

# Building Blocks of Social Inequality: A Critique of *Durable Inequality*

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*Durable Inequality* is an important and insightful book. In this work, Charles Tilly links organizational needs to the production and reproduction of social inequality. For some time now, organizational theorists have demonstrated that formal organizations are central actors in modern society, and that the significant environment of formal organizations are other formal organizations. *Durable Inequality* demonstrates how social inequality is directly tied to solving organizational problems. His four master mechanisms—exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation, and adaptation—tell us a great deal about how inequality is produced and maintained. The argument about categorical pairing and how such pairing is used by organizations to generate inequality is plausible and seductive.

Tilly's book provides an unequivocal structural argument of inequality. But cultural analysts will find a small space in which to huddle underneath this large structural umbrella. Tilly makes clear that belief systems affect inequality. His argument does not require students of inequality to completely discard beliefs systems like racism, sexism, and homophobia. For exploiters, opportunity hoarders, and even victims of inequality utilize such beliefs to rationalize, justify, and explain processes of inequality.

Nevertheless, Tilly's argument insists that belief systems play no causal role in the generation of inequality. Beliefs and ideologies may embellish and at times reinforce structural factors that produce durable inequality. For Tilly, ideas and belief systems pertaining to inequality are fluid and ad hoc in nature. They can be plucked from existing cultural repertoires and applied to processes of inequality as the need arises. He writes that "the relative prevalence of such attitudes plays a secondary part in inequality's extent and form. Mistaken beliefs reinforce exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation, and adaptation but exercise little independent influence on their initiation" (15). Structural mechanisms cause inequality. Tilly maintains that "causal mechanisms resemble each other greatly, while outcomes differ dramatically thus inviting very different rationalizations or condemnations after the fact" (15). This logic leads him to conclude that "social scientists dealing with such durable forms of inequality must hack through dense ideological overgrowth to reach structural roots" (15).

0010-4175/00/2811-0962 \$9.50 © 2000 Society for Comparative Study of Society and History

Some ideologies, like racism and sexism, have deep durable roots as well. While their content may shift, their basic structure can remain intact for centuries and help produce inequality. This line of reasoning raises serious questions about the risk of summarily dismissing ideological beliefs as noncausal factors in the generation of inequality. The force of racism serves as an example. Students of race, as well as astute observers, have documented that the racial segregation of neighborhoods is often caused by the fact that whites believe that property values will fall when blacks move into a previously all-white neighborhood. It is a knee-jerk, unexamined belief, but it has power. In such situations whites often resist the efforts of blacks to integrate the neighborhood, thus denying blacks access to better schools, homes that generate decent equity, and neighborhoods with superior services. The result is racial inequality. However, in cases where whites are unable to resist racial integration, then a tipping point is often reached, and white flight ensues. As blacks move into such neighborhoods, credit agencies and banks devalue property; city services decline; experienced white teachers leave the now predominantly black schools, and the tax base is generally weakened. In Mertonian terms, the fears of whites are self-fulfilling, because white flight creates the appearance that the presence of blacks caused profit values to plummet, when it was actually a belief that triggered the process of inequality.

A similar phenomenon is widespread in American colleges and universities. In the academy there usually exists the potent, but unexamined belief that the recruitment of minority faculty and students will automatically compromise academic standards. This belief leads recruitment committees to superficially examine the applications of non-whites and weed them out because of a selective risk aversion. In situations where this practice has been challenged, significant numbers of blacks are often recruited, and whites, to their amazement, come to realize that these individuals are excellent faculty hires and students. In some of these instances, white professors have decided to head recruitment committees and institutionalize efforts to recruit people of color. Their initial racial beliefs had promoted racial inequality in the academy. Their new belief—which rose out of struggle and experience—transformed them into agents of change, who devote their efforts to decreasing racial inequality in the academy.

It is feasible, therefore, that social inequality results from a dialectical and dynamic interplay of structural and cultural factors. *Durable Inequality* does not provide evidence that cultural factors do not constitute a part of the causal nexus of social inequality. In considering cultural causes, we should continue to pay attention to W. I. Thomas' dictum that that which is perceived as unreal, can be real in its consequences. Tilly's theoretical account cannot adequately deal with cultural causes of social inequality, for in his framework only structural factors are theorized to be the sole root causes of inequality.

The concepts of "opportunity hoarding" and "exploitation" serve as Tilly's two key structural causes of social inequality. Here I wish to scrutinize the

concept of “opportunity hoarding,” because of its capacity to inadvertently cause the analyst to romanticize aspects of social inequality. Opportunity hoarding, according to Tilly, “operates when members of a categorically bounded network acquire access to a resource that is valuable, renewable, subject to monopoly, supportive of network activities, and enhanced by the network’s *modus operandi*” (10). In Tilly’s argument, powerful elites generate inequality through the exploitation of the labor power of others, while non-elites like American ethnic immigrant groups generate inequality through opportunity hoarding. Thus, opportunity hoarding can and often does occur in the absence of exploitation. While there is no neat break between exploitation and opportunity hoarding, it is possible for groups to be involved in both types of activities in certain situations. Nevertheless, Tilly emphasizes how powerholders exploit, while non-elites engage in opportunity hoarding. In fact, one major message of this book is how immigrant groups generated inequality through opportunity hoarding, rather than exploitation.

I think this formulation is problematic for several reasons. First, Tilly’s theoretical distinction that elites generate inequality largely through exploitation rather than opportunity hoarding does not hold up very well in the real world. Elites exploit others through their organizations. Within these organizations, especially at the top, there exists a categorically bounded network of powerful actors who control a valuable resource, and restrict access to their ranks. The valuable resource is the organization itself, through which elites sequester and hoard resources. Thus, powerholders always opportunity hoard as well as exploit.

Second, the concept of opportunity hoarding contains blind spots that led Tilly to paint a romantic and sanitized view of how immigrant groups establish ethnic niches, through which they generate and reproduce inequality. In Tilly’s account the white immigrant groups are not portrayed as exploiters. For him, these groups opportunity-hoard through processes such as chain migration and the passing on of skills to new immigrants, both horizontally and across generations. Such groups restrict access to their ethnic networks and resources.

This formulation does a woefully inadequate job of capturing the inequality-producing mechanisms that enabled white ethnic groups to establish domination over African-Americans. Why did black immigrants fail to establish niches similar to those created by white ethnic groups? Oliver and Shapiro in *Black Wealth and White Wealth*, as well as Butler in *Entrepreneurship and Self-Help among Black Americans*, provide answers. Oliver and Shapiro write that “explicit state and local policies restricted the rights and freedom of Blacks as economic agents. Many types of businesses were off limits to them, and more important, they were restricted to all-black segregated markets. While whites and other ethnic groups could do business with blacks, whites, and whomever else they pleased, black businesses were prohibited from entering into any but all-black markets. This restriction had a devastating impact on the ability of blacks to build and maintain successful businesses” (1995:46). Nevertheless, despite

these odds, blacks did create an ethnic enclave. Indeed, “between 1867 and 1917 the number of Afro-American enterprises increased from four thousands to fifty thousand” (Butler, 1991:147). Similarly, in 1949 over three hundred African-American firms flourished in Durham, North Carolina (Oliver and Shapiro, 1995:49). The question is this: what happened to these black enclaves? They were destroyed by organized white violence. One study pointed out that “immediately after the massacres, white businesses moved in and filled the economic gaps left by the flight of the blacks. When the turbulence receded the integrated neighborhoods had disappeared” (quoted in Oliver and Shapiro, 1995:49).

The concept of opportunity hoarding is not designed to explain these racial dynamics of inequality. Tilly fails to address why the Italians, Irish, Polish, and other white ethnics locked fists across their ethnic enclaves, delivering collective blows that crushed black businesses and divided the spoils. Moreover, the state did nothing to prevent these massacres and, in most cases, stood behind the white ethnics. Thus, blacks were denied the opportunity to sustain a black enclave, and were restricted to black-only markets when they could survive the white mobs. A concept that focuses on oppression, violence, racist ideologies, and state duplicity is needed to grapple with these dynamics. A concept which deals with extreme exploitation is needed to understand why blacks never rose from the bottom of America’s racial and ethnic hierarchy. I propose the concept of superexploitation to address these matters. Superexploitation refers to the condition whereby a group or groups become dominant over a given population by forcefully seizing that population’s valuable resources and creating the conditions necessary for keeping that population in a long-term state of subordination. The dominant population is often supported in this effort by the state, and by a set of negative ideologies used to stigmatize and delegitimize the victimized population. The real history of ethnic enclave-building in this country was nasty, bloody, brutish, and racist to the core. The concept of superexploitation, unlike opportunity hoarding, is designed to grapple with these real-world, unsavory mechanisms of inequality.

*Durable Inequality* also largely overlooks the role that the institution of inheritance plays in transmitting inequality across generations. Inheritance takes place primarily outside of organizations, and is rooted in family trusts and dynamics. Oliver and Shapiro (1995) reveal the central role inheritance has played in maintaining racial inequality. Because wealth is largely transmitted across generations through inheritance, it is a linchpin of social inequality, and not merely a component of opportunity hoarding, as Tilly suggests. Inheritance, I argue, is one of the master causes of inequality and its reproduction. I find it somewhat strange that a book which seeks to explain all forms of inequality, including the causes of racial inequality in America, fails to examine the role that two and a half centuries of slavery, combined with another three-quarters of a century of Jim Crow, played in the creation of racial inequality. Inheritance

lies at the heart of the slavery and Jim Crow story. Both regimes made it possible for whites to occupy a privileged place in the labor market, passing on the accumulated wealth and privileges to succeeding generations through inheritance. In contrast, to this very day blacks have little wealth because three hundreds years of economic exploitation and racial oppression caused them to inherit poverty and a legacy of struggle to decrease racial inequality.

Opportunity hoarding refers to restrictive networks through which bounded groups hoard resources. In contrast, inheritance is a legal and social device governing the transmission of resources and wealth across generations. It is also a key inequality-producing mechanism, because it determines who will inherit preexisting wealth. Changes in this institution would dramatically affect the scope and extent of inequality.

The core strength of Tilly's work is its structural analysis. The author takes us inside organizations and dissects how they generate inequality by installing exterior, unequal categorical pairings. For Tilly, the concept of "organizations" encompasses all conceivable forms, ranging from small households to large corporate entities. But on close inspection it becomes clear that the imagery and needs of large formal organizations dominate the analysis. The book largely ignores the world outside of formal organizations, where most unequal categories are forged and sustained. It is this vast space—where many of inequality's structural and ideational forces churn—that *Durable Inequality* leaves in shadows, largely hidden from critical analysis.

*Durable Inequality* is an important study because of the light it sheds by so doggedly pursuing the structural and organizational dimensions of social inequality. It maps out an important beginning of a comprehensive theory of one of the most perplexing sociological problem of all—why and how human groups continue to engage in the costly game of human oppression and the generation of social inequality.

#### REFERENCES

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