Principles of Social Inequality

Equality has been a pervasive though not universal demand in human societies. Inequality has been a universal fact of human societies with a written language, as well as a fact of several nonliterate societies. In the hope of shedding light on the apparent paradox I shall review here the main principles that have governed and continue to govern inequality in human societies. Much writing on this topic has taken the form of pleas and arguments on behalf of equality combined with attacks on some form of inequality. This essay instead represents a sustained effort to explain what exists and what has existed. Here “principles” refers to the varied criteria according to which human societies judge people to be unequal and the reasons why such criteria exist and change. We shall be looking for causes and results rather than ethical justifications for inequality or ethical attacks on it.

The forms of inequality discussed here have little or nothing to do with individual qualities such as bravery in a warrior, skill in the hunter, sexual attractiveness in the young girl, and similar instances. By themselves whatever advantages such distinctions confer on an individual usually disappear with the death of that individual, even though these distinctions may be significant for the group during that person’s lifetime. Such distinctions are not institutionalized and passed along to the next generation. They are not as such the basis of a system of social classes, though the upper classes usually claim to possess more socially desirable qualities than the lower classes. Our interest here is in institutionally created and supported forms of inequality.
II

We may begin the concrete analysis of inequality with a brief discussion of two principles, age and sex. To the best of my limited knowledge every known human society draws distinctions along these two axes. Their universality distinguishes them from the sources of inequality in the more complex societies, sometimes also referred to as high cultures, to be discussed shortly. In these latter cultures inequality arises from internally generated social causes usually mingled with elements of force and fraud derived from such things as a history of conquest.

There is a wide range of variation in the nature and meaning of social distinctions according to age and sex. Among highly mobile peoples living close to the margin of existence, old people may not be able to keep up on a day’s march. Among such people there is the custom of killing the old. Our own society belongs near the opposite end of the spectrum. Demographically we produce more and more old people, and devote more and more resources to taking care of them. That happens because the old are fairly well organized politically. Even our society’s greater resources do not provide enough humane care, as defined by our society, for all old people who need it. Therefore it is an open question whether the “primitive” killing of the old causes more or less suffering than the “care” provided—and not provided—in our society.

Allocations and treatment by sex may display a somewhat smaller range of variation than those by age. Just about everywhere the tasks that require steadiness and application, without huge bursts of strength, have fallen to women. As a group they have played hardly any role in politics, though there have been a scattering of talented female rulers and a few vicious ones. Nor do women have much to display in the way of leadership and attainments in warfare, the economy, and even religions. Feminists have yet to make a persuasive contrary case. Among historians and social scientists there is not a great deal of dispute about the facts of widespread female subordination. Disagreements begin with attempts to assess the extent to which the inequalities are due to biological factors or are historically determined (and therefore subject to changing and changeable social and historical causes). This argument has been going on as long as the present writer can remember without any sign of emerging agreement. As it would be absurd to try to resolve the issue here, I shall confine myself to a few brief comments that apply especially to the contemporary situation in advanced industrial countries.

Motherhood is a special social role confined to women. It has both
biological and social aspects, especially in the rearing of children. This special role continues to exist in modern societies where the advantages of superior physical strength, the source of male superiority in the past, have greatly diminished. (The advantages have by no means altogether disappeared, as one can notice from watching the work of carpenters, plumbers, mechanics, and other similar trades.) Motherhood takes a woman out of the labor force for a brief period of time before and immediately after the birth of a child. This experience adds an obligation that consumes a great deal of time and energy. Many women find the task of continuing to work while raising a child quite overwhelming. Even in economically advanced societies this special burden is liable to remain a heavy tax on female energies and capacities for an indefinite future. The burden can be somewhat reduced by a cooperative and understanding husband, and a great deal more by hiring other women, either as individual nurses, domestic servants or as the staff of collective organizations such as day care centers, to take the burden off the mother’s shoulders. But hiring help means that well-to-do women put the burden of child-care on the shoulders of the less well-to-do. That is the case no matter who pays for this care. For women as a whole the burden is still there and reduces their prospects of accomplishment in all fields of endeavor. For the foreseeable future there appears to be no prospect of fundamental change in this situation.

III

Social inequalities based on age and sex crystallize around physiological inequalities. They are the main foci of inequality in simple nonliterate societies. Though these two foci continue to have effect in complex literate societies, other and more strictly social and historical causes of inequality overshadow them by far.

Civilized or complex societies (i.e., those with a written language and based initially on agriculture, the production of artisans, trade, and, as a rule, some predatory activities ranging from piracy to large scale warfare) grant very unequal rewards to the series of social activities that supply their material and spiritual requirements. As human societies evolved from pre-industrial civilizations to our present electronic-nuclear one, the number and types of these activities have greatly increased. If the nuclear age does not turn out to be the last phase of human civilization, the increase can be expected to continue. Despite this growing complexity it is possible
to construct a rough and ready classification of five major types of social activities that applies to both pre-industrial agrarian societies and modern industrial ones.

The first type of social activity is governing or control over people. By that I mean primarily social coordination or seeing to it that socially necessary tasks are carried out on time and in the proper relation to each other. In my judgment social coordination is the most important and most difficult task facing human societies. Nearly any human undertaking that needs a considerable number of people to execute it requires coordination through command-obedience relationships. (We shall consider exceptions shortly.) These relationships can at times be soft and gentle and even pseudo-egalitarian, as in a large business firm where office employees may use first names in talking with the firm’s officers. Nevertheless everyone in the firm knows who the bosses are. In a military or police organization, as well as some forms of ecclesiastical organizations such as the Catholic Church, the command-obedience relationships are clear, obvious, and frequently painful to subordinates. Gentleness can of course occur as well in these strictly hierarchical organizations on occasion, though it is blatantly manipulative.

The point that requires emphasis is that, outside a few small nonliterate societies, social coordination through command-obedience relationships—masked and gentle, or strict and hierarchical—is pervasive throughout human history. It is the way to get things done that have to be done in societies with a recorded history. In that sense it has a powerful rational component. In that sense too the modern romantic complaint against manipulative social behavior goes much too far. Even the simplest conversation is manipulative insofar as it is an attempt to persuade someone to think or do something.

To emphasize the rational and benign aspects of command-obedience relationships and the inequality that arises from them does not, or at least should not, imply neglect of the cruel aspects of governing. Force and fraud have certainly been major themes in human history. Organized governments may have been the worst offenders because they have had the most power to inflict damage on other people. Yet the situation has frequently been even worse whenever and wherever the formal government has broken down or been seriously weakened. Europe’s Dark Ages as reported by Gregory of Tours have their parallels in both China and India during periods of weak rule.

Force and fraud are of course not identical. Still they are both ways of
taking goods and services from one set of people and handing them over to someone else without adding anything to the general social product. For these reasons social inequality based on force and fraud is anything but rational and socially benign. Since so much of inequality in the course of history has been based on both force and fraud, it is hardly surprising that thoughtful people have decided we ought to dispense with rulers and inequality altogether. These neo-anarchists forget that the situation has become even worse without government, as well as the necessity for rational authority for socially benign purposes.

One cannot discuss social coordination without mentioning control over the instruments of violence—armies, navies, and, since the nineteenth century in Europe, the police—as sources and upholders of inequality. It is worth drawing attention to the fact that this is by no means an exclusively modern situation. In the Roman Empire first the praetorian guard and later the provincial armies came to dominate in the choice of emperor. On the other hand the empire had little or nothing in the way of domestic police. Only recently has there come to be scholarly interest in the far-reaching political consequences of changes in the organization of European armies during the late Middle Ages and early modern times. Brian Downing sees such changes, correctly I believe, as the major determinant of dictatorial and democratic outcomes in the twentieth century. Systematic police terror on a worldwide scale under fascism and communism is of course an achievement of twentieth-century civilization. Yet after the deaths of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, signs appeared that this achievement was becoming historically obsolete.

The second social function is control, or perhaps attempted control, over the unexpected, the unpredictable and threatening. For millennia this was the task of the priest. Frequently but not always the priest also upheld and sanctioned public morality. That too was a way of warding off danger from the unknown. By and large, the ruler, flanked by the military and the priesthood, dominated pre-industrial societies.

Ever since the seventeenth century, scientific and secular explanations have been pressing religious ones into the background. The newer explanations and techniques may have been harder for ordinary people to understand. But they work better. Since the end of the Second World War there have been increasing signs of a reversal of this trend toward secular rationality. Natural scientists and doctors have lost some authority and prestige. Correspondingly there has been an increase in the visibility and appeal of the antirationalist forms of religion.
The fourth social function is the production and distribution of goods and services. From the standpoint of the study of inequality two aspects deserve consideration.

First, the dominant groups discussed so far—royal officials and the upper ranks of the priesthood and the military—do not engage directly in the production of food and other material goods. Instead the subordinate classes have to generate an economic surplus that the dominant classes appropriate for their own use including the creation and consumption of high culture. (The actual creation of high culture is often done by individuals from lower strata at the behest of those with high status.) The ways in which the dominant strata “pump out” a surplus, to use the Marxist expression, varies considerably over time and place. Taxes in kind and in cash along with legally required labor services constitute the central obligations. For historians and social scientists the character of the pumping out process offers a major key to understanding any specific society, especially its system of inequality. The pumping out process reveals how inequality works: who gains, who loses and why.

In the second place, within the system of production and distribution there often exist important forms of coordination without authority. Individuals make and distribute goods and services without being ordered to do so. We can distinguish two forms of nonhierarchical distribution. One is simply custom, most noticeable in nonliterate societies where it often displays egalitarian traits. The Russian mir is an instance from a literate society. Custom, however, may also be part of a hierarchical society, as in the case of the peasants’ feudal dues to their overlord. The other form is the market.

In modern societies the market, where it is allowed to work freely, is a remarkable form of nonhierarchical coordination. Unlike custom it can be completely impersonal. Responding only to the cues of price, individuals can decide what to produce, how to combine labor and capital in production, how many people will receive the goods, and where. The general result of market economics on the other hand is far from egalitarian. An economist, whose name I can no longer recall, once remarked that the market faithfully reproduces all the injustices in the prevailing society. More than that, it seems that in a market society the rich do get richer and the poor get poorer. Advantages beget more advantages on one side of an exchange relationship, and the converse is also true. But the only alternative to the market in modern societies is a bureaucratic command economy, which is often much worse both economically and politically.
Fortunately in the domain of actual practice the choice is not so stark as one between a free market and a command economy. Both socialist and capitalist economies permit market prices in some sectors of the economy and the administrative controls over prices and production in other sectors. Both egalitarian-ethical ideals and other political ideals, such as a general social necessity or the security and grandeur of the state continue to serve as justifications for removing some economic activities from the control of the market. Mixed economies are subject to some internal tensions because the free market and administratively controlled areas compete with each other. Popular dissatisfaction with the workings of the market lead to demands for political control and vice versa. However, all these societies work after a fashion. In any case, no civilized society has yet come anywhere near satisfying everybody.

The pumping out of an economic surplus has obvious inegalitarian consequences even in those rare cases where the surplus serves primarily to support and create peace, order, and culture. Economic institutions without authority, such as the rare cases of factories run mainly by the workers, have at times noticeable egalitarian consequences. The case of the market is ambiguous.

Now we may turn to the division of labor, an aspect of economic production in all known societies, that is widely held to be a major source of social inequality and in all likelihood a permanent one. The division of labor reflects a society’s historically created level of technology. In very simple nonliterate societies just about everybody can do just about everything, even if not equally well. Thus there is rough equality. Yet even in nonliterate societies there is always some division of labor by age and sex. In modern industrial societies, there is, in contrast to nonliterate ones (and even primarily agrarian ones), a huge number of full time-activities with a high level of specialization. It is out of the question for any one person to do everything. At first glance one might wonder why this new situation would produce inequality. Why should some occupations earn a great deal more than others? Part of the answer is that some activities are much more in demand than others. The services of a surgeon who can save your life are in greater demand than those of the man who takes the trash away from your house.

This explanation is true as far as it goes. But it is a deceptive oversimplification. There are quite a few skills that are hard to acquire, such as the writing of good sonnets, for which there is only a small demand and hence a minimal reward, at least in modern American society. To understand social demand we have to understand a society’s prestige sys-
tem and its ranking of different forms of human activities. We have already had occasion to notice certain broad similarities on this score. High governing officials, military officers, priests, and scientists (the latter less successfully than priests) can as a rule claim high positions of authority and prestige.

Sooner or later great wealth seems able to make its way up there too. Yet wealth as such is hardly decisive in creating the character of an elite. One need only contrast the hard-riding, hard-drinking gentlemen of eighteenth-century England with their contemporaries, the scholar officials of Imperial China, devoted to books and painting. It is fairly obvious that human societies develop collective preferences and systems of prestige that have a powerful influence on the members of that society. So far as I can see there is no useful general formula that will explain the variety of such social preferences. There are reasons for suspecting that they may reflect the outcome of earlier struggles for social recognition.

As crystallizations of past experience with a slightly contemptuous attitude toward novelty—think of the cavalry officer’s attitude toward tanks—these prestige systems can be maladaptive. They can be maladaptive for other than historical reasons as well. It is impossible to account for the extremely high prestige and earnings of American stars in sports and entertainment on the basis of their contribution to social welfare or the common good, no matter how these terms are defined. A great many people want to see and hear these stars, and that is all there is to it. To sum up, social demand is important in creating and sustaining social inequality. But social demand itself changes historically and is often impossible to defend on objective grounds.

The same is obviously true of social reproduction, the last major category. Social reproduction refers to the reproduction of any given social order from one generation to the next. For the most part this reproduction takes place through the family and, especially in advanced industrial societies, also through formal and informal systems of indoctrination and education, such as peer groups, gangs, and to a lesser extent schools. The arrangements themselves vary widely from society to society and in effectiveness. Still it is probably correct to say that in the course of social reproduction there is more emphasis on indoctrination, especially indoctrination in grounds for accepting the prevailing system of inequality, than on the transmission of technical knowledge and intellectual skills. Indeed, it may not be too cynical to suggest that in modern societies a major unacknowledged purpose of formal education is to inhibit too wide a
dissemination of accurate knowledge about the workings of one's own society. Partly for this reason youngsters in contemporary Western society, and perhaps elsewhere, think they are getting the "straight goods" from peer groups or selected older informants. Anything sanctioned by the older generation arouses suspicion among many adolescents. In fact, of course, indoctrination by the peer group and selected elder heroes is equally misleading, even if it seems less dull.

Inequality is widespread in the area of social reproduction. There is the authority of the father over the household and the parents over the children as well as the teacher over the students. In Europe and the United States all these forms of authority have been eroding over the past generation. There is a limit to such erosion beyond which widespread social disorder and collapse could set in. That, however, is probably less of a danger than a widespread takeover by semifascist forces of order and morality to prevent just such a collapse.

Although there are command-obedience relationships and "short" hierarchies with a few steps in the area of social reproduction, there is no single hierarchy culminating in a position near the top of the social pyramid as there often is in the case of the military, the police, and the priesthood. Only modern totalitarian dictatorships with their ministries of culture, propaganda, and education have attempted this type of top to bottom control. Even these dictatorships in practice left the family to work out the routines of daily life within a setting of a few incentives and penalties. For instance there were rewards for having children, or there were efforts to draw women into the labor force. But beyond the school curriculum there was little in the way of detailed orders from above.

At this point it is apparent that hierarchies form in connection with the working of each social function and thereby create forms of social inequality. These hierarchies arise and are sustained in two analytically distinct ways. One is by force and fraud, as in the case of a slave society that is the result of conquest. There the mechanisms of social coordination and the division of labor are forced upon the underlying slave population. The other way hierarchies can arise is a spontaneous one. In such cases individuals discover that command-obedience relationships and a division of labor are necessary to accomplish a series of socially indispensable and agreed upon tasks. In the real world, nearly all systems of social inequality have both spontaneous and compulsory features in varying amounts.

The image of social inequality presented here is not the traditional one of castes and or classes superimposed on one another in the form of a
layer cake. (Since the top layer is small, the layer cake looks like a pyramid in some expositions. Or it may look like a diamond if the bottom class is also thought to be rather small.) Instead this presentation looks like a series of five ladders, corresponding to the five social functions, placed against a wall. The ladders are not equal in height. The one labeled government is generally the longest; the one labeled social reproduction the shortest. Men on the very top rungs of the governmental ladder ordinarily exercise some control or influence over affairs in all the other ladders (economic, religious, etc.). But from time to time the military and even the priesthood may become the dominant element in a society, replacing other rulers.

Each rung in each ladder represents a rank in a specific social hierarchy. In some societies it is possible for an energetic and ambitious individual to work his or, more rarely, her way to the top by changing ladders, moving from an economic ladder to a military or political one. In a rigid caste system on the other hand such a possibility does not exist, at least not in theory. Everyone is expected to stay put and occupy only the few ranks available for a particular caste.

This representation certainly acknowledges the existence of classes and castes. Individuals occupying roughly the same rank in all four social functions belong to the same social class or caste. But I hold that the separate vertical divisions reveal more about social inequality than do the concepts class and caste. The metaphor of ladders and ranks calls attention to the fact that social inequality has analytically distinguishable forms that overlap in the real life of many societies: inequalities of power, authority, wealth (including income), and prestige. It is relatively easy to convert power into authority, wealth, income, and finally prestige. It is much more difficult to convert in the reverse direction, beginning with prestige and working up to power. By itself prestige carries little weight. To last, it needs the support of some other form of inequality. With this exposition I also reject any notion that trends and social relationships in the economy always determine what happens in other parts of the social order. Often the lines of causation have run in the opposite direction. Political, military, and religious-ideological considerations have determined the contours of the economy in classical and medieval Europe and much of modern times. The same holds true for India, China, and perhaps only slightly less so for Japan. On the other hand, to my knowledge no society sufficiently “advanced” to have a written language has managed to dispense with any of these four social functions and the hierarchies necessary to make them work.
IV

Within each of the four social functions there are two analytically distinct ways by which human societies allocate individuals to unequally rewarded tasks and positions in these five hierarchies. Social scientists often refer to them as ascribed status and achieved status. From the standpoint of the individual one might call them effortless and strenuous status systems. In a system of ascribed status the individual does nothing to attain it. He or she is simply born into a high or low position. No amount of effort can raise the individual to a higher position, though disapproved behavior can lead to the loss of high status. A hereditary nobility is a familiar example from the top of the social scale. Another from the bottom is the lower caste (or outcaste) Hindu, where the work of the males brings them in contact with garbage, human excrement, corpses and dead animals. Nothing the individual can do will enable a person to rise out of this caste. In theory a caste system contains only ascribed or effortless status. In practice, however, even caste societies display some touches of upward and downward mobility or achieved status.

Achieved status one could call the strenuous status because the individual ordinarily must make strenuous efforts to attain higher status as well as to avoid falling into a lower position. In the case of achieved status, the society through its appointed “gate-keeping” officials confers high position on the basis of socially valued and publicly demonstrated capacities. Often these highly valued capacities may lack any close connection with the duties required of a person of high standing.

The mandarinate in the Chinese Empire is one of the best known examples. Chinese scholar-officials were recruited on the basis of knowledge of the Chinese classics, as demonstrated in examinations. These classics contain a great deal of moral preaching supported by historical anecdote. The main thing the officials learned from their preparation was how to produce acceptable rhetoric, no easy task given the behavior of many an emperor. Others learned how to play power politics, and a few managed to perceive fairly accurately the economic and political problems facing China.

Still, the reason for the tremendous effort put into acquiring literary culture was to get a good job. In theory any male could apply. On the other hand the long years of study meant that only those with property to support them stood any chance of success. Rich people with no children or a clutch of academic dullards sometimes adopted a bright boy hoping that he could bring fame and fortune to the family or at least keep
it going as a credit to the ancestors. Thus the mandarinate was in theory a set of purely achieved statuses, while in practice there was a substantial ascribed or hereditary component.

All forms of achieved status, I suspect, have a large ascribed component. It is difficult to think of any society where the experiences of living in the lower classes are actually helpful to achieving membership in the upper ranks of one of the four functional hierarchies. To be sure many a political leader finds it helpful to have the common touch, an intuitive understanding of how ordinary people think and feel, based on some direct experience. Such different examples as Julius Caesar, Louis XIV, Lenin, and Mao come to mind in this connection. But the common touch is only a touch of lower-class culture in which other elements of a socially formed personality predominate overwhelmingly. As the talented move up the social pyramid, they usually shed the traces of lower-class origins and are liable to be embarrassed by any that stubbornly cling to them.

Though Imperial China constitutes a decisive exception, we generally think of the effortless and ascribed inequalities as flourishing mainly in stable agrarian societies and achieved status as being mainly a product of the ferment that accompanies industrialization and modernization. The contrast makes reasonably good sense, although the top military and political positions in classical Athens and in Rome seem on the basis of limited evidence, to have gone to men of talent, luck, and background in proportions not very different from those prevailing in twentieth-century Europe. At least in the short run political disorder may do more to loosen up a rigid class system than economic growth.

On the other hand the introduction of substantial amounts of money into an agrarian society always corrodes the traditional social hierarchy. Enough money in the hands of a parvenu will sooner or later buy the offices and honors traditionally reserved for members of the dominant class on the basis of their traditional virtues, such as a somewhat antiquated military skill requiring much bravery, control of “orthodox” religious and cultural symbols, and finally just plain snobbery based on inherited status. When it becomes possible to purchase the status because aristocrats and aristocratic governments generally run short of cash with the onset of modernization, snobbery becomes futile. As the barriers to the ascent of the rich parvenu begin to come down, premodern elites are likely to dig in their heels. The cultural expression of this move takes the form of an emphasis on old-fashioned virtues: loyalty to superiors, bravery, hard work for the peasants. These virtues appear within the framework of an organic society, that is one without class struggle, and where
every person knows his place in a set of organically related social activities. This romantic conservatism contrasts the alleged organic unity of the pre-modern society with the supposed destruction of traditional family and community life in the cities, a destruction supposedly due to the ruthless pursuit of money. There is just enough truth in this romantic ideology, and quite enough need for the comfort of its message, to keep the doctrine very much alive, now and for the foreseeable future.

There are considerable variations in the intensity and forms of the conflicts arising out of the introduction of trade and monetary relationships into a static agrarian economy. Here it is impossible to do more than hint at the differences. The United States found itself in a civil war with its agrarian slaveholder elite, even though this elite was thoroughly capitalist (and certainly not feudal). England may have had the easiest time of all, possibly because the landed classes had engaged in commercial undertakings for a long time. By the eighteenth century, anyone who had money and wit would find an easy acceptance in the ruling elite. China, by way of contrast, has had an unusually painful time. When around the turn of the century it began to be possible to buy a degree and thereby short circuit the onerous trial by examination, the whole edifice of Confucian morality, indeed the whole moral justification of the existing order showed itself to have crumbled away. Men and women lost their social attachments and found themselves adrift on a dark sea of stormy despair with a few flashes of light from utopian hopes that in time produced their own disappointments.

This emotional turmoil should not blind us to the fact that modern industrial societies stress the importance of skills in allocating jobs and social positions to a degree unheard of in pre-industrial societies. The rise of the professions is strictly a feature of modern societies. The emphasis on technical competence as the basis for getting and holding a job is not limited to the professions. Airplane pilots have to demonstrate this competence. So do electronics technicians, as well as others in less demanding occupations. To an outsider who observes the incompetent and reckless behavior of, say, drivers of huge trailer trucks, or who follows the details of reports on airplane and spacecraft accidents, the level of competence often seems abysmally low. Nevertheless an applicant has to demonstrate some skill. He or she does not get the job merely on the basis of social background.

A more important observation is that those who merely pass tests seldom if ever find their way to the top of the heap. If they do get to the top, their technical training, even in the case of lawyers, plays only a minor
role. Administrative skills, the ability to persuade, cajole, impress, and threaten people in such a way that tasks get done in a coordinated fashion, are the qualities necessary to get to the top. Furthermore a visible political leader must know how to play on popular emotions. In that sense we are still ruled by amateurs who call on professionals with special skills when they think the skills might help, often to buttress a position or policy that is the outcome of political infighting and synthetically manufactured public outrage.

The introduction of tests for competence arouses the opposition of upper-class groups accustomed to having access to these posts as a privilege of their class. The history of appointments to bureaucratic office in the government and of military officers in England, France, and Germany during the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth century displays the struggle against "merit" quite clearly. Once the standards have been adopted complaints begin that they are too high, biased toward certain groups in the society and against others, or unfair in other ways. The insiders in other words try to set up a monopoly while the outsiders try to force the gate. Many of the outsiders come from the lower strata. In modern societies it seems almost impossible to establish a system of social inequality that can command really widespread assent. Yet inequality is probably more "socially necessary" than ever before.

In modern capitalist societies specific public demonstrations of competence for specific jobs and occupations play an important though still secondary role. Prestige and high status are indeed matters of achievement, often by strenuous effort, in these societies. But the achievement is not tied to a specific occupation. The visible sign is merit as demonstrated in the marketplace, or the acquisition of wealth by more or less legal methods. Though the acquisition of wealth leads to comfort, luxury, and a substantial amount of social approbation, in the course of the twentieth century it has seemed less and less satisfactory as the primary goal of human existence. An extreme form of this rejection appeared in the 1960s and 1970s as Western societies witnessed a widespread adolescent revolt against not only meritocratic requirements but the general standards and taste of upper-middle-class culture. As part of their revolt they adopted what they believed to be the dress, manners, and ideas of the oppressed including a big dose of ethnocentrism and cultural provincialism. It is unlikely that this adolescent upheaval would have taken place on so wide a scale without the stimulus of American military intervention in Vietnam, which outraged more and more adults, inclining them toward tolerance of rebellious adolescents. Whether this discontent with, and even hostility
towards, both capitalism and liberalism, a hostility that has both idealistic and quite selfish sources, will some day seriously undermine the motivation and commitments that keep capitalist societies going remains to be seen. In any case, it is by now reasonably clear that capitalist societies are not as badly off as socialist ones on the score of their moral authority and legitimacy.

V

Now we may turn from variations in the way human societies allocate individuals to specific slots in a set of more or less unequally ordered activities, to variations in the authority, prestige, and perquisites that these four social functions have been able to command in different historical epochs. For the purpose at hand it will be sufficient to draw attention to some changes in the control of violence and of the unknown.

To begin with a familiar but instructive case, prior to about 1940 the military played at best a tertiary role in American society. Their rise to prominence as perhaps the dominant partner in the military-industrial complex was due to the Second World War. To explain this change in the character of American society it is necessary to look outside the boundaries of the United States itself. Similar changes have occurred in many instances and are by no means limited to modern times. Athens emerged into recorded history as a nation of peasant warriors. The Persian Wars turned it into a naval empire with strong trading and colonial interests.

It is worthwhile emphasizing that transformations in the human institutions that organize, control, and use violence are by no means wholly predetermined by economic factors. Instead military and police organizations often determine what happens in the economy. To paraphrase Marx, we can say that the social relations of death are frequently more important than the social relations of production.

Turning now to changes in the control of moral symbolism, and fears of the unknown, we see in European society from the Middle Ages onward an equally profound but rather more gradual set of changes. In the Middle Ages this control was a near monopoly of the Catholic Church. Amid the multiple terrors and teeming uncertainties of life on earth the Catholic Church offered the comfort and consolation of salvation after death. Hence the faithful should not be overly concerned with present suffering. Guilt the Church assuaged with what became a highly bureau-
married system of organized forgiveness. It resembled the automat­
cafeteria of depression times. One put coins in the slot and out came the
“dessert” in the form of authorized forgiveness and penance.

Nowadays this function of managing the unknown and the unpredic­
table (as well as taking care of guilt) has split into numerous subdivisions.
There are the natural scientists. Then there are the educators. In addition
there are numerous varieties of moral exhorters and advisers, who share
television, radio, and the newspaper with entertainers, from whom they
are not always easy to distinguish. Cultural and ethical standards have
become fragmented to the point where there are almost as many varieties
of morality as breakfast foods in a supermarket. If there is any visible
principle of change in this area, it would seem to be Herbert Spencer’s
theory of evolutionary change from homogeneity to heterogeneity.

Now we may ask whether there is any general principle that could help
us to understand changes in the power, authority, and prestige of different
social functions and the social groups that perform them. Marxism pro­
vided an answer that seems to me helpful but insufficient. I suggest that
changes in the social usefulness of such functions, changes that come
about from both domestic and foreign causes or a combination of the
two, can go a long way toward accounting for such shifts in the structure
of inequality. However, it is no simple matter to sort out the empirical
evidence in specific cases. Furthermore there are built-in traps in the ev­
idence that may easily mislead the unwary. For instance the term “useful”
can conceal as much as it reveals. We have to ask “useful to whom” and
whether there are harmful consequences for others.

To elaborate a bit, in “civilized” societies there is generally a contest,
usually but not always peaceful, for esteem and a share in material goods.
The contest, as I perceive it, includes the class struggle where one exists,
but is much broader. It is simultaneously a contest among social functions
as well as ranks within each function. The higher strata are generally more
active in this contest than the lower ones, though they too enter the fray
from time to time thereby making the contest more intense. Meanwhile
threats come and go from other societies and often alter greatly the cal­
culations and strategies of those engaged in the domestic struggles: All
this tugging and hauling, which at times degenerates into violently de­
structive conflict, is as old as civilized life. For roughly the last five cen­
turies it has been going on in a context of economic and moral change
where familiar social landmarks disappear and old rules of conduct cease
to make sense. The rate and depth of change have both greatly increased
in modern times. Yet one can see intermittent signs of change and disorientation in human societies just about as far back as the records go.

Thus human societies are constantly changing in response to internal pressures and external threats. In any given society the organization of inequality undergoes important changes in adapting to the threats just mentioned and simultaneously creating new ones. The organization of inequality constitutes the sum of all social adaptations up to a given point in time. It sets the limit within which most members of society live. Still if a large enough body of people, and a strategically placed one, come to the conclusion that, for example, a certain military ethic and style are no longer useful, then it will suffer. The same is true of a religious or economic ethic. Since none of these are watertight intellectual or social compartments, changes in one will have consequences for the others. Exaggerating slightly we can say that with the passage of time the normal assumption of utility dissolves into a judgment of futility. A specific form of inequality becomes historically obsolete.

A judgment of futility seldom goes quite as far as the term suggests, at least not in its socially accepted and politically significant form. A judgment of futility may or may not be the beginning of—or any part of—a wholesale transformation of the prevailing system of social inequality and the set of values that sustains it. What actually happens depends on the social and cultural context that requires concrete analysis in each case. The British cavalry officer of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Japanese samurai and the Prussian Junkers of the same period show different assessments of survival value in a presumably obsolete social formation. Likewise kings lasted beyond the First World War despite the regicides of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The main difficulty and the most serious source of error in analyzing any concrete case of social obsolescence derives from a circularity built into the evidence. Those with high status in any society do their best to see to it that the qualities they possess are the ones upon which their society will place a high value. Thus one cannot say that such and such a group enjoys high status because it performs a function highly valued in this society. A statement like this is no more than a deceptive tautology, a way of succumbing to the mystique of a particular elite. It is necessary to demonstrate by independent means that this ostensibly highly valued social task really is of great importance, that there would be serious loss and suffering if it were discontinued or its performance reduced. Such evidence is hard to obtain but not impossible.
VI

The issues of exploitation and oppression have already appeared in the foregoing discussion of the main social causes of inequality. The concluding portion of this essay will analyze the extent to which exploitation and oppression may or may not be unavoidable features of any system of inequality. For that purpose I will first sketch out what I trust is not a totally unrealistic model of an inegalitarian society with little or no exploitation. Then we may see how and why such a society could generate strong exploitative and oppressive traits. In the light of this somewhat cheerless conclusion we will then change tacks to approach the problems with different questions. We shall ask what obstacles exist to the establishment of an egalitarian society, posing the issue mainly in terms of modern society.

To sketch a model of an inegalitarian society without exploitation or oppression it is only necessary to stress practices and tendencies that have existed at one time or another in quite a number of societies. There is no need to create another imaginary utopia. Instead we are looking for the conditions that promote the acceptance of more or less rational authority by subordinate elements in the population.

Ordinarily the subordinate strata have quite specific expectations about what their rulers should do for them. They expect from their rulers protection against foreign attack. Likewise they expect protection against domestic predators in the form of thieves and bandits. Where the central authority is remote and ineffective, the people will try to protect themselves. If the local representatives of power are themselves greedy and exploitative and the bandits choose local elites as their favorite targets, large sections of the population may side with the bandits. By that point, however, the established powers are in serious trouble.

Maintaining domestic peace and order includes the settling of disputes according to a generally acceptable code of justice. What makes a code acceptable is the prospect that the little man can get his due if he is in the right legally and morally. In practice that situation appears to be rare. Many older legal codes do not recognize it even in theory. Instead the severity of punishment depends on the social status of the victim. Yet the hope that disputes may be worked out according to a code has been important in the past. In the twentieth century it seems more powerful and widespread.

A satisfactorily working economy is another precondition for the popular acceptance of authority. A satisfactory economy exists where most
people can obtain enough material goods to sustain their accustomed social roles. An unsatisfactory economy deprives people of their accustomed status. The belief that the ruler or rulers are responsible for the economic security of the population is strong even in preindustrial societies. In contemporary industrial societies it is even stronger. As in China under “good” emperors, the ruler may be expected to help people who suffer from natural disasters, especially crop failures due to flood or drought. Serious and widespread economic failure undermines the ruler’s legitimacy. This is the case in the United States as well as in China.

Thus the relation between rulers and rules, dominant and subordinate strata takes the form of an implicit or sometimes explicit social contract. If rulers provide protection, justice, and a satisfactory economy, they fulfill their part of the contract. The subordinate population will then carry out their part by yielding a substantial economic surplus to the dominant elements in the social order and remaining peaceable. If that were all, we could say that in such situations there was little or no exploitation. But it is far from the whole story.

Authority displays a built in tendency toward abuse and selfish aggrandizement even where it is for the most part rational. By that, I mean where it serves generally accepted nonpredatory social purposes. It is rather obvious that authority is widely and even enthusiastically accepted when its purposes are predatory against other societies and successful. Self-aggrandizement takes the cancer-like growth of governmental and private institutions well beyond any imaginable social necessity for them. Internal security organs in socialist states are the most familiar example. Some form of internal police is necessary in any modern society. It only takes one bad criminal to make a police system necessary. But once established any form of bureaucracy tries to grow. One reason for growth is the extreme difficulty in deciding in any specific case what is superfluous and what is not, even if the distinction obviously exists. There is a limit to the amount of resources a society can afford to give to, say, a department of agriculture. Members of an organization will push for an institution’s growth because at least a few believe in its mission, while others want more and better jobs. The tendency toward self-propelled growth increases inequality. On occasion it may also produce oppression. Abuse takes the form of using authority or power for personal gain at the expense of members of the public. Using official position to demand goods, services, sexual favors and the like, which are not part of the legal and customary demands of the office, constitute widespread examples. Many a modern city, where one has to get official permission to do just about
anything from disposing of trash to holding a parade, offers splendid opportunities for petty gouging with fees for licenses and permissions.

Such situations have often grown up in pre-industrial societies, though it is not confined to them. The usual justification for such petty gouging is that the government is too poor to pay many minor officials who must therefore supplement their earnings by shady methods. This justification is based on dubious assumptions. One is that minor officials will become honest if they are paid more. The experience of the decline of administrative corruption in England during the nineteenth century suggests, on the other hand, that new methods of recruitment and the concomitant growth of new ethical standards are equally necessary. The justification also assumes that a pre-industrial government’s resources for paying officials and the officials’ conceptions of a satisfactory income are both fixed quantities. That is true at any given moment in time. Over a longer period, say a generation or more, both quantities can change a great deal. Relatively honest government, though rare, is possible. Again as English experience shows it can emerge out of a history of corrupt abuse. To bring it about apparently requires a cultural and social mutation similar to the triumph of Victorian moral standards over those of the eighteenth century. This triumph was a reworking of old ideas, mainly Christian ones, in the new social and economic context of advancing industrialism. The situation demanded calculation, foresight, hard work, and control of impulses and instincts, and yet permitted touches of tender conscience. In such situations, admonition and exhortation, especially by foreigners, produce by themselves negligible results.

There are at least two more innate sources of inequality and, on occasion, oppression that are liable to afflict regimes with egalitarian commitments. Both concern relationships between dominant and subordinate groups. Both appear to be necessary for the successful exercise of power and authority. One is the role of fear, including fear in even a most benign regime. The other is the fragmentation of the underlying population in relation to the holders of power and authority.

Without any fear behind it, authority ceases to be effective. If authority can be challenged at will, even in apparently harmless ways such as graffiti, without some kind of retribution, sooner or later it will cease to be taken seriously and therefore disappear.

As a matter of historical fact there has nearly always been some element of force and fraud in the way ruling groups obtain and maintain power. This situation has usually been enough to elicit easily the minimum dose of fear necessary to hold the regime together, and often a great deal more
than the minimum dose. If however a government is obeyed mainly due
to fear, then that government and its remaining supporters are in serious
trouble. Some element of fear well short of this extreme or terminal sit-
tuation apparently characterizes every political system.

There is another aspect of fear that requires mention. Any “normally”
strong government can always mobilize overwhelming force in short or-
der against any challenge to its authority. Indeed the ability to crush such
a challenge amounts to a definition of a strong government. A regime
that cannot mobilize enough resources to put down a challenge, and strike
fear into the hearts of those sympathetic to the challenge, is automatically
dismissed as weak and ineffectual. Even a regime based almost entirely
on accepted rational grounds for its authority—something hard to find
except perhaps in some sheltered political backwater—has to be willing
and able to use force and instill fear because in a good-sized society there
is always the possibility that a tiny but audacious minority will challenge
the moral authority of the state. The challenge need not be political. It
may be no more than a criminal gang. Such challenges are always tiny at
the start. Yet under the right circumstances they can attract more and
more adherents. Both pre-industrial and modern states have tolerated dis­
order and the flouting of established authority on a wide scale. Still there
is a limit to what a state can tolerate and remain a state. Indeed if the
challengers can meet and create needs relevant to the historical epoch, they
can replace existing rulers—with the help of their own varieties of fraud
and violence.

The second precondition that encourages oppression concerns the social
structure of the lower strata. The disunity of subordinate strata relative
to the dominant strata helps to sustain “legitimate” political systems, and
even more, those with marked oppressive and exploitative features. As
Gaetano Mosca pointed out long ago, a dominant minority enjoys great
advantages simply because it is a minority. For that reason it can organize
and act much more easily. The mass of the population contains so many
diverse interest groups that action becomes extremely difficult.

It is worth noticing on the other hand that ethnic and religious mi-
norities also organize more easily than the general population because they
too are minorities that can coalesce around certain symbols. As long as
they are in opposition, these minorities are rather successful in using their
collective symbols to overcome cleavages within the minority derived
from class and occupational differences. By the last decade of the twen­
tieth century minorities in many parts of the world were channeling their
grievances into nationalist demands. Nationalism provides for these peo-
ples an explanation and remedy for their misfortunes with a far greater popular appeal than Marxism ever had. If they succeed there may be worse cruelty than before.

The subordinate population in modern industrial societies is rather more differentiated than was the case with the preindustrial monarchies that flourished in Europe and Asia during the seventeenth century and well into the eighteenth. There the subordinate population was made up mainly of peasants and artisans. To be sure there were important subdivisions in each. With the advent of industry the number of new occupations greatly increased while many old ones changed rather than disappeared. We now have big commercial farmers, new forms of artisans (such as plumbers, electricians, mechanics, and miscellaneous repair services), sales clerks, office workers, factory workers, and so forth, each with a distinct set of insecurities and demands on the social order. It is tempting to assert that we live in a mass society without real masses (or at least homogeneous masses) just as we live in a service economy without adequate services.

As modern society becomes more complex, the vulnerability of society as a whole to the failure of any one of its working parts becomes ever greater. The consequence is that the workforce in any key sector, if it is able to act collectively, can hold the rest of society up for ransom by refusing to work. So far such attempts on the scale of a whole industry have been rare. Since World War II we have had a rail strike in England that helped produce the victory of Margaret Thatcher. The success of French students in almost paralyzing de Gaulle’s regime was a similar situation, though one that also reveals the vulnerability of modern governments to political disorder. In these instances the groups that tried to hold up the society in order to force through their demands used at least some of the rhetoric of class struggle. The leaders claimed that their demands were the just demands of the unfortunate and oppressed and that they were acting not only on behalf of their own followers but on behalf of the unfortunate and oppressed generally.

How seriously should one take such claims? The outcome of a class struggle is, in theory at least, supposed to be a gain for most people. It would be hard to maintain that such was the situation or intention here. Rather it looks like a war of all against all in which one contestant can use a strategic advantage to levy tribute on all the others. In the short run it is a zero-sum contest insofar as what the winner gains everyone else loses. Furthermore I would suggest that this has become the main pattern of conflict in present-day societies, capitalist or communist. Every contestant wants more jobs, higher pay, and less hard work.
If this impression is correct, it means that oppression and exploitation have become much more democratic than was the case in pre-industrial societies. It is no longer just the dominant class that can exploit and oppress. All sorts of people can find ways to do it now, though of course not everybody. In both capitalist and the remaining socialist societies the rhetoric of class struggle serves to justify group struggles for quite selfish ends.

Summing up the observation on the lower strata we find three factors that promote various forms of exploitation and oppression even where such tendencies are minimal to begin with. They are fear of the rulers, the rulers' ability to mount overwhelming force at any single point, and finally the fragmentation of the lower strata, a situation especially noticeable in contemporary industrial societies. The systems of authority, or of social coordination from above are an even more important source of inequality and, potentially, of oppression. Even the most rational forms of authority are subject to corruption, abuse, and unjustifiable expansion of facilities and perquisites.

In closing we may ask what obstacles the members of a civilized society would have to overcome in order to establish an egalitarian social order and the problems an egalitarian order would have to solve to maintain itself. Two comments must be made to clear the ground.

It is possible to accept as a fact a very unequal distribution of talents and capacities among human beings without accepting this form of inequality as more than a minor cause of social inequality. The inequalities manifest in social institutions and perpetuated through them have primarily social and historical causes rather than biological ones. If, on the other hand, it should be possible to set up an egalitarian society that was at the same time quite fair in allocating individuals to different tasks, considerable inequality would presumably appear within a generation or so.

My second comment is on the Christian left's attempt to accept a considerable degree of inequality in modern industrial societies while drawing the sting of this inequality with a generous application of Christian balm. According to this judgment, well expressed in R. H. Tawney's *Equality*, the ways in which human beings are alike are more important than the ways in which they become unequal. We share many of the same feelings and something like a common propensity to misfortune and a common capacity for joy.

This element of shared humanity provides the basis for arguments on behalf of at least minimal civility and decency (i.e., avoiding cruelty) in the treatment of any human being. Yet, it is only too painfully obvious
that in practice this minimal civility and decency is the exception rather than the rule. By itself the belief in a common humanity has little effect. To be effective it requires the help of other beliefs and social arrangements.

Thus neither the biological argument against the possibility of equality nor the ethical one favoring this possibility carry much conviction. Apparently one has to start from scratch.

To establish and sustain an egalitarian society it would be necessary to do three things. First, one would have to overcome or at least neutralize the historical results of force and fraud in creating special privileges for the dominant elements of the society. In a good many cases the mere prospect of such a purge would be enough to set off a civil war. The second task would be to find methods of social coordination that did not depend on authority or relationships of command and obedience. As discussed earlier, the market does provide through the price system a series of decentralized incentives and negative sanctions that together create a fair facsimile of voluntary acts resulting in social cooperation without any central authority. However the market has never been able to generate, and probably never could generate, all the goods and services in modern societies. Its role is minimal, for instance, in the provision of such different services as the military and education. Clearly there is a range of activities in which price alone is insufficient to elicit the desired form of behavior.

Furthermore, even within the range of activities coordinated by the market authority and its resulting inequalities, authority often plays a decisive role. Management has to obtain capital, turn it into machinery, and then direct, cajole, or order specifiable types of workers to serve the machinery with raw materials in such a way as to turn out serviceable goods. Where the cues of price variation, including the price of labor, are weak or meaningless, as has been the case in socialist societies, the resort to bureaucratic compulsion has been unavoidable. Appeals to an alleged socialist conscience have been ineffective in comparison with fear and material self-interest.

The third obstacle to an egalitarian society derives from the division of labor. An elaborate division of labor into numerous types and grades of skill, ranging from eye surgeons to trash collectors, is an inherent characteristic of modern industrial societies. The serious egalitarian would have to find a way to recruit, train, allocate, and motivate each of these different kinds of labor without resorting to differences in pay, or at most using very small differences. To state the problem is enough to show that
it is just about insoluble short of a near total destruction of modern society. Even if, as pointed out earlier, the capitalist division of labor and corresponding system of rewards display many irrationalities, an egalitarian one is hardly the remedy, and looks like an impossibility if taken at all seriously.

Quite apart from any historical legacy of force and fraud in the establishment of social inequalities, modern societies generate and reproduce inequalities out of the need for authority and social coordination and as a consequence of the division of labor. For these reasons alone social inequalities will almost certainly be with us for the foreseeable future.

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This prediction does not carry any implication that one should passively accept the world as it is and is likely to be. The assertion that inequality is a permanent feature of complex human societies is not meant to justify any existing form of inequality.

How then can one distinguish between justifiable and unjustifiable forms of inequality? The question is not an easy one. Religious and political doctrines have justified just about every conceivable form of inequality as part of some natural or divine order. There is not much help to be found grubbing around in those archives. We would do better, I believe, to toss this intellectual freight overboard since the ship is already leaking at the seams, and try for a simple commonsense solution.

The test for any given form of inequality is not whether it fits some higher “cosmic” scheme of the universe and the nature of human affairs or human society therein. Instead the question to ask is whether this inequality is required in order to elicit concretely specifiable and socially necessary goods and services. For instance, is a salary of $200,000 a year required to have the services of a cardiac surgeon? And how valuable are these services to the society at large when set against the known needs of the society? Such questions, it must be emphasized, cannot have completely objective and determinate answers, partly because they require comparing an unknown future situation with currently existing realities. The results of such a test would still leave plenty of room for disputes over the distribution of resources. Nevertheless one can trace out the causes and consequences of an existing form of inequality with enough accuracy to make worthwhile judgments about the wisdom of leaving the situation as it stands or attempting some changes. Granting the element of indeterminacy in such discussions, I still cannot discern any reason for letting the status quo have the benefit of all doubts.