

# The Incorporation of Symbolic Inequality

Boike Rehbein, Jessé Souza

This paper proposes an interpretation of social inequality beyond the economic focus on capitalism. We have become used to the idea that our contemporary world is characterized by capitalism and that capitalism is responsible for all good and evil we may detect in this world. The following lines will argue that this idea is correct and incorrect at the same time. It is incorrect insofar as capitalism only covers the surface of the contemporary social world. It is correct insofar as the surface is vital and transforms even the deep structures of the contemporary world. To the degree that we deal only with the surface, however, the deeper mechanisms of the production, reproduction and incorporation of inequality remain invisible and are thereby very effective, possibly more effective than in any other type of society. The focus on capitalism and the ensuing entrenchment of inequality by now characterizes almost all societies. The capitalist transformation is similar in all societies and the mechanisms generating inequality in capitalist societies are identical in the West and the East, the North and the South. However, the particular sociocultural configurations are very diverse and depend on the combination of precapitalist history with the type and speed of the capitalist transformation.

The paper aims at the structures beneath the capitalist surface by arguing that precapitalist structures are reproduced and merely transformed precisely because they become invisible under the capitalist surface. They form the basis of the structures of contemporary inequality. In the following paragraphs we will develop the claim that the focus on capitalism reproduces structures of inequality through an invisible and unconscious *symbolic domination*, which is linked to a hierarchy of values inherent in the visible capitalist discourse and structures proclaiming equality, liberty, the rule of law and competition. More precisely, the paper deals with the incorporation of symbolic domination, whereby the reproduction of inequality becomes natural and invisible.

We will first introduce and explain our core concepts, namely symbolic domination and symbolic liberalism. Accepting some core assumptions of *symbolic liberalism*, which is linked to Enlightenment, renders the mechanisms of the production of social inequality invisible. We call this acceptance symbolic domination. The acceptance is not an intellectual and conscious process but ingrained in the symbolic structure of a society. We will study the process of generalizing symbolic liberalism in three steps. First, following Michel Foucault, we will look at the normalization of the population. Then, following Pierre Bourdieu, we will argue that the normalizing process implies an incorporation of symbolic liberalism. Finally, following Charles Taylor, we will try to show that the incorporation works in a hierarchical way and results in each precapitalist class acquiring a specific ethos, which is transmitted from one generation to the next.

## Symbolic domination

The core of our approach consists in the interpretation of society not as a functional or material structure but as *symbolically mediated practice*. We refuse to distinguish between being and

consciousness or matter and ideas or reality and ideology or structure and action. Instead, we consider all of them to be components of symbolically mediated practice. The term 'symbol' refers to Ernst Cassirer's (1997) interpretation of humanly produced entities as imbued with meaning. The term 'practice' refers to the processes within the human realm. From this perspective, all symbols are part of practices and all practice is symbolically mediated. There are plenty of non-symbolic realms relevant to human life, from one's *physis* to the natural environment to the universe. However, none of these are part of society even though they are its limiting factors. Whenever they enter society, they are symbolically mediated, they have a (social) meaning. This is also true for capitalism, which is neither a natural process nor a certain configuration of productive forces nor a certain distribution of capital. It is a symbolically mediated practice.

We argue that inequality is a more fundamental structure than capitalism. In any society with permanent inequality, it is based on the *symbolic mediation of power*. The term 'power' refers to the impersonal distribution of chances to influence the social evaluations and practices of life. This definition distinguishes the inconsequential use of symbols (or dreams, idle talk, inconsequential discussions etc.) from the use of symbols, which has social consequences. Specific for the symbolic mediation of power in capitalist societies is its foundation on a scientific discourse, which proclaims all individuals to be equal and inequality to be the meritocratic result of competition between these individuals. This scientific discourse emerged at the same time as capitalist democracy and Enlightenment. It is the root not only of contemporary political and economic discourse but also of all the social sciences as we know them. We designate this type of scientific discourse as symbolic liberalism. Its specific character lies in the combination of scientific method with an affirmation of capitalist democracy.

Enlightenment has developed the idea that we basically all share the idea of society consisting of free and equal individuals. In a democratic society, each and every individual is supposed to be able to determine his or her own fate and to choose between socially available options. That a large percentage of the members of any democratic society are not in a position to choose the best possible option is, according to this view, due to individual failure. The failed individual deserves less respect by him- or herself and by others and loses a substantial amount of dignity. We also speak of *humiliation* and call the process constituting it *symbolic racism*. In order for symbolic racism and humiliation of entire classes of people to work, it has to appear as legitimate. The Enlightenment idea of democratic society is coupled with the idea of individual failure on the basis of individual traits. The reasons for individual failure appear as natural, not as socially constructed. The process of differentiation between failure and success, worthy and unworthy individuals, is supposed to refer to the result of free competition, as formally all individuals have the same opportunities. Those who succeed are more disciplined, smarter, more hard-working and more goal-oriented, which seem to be natural and individual character traits.

We argue that the combination of symbolic liberalism and symbolic racism has spread across the entire globe and constitutes inequality in all capitalist societies. More importantly, it reproduces the structure of inequality by making the mechanisms of its constitution invisible. The supposed difference between Western and 'underdeveloped' societies is itself part of symbolic racism and constitutes an entrenched inequality between different classes of societies, namely free, democratic ones in the West and corrupt, unequal ones populated by untrustworthy, undisciplined people with dark skin.<sup>1</sup>

Our empirical research in Brazil, Germany, India, and Laos has shown that those who fail in

---

<sup>1</sup>Any modernization theory, development discourse or ranking of states presupposes this distinction. We acknowledge in this paper that there is a difference between the former colonial powers and the former colonies but we argue that this difference today is partly based on symbolic racism. We will not make any qualitative distinction between capitalist societies but distinguish geographically and historically between Northatlantic societies and the global South.

the competition are almost entirely children of people who have also failed. Their ancestors have mostly belonged to the lowest ranks of precapitalist society. During the capitalist transformation and in the wake of social revolutions, there is some mobility but it disappears when a stable capitalist society that matches scientific ideals has been established. Mobility in a capitalist society is restricted to the economic dimension, as people have other jobs or a different income than their parents. Socially, they remain in the same class. This paper studies how class is reproduced. It argues that the scientific foundation of capitalist societies makes the persistence of classes invisible that are reproduced on the basis of a hierarchy of values, which itself decides about success in competition. In other words, in spite of the formal equality of all individuals, they are symbolically distributed into unequal classes even before any competition has started.

## Symbolic liberalism

It is a specific trait of contemporary societies that they are founded on science. The social sciences as developed by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Smith applying the Cartesian theory of science not only inspired the bourgeois revolutions but they were used to organize all aspects of society, from the Constitution to the economy to social welfare. The sciences and their application are being perfected up to this day. The common core of the factual discourse in these societies and the philosophy of science shared by the social sciences consists in symbolic liberalism. According to this view, society is the interaction of individuals, whose prime characteristic is the pursuit of self-interest. These individuals are supposed to be formally free and equal (Rousseau 1997: 41). They transfer part of this freedom to the national government, which represents them, in order for the government to protect their rights, especially their formal freedom and their property (Rousseau 1997: 47). The government guarantees the security and lawfulness of the free market, which is the sphere of competition between formally free and equal individuals in pursuit of their goal, which is wealth (Smith 1990). By increasing their own wealth, they increase that of the entire society, which is merely the totality of all individuals. The workings of the free market and the generation of wealth can be calculated because the driving forces of its smallest unit, the individuals, are known and its functions are based on scientific organization (Hobbes 1968).

Symbolic liberalism has become something like the transcendental reason of contemporary human beings. In fact, the critique of reason advanced by Kant (1956) refers to symbolic liberalism. He argues that it is not possible to know whether reason generates truth or not, but it is impossible to think outside its transcendental categories anyway. This is exactly how symbolic liberalism works in capitalist societies and why it reproduces inequality. It is not, as Smith and Kant have it, the natural and unchanging character of man but it has been generated within a particular type of society and then consciously applied to shape the minds, bodies and institutions of contemporary societies. All of us are being taught Enlightenment thought and values in the family, at school, in local and international organizations, at work and in the academia. In our empirical research we were surprised to find that symbolic liberalism has actually spread to all corners of the world, even though in countries like Laos and India it is still mainly restricted to those social groups with several years of formal education.

To a detached observer, who does not exist, it would be immediately obvious that symbolic liberalism is not an objective analysis or even description of reality but the core of the symbolic universe. Everybody knows that individuals are not equal, that markets are not free and open to everyone, that democracy is not rule by the people and that there are other issues or interests apart from wealth. The social sciences, official discourse and policies are not aiming at a mere description of reality but at its organization. The problem with the application of symbolic liberalism is that it generates the same transcendental categories both for practice and for science. It becomes

impossible to view the world otherwise. There is freedom of opinion in capitalist societies but it is not possible to utter scepticism about concepts like freedom, equality, democracy, wealth, economic growth and property. Our oath is not on the bible or any other sacred thing but on the Constitution, which is based on the afore-mentioned concepts. As these concepts are a core component of both the subject and the object of the social sciences, it is not possible to study the foundations of contemporary society. To a detached observer, a social science is impossible under these conditions.

It is interesting to note that Hobbes and Hegel as well as the American and the Swiss Constitutions included only a small percentage of the population into their concept of society. Slaves and women, foreigners and indigenous peoples, lower classes and convicts were at the time of writing partly or entirely excluded from citizenship. When they were accepted as citizens, they were integrated as people of a lower value and with poorer starting chances. It is also interesting to note that economic inequality is an explicit component of capitalist society and that it is based on the assumption of qualitative differences between people, such as discipline, intelligence or industriousness. People are supposed to be equal and to have equal chances but existing inequalities are supposed to be the product of a natural difference between people, which characterizes entire groups, such as women or blacks. Symbolic racism is the flipside of the meritocratic myth, which claims that inequality is the result of competition between equal individuals.

Symbolic liberalism is not, however, the conscious ideology of the ruling class to legitimize socioeconomic inequality. Symbolic racism is part of the transcendental reason brought to light by liberal philosophers and politicians, who probably were not evil ideologues. The core concepts of Enlightenment were *not* invented to exclude and later unequally integrate labourers, women and slaves. Symbolic liberalism rather legitimizes inequality precisely *because* it is not conceived to pursue this goal. It is successful and therefore adopted by the dominant class because it proclaims equality and freedom and at the same time symbolically reinforces the actual differences between the classes by making them invisible and naturalizing them. Symbolic liberalism is our transcendental reason because it is a component of our everyday practice. By participating in markets and democracy, one has to abide by its principles and believe in its core concepts. It is not possible to invest capital without seeking wealth or to cast a vote without supporting a political party - except to make a practical joke. Within this closed circuit, the dominant class 'happens' to master the necessary skills better than other classes and are therefore more successful. Their social position is justified without them having to manipulate the symbolic universe or to use force. It is a consequence of the belief in symbolic liberalism. That is why we speak of symbolic domination. We will now inquire into its workings.

## Normalisation and symbolic domination

In a capitalist society, personal rule is replaced by a technocracy, which seems to merely regulate markets and guarantee security. Technocracy is also responsible for enabling individuals to be equal participants in free markets. In fact, this is how individuals are produced in the first place. The work of Michel Foucault was mainly devoted to the study of this process. A prime example for it is his inquiry into the transformation of the judicial system from a public retaliation against the offender into the education of the offender to be a productive citizen (Foucault 1980). We completely agree with Foucault that this type of education produces the individual of Enlightenment theory - instead of drawing on a supposed original nature of that individual postulated by Hobbes and Smith.

Foucault tries to understand the combination of judicial practices, science and the use of the human body, which is particular to contemporary societies. He classifies it as a configuration of

power, which he calls 'disciplinary power' (1995: 153). This configuration extends to all parts of society and shapes new institutions or reshapes old ones, prisons, factories, schools, hospitals and courts. Its purpose is the formation of disciplined and productive bodies (1995: 26). A new technology of the body emerges, which includes the active participation of each person and the unconscious submission under the technological requirements. As it is both active participation and unconscious submission, Foucault speaks of a 'microphysics of power' (1995: 28). This form of power presupposes no heteronomous exercise of force but it is played out by each and every action to the individual's own good.

Science is a core component of disciplinary power for Foucault (1995). The capitalist institutions require thorough knowledge of their subject matter. The judicial system is not arbitrary or excessive any more but it is founded on law, psychology and other social sciences. However, these only gain their knowledge through the daily practice of the institutions themselves. According to Foucault, the technologies of surveillance and education are necessary for the production of scientific knowledge, they serve as experiments in the social sciences. Then, this knowledge is applied in the same institutions, tested and improved. The scientific foundation of the judicial system is responsible for the invisibility of the structures of power which are immanent to it. Foucault extends this argument to the entire society and to all human and social sciences. As science is characterized by its objectivity and absence of power, the submission under its insights and the institutions founded on them is only rational and ethical. Anything else would be not only irrational but also authoritarian and a visible exercise of power. The obvious forms of domination are replaced by impersonal and universal discipline, whose workings remain invisible. In his later works, Foucault (2007) spoke of governmentality rather than disciplinary power because the process of disciplining and normalization has found its completion in contemporary societies.

As domination is no longer visible, personal and arbitrary, resistance decreases. It also decreases because of the scientific foundations of disciplinary power. Finally, it decreases because disciplinary power seems to work for the individuals' own benefit rather than that of the ruling power. A disciplined body is able and legitimized to participate in the free market and to reap the profits offered by it. According to Foucault, there are immediate material benefits for conformity with disciplinary power. As soon as the individual is constituted that knows to put his or her own body to use in contemporary society's institutions, it can enter any institution and put his or her power to use with the prospect of immediate material gains. As the individualization or standardization is embodied both in the individuals and in the institutional mechanisms, its root in the constitution of disciplinary power is no longer visible. Self-control takes the place of control and discipline takes the place of the personal ruler. In this society, the social position is defined by qualities like self-control, discipline and scientific rationality. Any success, whether at school or on the job, in formal organizations or on the market, depends on the effective incorporation of these qualities. Even the access to society in the form of citizenship presupposes a certain mastery of them as the immigrant and the criminal offender are judged on their basis.

## The incorporation of symbolic domination

Foucault has demonstrated the institutionalization of symbolic domination on the basis of symbolic liberalism and disciplinary power. He does not answer the question, however, how disciplinary power is embodied and why it becomes a core element of our vision and emotional perception of the world. The following paragraphs will deal with this question drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'. Why do people in contemporary societies perceive of themselves as free and equal individuals, who have the mission and the possibility to strive for something like success? Why do we believe in the meritocratic myth, which mistakes social privilege for merit?

Why are we victims and perpetrators in this process at the same time? Why do we believe in a domination, which we interpret as just, egalitarian and democratic?

Bourdieu's concept of habitus seeks to answer precisely these questions. The concept is developed in constructive reinterpretation of two contrary traditions (Bourdieu 1977). Objectivism claims that action is forced on the individuals by transcendent structures, while subjectivism builds on the self-interpretation of individuals as free and self-determining. Bourdieu agrees with objectivism and Foucault that social structure largely determines individual practices through institutional sanctions and socialization. However, beyond Foucault he tries to demonstrate how individuals have to play an active role in this process by internalizing and subjectively reinterpreting the institutionalized models of action. The habitus is supposed to explain how a system of cognitive and motivating dispositions is acquired in the life-course and plays out as real possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and boundaries, visibilities and invisibilities for each individual from his or her own perspective.

The habitus, according to Bourdieu (1977), is the sum of patterns for action and perception, which are the preconditions for all later patterns. Therefore, spontaneous action or unlimited freedom are not possible but constrained by previous experiences. One could say that the past is incorporated in the habitus and forgotten over the actual application of the available patterns of action. This generates at once the misconception of individual freedom and the naturalization of 'character traits' acquired in a specific social environment.<sup>2</sup> Institutional structures have neither life nor meaning if they are not incorporated in patterns of action and perception. In order to give life and meaning to institutional structures, the individual has to interact with these structures, incorporate the correct forms of interaction and forget the genesis of both habitus and institution. Just as it is impossible to walk if one has to reflect on the movements and their origin, it is impossible to act as a woman or a man, a labourer or a manager, an artist or a football player if one has not incorporated and naturalized the appropriate patterns of action (Bourdieu 1977: 189). Our haircut and our stature, our language and our emotional expressions are not only manifestations of our socially formed habitus, they are also the signals, which constitute the social classification of us by others.

The incorporation of meaning and classification begins in the first year of life. It is equivalent to an education of the body as a reservoir of social values. These values are trained in the framework of an implicit pedagogic, which naturalizes a view of the world because it is not object of the interaction or the perception itself. Its purpose is to teach us the appropriate modes of action in order to be able to act in society. It teaches the woman to use the indirect glance or the man to be fond of alcoholic beverages. Thereby, we incorporate an entire hierarchy of values, in this case the supremacy of the male and its manifestations over the female. As this hierarchy is implicit in the institutional structures as well, it expresses reality, fits reality and reproduces reality. If one should act in violation of this hierarchy, one would neither be understood nor accepted. This type of behaviour would be experienced as rude, inappropriate or downright crazy.

Bourdieu wanted to make the naturalized hierarchy of values explicit. We only experience its effects, such as the female predilection for lighter food and the labourer's for filling dishes. Bourdieu (1984) argued, however, that the struggle for the definition of more or less appropriate patterns of behaviour is actually a struggle between values, which in turn are the expression of different social environments. The values incorporated in each social environment are not arbitrary and equal but correspond to a hierarchy of social positions. Not all social groups have incorporated the disciplined and therefore useful personality to the same degree. Just like Foucault, Bourdieu claims that only the dominant class in capitalist societies is in a position to fully comply with the model of an appropriate personality, which defines the legitimate patterns of action and

---

<sup>2</sup>We call 'naturalization' the classification of socially constructed or at least mediated traits as unchangeable and given.

perception. This class, therefore, is not in a dominant position because it was successful in a free and open market but it is successful because it is in a dominant position, in which it incorporates the dominant values to a more perfect degree than other classes.

All of us classify others in a similar fashion. We feel pity or contempt for those who are not disciplined, controlled and rational. No employer would prefer such a person over those who are. Selection processes in schools, organizations and companies aim at the habitus traits that characterize a productive person, one who is disciplined and rational (Lepak/Snell 2002). In fact, these traits appear as natural components of the human species to us, just like two arms and a head. Those who do not possess them appear as deviant, disturbed or failed. We do not realize that the traits of the normalized individual are social constructions that arise in a certain symbolic universe.

## Social differentiation of the symbolic universe

Bourdieu and Foucault presupposed a single symbolic universe for the entire society, a set of values that is identical for all members of a particular nation state. The definition of the dominant values is supposed to be shaped by the dominant class and differentiated by the degree to which each class incorporates it. However, our empirical research shows that each social environment, which is a product of class and historical time, shapes its own values on the basis of its history and relative social position. We have to enquire into this process because the postulate of the active and even manipulative role of the ruling class is just as misleading as that of the homogeneous character of the symbolic universe.

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 more slowly but they do change. Through social revolutions new cultural frameworks for inequality emerge, while older ones persist. 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.

In spite of constant social change, the hierarchy of social groups within a capitalist society basically stays the same. One reason is the cultural continuity that each class produces. 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 (2001: 23). According to Vester, Marx and Beck failed to see that the European workers were no fragmented group, which organized from scratch, but had incorporated their precapitalist traditions and adapted them to the conditions of industrial capitalism (2001: 133). Instead of classes, Vester therefore speaks

of 'tradition lines'. Tradition lines are the cultural continuities, which constitute the symbolic and practical unity of a class. They are segmented by major historical transformations, especially revolutions, such as 1945, 1968 and 1989 in Germany or 1947 and 1991 in India. Each segment can be called a 'milieu' (Vester et al. 2001). The transformation and reproduction of tradition lines as symbolic entities is the secret to understanding of inequality in capitalist societies. Each tradition line classifies itself and the others within its own discourse. It establishes a frame of reference for the practices of its members and their ambition. This frame of reference is merely a transformation of each earlier frame within the same tradition line. Sons of peasants have always become peasants but in capitalist societies, this may no longer be true due to tertiarization; however, the son will still share many of the basic values and especially the relative self-evaluation of his father as a non-intellectual, decent, hard-working man without ambition to excel as a leader.

We can illustrate the segmentation and continuity of sociocultures with reference to Lao language. Five relatively distinct historical phases can be differentiated in the recent past, which persist as four sociocultures in contemporary Laos: village-level subsistence society, urban patrimonialism, socialism and capitalism. Each has its own sociolect and its own register of terms of address, which expresses historically specific forms of hierarchy and inequality. This indicates that the structures of inequality and the discourses, even the grammatical structures, are peculiar to each socioculture. While the relevance of the older sociolects decreases, the anonymous and seemingly egalitarian form of address associated with capitalism, the personal pronoun, spreads. At the same time as the relevance of capitalist language is growing, people are moving from the countryside to the towns and are leaving subsistence economy for cash-crops and capitalist professions. The hierarchical positions remain the same. The poor peasant becomes a rural worker or urban labourer, the rich peasant a commercial farmer, the low party official a clerk, the noble person and the party official become entrepreneurs, and the old aristocracy forms a new capitalist elite merging with the socialist leadership. But the old hierarchies persist in a merely transformed shape.

The transformation of the old hierarchical ranks into capitalist classes remains invisible because all citizens of Laos are formally equal. The persistence of older sociocultures and the origin of current inequality in older sociocultures remain invisible because there seem to prevail only one standard language and one dominant discourse. The dominant discourse proclaims equality and citizenship. In contrast to Foucault's and Bourdieu's interpretation, it is not produced by the Lao ruling class but by international organizations, consultants, Thai media, and the new middle class. The Lao ruling class pursues contradictory goals: control through egalitarianism and party bureaucracy, personal wealth through the market economy and corruption, nationalism through standardization of the symbolic sphere. And there are several discourses at work, at least one in each socioculture. All of them serve the interests of the dominant class, not because they are constructed by this class but because they express, reconfirm and stabilize the existing social hierarchy.

## Classes and the hierarchy of values

The sociocultures and tradition lines differ from the dominant discourse and hierarchy of values. They do not even speak the same language. But they reproduce and transform their discourses in direct relation to the discourses of the neighbouring classes and sociocultures. This is how inequality is reproduced in a capitalist society. It means that the social groups do not share a common discourse but the relational character of their discourse implies that they establish a hierarchy of discourses, which is based on a hierarchy of values. Foucault and Bourdieu have, just like Smith and Marx, focused on the distribution of resources that are needed and relevant for

social action. This implies that a 'just' and 'equal' distribution of relevant resources is the cure for the problem of inequality. It is not. After an entire redistribution of resources, the value of each social group would still be determined by a system of relative discourses. A black person would still be less trustworthy, a labourer would still be more suitable for manual work, and a delinquent would still be useless for the productive process.

The classical theories underestimate both the role of the symbolic universe and the importance of immaterial rewards. The turn toward materialism in philosophy was a revolution against the philosophy of consciousness. Instead of developing the world out of ideas and human knowledge out of the stream of subjective ideas, thinkers like Diderot, Marx and Foucault insisted on production - of things, relations and knowledge - before any consciousness comes to work. This entailed the insistence on objective factors. However, the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism or materialism and idealism is wrong in itself. It only works if meaning and practice could be somehow separated, which is not the case. Both sides presuppose the infantile liberal notion of an autonomous subject that produces meaning in the head, which is considered irrelevant by the objectivist tradition. The objectivist tradition in turn claims that practice somehow works without the participation of the subject - which would only be true if this subject is the liberal autonomous self. However, a meaningless practice is precisely this, it is meaningless. It is not human. Even Bourdieu fails to take this seriously as his idea of subjectivism remains phenomenology, which can be disregarded as a philosophy of consciousness. But its fundamental question, how is meaning produced by and for the agent him- or herself, cannot be answered by merely pointing to the reproduction of objective structures.

Each class has its own discourse but shares a hierarchy of values with the other classes. This hierarchy is largely constituted by symbolic liberalism. We want to argue that inequality in capitalist societies presupposes a specific idea of the self and a specific hierarchy of values attached to it. The value of a person is no longer measured by a list of virtues like in feudal societies or by any other personality trait but by procedural values, which are linked to Foucault's disciplinary power. All of us incorporate the procedural values to different degrees and are therefore judged as different types of people as our actions symbolically reveal precisely this degree of incorporation. In order to understand the institutionalization and incorporation of symbolic inequality that we outlined above, we still need to discuss the values implied in this symbolic inequality.

We will propose a sketch of these values in a discussion of Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989). Taylor seeks to reconstruct the moral origins of the practices of modern individuals. We will focus on two of these origins, the strife for 'dignity' and the strife for 'authenticity'. This interpretation presupposes that human action is neither a blind functioning according to natural laws nor the intellectualist following of a rule. We assume, in contrast, that practice is mainly the application of incorporated and socially meaningful patterns in specific contexts (Bourdieu 1987; Taylor 1994). It is possible to articulate intellectualist reasons and even rules for these actions but they are not what guides our practice. Our practice is what we learn in our life-course within specific social environments, which differ from each other and are classified according to a hierarchy of values.

The hierarchy is closely linked to symbolic liberalism and is largely developed in line with it. Just as we have traced the philosophic root of symbolic liberalism to Hobbes' interpretation of Descartes, Taylor (1997) views Descartes as the major inventor of the modern concept of the self, which he calls the 'punctual self'. 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 methodological 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). The sociologically relevant innovation of Protestantism according to Taylor, which recalls Max Weber's argument, 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. 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 *Übermensch* is an integral component of our contemporary concept of the self, both for common sense and for the affirmative social sciences.

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.

The psychosocial structure, which Taylor refers to as dignity, is a presupposition for the consolidation of market and state. Without the effective incorporation of the social dispositions contained in the principle of dignity, such as discipline or rational calculation, success in capitalist institutions becomes impossible. The generalization of the presuppositions enables us to speak of citizenship, the supposedly universally shared rights and duties in a nation state of equal individuals. Participation and success in a capitalist society thereby depend on the incorporation of an arbitrary moral and emotional system. A merely formal analysis of legal institutions remains superficial because there is no formal equality without moral and emotional equality.

The case of the socially excluded shows that capitalist societies share much more than flows of capital and legal institutions. They also share a moral hierarchy, which defines who is regarded as worthy by institutions and individuals. It is the ignorance of the symbolic dimension of capitalism, which makes the hierarchy of values invisible and thereby efficient. The existence of a 'line of dignity' in all capitalist societies shows that there is a moral hierarchy, which is legitimized in the same way in all capitalist societies. The meritocratic myth is the core of symbolic domination in capitalist societies and it articulates its inherent symbolic inequality in its devaluation and humiliation of the socially worthless and excluded. There is no difference between societies of the centre and those of the periphery in this regard. It is therefore not the distribution of resources that produces inequality but the unequal distribution of resources is produced by the hierarchy of values and its legitimation by the meritocratic myth.

The humiliated and excluded have to be, at least partly, convinced that their humiliation is legitimate. This is possible on the grounds that the rules for competition and success are the same for everyone in capitalist societies. They have to accept that their failure is not based on discrimination or symbolic domination but on insufficiency, which again supposedly characterizes their nature. The same would be true for the dividing line between those who have incorporated the value of authenticity and those who have not, a dividing line that Bourdieu has investigated thoroughly as the line of 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1984).

In our empirical research in Brazil, Germany and Laos, we have been able to distinguish three classes that correspond both to Taylor's hierarchy of values and Bourdieu's three classes. While the lowest class has not incorporated the virtues of disciplinary power to a sufficient degree, the middle class has acquired a habitus, which makes a life in dignity possible. The upper class has not only incorporated the value of dignity but also that of authenticity. It is able to succeed not only on the job but also in everyday life, culture, and academia. Thereby, its dominant position is legitimized and merited because its achievements are greatest and best within the prevailing hierarchy of values. We call these three classes the marginalized, the fighters and the established. In contrast to Bourdieu, we have encountered fourth class, which has remained invisible to sociological research. It is the very small dominant class, which stands aloof the struggle for dignity and authenticity. While the established have to prove themselves through scholarly and professional achievements, the dominant class is successful right from the start. Their members sit on the boards of the best schools, use their wealth for culture and charity, act as advisors and own the large legal, health, charity and other organizations. In contrast to the superrich and other supposed newcomers in the dominant class, members of the dominant class do not have to prove anything. We estimate their number at less than one percent of any nation state.

The dominant class has not created disciplinary power and has not defined the 'modern' human being. It does not dominate the symbolic universe in the sense of Gramsci's hegemony (1992: 233). At any given point, it incorporates the dominant values without having to prove it and occupies those positions that are in charge of recruiting the next generation of dominant groups. There

is an element of hegemony contained in its position as the dominant class occupies that most important functions in the intellectual world, think tanks and boards of elite universities, and increasingly contributes to science itself (Bourdieu 1998). In contrast to the concept of hegemony, the dominant class has not created the social sciences or even its core concepts. Its dominant position is merely legitimized by the social sciences and the social sciences are reinforced in their symbolic liberalism exactly for this reason. As all other social scientists aspire to the same ideals and to the incorporation of the same values, they reconfirm symbolic domination.

The hierarchy of values, its incorporation and its institutionalization, which we have outlined, appear on the surface as symbolic liberalism. The scientific foundation of capitalist economy and politics is its expression, its symbolic structure and its validation. Meritocracy is naturalized because the upper classes incorporate precisely those values, which are necessary to occupy a leading position. These are not personal, arbitrary values but scientifically validated impersonal traits of individuals within a scientifically validated system. In order to understand its unequal structure, it is necessary to see that the symbolic worlds of precapitalist tradition lines continue to persist in capitalist society and are transformed as expressions of the values discussed by Taylor. The surface and the deep structure of capitalist society are held together by the value hierarchy implied in symbolic liberalism and generalized together with the spread of democracy, capitalism, science and the punctual self.

## Conclusion

In our contemporary world, everything is framed as rational and innerworldly, very much in the veins of Max Weber's (1972) diagnosis a century ago. However, the rational foundations of this rationality are lacking. Weber himself has argued that founding rationality on rationality leads into a circle. One could argue that rationality is the most suitable means to achieve economic growth, which is the declared primary goal of capitalism and therefore of contemporary society. The focus on growth, however, not only entails a great number of severe well-known problems, it also makes its sociocultural conditions invisible. For the liberal tradition, inequality has been either an irrelevant or even a desired outcome of economic development. As such, it is not necessary to address it as a problem in itself. The study of growth can be quite rational but it remains unclear to this day why growth is a more rational goal than addressing social inequality. In fact, the question what inequality means has not even been asked. We have argued in this paper that the fixation on rationality is not merely a social-scientific matter but also informs the social structure and our everyday life itself.

## References

- Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Bourdieu, P. (2004) *Science of Science and Reflexivity*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Cassirer, E. (1997) *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft
- Foucault, M. (1995; second edition) *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing
- Foucault, M. (2007) *Security, Territory, Population*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

- Gramsci, A. (1992) *Prison Notebooks* (ed. by Joseph A. Buttigieg). New York: Columbia University Press
- Hobbes, T. (1968) *Leviathan*. London: Pelican
- Kant, I. (1956) *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Werke 3/4. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft
- Lepak, D. P. and Snell, S. A. (2002) 'Examining the Human Resource Architecture: The Relationships among Human Capital, Employment, and Human Resource Configurations', in *Journal of Management*. Vol. 28 (517-543)
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1997) *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Smith, A. (1998) *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Souza, J./V. Sinder (eds.) (2005) *Imagining Brazil*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield
- Taylor, C. (1989) *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Taylor, C. (1994) 'The Politics of Recognition', in Amy Gutmann (ed.): *Multiculturalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (25-74)
- Thompson, E. P. (1963) *The Making of the English Working Class*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books
- Vester, M., P. von Oertzen, H. Geiling, T. Hermann, D. Müller (2001; second edition) *Soziale Milieus im gesellschaftlichen Strukturwandel*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp
- Weber, M. (1972; fifth edition) *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr