

My argument may seem to follow a well-worn path that laments the loss of hope and certainty, but ultimately I take a very different path. Recent decades are littered with proclamations of the emergence of postindustrialism, globalization, risk society, and such like, which insist on the acceleration of our society into something new and uncertain that has broken from past moorings and become more unstable.¹⁷ These epochalist accounts are profoundly unhelpful. Rather than moving into some brave new postindustrial and affluent era, the past is catching up with us. The bold dream of breaking free from the shackles of the past and ushering in a new dawn—the vision that has been paramount across much of the globe since the eighteenth century—is fading. Instead, we are left with a world littered by centuries of accumulated economic, social, and cultural debris, in which the power of these heaps, accretions, and wrecks has an increasing hold on the present and future. In this respect, the analogy between inequality and the climate crisis is very apt. Just as our future prospects are driven by the weight of carbon deposits and associated environmental detritus that cannot be effaced, so the true recognition of inequality forces us to acknowledge the weight of past historical social and economic forces that constrains our futures. It thus places the fundamental question of sustainability at the center of our thinking.

It is in this spirit that I will draw out the wider stakes involved with invoking inequality in order to infuse a broader sociological reflection on the course of contemporary social change. The inequality paradigm opens a dark window onto the nature of social change today. The view from this window may appear bleak: It clouds liberal progressivist ideals about the power of modernization and development to address the world's ills. But this is also a view that offers succor by suggesting new perspectives attuned to the damage caused by inequality. It champions the need for a politics of social sustainability.

5: Outline of the Book

I have endeavored to write a book that is accessible and can be read by those without prior knowledge of specific fields of study and yet also does justice