

INEQUALITY AND U.S. SOCIETY

DOUGLAS S. MASSEY, *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System*.
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Reynolds Farley

Department of Sociology, University of Michigan

Among the advanced industrial nations, the United States has the most unequal distribution of income. Douglas Massey emphasizes that the purchasing power of households in the top five percent of the income distribution rose sharply from the early 1980s to 2000 while the purchasing power of those in the bottom twenty percent of the income distribution remained constant—proving a much larger economic gap between rich and poor households. This book summarizes an extensive array of studies from a variety of disciplines and cogently describes federal policies that promoted income disparity. Many sections of this book provide lucid information about the changing status of women, shifts in racial disparities, and the consequences of immigration from Mexico. It is not, however, a definitive book about inequality in this nation.

The author gives us no clear definition of inequality and provides sparse information about what he means by stratification. Much more attention is devoted to the processes that he believes generate and then preserve inequality. It is impossible for an author to discuss all types of inequality in one volume but a reader would benefit greatly from the author's definition of what inequality means, what types will be considered, and why. In place of that, the reader of this book learns interesting facts about a variety of types of inequality but there is little guidance about how they may or may not be linked. If the key or exclusive indicator of inequality is the distribution of household income, then the 1980s and 1990s were decades of accelerating inequality. This is well described in this book. But if you take a broader definition of inequality, you conclude that not all major trends point toward more inequality. In some important dimensions, we are now a more nearly equal society.

What about racial and gender gaps in educational attainment and earnings? Should they be considered indicia of inequality, perhaps as important as the distribution of income? If so, trends over time are moving toward less inequality. As Massey's evidence from his analytic model unambiguously shows, gender and race have become less important in explaining an individual's income while education attainment has become much more important.

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Massey's chapter on "Reworking the Color Line," carefully describes governmental policies and private decisions that, prior to the Civil Rights Revolution, kept Whites and Blacks apart. A major section of the chapter describes the causes of residential segregation and its persistence. But, in an important way, this chapter is not up-to-date. The residential segregation of Blacks from Whites has clearly been declining for a quarter century and quite a few large, rapidly growing metropolises in the South and West now have moderate segregation scores. Is the drop in residential segregation an indicator of declining racial inequality in the housing market? The chapter includes no discussion of increasing racial diversity within households. Traditionally, Whites married Whites while African Americans married African Americans. But in 2008, fifteen percent of Black men who married wed White wives and two percent of White women who married wed Black men. Is this a significant indicator of shift toward more racial equality in the marriage market? Reading this chapter provides little, if any, information about the emergence of a Black middle class or the substantial migration of African Americans from central cities to suburbs. This chapter is interesting and clear but it stresses, not what has been accomplished since Dr. King led the Civil Rights Movement but, rather, what has not been achieved. Indeed, the chapter's pessimistic conclusion dismisses civil rights changes by contending that, today, persistent racial stereotypes and subtle discrimination have effects as pernicious as those of the Jim Crow laws.

Another chapter on "Building a better underclass" focuses on Mexicans in the United States. In Massey's view, these immigrants drive down the wages of native-born workers while keeping Mexicans poor. He contends that stereotypes are now being developed and popularized that imply that undocumented immigrants are a security risk, may not be fully human in term of cognitive development, and deserve few, if any, civil rights while in this nation. He suggests that current policies will produce an underclass of Mexican workers who will consistently be exploited. Sanctioning employers who hire undocumented workers, he argues, will lower wages for both Mexican immigrants and native-born workers. Mexican immigration, he avers, generates greater economic inequality in the United States. A different way to phrase the question would be to focus upon economic inequality among the Mexican-born population. Do low-wage Mexican immigrants in the United States substantially reduce the Gini Index for Mexican born workers? As Massey points out, before the current recession began, it was reasonable to expect that upwards of ten percent of the Mexican-born population would soon reside in the United States. Intergenerational upward mobility is not described in this chapter and there is no effort to distinguish first-generation immigrants from the second and higher generations. Perhaps Mexicans are not all that different from the Irish, Italians, or Eastern Europeans in their process of upward mobility.

Massey's chapter on the political economy is the best one in this volume. From the election of the New Deal until the 1960s, Congress enacted, and presidents signed, many laws that had the consequence of reducing economic inequality, albeit laws that often benefitted Whites much more than minorities. In recent decades, however, numerous laws reduced tax rates on those with large incomes and substantially cut back on programs that benefitted the poor. These decisions are clearly described but it is a one-sided presentation. Many recent laws fostered economic inequality but quite a few sought to minimize it. The Earned Income Tax Credit that provides cash to the poor is not cited, nor are the changes in federal income rates that more or less exempt low- and moderate-income earners from paying such tax. There is no discussion of the federal government's assumption of health care costs for the low-income and older population, nor is there a discussion of the tremendous increase

in federal funding for local schools—spending that its defenders argue will minimize educational inequality. We do not learn from this chapter about how the indexing of Social Security payments reduced inequality by lifting older persons above the poverty line.

There are a variety of provocative statements in this book that lead the reader to question the author's views and assumptions. These include the assertion that the United States Constitution was written to impose chattel slavery upon persons of African American ancestry and that President George H. W. Bush won both presidential elections because of the disenfranchisement of Blacks—the denial of votes to Florida felons in 2000, and the restriction of Black voting in Ohio in 2004.

There are puzzling gaps. Much of this book is devoted to a discussion and evaluation of governmental policies. However, there is no description of what federal policies should be or what they should seek to achieve. Should policies aim at maximizing equality of opportunity or should they seek to minimize economic inequality itself?

There are also inconsistencies. Much attention is devoted to the extremely high rate of incarceration of Black men. Massey stresses that the current penal policies unintentionally devastate the Black community by severely limiting employment and educational opportunities for African American men. He shows that the proportion of young Black men in prison has risen sharply in a time when crimes rates have gone down. He does not consider the possibility that incarceration plays some role in the decline in crime. There is no discussion of alternatives to this incarceration or any description of its possible benefits. But in a subsequent chapter, Massey dusts off the culture of poverty thesis that Oscar Lewis popularized four decades ago. Supposedly the concentration of the poor creates communities in which young men find it useful—perhaps necessary—to be violent in order to defend themselves, while engaging in illegal pursuits to support themselves. Presumably, some communities benefit from the incarceration Massey decries. Another section of the volume describes the trend toward the increasing residential segregation of the prosperous from the poor in the nation's large metropolises. But the figures in this book show a decrease in such segregation in the 1990s.

The issue of what is causing inequality is important to Massey and is discussed throughout the volume. Many economists would explain increased inequality in terms of the changing industrial structure and shifts in human capital. That is, manufacturers invest in machines to replace personnel or shift production to low-wage parts of the United States and abroad. While employment opportunities for the less educated decline, they expand for the highly educated who can contribute to the new high technology industries and to the burgeoning financial sector. Massey presents and defends that argument but it is not the explanation he emphasizes. He explains that the limbic system of our brain is common to all mammals but humans also have a rational brain centered in the prefrontal cortex and the neocortex. We are neurologically programmed to stereotype, so we categorize groups of people along two dimensions: warmth and competence. Using a four cell model, he contends that we despise groups we think of as lacking warmth and competence whereas we esteem groups that we view as competent and warm. The dominant group is quite likely to place racial minorities and unskilled immigrants into the “despised” category—people they view as lacking warmth and competence. The dominant group places their own group in the “esteemed” category seeing them as competent and warm. Massey observes that when we perceive another human being, the medial prefrontal cortex lights up. Presumably, our neurological processes then lead us to invoke our firmly held stereotypes and place the person we see into one of the following groups: despised out-group, envied out-group, pitied out-group or esteemed in-group.

Many readers may find that this biological explanation does not go far in explaining current trends in inequality—smaller racial and gender differences on most indicators but larger gaps between the top and bottom of the income distribution. Massey does not argue that our brains have changed in recent years to generate more inequality. He observes that governmental policies reduced inequality for three decades in the last century and then, for the next three decades, governmental policies encouraged economic inequality. There is no explanation of how those trends fit with the neurological model presented in this volume. The book would be more convincing were greater consideration given to social values and how they change; sometimes quite rapidly. Six decades ago the society's norms endorsed restricting the careers that women might pursue, called for strict racial segregation in most areas of American life and tolerated or encouraged discrimination on the basis of sexual preference and age. Views and attitudes changed because Americans increasingly endorsed the ideals of equal opportunity and social justice and courts upheld principles of justice for all. Now the nation's norms abjure blatant gender and racial discrimination thanks, in large part, to the Civil Rights Revolution and a growing awareness that intellectual accomplishments are not, primarily, genetically determined. However, there have been few challenges to the widely held belief that our economic system equitably determines winners and losers.

Inequality is an extremely important issue for this nation. As Massey notes, greater economic polarization appears to generate more political polarization. In 1980, the least prosperous ten percent of the country's household obtained just 1.11 percent of total income. By 2008, their share had fallen to 0.95 percent of all income. But the share going to the top ten percent of households grew from 26.7 percent in 1980 to 33.6 percent in 2008. *Categorically Unequal* may encourage scholars and students to further explore the many dimensions of inequality.

Corresponding author: Reynolds Farley, Population Studies Center, University of Michigan. 426 Thompson Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248. E-mail: renf@umich.edu

Lawrence D. Bobo

*Department of Sociology and of African and African American Studies,
Harvard University*

Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System, is a big, ambitious, tough-minded, and carefully argued book. In a fashion, Princeton sociologist Douglas Massey sets out to answer the daunting questions of what are the fundamental mechanisms that lend recurrent patterning—social organization and structure, in a phrase—to social inequality in the United States. He unfolds a three-part answer. First, he sets out a basic theoretical framework for understanding the process of social stratification: the factors and mechanisms to which we must attend in order to understand how people come to be systematically allocated to positions of differential reward and status. This section of the book is heavily indebted to Charles Tilly (1998). Part of what Massey does here is quite conventional within sociology, so much so that he rightly refers to it as invoking “stratification’s Holy trinity”: namely, he points to the dividing lines of race, class, and gender. Yet, part of what he does

here—or at least how he does it—strikes me as quite unusual for sociologists: namely, he says that in order to understand social stratification you *must* attend in some detail to foundational notions from social psychology. To wit, attention to institutional practices and macro-level process are insufficient to provide a robust sociology of the dynamics of inequality.

Second, Massey develops an overview, mapping the current topography of inequality with regard to core economic measures. This part of the work is probably the least likely to generate contention and what matters most about it, in any event, is really played out in fuller detail as part of the third task which Massey sets for himself. Third, he then fleshes out in great detail the dynamics of inequalities of race, of class, and of gender with an emphasis on the post-World War II period.

For sociologists, as Massey explains, “stratification refers to the unequal distribution of people across social categories that are characterized by differential access to social resources” (p. 1). The resources might be economic in the form of income or wealth. They might be status related involving prestige or other symbolic claims. And they might even be socioemotional. (I assume that power and access to power resources, legitimate and otherwise, is included here, though he does not say so explicitly.) Drawing on Tilly’s durable inequality formulation, Massey suggests that stratification processes entail two basic mechanisms: (1) “the allocation of people to social categories”; and (2) “the institutionalization of practices that allocate resources unequally across these categories” (pp. 5–6). These institutionalized practices involve exploitation and opportunity hoarding.

Critically, the process rests on the human cognitive capacity, and indeed proclivity, to categorize. “In a very real sense,” Massey writes “stratification begins psychologically with the creation of cognitive boundaries that allocate people to categories. Before categorical inequality can be implemented socially, categories must be created cognitively to classify people conceptually based on some set of achieved and ascribed characteristics” (p. 8). At this point, some students of social stratification may wonder exactly how much social psychology does a good sociologist *really* need to know, for Massey does not stop here. Moreover, he does not even turn in the direction of a more familiar social psychological model of social stratification, namely the Wisconsin status attainment model, wherein interaction with and the influence of significant others in one’s life helps to shape aspirations and related patterns of behavior that intervene in between parental socioeconomic status and a child’s own educational and early occupational attainments (Sewell and Hauser, 1980).

No, Massey turns at this point to eminent social psychologist Susan Fiske’s work on stereotyping and prejudice and even delves a bit into the emerging field of cognitive neuroscience (Fiske 1998; Fiske et al., 2002). The upshot of this maneuver is that all of us, “whether [we] think of [ourselves] as prejudiced or not, hold in [our] heads schemas that classify people into categories based on age, gender, race, and ethnicity. [We] cannot help it. It is part of the human condition, and these schemas generally include implicit memories that yield subconscious dispositions toward people and objects, leading to stereotypes” (pp. 10–11). Critical here is the claim that these stereotypes are not merely associations of category memberships with various positively or negatively valued traits or attributes. There are two evaluative dimensions at work that lead us to array members of groups in a two-dimensional space. Those dimensions are warmth, on the one hand, and competence on the other. The result is a core set of four-ideal types linking groups to a central socio-emotional predisposition toward them: such as *pity* for those viewed as warm but not particularly competent (classic chauvinist, paternalistic male orientation to women); *envy* toward those viewed as highly competent but not very warm (as perhaps best epitom-

mized by the conspicuous Asian success at certain elite institutions of higher learning); we tend to *despise* those understood as neither warm nor competent (we need only think of radio personality Don Imus's hateful remarks about the Black women of the Rutgers basketball team in 2007 as "nappy headed hos"); and lastly those who we hold in high *esteem* as both warm and competent, the privileged classes.

I find myself very much in agreement with this set of framing moves by Massey. I think it important for students of social stratification, and especially for those interested in understanding racial inequality. Let me say several things about Massey's treatment of race and a changing but remarkably durable racial divide. First, BRAVO! I'm in near complete agreement with the argument he sketches out, both with respect to the contemporary presence of discrimination in many key domains of life and the extent to which such bias rests upon negative stereotyping and racial prejudice. Yet, second, there are important ways that his argument is incomplete or insufficiently complex and nuanced. Part of this traces, no doubt, to the enormity of the terrain he had to cover in a relatively compact treatment. However, to elaborate a bit, more could have been folded in to capture just how much more complex the terrain is today. In the process of documenting continuing discrimination in the housing market, in insurance markets, in car sales, and in the erection of a vast racialized, mass-incarceration society, Massey's treatment actually short changes the vast differences in accumulated wealth linked with race (Oliver and Shapiro, 1995). The profoundly sedimentary character of this dimension of economic status and resources is critical to an individual or family's capacity to maintain a particular standard of living. Incorporating a more substantial discussion of wealth inequality would not reverse any aspect of Massey's argument, but it would serve to reinforce and deepen an appreciation for how race still structures overall quality-of-life experience.

Now, let me say something a little more contradictory. Because of the emphasis on major patterns of racial inequality and the contemporary relevance of discrimination, the changing nature of the racial divide itself and the class complexity of Black America are given short shrift in *Categorically Unequal*. That is, to say that Blacks have lower odds of a call back from an employer or realtor, or that a White car salesman is likely to hold out for a higher price from a Black buyer, especially a Black male buyer versus a White male, is not to say that the sort of absolute categorical distinctions evident in the slavery and Jim Crow eras operates today. Massey certainly acknowledges the more subtle, complicated, and indirect ways in which discrimination now operates. But one feels the need to see more detail on how this plays out at different points in the class structure than Massey ever provides. Thus, for example, Bruce Western's (2006) analysis of the rise in incarceration is careful to stress the extent to which this has involved class and race, falling with special severity on high school-dropout Black men. We could use some consideration of the dynamic of racial discrimination at the higher end of the class distribution as well, but we find relatively little of it. This is important to do because it is too easy for some analysts to dismiss the evidence of on-going discrimination by pointing to the attainments of the Black middle class (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1997). The very powerful and convincing auditing studies can be read as establishing that the hurdles Blacks face in finding employment are somewhat harder—neither completely categorical nor impassable, just harder. Could such problems be solved perhaps, some might ask, with a little more effort or more diligence in school?

This concern about nuance and complexity in the argument can be raised in regard to Massey's discussion of Latinos being fashioned into a new, increasingly racialized underclass. He shows that changes in immigration policy have worked to

reduce the status of Latinos—a group that once occupied a sort of liminal status in between Black and White—to a point where they increasingly come to resemble Blacks on key economic indicators. The problem here is that crucial distinctions regarding citizenship status, generational status, and other factors such as English language mastery are not uniformly taken into account in making these comparisons. My point is not that Massey's claims are wrong—but one immediately wants to know how robust some claims are in the presence of controls for these sorts of other factors. We know from other careful research that these patterns are quite robust (Telles and Ortiz, 2008).

Likewise, the nuance and complexity concern arises in the final chapter as well where Massey does attempt some analysis of race, class, and gender simultaneously. Such integrated analyses of race-, class-, and gender-dynamics are never easy and we have few powerful exemplars in the sociological literature (Jackman 1994). For Massey, this part of the analysis proceeds mostly with respect to explaining individual and family earnings, specifying main effects for the 'holy trinity' or interactive ones. Again, he provides a useful but very gross cut on how these factors intertwine. Thus, one suspects a more specific face could be put on some of the extreme points in the continuum, comparing an undocumented recent Latina immigrant at one extreme, to an Ivy-league educated legacy-admit White male at the other. To his credit, Massey does specify the extent to which inequality has grown and identifies formal education as an increasingly central mechanism allocating people to relative privilege or disadvantage. Access to education and its quality, of course, are also, Massey notes, very much class- and race-stratified.

Third, the whole project has more the feel of a powerful typology and descriptive account, than it does an explanatory or predictive model. The clear specification of an engine or driver to change is largely absent, having been left as implicit. Namely, Massey seems to suggest that people act in ways that are consistent with their underlying stereotypes and schemas and, furthermore, that there is a certain inertia attached to established institutional practices. In fairness, much great sociology does not reach beyond excellent typologizing and thick description. But I think more is possible here. Let me give just a quick teaser: I am very much attracted to the notion of boundary work as Massey uses it. Accordingly, "Boundary work involves actions and behaviors undertaken to differentiate people socially; they are publicly labeled as members of an in- or out-group who thus embody the social traits associated with that category of people. Labeling may occur through informal mechanisms such as gossip, ridicule, shaming, ostracism, praise, or harassment that serves to 'put people in their place,' or it may be effected formally through regulations and laws such as the one-drop rule and the anti-miscegenation laws enacted throughout the South before the civil rights era. Boundary work distinguishes people from one another socially by highlighting interpersonal differences across categorical lines" (p. 244).

I have also been a long-time advocate for the notion of prejudice as a sense of group position, a view of prejudice with unambiguous sociological pedigree (Blumer 1958; Bobo and Tuan, 2006). To wit, many of the great struggles of the past, over school desegregation and affirmative action, let's say, can be read as boundary struggles where the fight really was very much over changing, or resisting change to customary group positions in access to key social resources of educational and job opportunities. The politics of these struggles, a great body of literature shows, is directly and deeply linked to things we would rightly classify as racial prejudice and its social dynamics.

The importance of Massey's work springs from what we all know: inequality has widened enormously in this country over the past several decades. The growing gap

between the haves and have-nots here in the United States, while certainly linked to large-scale processes of globalization and technological innovation, is not a simple mechanical function of such externalities. Nor is the rise in Black incarceration the inevitable product of a society's age-old struggle to deal with "unruly men;" just as the declining fortunes of undocumented immigrants in particular, and segments of the Mexican American community more generally, reflect policy choices and actions, not some inevitable macro-social dynamic. Sociologists need theoretical models that involve the full specification of these critical micro- and meso-level processes that undergird social inequality. With *Categorically Unequal*, Massey has provided a strong provocation and analytical push in the direction of a more comprehensive sociology of stratification processes.

Corresponding author: Professor Lawrence D. Bobo, Department of Sociology, William James Hall, 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA 02138. E-mail: bobo@wjh.harvard.edu

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