

# Inequality in Capitalist Societies

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Inequality has been one of the most debated topics in the public and the social sciences for at least the past decade. In this paper, we argue that the phenomenon of inequality cannot be understood properly within the frameworks hitherto applied. In fact, these frameworks contribute to the reproduction of inequality by making its mechanisms invisible and by setting a misguided agenda. We claim that this is due to the hidden assumptions that the debates share with the foundations of contemporary societies, especially a particular concept of democracy, a modernization theory, an economic view of society and a deductive concept of truth. As these assumptions are shared by the subject and the object, they have not been visible when Western academics studied Western societies.

On the basis of empirical research on four continents, we have developed a new approach to the understanding of inequality (Rehbein/Souza 2014). This research has been carried out by multicultural teams applying the same conceptual and methodological tools in societies that appear to be on very different levels of “modernization”. We found that in contrast to modernization theory the mechanisms of the production and reproduction of inequality are identical in all of these societies. The core of these mechanisms is a symbolic domination that renders structures of inequality invisible. At the same time, the actual structures, cultures and histories of each society and even locality are different and have to be studied empirically in themselves. In this paper, we will focus on the general mechanisms and structural traits that apply to all the societies we have studied. We will first explain our approach by offering a critique of existing approaches and then introduce the main concepts that define our approach.

## 1 Hidden assumptions

It has been impossible to resolve the problem of social inequality because many assumptions inherited from European Enlightenment have not been called into question. These assumptions include the interpretation of history as an evolution toward a superior model of society embodied by Northatlantic nation states, the concept of democracy as a community of free, equal and individualized citizens, the notion of capitalism as defined by a competition for capital and a deductive theory of truth. We argue that these assumptions contribute to the resilience of inequality and need to be overcome. In the following section, we outline an alternative approach.

Variants evolutionistic thinking or *modernization theory* are deeply incorporated in our common sense and in the foundations of social science. We think of underdeveloped societies, which need to implement reforms in order to reach certain standards of social organization and institutions, and of developed societies, which have by and large met or even elaborated these standards. Closely connected to this idea is the interpretation of “underdeveloped” societies as corrupt, inefficient, undemocratic and somehow incomplete, while their citizens are regarded as untrustworthy and undisciplined. Good examples beyond our own common sense would be the depiction of Mexicans in American movies and the financial country ratings by agencies like Moody’s. This idea implies that inequality in Northatlantic societies is either a transient phenomenon (Kuznets 1955) or a desirable result of a fully developed market economy (Friedman 1962).

The concept of modernization is linked to a normative concept of democracy. Both were developed by European Enlightenment. This idea of democracy comprises an atomistic and rationalistic notion of the human being. All members of a democracy are supposed to be in principle physically, socially and legally equal. Each individual is deemed to determine his or her own fate and to be able to choose between all socially available options. Socioeconomic inequality appears to be the outcome of bad choices and lacking achievement, of individual failure. We call this view of the social world symbolic liberalism. It implies an infantile self-interpretation as master of one’s own fate. Even the critique of this self-image pointing to the fact that all symbols and thereby all choices available to the individual have been socially

produced (just like the emblematically free easy rider drives on a road planned, built and controlled by the state) usually shares the notion of human beings as principally free and equal. This notion is rooted in the mechanistic enquiry of natural laws (Freudenthal 1986). These laws are based on forces embodied in the smallest units, in the case of society, in the individual's self-interest. Under the conditions of a free market guaranteed and regulated by the state, the individuals can best pursue their self-interest and contribute to society's goal, which is the accumulation of wealth to be used in individual freedom.

Modernization theory and symbolic liberalism combine with a self-proclaimed materialism, which we would like to term *economism*. Symbolic liberalism and its critics basically agree that capitalism is about competition for capital, be it merely economic (Marx 2002) or be it of various forms (Bourdieu 1984; Putnam). They only disagree on the precise interpretation and on the evaluation of this competition. It is also common understanding that competition is rooted in material conditions (like means of production or capital accumulation) and guided by laws. This line of thought is heir of the separation of mind and body by Descartes. Reality is supposed to be the realm of the body, while the mind is the realm of ideas. Capitalism, in this framework, has to be an affair of the body and it has to be about bodily goods, while it can be rationally understood in the realm of ideas as an economy.

The separation of mind and body is the origin of a *deductive theory of science*. According to the philosophy that implicitly or explicitly informs any available approach to the study of inequality, there are universal laws of the social. The idea of the universal claims the existence of laws above or beyond empirical reality applying to any real and possible phenomenon in the field. An explanation is based on timeless axioms and the notion of causality (Hempel 1962). Concerning inequality, the technically and formally equal individuals are acting in a social universe ruled by universal laws, which are based on unalterable principles. In contemporary democratic societies these principles are supposed to have been made explicit in the respective constitutions and to have been uncovered by science.

## 2 An alternative perspective

Even though the critique of mainstream approaches to inequality offers an alternative interpretation of reality, it mostly shares their hidden assumptions. The critique merely interprets reality as wanting, as not yet fully developed. Contemporary societies are assumed to be not completely modern and not entirely democratic, they have not realized equality of opportunities and an equal distribution of capital and they have not entirely understood the laws of society and economy. We argue that any acceptance of the hidden assumptions makes the mechanisms of the production and reproduction of inequality invisible and thereby contributes to their persistence. For this reason, we speak of an *affirmative science*.

Any critical science has to make the mechanisms visible by demonstrating their relation to the hidden assumptions and the entire symbolic universe of capitalism. This cannot be done on the basis of the same theory of science that informs capitalism and affirmative science. We argue for a theory of configurations on an intermediate level (Rehbein 2014). Theory and empirical research should not be separated but theoretical statements (like axioms and explanations) should refer only to those cases that have been empirically studied. One arrives at more *general* theories by extending the empirical basis, by comparison and by critique but one never arrives at *universal* theories. No axiom can be taken for granted and therefore, hidden assumptions of theory and social reality have to be subjected to critique. The critique of things taken for granted is the core task of any social science. For this reason, we argue for a *critical theory*.

We reject the distinctions between being and consciousness, mind and body, economy and ideology and functional system and life-world. Instead, we interpret society entirely as *meaningful practice*. From this perspective, the symbolic mediation of power is the structural root of inequality. Power is understood as the impersonal possibility of influencing the social definition and practice of life. Symbol is understood as comprising all perceivable forms of meaning (Cassirer 1997), from signs to art to language. We argue that human practice is always symbolically mediated and that the understanding of this process is the key to understanding society. We agree with those interpretations of capitalism that regard it as a largely unconscious practice but we deny that it is "material" or guided by natural laws. It is not even about material things but about symbolically mediated things. Machines, capital, money, exchange value and labour are something completely different without symbolic mediation. Socially, they would be nothing in this case. A bank note that is not recognized as money is a sheet of paper and a stock exchange that is not understood in its meaning ceases to exist.

The core of our approach consists in pointing to the relation between the symbolic universe and invisible structures. By basing its symbolic universe on supposedly true and scientific axioms and by claiming equality, contemporary capitalist societies render persisting structures of inequality invisible and exclude the possibility of a critique pointing to the difference between symbolic universe and social structures. According to the symbolic universe of capitalism, society consists of equal individuals, inequality results from regulated competition between them and any type of privilege is therefore based on individual merit. This meritocratic discourse ignores on a theoretical level that the truth about society and its foundations is not yet known and on a practical level that any capitalist society inherits structures of inequality from precapitalist society and that individuals are therefore never equal. Capitalism increasingly dominates the symbolic universe but at the same time, parts of symbolic universes developed in earlier historical times persist. Merit is only partly based on economic success and money makes the world go round only on the surface, however relevant and dominant it may be. While the game of competition rules the visible world, privileges are passed on from generation to generation invisibly. These privileges include not only all kinds of capital but also the symbolic distinctions between classes and their evaluation. All classes share the symbolic universe of capitalism characterized by meritocracy and the hierarchy of social classification, which makes some classes virtuous on the basis of their inherited symbolic characteristics, especially industriousness, dignity and aesthetic sense. Those classes who do not inherit a sufficient degree of the valued social characteristics, are regarded as inferior and will never compete on a level playing field.

The symbolic inequality between the classes has to be expressed in a manner that makes it appear natural instead of socially constructed and socially inherited. Otherwise, it would not be legitimate. This is the purpose of symbolic liberalism and the meritocratic myth. It is specific for contemporary capitalist societies that inequality is at once naturalized and covered up. According to symbolic liberalism, inequality results from the competition of equal individuals on free but legally regulated markets. As success on these markets is supposed to be the outcome of merit but actually reflects the symbolic order of power, it includes both a legitimation of social inequality and an expression of class structure. It includes a declassification and humiliation of entire groups of human beings, namely the lower classes, the global South and other groups, who appear to be at once less virtuous and less successful. We refer to this declassification as *symbolic racism*.

We are not saying that capitalism is not the main characteristic of contemporary societies nor that it is not a major problem. We merely claim that it is not the root of the production and reproduction of social inequality. Any focus on capitalism as a socioeconomic system or as a market contributes to the reproduction of inequality. Market, competition and capital are central features of capitalism but they produce neither the unequal evaluation of classes nor the system of unequal inheritance. They only contribute to them by making them invisible. This seems to be true for all contemporary societies. There is no difference between more or less “developed” societies as far as inequality is concerned but the mechanisms are more visible in the process of capitalist transformation.

### 3 Capitalist Transformation

Theories of social inequality as well as the political discourse and common sense have assumed that the transformation of society toward capitalism produces a complete rupture with the past. Right with the transformation, the population was supposed to be individualized into free and equal citizens, either instantaneously on the basis of a Constitution or in a process of reform and revolution. According to this view, inequality results from engagement in a market, which is about the increase of capital. Supposedly, capitalism is the highest form of the evolution of society, either absolutely or until being replaced by a more equal society, and is embodied in Northatlantic societies. Liberal and critical interpretations merely disagree in their assessment of the unequal distribution of capital.

The foundation myths of capitalist societies in Europe and North America proclaim the equality of all citizens and derive their principles from science. However, society remains opaque and unequal. For the Enlightenment theories of the state and in the first capitalist democracies, only the citizens were free and equal, while the majority of social groups (such as slaves, women, non-whites and labourers) were excluded from the community of citizens and therefore unequal. The lower ranks of precapitalist society as well as colonized peoples were excluded from capitalist society.

When these groups were included into the community of equals and accepted as citizens, they re-

mained underprivileged and unequal. Inequality within the community of equals supposedly results from differences in achievement. As all equals were regarded as biologically equal and socially endowed with equal rights at birth, they were supposed to have the same opportunities. This is the main assumption of symbolic liberalism from Hobbes (1968) to Locke (1967) to Friedman (1962). It also informs the Constitution of most democracies. Whoever is poor or humiliated, has to bear at least part of the blame. Whoever is rich or respected, has to base this on some kind of achievement. However, the groups initially excluded from Northatlantic democracies have always started from a less favourable position as latecomers. What is more relevant to our argument, they have never been able to acquire the symbolic characteristics of equal citizens. Up to this day, there is a distrust against blacks, women, lower classes or people from the global South taking important positions in society. They simply do not have what it takes, in terms of symbolic classification and in terms of habitus because they have inherited less valuable social traits.

This is not visible if one refers the analysis of inequality only to the present, as almost all theories developed in the twentieth century have done. We wish to make two points in this regard. First, capitalist transformation only modified precapitalist structures but does not erase them. Second, precapitalist inequalities persisted because of the unequal integration of precapitalist ranks. The same process took place in Europe and the Americas. At first, capitalist society only comprised a few privileged groups and successively integrated the entire population, mainly due to protests and revolutions. The excluded groups were integrated unequally but in the symbolic universe, all citizens were equal because they had the same rights. Even though socioeconomic mobility is minimal in Northatlantic societies, the few cases of stars or entrepreneurs coming from unequally integrated groups serve as examples to sustain symbolic liberalism.

In many former colonies of Asia and Africa, however, the entire population was declared equal citizens after independence. The preceding structures of inequality were immediately transformed into capitalist classes. Linked to revolutionary struggles, there was more socioeconomic mobility in the newly independent states than would have been possible at any moment in the history of Northatlantic societies. At the same time, persisting inequalities were rendered invisible much faster because underprivileged groups were formally equal right from the start and were open to some socioeconomic mobility. This process still continues in parts of the global South.

Nowhere the transformation has altered the conditions for participating in capitalism and democracy. The distribution of resources has remained the same. A few revolutionaries and a couple of entrepreneurs have moved up into the ruling class but in general, the peasants have remained poor, uneducated, peripheral, despised and powerless, while the aristocrats have kept their castles and their prestige. The capitalist transformation has focused on the division of labour and its scientific organization but has left social structures untouched. Formally, these structures have been formally abolished in almost all capitalist societies. This made their reproduction even more efficient because they are invisible and within the symbolic universe even inexistent.

Along with the specific relation between symbolic universe and social structures, capitalism creates a few novelties, which are relevant to the understanding of inequality. With the capitalist transformation, the social position is no longer equivalent to the type of activities one performs. Social structure and division of labour become detached from each other, while the population seems to be transformed into a mass of equal and disciplined individuals. The focus on the division of labour makes society more productive. Another novelty is that political order, division of labour and virtually every capitalist society is based on science. Before capitalism, there has neither been a scientific legitimation of political order nor a scientific organization of the division of labour.

The capitalist transformation certainly first took place in Europe, even if it was possible only within a developed Asian world-system (Abu-Lughod 1989) and in connection with colonialism (Frank 1998). Most of the apparent novelties that European capitalism created, had existed before in Asia, often in a more “developed” form (Hobson 2004). However, symbolic liberalism as the dominant symbolic universe is a European creation.

In a society based on symbolic liberalism, people are individualized, disciplined and mobilized for the division of labour and “wealth of nations”. Their competition results in inequalities of individual property that seems to be the social structure. There are rich proletarians and poor aristocrats and that supposedly proves the equality and openness of society. However, the proletarian usually remains a proletarian and never gets access to the circles of the ruling class. Usually, his son or grandson becomes impoverished too. Social mobility is almost never based on individual achievement or merit

but results from large social transformations. Social structures, cultures and practices are subject to constant transformations and sometimes even revolutions. New institutions appear, old ones are done away with, new discourses emerge, economic crises erupt or oil is discovered. These transformations have an impact on the configurations of inequality. However, these do not appear out of the blue but literally are transformations of earlier configurations.

Structures of inequality are relatively persistent. Aristocracy or working class, the value of a PhD or the reputation of doctors do not disappear over night. The structures, on which they are based, change even slower but they do change. Through social revolutions new cultural frameworks for inequality emerge. We refer to these frameworks as *sociocultures*. As sociocultures persist, so do forms of action or institutions that appear outdated. Monarchic rituals, bar associations, village structures or sociolects would be examples for this.

The capitalist transformation creates a similar surface everywhere but meets different historical conditions and takes place in different historical processes and periods. All societies and nation states have different histories, precapitalist structures and therefore different sociocultures. This also means that they differ in their configurations of inequality. The most important factor is the role of colonialism. In this regard, we can distinguish between three types of capitalist states. The states, in which a bourgeois revolution introduced capitalism and democracy, have transformed precapitalist structures by successively integrating the lower ranks. In contrast, some of the former colonies were dominated by descendents of the former colonizers, who formed the ruling classes of the now Independent states, especially in the Americas. The native peoples were partly killed and partly integrated as lower classes along with the former slaves. The third type are former colonies that transformed the precolonial and colonial structures directly into unequal democracies, especially in Asia.

## 4 Sociocultures and Classes

The capitalist transformation is a real revolution but a revolution is not a creation out of nothing. That the European bourgeoisie abolished the feudal ranks and established a democracy, is a myth. that fooled even Marx. There has never been a real democracy with a free market. The capitalist transformation entails socioeconomic mobility, especially of bourgeois and revolutionaries into the ruling classes. It also separates social structure from the division of labour and creates a whole new range of professions for all social groups. But it does not abolish older inequalities, it only transforms them and makes them invisible.

Edward P. Thompson (1963) was the first to demonstrate the continuity and transformation of a class with the advent of capitalism in England. Michael Vester enlarged Thompson's approach with regard to Germany. He argued that social milieux in contemporary Germany are successors of precapitalist ranks (Vester et al. 2001: 79). Thompson and Vester define classes not merely on the basis of capital but interpret them also as cultures with a common practice. Their central argument is that practices are not created spontaneously but are passed on through habitualization or training from one generation to the next. On the one hand, these practices and cultures are subject to constant change because they relate to and influence each other, on the other hand, they continue long traditions. This interpretation acknowledges both change and continuity and resolves the contradiction between social structure analysis and everyday history (ibid.: 23). According to Vester, Marx (2002) and Beck (1992) failed to see that the European workers were no fragmented group that organized from scratch but they had incorporated their precapitalist traditions and adapted them to the conditions of industrial capitalism (Vester et al. 2001: 133). Instead of classes, Vester therefore speaks of "tradition lines".

We follow Thompson and Vester in their interpretation of class as culture and tradition line. A class passes on core elements of habitus and capital from one generation to the next and distinguishes itself actively and passively from other classes. Hereby, it erects barriers for mobility and access to specific activities as well as power. On this basis, it is possible to establish classes empirically as the barriers of mobility and of access to activities are the limits of a class. An increase in one type of capital is not equivalent to mobility. Gopal Guru (2012: 47) has demonstrated that a casteless person in India may be able to accumulate all kinds of capital on the free market but still remains excluded from the upper strata. A casteless millionaire remains casteless. Guru (2012: 49) adds exactly in our veins that a casteless becoming a millionaire has only one structural effect and that is the legitimation of neoliberalism. Most critics of liberalism, including Marx and Bourdieu, were unable to see this because

of their focus on capital and labour. The successful struggle for capital renders the mechanisms of social inequality invisible.

## 5 Individualization, Milieux and Division of Activities

The narcissistic idea of the free individual has been part and parcel of symbolic liberalism ever since Hobbes. Any encounter between an Asian and a Northatlantic society proves that the idea of individualization needs to be defined more precisely as normalization plus formal liberalization. The apparent chaos and lawlessness of traffic in India is as much an example for Asian individualism as John Embree's famous characterization of Thailand in the 1940s as an individualized society (Evers 1969). The free liberal individual is produced in a long process of standardization. A British driver does not have to be forced to turn in the direction he is signalling because he has internalized the system of rules. Most Indians have not.

Michel Foucault (1977) has dealt with the process of normalization in France, which took several centuries. He makes two points that are relevant for our argument. First, the process of normalization also created the individual of symbolic liberalism. Second, the process differed for and in each class. One could say that each class was normalized to fit a specific type. Following Marx, he distinguishes the two classes of bourgeoisie and workers but then also talks about a class of delinquents. This resembles the class structure we have found empirically in capitalist societies except that he, just like Marx and Bourdieu, does not specifically address the ruling class as a separate group.

Foucault (1977) shows that the legal system of the new democratic state developed in such a way that it at once normalized all citizens and divided them into different classes. It is based on the principle developed by Hobbes and Rousseau that any legal offense is not directed against specific individuals but against the entire society. It is not the king, a victim or a responsible person who takes charge of the offender but a representative of society. The goal of the legal sanction consists in reintegrating the offender into society as well as normalizing all other individuals by demonstrating the limits of the legal system and society. According to Foucault, the legal system is only one element in a complex setup of institutions designed to streamline the citizens of the newly democratic state. He calls its functioning "disciplinary power". In contrast to feudal society, power in a democratic society is not designed to oppress or exploit people but to make them useful, to increase their socioeconomic productivity to a maximum. To this end, the highest degree of standardization has to be combined with the highest possible degree of specialization. This is exactly what Adam Smith called for as well.

Like Smith, Foucault argues that there are different classes in the newly democratic society, which are supposed to carry out different functions in the division of labour and have different positions in the institutions. It is interesting to note that Foucault referred to the emblematic democratic society, France after the revolution, while Smith was referring to the feudal society of the United Kingdom. Foucault demonstrates the persistence of classes and their transformation within a democratic state with regard to the legal system. While the civil law mainly concerned citizens and their property, the system of accusation and punishment mainly concerned the lower classes. Different courts were established to deal with different issues, which concerned different classes. Our empirical research shows that this division of classes in the legal system is still valid for present-day Germany. It is almost a defining feature of the underclasses that their members have been convicted at least once in their life.

We do not think that this system is intentionally designed to oppress the lower classes. No malevolent intention and no conscious action is necessary to reproduce the class structure. The differences are incorporated, contained in the meaning of the socially accepted symbols and transmitted from one generation to the next. Formally, all individuals are equal but their incorporated patterns of actions as well as the social evaluation of these patterns differ according to class. This is hardly visible, not only because of formal (legal and political) equality but also because of the individualization of life-styles, professions, economic status and personal characteristics.

Formally, all institutions in a formally democratic society are open to everyone. This is due to the democratic idea of equality but also to the economic idea of the increase of productivity or the "wealth of nations". The division of labour is no longer based on the order of classes but on the maximum output. To this end, any labour has to be carried out by the person most suitable for it, by the best. This is exactly what happens. In capitalist societies, the best carry out the most important functions in the division of activities. This seems to be based on merit but it is actually based on class. The

members of the highest classes incorporate the patterns of action required and valued for the highest functions in the division of activities. Members of the highest classes occupy the highest functions in the division of activities and define the characteristics required to carry out such a function. They recruit individuals on the basis of these criteria. Unsurprisingly, other members of their class, who embody the same characteristics because they grew up in the same environment, are those individuals who meet the criteria best. They are the best.

This reproduction of class is at the same time more risky and more efficient than a feudal order. As all individuals are formally equal and all institutions are open to everyone, the highest classes have to enter competition. Upward mobility for the lower classes is formally and actually possible. However, the invisibility of the reproduction of class makes it more efficient than any open inequality. Class position is also more secure because a feudal order is characterized by constant struggles, assaults and even annihilation of ruling families. One could be toppled, exiled or killed at any point in time. In a formally democratic society, any dominant position is based on some kind of achievement, a seemingly objective recruitment of the best. It is legitimized by merit.

The reproduction of inequality becomes even more opaque because of the obvious individualization. There are no visible classes any more, just individuals competing on open markets. These individuals carry out a bewildering variety of activities, which they combine to rather unique life-courses. This has given rise to the hypothesis of a society “beyond status and class” (Beck 1986). Socioeconomic parameters and rank no longer allow for predictions of an individual’s life-style, let alone concrete choices in everyday life. We agree that predictions of this kind, including the ones made by Bourdieu (1984), are empirically incorrect. What is worse, they contribute to the invisibility of the mechanisms reproducing inequality. It is precisely the apparent individualization that makes these mechanisms functional. It goes hand in hand with a recruitment for important positions, which is apparently based on merit. Choices are particular and based on rather individual life-courses. However, they hardly affect the reproduction of class. That a manager listens to “proletarian” rock music or that a labourer wears a three-piece suit has virtually no effect on their sociological life-chances.

Still, the apparently individual life-styles are not random, they bear resemblances on the basis of class and socioculture. Such resemblances constitute social “milieux” (Vester et al. 2001). People of the same class and the same generation have more in common with each other than with other people. This commonality does not consist in merely statistical preferences for this or that but mainly in a similar habitus. The general orientation of individual actions and (supposed, observed or incorporated) traits is the same in many regards for a milieu. We found empirically, for example, that the entire generation of West Germans that was socialized around 1968 has a much more liberal attitude towards society in general and disadvantaged groups in particular than the other generations, or that the entire generation socialized after 1975 in Laos grew into a peasant culture (Rehbein 2007). However, in each generation the class cleavages persist. Even in the German 1968 generation, which acquired certain habitus traits that distinguish it from any other generation, the children of the ruling class acquired a “taste”, a social knowledge and certain skills that no other class possesses and that are highly valued, especially in the ruling class itself. These traits were prerequisites to access highly valued positions in the 1970s and 1980s. The prerequisites have been transformed since but only the children of the ruling class were capable of attaining them in their childhood.

The criteria for recruitment are constantly transformed because the capitalist division of activities is constantly revolutionized. However, the criteria applied by those occupying the highest positions and recruiting juniors to occupy them in the future are precisely those which they teach their children and which their children incorporate better than other persons (Jodhka/Newman 2007). Those persons occupying the highest positions know best what it takes to run the show tomorrow. They want to make sure to recruit people who have what it takes. This is not taught in any family or school, simply because very few people know what it takes to run the show. Of course, the criteria that are applied by the recruiters are still subjective in the sense that they are constructed and incorporated but they are also objective in the sense that they are unconscious and a product of history.

Members of the ruling class occupy the highest positions and have access to the most valued positions, while members of the other classes formally have access to them but are practically excluded because they do not meet the criteria. Which activities are valued and reserved for members of the higher classes, is a product of history (Massey 1984: 40). It is somewhat irrational and arbitrary but intelligible and consequential. The marginalized class has no access to markets or even to productive activities, while the fighters only have access to the lower segments of the labour market and the established to the upper

segments and to some segments of the capital markets. Only the ruling class has access to all markets without even needing it. The differential value of activities reproduces the order of power and makes it invisible. A CEO or a supreme court judge are mere employees, who had to succeed on a competitive labour market like everyone else. But their decisions impact the lives of thousands, which is not the case for the decision of a house-wife or a storage worker. And the latter will never apply for a more valued activity, and if they did, they would not be recruited because they do not have what it takes. And from the perspective of the ruling class and the division of labour, this is even true. The members of the ruling class usually do not even need to compete on any market as their activities are often constrained to running a charity foundation or looking after their fortune.

## 6 Symbolic Reproduction

Much of our argument has already been advanced by Bourdieu and Foucault. Our argument is only complete after understanding why labourers or house-wives never become CEOs even though they formally can. In capitalism, this is due to a specific form of symbolic domination, which has not been addressed properly by Bourdieu and Foucault who have argued that the entire society shares a dominant discourse, which is the discourse of the dominant class. They have also postulated that the unequal distribution of capital is the root of inequality and its reproduction in capitalist societies. We argue that this postulate contributes to the invisibility of the mechanisms at the root of inequality and thereby contributes to its reproduction. The foundation of inequality is not capital but its evaluation. More generally, it is the unequal value that is attributed symbolically to activities and habitus traits including the evaluation and devaluation of groups and individuals. The unequal value is contained in the use of symbols, which means in any action.

Empirically, there is no discourse that dominates the entire society. There are very few elements of discourse that are shared by all social groups. In most regards, each milieu has its own discourse and its own sociolect. People classify each other within this discourse, which means that each classification of another person depends on the relation of one's own milieu to that of the other. However, the discourses are not equal as their power to influence the discourses and lives of other groups differs and as the activities and habitus traits valued by the dominant are also valued by the dominant to a certain degree, which is not true the other way around. In other words, the power to define and apply symbols differs according to class. This is also true for other forms of inequality, e.g. between genders or ethnic groups. The symbols used for the dominated and their traits contain a devaluation in themselves, at least in the discourses of the dominant. It is not up to the dominated to change that because they do not have access to the valued positions, traits and discourses.

What is more, the dominated cannot change their symbolic value because they incorporate the negative traits and are not even conscious of their social construction. It is considered natural for a woman to be soft and powerless, for the underclasses to perform manual labour, for the dark-skinned to be less intellectual and enterprising or for the societies of the global South to be more corrupt. Any reality check confirms these stereotypes because they have been embodied by the individuals in their respective social environment. Thereby, the traits mentioned are naturalized together with their negative value (Souza 2009). This is why the symbolic universe magically fits social reality even though it is not intentionally constructed by the ruling class for the purpose of domination. Even Bourdieu and Foucault contribute to this symbolic domination by claiming a qualitative difference between more and less advanced societies and by focusing their analyses on the supposedly most advanced nation state. The empirical fact that France is more productive and less corrupt than Brazil, however, is not proof of modernization theory but of the effectiveness of symbolic domination, which postulates that the value of a nation and its inhabitants should be judged on the basis of productivity and corruption.

Symbolic domination implies that people and their traits have a value. This value is supposed to differ between classes. Instead of socially constructed it is regarded as being founded on natural reality because the traits are incorporated, as they are an integral component of the person under consideration. There are more and there are less valuable activities, there are more and there are less valuable personality traits and capabilities, there are more and there are less valuable habitus or types of people and there are more and there are less valuable classes of people. This classification is implied in any hierarchical or unequal social order. It is not specific for capitalism. In capitalism, it acquires two peculiarities. Firstly, it becomes invisible because it is covered up by a surface proclaiming equality and competition.

Secondly, it establishes a hierarchy of values, which is based on supposed moral superiority. We have dealt with the first characteristic in the previous section and the preceding paragraphs. Now, we have to briefly outline the genesis of the capitalist hierarchy of values.

The hierarchy is closely linked to symbolic liberalism and is largely developed in line with it. Charles Taylor (1989) has analyzed the history of the contemporary concept of the self as a conjuncture of Platonic Christianity, reformation and Enlightenment. Just as we have traced the philosophic root of symbolic liberalism to Hobbes' interpretation of Descartes, Taylor views Descartes as the major inventor of the modern concept of the self, which he calls the "punctual self". Like our reconstruction at the beginning of the paper, Taylor does not deliver another history of ideas but tries to trace how the concept of the self became an integral part of people's practice and emotions. He fails to explain how they became institutionalized and incorporated but this can be easily understood in the framework of the process of normalization outlined above following Foucault.

According to Taylor (1989: 117), Plato installed the rule of reason over the passions, which was integrated into Christianity. The Christian Church called for a taming of the passions and a rationalization of practice. Thereby, Plato's concept of reason did not remain a philosophical idea but became part of everyday practice. It was complemented by Augustine's focus on the inner world and his concept of virtue as something invisible. Descartes followed Plato and Augustine but changed the hierarchy of virtue and reason. While for the Christian tradition as well as for Greek antiquity, virtue (mediating the good) was the highest value, Descartes argued for the precedence of reason (Taylor 1989: 177). Cartesian reason, however, is no longer characterized by specific contents but by a certain method, a rational procedure. This, for Taylor, is the main trait of the "punctual self". The punctual self became the foundation of Hobbes' theory of the state and was entirely strapped of all historical, religious and social constraints by John Locke.

This self is "punctual" because it is not embedded in particular contexts but virtually empty. It can be shaped by methodic and disciplined action. Together with Locke's liberal concept of the self, a liberal science, administration and social organization was developed to ensure the disciplining of the self. According to Taylor, this was only possible because the protestant reforms established the rule of reason over the everyday practice and the inner self of the citizens (1989: 159). This evidently is a similar argument that Max Weber proposed concerning the protestant ethic. The sociologically relevant innovation of protestantism according to Taylor and Weber was the denial of Plato's dominance of contemplation over practice, which was shared by Augustine and the catholic doctrine. For protestantism, labour is the highest value, not contemplation (cf. Arendt 1958). This reversal includes a denial of the entire hierarchy of the catholic church and its rationale. The feudal order was no longer justified and legitimized on the basis of virtue and God. Therefore, the way was paved for the concept of an egalitarian society consisting of "punctual selves" based on self-discipline, labour and rationalization.

The new, liberal values remain mostly unconscious but are deeply incorporated and institutionalized. They become explicit only in their practical effects. We have not conducted a single interview in Germany, in which labour did not play a core role for the definition of the self. Neither did we encounter people who are untouched by the "punctual self", which portrays the individual as free, autonomous, independent, self-transparent, conscious and in charge of his or her own choices. This infantile notion of the everyday "Übermensch" is an integral component of our contemporary concept of the self, both for the common sense and for the affirmative social sciences. We believe to be the creators of our values and of our life-courses without taking their social base and their history into account. Our idea of freedom is the easy rider - driving along an asphalt road under the attentive eyes of the police.

The social bond keeping the society of free individuals together is the contract. The contract is the main concept in the political theories of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau as well as in economics from Smith to the contemporary market ideas. It was globalized under the label of universal civil rights. Taylor subsumed all ideals linked to the liberal concept of society under the term "principle of dignity". It is based on the idea that all equals can potentially recognize each other as such (Taylor 1994). The principle of dignity according to Taylor is one of the sources of the contemporary self. It goes hand in hand with the punctual self and partly contradicts another root of the contemporary hierarchy of values, namely the "expressive self". The punctual self implies equality and reciprocity, while the idea of the expressive self points to the original and singular character of a person. The expressive self is not about identity of social atoms but about the voice of the individual, which cannot be mistaken for anyone else's. Both concepts contradict each other because they both originated in the subjective turn toward the inner being in Christianity but point to contradictory ideas of the moral good. Discipline and identity on the

one hand are contrasted with originality and difference on the other (Taylor 1989: 375). The idea of the expressive self reinterprets affects as feelings by infusing them with meaning and spirit. The inner self is no longer a field threatened by irrational and unholy impulses but a sphere of the depth of meaning. Linked to this reinterpretation is the transformation of moral judgment into something where reason and feeling have to join forces in order to distinguish right and wrong.

While the principle of dignity distinguishes the worthy members of society, the decent working classes, from the marginalized underclasses, Foucault's delinquents, the expressive self is reserved for the upper classes who are not only hard workers but also possess an individuality that deserves expression. These principles guide our evaluation of classes as groups of people who are naturally equipped to be what they are. Taylor's hierarchy of values does not explain all classifications and inequalities but it points to the most important dividing lines in all capitalist societies, be it Brazil or Germany. More importantly, his approach enables a critique of the principles of humiliation and inequality, which appear natural to us and remain invisible.

## 7 Conclusion

The social sciences have played an essential role in the production and reproduction of inequality. Not only have they developed symbolic liberalism, they also sustain the invisibility of symbolic domination. All contemporary societies, even if they classify themselves as non-capitalist, base their constitutions and their administrative practices on the social sciences. The social sciences have proposed to make society transparent in order to improve it. We agree with this goal. We argue that symbolic liberalism has not pursued this goal vigorously enough. By claiming to be value-free (Weber 1965; Albert 1968), it detaches itself from the existing social order and thereby renders it opaque and legitimate. Symbolic liberalism and contemporary capitalist societies presuppose the same foundations, from Taylor's hierarchy of values to economic growth and individualism, without ever critically reflecting on these foundations. This reflection would be the task of science. By failing to apply it, science becomes affirmative and part of disciplinary power or a "knowledge-power dispositif" (Foucault 2007).

Affirmative science has the form of technology because its foundations are realized as the foundations of capitalist society and incorporated by its members (Habermas 1970). Science is no longer the privilege of a small class of mandarins or a group of esoteric philosophers but can be carried out by anyone, including the ruling class itself. As it focuses on technological problems, it renders structures and mechanisms of inequality utterly invisible. A closed system of power and knowledge without any outside is the result (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002). It is no longer possible to contradict reality on scientific grounds.

Any intervention that is not "value-free" and dares looking at the foundations of science and society, must appear as ideological and irrational. The alternative is science or critique. We agree with this alternative insofar as science should aim at knowledge and should avoid the influence of non-scientific interests. Precisely for this reason, the mentioned alternative is nonsense because a social science that is not influenced by non-scientific interests is inconceivable. Any science is part of a society, carried out by individuals who are influenced by society, who influence it in turn, who speak its language and have to be understood by other members of the same society, even in those cases where the members are merely other scientists. The influence cannot be obliterated, it can only be critically reflected. This is why we claim that there is only one social science and that is critical. This being said, our research shows that only changes transforming the entire society can lower inequality, such as war, political revolution, cultural revolution or large-scale political intervention.

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