

The Rise and Fall of Benign Narratives About Inequality

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There is a growing consensus among academics, policy makers, and even politicians that poverty and inequality should no longer be treated as soft “social issues” that can safely be subordinated to more fundamental interests in maximizing total economic output. The most important sources of this newfound concern with poverty and inequality are (1) the spectacular increase in economic inequality and other forms of disadvantage in many late-industrial countries (the *takeoff account*); (2) the striking persistence of many noneconomic forms of inequality despite decades of quite aggressive egalitarian reform (the *persistence account*); (3) an emerging concern that poverty and inequality may have negative macro-level effects on terrorism, total economic production, and ethnic unrest (the *macro-level externalities account*); (4) a growing awareness of the negative individual-level effects of poverty on health, political participation, and a host of other life conditions (the *micro-level externalities account*); (5) the rise of a “global village” in which regional disparities in the standard of living have become more widely visible and hence increasingly difficult to ignore (the *visibility account*); (6)

the ongoing tendency to expose and delegitimize new types of inequalities (based on sexual orientation, disability, or citizenship) that, not so long ago, were taken for granted, rarely discussed, and barely seen (the *new inequalities account*); and (7) a growing commitment to a conception of human entitlements that includes, at minimum, the right to seek or secure employment and thereby be spared extreme deprivation (the *social inclusion account*).

The foregoing list is remarkable in two ways. First, only two of the seven reasons for this newfound interest are about the brute empirics of inequality (i.e., its growth or intransigence), while all others are about changes in how we have come to view, study, and evaluate those empirics. When scholars now argue, for example, that inequality has multifarious effects (i.e., an *externalities account*), they presumably don't mean to suggest that such effects suddenly multiplied in the contemporary period. Rather, we are to understand that inequality was always rife with externalities, however inadequately we may have appreciated them in the past. Although changes in empirics hardly exhaust, then, the sources of

our growing concern with inequality, this is not to gainsay the equally important point that such changes, especially the takeoff in income inequality, are likely a core reason why inequality has come to be understood as a fundamental social problem of our time.

The above list is no less remarkable for the relatively minor role that normative concerns play. To be sure, there appears to be a growing sentiment that, at minimum, contemporary social systems should guarantee an opportunity to all citizens to participate in economic life and hence avoid the most extreme forms of social and economic exclusion (i.e., the *social inclusion account*). It would nonetheless be a mistake to understand the rising interest in poverty and inequality as principally fueled by some sudden realization that social inclusion is a fundamental social good. Indeed, far from treating inequality as a moral problem in itself, the contemporary tendency is to emphasize its profound consequences and threats for the world community as a whole (i.e., the *macro-level externalities account*). The rhetoric of "sustainability," although more frequently featured in discussions of environmental problems, is increasingly taken as relevant to discussions of inequality as well. In adopting this rhetoric, the claim is that extreme inequality is counterproductive not just because it reduces total economic output, but also because other very legitimate objectives, such as reducing mortality rates, might also be compromised. By this logic, social policy must simultaneously be oriented to increasing economic output *and* restraining the rise of debilitating and counterproductive forms of inequality, a rather more complicated maximization problem than those conventionally taken on in economics (see Ch. 3, Fischer et al.; Ch. 4, Krueger).

The Role of Benign Narratives in Past Scholarship

The foregoing orientation to poverty and inequality should be understood as a sea change relative to the sensibilities that prevailed after World War II and even into the 1960s and 1970s. To be sure, the standard-issue sociologist of the past also embraced the view that inequality was an important social problem, but overlaid on this sensibility was an appreciation of various "logics of history" that operated in the main to reduce inequality, if only gradually and fitfully. The problem of inequality was understood, then, as a tractable moral problem, an unfortunate side-circumstance of capitalism (and even socialism) that would become yet more manageable with the transition into the increasingly affluent forms of advanced industrialism. This orientation to inequality, which we characterize throughout our essay as "benign," is expressed in the standard postwar narratives about three types of outcomes: (1) the distribution of income, power, and other valued resources; (2) the distribution of opportunities for securing income, power, and other valued resources; and (3) the formation of social classes and other institutionalized groups (e.g., racial groups, gender groups). We review each of these three types of benign narratives below.

Long-Term Trend in Inequality

The dominant inequality narrative of the postwar period featured the emergence of egalitarian ideologies and the consequent delegitimation of the extreme forms of inequality found in agrarian systems (e.g., Bell 1973; Kerr et al. 1964; Parsons 1970). The Enlightenment was understood as fostering a critical rhetoric of equality that unleashed one of the most profound revolutions in

human history. The resulting decline in inequality can be seen, for example, in (1) the European revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries against the privileges of rank (honorific equality); (2) the gradual elimination of inequalities in the right to vote, own property, and speak and assemble (civil equality); (3) the abolition of slavery and the establishment of the radically egalitarian principle of self-ownership (equality of human assets); and (4) the equalization of economic assets via the rise of socialism, welfare capitalism, and their many institutions (economic equality).¹

As is well known, the latter commitment to equalizing economic assets was rather weaker than the commitment to other forms of equalization, with the result that economic inequalities remained extreme in all market economies. There was nonetheless a gradual decline in economic inequality throughout the postwar period in the United States. According to the classic Kuznets curve (Kuznets 1955), the initial stages of capitalist development bring about an increase in income inequality as capital is increasingly concentrated among a small number of investors, whereas more advanced forms of capitalism entail a growth in the size of the middle class and a consequent reversal of the upward trend. The causal dynamics behind the resulting inverted-U pattern remain unclear (see Acemoglu and Robinson 2002), but most sociologists attribute the late-industrial decline in inequality to the increasingly crucial role that the skilled working class played in production, the associated growth in working-class productivity, and the leverage that this growth in skills and productivity conferred on skilled workers.

The careful reader might inquire as to the mechanisms by which cultural egalitar-

ianism of this sort diffuses and takes hold. The conventional view in this regard is that a series of crucial historical events after the Enlightenment (e.g., the defeat of Nazism, the civil rights movement) served to define equality as one of our core cultural commitments. Absent some revolutionary event that changes this cultural trajectory, the course of human history then becomes the "working out" of this commitment, a task that involves shedding subsidiary values that sometimes come into conflict with our deeper commitment to egalitarianism. The core mechanism that drives this cultural diffusion may therefore be understood as the gradual reconciling of competing values to a new value, that of equality, that has been elevated by one or more historical events to a position of prominence.

Long-Term Trend in Inequality of Opportunity

The second narrative of interest rests on a sharp distinction between the distribution of social rewards (e.g., income) and the distribution of opportunities for securing these rewards. In liberal welfare regimes, extreme inequalities in rewards may be tolerated, but only insofar as opportunities for attaining these rewards are understood to be equally distributed. It is inequalities of opportunity that are regarded, then, as especially illegitimate in the context of liberal welfare regimes.

The dominant narratives of the postwar period have these inequalities of opportunity gradually weakening. The narratives of this period may be understood as benign because they describe the withering away of precisely those types of inequalities (i.e., inequalities of opportunity) that are regarded as problematic or illegitimate. The trademark of the benign narrative is this simple

correspondence between what we want and what we think will likely happen. We describe below four benign subnarratives that characterize some of the processes by which inequalities of opportunity come to be weakened.

The most famous such subnarrative pertains to the discrimination-reducing effects of competitive market economies. In his original formulation of the “taste for discrimination” model, Becker (1957) argued that discrimination would be eroded by competitive market forces because it requires employers to pay a premium to hire members of the preferred class of labor, whether these be males, whites, or any other ascriptively defined classes. This taste is “discriminatory” because it rests on exogenous preferences for a certain category of labor that cannot be understood as arising from some larger concern for maximizing profitability or market share. When managers make hiring decisions in accord with such tastes, their firms will not be competitive with nondiscriminating firms because they must pay extra to secure labor from the preferred class (without any compensating increase in productivity). In standard renditions of this account, it is presumed that discriminating firms will gradually be selected out by the market, although it is also possible that some discriminating firms will change their hiring practices to remain competitive.

This economic subnarrative works in tandem with a second, “organizational” one that emphasizes the diffusion of modern personnel practices in the form of universalistic hiring practices (e.g., open hiring, credentialism) and bureaucratized pay scales and promotion procedures (see Ch. 5, Weber; Ch. 38, Charles and Grusky; Reskin and McBrier 2000). The essence of

such bureaucratic personnel practices is a formal commitment to universalism (i.e., treating all workers equally) and to meritocratic hiring and promotion (i.e., hiring and promoting on the basis of credentials). In its ideal-typical form, the spread of bureaucracy becomes an organizational process with its own dynamic, a process of diffusion that rests not on actual efficiencies, as with the economic subnarrative, but simply on the *presumption* that bureaucratic practices are efficient and that “modern firms” must therefore adopt them. This subnarrative, like the economic one, implies that firms will gradually come to embrace organizational procedures that reduce inequalities of opportunity.

The third subnarrative of interest is the political one. Whereas the economic and organizational subnarratives treat change in inequality as an unintended by-product of macro-level forces (i.e., competition and bureaucratization), the political subnarrative is about instrumental action explicitly oriented towards effecting a decline in inequality. In theory, such political action could be oriented toward reducing either inequalities of opportunity or outcome, but historically a main emphasis within liberal welfare regimes has been legislation aimed at reducing inequality of opportunity (e.g., antidiscrimination legislation, early education programs, educational loans). The distinctive assumption of the political subnarrative is that straightforward “social engineering” is an important source of change and that the unintended or unanticipated consequences of such engineering are too often overemphasized.

The final subnarrative, a simple cultural one, rests on the argument that Western ideals of justice and equality continue to be endogenously worked out through a logic

that diffuses independently of the economic efficiency of such ideals. The cultural subnarrative can be straightforwardly distinguished from the economic one because the growing “taste” for equality is presumed to be an exogenous shift rather than some accommodation to the rising economic cost of exercising discriminatory tastes. Likewise, the cultural subnarrative is distinct from the organizational subnarrative by virtue of focusing on the spread of tastes for equality and equality-enhancing practices, not the spread of organizational forms (e.g., bureaucratization) that are deemed efficient, normatively desirable, or both. Finally, the cultural and political subnarratives are closely related because political commitments to equal opportunity, antidiscrimination legislation, and school reform may be partly or even largely motivated by these newfound tastes for equal opportunity. At the same time, the cultural commitment to equal opportunity is not expressed exclusively in such political terms but is additionally expressed in the attitudes, behaviors, and personnel practices of employers. Most obviously, employers may gradually shed their preferences for certain categories of labor and instead develop tastes for equality in hiring, firing, and promotion, tastes that might at the limit be exercised in the labor market even with some loss in profits or efficiency.

The spread of such tastes for equal opportunity may again be viewed as part of our Enlightenment legacy, albeit a particular “liberal” variant of that legacy that emphasizes equalizing opportunities, not outcomes. This commitment is expressed not only at the individual level (e.g., changes in attitudes) but also at the collective level through various types of political reform (e.g., antidiscrimination legislation) as well

as the diffusion of bureaucratic personnel policies (e.g., open hiring).

Long-Term Trend in Class Formation

The final benign narrative of interest describes the gradual transition from “lumpy” class-based labor markets to more purely gradational ones (see Ch. 9, Hauser and Warren). Within this narrative, the early-industrial economy is represented as deeply balkanized into partly-independent labor markets defined by detailed occupations (e.g., economist, carpenter), big social classes (e.g., manager, farmer), or yet more aggregated factors of production (e.g., worker, capitalist) (Wright 2005). For our purposes, what is principally of interest is our collective fascination with arguments describing how these classes, however they may be defined (see Wright 2005), tend to gradually dissipate and leave us with gradational labor markets that increasingly approximate the seamless neoclassical ideal. The first step in this transition, as described most famously by Dahrendorf (1959), is the gradual “institutionalization” of class conflict, a regularization of labor–capital relations achieved through the establishment of unions, collective bargaining agreements, and other laws defining how labor and capital should negotiate (also see Parsons 1970). The second step in this transition involves the dismantling of unions and other institutionalized residues of classes as the liberal welfare ideals of “deregulation” and flexibility are increasingly pursued.

This line of argumentation is somewhat differently expressed in more recent post-modernist narratives. Although the post-modern literature is itself notoriously fragmented, most variants have proceeded from the assumption that class identities,

ideologies, and organization are attenuating and that “new theories, perhaps more cultural than structural, [are] in order” (Davis 1982, p. 585). The core claim is that politics, lifestyles, and consumption practices are no longer class-determined and increasingly become a “function of individual taste, choice, and commitment” (Crook, Pakulski, and Waters 1992, p. 222; Ch. 8, Pakulski and Waters; Pakulski 2005).

In more ambitious variants of postmodernism, the focus shifts away from simply claiming that attitudes and practices are less class-determined, and the older class-analytic objective of understanding macro-level stratificational change is resuscitated. This ambition underlies, for example, all forms of postmodernism that seek to represent “new social movements” (e.g., environmentalism) as the vanguard force behind future stratificatory change. As argued by Eyerman (1992) and others (e.g., Touraine 1981), the labor movement can be seen as a fading enterprise rooted in the old conflicts of the workplace and industrial capitalism, whereas new social movements provide a more appealing call for collective action by virtue of their emphasis on issues of lifestyle, personal identity, and normative change. With this formulation, the proletariat is stripped of its privileged status as a universal class, and new social movements emerge as an alternative and far more benign force “shaping the future of modern societies” (Haferkamp and Smelser 1992, p. 17).

New Approaches to Studying Inequality

The foregoing narratives, all of which were fixtures of the postwar intellectual landscape, describe the emergence of a world in which inequalities are less profound, op-

portunities are more equally distributed, and class conflicts and interclass differences become attenuated. These narratives are benign in the sense that they push us toward equilibria that most commentators, even neo-Marxian ones, might well regard as appealing. The benign narrative is accordingly built on the happy correspondence between what should be and what will be.

If there is any theme to contemporary analyses of inequality, it is that the benign narrative has fallen largely out of fashion. We have nonetheless laid out these narratives in some detail because they provide an important backdrop to current theorizing and are often used as foils by contemporary scholars seeking to motivate their own analyses. The benign narrative is in this sense lurking in the background of contemporary discussions of inequality. We turn now to a closer discussion of how contemporary analyses of inequality have developed partly in reaction to the benign narratives of the postwar period.

Multidimensionalism and New Inequalities

As a natural starting point for this discussion, we note that contemporary inequality scholarship is increasingly concerned with new forms of inequality, forms that were either ignored in the past or have been spawned by new technologies or institutions. This growing emphasis on new inequalities is consistent with the now fashionable view that inequality is “multidimensional” and that conventional studies of economic, socioeconomic, or cultural inequality hardly exhaust its many forms (e.g., Sen 2006).

If a multidimensional approach is taken, one might usefully distinguish between the eight forms of inequality listed in Table 1.1,

Table 1.1 Types of Assets and Examples of Advantaged and Disadvantaged Groups

<i>Assets</i>		<i>Examples</i>	
Asset group	Examples of types	Advantaged	Disadvantaged
1. Economic	Wealth Income Ownership	Billionaire Professional Capitalist	Bankrupt worker Laborer Worker (i.e., employed)
2. Power	Political power Workplace authority Household authority	Prime minister Manager Head of household	Disenfranchised person Subordinate worker Child
3. Cultural	Knowledge Digital culture "Good" manners	Intelligentsia Silicon Valley resident Aristocracy	Uneducated Residents of other places Commoner
4. Social	Social clubs Workplace associations Informal networks	Country club member Union member Washington A-list	Nonmember Nonmember Social unknown
5. Honorific	Occupational Religious Merit-based	Judge Saint Nobel Prize winner	Garbage collector Excommunicate Nonwinner
6. Civil	Right to work Due process Franchise	Citizen Citizen Citizen	Illegal immigrant Suspected terrorist Felon
7. Human	On-the-job General schooling Vocational training	Experienced worker College graduate Law school graduate	Inexperienced worker High school dropout Unskilled worker
8. Physical (i.e., health)	Mortality Physical disease Mental health	Person with long life Healthy person Healthy person	A "premature" death Person with AIDS, asthma Depressed, alienated

each such form pertaining to a type of good that is intrinsically valuable (as well as possibly an investment). The multidimensional space formed by these variables may be labeled the "inequality space." We can characterize the social location of an individual within this inequality space by specifying her or his constellation of scores on each of the eight classes of variables in this table.

This framework allows scholars to examine how individuals are distributed among

the less conventionally studied dimensions of the inequality space. Are "new" assets as unequally distributed as old ones? Is inequality becoming more of an "all or nothing" affair in which upper-class workers are advantaged on all dimensions of interest and lower-class workers are disadvantaged on all dimensions of interest? Are new assets sometimes distributed in ways that compensate for shortfalls in older ones? In the present volume, multidimensionalist

questions of this kind are posed for such "new" outcomes as health (Ch. 55, Scott; Ch. 56, Mullahy, Robert, and Wolfe), computer literacy (Ch. 59, DiMaggio et al.), imprisonment or capital punishment (Ch. 21, Western), and networks and social capital (Ch. 52, Granovetter; Ch. 53, Lin; Ch. 54, Burt). These new types of inequality may be understood in some cases as truly new divides generated by new technologies (e.g., the digital divide) or new social institutions (e.g., modern mass prisons). More typically, the "new" outcomes are just increasingly popular topics of study among academics, not truly new forms (e.g., health inequalities).

The Intransigence of Poverty and Inequality

The foregoing line of research typically takes the form of an exposé of the extent to which seemingly basic human entitlements, such as living outside of prison, freely participating in "digital" culture, or living a long and healthy life, are unequally distributed in ways that sometimes amplify well-known differentials of income or education. The continuing attraction of such exposés (at least among academics) may be attributed to our collective discomfort with an economic system that generates rather more inequality than is palatable under contemporary cultural standards. Although the equalizing reforms of social democracy have historically been a main solution to this tension, the declining legitimacy of such reform (especially in Europe and the United States) leaves the tension an increasingly unresolved one.

Whereas the old narratives focused, then, on the forces making for decline in inequality, a more pessimistic assessment of the trajectory of late industrialism has now taken

hold, and much scholarship accordingly focuses on documenting that inequality has persisted at higher levels than had been anticipated. This sensibility underlies, for example, contemporary research showing that residential segregation in the United States is so extreme as to constitute a modern form of "apartheid" (Ch. 18, Massey and Denton), that racial discrimination in labor markets likewise remains extreme (Ch. 28, Bertrand and Mullainathan), that the occupational structure is "hypersegregated" by gender (Ch. 38, Charles and Grusky), that income inequality has increased markedly in many countries over the last thirty-five years (Ch. 10, Morris and Western), that poverty rates in the United States remain strikingly high (Ch. 16, Smeeding, Rainwater, and Burtless), that African Americans are routinely harassed, slighted, and insulted in public places (Ch. 27, Feagin), that working-class and middle-class children tend to be raised in profoundly different ways (Ch. 58, Lareau), that political behavior continues to be strongly shaped by class-based politics (Ch. 60, Hout and Moodie), and that massive class disparities in access to health services persist (Ch. 55, Scott; Ch. 56, Mullahy, Robert, and Wolfe).

The cynic might ask whether this new muckraking tradition is really all that necessary. Is there truly a large public that doesn't already appreciate the persistence of many of these inequalities? We live, after all, in a market society in which virtually everything is commodified, meaning that almost all goods and services (e.g., health care, housing) are allocated on the basis of our ability to pay for them. Because we are so deeply and (seemingly) irrevocably marketized, the real intellectual challenge would be to find a good, service, or outcome that is somehow untouched by class,

one that is perfectly and equally distributed to all.

We suspect that our contributors would react to such (hypothetical) criticism by emphasizing that only some inequalities may be understood as the inevitable outcome of our collective decision to allocate resources on the basis of a market. It is at least possible to imagine markets that do not entail racial discrimination, that do not entail gender discrimination, and that encompass institutions that have a substantial inequality-moderating effect. It is likewise possible to imagine that class differences in politics, culture, and child rearing practices would have by now abated. The benign narratives of the postwar period in fact laid out precisely such imaginings. If it is now clear that these imagined futures have not been realized, surely we need to document that conclusion with all the rigor that can possibly be mustered. To be sure, many of us well know that the world is a massively unequal one, but even so the force of the known can be readily lost when we live with profound inequality on a day-to-day basis. This commitment to remind us of what comes to be taken for granted is the cornerstone, we suspect, of the renewed interest in the inequality-documenting function.

The Rise of New and Less Benign Narratives

The rise of this muckraking exposé of inequality has been coupled, moreover, with increasing interest in developing narratives that explain why inequality has persisted or grown more extreme. These narratives are typically less grand than the quite encompassing narratives of the postwar period; that is, rather specialized narratives have recently developed around many of the various unit trends of interest (e.g., the ex-

pansion of income inequality, the stalling decline in the gender wage gap), and rather little attention has been paid to developing some grand meta-narrative that links these specialized narratives together. The signature, then, of the contemporary narrative is this highly delimited focus, a commitment to developing a rigorously empirical foundation, and a special interest in identifying those more insidious social forces that undermine the benign narratives of the past.

By way of example, consider the historic rise in income inequality, a development that has spawned one of the most sustained efforts at narrative-building of our time (see Ch. 10, Morris and Western). As noted above, the classic Kuznets curve aligns nicely with the facts of inequality up to the early 1970s, but then a dramatic, unprecedented upswing in inequality in the post-1970 period made it clear that inequality history had not ended. We have since witnessed one of the most massive research efforts in the history of social science as scholars sought to identify the "smoking gun" that accounted for this dramatic increase in inequality.

Initially, the dominant hypothesis was that deindustrialization (i.e., the relocation of manufacturing jobs to offshore labor markets) brought about a decline in demand for less-educated manufacturing workers, a decline that generated increases in inequality by hollowing out the middle class and sending manufacturing workers into unemployment or into the ranks of poorly paid service work. Although this line of argumentation still has its advocates, it cannot easily be reconciled with evidence suggesting that the computerization of the workplace and related technological change has been at least one force behind a heightened demand for highly educated workers.

Because of this result (and other supporting evidence), the deindustrialization story has now been largely supplanted by the converse hypothesis that “skill-biased technological change” has increased the demand for high-skill workers beyond the increase in supply, thus inducing a short-term disequilibrium and a correspondingly increased payoff for high-skill labor. At the same time, most scholars acknowledge that this story is at best an incomplete one and that other accounts, especially more narrowly political ones, must additionally be entertained (e.g., Card and DiNardo 2002). Most notably, some of the rise in income inequality in the United States was clearly attributable to the declining minimum wage (in real dollars), a decline that in turn has to be understood as the outcome of political processes that increasingly favor pro-inequality forces (Ch. 10, Morris and Western). The same conclusion applies yet more obviously to the recent round of tax cuts in the United States.

The future of income inequality depends on which of these underlying mechanisms is principally at work. The silver lining of the deindustrialization story is that within-country increases in inequality should be offset by between-country declines (as poor countries profit from new manufacturing jobs), whereas the silver lining of skill-biased technological change is that the heightened demand for high-skill workers is presumably a one-time, short-term disequilibrium that will, by virtue of the higher payoff to high-skill jobs, trigger a compensating growth in the supply of high-skill workers. There is, unfortunately, no shortage of competing stories that imply more disturbing futures, even futures consistent with a classical Marxian account in which low-skill workers are emiserated within some

countries by virtue of a globalization-induced “race to the bottom.” Indeed, accounts that focus on the political sources of rising inequality often take on this more disturbing character, given that social democratic ideologies have fallen largely out of fashion and no longer provide capitalists with a viable high road of “enlightened self-interest” (e.g., support for labor unions, redistribution). As social democratic agendas come to be viewed with suspicion, political support for the minimum wage and other inequality-reducing institutions may increasingly falter, and market-generated inequality may no longer be much restrained by premarket or after-market interventions.

We have focused on the rise of income inequality and the various narratives it has generated only because this literature is especially well known and central to the field. The larger point that we seek to make is that, no matter the subfield, there appears to be much interest in developing narratives that explain why long-standing declines in inequality have slowed down, stalled altogether, or even reversed themselves. We are referring, for example, to (1) narratives of “globalization” that describe how the liberalization of financial and capital markets has harmed poor countries (Ch. 61, Stiglitz); (2) narratives of “deindustrialization” that describe the loss of inner-city jobs and the associated rise of an urban underclass (Ch. 17, Wilson); (3) narratives of “segmented assimilation” that describe the relatively bleak prospects for at least some new immigrant groups (Ch. 24, Portes and Zhou); (4) narratives of “opting out” that have highly trained women eschewing stressful careers in favor of recommitting to their children, spouses, and domestic responsibilities (Ch. 34, Belkin; cf. Boushey 2005); and (5) narratives of

“essentialist segregation” that describe how sex-typed occupational ghettos continue to be built around presumed differences in male and female aptitudes (Ch. 38, Charles and Grusky). Although counternarratives of the more optimistic sort are also being developed (e.g., Alba and Nee 2003; Ch. 62, Firebaugh), these seem not to be as frequently generated or as readily embraced; and the proponents of such narratives find themselves beleaguered, outnumbered, and on the defensive.

Conclusions

We have fashioned our review and introduction around the revolutionary changes over the last half-century in the types of narratives that sociologists and other social scientists have applied to make sense of trends in inequality. The narratives of the postwar period took on a strikingly benign form in which the dominant logics of history were understood as operating in the main to reduce inequality. These benign narratives, which now mainly seem naive and quaint, have been supplanted by a host of new narratives that give far greater weight to the forces making for inequality.

Has the pendulum swung too far? It is of course child's play to posit any number of nonempirical sources of our fascination, some might say obsession, with the pessimistic narrative. The following are perhaps the most obvious of such accounts:

1. *The newsworthiness account.* If the postwar era of the benign narrative was indeed one of across-the-board declines in inequality, then a special incentive presumably emerged to ferret out results that were inconsistent with the prevailing wisdom and hence would

be regarded as newsworthy. It is surely difficult to market analyses and forge careers on the basis of business-as-usual evidence. We might ask, for example, whether the “digital divide” emerged as a newsworthy topic because of early evidence of a substantial divide. If instead access to computing was found to be equal, would we have quickly discarded the topic and set off to find some other more unequal outcome? This type of selection on the dependent variable (i.e., inequality) will create a research literature that exaggerates how unequal the world is.

2. *The “moral credentials” account.* It is well to bear in mind that the contemporary academic, far from taking a vow of poverty, is now firmly ensconced in the middle class, often the upper middle class. When relatively privileged scholars study poverty and disadvantage, they often feel a special obligation to demonstrate a strong commitment to amelioration and to display political sentiments that are liberal, progressive, or even radical. In some cases, this pressure may motivate them to downplay any evidence of decline in inequality or disadvantage, presumably out of concern that undue emphasis on the progress achieved so far will make it appear that the remaining disadvantage is taken as acceptable or unproblematic.
3. *The “obsession with small differences” account.* The continuing diffusion of egalitarian values renders any departures from equality, no matter how small, as problematic and newsworthy. By this logic, even increasingly small intergroup differences will attract much attention, especially because ever more

powerful models and statistical methods now make it possible to tease them out (see Nisbet 1959, p. 12).

These nonempirical interpretations shouldn't be dismissed out of hand, nor should they be taken too seriously. It is relevant in this regard that many of the pessimistic narratives involve indisputably dramatic changes in outcomes (e.g., income) that were frequently studied well before any reversal in the trendline was detected. Although some of the pessimistic narratives featured in this volume are still in incipient form and are not yet well-researched (especially Ch. 34, Belkin), it will of course be difficult to continue to maintain these narratives should strong disconfirming evidence turn up. The implication, then, is that our exaggerated taste for pessimism might conceivably lead us to cycle through a great many pessimistic stories (and fail to develop enough benign ones), but at least the usual rules of evidence will have us excise egregiously flawed narratives, no matter how benign or pessimistic they may be.

NOTE

1. This is not to suggest that *all* postwar sociologists and social scientists emphasized forces making for a decline in inequality. However, even when a benign narrative was not adopted, there was usually some effort to engage with it and to explain or defend the decision not to take it up. This defensiveness was especially apparent in neo-Marxian analyses of the postwar era. Although such analyses were based on deeply pessimistic subnarratives about the trajectory of capitalism, these subnarratives were typically attached to larger and more benign narratives about the post-capitalist trajectory (see Ch. 5, Marx; Ch. 7, Wright).

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