

# An Interview about Contemporary Inequality with Boike Rehbein<sup>1</sup> and Jessé Souza<sup>2</sup>

Tamer Söyler

TAMER SÖYLER : After climate change and populism, inequality is probably the most widely discussed topic of social relevance today. But we can observe that inequality keeps increasing and that research does not contribute to practical solutions for the problem of structural inequality.

BOIKE REHBEIN : Inequality studies today mislead us about what inequality is really about. Most inequality research is dominated by mainstream institutions, especially the World Bank and departments of economics, that are not really interested in understanding inequality. Why? Because they fulfill a political function and, to a certain degree, an ideological function. They make us believe that inequality is about the economy; more specifically, about money. The suggestion is that if you make a little bit more money, you advance in society. And the ideological function of this suggestion is that we are all integrated by this into the system as labourers and consumers without questioning the structures of inequality. We may make a bit more money but we don't really change our social position, let alone our lives in society in general.

So, in order to understand inequality in the world today, but also in the world of the past and probably in the future, we have to look at the structures of inequality, which are more related to the social position and the social characteristics that we have beyond money. We have to look at domination. And that implies a fundamental structural change of society – which nobody is interested in who believes to be profiting from the system.

TAMER SÖYLER : What does domination mean for you in this regard?

JESSÉ SOUZA : Instead of looking at money, we need to look at life chances and the reproduction of structures. Who has access to valued activities, functions, positions and goods in society? Some people have access to these things and others are excluded to varying degrees. In the last instance, this is not about money and it's not even about these goods and functions, but it's about domination. That is: who decides, and who leads, and who is led, and who profits and who doesn't. Some of these things are partly economic, but they are mostly non-economic. Economic and social and cultural go together. They form a package. And this package is not visible if you look at one factor only, like money or the economy or consumption or something like this. If you isolate one factor, like money, you not only integrate people into the system as labourers and consumers, but you also mislead them about the structure of domination, and you make them believe that the improvement in this one single factor, like money, really changes something in their lives.

TAMER SÖYLER : How does inequality in Germany today compare to Brazil?

BOIKE REHBEIN : This is a really good question. Because it implies that Brazil is one of the most unequal countries, while Germany is much more equal. We think this way because of modernization theory. Brazil is less developed than Germany, therefore it is more unequal.

This is not true. If we look at the distribution of wealth or social capital, the differences between Brazil and Germany are not very large. And if we look at social mobility, the situation is better in Brazil than in Germany. To give you another example, as far as wealth concentration is concerned, Sweden is probably more unequal than Brazil. The Gini for wealth inequality in Sweden is up to 80, higher than income inequality in any country of the world. This is something that is not usually taken into consideration. In terms of income inequality, Brazil is much worse than Sweden, but in terms of wealth Sweden is worse than Brazil.

If we look at why there is so little social mobility in Germany – or Sweden, or England or other European countries – it is because they have not experienced massive social change or a revolution in a very long time, and capitalism was installed a long time ago. Ever since the Thirty Years' War, ending in 1648, European societies have not really experienced fundamental change in social structure. But many societies in the global South have experienced change with independence. Brazil experienced change with the abolition of slavery, and so on. So, statistically speaking, there is more change in Brazil than in Germany and more wealth inequality in Sweden than in Brazil.

The most important observation, however, is that the social classes are much more cemented in a country like Germany, and they are more emerging and fluid and configuring in a country like Brazil. In Germany, we can trace back the contemporary social classes well into the 19th century, and the boundaries between these classes have not really changed. If we trace back the family histories of people alive today into the 19th century, we see very little mobility. We see change in profession and change in location, change in cultural capital, change in income and so on. But we don't see relative rise or fall in the social position. We merely saw that the social classes of shopkeepers and proletarians, distinguished by Marx in 1848, and the social classes of petty bourgeoisie and proletariat, distinguished by Geiger in 1932, have basically merged after the Second World War. There is mobility between them.

JESSÉ SOUZA : The main difference between Germany and Brazil is their position in the global structure. Brazil is a former colony and has never advanced into the circle of “civilized” and “developed” countries. This refers to the nation state as such but also to all of its inhabitants. Each and every Brazilian who comes to Europe or the US is not considered equal. He or she is always member of a society that is worth less than a “developed” society. The structures of former colonialism are upheld by means of a particular racism. Just as a black person is not trusted within Brazil and is not considered as worthy as a white person, a Brazilian on the global level is not trusted to the same degree by a European as another European.

This type of racism is key for the persistence of inequality in a formally democratic nation state and on the global level. It groups people into different categories and relegates some of these groups to the status of being unworthy or second-class humans. This is naturalized. Even a liberal or left-wing person from Germany or Sweden would say that Brazil is more corrupt. If you ask the person for empirical evidence, it is unlikely to be presented. “Everybody knows.” This is exactly the embodied racism I am talking about.

This racism has to be distinguished from a biological race ideology and from simple discrimination. The racism that is relevant for inequality is the embodied symbolic classification of entire groups of people as more or less valuable. The most important aspect of this is the tacit, naturalized character of this racism: We are all equal – but former colonies are more corrupt and order-less, while the lower classes are less efficient and educated.

BOIKE REHBEIN : This type of classification, which we call symbolic racism, has become omnipresent during the past decades. You have to consider that explicit social ranks disap-

peared from most states only around 1900 and colonialism disappeared from much of the globe after the Second World War, while racism as a biological ideology became unfashionable only around this time as well. They transformed into something like an embodied prejudice, which serves as a gatekeeper and a wall between classes and nations. It has also replaced the open class struggle of the period before the Second World War. Today, we are all equal – around the world. It is just that some people have made it, while others have failed. Some states got their act together and are clean, developed, transparent and democratic, while others are failed states. The success is due to achievement – even though the groups on top have always been on top during the past centuries. Even the billionaire who has inherited his wealth in the seventh generation is “successful” and smart and worthy and so on.

TAMER SÖYLER : So, inequality has been increasing during the past years?

JESSÉ SOUZA : This also depends on the interpretation. If you ask about inequality between social classes, I would say “no” because it doesn’t really change or it has not changed in recent years. If you look at economic inequality, everything points to more inequality, but this is difficult to assess because poverty levels stay about the same. The amount of poor people in the world, remains more or less identical but the world population increases. Relatively speaking we have fewer poor people and you could say that this type of inequality is decreasing.

There are changes, but these changes affect money and external factors, and they don’t affect the relation between social classes. The class structure doesn’t really change; all societies have a tiny, tiny dominant class, which comprises anywhere between 0.01% and 0.1% of the population. And this class remains pretty much unchanged and untouched by the current transformations. It becomes richer than ever before at the moment, it seems. So, the dominant class concentrates more economic capital at present, due to the financialization of the world. But the relative position remains the same.

One of the most interesting questions now is, do the dominant classes around the world opt for globalization, or do they opt for nationalism? And we see at the moment a tendency of many dominant classes in the world tending towards nationalism, because their social position is very much tied to the nation state, and the competition between dominant classes on the global level always turns out in favour of the dominant classes of the dominant nation states. The US dominant class would be more in favour of globalization, just as that of Great Britain; maybe Germany too. And dominant classes of countries like Brazil would be more against globalization, because they maintain their dominant position only within nation state. But of course, the dominant classes don’t understand society better than we do. Some of them think globalization is better, even if it’s worse for them, and the other way around. There is no match between social position, political attitude and sociological understanding.

TAMER SÖYLER : What can we do about inequality, if it is so deeply entrenched?

JESSÉ SOUZA : To start with, inequality is not just one problem apart from others, like environmental problems, labour problems or digitalization, problems with garbage, and then also inequality. This, once again, is misleading.

Inequality is about domination and the structure of domination is responsible for the other problems I just mentioned, and not the other way around. We will not solve any environmental problem without solving the problem of inequality, while the opposite is not true – if we solve an environmental problem, we have not yet solved the problem of inequality.

And the problem of domination is also more fundamental than the problem of capitalism. Because capitalism is only one form of domination. We have other forms of domination

historically, and we have also seen that attempts at doing away with capitalism have led to new forms of domination, under the heading of socialism or whatever. We have seen new totalitarian states and forms of domination emerging. It is not enough to abolish capitalism, you have to abolish domination. And that means you have two tasks at the same time, which are different, located on different levels. That is very difficult, and becomes even more difficult if you consider that the structures of domination are incorporated in institutions and in our own bodies.

BOIKE REHBEIN : We reproduce inequality in our everyday actions and lives without even being aware of it. So, we need to change ourselves, we need to change the institutions, we need to change the social structures, and we need to understand all of this in order to do so, which means it is very difficult to do something about it. The only path I see is one that takes a lot of time. And that is a problem because I think we don't have much time left to do something about the problems of capitalism and domination.

But if we want to pursue this and risk running out of time in the process, I think we do have to start with education. This includes ourselves as well. The best thing to do would be, first, for children to learn sociology – but sociology not in the form of mainstream sociology, like teaching about socio-economic inequality and having more or less money, but sociology in the form of understanding the structures of domination.

A second measure would be training equality in school, that means training the body not to exert social classification or symbolic racism towards others, and also becoming aware of when we do it and how we do it. The goal would be to learn to behave in a more egalitarian way already in school, and become aware of it, and reflect on the structures that we live in. I think this is the only path we can take before we can engage in political action, which would only lead to a new form of domination, a new structure of domination, even if we get rid of capitalism. We have embodied the structures of inequality and if we come up with a new type of society just like that, it will be a structure of domination once again.

TAMER SÖYLER : Do you see any changes at all?

BOIKE REHBEIN : In many regards I would say the situation is as bad as it has ever been, or maybe worse than it has been ever before. Why? Because many social groups are no longer interested in doing something about inequality, or domination. If we look back in history, the past hundreds, thousands of years, we see social movements, that really want to change the structures of society and especially domination. We don't see much of this today.

We see movements for and against isolated issues but we don't really see movements for the change of structures of inequality. This is a problem. And another problem is that, as I had just mentioned before, in economic terms and some other terms, inequality is worse today than it has ever been. The concentration of wealth today is much more extreme than under the kings of the past. Financial and commercial capital in the 17th century, and under colonialism, was never as concentrated as it is today. And the structures of inequality have possibly never been so invisible as today, because in feudal society or slave-holding society they were evident. It was clear, it was written on a person. I'm worth, like this much, and I'm worth like that much. Today we think we are all equal and we don't even consider inequality to be structural.

JESSÉ SOUZA : We think anyone can make it and we have a democracy. And if we make a bit more money than our neighbour, we have been upwardly mobile and have made it. We have an illusion in our head, which grows every day because it's reinforced by the media and mainstream academia, and it becomes more and more difficult to see the structures of domination and to do something about them.

## Notes

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