International Journal of Sociology and Political Science
www.sociologyjournal.in
Online ISSN: 2664-7745
Received: 25-11-2025, Accepted: 28-01-2026, Published: 13-02-2026
Volume 8, Issue 1, 2026, Page No. 28-32

Theory of sacralised exclusion: A middle-range sociological framework for understanding the symbolic reproduction of inequality

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Abstract
This paper proposes the Theory of Sacralised Exclusion to explain why social inequality persists even in contexts marked by constitutional equality, welfare expansion and democratic participation. Classical and contemporary sociological approaches have explained inequality through exploitation, legitimacy, moral consensus or resistance, yet they offer limited insight into why marginalized groups often endure exclusion without sustained challenge and, at times, defend it in moral or cultural terms. Drawing on political economy, interpretive sociology and the sociology of religion, this paper argues that inequality increasingly survives beyond direct coercion through a symbolic process in which structurally produced exclusion is reframed as morally virtuous, spiritually meaningful or culturally legitimate. In this sense, Sacralization is not treated as a cultural leftover or religious residue but as an active social mechanism that stabilizes unequal arrangements by making deprivation livable and socially acceptable. This paper outlines a sequential mechanism through which exclusion is produced structurally, symbolically reframed, institutionally legitimized, internalized as moral self-regulation and reproduced across generations. By locating sacralization at the intersection of structure and meaning, the theory bridges religion and welfare, tradition and modern governance showing how moral narratives circulate through religious institutions, welfare regimes and everyday practices of recognition without redistribution. As a middle-range theory, Sacralised Exclusion is applicable across diverse settings including caste-based religious practices, tribal spiritual identities, urban ascetic communities, gendered care labour and digitally excluded populations. The paper contributes to inequality studies by shifting attention from domination and resistance alone to the moral processes that enable endurance offering a framework for understanding why inequality remains durable in societies that formally reject it.

Keywords: Sacralised exclusion, social inequality, symbolic legitimation, moral endurance, welfare and religion, social reproduction, marginality

Introduction

Inequality in contemporary society does not always appear as open force. It often settles into daily life in quiet ways through routine practices, familiar language and expectations that no longer feel shocking. People notice it. They speak about it among friends or family. Sometimes they even criticize it openly. Still, the structure itself remains largely untouched. This quiet survival of inequality is what makes it difficult to explain. This persistence is striking because many structural changes have taken place. Constitutional frameworks promise equality and legal protection. Welfare policies claim to reduce poverty and social exclusion. Democratic systems emphasize participation and representation. Digital technologies are often presented as tools of access and empowerment. Despite these developments deep social gaps continue to shape life chances. In several contexts, these gaps have not weakened but instead become more stable and predictable. The distance between formal promises and lived reality remains wide. Part of the difficulty lies in the changing nature of domination. Earlier forms of inequality were often tied to visible control like legal discrimination, physical violence or explicit exclusion from institutions. Much of present-day inequality works differently. It is less direct and more symbolic. Power operates through values, moral language and institutional reasoning that appear reasonable and even ethical. Force has not disappeared but it is no longer the main requirement for maintaining unequal arrangements. This shift has consequences. When inequality is no longer experienced primarily as coercion, resistance becomes harder to sustain. People are not constantly pushed down. Instead, they are guided into social positions that come to feel normal or even meaningful. Exclusion is not always named as injustice. It is often explained as destiny, duty, sacrifice or moral strength. These explanations do not remove suffering but they reshape how suffering is understood. The central question of this paper emerges from this condition. Why do marginalized groups so often endure exclusion without sustained challenge and in some cases actively defend it in moral or cultural terms? This question cannot be answered by assuming lack of awareness. Most people recognize unfairness in one form or another. Awareness exists alongside acceptance. The problem lies in understanding how this coexistence becomes possible. Classical sociological traditions offer important insights but they do not fully resolve this puzzle. Political economy which was shaped strongly by the work of Karl Marx explains inequality through control over labor and resources. This approach remains crucial for identifying exploitation. Yet it often assumes that once material injustice becomes clear, resistance will naturally follow. In many social settings, this expectation does not match reality. Knowledge of exploitation frequently coexists with endurance rather than revolt. Interpretive sociology adds another layer by focusing on meaning, belief and legitimacy. The work of Max Weber helps explain why people accept authority and social order as legitimate. However, meaning in this tradition often appears politically

neutral. Less attention is paid to why moral and cultural meanings so often work in favour of unequal arrangements instead of challenging them. The sociology of religion further complicates the picture. Religion is not limited to belief; it shapes daily discipline, moral judgment and institutional life. It can inspire protest but it can also encourage patience, endurance and acceptance. This dual role is rarely examined in relation to long-term inequality. The question is not whether religion oppresses or liberates but how religious and moral ideas become embedded in institutions that stabilize exclusion. Subaltern studies and related approaches shift attention toward lived experience and everyday agency. They rightly reject the image of marginalized groups as passive victims. Yet the focus on resistance and voice sometimes leaves endurance underexplored. Less is said about why people remain within unequal arrangements even when they are aware of injustice and capable of critique. This paper argues that inequality increasingly survives through symbolic processes that make exclusion morally acceptable. Exclusion is not only imposed from above. It is explained, justified and normalized through meanings that circulate across religious practices, welfare programs, cultural narratives and institutional routines. These meanings offer dignity, purpose and emotional stability, even as material conditions remain unchanged. The core contribution of this paper is the proposal of the Theory of Sacralised Exclusion. The theory suggests that structurally produced exclusion is often reframed through moral, spiritual or cultural language in ways that give it legitimacy and value. Through this process, inequality is reproduced without the need for constant coercion. Sacralization here is not limited to formal religion. It includes any symbolic frame that treats deprivation as virtue, patience as moral strength or endurance as a sign of worth. This framework does not deny material inequality or dismiss resistance. It builds on existing approaches while shifting attention toward how inequality becomes livable. By focusing on the symbolic work that stabilizes exclusion, the theory aims to explain why inequality remains durable in societies that formally reject it.

Review of Classical and Contemporary Approaches

The study of inequality has long occupied a central place in sociology and over time several major traditions have attempted to explain how unequal social arrangements are created, maintained and justified, yet when these approaches are read together, a common gap becomes visible. Political economy offers perhaps the most forceful account by locating inequality in relations of production, exploitation and control over resources, an approach most clearly associated with Karl Marx whose analysis showed that domination is not accidental but built into economic structures themselves while ideology and religion work to stabilize these arrangements by making them appear natural or unavoidable. This perspective remains indispensable because it insists that inequality is material before it is moral yet it often assumes that once exploitation is recognized, resistance should logically follow, an assumption that does not always hold in lived social worlds where people may clearly understand injustice and still endure it without open challenge. Interpretive sociology shifts attention from material force to meaning, authority and legitimacy, most notably in the work of Max Weber who demonstrated how social order depends on shared beliefs about authority and the moral grounds of obedience including the powerful role of religious ethics in shaping disciplined and orderly conduct. This tradition helps explain why domination is accepted but it tends to treat meaning as something that legitimizes authority rather than as something that actively reshapes deprivation into moral value leaving unanswered why meaning so often works to protect unequal outcomes instead of unsettling them. Functionalist approaches, associated strongly with Émile Durkheim move further in this direction by emphasizing moral consensus, social cohesion and the necessity of stability arguing that shared values hold society together and prevent disintegration, a view that highlights order but risks smoothing over suffering by treating inequality as a functional or secondary issue rather than a lived burden. In this framework, inequality becomes normalized as part of social integration and the everyday pain attached to exclusion fades into the background. More recent subaltern and cultural approaches attempt to correct this by centring voice, experience and agency showing how marginalized groups negotiate power in daily life and sometimes resist it in subtle ways, an important intervention that disrupts images of passive victims. Yet here too a limitation appears, as the focus on resistance and negotiation often leaves acceptance and endurance under-theorized, even though these are far more common responses to inequality than open defiance. Across these traditions, domination, meaning, order and agency are all examined with care but none fully explains how exclusion itself comes to feel morally justified or even necessary to those who live within it. What remains largely unexplained is how symbolic and moral frames transform deprivation into something that can be endured without constant coercion, how institutions circulate these frames, and how inequality is reproduced precisely because it has been made meaningful. This unresolved gap motivates the present paper, which proposes that sacralization functions as a mechanism through which exclusion is legitimized and sustained allowing inequality to persist quietly even in societies that formally reject it.

Conceptual Foundations of Sacralised Exclusion

The concept of Sacralised exclusion is introduced here as a precise analytical tool rather than a metaphorical expression because the aim is not to describe suffering in poetic terms but to explain how inequality continues to hold its place in social life with surprising stability. Sacralised exclusion refers to a social process through which marginal positions that are produced by structural arrangements such as caste hierarchies, gendered divisions of labour, religious status or uneven access to resources are symbolically reframed as morally virtuous, spiritually meaningful or culturally legitimate, allowing inequality to persist over time without the need for constant external force. The emphasis on process matters. This concept does not describe a fixed identity or a cultural trait of marginalized groups; it points to an ongoing social operation in which structure and meaning work together. Structural arrangements generate exclusion but meanings give that exclusion a moral shape turning what could appear as injustice into something that feels purposeful, necessary or even honourable. The key issue here is legitimacy, not deception. Sacralised exclusion does not depend on people being unaware of their condition. Many individuals clearly recognize their disadvantaged position yet they continue to inhabit it because it has been

made socially and morally intelligible. This is where the concept moves beyond explanations that rely on illusion or misrecognition alone. In contrast to ideas such as false consciousness, commonly associated with the Marxian tradition (Marx, 1867) [4], Sacralised exclusion does not assume that people are simply mistaken about their interests or trapped in distorted beliefs. Awareness and endurance coexist. People may know that inequality exists and still accept it because acceptance has become a practical and moral strategy for living within constrained conditions. The concept also differs from symbolic violence as developed by Pierre Bourdieu which highlights how domination operates through internalized dispositions and taken-for-granted norms (Bourdieu, 1986) [1]. While symbolic violence is crucial for understanding how power becomes embodied, it often emphasizes unconscious acceptance whereas Sacralised exclusion allows room for conscious adjustment where individuals actively interpret endurance as virtue or patience as strength. A similar distinction can be drawn from the notion of hegemony associated with Antonio Gramsci which explains how consent is organized through cultural leadership and ideological dominance (Gramsci, 1971) [3]. Hegemony focuses on how ruling ideas become common sense but Sacralised exclusion shifts attention toward how exclusion itself is endowed with moral worth, not merely accepted as inevitable. The concept also needs to be separated from liminality, particularly as developed by Victor Turner where marginal or transitional positions are often seen as moments of potential transformation or subversion (Turner, 1969) [6]. By contrast, Sacralised exclusion does not treat marginality as temporary or inherently disruptive; it explains how marginal positions become stable and durable precisely because they are Sacralised. Even the phrase ‘sacred marginality,’ which appears occasionally in anthropological or religious studies as a descriptive metaphor, lacks the analytical sharpness required here, as it tends to romanticize the margins rather than explain how they are reproduced. What Sacralised exclusion foregrounds instead is conscious endurance as a form of adaptive survival shaped and reinforced through institutional mediation. Religious organizations, welfare systems, charitable institutions and even development discourse play a central role in circulating narratives that frame deprivation as sacrifice, service, destiny or moral discipline. These narratives do not erase suffering but they make it livable, and that is precisely why they are effective. By locating sacralization within institutional routines rather than private belief alone, the concept avoids reducing inequality to either ideology or culture in isolation. It insists that symbolic meaning and social structure are intertwined and that inequality persists not simply because people are dominated but because domination has been made meaningful. This conceptual framing allows Sacralised exclusion to be studied empirically, traced across contexts and used to explain why inequality often survives periods of reform, modernization and apparent inclusion remaining intact even when coercion fades into the background.

Social Mechanism of Sacralised Exclusion

The social mechanism of Sacralised exclusion unfolds as a connected sequence rather than a set of isolated stages beginning with the structural production of exclusion that is rooted in long-standing social arrangements such as caste hierarchy, class inequality, gendered divisions of labour and tribal marginalization, all of which operate through institutions that control access to land, education, employment, political voice and social mobility, ensuring that disadvantage is not accidental but patterned and predictable, so that individuals enter social life already positioned within unequal grids that shape what they can realistically hope for and what remains out of reach. This structural grounding is familiar territory in sociology, strongly emphasized in political economy and especially in the work of Karl Marx who showed that inequality is produced through durable relations rather than personal failure, yet structure alone does not explain how people continue to inhabit these positions without constant coercion which is where the second movement of the mechanism becomes crucial, as exclusion is symbolically reframed through moral and cultural language that gives deprivation a higher meaning. In this symbolic reframing, lack of resources is recast as sacrifice, limited choice becomes service, blocked mobility is described as destiny, and enforced simplicity is elevated into renunciation with language, ritual practices, everyday stories, and religious idioms playing a central role in translating material disadvantage into moral worth. These meanings circulate informally through families and communities but also draw strength from older religious traditions that value suffering and restraint, a dynamic that resonates with Max Weber’s insight into how ethical systems shape disciplined conduct, though here the emphasis is less on individual salvation and more on collective endurance. Symbolic reframing does not deny hardship; instead, it rearranges how hardship is interpreted making deprivation appear purposeful rather than unjust which allows people to remain within unequal arrangements without experiencing constant moral conflict. This reframing gains real power in the third movement of the mechanism, institutional legitimation where symbolic meanings are stabilized and circulated by formal organizations such as religious institutions, welfare regimes, non-governmental organizations, educational systems and even digital platforms that publicly recognize suffering while stopping short of altering the structures that produce it. Religious organizations may praise humility and service, welfare programs may emphasize gratitude and discipline, NGOs may highlight resilience and educational or digital initiatives may celebrate ‘inclusion’ without addressing unequal starting points, producing a situation where recognition becomes widespread while redistribution remains limited. This pattern of recognition without redistribution is critical because it offers dignity and visibility while leaving power relations intact, a process that feels humane and ethical but quietly reinforces inequality over time. As these institutional messages repeat, they move inward producing the fourth movement of the mechanism, internalization and moral self-regulation where individuals begin to judge themselves and others through the very frameworks that justify exclusion, accepting symbolic explanations as common sense and policing boundaries within their own communities. Endurance becomes a moral expectation, patience is treated as virtue and those who question the arrangement too sharply may be viewed as disruptive or ungrateful which makes resistance appear morally suspect rather than politically necessary. This dynamic echoes aspects of symbolic power discussed by Pierre Bourdieu, particularly the way domination becomes embedded in everyday judgment yet Sacralised exclusion

allows for conscious awareness alongside acceptance, as people actively interpret adjustment as a sensible way to survive within narrow constraints. Over time, these patterns do not remain confined to one generation which brings the mechanism to its final movement, intergenerational reproduction where inequality stabilizes as symbolic meanings and structural limits are passed on together through socialization, ritual practice and institutional continuity. Children grow up learning not only what resources are unavailable to them but also how to explain that absence in moral terms, absorbing narratives that frame limited horizons as normal, dignified or even necessary, so that exclusion is inherited not simply as lack but as a meaningful social position. This intergenerational transmission is what gives Sacralised exclusion its durability allowing inequality to persist across periods of reform, modernization and policy change, because even when overt coercion weakens, the moral and symbolic frameworks that sustain exclusion remain firmly in place. Taken together, these interconnected movements show that Sacralised exclusion is not a single act or belief but a continuous social process through which structure and meaning reinforce one another enabling inequality to reproduce itself quietly, efficiently and with relatively little resistance even in societies that publicly commit themselves to equality.

Theoretical Propositions

The Theory of Sacralised Exclusion rests on a set of propositions that translate its conceptual claims into ideas that can be examined across contexts and compared empirically without turning them into rigid hypotheses. The first proposition is that exclusion becomes most stable when it is Sacralised because sacralization transforms disadvantage from a condition that demands correction into a position that appears morally grounded and socially necessary making inequality easier to live with and harder to contest over time. A second proposition follows from this that institutions play a decisive role in converting deprivation into legitimacy, since religious organizations, welfare agencies, educational systems and development frameworks repeatedly frame endurance, patience and sacrifice as virtues, thereby giving symbolic value to structurally limited lives while leaving the underlying distribution of power largely untouched. Third, Sacralised exclusion lowers the likelihood of collective resistance, not because people are unaware of injustice but because moral narratives recast adjustment as maturity and restraint as responsibility which shifts anger inward and makes open opposition appear excessive, risky or ethically questionable. A fourth proposition holds that recognition without redistribution intensifies symbolic dependence, as public acknowledgment, praise and visibility offer emotional relief and social dignity while simultaneously deepening reliance on institutions that control resources creating a situation in which gratitude replaces claims and moral approval substitutes for material change. Fifth, the theory proposes that modernity does not dissolve sacralization but repackages it, since new forms of governance, digital platforms and welfare systems often adopt secular languages of resilience, discipline and self-improvement that perform the same legitimizing work once carried out more explicitly by religious doctrine echoing but extending insights about legitimacy and authority found in Max Weber's work. A sixth proposition suggests that welfare states increasingly govern through moral legitimation rather than empowerment emphasizing behavioural conditions, gratitude and responsible conduct which can soften the experience of exclusion while leaving recipients with little control over the structures that define their dependence. A seventh and related proposition is that Sacralised exclusion operates most effectively when it becomes internalized as moral self-regulation meaning that individuals begin to police their own expectations and aspirations in line with dominant narratives reducing the need for overt surveillance or enforcement. Taken together, these propositions suggest that Sacralised exclusion is not an accidental cultural residue but a systematic mechanism through which inequality becomes durable, portable across institutions and adaptable to changing political and economic conditions making it possible to study how inequality persists not only through force or ideology, but through meanings that render unequal arrangements acceptable, even reasonable, to those who live within them.

Scope, Applications and Analytical Reach

The Theory of Sacralised Exclusion is intended as a middle-range framework wide enough to travel across social settings but focused enough to avoid becoming vague and its analytical reach becomes clear when it is placed next to different yet connected forms of marginal life. In the context of Dalit religious practices, the theory helps explain how devotion, humility and service are often elevated as moral strengths that offer dignity within exclusion while quietly discouraging direct challenges to caste-based hierarchies, so that religious participation becomes a space of recognition without a corresponding shift in social power. A similar dynamic appears in many tribal spiritual identities where attachment to tradition, nature and ancestral belief is celebrated as cultural richness even as material deprivation, land dispossession and political marginality remain unresolved allowing exclusion to persist under the language of cultural pride and spiritual authenticity. Urban ascetic communities offer another telling case, as renunciation and voluntary poverty are granted high moral value in religious and cultural discourse, masking the economic vulnerability, dependence and limited mobility that often structure the lives of ascetics in rapidly commercialized cities where symbolic reverence replaces material security. Gendered religious and care labour extends this pattern further, particularly in the everyday lives of women whose unpaid or poorly paid work is framed as selfless service, devotion or moral duty, a framing that provides social respect while normalizing unequal burdens and limiting claims for redistribution or autonomy. The same mechanism can be traced in digitally excluded populations where lack of access to technology, skills or online spaces is frequently reframed as simplicity, authenticity or resistance to excess, a narrative that softens the experience of exclusion while obscuring how digital absence increasingly restricts education, employment and civic participation. Across these cases, Sacralised exclusion does not operate through a single belief system or institution but through a flexible moral language that adapts to different social worlds making it especially effective in contexts shaped by both tradition and modernity. This adaptability is precisely why the theory should be understood as middle-range rather than universal, as it does not claim to explain all forms of inequality but focuses on a specific mechanism through which inequality

becomes acceptable and durable. The theory works best where exclusion is long-standing, institutions are dense, and moral narratives circulate widely, conditions that are common in many societies undergoing uneven modernization. Its relevance across religious, cultural, urban, gendered and digital settings demonstrates breadth, but that breadth is held together by a single analytical focus on how symbolic meaning and institutional practice combine to stabilize exclusion. By remaining attentive to both older traditions and newer forms of governance, the Theory of Sacralised Exclusion offers a way to understand how inequality survives shifts in policy, technology, and ideology, not by resisting change outright, but by absorbing it into moral frames that keep unequal arrangements firmly in place.

Theoretical Contribution and Originality

The central contribution of the Theory of Sacralised Exclusion lies in the way it reframes the relationship between inequality, meaning and social order moving beyond explanations that treat symbolic processes as secondary or merely decorative to material domination. Existing theories have tended to separate structure from meaning with political economy focusing on resources and exploitation and cultural or interpretive approaches focusing on belief, legitimacy and moral order, but rarely have these dimensions been brought together to explain how inequality continues to reproduce itself so effectively over time. What this theory does differently is to show that sacralization is not simply a leftover of tradition or a cultural habit that survives alongside modern institutions but an active and adaptable mechanism that allows structurally produced exclusion to appear justified, necessary and even valuable. In this sense, the theory does not add another cultural explanation to the study of inequality; it changes the way culture itself is understood within the reproduction of social hierarchies. By treating sacralization as a structural process rather than a symbolic ornament, the theory bridges the divide between material conditions and moral meaning demonstrating how deprivation becomes livable precisely because it is morally framed rather than denied or ignored. This approach also brings religion and welfare into the same analytical space refusing the common tendency to treat them as separate domains, one belonging to tradition and belief, the other to modern governance and policy. The theory shows how religious idioms of sacrifice, service and discipline often reappear in secular welfare regimes through languages of responsibility, gratitude and self-improvement creating continuity between religious moral orders and bureaucratic systems of care. In doing so, it reveals how modern governance does not replace sacred logic but reshapes it in ways that are more subtle and institutionally efficient. At the same time, the theory challenges the assumption that modernity necessarily weakens moral justifications for inequality, instead showing how tradition and modern governance often work together to stabilize exclusion. This perspective allows Sacralised exclusion to be analyzed across historical periods and institutional settings without reducing it to either cultural persistence or ideological manipulation. The originality of the Theory of Sacralised Exclusion lies in conceptualizing sacralization as a structural mechanism of inequality reproduction rather than as a cultural residue or symbolic anomaly, a move that shifts attention from isolated beliefs to ongoing processes that link institutions, moral language and everyday survival strategies. By foregrounding this mechanism, the theory opens new space for analyzing why inequality remains durable even in societies that formally commit themselves to equality, inclusion, and rights, offering a framework that explains endurance without romanticizing it and stability without mistaking it for justice.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that inequality in contemporary societies cannot be understood only through force, economic domination or formal exclusion because much of its durability now rests on the way exclusion is made meaningful and morally acceptable in everyday life. The Theory of Sacralised Exclusion was proposed to capture this process showing how structurally produced disadvantage is symbolically reframed as virtue, discipline, service or destiny allowing unequal arrangements to persist without continuous coercion. At the center of the argument is a simple but unsettling claim that inequality survives most effectively when it no longer appears as a problem that demands correction but as a condition that carries moral weight and social legitimacy. By tracing the mechanism through which exclusion moves from structural positioning to symbolic reframing, institutional legitimation, internal moral regulation and finally intergenerational transmission, the paper has shown how structure and meaning reinforce one another in ways that stabilize inequality over time. The theoretical contribution lies in shifting attention away from isolated beliefs or cultural residues and toward sacralization as an active mechanism of social reproduction, one that operates across religious practice, welfare governance, development discourse and everyday moral reasoning. This perspective matters for sociology today because it helps explain why inequality remains stubbornly intact even in societies committed, at least formally, to equality, inclusion and rights. For inequality studies, the theory opens a way to analyze endurance rather than only domination or resistance drawing attention to the moral frames that make unequal lives livable. Its relevance is especially strong for the Global South where long histories of hierarchy intersect with expanding welfare regimes and uneven modernization but it also speaks to modern welfare societies more broadly where symbolic recognition often substitutes for redistribution. By focusing on how exclusion is Sacralised rather than simply imposed, the Theory of Sacralised Exclusion offers a grounded and timely framework for understanding why inequality continues to hold on, quietly and effectively, in the present moment.

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