

## **The politicization of a sociofact: exploring economic inequality in the global age**

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*IPSA 2016, 23-28 July 2016, Poznan.  
Panel: Is Economic Inequality a Political Problem*

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## 1. Mapping out the terrain: inequality and politics.

Inequality is back as a public concern in Western democracies, and so is the question about how to deal with it politically, i.e. political decisions are expected to restore acceptable levels of inequality rather than to set up a regime of complete equality among citizens. The logic behind this request is also purely political: as Branco Milanovic has argued in his sober treatise on global inequality, if the latter leads to the rise of collective anger and hence populism, democracies become severely endangered, affected by a lack of legitimacy. What an *acceptable* level of inequality is cannot be said easily, just as it is neither easy to predict when will a given degree of inequality will be perceived as *unacceptable*. The key to that dilemma is, precisely, the *perceived* quality of both psychopolitical states: it depends heavily on public moods and private perceptions, as well as in the effect of political discourses and mobilizations. Yet it seldom is a capricious thing, responding usually to external economic shocks -mostly a recession- that trigger the feeling of being impoverished. This feeling, in turn, is grounded in two main comparative operations: whether a subject is better off as compared to her past self and as compared to other people.

These nuances are relevant if we try to answer the question about the political nature of inequality. Is inequality a political problem? Or, to put it differently, is it *in itself* a political problem, or *just* a social problem that may or even must be transformed into a political problem? Might it also be the case that we can conceive of problems whose political *quality* is partial or can be measured in degrees?

What those intricacies show is that inequality possesses an unescapable social dimension. It is a relation between subjects that compare themselves with each other within a social order that makes inequality possible or does not hinder its production. However, the sources of inequality must be identified, because if inequality is attributed to *differences* in natural talents or abilities, the state could only impede it via a brutal equalizing of socioeconomic conditions that would be totalitarian in nature -while differences themselves would remain, as some people would be more intelligent or pretty or even happier than other. Of course, a more reasonable standpoint can be adopted, so that what matters is that *natural* differences do not lead to too large *social* differences, a task that would pertain politics. Somebody could even argue that such differences are not completely natural, as a tragic loop can take place if someone is born disadvantaged and thus deprived of the chance to move upward, but could improve her lot if that lack of opportunities is dealt with politically. This claim could hold even if we assume that a part of those natural differences belong to each genetic's hardware, in a twofold way: by recurring to epigenetics or by stating that, in such case, the individual is hardly responsible of her fortunes, so that the reasons for political intervention are firm.

For the purposes of this paper, inequality will be understood as a real or perceived difference in socioeconomic status among individuals that may be at least partially corrected by the state. That is, inequality is seen as tractable by political means, irrespective of the effectiveness of the solutions so adopted. If the problem could not be solved at all, as seems the case with natural differences among individuals, it could hardly qualify as a problem in the first place. On the other hand, a political problem is defined as one that arises from the political organization of society, so that if society were organized differently from the outset the very problem -an unacceptable degree of inequality- would never manifest itself. What remains to be explored is thus whether inequality is in itself a political problem and, depending on the answer, whether it is justified to deal with it as such.

This paper is organized as follows. First, the question about the sources of inequality will be explored together with the tractability of the latter as a political problem. Secondly, the reasons for the current increase in inequality are reflected upon, in order to add collective phenomena at the macrolevel to the more basic, even prepolitical considerations made in the first section. Thirdly, the problems posed by envy and resentment will be considered, so that the key role of perception is highlighted. Finally, a conclusion is offered, whereby both capitalism and inequality are seen as prepolitical features of the species that however must be politically approached and dealt with, lest an excessive

degree of inequality threatens the general benefits provided by an *unavoidable but acceptable* level of socioeconomic inequality.

## 2. The prepolitics of inequality.

Inequality's *rentrée* in the public and academic debate has been marked by a French touch. It makes sense, since the attention to inequality is actually a very French thing -a concern that, in its socioeconomic sense, has been brought to the global spotlight by Thomas Piketty's unlikely *best-seller*. Its first edition, published in France, did not stir such scholarly passions as the translation to English has: after all, the topic is always present in the French conversation, whereas economic stratification has not traditionally had such traction in the American collective psyche.

At least, that is how journalist Gillian Tett explained Piketty's sudden success in the anglo-saxon world. The French economist would dispel the myth of equality in freedom -according to which, in opposition to an European tradition plagued by inherited privileges and entrenched interests, any American citizen should be able to enrich herself through work in a meritocratic society<sup>1</sup>. But data do not seem to support this principle anymore, or not just now -and that is why inequality is back to mainstream politics. Yet it would be unfair to say that inequality has been absent in the US conversation, since the most influential piece of political theory published in the second half of the twentieth century was not written in Paris but in Harvard and had inequality -the goal of assigning resources fairly within a society- as a central theme: John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*<sup>2</sup>. From New England has also come, much more recently, a brief work by Darun Acemoglu and James Robinson which, from an institutionalist standpoint, present a deep critique of Piketty's thesis<sup>3</sup>.

My purpose in this section is to dwell on arguments like those presented by Rawls and Acemoglu/Robinson -against Piketty- in order to highlight the unsurmountable difficulties that pose the goal of equality. By doing so, I hope to explore the prepolitics of inequality.

Piketty's work has been widely discussed. His main arguments are well-known: challenging the Kuznet's curve, Piketty claims that inequality does not tend to disappear as economies mature. As a result, capitalism would not be able to neutralize the inequality that it generates. The main reason lies in the formula  $r > g$ , according to which capital provides greater returns than labour. With the passing of time, this explains the accumulation of wealth. If the latter is passed on between generations, inequality grows. In times of low economic growth, inequality grows more rapidly.

This reasoning has been subjected to a number of criticisms. Leaving methodological questions aside, one can make objections of different kinds: economic (the role of technological disruption as a temporary reason for the widening of inequality, the decrease in global poverty, the availability of goods and services that would have been the preserve of elites yesteryear), sociological (the influence of genetics in poverty), or normative (inequality's increase could well be less important than greater growth). Yet it remains the case that inequality has increased within advanced societies and emergent economies, irrespective of the transient nature of the reasons that can be often invoked to explain this evolution: technological change, globalization, financial crisis. This is where Acemoglu and Robinson step in: they suggest that Piketty is affected by the same pathology that suffered in the past economists like Marx or Ricardo: the need to formulate general laws, ignoring the key role played by culture and institutions within society. So that the general law,  $r > g$ , is not a given but one of the many factors that can explain inequality.

However, if we free Piketty from the burden of teleology and reduce him to his essence, he still has something important, albeit hardly new, to say. Or we can say something important dwelling on

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<sup>1</sup> Gillian Tett, "Lessons from a rock-star economist", 25 abril.

<sup>2</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Darren Acemoglu and James Robinson, "The Rise and Decline of General Laws of Capitalism", NBER Working Paper No. 20766, December 2014.

Piketty. Namely: that economic equality is unfeasible without an extreme degree of coercion. In fact, not even state socialism was able to make that equality possible -some were more equal than others. This does not imply that inequality must be accepted as such, in any forms it might take; but it does imply that it is impossible to eradicate, hence forcing us to limit ourselves to reduce it if we decide so. Moreover, these considerations are prior to, and independent from, the debate about equality's or inequality's *desiderability*: before we develop any normative argument about this, it is advisable to know in which degree and through what means is equality a goal that can be achieved at all. Feasibility trumps desiderability.

For that reason, it is helpful to reduce the problem of equality to its most basic components. This simplification is akin to the one practiced by contractualist thinkers who employ the fiction of the state of nature in order to shed some light on the question about the state. Likewise, if we place ourselves in some sort of original situation as far as equality is concerned (leaving aside institutional and political differences between particular societies), what Piketty reminds us is that the sheer accumulation of capital makes some people richer than other, that such capital tends to grow and is intergenerationally transmitted, thus reinforcing the dividing line between those who were able to stock it initially and those who were not.

Strictly speaking, public confiscation is not enough to prevent accumulation, since it entails a simple transference of rents from private to public hands. That is why Piketty himself finds that wars are the best levelling mechanisms -and the greater the war, the more radical the levelling. After a brutal conflict, such as the Second World War, society moves closer to a new beginning: a Year Zero of Equality. According to Piketty, if wealth is not even more unevenly distributed today, is because not so much time has passed since 1945. In other words, not enough time has passed for some to accumulate much more than others.

At this point, Acemoglu and Robinson would protest that institutional factors -redistribution by the state- may prevent the gradual but steady divergence between the *haves* and the *have-less*. And so it seems: Sweden is different than England. But in truth it can only prevent it *up to a point*, because, unless the authorities assume full confiscatory powers and implement a policy whose goal is absolute equality, nothing can prevent that some people perform better than other in the economic realm -thus distancing themselves from those who perform relatively worse and ending up, in fact, inhabiting truly different social worlds. I am not going to press the question as to *why* some perform better than others, although potential reasons abound. One way or another, there will be winners and losers. In relative terms: they must not be absolute winners and losers to be winners and losers in relation to each others.

Therefore,  $r > g$  is not *the* explanation for inequality, but rather a factor that helps to explain the increase in the wealth of those who are already -by performance or inheritance- far better off than others. Of course, we could think of suppressing the right to inherit, so that no wealth could be transmitted but to the state, which in turn would use it for making people even. However, this would create other, arguably more disturbing, problems: incentives for the initial accumulation of wealth would be suppressed, thus neutralizing the very precondition of any redistribution: the creation of wealth.

Historically, even in a "new" society such as the American one -free of the privileges and burdens that affected Europe before and after the liberal revolutions- inequality starts to be produced as soon as society itself is in motion. Slavery, though, shows as well how difficult it is to mark a true Year Zero of Equality when real societies are at play. Still, California around 1835 will be closer to that stage than London in 2014. And this problem is acutely highlighted by Robert Nozick's theory of distributive justice -an answer to Rawls<sup>4</sup>. Although Nozick will cease later to be a libertarian, this books is concerned with the justification of a *minimal* state compatible with the *highest* individual freedom. To such end, he deals with the public distribution of wealth, attacking it wherever it

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, Utopia*, Malden, Blackwell, 2008.

threatens individual freedom. For instance, to reach agreements and sign contracts -agreements and contracts whose fruits are distributed *while* they are produced. Nozick prefers distribution to redistribution -liberty to equality.

His departure point is well-known. The fairness of individual (or familiar) possessions depend on two only factors: their original *acquisition* and its later *transmission*. A simple distributive principle emerges by which a given distribution will be fair if everyone's possessions are legitimate. Yet reality complicates things, as usual, since it cannot be ignored that there exist past injustices. Thus Nozick introduces a third factor: the *rectification* of possible injustices in the acquisition, possession, and transmission of goods. Therefore, a person will possess legitimately her goods -and will thus be unequal in relation to others- if according to one of those principles: acquisition, transmission, rectification. So that a given distribution of goods -be it California around 1835 or London in 2014- will be fair or unfair depending on its *history*. Nozick:

"The systems of entitlements is defensible when constituted by the individual aims of individual transactions. No overarching aim is needed, no distributional pattern is required. (...) *From each as they choose, to each as they are chosen*"<sup>5</sup>.

If these principles are applied equally to all *before* a society puts itself in motion -in the Year Zero of Equality, be it politically created anew or recreated via the rectification of past injustices- the emergence of inequalities among individuals will be justified and nobody, according to Nozick, should have the right to correct them. In this context, the accumulation of wealth derives from the economic interplay and does not require any rectification if no injustice is made. For Nozick, any theory of justice based upon an *structural* principle of distribution is unacceptable, because it determines *ex ante* who ends up having what, thus interfering with personal liberty. A distribution is fair when its historical origin is fair, whereas public redistribution must be guided by an abstract principle and thus cannot be legitimate.

What is interesting here, though, is that not even a libertarian thinker, whose main goal is to protect the sanctity of individual agreements, can ignore the uneven opportunities and possessions *inherited* from the social past: the unavoidable distance that separates us from Year Zero. In this regard, no matter how reasonable Nozick's principle of rectification may appear, its implementation would be so difficult that it would never be considered fully realized. What counts as a past injustice, how should the latter be rectified exactly, when is the victim redeemed? Slavery is a perfect example of the obstacles that faces any such rectification. Injustices cannot, in fact, be rectified.

That said, is the inequality produced afterwards -once an equal society is in motion- permissible? An inequality that is the outcome of a socioeconomic process where all depart from the same position.

Much depends on what that "same position" means. If inequality stems from differences in talent and skills between individuals -Rawls' "natural lottery"-, we could protest: no individual can be held responsible for her innate abilities. On the contrary, if such differences are taken as a consequence of our common humanity, another rule of the social game, then the inequality that is gradually produced due to the disparate performances of individuals (and groups) would be *defensible*.

In a recent book, economist Robert Frank has emphasized the role that luck plays in our lives<sup>6</sup>. In his view, the contingency of birth possesses a decisive importance for the outline of our biographies, since being born in different social groups determines the extent of our opportunities and the strength of the security net we can rest on if we fail. The latter point is relevant, insofar as what we do with our unequal talents and abilities will also differ depending on how many chances we enjoy to get it right. Moreover, Frank argues, we tend to think that we have *conquered* with our effort

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Nozick, *op. cit.*, 2008, p. 159-160.

<sup>6</sup> John Rawls, *op. cit.*, 1971; Robert Frank: *Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2016.

everything that we have *achieved*, thus overlooking the key part that luck plays in life. Merit would then be a delusion that is hard to deactivate -we are the apparent protagonists of our lives, so that successes are ours and failures are attributed to exogenous causes. Frank claims that this collective mirage is created by the formal proclamation of meritocracy. If individual merits are the product of innate factors and systemic forces, why should the loser be punished?

As it happens, that initial inequality reinforces itself with the passing of time, because of the accumulation of capital and its transmission via inheritance. Year Zero would be farther away in the past and we would end up with the same initial problem: the disadvantages among individuals who do not hold the same position when beginning their lives. As a result, an inequality that seemed fair insofar as it derived from an original equality of opportunity ends up curtailing the latter. Inequality becomes thus a labyrinth that has no exit -just as equality. Needless to say, contemporary debates are not concerned with an *absolute* inequality, but with the degree of inequality that is *permissible*: for those who wish to be equal, for those who wish to be unequal. It would be good if this conversation dealt with *feasible* equalities and inequalities, yet this is not always the case: sometimes an unfeasible equality is demanded, and the same goes for inequality.

Now, the beauty of Rawls' solution is that he reduces the argument to its essential components. he does so with a clever move, that of placing individuals in an "original position" where their own personal features and social circumstances are hidden under a "veil of ignorance" when they are asked about the kind of society they would support as preferable. Their answer, according to Rawls, is a free society whose state however assume legitimately the task of redistribute wealth in order to help the most disadvantages. This social contract is thus conceived for a society that is already in motion, where a given and relatively dynamic distribution of abilities and resources already exist, so that the pending task is giving the state a mandate to make corrections in that distribution.

But even in such society, as long as it remains one where a market economy is functioning, individuals will be conditioned by the relative position occupied by their families when they are born. For those who are disadvantaged in relation to others, this situation cannot possibly be fair. Is it fair, for instance, that a teenager inherits a small fortune, because his aunt died, whilst his classmate inherits debts after the accidental death of her parents? Maybe it is not unfair -but fair is not either. This points out to the impossibility to guarantee fairness through state redistribution. Of course, when taxing, one does not takes from Peter to give to John, as Anthony de Jasay claims: a Rotschild is taken from, in order to give to John. However, maybe Robert is receiving state benefits when he could work but refuses to do so. Or maybe Alex is also benefiting from state redistribution, but he makes enough money in the parallel economy beyond state control. And so on, and so forth.

It can does be concluded that equality is impossible, but too much inequality is undesirable -as the global rise of populism in our days comes to show. Yet it remains to be elucidated whether inequality is a political problem. Before we answer that, it is useful to complete the reflection about inequality in the abstract by considering how contemporary inequality is produced. This will show that inequality is not *by itself* a political problem, but rather a sociofact, a feature of social relations that cannot be eradicated yet can *and* must be politicized.

### **3. Inequality in the global age.**

Why inequality must be politicized becomes clear precisely in our times, arguably a moment of transition between two different varieties of capitalism. The main question is whether we can affirm that an individual is responsible of its own socioeconomic destiny. If a robot puts someone out of order after three decades as a factory worker or as accountant, is he to blame for the corresponding fall in disposable income?

Current economic turmoil cannot be explained without taking globalization into account. Remarkably, the latter reinforces the point made above about the degree in which birth conditions individual performances and, ultimately, whole lives. It does so because being born in different

countries also matters -the abandonment of methodological nationalism allows us to see this from a wider perspective. In his work on globalization and inequality, Branko Milanovic has showed that while inequality has increased within countries, it has diminished between them, so that reactions against globalization on the part of those social groups that feel most damaged by it (blue-collar workers in rich countries, mostly) can be understood as a defence of the greater "citizenship rent" that enjoy citizens of advanced societies<sup>7</sup>. This can be defined as the advantage enjoyed by those who are born in a rich country -an exogenous circumstance that is independent from individual efforts. Being against immigration, Milanovic claims, is tantamount to defending our citizenship rent. We are defending our luck.

The fundamental question concerns the relation between personal responsibility and impersonal compulsion. The latter was defined by Friedrich Hayek as the forceful adaptation to be made by most social actors in the face of an economic or technological change that depreciates or neutralizes our abilities or assets<sup>8</sup>. It is impersonal, since it does not derive from a decision, but is rather the outcome of a social process that aggregates millions of individual decisions and causal effects; it is compulsive because those who do not adapt will be left behind.

It could be deduced therefrom that the state is obliged to make a supplementary effort in exceptional times, i.e. times in which an accelerated and radical transformation in pre-existing economic conditions take place. In other words: *where a reasonable management of one's own life opportunities is not enough to secure a socioeconomic position that is accord to our abilities*. Or: when one would like to, but cannot. After all, if an individual acts responsibly and aptly, but the system fails him, it cannot be said of her that she acted irresponsibly. Therefore, it would not be just to punish him *as if* he had been.

However, this principle is easy to formulate but hard to implement. What exactly is "a reasonable management of one's own life opportunities"? If a person completes a degree in Architecture or Journalism and steps in a market saturated with architects and journalists, whose fault is that? The same goes for someone who makes a bad management decision or misses obvious business opportunities. A case-by-case analysis could be done, but which public administration has such capacity? This rationale could also be applied to the "socioeconomic position that is accord to our abilities". Moreover, the compensation system that could be implemented, since the device that pushes people to new spheres of economic activity should be preserved, lest the whole economic system is damaged and no money to pay compensations exists.

As a result, the relationship between personal responsibility (as derived from the principle of autonomy) and impersonal compulsion (as resulting from the market process) cannot be easily discerned. Yet it is a troublesome relationship that cannot be disdained by invoking the primacy of personal liberty (that makes individuals ultimately responsible of everything that befalls them) or by doing just the opposite (describing a deterministic mechanism where individual actors disappear under the sheer oppressive force of systemic structures). A basic economic fact, that derives from the basic political fact, is hinted at: the impossibility to reconcile the individual and the collective realms. The interplay between the micro and the macro levels is similar in both cases: the capitalist economy produces innovations that are benefit to all, but punishes particular groups and members of such society during the process. Unless we suppress economic competence upon which markets depend, these two perspectives are irreconcilable. This reality, as inequality itself, is tragic. It cannot be solved, although its -their- most destructive consequences can and should be alleviated.

In sum, the reasons that explain the increase in inequality in the global age reinforces the view that inequality is not a political problem in itself, but a sociofact, i.e. a feature of social relations that exist in any given social body. As societies become more complex, however, the abilities of individuals to

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<sup>7</sup> Branko Milanovic, *Global Inequality. A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*, The Belknap Press, Cambridge y Londres, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, Routledge, Londres, 2006, p. 140.

make individual progress are weakened, while a basic social protection is granted by the state. Differences in birth gain importance as social mobility is reduced -and the farther we are from a Year Zero, the greater inequalities tend to be. As a result, inequality *becomes* a political problem due to a growing social discontent and an increasing propensity to protest on the part of those who are or feel left behind when compared to others. Politicization, even a pre-emptive politicization, is thus advisable.

#### 4. Political emotions and inequality.

We may well agree that inequality, not being a political problem but a social feature, must however be politicized in order to preserve a democratic social order -or, reversely, to pull down a non-democratic one where inequality is reinforced by social and economic structures that prevent social mobility. Yet this politicization brings about its own problems, which I would like to discuss briefly in order to highlight how difficult it is to deal politically with this issue. Above all, I would like to highlight resentment, a political emotion that usually makes itself visible during economic crisis and takes the form of a denunciation -that of an unfair treatment that in turn demands reparation. In fact, it could well be seen as akin to Nozick's rectification principle: the complaint would not concern the illegitimate possession of goods, but rather the resentful citizen claim that he is dispossessed for illegitimate reasons. The resentful citizen describes the harm she has suffered as *unjust*, opening the door for a social change that is repairing in nature. Martha Nussbaum thus claims that resentment is a moral emotion that entails an idea of what is just<sup>9</sup>.

The key point is to distinguish between reality and belief: the subjective belief that an injustice has been done and its objective existence. Somehow, this distinction is present in some authors. John Rawls argues that a "rational" subject cannot feel envy, at least not while the differences between her and the others are not perceived as unjust or exceed certain limits<sup>10</sup>. This is a key point: if those differences are *just* but *excessive*, the individual -albeit rational- will *feel* envy. An objective injustice demands reparation, whereas an imaginary injustice does not. The process by which these emotions are formed is decisively mediated by the *framing* of the injustice/inequality. Instead of taking anger as the *automatic* answer to the lack of recognition that suffers the angered citizen, it all depends on the way in which that experience is constructed: there may be no injustice at all or the latter may be attributed to the wrong source<sup>11</sup>.

How to distinguish them? Who is to decide whether we face a real or imaginary injustice? Rawls, while discussing "the problem of envy" for a well-ordered society, solves the problem by putting the burden of proof on the resentful, appealing to the deliberative dimension of a pluralist democracy:

"If we resent our having less than others, it must be because we think that their being better off is the result of unjust institutions, or wrongful conduct on their part. Those who express resentment must be prepared to show why certain institutions are unjust or how others have injured them"<sup>12</sup>.

In other words, the resentful must *persuade* the other participants in the public conversation of her good reasons. But this, being the only solution, is however a tricky solution. Specially since the relationship between envy and resentment is far from morally edifying. As the former is a shameful feeling that we can hardly acknowledge in public, the solution is often to transform envy in righteous

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<sup>9</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions. Why Love Matters for Justice*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge y Londres, 2013, p. 344.

<sup>10</sup> John Rawls, *op. cit.*, 1971, p. 530.

<sup>11</sup> Simon Thompson, "Anger and the struggle for justice", en S. Clarke, P. Hoggett y S. Thompson (eds.), *Emotions, Politics and Society*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> John Rawls, *op. cit.*, 1971, p. 467.



indignation through a re-writing of the story we tell ourselves, arguing that the other has achieved the object of our envy by illegitimate and immoral means<sup>13</sup>.

Social and political mobilization is, of course, an ordinary way of making demands in democratic regimes. The problem with resentment-driven protest in complex societies is that sometimes the demand made by groups or citizens may be misguided, but produces political effects all the same. Let us take the financial crisis, which is the aggregate result of so many decisions that the blame cannot be attributed clearly to any of them. In countries that suffered a real state bubble, like Spain, a citizen ends up being economically punished irrespective of her own contribution -she might have rented her home, in fact. Moreover, economic policy depends on governments and governments are chosen by the electorate, which, by doing that, becomes also responsible for the decisions adopted by its representatives. In Spain, the Socialist Party claimed, ahead of the general election in 2008, that no economic crisis was in sight, whereas the Conservative Party said just the opposite. Spanish voters backed the Socialist Party, thus giving a mandate to the ensuing government *not* to prevent the crisis. Many of these very voters unseated the President in the next general elections, after he had been pushed by events to make deep cuts in public finances in order to avoid Spain's bankruptcy at the end of 2010. As it happens, those who dramatize their resentment through a display of anger have an advantage: the *visibility* of the claim, linked to a harm, neutralizes any appeal that can be made to the *history* of that harm. Only the problem we face, full of affective force, counts -original causes do not.

But the mobilization of resentment poses some other conundrums. Firstly, the ability to be listened to by state actors and to be granted a compensation depends on the group's visibility, in turn highly dependent on dramatization and turnout. But nothing guarantees that the most unfairly treated are the ones who get the attention, nor that their demands are consistent or, for that matter, that their relative inequality *is* the outcome of an unfair treatment. Secondly, moreover, an effective mobilization of this powerful emotion can lead to further inequality if disadvantaged groups remain invisible or not attended to.

Regarding the question about the nature of inequality, it is interesting to distinguish between envy, emulation and resentment. They are members of the same moral family --that of mimetic desire--without being exactly the same thing. To differentiate them is important, in order to answer to each of those affects. Pure envy, after all, cannot be satisfied. Rawls distinguishes between a *general* envy that is experienced by the disadvantaged against the advantaged, and a *specific* envy that is intrinsic to rivalry and competition, irrespective of the departing point of the participants. The most destructive envy is the hostility towards other people's goods *although* they make no harm to us. However, envy can be positive to the whole society when integrated into the market economy, i.e. when it is transformed into emulation: the aspiration to be where others are. Obviously, these fine conceptual distinctions can hardly be found in the real world, where actual affects will be intertwined. Yet it is not the same thing to react against other people's fortunes by setting up a firm than by throwing stones against a villa.

In order to avoid the negative consequences of envy, Rawls set up a double defence line. On the one hand, a number of basic rights and redistributive principles oriented to provide every citizen with opportunities; on the other, legal and political institutions that make possible to channel genuine claims on the part of those citizens that think or feel having been unjustly treated. This would not eradicate envy, but would make it socially manageable.

Therefore, the crucial distinction is that between a specific or competitive envy from which no rights are deduced, and a justified resentment that points towards injustices that must be repaired. The latter are less likely, but still possible, in a democratic society. On its part, specific envy is a natural outcome of the ordinary functioning of a liberal society and a market economy. This structural envy

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<sup>13</sup> Jon Elster, *Explaining Social Behavior. More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, p. 158-159.

could lead to a negative view of liberal societies. As Peter Sloterdijk has claimed, the latter have abolished serfdom, but invented the loser<sup>14</sup>. One becomes a winner or a loser by just leading a life in societies that, albeit providing a basic equality, acknowledges their members' right to prosper. This will in turn lead to increasingly wider differences in wealth, status, sexual advantaged and intellectual superiority. As these goods are reduced and often positional, the liberal system accumulates a huge deposit of envy and bad tempers among the defeated contenders, not to speak of the really damaged and marginalized. That is why resentment is less an intraindividual emotion than a social relation located in specific contexts<sup>15</sup>.

Does this mean that the whole liberal society is founded on envy and is, therefore, a net producer of resentment? Actually, the reverse can also be said: liberal societies can be seen as efficient organizers of envy, as they try to transform it into creative emulation not resentment: creating an incentive and not a hindrance. The desire to emulate others is supposed to lead to self-construction rather than to self-destruction. Sloterdijk himself has suggested that the "valorative passions" -such as fame, vanity or ambition- are dangerous but inerradicable, as well as highly productive for mankind as a whole, as strong drivers of moral and material progress. An idea that suggest the need to pay attention to the level of the species when meditating upon the nature -political or not- of inequality.

### **5. Coda: inequality, the larger view.**

What happens if we abandon the current framework for discussing inequality, based established societies and historicized values, either liberal/capitalistic or egalitarian/socialist, and take a longer view? That is, if we adopt an evolutionary approach that explains social evolution focusing on the species' traits and their combination, in order to make sense of the increasing complexity of human societies. Where happens to inequality under that framework?

This is not the place to develop this point extensively, but some suggestions will suffice to make the point. I will dwell on biologist Earle Ellis' paper from 2015, where he attempts to develop an "Anthro-Ecology", a powerful and thorough synthesis of evolutionary theory, biology, and the social sciences in order to explain why human beings have colonized the planet<sup>16</sup>. What is interesting for my purposes is precisely the *why*: the reasons for the way in which human beings behave as an species.

As Ellis suggests, there are two patterns of human social behavior that are key for making sense of human societies evolution. The first is the unrivalled capacity of humans to transmit information by social learning, exemplified by human use of language: humans are far more capable than other species of social learning across both kin and non-kin individuals, and especially across generations. The second is their unparalleled capacity to form, sustain and depend for survival on complex non-kin relationships, what makes us the most ultrasocial species on Earth. Most importantly, an increasing dependence on non-kin subsistence exchange networks has enabled human societies to become increasingly specialized, complex and hierarchical. As Ellis describes:

"Specialization and exchange in subsistence regimes have made it possible for human individuals to subsist apart from any direct interactions with ecosystems (though not without indirect interactions, or telecoupling), with all subsistence needs met through exchange networks of subsistence producers (i.e., farmers, fisherman), processors (food preparation), providers (traders), and potentially many more specialists (tool makers, irrigation experts, bankers) in complex and dynamic subsistence supply chains ("subsistence webs") inviting further study as "socio-trophic relations'."

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit, Zorn und Zeit. Politik-Psychologischer Versuch*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Stefano Tomelleri, "The sociology of resentment", en B. Fantini, D. Martín Moruno, J. Moscoso (eds.), *On Resentment. Past and Present*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2013, 259-276.

<sup>16</sup> Earle Ellis, "Ecology in an anthropogenic biosphere", *Ecological Monographs*, 2015, 85(3), 287-331.

In turn, the social organization of societies -including their institutions, beliefs, complexity and degree of specialization- are seen as responses to the population size and densities sustainable by their primary subsistence technologies, together with the accumulation of these and other cultural inheritances over time through cultural evolution.

My conclusion from this is that inequality does not exist for political reasons, i.e. a conscious decision about how to build up a social system that leads to an unequal distribution of wealth, but is a non-intended product of societal evolution. Inequality within particular societies take place at the micro level, whereas societal evolution in the direction of an increasingly complex and specialized societies take place at the macro level. Humans innovate, produce, specialize, communicate -a process that can be explained with evolutionary tools in a non-deterministic fashion. Probably, the key feature is that of complexity: societies cannot but be increasingly complex, especially after the natural tendency of individuals and groups to specialize. In this context, as societies scale up, inequality becomes an unavoidable feature of human communities.

That said, cultural evolution also exist. Inequality has always been a social issue, since the moral conditions within human communities affect their ability to cooperate actively -not to mention some innate sense of reciprocity that is activated when flagrant injustices take place. Therefore, inequality becomes politicized despite it not being originally a sociofact. That is also the reason why its politicization should be soft rather than hard, as the failure of state socialism demonstrates. A hard politicization aimed to achieve total equality threatens to block the channels through which human material and moral progress takes place. A soft politicization is intended to guarantee that all members of society are provided with a number of basic rights and services, enjoy equal life opportunities, and are compensated when unfairly treated or prevented by historical circumstances to make the most of her abilities.

## **6. Conclusion.**

This paper has reflected upon the nature of inequality, trying to answer the question as to whether it is a political problem or rather a non-political one. On my view, it is a non-political problem, since it does not spring from a political organization of resources -despite the fact that actual societies are organized and distribute their resources in a certain way when an individual is born in it. However, I have tried to show that unless a totalitarian level of coercion is employed, there is no way to avoid that a society becomes unequal when in motion -even if the departure point is total socioeconomic equality. The reason is threefold: different abilities and talents, different choices and luck, an economic life where different yields are obtained. The reasons for the increase of inequality in our times have also been explored, pointing out the conflict between personal autonomy/responsibility and impersonal compulsion. This conflict confirms that inequality should be politicized, despite it not being, properly speaking, a political problem. Yet politicization creates problem of its own, reinforcing the actual impossibility of achieving anything like a "fair equality". I have focused on resentment and envy, which often leads to angered claims about an unfair treatment that demands compensation. Finally, a larger view is suggested -that of the human species as a whole. By taking a non-deterministic evolutionary approach that takes into account cultural evolution, the increasing complexity of human societies -of which individual and group specialization is a main driver-becomes the framework (at the macro level) where inequality unavoidably emerges (at the micro level). Yet this view of human beings comprise cooperation as one of the features of our ultrasocial species, which means that a certain degree of equality is required for human groups and societies to remain functional. As a result, the soft politicization of this non-political problem is justified.