



# SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

*Michaelmas 2025*

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Theoretical Perspectives

## **7. Systemic oppression**

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SociologicalTheory.shtml](http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/SociologicalTheory.shtml)

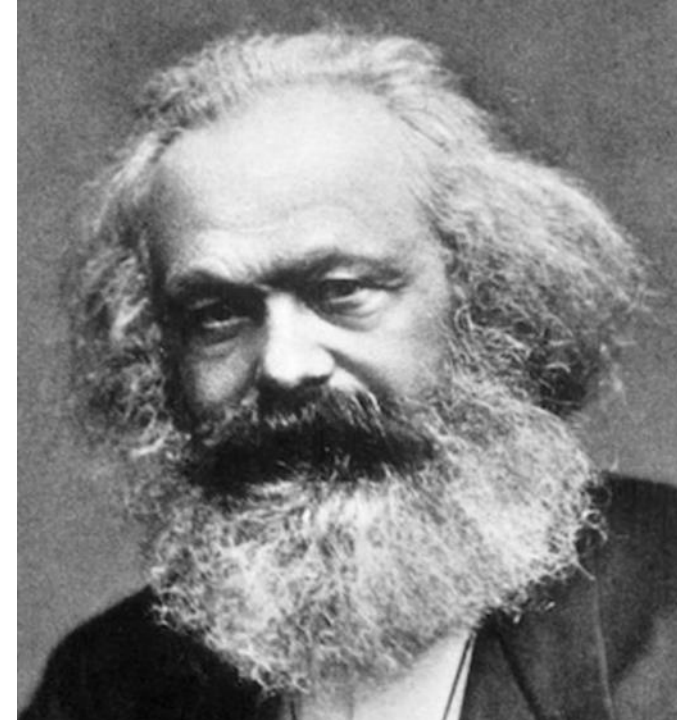
# Introduction

- Networks are *horizontal* (e.g.. friendship, directorships)
- *Vertical* relations of oppressor and oppressed, dominant and subordinate
  - systemic and total, extending beyond national states
- Class; sex; race ...

# Class

‘The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society or in the common ruin of the contending classes’

(Marx & Engels 1848)





- Oppression located in production: the material “*base*”
- Oppressor class *exploits* the oppressed class—normative judgment
- Dynamic: oppressed have a compelling interest in overturning oppression

- Bourgeoisie / capitalist class
  - view the conditions of its own emancipation—private property, free market—as universal
  - ‘the state is the executive committee of the ruling class’ (Marx & Engels 1848)
    - under democracy? => **lecture 8, functionalism**
- Proletariat / working class
  - class-in-itself => class-for-itself
    - ‘What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave diggers’ (Marx & Engels 1848)
    - immiserization and polarization
    - class struggle

## Capitalism reveals oppression

- Bourgeoisie ‘has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors”, and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment”. ... for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation’  
(Marx & Engels 1848)

## Capitalism conceals oppression

- commodity fetishism: ‘It is nothing but the definite social relations between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things’ (Marx 1867)
  - e.g. famines: lack of entitlement rather than food (Sen 1983)
- ostensibly free exchange in market conceals exploitation in production
- “*false consciousness*” is 20thC, Lukacs and Marcuse!



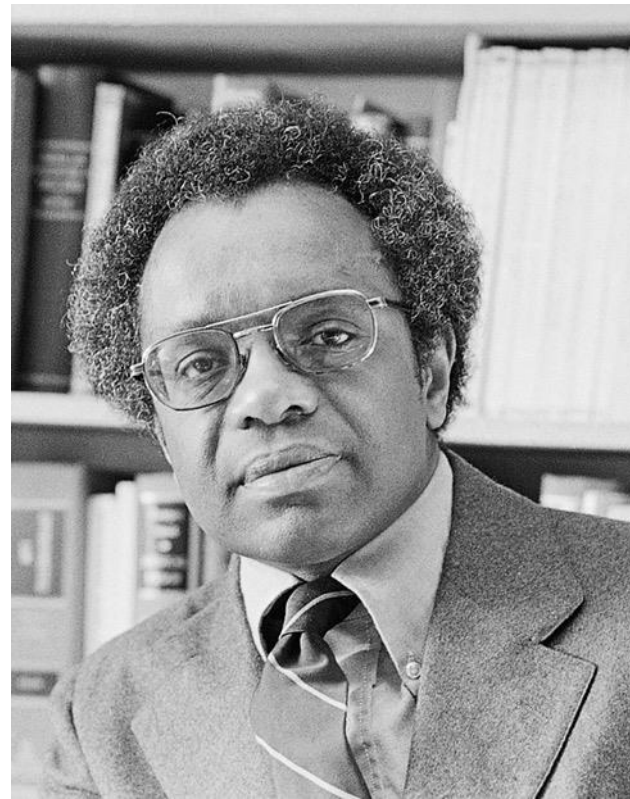
## Sex

- ‘As the organization of the work of some for the benefit of others defines a class, workers, the organized expropriation of the sexuality of some for the use of others defines the sex, woman’ (MacKinnon 1989)
  - sexual harassment, rape, prostitution, pornography
- Concealed:
  - male viewpoint is ostensibly objective and universal
  - ‘The assumption that in matters sexual women really want what men want from women, makes male force against women in sex invisible’ (MacKinnon 1989)
  - ‘a feminist standpoint based on women’s relational self-definition and activity exposes the world men have constructed ... as partial and perverse’ (Hartsock 1983)

- Disanalogies with class:
  - patriarchy is not historical, unlike capitalism
  - women are not becoming a majority, unlike proletariat
  - women and men have intimate relations, not segregated
- Does not explain why dominance aligns with biological sex
  - ‘Male is a social and political concept, not a biological attribute, having nothing whatever to do with ... nature ... or body as such’  
(MacKinnon 1989)

# Race

- Race analogous if it treated as dichotomous
  - whites as oppressor;  
indigenous or colonized or former slaves as  
oppressed
- How to claim exploitation when oppressed race is a  
minority?
  - historical: slavery or colonialism was the foundation  
for current economic prosperity:
    - US is ‘[a] nation built on the backs of black labor’  
(Bell 1995)



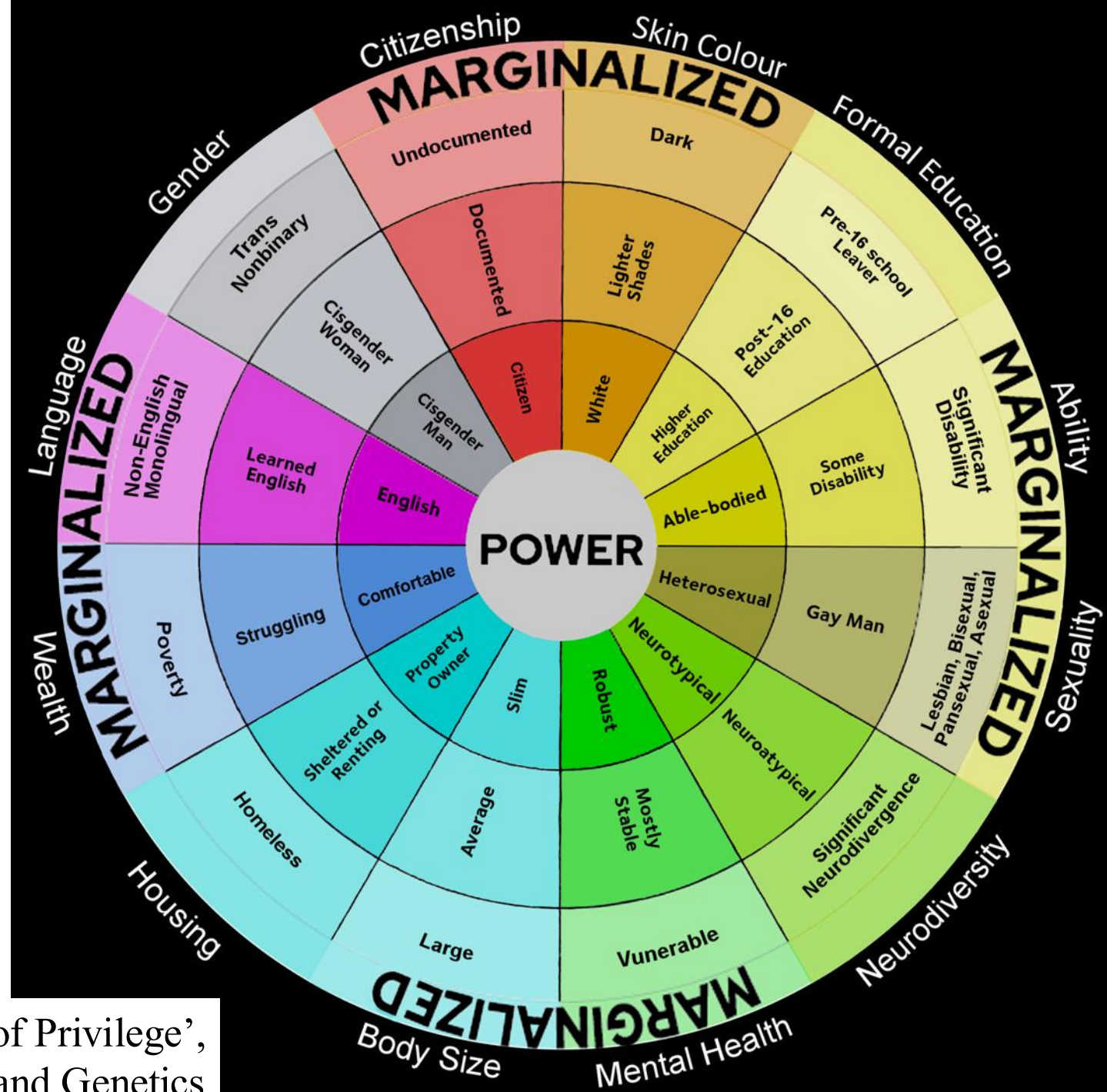
- System of oppression is homeostatic
  - ‘The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites’ (Bell 1980)
  - ‘abstract legal rights, such as equality, could do little more than bring about the cessation of one form of discriminatory conduct that soon appeared in a more subtle though no less discriminatory form’ (Bell 1992)
    - legal equality masks de facto inequality—like Marx
- Is race real?
  - ‘the most critical resistance strategy for disempowered groups is to occupy and defend a politics of social location rather than to vacate and destroy it’ (Crenshaw 1991)

# Problems

- Amelioration interpreted as masking oppression—e.g. welfare state
- Focus on statistical disparities is selective—criminalization of racial minorities versus men; gender pay gap versus gender longevity gap
- Prescriptions for the oppressed are violated—e.g. working-class Tories; feminist BDSMers

# Summary

- Social phenomena are explained by the struggle between oppressor and oppressed—either maintaining oppression or revolting against it
- Dimensions multiply ...
- Combine multiple dimensions as intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991)

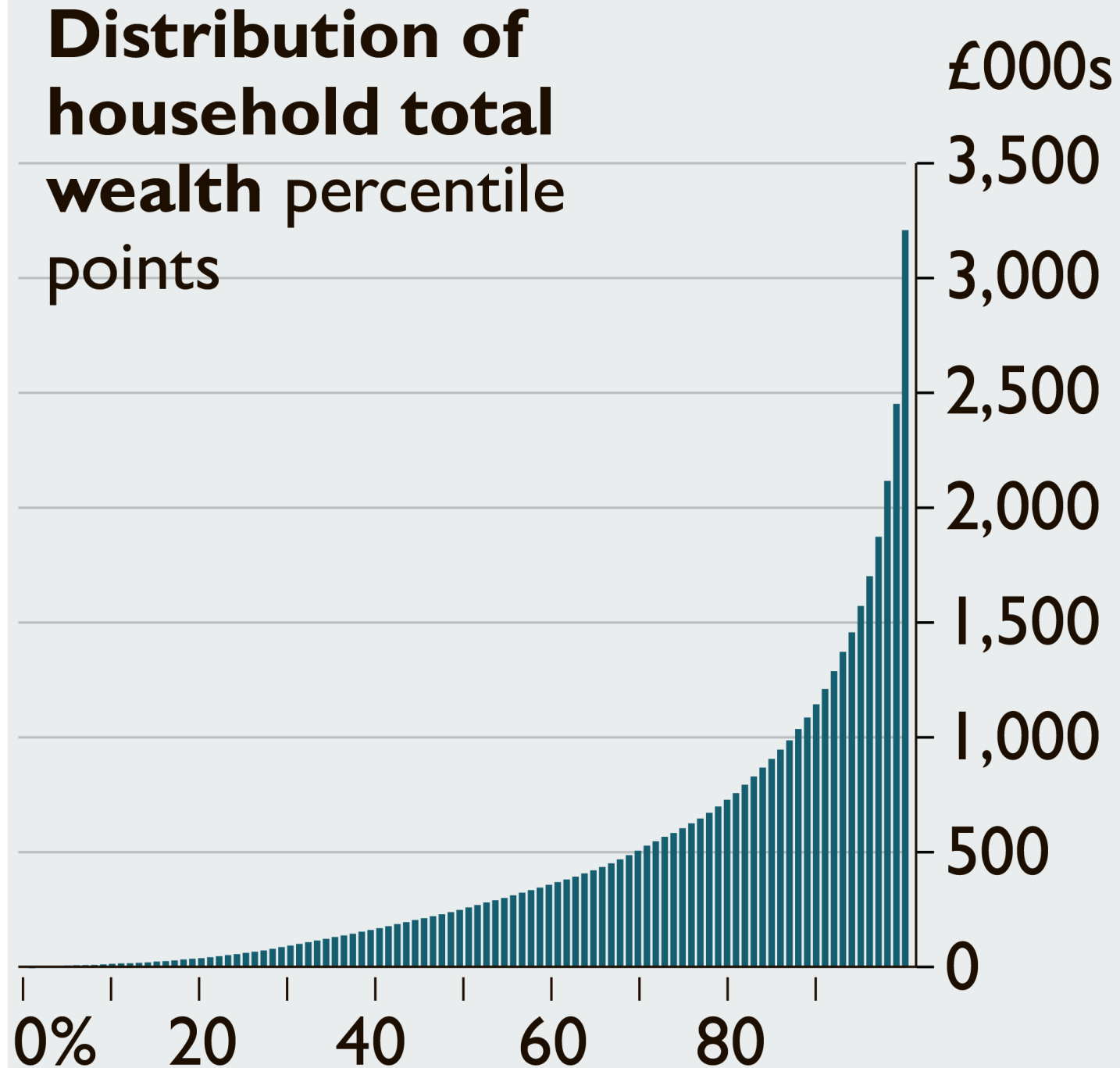


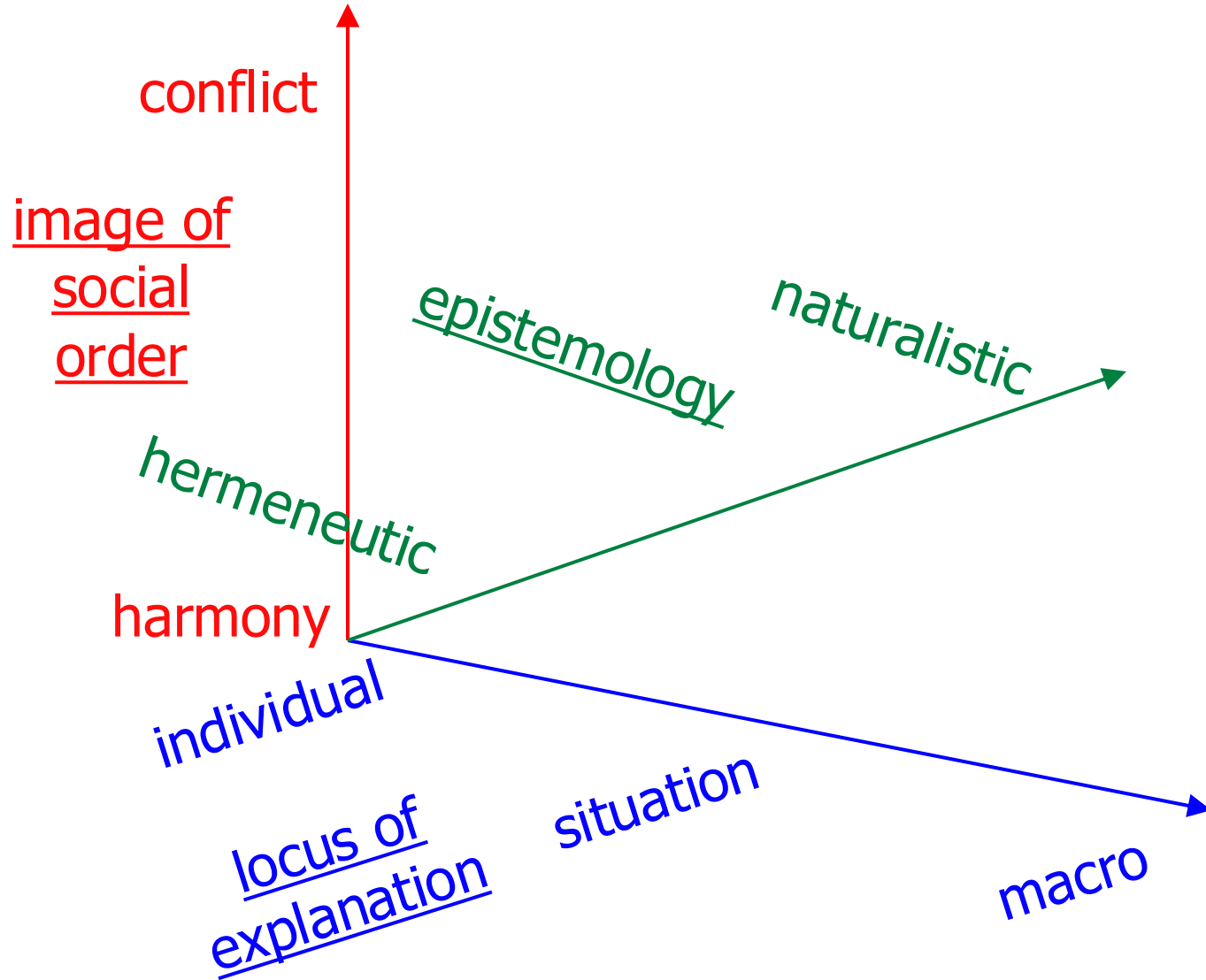
‘Wheel of Privilege’,

Oxford’s Department of Physiology, Anatomy and Genetics

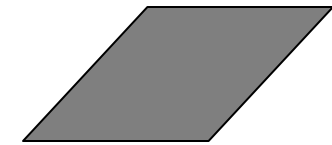
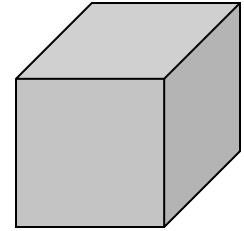
## Virtues

- Institutionalized as EDI
  - just as RCT undergirds libertarianism and neoliberalism
- Sexual violence against women
- Economic inequality fundamental to modern society—  
notwithstanding rhetoric of equality!





Systemic oppression



# Hilary Term: Sociological Problems

- Micro and macro
- Collective groups: ethnicity, nationality, and race
- Strategic interactions, games, and trust
- Governmentality and totalitarianism
- Norms
- Collective action
- Gender
- Violence and protection

# Questions

- ‘An important function of social institutions in societies such as Britain or France or the USA is to maintain white supremacy.’ Do you agree?
- ‘Gender is inextricably connected with hierarchy: masculinity denotes domination, femininity subordination.’ Do you agree?
- ‘Modern ideals of equal rights serve to conceal class, gender, and racial oppression.’ Discuss.
- Are profound inequalities inevitable in modern complex societies?
- Why do so many staff and students at elite universities proclaim egalitarian values while enjoying the privileges of inequality?

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