



**RETURNING MATERIALS:**  
Place in book drop to  
remove this checkout from  
your record. FINES will  
be charged if book is  
returned after the date  
stamped below.

65-201  
JUL 19 1982  
R-216

THE FUNCTIONALIST AND HISTORICAL  
MATERIALIST PERSPECTIVES ON  
SOCIAL EGALITARIANISM:  
A COMPARISON

by  
Robert Glenn Parr

A THESIS

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Sociology

1981

ABSTRACT

THE FUNCTIONALIST AND HISTORICAL  
MATERIALIST PERSPECTIVES ON  
SOCIAL EGALITARIANISM:  
A COMPARISON

by

Robert Glenn Parr

Inequality has been an obvious fact of history, recognized by both the functionalist and the historical materialist. But a comparison of these two perspectives indicates a completely different approach to the fact of equality. However, it does not follow from that recognition that there is any agreement on the meaning and significance of equality in human society. Therefore, a comparison of how both functionalists and historical materialists interpret this pervasive phenomenon is needed.

A comparison of these social interpretations is likely to emphasize similarities and differences in the observation of facts, and in the theoretical approach to explaining those facts. But a phenomenon such as equality is more than a matter of fact and theory. It becomes a value for some, often a battle cry of social movements.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
CHAPTER I. THE HISTORY OF INEQUALITY . . . . .	2
CHAPTER II. THE RESPONSE TO INEQUALITY . . . . .	14
CHAPTER III. THE RESPONSE OF SOCIOLOGISTS TO INEQUALITY. . . . .	20
Lenski	
Mosca, Michels, and Pareto	
Functionalism	
Criticism of Functionalism	
Marx	
CHAPTER IV. FUNCTIONALISM AND MERITOCRACY . . . . .	40
Statement of the Problem	
CHAPTER V. A COMPARISON OF THE FUNCTIONALIST AND HISTORICAL MATERIALIST PERSPECTIVES ON EQUALITY . . . . .	50
The Fact of Inequality	
The Value of Inequality	
The Theories of Functionalism and Historical Materialism	
CONCLUSION . . . . .	72
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	77

## INTRODUCTION

Social historians like Herbert Gans and Gerhard Lenski conclude that humanity has known only inequality. Those who have sought solutions traditionally have built upon religious and philosophical bases, appealing to a world other than the physical, empirical world of social science.

Functionalists see inequality as inevitable for the maintenance of society. Writers such as Gaetano Mosea and Robert Michels, and Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore defend the inequalities which accompany a class structure in society. Critics like Melvin Tumin are able to point out the inconsistencies and inequalities of this utilitarian approach.

Meritocracy is a companion of functionalist thinking which visualizes the post-industrial society as one built upon the ability and performance of its individual citizens. As the "cream of the crop" is discovered through testing and then groomed for the top leadership positions, a country will be able to become influential in the world to come. Michael Young and Daniel Bell deal with this viewpoint in their writings.

The egalitarian cause finds some of its key theoretical support in Karl Marx. The attempt of Marx is to root equality in history, and in society's economic relationships which serve as a basis for values like equality. This then leads to a contrast of positivism and historical materialism as it regards their outlook on human equality.

CHAPTER I  
THE HISTORY OF INEQUALITY

Where and when human beings first began to reflect on the conditions and causes of inequality is anybody's guess. "The fact of inequality is almost surely as old as the human species. No known society has ever had a complete egalitarian social system."<sup>1</sup> Inequality appears to be a fact of life which has characterized all of known history. This conclusion has been drawn by many.<sup>2</sup> "More equality may be morally desirable or politically necessary, but few human societies, and no modern ones have so far achieved a significant degree of equality."<sup>3</sup> In this quote, Herbert Gans does not indicate which ancient societies have achieved a significant degree of equality. He offers some examples on the individual level, but admits, "The kinds of relationships I have just described differ from being hypothetical....All of the relationships I have described so far are micro-level, and among interpersonal and instrumental

---

<sup>1</sup>Gerhard H. Lenski, Power and Privilege (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1966), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>See Andrew Peck and Herbert Spiegelberg, The Concept of Equality, ed. by William T. Blackstone (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 136, 152. Also Ralf Dahrendorf, Essays in the Theory of Society (Stanford University Press, 1968), p. 178.

<sup>3</sup>Herbert J. Gans, More Equality (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), p. 62.

relationships, equality is probably much rarer."<sup>4</sup> Gans then recommends that research be carried on to see if an egalitarian society that may have existed in the past can be rediscovered. "Finally, although equality at the macro-level, or societal equality, is hard to find in a modern society, it may be worthwhile studying preindustrial or so-called primitive societies, either through reviewing the existing literature or through new field work, to find out if any are egalitarian, and if so, why." He continues by offering suggestions as to where one might find desirable results.

Very simple and smaller societies without a division of labor can perhaps be egalitarian, particularly if they have no religion or one that does not need priestly authorities; and if they live in an environment where food and shelter are available in unlimited quantity so that the need for private property does not need to be divided into haves and have-nots.<sup>5</sup>

Finding a society with no division of labor, no religion with priestly authorities, and unlimited quantities of food and shelter is a tall order. But in addition to this it may not be helpful, as Gans indicates. "I do not know whether studies of such societies would be at all relevant to modern societies, but it seems to be worth some research effort to find out."<sup>6</sup> He realizes that the present condition is serious enough that it warrants this kind of "needle in the haystack" research. And he is not looking for perfection, or complete equality, either

---

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 185

in the past or for the future. "A completely egalitarian society strikes me as so utopian as to be beyond policy-oriented discussion."<sup>7</sup> Societies that even remotely approach equality are rare, if not impossible to find in the history of humankind. Gans is unable to come up with an societies that have "achieved a significant degree of equality."

Gerhard Lenski traces the development of inequality through different stages of historical development. He deals with inequality as it applies to the distributive systems of five stages of society: the hunting and gathering societies, simple horticultural societies, advanced horticultural societies, agrarian societies, and industrial societies.

Lenski makes the statement in the first chapter of his book, Power and Privilege, that,

From primitive Stone Age communities to complex industrial societies, inequality has always been present, though its forms and degree may vary considerably. In the simplest societies in the world today, the fact of equality is taken for granted, as are other familiar features of existence. Undoubtedly this was true in prehistoric societies. The belief that conditions need not be as they are is characteristic of socially and technologically more advanced societies.<sup>8</sup>

The author then begins an examination of these simple and advanced societies. He deals with the five different societies named above, noting the degree of equality in each.

---

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>8</sup>Lenski, op. cit., p. 3.

First is the hunting and gathering societies which are the most primitive of all human societies with respect to technology in general and mode of production in particular. Nevertheless, throughout most of human history this was the only type of society known to man. It is only in the last then thousand years that men have advanced to the point where they have been able to control and enlarge their food supply through the cultivation of plants and domestication of animals.<sup>9</sup>

At first glance these societies appear egalitarian to some, but doubts begin to arise when examined more closely. "...Many untrained observers have reported perfect equality in certain of these societies...The more careful observations of trained observers force us to reject these extreme claims...."<sup>10</sup> Lenski makes note of the radical difference between these societies and industrial ones, and then continues to delineate some signs of inequality.

In many of these societies, those who are helpless because of old age, injury, or illness are denied the necessities of life and in some instances are put to death by their fellow tribesmen...A much more common practice has been to abandon such persons at the time of breaking camp.<sup>11</sup>

In such primitive societies, this can be the fate of any old person. In that sense it would be an equal condition of life for all who live long enough. And later,

Sex, like age, is a factor in the distribution process in these societies, though its importance is variable. Women invariably occupy a position inferior to men, though in some societies the difference is not great. Women are almost always excluded from the role of headman and usually are ineligible to become shamans or participate in council

---

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

meetings. Though, as a group, women enjoy less prestige and influence than men, all women are not equal. Usually the status of a married woman reflects the status of her husband.<sup>12</sup>

In the primitive hunting and gathering societies the disabled and women have occupied secondary, inferior roles. From this point things get worse until the industrial age, according to Lenski's analysis.

The second societies are simple horticultural ones.

Ten thousand years ago primitive men first learned how to cultivate, or raise for themselves, certain of the plants on which they depend for food. This important discovery laid the foundation for the eventual emergence of the first horticultural societies some centuries or millennia later... As their name implies, horticultural societies built upon the foundation of a gardening economy. In this respect they differ...from the more primitive hunting and gathering societies, in which the cultivation of plants is either absent or of secondary importance....<sup>13</sup>

But how do these societies compare with hunting and gathering ones in terms of equality? "Under comparable conditions, however, simple horticultural societies are normally larger, more productive, and less egalitarian."<sup>14</sup> This is reemphasized later:

"...one of the striking differences which emerges from any comparison of these two types of societies is that social inequalities are more pronounced in the horticultural...On the average there is a definite difference between the two

---

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

categories, and many simple horticultural societies exhibit a degree of inequality unmatched in any hunting and gathering society.<sup>15</sup>

Lenski is clear and certain that there was a definite rise in inequality as society advanced from the hunting and gathering to the simple horticultural stage.

Lenski's third stage of historical development is the advanced horticultural society. Here we read, "Where and when the first advanced horticultural societies appeared are questions which still remain unanswered. On the basis of available evidence it appears that they had their beginnings in the Middle East more than 6,000 years ago."<sup>16</sup> The difference between the simple and the advanced agricultural societies is that the latter are

the more advanced agricultural societies, which employ more efficient techniques of cultivation and farm on a larger scale. Perhaps the best single criterion for differentiating between horticultural and agricultural is that the latter employs the plow as the basic tool in cultivation while the former depends on the more primitive hoe or the still more primitive digging stick.<sup>17</sup>

Then Lenski proceeds to compare the advanced horticultural societies of Africa to those of the New World, even though the two had no cultural contact. He concluded by noting that

these differences are more than offset by the striking similarities in more basic matters. In the New World, for example, the rulers of advanced states were regarded as demigods and treated as such. They enjoyed immense power and privilege and their subjects were sompelled to display

---

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 117-118.

extreme deference. They had at their disposal a complex and highly developed retinue of ministers, courtiers, and officials, who saw to it that their slightest order was executed and who formed a privileged class set apart from the mass of commoners. Similarities even extended to the widespread practice of human sacrifice,...the presence of royal harems, and the practice of electoral succession...In fact, it appears to be a basic principle that among societies at an advanced horticultural level of development, the separation of the political and the kinship systems and the resulting development of the state are necessary preconditions for the development of marked social inequality.<sup>18</sup>

Lenski is pointing out that the instituting of governments during this period contributed to stratification of society.

Lenski seems to believe this trend was inevitable.

While it is impossible to prove that African despotism developed in this manner, as a natural evolutionary outgrowth of the modest tribal governments of simple horticultural societies, both theory and the evidence of ethnographic studies point this way...The means of effecting the transformation appear to have lain ready at hand in the older, more primitive system. Thus...an institution which began primarily as a functional necessity of group life became, in many advanced horticultural societies, an instrument employed primarily for self-aggrandizement and exploitation.<sup>19</sup>

So inequality becomes more deeply entrenched in society through government institutions.

Agrarian societies are the fourth stage of Lenski's historical progression. This type of society

had its beginnings five to six thousand years ago in the fertile river valleys of the Middle East. Subsequently it spread both east and west, with the result that by the end of the fifteenth century A.D. agrarian societies were firmly established throughout most of Europe, North Africa,

---

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 159-160.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 168.

the Middle East, and South and East Asia. With the discovery of the New World, this form of social organization was brought to North and South America....<sup>20</sup>

Continuing to speak of the development of the agrarian society, he says it

was made possible by a variety of factors, the most important of which was a series of inventions and discoveries that resulted in major advances in production, transportation, and communication. Prominent among these were the invention of the plow and two related developments which greatly enhanced the value of the plow, namely, the discovery of how to harness animal energy, and the discovery of the basic principles of metallurgy. The latter made possible the forging of iron plowshares (a great advance over their wooden predecessors)...Paralleling these developments were the inventions of the wheel and the sail, which greatly facilitated the movement of both men and goods.<sup>21</sup>

Many inventions made the agrarian society what it was, as production, transportation and communication bring greater masses of people together for social interaction.

Lenski also analyzes this form of society in light of the degree of equality.

One fact impresses itself upon most any observer of agrarian societies, especially on one who views them in a broadly comparative perspective. This is the fact of marked social inequality. Without exception, one finds pronounced differences in power, privilege and honor associated with mature agrarian economics. These differences surpass those found in even the most stratified horticultural societies of Africa and the New World, and far exceed those found in simple horticultural or hunting and gathering societies.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 210.

This is a rather conclusive statement--a fact that almost any observer can see, marked social inequality, without exception. Lenski feels there can be little doubt concerning the deterioration of equality in agrarian societies.

In a concluding statement, he says,

On the whole, agrarian societies give the impression of gross injustice in the distributive realm. As we have seen, a small number of individuals enjoyed immense luxury, consuming in a single day goods and services sufficient to support large numbers of the common people for a year. At the same time a considerable portion of the population was denied the basic necessities of life and was marked out by the social system for a speedy demise. It does not take much imagination to conceive of a more equitable method of distribution.<sup>23</sup>

Distributive justice appears to strike a new low in agrarian societies in light of Lenski's analysis.

The fifth and last stage of historical development is that of the industrial societies. In distinguishing such a society, Lenski tells us

During the last two centuries, the productive systems of many societies have undergone a profound change. In this relatively short space of time, techniques of production and patterns of economic organization which had endured for thousands of years have been replaced by new and radically different ones. These developments have laid the foundation for a new and profoundly different kind of society, the modern industrial...From the technological standpoint, the more advanced industrial societies of the present day differ greatly from agrarian. The raw materials used are far more complex and efficient...One of the most important differences sociologically pertains to the sources of energy used in the performance of 'work'....<sup>24</sup>

Here is the development of "a new and profoundly different kind of society."

---

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 297-298.

But even more important than the profound difference, Lenski sees a change in the growing effects of inequality.

Given the vastly increased productivity of this type of society and the greater enlarged powers of industrial states, nothing would be more logical than to predict inequalities in power and privilege even greater than those found in agrarian societies. However, even a limited survey of the contemporary scene suggests that it is not the case, and a more intense examination confirms this impression. If anything, inequalities in power and privilege seem somewhat less pronounced in mature industrial than agrarian. In short, the appearance of mature industrial societies marks the first significant reversal in the age-old evolutionary trend toward ever increasing inequality.<sup>25</sup>

He would say we have a long way to go, but such a remarkable reversal in a major historical trend deserves an explanation. Though the reasons are by no means obvious, according to Lenski, he suggests a few possibilities, and then one which is most significant. One contributing factor to the decline of inequality in the industrial age is the great expansion of human knowledge, accompanied by the spread of literacy and the extension of education. Another factor is the modern pattern of warfare which involves the entire population to an extent unknown in agrarian societies.

But for Lenski there is another factor that stands out above all others.

More significant than any of these, however, has been the rise and spread of the new democratic ideology which asserts that the state belongs to the people. This ideology is not simply a reflection of changing economic conditions, though as we have seen, it has been affected by them. Rather, the historical record indicates that it

---

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 308.

had its origin in religious and philosophical developments in the seventeenth century and spread rather widely in the eighteenth century in countries which were still thoroughly agrarian in character, e.g., the United States and France. In fact, there appears to be as much justification for the thesis that this new ideology contributed to the emergence of industrial societies as for the converse.<sup>26</sup>

Lenski does not feel that this ideology is completely new, but that modern democratic beliefs were derived from the work of seventeenth century political theorists such as John Locke, who put an ancient idea into modern form and made it a significant force in the intellectual and political world. Lenski feels that the ideology was born back in the hunting and gathering societies even though it never materialized in real life to any extent.

Lenski still believes that inequality is very basic and an inevitable part of human existence. "Despite substantial movement toward the democratic ideal, political inequality is still a basic fact of life in all advanced industrial societies..."<sup>27</sup> And later he says, "...inequality is apparently inevitable..."<sup>28</sup> although he qualifies this by stating that the degree of inequality is highly variable in and between societal types.

Gans and Lenski are just two among many who recognize that inequality is a characteristic of human society as far back as recorded history reaches. There is simply no empirical

---

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 317.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 327.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

evidence indicating a society which is characterized by equality to any extent in any regard (whether in terms of power, wealth, education, or division of labor). This is the reason for Gans' appeal for more research, even against the odds that anything will be discovered.

CHAPTER II

THE RESPONSE TO INEQUALITY

Since inequality seems to be a way of life for the human race, a way which can be historically and scientifically demonstrated, how have persons chosen to respond to this plight? Down through history some have been dissatisfied with the inequalities of their day, while others have adjusted to them and even attempted to justify them. But few have claimed that inequalities were non-existent in their society. Traditionally, inequality has been justified or rejected on religious or philosophical grounds. Inequalities were seen as divinely ordained or divinely condemned, as rational or irrational.

Examples of ancient writers who believed that conditions need not be as they were are the early Hebrew prophets who lived around 800 B.C. Men like Amos, Micah and Isaiah denounced some of the rich and powerful men of their day. They were not only concerned with the misuse of wealth and power, but the means by which they had been acquired. An example is Micah's indictment of the leading citizens:

Listen, you leaders of Jacob,  
you rulers of the house of Israel.  
Should you not know justice,  
you who hate good and love evil....  
Hear this, you leaders of the house of Jacob,  
you rulers of the house of Israel,  
who despise justice  
and distort all that is right;

who build Zion with bloodshed,  
 and Jerusalem with wickedness....  
 Woe to you who plan iniquity,  
 to those who plot evil on their beds!  
 At morning's light they carry it out  
 because it is in their power to do it.  
 They covet fields and seize them,  
 and houses, and take them.  
 They defraud a man of his home,  
 a fellowman of his inheritance.<sup>29</sup>

Micah indicates that these practices are against God's will and will lead to judgment upon the nation.

But in India, ancient religious thinkers had a different view than that expressed by Micah. In the introduction to "The Laws of Manu" compiled by Hindu priests about 200 B.C., there is the following account of the creation of the world.

For the sake of the posterity of the worlds, he (the Lord) caused the Brahmana, the Kshatriya, the Vaisya, the Sudra to proceed from his mouth, his arms, his thighs, and his feet...But in order to protect this universe, He, the most resplendent one, assigned separate (duties and) occupations to those who sprang from his mouth, arms, thighs, and feet.

To Brahmana he assigned teaching and studying, sacrificing for their own benefit and for others, giving and accepting (of alms). The Kshatriya he commanded to protect the people...The Vaisya to tend the cattle...One occupation only the Lord prescribed to the Sudra, to serve meekly even those (other) three classes.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to the prophets of Israel, this states that social inequalities and classes were divinely ordained for the good of the world.

---

<sup>29</sup>Micah 3:1-2, 9-10; 2:1-2, The International Version of the Holy Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1978), p. 1240, 1242-1243.

<sup>30</sup>Lenski, op.cit., p. 4.

Greek philosophers of the classical period reflected on the inequalities of their day. Aristotle, for example, was a supporter of the basic institutions undergirding the system of social inequality. He defended the institution of slavery. "It is clear that some men are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right."<sup>31</sup> Aristotle recognized that some men who should be free were enslaved by force and violence, but this had no bearing on the justice and propriety of the institution itself.

But Plato attacked the basic institutional structure of society and advocated the communal ownership of all forms of property. The ruling class would then be selected on the basis of moral virtue, intellect and love of knowledge. In The Republic, Plato recommends, "Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never have rest from their evils..."<sup>32</sup> Plato does not object to social inequality, but to the specific institutional bases upon which the existing system of inequality rested. In general, intellectuals and scholars are attracted by this elitist position

---

<sup>31</sup>Aristotle, Politics, trans. by Benjamin Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 1943), p. 60.

<sup>32</sup>Plato, The Republic, trans. by Benjamin Jowett (New York: Vintage Books, n.d.), p. 203.

which criticizes the existing system of allocating rewards, but finds nothing objectionable in social inequality per se.

Centuries later, Jean Jacque Rousseau responded to inequality in a different manner. He contends,

I have endeavored to trace the origin and progress of inequality, and the institution and abuse of political societies, as far as these are capable of being deduced from the nature of man merely by the light of reason, and independently of those sacred dogmas which give the sanction of divine right to sovereign authority. It follows from this survey that, as there is hardly any inequality in the state of nature, all the inequality which now prevails owes its strength and growth to the development of our faculties and the advance of the human mind, and becomes at last permanent and legitimate by the establishment of property and laws. Secondly, it follows that moral inequality, authorized by positive right alone, clashes with natural right, whenever it is not proportionate to physical inequality--a distinction which sufficiently determines what we ought to think of that species of inequality which prevails in all civilized countries; since it is plainly contrary to the law of nature, however defined, that children should command old men, fools wise men, and that the privileged few should gorge themselves with superfluities, while the starving multitude are in want of the bare necessities of life.<sup>33</sup>

Rousseau feels that inequality has been aggravated by civilization, laws and property. There is barely any inequality in the state of nature since it is plainly contrary to the law of nature. The natural state of life is one free of inequality, according to Rousseau.

John Locke, the political theorist of the English Revolution of 1688, takes a similar approach.

---

<sup>33</sup>Jean Jacque Rousseau, The Social Contract and Discourses, trans. by G.D.H. Cole (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company 1950), pp. 271-272.

To understand political power aright and derive it from its original, we must consider what state all men are naturally in, and that is a state of perfect freedom to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending on the will of any other man. A state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another; there being nothing more evident than that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same facilities, should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection, unless the Lord and Master of them all should by any manifest declaration of his will set one above another, and confer on him by an evident and clear appointment an undoubted right to dominion and sovereignty.<sup>34</sup>

All men are in a natural state of perfect freedom, according to Locke. No man should be dependent upon another or ruling over another unless God himself does so. The law of nature allows each individual to function without hindrance from others. Such is a state of equality where everyone has the same advantages, none having any more than another.

Many more examples could be cited of religious, philosophical or political responses and reactions to inequality. Some condone and defend inequalities of their day, others violently oppose existing inequalities of one form or another. But once again the point is that the inequalities are there and are real as far as these observers are concerned. In this they all agree, though they differ in their approach to the problem. Another common denominator these approaches have is their appeal to beliefs or values that transcend the physical,

---

<sup>34</sup>John Locke, The Second Treatise of Government, ed. by Thomas P. Peardon (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1952), p. 4.

empirical, scientifically testable world. Whether the appeal be to a deity, a utopia where philosopher-kings rule, to reason or to the natural state of life, the solutions all "jump outside" so to speak. Both Gans and Lenski "stayed inside" and dealt only with the scientific evidence made available to them. For this reason we have to appreciate Gans' appeal for more research against the odds that the "needle in the haystack" can be dsicovered. He is attempting to remain consistent scientifically and historically even though he would like to see more equality.

CHAPTER III  
THE RESPONSE OF SOCIOLOGISTS TO INEQUALITY

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries social theorists have joined the ranks of philosophers, prophets, and political theorists in attempting to deal with the inequalities of their day.

LENSKI

Gerhard Lenski was quoted earlier in support of history being of a record of inequality. However, he was not simply focusing on the fact of inequality. His concern was how scarce resources come to be distributed as they do. He concludes that inequality exists once there is a surplus, and it is power that determines the unequal distribution of that surplus. He defines a surplus as "...goods and services over and above the minimum required to keep producers alive and productive..." He continues,

...if we assume that many of the things men most desire are in short supply, then,...this surplus will inevitably give rise to conflicts and struggles aimed at its control. If, following Weber, we define power as the probability of persons or groups carrying out their will even when opposed by others, then it follows that power will determine the distribution of nearly all of the surplus possessed by a society.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup>Lenski, op. cit., p. 44.

So privileges are primarily the result of power, power being the determinant in the distribution of goods and services. This unequal distribution in turn, leads to the stratification of social classes.

For Lenski, this use of power is based upon human nature which is basically selfish. "Thus, when one surveys the human scene, one is forced to conclude that when men are confronted with important decisions where they are obligated to choose between their own, or their group's interests and the interests of others, they nearly always choose the former-- though often seeking to hide this fact from themselves and others."<sup>36</sup> When important decisions are at stake and there is a conflict of interests, individuals virtually always make decisions that benefit themselves rather than others. Later the author states that "...most human action is motivated by self-interest or by partisan group interests."<sup>37</sup> Since humans are selfishly motivated but also need others in order to satisfy their principle goal of survival, "...men will share the product of their labors to the extent required to insure the survival and continued productivity of those members whose actions are necessary or beneficial to themselves."<sup>38</sup> So the selfish nature of the human being is the key motivating factor for those who

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

have the power to distribute the surplus of a society. And, "...societies, like individuals are basically self-seeking units."<sup>39</sup>

Lenski also suggests another inborn trait in human nature which contributes to social inequality. It "...is that men are unequally endowed by nature with the attributes necessary to carry on these struggles", that is, the struggles for rewards that are in short supply. He continues,

These inequalities in natural endowment are not the primary source of inequality. But they are important enough to provide some foundation for the...thesis that nature is the source of social inequality.<sup>40</sup>

Humans are unequally endowed by nature with the tools needed to be successful in the struggle for rewards.

#### MOSCA, MICHELS, AND PARETO

Three classical writers in social theory deal with social inequality by postulating an elite theory. These men are Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, and Robert Michels. These men also refer to power, as did Lenski, but they relate it to political inequality, which will then be matched by material inequality.

Vilfredo Pareto is the first proponent of the elite theory to be considered. Every society contains some individuals who have greater skill, intelligence, or manipulative ability than others, and they tend to dominate the group.

---

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

So let us make a class of people who have the highest indices in their branch of activity, and to that class give the name of elite.

For the particular investigation with which we are engaged, a study of the social equilibrium, it will help if we further divide that class into two classes: a governing elite, comprising individuals who directly or indirectly play some considerable part in government, and non-governing elite, comprising the rest.<sup>41</sup>

According to Pareto, the way a society remains stable in equilibrium is by the circulation of elites. Some of these elites are in the non-governing elite class, but political systems should remain open and available for the entrance of new rulers replacing the old ones in a continual circulation of elites.

Aristocracies do not last. Whatever the causes, it is an incontestable fact that after a certain length of time they pass away. History is a graveyard of aristocracies....

They decay not in number only. They decay also in quality, in the sense that they lose their vigor, that there is a decline in the proportions of the residues which enabled them to win their power and hold it. The governing class is restored not only in numbers but...in quality, by families rising from the lower classes and bringing with them the vigor and the proportions of residues necessary for helping themselves in power.<sup>42</sup>

A flow or circulation of elites from the governed class to the governing class keeps the latter vigorous and capable of ruling. But not everyone in the governed class possesses the necessary "proportions of residues"--only the elite who are able to rise to obtain and maintain power.

---

<sup>41</sup>Vilfredo Pareto, The Mind and Society, Vol. III (New York: Dover Publishing, Inc., 1935), p. 1423.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., pp. 1430-1431.

Gaetano Mosca sees two classes, the ruler and the ruled, as essential to any society.

In all societies...two classes of people appear--the class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class, always the less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class, is directed and controlled by the first, in a manner that is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent, and supplies the first, in appearance at least, with material means of subsistence and with the instrumentalities that are essential to the vitality of the political organism...We know that the same thing goes on in neighboring countries, and in fact we should be put to it to conceive of a real world otherwise organized--a world in which all men would be directly subject to a single person without relationships of superiority or subordination, or in which all men would share equally in the direction of political affairs.<sup>43</sup>

Concerned primarily with the political sphere, Mosca sees no possibility for equality which would eliminate the necessity of the ruling class and relationships of subordination.

Later he is speaking in the context of democracy, assuring the reader,

Absolute equality has never existed in human societies. Political power never has been, and never will be, founded upon the explicit consent of majorities. It has always been, and it will always be, exercised by organized minorities, which have had, and will have, the means, varying as the times vary, to impose their supremacy on the multitudes. Only a wise organization of circumstances have managed to render the preeminence of a ruling class less burdensome and less abusive in our time.<sup>44</sup>

Equality is given no hope whatever of becoming a reality as far as the government of societies is concerned. The ruling class is envisioned as always reigning over the multitudes.

---

<sup>43</sup>Gaetano Mosca, The Ruling Class (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1939), p. 50.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., pp. 326-327.

Mosca concludes his book with some suggestions for the future. One of the concerns was the European scene of his day. "Brief periods of strong government, where the state exercises many powers and great authority, may prove of actual benefit in some European countries, as helping to restore or provide conditions that will enable the representative system to function normally in the near future."<sup>45</sup> For normal functioning it may be necessary for government to exert strong authority. He continues, "But if the present crisis that is threatening our political systems and the social structure itself is to be surmounted, the ruling class must rid itself of many of its prejudices and change its psychological attitude."<sup>46</sup> Notice that the ruling class should purify itself by the removal of certain attitudes, but there is no hint that society should rid itself of the ruling class.

Robert Michels, in his book Political Parties, A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy, rejects the possibility of a democratic society in the chapter entitled "Democracy and the Iron Law of Oligarchy." He points out, "...this tendency is particularly strong in Italy, where it is led by a man of weight, Gaetano Mosca, who declares that no highly developed social order is possible without a 'political class'...that is to say, a politically dominant class, the class

---

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 493.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

of a minority."<sup>47</sup> The term "oligarchy" means "rule by the few", and is utilized by Michels to describe the tendency for large populations to come under the control of a small clique of leaders who make decisions on their own irrespective of the interests of the common citizens. He explains,

There is little difference, as far as practical results are concerned, between individual dictatorship and the dictatorship of a group of oligarchs...Theophrastus noted long ago that the strongest desire of men who have attained to leadership in a popularly governed state is not so much the acquirement of personal wealth as the gradual establishment of their own sovereignty at the expense of popular sovereignty. The danger is imminent lest the social revolution should replace the visible and tangeable dominant classes which now exist and act openly, by a clandestine demagogic oligarchy, pursuing its ends under the cloak of equality.<sup>48</sup>

Society cannot be constructed otherwise.

...the social revolutions would not effect any real modification of the internal structure of the mass. The sociologists might conquer, but not socialism, which would persist in the moment of its adherents' triumph. We are tempted to speak of this process as a tragicomedy in which the masses are content to devote all their energies to effecting a change of masters. All that is left for the workers is the honor "of participating in government recruiting." The result seems a poor one, especially if we take into account the psychological fact that even the purest of idealists who attains to power for a few years is unable to escape the corruption which the exercise of power carries in its train.<sup>49</sup>

When speaking in an economic context, Michels mentions,

It is nonetheless true that social wealth cannot be satisfactorily administered in any other manner than by the

---

<sup>47</sup>Robert Michels, Political Parties, A Sociological Study of the Oligarchal Tendencies of Modern Democracy (New York: The Free Press, 1962), p. 342.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 349.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 355.

creation of an extensive bureaucracy. In this way we are led by an inevitable logic to the flat denial of the possibility of a state without classes.<sup>50</sup>

Stratification is inevitable. He concludes,

The sociological phenomena whose general characteristics have been discussed in this chapter and in preceding ones offer numerous vulnerable points to the scientific opponents of democracy. These phenomena would seem to prove beyond dispute that society cannot exist without a "dominant" or "political" class, and that the ruling class, while its elements are subject to a frequent partial renewal, nevertheless constitutes the only factor of sufficiently durable efficacy in the history of human development. According to this view, the government, or, if the phrase be preferred, the state, cannot be anything other than the organization of a minority. It is the aim of this minority to impose upon the rest of society a "legal order," which is the outcome of the exigencies of dominion and of the exploitation of the mass of helots effected by the ruling minority, and can never be truly representative of the majority. The majority is thus permanently incapable of self-government....Thus the majority of human beings, in a condition of eternal tutelage, are predestined by tragic necessity to submit to the dominion of a small minority, and must be content to constitute the pedestal of oligarchy.

The principle that one dominant class inevitably succeeds to another, and the law deduced from that principle that oligarchy is, as it were, a preordered form of the common life of great social aggregates, far from conflicting with or replacing the materialist conception of history, completes that conception and reinforces it. There is no essential contradiction between the doctrine that history is the record of a continued series of class struggles and the doctrine that class struggles invariably culminate in the creation of new oligarchies which undergo fusion with the old.<sup>51</sup>

Michels sees government as essential to the ongoing of human history, and that government must be composed of a minority imposing its authority on the majority which is incapable of

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 348.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 353-354.

self-government. The necessity of this principle of oligarchy is an iron law which is predestinated and preordained to be so.

In summary, the arguments of Lenski and these three elite theorists are similar in that they combine power with differences in human nature. Lenski is concerned with power as it relates to the division of labor, while Pareto, Mosca, and Michels concern themselves primarily with the power of the state. They view the state as a concentration of political power and also a necessary function, the political one. So they anticipate the functional argument by asserting that there is a political function, that of ruling governing, and this requires an elite, thus inequality. However, they are not concerned with inequality as a consequence of the division of labor, as Lenski is. Lenski recognizes how changes in the material base of society and its evolving division of labor permits new forms of power and conquest.

#### FUNCTIONALISM

In turning to the functional argument, we phase out the matter of state and deal with inequality only as it relates to the division of labor. Perhaps the best known representation of the functionalist position in contemporary sociology is Kingsley Davis' and Wilbert E. Moore's article entitled, "Some Principles of Stratification." Stratification is a type of inequality in which people are grouped together according

to certain characteristics. Then these groups are ranked higher or lower than one another. Davis and Moore defend systems of inequality because they insure the fulfillment of society's essential needs.

The authors explain their direction. "Starting from the proposition that no society is 'classless', or unstratified, an effort is made to explain, in functional terms, the universal necessity which calls forth stratification in any social system."<sup>52</sup> Notice that inequality is a universal necessity. The key function of society is the matter of placing and motivating individuals to perform duties essential to the ongoing of civilization. And even though the order of society may be static, people shift out and die while new ones are born and need to replace them.

But in this replacement process, Davis and Moore note that some of these duties or positions are functionally more important than others. The problem of placement is a major one since some of the positions most essential to the survival of society require the greatest ability and training.

"Inevitably, then, a society must have, first, some kind of rewards that it can use as inducements, and, second, some way of distributing these rewards differently according to position."<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup>Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore, "Some Principles of Stratification," American Sociological Review, Vol. 10, No. 2. April 1945, p. 242.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 243.

The distribution of these rewards requires stratification.

Social inequality is thus an unconsciously evolved device by which societies insure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons. Hence, every society, no matter how simple or complex, must differentiate persons in terms of both prestige and esteem, and must therefore possess a certain amount of institutionalized inequality.<sup>54</sup>

The essential nature of universal inequality is emphasized again, as the authors believe every society should have a degree of inequality.

#### CRITICISM OF FUNCTIONALISM

The critics of this functionalist view of inequality are many. One point of controversy involves the question of who defines the needs of society. The assumption of a consensus about the needs of society is highly questionable. Does everyone hold the same values? Are the needs of society manipulated through propaganda or artificially created scarcity? Are high rewards necessary to get people to take certain jobs, or will individuals undergo sacrifices because the qualities of the job appeal to them? And what about the high rewards given to seemingly insignificant, nonfunctional roles such as professional athlete, call girl or musical entertainer?

A critique of Davis' and Moore's position was made by Melvin Tumin, who questions the assumption and the positive

---

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 243.

functionality of stratification.

The ubiquity and the antiquity of such inequality has given rise to the assumption that there must be something both inevitable and positively functional about such social arrangements. Clearly, the truth or falsity of such an assumption is a strategic question for any general theory of social organization.<sup>55</sup>

Later Tumin summarizes,

The possible alternative meanings of the concept "functional importance" has been shown to be one difficulty. The question of the scarcity or abundance of available talent has been indicated as a principle source of possible variation. The extent to which the period of training for skilled positions may reasonably be viewed as sacrificial has been called into question. The possibility has been suggested that very different types of motivational schemes might conceivably be made to function. The separability of differentials in power and property considered as resources appropriate to a task from such differentials considered as rewards for the performance of a task has also been suggested. It has also been maintained that differentials in prestige and esteem do not necessarily follow upon differentials in power and property when the latter are considered as appropriate resources rather than rewards.<sup>56</sup>

The article concludes with a listing of sample hypotheses which are not generally considered when dealing with the unequal distribution of rewards in a society. Social stratification systems discourage the development of considerable talent in a society, provide unequal access to motivation, recruitment and training, and justify themselves as natural, right and inevitable in order to rationalize the status quo, according to Tumin. These "provisional assertions... should serve to reinforce the doubt that social inequality is a

---

<sup>55</sup>Melvin Tumin, "Some Principles of Stratification: A Critical Analysis," American Sociological Review, Vol. 18, No. 4, August 1953, p. 387.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 394.

device which is uniformly functional for the role of guaranteeing that the most important tasks in a society will be performed conscientiously by the most competent persons."<sup>57</sup> Thus he casts doubt on the assertion that social inequality will guarantee the most important positions to be properly occupied by the most qualified persons.

Functionalism is the modern, sociological defense of inequalities that have existed in society throughout human history. Inequalities of the past may have been based upon birth or wealth rather than upon personal performance, but the basic inequalities remain the same. They are simply built upon a different "status symbol." Functional critics like Tumin point out the inconsistencies and inequalities of the functional approach as it is applied today in countries like the United States and Western Europe. Functionalists justify their position claiming it is at least inevitable to allow society to maintain its existence, and it is at best good and rational. Tumin and others have revealed some of its glaring injustices and false unreasonable claims, effectively questioning its goodness or rationality. But do they show that functional inequality is not inevitable? Tumin put his finger on the problem by noting,

---

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 393.

The ubiquity and the antiquity of such inequality has given rise to the assumption that there must be something both inevitable and positively functional about such social arrangements. Clearly, the truth or falsity of such an assumption is a strategic question for any general theory of social organization.<sup>58</sup>

There is no doubt that functionalism builds upon the foundation stones of inevitability and the positive maintenance of society. The argument is based upon history and utility. Tumin himself recognizes the ubiquity and antiquity of inequality. According to previous conclusions drawn from Gans and Lenski, inequality has been around a long time (throughout recorded human history) and it does seem to be everywhere and without beginning or end.

But the all-inclusive appearance of inequality does not necessarily make it inevitable, although it does chalk up one major point in favor of the functionalist argument. The world of social science does not provide us with evidence of a society that has even remotely approached a level of equality--whether it be removing class distinctions in regards to race, sex, wealth, power, education, etc. Functionalism can establish an argument for the inevitability of inequality based upon human experience throughout history, and egalitarianism is at a loss to come up with anything comparable on a macro-sociological level.

Functionalism also builds on a utilitarian basis, claiming that this arrangement is necessary to hold society

---

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 387.

together and make it work. The inequalities purported by functionalism have been humanity's way of life for centuries. The functionalist claims that prestige and rewards should be arranged to encourage stratification in modern society. Now the fact of the matter is that inequality has worked to the extent that humanity still exists on the earth. Other arrangements may have worked, and may have worked much better. But we have no evidence of that. All we have is wishful thinking. And in the present world situation it is not difficult to come up with wishful thinking. But there is little evidence to indicate the wishful thinking of the egalitarian is much different than that of Plato, Rousseau or the Hindu priest. Is it another escape to a world that isn't really there? Is it another solution that "jumps outside"?

#### MARX

Karl Marx introduces an analysis of inequality from a different direction. He rejects inborn differences as a basis that requires elitism. While recognizing that inequality had always been a part of human history, that each class struggle only brought a new ruling class into existence, he refuses to accept this as an inevitable characteristic of the human situation.

Marx builds on history rather than human nature or universal generalizations, arguing that men create history as well as social inequalities.

History does nothing; it "does not possess immense riches," it "does not fight battles." It is men, real, living men, who do all this, who possess things and fight battles. It is not "history" which uses men as a means of achieving--as if it were an individual person--its own ends. History is nothing but the activity of men in pursuit of their ends.<sup>59</sup>

History does not control men, forcing them into molds of inequality, but history is the product of men. It is men who achieve goals through their own activity. Humans are not the pawn of history as it manipulates them for its own purposes.

In producing history, people organize themselves in relationship to their physical environment. According to Marx, this is a basic starting point as humans produce their own sustenance.

...we must begin by stating the first presupposition of all human existence, and thereby of all history, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to "make history." But life involves before anything else, eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is, therefore, the production of material life itself. This is indeed a historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must be accomplished every day and every hour merely in order to sustain human life...In any conception of history, therefore, the first requirement is to observe this basic fact in all its significance and in all its implications and to give it its proper importance.<sup>60</sup>

The first assumption in the historical approach of Marx is that humans produce their material life, and in so doing they "make history." For Marx this "purely empirical" base was the

---

<sup>59</sup>T. B. Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel (eds.), Karl Marx: Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1956), p. 63.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

only proper starting point.

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can be made only in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and their material conditions of life including those which they find already in existence and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be established in a purely empirical way.

The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. The first fact to be established, therefore, is the physical constitution of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature...All historiography must begin from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history by man's activity.

The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends in the first place on the nature of the existing means which they have to reproduce. This mode of production should not be regarded simply as the reproduction of the physical existence of individuals. It is already a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite way of expressing their life, a definite mode of life. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, and what they produce and with how they produce it. What individuals are, therefore, depends on the material conditions of their production.<sup>61</sup>

Marx does not begin with "dogmas" which are presupposed arbitrarily from one's imagination, but he starts with the "material conditions of life," the product of humans expressing their life in physical existence.

This relates to society in the following way:

I was led by my studies to the conclusion that legal relations as well as forms of state could neither be understood by themselves, nor explained by the so-called general progress of the human mind, but that they are rooted in the material conditions of life...The general conclusion at which I arrived and which, once reached, continued to serve as the guiding thread in my studies, may be formulated briefly as follows: In the social production which men carry on, they enter into definite

---

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., pp. 53-54.

relations that are indisposible and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society--the real foundation, on which legal and political superstructures arise and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual process of life.

Note the foundation upon which the social, political, legal, and spiritual aspects of life are built is the foundation of the economic structure. This structure is composed of the relations of productions which are rooted in the material conditions of life. Such relations of production correspond to the stage of development of material powers of production in which a society is located.

Marx continues,

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production in society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or--what is but a legal expression of the same thing--with the property relations within which they had been at work before. From forms of development of the forces of production these relations turn into their fetters. Then occurs a period of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation, the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.

Humans create relations of production which compose the economic structure upon which is built a superstructure of social, legal, and political relations. But these relations change from forms of development into fetters which bind and enslave the individuals who made such history.

However,

No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have been developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society...In broad outline we can designate the Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society.<sup>62</sup>

The economic structure is most important in shaping the events of history as well as the superstructure of other institutions in society. Here Marx earmarks four basic stages of historical development: the Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois (capitalistic). The economic structure of each holds within itself the seed which will produce the next epoch.

The meaning of Marx's concept of inequality is embedded in his analysis of historical changes in the economic structure.

In the development of the productive forces a stage is reached where productive forces and means of intercourse are called into being which, under the existing relations, can only work mischief, and which are, therefore, no longer productive, but destructive forces...Associated with this is the emergence of a class which has to bear all the burdens of society without enjoying its advantages, which is excluded from society and is forced into the most resolute opposition to all other classes; a class which comprises the majority of the members of society and in which there develops a consciousness of the need for a fundamental revolution, the communist consciousness.<sup>63</sup>

As the forces of production develop, one class is oppressed with the burden of society and this class composes the majority of individuals within that society.

But the communist consciousness has its seeds of development in the bourgeois epoch, and this will have a different

---

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., pp. 64-65.

impact upon inequality in the future, according to Marx.

In all former revolutions, the form of activity was always left unaltered and it was only a question of redistributing this activity among different people, or introducing a new division of labor. The communist revolution, however, is directed against the former mode of activity, does away with labor, and abolishes all class rule along with the classes themselves, because it is effected by the class which no longer counts as a class in society, which is not recognized as a class, and which is the expression of the dissolution of all classes, nationalities, etc., within contemporary society.<sup>64</sup>

For Marx, inequality is an historical creation of humankind and communism is a new stage of human history in which classes are abolished. Since history is the record of human self-development, past inequalities are understood as the social consequences of social conditions and economic structures which are humanly made, not universal generalizations or characteristic of human nature as an inborn trait.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

CHAPTER IV  
FUNCTIONALISM AND MERITOCRACY

The functional approach to stratification tends to shift the justification of classes in society from a hereditary basis to one of meritocracy. This new class society allocates to individuals according to specialized abilities rather than by birth. It will be helpful to distinguish between stratification in general and the particular form it takes in a meritocracy.

The tendencies in mass society toward specialization, professionalization, and the destruction of official philosophies of inequality can all be summed up in the master myth of the meritocracy. The meritocracy describes a mythical future society in which all inequalities are based on achievement of specialized tasks. At the very beginning of childhood people begin taking 'intelligence' tests to determine what they will learn and what kinds of jobs they will prepare for. As they proceed through life and enter careers they are continually tested, and are promoted and demoted according to the test results. Only functional competence counts, and nobody can determine what the final goal of all the specializations should be. The elite is composed of those who have achieved the most according to the standards of the meritocracy, and its members can be sure that their superiority is justified and scientifically validated.

The tendency toward specialization leads to a meritocracy wherein one's status is determined by standardized test results.

---

<sup>65</sup>Deena Weinstein and Michael A. Weinstein, Living Sociology, A Critical Introduction (New York: David McKay Company, 1964), p. 249.

Michael Young wrote a fable entitled The Rise of the Meritocracy in which England transformed its elite from the children of the nobility based upon the heredity principle to those who were victorious through the principle of achievement. The writer is reflecting back from the year 2034 in light of a revolt among the lower classes, the Populists. Those who were able to rise to the top through achievement were the intellectuals.

At the beginning of my special period, 1914, the upper class had their fair share of geniuses and morons, so did the workers; or, I should say, since a few brilliant and fortunate working men always climb up to the top despite having been subordinate in society, the inferior classes contained almost as high a proportion of superior people as the upper classes themselves. Intelligence was distributed more or less at random. Each social class was, in ability, the miniature of society itself; the part the same as the whole. The fundamental change of the last century, which was fairly begun before 1963, is that intelligence has been re-distributed between the classes and the nature of the classes changed. The talented have been given the opportunity to rise to the level which accords with their capacities, and the lower classes consequently reserved for those who are also lower in ability. The part is no longer the same as the whole.<sup>66</sup>

The redistribution of the intelligent permitted all the talented to rise to the level of their ability while the inferior classes collected the "morons".

This principle of merit slowly became established through school reform, according to Young. Each person was directed to his place in society on the basis of his IQ. So by

---

<sup>66</sup>Michael Young, The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), pp. 11-12.

the late twentieth century all adults with IQs over 130 belonged to the meritocracy.

The rate of social progress depends upon the degree to which power is matched with intelligence. The Britain of a century ago squandered its resources by condemning even talented people to manual work; and blocked the efforts of the lower classes to obtain just recognition for their abilities. But Britain could not be a caste society if it was to survive as a great nation; great, that is, in comparison with others. To withstand international competition the country had to make better use of its human material, above all, of the talent which was even in England, one might say always and everywhere, too scarce. Schools and industries were progressively thrown open to merit so that clever children of each generation had opportunity for ascent. The proportion of people with IQs over 130 could not be raised--the task was rather to prevent a fall--but the proportion of such people in work which called upon their full capacities was steadily raised...Civilization does not depend upon the stolid mass, the homme moyen sensuel, but upon the creative minority, the innovator who with one stroke can save the labor of 10,000, the brilliant few who cannot look without wonder, the restless elite who have made mutation a social, as well as a biological, fact. The ranks of the scientists and the technologists, the artists and the teachers, have been swelled, their education shaped to their high genetic destiny, their power for good increased. Progress is their triumph; the modern world their monument.<sup>67</sup>

The key to progress in civilization is the nurturing of high IQ children to the high destiny for which they were equipped. Then such a creative minority will not waste away in manual labor as a member of the lower class.

Daniel Bell sees the rise of the meritocracy in The Coming of Post-Industrial Society.

---

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

The post-industrial society, in its initial logic, is a meritocracy. Differential status and differential income are based on technical skills and higher education. Without those achievements one cannot fulfill the requirements of the new social division of labor which is a feature of that society. And there are few high places open without those skills.<sup>68</sup>

Later Bell adds, "A post-industrial society reshapes the class structure of society by creating new technical elites."<sup>69</sup> These new elites are discovered to be the talented ones through IQ tests. "By the logic of a meritocracy, these high-scoring individuals, no matter where they are in the society, should be brought to the top to make the best use of their talents."<sup>70</sup> So recruitment into the elite is based upon individual intellectual achievement. And it is in the best interest of the society to do this in order to protect and develop its most valuable resource.

As the populist reacts in a demand for greater equality in this post-industrial society, Bell sees the issue to be equality versus meritocracy. He notes that equality has been poorly defined, and that its emphasis and application have changed in American history. Regarding the redefinition of equality, Bell points out,

The issues of schooling, of income, of status have all become matters of social policy because equality has been one of the central values of the American polity. But

---

<sup>68</sup>Daniel Bell, The Coming of Post-Industrial Society (New York; Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1973), p. 409.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 410.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 411.

there has never been a clear-cut meaning to equality, and the earliest form of the idea in the seventeenth century was quite different than what it assumed in its popular form by the third decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>71</sup>

He continues by referring to the Pilgrim Fathers who founded the New England colonies. Their equality was one born out of election by grace, according to Bell, emphasizing the virtue of labor with the central theme of independence.

This was replaced by sentiment and feeling in which each man's sentiments were held to be as good as any others.

In nineteenth-century America, however, the notion of equality was never sharply defined. In its voiced assertions it boiled down to the sentiment that each man was as good as another and no man was better than anyone else. What it meant, in effect, was that no one should take on the airs of an aristocrat and lord it over other men. To this extent, it was a negative reaction to the highly mannered society of Europe, and travelers to this country at the time understood it in those terms. On its positive side, equality meant the chance to get ahead, regardless of one's origins--that no formal barriers or prescribed positions stood in one's way. It was this contribution of attributes--the lack of deference and the emphasis on personal achievement--which gave nineteenth century America its revolutionary appeal, so much so that when the German '48ers came here, including such members of Marx's Socialist Workers Club as Kriege and Willich, they abandoned European socialism and became Republicans instead.

What is at stake today is the redefinition of equality. A principle which was the weapon for changing a vast social system, the principle of equality of opportunity, is now seen as leading to a new hierarchy, and the current demand is that the 'just precedence' of society, in Locke's phrase, requires the reduction of all inequality, or the creation of equality of result--in income, status, and power--for all men in society. The issue is the central value problem of the post-industrial society.

The principle of equality of opportunity derives from a fundamental tenet of classic liberalism: that the individual--and not the family, community, or the state--is the singular unit of society, and that the purpose of societal arrangements is to allow the individual the

---

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 424.

freedom to fulfill his own purposes--by his labor to gain property, by exchange to satisfy his wants, by upward mobility to achieve a place commensurate with his talents. It was assumed that individuals will differ--in their natural endowments, in their energy, drive, and motivation, in their conception of what is desirable--and the institutions of society should establish procedures for regulating fairly the competition and exchanges necessary to fulfill these individually diverse desires and competences.

As a principle, equality of opportunity denies the precedence of birth, of nepotism, of patronage or any other criterion which allocates place, other than fair competition open equally to talent and ambition. It asserts, in the terms of Talcott Parsons, universalism over particularism, achievement over ascription.<sup>72</sup>

In tracing the development of equality in American history, Bell demonstrates that "there has never been a clear-cut meaning to equality" and "the notion of equality was never sharply defined." It has taken on such emphases as independence, each one is as good as another and no one better than anyone else, the chance to get ahead regardless of one's origins, and the reduction of all inequalities. Bell insists that the central problem of post-industrial society is the redefinition of equality.

So Bell sees little problem in redefining equality to include meritocracy.

The post-industrial society, in this dimension of status and power, is the logical extension of the meritocracy; it is the codification of a new social order based, in principle, on the priority of educated talent.

In social fact, the meritocracy is thus the displacement of one principle of stratification by another, of achievement for ascription. In the past--and this was the progressive meaning of liberalism--this new principle was considered just. Men were to be judged--and rewarded--not by attributes of birth or primordial ties but on individual merit.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., pp. 425-426.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., pp. 426-427

There is no question about the fact that meritocracy is simply the exchange of one form of stratification for another. According to Bell's usage, meritocracy can be equality of opportunity.

The United States today is not a meritocracy; but this does not discredit the principle. The idea of equality of opportunity is a just one, and the problem is to realize it fairly. The focus, then, has to be on the barriers to such equality. The redress of discrimination by representation introduces arbitrary, particularistic criteria which can only be destructive of universalism, the historic principle, won under great difficulty, of treating each person as a person in his own right.<sup>74</sup>

Bell sees the individual and his achievement as basic and right in the maintenance of equality of opportunity. Thus, minority representation and the redress of discrimination undermine such equality and justice obtained historically at great price. These are barriers to equality of opportunity. "But one need not impose a rigid, ideological egalitarianism in all matters, if it results in conflict with other social objectives and even becomes self-defeating."<sup>75</sup> The problem here is, what are the other social objectives and who determines those objectives? And at what point does egalitarianism become self-defeating?

For Bell, meritocracy emphasizes individual achievement and earned status as confirmed by one's peers.

The meritocracy, in the best meaning of that word, is made up of those worthy of praise. They are the men who are the best in their fields, as judged by their fellows.

---

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 450.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 452.

And just as some individuals are worthy of praise, so are certain institutions--e.g., those engaged in the cultivation of achievement, the institutions of science and scholarship, culture and learning. The university is dedicated to...scholarship and learning and to the transmission of knowledge from those who are competent to those who are capable. There is no reason why a university cannot be a meritocracy, without impairing the esteem of other institutions. There is every reason why a university has to be a meritocracy if the resources of the society--for research, for scholarship, for learning--are to be spent for 'mutual advantage,' and if a degree of culture is to prevail.

And there is no reason why the principle of meritocracy should not obtain in business and government as well. One wants entrepreneurs and innovators who can expand the amount of productive wealth for society. One wants men in political office who can govern well. The quality of life in any society is determined, in considerable measure, by the quality of leadership. A society that does not have its best men at the head of its leading institutions is a sociological and moral absurdity.

Nor is this in contradiction with the principles of fairness. One can acknowledge, as I would, the priority of the disadvantaged (with all its difficulty of definition) as an axiom of social policy, without diminishing the opportunity for the best to rise to the top through work and effort. The principles of merit, achievement, and universalism are, it seems to me, the necessary foundations for a productive--and cultivated--society.<sup>76</sup>

Society's leading institutions should have its best men at the top, according to Bell, and anything less than that is ridiculous. It is assumed that these leaders will maintain a quality leadership that will seek the mutual benefit of everyone, even the disadvantaged. Productive, cultivated society can only be attained through the principles of merit and achievement.

Many problems can be pointed out here, just as Tumin does with the functionalism of Davis and Moore. For instance,

---

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 454

will the meritocracy give priority or any recognition at all to the disadvantaged? At what point will the maintenance of a degree of culture prevail over the mutual advantage of the competent as well as the unqualified? But Bell builds on the ambiguity of equality. He attempts to demonstrate that meritocracy is in the best interest of equality and all of society.

#### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Inequality has been an obvious fact of history, recognized by both the functionalist and the historical materialist. But a comparison of these two perspectives indicates a completely different approach to the fact of equality. However, it does not follow from that recognition that there is any agreement on the meaning and significance of equality in human society. Therefore, a comparison of how both functionalists and historical materialists interpret this pervasive phenomenon is needed.

A comparison of these social interpretations is likely to emphasize similarities and differences in the observation of facts, and in the theoretical approach to explaining those facts. But a phenomenon such as equality is more than a matter of fact and theory. It becomes a value for some, often a battle cry of social movements.

In the next section, therefore, we shall develop a comparison of the functionalist and historical materialist perspectives on equality by comparing them in terms of fact, value and theory.

## CHAPTER V

### A COMPARISON OF THE FUNCTIONALIST AND HISTORICAL MATERIALIST PERSPECTIVES ON EQUALITY

So far we have attempted to establish that inequality has been the trade mark of human history, and characterizes society in our day. These inequalities were evident to many who responded to them in one way or another. They may have attempted to justify the status quo, or may have reacted strongly against the inequalities of their day. While there may be slight variations, it appears that the evidence of social science is overwhelmingly conclusive that there are inequalities and classes of people even in so-called advanced Western society. Both the functionalists (many of whom are positivists in that they go about their argument in a positivist way) and the historical materialists such as Marx attempt to deal with the fact of inequality from their different theoretical perspectives.

In comparing the two approaches to equality, it will assist our thinking to examine the perspectives in light of the fact of inequality, the value of equality and the theoretical approach to equality. First, how do the functionalists and historical materialists respond to the fact of inequality?

Second, what is the position of each perspective on the value of inequality? And thirdly, how do the positivists and Marx seek to explain inequality in light of their value commitment? This would be their theoretical perspective.

#### THE FACT OF INEQUALITY

It has already been noted to considerable extent that the fact of inequality is as old as human society itself, and characterizes all of human history. Both functionalists and historical materialists concur on this point. Davis and Moore acknowledge that they are "starting from the proposition that no society is 'classless' or unstratified..."<sup>77</sup> After Marx designates the four basic stages of historical development, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois, he then recognizes that classes have characterized all these epochs. "In all former revolutions, the form of activity was always left unaltered and it was only a question of redistributing this activity among different people, of introducing a new division of labor."<sup>78</sup> There is simply no empirical evidence indicating a society which is characterized by equality to any extent in any regard (whether in terms of power, wealth, education or division of labor).

It was noted that throughout history many have been dissatisfied with inequality (like the historical materialists),

---

<sup>77</sup>Davis and Moore, op. cit., p. 242.

<sup>78</sup>Marx, op. cit., p. 65.

while others have attempted to justify them (like the functionalists). Functionalists tend more to relativize the problem; that is, they speak of degrees of equality as a trend of greater or lesser inequality over a period of time. Marx does not seem to speak of such degrees. The historical materialist deals with limited forms of equality in connection with social class, while the functionalist treats them independently of the class structure. But no theorist on either side of the issue claims that inequalities are non-existent.

#### THE VALUE OF EQUALITY

Despite the persistent history of inequality, there is also a persistent value placed on equality. The facts of history have not been able to destroy this value.

The functionalist takes a positivistic, value-free approach to equality. According to this perspective, beliefs and values transcend the physical, empirical, scientifically testable world. Whether the appeal be to a deity, to a utopia where philosopher-kings rule, to reason, or to the natural state of life, the solutions all "jump outside" of the real world. The positivist emphasizes that each of the solutions to inequality goes beyond the boundaries of science and explores an area not open to the sociologist when operating as a social scientist. The sociologist is tied to empirical science and what it reveals about the world in which we live. In social science truth can be determined only through the

consistent, honest use of science and its testing procedures. One can sharpen the tools and methods of research, but one cannot jump to another world where the tools and methods of scientific examination do not apply and speak with the same authority.

So the functionalist insists that egalitarian concerns are just another escape to another world--the product of wishful thinking which has no scientific support. If one represents and contends for some egalitarian interest, how can he know he is supporting an interest which is consistent with what he knows and claims to be as a social scientist--one who is committed to evidence as it is validated through his profession and discipline?

Since stratification is the way society has always "worked", the functionalist values this stratification above other values such as equality. This is not to say that the functionalist does not recognize the value of equality; he simply thinks in terms of a hierarchy of values, placing meritocracy or equality of opportunity above other values. Daniel Bell writes

The post-industrial society, in this dimension of status and power, is the logical extension of the meritocracy; it is the codification of a new social order based, in principle, on the priority of educated talent.

In social fact, the meritocracy is thus the displacement of one principle of stratification by another, of achievement for ascription. In the past...this new principle was considered just. Men were to be judged--and rewarded--not by attributes of birth or of primordial ties but on individual merit.<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup>Bell, op. cit., p. 427.

For the functionalist, the status quo remains the same while the value emphasis shifts from ascription to achievement. "The United States today is not a meritocracy; but this does not discredit the principle. The idea of equality of opportunity is a just one, and the problem is to realize it fairly. The focus, then, has to be on the barriers to such equality."<sup>80</sup> Values such as equality would be barriers to meritocracy, or equality of opportunity. "...One need not impose a rigid ideological egalitarianism in all matters, if it results in conflict with other social objectives and even becomes self-defeating."<sup>81</sup> For the meritocrat, egalitarianism conflicts with the more essential social objective or value of achievement. Functionalism builds upon the foundation stones of the inevitability and positive maintenance of society. The argument is built upon history and utility. The all-inclusive appearance of inequality makes it inevitable as a value. The functionalist insists that the argument for the inevitability of inequality is based upon human experience throughout human history, and the egalitarian is unable to support his value of a macro-sociological level. Therefore, while some functionalists recognize that limited inequalities may not be necessary for society (dysfunctions of racial inequality or inequality of educational opportunity), yet these inequalities are necessary for the functioning of privileged groups in society.

---

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 450.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 452.

Another key value for the functionalist is utilitarianism. Meritocracy insists that the value of achievement in modern society is necessary in order to hold society together and make it work. While it is true that other values may have worked, the fact of the matter is that only stratification in society has worked. There is no evidence, but only wishful thinking that any other value could work. For the functionalist, egalitarianism is simply an escape to another world that does not exist.

Now what about the position of the historical materialist on equality as a value? Marx would look at the process of production by which humans sustain life, and then social relations which give rise to values or principles.

Let us admit...that real history, history as temporal order, is the historical succession in which ideas, categories and principles have manifested themselves.

Each principle had its own century in which to reveal itself: The principle of authority, for instance, had the eleventh century, just as the principle of individualism had the eighteenth century. Accordingly, it was the century which belonged to the principle, and not the principle which belonged to the century. In other words, it was the principle which made history, and not history which made the principle. When further, in order to save the principles as well as history, we ask ourselves why a particular principle appeared in the eleventh or the eighteenth century rather than in any other, we are bound to study closely the men of the eleventh century and those of the eighteenth, to examine their respective needs, their productive forces, their mode of production, the raw materials of their production, and finally the relations of man to man which resulted from all these conditions of life. In making a thorough study of these questions, are we not presenting the real, profane history of men in every century, showing men to be at the same time the authors and the actors of their own drama? But from the moment that men are represented as the authors and actors

of their own history, we arrive, by a roundabout route, at the real point of departure, for we have now abandoned the eternal principles from which at first we began.<sup>82</sup>

Marx would reject any permanent, unchanging values, thus placing all ideas into their originating context which is a real history as temporal order, that "historical succession in which ideas, categories, and principles have manifested themselves."

This is the Marxian starting point, as quoted earlier.

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can be made only in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and their material conditions of life, including those which they found already in existence and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be established in a purely empirical way.<sup>83</sup>

Such a starting point cannot begin with the egalitarian dogma. As it begins with real individuals and their material conditions of life, it begins with premises which can "be established in a purely empirical way." But the positivist begins with the assumption of universal propositions which then form a case against equality, according to the functionalist. A meritocrat such as Bell maintains such a starting point, based upon the evidence of stratification as the only relations which men have ever known. For Bell, the shift from the old to the new, or the former to the present relations is not a shift to a new type of relations (equality), but simply a shift in the basis

---

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 61

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

of the old inequality.

The post-industrial society, in this dimension of status and power, is the logical extension of the meritocracy; it is the codification of a new social order based, in principle, on the priority of educated talent.

In social fact, the meritocracy is thus the displacement of one principle of stratification by another, of achievement for ascription. In the past...this new principle was considered just. Men were to be judged--and rewarded--not by attributes of birth or primordial ties but on individual merit.<sup>84</sup>

As was mentioned earlier, the meritocracy advocates have history on their side in this regard. However, they argue that the fact of inequality is an argument against the value of equality.

Marx responds in a manner that applies to the issue at hand.

The whole previous conception of history has either completely neglected this real basis of history or else has considered it a secondary matter without any connection with the course of history. Consequently, history has always to be written in accordance with an eternal standard; the real production of life appears as ahistorical, while what is historical appears as separated from ordinary life, as supraterrrestrial.

Here the functionalist could continue his argument claiming there is a tendency to write and interpret history from the viewpoint of the "eternal standard" of equality as a value, unsupported by the facts. "Thus the relation of man to nature is excluded from history and in this way the antithesis between nature and history is established. The exponents of this conception of history have consequently only been able to see in history the political actions of princes and States, religions

---

<sup>84</sup>Bell, op. cit., pp. 426-427.

and all sorts of theoretical struggles, and in particular have been obligated to share in each historical epoch the illusion of that epoch." The functionalist may argue that egalitarianism is part of the illusion of the present epoch in American and Western society. Marx then illustrates,

For instance, if an epoch imagines itself to be actuated by purely 'political' or 'religious' motives, although 'religion' and 'politics' are only forms of its true motives, the historian accepts this opinion. The 'idea,' the 'conception' of these conditioned men about their real practice, is transformed into the sole determining, active force, which controls and determines their practice.<sup>85</sup>

It is not difficult to motivate people, even those of the Western world, with religious motives. An egalitarian cause can take on a religious flavor and conceal true motives. The equality concept lends itself to this quite easily because of its popular emotive appeal. It can take the form of an eternal principle of justice for those who are accustomed to that sort of thought process while at the same time motivating the existentialist who would reject the existence of any absolutes. Thus it can be used to control and determine the practice of two individuals who are diametrically opposed in their general philosophy of life. It can be so used to great effectiveness because of its emotive value in Western thought as an "illusion of the epoch." The word equality can become, a contentless banner which individuals are called to follow with highly motivated fervency. There is no content by which

---

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., pp. 55-56.

by which to test it, so the word can be used to mean the very opposite of that to which an egalitarian may adhere. The result may be that some will begin to fear the very word "equality," not because they lack a desire for it, but because of memories of its use for obtaining some sort of manipulative political, religious, or social control.

Quoting Marx again,

When the ideologists had thus assumed that ideas and thoughts dominated past history, that the history of ideas was the whole of past history, when they had assumed that real conditions were modelled on man and his ideal conditions, i.e., upon his determinations, in short they have made the history of the consciousness men have of themselves the basis of their real history, nothing was easier than to call the history of mind, of ideas, of the sacred, of representations, the history of 'man' and to substitute this for real history.<sup>86</sup>

The application of this Marxian analysis to the contemporary egalitarian issue reemphasizes the epistemological and metaphysical questions posed earlier. Has equality or the ideal of classlessness taken on the characteristics of an eternal standard of measurement, and the teleological goal of human history? Is it viewed as dominating past history in the sense that life's real conditions are being modelled on man as history inevitably evolves to its ideal goal of equality? Marx would not accept such an interpretation, but would explain this as humans making "the history of the consciousness men have of themselves the basis of their real history", which is calling "the history of the mind, of ideas, of the sacred, of

---

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

representations, the history of 'man' and to substitute this for real history."

Elsewhere Marx warns that periods of transformation are especially vulnerable to this method of historical interpretation.

With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense structure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations the distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophical--in short, ideological, forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must rather be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social forces of production and the relations of production.<sup>87</sup>

So the historian should beware not to judge a period of transformation by its own consciousness. From the standpoint of "natural science," humans are producers of inequality in their relations. Any other picture or projection of human relations is not real from a scientific point of view. Any projection of meritocratic society must be based upon an "idealist view of history." It explains practice from the idea rather than explaining the formation of ideas from material practice.

Marx criticized Hegel of the same thing--that is jumping outside of human history and appealing to universal or absolute ideas.

---

<sup>87</sup>Ibid.

Hegel's conception of history presupposes an abstract or absolute Spirit which develops in such a way that humanity is nothing but a mass which more or less bears it along. Within the framework of empirical exoteric history, Hegel introduces the operation of a speculative, esoteric history. The history of humanity becomes the history of the abstract Spirit of humanity, a Spirit above and beyond the real man.<sup>88</sup>

The idealist can be guilty of appealing to the absolute, abstract Spirit of classlessness, a value which is above and beyond the real man.

However, it must be emphasized that Marx is taking a different approach than Hegel and the idealists. He is wrestling with the age old problem in Western thought--that of the two worlds. The two world concept can be traced back to Plato and his mind/body dichotomy. Then it flows through Kant's noumena/phenomena distinction into Hegel's attempt to unite the absolute ideas with phenomena. This same dichotomy is evident in the separation of facts and values by the positivist. For Hegel, the absolute Spirit, history, ideas, or whatever was the manipulator and director of the phenomenal realm, where humans live. Marx rejects, or reverses, this, and in so doing "turns Hegel on his head". It is the phenomenal world, particularly as it relates to the means of production, which gives rise to ideas, categories, history, and so on. Marx does not reject ideas, morality or even the ethic of equality, but he merely insists that such is not an "abstract

---

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

Spirit of humanity, a Spirit above and beyond the real man,"<sup>89</sup> a separate metaphysical entity which is not rooted in "real history" in a firsthand fashion. Marx not only objects to ideas and absolute Spirits imposing their "wills" upon men, he also objects to the manner in which Hegelian thought carries on the dichotomy of ideas and real history.

Just as it separates thought from sense experience, mind from body, and itself from the world, so it separates history from natural science and industry, and sees the birthplace of history, not in vulgar material production on earth, but in the cloudy regions of heaven.<sup>90</sup>

Marx is attempting to dissolve the barrier between things as they appear, and things as they are, between ideas and empirical reality. He is not rejecting values, but combining them with "real history" by rooting them in the empirical, phenomenal world.

On the other hand, Marx avoids the trap of positivism which begins and ends with empiricism alone, leaving no room or place for values, such as egalitarian concerns. Positivism has a rather paradoxical development, for it begins with randomness and chance in its purely inductive approach to the empirical universe, and it ends with determinism. For all egalitarians, and certainly for Marx, such determinism is utterly intolerable. However, as a social scientist, Marx is committed to the historical perspective. How can man's liberty

---

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p. 57

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p. 59

and freedom be salvaged from behavioristic, deterministic positivism? The Marxian answer is to reject any sort of metaphysical reality while positing all of history as humanly created. "...We must begin by stating the first presupposition of all human experience, and therefore of all history, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to 'make history'."<sup>91</sup> In this way equality can be attained through human struggle, and approximated through socialist forms of organization until true communism is attained.

#### THE THEORIES OF FUNCTIONALISM AND HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

The theoretical approaches of these two perspectives is an attempt to explain the fact of equality and in turn a justification for their respective value positions.

Functionalism supports stratification as the grouping together of people according to certain characteristics, and such groups are ranked higher or lower than one another. The meritocrat insists that such a system will insure the fulfillment of society's essential needs. The problem of placement is important since some of the most essential positions require the greatest ability and training. "Inevitably, then a society

---

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 60

must have, first, some kind of rewards that it can use as inducements, and, second some way of distributing these rewards differently according to position."<sup>92</sup> The distribution of these rewards requires stratification.

Social inequality is thus an unconsciously evolved device by which societies insure that the most important positions are consciously filled by the most qualified persons. Hence, every society, no matter how simple or complex, must differentiate persons in terms of both prestige and esteem, and must therefore possess a certain amount of institutionalized inequality.<sup>93</sup>

The functional approach justifies classes in society on the basis of meritocracy.

This class society allocates to individuals according to specialized abilities rather than by birth.

The post-industrial society, in its initial logic, is a meritocracy. Differential status and differential income are based on technical skill and higher education. Without those achievements one cannot fulfill the requirements of the new social division of labor which is a feature of that society. And there are few high places open without those skills.<sup>94</sup>

Bell continues, "a post-industrial society reshapes the class structure of society by creating new technical elites."<sup>95</sup>

Such new elites are recognized as the talented ones through testing. "By the logic of meritocracy, these high-scoring individuals, no matter where they are in the society, should be brought to the top to make the best use of their talents."<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup>Davis and Moore, op. cit., p. 243.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>94</sup>Bell, op. cit., p. 409

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., p. 410.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p. 411.

It is in the best interest of society to recruit the individual achiever into the elite in order that society protect and develop its most valuable resource.

The principle of equality of opportunity derives from a fundamental tenet of classic liberalism: that the individual--and not the family, community, or the state--is the singular unit of society, and that the purpose of societal arrangements is to allow the individual the freedom to fulfill his own purposes--by his labor to gain property, by exchange to satisfy his wants, by upward mobility to achieve a place commensurate with his talents. It was assumed that individuals will differ--in their natural endowments, in their energy, drive, and motivation, in their conception of what is desirable--and the institutions of society should establish procedures for regulating fairly the competition and exchanges necessary to fulfill these individually diverse desires and competencies.

As a principle, equality of opportunity denies the precedence of birth, of nepotism, of patronage or any other criterion which allocates place, other than fair competition open equally to talent and ambition.<sup>97</sup>

A hands-off policy is encouraged by Bell whereby an individual might be able "to achieve a place commensurate with his talents." Institutions are only to assure fair competition, recognizing that individuals differ in energy, motivation and desire.

Functionalism is concerned with providing for the best men to get to the top.

The meritocracy, in the best meaning of that word, is made up of those worthy of praise. They are the men who are the best in their fields, as judged by their fellows.

And just as some individuals are worthy of praise, so are certain institutions--e.g., those engaged in the cultivation of achievement, the institutions of science and scholarship, culture and learning. The university is dedicated to...scholarship and learning to the transmission of knowledge from those who are competent to those who are capable. There is no reason why a university cannot be a

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 425-426.

meritocracy, without impairing the esteem of other institutions. There is every reason why a university has to be a meritocracy if the resources of a society--for research, for scholarship, for learning--are to be spent for 'mutual advantage', and if a degree of culture is to prevail.

And there is no reason why the principle of meritocracy should not obtain in business and government as well. One wants entrepreneurs and innovators who can expand the amount of productive wealth for society. One wants men in political office who can govern well. The quality of life in any society is determined, in considerable measure, by the quality of leadership. A society that does not have its best men at the head of its leading institutions is a sociological and moral absurdity.

Nor is this in contradiction with the principles of fairness. One can acknowledge...the priority of the disadvantaged...as an axiom of social policy, without diminishing the opportunity for the best to rise to the top through work and effort. The principles of merit, achievement, and universalism are...the necessary foundations for a productive--and cultivated--society.<sup>98</sup>

Men of achievement would be judged by their peers as to whether or not they were worthy of elevation. The university can serve as a key institution of achievement, cultivating the talents of the meritocracy. Those talents would, in turn, be invested for the mutual benefit of all. Even the disadvantaged would come out ahead, for they would receive priority. But productive, cultivated society can only be realized through the principles of merit and achievement.

Karl Marx, the historical materialist, explains inequality in a completely different manner. He places it in the context of a communist society which develops out of history. "What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundation, but, on the contrary

---

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., p. 454.

just as it emerges from capitalist society; and which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges." For Marx, the Communistic Society or equality does not "develop on its own foundation" as a universal absolute, but "it emerges from capitalist society." Since he views history and life as a flow, there is no place for static, isolated values. All values, experiences, and classes come out of or emerge from the history which humans created before that time. Truth and knowledge flow out of this river of life or this womb, and that is an important clue for evaluating a Marxian epistemology.

Now the value of equality emerges out of human history, specifically out of capitalistic society as Marx goes on to explain.

Accordingly, the individual producer receives back from society--after the deductions have been made--exactly what he contributes to it. What he has contributed to it is his individual quantum of labour. For example, the social working day consists of the sum of the individual hours of work; the individual labour-time of the individual producer is the part of the social working day contributed by him, his share in it. He receives a certificate from society that he has furnished such and such an amount of labour (after deducting his labour for the common funds), and with this certificate he draws from the social stock of means of consumption as much as costs the same amount of labour. The same amount of labour which he has given to society in one form he receives back in another.

...a given amount of labour in one form is exchanged for an equal amount of labour in another form.

Hence, equal right here is still in principle--bourgeois right....

In spite of this advance, equal right is still burdened with bourgeois limitations. The right of the producers is proportional to the labour they supply; the equality

consists in the fact that measurement is made an equal standard, labour.

But one man is superior to another physically or mentally and so supplies more labour in the same time, or can labour for a longer time; and labour, to serve as a measure, must be defined by its duration or intensity, otherwise it ceases to be a standard of measurement. The equal right is an unequal labour. It recognizes no class differences, because everyone is only a worker like everyone else; but it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowment, and thus natural privileges in respect of productive capacity. It is, therefore, in its content, a right of inequality, like every right. Right by its very nature can consist only in the application of an equal standard; but unequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals if they were not unequal) can only be assessed by an equal standard in so far as they are regarded from a single aspect, from one particular side only, as for instance, in the present case, they are regarded only as workers, and nothing more is seen in them, everything else being ignored. Further, one worker is married, another not; one has more children than another, and so on. Thus, with an equal performance of labour, and hence an equal share in the social consumption fund, one individual will in fact be richer than another, and so on. To avoid all these defects, right instead of being equal would have to be unequal.

But these defects are inevitable in the first place of communist society as it is when it has just emerged after prolonged birth-pangs from capitalist society. Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and the cultural development conditioned by it.

In passing, it should be noted that here is another indication of the evolving, developing, flowing interpretation of human history, and "right" emerges out of such a flow, rather than being imposed upon it or poured into it as a universal proposition. Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society because it is born out of such structure.

Marx continues,

In a higher phase of communistic society, when the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and with it the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has banished; when labour is no longer

merely a means of life but has become life's principle need; when the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly--only then will it be possible completely to transcend the narrow outlook of bourgeois right and only then will society be able to inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!<sup>99</sup>

For Marx, history is teleological; it is moving toward the goal of an equal distribution of goods according to one's needs. However, this egalitarian goal is not superimposed upon human history as an absolute ideal, but emerges out of it. And this history is made up of many inequalities. Marx notes just a few of them:

...one man is superior to another physically or mentally and so supplies more labour in the same time, or can labour for a longer time...It recognizes no class differences, because everyone is only a worker like everyone else; but it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowments, and thus natural privileges in respect of productive capacity...Further, one worker is married, another not; one has more children than another, and so on.

These are the facts of life for the positivist who divorces values from facts in his strictly empirical science. But Marx is committed to relating and unifying these ingredients of history which seem so chaotic and disjointed by "the division of labour, and...the antithesis between mental and physical labour". Since history is a flow and a continual development for Marx, these loose ends are tied together and related in the process of development. But he also is committed to remain with the phenomenal world rather than jumping to the

---

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., pp. 256-258.

noumenal realm, or to project an absolute standard from "the history of the abstract spirit of humanity, a Spirit above and beyond the real man."<sup>100</sup>

Marx applies a value of measurement, and he refers to it in the extended quote above. "Right by its very nature can consist only in the application of an equal standard." Ultimately that standard will not be reached overnight. It was born out of the womb of bourgeois right, which emerges with capitalist society. So "in spite of this advance, equal right is still burdened with bourgeois limitations." In capitalism, "...the equality consists in the fact that measurement is made with an equal standard, labour." But Marx warns,

...and labour, to serve as a measure, must be defined by its duration and intensity, otherwise it senses to be a standard of measurement. The equal right is an unequal right for unequal labour...It is, therefore, in its content, a right of inequality like every right..., but unequal individuals...can only be assessed by an equal standard in so far as they are regarded from a single aspect...Thus, with an equal performance of labour, and hence an equal share in the social consumption fund, one individual will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another, and so on. To avoid all these defects, right instead of being equal would have to be unequal.

However, this will be outgrown as equal right moves on to maturity, having been born in the womb of bourgeois right.

...when labour is no longer a means of life but has become life's principle need; when the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly--only then will it be possible to transcend the narrow outlook of bourgeois right...

---

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

Equal right or communist society is the unifying factor for Marx. There are defects or inequalities in the real world of human history, in bourgeois capitalism and its standard of equal measurement, labor. But Marx wishes "to avoid all these defects," and although "these defects are inevitable in the first phase of communist society as it is when it has just emerged after prolonged birth-pangs from capitalist society," yet such defects are signs of immaturity and will be outgrown through human struggle. Thus the inequalities, inconsistencies and apparent unrelatedness of human history are fused together in a flow. Communist society leaves humans in control, but has a goal which is firmly rooted in the apparent inequalities of human experience.

So while the functionalist attempts to justify classes on the basis of meritocracy, Marx sees the inequalities as human-made products which will be eliminated as a communist society develops out of the womb of capitalism.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has noted, first of all, the universal fact of inequality. Stratification has been a way of life for humans on earth throughout history. The primary theoretical perspectives from a sociological point of view have been those of the functionalist and that of Karl Marx. These two theories have been contrasted in terms of the positivist (functionalism) and the historical materialist (Marx). Each takes a different position on the value of equality. Equality as a value is perceived in a positive manner by the historical materialist, and negatively by the meritocratic functionalist who builds upon positivistic assumptions.

Functionalists attempt to argue from history, claiming that people have known nothing else and emphasizing that it has always "worked". The functional position is a utilitarian stance which determines whether certain societal relationships "work" better than others. Such a meritocracy is supposed to let super-achievers rise to the top, and their expertise will engineer society toward the most profitable course. This implies a "knower" of no small stature who is quite certain as to which course society should take in order to work, thus achieving the greatest amount of benefit for the greatest amount of people. Such insight knows what is best for society,

even if the persons in that society disagree. Those individuals simply do not "know" what is best for them.

The positivist social scientist examines the empirical data and inductively concludes that because inequality has been a fact of history, it should be adopted as a value in decisions regarding current and future social policy. But values are beyond knowing if this value-free, purely objective, empirical approach is to remain consistent.

The Marxian approach limits values to the historical development of material life. Values then grow out of such relationships. Marx does not try to conceal values, recognizing that valueless science produces meaningless life where humans become machines responding to stimuli in a behavioristic fashion. He clearly rejects this impersonal mechanistic approach to the human situation. So the goal for Marx is to establish a material, historical base for the value of equality of classlessness. The positivist would protest that the historical materialist imposes classlessness as a value upon the historical, empirical data as an assumption before the fact.

At this point it is recognized that the positivist and the historical materialist think differently. The positivist reasons inductively, from particulars (facts) to generalizations as a naturalist. But the historical materialist thinks critically. He is committed to a dialectical approach

where facts and values are blended together in the constant flux and flow of human history. History for the positivist would be like a sequence of events which can be isolated as distinct stages. But time is not like separate frames on a video tape for the historical materialist. So if one approaches Marx from a positivistic position, he would insist that Marx is presupposing his dialectical methodology upon history. However, a Marxian system of thought does not permit such assumptions, but rather insists that such a dialectical flow is inherent in human history and can be gleaned from an examination of the mode of production.

Along this same line of thinking, it would be well to emphasize that the view of history as a flow or process does not lend itself to any sort of absolutes. The Marxian view of history as a flow will not allow for any universal, absolute standard that would stand over and above history and by which history would be judged. So values like that of equality are part of the process and flow of history.

For the functionalist the value of equality is relegated to the area of the post-cognitive sphere, and is beyond knowing. The positivist considers that which is post-empirical as being post-rational. His world is divided into two realms: the phenomenal world which he can know through his senses, and the noumenal world which is not testable and cannot be validated. But for Marx, equality is not post-rational, for everything grows out of human history.

So it can be concluded that the positivist and the historical materialist are thinking in different and opposite directions. The positivist begins with the assumption of a value-free social science perspective, and with universalism. In his universalism as a functionalist he assumes that propositions have universal application, and that the study of society can be treated ahistorically. So it is assumed that inequality always has been and always will be. It builds social science on the physical science model where there are universal laws that do not allow for cultural differences or historical change.

On the other hand, the historical materialist sees history as definitive. He assumes historical differences and changes that are not the same for all of time. He rejects the simple cause and effect method as inappropriate for social science.

While both approaches are distinctly different in their approach to equality, neither approach can be used to prove or disprove the value of equality as an appropriate value for the social scientist. Ethics simply cannot be empirically based or validated by what is. Facts do not explain values, but facts are historical and culturally explained and given meaning by systems of thought. These systems of thought or theories such as positivism and historical materialism are historically and culturally limited and each starts with explicit and implicit assumptions, many of which are taken for granted.

So while inequality is an undeniable fact of history, the value of equality may be worked into any number of theories which attempt to explain that fact. And those theories may offer guidance for praxis in a meritocratic or an egalitarian direction, depending on how they value equality as that which is either desirable or undesirable.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aristotle. Politics. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. New York: Modern Library, 1943.
- Bell, Daniel. The Coming of Post-Industrial Society. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1973.
- Benn, S.I., and Peters, R.S. Principles of Political Thought. New York: The Free Press, 1959.
- Blackstone, William T. (Ed.). The Concept of Equality. Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Company, 1969.
- Bottomore, T.B. and Maxmilien Rubel (eds.). Karl Marx: Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1956.
- Davis, Kingsley, and Moore, Wilbert. "Some Principles of Stratification," American Sociological Review, Vol. 10, No. 2 (April 1945), 242-249.
- Gans, Herbert J. More Equality. New York: Pantheon Books, 1968.
- Gouldner, Alvin. "The Sociologist as Partisan: Sociology and the Welfare State," The American Sociologist, (May 1968), 106-118.
- The International Version of the Holy Bible. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1978.
- Lenski, Gerhard H. Power and Privilege. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966.
- Locke, John. The Second Treatise of Government. Edited by Thomas P. Peardon. New York: The Liberal Art Press, 1952.
- Michels, Robert. Political Parties, A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy. Translated by Eden and Cedar Paul. New York: The Free Press, 1962.

- Montgomery, John Warwick. The Law Above the Law. Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975.
- Mosca, Gaetano. The Ruling Class. Translated by Hannah D. Kahn. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1939.
- Pareto, Vilfredo. The Mind and Society, Vol. III. New York: Dover Publishing, Inc., 1935.
- Plato. The Republic. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. New York: Vintage Books, n.d.
- Rawls, John. A Theory of Justice. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.
- Rousseau, Jean Jacque. The Social Contract and Discourses. Translated by G.D.H. Cole. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1950.
- Tawney, R. H. Equality. London: Unwin Books, 1964.
- Tumin, Melvin. "Some Principles of Stratification: A Critical Analysis," American Sociological Review, Vol. 18, No. 4, (August 1953), 387-394.
- Weinstein, Deena, and Weinstein, Michael A. Living Sociology, A Critical Introduction. New York: David McKay Company, 1964.
- Young, Michael. The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033. London: Thames and Hudson, 1958.