



# **SOCIAL INEQUALITY: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT**

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## **Abstract**

This scientific article reviews social inequality as a complex theoretical, historical, and literary phenomenon. The investigation covers the concept and definition of social inequality, its philosophical roots in classical and Enlightenment thinking, and its elaboration in the context of major historical processes. Particular attention is paid to the contribution of Plato, and to the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men" (1755), which conceptualized inequality as man-made. From the literary perspective, the research then examines the ways social inequality has been represented and criticized in world literature, mainly through the traditions of realism and humanitarianism. Author such as Charles Dickens is considered as who reflected poverty, injustice, and lives of living on the margins of society. In this way, the study illustrates that literature is an effective medium for the denunciation of social injustice, the shaping of moral consciousness, and the contestation of unequal social structures.

**Keywords:** social inequality, philosophy, literature, realism, slavery, colonialism, segregation, humanitarianism, Plato, Rousseau, Charles Dickens, Victorian literature, class structure, social justice.

## **Introduction**

Social inequality is the phenomenon that arises when resources in society are not distributed equally, resulting in identifiable patterns based on socially defined categories such as class, race, gender, ethnicity, and other factors. Social



inequality affects life chances, resource distribution, and power relations in populations, going beyond the realm of economic differences to include the intersection of multiple categories of social inequality. The literature on social inequality has produced a vast amount of scholarship across several disciplines. The classical theory of sociology has offered the underlying frameworks through the works of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, each offering a different explanation for the development of stratification (Williams, 1958). Recent scholarship has built on these foundations with new tools. Theoretical frameworks of intersectionality, developed by thinkers such as Crenshaw and Collins, showed how different systems of oppression intersect to produce a distinct experience of marginalization. However, despite such a rich body of scholarship, research is generally confined to the boundaries of a particular discipline, with very little overlap between philosophical, historical, and literary studies. Such compartmentalization hinders a comprehensive understanding of inequality as a theoretical construct, historical phenomenon, and lived experience. This study bridges the gap by combining philosophical, historical, and literary approaches, ranging from classical philosophy through industrial capitalism to the writings of Charles Dickens, to achieve a holistic understanding of social inequality.

### **Literature Review**

Plato laid down the basic frameworks for understanding social inequality around 2,400 years ago. Plato, in his works "The Republic" and "The Laws," emphasized the dangers of excessive inequality, stating that societies divided between the very rich and the very poor are bound to face instability and moral deterioration. Plato's observations of Athens and Sparta, where excessive inequality was weighing down the city-states, influenced his views on the need for moderation in wealth distribution. Also, Plato says, "Quarrels will be avoided because honors and offices will be distributed as equally as possible on the basis of proportional inequality. For these reasons, four classes should be created, according to the amount of property.: a First, a Second, a Third, and a Fourth – or they may be known by some other names, both when individuals stay in the same class, by becoming richer from being poor or by becoming poor from being rich"<sup>1</sup>. The

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<sup>1</sup> Plato. (c. 360 BCE). *The Laws* (Book 5, 744-c, 744-d . page 132). (T. Pangle, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.



trouble with Plato's four-class society is that although he truly believes that a formal system of classification will make inequality fair and eliminate quarrels, he doesn't realize that once you formalize inequality by saying First, Second, Third, and Fourth, you've given those at the top a formal system of justification to maintain their privileged position, when what he's trying to do is create a fair system.

### **Methodology**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men" (1755) is a revolutionary step forward in the theorization of inequality. Rousseau distinguished between natural physical inequality and moral inequality, which is unique to civil society. According to Rousseau, natural differences among human beings cannot account for the huge inequalities in terms of wealth, power, and prestige found in organized societies. Moreover, He argues in this book about the origin of systematic inequality: "The first person who , having enclosed a plot of land, took it into his head to say this is mine and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society".<sup>2</sup> This is one of the most crucial claims ever made in the history of inequality theory. While other philosophers have argued that civil society is founded on reason, religion, or mutual consent, Rousseau argues that it is founded on a simple act of taking—one-person appropriating land as private property. The truly revolutionary aspect of this claim is not simply that it is based on the act of taking, but on why others accepted it as legitimate.

### **Materials and Discussion**

Major structural systems have historically organized inequality across various periods, illustrating how contemporary manifestations of inequality have emerged from particular institutional structures. Slavery diminished people to property via violent exploitation justified by racist ideologies. The transatlantic slave trade established plantation economies that produced vast wealth for slave owners and European nations while dehumanizing enslaved individuals. The Victorian Age (1837-1901) saw a serious division of classes in the wake of

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<sup>2</sup> Rousseau, J.-J. (1755). *Discourse on the origin and basis of inequality among men* (R. D. Masters, Trans., p. 43). University Press of New England. (Original work published 1755)



industrial capitalism. The industrialists amassed fortunes, while the workers toiled for long hours, meager wages, and in hazardous conditions. Child labor became common as poor parents needed the earnings of their offspring. Poverty, slums, and poor sanitation in urban areas led to serious health crises, which mainly affected the working class. Women were relegated to the home or forced to work as factory hands or maids.

Charles Dickens employed literature to record the inequality experienced during the Victorian era with a great deal of honesty. His literary works offered a deep understanding of the struggles faced by the underprivileged and the strict class-based injustices. In his work "Hard times", the workers in the factories are referred to as "Hands," a literary device that symbolizes one of the most damaging forms of social commentary in literature during the nineteenth century. As Dickens reveals in his depiction of industrial management, workers are reduced to mere instruments: "So many hundred Hands in this Mill; so many hundred horse Steam power".<sup>3</sup> He just shows us what the industrial system refers to its workers—not people, not citizens, not human beings with names and hopes and families, but body parts, tools of production good only for their physical use.

## **Results**

By integrating theoretical, historical, and literary approaches, the complexity of social inequality emerges. From a theoretical point of view, Rousseau's work shows that social inequality is not a natural phenomenon but a product of institutional structures, especially those based on private property that lead to a cumulative advantage over time. Historically, the existence of slavery, colonialism, segregation, and industrial capitalism has led to a legacy that continues to exist even after the achievement of formal equality through legal reforms. From a literary perspective, Dickens's novels show how people deal with their circumstances and sometimes achieve critical consciousness to challenge the existing order of inequality. This integration reveals three crucial insights. First, inequality exists and functions in multiple ways, including economic, political, cultural, and psychological terms. Second, to overcome inequality, it is necessary to focus not only on redistribution but also on political and cultural

<sup>3</sup> Dickens, C. (1854). *Hard times*. Bradbury & Evans. (Chapter XI, p. 87)



transformation. Third, to achieve a substantial reduction in inequality, it is necessary to rely on social movements rather than gradual reforms.

## **Conclusion**

Social inequality is a phenomenon that demands multi-dimensional analysis and synthesis of theoretical, historical, and literary perspectives. Philosophical analysis from Plato to Rousseau reveals that social inequality is produced by institutional arrangements, not by nature, and that property rights are the instrument of social inequality. The quotes that were analyzed have implications that are timeless. Plato's insight into the fact that societies need neither absolute poverty nor absolute wealth is a vision that is pertinent to the current debate. Rousseau's observation about the role of private property in the founding of civil society and his psychological insight into the transformation of individuals from self-sufficient to validated individuals is a framework that can be used to understand the material as well as the psychological aspects of inequality. Dickens' technique of referring to workers as "Hands" is a literary device that uses structural analysis to make it personal. To address the contemporary problem of inequality, one must adopt a comprehensive strategy that encompasses economic redistribution, political empowerment, cultural recognition, and changes in property relations. Stratification is not an inevitable phenomenon that can be easily eradicated, but it is a manifestation of power relations and cultural beliefs that can be contested by collective action, social movements, and literature that reveals the truth about inequality and envisions possible alternatives. This synthesis demonstrates the strength of a holistic approach that integrates philosophical, historical, and literary analysis. Finally, the implications of the analysis of inequality extend beyond the frontiers of knowledge.

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