that have plagued humankind for centuries – again, gender, ability, and race but also social class, and increasingly deep divisions between the center and the periphery in global systems. Yet other social and technological developments have created new forms of inequality – digital divides, advances in genetics and biotechnology, environmental racism, and cultural imperialism, for example. The chapters in this volume represent the conversation on social inequalities taking place in the discipline, which is also reflected in national and international political debates. Debates within the field of sociology concerning the influence of technology, identity politics, and globalization enter into the analysis of parenting, childhood, racism, migration, welfare, media, tourism, and health care.1

This volume in the Blackwell Companions to Sociology series provides a state-of-the-art collection of sociological scholarship on inequalities, emphasizing those incorporating race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and nationality. We approached the project by identifying emerging topics and trends that represent the scope and range of theoretical orientations and contemporary emphases in the field of social inequalities. As we began to map out our project, it became obvious that
issues of social inequalities between individuals, families, communities, societies, nation-states, and global regions have become central to research in every field in sociology. Consequently, drawing the boundaries for the specific study of social inequalities remains an ongoing enterprise in sociology. However, from the beginning, we decided against the conventional approach of categorizing social inequalities in terms of specific axes of domination – race, sex, gender, and so forth – an approach that too frequently works against understanding structures and processes that cut across these social constructions. Instead, we encouraged our contributors to focus on the conceptual underpinnings of inequality.

Leading scholars responded to the invitation to write chapters in their area of expertise that represent the scope and range of theoretical orientations, contemporary emphases, and emerging topics in the field of social inequalities. We urged contributors to attend to debates in the field, highlighting developing trends, directions, and interdisciplinary influences in the study of social inequalities. They were similarly encouraged to address the construction, maintenance, and deconstruction of inequalities, as expressed in processes of production, reproduction, and normalization, but also to address the dismantling of inequalities through individual, community, and institutional resistance. We also made two other requests: first, we asked the authors to highlight their own substantial contributions to sociological theory, research, and methodologies on social inequalities; second, we asked them to incorporate detailed literature reviews to help orient readers new to the area. The scholarship on social inequalities presented in this volume accomplishes these many tasks well. In ensemble, it reveals multiple and competing values that surround issues of equity, fairness, and justice, as well as individual rights and obligations.

With these goals shaping the volume, the chapters are organized around five themes that reflect emerging perspectives and approaches that suggest changing as well as consistent ways of thinking about social inequality. Chapters selected for Part I, starting with Charles Tilly’s masterful and succinct historical perspective, provide essential theoretical foundations and conceptual frameworks that influenced and continue to influence the ways that subfields in sociology discuss and debate social inequalities. Part II contains chapters addressing epistemological and methodological concerns in researching social inequality, which range from the development of critical race theory to methodological concerns with measuring homelessness. Part III turns to the crucial mechanisms studied by sociologists at sites where social inequalities are reproduced. The four chapters focus on families in the context of childhood and parenting; communities in terms of migrant networks used in international migration; and the debates surrounding education, which long ago Horace Mann saw as the “great balance wheel” of society and which modern sociologists, from Structural Functionalists like James Coleman (1988 [1966]) to Marxists like Bowles and Gintis (1976), saw as essential to meritocracy. The chapters organized in Part IV deal with the debates over policy responses to inequalities, including government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements: what rights and claims to equity and citizenship can be made by the poor, criminals, disabled persons, sick people, and so on. The final section brings together analyses that are essential in understanding media and technology as sites of both oppression and resistance. The final chapter, an important work by Stephen Pfohl, reexamines theoretical inquiries discussed in Part I.
In Part I the authors provide comprehensive overviews of how inequalities have been conceptualized. Major themes that are addressed in the rest of the volume are given a sound grounding, including: social inclusion and exclusion, citizenship, politics of recognition, agency vs. structural explanations, subordination, domination, and resistance. Charles Tilly (Chapter 1) sets forth the basic premise that contemporary debates on inequalities are evaluated through a historical lens that distinguishes long-term changes as either distinctive or universal. He argues for an analysis that focuses on changes in the control of resources and examines the structures of exploitation and opportunity hoarding in the production, distribution, and consumption of resources. Tilly’s goal is to provide a theoretical foundation for the study of social inequality that is not nation- or region-bound. In Chapter 2, Ronaldo Munck investigates debates on social inclusion and exclusion in the globalization discourse. He examines the complexity of global economic and social integration as articulated by the separate circumstances confronting North and South. He poses questions concerning the opportunities for diverse struggles to eliminate global inequality, and concludes his essay with an assessment of arguments identifying possible paths toward global justice. Sallie Westwood’s chapter amplifies several questions raised in the previous two chapters. Her analysis of the rhetoric of process and rights, the discourse of the nation and modernity, and the spaces of opportunity for democratic struggles, poses a politics of recognition for racialized subjects. Highlighting the establishment of inequality from the point of nationhood, Westwood turns to examining institutional practices that maintain inequality through specific expressions of citizenship. She considers nationalism and resistance occurring in politics of recognition, as demonstrated by Mothers of the Disappeared, gay pride marches, Sydney Mardi Gras, and other collective activities. In the fourth chapter, Ken Plummer further expands the discussion of politics of recognition in exposing inequalities from the perspective of intimate rights. Similar to Charles Tilly’s emphasis on identifying resources, Plummer problematizes the significantly different choices and inequalities that groups within society and across nations experience in the shaping of intimacy. Attending to the matrix of inequalities that includes both processes of social exclusion and the personal experience of inequalities, Plummer conceptualizes “citizenship of equalities” and “citizenship of choices.” He highlights the limitation of choices versus the choices of luxury. In the final chapter in Conceptualizing Inequalities, Barry Adam returns to the question of the relation between subjectivity and social inequality. He provides a comprehensive synthesis of social theory, identifying points of agreement and disputes in theorizing domination, resistance, and subjectivity.

Chapters selected for Part II are diverse in subject matter but share a similar approach in formulating their contribution to the volume. Each of the scholars frames their argument around questions of epistemology and the methods used to research social inequality. Advocating a critical race theory approach in sociology of race relations, Tara J. Yosso and Daniel G. Solórzano’s chapter underscores the failure of traditional US sociological approaches based on Eurocentric versions of history. They argue that such an approach constructs a hierarchy of cultural values that are based on the promise of social mobility through assimilation. In chronicling their own intellectual journey to critical race theory, they provide a brief
overview of the emergence of critical race theory among legal scholars of color, and the later development of LatCrit (see http://personal.law.miami.edu/~fvaldes/latcrit/). Suggesting compatibility with interdisciplinary social and racial justice research, they center racialized and gendered experiences at the center of social inequality analysis. In the next chapter, David Naguib Pellow traces the development of scholarship on environmental racism, environmental inequality, and environmental injustice. He simultaneously chronicles the emergence of the environmental justice movement within communities of color and poor and working-class White communities in the United States. Pellow’s approach to the growing sociological field of environmental racism emphasizes the synergy of innovative methodologies. For instance, he shows how participatory research collaborations can link environmental inequalities to other social issues, including housing, transportation, the workplace, natural resources, immigration, and gender. In Chapter 8, Irene Browne and Joya Misra critique intersectionality as an under-theorized but potentially useful construct. In studying labor markets, they identify themes and questions posed by various conceptions of intersectionality, and the empirical challenges for researchers who would seek to employ the concept; three areas of study are synthesized to indicate methodological problems encountered in the use of quantitative and qualitative methods. In the final chapter in Epistemology, Method, and Inequality, Malcolm Williams uses the research on homelessness to demonstrate the challenges in researching social inequality, particularly hidden and hard-to-reach populations that are considered to be difficult to identify and uncharacteristic of the general population. Starting with the problem of defining homelessness – which has various meanings for particular societies and interest groups – he analyzes the methodological issues confronted by both definitional and enumeration strategies. Williams concludes the chapter with suggestions for alternative ways to conceptualize the inequalities of homelessness and alternative methodological approaches that apply to many other areas of social inequality.

Part III thoroughly examines social inequalities in families, communities, and education. This section includes comprehensive reviews of the literature, and introduces new themes and directions emerging in the sociology of family, immigrant communities, and education. The focus is generally on the reproduction of social inequality in areas that have traditionally been framed as primary sites for socialization, acculturation, and social change. By placing these four chapters together, the domain assumptions embedded in traditional approaches are purged; for example, the significance of studying childhood and parenting separately suggests the importance of these new directions in the study of social inequality. Similarly, the critical assessment of immigrant networks generates new questions about adaptability, social mobility, and social equality. Research on educational achievement and race, long dominated by genetic, cultural, and structural explanations, is related to traditions of studies on the family and immigrants. Julia Wrigley and Joanna Dreby’s chapter incorporates the newly emerging field of the sociology of children, with literature on the impact of economic inequality on children. They suggest productive integrations to capture both structural analyses and the centrality of human choice and agency. Throughout their overview societal change in constructing childhood is evident, as is its effect of increasing inequality among children. In the chapter
on parenting and social inequality, Rachel Grob and Barbara Katz Rothman demonstrate how changing societal structures and ideologies function to produce and maintain social inequality within families as well as between families. They examine the axes of inequality (race, class, gender, sexuality, medicalization, professional expertise, and technology) that frame the choices or limitations in parenting (or not parenting). Included are discussions of conception, pregnancy, birth, and adoption. Grob and Katz Rothman’s discussion of parenting practices in different ethnic communities, and the social networks available in each, makes an excellent segue into Steven J. Gold’s chapter on migrant networks. His review of studies of migrant networks suggests that in the past they have been overly positive, and only recently have gender inequities and other restrictive membership, as well as the unequal allocation of resources, been considered. Gold’s synthesis of the literature on network-based approaches to international migration centers on identifying significant conceptual and methodological problems that require attention to better assess the level of opportunity that networks offer migrant communities. The final chapter in this section examines race, education, and inequality by considering why indicators of educational achievement are significant and how they vary by race. Caroline Hodges Persell and Giselle F. Hendrie’s thorough literature review will be useful to any scholars in this area. They review and evaluate the wide variety of explanations for variation in educational achievement by race and access. They make a major contribution to the literature by proposing a composite-theoretical model that has potential for much more sophisticated explanations for educational variations among racial groups and across nations.

Part IV deals forthrightly with policy responses to inequalities. In Chapter 14, Lynne Haney and Robin Rogers-Dillon critique the uses and abuses of feminist constructions of the independence–dependency debates on welfare. In the past, welfare dependency has been linked to a social pathology approach and “independence” has been employed to express normality and conceptualize the neoliberal connections between state, market, and familial institutions. Haney and Rogers-Dillon draw on their own research conducted in the United States and Hungary to develop the implications of an interdependence model. In the next chapter, Nigel South investigates social inequalities in the criminal justice system through the concept of citizenship. He examines the widening gap between the treatment of rich and poor persons accused of committing crime, but notes that the victims of crime are similarly placed in categories of “deserving” and “undeserving” when they are poor. Synthesizing the literature of both social and income inequality makes it clear that there is no easy causal relationship between poverty and crime; South concludes that it is essential to attend to issues of personal choice and responsibility as well as the social conditions in which citizens encounter the criminal justice system. The reader may find placing a chapter on disability in a section on policy responses to social inequality a bit odd, but Mark Priestley’s overview of disability studies skillfully links the social construction of disability with institutional responses. He also reveals the impact that the international disabled people’s movement has had in shaping academic discourse. Examining disability along dimensions of difference (gender, ethnicity, generation, class, and sexuality), Priestley draws attention to the significance of cultural values in defining disability and imagining solutions that follow. In the chapter on the culture of medicine, Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Cara
James, Byron J. Good, and Anne E. Becker report on their investigation into the ways that health care providers deliver inequitable care. They synthesize the literature on many aspects of medical culture, including health care delivery, medical training, medical decision making, the actions of individuals, and institutional cultures and practices that contribute to disparities in the health status and medical treatment of ethnic and racial populations in the United States. Claudia Bell’s chapter on tourism and social inequality exposes the deep ironies of tourism. Social policies advocate tourism for economic expansion and cultural exchange when, in reality, little economic advantage is gained by Third World host populations, most of whom become a servant class. Drawing on her research on backpacking tourism in Pretoria and Botswana, Bell illustrates how tourism depends on the social construction “otherness.” However, well-heeled Western tourists are cocooned to the point where they rarely ever encounter the “other” outside of circumstances as tightly controlled as spectators of a museum diorama. Drawing on primary research in Indian villages, Tulsi Patel and Navtej Purewal’s chapter rounds out the discussion of policy responses to social inequality. They criticize the origins of the population debate, chronicling theories, government policies, laws, and social movements limiting population growth among targeted populations.

Part V is pivotal in bringing the volume of social inequalities full circle. These chapters identify debates over the role of new media and technologies in maintaining or dismantling inequalities. Processes of reproduction and normalization of inequality, as well as disruption and resistance, lie coiled at the heart of the technologies of global communication. In his chapter, “Selling Images of Inequality: Hollywood Cinema and the Reproduction of Racial and Gender Stereotypes,” Norman K. Denzin offers an overview of cinematic history that identifies key historical moments and structural processes producing and reinforcing negative representations of minorities in the United States. This chapter also contrasts the critical cultural approach and the traditional sociological approaches to the study of cinema. Although in his conclusion Denzin argues that there is a potential for Hollywood cinema to become a progressive force challenging inequality, he is generally making the cultural imperialism case. Taking an entirely different approach to representation, Chris Barker claims that US cultural hegemony has not occurred and argues that television viewers read and decode images based on their own national and ethnic positions. Even if Hollywood offers negative stereotypes, he suggests, they are not consumed uncritically. Denzin attempts to systematically identify historical moments with corresponding versions of class-based American racial representation, thus making visible the ideological underpinnings in popular culture. Barker, on the other hand, counters that “television could act as a cultural and social interpreter and promote an arena of communicative equality and solidarity in which to present diverse values.” Unlike many critical cultural studies scholars in the field, Barker contends that nation-states and language communities have retained control over public and commercial television, and disputes the cultural imperialism thesis from the context of audience research.

Moving away from the globalization of film and television, the next chapter turns to the complex questions of assessing the digital divide as producing and reinforcing social inequality or offering an avenue toward equality. Wenhong Chen and Barry Wellman identify three scenarios that frame the literature; they then suggest
introduction

competing perspectives on the Internet and the question of social inequality: equalization, amplification, and transformation. They conclude by summarizing the conceptual and methodological gaps in the existing literature that contribute to inconclusive and paradoxical findings. The concluding chapter in this section addresses all the major arguments and debates in the previous chapters. In his chapter, “New Global Technologies of Power: Cybernetic Capitalism and Social Inequality,” Stephen Pfohl reasons that a historical analysis is essential to understanding the impact that technology has on social life. He provides a genealogy that traces the links of social power and technology from the onset of Northwestern modernity. Each major technological advancement has transformed our social world. The second half of Pfohl’s chapter constitutes an overview of the global distribution of power entailed in cybernetic control mechanisms and identifies the means of accessing these new forms of power. Responding to the question, “Why have the utopian dreams of cyberneticians been transformed into the global economic nightmares and social injustices depicted by more recent observers?,” he concludes by assessing both cybernetic sites of power and control, as well as subversion, resistance, and transformation.

The dominant themes in this anthology are social inclusion and exclusion – and resistance. Although issues of agency and structure continue to dominate the discussion, throughout the entire volume the sociologists can be seen engaging in common attempts to assess the most promising ways to conceptualize all-embracing social inequalities and allow for comparative research. Far from the twentieth-century grand narratives of stratification theory and equality of opportunity or class analysis and imperialism, these sociological investigations reveal a discipline that is much less narrow, methodologically obsessed, and boundary maintaining than it has been in the past. In defining social inequalities, recognizing the centrality of a society’s values surrounding issues of equity, fairness, and justice, as well as centering individual agency, rights, and obligations, the authors moved to incorporate much that was developed in diverse fields, including: women’s studies, ethnic studies, cultural studies, history, the law, and anthropology/ethnology, to name but a few. Embedded in the synthesis of the literature within the diverse fields of study are social constructions of inequalities that eschew the construction of master narratives in favor of recognizing differences among various populations and distinguishing between inequalities that destroy life or threaten life chances, from those involving quality of life, and others that limit the range of opportunities available. In this work we are given new tools and asked to consider new questions: How shall sociologists conceptualize the different levels of inequality, within and between nations? How can we unpack the particular institutions – family, education, welfare, criminal system, and media – that dominate our lives? Given the multiple layers of oppression and discrimination in such things as intimate citizenship or population policies, what is justice? Where do the rights and obligations of individual, state, and nation converge and diverge? How do our personal and political identities – class position and consciousness, sexual behaviors, abilities, racial, ethnic, national, and citizenship – facilitate or frustrate the mitigation of inequalities? What forms of resistance are even possible given the advanced cybernetic technologies for surveillance and behavior control?
Note

1 Highlighting the socio-spatial dynamic producing new forms of inequality, important debates recognize complex geographical division of labor and markets and point to the new and sharpened inequalities within global cities and across the North South divide (see Bluestone and Harrison 2000; Harvey 2000, 2001, 2003; Sassen 1991, 1999, 2002).

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Further Reading


Part I

Conceptualizing Inequalities