Introduction

Critical Perspectives on Justice

The Persistence of Global Injustice and Inequality*

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When we received the invitation in early 1996 to create this special issue for publication in 1997, four matters became immediately clear. First, we knew that the substantive topic would focus upon comparative studies of inequality and injustice. Second, we realized that it was crucial to find exceptional scholars who not only were actively engaged in the areas, but who could put aside major parts of their research agendas to meet a hard and fast deadline, particularly in light of the fact that many of them were working and traveling in different parts of the world. Third, we wanted articles from researchers who had both quantitative and qualitative knowledge of diverse peoples’ struggles against inequality and injustice, rather than the popular but false dichotomy between homogeneous globalization (vulgarized as “McWorld”) and secessionist self-determination (vulgarized as Jihad). And fourth, we wanted to challenge scholars by having them directly address the concept of justice in a meaningful way. This special issue has been compiled with these guiding principles in mind.

The study of justice has generally been considered the province of philosophers and legal scholars. Rooted in the tradition of classical social contract theory and

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informed by the actual or idealized social arrangements of a particular historical period, such work typically analyzes the role of the state in producing justice and maintaining social order through codified law and the political system. As seen through this lens, justice is the end of a process characterized by rationality, equality before the law, and concentrated power in enforcement and sanctioning. Often overlooked in such analyses, however, are the pervasive injustices and inequalities borne by peoples around the globe at the hands of state hegemony and the pressures of international corporate rationality. Simply put, there are intractable problems created by stating what justice should be rather than the sociological analysis of how different constructions of justice are employed for various ends. In many respects, then, much of the classical theorizing about justice amounts to little more than an ongoing apology for the modern state and its ideological cornerstones of linear progress, universal truth, and the domination of nature.

In contrast, comparative sociological research often focuses on injustice and inequality, operationalizing these concepts from the lived experiences of marginalized peoples throughout the world system; justice in this lexicon is not simply a detached ideal or a set of universal principles, but instead can serve as a comprehensive locus of inquiry for a study of social conflict and global change. From this perspective, concrete struggles against material stratification and political exclusion can inform the study of justice by bringing to light its failure to manifest in much of the world—in stark contrast to the monolithic models of progress and prosperity often invoked by entities such as the United Nations and other global organizations such as the International Monetary Fund. What a comparative, critical sociological analysis reminds us is that for most of the world’s inhabitants, justice remains a desire that has gone unfulfilled; in this sense, we come to understand justice not as a transcendent universal ideal, but rather as dependent in part upon one’s place in the hierarchical spectrum of global power, wealth, and status.

The articles collected in this volume all address these questions of justice, injustice, and inequality from a comparative, critical perspective. In view of the range of theoretical comparative approaches in sociology, we chose the widest variety of sophisticated perspectives that integrate theory, methodology, and analysis. The papers were selected for their unique but compatible approaches to a sociological study of justice, with each contributing to the state of confirmation or disconfirmation of a substantive theory. Common thematic threads include analyses of the alternative ways in which historically marginalized peoples have come to define the concepts of justice and injustice; how such peoples have fared in utilizing various means to attain justice; and the role of discourses surrounding class, race, ethnicity, and gender in shaping conceptions of what is just or unjust. Rationalization, for example, refers to an encompassing process by which exchange and authority are brought within the purview of intellectually calculable rules; authority promoted by increased rationalization becomes characterized by an impersonal, formal legal order with concomitant