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Theory of Social Inequality

Structural social inequality is a culturally and socially produced notion of difference constructed to dispossess people of land, body, rights, and personhood. Throughout geographic and temporal history, social inequality has been galvanized as a product of capitalism that relies on accumulation and dispossession.

Property, a central tenet of capitalist frameworks and key to my theory of social inequality, is contingent upon paradigms of ownership and possession. If we extend the term “property” to include possession of all value resources: including material goods, financial accrual, as well as innate and acquired attributes, property can be thought of as a relationship of power through ownership and nonownership. Therefore, the ability to have claim and belonging over property demonstrates, to use Payne’s language, the “Have” of some and “Have-not” of others. For example, the notion of private property, often used to invoke custody of land, indicates a sole ownership and control over a place. Thus, those without the deed or contractual rights to this land possess no agency, access or control in managing said place. This example, as a microcosm, demonstrates an inherent dynamic in capitalism of possession and deprivation, therefore illustrating the embeddedness of innate hierarchy within a capitalist society.

Because of this necessary hierarchy, forms of social inequality are fabricated in an attempt to naturalize social power differentials. For instance, modern understandings of race as a social classification emerged during the Atlantic Slave Trade as a construction to justify the

exploitation of labor and dispossession of bodies in service of economic production. With no biological basis, racialization was a manufactured social difference intended to create and sustain novel relationships of power. Racialization is central to the development of social dynamics in the United States, and persists in institutional processes, economic systems, and cultural understandings.

This process of creating social difference is enacted to perform various functions of a Global Racial Empire, as coined by Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwò, as racialized constructions can vary depending on the desired outcomes of colonial and capitalist domination. For example, the racialization of Indigenous communities was largely to dispossess these populations of land, and thus concocted narratives of Indigenous people as inhabiting a “undeveloped wilderness.” This fallacy, coined “The Pristine Myth” by William Denevan, rationalized and enabled processes of settler colonialism and displacement of Indigenous Peoples to expand American territory. Conversely, racialization of Black communities functioned to dispossess individuals of their bodies, and thus white supremacist constructions produced “attribute theories”, as articulated by Payne, that espouse certain inherent characteristics of racialized populations. In a particular example, Payne outlines a traditional attribute theory approach to why rebellions of enslaved people in the United States were considered less successful than rebellions elsewhere, explaining “these slaves had internalized the attitudes of their masters”. This unsubstantiated supposition assumes that enslaved individuals absorb white supremacist notions, demonstrating how the racialization of enslaved people was to deprive them of autonomy over their minds and bodies to justify exploitation of labor.

Although social inequality is not new, it is continuously reinforced and reproduced, evolving to maintain social order and capitalistic homeostasis. As people move through

structures, society, and social inequality continues to be reproduced. Although it can be sometimes visible, social structures that generate inequality are intricate assemblages of social, personal, political and economic facets that at first glance may not be oppressive, yet coalesce to co-produce and enforce realities of social inequality.

Update 05/2026

Upon completion of my praxis project process, my theory of social inequality has, in concept, remained constant. However, as our praxis cohort interrogated, iterated, and problematized our theories, my contextual foundations have deepened. Scholarship like Cedric Robinson's work on racial capitalism have provided intellectual frameworks for grounding my theorizations in theoretical context. Additionally, through my work with youth, I would also expand many of my frameworks of capital possession to include age and language as facets of property.

This addendum is not a sign-off or a signature of completion in my theorization about social inequality and relationships. These theories are constantly evolving, developing to recontextualize or encompass the complexities of social realities.

Theory of Positionality

In 3rd grade, I fell in the recess schoolyard. I remember watching the pavement, painted green to resemble a meadow, engulf my vision as I lost control of my limbs and felt granules of asphalt press against my lips. Although it was green, the concrete seemed much more piercing than the grass it imitated. Getting up, a hole in my jeans revealed my skinned knee, as a trickle of blood began to flow down my right shin. I told the gym teacher I lost my balance jumping rope. I didn't mention that I was pushed by Sebastian for singing the accompanying chant "like a pussy". The next day, I wore new pants from GAP, a pair of tight blue jeans. In reading class, Madison asked me if they were hand-me-downs from my sister, cause they looked like "girl jeans". She was well-meaning, genuinely curious if I had repurposed my sister's old clothing. I refused indignantly. Intent on demonstrating to her that I was not girlish, I never wore those pants again.

From then on, I became aware of how I spoke, how I acted, and what I took interest in. As a young boy, for some undetermined reason, I knew that being feminine was seemingly a violation of some tacit social rulebook.

What I did not think about was my race, Jewish faith, and nationality. Although people around me looked different than I did, I was comfortable in school and found it enjoyable. I have come to understand that the apparent ease of my school experience was because I am privileged to attend school in a system that was built to reproduce conceptions of whiteness. I never had thought about my racial identity as a child because social structures are built for me.

Identities are aspects of an individual's social or personality. Positionality is, instead, a relationship that is informed by the space that an individual is in. Many social identities are in constant interaction and relationship with each other in every space, therefore creating

positionalities that can exist throughout your entire life. Positionality is furthermore a complex interaction of your identities, other people's identities, and sociocultural structures. Nonetheless, at its core, I believe that positionality and identity are separate, in that positionality is inherently linked to context.

Update 05/2026

My theory of positionality underscores that positionality is tied to context. This is true, and I would also expand this definition to highlight the complexities of interconnected or disparate contexts. Positionality can be informed by immediate social context, larger structural context, interpersonal context, and is most commonly informed by all of these contexts simultaneously.

I have also developed an interest in exploring conceptualizations of social identity, salient identity and positionality in discourse. My working theories on how and why people claim identities rely on considering what identities people consider salient to them. While this is individually unique, through my work I've begun to formulate theories that posit "relevant" identity, or identity that people select as most salient, are often social identities that fall outside of hegemonic ideals. Socialization processes work to place dominant identities as the norm. Thus, identities that align with this standard are able to go unquestioned. Conversely, identities that differ in hegemony are consistently called into question, made visible and salient through perceived and lived differences in figured worlds of discourse. However, all identities are relevant in positionality, as these relationships undergird all social processes. Furthermore, I then continue to wonder how these conceptualizations of salient identity impact individual perceptions of self, as well as how the individual presents their identity to others.

Theory of Social Change

Because dominant social norms are so pervasive, genuine social change requires addressing both sides of the inside/outside and ideological/material reality dichotomies. Often, attention to one of these tenets yields consideration of the other. For example, mutual aid networks seek to change material reality, providing resources to meet the immediate needs of individuals and families. However, many mutual aid resources also aspire to construct lasting networks of redistribution, simultaneously resisting current capital distribution paradigms while recreating accumulation systems that attempt to reshape ideologies of possession, wealth, and community.

Furthermore, conceptualizing social change demands an interrogation of existing social conventions. For comprehensive social change, one must consider personal and interpersonal attitudes, yet also investigate how social conditions are enshrined into structural procedures. Sole attention to interpersonal beliefs may address symptoms of inequity but not more covert structural factors. Conversely, it is crucial to understand that systems are constituted and constructed by people. Fundamentally, social change requires a change within and between people. Therefore, I think interpersonal values and relationships must be ultimately centered in changework. Authentic relationships innately resist existing capitalist, white supremacist and patriarchal structures, but attention still must be given to these systems to recognize and deconstruct their inequities. Thus, it is worthwhile to hold both personal and structural factors in changemaking consciousness, as these processes are interrelated, coalescing to coanimate social and material realities. (Community organizing is an example of this??)

Fundamentally, I believe that change must happen from the 'outside', as innately inequitable mechanisms cannot create sustainable justice. However, people existing in society

have immediate needs and wants. Therefore, system reforms, while I believe will not solve issues core to our society, remain important to advocate for, to allow individuals that are marginalized, material and social equities.

Additionally, and individual or groups ability to enact social change varies based on complex intersections of positionality. In the world, I believe that an individual who benefits from a system can never truly identify and align as an 'outsider'. A privileged individual operates within the system, and can agitate from within through advocacy or amplify voices of underrepresented individuals, but ultimately should not be the ones uplifted by efforts towards justice. (Allyship???) Justice does not mean equality, rather equity, therefore those who are socially and structurally dispossessed must be uplifted, heard and empowered louder than dominant voices, to aspire towards social equity.

Update 05/2026

I remember this theory piece was the most challenging for me to write, as I have found that much of my schooling has equipped me to analyze and critique, but it was much less common to be asked to redesign or reimagine. Most of my theory on changework has emerged from experiential knowledge and practice. Through this praxis process, my theorizations of changework have shifted considerably.

Notably, I now highlight relationships of trust as essential and foundational to processes of changework. Trust and relationality, which I initially downplayed, are critical in ideating models of social change, cultivating solidarity in changework practices and committing oneself to redesigning social realities. I resonate with a specific trust framework - coalitional agency -

that I developed in my praxis project. In this theoretical model, our fates are perceived as intertwined, thus reinforcing the importance of relationality and trust in changework.

Finally, I have also developed an appreciation for actions of partial change. I believed before that change must emerge as revolutionary. This felt intangible, and I often was stuck in iterating this framework in my theorizations. While this model is still relevant (and important to understand), I've come to acknowledge the capacity for resistance and redesign in the micro-scale, or in incremental ways. Scale of impact does not correlate to scope of importance, and thus we must still try to enact change, even in the mundane, daily practices of our lives.

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