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Iceland, J., Silver, E., & Redstone, I. (2023). *Why We Disagree about Inequality*. Polity Press, 208 pages. ISBN: 9781509557141

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Why We Disagree about Inequality is a conceptually clear and accessible contribution to the debates about why well-intentioned and 'reasonable' people hold divergent views about inequality. Written for a broad audience by three American sociologists (John Iceland, Eric Silver and Ilana Redstone) and using the United States (US) as their primary case study, the authors argue that Americans disagree about inequality because they are persuaded by two coherent yet competing moral worldviews: social justice and social order. According to Iceland and colleagues, sustained disagreements over various inequalities—income, gender and race—are driven not by widespread dis/mal/misinformation among citizens (see, for example, Zollo, 2019), but because citizens are divided in their moral intuitions about what constitutes a good and just society and how best to achieve it. Citizens who endorse a social justice worldview tend to be more aware of historical injustices and structural issues that drive contemporary inequality; thus, they consider reparative justice, wealth redistribution and the pursuit of equity-oriented policies as morally compelling. By contrast, those with a social order orientation tend to foreground concerns about the unintended consequences of attempting to re-engineer society in a bid to address historical injustices; consequently, they emphasise rule-following and uniform application of laws and institutional processes as the fairest means of maintaining social stability.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the social order-social justice framework for understanding particular moral disagreements. Chapters 3 to 6 use this framework to analyse disagreements within the American polity on issues that border on inequality and how best to address them. Drawing on academic research, newspaper publications, blog posts, social media interactions and public opinion surveys, the authors show in these central chapters how American society is often bifurcated along these two moral lines—with those of the social justice persuasion emphasising care and protection for the vulnerable, while those with a social order perspective emphasise social stability and cohesion. The final chapter shows how these moral persuasions shape narratives in both the media and the knowledge industry. The authors propose that academics (particularly those who teach the young) refrain from taking ideological stances and instead present students with a diversity of viewpoints as if they were on equal moral footing with one another. This, they argue, would enhance the ability to discuss and address issues related to inequality.

The book's accessible language and its binary analytical framework make it especially useful for undergraduate students of sociology and/or political science who may be grappling with multiple reasonable yet conflicting viewpoints presented in political debates, everyday media and (at times) in scholarly engagements on why inequality persists and/or how to address it. In this sense, the book performs

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an important pedagogical function. However, this strength of the book also constitutes its limitation. By prioritising conceptual descriptions with examples, the book advances relatively little beyond existing research in social psychology and cultural anthropology. Scholars from these disciplines (see, for example, Evans, 2003; Haidt, 2001, 2012) have long demonstrated that Americans are divided along broadly similar lines, with liberals prioritising fairness and care for the vulnerable, while conservatives valuing authority and in-group cohesion. These priorities often align with the stances of the two major political parties in the US—an argument that Iceland and colleagues also make, albeit with a caveat that citizens can oscillate between these moral persuasions while maintaining stable party affiliations (see pp. 20–22).

Moving beyond the work done in social psychology and cultural anthropology requires the authors to engage more explicitly with normative political theory and to propose how policymakers at various levels might address inequality in contexts marked by disagreements. Rawls's (2005) work, for example, advanced how scholars and policymakers thought about inequality and what to do about it. His articulation of the "principle of reflective equilibrium",[1] alongside a formulation of what citizens would endorse behind "the veil of ignorance", has been helpful in providing guidance on which viewpoint should carry greater normative weight or guide policy options when people disagree based on divergent moral frameworks. *Why We Disagree about Inequality*'s emphasis on recognising the existence of multiple viewpoints does not offer much to readers grappling with substantive questions of inequality. Most citizens already recognise that social and political debates are characterised by alternative and sometimes contradictory viewpoints. What is needed (especially in scholarly analysis) is greater analytical direction on how individuals, groups and societies might navigate such disagreements when deciding policy options.

Given the book's focus on explaining *why we disagree* on a particular moral issue, the absence of engagement with the epistemology of disagreement, particularly scholarship on deep disagreements (see, for example, Kappel, 2012; Lynch, 2010; Ranalli, 2018), represents a significant limitation. Research in the epistemology of disagreements has demonstrated strong connections between deep disagreements (the kind identified by Iceland and colleagues) and processes of polarisation (see Ridder, 2021). Scholars who examine inequality using analytic and conceptual tools from this field of study contend that some disagreements about inequality are normatively indefensible (see, for example, Scanlon, 2017). From this perspective, *Why We Disagree about Inequality* could have advanced the literature further by offering a more explicit normative assessment of the competing moral orientations it documents, indicating which arguments might plausibly be regarded as more reasonable in light of the specific contexts in which disagreements arise. Relatedly, given that moral disagreement often reflects the stakes social agents have rather than seasoned rational considerations (see Bourdieu, 2023, pp. 144–146), a more sociological analysis would also have benefited from sustained attention to how moral worldviews that citizens come to adopt are shaped by their socialisation, education, media environment and intersecting identities, thereby clarifying how individuals come to adopt particular moral orientations towards inequality (see, for example Borhek, 1965). Such analysis would foreground the extent to which moral disagreements reflect differential material interests, lived experiences and access to various forms of economic, social or symbolic capital.

There are some stylistic choices in the book that are puzzling, such as the consistent capitalisation of Social Justice and Social Order, contrasted with the use of lowercase for racial groups (see pp. 16, 84, 86, 92). Moreover, the authors in a number of instances refer to race, gender, social class and sexual orientation as immutable characteristics (see pp. 27–29). Unless the aim is to make a political or moral statement, this sits uneasily with sociological research demonstrating the fluidity and social construction of

[1] *Reflective equilibrium* is the mutual adjustment of principles and judgments in the light of relevant arguments. It is attained when individuals weigh various proposed conceptions of the good or the right and have revised their judgements to achieve coherence with principles (see Knight, 2025; Rawls, 1999).

these identity categories, including those often assumed to be biologically fixed (see Brubaker, 2016; Fisher et al., 2024; Tuvel, 2017).

Despite its strong focus on the US, *Why We Disagree about Inequality* is relevant beyond American society. In settler colonial contexts such as Aotearoa New Zealand, citizens often engage with inequality debates from similar moral frameworks. For instance, should historical injustices experienced by the Indigenous people (Māori) continue to inform policies, or should the reparations made with the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal be regarded as sufficient? Should equity-informed policies be pursued across institutions, or should all New Zealanders be subjected to the same institutional processes? Again, recognising the existence of competing moral frameworks does little to advance deliberation on such questions. What is required instead is robust theorising about how such disagreements might be productively addressed, with policy options that each party in the disagreement would reasonably be expected to endorse. It is in this respect that I invite New Zealand's political philosophers and sociologists to engage more deeply with this enduring moral issue that has become increasingly salient in recent political debates, particularly under the current right-wing coalition government.

Overall, Iceland, Silver and Redstone have provided us with a thoughtful and accessible account of the persistence of moral disagreement about inequality in the US. Their charitable engagement with both social justice and social order perspectives is a notable strength of the book. Readers may still be left wondering where the authors themselves stand within this moral landscape. I infer a slight orientation towards social order, given the literature they draw upon, though this remains open to interpretation. As an initial and systematic attempt to map the moral terrain underlying debates about inequality, *Why We Disagree about Inequality* makes a valuable contribution, particularly for teaching and public engagement—even as it leaves open important normative and epistemological questions for future scholarship.

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