



Relational origins of inequality

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Abstract

Transformations of credit in 16th-century England illustrate how interpersonal transactions cause changes in inequality. Despite the efforts of such outstanding scholars as Eric Wolf, Don Kalb, and Timothy Earle, inequality has lost the prominent position it once occupied among anthropological concerns. As a result, anthropologists are missing the opportunity to intervene in important debates about inequality in history and the social sciences. A primitive general theory of inequality centering on the dynamics of interpersonal relations identifies one way in which anthropological investigation can contribute to those debates.

Key Words

credit • exploitation • inequality • relational analysis

Virtually invisible in the passing crowd of 16th-century English historians, Craig Muldrew stealthily dropped a bomb into analyses of inequality. Muldrew looked closely at uses of credit in commercial transactions, which expanded rapidly after 1540 or so as England engaged more heavily in textile production and continental trade. Legal tender then consisted almost entirely of gold and silver coin. The money supply, however, expanded much more slowly than the production of goods and the pace of commerce. Most likely some deflation and some acceleration in monetary circulation occurred as a consequence. But expansion of interpersonal credit – more to the point, of credit among households and the commercial enterprises embedded in those households – far outstripped changes in money as such. Note some crucial effects:

As credit networks became more complicated, and more obligations broken, it became important before entering into a contract to be able to make judgements about other people's honesty. The more reliable both parties in an agreement were in paying debts, delivering goods or in performing services, the more secure chains of credit became, and the greater the chance of general profit, future material security and general ease of life for all entangled in them. The result of this was that credit in social terms – the reputation for fair and honest dealing of a household and its

members – became the currency of lending and borrowing. Credit . . . referred to the amount of trust in society, and as such consisted of a system of judgements about trustworthiness; and the trustworthiness of neighbors came to be stressed as the paramount communal virtue, just as trust in God was stressed as the central religious duty. Since, by the late 16th century, most households relied on the market for the bulk of their income, the establishment of trustworthiness became the most crucial factor needed to generate and maintain wealth.

(Muldrew, 1998: 148; see also Muldrew, 1993)

In the first instance, a household's credit did not depend on its material possessions or its cash on hand. It depended on relations to other households, so much so that people commonly spoke of each other's credit-worthiness in terms of their ability to raise money from other people on short notice (Muldrew, 1998: 148–72). Muldrew's analysis helps explain why ties of kinship, neighborhood, and shared religion remained crucial to risky commercial transactions as an ostensibly rationalizing and depersonalizing market expanded. It also helps explain why in a time of economic expansion members of ascendant commercial classes increasingly condemned proletarians as improvident, bibulous, and morally unreliable.

Muldrew's analysis stands Max Weber on his head: where Weber saw the Protestant Reformation as promulgating doctrines of individual responsibility that favored capitalist achievement, Muldrew perceives a transformation of social relations that made a reputation for uprightness crucial to commercial viability. In regions and classes where heterodoxy, mayhem, debauchery, and pillage had long prevailed, religious, political, familial, sexual, neighborly, and commercial irregularity all came to raise doubts about the creditability of any particular person, household, or social category (see also Wrightson and Levine, 1979, 1991).

Muldrew's perception is delightfully subversive; it not only reverses the causal arrow between belief and practice, but also indicates that far from dissolving previously existing social ties, market expansion depended on the creation of far more extensive interpersonal relations. Instead of deriving relations of trust from general culture or contract-enforcing institutions as is currently fashionable, he derives new attitudes and contracting-enforcing institutions from alterations in social relations. Despite some concessions to trust as attitude or belief, he advances analyses of trust by treating it as a feature of social relations themselves; by implication, trust consists of placing valued resources and outcomes at risk to the malfeasance of (trusted) others. In line with those recent economic historians and analysts of eastern Europe who have emphasized the significance of trust-sustaining networks for markets and other forms of economic organization, Muldrew insists on the priority of social ties. (For other discussions of trust-sustaining institutions, see Bates et al., 1998; Besley, 1995; Burt and Knez, 1995; Edwards and Foley, 1998; Elster, 1999; Elster et al., 1998; Feige, 1998; Gambetta, 1993; Gould, 1999; Granovetter, 1995; Greif, 1994; Landa, 1994; Ledeneva, 1998; Levi, 1997; Lonkila, 1999; Paxton, 1999; Postel-Vinay, 1998; Rotberg, 1999; Seligman, 1997; Shapiro, 1987; Solnick, 1998; Stark, 1995; Woolcock, 1998; Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1994.)

Although national governments eventually intervened massively in credit-connected markets by establishing central banks, issuing paper money, and regulating commercial transactions, according to Muldrew, they intervened not in a void but in dynamic

networks of connection among households. Indeed, Muldrew argues that credit's expansion eventually produced uncertainties favoring both calls for governmental intervention à la Thomas Hobbes and spread of a more pessimistic, individualistic view of human nature (Muldrew, 1998: 315–33; see also McGowen, 1999).

Meanwhile, local authorities and interacting households fashioned or adapted their own trust-confirming institutions: kinship, common religious affiliation, oath-taking, public tokens of indebtedness, earnest payments, courts of settlement, and more. According to Muldrew,

The phrase 'to pay on the nail' comes from Bristol where there were four bronze pillars erected before the Tolzey – the ancient covered colonnade where merchants conducted their business, and which was connected to the sheriff's court where most debt litigation was initiated. The 'nails' are still in existence, and have flat surfaces where downpayments, and payments in cash, would have been made, and the practice of doing so was considered to be symbolic of the trust invested in the agreements. The date of the oldest nail is not known, but the other three were erected as gifts to the city in 1594, 1625 and 1631 to meet the need of increased business. The most interesting fact about the pillars are [sic] the inscriptions around the capitals on the religious and social nature of trust, which were comments upon the bargains made over them. One repeated the classical dictum that, 'No man lives to himself', and another stated: 'The Church of the livinge God is pillar and ground of trewth'.

(Muldrew, 1998: 106–7)

Thus religious beliefs and practices fortified the politics of reputation, but by no means explained the vast changes that were occurring after 1530.

Fundamental alterations of social relations brought new forms, practices, and symbols into everyday prominence. Public oaths, mutual surveillance, and representations of social ties as if they were contracts proliferated. Literature gave expanded attention to credit and contract. Muldrew remarks that

Shakespeare often used this language in metaphors and conceits, as in Sonnet 134 where debt, sureties, bonds, a mortgage and a law suit were all used to describe the relationship between a lover, his former mistress and her new lover. They were also a common feature in drama, with the [sic] some of the most obvious examples being Shakespeare's treatment of the ethics of forgiveness and discretion versus the binding force of contract in *The Merchant of Venice*, Philip Massinger's comedy about miserliness and prodigality, *A New Way to Pay old Debts*, and Webster's tragedy about uncharitable litigation, *The Devil's Law Case*.

(Muldrew, 1998: 315)

Muldrew backs such general interpretations with systematic analyses covering thousands of 16th-century court cases. His evidence establishes deep, rapid increases both in uses of credit and in disputes about its abuses.

Muldrew makes no claim to explain all changes in English inequality during this period. Nor should he; a more general account would have to integrate massive shifts in demographic structure, migration, agriculture, manufacturing, marketing, and governmental activity (for an informative survey, see Wrightson, 1982). The very period Muldrew

studies, after all, brought dispossession of English monasteries, establishment of a Protestant state Church, protoindustrial expansion, proliferation of international trade, energetic emigration, colonization, and exploration, new laws for control of the poor and regulation of master-servant relations, not to mention rapid growth of the landless population. Any of these processes might plausibly figure in explanations of changing inequality. Yet Muldrew's analysis of credit identifies one important impetus to changing patterns of inequality and implies very different sorts of explanation from prevailing histories of the period. Instead of locating sources of change chiefly in shifting modes of production or in evolving mentalities, Muldrew pivots them on mutations in relations among households (cf. Bearman, 1993).

By no means all 16th-century historians would agree. Muldrew's analysis contrasts sharply, for example, with an equally innovative close reading of Gloucestershire's history during the same period. David Rollison intends to show how durable attachments to particular regional cultures created the English national culture of the 16th to the 18th centuries, including the transfer of the word 'country' from the English equivalent of *paese* to the nation's identity. Unlike Muldrew, Rollison presents inequality as largely a cultural matter, a way of seeing and relating different categories of people (Rollison, 1992: 248–9). He portrays his anthropological ambitions in this way:

These 'thickish descriptions' of the people of one of England's most highly industrialised regions during the transition from feudal-tributary to capitalist civilization in England are concerned with the nature of the relationship between inherited, or 'structural', circumstances and culture, the ways those circumstances are interpreted, represented and communicated. The structure/culture dichotomy is too crude, for cultures are also structured by abiding idioms, metaphors and myths which shape the fluid historical surfaces of individual and collective consciousness.

(Rollison, 1992: 12)

For Rollison, social and material milieu matters because it shapes human consciousness, which then translates into shared culture. Culture then constrains perception and action as it supplies the categories – including categories of class – by which people interpret their experience. Rollison's view comes closer to the contemporary consensus among historians than does Muldrew's. It also resonates more directly with today's cultural and social anthropology (Kuper, 1999).

Muldrew's observations, if correct, therefore carry implications far outside of 16th-century English history. Let me single out just two implications of particular relevance to anthropological theory: first, a fresh view of commercialization and its effects; second, a relational explanation of inequality. The first bears on the second, which will occupy most of this article.

Muldrew's findings significantly challenge common understandings of commercialization and its effects. Hence their interest to anthropologists. Whatever else anthropologists do, they examine causes, correlates, and consequences of commercialization, on one side, and of incorporation into larger-scale political systems, on the other. The development of anthropology from European encounters with non-European regions in which Europeans were striving to establish commercial and political control inevitably placed commercialization on anthropologists' analytical agenda – often, in early formulations, as the solvent of traditional social structure (Cooper and Stoler, 1997; Ferguson, 1997; Wolf, 1982).

That notion of commercialization as standardizer, stifler, or strangler of meaningful social life persists into our own time (Guyer, 1995; Tilly, 1999; Zelizer, 1994, 1999). Muldrew replies that expansion of commercial transactions caused new forms of interpersonal relations, new meanings, and new social institutions embedding the relations and meanings to arise. Muldrew's contrary formulation calls anthropologists to re-examine commercialization as a complex social process having significantly different causes, concomitants, and consequences from one setting to another.

The same encounter between Europeans and non-Europeans also placed the intersection of culture and inequality high on the anthropological agenda. As compared to their cousins in economics or sociology, anthropologists have paid considerable attention to the ways that cultural variation causes, correlates with, results from, or becomes the instrument of inequality with respect to power, wealth, prestige, and well being. Such classics as Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970) placed inequality visibly on the anthropological agenda.

Long before their social scientific cousins, anthropologists recognized that socially constructed cultural differences played significant parts in inequality by class, race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and other categorical principles. But they continue to divide sharply when it comes to locating culture in the causal processes producing such differentiation. (Let us leap over many a controversy – see Kuper, 1999 – by defining culture as shared understandings and their representations in language, objects, and practices.) Some analysts of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and national identities, for example, treat such identities as negotiated relations with others (e.g. Brass, 1996, 1997; Harrison, 1995; Karakasidou, 1997; Ludden, 1996; Ong, 1996; Roy, 1994; Tambiah, 1996, 1997; Brackette Williams, 1989; Brett Williams, 1991). So doing, they locate culture (or at least that portion of culture implicated in identities) within interpersonal transactions. Many more analysts of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and national identities, however, center their explanations of identity on culture and/or phenomenology considered as separate from or prior to social interaction (e.g. Appiah and Gates, 1995; Blackwood, 1998; Daniel, 1996; Friedman, 1994; Hale, 1997; Hart, 1996; Nagi, 1992; for helpful reviews and critiques, see Cerulo, 1997; Cooper, 1994; Cornell and Hartmann, 1998; Lebovics, 1995). Anthropologists who work on categorical differences generally hew closer to Rollison's line than to Muldrew's.

How so? Muldrew's analysis of 16th-century England assigns exceptional importance to processes of social interaction in the interdependent origins of both new cultural forms and new categorical inequalities. He proposes a relational explanation of inequality. Thus Muldrew makes a second claim on anthropologists' attention.

At least the late Eric Wolf would have listened. In the book he published shortly before his death in 1999, Eric Wolf offered anthropological reflections on the interplay between class and culture:

When first introduced in their present-day senses, these concepts appeared to be wholly incompatible, especially when deployed in political discourse. Yet they do not exclude each other; they occur together and overlap in various ways. Both terms, in fact, claim too much and also too little. They suggest that 'classes' or 'cultures' represent totalities in their own right – homogeneous, all-embracing entities, each characterized by a common outlook and capable of collective agency.

The advocates of class assumed that a common position along a gradient of control over the means of production entails a common interest shared by all members of the class and, hence, common propensities for action. Yet class and classness are better understood in terms of relations that develop historically within a social field. That field subsumes diverse kinds of people, rearranges them, and causes them to respond to new ways of marshaling social labor. One can then speak of the 'making' of a class (as did E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class*) out of disparate groups of people, who bear diverse cultural heritages and yet must adjust them to the requirements of a social order. Similarly, a class may be 'unmade' and its members scattered and reallocated to different groupings and strata.

(Wolf, 1999: 65)

Thus Wolf advocated a Thompsonian view of class as dynamic social relations. Although I do not suppose that Wolf and Muldrew ever met, they would have had much to talk about. Without employing the term 'relational' (which my late friend Wolf would probably have abhorred), both of them favored accounts of inequality in which negotiated social relations figured centrally. This article follows in their wake. In explicating and advocating relational analysis, I am advertising a mode of thought that already possesses a substantial anthropological pedigree (see, e.g. Barth, 1969; Bonneuil, 1997; Burawoy and Verdery, 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992; Davis, 1992; Domínguez, 1986; Gal, 1987, 1989; Scott, 1990; Verdery, 1991) but has lately fallen out of favor among anthropology's heralds.

Since, as Wolf states clearly, the relational account competes with several other approaches to inequality within contemporary anthropology, the advertisement deserves airing. Relational explanations currently occupy a minority position; anthropologists have – wrongly, to my mind – found other positions more attractive. What is at issue? Anthropologists or otherwise, analysts of inequality generally choose among four families of explanation: cultural, functional, coercive, and competitive. In their starkest versions:

- Cultural explanations derive inequality from widely held beliefs, values, and practices that promote differential distribution of advantages among social categories. Racism, patriarchy, caste, and similar ideas frequently figure in cultural explanations.
- Functional explanations derive inequality from differential contributions to accomplishment of societal goals, including collective survival. Accounts of the changing prominence of warriors, priests, intellectuals, and merchants often take functional forms.
- Coercive explanations derive inequality from the exercise of power. Views of control over land, military force, or capital as the key to inequality generally give pride of place to coercion.
- Competitive explanations derive inequality from the passage of individuals or larger social units through sorting processes in which differential attributes and performances lead to differential rewards. One pertinent version of meritocracy is the idea that markets reward the most able and industrious, regardless of origin or connection.

Let us linger a bit over the fourth family: competitive explanations of inequality. Although cultural, functional, and coercive explanations continue to prevail in anthropology, during recent decades competitive models have come to predominate in history

and other social sciences. These days any social scientist who tries to explain, criticize, or influence major social inequalities, past or present, is likely to rely on the same basic model of how inequality comes about. The model features sorting of unequally endowed individuals into unequal positions, one by one. In its simplest versions, it contains just three elements:

- 1 a set of unequally rewarded positions – jobs, public offices, dwellings, prestige categories, and so on,
- 2 a sorting mechanism that channels people to different positions,
- 3 individuals who vary in characteristics that the sorting mechanism detects.

Thus individuals arrive at the scanner, undergo evaluation, and get sent to an appropriate position. For example, Chinese intellectuals of unequal wit, learning, and family background study for imperial examinations, a few of them actually pass, those few move on into the imperial bureaucracy, while failed candidates find careers as scribes, servitors of county governments, or other occupations requiring literacy and cultivation. Similarly, today's American educational systems track youngsters from different social origins into socially segregated schools, which then provide differentiated skills and credentials that mark the youngsters' suitability for contrasting forms of employment. Or so says one simple version of the model.

In mildly complicated versions of the model, elements, positions, sorting mechanisms, and individual differences interact. For example, the number and characteristics of persons who present themselves for sorting (the 'labor supply' in some versions) affect the distribution and character of positions ('jobs' in those same versions; for reviews and critiques, see Granovetter and Tilly, 1988; Grusky, 1994; Grusky and Sørensen, 1998; Hanagan, 1994; Steinberg, 1999; Steinmetz, 1993; Tilly and Tilly, 1998; Wright, 1997).

Both critics and defenders of existing inequalities commonly adopt the same basic explanatory model. Critics typically attack the sorting mechanism as unfair, inefficient, or destructive. They say that assigning people to advantageous or disadvantageous positions on the basis of race, gender, age, nationality, or physical attractiveness produces injustice, misuse of valuable talents, or damage to the individual and society. Yet they insist that a sorting mechanism is producing these nefarious effects.

Defenders of the existing system, in contrast, typically stress differences among individuals – differences in energy, knowledge, skill, intelligence, strength, or (more rarely) acceptability to people who already occupy positions connected with those that newcomers might fill. They say that people differ significantly in their capacities to fill various positions, and that efficiency, justice, or even divine will prescribes matching of position to capacity and vice versa. Yet they, too, insist that a sorting mechanism produces the matching in question.

Some kinds of inequality do result from such sorting systems. The Chinese imperial examination system does appear to have performed a very effective triage (Wong, 1997). Competitors for positions on football teams, ballet corps, and parliamentary seats do undergo scanning by sorting mechanisms – tryouts, auditions, and elections – in which only candidates with certain characteristics end up in coveted positions. Critics then typically declare that the screening is unfair, inefficient, or destructive. Defenders typically reply that self-selected candidates differ so much in ability that the screening

produces a superior outcome to its likely alternatives, such as assignment by seniority or random selection.

Proposals to alter such unequal systems appropriately concern changes in one or more of the three elements: revamp positions so that opportunities available to the candidates change in some desirable direction; reform the sorting mechanism; transform the preparation of possible candidates for selection. Critics of gender inequality in employment have, for example, made all three kinds of proposals: to recast jobs so that they give no advantage to masculine bodies; to monitor hiring so that it becomes gender-blind; and to offer women special training so that they are well prepared to fill previously all-male jobs.

Advocates of such standard competitive models have applied them chiefly to income and wealth differences in market economies, especially capitalist market economies. In principle, however, nothing forbids their application to differences in power, reputation, sexual access, health, or other capabilities, as well as to other sorts of economies. To the extent that anthropologists enter general discussions of inequality, they have no choice but to confront the predominance of competitive models in today's analyses.

Concrete explanations of particular inequalities, to be sure, often combine two different accounts of inequality, for example, by arguing that culture determines which attributes competitive sorting processes reward. Nevertheless, the four types of explanation lead in substantially different directions. It is difficult to reconcile functional and coercive accounts of inequality, just as it takes considerable agility to link cultural with competitive explanations.

The line of thought exemplified by Muldrew and Wolf, however, points us in a fifth direction: toward relational explanations of inequality. In a relational view, inequality emerges from asymmetrical social interactions in which advantages accumulate on one side or the other, fortified by construction of social categories that justify and sustain unequal advantage. As a rough analogy, consider a conversation involving initially equal partners in the course of which (through wit, guile, knowledge, or loudness) one conversationalist gradually gains the upper hand. We can extend the analogy to many forms of social interaction, brief or prolonged, as well as to interactions among groups or categories of persons.

In addition to adopting a conversational view of inequality-generating processes, relational analysts take a further step entailing serious theoretical consequences. Many theorists of inequality assume, implicitly or explicitly, that they are accounting for relative positions of individuals or groups within an abstract, continuous space – a hierarchy of prestige, a continuum of power, a pyramid of wealth, or something of the sort. In such a view, explanations of inequality and its changes concern either (a) movement of social units within the space, for example, lifetime occupational mobility and the rise and fall of particular lineages, or (b) alterations of that space's general shape, for example, lengthening of hierarchies and increasing salience of educational differences. Cultural accounts characteristically base such abstract spaces on value systems, functional accounts on societal needs, coercive accounts on conquest, and competitive accounts on efficiency.

The relational story differs significantly. It treats inequality as a feature of transactions among social positions. For the neat multi-dimensional space of conventional treatments, it substitutes a dynamic tangle of incomplete, clumped, and changing connections. From a relational perspective, inequality appears everywhere, but it rarely crystallizes into neat, continuous hierarchies somehow arraying whole populations into

strata. A relational analysis leads to the conclusion that any such hierarchies (which do, indeed, occasionally take shape in bureaucracies, armies, nobilities, and similar honorifically-differentiated structures) rest on extensive social effort, only emerge under unusual historical conditions, and undergo incessant pressure for modification. Categories, in such a view, do not consist of mental constructs, but of socially negotiated boundaries and changing relations across those boundaries. Most large-scale systems of inequality involve incompletely connected, inconsistent, contested, changing, yet powerful differences among clusters and categories of persons.

Think back to Muldrew. Muldrew's analysis challenges any picture of any single English hierarchy based on culture, function, coercion, or competition. In 16th-century England, households that could not manage credible reputations lost their ability to engage in extensive commercial transactions with other households, and thereby skidded to ruin. Without credit, they failed. In a world that was disappearing, location within patron-client chains defined the opportunities and constraints of most households. In the very different world that was emerging, categorical differences between the reputable and the disreputable, the credit-worthy and the worthless, the middling and lower classes, began to govern relations among households. Muldrew's account places cumulative effects of asymmetrical social relations at the heart of his explanation. As in Muldrew's case, relational accounts of inequality commonly make concessions to cultural, functional, coercive, or competitive mechanisms, but center their explanations on cumulative and long-term effects of asymmetrical social interaction.

Muldrew's relational analysis of inequality stands out for its originality and ample historical documentation, but it does not stand alone. Historical anthropologist Don Kalb's analysis of changing class relations in North Brabant, the Netherlands, between 1850 and 1950 boldly takes on recent dismissals of class in studies of western European industrialization. He sets himself deliberately against interpretations of class as essentially cultural – as consisting of individually-carried understandings and their representations in objects and practices. His view of class allots plenty of space to culture, but in the guise of a collective and continuously negotiated feature of interaction.

Drawing considerable inspiration from E.P. Thompson, Kalb shows that a conception of class as a set of dynamic relations rather than as an attribute of individuals helps explain the distinctive politics of shoemakers and electrical workers in the region around Eindhoven. As Kalb puts it:

My case studies of class formation in subregions of industrializing Brabant tend to illustrate that an anthropological interest in popular culture, discourse, and everyday life can, and indeed should, be wedded to a class-oriented analysis of the sources, operation, and mechanisms of social power and social process. This is so not only because power, change, and inequality are central aspects of social life that ought not be missed by any serious analyst of human affairs (that is, unless he or she accepts political irrelevance), but more importantly because class-oriented analysis can reveal crucial ambiguities, contradictions, divisions, limits, obstacles, and dynamics of culture that cannot be uncovered in other ways. In short, by consciously elaborating an approach based on a materialist idea of class with the intention to study social power and social process, I claim a more penetrating methodology for explaining and understanding culture.

(Kalb, 1997: 2)

Like Muldrew, Kalb grounds his analysis in extensive study of personal documents and firm records. Studying the recent past, however, he has the additional advantages of newspaper coverage and his own extensive life history interviews with survivors of the processes he is documenting. To Muldrew's anthropological sensibility Kalb adds anthropological observation of people and places.

Kalb's analysis is the more challenging because it incorporates some coercion and pays considerable attention to culture, but resolutely rejects both functional and competitive accounts of inequality. Kalb centers his explanation on continuously negotiated social relations. His investigation thereby provides a promising model for further anthropological work.

Elsewhere in anthropology, archeologists have often adopted implicitly relational explanations of inequality. Timothy Earle's recent synthesis of a long line of investigation concerning the emergence of chiefs, for example, explicitly bases its explanations of emergent political inequality on access of power-accumulating persons to four different sources: military might, ideology, the economy, or other sorts of social relations such as kinship. All four identify the introduction of certain types of incentives into interpersonal ties. Military might introduces coercion into relations with others, ideology introduces belief, economic activity introduces material rewards, while kinship and similar ties, in Earle's view, provide only weak bases for political inequality, apparently because solidarity, mutual knowledge, and collective pressure inhibit differentiation (Earle, 1997: 4–9).

Earle then follows this reasoning through analyses of Denmark during the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, the high Peruvian Andes from AD 500 to 1534, and the Hawaiian islands from 800 to 1824. He ultimately gives pride of place to economic networks:

The strategic uses of each power source depend on historical circumstances and immediate political objectives. The selection of one strategy over alternatives involves comparing the effectiveness and costs of implementation and the length of time that each must be sustained. In the cases considered, *the primary determinant appears to have been the nature of the developing political economy*. The operationalization of one power strategy versus another rested on the ability to intensify and control aspects of the political economy and to use the mobilized surplus to develop central power sources.

(Earle, 1997: 193–4; italics in original. For related views, see Midlarsky, 1999)

Political economy, in Earle's analysis, refers to relations of power involving productive resources. In prehistoric Denmark, for example, chiefs built their power initially by wresting surpluses from local herding economies, but fortified it by means of an ideology identifying superior lineages materialized in conspicuous burial mounds and ceremonial objects acquired through elite trade in prestige goods. While not self-consciously relational, Earle's explanation of increasing political inequality – in the form of emerging chiefdoms – clearly depends on the dynamics of asymmetrical social relations.

I am claiming, then, that well executed relational accounts of inequality offer an explanatory purchase greater than that of cultural, functional, coercive, or competitive accounts. What might we recognize as a valid explanation of inequality? Let us leave aside the frequent claim that no explanation of social processes is actually possible, because social life is inherently chaotic, because human agency always baffles determinism, or because linguistic, cultural, and/or phenomenological barriers block any effort to identify causes of human behavior.

In those portions of social science and history that deliberately seek explanations of social phenomena, three styles of explanation generally compete (Bunge, 1997, 1998; Elster, 1989; Hedström and Swedberg, 1998; Little, 1991, 1998). The first expects social life to exhibit empirical regularities that at their highest level take the form of laws; explanation then consists of subsuming particular cases under broadly validated empirical generalizations or even universal laws. The second accounts for particular features of social life by specifying their connections with putative larger entities: societies, cultures, mentalities, capitalist systems, and the like. Explanation then consists of locating elements within systems. The third regards social units as self-directing, whether driven by emotions, motives, interests, rational choices, genes, or something else. Explanation then consists of reconstructing the state of the social unit – for example, an individual's beliefs at a given point in time and space – and plausibly relating its actions to that state.

A fourth view, however, deserves attention. It claims that explanation consists of identifying in particular social phenomena reliable causal mechanisms and processes of general scope. Causal mechanisms are events that alter relations among some set of elements. Processes are frequent (but not universal) combinations and sequences of causal mechanisms. Social mechanisms are sometimes cognitive, involving changes in perception, consciousness, or intention. They are sometimes relational, involving shifts in connections among social units. They are also sometimes environmental, involving alterations in the surroundings of social units. Explanation then consists of locating robust cognitive, relational, and environmental mechanisms within observed episodes.

In practice, no explanation in this mode can ever be complete. But, I claim, it can be far more adequate than subsuming whole episodes under empirical generalizations, searching for locations of units within larger systems, or reconstructing the social unit's state before and during the initiation of some action. We have, in fact, seen Craig Muldrew, Don Kalb, and Timothy Earle stressing relational mechanisms as they explained significant concrete changes of inequality. Without having signed on to the full explanatory program I am recommending here, they generally exemplify the fourth view of explanation.

Leaving Muldrew, Kalb, and Earle aside, let me sketch an approach to explaining inequality that includes environmental and cognitive mechanisms, but centers on relational mechanisms. My analysis features four relational mechanisms: exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation, and adaptation (see Tilly, 1998a for an extended exposition). Stated schematically, the argument runs:

- Inequality is a relation between persons or sets of persons in which interaction generates greater advantages for one than for another (e.g. a warlord receives tribute from many local chiefs, who receive intermittent protection from exactions by rival warlords).
- Inequality results from unequal control over value-producing resources (e.g. in an agrarian economy, some lineages settle on fertile land, others on infertile land).
- Paired and unequal categories, consisting of asymmetrical relations across a socially recognized (and usually incomplete) boundary between interpersonal networks, recur in a wide variety of situations (e.g. divisions between mounted warriors and ordinary foot soldiers, between officers and enlisted personnel, between aristocrats and plebeians, form in a surprising range of military organizations).

- The usual effect of such arrangements of paired categories is unequal exclusion of each network from resources controlled by the other (e.g. Sarwa serfs supply skins, meat, and honey to their Tshidi masters, but do not share in the booty of Tshidi hunts).
- An inequality-generating mechanism we may call *exploitation* occurs when persons who control a resource (a) enlist the effort of others in production of value by means of that resource, but (b) exclude the others from the full value added by their effort (e.g. South African gold mines long depended heavily on black labor, but paid black miners barely enough to survive).
- Another inequality-generating mechanism we may call *opportunity hoarding* consists of confining use of a value-producing resource to members of an ingroup (e.g. through long political struggle American physicians acquired exclusive rights to prescribe a wide variety of drugs, while allocating to American pharmacists exclusive rights to dispense those drugs).
- Both exploitation and opportunity hoarding generally incorporate paired and unequal categories at boundaries between greater and lesser beneficiaries of value added by effort committed to controlled resources (e.g. 19th-century English textile mills distinguished sharply between men's work and women's work, with women's work almost universally receiving lesser rewards for similar effort).
- Neither exploitation nor opportunity hoarding requires self-conscious efforts to subordinate excluded parties or explicitly formulated beliefs in the inferiority of excluded parties (e.g. recruiting political allies from among former schoolmates inscribes into political divisions whatever divisions by class, gender, ethnicity, or language previously distinguished schools).
- Emulation (transfer of existing organizational forms, representations, and practices from one setting to another) generally lowers transaction costs of exploitation and opportunity hoarding when the transferred forms, representations, and practices install paired, unequal categories at the boundaries between greater and lesser benefits (e.g. managers of new hotels adopt essentially the same division of labor by gender, education, ethnicity, and age as old hotels, thus naturalizing the recruitment of cleaners from among poor immigrants and desk clerks from relatively educated immigrants or members of the second generation).
- Adaptation (invention of procedures that ease day to day interaction, and elaboration of valued social relations around existing divisions) usually stabilizes categorical inequality (e.g. students may well hate their schools, but they entwine friendship, courtship, rivalry, and daily schedules around school routines, thus depending upon and reinforcing whatever distinctions are built into those routines).
- Local categorical distinctions are not necessarily unequal, but when they are, their maintenance relies on beliefs and practices that defend and naturalize them (e.g. chemists and their laboratory technicians actually share a great deal of knowledge, but their titles, credentials, powers, privileges, and career trajectories differentiate them).
- Local categorical distinctions gain strength and operate at lower cost when matched with widely available paired, unequal categories (e.g. California lettuce growers long found it advantageous to recruit field hands entirely from among expendable non-citizen Mexican immigrants).
- When many and/or very influential organizations adopt the same categorical

distinctions, those distinctions become more pervasive and decisive in social life outside those organizations (e.g. on and around army bases, the military rank system marks housing, entertainment facilities, and public sociability for members of military households as well as for soldiers themselves).

- Experience within categorically differentiated settings gives participants systematically different and unequal preparation for performance in new settings (e.g. teachers who treat their pupils differently according to race, gender, and ethnicity predispose those pupils toward different relations with authorities elsewhere and later).
- Most of what observers ordinarily interpret as inequality-creating individual differences are actually consequences of categorical organization (e.g. in Singapore native speakers of English, Chinese, and Malay experience such different environments from birth that few of them ever cross boundaries among the schools and careers that separate the three categories).
- For these reasons, inequalities by race, gender, ethnicity, class, age, citizenship, educational level, and other apparently contradictory principles of differentiation form through similar social processes and are to an important degree organizationally interchangeable (e.g. religious, ethnic, linguistic, and racial nationalisms take remarkably similar forms and generate remarkably similar justifications wherever they occur).
- Mistaken beliefs about categorical differences play little part in the generation of inequality, indeed tend to emerge after the fact as justifications of inequality and to change as a consequence of shifts in the forms of exploitation or opportunity hoarding as well as in the parties involved (e.g. where populations have long coexisted and frequently intermarried, it takes substantial organizational effort to align people against each other across such boundaries as Hutu-Tutsi or Serb-Croat, but that organizational effort usually generates or fortifies hostile beliefs).
- Changing unwarranted beliefs about categorical differences has little impact on degrees and directions of inequality, while organizational change altering exploitation and/or opportunity hoarding has a large impact (e.g. within factories whose departments recruit workers from different migrant streams, stories about the capacities and propensities of different groups of immigrants for various kinds of work take shape rapidly, then fortify the division of labor).

This account of inequality incorporates some elements of conventional cultural, coercive, and competitive accounts. It also takes a weakly functional line – not strongly functional because it does not trace inequality to the service it renders for society at large, but weakly functional because it asserts that viable relations of exploitation and opportunity hoarding generate consequences that in turn sustain those relations. Nevertheless, its principal causes and effects occur within dynamic social relations. It is a strongly relational account.

Here is the sort of causal story this account of inequality implies. Broad similarities exist between inequality-generating processes and conversation: parties interact repeatedly, transferring resources in both directions, bargaining out provisional agreements and contingently shared definitions of what they are doing (see Tilly, 1998b). That interaction responds in part to available scripts, but interaction modifies the scripts

themselves, and only works at all because participants improvise incessantly. Nevertheless, available scripts crucially include paired, unequal categories. Controllers of valuable resources who are pursuing exploitation or opportunity hoarding commonly invent or borrow categorical pairs, installing them at dividing lines between greater and lesser beneficiaries from products of those resources.

In this broad sense, inequality by gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, citizenship, lineage, and many other categorical principles follows common causal patterns. Explanation of inequality and its changes must therefore concentrate on identifying combinations and sequences of causal mechanisms – notably exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation, and adaptation – within episodes of social interaction.

My own concrete studies of inequality (e.g. Tilly, 1982, 1984) have applied this sort of reasoning chiefly to modern European historical experience and contemporary North America. As the analyses of Muldrew, Wolf, and Earle demonstrate, however, similar mechanisms and processes arise far outside of the contemporary West. Every anthropologist who is trying to make sense of changing inequality in post-socialist or post-colonial polities has an opportunity to investigate relational processes of the Muldrew variety. Most likely exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation, and adaptation are producing significant shares of the changes such anthropologists are observing. As compared with more familiar cultural, functional, coercive, and competitive models of inequality, relational models deserve anthropological attention.

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