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Is America Sick with Inequality?

Mirna SAFI

Douglas Massey's book, *Categorically Unequal*, draws up an instructive inventory of inequality in the United States. A classic study of social stratification, it is complemented by a discussion of the production of the categories by means of which individuals and groups are hierarchically organized.

Under Review: Douglas S. Massey, *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System*, New York, NY, Russell Sage Foundation, 2007, 319 p.

Categorically Unequal is above all a work of scholarship: it is distinguished by the quality of the synthesis that it offers of a multi-disciplinary literature on the measurement, analysis and explanation of social inequality in the United States. To read *Categorically Unequal* at the end of 2008 – that is, at a moment when the entire world seems to be looking toward America and its future President – nevertheless amplifies the work's eminently political character, which under other circumstances might have seemed secondary. Indeed, with the world's aspirations and expectations focused on the impact of the incoming Administration on world peace and international diplomacy, *Categorically Unequal* allows the reader to evaluate what's at stake in this change for American society itself.

The richness of this work resides in the fact that it lends itself to two distinct readings. First of all, it can be read as a socio-historical analysis of inequalities related to skin color, ethnic origin, social class and gender in the United States. This analysis is developed by means of a particularly impressive survey of the mainly empirical studies that have recorded the level and evolution of inequality over the course of the 20th-century. Though this might seem overly ambitious, Douglas Massey is probably better equipped than most sociologists to meet the challenge. A professor at Princeton University, he has long worked on racial inequality in the United States: *American Apartheid* (co-authored with Nancy Denton) is thus one of his best known works¹. He is also a leading specialist of American migration issues and has given particular attention to Hispanic populations (particularly as relates to Mexican immigration²). More recently, his work has addressed questions of social class and educational inequality.

A Portrait of Social Stratification in the United States

Massey shows himself to be up to the task of providing a synthetic overview of research in all of these areas. His book, which supplies a very thorough portrait of the system of social stratification in the United States, is written in a perfectly accessible style and treats scholarly sources with admirable precision. Levels of inequality in the United States are unparalleled among developed countries. In contrast to the orthodox Marxist analysis, which presents capitalism as the driving force behind inequality, Massey shows how social inequality is in fact generated by the lasting and sometimes institutionalized exclusion of certain groups from the market (by mechanisms of discrimination) along with the simultaneous protection of other groups from its failures. While America underwent an experiment in “egalitarian capitalism” during the New Deal/Fair Deal period, inequality has continually grown since the 1970s. The most convincing example of this concerns the long-standing subordination of African-American populations, which did not even benefit from the progress made during the period of egalitarian capitalism (the G.I. Bill, for example, which spurred the advent a

¹ Massey, Douglas S. and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993.

² Cf. Massey, Douglas S., Jorge Durand and Nolane J. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an era of Economic Integration*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 2002.

society of mass consumption, was exclusively reserved to whites). The book's third chapter, without a doubt its richest, offers a history of racial inequality in the United States from the segregationist era through the Bush years. It subtly shows how the mechanisms of racial categorization resisted the revolution that the Civil Rights Act represented: despite the rational rejection of racism that was reflected in opinion polls, a sort of "cognitive inertia" allowed whites' negative feelings towards black people to persist.

Massey carries out an extremely valuable survey of empirical studies of the spatial segregation of African-Americans, the discriminatory mechanisms that victimize them as soon as they try to rent or buy a home, ask for a job or a raise, apply for credit from the bank or take out insurance. One can only be impressed by the extensive research that has been conducted in the United States to locate and quantify such discriminatory practices, whether by means of statistical analysis or audit studies (of, for example, the taxi industry! p.93). The most striking research concerns the judicial and prison systems: drawing upon the work of Loic Wacquant and Bruce Western, in particular, Massey shows how the massive incarceration of blacks – young African-American high school dropouts have a 0.59 probability of being incarcerated before turning 35! (p.11) – compounds exclusion from the market with physical exclusion from society. And these trends show no sign of changing: current measurements of inequality show striking differences independently of whether or not the incarcerated population is taken into account.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 describe how this inegalitarian dynamic more generally affects all disadvantaged groups in American society: immigrants, women and poor people. Coupled with an explosion of illegal immigration, restrictive legislation, particularly since the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, has stimulated the emergence of an underground economy that exploits undocumented workers (with the growth of subcontracting). Legal immigrants have also experienced deterioration in their situation and a curtailment of their rights (particularly since September 11th). The example of Mexicans is typical: while they occupied an intermediate position between

whites and blacks over the first half of the 20th-century, Mexicans have in recent years seen their living and working conditions converge with those of African-Americans.

In what concerns class inequality, the author shows the devastating effects that the Reagan Administration's decision to break the airport controllers' strike in 1981 has had on the balance of power between employers and employees. Since then, America has served the rich, with plunging minimum wages, a rise in levels of poverty, the dismantling of the Welfare State and a gradually shrinking federal government (a process that dramatically accelerated under Bush). A survey of recent work in political sociology shows how the multiplication of municipalities in a single metropolitan zone has allowed a significant portion of the tax money raised in poor neighborhoods to be used for financing the luxurious facilities of rich neighborhoods, where inhabitants disproportionately benefit from tax breaks. Even at schools and in universities, the mechanisms of social reproduction remain very strong: far from being a trifling matter, "legacy" discrimination in favor of the children of former students, particularly as practiced by the country's most prestigious universities, contributes to the concentration of cultural and human capital within the ruling class.

Finally, despite global improvement in the situation of women in the labor market, Massey claims that in reality they have not escaped the inegalitarian dynamic that characterizes contemporary America. While studies reveal some reduction in the gender wage gap, the horizontal separation of masculine and feminine professions has continued to grow (manual and non-manual professions) and vertical separation (job prestige and remuneration) remains very salient even within professional categories. By drawing on the work of Maria Charles and David Grusky, in particular, the author presents the growing schism between two categories of American women: on the one hand, well-educated women who have made it into prestigious and well-paying professions and have married educated, non-chauvinist men and, on the other hand, poorly educated working class women who find themselves confined to ill-paying and particularly difficult work. These are often single mothers who clean the homes or look after the children of their wealthier counterparts.

Categorically Unequal thus presents a very negative portrait of America, particularly the America of the last thirty years, depicting it as a racist, xenophobic, imperious, macho and far from democratic country. Indeed, the author occasionally allows himself to get carried away: one might in this connection cite the passage describing the American prison system as a Gulag that “surpasses that created by the Soviets” (p.112) or that concerning the democratic functioning of a country where “money talks” while the voice of the poor counts for nothing (the “bullshit” of the poor, p.186). These passages reveal what is no doubt the soul of a militant behind the sociologist’s objective stance. Indeed, Massey says as much on this web page: what gives him the greatest satisfaction is the real world impact of his research. “I am proudest when I make a difference in the life of people,” he writes there.

The Cognitive Foundations of Social Stratification

In addition to presenting this portrait of America, *Categorically Unequal* can be read as a theoretical essay that uses the historical example of American society to examine the production and persistence of social stratification. It’s this reading that has inspired most criticisms of Massey’s book. Indeed, Massey transgresses certain taboos of classical social theory, which insists on the constructivist nature of all forms of social categorization related to differences of biology (gender), origin (ethnicity) or skin color. Under the influence of several works in social psychology, cognitive science and neuroscience, Massey returns to the roots of social categorization as it takes place in individual brains. The first chapter, which departs from the general narrative sweep of the book, attempts to explain how stratification works by presenting the cognitive foundations of social relations of exploitation. According to Massey, the construction of frontiers between social groups first takes place at the level of the individual. In applying a principle of dual classification along an axis of skill, on the one hand, and an axis of warmth or sympathy, on the other, the human brain lays the groundwork for social stratification. These cognitive schemata are of course socially reinterpreted and “framed” by attributing stereotyped characteristics to certain social groups. It is no less the case that they exist first and foremost in the heads of humans. It is not the market, capitalism

or even the power and interests of the ruling class that create inequalities: it's above all else the synapses!

This analysis of the construction of social frontiers draws upon a variety of sources: Massey cites work in cognitive science and social psychology (particularly that of Suzanne Fiske) as well as the work of sociologists (that of Michèle Lamont, for example) and more anthropological work such as that of Fredrik Barth. This rapprochement between sociology and the biomedical sciences will no doubt raise eyebrows – some reproach Massey with reviving a substantialist vision of ethnic, racial and even gender differences. Yet the author denies that this is his intention on several occasions. Opening up sociological inquiry to the findings of neuroscience does not imply that inequalities are natural: they are of course always subject to historical and social contingency. Nevertheless, to say that whites discriminate against blacks in order to preserve their interests as a dominant group is not satisfying in itself: for a group to become exploitable in the sense that it becomes possible to extract the fruit of its labor from it, its members must first be despised and seen as incompetent in the “head” of the dominant group. In this way, they lose all characteristics specific to human beings to such an extent that the cognitive system no longer even identifies them as such (pp. 12-14).

In this way, it becomes possible to inflict all possible forms of inequality on them (spatial segregation, housing, work and credit discrimination and even incarceration) without compassion and at no psychological cost to members of the dominant group. While some will find Massey's biomedical turn dangerous, it has the undeniable advantage of linking up with an exciting and rapidly growing literature in neuroscience and social psychology concerning these questions. While its tools are those of scientific research, this work has produced results that are far from being without interest to sociologists. The latter have long looked down on this type of work, sometimes perhaps for good reason, but also sometimes mistakenly, reducing these fields to a crude caricature.

For all that, in reading *Categorically Unequal*, the first chapter can be dispensed with. It seems to have been grafted onto the others, probably out of a desire to strengthen the work's theoretical character by creating a bridge between, on the one hand, precise and well-documented analysis of the evolution of inequality in American society and, on the other, a general theory of social stratification. It is the former that doubtless constitutes *Categorically Unequal*'s greatest contribution. In this respect, Massey's book should be seen as an indispensable resource for all scholars who work on contemporary American society.

Translated from french by **Ethan Rundell**.

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