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SOCIAL INEQUALITY: A SHORT HISTORY OF AN IDEA

1.1 Introduction

This chapter sets the scene for our exploration of social inequality, defining the concept of inequality and its significance, and explaining how theories of inequality have changed in response to changing social conditions. It pays special attention to the challenge presented to traditional theories of inequality by the transition of Western liberal democracies to their current postindustrial form. And it addresses one of this study’s guiding questions: how are the dimensions of social inequality changing in the context of globalisation and a postindustrial society? The next two chapters review in detail the main theories of inequality from classical times to the present day.

The transition from an industrial to a postindustrial society represented a crisis for theories of inequality because throughout the modern period, the core concept for the field was closely associated with the modernist paradigm. David Lyon (1999) explains that class was one of the ‘metanarratives’ of modernism that sought to explain everything according to a single idea, and that this metanarrative became unsustainable in the conditions of postmodernity. Class is a collective concept that stresses the centrality of the economy and the objective nature of inequality. It is at odds with the fluidity of contemporary social arrangements and trends towards individualisation.

In the 1980s, as the influence of cultural studies within social theory grew, the study of social inequality came increasingly to be seen as an outdated approach to understanding social life. There were sociologists who argued strongly for the enduring importance of class and inequality but the direction of social theory was heading away from this kind of structuralist approach (Wright 1997). But by the 1990s new ways of
understanding the field appeared, which accommodated new realities through a looser, more multidimensional framework.

1.2 Defining social inequality

The idea of social inequality refers to differences between groups of people that are hierarchical in nature. At its most basic, it refers to the hierarchical distribution of social, political, economic and cultural resources. A closely related concept is that of stratification, a more specific and technical term that refers to a model of social inequality that specifies the relationship between particular variables, such as wealth and social standing. Stratification refers to a systematic and enduring pattern of inequality that is transmitted across generations, built into institutions and practised in everyday activities. The most influential theory of stratification is that of Marx, who argued that all stratification systems are ultimately determined by the distribution of economic resources.

Going deeper into the idea of social inequality, it is clear that establishing conceptual clarity is not straightforward. What kinds of inequality should the term include? Should it refer primarily to economic differences or are social and cultural differences also important? Should physical or health differences be included? What is the relationship between inequality and poverty and at what point should levels of inequality become a public concern? The measurement of inequality is also challenging. What should the level of analysis be—the individual, the family or some other unit, such as the household? How do you estimate the wealth of the rich when so much of their wealth is held in complex cross-national arrangements? These are just some of the questions that are implicated in the study of social inequality, and at different times and places the answers have varied, reflecting the way sociological ideas adjust to changing social arrangements. This variation is also because there is never any one way of looking at a social issue; rather, different concerns and interests lead to different questions and answers.

An important distinction in the study of inequality is the difference between distributional inequality and equality of opportunity or meritocracy. Distributional equality is concerned with the extent to which everyone receives a similar amount of economic resources. A concern with minimising economic, and sometimes also social, differences between individuals and groups is sometimes described as egalitarianism. Equality of opportunity focuses on the extent to which people have a similar chance to obtain rewards, with less attention paid to the effects this has on the distribution of wealth, income and influence. Egalitarianism is associated with socialism and communism while equality of opportunity has historically been associated with capitalist liberal democracies. Liberal democracies often claim to be meritocratic because the institutions of society are designed to ensure
that everyone has a fair go so that social position is not based on privilege but on individual ability and effort. The term ‘social inequality’ is most widely used as shorthand for distributional inequality and it is in this sense that the term is used throughout this study.

1.3 Why inequality matters

Why should it matter if some people receive more advantages than others? Historically, it is inequality rather than equality that has been regarded as normal and natural. The argument that a just society is also an equal one was associated with the Enlightenment and the beginnings of modernity in the eighteenth century. Egalitarian ideals were closely tied to political ideals of democracy and the belief that a just society is one in which everyone should have their needs met and receive a good start in life.

The arguments for greater equality are ideological and practical. Proponents of egalitarianism point out that inequality violates principles of natural justice, damages human potential and creates problems that affect everyone.

Inequality offends the principle of egalitarianism that is fundamental to social justice. That some people should be privileged as a result of an accident of birth, and that for others the odds of achieving a good life are stacked against them, is unfair and a denial of human rights. Inequality is also inefficient because it reduces the potential for human development. The unequal distribution of opportunities for the development of individual and community capacity represents a loss to nations and to humanity in general. Inequality means that those at the bottom of the ladder experience disadvantage and poverty and carry health deficits that shorten and disrupt lives. People who are poor often miss out on quality education and fail to achieve their potential. This limits their future and curtails the contribution they can make to the development of their community.

There is also a strong association between poverty, crime and race. Merton argued that high levels of inequality create a sense of envy and resentment within communities, which leads to criminal behaviour as this is a way that excluded groups can achieve material success (Merton 1968). High levels of inequality are also associated with lateral violence—violence within disadvantaged groups. Middleton-Moz suggests that black-on-black violence arises from the sense of shame and anger Aboriginal people carry with them as a result of their oppression, which is expressed through dysfunctional behaviour (Middleton-Moz 1999). High levels of incarceration prevent people from living normal lives and have effects that ripple out to partners, children and neighbourhoods (Wacquant 2004).

High levels of inequality are an impediment to economic growth (Ostry et al. 2014). Nations with high levels of income inequality are inefficient because they limit potential markets, reduce human capital and constrain opportunities for investment and economic growth. Political and social inequality also hold back development through their association with political corruption (Bernstein 2013). In their influential book The Spirit Level (2009), Wilkinson and Pickett show that high levels of inequality affect everyone through their association with social ‘bads’ including high rates of crime and imprisonment, drug use, mental health problems and poor child well-being. They suggest that large income differences affect how people relate to one another and create ‘broken societies’ (2009:5).
Using secondary analysis of epidemiological data, Wilkinson and Pickett show that in wealthy countries, measures of the quality of life amongst individuals do not increase as national income per head increases. Instead quality of life is related to the level of equality within the nation, with higher levels of inequality associated with higher social dysfunction. Their analysis shows that, at any given level of personal income or education, an individual’s quality of life will be higher in a more equal society, than that of an equivalent person in a more unequal society. Levels of inequality are also associated with higher levels of violence that affect everyone in the nation. The authors also show that race plays a critical role in shaping the impact of inequality. As the exclusion of ethnic minorities from education and job opportunities increases, so negative health outcomes increase for both black and white populations. It is not only the poor that benefit from higher levels of equality, but everyone in the society (2009:178).

Inequality is also inseparable from ideas of social division and the creation of a sense of distance and separation between social groups. It creates relations of domination and subordination that carry with them judgments about the value of different groups. In identifying some groups as inferior to others, inequality opens the door to processes of dehumanisation and the violation of human rights.

The view that inequality matters is not without its critics. Social libertarian Friedrich August von Hayek argues that social justice is a human invention and does not really exist (1976). This view is associated with neoliberalism, which suggests that the operation of the market should be the only real determinant of the distribution of wealth. This position is closely associated with the view that political, not economic, equality is what matters. So long as everyone is equal before the law and has equal political representation, then the distribution of wealth and privilege is unimportant. This argument ignores the political privilege that accompanies wealth and the fact that the views of those with few economic resources are usually poorly represented in public debate: compared with the wealthy or socially influential, they have little capacity to influence governments or shape policy agendas. There are many examples of this. In Australia the mining lobby was successful in substantially diluting the Gillard Labor government’s mining tax. The policy was anticipated to reap $300 billion in revenue but actually gathered only $300 million (Ker 2013). In contrast, the severe opposition of many Aboriginal people to the Northern Territory Emergency Intervention in 2007 was not enough to prevent its introduction. This illustrates why the argument that it is poverty that matters rather than inequality is flawed. The view that it is permissible for some sections of the population to have enormous wealth if everyone has a minimum acceptable standard of living ignores the social and political injustices that tend to accompany excessive disparities of wealth.

1.4 Modernist approaches to the study of social inequality

When sociology first made its entrance as an academic discipline in the middle of the nineteenth century, the most influential theory of social inequality was that of Karl Marx (1818–83). By the turn of the twentieth century his ideas were joined by those of the other founding figures of sociology, Max Weber (1864–1920) and Émile Durkheim
(1858–1917). Marx regarded possession of capital (wealth that is used to produce more wealth) as the ultimate determinant of all forms of inequality, while both Weber and Durkheim believed political and social factors had an independent influence. As the twentieth century progressed, attempts to understand and explain social inequality mainly revolved around debates between Marx’s economically deterministic model of class and Weber’s softer, but still structural, model which saw economic resources as one of a number of sources of power that determined who received scarce resources. In these analyses the term ‘social inequality’ was used virtually interchangeably with stratification theory and, with the exception of functionalist theories, class theory was the major paradigm. To some extent, the terms ‘class theory’, ‘stratification theory’ and ‘social inequality’ were interchangeable terms.

Throughout the modern period, from the time of the Enlightenment until the Second World War, ideas about social inequality were central to sociology. Class operated as the most important concept within sociology, understood as offering the greatest explanatory power for understanding social formations. Until the mid-1970s, the idea of class was widely used to explain social arrangements and to understand how society changed. Although theories about the centrality of class and the extent of its explanatory power were contested, the idea that how people earn their living is central to their experiences and their destiny was the point of departure for many debates. Within the field of inequality Weber’s more flexible and less deterministic model of inequality became the most widely used theoretical framework and existed alongside, rather than in opposition to, a Marxist framework. But as globalisation progressed, and the economy moved away from industrial production to service delivery, the weakness of these structuralist understandings of social inequality became more apparent.

These weaknesses derived from theoretical problems that had always bothered class theory but they became more exposed as the transformations associated with the move to a highly competitive, interconnected and fluid society, and the shift to a post-industrial economy, created a world in which the explanatory power of solid concepts such as class became increasingly compromised.

### 1.5 Postindustrialisation and debates on the death of class

The determinism inherent in Marx’s argument that all social phenomena were reducible to access to economic resources was always highly contested, even among Marxist theorists, who pointed to contradictions within Marxist theory itself. One much discussed difficulty was described by sociologist Ray Pahl (1989, in Devine & Savage 2005:5) as the SCA problem, where S equals structure, C equals class consciousness and A equals agency. In a pure Marxist model, objective (that is, structural) class position gives rise to a particular kind of consciousness that determines how people will act (agency). Evidence for this was found in the development of the main political parties, each of which emerged out of class-based social movements. The working class formed the Labor Party and the middle and upper classes formed
conservative parties, such as the Liberals in Australia. But closer investigation reveals that the empirical reality of class affiliation was not so neat, and many people supported political parties that did not represent their interests; many manual workers, for example, voted for the Liberal Party. The working class also failed to develop the radical consciousness Marx had predicted would eventually overthrow capitalism. With rare exceptions, trade unions followed a reformist path, focusing on redistributive issues, that is, how much workers receive for their labour, rather than challenging the principles behind redistribution and a rejection of capitalism as an economic system.

Marxists explained these failures through the concept of dominant ideology. This suggests that through their domination of the economy, the ruling classes are able to control culture so that the ideas that dominate society are those that benefit them. As a result, the working classes are unable to recognise the reality of their exploitation. The difficulty with this model is that it assumes that the influence of all other phenomena, most notably culture, is secondary to the underlying influence of the economy.

Although most stratification theorists continued to use class—operationalised in terms of the occupation system—as the main concept for examining inequality, it became increasingly apparent that the social transformations associated with postindustrialism were making the concept increasingly irrelevant. Throughout the industrial period, the existence of an upper, middle and working class, each defined in relation to their role in the production process, has been empirically defensible. The existence of the working class could be demonstrated across many variables: the nature and experience of their work was different from that of other classes; it involved manual labour that was dirty, dangerous and poorly rewarded, in marked contrast with the intellectual labour, clean, safe working environments and higher earnings of the middle class. To be a plumber or builder’s labourer also carried less social prestige than being a professional such as a teacher, clerk or lawyer. There were also visibly distinct class cultures that were located in different geographical spaces.

Working class people tended to live in the industrial heartlands of cities. Their relationships with neighbours and family were different from those of the middle class, involving strong social networks based on frequent contact (Wilmott & Young 1962). Studies show the existence of distinct communities with a shared sense of social identity, rooted in common workplace experiences, close kin and neighbourhood ties, and recognition that collective action represented the best strategy for improving their situation (Metcalfe 1988). This was the sentiment that was the foundation of the trade union and Labor Party movements. There was a strong oppositional culture expressed in industrial action and resistance to right-wing political demands. While ethnicity and gender divided the working class, this was subdued under the cultural hegemony of white, male working-class culture. Contemporary studies such as social researcher Claire Williams’ analysis of an Australian mining town offered rich accounts of these social spaces in which the significance of class analysis was not in doubt (Williams 1981).
With the transition to a service economy the stability of these arrangements began to dissolve. The expansion of the service sector, together with the associated rise in educational participation, created high levels of social mobility and a growing number of people who identified themselves as somewhere in the middle. By 1980, research by sociologist Chris Chamberlain found that only 21 per cent of the Australian population identified as working class (1983). The collapse of the manufacturing sector meant that traditional areas of working-class employment fell into decline and those who could, moved to new areas and new jobs (Bryson & Thompson 1972; Bryson & Winter 1999). The suburbs expanded and began to be filled by a new, more individualised aspirant class whose loyalty was to their immediate family rather than to their fellow workers. A belief that poverty and class were things of the past began to emerge.

The sense that class no longer mattered was assisted by the increased visibility and significance of the horizontal divisions that cut across classes. While classes had always been divided by factors such as ethnicity, age and gender, a number of developments made these internal distinctions more apparent. These included the transformation of the labour force with the entry of increasing numbers of women and immigrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB) as well as the impact of the civil rights movements of the 1960s. The expansion of the service sector brought increasing numbers of women into the labour market, which challenged male dominance of the workplace and changed workplace politics and culture. The interplay between gender and class became more apparent, thereby exposing the limitations of class theory.

The rise of multiculturalism in the period following the Second World War further fragmented the illusion of a homogenous class structure. Although there had always been ethnic minorities within the labour force the dominance of Anglo-Celts had made them relatively invisible. But the social turmoil that followed the end of the Second World War, together with the collapse of colonialism and a rise in egalitarianism, saw large-scale movements of population across national borders. In Australia, the demise of the ‘White Australia’ policy in 1973 led to rising numbers of NESB immigrants entering the country and taking their place alongside their Anglo-Celtic counterparts in the labour force. Multiculturalism, and the entrance of women into the labour force, began to fragment the cultural hegemony of the working class.

The 1960s civil rights movement of Indigenous Australians focused attention on their contribution to Australian identity and history. Citizenship gave Indigenous people a new visibility in Australian society and political culture, and raised questions about their place within the nation and what their relationship to the state should be.

These changes represented a challenge to class theory because dispelling notions of a unified working class also delegitimised claims of a unified working-class consciousness based on shared interests. Far from having a shared experience, the working class was revealed to be internally divided and fragmented. Resistance to the inclusion and representation of Indigenous Australians, women and immigrants within the white, male-dominated trade union movement, and the differential treatment of their labour through, for example, lower
rates of pay or different employment conditions, showed that cultural and social differences were a source of divisions that were as significant as vertical divisions of wealth.

These developments provided fertile ground for social theorists sensitive to the failings of the traditional models of inequality. Feminists pointed out that class was not a gender-neutral concept but fundamentally masculinist in its focus on male experiences and domains. Most stratification theorists were male, which had led to myopia when it came to exploring sites of inequality. Fixated on the notion that the workplace and public politics were the only sites in which social life was shaped, they ignored the significance of the domestic arena. Feminist research on the role of gender in a wide range of settings suggested that it was gender, not class, that was the most enduring and significant source of inequality. A new wave of feminist research revealed the extent to which the workplace was permeated by gender issues, from characteristics such as the division of labour and pay differentials, to less acknowledged features such as everyday interactions and skills categorisation (Scott, in Crompton & Mann 1986:156). Although sociologists such as Juliet Mitchell (1971) and Sheila Rowbotham (1977) attempted to combine Marxist and feminism, class remained a fundamentally intransigent concept—too solid to incorporate the notion of gender.

Feminists also pointed out that the gender blindness about inequality extended to its measurement. In empirical measures of class by male social researchers, men were assumed to be the unit of analysis, with the contribution of women to the stratification system discounted. This was justified because occupation more or less equated with class, and men were the primary breadwinners. But the rise in the number of women in the labour market made it difficult for stratification theorists to defend this approach from the criticisms of their feminist colleagues. Although some, most notably British Weberian and stratification theorist John Goldthorpe (Goldthorpe et al. 1987), initially resisted revision and attempted to justify the exclusive focus on men, others responded by developing more inclusive measures.

The feminist critique did not end there. Working within a predominantly poststructuralist framework, a new wave of writers on gender and sexuality drew on the concept of identity to explore men’s and women’s subjectivities. They argued that there was no straightforward relationship between social position and consciousness and that identity was formed from multiple sources rather than one essential variable such as gender or class.

These arguments gained impetus from black feminists who accused white middle-class feminists of treating the category of gender in the same essentialist way as class had hitherto been treated. Feminist writer bell hooks accused white feminists of ignoring the situation of black women and challenged the view that social phenomena could be captured through any essentialising category, whether it be gender, class or race (1981). In Australia, Indigenous scholar Moreton-Robinson’s study of Indigenous women and feminism revealed the extent of difference between the experiences and interests of Indigenous and Anglo-Celtic women (2000). These writers pointed to the fragmented nature of identity and the individualised and fluid way in which the experiences and consciousness of subjects was established.
Sociologists have used different terms to describe the changed social conditions that accompanied the process of individuation associated with globalisation. These changes led to the argument that it is identity rather than class that should be the primary concept for understanding social life. For sociologist Anthony Giddens rapid social change has released people from their traditional social contexts. The values, beliefs and forms of social organisation that were once passed down through generations have lost their relevance and, in this social vacuum, people are forced to make choices without the support of ancestry or tradition. He argues that we now live in a world of ‘reflexive modernity’ in which individuals must engage in ‘the project of the self’ (1991). Our intimate relationships are no longer prescribed but based on personal choice and so are always subject to the principle of ‘until further notice’.

Social theorist Zygmunt Bauman uses the term liquid modernity to capture this fluidity of social life. He argues that in any society there is always tension between having the freedom to choose who you want to be and how to live your life, and the security that comes with having your place ascribed by social arrangements. In the past, strong social norms and rigid social boundaries meant people were certain about where they belonged but lacked freedom to develop their own identity. Today the reverse is true. There are few social barriers preventing us from living any way we choose, but this comes at the cost of frail social bonds and the insecurity of living in a world where nothing can be taken for certain. Freedom is also distributed unequally, with those who are disadvantaged being trapped in situations where they have few choices and experience social exclusion.

Sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) points out that this freedom to choose our identity is not one that is freely entered into but is imposed by contemporary institutional arrangements. While in the past, major institutions such as education and welfare allocated responsibility to collective institutions such as the family or the workplace, today they demand that people act as self-determining and self-responsible agents. We live in an individuated world but it is still our social environment that compels citizens to act for themselves.

### 1.5.1 From production to consumption

Closely associated with the shift from class to identity is a concern with consumption rather than production. In traditional stratification theory, understanding how people contributed to production—generally understood as how they made their living—was regarded as the most revealing social attribute, a position that implies the primacy of the economy. Today it is consumption rather than production that is the most striking feature of contemporary social life. Social identity is now established more by what we consume than by what we produce so for many theorists it is lifestyles rather than life chances that should be the primary focus of sociological interest, and this is closely tied to culture. Today we position ourselves in social space through the development of our aesthetic style.
Unhindered by ascribed categories such as class, this positioning is relatively fluid and open to change. No longer fixed by the accident of geography, birth or biology, we can elect the groups with whom we wish to identify. From this perspective we can choose to be straight or gay, to support the Labor Party or the Greens, to be an Indy fan, follow Yogananda or become a committed feminist. Whatever our choice, it is associated with consumption patterns, such as how we dress or how we spend our leisure time, that serve as markers of being and belonging. The idea of a hierarchy of resources, of a world of haves and have nots, in which the economy serves as the key distributor of life chances, is replaced by a concern with different cultural forms.

The emergence of culture as the central feature of social life in a **postindustrial society** was closely tied to the growth in the power of the media and the knowledge economy. The post-Second World War period was characterised by an explosion in information technology, which played a major role in the process of globalisation. Time–space compression (Harvey 1990) is the process by which time and space shrink so that distant events, such as the war in Iraq, are experienced in real time across the globe. Communication is sped up through new technologies such as mobile phones, the internet and air travel, and a new global culture is created in which the media play a pivotal role. The high visibility and impact of the media, their integration with everyday life and their contribution to culture, make them essential objects of sociological analysis. Social theorists such as Stuart Hall (Hall et al. 1978; Hall 1997), who began his analyses within a neo-Marxist framework, embraced new paradigms to develop models of analysis that recognised the waning power of social structures.

The changing political landscape of the postwar period also contributed to the demise of class theory. As the century drew on, class-based politics declined in importance and voting preferences became increasingly detached from occupational position. Instead, identity politics emerged in the form of social movements, such as environmentalism, feminism and gay liberation. These movements were rooted in conscience politics rather than class location, further adding to the perception that class-based politics was a thing of the past.

The collapse of communism in the closing decades of the last century also had implications for class theory because it undermined the position of Marxist theorists. It led to claims that liberal democratic regimes had got it right and that market-led economies, balanced by the rule of law to ensure individual political and social rights, offered the best hope for humanity (Fukuyama 1992). The hopes that many left-leaning social theorists and activists had for a more egalitarian social order were replaced by a resignation to the seeming inevitability of inequality. In the West, socialist ideals, such as the provision of universal social care, appeared to be of declining relevance because of the persistence of poverty and disadvantage despite the existence of the welfare state. This made it very difficult to counter the arguments of the Right that the welfare state should be wound down because it encouraged dependence and was a waste of taxpayers’ money.

These developments were important in moving academic attention away from a concern with division to that of difference. This was assisted by a sense that the expansion...
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in middle-class jobs and the growth of consumerism had created a level of affluence that suggested the old inequalities of modernity had disappeared or were now so residual that they were of little academic interest. The changes in the experiences of women also had implications for the feminist movement. As women entered the labour force, their dependence on men declined, creating a new sense of independence and agency. Feminist paradigms of women as victims, subject to male oppression, came into question (Yeatman 1990). This corresponded with the rise of a new agenda of sexual difference derived from the experiences of gay men and lesbians. Both the feminist movement and the gay liberation movement moved away from an interest in gender inequality towards a concern with the construction of subjectivities and difference. This shift was also influenced by the development of postmodern and poststructural theory which rejected the possibilities for absolute truth and portrayed social reality as so relative and fragmented that it removed the subject as a coherent object of study. If there were no subjects then how was it possible to examine the social divisions between them (Derrida 1991)?

1.5.2 The death of class

For some stratification theorists the arguments of postmodernists and poststructuralists were too powerful to ignore. The view that class was a redundant concept was expressed in the 1980s and 1990s as the death of class debate. Sociologists Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters reviewed many of the arguments against the continued relevance of class and concluded that class ‘can no longer give us purchase on the big social, political and cultural issues of the age’ (1996:vii). They divided their analysis of the concept into three historical periods. The first period, ‘economic-class society’, is the classic period described by Marx: class relations are dualistic, oppositional and exploitative. There is a ‘radically unequal distribution of property’ (1996:88), with capitalists, whose wealth is predominantly inherited and rooted in property ownership, opposing industrial workers, who are organised for collective action and possess a revolutionary identity. In the second period, ‘organised-class society’, the sharp boundaries between classes begin to blur. The state emerges as a dominant interest group and the masses are organised into national-political groups; some diffusion of wealth occurs as occupational achievement overtakes inheritance as the primary source of wealth. This process continues into the third period, ‘status-conventional society’. Globalisation, the collapse of state socialism and the growth of unemployment give birth to new status-based social divisions (1996:4). Privatisation and the new currency of intellectual knowledge further reduce the concentration and inheritance of wealth. Individual biography is what counts, with markets acting like casinos, where ‘each individual is now their own market player ... what you get depends on how you perform’ (1996:89). Even occupation has been displaced as the source of social position, which is instead determined by individual achievement. Consumption is the central expression of social position, which is now status- rather than class-based.
Pakulski and Waters concluded that although material inequality is still important, class has lost its currency as the master concept for explaining contemporary social life. It cannot explain the post-Fordist industrial environment, nor the postcolonial, postcommunist political landscape. It offers no purchase on postwelfare states or the emergence of identity politics and global political movements such as Islamic fundamentalism: ‘Let class … rest in peace, respected and honoured, but mainly relevant to history’ (1996:153). Yet even though the death knell seemed to have been sounded on the field, new understandings and possibilities for examining social inequality were emerging, with a renewed emphasis on the need to understand its stubborn persistence.

1.6 Conclusion: Reinventing social inequality

The effects of three decades of a market model of social responsibility, and growing evidence of its damaging effects on the social fabric, have renewed concerns about social inequality. The idea that inequality does not matter, but that difference and lifestyles do, has become hard to sustain in the face of an increase in inequality in OECD countries (Vieira 2012). The failure of the excessive wealth associated with globalisation to trickle down to the lower reaches of society, the emergence of new groups of poor, and the stubborn persistence and sometimes worsening circumstances of other disadvantaged groups, such as Indigenous Australians, have led to a return to sociology’s traditional concern with disadvantage.

Cultural theory has also been criticised because its arguments about the centrality of the individual and denial of the role of structural forces in shaping social outcomes has similarities with neoliberal views. Social researcher John O’Neill, for example, suggests ‘a convergence of a postmodern leftism with neoliberal defences of the market’ (1999:85). Implicit in the concern with difference rather than division is the assumption that in a postmodern world people make genuine choices about how they will live their lives. This position runs counter to a wealth of research that shows that for some groups the word ‘choice’ is a misnomer and that to suggest they are the exclusive architects of their fate is to deny the circumscribed circumstances of their lives. Questions of who gets what, and how and why they get it, remain critical sociological concerns.

Although the sociological gaze is returning to social inequality, it does so through a lens that is markedly different from that of a generation ago. It is characterised today by a diversity of perspectives and an emphasis on multiple positions. The ideas of Bourdieu are influential as a way of encompassing the role of culture and other non-economic forces in shaping inequality experiences and positions. Inequality is now understood as multi-dimensional, involving the interaction of diverse variables that include gender, ethnicity
and class (Anthias 2001). Instead of a dominant paradigm such as neo-Marxism there is a more eclectic approach and an attempt to use whatever concepts and models work best for particular tasks.

Discussion questions

1 Define social inequality. How does distributional inequality differ from meritocracy?
2 What were some of the changes associated with postindustrialisation that challenged the notion of class as the primary determinant of social inequality?
3 What is meant by the claim that identity has replaced class as the key concept for understanding social location?