

Symposium: The Future of Inequalities

Past and Future Inequalities

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ABSTRACT: To anticipate future inequalities requires a combination of 1) sound explanations of inequality's different forms, 2) reasonable projections of the variables that figure in those explanations. An explanation in terms of exploitation and opportunity hoarding plus some extrapolations from recent changes with respect to capital, communication, and coercion lead to tentative predictions for 2001 through 2050 that a) land-based inequality will diminish in importance, b) machine-based inequality will become more salient, c) inequality based on access to financial capital, information, science, and coercive means will sharpen significantly.

“When it was proclaimed,” wrote Jorge Luis Borges, “that the Library comprised all books, the first impression was one of extravagant joy. All men felt themselves lords of a secret, intact treasure. There was no personal or universal problem whose eloquent solution did not exist – in some hexagon. The universe was justified, the universe suddenly expanded to the limitless dimensions of hope. At that time there was much talk of the Vindications: books of apology and prophecy, which vindicated for all time the actions of every man in the world and established a store of prodigious arcana for the future.” (Borges 1962: 83).

Borges spoke of Babel’s Library, but he spoke with the wisdom acquired as longtime director of Argentina’s national library. In Borges’ fable, we glimpse the mingling of prediction with vindication - with the hoped-for discovery that past and present have meaning, that we have discerned the meaning, that there was some good reason for the way we behaved. We also glimpse the scholar’s wish to find that niche within the library, that hexagon, containing precisely the formula to link past, present, and future. Still we must remember Borges’ warning: the library is endless, whereas we are finite. I promise you no more than a guided tour of one section

within a vast palace of uncertainties concerning the future of social inequality on a world scale.

Let us, therefore, peer into the future together, trying to use what knowledge we already have concerning past and present inequalities to think through what sorts of inequalities might prevail across the whole world a half a century from now, in 2051. My contribution to that joint effort will not consist of point predictions, but of reflections on how we can properly use existing knowledge to anticipate possible futures.

Anyone wanting to use knowledge of past inequalities for anticipation of future inequalities must employ three complementary tools:

First, identification of robust long-term trends that show signs of continuing, which would, for example, include verifying the general impression that increasing salience of control over finance capital has been deepening economic inequality on a world scale for the last half-century or so.

Second, familiarity with causal processes that generate and transform inequality, which must surely extend beyond the income differences that currently attract the greatest attention to other resources that affect the quality and length of life.

Third, reasonable projections of which causes are likely to gain or lose significance as time goes on, which require not only knowledge of what causes inequality but also analysis of conditions that favor or inhibit those causes.

I claim no clairvoyance in any of the three regards, but I want to stress the importance of the second item: understanding causal processes that generate and transform inequality.

Compare two vivid images of the processes that produce inequality: *queues* and *conversations*. The queue image prevails these days. It lines up individuals to pass a checkpoint where a monitor scans them, matches their various attributes with well-established templates, and then shunts them into different channels, where they join other people having similar attributes. The best-known version of the queue employs one main template: human capital. In this scenario, the monitor is a market or its human agents. The monitor scans each individual for human capital, then matches the detected human capital with a position in which it will produce a net return for the market as well as for the individual. In competing versions of the queue, the monitor selects for gender, race, fame, estimated commitment, or other attributes instead of – or in addition to – human capital. Thus the manager of a fast-food restaurant hires, fires, pays, and promotes counter workers on the basis of a personal preference schedule, but in implicit competition with other potential employers of the same workers.

More complex accounts in the same vein allow for additional effects of effort, inheritance, social connections, and learning, with the individual passing

multiple monitors over a career. Still the central image shows us one person at a time passing a checkpoint and moving on to differential rewards as a consequence of attributes or performances registered at that checkpoint. Cumulatively, such a process generates distributions of individuals and positions differing significantly in current rewards and accumulations of past rewards as a function of their relationship to criteria built into the monitor.

Inequality-producing queues do exist. Law firms vie vigorously for high-ranking graduates of prestigious law schools, and vice versa. Competitive tryouts for ballet corps, football teams, and Rhodes Scholarships produce sharp divisions between winners and losers. First-past-the-post elections cumulate individual votes into a monitor having fateful consequences for politicians in parliamentary democracies. A knack for answering questions on what Nicholas Lemann (1999) calls *The Big Test*, early equivalents of the SAT, helped me become the first member of my large, recently immigrant kin network to attend college. The question, then, is not whether inequality ever results from queuing processes, but whether we can reasonably take the queue as a general model for the production of inequality. Later I will give reasons for thinking that, on the contrary, the inequality-generating queue constitutes an exceptional case that only works under special institutional conditions.

Imagine a rectilinear space with social rank defining its vertical axis, and various social sites its horizontal axis. In the queue view, inequality consists of differential location within such a space. We can follow current fashion by constructing that space around monetary income or wealth, but nothing in principle keeps us from adding or substituting criteria such as power, fame, prestige, and overall well being. Any set of social units is unequal to the extent that its members occupy different positions within that space.

The idea lends itself easily to the notion of a single hierarchy within which every individual has a defined place. The hierarchy may, of course, array individuals according to income, wealth, power, prestige, or some combination of these advantages. The queue perspective also articulates neatly with the notion of social mobility as movement of individuals from step to step within such a hierarchy. Aggregate inequality thus conceived refers to distributions: in static terms, the extent to which higher-ranking individuals amass advantages. In dynamic terms, it concerns the extent to which the average individual and that individual's offspring stay in the same inferior location throughout careers, lifetimes, or generations. A highly unequal system, in these terms, concentrates advantages at its hierarchy's top and fixes individuals or social units at their positions within the hierarchy.

Scholars have reached little consensus on causes of long-term transformations over whole inequality spaces. The prevailing economic account, however, expands queuing mechanisms to a national, or even an international, scale.

Markets, in that account, serve as monitors, sorting out individuals according to the marginal increases in productivity caused by incremental inputs of the resources they embody or control. Thus, in general, resources currently in short supply that make large contributions to productivity command greater rewards than those in excess supply and/or without significant impacts on productivity. The relative supply and significance of resources such as land, labor power, knowledge, information, machines, and financial capital, shift massively over time as a function of interactions between their own transformation, on one side, and the changing organization of production, on the other.

With lags due to the accumulation of wealth, in such a view, basic inequalities shift from dependence on control of one kind of resource (e.g. land) to another (e.g. capital). Prediction of future inequalities, therefore, requires identifying future forms of production and the resources whose possession they will reward. Those who control the crucial resources will, according to the argument, reap disproportionate gains. While raising doubts about the generality of queuing processes as causes of inequality, I will borrow that important insight from queuing approaches later on.

What about conversation as a source of inequality? As an inequality-generating process, a conversation looks quite different from a queue. To the extent that the market serves as a monitor but operates as a black box, the contrast increases. It does little good to converse with electric eyes. Turning the market back into a dynamic set of social relations, conversely, reduces the difference between queuing and conversational perspectives. Recognizing the Middle Eastern bazaar and the local bake sale as different manifestations of markets makes it easier to conceive of markets in general as conversations (White, 1988).

We encounter an etymological irony. Consider the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s five main entries for the word "commerce":

1. Exchange between men of the products of nature or art.
2. Intercourse in the affairs of life.
3. Intercourse of the sexes.
4. Interchange, especially of letters, ideas, and so on.
5. Communication, means of free intercourse.

The sense of commerce as conversation comes through loud and clear. The OED's citations in support of these meanings date chiefly from England's commercial expansion of the 16th century. In his superb analysis of credit's proliferation during that same century, Craig Muldrew points out that prevailing views of the market then insisted on sociability as its basis. "Commerce and marketing," he remarks,

came to be interpreted as one form of communication used to form social bonds. Thomas Starkey discussed the communication of wealth in terms of profit, and Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique* was, of course, about the importance of using language in communication. It was through oratory, he argued, that men were convinced of the justice of dealing truly. Similarly, Malynes described commerce as the 'enterchange and communication of things'. In Stefano Guazzo's *La Civile Conversatione* (sic), translated into English in 1581 by George Pettie, conversation was described as *the* essential social relation, and the marketplace, 'where there is a bargayning for all things', was described as the most representative forum for such communication, where an exchange of words as well as goods took place (Muldrew, 1998: 138).

Only later, argues Muldrew, did the idea of trade as depending on individual self-interest come to prevail.

Assuming that market operations play a part in creating inequality, then, we have a choice between a) imagining the market as an impersonal sensor, and b) including dynamic, negotiated, conversational social relations in our picture of the market. To the extent that we choose the second option, we move away from strict queuing.

Conversation provides an illuminating example and model of social life because it so blatantly contradicts both rule-controlled and individual-interest-driven portrayals of social life (Tilly, 1998b). Participants in conversation obviously build on previous experience and follow known scripts, yet improvise incessantly, and collectively produce new outcomes that affect their subsequent interchanges. In the most elementary conversation, only two parties engage in negotiated communication. Although the parties begin with at least partially shared definitions of their identities and relationship, both identities and relationships are modified as a result of the colloquy. In the course of their exchange, each party deploys available resources in efforts to influence the other party and to shape the collective output of their talk. Many conversations operate asymmetrically, producing a net flow of advantage to one party or the other. Those conversations alter relationships between interlocutors.

In the analysis of inequality, the best-known conversational image represents the relationship between the parties as joint participation in material production. Here we see one party imposing controls and restrictions on the other such that the two parties leave their interchange with unequal gains or losses. Marxist models of inequality generally fit that image, but so do a number of non-Marxist and semi-Marxist materialist accounts (see e.g. Bowles & Gintis, 1976, 1993; Earle, 1997;

Granovetter & Tilly, 1988; Kalb, 1997; Midlarsky, 1999; Tilly & Tilly, 1998). Competing conversational explanations of inequality – especially inequality by gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and other criteria that are not *ipso facto* economic – stress guile, coercion, mystification, and rhetoric as bases of unequal exchange. The elementary two-person model has its uses as a starting point. Yet, conversational explanations of inequality gain in value when they incorporate three or more interlocutors, when those interlocutors include social sites as well as individuals, when categorical boundaries separate at least two of the parties, and when the residues of previous conversations among the parties shape their current interchange.

In the conversational view, inequality is a relation between persons or sets of persons in which interaction generates greater advantages for one than for another. At a small scale, we might trace out the unequal relations that characterize a shop, a household, or a neighborhood. At a large scale, multiple relations of this kind compound into great connected webs of inequality. At either scale, the interpersonal networks involved only approximate single hierarchies under extraordinary circumstances – for example, when some powerful institution such as an army, a corporation, or a church groups people into distinct levels. We cannot easily locate most such webs in the sorts of abstract inequality spaces according to income, wealth, or prestige commonly associated with queuing models. Yet the web-like structure poses no fundamental barrier to assessing aggregate inequality. It simply requires shifting from examination of static stocks to dynamic flows (Brudner & White, 1997).

Just as we can detect dominant economies by tracing international trade flows, dominant firms by tracing interlocking directorates, and dominant universities by tracing movements of scientists among institutions, we can identify dominant clusters within larger interpersonal webs by tracing net flows of advantages among social sites. Recent analyses of US black-white differentials in wealth and well being (Oliver & Shapiro, 1997; Conley, 1999) indicate, for example, that even at similar levels of current income parent-child transfers of wealth give whites, on the average, great advantages over blacks. Racial endogamy probably reinforces those differences. Social mobility, in conversational perspective, does not consist of individual movement up and down an abstract hierarchy. It involves concrete flows of persons among clusters, especially clusters that differ significantly in dominance.

Long-run changes of inequality, in this view, depend on regrouping of relations among clusters of interlocutors. Like their neoclassical counterparts, Marxist explanations of major shifts in inequality emphasize control over productive resources. Classic Marxist explanations differ dramatically from neoclassical formulations, however, in two regards. First, they deny that markets do the crucial adjudicating, insisting instead on the generation of inequality within relations of production. Exploitation – unequal sharing of value added by effort in socially

organized production – thus forms unequal social classes. (Some Marxists also make concessions to unequal exchange, but that is a secondary current within Marxism.)

Second, Marxists differentiate between a medium-run and a long-run. In the medium run, interaction within modes of production creates changes in the degree, but not the type, of inequality, the prediction for capitalism being ever-increasing polarization between capital and labor. In the long-run, coercion in the form of conquest, colonization, or revolution creates shifts from one mode of production to another. To the two time spans correspond contrasting styles of conversation: grudging collaboration in the medium-run, open confrontation in the long-run.

At best, the Marxist historical account only explains the evolution of class differences. It lacks a plausible explanation of differences by gender, race, ethnicity, age, nationality, religion, and other categorical principles insofar as those principles operate in partial independence of class. The lack has led a number of Marxist theorists either to argue that inequalities among such non-class categories ultimately derive from class inequalities or to search for ways in which their existence serves the interests of dominant classes (see e.g. Leiman, 1993).

I have taken a different tack, investigating the interplay of categorical distinctions with various forms of exploitation and opportunity hoarding (Tilly, 1998a). Here is how the argument runs:

- inequality results from unequal control over value-producing resources (for example, some wildcatters strike oil, while others drill dry wells),
- paired and unequal categories, consisting of asymmetrical relations across a socially recognized (and usually incomplete) boundary between interpersonal networks, recur in a wide variety of situations, with the usual effect being unequal exclusion of each network from resources controlled by the other (for example, under apartheid many of South Africa's Asians made their livings by running retail shops in black settlements where they had no right to reside),
- an inequality-generating mechanism we may call *exploitation* occurs when persons who control a resource a) enlist the efforts of others in production of value by means of that resource, but b) exclude the others from the full value added by their efforts (for example, before 1848, citizens of several Swiss cantons drew substantial revenues in rents and taxes from non-citizen residents of adjacent tributary territories who produced agricultural and craft goods under control of the cantons' landlords and merchants),
- another inequality-generating mechanism we may call *opportunity hoarding* consists of confining use of a value-producing resource to members of an

- ingroup (for example, Southeast Asian spice merchants from a particular ethnic-religious category dominate the distribution and sale of their product),
- both exploitation and opportunity hoarding generally incorporate paired and unequal categories at boundaries between greater and lesser beneficiaries of value added by effort committed to controlled resources (for example, the distinction between professionals and non-professionals – registered nurses and aides, scientists and laboratory assistants, optometrists and optical clerks, architects and architectural drawers, et cetera - often marks just such boundaries),
 - local categorical distinctions gain strength and operate at lower cost when matched with widely available paired, unequal categories (for example, hiring women as workers and men as bosses reinforces organizational hierarchy with gender hierarchy).

If exploitation and opportunity hoarding are the basic mechanisms behind inequality, then queuing is simply one of several differentiating mechanisms by which exploitation and opportunity hoarding produce their effects. Queuing requires unusual special conditions: individual-by-individual selection rather than collective incorporation of categories; centralization of monitoring rather than multiple, diverse points of entry; crisp and visible selection criteria; relatively extensive divisions both among candidates and among positions to be allocated.

While these conditions commonly occurred in twentieth century firms – hence the recent popularity of queuing models – they have rarely appeared together in history. They rest, in fact, on extensive organizational infrastructure. In the more general case, collective (rather than individual) selection occurs, monitoring operates in a dispersed fashion, criteria vary from situation to situation, as the numbers of categories and positions remain limited. Even within contemporary capitalist firms, for example, mutual recruitment to jobs within channels marked by common origin – migration stream, schooling, race, or ethnicity – still plays a large part in hiring. Such practices do not conform to simple queuing models. Queues are special cases.

For the purpose of reasoning about future inequalities, all we need draw from this complex explanatory apparatus is the inference that the future depends especially on concatenation of three factors:

- seizure of value-producing resources by limited networks of people;
- creation of exploitation and opportunity hoarding on the basis of those resources; and
- insertion of categorical differences into those systems of exploitation and opportunity hoarding.

Whether selection processes occur through queuing or other mechanisms matters much less than the basic combinations of value-producing resources, networks, exploitation, opportunity hoarding, and categorical differentiation.

For most of human history, large-scale inequality has depended chiefly on control of land. The overall human shift from hunting and gathering to settled agriculture beginning some ten thousand years ago, had two profound effects. First, it magnified distinctions based on control over land. Second, it augmented the ability of networks combining coercive force with well-connected hierarchies to seize and hold land. Pastoral people, slash-and-burn farmers, and pure hunter-gatherers have great trouble establishing continuous control over land – among other reasons, because they do not create sedentary military forces. Exceptions such as Mongol empires generally depended on terrifying force to extract tribute from agricultural populations that *did* possess land (Barfield, 1989). Settled cultivators themselves created specialized institutions for control of land. Exploitation, in these circumstances, included such arrangements as slavery, serfdom, feudal exaction, rack-renting, and sharecropping. Opportunity hoarding grew up with exclusive rights to superior land, pastures, forests, fisheries, wild game, and minerals.

Almost everywhere, categorical divisions by gender and age differentiated control over land and its related resources. The fact that warriors were almost exclusively male simply reinforced that very general principle. But such divisions as race, ethnicity, caste, religion, and lineage grew up in part as causes, and in part as consequences, of inequality with respect to control over land and coercive means. They figured directly as causes when conquerors used such divisions to establish advantage-yielding differences from the conquered. They figured as effects when divisions by race, ethnicity, caste, religion, and lineage emerged from boundaries created by exploitation and opportunity hoarding. Thus the now profound division between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda grew from a fuzzy nineteenth century boundary between culturally similar but mainly agricultural Hutu and mainly pastoral Tutsi, a boundary greatly sharpened and reinforced by German, then Belgian, incorporation of Tutsi into their systems of colonial rule (Jones, 1995; Mamdani, 2001; Uvin, 1998).

In land-based systems, exploitation and opportunity hoarding commonly co-exist, and often reinforce each other. In many peasant economies, for example, local landlords operate exploitative systems in which tenant households owe them dues, services, and labor on the landlord's domain for which the peasants receive little or no compensation. But peasant households themselves hoard the opportunities afforded them by the land they lease or own, the cattle and tools they have accumulated, and the claims on others embedded in ties of kinship, neighborhood, and religious solidarity. Landless laborers typically occupy the least advantageous

positions within such systems, extensively exploited by landowners, and excluded from rights based on full membership in the peasant community.

Our own era has diminished the centrality of land in the generation and maintenance of inequality. Over the world as a whole, nevertheless, control of land – and its auxiliary, coercive means – has by no means dissolved as a foundation of exploitation and opportunity hoarding. Consider Siddharth Dube's gripping transcription of testimony from members of a poor (but by no means the poorest) village family in India's Uttar Pradesh (Dube, 1998). The family are Harijans, formerly known as Untouchables, and officially designated as Scheduled Castes (see Human Rights Watch, 1999, which uses the alternative name Dalit). Life histories from patriarch Ram Dass and his extended family show vividly not only how much the inequalities in land ownership dominate local life, but to what degree central governments still depend upon the collaboration of small and medium landlords to keep the rest of the population in check.

Ram Dass comments on how Thakurs, higher caste village landlords, came into their own after Nehru's reforms eliminated zamindari overlords:

Apart from the Thakurs, everyone was poor before zamindari abolition. Some of the Banias [traders] did have money from business. The middle castes were also poor, though not as poor as us Harijans. And even up to now, the richest are the Thakurs, then the middle castes, and the poorest are the Harijans! The Thakurs had all the advantages earlier: they were rich, they were educated, they had land, and they had us Harijans to be their slaves. So it is not surprising that till today they are the lords and we are still poor. (Dube, 1998: 175)

In India as a whole, distinctions by religion, caste, and gender reflect long histories of conquest, exploitation, and opportunity hoarding, but now serve to solidify and justify current inequalities with respect to land. A majority of the world's population still lives in systems where land ownership looms large.

Nor need we reach far back into the histories of today's wealthy states to find similar conditions. As westerners built centralized states with standing armies, after all, they continued to restrict military service to males, to tie full citizenship to military service, and to impose restrictions on suffrage and office-holding based on landed property-holding. But in the world's richer regions, starting a few hundred years ago, inequality began to spring increasingly from control over machines and raw materials for machines. At first, a balance between land and machines prevailed, because landlords and merchants who supplied wool, cotton, flax, and silk to machine operators actually dominated their own territories as textile production expanded. Furthermore, since vital materials included fuel and metals, persons who

controlled land containing those precious materials continued to prosper. But, increment-by-increment, ownership of machines became an ever more prominent basis for exploitation and opportunity hoarding.

Divisions within machine production articulated deeply and widely with categorical distinctions having no logically necessary connection to the labor process. It became standard to package work relations in jobs, and to allocate those jobs by gender, age, race, ethnicity, and other social criteria. Stories – including queuing-style stories – grew up to explain and justify such job segregation, often alleging natural differences among categories in capacity and propensity for certain kinds of work. Categorical differences in availability and qualifications, however, actually resulted largely from the existence of segregation. The rapidity with which men's work became women's work or ethnic boundaries shifted with labor supply suggests as much. As in land-based systems of exploitation and opportunity hoarding, categorically differentiated relations to machine production became the basis of deep inequalities over social life as a whole.

Our checklist of elements whose interactions explain inequality includes: 1) value-producing resources, 2) networks, 3) exploitation, 4) opportunity hoarding, and 5) categorical differentiation. Using that checklist, what can we discern in the future? The big questions concern value-producing resources. Machine-based systems of inequality will continue to spread throughout the world for another half-century or more. It will take a long time before India, China, Africa, Latin America, and other relatively rural parts of the world accomplish full shifts to economies, and inequalities, based on control of machine power.

If they do. After all, it is conceivable that substitution of machines for labor power will accelerate so rapidly in already mechanized economies that the export of low-wage machine work to poor countries will lose its current attractiveness. Similarly, poor countries might become significant sites for manufacturing only in those industries where machine production reaps great advantages from proximity to raw materials or to low-wage consumers. We face the frightening prospect of opportunity hoarding at a world scale: increasingly deep division between a minority segment living with machine-based inequality and a majority segment condemned to land-based inequality.

Still, three newly prominent bundles of value-producing resources show some signs of displacing control over machines from its world dominance of the last few centuries. The first is financial capital – by no means a new element in the world economy, but one whose volume and volatility now lend enormous power to those who control it. Small, well-connected networks of financiers can batter whole national economies by shifting their investments from site to site.

The second is information – as old as the world, but newly prominent with the spectacular expansion of electronic communication. Despite the internet's

promiscuity, information is even easier to hoard than money, machines, and land; all it takes is dedicated circuits and secure memories.

The third, science, is looming larger by the day. In the form of pharmaceutical development, genetic engineering, biomechanical computing, microelectronics, medical diagnostics, telecommunication, geophysical mapping, and astrophysical exploration, scientific innovation produces possibilities of control, hence of inequality, exceeding all its predecessors.

Financial capital, concentrated information stores and scientific expertise all currently remain under the control of small networks of persons, compared to the world population as a whole. Each has expanded with extensive systems of opportunity hoarding, which yield increasing advantages to those who live within those systems. To what extent they form bases for exploitation remains more controversial. Remember that by exploitation we mean the process by which those who control a resource enlist the labor of others in production of value by means of that resource, and yield to those others less than the value added by their effort. Opponents of direct foreign investment regularly warn against the exploitative power of financial capital in just such terms. Critics of marketing surveys, credit information pooling, and government information systems levy parallel charges against concentrated information stores. Fears of big science likewise rest on ideas that it will take away more than it gives. At least in principle, all three could serve as bases of exploitation as well as opportunity hoarding.

Their impact on inequality would still depend on two other factors we have encountered before: their integration with categorical differences, and their relation to concentrated means of coercion. Although all three have incorporated existing distinctions by gender, age, race, ethnicity, and religion to some degree, so far the largest gap fostered by these emerging bases of inequality separates people with qualifying technical educations from everyone else: MBAs, JDs, computer science degrees, Ph.D.s, and the like. Of course each arena has its heroic tales of people who succeeded without certification: college dropouts who made billions as investors or internet entrepreneurs, and so on. Not since the Chinese mandarinates, nevertheless, have specially educated people played so prominent a part in world affairs, and received rewards so definitively separating them from their neighbors. Educators will have to balance between two long-cherished dreams: on one side, forming a queue-based intellectual meritocracy that recruits regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, or religion; on the other, spreading the benefits of knowledge equally through whole populations.

The second unknown is connection between these competing bases of inequality and organized concentrations of coercion. Through most of human history coercive means remained relatively fragmented, dispersed among communities, warlords, thugs, bandits, pirates, mercenaries, feudal retainers, religious

organizations, and private armies despite the occasional formation of an empire. Over the last few centuries, humanity performed the surprising feat of placing its major concentrations of coercive means under the control of national governments. The cost was increasingly bloody international warfare. But it brought the benefit of reduction in domestic mayhem – more so, I might add, in other western countries than in the United States.

In our own time, that trend seems to be reversing. Civil war, guerrilla, genocide, politicide, gun-running, and even mercenary activity have been rising irregularly since World War II (Creveld, 1991; Gurr, 1993; 2000, Kaldor, 1999; Tilly, 1995). Despite often being incited by outside states or by paramilitary shadows of existing states, on the whole these homicidal activities are escaping the system of state control over concentrated coercion that grew up between 1750 and 1950 or so. To the degree that international flows of drugs, arms, oil, gas, military expertise, and precious stones come under the influence of those who already dominate financial capital, information banks, or scientific knowledge, whole new forms of inequality could form, with disastrous consequences for humanity as a whole.

Let me justify these gloomy speculations by reminding you that Borges was a far worse pessimist than I. Toward the end of the fable with which we began, he remarked:

Perhaps I am deceived by old age and fear, but I suspect that the human species – the unique human species – is on the road to extinction, while the Library will last on forever: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly immovable, filled with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret. (Borges, 1962: 87)

There Borges and I part company. In fact, we humans built the library, and we can change it. One step toward a superior future is careful reasoning about the processes that generate inequality, wherever they occur.

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