

New Angles on Inequality

Katherine S. Newman

Abstract: The trenchant essays in this volume pose two critical questions with respect to inequality: First, what explains the eruption of nationalist, xenophobic, and far-right politics and the ability of extremists to gain a toehold in the political arena that is greater than at any time since World War II? Second, how did the social distance between the haves and have-nots harden into geographic separation that makes it increasingly difficult for those attempting to secure jobs, housing, and mobility-ensuring schools to break through? The answers are insightful and unsettling, particularly when the conversation turns to an action agenda. Every move in the direction of alternatives is fraught because the histories that brought each group of victims to occupy their uncomfortable niche in the stratification order excludes some who should be included or ignores a difference that matters in favor of principles of equal treatment.

KATHERINE S. NEWMAN, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2011, is the Torrey Little Professor of Sociology and the Interim Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts, Boston. She is the author of fourteen books, including *Downhill from Here: Retirement Insecurity in the Age of Inequality* (2019), *Reskilling America: Learning to Labor in the Twenty-First Century* (2016), and *After Freedom: The Rise of the Post-Apartheid Generation in Democratic South Africa* (2014).

The past twenty years have seen an explosion of interest in the causes, consequences, and remedies for inequality across the entire spectrum of the social sciences. Political scientists, sociologists, social psychologists, decision scientists, education researchers, public health scholars, and a host of others have recognized that throughout the developed and, even more so, the developing world, the specter of inequality is threatening the internal stability of nations, propelling millions to leave their homes in search of refuge from brutal wars and natural disasters that are themselves symptoms of inequality, and upending the post-World War II international order.

Attention to inequality, which was something of a new enterprise as recently as the millennium, is flowering in every corner of academia. Perhaps even more important, it has become a leitmotif, if

not an animating force, in political campaigns. Mayor Bill de Blasio was perhaps the first to sound this theme, and his “tale of two cities” found a receptive audience among New York City voters. Bernie Sanders was not far behind. And Elizabeth Warren has made the ravages of inequality – and the imperative to reign in elites who have profited from it – the cornerstone of her presidential bid.

With this much firepower trained on the problem, one could be forgiven for thinking that we have covered our bases. This collection of essays tells us that nothing could be further from the truth. There are still deeply rooted problems to be explored and the social sciences remain essential to uncovering and explaining what we must understand if we are to speak conclusively to the damage done by unchecked power and resources accumulating in the hands of the few, while displacement, rejection, and economic insecurity increasingly plague the many.

The essays in this issue of *Dædalus* come at the problem from a variety of angles, but two questions underlie them. First, how should we understand the growing vitriol aimed at those on the losing end of the trend toward inequality, especially immigrants and minorities? What explains the eruption of nationalist, xenophobic, and far-right politics and the ability of these extremists to gain a toehold in the political arena that is greater than at any time since World War II? Two essays in this volume, “Membership without Social Citizenship? Deservingness & Redistribution as Grounds for Equality” by Irene Bloemraad, Will Kymlicka, Michèle Lamont, and Leanne Son Hing and “Failure to Respond to Rising Income Inequality: Processes That Legitimize Growing Disparities” by Leanne Son Hing, Anne Wilson, Peter Gourevitch, Jaslyn English, and Parco Sin, can be considered together along these lines.¹

Second, what is the relationship between the spatial distribution of opportunity and the policies that undergird or ameliorate increasing segregation? How did the social distance between the haves and have-nots harden into geographic separation that makes it increasingly difficult for those attempting to secure jobs, housing, and mobility-ensuring schools to break through? “The Rise of Opportunity Markets: How Did It Happen & What Can We Do?” by David Grusky, Peter Hall, and Hazel Markus and “‘Superstar Cities’ & the Generation of Durable Inequality” by Patrick Le Galès and Paul Pierson train our attention on the geography of inequality and warn against thinking of these trends as natural or inevitable rather than political. Power increasingly determines how advantage will accrue within particular cities, neighborhoods, and communities.²

Finally, “The Difficulties of Combating Inequality in Time” by Jane Jenson, Francesca Polletta, and Paige Raibmon reminds us how hard it is to reach a consensus – even among like-minded progressives – about whether and how these trends in inequality should be reversed or resisted.³ Every move in the direction of alternatives excludes some “victims” who should be included or ignores a difference that matters in favor of principles of equal treatment.

The Bloemraad and Son Hing essays agree on one key observation: exclusion is growing everywhere in the Western world. For the former, this is an irony because for decades, the authors argue, most countries have been migrating toward a more inclusive society. For the latter, this is no surprise. We have been entirely too optimistic about the relationship between the perception of inequality and the rejection of it. Instead there is growing evidence of acceptance

and justification, undergirded by exactly the “othering” stance identified by Bloemraad and her colleagues.

“Membership without Social Citizenship” opens with an apparent paradox. Barriers to racial and ethnic intermarriage have been falling in Europe and the United States, and naturalization policies increasingly embrace the foreign born who can now claim citizenship in countries from which they were formerly excluded for life. At the same time, welfare chauvinism – the view that safety nets are legitimate for insiders but not for “others” deemed unworthy – is growing. From one perspective, those others “r us.” From another, their undeserving status means they will never truly “be us,” regardless of their citizenship or their legal rights. This is characterized as a jarring contradiction.

A case can be made that the trend toward inclusion identified by Bloemraad and her colleagues came to a near complete stop in the last decade, especially in Western Europe. They note this in passing, with a reference to a “halt” in 2008. But from my perspective, not enough is made of this reversal. As the storm over illegal immigration grew – exacerbated by accounts of thousands of Africans drowning in the Mediterranean and “caravans” of migrants camping outside the entrance to the Channel Tunnel – the right-wing turn we have seen in the rise of Victor Orban in Hungary, the rejection of Angela Merkel’s pro-immigration policy in Germany, the growth of extremism in Poland, and the success of the “Leave” movement in England has brought us full circle back to sentiments and electoral victories not seen since World War II. Donald Trump’s election on the backs of demonized migrants cemented the participation of the United States in this unholy xenophobia. There is likely more to come in Venezuela and elsewhere.

In some respects, “Membership without Citizenship” catches this history in midstream. It points quite legitimately to the progressive sentiments underlying birth-based citizenship and naturalization and rising rates of intermarriage and focuses on the growth of welfare chauvinism as a growing reaction that reinforces boundaries of “us” and “them.” Post 2008, though, I believe it is fair to say that reactionary elements have grown so strong and politically successful that the universalist thrust is nearly dead in the water, or at least very compromised. Closing borders, restricting legal immigration, overthrowing decades-long policies designed to incorporate immigrants, ordering rescue boats to leave refugees to drown in the Mediterranean, and similarly harsh measures in the United States (like separating children from families, throwing asylum seekers into detention) strike me as a nearly fatal blow to the progressive and inclusive trends of the past. This is more devastating than “deservingness,” for that could always discover exceptions and hence forms of inclusion. Nativism, right-wing populism, and nationalism strike me as incompatible with the relativism implied by a “deserving” paradigm. They are extreme illustrations of political scientist Robert Putnam’s distressing observations about the role of diversity in the growth of intolerance, conclusions these authors believe are premature, but strike me as on point in this era.

It would be instructive for Bloemraad and her coauthors to consider what this right-wing surge means in their theoretical universe. Can it be accommodated by their model? Or do we need some additional sociological studies of the far right (and its success) to come to grips with these developments?

Son Hing and her colleagues have an explanation for these developments that is not particularly comforting: the

greater inequality becomes, the more that forces of segregation (in media consumption and residential location) create the conditions of ignorance or blindness to its extent, and tendencies toward “system justification” sustain acceptance of its pernicious distributional consequences. On this account, we have been entirely too optimistic and there is no paradox. Rising inequality actually triggers psychological responses that justify and applaud outcomes that are wildly disparate because they are seen as part of the natural order and critical to motivation for self-help and success. Redistribution, the remedy espoused by progressives when reckoning with inequality, here generates a response that suggests redistribution will weaken a society, dampen the necessary energy for forward motion, and create dependency where there should be resilience.

“Failure to Respond to Rising Income Inequality” argues that we have completely misunderstood the psychological mechanisms triggered by a recognition of inequality. The more inequality grows, the more it is rationalized and legitimated. What follows then is not the desire to help or support those who are on the receiving end, but instead “prejudice toward the poor and more conflictual intergroup relations.”⁴ Son Hing’s work helps us understand why this would be particularly pronounced among the working class, who are uncomfortably vulnerable but psychologically inclined to distance themselves from those who are truly disadvantaged.

This essay makes it clear that the ability of most survey respondents to assess existing levels of inequality is weak at best. Respondents typically underestimate inequity, particularly by failing to understand how wealthy those at the top of the income distribution actually are. The concentration of media power in the hands of

moguls like Rupert Murdoch, who have an interest in masking this issue, actively retards social awareness of inequality. This blindness, Son Hing argues, is most pronounced in countries with the highest actual levels of inequality.

Most distressing of all the findings in this essay is that the more inequality, the more strongly subjects endorse the notion that inequality is desirable and, over time, this inclination grows as the pattern of distribution comes to be seen as normative. The power of “belief in a just world” and “system justification” underwrite these perspectives. For people to reject the legitimacy of what they perceive seems to be too destabilizing and the reversion to visions of normalcy is comforting.

Disturbing as it may seem, this argument helps us to understand how people now living under a government like Hungary’s, which is demonizing immigrants and harkening back to the darkest days of the Nazi regime, would come to accept extremism as something quite different: the status quo. At the same time, Son Hing’s essay does not help us understand how that kind of worldview can flip on its head and become a source of popular criticism. History is full of such reversals, of collective revulsion for what was once seen as the norm. In countries like Germany, entire generations followed World War II with blistering critiques of what their parents and grandparents had contributed to murderous fascism. The Roosevelt era saw a public embrace of redistribution, public employment, social security, and a host of other policy moves that would have been unthinkable only a few years before. How did those reversals come to pass? And how does the framework in Son Hing’s essay help us understand that social history? I would argue it is better at accounting for the acceptance of inequality than it is at explaining those periods when the opposite was in vogue.

If the first two essays focus on psychological processes of determining deservingness and justification for inequality, the second two are united by a concern for the spatial organization of inequality and the ways in which segregation translates into social immobility that places those at the bottom ever farther from the possibilities of upward mobility in the form of employment, marriage prospects, and the accumulation of wealth.

They argue that spatial segregation and all that follows in the way of sociological consequences is a creature of politics and policy. These are not “naturally occurring” forms of inequality, however much they may be self-reinforcing. They happen when those with power are able to bend public investment, zoning, lending policies, inheritance taxes, public expenditures in education, transportation, and the like to their advantage. Accordingly, the spatial sorting process either accelerates where elites have been particularly influential or is dampened by progressive policies that mitigate capital accumulation.

Le Galès and Pierson provide a fascinating account of the evolution of “spatial polarization” in the “superstar cities” of London, Paris, New York, and San Francisco. Of course, it has not gone unnoticed that housing prices are astronomical in at least three of these four examples – Paris being somewhat less costly – as the concentration of finance capital, lucrative tech industries, and the cultural amenities that appeal to well-heeled consumers proceeds apace. With this agglomeration of wealth comes social sorting, bringing well-educated women and men of marriageable age into proximity with one another, promoting assortative mating that yields new cycles of class stratification.

That Paris has remained relatively immune to this pattern (even as prices have

increased) is a testimony to French social policies that support social housing and rental sectors. Home ownership is lower in France than in the neoliberal economies where housing is a critical aspect of the safety net, given weaker welfare policies. London under Margaret Thatcher sold off much of its council housing, and in a nod to the working class, enabled a single generation to benefit from these sales, but locked out succeeding generations from the ability to live in England’s capital city at all.

New York and San Francisco, both of which have become stratospherically expensive (and hence a haven for international investors looking to park their wealth), are embedded in policy regimes that enable intergenerational transfers of wealth that intensify class stratification. Thus, while adult children of the very rich can often count on their parents enabling the accumulation process in the next generation, those who chose their parents poorly will find themselves locked out of the sweepstakes, facing high prices, lower wages, and costly rents.

These dynamics lead to geographic immobility because the costs of moving to a high opportunity zone are prohibitive, which in turn imposes limits on occupational and earnings opportunities. Even in an era of electronic communication, physical proximity matters, and not just for dating. It opens and closes doors of all kinds.

While I agree with virtually all of these observations, I also reluctantly acknowledge that market dynamics can (and do seem to be) intervening in the concentration of opportunity. The tech giants that were once confined to Silicon Valley are spreading out. Their employees cannot afford and do not want to indenture themselves to pay for exorbitant real estate. As a result, we see states like Texas and Utah jump into the high-tech act.

Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh becomes a first-class engineering school and it catalyzes the development of a once deindustrialized city and the attraction of a tech class that does not want to pay Bay Area prices. Amazon decides to hold a contest for its second headquarters and it steadfastly avoids some likely (but high-priced) prospects like Boston and suburban Virginia. Those communities fear the “Seattle-ization” of their communities, but for now we have an engine of economic prosperity plunked down in a less likely spot because they were looking to avoid precisely the kind of segregated wealth that Le Galès and Pierson point to.

It is one of the ironies of contemporary inequality that it is intertwined with forms of meritocracy. As “The Rise of Opportunity Markets” argues, it is no longer sufficient for the wealthy simply to pass on material advantages to their children. The gates of Harvard and Stanford do not swing open as easily for the scions of rich families as they once did. Instead, children of privilege must compete for entry. Even though one can point to the legacy admissions process as a “thumb on the scale,” on the whole it would be regarded as illegitimate to admit a low scoring, poorly performing freshman from a wealthy family unless there was some compensating talent (an extraordinary athlete, for example). Outside of those examples, Grusky and his colleagues argue, the rich must now pass through a similar sifting process as the rest. Nothing testifies more keenly to the pressures this produces than the college admissions scandal that brought to light the “pay to play” schemes of wealthy parents who bribed university coaches at Yale, Stanford, and, most notoriously, the University of Southern California to admit children who did not participate in the sports in question.

For those who stick by the rules, the scramble to access the proving grounds that will yield necessary accomplishments (from high test scores, to opportunities to demonstrate leadership in clubs or contests, to AP courses or musical training) is coveted. It is also spatially confined to areas that can afford to pay for it, which in turn means that the ability to accumulate this kind of intellectual capital is not randomly distributed. It is part and parcel of a system of opportunity markets, underwritten by an educational system paid for by local real estate taxes.

Recognizing that this becomes an exercise in inequity, universities have built systems of financial aid and affirmative action that are designed to at least partially level the playing field. Grusky and his colleagues argue that this is generally too little, too late. Accumulated advantage is simply too hard to compete against for those who come from less privileged neighborhoods. We do not enable parents to borrow money for high-quality childcare to create a better shot at the next stage of educational competition. We simply correct for inequality at the back end and hope the diamonds in the rough somehow get noticed.

They argue instead that we should adopt variations on the theme of the “Texas 10 percent” policy, admitting students who are at the top of each of the ten deciles (or more) of the American income distribution. Whether this is a workable approach or not, the fact that it seems plausible owes a great deal to the interventionist culture that has grown up alongside massive stratification and inequality. As a society, we are clearly not comfortable with the opportunity markets they point to and hence we intervene to reset the competition. Even if not completely effective, these efforts have made high-prestige universities far more accessible to low-income and minority

students than they ever were in the past. It may be “too late” for some, possibly even for millions. But it is also “just in time” for millions more who have benefited from our inadequate, but not negligible, attempts to correct for hoarding, zoning, educational inequality, and the like.

The final essay in this remarkable volume takes a more philosophical and comparative approach, looking at three case studies in which progressives have struggled to define who should be treated through the lens of equality and who should be treated differently in order to achieve equalities of outcome. In each instance, well-meaning advocates initially argue for treating the disadvantaged just the same as everyone else as a means of avoiding discrimination, and are brought up short thereafter when it becomes obvious that the traces of oppression have created such profound differences that equal treatment is not enough. Instead, some kind of special dispensation is necessary in order to create the conditions of fair competition.

Yet this very recognition runs the risk of “essentializing” the parties in question. If women need time off from work because they are uniquely able to breastfeed their infants, then formal equivalence will never be enough. Instead, difference must be recognized in order to truly level that playing field. If African Americans appear to react differently to a medication than whites, personalized medicine may – all at once – create a better treatment regime and call into question a sacred assumption: that race is not biological but social. As the authors quote one European feminist: “equal treatment of unequals only reproduce[s] the existing inequality.”⁵

The authors struggle, as we all do, with figuring out how to justify the ends we

know we are seeking. We want equality of outcome and oscillate over whether that end can be pursued without invoking means that point away from similarity and toward difference. The historical examples though do seem to point toward a consensus that the outcome is really what a just society looks to produce. Imperfect means of arriving at that end may be the price we pay for that, and caution is clearly warranted lest those means turn out to have pernicious consequences of their own.

If personalized medicine reifies the meaning of race, turning it into a hardened reality that progressives reject, then we must still find a way to acknowledge the reality that the history of disadvantage leaves a physical trace. Environment matters. Stress accumulates and leaves a mark in physical differences. The production of biological difference is not necessarily testimony to genetic endowments; it may be instead the mark of stress, as public health researcher Arlene Geronimus instructed us long ago in her pioneering work on accelerated aging among young black women.

I began this commentary by noting that inequality has been a hot topic now for more than twenty years. It is hard to imagine an interdisciplinary field of this kind remaining for so long a source of such creative social science. Yet as these essays make clear, there is still a great deal left to understand about the causes, consequences, and remedies of this striking feature of the modern era. Our fields lost two giants in the study of inequality in the last year: sociologists Devah Pager and Eric Olin Wright. Each of them would have agreed that these essays add a great deal to our understanding of inequality and that there nevertheless is a very long way to go before we have exhausted the topic.

- ¹ Irene Bloemraad, Will Kymlicka, Michèle Lamont, and Leanne S. Son Hing, “Membership without Social Citizenship? Deservingness & Redistribution as Grounds for Equality,” *Dædalus* 148 (3) (Summer 2019); and Leanne S. Son Hing, Anne E. Wilson, Peter Gourevitch, Jaslyn English, and Parco Sin, “Failure to Respond to Rising Income Inequality: Processes That Legitimize Growing Disparities,” *Dædalus* 148 (3) (Summer 2019).
- ² David B. Grusky, Peter A. Hall, and Hazel Rose Markus, “The Rise of Opportunity Markets: How Did It Happen & What Can We Do?” *Dædalus* 148 (3) (Summer 2019); and Patrick Le Galès and Paul Pierson, “‘Superstar Cities’ & the Generation of Durable Inequality,” *Dædalus* 148 (3) (Summer 2019).
- ³ Jane Jenson, Francesca Polletta, and Paige Raibmon, “The Difficulties of Combatting Inequality in Time,” *Dædalus* 148 (3) (Summer 2019).
- ⁴ Son Hing et al., “Failure to Respond to Rising Income Inequality,” 110.
- ⁵ Jenson et al., “The Difficulties of Combatting Inequality in Time,” 146.