

The Future of Inequality

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The future of inequality? I am tempted to say, who can possibly know? We know the past, and as far back as we look it seems to be a story of inequality. All known historical social systems have been hierarchical and unequal. To be sure, various philosophers and social scientists have posited the existence of systems at some early moment of human society which were perfectly egalitarian. Marx and Engels called this “primitive communism”. But, in fact, we have no real evidence that such systems ever existed. Such arguments are either a sort of romanticist embellishment or a hypothetical premise from which one might deduce a current political philosophy (as, for example, in theories of a social contract).

One of the characteristics of the modern world-system has been the extensive discussion of the merits of equality as a prescriptive concept. Nominal obeisance to the desirability of equality has been a centerpiece of most, or at least many, ideological justifications of the modern world-system. Nonetheless, if we look at the totality of this discussion, we can readily see that equality has really been, generally speaking, an unpopular concept. Most people, including most social thinkers, have spent their energy trying to figure out not how to implement the concept, but rather how best to limit the applicability of the concept, usually without saying that this is what they are trying to do.

Few people, especially few people who have power and/or privilege, really want the unwashed masses, the “dangerous classes”, to be able to have a real influence on how the system operates, either in the short run or the long run. The reason is so simple that it seems almost naive to assert it. Basically, if one says “equality”, what comes to mind for anyone who has current advantage is that he/she must give up something - money, power, status - and it is not at all clear that what he would get in return would match in any way what he would be giving up. If a member of the privileged strata favors real equality, he is likely to be either masochistic or morally idealistic (and possibly ascetic as well). Realism seldom enters the picture, because realism seems to be largely on the side of maintaining inequalities.

What has social science had to say about inequality in the modern world, and has it been anywhere near right? When the French Revolution invented the slogan, “liberty, equality, fraternity”, the equality to which they were referring was essentially political. It had the same function as insisting on the appellation *citoyen* in place of *monsieur*. It was a

way of saying that they rejected the concept of orders in society that underpinned the *Ancien R'gime*. The *Tiers-Etat* was no more. We were all citizens now.

It was basically the socialist movements in the nineteenth century which insisted that theoretical political equality did not ensure real equality. It did not ensure economic equality or social equality, and without these, political equality was a chimera. So problem number one was, was equality possible in a society of classes?

The class struggle was not the only problem for analysts. The world-system was made up of states, and not all states seemed to be equal. Indeed, not all states were even sovereign. Nineteenth-century Europeans (and nineteenth-century social scientists) discovered the problem of “civilization”. Were all states equally civilized? It seemed to those with world power that the answer was, clearly not. And until peoples were equally civilized, they could not be treated equally, it was argued. And how did we know that they were not equally civilized? Many measures were offered, but one clear criterion was that they were not equally powerful (weapons and technology). And so, politicians and social scientists put forward various schemes for their “*mission civilisatrice*”, as the French called it.

So much for the analysis of the roots and reality of existing inequalities... But what did this portend for the future? The answer depended on the basic ideological camp of which one was a member. The conservative right saw inequalities as largely inevitable, although it might be possible to alleviate some of its harshest consequences. The radical or socialist left saw inequalities as largely socially-constructed. They could, and should, be dismantled, if necessary by revolutionary action. And the liberal center took precisely a centrist position. Inequalities were, in theory, undesirable. Hasty reformist action, however, could actually make the situation worse, the liberals said. Reforms had to be carefully modulated by experts. The hope they offered was quite simple. Economic growth over time would end the problem by creating an ever-larger pie to share. The world was inexorably moving towards the reduction of differences, including, and even especially, the inequalities. The analyses were primarily intra-state, but some analysts extrapolated the same model (s) to the world level, thus speaking to the issue of “civilization” as well as the issue of “class.”

If one turns from the intellectual history of the modern world to its political history, we see that the latter has been in large part a struggle for greater equality by large numbers of people, and this struggle has had some positive consequences, at least for some people. And here too the reason seems obvious. People who have less, but are numerically more numerous than those who have more, have organized in various ways, protested, and threatened to wreak havoc on the system. This has been true within states and, at the world level, among states. Such organization and such disruption have led to various kinds of concessions.

These concessions have taken three forms: political, economic, and social. At the

level of politics, the major intra-state concession has been the universalization of suffrage, ever increasing the percentage of the population that has voting rights. The major interstate concession has been the creation of an ever-larger number of sovereign states, ending colonial regimes of various kinds, and granting formal equality in the interstate system.

The economic concessions have been in the form of redistribution. Within states, this has involved programs of state expenditure on education, on health, and on maintaining stable levels of lifetime income. These are known generically as the welfare state. Between nations, this has involved programs of assistance in the process of economic development.

Socially, the concessions have been in terms of recognizing the social equality of non-dominant "groups" with those that dominate social arenas. Within states, this has involved rights for women, rights for "minorities" and indigenous populations (in settler countries), and a whole series of other groups who have proclaimed their separate identities as groups. In the interstate arena, this has involved the delegitimization of Eurocentric prejudices and practices.

Now, it is obvious, as I list all these concessions, that the net result has not at all been a situation of equality, either within states or in the world-system as a whole. The optimistic view is that the changes have improved the situation from that of say 200 years ago, and that further incremental improvement is possible. The more dubious view, expressed in both rightwing and leftwing language, is that the changes have been insubstantial, and are not possible (ever, for the rightwing point of view; within the existing system, for the leftwing point of view).

The rhetoric of progress towards equality preached by the liberal center was not devoid totally of substance. What was it? We have to reflect on the fundamental difference between a capitalist and a pre-capitalist system in terms of social stratification. In a pre-capitalist structure, the upper stratum holds power because it controls the means of violence. It thereby lays claim to a disproportionate share of the wealth. Those who acquire wealth otherwise than by military appropriation, say via the market, are not defined as part of the upper stratum and therefore live in the eternal fear of confiscation. They seek to avoid this fate by buying their way into the aristocracy, which took time, sometimes as much as four generations, to complete.

The capitalist world-economy is just as deeply stratified as the pre-capitalist systems, but the relations of the strata are different. The upper stratum holds its rank not because of its past military prowess, but because of its past economic prowess. Those who are not at the top but have skills, those we are calling the cadres or middle strata of the system, are not living in fear of confiscation. On the contrary, they are in effect being constantly solicited and appeased by the upper strata, who need their assistance to maintain the political equilibrium of the overall world-system, that is, to hold in check the

dangerous classes.

The extension of the suffrage, the benefits of the welfare state, the recognition of particularist identities, are all part of the program of appeasing these cadres, of securing their loyalty to the overall system, and most of all, of obtaining their assistance in maintaining in their place the majority of the world's population. Let us think of the capitalist world-system socially as a tripartite system divided (symbolically) into 1% at the top, 19% who are cadres, and 80% at the bottom. Then let us add the spatial element. Within the bounds of the singular system that is the capitalist world-economy, the 19% are not spread out evenly among all the political units, but rather concentrated in a few of them.

If we make these two assumptions - a tripartite stratification system, with geographical lumpiness - then it seems obvious that the 19% have experienced a real improvement in their political, economic, and social situation, and can think of themselves as closer to equality with the top 1% than they were 200 years ago. But we can also see that there has been very little change for the 80%, since they have received very little of the presumed benefits, whether political, or economic, or social.

So, whereas there has, in fact, been increasing equality among a minority of the world's population, if one looks at the modern world-system as a whole over historical time, the situation is as polarized, in fact even more so, than it had been previously. What does that tell us about equality? Very little, except that it has not been happening within the framework of the capitalist world-economy. This does not tell us whether or not one could create an alternative system which was largely egalitarian.

The main argument against the possibility is that it is historically unknown. This seems to me a very weak argument. Human societies have existed for a very brief time when all is said and done. We cannot begin to rule out the future on the basis of our short historic past. In any case, the only conclusion one can draw from pessimism is to give up the ghost. The second major argument against equality is the sorrow showing of the now largely extinct Leninist regimes. But, of course, these regimes were never egalitarian, at any point, although at early points they pursued an egalitarian rhetoric and may, to some extent, have believed in it. But their practice was deeply inegalitarian, a mere variant on other regimes in peripheral and semi-peripheral zones of the capitalist world-economy. Their experience also tells us absolutely nothing about the possibilities of an egalitarian social system.

The fundamental issue is that today, at this point in the evolving history of the capitalist world-economy, further incrementalism is not a real choice. We have, it seems to me, reached its limits within the framework of our present historical social system. The system is in crisis and will inevitably change, though I have not got the space to argue this

here.¹ But it will not necessarily change for the better. This is the political and moral choice of this era of transition. I do not believe there is any reason to assume the inevitability of progress, of political or moral progress. I believe, however, in the theory of possible progress.

What do we then need to do? First of all, we need to be clear about where we are, and about the fact that we have choices, because the system is bifurcating and, therefore, ending. Secondly, we need debate among ourselves (the us being those who would wish that the successor system be egalitarian) about what political tactics might offer us the possibility of creating such a system, and how one might construct the alliances that are necessary to achieve this. And thirdly, we need to avoid the siren songs of those who would create a new, but still hierarchical and inequalitarian, system under the aegis of something progressive. None of this is easy. And there is no assurance we can succeed. What we can be sure of is that those with privilege intend to retain it in one form or another, and will fight both fiercely and intelligently to do so.

¹ See *Utopistics, or Historical Choices for the Twenty-first Century*, New York: New Press, 1998.