

SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

A SOCIAL PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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We must first look critically at whether or not the concept of “social inequality” is the most useful one for understanding what the social sciences say about the structures and cultural processes of modern society. Inequality has an ethical and political connotation to the extent that society does not provide all of its members with the same opportunities to develop themselves as persons. Over the last few decades, this has also taken on an international dimension in what has been called the North-South tension. The social sciences are also increasingly aware of the role played by differentiation and social segmentation in constituting communication systems and mechanisms that allow for greater complexity and make it possible to operate in contexts with high degrees of contingency and improbability. Differentiation functions by recognizing inequalities, which is not seen as something negative but rather as a way of reducing the risk of incorrect decisions and of assuming the resulting economic, political or moral responsibilities. Without differentiation modern society would be unable to operate efficiently.

Why, then, speak in terms of “equality” and “inequality”, instead of using the traditional ethical concepts of “justice” and “injustice”? Apparently, it is a concession to the language of the positive sciences, which are uncomfortable with ethical terms, which question their supposed neutrality with respect to values. However, one cannot avoid the paradox that “inequality” is a social concern precisely if it is unjust, if it generates injustice. From the perspective of a purely cognitive logic with no ethical “prejudices”, it can be said that to observe is to establish differences and generate inequalities that make it possible to compare different behavior patterns and delimit more precisely spheres of action. Therefore, inequality as such cannot be identified with injustice; only “certain” inequalities are

unjust in virtue of an ethical judgment and not in virtue of an act of mere cognition.

The classical tradition does not identify the word “injustice” with “inequality”, because justice recognizes that each person deserves to be treated according to the absolute magnitude of their value which, by definition, cannot be compared to any other. Therefore, the classical definition of justice is “give each one their due” and not “give everyone the same”. This definition covers both commutative justice, which seeks proportionality and reciprocity rather than equality, and distributive justice, which seeks subsidiarity as the principle that guarantees the exercise of freedom for individuals and associations. Given that the aim of justice is to promote the development of every person’s virtues and their capacity to differentiate for themselves between good and evil and choose the former, this task cannot be identified with the promotion of equality, since a personalized conscience can only be developed on the basis of an education that is also personalized. Therefore, tradition, considering a more massive and less personalized scale of social reality, saw the act of governing precisely as an art whose main virtue and characteristic was prudence, which does not judge everything by the same standard but rather each situation according to its peculiar differences.

Justice becomes identified with equality, in my opinion, only when the political organization of society gives form to the modern “State of law”, the most relevant social structure of literacy culture. In oral traditions, justice is inseparable from customs and its legitimacy within a particular cultural tradition, which might be very different from other traditions. Written law, to the contrary, introduces formal equality before the law as a necessary prerequisite for the legitimacy of its contents. Indeed, if a common law is good in itself, it cannot be good for some but not for others. If that were not the case, it would be senseless to formulate it in written form in order to objectify it. To the objectivity of its wording corresponds the objectivity of the procedure for interpreting and applying it. Therefore, the law should not only spell out the content of its norms but also establish the hermeneutical criteria for interpreting that content. If that objectivity is not ensured, the principle that sovereignty resides in the people and can be delegated, by law, to the different powers of the State would lack legitimacy. The very idea of democratic representation of the people demands, in literate culture, the equality of all before the procedure. This is what Luhmann calls “legitimation by procedure”.

Anyone can see, however, that the application of the same procedure gives very different results for individuals and societies according to the real circumstances in which it is applied. Known and accepted cases of legal

discrimination (such as Hitler's racist laws and apartheid) have been, historically, few. What is normally seen as problematic is that which is unregulated or that which, although equitably regulated, produces unequal effects. This gives rise to the need to reformulate ethical principles based on equality before the law and on objective procedures in order to guarantee the correct application of norms. This is what Rawls has done, for example. He states that society should not discriminate against anyone, but if it does, it should be in favor of the weakest and most needy. In other words, equality for the powerful and inequality for the weak is formulated as a general principle of justice today. But who determines the social boundary between the powerful and the poor? Could not individuals justify discrimination in their favor based on the argument that there will always be some more powerful than they, even though there are also some weaker?

Injustice in society today rises from a more complex problem, however, than from a merely hermeneutic difficulty in deciding who are the weak and who are the strong. In my opinion, the basic problem in technological society arises from the renunciation of a teleological and normative foundation for justice, since, it is held, such a foundation would entail opting for a specific concept of the individual and society, which would be incompatible with diversity and cultural pluralism. Instead, it is thought that what is socially reasonable can only come from an ethical neutrality that seeks its foundation in the self-referring and self-regulatory dimension of rationality. Given this viewpoint, society is what it is and not what someone thinks it should be, and the task of the legal order and governmental authority would consist in improving self-regulation in such a way so as to reduce disequilibria in favor of equilibrium.

It is no longer a question of ideologically ensuring the equal dignity of individuals among themselves and before the law, which would presuppose adopting a specific philosophy of man, but rather of considering society to be a collection of "social actors" who, because of the high improbability of predicting with precision the outcome of their behavior, whatever the subjective reasons that motivate them, incur dysfunctions that prevent the optimization of the collective product. The perception of injustice, then, gives way to a mere perception of the problematic nature of certain social behavior patterns that hinder the constant growth of the social product.

But is it realistic to pose the problem of social inequality as an imbalance which needs to be remedied for the good of the whole? This argument has been used from the perspective of security, as a geopolitical argument, to highlight the risk that the poor, weak and those excluded from the system might react violently against those who are integrated in and benefit from it. This argument has some weight. Suffice it to cite the massive

migrations from less developed to more developed countries, which generate defensive and even hostile and xenophobic attitudes. But an argument that only considers the prevention of potential conflicts is quite short sighted. Instead of resolving imbalance, experience shows that this kind of reasoning frequently leads to an intensification of inequalities, rendering the legal system even more inoperative and engendering corruption among those who now become illegal as well as poor. In the case of Latin America, as many studies have shown, the portion of the population that operates outside the law can reach as high as 50% in some countries.

Nor does seeing inequality as merely a problem of economic imbalance lead to satisfactory conclusions. Certainly, in ideal conditions the economy would be strengthened if everyone had more access to educational and cultural goods which would allow them to increase their productivity. But if the presupposition is accepted that society is what it is and not an ideal model, then it has to be taken into consideration that pressure on the social expenditure of the public sector is much greater in more developed than in less developed countries. The functional logic of differentiation and segmentation operates with more force in more complex societies. The result is not necessarily greater equality but rather a rise in the qualitative levels of inequality, which reach ever new degrees of sophistication.

It is striking to observe from what was once called the Third World how developed societies are beginning to produce deeper and more complex problems of poverty, marginalization and social exclusion than those normally produced in underdeveloped societies. It would seem that the cost of the "developed poor" is much higher than that of the "underdeveloped poor". The rate of technological obsolescence obviously has a greater impact on those accustomed to adding value to output and who have social mobility expectations in accordance with their degree of success.

The structure of unemployment is an interesting indicator in this regard, as are the fertility rates of different countries. With respect to the latter, the developed and technologically advanced world had to bring to an abrupt halt its population growth for the sake of equilibrium. The conditions for "equity" would appear to be sustainable, in the medium term, only if all growth indicators constantly increase, except population growth. In order to achieve this result, this way of conceptualizing justice proclaims its neutrality with regard to abortion, sterilization and other forms of birth control, which are then considered to be policy options that ensure the "reproductive health" of the population. In this sphere, not even Rawls' principle of discriminating in favor of the weak can be applied to a concept of equality as the mere overcoming of functional imbalances, since the equilibrium sought is obtained at a lower cost by sacrificing the weakest.

One cannot avoid the conclusion that considering social inequality as a temporal imbalance of the social system proves to be inadequate and insufficient. We need to move from a purely regulatory rationality to a teleological rationality, which recognizes that it is not only useful and convenient to reduce social imbalances to prevent potential conflicts, but that the dignity of the person demands accepting a principle of justice that recognizes the absolute value, incomparability and irreplaceableness of the person, as well as the existence of an objective link of solidarity that unites everyone alive.

This is the horizon proposed by the Holy Father in *Centesimus annus* when he speaks of the need to generate the conditions for developing an authentic "human" or "social ecology". It is not only a question of a more stable and broader social balance, but rather one of existential realism that recognizes in the genesis of each human life the fact that it has been given for others, that it has not invented itself, and that it will be projected in time through its free giving of self to its descendants. Ecology, unlike economics, cannot be satisfied with the fact that the actions of the members of the common household take place in orderly fashion without disequilibria; it needs to understand the genealogy of each being, the value of its presence and the destiny that awaits it in the medium and long term. Ecological temporality is very different from economic temporality.

From the perspective of a "human ecology", social evolution is not seen merely as an accumulation of forces or ideas and projects that push history in one direction or another. The ontological substratum of human life refers to the existence of a unique and personalized link which unites everyone alive today with a thin chain of ancestors that goes back to the "arche". This is an ontogenetic inheritance which will be transmitted, in turn, to those who will be engendered, also in a personalized fashion, in the future. This dependency and objective solidarity between living generations values equality and difference simultaneously. On the one hand, all human beings are substantially equal in dignity because they receive life as a gift from others and their vocation is also to give it to others (*Gaudium et spes*, No. 24), both in the direct biological sense and in the broader sense of education, culture and life in the Spirit. On the other hand, each person is an unique and unrepeatable being, engendered in one sex act, which had it not occurred in the way and circumstances in which it did, that person would not exist.

The contingency of each person, its high degree of improbability, does not constitute its weakness but rather its strength. It guarantees the development of a personalized conscience that will know how to value its own presence as well as that of each other human being, in its

unrepeatableness, thereby enabling the recognition of the dignity of a person and not the functionality of a thing. The absolute value of human life is inseparable from the recognition of the mystery of gratuity that gave it existence. What may seem mere improbability from one point of view is, from the viewpoint of a consciousness grateful for its presence, a vocation, a way which reveals it and anticipates its finality. The first condition of justice, in this context, is that everyone be granted the freedom to pursue their vocation, which does not come from the expectations of other people, but rather directly from the mystery of grace that has given them life.

Therefore, social inequalities constitute injustices where the personalized ontology of the human being is not recognized and has been replaced by an ontology of the product which is essentially replaceable and interchangeable. However differentiation within the limits of absolute respect for human dignity is not only acceptable but is the mechanism through which the creativity and spiritual richness of each culture are generated, the variety with which each generation sees itself in the historical circumstances and inheritance it has received, in search of its specific vocation. The technological revolution has multiplied the mechanisms of social differentiation in both the temporal and spatial sense, allowing for a knowledge of the enormous variety of possible responses to the challenges of existence. If today social reality can be understood from an ecological perspective, it is due, in large measure, precisely to the greater social differentiation introduced by the systematic use of technological resources. Prosperity has also increased and the average educational level of the population which has risen.

However, when the personalized horizon of conscience is obscured and the same cost-benefit equation is applied to human beings as the one used for marketable products, the gratuity of human life becomes vulnerable, dispensable. Thus it is difficult for the mass culture of today's technological society to find meaning in suffering, in the lives of the handicapped, the elderly, the non-productive, the unborn, and the poor, because its thinking is based on aggregate values and magnitudes and not on the irreplaceable existence of each person. Inequalities become unjust, but not because some have more and others less, but prior to that, because the person itself is identified with its possessions. Vocation, born from the contemplation of the gratuity of existence, becomes then a purely social expectation, an unending plan for comparative improvement of the conditions of existence.

The increase in social heterogeneity and in functioning on ever more contingent bases also raises the level of risk in decision-making, which can only be assumed by a better understanding of the functioning of complex society and by more rapid responses to the challenges of the times. All

indications are that the biggest source of social inequality in the future will lie primarily in the distribution mechanisms of knowledge and in the educational possibilities of each person. If in the past inequality was more concentrated among those who only knew how to speak and could not write (the tension between orality and literacy), the key difference today is between those who have the capacity to understand highly improbable phenomena and react quickly to them and those who remain in a culture which, although literate or audiovisual, does not provide them with the tools that allow them to understand complexity.

But it would be erroneous to reduce this understanding of complexity to the use of high technology tools. The more common intercommunication through electronic networks becomes, the more urgent is the question about whether or not there is an authentic cultural patrimony to communicate. Up till now, this new way of intercommunication has been characterized by its triviality, vacuity and the lack of a reason capable of explaining its own foundations. It is indispensable, therefore, to analyze deeply the relationship between the person and social complexity, the person and highly contingent operations. I think that technology, by making it possible to operate in contexts of high improbability or indetermination, has also made it possible to rediscover precisely what the contingency of the human person consists of, and what is the relationship between that contingency and the affirmation of the person's absolute value. The technological world view has become a sort of negative philosophy of man that shows us clearly what the human being is not, as happened, for example, in the discussion about abortion. Culture, on the contrary, open to the contemplation of "the greatest mystery: the mystery of God" (*Centesimus annus*, n. 24), makes it possible to understand and experience the personalized linkage that undergirds the social fabric of existence.

My personal conclusion is that the understanding of the new social tensions between equality and inequality calls for a serious consideration of the Holy Father's proposal to UNESCO, that "the person is the unique ontic subject of culture" and that all other social and economic entities with which modern society operates have a reality derived from the person. Without this presupposition, there is no way to preserve a teleological reason capable of revealing the meaning of existence, of defining a concept of justice suitable for the nature of the person, and of organizing social behavior in such a way as to realize its potential. The lack of this realistic presupposition will impose a self-regulating rationality which, even though it seeks to improve the balance of forces and reduce functional imbalances, is incapable of distinguishing the absolute value of the person from the relative value of things.