Recent years have seen an increasing amount of empirical and theoretical work concerned with economic inequalities. Among other things, these investigations have focused on people's perceptions of the 'fairness', 'justice', 'equity', and 'legitimation' of the unequal distribution of economic rewards and benefits. Such studies rest on experimental (laboratory) research, survey interviews, the utilization of vignettes to elicit judgments about respondents' views of differential earnings, and on more strictly theoretical attempts to uncover the various rationales and justifications that underlie people's views about the unequal distribution of economic rewards.

Although these various investigations differ in their theoretical and methodological approaches to studying the normative standing of economic inequalities, all appear to reach a similar conclusion: what most people find fair, just, equitable, or legitimate in regard to distribution is generally consistent with the actual distribution of rewards or outcomes. This finding is very much in line with Homans' observation that 'What is, is always turning into what is right'.

If indeed people's views concerning the 'rightness' (normative acceptability) of economic inequality are a mere reflection of the existing patterns of economic distribution, then we must come to recognize this. It is also important to try to uncover the general principle utilized by people in making assessments about the equity, justice, or legitimation of an unequal distribution of economic rewards. That is, we need to establish how 'what is' turns into 'what is right'. Finally, the factual status of whatever principle is involved in this regard must be established. It is these issues that constitute the major concerns of this paper.

I will begin by reviewing three different studies focusing on the unequal distribution of rewards. Each of these has appeared in the official journal of the American Sociological Association, the American Sociological Review, and each has received considerable attention by other sociologists. Presumably, then, they have reached a very wide audience of sociologists - both in the United States and
Derek L. Phillips  The normative standing of economic inequalities

elsewhere. It is for these reasons that I have selected these particular studies for examination.

Equity and Justice

The first of these is Cook's laboratory research on the equity and justice of allocating rewards.3 According to Cook, the conditions under which a concern with justice is likely to emerge in social systems are as follows:

The key concept, a distributive rule, specifies how the dimensions of evaluation in a social system (e.g., skill level, seniority, etc.) are related to the allocation of valued outcomes in that system. If the rule is perceived to be legitimate and if an individual knows his position (or that of any other member of the system) on the dimension of evaluation, then he can determine whether or not he (or any other actor) has been treated inequitably.4

Thus, says Cook, a state of equity exists if the actual allocation of outcomes coincides with the individual's beliefs about how they should be distributed within the system.5 Consider how this works.

If someone accepts that, say, skill level is the legitimate basis for allocation, then he expects that he will receive the economic rewards (income, salary) which he 'deserves' by virtue of his own level of skill. Such an expectation holds for the individual himself and for others as well. Further, says Cook, this expectation includes both an anticipatory and a normative aspect: an individual not only anticipates that people (himself included) will receive a differential allocation of rewards, but believes that they should receive such an unequal allocation.6 When people's rewards are not consistent with their differential skill levels, they see an injustice as having occurred.7

But how do people come to form expectations about what they and others should receive, and how is the justice of one or another distribution assessed? In the easiest case, people actually know everyone else's position on the dimension of evaluation and simply form expectations about the appropriate distribution of outcomes on the basis of this knowledge. Thus with differences in level of skill, it is expected that individuals will be differentially rewarded on the basis of the varying degrees of skill. If, however, knowledge concerning people's degree of skill is not available, how can someone decide what he or others deserve? In such instances, we are told, individuals tend to form expectations for an appropriate distribution of rewards on the basis of the actual distribution.8 What this means is the following. When an individual does not know his actual level of skill, extent of contribution, or the like, he will judge his own level on the basis of the rewards that he receives. Thus, someone may conclude that he must have a higher degree of skill or be contributing more than others simply by virtue of the fact that he is

319
receiving higher rewards than they are. Conversely, he will conclude that those other persons who are receiving high rewards must, therefore, be deserving of them on the basis of a greater degree of skill or greater contributions.

In those many situations where the actual position on the relevant dimension of evaluation—skill, ability, contribution, 'know-how'—is unknown for most other persons, individuals will follow a particular mode of reasoning: 'So and so must have a high (or low) degree of the relevant attribute; otherwise he would not be receiving such a high (or low) salary (wage, income, etc.). And since I receive a lower (or higher) salary than he does, I must have a lesser (or greater) amount of the relative attribute'. Although Cook may be correct in her portrayal of the actual processes at work when people must decide whether or not they are being treated justly, it is also clear that these processes tend to justify the status quo.

**Justice**

The conclusions of Cook, as I noted earlier, are based on laboratory studies. Jasso and Rossi, by contrast, examine people's judgments about the just distribution of earning by way of a large-scale survey study. They utilize vignettes about fictitious individuals and families, involving a combination of characteristics such as sex, marital status, number of children, education, occupation, and earnings. Their purpose is to elicit from a sample of respondents a set of judgments about the 'justice' of the earnings enjoyed by the persons described in the vignettes.

Thus, for example, one vignette might describe someone as an unmarried man, with a university education, employed as an engineer, and earning $25,000 per year; while another vignette might describe someone as a married woman, with two children, with a high school education, employed as a secretary, and earning $10,000 per year. After reading each vignette, the respondents were asked to evaluate the fairness or justice of the salary which the person is described as receiving: fairly paid, extremely overpaid, etc.

As the authors note, there are a number of possibilities for the just distribution of earnings. One is equality, with equal salaries for all workers. A second possibility would be the payment of differential salaries on a completely random basis. And a third obvious possibility (the existing state of affairs) is for people to receive unequal salaries on the basis of such personal characteristics as sex, marital status, educational accomplishments, and occupational level, and such family characteristics as number of children and the earning of one's husband or wife. The findings presented by Jasso and Rossi indicate clearly that people's judgments of the justice of earnings support an unequal distribution of salaries. In general, there is consensus that educational attainment and occupational prestige are the most important determinants of what constitute just earnings; the higher someone is on these two dimensions, the higher the salary that he or she ought justly to
receive. This holds true as well for the earnings of married couples.  

There is also, however, consensus (among both men and women) that for men and women with the same level of education and the same occupational status, justice requires that the men be paid more. This can be seen from the following estimates of 'fair earnings' for people with varying characteristics: (1) for persons described as having the lowest level of education and the lowest occupational prestige: unmarried man: $8,474, unmarried woman: $7,125, married man: $9,217, married woman: $8,398, and married couple: $13,188; (2) for persons having a middle level of education and occupational prestige: unmarried man: $12,507, unmarried woman: $10,861, married man: $13,803, married woman: $12,801, and married couple: $23,813, and (3) for a couple who are both university graduates and with jobs such as 'lawyer': unmarried man: $16,059, unmarried woman: $14,040, married man: $18,448, married woman: $17,187, and married couple: $34,594.

In other words, the respondents in this study believe that a just, distribution of salaries requires that those persons with high educational attainment and high occupational status be paid more than those who are lower on these two dimensions. When men and woman (married or unmarried) have the same level of education and the same jobs, however, the respondents believe that men should be paid more than women. With regard to the relative salaries paid to people in the United States, then, the judgments of just earnings are very much in line with the actual distribution of earnings; in general, higher salaries are associated with a higher level of education and occupational prestige, and men are usually paid more than women with the same amount of education and doing the same kind of work.

Based partly on the above research concerning perceptions of justice in regard to earned incomes, Jasso advances a theory of distributive justice. She argues that the 'sentiment of justice' in the individual is largely a function of the ratio of the actual share of a good to the perceived just share. In other words, justice evaluation

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\text{justice evaluation} = \frac{\text{actual share}}{\text{just share}}
\]

If, for example, someone feels that his just income ought to be $20,000 per year and his actual salary is $20,000, then he will feel that he is being treated in a just manner. If, on the other hand, he believes that his just salary ought to be $20,000 and his actual salary is above or below this amount, then his justice evaluation will be that he is being unjustly over- or underpaid.

As Jasso emphasizes, an individual’s perception of what is just for him or her depends ultimately on the actual distribution of the relative characteristics (e.g., occupation and education) and of the goods (e.g., salaries) in the relevant social system. In her words:

The sentiment of distributive justice bridges the gap between individualistic and
collectivistic explanations; for it is experienced by the individual and measurable in the individual but, unlike hunger or thirst or fatigue, cannot even occur except by reference to the distribution of a good among a collection of humans.\textsuperscript{15}

Thus, whether someone feels justly or unjustly rewarded depends not on his or her own ‘objective’ situation, but ultimately on an assessment of how rewards are actually distributed. Whereas the solidary individual can experience hunger or thirst without the presence of others, he or she can experience the justice sentiment only by reference to the situation of other persons. This means, as I already noted, that whether people feel that their own salaries are just or not is determined ultimately by the actual state of affairs in their own society. This conclusion is common to the work of Cook and of Jasso and Rossi.

**Legitimation**

Having considered Cook’s laboratory study and Jasso and Rossi’s survey research (as well as Jasso’s theoretical views), I turn now to an examination of a third approach to the normative acceptability of economic inequalities: Della Fave’s recent article on the legitimation of stratification.

‘Legitimation’, states Della Fave, ‘refers to a belief on the part of a large majority of the populace that institutionalized inequality in the distribution of primary resources – such as power, wealth, and prestige – is essentially right and reasonable’.\textsuperscript{16} His major objective, Della Fave says, is to advance and defend propositions in which ‘legitimation is treated as a process in which the structure of the larger society becomes incorporated within the inner consciousness of the individual’.\textsuperscript{17}

Reviewing the work of Marx, Mosca and Parsons – who represent, respectively, the approaches of radical conflict theory, elite conflict theory, and functionalism – he concludes that there is a common thread running through their work: ‘In each case there is an ideology that justifies a highly stratified system of resource allocation. But this ideology also allocates feelings of potency, competence, and, above all, importance and self-worth in a manner congruent with that of primary resources’.\textsuperscript{18} Della Fave is concerned with understanding how ideologies that justify structured inequality in the distribution of primary resources become part of the social consciousness of individuals.\textsuperscript{19} He provides an answer to this in the main proposition of his theory: ‘The level of primary resources that an individual sees as just for him/herself, relative to others, is directly proportional to his/her level of self-evaluation’.\textsuperscript{20}

Through a process of comparison between the primary resources held by themselves and others, then, people develop a certain level of self-evaluation. The individual’s perception of the social values that others attribute to him or her is
what Della Fave defines as self-evaluation. Therefore, people with relatively high self-evaluations, i.e., those who have much of the most important primary resources, will see themselves as 'deserving' of high levels of resources relative to others. And, conversely, those with relatively low self-evaluations will view themselves as deserving relatively little. In short, self-evaluations result from the possession of such valued resources as power, wealth, and prestige; and, in turn, people's self-evaluations help determine what they see as just for themselves.

Della Fave also deals with a related question concerning the circumstances under which the stratification system of any society will have relatively high or relatively low levels of legitimacy. Here, he introduces a corollary of his first proposition: 'The strength of legitimacy of stratification in any society is directly proportional to the degree of congruence between the distribution of primary resources and the distribution of self-evaluations.'

Underlying these two propositions is the 'self-evaluation hypothesis' which describes various social psychological processes that operate within the confines of asymmetrical relationships embedded in the major social institutions of a society. Most importantly, those who have the greatest wealth, power, and prestige will also be perceived as actually being superior. And those who are perceived as superior by others will come to believe that they deserve to be more richly rewarded. Thus it becomes part of the social consciousness of individuals that their level of primary resources is perceived, in Della Fave's words, as 'just'. So long as people's self-evaluations are congruent with their actual command of primary resources, there will be a high level of legitimacy (Della Fave's second proposition). Hence, when a large majority of the populace believes that the distribution of primary resources is just, stratification is 'legitimate'.

Della Fave acknowledges that the legitimation process is self-reinforcing and observes that 'the circular logic of the legitimation process reinforces the stratified status quo'. He goes on to note that, under most circumstances, stratification is legitimate in that there is no incongruence between the distribution of primary resources and self-evaluations. In fact, he says, the self-reinforcing legitimation process of stratification has been 'nearly universal'.

In his focus on the legitimation of stratification, Della Fave follows Weber in defining legitimacy in terms of people's 'beliefs' that various social arrangements are essentially right and reasonable. They both treat legitimacy empirically; they are concerned with people's attitudes and beliefs and the conduct which ensues on the basis of them. Della Fave, of course, goes beyond Weber in trying to specify the particular social psychological mechanism that explain how legitimation of stratification becomes part of the consciousness of the individuals who make up society.

Both Weber and Della Fave mention the need of people to see their advantages or disadvantages as 'deserved'. Weber says that 'he who is more favoured feels the
never ceasing need to look upon his position as in some way 'legitimate', upon his advantages as 'deserved', and the others' disadvantages as being brought about by the latter's fault'. And Della Fave states that 'Those in power are assumed to be contributing more and, therefore, are seen as deserving of greater rewards'. He then asks *why* people tend to perceive those in power as contributing more, and answers this in terms of status attribution theory. The entire process through which the appropriate level of reward is determined is 'circular, in that the very fact of someone's being wealthy or powerful influences our assessment of 'contributions' and, on the basis of such assessment, we judge that person worthy of such a high reward'. In other words, people are seen as deserving of high rewards because the fact that they have such high rewards is taken as evidence that they are contributing more than other people. This, it may be recalled, is very much the process uncovered by Cook in her laboratory research.

**Normative Acceptability**

What is most striking about the general results of Cook, Jasso and Rossi, and Della Fave is the great similarity in their conclusions concerning the normative acceptability of economic inequalities and in the underlying rationales supporting such inequalities. All three studies indicate that people not only expect that there *will* be an unequal distribution of rewards, but they also feel that there *should* be such an unequal distribution. For Cook, justice requires that people receive the economic rewards (income, salary) that they deserve by virtue of their level of skill or ability. Similarly for Jasso and Rossi; there is consensus that a just distribution of salaries is one determined mainly by the level of people's educational attainments and occupational prestige. And Della Fave, too, concludes that people expect that rewards should be differentially distributed on the basis of the contributions that individuals make.

All three investigations are also in agreement that people's assessments about the justice or legitimacy of what they themselves receive is a function of what others receive. When knowledge is lacking about the actual level of skill, education, occupation, or contribution of themselves or others, people will utilize the very fact of someone's being, for example, highly paid as evidence that he or she is indeed more highly skilled, more educated, or is contributing more than others.

Thus, these varying studies agree that there exists consensus (at least in the United States) about the normative acceptability of a highly stratified system of resource allocation. An unequal distribution of incomes or salaries is seen by people as just or legitimate in so far as individuals are rewarded on the basis of what they 'deserve' by virtue of their position on the relevant dimensions: skill, ability, education, occupation, or contribution.

It is interesting in this regard that the actual distributions of incomes found in both
capitalist and socialist societies are surprisingly similar. Also striking is the fact that the rules of allocation are little different in socialist than in capitalist societies. Under both sets of economic arrangements, there is the same principle at work: differentials in pay are appropriate rewards for those men and women who have undergone the training or schooling necessary for performing jobs which require unusual skill or talent, who bear heavy responsibility, are highly productive, or contribute more to the social and economic welfare of the society. Those who produce or contribute more ought, therefore, to get more in return. This standpoint can be summed up in the following general principle: those who contribute more are deserving of higher incomes.

This general principle underlies the conception of justice, equity, and legitimation found in the three studies considered above, those found in a large variety of other writings, and constitutes the major principle for distributing economic rewards in most industrialized societies in the world today. Since it is central to income distributions and to people's beliefs about the acceptability of such unequal distributions, it is worth considering in some detail.

Della Fave, it may be recalled, states that there is a common thread running through the work of radical conflict theorists, elite conflict theorists, and functionalists: ‘In each case there is an ideology that justifies a highly stratified system of resource allocation’. While Della Fave speaks of an ‘ideology’ in this regard, Cook speaks of people’s ‘beliefs’, and Jasso and Rossi speak of consensus about what people ‘think’ with regard to the distribution of economic benefits. Nevertheless, all of these investigators seem to agree that people make judgments about what ‘ought to be’ on the basis of ‘what is’. That is to say, there appears to be widespread consensus that the normative standing of a particular distribution of incomes or salaries is ultimately justified by something like the general principle mentioned above: those who contribute more are deserving of higher incomes and salaries. This, as I noted at the outset, is consistent with Homans’ observation that ‘What is, is always turning into what is right’.

The crucial question, which all of these authors ignore, is the following: What is the factual status of the general principle which seems to have such an important influence on people’s judgments about the justice, equity, or legitimation of the unequal distribution of economic rewards? It is to this question that I now turn.

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The general principle to be examined is, I repeat, that those who contribute more are deserving of higher wages and salaries. Thus, the major elements involved in people's assessment of the normative acceptability of unequal economic benefits or of social stratification are contributions, rewards, and desert. Implicit in the application of this principle are (at least) the following claims: (1) the relative
contributions of different persons or different positions (occupations, jobs) can be accurately determined, (2) the differential rewards associated with differential contributions can be adequately explained, and (3) there is a satisfactory justification for the element of deservingness in the relation between contributions and economic rewards. Let us, then, examine these claims seriatum.

Relative Contributions

It is, of course, sociologists in the functionalist tradition who more than anyone else argue that people must be differentially rewarded in accordance with the 'functional importance' of the positions they fill. But even Marx held this view to some extent. During the first stage of post-capitalist society, he said, the governing principle is 'From each according to his capacity, to each according to his contribution'. How, then, is the functional importance or relative contribution of various positions to be established?

Perhaps in the paradigm case of the physician it can convincingly be demonstrated that there is a functional requirement for a society to have highly trained specialists who are able to meet people's health needs, and that they contribute greatly to the social welfare of a society's citizens. Probably everyone would agree that the chief of surgery of a large hospital makes a greater contribution than a dishwasher in the same hospital. But the case of the physician is a misleadingly simple aspect of the question under consideration. After all, the health needs of a society are widely recognized as 'basic', and the physician is a clearcut example of someone who contributes to meeting these basic needs. Yet, even the case of the physician involves considerable difficulties. For example, based purely on considerations of their contributions to a society's health needs, whose contribution is greater: the obstetrician who is involved in seeing that mother and child both survive, the pediatrician who cares for sick children, the internist who ministers to an enormous variety of illnesses and diseases, the heart specialist, or the psychiatrist who helps to alleviate mental turmoil and suffering?

The difficulties encountered in the case of medical care pale into insignificance, however, when compared with the problem of judging occupations and professions of a largely dissimilar nature. Who contributes more to the social or economic welfare of a society: the chemist who works on developing synthetics for clothing or the one who works on developing weapons of chemical warfare, the clergyman or the economist, the 'pop' entertainer or the construction worker, the philosopher or the policeman, the university teacher or the kindergarten teacher? We need not extend the list to be impressed with the enormity of trying to establish the relative contributions of various positions to a society's social or economic welfare.

There is further the problem – especially in so-called advanced societies – of
establishing each individual's proportional contribution to jointly made products and to goods and products involving techniques and machines for which the individual him- or herself is not responsible. When, as is often the case nowadays, several persons are involved in producing a common product or result, there is usually no device at hand for measuring the comparative contribution of several different individuals.

Some sociologists do, of course, attempt to establish the functional importance—and, by assumption, the relative contributions—of various positions. The trouble with these studies is that they may not be measuring the respondent's own personal evaluation of the importance or contribution of various positions, but rather their own assessment of what they view as the existing or factual standing of the different positions. As Parkin points out: 'what is often being measured is the perception of the existing status hierarchy, and not our own private evaluations of the way positions ought to be socially ranked, if indeed they ought to be ranked at all'.

But even if, pace Parkin, we were able to accurately determine people's 'private evaluations', this would not address the question under review here: Can the relative contribution of different positions be accurately determined?

The answer to this question is that we simply do not know how to estimate the relative contributions of tasks employed in different spheres of human endeavor. Although we might reach global agreement when comparing the contributions of say, a brain surgeon and a street cleaner, we encounter great difficulties when it comes to, for example, the artist, clergyman, teacher, and social worker. To the extent that relative contributions can be accurately assessed, this occurs on the basis of comparisons within rather than between various kinds of jobs or work. That is to say, it is at least sometimes possible to assess the relative contribution of several bricklayers, football players, art historians, dishwashers, or surgeons. But even here, as we know, the problems can be formidable.

With regard, then, to the general principle that those who contribute more are deserving of higher wages and salaries, at least one of the claims implicit in the application of this principle is false: the relative contributions of different persons or positions can, in general, not be accurately determined.

**Rewards**

If the above conclusion is correct, it has obvious implications for the second claim implicit in the general principle concerning the distribution of economic benefits, i.e., that the differential rewards associated with different positions can be adequately explained. For if, as I have argued, people's relative contributions cannot be accurately determined, then the economic benefits they receive cannot be a function of their actual contributions. If people's relative contributions cannot usually be accurately determined, then obviously they are not being differentially
rewarded because of their differential contributions.

This conclusion, I hold, is correct. As the economist Jan Pen, notes, it is simply nonsense to claim, as some economists do, that inequalities in income in some way reflect differences in contributions or 'marginal productivity'. He points out that a secondary school teacher may earn more than a primary school teacher, but observes that this has very little to do with marginal productivity. What counts is that 'society feels that a secondary school teacher ought to earn more'.

He is further up the ladder, and the number of rungs can be measured by the differences in income. This is a social evaluation. The Civil Service hierarchy is reflected by the salary scales, and top incomes in business are set by what the top executives themselves consider right and proper. This explanatory principle does not apply solely to wages and salaries; it also operates in other areas, such as the fees of lawyers and doctors, although in these cases market conditions naturally cut across it.

Thus, it is not contribution or marginal productivity that determines the incomes of primary school, secondary school, or university teachers, of doctors, lawyers, economists, sociologists, or business executives – or their salaries relative to one another – but various societal views as to what is appropriate, the influence of tradition and various vested interests, the strength of labor unions and professional organizations, and the influence of the government. (Think of differences in the relative prestige and salaries paid to physicians in the Soviet Union and the Netherlands in this regard.)

Some sociologists, however, interpret the fairly high degree of congruence between the prestige rankings of various occupations and the economic rewards received as evidence that the rewards are a result of the prestige rankings of the positions – and of their functional importance or contribution to a society's economic or social welfare. A more correct interpretation, I believe, would reverse the direction of the presumed causal sequence; that is, people perceive that certain positions receive high economic rewards and, for that reason, they rank them highly. Such an interpretation receives support from Della Fave's formulation of the way individuals actually do reason in this regard: the very fact of some people receiving higher economic rewards influences our perception of their contributions and, on the basis of such assessment, we judge those persons worthy of such high rewards.

In fact, as Della Fave also concludes, most people appear to accept the evaluations of the existing prestige and stratification hierarchies. This generally means that they accept the existing hierarchies upheld by the dominant class in the society in which they live. Parkin is correct when he states that: 'In so far, then, as there seems to be a general agreement about the factual status order in its day-to-day operation, it would be more realistic to see it as a tribute to the effectiveness of the socialization process than as evidence for some sort of moral consensus indepen-
dently arrived at by different class members'.

At least when different occupations and professions are being compared, then, there is no way of adequately accounting for differential rewards as a function of differential contributions. But even is there were – even if contributions could be fairly accurately measured – there would remain the problem of justifying the differential salaries and wages attached to the different positions. How much, for instance, should an airline pilot be paid relative to the mayor of a large city, and why?

Still, it does appear possible to examine the relationship between contributions and rewards within a particular occupational category. Broom and Cushing are among the few to attempt such an examination. For that reason, their research deserves attention here. Recognizing the many problems involved in assessing contributions (and especially those supposedly related to the survival or optional functioning of society), they specify that the positions to be examined in their investigation should carry high and measurable responsibility (i.e., should be contributing to some specified goal or accomplishment), that there should be a clear way of assessing performance, and that there should indeed be differential rewards. 'Senior management positions in capitalist industrial organizations', they state, 'come as close to satisfying these criteria as any'. Thus, their research focuses on a sample of large, publicly held companies within the private sector of the US economic system.

The logic of their approach required, of course, that they look at companies that are homogeneous with regard to types of business activity in order to control for differences in the scarcity of rewards and of qualified persons. All of their comparisons, therefore, are within and not between business activity types. With regard to the contributions of those studied – top management – they are concerned with the 'responsibility' of such persons. They argue as follows: 'The major responsibility for a company and its success or failure is assumed to rest with the top management of a firm. Clearly, they are responsible to a variety of clients. They are obliged to protect the interests of creditors and shareholders, to maximize profit and growth. They also have obligations to the company's employees...'

The actual 'performance' of companies is measured by their profitability, and 'compensation' is measured on the basis of the total compensation (salary, bonuses, fees, etc.) received by the chief executive officer in each company. Based on data concerning 859 companies – producing, for example, beer, cosmetics, soft drinks, tobacco, food, steel, and textiles – Broom and Cushing hypothesize that 'Company performance is positively related to the total compensation of chief executive officers'. Consistent with the view that rewards are a function of contributions, they reason that greater compensation should be associated with higher company performance.
If we accept that organizations providing a product or service have positions that are the loci of responsibility, then if the company is to perform its functions (that is, to do its work and survive), the responsibility inherent in such positions must be competently discharged. Rewards should be related to such competent performances so that the company can retain the service of the competent performer.50

In fact, however, they found no empirical support for their hypothesis. Contrary to the assumed linkage between contribution and reward, their data showed that company performance is not positively related to the total compensation paid to the chief executive officers.51

If the differential rewards received by the chief executive officers within each of a wide variety of business types are not a function of their differential contributions to the success of their companies, how, then, are these differential rewards to be explained? One answer, Broom and Cushing suggest, is that large companies can provide the greatest amount of compensation with the least visible impact on the balance sheets.52 The mechanism for this reward pattern, they observe, is simple indeed: 'chief executive officers influence, when they do not determine, their own compensation'.53

The research of Broom and Cushing shows that even when comparisons are made within similar types of companies, there is no evidence to support the widely-held view that people are unequally rewarded on the basis of their differential contributions. This being the case, it is not surprising that such evidence is also lacking when comparisons are made across different types of tasks. As with the virtual impossibility of estimating the relative contributions of different occupations and professions, we do not know how to adequately explain the differential economic rewards associated with these different positions.

In regard, then, to the general principle that those who contribute more are deserving of higher wages and salaries, a second claim implicit in the application of this principle is also false: the differential rewards associated with different positions cannot be adequately explained.

Desert

It may be recalled that I am concerned here with the factual status of the general principle that those persons who contribute more are deserving of higher wages and salaries. Thus far, I have concluded that two claims implicit in the application of this principle are false: the relative contributions of different persons or positions cannot be accurately determined, and the differential rewards associated with different positions cannot be adequately explained. If I am correct, then it would appear pointless to examine critically the third claim implicit in the principle, i.e., that there is a satisfactory justification for the element of 'deservingness' in the relation between contribution and economic rewards. After all, if there is no
demonstrable empirical relationship between contribution and rewards, then no justification for deservingness is required.

Against this conclusion, however, two things can be said. First of all, there are certainly some instances where we are able to roughly calculate people’s relative contributions. For instance, a psychologist who has published several highly regarded books and is widely recognized as an excellent teacher undoubtedly contributes more to his discipline (and to his department and university) than does a colleague who publishes nothing and is considered a very bad teacher. Similarly, a dishwasher who washes more dishes, both faster and cleaner, than his colleagues contributes more to the enterprise where he is employed than they do. And oftentimes those persons who are acknowledged as contributing more do receive higher wages or salaries. In fact, we can probably all point to situations where relative contributions are not in serious dispute and where economic benefits are a function of differential contributions. Under such circumstances, the claim that those whose contributions are greater deserve greater economic benefits is obviously relevant.

Secondly, it is at least conceivable that in the future it might be possible to accurately measure the relative extent of contributions both within and across different occupations and professions, and that it might be further possible to assure that differential economic benefits would be closely related to people’s relative contributions. Here, too, it is necessary to show that those who contribute more do indeed deserve higher salaries or wages. For these reasons, then, it is well worth exploring the claim that people who contribute more are deserving of the differential rewards which they receive.

If someone can be said to be ‘deserving’ of something, it must be in virtue of some possessed characteristic, quality, or prior activity. That is, judgments about desert are justified on the basis of certain facts about individuals. ‘It is because no one can deserve anything unless there is some basis or ostensible occasion for the desert’, writes Feinberg, ‘that judgments of desert carry with them a commitment to the giving of reasons’. We cannot claim, for example, that Smith deserves our praise or thanks although he has done ‘nothing in particular’. In asserting that Smith deserves praise or thanks (or punishment, or whatever), we must be ready to answer the question ‘For what?’ Unless we can supply a basis for Smith’s desert, we are not really using the correct terminology. If someone deserves something, it must be for some particular reason. Thus, the notion of desert requires a basis (a reason).

However, not any basis will do. Whatever facts serve as the basis of someone’s desert must be facts about him or her. If Smith deserves a higher salary than he is now earning, it must be in virtue of his previous training, skill, responsibilities, contributions, or something similar, and not because he will be angry or disappointed if he doesn’t earn more money. Of course, we might still say that it would
be a good thing for Smith if he were given a higher salary (because otherwise, for instance, he will be depressed and unhappy). Although this fact might be a reason for his employer’s action, it cannot be the basis of Smith’s desert.

‘Deserving’ something is not the same as being ‘entitled’ to it. Being entitled to something involves a right, claim, or promise. An individual may be deserving of, say, a higher salary in virtue of some specific thing that he has done. Or he may be entitled to a higher salary on the basis of his having been promised by his employer or because he has satisfied clearly-defined conditions of his work role. Thus, individuals can be entitled to rewards that they do not deserve, or deserving of rewards to which they are not entitled. Imagine that someone is to be selected for promotion to supervisor from among those working in a particular organization. One of the candidates, Smith, is widely recognized as ‘deserving’ of promotion to this post: he is the best trained, most responsible and reliable, and has the greatest skill of all those who apply. But another candidate, Jones, although lacking all the attributes possessed by Smith, is clearly ‘entitled’ to promotion to supervisor: on the basis of a long-forgotten rule that makes mandatory the selection of the most senior employee, he qualifies for promotion. Clearly, then, desert and entitlement are in conflict here – as they are in numerous real-life situations.

It makes a considerable difference, of course, whether economic rewards are to be linked to desert, on the one hand, or to entitlement, on the other. But since my concern here is solely with desert I will say nothing more about entitlement. As noted earlier, there appears to be almost universal acceptance of the idea that people who contribute more deserve greater rewards. This holds for capitalist and socialist societies alike.

The question, then, is: Do people really deserve the differential rewards which they receive, either in capitalist or socialist societies? Della Fave, Cook and Jasso and Rossi apparently think that they do, since they all take the populace’s views about institutionalized inequality as the ultimate criterion for its justness or legitimacy. If, as Cook and Della Fave argue, the very fact that some persons are wealthy or powerful is taken as evidence by most people that they are indeed contributing more than other persons and, therefore, are deserving of such high rewards, then those with most of the ‘spoils’ appear to deserve them. The fact that most people accept the ideological standpoint that those with higher incomes and greater power are contributing more, and hence deserve their greater rewards, settles it for Cook and Della Fave.

But Marx, to the contrary, was not so willing to accept desert as an ideological justification for highly stratified systems of resource-allocation. Despite his critical remarks about it being a mistake to put the principal stress on distribution, Marx was quite sensitive to certain normative issues concerning who got what, and why. Rather than being totally unconcerned with distribution, his attack was directed mainly at those who considered distribution as ‘independent’ of the mode
of production. He did, in fact, give sympathetic attention to questions of distribution, albeit in a somewhat unclear and unsystematic manner. Further, his famous notion of 'exploitation' makes sense only in light of a (largely implicit) concern with distribution.

According to Marx, exploitation involves the appropriation of the surplus product of a class of workers by a class of non-workers. This surplus product is constituted by the quantity of goods produced minus the quantity of goods required to sustain the work force. In this sense of exploitation, no mistreatment or physical oppression need be involved. Exploitation here is employed in a technical descriptive sense as referring to appropriation of a surplus product by non-producers. In order to specify Marx's normative view on exploitation, i.e., as something wrong or undesirable, it is necessary to locate particular normative premises that are concealed in his writings. This task has recently been undertaken by Arneson in his article 'What's Wrong With Exploitation?'. and I draw on his arguments in the following discussion.

Noting that Marx's ethical views are never clearly set forth, Arneson attempts to come to grips with what he terms 'wrongful exploitation'. Wrongful exploitation occurs, says Arneson, 'where there is appropriation of a surplus product by nonproducers and mistreatment or (to employ another idiom) violations of the rights of the producers'. According to Arneson, there are two normative ideas fused together in Marx's notion of wrongful exploitation.

The first normative premise implicit in Marx's writings is that people ought to get what they deserve. With Marx's notion of deservingness, people can be viewed as responsible for their intentions (though they need not always be) but certainly not for the actual results of acting on their intentions. This is because, under capitalism, these results are causally influenced by contingencies over which people have no control. When individuals lack the empirical prerequisites for developing the willingness or ability to make economic contributions, it is questionable to dispense blame to economic malingerers or to dispense superior rewards to the more successful. In a market economy, people are rewarded on the basis of contributions which vary because of the influence of what Marx regarded as morally arbitrary factors such as social circumstances, intelligence, and, most importantly, ownership of wealth. The rough idea, says Arneson, is that people should be viewed as 'deserving' economic remuneration only for trying, only for effort or sacrifice expended.

As Arneson sees it, the origin of Marx's conception of wrongful exploitation is to be found in his vision of a cooperative economy organized with tolerable efficiency and producing a given stock of goods for the satisfaction of people's needs at the cost of a given amount of human drudgery for everyone. In such a cooperative economy, each person deserves a fair share of economic goods in exchange for his or her willingness to contribute a fair share of the drudgery that is
required to produce those goods. Drudgery here is labor that is intrinsically disliked or dissatisfying. 'To be exploited', says Arneson, is 'to be forced to perform drudgery to an unfairly great extent, and to receive in return an unfairly small share of goods, where the forcing is brought about via an inequality of power favoring some economic agents over others'.

In the above quotation from Arneson, we find the second premise which he locates in the ideal of wrongful exploitation: the normative claim that people should not force others to do their bidding. As Marx pointed out in the Communist Manifesto: 'Communism deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society; all that it does is to deprive him of the power to subjugate the labour of others my means of such appropriation'. In Communist society, all will appropriate the labor of all. But it will be impossible for anyone to subject the labor of someone else to his own control by appropriating it. Thus, appropriation is wrong only when it involves the exercise of power by some over others to the disadvantage of the less powerful.

Technical exploitation, i.e., the appropriation of a surplus product by non-producers, will coincide with wrongful exploitation whenever one cannot distinguish the gainers and losers within an extremely unequal distribution of economic advantages in terms of the greater 'deservingness' of the former, and when the non-producers have vastly more social power than the producers.

On Arneson's reading, Marx believes that in the economic area people ought to get what they deserve, and that what they deserve varies with their efforts rather than with the outcome of such efforts (contributions). In this connection, he refers to Marx's remarks in The Critique of the Gotha Programme concerning the two stages through which he predicts postcapitalist society will pass. As Arneson points out, both stages are characterized in terms of principles of economic distribution.

In the first stage, the governing principle is 'From each according to his capacity, to each according to his labor contribution'. The core idea of this principle is that every individual will get what he deserves in proportion to his labor contribution. Under a society defined by moderate scarcity, this principle justifies economic inequalities by rewarding higher incomes to those workers who work longer, more intensely, or otherwise contribute more than other workers. Marx apparently believed that such inequalities were necessary to assure the willing cooperation and maximum productive effort of everyone participating in socialist society.

But given Marx's concerning with deservingness, he was obviously not satisfied with this governing principle. In fact, he observes that the principle sustains a right that is 'burdened with a bourgeois limitation'. He explains this limitation as follows:

The right of the producers is proportional to the labour they supply; the equality consists
in the fact that measurement is made with an equal standard, labour. But one man is
superior to another physically or mentally and so supplies more labour in the same time,
or can labour for a longer time; and labour, to serve as a measure, must be defined by its
duration or intensity, otherwise it ceases to be a standard of measurement. This equal
right is an equal right for unequal labour. It recognizes no class differences, because
everyone is only a worker like everyone else; but it tacitly recognizes unequal individual
endowment and thus productive capacity as natural privileges. It is, therefore, a right of
inequality, in its content, like every right.70

Thus Marx views it as morally problematic that people should be seen as 'deserving' those greater economic benefits which they are able to acquire by virtue of
their superior 'individual endowments'.

When the postcapitalist society attains the conditions for passing to the second
stage, however, Marx says that the operative principle of economic distribution
will then be: 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!'71
This formula, Arneson argues, is intended to satisfy the deservingness proviso
that inequalities in the division of economic benefits should not be established by
morally arbitrary factors (like physical or mental superiority).72 In Marx's words:

In a higher stage of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the
individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental
and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but
life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around
development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more
abundantly - only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its
entirety and society inscribe on its banner: From each according to his ability, to each
according to his needs!73

If all economic agents produce according to their capabilities, then all should be
remunerated equally in the sense that all have their needs satisfied to an equal
degree. Equal need-satisfaction entails, of course, an unequal distribution of
goods since people presumably have different needs and different degrees of
intensity concerning them. But because, under communism, there are more goods
available than there are claims for the goods, unequal needs can find equal
satisfaction. Furthermore, labor becomes 'life's prime want' in this higher stage,
so that there is no particular need to motivate people to contribute their labor.
After all, labor is no longer labor, properly speaking, no longer divided labor, but
becomes the individual's life want par excellence. Pointing out that the satisfaction
of the elementary needs for food, drink, clothing, and habitation are indispensable
for life74, Marx says that under communism each person will receive the social
benefits necessary for the satisfaction of these needs. And, of course, the need to
perform productive work and to form solitary relationships with others will also
be satisfied. What we have in this higher stage of communist society, then, is labor
as need, satisfaction of needs, consumption according to needs.

335
The important point in this second stage, Arneson observes, is that 'Society severs all connections between the amount of benefits one receives from the economy and the 'morally arbitrary' genetic and social factors that determine one's ability to contribute to that economy'. Whatever the many doubts that can be raised about the formula, 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs', it seems clear that its thrust is in the direction of rejecting the idea that people are 'deserving' of those economic benefits they are able to acquire by virtue of their superior individual endowments. One of the characteristics of wrongful exploitation, then, is that the division of the economic surplus in no way reflects differences in the extent to which people deserve their unequal benefits. For this reason, Arneson argues, exploitation is basically a distributive notion.

It is interesting that John Rawls, a very un-Marxist philosopher, has recently set forth similar arguments concerning desert. In discussing his two principles of justice he writes:

[They] seem to be a fair agreement on the basis of which those better endowed, or more fortunate in their social position, neither of which we can be said to deserve, could expect the willing cooperation of others.... Once we decide to look for a conception of justice that nullifies the accidents of natural endowment and the contingencies of social circumstance... we are led to these principles. They express the result of leaving aside those aspects of the social world that seem arbitrary from a moral point of view.

Rawls goes on to say:

Perhaps some will think that the person with greater natural endowments deserves those aspects and the superior character that makes their development possible. Because he is more worthy in this sense, he deserves the greater advantages that he could achieve with them. This view, however, is surely incorrect....[No] one deserves his place in the distribution of native endowments, any more than one deserves one's initial starting place in society....[His] character depends in large part upon fortunate family and social circumstances for which he can claim no credit.

Although Rawls is obviously not speaking here about the first stage through which postcapitalist society must pass, he clearly shares many of Marx's reservations about the extent to which people are deserving of their advantages. He is, of course, much more explicit about this than is Marx, and also appears to go beyond Marx in that he not only points out that people surely cannot claim credit for their initial starting point in society or their natural endowments but also questions whether they deserve their assets of superior character. Rawls' arguments, like Marx's, will – if correct – undercut all and any theories of economic distribution based on the principle that people should be rewarded differentially according to their labor contributions. Let us, then, examine these arguments more closely.

I noted earlier that for someone to be deserving of something, it must be in
Derek L. Phillips  The normative standing of economic inequalities

virtue of some possessed characteristic or prior activity. If people deserve, it is in virtue of those facts about themselves. But, say Rawls and Marx, these facts themselves are not deserved. Someone can be said to be deserving of the rewards accruing to greater labor contribution only if he or she is deserving of those facts (greater strength or intelligence, for example) which are responsible for greater contribution. That is, the facts which justify a desertclaim are the ultimate grounds for deserving. If, therefore, someone claims to deserve his greater economic rewards simply because it ‘happens’ to be true that he is stronger or more intelligent than other people, Rawls would reject such a claim. An individual who deserves something must be able to, in Rawls’ formulation, ‘claim credit’ for the ground being true to him. Since no one can claim credit for his strength or intelligence, no one deserves them, and no one deserves the differential rewards that follow from these facts about themselves.

This argument, at least as formulated, leads to an infinite regress. Imagine that Smith claims to deserve his high income in virtue of his greater ability to make contribution to labor. Then it has to be shown that he deserves his greater ability. His greater ability, he claims, is deserved in virtue of his having acquired enormous knowledge in the university. But he can deserve his university education only in virtue of some new ground, perhaps his high intelligence. But, again, he must now deserve to have high intelligence. This requires yet another grounding, so that the conditions for deserving are never fully satisfied by anyone. The consequence of this line of argument is that ‘no one ever deserves anything’. What this means, of course, is that the whole notion of desert disappears entirely.

Despite this unhappy conclusion, let us grant that the never-ending sequence of deserving to deserve to deserve... is inevitable. Let us accept Rawls’ conclusion that the facts about us which ground our desert-claims are ‘arbitrary from a moral point of view’. But even if we accept this, can it not still be said that we deserve something on the basis of what we do with those facts: our strength, intelligence, character, or whatever? Is this not perhaps what Arneson intends when he says that Marx relies on the implicit proviso that people should be viewed as ‘deserving’ of economic remuneration only for effort or sacrifice expended?

This appears to be the position taken by Michael Slote in a recent article where he distinguishes between two types of theories where desert contributions relate to economic distribution. Capitalist theories, he says, appeal to what he calls ‘desert for success’. As with Marx’s first principle, people are differently rewarded according to their contribution. Against the desert for success position, Slote says, ‘It is unfair for someone to reap more of the rewards society has to distribute simply because he happens, through greater innate talents or other ‘lucky breaks’, to (be able to) do more for society’. This objection is in line with those set forth by Marx and Rawls.

As an alternative to capitalist theories, Slote advocates socialist theories which
invoke what he calls a 'desert for effort' principle. According to this principle, rewarding desert for effort is associated with a kind of society in which economic benefits are distributed in keeping with the socialist motto 'to each according to his needs'. It is apparently assumed here, as is often done by egalitarians, that variations in need will not be large enough to spoil the equality of a distribution. For this reason. Slote speaks of desert-for-effort theory as egalitarian.

Aside from questions about variations in need, it is extremely doubtful whether this kind of theory is really socialist and egalitarian, as Slote claims. There are two reasons for this. One concerns the sort of objections raised by Rawls: no one deserves anything. That is, no one can deserve something in virtue of a ground (e.g., strength, intelligence) that just happens to be true of him or her. The questions is whether this also holds for effort. Rawls says that it does, asserting that 'it seems clear that the effort a person is willing to make is influenced by his natural abilities and skills and the alternatives open to him. The better endowed are more likely, other things being equal, to strive conscientiously, and there seems to be no way to discount for their greater good fortune'. Thus, the effort that an individual is able to make is influenced by such things as his family background. If, for example, someone is born to parents who emphasize the importance of trying, applying oneself, persevering in the face of difficulties, and the like, he or she will probably be able to exert more effort than someone whose upbringing placed less stress on these things. If this argument is correct, then the desert-for-effort theory will fail.

But even if the argument is not correct, there is still a problem with this sort of theory. Here I come to the second reason why it is not socialist and egalitarian. For whether or not they deserve whatever effort they are able to make, there simply are considerable differences in the amount of effort which people do exert. Whatever the reasons for this (genetic, social, psychological), it is a fact of life that some persons are able to work harder than others. If, as Slote advocates, people are to be rewarded on the basis of their efforts, this would in no way lead to an egalitarian society. Distribution in such a society would be governed by the principle 'to each according to his (differential) efforts', and not—as Slote suggests—by the principle 'to each according to his needs'. This is obviously not egalitarian.

Thus it appears that both of Marx's principles of economic distribution are subject to important criticisms. The first, where people are differentially rewarded according to their labor contribution, is unacceptable because people do not (Marx, Rawls, and Slote agree) really deserve the grounds which provide for the extent of their contribution. The second, which Slote formulates as a desert-for-effort principle, is unacceptable because either it (a) is subject to the same criticisms as the first principle, or (b) it is in no way socialist and egalitarian.

If, then, Arneson is correct in claiming that Marx held that people 'deserve' economic remuneration only for the effort expended, it cannot be the case—given
the goal of communist equality in the higher stage – that what people deserve in some way varies with the extent of their efforts. Therefore, neither of Marx’s two principles for postcapitalist society satisfy his deservingness proviso (as formulated by Arneson) that inequalities in the distribution of economic benefits should not be established by morally arbitrary factors. Since inequalities based on either labor contributions or extent of effort are established by morally arbitrary factors, they do not satisfy the deservingness proviso.

At the very least, then, the whole notion of desert is quite obviously problematic. If, as is often claimed, desert should depend entirely upon what is within an individual’s control, on his own efforts and the choices that he makes, then it is clear that people cannot be said to deserve their native endowments: intelligence, beauty, and perhaps strength and agility. Whether or not they deserve whatever they are able to achieve on the basis of what they do with their native endowments is called into question by Rawls and others. Yet, for me at least, it is not easy to accept such views. The argument that no one deserves anything is so totally deterministic as to leave no room at all for the exercise of individual responsibility, control, and initiative.

Nevertheless, these considerations of desert do raise serious questions about the general principle under review, i.e., that those who contribute more are deserving of higher wages and salaries. If this is to be a genuine principle for the distribution of economic benefits or rewards, then rewards must be proportional not to actual contributions but to that part of each person’s contributions which can be attributed to those abilities and efforts which he or she can be shown to really deserve. As things now stand, however, no one has yet been able to establish what people ‘really’ deserve. Thus, our conclusion as regards the third claim implicit in the application of the general principle is that it is false: there is no satisfactory justification for the element of deservingness in the (presumed) relation between contributions and rewards.

What, then, must we conclude with respect to the application of this principle which is so important to the normative acceptability of an unequal distribution of economic benefits? For me, the conclusion is clear: the three claims implicit in the application of this principle are all false. That is to say, there is no justification for applying the principle that those who contribute more are deserving of higher incomes. In other words, the general principle which guides people’s reasoning about the unequal distribution of incomes is based on false assumptions.
assumptions. What ought the sociologist to say about this? If, for example, people assume (as Cook and Della Fave say they do) that those with higher incomes must be contributing more and hence deserve greater economic rewards, ought the sociologist to make it clear that this is a mistaken assumption? And, if so, should he or she speak of its being based on ignorance? Further, if the term 'ignorance' is employed, isn't it just one's own opinion that assumptions based on ignorance are inferior to those based on knowledge?

One answer to these sorts of questions is that 'value-judgments' must be avoided by the social scientist. According to the dominant view in sociology, it is considered meaningless to refer to the truth or falsity of values. 'To judge the validity of such values', says Weber, 'is a matter of faith'. Parsons echoes this viewpoint, writing that 'Value-judgments cannot claim the objective validity of science, and science must, as a methodological ideal, be kept free from them'. In short, value-judgments ought not to be the concern of a science characterized by an emphasis on value-neutrality.

But by avoiding an important value-judgment, i.e., that people's reasoning about the normative standing of economic inequalities rests on incorrect assumptions, the sociologist would be giving a factually incorrect picture of the social mechanisms actually involved in the attribution of fairness, justice, or legitimation. Consider, for instance, Della Fave's arguments. He can be presumed not to recognize that people's belief in the legitimation of stratification is, in a sense, a false belief. But were he to acknowledge this, he could still refrain from making a value-judgment about it. He might, for example, remind us that his major concern is with understanding how legitimations of stratification become part of people's consciousness. After all, he does make clear that his primary question is: 'How do ideologies that justify structural inequality in the distribution of primary resources become part of the consciousness of individuals?'

Della Fave's concern, then, is with ideologies in the 'descriptive' sense, as comprising those beliefs about the legitimation of stratification which people hold in common. This sense of ideology is non-evaluative and non-judgmental; no praise or blame is involved in describing a group's ideology. His question, therefore, is how a particular ideology regarding the legitimation of stratification becomes part of people's consciousness.

Given his use of ideology in a completely descriptive sense, however, he ignores another relevant question which has direct bearing on the legitimation of stratification. Recall that he states that there is a common thread in the work of radical conflict theorists, elite conflict theorists, and functionalists: 'In each case there is an ideology that justifies a highly stratified system of resource allocation'. The interesting question which Della Fave ignores here (as do Cook and Jasso and Rossi in their work) is the truth or correctness of this ideology.

Because of his apparent wish to remain value-free, Della Fave is unwilling to
engage in ‘ideologiekritik’. As with most sociologists, ideology in the pejorative sense – as delusion or false consciousness – does not directly concern him. Therefore, Della Fave has nothing at all to say about the following crucial question concerning the legitimation of stratification: What is the factual status of the ideology which has such an important effect on people’s judgments about the legitimation of stratification, and how does it become part of the consciousness of individuals? Shouldn’t this be of concern to a sociologist?

Weber would, of course, say no. According to him, to say something about the value of the ideas which people hold is to violate the prohibition against making value-judgments. If people’s assessments about the legitimation of stratification are the result of their accepting certain ideologies about contributions, rewards, and deserts – as Della Fave says – then it is not for the sociologist to offer any value-judgment about this. To show that the acceptance of these ideologies has a great effect on people’s ideas about the legitimation of stratification is a proper part of the sociologist’s work. But it is not for him or her to say anything about the value of those ideologies. It may be proper for the sociologist to show that the ‘facts’ about contributions, rewards, and deserts are other than what people believe them to be, but it is not proper for him or her to offer a value-judgment about that.

This line of reasoning, however, has the consequence that we are permitted to give a factual description of the assumptions which guide people’s judgments and also an equally factual analysis of the social-psychological mechanisms involved in these assumptions, but we are not permitted to offer any value-judgments about whether it is good or bad for people’s thinking and actions to be guided by mistaken assumptions (‘ideologies’ in the pejorative sense). I agree with Weber and Della Fave that it is, of course, very important for the sociologist to understand people in the way in which they understand themselves. But surely the sociologist cannot be obliged to accept the fictions which may guide the thinking and actions of those whom he studies. Such a limitation on value-judgments, as Leo Strauss has noted, ‘exposes one to the danger of falling victim to every deception and every self-deception of the people one is studying; it penalizes every critical attitude; taken by itself, it deprives social science of every possible value’. Thus, says Strauss, the social scientist cannot ‘afford to rest content with the interpretation of a given phenomenon that is accepted by the group within which it occurs’.

Like Strauss (and, of course, Habermas and the critical theorists), I see no reason why the sociologist should not try to distinguish between (and evaluate) actions based on knowledge and those based on ignorance. This means a rejection of the views of those like Schutz and Winch who hold that corroboration by the subjects of social scientific inquiry constitute verification of the social scientist’s interpretation. I do agree that the subject’s views may often be relevant to the
validity of an interpretation. But in some instances, at least, a critique of the ideology accepted by the subjects of sociological inquiry is to be recommended. If an ideology serves to legitimate domination and justify unjust social practices or reprehensible institutional arrangements, then it is the responsibility of the sociologist to point out that a particular form of consciousness is an ideology (again, in the pejorative sense).

To see why this is so, we have only to recognize that all of us sometimes come to see that our current beliefs are not well-founded. Realizing as we do (and as practically all adult human beings do to some extent) that our claims, arguments, beliefs, and capacities for understanding are influenced by various internal and external factors of which we may be unaware, we must all acknowledge that what is ‘real’ for us may be different from what might be realized under ‘ideal’ circumstances. Whether one holds that various ‘distortions’ in our beliefs and understandings are the result of sexism, racism, our position in the social class hierarchy, or whatever, some sort of ideal community—where all participants in discussions are free, equal, and fully informed—is very often presumed. Those like Habermas and Apel who represent this general standpoint, emphasize the need to eliminate those structural constraints responsible for the gap between the actual and the ideal (the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’).

Given the presumption that most persons are at least sometimes aware of this distinction between the actual and the ideal, and the fact that all human beings are constantly involved in making and evaluating various claims through discussion and argumentation, there is no reason why it should be either inappropriate or impossible for the sociologist to advance and rationally justify a value-judgment about, in this case, people’s belief in the justice of income inequalities or the legitimacy of stratification. Like the rest of us, the subjects of Cook’s, Jasso and Rossi’s, and Della Fave’s inquiries presumably have had the experience of having had questions raised about their beliefs, assumptions, and understandings. Questions about their beliefs must in principle be something that can be understood by those being investigated (as well as by the sociologist). All of us do, in fact, revise previous beliefs on the basis of experience and new information. This is common to all human beings.

Specifically, I want to ground my value-judgment concerning people’s beliefs in the normative acceptability of economic inequalities upon the following principle: A belief, assumption, or whatever, has validity only if it is possible for people to be committed to it without that commitment being due to, or explainable in terms of, their being ignorant, or being kept ignorant of various relevant facts.

Thus, when I offer a value-judgment about people’s belief in the normative acceptability of economic inequalities, I do so on the basis of a principle that can be rationally justified. That is, my value-judgment is not simply, as Weber would have it, a matter of ‘faith’. Although I will not attempt a full-fledged justification
here, at least the following may be suggestive of what a more fully adequate justification would have to include.

I would want to emphasize the extent to which various critiques of our own actions and of different social arrangements often help provide a deeper self-understanding and a more adequate understanding of the societies in which we live. Certainly Marx and Freud make implicit use of something like this principle in much of their work. Marx speaks, for example, of certain ideas as illusory 'ideological reflexes', based on ignorance of the basic economic and social relationship which produce them and which they distortedly reflect. Freud devotes considerable attention to unmasking those ideas and standards that are accepted by individuals on the basis of ignorance or mere belief. Further, he can be seen as suggesting that neurosis is the equivalent of being kept ignorant of various internal facts about oneself. And Habermans speaks of the need for knowledge as coming to coincide with the interest in autonomy and responsibility, suggesting that autonomy is blocked by error and ignorance. In my view, an adequate justification of the above principle would have to consider to what extent freedom is the equivalent of acting out of knowledge—not ignorance. At the very least, the ability of people to think and act without their thoughts and actions resulting from ignorance is a necessary condition of human well-being.

Consider what this means for the legitimacy of stratification. Della Fave states that 'Legitimation refers to a belief on the part of a large majority of the populace that institutionalized inequality in the distribution of primary resources—such as power, wealth, and prestige—is essentially right and reasonable'. Clearly, such a belief may be, at the one extreme, entirely the result of people's being ignorant of certain relevant facts or of their being successfully kept ignorant about these facts by those who in some way 'control' the relevant information. At the other extreme, such a belief may be the result of the judgment of free and rational individuals who are knowledgeable about the relevant facts. Since my own conclusions regarding the relevant facts about contributions, rewards, and deserts (Della Fave's self-evaluation hypothesis) is that people's belief in the legitimation of stratification is based on ignorance, then institutionalized inequality in the distribution of primary resources is not legitimate.

Della Fave would avoid such a conclusion because his conception of legitimation ignores normative considerations and rests entirely on people's belief that institutionalized inequality is right and reasonable. From this standpoint, as he makes clear, the legitimation of stratification is almost universal. But it is no wonder that he reaches such a conclusion given his lack of concern for distinguishing between beliefs based on knowledge and those based on ignorance. In this sense, he follows the lead of Weber; if people come to believe that the existing system of stratification is legitimate, then it is legitimate. They both hold a 'thin theory' of legitimacy; they equate the belief by people that a practice is legitimate with its actual legitimacy.
It is not that Weber and Della Fave avoid making value-judgments while I do so quite willingly. No, the major difference between us is this: Weber and Della Fave hold that a system is legitimate if people believe it to be so, while I hold that whether or not a system is legitimate must be decided on the basis of rationally justifiable standards and principles (like the above principle of knowledge) that will allow for the appraisal of particular systems (political, economic, legal, stratification) from a standpoint independent of those systems. Claims about the legitimation of one or another system are not to be decided solely by reference to what those concerned happen to believe. Why they believe, the grounds for their beliefs, needs to be determined and evaluated. Thus, Weber and Della Fave make one value-judgment, i.e., that all values are of the same rank. I make another: that some values can be shown to be superior to others. The issue, then, is not whether value-judgments are to be expressed by a social scientist, but how they are to be expressed.97

- IV -

Having examined the question of the normative acceptability of economic inequalities at great length, I want now to summarize my conclusions in this regard.

1) What most people find just or legitimate in regard to the distribution of incomes is largely a reflection of the actual distribution of incomes in the society where they live.

2) The general principle which guides people’s assessments of the justice or legitimation of income inequalities is (roughly) that those persons who contribute more are deserving of higher incomes.

3) Implicit in the application of this principle are the following claims: (a) the relative contributions of different persons or different positions can be accurately determined, (b) the differential incomes associated with different contributions can be adequately explained, and (c) there is a satisfactory justification for the element of deservingness in the (presumed) relation between contribution and incomes received.

4) With regard to (a) and (b), there is no empirical support for their validity; relative contributions cannot be adequately determined, and the differential incomes associated with different positions cannot be explained. As to (c), conceptual analysis reveals that there is no satisfactory justification for the element of deservingness in the (presumed) relation between contribution and income.

5) Although there is a general consensus about the principle that guides people’s reasoning in regard to the unequal distribution of incomes, their reasoning is based on ignorance concerning the factual status of the elements contained in the principle. Despite their shared beliefs about contributions, rewards, and desert, these beliefs are not consistent with our knowledge about these phenomena.
6) To say that people’s beliefs about the normative acceptability of income inequalities rest on ignorance and that knowledge is to be preferred to ignorance is indeed to make a value-judgment. But this value-judgment is not simply a matter of personal preference, faith, or belief. Instead, it can be rationally justified on the basis of my suggested principle: A belief has validity only if people can be committed to it without that commitment being due to their being ignorant, or kept ignorant, of various relevant facts.

7) Since knowledge is to be preferred to ignorance, the fact that people’s beliefs about the equity, fairness, justice, or legitimation of the unequal distribution of incomes rest largely on ignorance has the following consequence: As it now stands, the normative standing of income inequalities is not justified by what most people seem to believe. To put it somewhat differently, the empirical investigations of sociologists about what people believe with regard to the justice or legitimation of income inequalities do not advance our knowledge or understanding of the normative standing of income differentials.

8) Whether or not it is possible to provide a rational justification for the justice or legitimation of economic inequalities has not been my concern here. Certainly the work of Rawls, Nozick, Gewirth, and others, does suggest that such a rational justification may be possible.98 But I have not attempted to specify in this essay how we might come to terms with questions about a rational defense of the justice or legitimation of income inequalities.99 Instead, I have had a relatively more modest goal; i.e., pointing out some of the difficulties involved in trying to make assessments about the normative status of a phenomenon on the basis of empirical investigations concerning what people believe.

9) Given the interest of many sociologists in theoretical and practical problems associated with economic inequalities, it is obviously important that we not simply take for granted and leave unexamined certain assumptions and beliefs. In many instances, as we know, what most people assume or believe is also assumed or believed by the social scientist. This appears to be especially true with regard to economic inequalities, certainly for those functionalists among us. But there are instances where our assumptions and beliefs need to be re-examined.

In the case of many explanatory and theoretical accounts of male-female differences, for example, sociological inquiry was long based on a commitment to a certain view of the ‘normal’ role of women in Western societies. Largely as a result of insights and consequent perspectives associated with the feminist movement, many sociologists have come to re-examine their earlier beliefs about women and about male-female relationships. It seems to me that the same sort of re-examination is required with regard to social scientists’ views about the distribution of incomes. Living as we do in societies where both interpersonal and economic relations are often viewed as relationships of exchange, it is probably understandable that most persons (including sociologists) would come to believe
that people are, and should be, differentially rewarded according to their deserts. After all, the institutions of the free market rest on the assumption that people really are rewarded according to their contributions and that they, therefore, deserve their unequal economic rewards.

In my view, however, such an assumption does not stand up to empirical and conceptual scrutiny. Just as with a previous consensus about the needs, interests, and desires of women, the present consensus about the justice or legitimacy of economic inequalities rests largely on ignorance. Thus, we must come to recognize that our current beliefs about the normative acceptability of inequalities in income have not, in fact, been rationally acquired. It needs to be emphasized in this regard that I am not claiming, as might Habermas, that the existing consensus about such inequalities is out of line with our 'real' interests—although that might indeed be the case. Rather, as I said earlier, my claim is much more elementary: our reasoning about the unequal distribution of economic benefits is based on mistaken assumptions.

Contrary to what most people apparently believe, then, there is no justification for our continuing to accept the application of a principle which assumes that those who contribute more are deserving of higher incomes. We must acknowledge the weak empirical basis for such a principle, the conceptual problems involved in its specification and application, and the extent to which it is utilized to explain and defend existing institutional arrangements. Although I will not try to justify such a conclusion here, these existing arrangements are both reprehensible and extremely unjust. Be that as it may, I hope that this essay will give rise to further critical assessments of the normative standing of economic inequalities. To do otherwise is to risk self-delusion and an uncritical acceptance of the status quo. Let us try to avoid both.

Reference notes


While these (mostly) American studies are all concerned with the normative standing of inequalities, publications here in the Netherlands have focused largely on the desirability and the possibility of a more equal division of incomes. See, for example, Jan Tinbergen, Income Distribution (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1976); Jan Pen and Jan Tinbergen, Naar een rechtvaardiger Inkomensverdeling (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1977); and A. Szirmai, 'Nivelleringsethos', Sociologisch Tijdschrift 9 (Oktober 1982), pp. 175-211. Further, these Dutch studies - although extremely valuable in their own right - are generally not explicitly concerned with the social processes or mechanisms involved in people's reasoning about the normative acceptability of income differentials. Nevertheless, as I indicate in footnote 12, these findings are relevant to the general topic under consideration here.

2. Quoted in Cook, op. cit., p. 386.
3. Cook, op. cit.
4. Ibid., p. 386.
5. Ibid., p. 376.
6. Ibid., p. 374.
7. Ibid., p. 375.
8. Ibid., p. 376, 382.
10. Ibid., p. 641.
11. Ibid., p. 650.
12. Ibid. These 'fair earnings' reflect a greater equality of earnings than actually exists. This is the same result found by Szirmai, op. cit., in his interesting research. Szirmai's findings also resemble the American results in two other ways: 'In de eerste plaats blijkt dat mensen ondanks hun voorkeur voor verkleining van inkomensverschillen, het idee van ongelijke beloning voor verschillende beroepen en functies aanvaarden' en 'In de tweede
plaats blijkt dat de rangorde van beroepen en functies naar inkomenshoogte nagenoeg ongewijzigd gelaten wordt', p. 192.


15. Ibid., p. 29.
17. Ibid., p. 956.
18. Ibid., p. 969.
19. Ibid., p. 962.
20. Ibid. Italics removed from original.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid. Italics removed from original.
23. Ibid., p. 965.
24. Ibid., p. 962.
25. Ibid., p. 964.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., p. 965.


30. Ibid., p. 961.


32. Ibid.
33. Della Fave, op. cit., p. 959.
34. Ibid.; Cook, op. cit., p. 375; Jasso and Rossi, op. cit., p. 641.

39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Della Fave, op.cit., p. 961.
42. Parkin, op.cit., p. 44.
43. Leonard Broom and Robert G. Cushing, 'A Modest Test of an Immodest Theory: The

44. Ibid., p. 160.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., p. 161.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., pp. 165-166.
49. Ibid., p. 167.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., p. 168.
53. Ibid.


56. Entitlement is discussed at length in Phillips, *op.cit.*
57. Cook, *op.cit.*: Della Fave, *op.cit.*

60. Ibid., p. 204.
61. Ibid., p. 205.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., pp. 212-213.
65. Ibid., p. 213.
67. Ibid., p. 212.
68. Ibid., 214.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid., p. 17.
73. Marx, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

76. Ibid., p. 224.

78. Ibid., p. 103.
79. Somewhat similarly, Freud writes: 'nature began the injustice by the highly unequal way in which she endows individuals physically and mentally, for which there is no help'. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958), p. 63.

81. Ibid., p. 324.


87. Della Fave, *op. cit.*, p. 969.

88. See Geuss, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-22, 26-44.


90. Ibid.


93. This is, in fact, the rationale underlying much of education.


95. Freud, *op. cit.*


97. Perhaps I can capture the crux of the difference between us with the example of slavery in the United States. Slaves outnumbered masters in the antebellum South, and outnumbered whites generally in some states. But even in those states where they constituted the majority, most of them appear to have assimilated much of the mythology (ideology) used to legitimate their enslavement. Thus, racial stratification was legitimate. But was it really legitimate? I say no. What would Weber and Della Fave say?


99. This is, however, one of my goals in a book now under preparation: *Towards a Just Social Order.*