

First Critical Thinking Paper:

Answering Why Social Equality is Difficult to Establish and Maintain

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Introduction

Joel M. Charon poses the question in his book, *Ten Questions: a Sociological Perspective*, “Why is Social equality so difficult to establish and maintain (Charon, 2013, p. 91)?” According to Charon (2013), social inequality primarily arises from four areas: the division of labor, social conflict, social stratification, and the institution of private property. Charon’s views will be described and evaluated to shed light on this convoluted issue.

Division of labor

Where labor is divided, inequality emerges because different work yields different (and unequal) rewards. Work that is valued more highly will be rewarded more greatly. As time goes on, rewards for highly valued work will compound upon themselves as the lowly-valued workers receive fewer benefits, thus the difference in equality grows. Division of labor also breeds inequality because it inevitably leads to positions of leadership and subservience. As society advances, the divisions of labor become more complex. This complexity creates the need for leadership; someone needs to ensure that the whole system runs smoothly. Those in positions of leadership automatically have an advantage over those they are leading. *The iron law of oligarchy* is the term used to describe this principle; where there is an organization, a few will hold power over the majority (Charon, 2013). Division of labor is almost inescapable in complex social structures because of its utility. As the saying goes, many hands make light work! Large jobs are accomplished most easily by dividing labor among the group.

Social stratification

Division of labor contributes to social stratification which is another form of social inequality. Social classes are often defined by occupation, income, property, and level of authority; each of the factors mentioned are heavily determined by what division of labor one is a

part of (Charon, 2013). As previously mentioned, the iron law of oligarchy dictates that formal organization breeds a small ruling party and a large group of those who are ruled. Layers of stratification multiply over time as the positions of leadership grow and divisions of labor branch off into increasingly complex structures, adding more layers to the hierarchy of society.

Social conflict

According to Charon, social conflict is defined as, “The struggle of actors over something of value” (Charon, 2013, p. 74). Social conflict arises when there is not enough of a valued commodity to satisfy every member in a group. Victory in social conflict often leads to more victories in the future as an actor’s prestige and resources increase with each win. Those who continually win can create a system which secures their success in the future. On the other side of the same coin, losing a social conflict can lead to increased losses in the future. With each social loss, reputation and resources are lost as well. As the losses continue the victor can almost guarantee that the loser will not have the opportunity to win in the future.

Social institution of Private Property

In almost all societies there exists private property. Where private property exists, there will inevitably be the unequal distribution of that property; some will have more while others have less. Those who have more can garner for themselves more favorable positions, powers and privileges. With increased position, power and privilege comes the ability to further secure more property and higher status on the social strata. Thus, the chasm of social inequality widens as the winners secure their future victory and the losers are secured in their loss.

This positive feedback loop between power and privilege is a primary reason why social inequality is maintained. More power brings more privilege (property, social status, wealth, etc.), more privilege brings more power, and the cycle continues. Charon asserts that there are five

factors which function to maintain this system of inequality; the five factors are the following: efforts of the powerful, social institutions, culture, socialization, and instruments of force (Charon, 2013, p 88). Efforts of the powerful include any measure taken by those in power to maintain their position of power or suppress the power of other people. Powerful people are in the best position to protect the system of inequality that has put them in power.

Powerful people also have the ability to create social institutions that favor a system of inequality. These institutions may include government, military, education and media, each of which can be tailored to benefit whomever is in charge. These institutions serve to reinforce a culture that supports inequality. Over time, people tend to accept what they're born into, believing that the way the world is, is the way it must exist. When the masses accept a state-of-being as necessary, they will also provide justification for that state-of-being. Charon asserts that two ideologies are commonly developed in a culture to justify social inequality (Charon, 2013, p. 84). The first is that the affluent deserve their affluence because of their hard work and innate superiority. The second is that the poor deserve their poverty because of their irresponsibility, laziness, or lack of education (Charon, 2013, p. 84). These two ideologies can be applied to other categories of inequality as well. For example, it could be culturally accepted that men deserve to be in positions of power because of their natural strength, and women deserve to be provided for at home because of their innate fragility.

Culture and socialization go hand in hand when it comes to cementing a system of social inequality. People are generally socialized from an early age to accept their position in life, or to strive slightly above their station, but not too far. Children are taught from their parents, teachers, friends and those around them what they should expect from life. Generally, children are taught to expect about the same level of living in which they were raised. Socialization is based largely

on culture and tradition. In cultures where women are viewed as subservient, little girls are socialized to be subservient. As Charon puts so eloquently, “The system prevails through the collusion of the individuals who are socialized into society. Socialization brings the acceptance of a culture that justifies inequality, and it normally brings an acceptance of one’s relative position in the system of inequality (Charon, 2013, p. 88).”

Occasionally, individuals will strain against their position or culture, striving to improve their lot in any way they can. Some groups are working against the system itself, recognizing its inherent bend toward inequality. When this happens, the system in place will use various means to stifle the threatening party. This may involve monetary fines, removal of status/position, or threat of imprisonment/violence. These means of keeping individuals and groups in submission are called *instruments of force* and they are the fifth way social inequality is maintained (Charon, 2013, p. 89).

Conclusion

Social inequality is more nuanced and enigmatic than is often thought. Its existence is inevitable, problematic, and essential. Perhaps the immortality of social inequality speaks to its timeless utility. If society was completely leveled in terms of equality, life would lose its meaning. If a person doesn’t have anything to strive upward towards, they don’t have anything to do. The meaning of a task is derived from the perceived value of the effort it takes to accomplish that task. Without the assumption that what one is aiming toward is more valuable than what one has now, there is no meaning in pursuing it. Having to aim upward in life provides meaning while simultaneously assuming a hierarchy of inequality. One can not toss out the hierarchy without also disregarding the meaning it provides.

References

Charon, Joel, M. (2013) Ten Questions: A Sociological Perspective. Cengage: Belmont, CA.