

7 Of Essences and Bonds

We could reasonably call James Gillray (1757–1815) Britain's first professional cartoonist (George 1967, 57; Hill 1976). He left us unforgettable images of public and private affairs under George III. Very few handsome people figure in Gillray's caricatures. In the savage portrayals of British life he drew, etched, and colored toward 1800, beefy, red-faced aristocrats commonly tower over other people, while paupers almost invariably appear as small, gaunt, and gnarled. If Gillray painted his compatriots with malice, however, he also observed them acutely.

Take the matter of height. Let us consider fourteen-year-old entrants to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst to represent the healthier portion of the aristocracy and gentry, and fourteen-year-old recruits for naval service via London's Marine Society to represent the healthier portion of the city's jobless poor. At the nineteenth century's start, poor boys of fourteen averaged only 4 feet 3 inches tall, while aristocrats and gentry of the same age averaged about 5 feet 1 inch (Floud, Wachter, and

Gregory 1990, 197; for the history of the Marine Society as an aristocratic benefaction, see Colley 1992, 91–93). An average beginning military cadet stood some 10 inches taller than a newly recruited mariner. Because poor youths then matured later than rich ones, their heights converged an inch or two by adulthood. Nevertheless we can imagine their counterparts in the army: aristocratic officers glowering down half a foot or more at their plebeian troops. Such an image vivifies the phrases “high and mighty,” “haughty,” and “look down on someone.”

Poor people have few good times. But the years around 1800 brought Britain’s low-income families especially bad times. In the short run, massive diversion of resources and labor power to French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars depleted domestic production as it drove up consumer prices. Over the longer run, the urbanization, industrialization, and sharpened inequality promoted by capitalist expansion were then aggravating the hardships faced by Western Europe’s poorer households. As poor people ceased producing their own food faster than agricultural productivity rose, hardship extended to their daily bread.

In his Nobel Prize lecture, economist and economic historian Robert Fogel points out that at nutritional levels prevailing toward the end of the eighteenth century, from 3 to 10 percent of the English and French work forces had too little food to sustain any effective work at all, while a full fifth of the population commanded too little for more than a few hours of light work per day (Fogel 1994, 371–374). At those low nutritional levels, furthermore, English and French workers were extremely vulnerable to chronic disease, hence liable to work lives disrupted by illness and early death. Fogel speculates that malnutrition itself thereby accounted for the stunning proportion of beggars—up to 20 percent of the entire population—reported in various regions of eighteenth-century Europe.

Over population categories, regions, and countries, as Fogel and other researchers have recently established, material well-being and stature vary in strong relation to each other (Floud, Wachter, and Gregory 1990; Fogel 1993, 1994; Fogel and Costa 1997; Komlos 1987, 1990, 1994). Richard Steckel sums up:

Stature adeptly measures inequality in the form of nutritional deprivation; average height in the past century is sensitive not only to the level of income but to the distribution of income and the consumption of basic necessities by the poor. Unlike conventional measures of living standards based on output, stature is a measure of consumption that incorporates or adjusts for individual nutritional needs; it is a net measure that captures not only the supply of inputs to health but demands on those inputs. (Steckel 1995, 1903)

Well-being and height link through food consumption; victuals invigorate. Although genes set variable limits to height distributions in human populations, childhood nutrition strongly affects the degree to which any individual approaches her or his genetic limit. Low birth weight, which typically results from a mother's illness and malnutrition, predicts reliably to a child's health problems, diminished life expectancy, and smaller adult size.

Within a given population, furthermore, short stature itself generally predicts to higher levels of morbidity and mortality—most likely not because of height's inherent advantages but because, on the whole, short stature correlates with unfavorable childhood health experiences and lesser body strength. Rising height across an entire population therefore provides one of our clearest signs that the well-being of that population is increasing, and marked adult height differentials by social category within the male or female population provide a strong indicator of durable inequality.

That average heights of adults in Western countries have typically risen 6 inches or so over the past century and a half reflects a significant rise in living standards. That even in egalitarian Sweden recent studies reveal lower birth weights for the newborn of less-educated women (in this case, most likely a joint outcome of smoking and nutrition) tells us that material inequalities persist into prosperity (*Dagens Nyheter* 1996). That at my modest altitude I easily see over the heads of many adult males with whom I travel on New York subways—especially those speaking languages other than English—signals that in capitalist countries we still have profound inequalities of life experience to identify and explain.

Since sexual dimorphism prevails among primates and since humans commonly live in mixed-sex households whose members share food, one might suppose that female/male height differences, unlike class inequalities, derive almost entirely from genetic predisposition. Not quite. Nature and nurture are disentangled with difficulty when it comes to such matters as sex differences in body size. As James Tanner puts it:

Variation between the heights of *individuals* within a subpopulation is indeed largely dependent on differences in their genetic endowment; but the variation between the means of groups of individuals (at least within an ethnically homogeneous population) reflects the cumulative nutritional, hygienic, disease, and stress experience of each of the groups. In the language of analysis of variance, most of the within-group variation is due to heredity, and most of the between-group variation is due to childhood environment. (Tanner 1994, 1)

What counts, however, as a subpopulation, or group? Surely not any cohabiting population, regardless of social divisions within it. For "group," read "category," to recognize that class, gender, race, ethnicity, and similar socially organized systems of distinction clearly qualify. (I will follow current conventions by speaking of "sex" in reference to X and Y chromosome-linked biological differences, "gender" in reference to social categories.) In each of these cases, differences in "nutritional, hygienic, disease, and stress experience" contribute to differences in adult stature. Researchers in the field have so far done much more with class differences, national differences, and change over time than with male/female differences.

Still, gender likewise marks distinctive childhood experiences, even when it comes to nutrition. When children in pastoral and agricultural economies begin serious work in their household enterprises, they almost always take on gender-differentiated tasks. That means their daily routines give boys and girls unequal access to food. Most of the time girls get less, and their food is of lower quality. Where men fish or hunt while females till and gather, however, the division of labor often attaches girls and women to the more reliable and continuous sources of calories. Thus in some circumstances females may actually get better nourishment than males.

The fundamental fact, then, is gender differentiation in nutrition, with the usual but not universal condition being inferior nutrition for females. We have enough episodic documentation concerning gender discrimination with respect to health care, feeding, infanticide, and general nurture, as well as slivers of evidence suggesting gender-differential patterns of improvement or decline in nutrition under the influence of broad economic fluctuations, to support hypotheses of widespread unequal treatment of males and females, of inequality in their resulting life chances, hence of a social contribution to gender differences in weight and height as well.

Below a certain threshold of food supply, most households make regular if implicit choices concerning which of their members will have adequate nourishment. Contemporary capitalist countries seem to have risen above that threshold, although we lack reliable evidence concerning nutritional inequality among capitalism's currently increasing share of poor people. But the hungry world as a whole still features gender discrimination in nutrition.

Here Fogel's line of investigation crosses the inquiries of Amartya Sen (Sen 1981, 1982, 1983, 1992). From his analyses of poverty and famine onward, Sen has sniffed out deliberately unequal treatment in the presence of resources that could ensure more general welfare. He recurrently detects gender-differentiated claims on such resources. "There is a lot of indirect evidence," he comments, "of differential treatment of women and men, and particularly of girls *vis-à-vis* boys, in many parts of the world, e.g., among rural families in Asia and North Africa. The observed morbidity and mortality rates frequently reflect differential female deprivation of extraordinary proportions" (Sen 1992, 123). The most dramatic observations concern female infanticide through direct attack or (more often) systematic neglect, which analysts have frequently reported for strongly patrilineal regions of Asia (Johansson and Nygren 1991; Langford and Storey 1993; Lee, Campbell, and Tan 1992; Lee, Feng, and Campbell 1994; Muhuri and Preston 1991; Yi et al. 1993).

People of Western countries have not much practiced selective female infanticide. But Western states have often reinforced gender distinctions in nutrition and nurture, notably by confining military service to males, diverting food stocks from civilian to military use, providing superior

health care for troops, and ensuring that soldiers receive better rations than the general population. Florence Nightingale, after all, more or less invented professional nursing as we know it while organizing the health care of British fighting men during the Crimean War. In the absence of powerful drugs and diagnostic instruments, Nightingale's nursing stressed cleanliness, warmth, and nourishment, comforts many women back home in Britain did not then share. If military men at war have historically faced exceptional risks of violent death and disabling disease, in recent centuries they have also typically received three square meals a day when civilians, especially female civilians, were tightening their belts.

Such socially organized differences in well-being illustrate this book's main subject: the causes, uses, structures, and effects of categorical inequality. The book does not ask what causes human inequality in general. Instead it addresses these questions: How, why, and with what consequences do long-lasting, systematic inequalities in life chances distinguish members of different socially defined categories of persons? How do categorical inequalities form, change, and disappear? Since all social relations involve fleeting, fluctuating inequalities, let us concentrate on *durable* inequalities, those that last from one social interaction to the next, with special attention to those that persist over whole careers, lifetimes, and organizational histories.

Let us concentrate, furthermore, on distinctly bounded pairs such as female/male, aristocrat/plebeian, citizen/foreigner, and more complex classifications based on religious affiliation, ethnic origin, or race. We focus on *categories* rather than on continua such as [rich . . . poor], [tall . . . short], [ugly . . . beautiful], and so on. Bounded categories deserve special attention because they provide clearer evidence for the operation of durable inequality, because their boundaries do crucial organizational work, and because categorical differences actually account for much of what ordinary observers take to be results of variation in individual talent or effort.

As Max Weber noted almost a century ago, the creation of what he called "social closure" advances efforts by the powerful to exclude less powerful people from the full benefits of joint enterprises, while facilitating efforts by underdogs to organize for the seizure of benefits

denied (Weber 1968, 1:43–46, 1:341–348; Parkin 1979, 44–116). A relationship is likely to be closed, Weber remarked,

in the following type of situation: a social relationship may provide the parties to it with opportunities for the satisfaction of spiritual or material interests. If the participants expect that the admission of others will lead to an improvement of their situation, an improvement in degree, in kind, in the security or the value of the satisfaction, their interest will be in keeping the relationship open. If, on the other hand, their expectations are of improving their position by monopolistic tactics, their interest is in a closed relationship. (Weber 1968, 1:43)

Organizations such as firms and clans use closure by drawing complete boundaries around themselves and then monitoring flows across those boundaries with care. Contrary to Weber, however, I argue that at a scale larger than a single organization completely bounded categories are rare and difficult to maintain, that most categorical inequality relies on establishment of a partial frontier and defined social relations across that frontier, with much less control in regions distant from the frontier. Yet in other regards my analysis resonates with Weber's discussion. It builds a bridge from Max Weber on social closure to Karl Marx on exploitation, and back. Crossing that bridge repeatedly, this book concerns social mechanisms—recurrent causal sequences of general scope—that actually lock categorical inequality into place. The central argument runs like this: Large, significant inequalities in advantages among human beings correspond mainly to categorical differences such as black/white, male/female, citizen/foreigner, or Muslim/Jew rather than to individual differences in attributes, propensities, or performances. In actual operation, more complex categorical systems involving multiple religions or various races typically resolve into bounded pairs relating just two categories at a time, as when the coexistence of Muslims, Jews, and Christians resolves into the sets Muslim/Jew, Muslim/Christian, and Jew/Christian, with each pair having its own distinct set of boundary relations.

Even where they employ ostensibly biological markers, such categories always depend on extensive social organization, belief, and enforcement. Durable inequality among categories arises because people who

control access to value-producing resources solve pressing organizational problems by means of categorical distinctions. Inadvertently or otherwise, those people set up systems of social closure, exclusion, and control. Multiple parties—not all of them powerful, some of them even victims of exploitation—then acquire stakes in those solutions. Variation in the form and durability of inequality therefore depends chiefly on the nature of the resources involved, the previous social locations of the categories, the character of the organizational problems, and the configurations of interested parties.

Through all these variations, we discover and rediscover paired, recognized, organized, unequal categories such as black/white, male/female, married/unmarried, and citizen/noncitizen. The dividing line between such categories usually remains incomplete in two regards: first, some people (persons of mixed race, transsexuals, certified refugees, and so on) do not fit clearly on one side of the line or the other; and, second, in many situations the distinction between the members of any particular pair does not matter. Where they apply, however, paired and unequal categories do crucial organizational work, producing marked, durable differences in access to valued resources. Durable inequality depends heavily on the institutionalization of categorical pairs.

ROOTS OF CATEGORICAL INEQUALITY

How and why does the institutionalization of categorical pairs occur? Since the argument is unfamiliar and complicated, it may help to lay out its major elements and their causal connections even before defining crucial terms. The list will serve as a preliminary map of the wilderness this book will explore:

1. Paired and unequal categories, consisting of asymmetrical relations across a socially recognized (and usually incomplete) dividing line between interpersonal networks, recur in a wide variety of situations, with the usual effect being the unequal exclusion of each network from resources controlled by the other.

2. Two mechanisms we may label *exploitation* and *opportunity hoarding* cause durable inequality when their agents incorporate paired and unequal categories at crucial organizational boundaries.
3. Two further mechanisms we may title *emulation* and *adaptation* reinforce the effectiveness of categorical distinctions.
4. Local categorical distinctions gain strength and operate at lower cost when matched with widely available paired and unequal categories.
5. When many organizations adopt the same categorical distinctions, those distinctions become more pervasive and decisive in social life at large.
6. Experience within categorically differentiated settings gives participants systematically different and unequal preparation for performance in new organizations.
7. Much of what observers ordinarily interpret as individual differences that create inequality is actually the consequence of categorical organization.
8. For these reasons, inequalities by race, gender, ethnicity, class, age, citizenship, educational level, and other apparently contradictory principles of differentiation form through similar social processes and are to an important degree organizationally interchangeable.

Whatever else it accomplishes, the book will make clear what is at issue in such an organizational view of inequality-producing mechanisms. At a minimum, it will challenge other analysts to clarify the causal mechanisms implied by their own preferred explanations of durable inequality and then to search for evidence that those causal mechanisms are actually operating.

Although the word "organization" may call to mind firms, governments, schools, and similar formal, hierarchical structures, I mean the analysis to encompass all sorts of well-bounded clusters of social relations in which occupants of at least one position have the right to commit collective resources to activities reaching across the boundary. Organizations include corporate kin groups, households, religious sects,

bands of mercenaries, and many local communities. Durable inequality arises in all of them. All of them at times incorporate categorical distinctions originating in adjacent organizations.

Humans invented categorical inequality millennia ago and have applied it to a wide range of social situations. People establish systems of categorical inequality, however inadvertently, chiefly by means of these two causal mechanisms:

- *Exploitation*, which operates when powerful, connected people command resources from which they draw significantly increased returns by coordinating the effort of outsiders whom they exclude from the full value added by that effort.
- *Opportunity hoarding*, which 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.

The two mechanisms obviously parallel each other, but people who lack great power can pursue the second if encouraged, tolerated, or ignored by the powerful. Often the two parties gain complementary, if unequal, benefits from jointly excluding others.

Two further mechanisms cement such arrangements in place: *emulation*, the copying of established organizational models and/or the transplanting of existing social relations from one setting to another; and *adaptation*, the elaboration of daily routines such as mutual aid, political influence, courtship, and information gathering on the basis of categorically unequal structures. Exploitation and opportunity hoarding favor the installation of categorical inequality, while emulation and adaptation generalize its influence.

A certain kind of inequality therefore becomes prevalent over a large population in two complementary ways. Either the categorical pair in question—male/female, legitimate/illegitimate, black/white, citizen/noncitizen, and so on—operates in organizations that control major resources affecting welfare, and its effects spread from there; or the categorical pair repeats in a great many similar organizations, regardless of their power.

In the first case, organizations that produce work and wield coercive power—corporations and states, plantations and mercenary forces, textile mills and drug rings, depending on the context—take pride of place because they ordinarily control the largest concentrations of deployable resources within large populations. In some settings of ideological hegemony, religious organizations and their own categorical distinctions can also have similar effects on inequality around them.

In the second case, households, kin groups, and local communities hold crucial positions for two reasons: within a given population, they form and change according to similar principles, and they strongly influence biological and social reproduction. Gender and age distinctions, for example, do not ordinarily separate lineages from one another, but the repetition of these distinctions in many lineages lends them influence throughout the population. The basic mechanisms that generate inequality operate in a similar fashion over a wide variety of organizational settings as well as over a great range of unequal outcomes: income, wealth, power, deference, fame, privilege, and more.

People who create or sustain categorical inequality by means of the four basic mechanisms rarely set out to manufacture inequality as such. Instead they solve other organizational problems by establishing categorically unequal access to valued outcomes. More than anything else, they seek to secure rewards from sequestered resources. Both exploitation and opportunity hoarding provide a means of doing so. But, once undertaken, exploitation and opportunity hoarding pose their own organizational problems: how to maintain distinctions between insiders and outsiders; how to ensure solidarity, loyalty, control, and succession; how to monopolize knowledge that favors profitable use of sequestered resources. The installation of explicitly categorical boundaries helps to solve such organizational problems, especially if the boundaries in question incorporate forms of inequality that are already well established in the surrounding world. Emulation and adaptation lock such distinctions into place, making them habitual and sometimes even essential to exploiters and exploited alike.

To be sure, widely applicable categories accumulate their own histories and relations to other social structures: male/female distinctions

have acquired enormous, slow-moving cultural carapaces yet reappear within almost all social structures of any scale, whereas in the United States the distinction Hispanic/white remains a disputed, politically driven division of uncertain cultural content. Such categorical pairs therefore operate with characteristic differences when imported into new settings. The distinction citizen/foreigner, for instance, does a variety of organizational work—separating temporary from long-term employees, differentiating access to public benefits, managing rights to intervene in political processes, and so on—but everywhere and always its existence and effectiveness depend on the present capacity of a relatively centralized government. The power of a differentiator based on membership or nonmembership in a political party (notable cases being communist parties in state socialist regimes) similarly depends on the existence of a hegemonic party exercising extensive state power and controlling a wide variety of valued resources.

Divisions based on preference for sexual partners—gay, lesbian, straight, and so on—depend far less on governmental structure. As compared to those who differentiate based on citizenship or party membership, those who install sexual preference as a local basis of inequality have less access to governmental backing as well as a lower likelihood of governmental intervention. Sexual preference distinctions, however, do import extensive mythologies, practices, relations, and understandings that significantly affect how the distinctions work within a new setting.

Categorical inequality, in short, has some very general properties. But one of those properties, paradoxically, is to vary in practical operation with the historically accumulated understandings, practices, and social relations already attached to a given set of distinctions.

Consider some quick examples. Josef Stalin knits together an effective political machine by recruiting ethnically identified regional leaders, training them in Moscow, making them regional party bosses, and giving their ethnic identifications priority within semiautonomous political jurisdictions. When the Soviet center later relaxes its grip, political entrepreneurs within regions mobilize followings around those ethnic identities, others mobilize against them, and ostensibly age-old ethnic conflicts flame into civil war.

Again, the founder of a small manufacturing firm, following models already established in the trade, divides the firm's work into clusters of jobs viewed as distinct in character and qualifications and then recruits workers for those jobs within well-marked categories. As turnover occurs and the firm expands, established workers pass word of available jobs among friends and relatives, collaborating with and supporting them once they join the work force. Those new workers therefore prove more reliable and effective than others hired off the street, and all concerned come to associate job with category, so much so that owner and workers come to believe in the superior fitness of that category's members for the particular line of work.

Another case in point. Householders in an urban neighborhood build up a precarious system of trust on the basis of common backgrounds and shared relations to third parties, live with persons and property at risk to that system of trust, and then react violently when newcomers whom they cannot easily integrate into the same networks threaten to occupy part of the territory. In the process, members of the two groups elaborate compelling stories about each other's perfidy and utter incompatibility.

Members of an immigrant stream, finally, peddle craft goods from their home region on big-city streets, and some of them set up businesses as suppliers, manufacturers, or retail merchants. New immigrants find work in the expanding trade, and not only an immigrant niche but an ethnically specific international connection provides exclusive opportunities for the next generation. In all these cases, organizational improvisations lead to durable categorical inequality. In all these cases, but with variable weight, exploitation and opportunity hoarding favor the installation of categorical inequality, while emulation and adaptation generalize its influence.

When it comes to the determinants of durable inequality, are these special cases or the general rule? This book gives reasons for thinking that categorical inequality in general results from varying intersections of exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation, and adaptation. It goes farther, claiming that much of the inequality that seems to result from individual or group differences in ability actually stems from the same causes: