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Past and Present of Social Inequality: Analysing Structure and Future Trends

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Abstract: The purpose of the article is to highlight the peculiarities of fundamental and applied forms of social inequality in the context of cultural and historical experience and prospects of civilisational development. Social differentiation has a diverse character, which forms the diversity of parameters of this socio-cultural phenomenon. The purpose of scientific research is to unify social indicators that activate and determine the level of inequality in society. Social processes are marked by contradictions in the worldview and mental understanding, so the issue of inequality is regulated by clear and understandable theoretical, methodological, legal, and socio-cultural guidelines. The research methodology is focused on the scientific and sociological methodological cluster. A sociological study based on content analysis, monitoring, and expert opinions allows us to determine the structure and manifestations of social inequality. Long-term sociological observations and in-depth analytical descriptions form the constants of the fundamental nature of social inequality. The results of the study emphasise the need to correlate the fundamental understanding of social inequality and the applied manifestation of this phenomenon in the socio-cultural space. In today's dynamic world, traditional and sustainable interpretations of inequality are hardly accepted, since the current principles of social development involve rapid permanent changes that determine the parameters of social inequality almost online. Under such conditions, society needs new flexible parameters that will determine the quantitative and qualitative parameters of social inequality. Thus, social inequality is an integral element of cultural and historical experience, having formed the

fundamental dimensions of this phenomenon, while its prospects require regulation by society to avoid and mitigate the negative impact of social inequality in the form of injustice, discrimination, chauvinism, etc. Promising areas of research on the problem of social inequality include focusing on the dynamics of the social structure, which fundamentally changes the fundamental and targeted understanding of social inequality, leading to inadequate assessments of threats associated with the direct manifestation of social inequality in society.

Keywords: social inequality, discrimination, justice, rights, human potential.

Introduction

Social development is characterised by a balance of fundamental parameters and data variables that determine the characteristics of all phenomena and processes that are characteristic of human and social development. United in civilisational progress, all social elements form specific guidelines for their development. Social life is reflected both in applied everyday functional manifestations and in the systemic, administrative, and conceptual dimension. Social inequality has also acquired its dimensions in these contexts in the course of cultural and historical development.

With the beginning of the formation of the social system, the processes of differentiation of people and their division into certain social strata began to take shape. With the development of civilisation, the number of parameters that created differences that later transformed into inequality only increased. Similarly, the semantic profile of the inequality dimension itself expanded, forming a number of indicators that increased the social distance between people, communities, societies, or cultures.

Research Problem

The scientific discourse leaves unresolved a number of issues related to social inequality and the prospects of this phenomenon in the context of the cultural and historical development of society. The problems of the diversity of factors of social inequality and, accordingly, the further classification of social inequality remain uncertain. The relevance of the study is to reveal the content and format of social inequality in the modern socio-cultural space. The research problem of the study proposes a transformation of the theoretical and methodological approach to the characterisation of social parameters that determine the forms of differentiation of society members. It is noted that if we are guided by the worldview and mental perception of social inequality, this leads to a social crisis, which manifests itself in the outrage of people and the growing contradictions between them. Therefore, the author identifies the need for a new conceptual understanding of social inequality, which will not be a statement of human existence, but a vector that will offer the development of individual human potential.

Research Focus

The focus of the study is to find innovative synergistic guidelines that will define a new understanding of social inequality. In contrast to the cultural and historical experience of perceiving social inequality, the strategy of a new interpretation of social inequality is proposed, which is not based on indicators that widen the gap between people, but on establishing a benchmark in all dimensions of social activity that will contribute to the movement of civilisation towards reducing the difference between people.

Research Aim and Research Questions

The purpose of the scientific research is to distinguish between the fundamental social concept of inequality and the applied practice-oriented manifestation of this phenomenon in society, which will allow for a value differentiation between the concepts of human rights and human benefits. The purpose of the article is to highlight a new understanding of social inequality in today's dynamic socio-cultural space and to eliminate the exclusively negative mental perception of this phenomenon. By providing social inequality with the synergistic principles of competitiveness, status, and quality, it is possible to transform the traditionally negative perception of this phenomenon in society into a conceptual dimension of development and progress.

The scientific hypothesis of the study involves positioning social inequality in new positive perspectives. To achieve such a socio-scientific transformation, it is necessary to develop several strategic lines of socio-philosophical interpretation of inequality:

- a statement of the inevitability of social differentiation in accordance with natural data and social principles of human development;
- the ability to regulate the specifics of social inequality at the legal and moral level, with the prevention of inhumane manifestations (discrimination, chauvinism, legal nihilism);
- conceptualisation of social inequality not as an inevitable statement of lack of status, but in the context of prospects and potential for opportunities to acquire such status.

An important point is the inseparability of these strategic dimensions in positioning the prospects for social inequality in the future. For example, if the function of regulation is ignored, the humanitarian-oriented socially active perspective of a person's desire to realise his or her potential and acquire social benefits is lost. In the absence of an understanding of the social nature of the differentiation of society, all manifestations of social inequality will be negatively perceived by society.

Literature Review

The problem of social inequality is covered in several ways in the scientific and sociological discourse. The vast majority of works focus on the negative manifestations of social inequality. A separate cluster explores the problem of inequality in the context of a socially-purposeful fundamental understanding of this phenomenon in the context of civilisational development. Another manifestation in the scientific literature is an attempt to reveal the content of value-oriented applied forms of social inequality.

However, it is worth noting the emergence of a new cluster of research related to the prospects for the process of social differentiation in the short and long term. The problem of social inequality is considered in a global dimension, in particular in the context of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Deo & Kumar & Sharma, 2022).

The concept of social inequality is widely covered in the context of sociological and cultural studies. However, recently, there has been a tendency to specify this concept of social life. The question of social "inequality of what?" (Zheng & Walsham, 2021) is becoming more and more common. Social inequality has been studied using various scientific and methodological mechanisms. The macro-micro model of inequality and relative derivation (MIRED) has been actively correlated (Osborne, García-Sánchez & Sibley, 2019).

The organisational elements of social inequality in the modern administrative dimension were studied by Amis, Mair & Munir (2020). Sweidan (2023), analysing the geopolitical aspects of the

development of social space in the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, concluded that large-scale shifts in the period of aggravation become factors of growing social inequality, while in the long run, they are prerequisites for the reverse process of social equalisation of society. The largest cluster of scientific and sociological topics on inequality is related to the economic aspect and financial well-being (Kakwani & Son, 2022).

Research Methodology

General Background

This research involves determining the axiological parameters of social inequality in society. The process of differentiation of society has always aroused great interest, so there is an urgent need to analyse this phenomenon. The scientific and methodological arsenal offers a number of methodological approaches (both general scientific and special sociological) to study the past, present, and future dimensions of social inequality.

The current qualitative study is based on the analysis of scientific literature, which highlights the historical aspects of social inequality, the current manifestation of this phenomenon and identifies the prospects for the differentiation of society.

Data Collection

The following scientometric databases were used to search for sources on the research issue: Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Scopus, Web of Science. The study used research papers from the last five years, as the issue of social inequality requires adherence to the principles of dynamism rather than sustainability in its analysis. The key search words were: social inequality and differentiation of society.

Data Analyses

The study uses general scientific methods to investigate the sociological cluster. Sociological research involves the use of conventional general scientific methods to study the fundamental principles of social inequality. At the same time, applied elements of social inequality require a specific format of classical methods. In particular, traditional content analysis provides results of social inequality parameters in the context of the dynamics of social progress. Social monitoring of social activity is important for the formation of social parameters.

Comparative analysis is relevant when compiling a semantic profile with a differential scale that determines the level of the gap between social indicators that form inequality. The findings of the study are correlated with the methodological contexts of systematisation and structuring.

In addition to the general scientific methodology, scientific and philosophical synergistic approaches are used to achieve the objectives of the article and confirm the scientific hypothesis of the study. The principles of self-organisation and interdisciplinary pluralism provide a new conceptual understanding of human status, which focuses on the development and positive dimensions of human potential and will gradually replace the concept of social inequality in its negative cultural and historical positioning.

Results

Social inequalities have been systematically formed since the time of the social order. Natural existential dimensions involve the struggle for status and resources between and within biological species. The socialisation of the human community has managed to normalise this struggle at the level of regulation through social and legal norms, which has made it impossible to fight

uncontrollably and has suppressed the massive scale of inhumane actions in the dispute for the privilege. It is clear that in the course of cultural and historical development, conflicts (both at the micro and macro societal levels) and confrontations (both horizontal between individuals and vertical between social clusters) based on social inequality constantly arise, but, as history shows, they all eventually end without global negative consequences for society.

Global inequality, according to Chase-Dunn & Nagy (2022), has been challenged by many uprisings, revolutions, and social movements throughout history. Humanity has realised that there is no alternative to fighting social inequality, as ideal societies are essentially utopian ideas and potentially have more destructive effects on the development of society.

The notion of social inequality is considered not only at the level of the individual or society but also has global civilisational dimensions. The specifics of the uneven distribution of resources and benefits in the structure of society differ in the context of global paradigms of social order. In particular, for a long time, social differentiation in Western society has been viewed in the context of competition and conditions for the realisation of potential (Pleinen, 2022). The global South in the issue of social inequality (Baumann & Rehbein, 2020) is focused mainly on the traditional paradigm, which continues the trend of dominating the existential and systemic nature of this phenomenon. In particular, a study conducted in Latin America states that social inequality (Drobotya et al., 2021) is one of the key problems of the society there, along with human rights violations, corruption, etc.

The feeling of relative disadvantage has a negative impact on the physical and psychological state of a person at the micro level of their life space (Osborne, García-Sánchez & Sibley, 2019). When such experiences are associated with a person's belonging to a particular community, the microsocial level of the inequality problem is formed.

Social inequality usually causes social protest. The level of discontent depends on the overall development of society. In periods of force majeure (Bapuji et al., 2020) or cultural and historical crises, the issue of social inequality is exacerbated by a general decline in living standards. To this cluster can be added climatic and geographical conditions (and especially disasters), which also have a peculiar impact on the quality of life (Faist, 2020) and provoke social inequality. Based on these realities, one way to maintain social peace is to keep the minimum parameters of observance of rights and benefits at the level of ensuring fundamental human needs.

Force majeure situations have a much greater impact on vulnerable segments of society that have limited resources to withstand negative scenarios (Pacquiao, 2021). The inability to respond to the challenges of the times and humanitarian threats is an obvious negative manifestation of social inequality that civilisation has not yet found a solution to. The institutional dimensions of the state have not been able to regulate the dimensions of inequalities (class, gender, ethnicity (Song, 2023)), which declares the need for new global cross-border solutions (Walby, 2021) to this problem. The stability of state progress with sustainable economic performance in a way freezes the level of social inequality (Gorus & Ben Ali, 2023). Gheorghe (2020) summarises the inability of state authorities to control the processes of social inequality by the increased distrust of institutions by the population and their focus on information and digital resources or civil society. Instead, the emergence of a responsible and active citizenry should put an end to the destructive dimensions of social inequality (Benson & Boatcă, 2023).

These realities of the past and current interpretation of social inequality indicate that this phenomenon is the object of constant social tension, which from time to time manifests itself in conflicts of varying scale and intensity. However, on the whole, human civilisation has actually accepted the uneven distribution of fundamental social goods, resources, rights, and freedoms at

the civilisational level. The fundamental goods, such as power, fame, and wealth, are constantly being replenished with new segments that are characteristic of social development at the local and global level - opportunities, responsibilities, preferences, etc. Each socio-cultural community determines the priority of the benefits that shape social inequality and the format of its construction. For democratic societies, the results of human activity in various fields and the acquisition of wealth or fame automatically allow for a privileged status. In conservative totalitarian systems, the government prioritises the distribution of wealth among citizens. Ultimately, the task of society is to harmonise social inequality to maintain social harmony.

To address these challenges, it is necessary to consider the strategic components of social inequality and its role in the life of civilisation in the past, present, and future (see Table 1).

Table 1

Strategic Factors of Social Inequality

Strategic context social inequality	Format of expression in society
Perception of social inequality	Cultural and historical experience of unequal distribution of benefits
Regulation of social inequality	Avoiding negative manifestations of social inequality in the form of violations of human rights and freedoms
Prospects for social inequality	A new synergistic conceptual understanding of the interaction of human and social potential and their well-being

Source: author's own development.

Social institutions play a special role in determining fundamental and applied forms of social inequality:

- the education sector involves the (re)creation of social inequality, which is manifested in the construction, reproduction, and legitimisation of stratification of society based on the performance of students (Croizet et al., 2019). The actual differentiation of pupils or students based on their abilities and opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills forms an understanding of the diversity of human potential. This has two implications for the phenomenon of social inequality: regressive (which only widens the gaps in people's opportunities for inequality between them) and progressive (which defines education as a mechanism for avoiding significant differences in status between people);

- is a field of health care that focuses on the combination of economic, cultural, and social capital in ensuring health (Veenstra & Abel, 2019). Traditionally, social inequality has an active social and psychological burden and is associated with such aspects as empathy, compassion, and emotionality (Pedrazzini et al., 2023). In modern society, special attention is paid to mental and psychological health (Cénat et al., 2020). It is believed that the problem of social inequality poses a real threat to the moral and spiritual state of society.

Recent evidence on the negative dimension of social inequality is rather controversial. It is noted that in communities with high incomes and high social standards, there is a tendency for health indicators to deteriorate as a result of excessive stressful situations (Jaeggi et al., 2021). Abbas (2020), continuing the theme of the discrepancy between a person's social status and their health

status, confirms this with a study in which the health indicators of successful people and prisoners do not have a striking difference. Ribeiro et al. (2021) conducted a study in which those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic were also not differentiated by social status.

Such indicators actually destroy the traditional notion of the wealth-health or wealth-happiness correlation, which, in turn, requires a fundamental revision of the constants of social inequality.

The level of income polarises society into rich and poor, creating vertical dimensions of social inequality. However, there is a more complex horizontal dimension of social inequality within a social group. It is noted that the polarisation of views on life and manifestations of social intolerance are more typical for the horizontal level, which is marked by the actualisation of applied forms of inequality (Roex, Huijts & Sieben, 2019). At the same time, as incomes increase and education levels improve, people and communities develop a fundamental understanding of inequality, which is characterised by social status not as a stable indicator, but as a dynamic element that people can and should change in their favour.

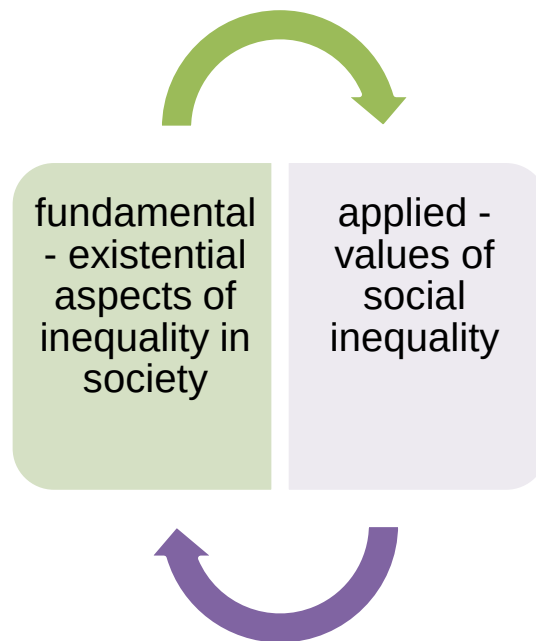
Neoliberalism (Bettache, Chiu & Beattie, 2020) and social conservatism (Azevedo et al., 2019), which are traditional for the modern socio-cultural space, emphasise the higher priority of the concept of rights over the concept of benefits. A person with rights and freedoms is provided with all the opportunities to achieve the required level of well-being. Therefore, the external factor of social inequality is no longer a dominant characteristic. The task of a highly developed society of the future is not to ensure social equality but to provide people with all the rights and opportunities to acquire the social benefits they need. At the same time, social tensions related to inequality are successfully converted into political dividends by radical movements (Engler & Weisstanner, 2021).

Barlosius (2023) bases his understanding of social inequality on the differentiation of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of this phenomenon: higher-lower, internal-external, earlier-later actualisation. The pragmatic vector of development of modern society determines the dominant factor of social differentiation as the economic indicator (Bapuji, Ertug & Shaw, 2020). The level of prosperity shapes the impact on other human rights and benefits that a person can afford, having the proper financial means to do so. This social orientation has both positive (equalising the potential ability of people to gain power through wealth) and negative (levelling human rights depending on the level of wealth) manifestations.

Today, social inequality is defined in two key dimensions (see Figure 1), which determine

Figure 1

Dimensions of Social Inequality



Source: author's own development.

A separate aspect of assessing and understanding social inequality in society is the stereotypical nature of the moments associated with this aspect of social development, so promising principles of innovative conceptualisation of social inequality will face obvious difficulties. Stereotypes are manifested in various spheres of social activity:

- financial and economic dimension (Bratanova et al., 2019), when the concept of wealth is associated with greater opportunities for its owner (Tanjitpiyanond, Jetten & Peters, 2022) and higher quality of life and happiness. Income and wealth are subjective factors of well-being, so the economic element is considered a component of social inequality (Quispe-Torreblanca et al., 2021). If we add to this the relationship between financial freedom and life satisfaction (objectification), the economic component of social inequality loses its influence. As economic development increases, income inequality increases, but this process does not cause serious tension, as enrichment is inclusive (Yan & Mohd, 2023).

- inequality in administrative and geographical parameters creates objective obstacles to the full (in this case, spatial and later temporal) realisation of its potential. Social balance based on the territorial principle cannot be achieved both fundamentally and practically (Camarero & Oliva, 2019). That is, overcoming social inequality based on the territorial principle is possible only if a person changes the territory where he or she is socially active (the concept of the regional scale of opportunities (Bernard et al., 2023)).

Discussion

The analysis of the problem of social inequality has shown that this process is a fundamental sociological phenomenon rooted in civilisational development and requires the formation of a proper value system in the socio-cultural dimension.

Social inequality is mostly negatively perceived by society, as it raises problems that arise from the uneven distribution of fundamental goods and rights among people. The reason for this is the dominance of the ideological and mental orientation of the problem of social inequality, which is part of the cultural and historical experience of the past and modern development of society. Scientific sociological research highlights the most pressing aspects of social problems, which in

social inequality still remain the results of the expansion of indicators of social differentiation and social tension that results from this phenomenon.

The study confirmed the key theses of the proposed research hypothesis, which determine the fundamental nature of social inequality in the cultural and historical dimension:

- Leicht (2022) confirms the assertion that the concept of status is crucial for the fundamental perception of social inequality. However, the perspective vector somewhat reorients these constants of social life. According to the very organisational ideas of the sociology of the future, status has a dynamic nature and can be both a factor in the formation of social inequality and, vice versa, a factor that blurs the boundaries between wealth and poverty, power and subordination, fame, neglect, and oblivion.
- The legitimisation of social inequality is in fact a continuous process in the cultural and historical process. In previous epochs, mythological, religious, human, and scientific factors gave legitimacy to social stratification. In the future, a key tool for legitimising social inequality will be the socio-psychological cluster (Costa-Lopes et al., 2023). The concepts of trust (Bobzien, 2023) and justice (Vuletich, Gray & Payne, 2023) are generally fundamental to achieving mutual understanding in society and relieving tension due to social inequality.

At the same time, the results obtained contradict the work of Weingartner (2021), as the problem of social inequality is gradually losing its value and purpose fundamental relevance. The reason is the formation of a consumer society, which is replacing an ideal-oriented society. This transformation leads to a decrease in the human need for value-oriented goods in favour of material goods. Achieving such a level of well-being is much more difficult and requires much less social activity. A person is ready to sacrifice his or her ideals and moral and spiritual principles in order to achieve material prosperity in a modern pragmatically oriented society.

The dimensions of social inequality obtained in the results coincide with the vector of contemporary sociological discourse, which attempts to reorient the problem of social inequality towards reducing social gaps rather than eliminating them (Grusky, 2019). In the modern world, the perception of social inequality is undergoing a fundamental transformation (Jetten & Peters, 2019). The information flow fully reveals not only the format of inequality but also identifies the factors and drivers of its formation. Therefore, the current understanding of social differentiation differs significantly from the vision of this phenomenon in previous studies.

The findings have opened a new perspective on the problem of social inequality, which was previously stated at the worldview and mental level as a certain inevitability of human life and activity, and the person's access to a qualitatively new level was associated mainly with irrational dimensions (fate, luck, chance), rather than systemic principles - ability to work, talent, efficiency. The results of the current study emphasise that innovative progress in the development of public communication significantly reduces the level of marginalisation of people (Tewathia, Kamath & Ilavarasan, 2020).

The scientific novelty of the obtained results lies in the identification of innovative approaches to social inequality, which should be considered meritocratic principles of citizens' income (Kuhn, 2019). The actualisation of the motivational element has a rather powerful creative potential, which can even cover the negative dimension of the social distance between rich and poor. To a certain extent, the belief that income inequality is meritocratic in nature legitimises growing inequality (Mijs, 2021). Such beliefs are fostered by active and aggressive advertising of a competitive environment and a world of unlimited opportunities, which has virtually flooded the information space and has a significant impact on public consciousness.

The reliability of the results obtained was influenced by the factors of the dynamism of social transformations in the modern socio-cultural space. The variability of the parameters of social well-being in today's turbulent world needs to be streamlined, as the problem of uncertainty in the positioning of human values in the social paradigm of our time is emerging.

Conclusions and Implications

Thus, social inequality has formed a powerful cultural and historical experience of the past, determines the sustainability of social development at the present stage, and requires promising strategies for future socio-cultural progress. The ideological and mental interpretation of social inequality has formed a predominantly negative dimension of this social phenomenon. In the process of forming a new scientific and sociological conceptual understanding of social inequality, synergistic principles are being actualised that orient it in the context of development, eliminating its destructive burden.

The reorientation of social inequality from an existential inevitability to an axiological perspective of development opens a new page in the cluster of social development. Inequality at the individual or societal level is no longer a sentence, but rather a status that is relevant in a particular place at a particular time. The dynamic nature of inequality makes it one of the main stimulating and motivating factors for a person, community, or civilisation as a whole.

Suggestions for Future Research

The prospect of studying social inequality is to give this social phenomenon a new synergistic theoretical and methodological colouring. The usual fundamental dimension of inequality has an existential character, which actually leaves no opportunity for a person to change his or her social status. This creates the preconditions for destructive manifestations of social inequality - discrimination, legal nihilism, chauvinism, and inhumane activity in general. In order to prevent negative manifestations of social differentiation, it is proposed to introduce a dynamic dimension to the concept of inequality. With the help of synergistic principles of development and interaction, social status loses its stability and becomes dynamic. This approach makes it possible to actualise the positive aspects of social processes associated with the differentiation of society.

An important point for future research on social inequality is to address such concepts as justice, motivation, and competition. This will allow us to move away from the stereotype that benefits are the only parameter that determines the form of social inequality. The specifics of social differentiation are much broader than a linear statement of the advantages of one person (community) over another. The focus of the sociology of the future should be on the ways of achieving wealth, power, and fame, which will lead to the formation of a favourable socio-cultural space in which people can realise their potential, develop and improve. Under such conditions, social inequality will not disappear (since it is obviously laid down by the laws of nature and society), but the lower parameters of the level of social welfare will significantly increase, which will reduce social tension and make room for development and progress in the ideological and mental paradigm of public consciousness. In such a society, a person does not focus on the destructive aspects of negative manifestations of social inequality but rather sees social differentiation as an opportunity to achieve higher results.

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