

The Political Meanings of Social Class Inequality

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Abstract

Research on a wide range of topics related to rising economic inequality is flourishing throughout the social sciences. One topic that is gaining fresh attention is the politics of inequality. We know very little, however, about how Americans define and perceive inequality or how they express and enact their political desires for more or less of it. In the absence of such knowledge, and under the influence of powerful theoretical models that depict how Americans *ought* to respond politically to rising inequality (but appear not to be), we are apt to resort to common sense notions of American indifference. This article examines the record of new empirical research on this subject to determine whether such notions are justified. Drawing from and building on this research, I then offer a methodological and theoretical framework for future studies of the political meanings of social class inequality.

Keywords

inequality, political sociology, poverty and mobility, race, gender, class

Introduction

As we enter the fourth decade of nearly continuous growth in economic inequality, the social and political implications of inequality, as well as its practical meaning in everyday life, are surprisingly neglected topics of research. Scholars across the social sciences, and across the world, are beginning to tackle these issues in greater numbers, however. What have we learned from these efforts and how might future scholarship proceed?

In this article, I build on a new and diverse body of research to sketch a methodological and theoretical framework for conceptualizing class inequality in a socially and politically meaningful way—a way that is recognizable to people who experience class-like divisions in their lives, observe them in the broader society, and reflect upon them politically. Although building on research carried out with both qualitative and quantitative methods,

I place more emphasis on their underlying similarities and core findings than on their differences. Given my focus on public culture, and on multiple methods of data collection and analysis to ascertain that culture, I characterize this as a “bottom-up” and “multi-method” framework. As such, it spans and has implications for multiple disciplines as well. Finally, the resulting framework is distinguished by its theoretical underpinnings in research on gender and racial inequality and the possibilities it offers for those interested in new empirical investigations of the politics of inequality.

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A Bottom-Up and Multi-method Approach

As lifelong residents and educated observers, those of us who have grown up in the United States tend to think we have a pretty good handle on American culture. The fact, however, is that we are less informed about the culture of social class inequality in the United States than we think. Indeed, relatively little research exists on the experience of social class inequality, particularly in the era of escalating inequality since the 1980s.¹ Without such research, we naturally fall back on our social antennae, which are not likely to be reliable given the necessarily limited scope of our experiences and networks. Add to this that many commentators either hail from or now inhabit relatively elite positions in society (e.g., as professors, journalists, and politicians). The result is a relatively homogeneous, white middle-class perspective on American inequality.

To be clear, I am not making an assertion about the epistemic privilege of individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. My objective instead is to expose the weak empirical foundations of conservative ideologies—ideologies such as the American dream, meritocracy, and economic individualism—which too often guide, or misguide, interpretations of the politics of rising inequality and economic redistribution. Because disjunctures between the reality and rhetoric of class relations date back decades, if not centuries,² I focus on perceptions of social class *inequality* rather than perceptions of social class groups as such, and on the period (since the 1980s) wherein such inequality has been rising. To reorient us away from commonsense notions espoused by conservative American ideologies, I provide four examples across methodological and disciplinary boundaries of alternative and empirically grounded interpretations of the political meanings of social class inequality in contemporary America.

Four Examples

The first example comes from the discipline of political science, which is perhaps the most

engaged of the social sciences at the moment in attempting to understand Americans' political grasp of rising inequality. Particularly useful is research by Katherine Cramer Walsh (2012) that explicitly and forcefully responds to widespread depictions of Americans as holding conservative views in one way or another: either by being distracted from voting in their economic self-interest by cultural issues (Frank 2005), unsupportive and uninformed of the benefits of redistributive policies (Bartels 2005, 2008), and/or backers of conservative parties and policies that reinforce inequality (Kelly and Enns 2010).

The purpose of her study, states Walsh, "is to think about political understanding not in terms of what people *lack*—knowledge or sophistication or mass belief systems (e.g., Converse 1964)—but [in terms of] what they *have*" (Walsh 2012:518, emphasis added). And what they have, Walsh finds in a qualitative study of more than 25 communities dispersed across urban and rural Wisconsin, is a "rural consciousness" that "helps to organize and integrate considerations of the distribution of resources, decision-making authority, and values into a *coherent* narrative that people use to make sense of the world" (Walsh 2012:518, emphasis added). Contrary to prevailing assumptions, strictly cultural issues were minor compared to material ones. Moreover, material divides were typically cast between urban public sector professionals (i.e., the "top" of the distribution) and underemployed rural folk rather than between urban black welfare recipients (i.e., the "bottom" of the distribution) and hard-working rural whites.³

That rural consciousness is attuned to matters of economic justice will not necessarily be news to rural sociologists (Lobao and Meyer 2001), or to other sociologists familiar with the "boundary-making" shorthands individuals employ to organize their understanding of social class structures (Lamont 1992, 2000). However, as a political scientist in a discipline embroiled in debates over the politics of inequality, Walsh focuses more directly on the contemporary *politics* of inequality than prior studies, and relative to most studies on this topic, she does something quite novel. Despite

her original intention to study the relationship between social *class* identities and political understandings, Walsh reoriented her research in the direction of *rural* consciousness once she discovered the lexicon of inequality adopted by her rural subjects—that is, terms that emphasized rural/urban divides along both material and cultural dimensions.

Although we must be careful not to assume that the results of such bottom-up observations are, or are going to be, inconsistent with arguments that are produced from more top-down, deductive approaches, the inductive aspects of the method offer some confidence that Walsh is capturing a previously obscured part of the social class picture. This hardly means that particular kinds of methods—specifically qualitative methods—are somehow inherently superior when studying such topics. An inductive methodological approach, guided by a flexible theoretical framework, can in principle be adapted to any research enterprise. The goal is to reduce the long “arc of inference” that now exists between the thin empirical record of beliefs about social class inequality on the one hand and claims about American acquiescence to rising inequality on the other hand. Using multiple methods, in fact, can advance our gaps in knowledge about the politics of inequality, provided that we place results in conversation with each other, a core point to which I return in the conclusion.

My second example draws on my own research using quantitative methods applied to large social survey data sets. Despite using different types of data and methods than Walsh, I arrive independently at the same conclusion regarding the coherence of American perceptions and everyday conceptualizations of inequality, as well as the (surprisingly?) critical stances toward inequality held by a majority of Americans.⁴ I allude to the specific content of these beliefs only briefly in this section and describe them in greater detail in the next. My main objective here is to foreground the methodological aspects of my work and the implications this has for future research on the politics of inequality.

My starting point was to examine public opinion *directly* on beliefs about income

inequality. This was a departure from previous research, which inferred beliefs about inequality from beliefs on related but distinct issues, such as faith in the American dream of upward mobility or opposition to redistributive policies (Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Lipset 1996). For reasons of external validity, it made sense to expand the boundaries of research by incorporating survey questions about inequality into the political study of inequality. But this reorientation also provided an occasion to test the inferences that were often made concerning the relationship between beliefs about inequality on one hand and beliefs about the American dream of upward mobility and redistributive policies on the other hand. For instance, Americans might aspire to the American dream in principle while being pessimistic of its attainability in practice, or they could be troubled by inequality without endorsing government redistribution as the solution. In neither of these scenarios would the conventional inferences be upheld.

Regarding the amelioration of inequality, I analyzed an array of possible policy responses to increasing concerns about inequality without imposing a single, predetermined response as the most theoretically rational one (McCall 2013; McCall and Kenworthy 2009). To reduce the “arc of inference,” the data I used contained questions on attitudes about both inequality and policy, and were not on distant but common subjects of research, such as vote choice, which could be determined by any number of considerations. The theoretical framework was also flexible enough to capture the rationality of alternative political orientations toward reducing inequality—orientations not often considered in prior work—such as preferences for greater educational spending, corporate responsibility, and local expenditures.⁵

My findings indicated that each of these alternatives is connected to rising concerns about inequality, and thus worth closer attention by researchers. Yet the overwhelming preoccupation of research at present is on gauging support for federal government policies that redistribute income (or on vote choice). This may represent a reasonable and pragmatic response to the lack of survey questions on

support for alternative policy options in our most widely used time series surveys, an obstacle I encountered as well. But adherence to dominant theoretical models may be at fault as well. We should begin introducing new policy content into these widely respected surveys if we hope to more adequately capture the political meanings and implications of inequality among the general public.⁶

This route is already being pursued in psychological research, the subject of my third example. Research using conventional experimental methods in psychology can more easily introduce new content because surveys are designed by researchers in their on-campus labs or, increasingly, in online survey environments. This methodological flexibility is now being combined with a new substantive interest in perceptions of social class inequality, whereas more abstract notions of meritocracy have been the preferred topic of social-psychological research for decades (e.g., Jost et al. 2003). Here, I want to highlight one notable innovation within this field: It is to embed questions of “system-justification”—the widespread tendency to view the economic system as meritocratic and fair—within conditions that emphasize either the rigidity or malleability of the relevant system (Johnson and Fujita 2012). Perhaps not surprisingly, when subjects are primed with a realistic possibility of social change, they are less likely to exhibit system-justifying beliefs.

Such findings have important implications for the political study of inequality. Americans may worry that any attempt to restrain rising inequality—that is, any attempt to change the system—will have undesirable side effects. For instance, business owners often claim that higher taxes will inhibit job creation and slow economic growth. If, however, Americans are assured of the economic viability of redistributive policies, they may support these policies with greater vigor. One could argue that the viability of redistributive policies has *not* been demonstrated to the American public and that this constrains their political imagination for social change (Lupia et al. 2007). This effect of political rhetoric on individual beliefs is a widely acknowledged instance of endogeneity,

yet few studies have tackled it empirically in the promising way that psychologists are now doing.

In the fourth and final example of this section, I denote how studies of media coverage may help us better understand political rhetoric itself, as well as its relationship to public views about inequality (though not in a causal way). Considering again the issue of political imagination, the media is often blamed for not covering inequality more regularly and more critically, and thus constraining possibilities for change (e.g., Hacker and Pierson 2010). Fox News in particular is singled out for misleading and misinforming Americans with coverage slanted in a conservative, corporate direction. However, there is little in the way of research on media coverage of inequality. Moreover, when I decided to fill in this gap, it did not seem feasible to rely on a transparent list of relevant keywords to index articles on inequality, as had been done by researchers who had conducted the most respected studies of race and the media (Gilens 1999). Keywords such as “income inequality” were much less effective in identifying articles on rising economic inequality than were keywords on “race” in identifying articles on racial inequality. Nor was it appropriate to deductively construct a set of elite “frames” that set the parameters of debate over rising inequality, another common method in the study of media influence (Kellstedt 2000). This was because it was unclear whether such debates even existed.

As a result of prior limitations, a team of research assistants and I worked both deductively from our social science knowledge of social stratification and inductively from an initial foray into newsweekly articles (Chong and Druckman 2009; Griswold 1987). We constructed a complex coding scheme that (1) systematically identified articles on social class inequality, (2) distinguished between explicit and implicit coverage and among different forms of inequality (e.g., labor market, family, wealth, post-tax and post-transfer, etc.), and (3) explicated distinct relationships between social class groups (e.g., executives, the rich, skilled and unskilled workers, the middle class, the median worker, immigrants,

the unemployed, etc.). In the end, and spanning 30 years from 1980 to 2010, a random set of articles was collected, and a startling number and variety of them were on inequality.

From such analyses, I have come to regard the media as a critical record of *public* opinion, whereas the media is often reputed to represent *elite* opinion only. As public opinion, the articles present another record—next to survey data—of American views toward the issue of rising class inequality as it evolved from its origins in the early 1980s to the present. This record furnished vital clues into how Americans think about inequality, consistent with the clues I gathered from research on gender and racial inequality, discussed in the next section. Most significant was the way that journalists wrote about rising inequality as *itself* a threat to the American dream, so that striving for upward mobility did not displace concerns about inequality but amplified them. Other research into coverage of economic issues, such as executive pay and living wage campaigns, also conceptualizes the media as a source of public opinion and finds similarly critical views (Kuhnen and Niessen 2012; Woodly, forthcoming). This research is providing a much-needed window into the nuance and even sophistication of Americans' grasp of distributional changes in the economy.

An Intersectional Approach

Within subfields of research, accepted narratives about the most salient issues and policy solutions are often taken for granted, making alternative interpretations difficult to advance. In this section, I argue that the above political beliefs about social class inequality are partially obscured by the tradition of treating beliefs about social class inequality differently than beliefs about racial and gender inequality. At first glance, of course, the analytic separation of class from race and gender appears entirely reasonable. Indeed, it seems imperative to gauge perceptions of class inequality alone, divorced from views of gender and racial inequality, not least because these unique dimensions of inequality have trended, or at least are perceived to be trending, in opposite directions.⁷

Nevertheless, beliefs and policies related to racial and gender inequality became increasingly pertinent as my research progressed. Many scholars studied how gender and racial inequality became politicized as social problems in need of remediation in the 1960s and 1970s (see especially Kluegel and Smith 1986). The same, however, cannot be said of studies of rising social class inequality; there are none of which I am aware dealing with Americans' growing politicization around this issue. If anything, scholars focus on the *lack* of politicization. Certainly, there is a need for such research, especially in the face of explicit contestation surrounding, for instance, the Occupy Wall Street movement. Moreover, my own research has indicated widespread desires for less inequality dating back to at least the 1980s. How are these patterns to be deciphered? Do studies of perceptions of racial and gender inequality provide insight into the circumstances under which Americans might be less tolerant of other kinds of inequality? I think they do.

Specifically, racial and gender gaps in educational or employment outcomes are often objected to (i.e., legitimately seen as discriminatory) when they are presented as evidence of violations of equal opportunity. For instance, racial and gender gaps in test scores, graduation rates, and occupational employment can come to symbolize the lack of equal educational and employment opportunities. When this happens, unequal outcomes function as indicators of unequal opportunities (Bell 1973; Roemer 1998). Class inequality, in contrast, is typically understood as *coexisting* with equality of opportunity (and, in some respects, for good reason). If we were to import the rendering and logic pertaining to racial and gender inequality into the study of beliefs about class inequality, it would suggest that Americans might become concerned about inequality of class outcomes if and when they see them as a reflection of limited opportunities.⁸

The alternative conceptualization proposed here—a conceptualization wherein growing income inequality arouses concerns when it signals a breakdown in the American opportunity structure—has political implications that

differ from those usually associated with rising class inequality. These implications parallel the politics of antidiscrimination. First, this conceptualization opens up policy avenues largely hidden in discussions of social class inequality, where the welfare state's income redistribution policies (i.e., welfare and progressive taxes) represent the primary solutions. Unlike government-based redistribution, affirmative action and anti-pay discrimination legislation are labor market-based policies enforced through government regulations that seek to erase unequal outcomes (by race and gender) in pursuit of equal opportunities. This might be referred to as labor market redistribution, and in theory, it is easily applied to the problem of wage inequality.⁹ Fair pay at the top for overpaid executives and at the bottom and middle for underpaid workers simultaneously reduces inequality and boosts opportunities for good jobs. Moreover, Americans have long bristled at executives' excessive pay and are far more accepting of collective bargaining and other regulatory policies to augment worker voice and pay than is commonly thought.¹⁰

Second, patterns surrounding pay discrimination and politics such as affirmative action have the advantage of shining a light on the agents of inequality and not just its victims (Lowery et al. 2012). Affirmative action developed because of employers' failure to abide by equal employment opportunity law (MacLean 2006). Stricter regulations regarding executive pay and equity norms within corporations likewise would denote an unusual but necessary degree of intervention to curb employer and market abuses.¹¹ More broadly, this approach nudges us in the direction of scrutinizing the rich as much as we do the poor. And, here, we can borrow from the literatures on the undeserving poor to apply notions of undeservingness to the rich (Gilens 1999). The rich may be deemed undeserving not simply as an abstract matter of fairness but because their excesses are potentially harmful to the rest of society, in generating skewed rather than shared prosperity. The recent Occupy Wall Street movement notwithstanding, this "zero-sum" analysis is too rarely encountered in academic and policy

discussions of rising class inequality. Instead, it is often considered preferable to leave employers and labor market dynamics to their own devices, to ensure economic efficiency and growth, and then to redistribute *after* the market works its magic (Haskins and Sawhill 2009; Lane 1986). Not only does this limit channels of redress, it bounds political imaginations of such channels, which I discuss further in the conclusion.¹²

My reinterpretation thus far of beliefs about class inequality—a reinterpretation that parallels understandings regarding racial and gender stratification—has been restricted to borrowing from the latter two arenas to inform the former. It has been unidirectional, and primarily theoretical, in avoiding the complicated empirical question of how the *content* of attitudes about racial and gender inequality intersect with those of class inequality. How are perceptions of rising class inequality affected: by perceptions of trends in racial and gender inequality? by racial and gender differences in education, wealth, poverty, employment, and residential segregation? by racial and gender identities? and by intersections of these with social class identities and social movements (e.g., the Occupy Wall Street movement has been discredited by some as a largely white, male-dominated movement)?

Here, again, our most venerable social surveys come up short. They do not present us with parallel questions about each of these dimensions of inequality.¹³ Of course, there are other ways to ascertain such relationships: Racial and class divergences in perceptions of economic opportunity and inequality have been richly documented in qualitative research (e.g., Hochschild 1995; Lamont 2000; Newman 1988, 1993; Young 2004). Studies such as these lay the foundation for further investigations into how *political* beliefs about rising inequality and falling opportunity are situated within the contemporary context of economic change for different groups of Americans (Walsh 2012). An examination of the economic and political orientations of women toward rising inequality is a particularly glaring omission in current research.

Conclusion

I close with a challenge to stratification scholars, broadly, and those especially interested in studies of the political meaning of social class inequality. In each of the qualitative studies mentioned earlier, the authors offer clear documentation of contradictions in perceptions of inequality (i.e., recognition and denial) as well as, at times, the invisibility or lack of salience of inequality in response to open-ended questions. How does this square with my argument that there is considerably more awareness of inequality, and substantially less tolerance of inequality, than commonly asserted?

I have attempted to demonstrate in this essay that the political terrain of inequality in the United States is far more complex than we typically assume. Given this, a lack of visibility, salience, or coherence in unscripted, open-ended conversations is not inconsistent with evidence of coherence in more scripted contexts, such as in the political conversations observed by Walsh, or in the survey responses that I analyze (which may guide respondents with embedded references to inequality in the question wording). The incoherence of public discourses of inequality writ large may indeed be an accurate portrayal of our current predicament, in which a chasm has opened up between political and economic elites and the public, and among subgroups of elites and the public, over the meaning of economic change and inequality. The fact that responses to prompts about inequality cohere at all in such an unsettled environment, and in a largely critical direction, should be taken as a sign of their validity.

But we can do better. Applying a wider range of data, methods, and perspectives would help fill the current vacuum in our conceptions of social class inequality, its ideological dimensions, and its political implications. Social scientists of all stripes are starting to challenge the hegemony of conservative American ideologies. They are doing so not to install an equally hegemonic set of liberal ideologies from the topdown, but to better calibrate existing and still powerful political models of redistribution from the bottom up.

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Notes

1. The most in-depth investigations of beliefs about class and inequality were conducted prior to the rise of economic inequality (e.g., Hochschild 1981; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Vanneman and Cannon 1987).
2. For an excellent and like-minded investigation of the thin empirical foundations of these debates and the tendency to “blame the victims” for their allegiance to an unjust economic system, see Reeve Vanneman and Lynn Weber Cannon’s (1987) *The American Perception of Class* and a more recent analysis of enduring subjective class identities by Michael Hout (2008).
3. On the enduring importance of material considerations in determining vote choice, see also Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2006).
4. Public opinion research has been criticized for its inability to capture critical perspectives on class consciousness (e.g., Fantasia 1988). However much this rings true of most public opinion research, this problem is not inherent to the enterprise of studying public opinion data, and sociologists would do well to take better advantage of the potential of public opinion data to offer a window into public values, interests, and culture (Manza and Brooks 2012).
5. The evidence on local government spending is presented in Lobao and Adua (2012). The relationship between economic inequality and educational policies is also the subject of cross-national research (Busemeyer 2012).
6. The United States is not alone in this regard, as surveys in other liberal democracies and advanced industrial countries lack questions on, for example, market institutions and preferences for market redistribution, even though concerns about markets are rising in these countries as well. I am working with collaborators to field such questions in the General Social Survey and the International Social Survey Program in Sweden and Denmark in 2014.

7. Although economic inequality is generally increasing within demographic groups and declining between them, there is evidence that racial inequality began to increase again between black and white women in the 1980s, though it has not returned to previous peaks (Card and DiNardo 2002; Pettit and Ewert 2009; Sites and Parks 2011). Racial disparities in net wealth also grew in the wake of the mortgage and housing crisis.
 8. For a discussion of how the effect of parents' income on adult children's income is analogous to the effect of race and gender on income (i.e., as an indicator of unequal opportunities), see Grawe (2004).
 9. The point here is not to replace race and gender affirmative action with affirmative action by class, something often proposed.
 10. Public opinion polls since the 1970s say that over two-thirds of Americans think major corporate executives are overpaid (McCall 2013; see also Burak 2013). On support for unions and other forms of worker voice, see Freeman and Rogers (1999).
 11. Indeed, the Corporate Social Responsibility movement is beginning to see broad compensation disparities as one of their targets of reform alongside their more conventional focus on environmental sustainability and employment diversity (e.g., Edmans 2012; see also Krueger 2012).
 12. In this light, criticism of the Occupy Wall Street movement for not formulating political demands is misplaced: The lack of clarity surrounding political solutions can be understood as a symptom of (1) the complexity and pervasiveness of the problem of inequality and (2) the lack of viable solutions to market and other forms of inequality put forward by elites.
 13. One notable exception is an underutilized series of parallel questions about the causes of income differences by income level, race, and gender in the 2002 American National Election Studies. These questions adapt the structure of past questions on racial inequality (e.g., see Hunt 2007).
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