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Book Review: *The Inequality Reader*

The Inequality Reader: Contemporary and Foundational Readings in Race, Class, and Gender has been dubbed as the essential textbook on poverty and inequality for undergraduate students studying Sociology. The editors, David B. Grusky and Szonja Szelényi, have compiled a series of essays and articles on these topics into one comprehensive book. This compilation illustrates how poverty and inequality are created and generated, and how they might potentially be overcome and resolved. The *Readings* introduce undergraduate students to traditional sociological thinking coupled with modern ideas of stratification. *Inequality's* compilation of journal articles and book chapters focus primarily on race, gender and class, as the title states. As a whole, they are easy to read and understand, and give readers a good look inside the world of inequality and poverty, which at times can be difficult to absorb. Each brief section is research-based and grounded in foundational theory. Inequality is explored in all its many forms with evocative rationale on what causes inequality, with arguments represented from both sides of the issue. This critical analysis of *Inequality* will take a definitive look at several of the book chapters and journal articles to determine if they measure up to the book's standards and expectations of readers, as was intended by the editors.

Book Chapter: "Racial Formation in the United States"

For a beginning undergraduate student studying sociology, this chapter is a brilliant addition to the *Inequality* text. The chapter "Racial Formation in the United States" details the

complete history of how racism came to be and defines for the reader what race is and how it correlates to racism as a whole. This chapter offers innovative and dynamic insights into how to reform welfare through a complete repeal of every piece of legislation pertaining to racism and social inequality, and start from scratch.

An interesting section within the chapter chronicles racism's evolution from religion to science and from science to politics. This transition from its religious tenets to politics shows a clear trajectory for how racism has been an easy target, used by politicians for political gain in order to push associated agendas within society and further segregate the population. The reader can get a real look inside the world of racism from its historical perspective and gain a greater understanding of why it has never been eradicated from society, and instead, continues to be a reality about which many politics and pundits are either reluctant to speak or call it a vice when there is no real evidence in our current day and age to support that racism should still be a modern-day reality.

In my opinion, this chapter was necessary to include in the textbook because it leaves no holds barred, nor does it sugarcoat for readers the hows and whys of the tenets of racism. It makes no excuses for it, nor does it attempt to justify why it was a necessary societal evil to begin with. As readers and beginning students dive into this chapter, they will find an easy-to-understand explanation in the proper context based on historical facts that some liberal textbooks have conveniently left out. The end of the chapter, perhaps, sums up the general consensus of *Inequality* as a whole, "The racism of today is no longer a virtual monolith, as was the racism of yore." (Grusky and Szélenyi 75). The text truly encompasses racial inequality in all its forms through this chapter, and readers come away with more knowledge and ideology about the core tenets of social injustice than can be found anywhere else.

Book Chapter: “No Degree and No Way Back to the Middle”

Chapter 7 of *Inequality* entitled, “No Degree and No Way Back to the Middle” gives a look at social injustice from a different perspective. This chapter tells the story of a middle-aged man by the last name of Martinelli who loses his job and has difficulty finding work because he does not have a college education. The chapter is a critical piece to the entire textbook as it gives undergraduate students and readers at will a realistic look at how bleak the job market can be when there is no college education to match the skill set required, and expectations of employers in modern society are higher than in past years. For workers like the man depicted in this chapter, no college education means relegation from former middle class status and seeking jobs that pay half of what he was accustomed to making. The way of modern society touts that everyone should pursue a college education if they have any hope of being successful and making it in the world. In Martinelli’s case, success in his career as a worker didn’t come from whether he got a college education or not, and he enjoyed many of life’s finer things on his middle-class salary.

This chapter demonstrates just how far societal expectations have evolved from where we used to be. Perhaps for undergraduate college students and other readers alike, there is a need to know and understand that there was a time when work ethic and learned skills were considered as valuable, if not more so, as a college education is today. Once upon a time, college degrees were pursued by the academically goal-oriented who needed a college education to work in certain fields. General, layman-type professions used to employ competent, loyal workers who were bright and hardworking without the red tape of the notion that a college education is crucial to getting a middle-class job – something that is presenting a challenge for many displaced workers like Martinelli.

The chapter also touts the impact and consequences of not having a college education. Undergraduate students studying in college may find that this issue resonates with them wholeheartedly and reinforces their rationale for why they are in college in the first place. It also illustrates the social injustice and disparity that now exist within modern society where experience is no longer valued and is being replaced with knowledge and skills obtained through a college education. The higher the degree, the better the job and likelihood of being employed.

Book Chapter: “A Story of Two Nations: Race and Wealth

The chapter “A Story of Two Nations: Race and Wealth” is another important one, as it covers yet another facet to racial inequality – an issue that is now receiving greater attention than ever before, thanks to social media and television. There is the presupposition that the United States has become a divided nation and is made of up two nations consisting of blacks and whites. The chapter outlines what the black middle class looks like and shows the divide in wealth between black and white households. It is an excellent tie-in to the aforementioned chapter, “No Degree and No Way Back to the Middle,” as it reinforces how racial inequality and disparities continue to be a prevalent societal issue today, deepening the division between black and white. It gives the impression that employers sort employees into “categories” according to class. “Others employ the notion of class and often use broad occupational groupings to distinguish one class from another.” (Grusky and Szelenyi 119)

In particular, this chapter lays it all out in a way that gives readers a heightened awareness to the realities that exist in the country around racial inequality and to how it affects our society. The editors of the textbook wanted readers to understand that being employable and being employed are two completely different things in this day and time. Class has much to do with who is employed, and the type of job an individual holds is also determinant of what class

they fall into. This demonstration of levels within society is indicative of how its citizens are treated. The more wealthy and affluent one is, the better the opportunities and circumstances surrounding every facet of life are.

Conclusion

Throughout this analysis, a few chapters have been highlighted and reviewed for their validity against what the editors were trying to accomplish when they compiled the various chapters and articles to create this textbook. *Inequality* is considered one of the best textbooks on the subject because of the book's ability to provide an extensive look into the history of racism and social injustice, and shine a light on their ideological tenets. This analysis, however, is just the tip of the iceberg with regard to everything the textbook has to offer on this topic. Students who are pursuing a degree in Sociology or other related fields will find this book to be comprehensive, easy to read and understand, and a resource guide they will refer back to again and again as they move through their educational journey to secure a decent career. Although the book does not provide clearly defined recommendations or solutions for overcoming racism and social inequality, it gives readers enough background information on the topic to become inspired to implement change. One common theme running through the compilation is that the system uses racism and social injustice to its advantage in order to accomplish its goals.

Works Cited

Grusky, David, and Szonja Szelényi. *The Inequality Reader: Contemporary and Foundational Readings in Race, Class, and Gender, Second Edition*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2011.
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