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THE TRAP OF FREEDOM
An analysis of the concept of social inequality

Relatore: Prof. Mauro Farnesi Camellone

Laureando: Agnese Di Nicola

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Introduction

When meeting a new person, one of the first questions asked him/her sounds, broadly speaking, something like this: «What do you do for a living?».

This is just an example but it is emblematic of the system: the worker myth has been introjected into the common belief so thoroughly that when faced with the infinite options possible for getting to know someone new, people choose the most obvious one, after the first name, which is precisely occupation. A convenient way to categorize who is the person just met. Moreover, when coupled with a work ethic that associates work with self-esteem, meritocracy becomes a tool that society has for assigning value and decision-making power to certain groups of people, and this carries serious dangers for a society that wants to call itself democratic.

This means that social inequality, based on income, is a fundamental way to organize and shape the society, since it is a measure to classify individuals according not only to their income, but also to what differences this income gap generates, in terms of education, culture, possibility to social mobility, and social value etc.

Material wealth and its misdistribution affect an individual's education and life course in ways as profound as they are unconscious. One need only consider the intangible advantage enjoyed by the wealthy, which can be encapsulated of the concept of cultural capital. This includes the speeches a child listens to at home from childhood, the books on the shelves, the environments he or she frequents, the network of parents, whether or not he or she is able to play sports and other recreational experiences, etc. Moreover, in a neoliberal society, characterized by individualism and the fake belief that everything is possible and that with talent and efforts social mobility is always possible, social inequality is seen as a guilt of the individual. This shift of responsibility creates the illusion that staying at the bottom of the social pyramid is up to every single individual, while it is actual due mostly to structural settings. If the individuals are seen as entrepreneurs, and social interactions becomes an arena in which every person carefully studies what to give and what to take, so the starting conditions become more relevant than

even. Hence, meritocracy generates inevitably inequality. The problem of meritocracy, as it will be seen later, is its connection to power. A democracy based on the meritocratic principle is therefore based on a selection (exclusion) principle that determines who can and cannot be part of the democratic process. The monopoly of knowledge and representation causes undemocratic effects and triggers movements which react by demanding a more equal distribution of power. Increasingly interdependent and interconnected, western States are less and less willing to produce public goods and cover collective risks, such as environmental ones, while the products of rising wealth reward a tiny minority.

The research question

This essay is an attempt to study the concept of social inequality in correlation with the complexity of modern western societies. Indeed, inequality is a multidimensional concept which involves questions of ethics, justice and culture, it opens the way for many issues related to the political but also social and economic dimensions. Moreover, in a way, it could be seen as a measure to classify modern societies, in terms of democratic quality and of grade of happiness. But it would be impossible to understand the implications of social inequality without considering the system in which this inequalities are in place, which is the neoliberal state. Phenomena as the globalization, the Europeanization and the transnationalism are contributing to the erosion of the sovereignty of the State, which is losing its capability to equilibrate its internal conflicts and to assure its legitimacy. Modern States and modern constitutions are democratic in the sense that they are based on the principle of equality among citizens, which is the fundamental principle of rule of law and it has the function of protecting individual rights and freedoms within the social system. Nevertheless, modern states are built up on institutions and structures that produce social inequality, and the neoliberal ideology provides the legitimization and justification of it. Thus, the goal of the essay is to reflect about the interactions that these concepts (democracy, neoliberalism, inequality, individualism) have practically in the everyday life of the common individual, in order to show that income inequality and its consequences produce effects that harm the society as a whole, and that the individualism,

which is the theoretical framework in which inequalities are perceived, is putting the fault on individuals instead of considering it as a structural problem.

The methodology

As said before, in order to analyze the phenomenon, it has been chosen to approach it by taking into account the interconnections between inequality and the reality in which the concept is put in place. Therefore, this is a conceptual analysis with the objective of juxtaposing the concept of social inequality with the one of modern complexity, and everything that this involves, in order to provide a deeper understanding of the concept.

Indeed, it would be impossible to understand the deep implications that inequality evokes without considering at the same time all the concepts which characterize modern western society. In this text the aim is to link the discourse about inequality with the effects of neoliberalism and the role of institutions. The approach chosen in the discourse about inequality is to treat the problem as a historically determined connotation. It is important to underline this because inequality is often conceived as a problem that cannot be solved once for all, and it is common to think that the realities in which humanity currently is (the organization of the community, the economic system, etc.), are immutable and therefore it is futile to try to change them. There is an approach in conceiving of inequality known as *Bossuet's paradox*: people tend to deplore in general what they agree to in particular. This means that there is a very wide discontinuity in the way inequalities are perceived: despite the fact that they are considered to be something socially dangerous or unacceptable, people generally end up accepting them in everyday life. Below, an overview of how the essay is structured will be provided.

Definition of the concept

First of all, inequality is a very broad and extremely vague concept, so the essay must start by giving a clear definition. The first thing important to point out, is that it has been chosen to deal with social inequality within western society. This means that the issue of global inequality, which would involve different concepts and different analyses, will not be taken into account. The reason behind this choice is that global inequality is an effect of the structures

that produce inequality within western society. In other words, understanding why inequality is increasing and it is legitimate within western society is essential to understand why the international system is increasingly unequal and why this is legitimate.

The organization of society inevitably passes through organization within a community, but today state sovereignty is challenged by new international and multilevel governance, and globalization, and thus the processes of transnationalization that are taking place in Europe pose a question about a rethinking of the concepts of nationality and citizenship (and thus of rights and social exclusion).

Social exclusion and inequality generate conflicts, but these are mediated in democratic contexts by the political actor. So, variations in inclusion or exclusion are the result of the power relations between the institutions, individuals and social groups. It is the community itself that excludes through rules, procedures and the (sometimes indirect) consent of its members. The concept of modern citizenship is based on principles universalism that nevertheless justify and legitimize forms of social exclusion. Human rights constitute a justification for combating discrimination, but also a cause of the reproductions of this discrimination, this happens because there is tension between what are recognized as universal rights of man and the rights of the citizen, which apply those rights by filtering them through policy according to the local context. Those who are excluded tend to violently manifest their condition, but exclusion from the political sphere annihilates the conflict.

It is useful to approach the notion of inequality by also analyzing its socio-economic causes. The neoliberalism cedes to market logic even areas that were traditionally excluded from it (education, health, jurisdiction), and in doing so has changed the very conception of politics, which now permeates in all compartments of society. Neoliberal policies have made individuals also devoted to the market logic, seeking efficiency in all aspects of life.

Consequences of social inequality

In the second chapter, it will be showed how the consequences of extreme social inequality have wider influences in the whole (or almost all) population within the society. In fact, it has been shown that inequality causes and

exacerbates so many social problems and, moreover, more unequal societies are also less healthy: lower life expectancy, higher child mortality rate, more violence and drug use, higher percentage of the population in prison and so on. As Marx explained very well, commodification of social relations (i.e., the tendency to conceive of human ties according to the logic of contract), allowed the emancipation of the individual from traditions, family and religion, but this came at the cost of subjection to the impersonal and uncontrollable laws of capital valorization. This modern form of individualism gives the illusion that every aspect of the human experience is controlled, and is chosen by the subject, that recognizes the amount of available resources and decides the proper allocation. Just like an enterprise. This enterprise culture that becomes proper to the neoliberal subject first and to society as a whole later, is the ideal paradigm in which to bring forth the idea that through constant work on oneself, and a competitive space in which to challenge oneself, everyone can achieve perfection. Therefore, the human being is under a constant pressure which imposes him to constantly work on himself, to be always flexible and able to change according to the demand, and actuate a cost and benefit analysis in every activity. This approach puts all the responsibility on the individual and it fails to recognize the impact of extreme inequality. The goal of the second chapter is to underline this mistake by showing evidences that extreme inequality actually produce effect on the individuals that are behind their control. The following pages will explore some of the most significant consequences of living in an increasingly unequal society. In particular, it will be seen how inequality and neoliberalism affect every aspect of life, and not only for the minority living below the absolute poverty line, but for the vast majority of people. As mentioned before, neoliberalism a not just an economic doctrine, but it is a way of understanding and conceiving society, is a code which define our society, and therefore its rules have deep connection to the determination of social behaviors. In this paper, it has been chosen to approach the study of the consequences of inequality by going after them in significant macro areas. First, an attempt will be made to understand the relationship between inequality and what it entails at the psychological level. In particular, it will show how, contrary to what one might think, living in an unequal society, in

which meritocracy and individualism permeate every aspect of life, has negative effects on (almost) everyone, because it increases the level of stress and depression, and because it generates a generalized sense of powerlessness. The second aspect to analyze is the relationship between unequal society and violence. This is very interesting because, as it will be shown later in the chapter, it is a very ambiguous connection: from one side, the rise of inequality produces a rise of violence, but from the other side it also provokes a complete annihilation of conflict in the public debate. The third relation which is important to explore deals with the concept of culture. Indeed, culture is a term that refers to a large and diverse set of mostly intangible aspects of social life, and it influences how a person behaves, their way of thinking and understanding the complexity of reality around them. Culture is defined by the education someone receives, their religious beliefs, the opportunities the person has to enter in contact with literature, films and every form of art. Therefore, it has been proved that the person who is born in a poor family has less possibility to receive a cultural background, and this gap, made during the initial years of their life, will influence the social behavior forever. As early as three years old, children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and adverse socioeconomic conditions may experience up to 12 months of developmental delay compared with more advantaged peers. By the first day of third grade, those who are poorer may be up to six months behind their wealthier peers.

Last but not least, it will be analyzed how all of the previously mentioned concepts and their relation with inequality influence the political dimension of society. Liberal democracy, today, is facing a huge crisis and there is a causal link between this, the problem of low representation, the rise of illiberal instances, and inequality. It will be shown as inequality increases the democratic deficit, because the issues of the poor people are not translated into policy ideas and the left parties are not interested anymore in covering these topics, since this is not anymore automatically translated into a stable electoral consensus, due to the fragmentation of groups and the lack of social class identity.

Not a conclusion

The last chapter is dedicated to offer hints to reflect on this topic, which does not have obvious solutions, precisely due to the highly complex interconnections among different levels of concepts, structures, dogmas and behaviors. It has been seen that one proposal that goes in the direction of freeing people from the yoke of labor and advancing Humanity out of the root traced by the logic of profit is that of universal basic income for all. Another example that goes into the direction of re-thinking about the neoliberal approach in political decision-making, is the discussion around the taxation of the rich.

Yet, the only certain outcome is that unequal societies produce unhappy individuals, distrusts towards politics and low quality democracies.

The main conclusion of the analysis is the need to re-consider social inequality as a structural problem that has grave effects on the society as a whole, and not as a guilt of the disadvantaged people. However, there are numerous ways to do this and policy makers are just starting to scratch the surface of it.

Social inequality, a closer look

Chapter one

1.1 Why

Democracy, and more in general the State as it is used to be intended, nowadays in western societies is facing unique challenges. Phenomena as the globalization, the Europeanization and the transnationalism are contributing to the erosion of the sovereignty of the State, which is losing its capability to equilibrate its internal conflicts and to assure its legitimacy. Modern States and modern constitutions are democratic in the sense that they are based on the principle of equality among citizens, which is the fundamental principle of rule of law and it has the function of protecting individual rights and freedoms within the social system. Nevertheless, in western societies more than in others, the highly complex system contributes to fade away the clear distinction between citizen and non-citizens, and thus the principle of equality needs to have a further development in order to fit this new complexity. Indeed, the very concept of citizenship, as the State is losing many parts of its sovereignty, is losing its meaning as well, and it does not incorporate or involve the intricacy of conditions that nowadays an individual can face.

Thus, liberal democracies are facing difficulties in achieving an effective equality among individuals, since the individual rights are still connected to the concept of citizenship, and there is not perfect overlapping between civil and social rights and human rights. Moreover, the persistence of extreme inequality among individuals between western States also intersects with the profound transformation of the society linked to the consequences of the establishment of neoliberalism as the doctrine by which every aspect of life is understood.

So, as the crisis of liberal democracy is becoming more and more evident, further attention is starting to be given to issues that absorb power from this rupture, and one hot topic is the debate around inequalities. Economists, journalists, and sociologists are questioning the economic and political structure in which the social order is determined, claiming that it is a

profoundly unequal society in which people do not have access to the same opportunities and means of self-determination.

In this text the aim is to link the discourse about inequality with the effects of neoliberalism and the role of institutions. The approach chosen in the discourse about inequality is to treat the problem as a historically determined connotation. This is because, as Anthony Atkinson wrote, it is risky to identify finance and globalization as the causes of increased inequality because it could be translated as that the phenomenon depends on forces beyond the control of society.¹ Wealth disparities do not necessarily harm those in advantageous circumstances, but their political consequences do so. Climate change, the rising of mental illnesses and depression, and the de-democratization of contemporary societies are consequences of the social and economic order that it was established and it is commonly called as neoliberalism, and, of course, their grave consequences are paid by the most disadvantaged groups. The lack of interest for collective needs generates problems for the environment and for the social order, in which inequality is starting to be a primary importance issue.

In particular, it will be showed as neoliberal logic, which permeates all aspects of society and the life of the individual, makes States, as well as people, slaves to the market logic of profit maximization. Neoliberalism has changed the very conception of politics, which has internalized the criterion of utility. This has triggered a process of elimination of the excluded through depersonalization.

The second aspect of neoliberal society that it will be analyzed is the relationship between democracy and meritocracy. If the individuals are seen as entrepreneurs, and social interactions becomes an arena in which every person carefully studies what to give and what to take, so the starting conditions become more relevant than even. Hence, meritocracy generates inevitably inequality. The problem of meritocracy, as it will be seen later, it is its connection to power. A democracy based on the meritocratic principle is therefore based on a selection (exclusion) principle that determines who can and cannot be part of the democratic process. The monopoly of

¹ Atkinson, A. *Inequality. What can be done?* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 2015.

knowledge and representation causes undemocratic effects and triggers movements which react by demanding a more equal distribution of power. Increasingly interdependent and interconnected, western States are less and less willing to produce public goods and cover collective risks, such as environmental ones, while the products of rising wealth reward a tiny minority. The individual's needs that politics takes into account are those expressed by the élite, and the financial crises, started since 2008, have contributed to the consolidation of the belief that a social democratic approach was not sustainable.² This allowed a universal expansion of neoliberalism, which now reigns unchallenged. Social democracy is a broad term to describe the political parties, and the movements which historically represented the working class, and brought their instances, like the reduction of inequalities, into the political debate. Social democracy starts from the belief that the market is not able to regulate itself without generating big problems in terms of fundamental social objectives, like guaranteeing that everyone can enjoy a decent life, regardless their value on the market. However, social democracy is not able to represent anymore the working class, since it is not as defined as it was in the past, because work is changed, and welfare State is seen as a system which takes money from employee just to give it to people who are too lazy to work. Moreover, all these problems become bigger if it is taken into account that globalization produce new waves of migrations and xenophobia is rising in western societies.

Inequality, therefore, becomes a good working package in which democracy could train itself to elaborate a new way of approaching social problems, economic crisis and the issue of representation, which is fundamental for a democratic system. It should be stressed that the social class in which everyone is born deeply determine how that person is recognized and how he/she/they interact with the others. So, in order to truly reduce inequality, and to tackle its democratic deficit, the States should assume the point of view of the most disadvantaged members of their societies. The expression democratic deficit may be used to describe the various ways in which institutions may fail to function properly (e.g., lack of transparency and

² Crouch, C. *Quanto capitalismo può sopportare la società*, Laterza, Roma 2014, p.7.

accountability, technocratic decision making, inadequate participation of citizens in policy making).³ Evaluations of the level of democratic deficit focus on the procedural aspects of democracy, reflected in the mechanisms of representation and decision making. Therefore, the notion of democratic deficit encompasses distortions in the flow of influence from citizens to government, that is it involves the issue of representation, which intersects with the topic of inequality. In fact, one dimension of inequality is precisely this one: there are individuals at the bottom of the social pyramid, that are non-citizens, that do not have access to political arena and that do not have role within the decision-making process.

As will be stressed in the following pages, all of this issues have to be dealt with an holistic approach that assumes the point of view of the dominated classes. This is because of the believe that if the goal is to fight racism, the way should be giving voice to non-white people, like if the goal is to eliminate the gender gap the person who should bring this issue to the political discourse must be not man. In the same way, the movements for the reduction of inequality must not forget the people who lives at the border of society, and make them the real protagonists of the lobbying strategy.

The dissemination about inequality will start from the concept of social justice, and this is to remind that this phenomenon is not out of people's control. It is up to the society to define what is considered right and what is wrong. Since inequality is a very broad concept, it necessarily crosses with the one of social justice, which has the duty to define which inequality are acceptable and which ones need the intervention to reduce them.

Inequality is often conceived as a problem that cannot be solved once for all, and it is common to think that the realities in which humanity currently is (the organization of the community, the economic system, etc.), are immutable and therefore it is futile to try to change them. There is an approach in conceiving of inequality known as *Bossuet's paradox*: people tend to deplore in general what they agree to in particular.⁴ This means that there is a very wide discontinuity in the way inequalities are perceived: despite the fact that

³ Mascia, M, *Unione Europea, cantiere aperto di governance. Teorie, istituzioni, attori*. Bari, Cacucci, 2016, p. 57.

⁴ Zamagni, S. *Disuguali*, Aboca edizioni, Sansepolcro (AR), 2020 p.13.

they are considered to be something socially dangerous or unacceptable, people generally end up accepting them in everyday life.

Inequality in modern societies and in liberal democracies is a multidimension model which involves many other concepts. First of all, before starting a reflection about this topic, it can be useful to define the concept, how to measure it and after that is fundamental to define why there's the need to analyze this topic, and then more detailed explanations of its causes will be furnished.

1.2 An initial characterization of the concept

The notion *social inequality*, which is the main topic of this essay, may be defined as the condition by which people do not receive the same treatment within the same society. Societies with class, racial, and gender hierarchies that unequally allocate access to resources and rights are the cause of social inequality. It can manifest in a variety of ways, like income and wealth inequality, unequal access to education and cultural resources, and differential treatment by the police and judicial system, among others. Social inequality goes hand in hand with social stratification and it involves an a priori definition of which inequalities are considered acceptable and which ones need the intervention of public authority. This is a matter of social justice, and a deeper clarification of the interaction among inequality, social justice and the role of institutions will be given later in this chapter. The first thinker who started to analyze systematically the concept of social justice and its connection with inequality was Plato. In his reflection, a relational dimension of justice emerges, as it is a virtue that at the individual level requires the cooperation of all parts of the soul, and at the political level the cooperation of all social classes. In addition, it also has a strongly hierarchical dimension and arises from a condition of inequality. This hierarchy and inequality are impossible to erase because it is its foundation. This means that inequality is ascribable a priori and society is rightly hierarchical and organized into classes.⁵ Later, Aristoteles will introduce the concept of equity (*epiēikeia*) and the two dimension of justice, one distributive and one corrective. Distributive justice does not have the role of eliminating every

⁵ Giovanola, B. *Giustizia Sociale*, Il mulino, Bologna, 2018, p.15.

form of inequality, but it does have the role of assuming them as a starting point. In ancient times, inequality was considered as a matter of fact, nobody considered that wrong. Things changed when Christianity introduced the concept of sin, and inequality is not aligned with God's message, since every man is equal in front of him.

The justification of inequality has a long history, which can be traced back as far as classical philosophy. An influential author on this topic was Grotius. According to him, human beings renounced the equality and independence of the state of nature in order to achieve living conditions less prone to scarcity and insecurity and social relations suitable to make room for the higher human faculties. Thomas Hobbes, like Grotius, also starts from the natural law and the state of nature, but with a different view of human nature. So, according to Hobbes, men are not at all sociable by nature, but rather conflictual, animated by passions such as pride, envy, the will to harm, and emulation, all of which generate a restless effort that drives into a continual struggle to assert their supremacy over others. Under these conditions, the common right over all things means the war of all against all for their appropriation and the consequent frustration of that right. So, in Hobbes, equality is a condition of conflict, which the political mediator through the control and management of private property succeeds in quieting. So, the renunciation of equality is necessary and takes the form of absolutism on the political level.⁶ Although in the same vein, Locke adds that great inequalities, however, arise with the monetary economy:

«it is clear that men have allowed for disproportionate and unequal possession of land in that they have invented, by tacit and voluntary consent, a way by which a man can equitably possess more land than he himself can enjoy its products, receiving in exchange for the surplus gold and silver, which can be accumulated without injustice to anyone, since these metals do not perish or deteriorate in the hands of the possessor».⁷

So, from the 16th century onward, the idea of an essentially positive function of economic inequality begins to be consolidated. Inequality in the qualities

⁶ Barbini, G. *L'origine della disuguaglianza*, edizioni Polistampa, Firenze, 2016, p. 23.

⁷ Locke, J. *Two Treatises of Government*, II, c. 5.50, p.320.

and condition of individuals appears as a limitation, a partiality that makes everyone in need of others, benefiting social cohesion rather than a source of conflict.

With capitalism, an even new way of understanding inequality is born, at the end of the XVII century. Calvinist theory considered wealth and richness as proof of divine grace, and with the establishment of the *Keynesian compromise*: inequality is a natural consequence of the capitalist society, it is up to democracy to reduce them. So, in contemporary studies, the concept of a priori inequality has been substituted by the recognition of a priori moral equality, and from this the development of a discourse about how to deal with the a posteriori inequality.⁸

History, as it is taught today in Western societies, conceives inequality as something inescapable, which has always been present and is therefore immutable. In reality, inequality is not innate in human nature and is a relatively recent phenomenon in human history because it began to form with the advent of agriculture.⁹ So, for more than 90% of his existence on earth, humans have lived in egalitarian societies. Moreover, classism as it is understood today is even more recent, because it first developed in the societies of the Tigris and Euphrates some 5500 years ago.¹⁰ So, inequality arises and increases when resources are plentiful, not when they are scarce. It is abundance, surplus, that makes societies increasingly unequal. Data show that substantial equality exists in hunter-gatherer societies, while substantial inequality has been studied in societies based on agriculture. Since then, inequality has become part of human history, and today the wealth possessed by 1% of the world's population has exceeded that of the remaining 99%. In Italy, the richest 1% of the population holds 23.4% of the national wealth¹¹, and data on high inequality go hand in hand with data about low social mobility.

On a political dimension, social inequality is translated to the concept of social exclusion and the related concept of social inclusion. Social inclusion

⁸ Giovanola, B. *Giustizia Sociale*, Il mulino, Bologna, 2018, p.15.

⁹ Wilkinson, R. Pickett, K. *L'equilibrio dell'anima, Perché l'uguaglianza ci farebbe vivere meglio*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2019, p.35.

¹⁰ Ivi, p.143

¹¹ Volpato, C. *Le radici psicologiche della disuguaglianza*, Roma, Laterza, p.134.

is the policy idea which emerged from the debate around inequality, and the broad meaning of it is well conveyed by the World Bank:

«Social inclusion aims to empower poor and marginalized people to take advantage of burgeoning global opportunities. It ensures that people have a voice in decisions which affect their lives and that they enjoy equal access to markets, services and political, social and physical spaces. »¹²

So, as highlighted in this definition, social inequality does not run out in the economic dimension, because its consequences are political, social and psychological.

Before continuing by analyzing how to measure inequalities and by mapping the historical, social and economic factors which are causing nowadays inequality in western society, it can be useful to point the attention of some specific forms of inequalities. The first one is the Inequality inheritance rate. Indeed, one of the main problem when dealing with inequality is the fact that it is an extremely stable condition, because there are very fast and well-established way to maintain the privileges, and the practices of transmitting welfare are powerful and considered valid. In Italy, for example, a child with poor parents, has 50% of probability to remain in the same condition.¹³ Another fact related to inequality is that concerning new slavery. Prostitution, forced labor, trafficking, systematic exploitation of labor, these phenomena have factors in common with past forms of slavery that have existed in history: submission to an extreme form of social domination, alienation, degradation and dishonor. however, the difference with the past is that there is no form of hope toward a possible redemption, because these human beings are made human scraps by the predatory logics that push the victims out of the boundaries of society making them invisible. In this regard, there is a grave contradiction if the system from one side glorify life and put the right of life at the pick of the individual freedoms, but on the other side it accepts that some lives are useless.

¹² Béland, D. Cox, R.H. *Ideas as coalition magnets: coalition building, policy entrepreneurs, and power relations*, in «Journal of European Public Policy», 23:3, 428.445
doi: 10.1080/13501763.2015.1115533

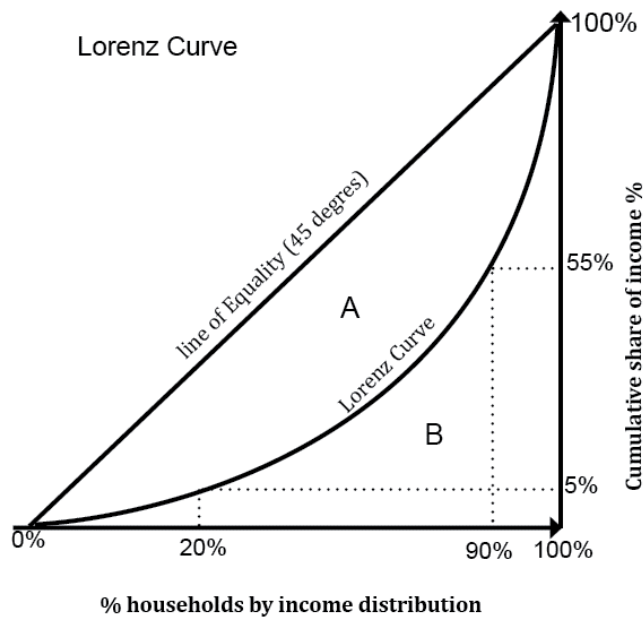
¹³ Zamagni, S. *Disuguagli*, Aboca edizioni, Sansepolcro (AR), 2020 p.42.

1.3 How to measure inequalities

Measuring inequalities is a difficult task because inequality comes in many forms and dimensions. However, often it is useful and easier to focus only on the aspect of inequalities that concerns income, because it is relatable and measurable. It should be noted, however, that this simplistic understanding of inequalities is one of the main reasons why the problem is not perceived in its totality, but only as a matter of economic problems, and, by consequence, the solutions adopted are not efficient.

So, there are several indicators that can measure the distribution of income, but the best-known tool of analyzing income distribution is the Lorenz curve. The curve is a graphical representation of income inequality in a Cartesian axis plane in which the share of the population that receives income is placed on the horizontal axe and the share of income earned on the vertical one. In a desirable condition of perfect equality, 20% of the population receives 20% of the income, 40% of the population receives 40% of the income and so on. Thus, the condition of perfect equilibrium would graphically translate into a bisector that cuts the plane in two.

Figure 1. Lorenz Curve



The more the income distribution forms a curve away from the bisector, the more there is an unequal distribution of income. The Lorenz curve lies beneath it, showing the observed or estimated distribution. If contributions

from all individuals are strictly equal, the Lorenz curve will become a straight line named the line of equality, as is shown in Figure 1.¹⁴ The Gini coefficient can then be calculated by dividing area A by area B. So, the area between the straight line and the curved line, expressed as a ratio of the area under the straight line, is the Gini coefficient, a scalar measurement of inequality. The Gini coefficient is the most used index to estimate inequalities in the distribution of income. The Gini index goes from 0 to 1, if it is 0 there is a perfectly equal distribution, if it is 1 the inequality is maximum. The dispersion index is another measure of inequality and is calculated through the ratio between the richest 10% of the population and the poorest 10%. It does not provide any clear information but is effective for estimating the concentration of income at the extremes of the distribution.¹⁵

However, often the approach used to measure poverty is based on rigid and absolute guidelines, that do not consider neither the differences among countries, nor changes over time. This approach, used for example by the International Monetary Fund, failed to ensure economic growth, which is exactly the goal of the body.¹⁶ Poverty should be measured as the capability of everyone to do the things they consider valuable. Thus, being equal does not mean being the same, but it means that everyone can decide how much and for how long they could differ from the others. The welfare cannot be the only measurement used to approach this thematic. In this direction goes also the work done by the United Nation Development Program and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), which suggested the global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). It conceptualizes poverty not only in terms of who is poor and where, but also considering how someone can be considered poor. In its report, the UNDP stated:

«The way people experience poverty goes beyond living on less than \$1.90 a day. Poverty is not only about lacking the means to make ends meet or pay

¹⁴ Boccella, N., Feliziani, V. e Rinaldi, A. *Economia e sviluppo diseguale*. Milano, Pearson, 2013, pp45-63.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Abbott, P, Barnebeck A., T, Tarp, F. *IMF and economic reform in developing countries*, The Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance 50, 17–26 2010.

the bills for basic services on time. Poverty is multidimensional and encompasses much more than income»¹⁷.

It identifies how people are being left behind across three key dimensions: health, education and living standards, comprising 10 indicators such as lacking access to clean water, adequate nutrition or primary education. The multidimensionality of poverty has been acknowledged also by many countries, which agreed on the Sustainable Development Goals, which present a roadmap to end poverty in all its dimensions, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. So, policy makers are asked to establish new tools to achieve a new kind of growth, based not only on the material dimension, but which also involves the spiritual and social dimension of growth.

1.4 Inequality and the role of institutions

For its nature, the concept of inequality inevitably intersects with the structure of the society, more precisely with how institutions deal with it. Institutions influence deeply how the society is organized and they contribute to develop the concept of social justice, which regards exactly how and why the public authority should intervene to reduce inequalities. These questions are very delicate and need further explanations. As regarding why institutions have to reduce inequality, a lot of theories of justice contributed to the debate, and highlighted the distributive dimension of justice. To say it with Rawls' words, who is considered to be the initiator of this debate¹⁸, social justice and the role of institutions can be described as follow:

“The fundamental structure is the main object of justice because its effects are very deep and evident from the very beginning. The intuitive idea is that this structure includes different social positions and that men born in different positions have different life expectations, partially determined by both the political system and economic and social circumstances. In this way, institutions favor certain starting situations over others. These inequalities are particularly profound. They are not only very widespread, but also affect the

¹⁷ Multidimensional poverty report, published by the UNDP, 2021
<https://feature.undp.org/multidimensional-poverty/>

¹⁸ Giovanola, B. *Giustizia Sociale*, Il mulino, Bologna, 2018, p. 18.

initial opportunities men have in life, so they cannot be justified by a hypothetical appeal to notions of merit or moral worth.”¹⁹

In this quote, the author answered the question about why the institutions should intervene to reduce inequality, and it underlined an important feature which characterizes the phenomenon: inequality often does not depend on the individuals, but it is a consequence of the social and economic environment in which the individual is born, and therefore is responsibility of the State to ensure that this different starting position does not become different access to opportunities, to freedoms and to life expectation. If it is impossible to eliminate every form of inequality, also because it would affect freedom of people to self-determination and it would be unfair, it is fundamental to develop an idea of justice which eliminates every consequence which derives from casualty (like the conditions in which someone is born).

So, it is important to note that the discussion about inequality does not have as goal the complete redistribution of wealth, because the objective is not to eliminate the rewards that an individual may gain from its talents and its worth; however, on the other side is fundamental to remember that the randomly assigned social and economic conditions in which every human is born deeply affect how that individual will grow and how they will develop in terms of culture, possibilities, political power and life capacity. Indeed, it has been studied that poor life conditions affect also the ambitions a person has.

Therefore, an analysis about social inequality necessary starts from a definition of social justice. Dealing with inequality starts by defining which inequalities are considered acceptable and which ones are not just. As highlighted before, economic inequalities which derive from talents, merit and commitment are considered to be part of the right of individuals of self-determination and the right to be rewarded for their work. However, there is a causal link between being rich and having more decisional power. It is not true that all people living in a state are able to participate equally in decision-making. There are certain categories of people, who are stigmatized and suffer from structural inequality, which does not depend on their subjectivity.

¹⁹ Rawls, J. *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 1971, p.24.

Those who live on the margins of society, those who do sex work, illegal immigrants, are just some of the social classes that are penalized the most within the society that is in fact unequal. Questioning about social justice is also about questioning how the public authority should deal with them, how to address the issue, keeping in mind that every social classes which demand for more equal treatment for itself, is at the same time oppressing another one. So, it would be impossible to effectively generate an insurrectional movement which would be truly universal.²⁰

So, one problem that causes inequalities is the difficult relation between democracy, universalistic principles, conflicts and meritocracy. The focus on meritocracy will be on its connection to power. If it is not possible, and it would be unfair, that everyone will have the same income, it is also unfair that the capability to influence policy making depends on the income. This distortion can be seen at every level of democracy: in the public arena, in the international debate, and also within the international organizations like the EU and the IMF. Regarding this matter, it should be noted that, in the EU framework, the economic interest groups played (and still playing) a crucial role since the establishment of the European Economic Community in the 1950s, and this background contributed to the development of new and more efficient lobbying strategies, while other organizations (like NGOs, civil society organizations...) started to be represented and involved in the decision-making process only after 1984.²¹ Moreover, the causal link between economy and democracy influences also the work of the IMF. Indeed, by analyzing the IMF programs, they outlined how loans are more likely to be approved and more likely to be larger when the receiving countries are more influential at the IMF. Of course, being more influential can be translated in *paying more quotas*.²²

This is the reason why is more correct to talk about structural inequality. Some groups are systematically disadvantaged due to economic and legal institutions which are not neutral. Moreover, the last two examples show as

²⁰ Balibar, E. *Cittadinanza*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2012 p.63.

²¹ Mascia, M, *Unione Europea, cantiere aperto di governance. Teorie, istituzioni, attori*. Bari, Cacucci, 2016 pp75-90.

²² Barro R. J. and Lee J.-W. *IMF programs: Who is chosen and what are the effects?*. Journal of Monetary Economics, 52(7), 1245-1269, 2005.

the transnational actors are gaining more influence within the national States, and this is an important development for the issue of social inclusion. In fact, especially in Europe, the State is not able anymore to control every communication means of its citizens, and also its economic and military sovereignty are discussed. So, it has been hypothesized that the vital cycle of the modern State is coming to an end, and this will require a new way to intend the concepts of social justice, inequality and social inclusion/exclusion. Especially in Europe, an attempt to separate the concept of national citizenship with the one of social inclusion has been made, and the effort towards a more equal treatment of individuals is going to the direction of conceiving individuals not as citizens. Indeed, due to the transnational processes and the globalization of the free market and the communication, the policy idea of social inclusion does not coincide perfectly with the one of citizenship, as it was in the past. The notion itself of citizenship and everything which derives from it is discussed, and this topic fits and complete the debate on inequality, because both arise from the need to reform the way the State give rights and duties to the people who lives in its territory.

1.5 Surpassing the institutionalism of the discourse about inequality

In the previous paragraph has been showed the fundamental role given to public authorities in the issue about social inequality. They are considered to be the driven actors of inequalities; however, it will be showed that focusing on social behaviors and giving an anthropological dimension to the discussion will help to deeply understand the matrices of inequality in neoliberal societies. In fact, in order to comprehend and discuss about inequality in today's society, it is necessary to search in the past history what made the society to arrive to this point. Therefore, it is necessary to start dealing with the economic factors which cause inequality, by analyzing how neoliberalism arose and how it is surviving to the crisis of liberal democracy which it originated itself. Moreover, a look will be given to the financial aspect of capitalism, which is the main cause of inequality. Then, regarding the institutional aspect, an excursus is needed on the history of Nation State. In

particular, the analysis of liberal democracy and from which it derives, will help to interpretate its crisis and its role in the phenomenon.

Often Neoliberalism is equated with a radically free market doctrine, with features like maximized competition and free trade achieved through economic deregulation, elimination of tariffs, and a range of monetary and social policies favorable to business and indifferent toward poverty, social deracination, cultural decimation, long-term resource depletion, and environmental destruction. However, these connotations, while capturing the most important effects of the phenomenon, they also reduce it to a package of economic policies, failing to address the political rationality that organizes these policies and reaches beyond the market. As outlined by Wendy Brown, neoliberalism has been analyzed only by its economic feature, as the mere rehabilitation of the *laissez-faire* doctrine, as:

«An instrument of a state's economic policy, with, on the one hand, the dismantling of social aid, tax progressivity, and other wealth-distributive instruments; and, on the other hand, the stimulation of free and uncontrolled use of capital through the deregulation of the health care system, labor, and environmental policies».²³

However, neoliberalism cannot be reduced to the faith in the free market, and this is demonstrated by the fact that even when the *laissez-faire* doctrine is accused and discredited, neoliberalism does not stop prevailing as a normative system. It is not just an economic ideology, is the way of the world, as described by Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval. It is the form of our existence, a rationality which defines how people should interact with themselves and with each-others, in a never-ending competition which involves every form of living. Western societies organize every form of social relationship according to the market logic, and this generate a deep polarization between rich and poor clusters of the society. Therefore, this rationality outlines the way governments act, but also the way who is governed behave. «The neoliberalism, since it inspires concrete policies, it denied to be an ideology, it is the reason itself».²⁴ The big novelty is that today

²³ Brown, W. *Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy*, in «Theory and event», vol.VII, n.1, 2003 p.45.

²⁴ Dardot, P, Laval C. *The new way of the world: on neoliberal society*, Verso books, 2013 p.288.

is not necessary anymore to maintain the link between capitalism and democracy, since western society is not anymore, a model to refer. New finance capitalism is able to adapt to a big variety of religious, ethnics and cultures. Finance is autoreferential, speculative activities in the financial market deprive the relationship between the value of goods and the way it is represented in various financial instruments of stability. This has allowed an expansion of greed and irresponsibility. This had not happened under liberalism, which confined capitalism to the state and therefore maintained democratic values.

Another point which is worth to mention, is the idea that inequality is a product of the social structure, and this causal link is not questioned. In other words, inequality exists because institutions exists and the association between these two concepts is inevitable and necessary. During the course of history, mankind has known many forms of inequality, and many forms of social structures, however is important to remember that neither institutions nor inequality are natural concepts. Everything is determined historically.²⁵

Therefore, it appears evident that any useful approach to social inequality must start from the study of the two main processes which led to the nowadays society: the birth of neoliberalism and the crisis of liberalism and the heritage of modern state and the subsequent crisis of liberal democracy. These two processes are interconnected; however, analyzing them one by one is useful to highlight the weaknesses and the strengths of the phenomena which allowed the deepen of inequality and the refusal to accept them anymore. Starting with the analysis of the passage between liberalism and neoliberalism will help to better understand the contingences which lead to the crisis of liberal democracies. So, the following paragraphs will be dedicated to this.

1.6 Liberalism's decline and Neoliberalism's ascent

The crisis of liberalism was very long, because it began in the last decades of the nineteenth century and continued until the 1930s. In those years the masses were starting to enter in the political arena, and the demand for social reforms was high. Therefore, the transformation of society was challenging

²⁵ E. Balibar, *Cittadinanza*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2012 p.12.

the liberalism and its dogmas, like natural law, freedom of trade, private property and natural market balance. The critics of liberalist dogmas, combined with the rise of socialism, create a fertile ground for the birth of neoliberalism.

The crisis is thus an ideological crisis, because liberalism freed society from the burden of the gods, making it historical, but at the same time chained it to another kind of yoke: a fatal course in which full individual autonomy becomes collective powerlessness.²⁶

On the contrary, socialism was able to grasp this nuance in the changing society, and exposes the falsity of liberal equality, which was only fictitious. It was successful compared to liberalism because it returned decision-making power to society, and it embodies the optimistic desire to construct the future.²⁷

Thus, new realities demanded a change in the way politics and economics were conceived, and the role of the state could no longer be marginal, and there was the practical problem of the need to legitimize and justify state intervention in economic and social matters. In particular, classical liberalism failed to grasp the implications behind the new way of doing business. The emergence of large cartel groups gave rise to oligarchical practices that actually prevented fair competition. Thus, the wage condition and the need for social reform were incompatible with the dogmas of liberalism, and the *visible hand* of managers and financiers, with the distrust on politicians, had undermined the belief in the *invisible hand* of the market.

Hence, there is a link between the crisis of liberalism and social inequality. As the masses started to enter in the political debate, it became mandatory for the State to find a justification to intervene, since the pressure for a better redistribution was as high as the fear of the communist revolution.

Neoliberalism arose from this tension, when governments were trying to find a third way between the pure liberalism, which was considered to be too old for the new society, and socialism, which was too risky. Neoliberalism is a concept that defines the tendency of governments to impose within the

²⁶ Dardot, P, Laval C. *The new way of the world: on neoliberal society*, Verso books, 2013, p. 27.

²⁷ Ivi, p.28.

economy, but also within society and the state itself, the logic of capital, to the point of making it the form of subjectivity and the norm of existence.

The neo word, which separates this new rationality from the classic concept of liberalism, is the evolution of liberal dogmas into a new and completely different notion. The words neo in neoliberalism establishes liberal principles on a significantly different analytic basis: it carries a social analysis that, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire. Neoliberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, it involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player. Neoliberalism does not simply assume that all aspects of social, cultural, and political life can be reduced to such a calculus; rather, it develops institutional practices and rewards for enacting this vision. That is, through discourse and policy promulgating its criteria, neoliberalism produces rational actors and imposes a market rationale for decision making in all spheres. Importantly, then, neoliberalism involves a normative rather than ontological claim about the pervasiveness of economic rationality and it advocates the institution building, policies, and discourse development appropriate to such a claim.²⁸

Therefore, in contrast to classical liberalism, neoliberalism is an active form of government. It does not conceive the market itself or rational economic behavior as purely natural. Both are constructed and organized by law and political institutions, and this requires political involvement and orchestration. The economy needs to be managed because it won't flourish if left undirected., it needs the protection of the State, by law and policy as well as by the dissemination of social norms designed to facilitate competition, free trade, and rational economic action on the part of every member and institution of society. The effects on redistribution and the growth of social inequality have proved to be so persistent in the context of neoliberalism processes that they can be considered structural elements of these processes. It is therefore possible to interpret neoliberalism as a utopian project aimed at a reorganization of international capitalism, or as a political project to re-

²⁸ Brown, W. *Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy*, Theory & Event, 7, 2003, p.38.

establish the necessary conditions for the accumulation of capital and restore the power of the economic elites. Neoliberalism has not been very effective in bringing about a resumption of capital accumulation globally, but it has succeeded to a considerable extent in restoring - or in some cases, as in Russia and China, creating - the power of an economic elite.²⁹

Neoliberalism therefore has been able to transform the need for public authority to intervene by making it a tool that consolidates the neoliberal set-up and prevents its change. For this reason, it is capable of governing even and especially through crisis, and this is possible because it has become a system. In fact, it has been called a *global system of power*³⁰, because even when crises arise out of the political and social hostilities it arouses, they are managed with instruments compatible with the neoliberalist system. This was demonstrated during the 2008's economic crisis, which was welcomed as the end of neoliberalism, but in reality, it just let the world discover the pluralistic and chameleonic dimension of neoliberalism. In the same way, neoliberalism survives even the crisis of liberal democracy because it no longer needs the democratic and liberal structures, in fact there are several demonstrations in today's political history of how it has been able to adapt even to illiberal democratic systems. So, it appears clear how the neoliberal approach is a major cause of the growing of inequality. The extension of economic rationality to every aspect of life translates into a highly competitive way of understanding social interactions. Moreover, in this way the measure to evaluate individuals becomes their income, since the maximization of profits is the ultimate value of any entrepreneur.

The neoliberal formulation of the State (intended as a specific legal arrangements and decisions as the precondition and ongoing condition of the market) does not mean that the market is controlled by the state but precisely the reverse. The market is the organizing and regulatory principle of the State and society. The State responds to the need of the market, and neoliberalism ties State legitimacy to its success to sustain and foster the market. So, the State must not simply concern itself with the market, but think and behave

²⁹ Harvey, D. *Breve storia del neoliberalismo*, Il Saggiatore, Milano, 2007, p.89.

³⁰ Dardot, P, Laval C. *The new way of the world: on neoliberal society*, Verso books, 2013, p.45.

like a market actor, across all of its functions, including law.

In this analysis, it is important to underline the consequences of this on the individuals, which are the ultimate object of this analysis, since they are the ones affected by the issue of inequality. It is important because inequalities have an important subjective dimension which developed from the neoliberalism dogmas. Neoliberalism normatively constructs see individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life. It figures individuals as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions. In making the individual fully responsible for himself, neoliberalism erases the discrepancy between economic and moral behavior by configuring morality entirely as a matter of rational negotiation about costs, benefits, and consequences.

So, from the crisis of governance arose this new mode of governmentality (techniques of governing that exceed express state action and orchestrate the subject's conduct toward him or herself) Neoliberal subjects are controlled through their freedom. Neoliberalism shifts "the regulatory competence of the state onto individuals with the aim of encouraging individuals to give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form. So, it appears clear how the neoliberal approach is a major cause of the growing of inequality. The extension of economic logic to every aspect of life translates into a highly competitive way of understanding social interactions. Moreover, in this way the measure to evaluate individuals becomes their income, since the maximization of profits is the ultimate value of any entrepreneur. By evaluating the worth of individuals according to their capability to produce wealth, the system demonstrates to have a complete lack of acknowledgment of any other dimension of the human being, and it does not consider the different starting conditions. Or, it considers it only when a person who starts from a disadvantaged position is able to prosper, and in doing that it creates a paradigm according to which, since few people actually reached the goal, this means that the people who did not obtain success have to blame no one else than themselves.

1.7 The crisis of liberal democracy

Neoliberal rationality has not caused but rather has facilitated the dismantling of democracy during the current national security crisis. Neoliberalism redefined democracy as a product of society, to be exported. In this sense, and after the end of the Cold War and the establishment and solidification of capitalism as the only system possible, a new process of exporting democracy started. However, it has now reached the point where liberal democracy has been emptied of its content. While the market does not need democracy to expand, democracy needs the market to fully realize itself. In today's society, the market no longer needs a national land base, and the need for security dominates the need for freedom.

Compared with the forms of organization used in the past, the Modern State is based on a formal constitution, which enshrines the equality of citizens. Equality is a value that is the result of a conquest, in that the privileged class never surrenders its advantages gladly. So, the principle behind citizenship is revolutionary in nature, and is in fact based on the absence of consent. Rights, in fact, are imposed and invented and won at the expense of the privileged class. A focus on the conquest of social rights and the consequent creation of the Social State which occurred in the XX century is important because, when the rise of capitalism deepened the inequalities, the issue was at the center of the debate.³¹ Social rights were not established as a protection mechanism against poverty, but as a universal solidarity tool used by politics. Consequently, welfare State was meant to be for every citizen, but it is worth to notice that social rights mostly regard work conditions, therefore they were conditioned to the belonging to the working class. It is not a matter of being rich or poor, but working gives the individuals a sort of social recognition, and a recognized status within the society. Political programs which aimed at reducing inequality associated social protection to the prevention to life's safety. With the end of the Cold War and the rise of neoliberalism and financial globalization, social fear changes shape. It is no longer the capitalists who are afraid of revolution, but it is the workers who are afraid of being out of work. Thus, the power relations that were the basis of the welfare state fail, as well as the universalist mission of social rights.

³¹ E. Balibar, *Cittadinanza*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2012 p. 64.

It is therefore possible to observe a first contradiction: modern democracy is founded on universalistic principles of equality but justifies and legitimizes forms of inequality. It is the society itself which generate social exclusion, through rules, procedures and with the (sometimes indirect) consensus of its members. Along the same lines, the human rights doctrine is a justification for fighting discrimination but also a cause of the reproductions of such discrimination. This occurs because there is tension between what are recognized as universal human rights, and citizen rights, which apply those rights by filtering them through policy according to the local context. The constitutive elements of liberal democracy, like informed and active citizenship, the separation of powers, free elections, civil rights equally distributed, fundamental freedoms, none of these features was fully implemented, they have been compromised by a variety of economic and social powers, from white supremacy to capitalism. Moreover, in order to have what they have, liberal democracies have always required other people to pay, politically, economically and socially. So, this demonstrates that there is a gap between what has been valued in the core and what has been required from the periphery.

One of the characteristics of inequality is social exclusion. Exclusion generates conflict, because those in this condition tend to violently express their dissent. However, if exclusion is radical and also affects the political sphere, conflict is annihilated. In this way, inequality renders one powerless because the system ensures that conflict always remains in the corporate form without reaching the political form. This process of manipulating violence is triggered by neoliberal logics that implement a depersonalization of the excluded.

So, today there is difficulty in keeping open the dialectic between institution and conflict, which is the very nature of democracy. Defending liberal democracy through the tools provided by the neoliberal structure would never lead to a radical change of perspectives.

1.8 Summarizing and elaborating what has been said

Inequality is bad for business, bad for economy and bad for democracy. Indeed, it is a political choice, not an economic necessity. “Inequality is the root of social ills” said Pope Francis on the 24th November 2013.³² The use of the term ill evokes the dangerous consequences that this phenomenon could provoke. Of course, differences among individuals both in terms of income and cultural backgrounds are legitimate and it would be silly to eliminate them, but the presence of extreme inequality within the society is something that affects negatively almost everyone, and it causes dangerous costs for democracy. So, after decades of policies that favored the economic before the political, something has broken in the relationship among capitalism, welfare and representativeness. The close connection between political power and the monopoly of the market power generates a gap between democracy and wealth. This is important in a discourse about inequality because it means that the economic elite enjoy a special access to market because politics create the rule of the game according to their wishes.³³ Concretely, this means that economic inequality produces political inequality, which deteriorates democracy.

This is one of the reasons why this crisis is unlike previous ones, the second one is its breadth. Every aspect of life in western society is in crisis: social relationships among human beings, individuals are losing their personality, there is a general depression, a general loss of faith, disillusion about work and life conditions.³⁴

Very interesting is the example Dardot and Laval made about how the neoliberal man is stuck in this urgency to compete and perform in every aspect of life, also the most intimate ones, like for example sexuality:

«Sexual practices become exercises in which everyone is encouraged to compare themselves with the socially requisite norm of performance. Number and duration of relationships, quality and intensity of orgasms, variety and attributes of partners, number and types of position, stimulation and maintenance of the libido at all ages – these become the subject of detailed

³² Via Twitter.

³³ Zamagni, S. *Disuguali*, cit., p.61.

³⁴ Dardot, P, Laval C. *The new way of the world: on neoliberal society*, cit., p.312.

inquiries and precise recommendations. [...] More so, perhaps, than economic discourse on competitiveness, this model has made it possible to 'naturalize' the duty of performance, which has diffused to the masses a normativity centered on generalized competition. »³⁵

This example shows how the logic of the market is invading also the personal sphere of every single person, and the State is not able to mediate and control this pressure that people have. Surrendering to the logic of the market, seeing persons like enterprises translate into a new understanding of inequality, which leaves no room for empathy and State intervention, and the paradigm of social justice is debated.

At this point, it is necessary to ask how it was possible for the State to lose such power, and how the citizen leaves the place to the entrepreneur man. The conception of citizenship, as intended since the XVIII century, is now put in discussion, and this is at the center of the discussion about inequality: access to certain goods and services is no longer tied to a status that entails rights, but is the result of a transaction between a performance and behavior that conforms to expectations. So, if democracy is based on popular sovereignty, neoliberalism is antidemocratic. So, a new phase for western countries is coming, in which the erosion of the concept of citizenship and the social exclusion of many parts of population generate not a new political regime, but rather a new logic in which whatever political regime is the same. This is the dangerous shape that western society are taking, and inequality is one of the clearest dimensions in which this form can be seen.

³⁵ *Ibidem.*

Inequality and its consequences

Chapter two

2.1 An issue affecting (almost) everyone

As stressed in the first chapter, and as will explained in the following pages, extreme inequality is bad for business, bad for economy and bad for democracy. Indeed, it is a political choice, not an economic necessity, because it stems from unregulated financial policies and the excessive expansion of neoliberal rationality. In an interview with the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*, the Pope stated:

«There was the promise that once the glass had become full it would overflow and the poor would benefit. But what happens is that when it's full to the brim, the glass magically grows, and thus nothing ever comes out for the poor.»³⁶

This quote only emphasizes the rising importance that the public opinion is giving to this issue, because while the richest part of the population is becoming richer and richer, the poorest is suffering and, more importantly for the policy makers, also the middle class is experiencing lower living standards. Indeed, extreme inequality is not a problem that affects only the most disadvantaged classes in society; rather, it is a structural problem of society itself. This means that its consequences have wider influences in the whole (or almost all) population within the society. In fact, it has been shown that inequality causes and exacerbates so many social problems and, moreover, more unequal societies are also less healthy: lower life expectancy, higher child mortality rate, more violence and drug use, higher percentage of the population in prison and so on. These issues are massively exacerbated by inequality, and a belief in meritocracy means that any failure is deemed a personal failure. This chapter will attempt to show how inequality affects the vast majority of the population, not just the poorest minority. The purpose of this approach is to reflect on why poverty is considered as a social problem

³⁶ Davies, L. *Pope says he is not a Marxist, but defends criticism of capitalism*, *The Guardian*, 15 December 2013.

but the same does not happen with the excessive wealth of some, which also has a strong impact on the vast majority of people.

The following pages will explore some of the most significant consequences of living in an increasingly unequal society. In particular, it will be seen how inequality and neoliberalism affect every aspect of life, and not only for the minority living below the absolute poverty line, but for the vast majority of people. As mentioned before, neoliberalism is not just an economic doctrine, but it is a way of understanding and conceiving society, is a code which defines our society, and therefore its rules have deep connection to the determination of social behaviors.

In this paper, it has been chosen to approach the study of the consequences of inequality by going after them in significant macro areas. First, an attempt will be made to understand the relationship between inequality and what it entails at the psychological level. In particular, it will show how, contrary to what one might think, living in an unequal society, in which meritocracy and individualism permeate every aspect of life, has negative effects on (almost) everyone, because it increases the level of stress and depression, and because it generates a generalized sense of powerlessness. This is due to the fact that neoliberal rationality and individualist doctrine locate almost complete responsibility for choices and poor living conditions in the individual, and this therefore produces a sense of guilt. If wanting is power, this means that if I do not have an affluent and respected social status, the fault is mine.

«The reality is that inequality causes real suffering, regardless of how we choose to label such distress. Greater inequality heightens social threat and status anxiety, evoking feelings of shame which feed into our instincts for withdrawal, submission and subordination: when the social pyramid gets higher and steeper and status insecurity increases, there are widespread psychological costs.» Argued K. Pickett and R. Wilkinson in their book *The Spirit Level*.³⁷ The authors point out that the life-diminishing results of valuing growth above equality in rich societies can be seen all around us. Inequality causes shorter, unhealthier and unhappier lives; it increases the rate of teenage

³⁷ Wilkinson, R. Pickett, K. *L'equilibrio dell'anima, Perché l'uguaglianza ci farebbe vivere meglio*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2019, p.48.

pregnancy, violence, obesity, imprisonment and addiction; it destroys relationships between individuals born in the same society but into different classes; and its function as a driver of consumption depletes the planet's resources.

The second aspect to analyze is the relationship between unequal society and violence. This is very interesting because, as it will be shown later in the chapter, it is a very ambiguous connection: from one side, the rise of inequality produces a rise of violence, but from the other side it also provokes a complete annihilation of conflict in the public debate. In other words, the violence within the society does not generate enough pressure to capture the attention of policy makers. As it will be seen, the reasons are mainly two: from one hand this is due to the fact that violence generally increases among the poorest, but the elite is not affected by this; on the other side, it is linked to the phenomenon of de-personalization of those at the bottom of the society.

The third relation which is important to explore deals with the concept of culture. Indeed, culture is a term that refers to a large and diverse set of mostly intangible aspects of social life, and it influences how a person behaves, their way of thinking and understanding the complexity of reality around them. Culture is defined by the education someone receives, their religious beliefs, the opportunities the person has to enter in contact with literature, films and every form of art. Therefore, it has been proved that the person who is born in a poor family has less possibility to receive a cultural background, and this gap, made during the initial years of their life, will influence the social behavior forever. Having a bigger cultural background is often associated with having a bigger value as a person. Therefore, someone who did not receive any cultural education since childhood will feel less entitled to be part in public decision processes, because they will feel this difference in terms of culture. So, in unequal societies culture is a form of dominance.

Last but not least, in the last paragraph of this chapter, it will be analyzed how all of the previously mentioned concepts and their relation with inequality influence the political dimension of society. Liberal democracy, today, is facing a huge crisis and there is a causal link between this, the problem of low representation, the rise of illiberal instances, and inequality. It will be shown

as inequality increases the democratic deficit, because the issues of the poor people are not translated into policy ideas and the left parties are not interested anymore in covering these topics, since this not anymore is automatic translated into a stable electoral consensus, due to the fragmentation of groups and the lack of social class identity.

2.3 Psychological consequences of inequality

The first dimension in which inequality is causing massive issues is definitely the psychological one, but in order to understand this it is necessary to do a step behind, and to illustrate once again how this is related to the currently ideology in power: neoliberalism. Indeed, psychologists and sociologists agree that in the last century something in the human narrative changed, and this is due both to the capitalism and to the scientific discourse.³⁸ These two phenomena contributed enormously to the secularization of society, which refers to the process by which the religious dogmas does not matter anymore within the political arena. Progressively, the average citizen was living on three different levels: the political one, in which mass parties were rising, the one at home, where religion and beliefs were still strong, and the working one, where the production and the value of money were unquestionable. These three spheres were separated at the beginning, but the interdependence and the balance of power among them changed, and this progressively changed also the way people interacts among each other's. With the establishment of capitalism and the confirmation of liberal democracy, the human being was split into two entities: the human being with inalienable human rights, and the economic man, who acts according a cost and benefit strategy. The arrival of modernity has caused an imbalance and favored the second dimension, and this dichotomy ended up with the birth of the productive man.³⁹ As Marx explained very well, commodification of social relations (i.e., the tendency to conceive of human ties according to the logic of contract), allowed the emancipation of the individual from traditions, family and religion, but this came at the cost of subjection to the impersonal

³⁸ Dardot, P, Laval C. *The new way of the world: on neoliberal society*, cit., p. 332.

³⁹ *ivi*, p.335.

and uncontrollable laws of capital valorization.⁴⁰ This modern form of individualism gives the illusion that every aspect of the human experience is controlled, and is chosen by the subject, that recognizes the amount of available resources and decides the proper allocation. Just like an enterprise. This enterprise culture that becomes proper to the neoliberal subject first and to society as a whole later, is the ideal paradigm in which to bring forth the idea that through constant work on oneself, and a competitive space in which to challenge oneself, everyone can achieve perfection. Therefore, the human being is under a constant pressure which imposes him to constantly work on himself, to be always flexible and able to change according to the demand, and actuate a cost and benefit analysis in every activity. Margaret Thatcher, who is considered to be, with President Reagan, the institutional initiator and the driver of this new rationality, explained this concept and this transformation very well: «Economics are the method. The object is to change the soul».⁴¹

The society founded on neoliberal ideology conceives of the subject, the human being, as a business, so it is evaluated in terms of productivity, and wealth. The new neoliberal subject, as it is called by Dardot and Laval in their study, is not only calculating and productive, but is deeply competitive, that is, immersed in the global competitive dynamic. Neoliberal ideology has a hegemonic vocation, since it permeates all aspects of life, to such an extent that the very possibility of taking a critical stance outside of it is very difficult. The staggering increase in inequality is precisely related to the neoliberal tendency to assign value to men with the same indicators that are used in the market. So, a man is more valuable if he is richer, if he has a higher level of education, and so on. Yet the reason why these differences exist is often forgotten in this logic, which cannot always and only be pinned on the choices of the individual. In fact, a first major problem arising from neoliberalism and inequality is the process of individualization. The more unequal society is, the more there is competition among workers, the more precariousness, which, however, is no longer transformed into a collective response to the

⁴⁰ *ibidem*.

⁴¹ Sunday Times, the 7th of May 1988.

crisis, but rather into each person's individual quest to get out of his or her disadvantaged condition, as access to a wide range of material goods creates the illusion of a social climb that seems possible but is actually blocked. In fact, as inequality grows, the conflict does not grow excessively, because inequality boosts the fragmentation of society and the search for individual solutions to collective problems.⁴² One characteristic of the business ethic described is that of self-help. It is thus an ethic based on self-enhancement, and in this sense the concept of self-help becomes not only a doctrine that every individual must follow, but also a mode of governance. The conception of life as essentially entrepreneurial involves the fact that everything becomes an enterprise, and the value in the individual is no longer identified in composure and rigidity in carrying out one's choices, but on the contrary, in flexibility and the ability to adapt to change is valued, so that one is always competitive. In this way, responsibility is completely up on the individual, and this is the great novelty of entrepreneurial government, the result of neoliberal ideology. As said before, the new subject is devoted to the competitive logic, everything is a performance, and he should never forget the anthem: we are the champions, no time for losers. However, the loser is the average ordinary man, crushed by unequal competition, and stretched toward the achievement of constant efficiency and productivity that it cannot accomplish. You are your only limit is another very famous motto, which it may be found in many advertisements, in children's clothes, but it actually encapsulates a great paradox. In fact, neoliberal institutions, which define roles, impose social hierarchies and set limits, are governed by the principle on the continuous crossing of limits. So, precisely on this point, the discourse intersects the issue of inequality. In neoliberal societies, where there is a strong unequal distribution of resources, the competitive man is not able to actually answer to the demand of the market, even if the narrative is telling him the opposite. For these reasons, feelings of being uncomfortable, burnout, stress in the workplace are very common, and it almost became the normality. Moreover, the highly competitive society makes the individuals distant from

⁴²Volpato, C. *Le radici psicologiche della disuguaglianza*, Roma, Laterza, 2019, p.9.

each other's, there is not solidarity, on the contrary, it intensifies the social phobia.

Social anxiety and depression

On a psychological level, the idea that the status of wealth or poverty depends almost exclusively on a person's efforts to produce and make the most of his or her capital has very heavy repercussions. The *self-made man* narrative creates the illusion that every person has the tools to be able to achieve anything he or she wants, that changing one's social class and status is possible for everyone. One important consequence of this rhetoric is the lack of solidarity, there is no longer any social identity, because those who belong to more disadvantaged, and therefore unappreciated, social groups will tend to seek to be part of more prestigious groups. In fact, the awareness of belonging to a marginal or discriminated group negatively affects the person's experience, making them more insecure, more disposed to anxiety problems and social stress.

Moreover, this makes it so that there is no longer any social identity, because those who belong to more disadvantaged, and therefore unappreciated, social groups will tend to seek to be part of more prestigious groups. In fact, the awareness of belonging to a marginal or discriminated group negatively affects the person's experience, making them more insecure, more prone to anxiety problems and social stress.

For a long time, anxiety and depression were considered "diseases of wellbeing", meaning that they mainly affected those who belonged to the wealthier classes. In contrast, it is those living in poverty who are at greater risk of suffering from mental disorders. This is the thesis argued in a systematic review paper conducted by Matthew Ridley, of MIT's economics department, along with other researchers from the same facility and Harvard. Their aim was to understand the complex and multidimensional relationship between poverty and mental disorders by analyzing experimental results obtained in several studies that showed a positive effect of mental illness

treatment on employment. Their results were published in *Science*.⁴³

The meta-analysis conducted by Ridley and co-authors suggests some ways to counter the vicious cycle between mental disorders and economic hardship. The studies they reviewed reveal that government investments in increasing income and employment rates reduce the occurrence of anxiety and depression, and that programs to counter poverty can have positive impacts on individuals' long-term mental health status.

So, it has been demonstrated how poverty produces feelings of uncertainty, fear, unhappiness and a chronic state of insecurity. As said many times, productivity is the measure of the new rationality, therefore in order to better explain how poverty and inequality deeply affect mental health, two dimensions will be analyzed. First of all, a deeper gaze at the way work is currently organized in western societies will help to better understand the framework. Then, more attention will be given to the issue of meritocracy, because it is the key to explain the connection between inequality and the increasing of depression.

As has been anticipated, it is important first of all to provide an overview of what the world of work is like today, so that it is possible to realize why there is an increase in anxiety and depression and why these problems, that are related to economic inequality, are problems that actually afflict the vast majority of the population. Anxiety and depression, which are mental illnesses, depend, as mentioned in the preceding pages, on each individual being held solely responsible for whether or not they achieve their goals. However, the intensification of work, and the weakening of social groups, are factors that increase symptoms related to psychological suffering. The employee is often left alone in the face of impossible tasks and very high productivity standards and is constantly threatened by the climate of competitive warfare. So, the worker continually lives in a condition of vulnerability and insecurity that is sold to him by his manager as an «incentive to work better and better». This way of organizing work produces in the employee the constant anxiety of both personal failure and devaluation as a

⁴³ Ridley, M. and Rao, G. and Schilbach, F. and Patel, V., *Poverty, Depression, and Anxiety: Causal Evidence and Mechanisms* (May 2020). NBER Working Paper No. w27157, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3603787>.

person. Moreover, the strong contradiction between the meritocratic rhetoric and the brutality of competition only annihilates the conflict, as subjects accept this logic and impose it on themselves.

The fact that neoliberal ideology, accompanied by the doctrine of meritocracy, inculcates in members of society the idea that both upward social mobility is possible for everyone, this generates an individual effort on the part of each person in an attempt to elevate his or her social status. Conversely, if members of disadvantaged groups had the knowledge that social change is impossible, they would tend to seek collective responses in order to trigger social change. The perception of having impassable social boundaries, for example, is what triggered the movement in South Africa for the abolition of Apartheid, when relations between black and white citizens were rigidly codified. In Western societies, however, the ruling class (which is the only one that still thinks in terms of class and implements actions to consciously maintain its privileges), is perceived as legitimate. Thus, inequality is also legitimized by the middle classes, who consider wealth inequality to be just by virtue of the fact that those at the top of the social ladder are there because they are more deserving. The current situation is that the separation between social classes has strengthened, but the dominant rhetoric strongly asserts that classes no longer exist.

In 2007, sociologists Layte and Whelan studied levels of status anxiety in more and less equal societies in order to understand whether there is a correlation between income inequality and levels of anxiety. Using data from 35,634 adults from 31 countries participating in the European Quality of Life Survey. They discovered that in every country, the anxiety level was bigger when the income was lower, but respondents from low-inequality countries reported less status anxiety than those in higher inequality countries at *all points on the income rank curve*.⁴⁴ Therefore, it can be said that inequality causes an increasing of social anxiety among everyone, not just among the poorest. Moreover, according to Wilkinson and Pickett, people in more unequal societies have a greater concern with social status and become more

⁴⁴ Layte, R. and Whelan, C. *Who feels inferior? A test of the status anxiety hypothesis of social inequalities in health*, European Sociological Review, 2014, 30, pp.525-535.

dominated by status competition⁴⁵, which has grave consequences at the psychological level.

Conceiving of mental illness as only a biochemical problem offers a shore to the status quo, because it feeds the vicious cycle of the systemic privatization of pathology itself and its progressive depoliticization (the retreat of public spending in Health Care, with a not even too subtle message that sounds like « Arrange and pay for your ills » is also part of the same ideological production). The privatization of sickness turns mental illness into an anomaly external to the economic and social cycle in which the sick individual lives, putting the responsibility only on the personal level. But being sick in a sick system is devastating to the extent that the race for profit makes individuals in need of a break ballasts to growth.

Discrimination

Another important psychological factor affecting inequality is discrimination. The existence of large income disparities and the weakening of the middle class, which now knows insecurity, has contributed to the increase in hatred and sociophobia toward the most disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, psychologists have observed that a common feeling in all social classes is the *fear of falling*.⁴⁶ That is, the apprehension of losing social status, a fear that turns into a powerful incentive to use strategies aimed at consolidating that status. In times of crisis, this fear is accentuated and is a particularly hot topic in Western countries, which have not yet fully recovered from the 2008 crisis. This deep economic crisis has caused the crumbling of the middle class, and this involved that precariousness, which previously belonged only to the proletariat, also spread to the self-employed and the petty bourgeoisie. The fear of falling generates violent sentiments against towards the one at the bottom of the social pyramid, but not towards the ones at the top.⁴⁷ This is due to the meritocracy ideology, which leaves the aspiration of reaching the richest groups, and blames the marginalized ones.

⁴⁵ Wilkinson, R. Pickett, K. *L'equilibrio dell'anima, Perché l'uguaglianza ci farebbe vivere meglio*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2019, p.49.

⁴⁶ Volpato, C. *Le radici psicologiche della disuguaglianza*, cit., p.142.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p.153

Some economists argue that discrimination in a market economy is impossible.⁴⁸ In fact, in an equilibrium situation with fair competition, if there is racial bias, people from discriminated groups will be hired first because their wages will be lower than those of people with similar qualifications but from non-discriminated groups. Such reasoning fully shows how neoliberal rationality triggers a justification in terms of productivity even of phenomena recognized as degrading such as discrimination. Yet anyone who has a chance to observe the reality around him or her will notice that discrimination is evident. A litmus test is, again, the political discourse, which in recent years has focused heavily on discriminatory policies such as anti-migration. In addition, there is the collective imagination that sees the immigrant as an enemy, and this makes the revolt against the violence of exclusion itself violent, justifying the law-and-order activities of the ruling class. The neoliberal view of politics has triggered a process of eliminating people at the margins of society through a process of depersonalization, which minimizes the undemocratic effects of the monopoly of knowledge and representation. Obviously, suffering discrimination involves the annihilation of the person, the internalization of one's inferiority status, and feelings such as frustration and discomfort. However, the lack of representation within institutions of these groups also means that they are powerless to have tools to fight against these discriminations, which are structural. So, inequality, combined with belonging to ethnic, religious or cultural minorities, results in a social exclusion from which it is really difficult to get out. Moreover, not implementing these discriminations also generates a negative effect on people who do not belong to the discriminated group. In fact, individuals who break the discriminatory behavior are punished, in the sense that other members of the group will refuse to purchase at that store, or work for them, etc.

Growing inequality thus results in the need to defend one's value in the face of increasing competition for status and concerns about the judgment of others. Discrimination results in the more or less conscious choice by discriminated groups to stop investing in their own education, and in not increasing their own value, since it is misperceived anyway.

⁴⁸ Becker, G. *The Economics of discrimination*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1957.

To conclude, it should be mentioned that not all discriminatory practices implemented by individuals occur consciously. In fact, discrimination can also be implicit, that is, unintentional or even contrary to explicitly stated thinking and preferences. The reason is that some practices, such as a company's evaluation of CVs to find a new resource, are carried out quickly, and at the cognitive level this generates implicit forms of discrimination against those from lower social classes or minorities. It is important to remember, in this sense, that inequality and the internalized sense of inferiority, also produce effects on the very posture of the person, who will therefore be less convincing in a job interview, compared to a person belonging to an elevated social class who, on the contrary, has internalized a narcissistic sense of self-confidence.

An example that may be useful for the purpose of understanding the link between income inequality, belonging to a disadvantaged group and discriminatory practices was illustrated in a study done by sociologist Devah Pager concerning the stigmatizing consequences of a criminal record.⁴⁹ The premise is that, for young people living in poverty, it is very common to end up in the business of drug dealing and theft, because it is often perceived as the only possible way to escape from the chain of precariousness and to gain respect from the community. In her study, the author investigated the relationship between having a criminal record for a nonviolent drug offense and access to employment opportunities. The research found that for white youngsters with a criminal record the chance of being called up was halved compared to those who had a clean record, while for blacks it decreased by up to one-third. These results imply that people who belong to a minority group, and who perhaps because of their poverty status have committed a crime, face significant barriers if they try to become self-sufficient. It is important to remember, therefore, that there is a close correlation between poverty, ethnicity and government policies. If some minorities are disproportionately poor, and if the government provides them with poor education and limited health care, their members will suffer

⁴⁹ Pager, D. *The mark of a criminal record*, in *American journal of sociology*, 2003, n.5, pp.937-975.

disproportionately.⁵⁰ So, in studying inequalities and how they affects the society is important to highlight that often this part of the population is at the intersection between multiple levels of discriminations, and economic inequalities only reflects the unequal set of possibilities that these groups have compared to the dominant group.

Depersonalization

To sum up what has been said until now, status hierarchies and differentials become more pervasive in societies with higher levels of income inequality and this produces a widespread sense of inferiority in the population with potentially damaging consequences for all members of the society. From this start point, the aim of this paragraph is to illustrate another psychological consequence of inequality, linked to the previous ones: the depersonalization of the poorest. In order to express what does this concept mean, it can be useful to use a quote taken written by Balibar in *Citizenship*:

« Louis de Bonald states that some people are in society without being of society. the concept could not be better expressed. [...] the fact that for a very long-time discrimination was inscribed within political institutions has left a deep mark. [...] So, it is not a question of external exclusion, but of internal exclusion, where this concept refers not only to a legal status, but to its combination with representations and practices. The importance of formal rights is undeniable, but their empowerment is no less so.»⁵¹

The concept of depersonalization refers to the procedure of excluding those on the edges of society from *the right to fight for their rights*. Sex workers, refugees, migrants or asylum seekers, homeless people, gypsies, these categories of people are excluded from the possibility of political existence. That is to say, their ability to contribute to the political process is severely limited, if not nonexistent. political exclusion effectively entails the elimination of these categories from social discourse. This issue is linked to the way modern societies are producing the *intentional servitude*.⁵² This

⁵⁰ Stiglitz, J. *Il prezzo della disuguaglianza*, Einaudi, Torino, 2012, p.114.

⁵¹ E. Balibar, *Cittadinanza*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2012 pp. 88-89.

⁵²Ivi, p. 143.

concept refers to the attitude of dominated people of accepting their conditions because of four reasons: the habit, the culture, the convenience and the charisma of the ruling class.⁵³

These reflections on voluntary servitude can be put side by side with those on the mediocre demons paradigm theorized by Simona Forti. The author argues that the common man accepts and participates in evil driven by the desire for normality, and the aspiration for participation that is realized through abstention, silence and letting go, which constitutes the essence of subordination.⁵⁴ Subjugation and subalternity affect the very way of understanding the reality and cause the implementation of practices that actually activate a process of internalizing a sense of social inferiority. This situation makes the dominated classes accept their status and even activate processes that penalize their conditions. Moreover, it should be pointed out that for the poorest people, just not knowing when the next meal will be or how to raise their children are constant worries that require too much physical and mental energy, so much so that one does not then have the strength or material ability to band together to change the status quo. In addition, in modern societies, economic growth is closely linked to the financial world, which has changed the original accumulation mechanisms into predatory formations, as defined by Saskia Sassen.⁵⁵ This means that there are very wealthy and powerful individuals, corporations and companies that are wiping out national boundaries but are not accountable towards the territories in which they operate. These predatory formations do not profit from labor, but from destroying the wealth of others, causing the exclusion and impoverishment of growing masses of people, who struggle to rebel for two reasons. First, because they live in places far from their oppressors, and second because the oppressor is difficult to identify because it consists of a complex system.

⁵³ Volpato C., *Le radici psicologiche della disuguaglianza*, cit., p.154.

⁵⁴ *ibidem*.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p.159.

Coping mechanisms

So, many studies show how disadvantaged groups, who occupy a weak position within society, are subjected to discrimination that has serious affective, cognitive and behavioral consequences. Thus, adhering to beliefs that justify the system is a coping mechanism that discriminated people implement because it reduces anxiety, guilt, and feelings of frustration and uncertainty that would result from opposing the system. Yet, it appears evident how the behavior of peoples who submit acquiescently to the tyrant's absolute power turns out, for no apparent reason, to be profoundly self-defeating. Voluntary servitude and depression appear to be united by the fact that in both must be seen the outcome of attitudes, stances, ways of acting, which the individuals involved do not suffer passively, but in which their freedom, their capacity for self-determination, their power to act, is at stake, albeit in a negative form. Long before psychoanalysis, the connection between weakened self-esteem and gratification in subjugation had been emphasized by Leopardi, in the *Zibaldone*.⁵⁶ No one is a servant by essence. Servitude is a social relationship, made possible by the fact that self-love is lacking in people at the bottom of the social system. According to Leopardi, in fact, servants lack that proper regard for their own dignity which is called "self-love" and which consists in caring less about their own comforts than about their own person. The absence of self-love, the *Zibaldone* continues, breeds indifference, inaction, and insensitivity to oneself. Hence the Leopardian conclusion:

« When man finds himself in such circumstances, that is, desperate in a manner, not to hate himself (what is the ferocity of despair) but not to care [...] he feels complacency in serving others.»⁵⁷

The feeling of being oppressed, the feeling of not having the possibility to change how the life path is going, produce in individuals the sensation of not being able to control their own life, and therefore people who are at the top of the social scale are seen as the ones to which confer all the power. In this

⁵⁶ Ciamareli, F. Olivieri, U.M., *Il fascino dell'obbedienza*, Mimesis edizioni, Milano, 2013.

⁵⁷ Leopardi, G. *Zibaldone di pensieri*, in Id., *Tutte le opere*, a cura di W. Binni, 2 voll., Sansoni, Firenze 1969, vol. II, p. 61.

way, psyche and society appear to be entangled as sites of production of voluntary servitude, precisely because power arises, organizes and consolidates through their cooperation. Power presents itself first of all as a set of visible institutions, endowed with a conditioning and manipulating social force, which from the outside induces human beings, over whom it has a hold, to conform to proposed, valued or imposed models of behavior. In such a collective process consists the socialization of individual psychic lives. But socialization itself could not take place without the active cooperation of the individuals involved. According to Hobbes, the first law of nature is that man is commanded to endeavour peace, whilst the second is that «a man being willing, when others are so too, as far-forth, as for peace, and defence of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself».⁵⁸ The same laws of nature lead people to stipulate a contract through which they decide to depose their rights to all things reciprocally for the purpose of establishing peace. Justice, then, is not inscribed within the order of reality, but emerges from the third law of nature: «Men perform their covenants made: without which, covenants are in vain». According to Hobbes, then, right cannot be produced by natural laws but only by civil ones.⁵⁹

Therefore, also laws that contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities are produced by the implicit consensus that the dominated group is given to the dominant one.

2.4 inequality and the links with violence

It has been studied how inequality has important psychological repercussions. In fact, inequality creeps into all aspects of life and also affects the way people think and interact, increases anxiety levels, and in general, less equitable societies tend to have poorer health: higher rates of infant mortality, and mental illness, drug use and obesity. Moreover, it has been stressed that inequality hurts in many ways and affects the poorest people most, but not just them. And, as inequality is getting worse, propagated by structures that

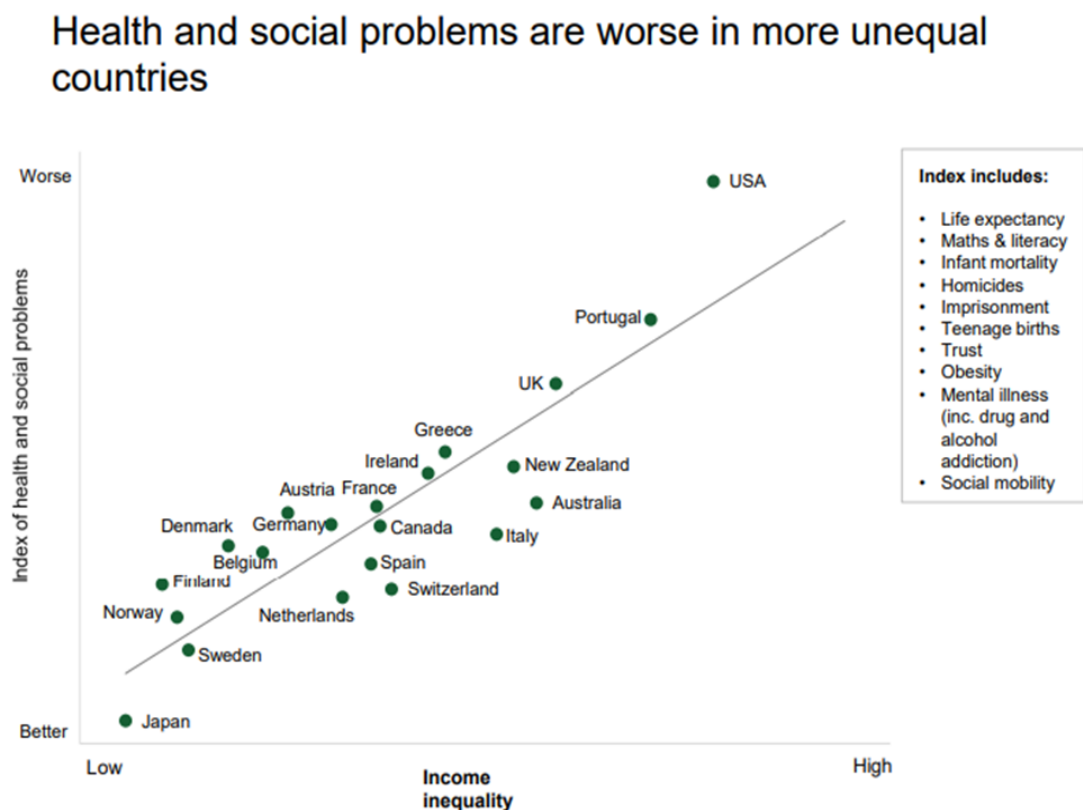
⁵⁸ Hobbes, T *Leviathan*, Part I, XIV, 1-2.

⁵⁹ Gerolin, A. *Rights and social contract: from the simple to the complex space*, p.201.

cannot help but increase it, the consequences described above become more consistent. Furthermore, inequality and violence are clearly linked. Whether through inciting violence between groups, within them or just through undermining social values, unequal societies are less safe.

In a study conducted by Wilkinson and Pickett, who put a great effort in demonstrating how extreme inequality is bad for everyone and that more equal societies creates better living conditions for all, they showed that less equitable societies are more violent and have a higher percentage of people locked up in prison.⁶⁰ As illustrated in the graph below, the relation between social problems (which include many dimensions as described in the figure) and unequal society is evident.

Figure 2 relation between income inequalities and social problems in western Countries



⁶⁰ Wilkinson, R. Pickett, K. *L'equilibrio dell'anima, Perché l'uguaglianza ci farebbe vivere meglio*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2019 p.10.

Source: Graph elaborated by Wilkinson, R. Pickett, K.⁶¹

Numerous studies have shown that in more unequal societies there is more violence, but this difference is not caused by the poor assaulting the rich, but by the increase in violence among those living on the margins. This stems from the fact that in more unequal societies, it is more important to try to preserve one's status, and the failure of peers to recognize one's position generates violent responses. This form of sociophobia goes hand in hand with the need to recognize the superiority of the dominant and the constant striving to tend and aspire to them. It should be emphasized how scarcity and precariousness profoundly affect the way humans interact and think because the problem of resource management is constant. Through some experiments, Mullainathan and Shafir (2013) have shown how scarcity reduces cognitive capacity: «the poor have a lower effective capacity than the rich, and not because they are inherently less capable, but because part of their mind is captured by the scarcity.»⁶²

In Western societies, where inequality increases, social problems are more dramatic, but worsening inequality is often interpreted as an opportunity for those at the bottom to move up the social hierarchy, and thus there is a distorted perception of the phenomenon, which is perceived as positive. For this reason, combined with the individualistic tendency that characterizes these societies, as inequality increases, social conflict does not increase, as individuals are spurred to seek individual solutions to the problem that is instead collective. So, the link between inequality and violence does not result in open class conflict. In fact, members of disadvantaged groups, despite often being subjected to discrimination and violence, take a passive attitude toward it because they have internalized their social inferiority. In fact, one's social position leads the disadvantaged to have little self-confidence, and the tendency to depersonalize those who live on the margins triggers helplessness in them. In fact, exclusion generally generates conflict, because those who are excluded tend to violently manifest their condition, but systematic exclusion from the political sphere, on the contrary, completely annihilates conflict. In

⁶¹ Wilkinson, R. Pickett, K. *L'equilibrio dell'anima, Perché l'uguaglianza ci farebbe vivere meglio*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2019 p.10.

⁶² Mullainathan, S., Shafir, E. *Scarcity*. New York: times book, 2013, p.68.

the words that E. Balibar uses in *Citizenship*, it is a form of «preventive counter-violence that holds conflict to its corporate form without it ever reaching the political one.»⁶³ Globalization and the new neo-liberal rationality, which make states slaves to the logic of the market, trigger a process of eliminating the excluded, as not productively useful, which in fact deprives them of any decision-making power. Exclusion or inclusion in a society depends on the internal conflict dynamics within it, mediated by the political actor. Each minority exerts pressure to obtain some concession from institutions, however, people who are on the margins of society such as migrants, those who do sex work, drug addicts, etc., suffer this pre-emptive counter-violence because they are not considered legitimate to enter the political sphere, which very often is all the more violent because it involves the asymmetrical use of institutional instruments (the police, heavier sentences, social stigma). Institutions' use of these forms of coercion actually generates a manipulation of violence, for poor people who are at the bottom of the social ladder are constantly exposed to the risk of elimination in one way (depersonalization) or the other (preventive counter-violence).⁶⁴

In democracy, conflict is institutionalized and becomes constructive, as the democratic system allows for the establishment of power plays between various groups for the purpose of gaining benefits, and the political actor, who determines the rules of the game, has the task of mediating between the various demands and reaching a compromise. Yet, today there is a general crisis of representation in liberal democracies, as there is much difficulty in keeping the dialectic between institution and conflict open, and there is no longer the ability on the part of citizens to delegate to representatives who perform the public function of collectivizing the needs of the population.⁶⁵ In fact, the existence of social injustice alone is not enough to trigger protest and social change. For this, it is first necessary for the injustice to be perceived as such by those who suffer it, the next step then is for that injustice not to be experienced as an individual experience, but to be processed and shared with others, so that the disadvantaged group begins to reject its condition and enact

⁶³ Balibar, E. *Cittadinanza*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2012 p.143.

⁶⁴Ivi, p. 114-115.

⁶⁵ Ivi, p.152

collective actions. At this point, another component is essential: the perception of efficacy. If the system is perceived as unstable, collective action is more likely. The third essential component for an injustice or discrimination to turn into collective action that can actually bring about social change is the presence of a shared social identity. If there is not what used to be called "class consciousness," uprisings are ephemeral and there is no time and space for the emergence of a leader capable of carrying out reforms. This is what happens in Western societies, where the illusion of easy upward mobility, individualism and neoliberal ideology promote the rhetoric of equality and democracy while simultaneously implementing actions to preserve the status quo of social exclusion and hierarchical control.⁶⁶

2.4 The cultural dimension of inequality

Culture is one of the most important concepts to understand society and social issues, because sociologists recognize that it plays a crucial role in our social lives. It is important for shaping social relationships, maintaining and challenging social order, determining how we make sense of the world and our place in it, and in shaping our everyday actions and experiences in society. It is composed of both non-material and material things. According to Marx, it is in the realm of non-material culture that a minority is able to maintain unjust power over the majority. He reasoned that subscribing to mainstream values, norms, and beliefs keep people invested in unequal social systems that do not work in their best interests, but rather, benefit the powerful minority. Culture can be a force for oppression and domination, but it can also be a force for creativity, resistance, and liberation. It is also a deeply important aspect of human social life and social organization. Culture is also what we do and how we behave and perform (for example, theater and dance but also which kind of restaurant we choose, which movies we go to see and so on). It informs and is encapsulated in how we walk, sit, carry our bodies, and interact with others; how we behave depending on the place, time, and "audience;" and how we express identities of race, class, gender, and sexuality, among others. Culture also includes the collective practices we participate in, such as religious ceremonies, the celebration of secular

⁶⁶ Volpato, C *Le radici psicologiche della disegualianza*, cit., p.188.

holidays, and attending sporting events.⁶⁷ The two sides of culture—the material and non-material—as intimately connected, since material culture emerges from and is shaped by the non-material aspects of culture.

Culture and education

The concept of culture is linked to the one of education, and it is remarkable that, especially with the Covid pandemic, education, which should be a right for everyone, was deeply affected by the unequal conditions of children.

If we take Italy into exam, the problem of educational poverty plagues cities almost uniformly from north to south, and has two dimensions: the availability of educational resources and on the other hand the consequences of this scarcity. A correlation has been found between student educational poverty and parental educational record.⁶⁸

In Italy, 13% of students were not reached by the distance education system during the pandemic, which resulted in a dramatic increase in inequality. Distance education during Covid required the active participation of parents, which can be a determining factor for those who, for example, are children of immigrants and their parents do not know the language or those who have parents who for one reason or another have been unable to provide the tools for their children to do the lessons properly. So, transporting teaching within the home has exacerbated inequality. In addition, the return to school was not accompanied by a thorough analysis conducted at the ministerial level assessing the level reached by various students.⁶⁹

According to the OECD⁷⁰, it takes five generations in Italy for those born into poor families to reach the average income level (the average among OECD countries is a little better: four and a half generations). According to the report, in the organization's countries, the average income of the richest 10 percent is nine and a half times that of the poorest 10 percent—a level of inequality equal to seven times what it was 25 years ago.

⁶⁷ Cole, N. L. *So What Is Culture, Exactly?*, ThoughtCo, Aug. 27, 2020.

⁶⁸ Cortellazzo, A. *la povertà educativa, un problema a due dimensioni*, il Bo live, Padova, 22 febbraio 2021.

⁶⁹ D'Aura, F. *Pandemia, ma non solo: la scuola delle disuguaglianze*, Il Bo live, Padova, 13 maggio 2020.

⁷⁰ OECD, *A broken social elevator? How to promote Social Mobility*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2018.

The report's thesis is stark: low social mobility is always a bad thing, because (even leaving aside ethical considerations) it carries economic and sociopolitical consequences that generate communities that are static, unresolved, with little participation in public life, poorly educated, and in ill health. In the 55-64 age group, Italians with a higher degree than their parents are about one in four, the lowest level in the OECD area after Turkey. Things are better when we consider the 25-34 age group: here, Italians who are more educated than their parents approach 50 percent, a figure higher than the OECD average. The report shows a clear correlation between public investment in education and high "educational mobility": in the usual Nordic countries we find, at the same time, the highest percentage of GDP allocated to education and the lowest incidence of fathers' educational qualification on that of their children. Level of education not only influences income: a 25-year-old college graduate has, according to the OECD, an average life expectancy four and a half (for women) and eight (for men) years longer than a peer with a low educational qualification. As early as three years old, children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and adverse socioeconomic conditions may experience up to 12 months of developmental delay compared with more advantaged peers. By the first day of third grade, those who are poorer may be up to six months behind their wealthier peers.⁷¹ These childhood inequalities become exponential as one grows up. More prestigious universities and schools, and a whole scaffolding that defines and crystallizes class inequalities. In addition, some majors, such as law and medicine, by their nature, providing a very long educational path, assume that the student has a family that can support him or her financially for a long time. Scholarships, which are structurally insufficient, operate a selection only among the weaker segments of the population.

How the dominant class use culture to pursue inequality

As stressed many times, inequality affects the way people act and interact with others, because it is connected to self-confidence and self-esteem. So, it is easily recognizable from the outside if a person in a theater is used to that environment or it is the first time he or she enters. In the same way, a waiter

⁷¹ Cortellazzo, A. *la povertà educativa, un problema a due dimensioni*, il Bo live, Padova, 22 febbraio 2021.

from a luxury restaurant can understand if the customer is regular or not. And, of course, all of this has to do with culture, and with the social class. It is a matter of social inequality if the individual has been exposed and educated to be in cultural environment or not, and this is something that creates a gap that is almost impossible to eliminate. Indeed, culture constitutes one of the main mechanisms for reproducing structural inequality.⁷²

Therefore, the cultural inequality, which depends of the education someone receive in the first years and, as a consequence, it is subject to the family, the social environment in which someone is born etc., and it a real way in which the dominant class is establishing its privilege. Knowing how to read and write has for centuries, for millennia, been the dividing line between the people and intellectuals, essentially religious, and then bourgeois secularists. In the twentieth century studying was for the few, for the children of doctors, for the children of intellectuals, and changing this path, which shaped the society's mindset for centuries, it is not easy at all.

According to the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Center, people from privileged backgrounds are twice as likely to be employed in the creative industries as those from humble backgrounds. In the UK, only 28% of those working in the film, TV, video and photography industries come from lower-class backgrounds and often do not hold apex positions.⁷³

Therefore, the cultural dimension of inequality has two important aspects: the unequal access to cultural experiences, which generates unequal cultural capital, and unequal possibilities to work in this field. Those who describe the world, those who inform, those who tell stories, and those who make long carousels explaining in detail what is the orthopraxis of the just battles against privilege, often in privilege originated. This means that the representation of the lower classes of the society through the mainstream media channels is often actuate through the eye of privileged people. So, A class niche that determines the narrative of reality to the exclusion of stories, opinions,

⁷² Volpato, C. *Le radici psicologiche della disuguaglianza*, Roma, Laterza, 2019, p.61.

⁷³ Carey, H. O'Brien, D. and Gable, O. *Screened out: Tackling class inequality in the UK's screen industries*, Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Center, 22 April 2021, link to the website: <https://pec.ac.uk/research-reports/screened-out-tackling-class-inequality-in-the-uks-screen-industries> last access: 31/10/2022.

viewpoints and traumas of most of the individuals who populate the lower part of the social pyramid.

In the Prison Notebooks, Gramsci ascribes to intellectuals a new function: no longer to preserve predefined power, but also to implement a real organization of consensus and hegemony.⁷⁴ The rise of modern capitalism and mass society have greatly increased the importance (and number) of these figures, because in order to gain political power in the Western world, it is necessary to exercise cultural hegemony within civil society.

Families belonging to the ruling class use three forms of capital to pass on their privileges to their children: economic capital, social capital, that is, the set of interpersonal relationships that constitute a functional network for the acquisition of other capital, and cultural capital. In his studies, Marx based class privilege on economic capital, while Weber made it more a matter of privilege, and social status, and little attention was given to cultural capital.⁷⁵ In his studies, Bourdieu, paid special attention to how the ruling class produces and transmits its cultural capital, breaking it down into three dimensions: embodied capital, which is that which everyone acquires through education and personal experiences, and is so strongly linked to the person and personality as to seem innate; institutionalized cultural capital, which is that which comes through education; and objectified capital, which is that formed by the material goods one possesses.⁷⁶ Wealthy people invest part of their economic capital by transforming it into cultural capital. A key concept in Bourdieu's analysis is the one of «habitus», which denotes the set of dispositions, expectations, and evaluations that influence the attitudes and practices that members of a class consider normal and appropriate.⁷⁷ Habitus is one way to explain how certain perceptions or tastes, which are outside the subject's awareness, actually depend on cultural capital. Individuals in fact absorb class rules implicitly, and it is difficult to recognize and acknowledge the proper self outside of them. In more advanced societies, cultural capital is of increasing importance. In fact, for wealthy people, the accumulation of

⁷⁴ Gramsci, A. *Quaderni dal carcere*, Editori internazionali riuniti, Roma, 2012, p. 112.

⁷⁵ Ernaux, A. *Il posto*, L'orma, Roma, 2014, p.46.

⁷⁶ Bourdieu, P. *Les trois états du capital culturel*, Actes de la Recherche en Science Sociales, 30, 3-6, 1979.

⁷⁷ Ibidem.

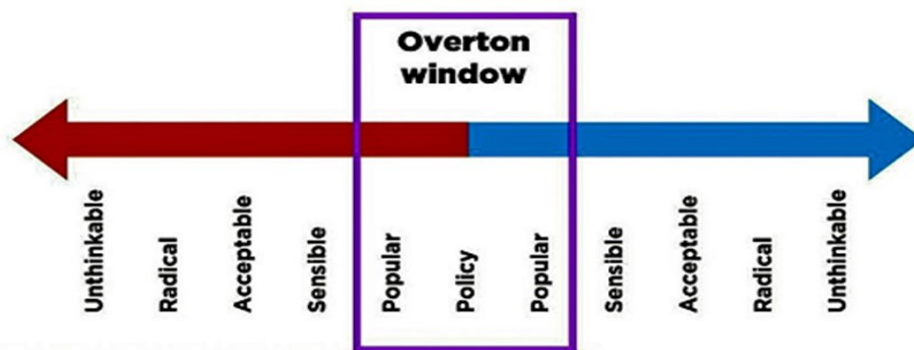
cultural capital begins as early as birth and coincides with the path of socialization. In this way, success is often seen as a merit of the person, as a talent, while it is actually due to the habitus.

2.5 Inequality and politics

Taken into account everything that has been written above, it is important to underline that, after all, this is primary a political issue. Politics is the space in which inequality becomes legitimized, protected by laws, and perpetuated through institutions.

There is a model in political science known as *Overton window*, which explains how ideas in society change over time and influence politics.

Figure 3, *Overton window*



In the figure 3 is evident that stages of a political idea range from the unthinkable to the legal, and when they are inside the Overton window they pass from being just ideas to become policy adopted by policy makers.⁷⁸ Just to make an example, same-sex marriage 50 years ago was something unthinkable, then it became a radical idea, as it was adopted by a small group of radicals, who brought the new concept from outside the political arena, although by sacrificing perhaps some plaudits, but they introduced it. Over time cultural hegemony did the rest, and now it is a policy adopted in almost all Western States. In the same way, there are legal ideas that can return to the unthinkable, such as slavery. The concept is simple: human nature does not know many limits, and any idea has a potential, albeit minimal, to enter

⁷⁸ Howlett, M, Ramesh, M, Perl, A. *Studying Public Policy*, Oxford University Press, 2009, p.39.

public debate and become customary. Therefore, whoever says that inequality cannot be eliminated is limiting his ideas, which actually can be expanded more and more. Indeed, every idea theoretically can move from the line and enter in the Overton Window, because politics is dynamic and changes over time, it has always been like this and it always will be.

The starting point is that politicians and policy makers have to decide every time which ideas they can implement, and usually they made this decision by considering which ideas have wider support within the public opinion. So, the Overton Window is the place in which ideas which are considered as legitimate lie. Outside this window there are ideas that exist, but it would be too risky for policy makers to support them. However, the Overton window can expand and ideas can shift and be inside and then move outside, depending on the electoral support. So, the whole range of political possibilities can go inside and outside the Overton Window, depending on the pressure the interest group is able to conduct. Regarding inequality, the interest around this issue is quite low because of the above-mentioned de-personalization of poor people, which have no space in the public arena.

Western societies are becoming increasingly unequal, less and less willing to produce public goods or cover collective risks, and the products of rising wealth reward a tiny minority.⁷⁹ Moreover, political parties are losing interest in this topic, because they are focused on not lose the vote of the middle class, which is more and more attracted by populism and conservative narratives which, of course, leaves behind the minorities.

However, this does not mean that the issue of inequality cannot be again within the Overton Window. Nowadays, some topics are taking more attention in the public debate, mostly regarding a fairer distribution of taxation (a progressive taxation law) and some claims about the minimum level of wages. These claims come from the middle classes, but it could be led to a recognition of the people which lives at the bottom of the social pyramid. In Italy, citizens are very familiar with the crisis - a disoriented public opinion, a self-referential political class barricaded in the defense of old privileges, a completely jammed decision-making mechanism - and very

⁷⁹ Crouch, C. *Quanto capitalismo può sopportare la società*, Laterza, Roma 2014, p.5.

little with the possible solutions. An in-depth sociological analysis that shows how the rediscovery of the random selection of political representatives is a possible way out, as Sintomer has shown in his book *Power to the People*.⁸⁰ In fact, while classical electoral representation remains important, it fails to account for crucial contemporary developments and of a number of claims of misrepresentation.

The welfare state, the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, have also collapsed as a result of the collapse of the social contract, which, as theorized by Rousseau himself, was a covenant of citizens with themselves, in order to build a society of the free and equal in which the principle of equality is enshrined not only from a formal, but, substantive point of view. This enormous downfall, has resulted in the rise of increasingly unjust and exclusionary societies in which a large part of the world's population cannot actively participate in political life. Moreover, very often a reaction by people who are victims of discrimination and injustice is not possible, because there is often no physical person, no determined social group against whom to lash out. Privatization and globalization have meant that often the average worker does not know who his boss is, and therefore there can be no form of class struggle as there was in the last century. This is another fact that causes powerlessness in the ordinary person, who therefore suffers a form of exclusion from political life and decision-making that depends on the fact that big business and large corporations are unquestionable, and too far to be held accountable for their activities.

Neoliberal globalization, with the same effects, stems from the dynamics of Western capitalism. It is promoted by powerful international actors who work to spread their conceptions and policies throughout the planet. This model, of course, which is slowly spreading like wildfire, holds within itself not a few contradictions since neoliberal economic policy, far from promoting situations of development, has generated a mighty social exclusion, in that it has ensured that international trade relations are established only between multinational corporations of great economic power and availability of

⁸⁰ Balibar, E. *Cittadinanza*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2012 p.182.

capital, thus excluding from this imposing circuit those countries that do not have enough economic strength to compete with them.

Power conflict is natural in organizations. Power over conflict and direct confrontation between powerful and powerless interest groups in society is the very essence of democracy, since a democratic society is a fluid organization that changes as the society change. Organizational power to capacity building, supporting individual decision making, leadership, etc. can be best reinforced through the process of empowerment. Thus, empowerment can also be defined as giving power to employees. Such empowerment triggers social mobilization, building of alliances and coalitions, increase in self-esteem, rise in levels of awareness, heightened consciousness, and confidence building among people so empowered. In organizations, when people fully participate in the decision-making processes, both the organizations and the people themselves stand to benefit and we achieve, in the true sense, empowerment of people.

In the next pages, the notion of entitlement will be analyzed deeply, since it is exactly what is lacking in the disadvantaged groups in order to act as a policy initiator.

Many faces of the same problem: what could be done

Chapter three

3.1 Inequality and its role in the crisis of liberal democracy

The increasingly violent deregulation of financial markets causes banks to develop a series of very risky investment strategies, which consequently destabilize the world economy. In this way, and even more so after the 2008 crisis, states are increasingly dependent on banks and are forced to cut costs on social spending so that they can bear the risks the banks take.⁸¹

Banks, for their part, backed by the state, have profit maximization as their primary goal, and therefore will always find it convenient to channel resources into speculative trading activities, effectively rendering the world of finance out of control. The evolution of the financial market in recent decades has made it clearer than ever that markets, especially where there are increasing returns to scale, do not tend spontaneously toward competition at all, but on the contrary toward oligopoly.⁸² This, of course, contributes to the increase in inequality. The remoteness of these phenomena from what is the real perception of people who in fact suffer from the increasing impoverishment of their condition allows them to be unable to grasp the reasons for their condition. With reference to the political dimension, moreover, it is important to point out that the greater the income inequality, the lower the participation in political life of the average citizen.⁸³ On the contrary, the political participation of the more affluent classes does not decrease as inequality increases, leading to the risk of plutocratic drift. Moreover, since the advantaged classes will not renounce their privileges spontaneously, their political pressure will be oriented towards political choices which will not reduce inequality.

⁸¹ Zamagni, S. *Disuguali*, Aboca edizioni, Sansepolcro (AR), 2020 p.74.

⁸² Ivi, p.76.

⁸³ Volpato, C. *Le radici psicologiche della disuguaglianza*, Roma, Laterza, 2019, p.27.

The crisis of democracy is, therefore, also a crisis of representation, a crisis that involves a distancing by the political class from real problems. The autarkic and populist drift that many European countries are taking is a direct consequence of the fact that left-wing parties, which historically are closer to social issues, are no longer able to translate the problems of the lower social classes, first and foremost inequality, into public policies that can be implemented. In the last century, the social base of leftist parties was the working class, but in today's increasingly complex societies, the working class has shrunk considerably and has changed a great deal. However, the change in the electoral base has not meant that in the public debate, the social issue-bearing parties were also able to change their rhetoric, adapting it to the new society in a way that included what are now the new disadvantaged classes: women, migrants, etc. So, although disinterest in politics is widespread and has undermined the power of almost all traditional parties, the loss of electoral consensus has affected social democracy the most, and leftist parties, being those that relied the most on an established social basis.⁸⁴ With the decline of social classes and the advent of an increasingly diverse and increasingly individualistic society, political parties have stopped seeking support in specific social classes, but seeking to promote a generalist and a-classist progressive agenda. As a result, inequality ceases to be a key issue in the political agenda of social-conscious parties.

Leftist parties have traditionally distinguished themselves from liberal reformers by the object of their criticism, and the intensity of their vision.⁸⁵ In fact, his action was aimed at criticizing the fundamental dynamics of injustice inherent in the regime itself. However, today we are increasingly witnessing the phenomenon of abandonment of total criticism, and the concrete possibility of democratic alternatives to liberal democracy is diminishing. Where before there was the party, the movement, the unions, today there are so many isolated spots of emancipatory struggle. The impossibility of imagining a viable democratic alternative to liberal democracy and, at the same time, the inability to become aware of it, generate

⁸⁴ Crouch, C. *Quanto capitalismo può sopportare la società*, Laterza, Roma 2014, p.11.

⁸⁵ Brown, W. *La politica fuori dalla storia*, edizioni Laterza, Bari, 2012, p. 19.

feelings of helplessness and anger in social groups. These negative emotions are usually expressed through reprobative political moralism.⁸⁶ So, moralism is the hallmark of today's political discourse, and it practically translates into snarky tones, know-it-all attitudes, and above all the tendency to make individuals and actions deeply blamable. Politics is the space in which inequality shows its most radical and grave consequences. In fact, the above-mentioned attitude has, of course, different effects depending on the social classes. The people belonging to the privileged class will implement this attitude towards the others, and the resentments will be crystalized among different social groups. Regarding the role that the privileged class has in shaping the decision-making process, it worth quote what Gramsci wrote more than fifty years ago, speaking about the intellectuals:

«The intellectual over here has the pretension of being a parasite. He sees himself as the bird made for the golden cage that must be kept on mash and grains of millet. The disdain there is still for anything that resembles work [...] is a rather stinking symptom of inner march. Intellectuals need to understand that the good times for such masquerades are over.»⁸⁷

Unfortunately, however, these masquerades are still very stable and fixed, since the golden cage is far from being broken. In the after marks of his Journey in America, Alexis De Toqueville wrote that he felt he was living in times of a global democratic revolution, where «the gradual progress of equality is fated, permanent, and daily passing beyond human control.»⁸⁸ Indeed, the American Declaration of Independence begins with the phrase: «We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and that they have certain inalienable rights... to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness», which is actually innovative for the XIX Century. Furthermore, even though he thought that the United States offered the most advanced example of equality in action, and he admired American individualism, he warned that a society of individuals can easily become atomized and paradoxically uniform when «every citizen, being assimilated to all the rest,

⁸⁶ Ivi, p.21.

⁸⁷ Gramsci, A. *Quaderni dal carcere*, Editori internazionali riuniti, Roma, 2012, p.116.

⁸⁸ Toqueville, A. d. *La democrazia in America*, Bur, Milano, 2015, p.54.

is lost in the crowd. »⁸⁹

It is emblematic how surprised was the French philosopher about the organization of the State in the USA, especially if comparing the same two States nowadays. Indeed, the USA is now suffering from extreme inequalities and all the problems connected to it way more than France, which has an history of social democracy, as many European countries. However, also in his argumentation was evident that too much individualism can damage the principle of equality and the democracy, which is exactly one of the reason why today's society is so unequal and yet so unwilling to change the path.

Hence the conclusion that a society of individuals lacks the intermedia al structures, such as those provided by traditional hierarchies, to mediate relations with the state. It is worth to note how this analysis fits nowadays issues and the discourse about inequality. Indeed, individualism does not generate political and social aggregation, which is exactly what the society would need in order to act consciously to reduce inequality.

3.2 Inequality and the neoliberal rationality

In the previous pages it has been shown the existence of an exacerbated relations between the logic of the market and the maximization of productivity at the human level. The entrepreneurial men act according to the cost and benefit logic, and they give an extremely high value to the money, and, as a consequence, to the wages. Therefore, inevitably, income inequality reflects how the individual is perceived in the society. This means that the value of a person is measured according to his or her income, his or her productivity in the market. Furthermore, over the past three decades, markets (and market values) have assumed a dominant importance in the daily lives of every individual. No other mechanism for organizing the production and distribution of goods has proved to be so effective in generating wealth and prosperity. Even more, after the end of the Cold War, market logic enjoyed undisputed prestige. The era from the 1980s to the 2007 crisis is called the era of market triumphalism: the belief in and exaltation of the market's self-governing mechanisms caused the market to expand to the point that

⁸⁹ Lom, P. *Alexis de Tocqueville: The Psychologist of Equality*, European University Institute, EUI Working Paper SPS No. 99/1, Firenze, 1999.

everything is for sale.⁹⁰ Siamo passati dall'averne un'economia di mercato all'essere una economia di mercato. Today, social relations and every other aspect of everyday lives also follow market logic. In the aftermath of the 2007 crisis, this trust is being questioned, and around this there is a public debate about market logic and whether or not it is right to set an insurmountable limit that the market cannot enter. However, apparently there is nothing that cannot be bought at the right price, everything is in the market, from emotions to securities to services, to affections.

This is one of the most significant changes of our time, and the two most serious negative consequences are worsening inequality and corruption. The fact that the commodification of everything has exacerbated inequality has been analyzed deeply in the text, but, as regard the second negative consequence, it could be useful to spend some words.

Indeed, in a society where everything is for sale, wealth takes on an ever greater role: for example, money can not only buy luxury goods, but also health care, political influence, access in a safer neighborhood, etc.. As for corruption, the problem is more complex. Assigning a price to any good can corrupt it: if it is assumed and taken for valid that certain goods can be bought or sold, implicitly this means that it is okay for them to be treated as commodities. Phenomena such as scalping or being able to pay someone to stand in line at the theater in place of the ticket owner are useful examples that can help identify the limits of market logic. Proponents of these practices justify them using the concept of utilitarianism: in fact, the arrangement between those who pay someone to stand in line in their place and those who get paid to do so is mutually beneficial.⁹¹ However, this logic does not take into account the fact that the market logic cannot be unlimited when it is applied to social issues, because it may affect democracy.

3.3 The hegemonic vocation of neoliberalism

As illustrated in the first chapter, neoliberalism can be defined as a global system of power, because it is a new way of seeing the world, like many other ideologies and new rationalities did in the past, like for example Christianity

⁹⁰ Sandel, M. J. *Quello che i soldi non possono comprare*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2015, p.27.

⁹¹ Ivi, p.35.

or Marxism. But, unlike these, neoliberalism does not have a founding father, and for this reason it is difficult to understand the concept as an ideology. After the 2008's crisis, the financial system went out of the control of political structures, and the last thirty-five years have seen ever-increasing globalization, the complexification of the supply chains, increasing global flows of money and people, and the intensification of more complex forms of identity.⁹²

It is emblematic that the first experiment in the creation of a neoliberal state occurred in Chile after Pinochet's coup on September 11, 1973. The coup against the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende was organized by the national economic elites, who felt threatened by the socialist policies promoted by the president, with the support of large American corporations, the CIA and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.⁹³ The coup violently repressed all social movements and left-wing political organizations and dismantled any form of popular organization (such as community health centers in poorer neighborhoods), while the labor market was freed from restrictions arising from regulations and institutions (such as labor unions). To help rebuild the Chilean economy, a group of economists known as the *Chicago boys* was convened, due to their adherence to the neoliberal theories of Milton Friedman, who was then teaching at the University of Chicago. Brushing aside General Gustavo Leigh, a Keynesian and rival of the coup leader, in 1975 Pinochet brought those economists into the government, where their first task was to negotiate loans with the International Monetary Fund. Working alongside the IMF, the *Chicago boys* restructured the economy according to their theories.⁹⁴ They revoked nationalizations and privatized public assets, made natural resources (fishing, timber, etc.) accessible to completely unregulated exploitation (which in many cases unscrupulously trampled on the rights of local people), privatized social security, facilitated foreign direct investment and free trade; the right of foreign companies to repatriation of the proceeds of their operations in Chile was guaranteed; import substitution was preferred to export-based growth.

⁹² Williams, H. *Political Hegemony and social complexity*, Palgrave, Norwich, 2020, p.1.

⁹³ Harvey, D. *Breve storia del neoliberalismo*, Il Saggiatore, Milano, 2007, p. 136.

⁹⁴ Ivi, p. 43

The immediate recovery of the Chilean economy in terms of growth rates, capital accumulation and high levels of profit on foreign investment was short-lived: the system collapsed with the Latin American debt crisis of 1982.⁹⁵ The result was that, in the following years, neoliberal policies were applied in a much more pragmatic and less ideological way. All of this, including pragmatism, was a useful test case in view of the neoliberal turn that would take place in Britain (under Thatcher) and the United States (under Reagan) in the 1980s. It is important to underline, in this regard, that it is not the first time that an experiment conducted brutally on the periphery of the world became a model for policy development to be adopted in the center, and this could be another interesting discussion about how the unequal distribution of powers within international relations generates a path of inequality which worsen the condition of many and many persons.

By examining some examples, taken from newspapers around the world (from the USA to Europe, from China to Africa), Sandel shows in his book that health, education, the environment, and public safety are often regulated according to the economic criterion of the best allocation of resources, without taking moral evaluations into account.⁹⁶ However, according to him «the logic of the market is incomplete without a moral logic».⁹⁷ In other words, the author's goal is to underline that societies need to have some sort of moral dimensions, and that the neoliberalism rationality is precisely affecting this and this is why is very dangerous. By giving to everything and everyone a price, that is making everything and everyone products buyable and sellable on the market, the consequence is that morality of the system is questioned. In particular, there are two major objections to this approach, the most dangerous one is linked to corruption warns against the degradation of some realities when they are treated as goods. Indeed, assigning a price to good things can corrupt them and resorting to economic incentives in a non-market context can change people's behavior and remove moral and civic commitments.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Ivi, p.45.

⁹⁶ Sandel, M. J. *Quello che i soldi non possono comprare*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2015.

⁹⁷ Ivi, p.83.

⁹⁸ Ivi, p.120.

3.4 Thinking of some alternatives

With respect to the issues raised, there are not obvious solutions, and the goal of this essay is just to give an overview about the condition of inequality, its consequences and its links with neoliberalism. Often the discourse about inequality is limited to global inequality, which is the big differences between the North and the South of the world. However, it could be a new perspective to analyse inequalities within the north of the world, because this approach allows to understand that western societies are replicating the same retorics and the same rationality also among their citizens. The last part of this essay will be dedicated to start a debate about inequalities and possible solutions, starting from the idea that the first thing to discuss about is how to find an alternative to neoliberalism. It is important to begin from this startpoint because it would be impossible to speak about reducing inequalities without considering that it is the neoliberal system which legitimates, perpetuates and protects them. This is a very urgent debate, because the fundamental questions of living together that are not addressed will not remain unsolved, but « the markets will solve them for us.»⁹⁹

In this regard, is worth to mention that there is a philosophical strand that is questioning the new rationality imposed with neoliberalism, especially in the field of knowledge. This approach is called Decolonial Thinking, which is an epistemological framework with the strategy to overcome cognitive injustices promoted by western dominant thought. Therefore, it is a perspective of the subalternities, the marginalized, those who have been silenced, repressed, demonized and devalued. The global dominant order used, within its structure, methods of repression and expropriation, supplemented by the imposition of rules, and the objective is social and cultural control. In this sense, repression was beyond physical, violence of was internalized, and this could happen, within the international system, because the patterns created by the west were seductive due to access to power and status. Besides, it imposed the western thought as the ultimate modernity in a unilinear line of history and development, in which the acquisition and production of knowledge were determined by dominant rules. This approach focuses on the

⁹⁹ Ivi, p.201.

inequalities between the western societies and the rest of the world, however it could be useful to apply the same discourse also within western societies. For a way of thinking to become dominant, it is necessary to set up a conceptual machinery that can solicit intuitions and instincts, values and desires, as well as the inherent possibilities of the social world in which it will be established. Once proven fit for purpose, this conceptual apparatus becomes so entrenched in common sense that it appears taken for granted and is no longer questioned. The founders of neoliberal thought adopted as foundations, that is, as «core values of civilization», the political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom.¹⁰⁰ This was a wise choice, since these are concepts with undoubted seductive power. These values, in their view, were threatened not only by fascism, communism and dictatorships, but also by all those forms of state intervention that substituted the free will of individuals for collective decisions.

Karl Marx wrote that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their lives, but it is the conditions of their lives that determine their consciousness".¹⁰¹ This shift in perspective is emblematic for understanding how inequality is not only a structural problem but also a political choice implemented by the dominant social class, which promotes and carries out inequality-generating mechanisms. So, the aim of this essay has been to shed light on this issue, which certainly has no ready-made or obvious solutions, but which is a valuable startpoint for many debates and discussions. The first important food for thought about what might be the first step toward a new response to the structural inequalities of Western societies can be found in Gramsci's theory of organic intellectuals. In fact, while in prison, Gramsci wondered about the role that intellectuals could play in political-cultural processes and understood that there was in the society of his time a strong need for the ideological-cultural formation of the proletariat. In fact, culture is necessary for the process of social liberation, as it enables "the awareness of one's own historical value," which is necessary to enact revolutionary change.¹⁰² Today, the proletariat is no longer such a defined and united social

¹⁰⁰ Harvey, D. *Breve storia del neoliberalismo*, Il Saggiatore, Milano, 2007, p. 123.

¹⁰¹ Hunter, D. *Chav solidarity*, Alegre edizioni, Roma, 2020, p.4.

¹⁰² Gramsci, A. *Quaderni dal carcere*, Editori internazionali riuniti, Roma, 2012, p. 113.

class, but certainly the problem of the dominated class not having historical self-consciousness remains as relevant as ever.

Indeed, one of the consequences of the extreme individualism in which Western societies are immersed is the refusal to think of themselves in terms of class. To this, one must then add the refusal on the part of the ruling class to surrender its privileges, and the reluctance of the political class to take charge of this issue. In this regard, it is interesting to note how political parties, even when they address the issue of inequality, they do so from a paternalistic perspective. Even radical left-wing activism is often exclusionary because activists with material and cultural resources tend to think in the same patterns that contribute to the consolidation of inequality and that is in terms of what is considered right, lawful, and worth defending and what is not (those who do sex work, illegal migrants, those who steal, etc.) and what is not (those who do not).¹⁰³ However, this dichotomy leaves out the real protagonists of discrimination. If the goal is to fight racism, the right way is to give voice and public space to nonwhites; if the aim is changing the patriarchal conception of society, the tool must be to listen to those who do not belong to the male gender. Likewise, if the goal is to implement a serious strategy aimed at eliminating extreme inequality, the starting point must be giving voice and space to those who personally experience economic precarity. People continue to reject the idea that it should be the oppressed who decide their own form of resistance, yet only the oppressed, once they become aware of their condition, have the tools and the will to sustain this battle toward change. To date, the political class is unable to conceive the concepts of liberty and equality beyond those of state, citizenship and rights, thus without the figures of a superordinate and sovereign institution.

One example that goes into the direction of re-thinking about the neoliberal approach in political decision-making, is the discussion around the taxation of the rich. In economy, there is a theory known as trickle-down theory, which refers to an idea of economic development based on the dogma that the economic benefits of the most advantaged parts of the population, will also benefit the rest. Promoters of this theory assume that company owners, savers,

¹⁰³ Hunter, D. *Chav solidarity*, Alegre edizioni, Roma, 2020, p73.

and investors drive growth, because they will expand businesses using any extra cash from tax cuts. For example, owners will hire workers and invest in operations; banks will increase lending, and investors will buy more stocks and companies. Then, all of this expansion will trickle down to the working class, where they will drive demand and economic growth by spending their wages.

Therefore, this theory associates the industrial production to a general improvement of the economic conditions of the population, but it does not take into account the inequalities in the distribution of welfare. In particular, it does not consider how much phenomena like poverty and unemployment affects the possibility of generating a trickle-down effect, especially in conditions of extreme inequalities and great economic growth.

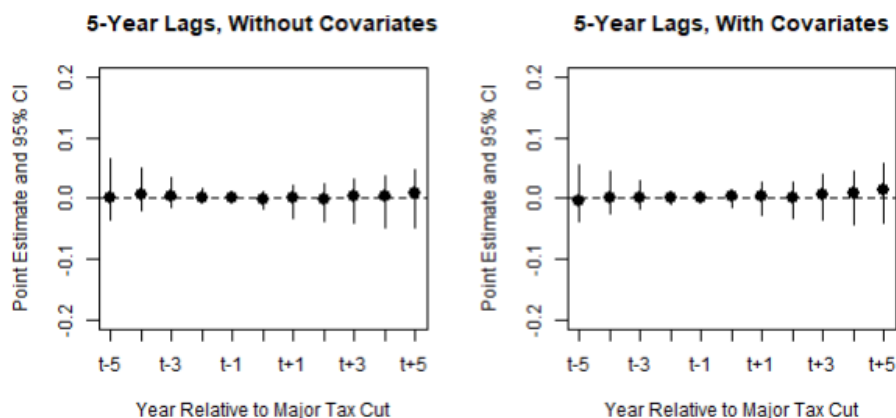
During Reagan's administration, his policies (known as Reaganomics) made it seem that trickle-down economics worked since they helped to end the 1980 recession. However, even if it is true that he cut the top tax rate from 70% for people earning \$108,000 or more down to 28% for those earning \$18,500 or more and he also cut the corporate tax rate down from 46% to 40%, trickle-down economics wasn't the only reason for the recovery.¹⁰⁴ In addition to the tax cuts, Reagan increased the government's spending by 2.5% a year, and he also tripled the federal debt. It went from \$997 billion in 1981 to \$2.85 trillion eight years later in 1989.¹⁰⁵ Most of this spending went to defense, supporting Reagan's efforts to bring down the Soviet Union and end the Cold War. Because of these other factors, Reagan never tested trickle-down economics in its pure form. It's very likely that his huge amounts of spending played just as large a role as trickle-down economics in ending the recession.

Furthermore, the research conducted by David Hope e Julian Limberg about the Economic Consequences of Major Tax Cuts for the Rich, demonstrated how the trickle-down theory is actually an illusion, because major tax cuts for the rich do not lead to higher growth in either the short or medium term:

¹⁰⁴ Etebari, M. *Trickle-down economics: four reasons why it just doesn't work*, United for a fair economy, 2003.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem.

Figure 4, Effect of major tax cuts for the rich on (log) real GDP per capita after matching on treatment trajectory and treatment trajectory with covariates.



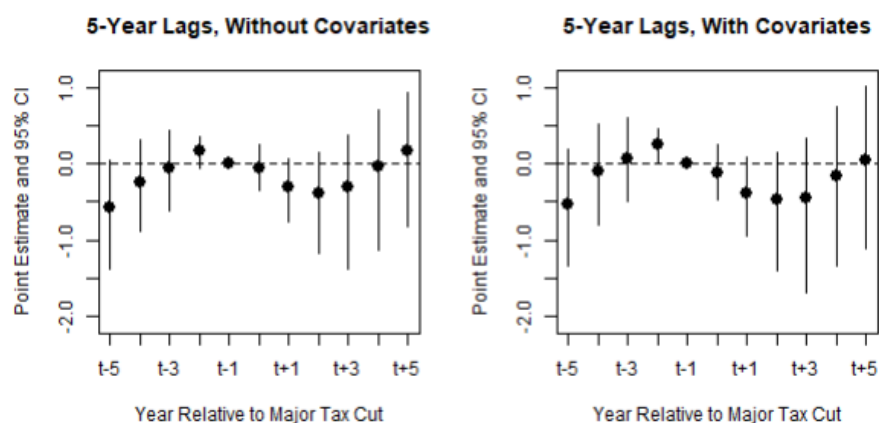
Source: Authors' own calculations, Hope and Limberg (2020).¹⁰⁶

These results suggest that tax reforms do not lead to higher economic growth. The effect size of major tax cuts for the rich on real GDP per capita is close to zero and statistically insignificant. Moreover, the authors also investigate whether there was a Trickle-down effect in the field of unemployment, connected to tax cuts for the richest. Also in this case, although the results show very slight indications of a flash in the pan effect of tax cuts for the rich on unemployment, these findings are neither statistically significant nor robust¹⁰⁷:

Figure 5, effect of major tax cuts for the rich on unemployment rates after matching on treatment trajectory and treatment trajectory with covariates.

¹⁰⁶ Hope, D. and Limberg, J. *The Economic Consequences of Major Tax Cuts for the Rich*, international inequalities institute, working paper 55, 2020, p.17.

¹⁰⁷ Ivi, p.20.



Source: Authors' calculations.

These results are important because they have significant implications for current debates around the economic consequences of taxing the rich, as they provide causal evidence that supports the growing pool of evidence that cutting taxes on the rich increases top income shares, but has little effect on economic performance. In opposition to this economic theory, there is a policy proposal that is based on precisely the opposite theory of trickle down, namely the idea that it is distributive policy that generates more wealth. The above proposal is that of universal basic income, first suggested by two Belgian authors, Van Parijs and Vanderborght.¹⁰⁸

The two scholars argue for the ethical roots of this proposal, conceived as a transfer of money disbursed to everyone, regardless of resources possessed and willingness to work. The basic idea is that universal income would grant each citizen the security necessary to enable each to be free. One downside that supporters of the universal basic income analyze is that this could induce people to stop working, but they counter that the measure simply aims to make everyone benefit from wealth that to date only the privileged receive, even if they did not create it.¹⁰⁹

This proposal, considered radical to this day by most people and considered unfair because it does not reflect the meritocratic dictate, allows people not to be forced to accept degrading jobs and goes in the direction of eradicating the income-human value association of individuals. The Universal Basic Income

¹⁰⁸ Van Parijs, P. e Vanderborght, Y. Il reddito di base, una proposta radicale, Il Mulino, Bologna 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Ivi, p.173.

is one of the few viable solutions to eliminate class injustice, including in the creative field, and restore justice to one of the most unjust sectors. Art, information, culture and entertainment would be revolutionized: just think of what unexplored paths Humanity would take if we start giving space to the last and allow them to create without external constraints. The bold and controversial idea of recognizing a basic income for every individual, rich or poor, without asking for work quid pro quo in return does not appeal, at least to most. It involves questioning the idea of money, work, artistic production and even society.

3.5 What the 99% could do?

When the Cold War ended, the very lucky book from Francis Fukuyama stated that humanity was in front of a great change in human history, so big that the author stated it was the end of history. Indeed, the western narrative gives so much importance to the end of the Cold War because it truly represents the birth of a new way of conducting international relations, but it is an illusion that in the XX century the ideologies ceased to exist. On the contrary, with the end of the Cold War just the communist ideology had had a decline, while the capitalist one has never stopped being hegemonic.

In 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement started to use as a slogan the sentence “we are the 99%”, to protest against the fact that the great majority of the population is paying for the mistakes of the 1% of the citizens. Understanding the complexity of modern western society through the lens of social inequality allows to grasp how power is declined within the society. Power is a complicate concept which deals with the organization of the society, the political stability, and it strongly contributes to crystalize the inequalities. The widening divide between rich and poor is a defining challenge of this time, and the need to find solutions to this issue is increasing.

Nowadays, this approach is starting to reveal its dark face, and it begins to show its limits, which are, as told before, one of the major causes of inequality in modern western States. However, thinking about some alternatives is still very difficult. Neoliberalism is a structure so overwhelming within the contemporary society, that is difficult to imagine something different. For this

reason, is not even possible to talk about propaganda, because this doctrine is not something that the institutions consciously enforce to the population through organizations, communication tools and so on. So, it is not a top-down phenomenon, on the contrary, this is an immanent one which permeates all levels of society in the same way. For this reason, it may seem that it is out of human control, and that it is impossible to change. However, it should be stressed once again that nothing in society is permanent, because everything is artificially and historically determined. If there is a protected minority in the world, it is the super-rich. In a system where economic power and political power are increasingly combined, wealth is a matter of power and threatens to negate the very principle of democracy. Possessing a great deal of wealth means being able to carry out lobbying activities, having the tools to circumvent tax systems, and having a great deal of influence over the media, thus imposing forms of cultural hegemony. Above all, the super rich class makes everyone else pay the cost of their externalities: those at the top of the social pyramid pollute more, and consume more, privatizing profits but collectivizing externalities.

«We are the 99%» were yelling those protesters. Nowadays, that *we* is something intangible, so far from reality in which there is only space for *I*. In the previous chapter, it has been showed how the meritocratic ideology actually represent an illusion for the great majority of people, because it gives the individual the instruments to dream bigger and bigger without actually provide him with the correct tools to achieve those dreams. In this sense, the freedom is a trap. Raise awareness around these topics is the first thing the 99% could do, and it is also the best possible way to have consciousness of all the structural psychological consequences of inequality described above. The concept of merit is inevitably related to the one of justice, and is juxtaposed with the condition of equality of opportunity, under which, everyone gets what he or she has earned. Equality of opportunity was described by Young as a *brilliant invention*, capable of fooling the citizens, who «did not realize that equality of opportunity meant equality of opportunity to be unequal».¹¹⁰ This merely individual perspective, which

¹¹⁰ Boarelli, M. *la tirannia del merito*, Laterza, Bari, 2019, p.107.

blames the individual for his or her failures, does not take sufficient account of the profoundly unequal starting conditions. Equality of opportunity at the policy level translates into the redistributive policies, because it cannot exist without equal access to education, and equal possibilities for everyone to reach their goals. As stressed in the first chapter, this does not mean that everyone should have the same things, or achieve the same goals, but, as Norberto Bobbio brilliantly argued:

«egalitarianism is to be understood not as the utopia of a society in which all are equal, but as a tendency, on the one hand, to exalt more what makes men equal than what makes them unequal and, on the other hand, practically to favor policies that aim to make the unequal more equal.»¹¹¹

Therefore, reduce inequalities does not mean reducing differences. The principle of equity was established just to protect differences, because it values every feature in the same way. It is not a matter of everyone getting the same results, it is a matter of everyone having the same chances.

The notion of entitlement

Rousseau, in the *Social contract*, wrote:

«it is slave thinking to think that those who dominate the world economically and politically deserve it.»¹¹²

This quote underlines perfectly how the dominated class actually contribute to preserve the privileges of the dominant ones. Social inequalities within society are very stable, this is because they are highly perceived as legitim, also from the average citizens, who does not benefit from them and, as explained in the second chapter, actually is receiving the negative effects of it as well. Inequality therefore plays a fundamental role in defining the attitudes of social classes. This can be explained by the concept of entitlement, which refers to the fact that members of the wealthiest social classes are convinced that they have more rights than others, that they deserve more and that they are more important. So, it is a cognitive judgment,¹¹³

¹¹¹ Ibidem.

¹¹² Volpato, C. *Le radici psicologiche della disuguaglianza*, Roma, Laterza, 2019, p.33.

¹¹³ Ivi, p.110.

which affects how member of the society associates persons and the goals achieved. Therefore, member of different classes will have different measures to judge success, and this contributes to the crystallization of inequality. Moreover, this forms of legitimization of inequality are linked to the human need of feeling to have the control over their life and their choices, which is a psychological need, and it is also the reason why is difficult to accept that meritocracy is can be questioned. Generally, the higher a person is in the social pyramid, the stronger he will attribute causes of social inequality to the individuals.¹¹⁴

Therefore, it has been showed as inequality is a structural problem, in the sense that it is caused by political choices and it is connected to the way the society is conceived, but due to the meritocratic ideology and the increasingly importance that neoliberal rationality gives to the individuals, people think that it is a matter of personal choices, and personal mistakes. It is important to note, in this regard, that extreme poverty is considered and treated as a social problem of the community, but the same does not happen with extreme richness, even if it has been demonstrated how the consequences are affecting everyone. Therefore, it appears clear that extreme inequality can be reduced only if the strategy to look for the solution change. The condition of poverty generates serious psychological consequences on individuals, which the state must recognize.

With an example which perfectly fits the concept, Jason Hickel explains what the State should do:

« Imagine being near a river with a rushing current. You notice a person in the middle of the rapids crying for help, and like good swimmers you dive in to save him. As you return to the shore to bring the other person back to safety, and catch your breath, you notice that there is yet another person crying out for help in the river. Again, you dive in to rescue her, but in the meantime, you notice that there is yet another person. Then, you will probably think about going and calling other people to help you in rescuing those at sea. But as you devote yourselves to this and the hours go by, perhaps you had better

¹¹⁴ Ivi, p.111.

go upstream in the mountain to find out why all these people are falling into the river.»¹¹⁵

This story is very useful because it allows to understand that a problem cannot be fixed by acting on its symptoms, but it must be dealt with at the origin of it. To do this, and in order to find a solution which is efficient and which actually solve the problem, it is important to firstly define very clearly what the problem is. Extreme inequality is a very complicate and multi-dimensional issue, but it is just for this reason that the need to find the real clue of it is fundamental.

As stressed many time, the solution cannot be found at the individual level, therefore the most important necessity is to stop to conceive poverty and inequality as personal failures, and start considering them as collective ones.

¹¹⁵ Hickel, J. *The Divide, guida per risolvere la disuguaglianza globale*, il Saggiatore, Milano, 2018, p.245.

Conclusion

Wanting to sum up what has been said so far, it seems clear that inequality is a structural issue, that is, linked to policy choices that perpetuate mechanisms designed to generate and increase inequality. However, the social perception is that inequality is an individual issue, linked to the concepts of justice and merit. In particular, there was a focus on the concept of merit and the consequences of this ideological framework. Society should reward the best ones, meritocracy does not exist but the goal is to strive for its achievement. This is one of those beliefs that grows up with every individual and that no one would question during a debate or dispute around the interests of a community. Yet, as written in the preceding pages, the proportional relationship that is made between an individual's income and his or her worth as a person creates very dangerous damage.

Moreover, the inability to govern one's own time independently and the difficulty of reconciling it with one's private life are health risk factors. According to the findings of numerous studies and to what numerous institutional agencies claim, these conditions can lead individuals to exclusion, depression, or harmful forms of stress and anxiety.

Questioning about the many collective automatisms that move and regulate the morals and institutions of modern civilization, and questioning beliefs and practices, first and foremost on the individual level, is one of the goals of this essay. Indeed, active participation in political debate is the fundamental characteristic of a democratic society. In these early years of the 21st century, however, a growing passivity is manifesting towards politics. Realism requires people to believe that the enormous inequality in which they are immersed is normal and that there is no alternative; redistribution seems utopian. In reality, as seen in the first chapter, inequality is a historically determined phenomenon, not innate and necessary in societies of men. In fact, gatherer societies have been shown to be fundamentally egalitarian societies. Custom is a collective automatism, and like all collective automatisms it

always works but is not always effective. By analyzing social inequalities in relation to the complex phenomena of modern societies, such as the crisis of liberal democracy and the neoliberalism rationality, allows to have a deeper perspective of the causes and to better identify the sickness of the system.

The most problematic aspect which emerges from the analysis is the general incapacity to conceive a different system, because the neoliberal rationality is so immanent in every aspect of life that is impossible to separate it from every way in which individuals process knowledge. Inequality, as a fundamental aspect of neoliberal rationality, became legitimate condition, and unquestionable. However, the great limitation of collective automatisms lies precisely in their uncritical activation, which in fact takes the form of castration of the reflective phase. The strength of customs lies precisely in the fact that they are often not questioned, and are accepted as they are.

In addition, there is a prejudice that has conditioned how history is conceived for centuries: men are selfish, bent on evil and war, on setting themselves against each other. No wonder that, since time immemorial, the rules and laws that bring order to the society have been inspired by the idea that people, because of their nature, are not to be trusted. This cynical view of humanity comes from centuries of philosophy and psychology, is full of echoes in literature and evidence in history. In short, it is everywhere. And although there has been some attempt in history to prove the goodness of human nature, selfishness and cynicism are the oldest ideas in western thought. Therefore, the society is organized accordingly. In his studies, Rutger Bregman tried to tell a new, non-cynical version of the last 200,000 years of human history, showing that we were made for kindness and are predisposed to cooperation far more than competition.¹¹⁶

Another macro-theme addressed in the text and on which it is worth picking up the threads is that of the relationship between inequality and politics, and in particular on the loss of interest of people from more disadvantaged social classes in politics. This happens because people no longer feel represented, and this problem is mainly found in left-wing political parties, which are no longer able to aggregate and represent the demands of the working class and

¹¹⁶ Bergman, R. *Una nuova storia (non cinica) dell'Umanità*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2019.

people living on the margins of society. One reflection that needs to be made on this issue is that of the snobbery and arrogance that, often, activist leftists, who are therefore often part of higher social classes and have a high level of education, implement towards the marginalized people. Ignorance, especially on the left, is the easy answer to complex phenomena. Associating ignorance with what it is believed to be evil is a serious mistake that risks making it difficult to understand reality. Nowadays, it is often said that, with access to an almost infinite amount of information on the Web, ignorance is a choice. At the same time, however, this reasoning fails to take into account the psychological and social consequences of inequality, which were briefly outlined in Chapter Two. Indeed, this attitude toward low voter turnout or rising support for the most populist parties is characteristic of cultural elites, who make ignorance a disgrace and a problem to be eradicated. To believe that racism, homophobia and patriarchy (or any other phenomenon deemed negative) can be defeated by providing those who do not know with books and research is as unthinkable as it is naive. On the one hand, proceeding by reverse reasoning, because it would mean believing the false assumption that those who know-or worse, those with degrees-cannot be moved by evil principles or unvirtuous actions. False as well as dangerous assumption. Human history is full of convincingly racist intellectuals, intolerant professors or misogynistic rulers. On the other one, because, choosing to be ignorant is never really a choice. For example: developing in a socio-economic context where knowledge is not a virtue most often causes an inhibition of the willing to know, or at least to want to know in its most common and institutionalized sense. This happens as early as the first years of life (at age 5) and changes the brain structures of individuals, who will continue to feel no need to conform to intellectual elites, from whom they will feel rejected and humiliated. Being born in the lucky cradle, on the other hand, incentivizes the acquisition of cultural capital, a necessary tool for people to emancipate themselves and achieve-at least in theory-a privileged position in society. Children of families from the most affluent percentiles of the population perform better in school, on average, as early as the first year of elementary school, pulling away from their poor peers by several months in terms of development and learning.

The gap between those who know and those who do not know is not the result of a deliberate choice of individuals but, on a large scale, the effect of an atavistic injustice that leaves wounds that are difficult to heal in the neurological and social fields. To think, therefore, that knowledge is a self-supporting legitimation of superiority is dangerous. For it makes the victims of an unjust system enemies.

Less studied and much more dangerous than the specular Placebo, Nocebo is the negative effect on body and mind of negative thinking or low expectations. Practically, the Nocebo effect can be summarized with the following example: in convincing myself that I am a bad person I will make myself a bad person, because my brain will try to make its own narrative production consistent and will adapt my every behavior so that expectations are not betrayed. It happens every day with acquaintances, with opponents, with own selves. And of course with society.

Imagining a society of individuals disconnected from each other and in eternal competition (like the self-styled rational theories proposed too often in business schools) produces a society of individuals disconnected from each other and in eternal competition.

What emerges in this analysis is the deep need to bring back politics in the private spheres, and to learn again how to search for solutions collectively. In order to explain better, it is worth to highlight once again what has been underlined about the psychological consequences of inequality, and in particular about depression. Indeed, inequality and neoliberalism way of approaching society increase depressions, but it is important to note that mental illness is never just a private matter. The diagnosis of depression tells what the individual feel or what they are suffering from but tells nothing about the historical, economic, and political drives that have fueled or generated the condition in which they live. To claim that, for example, depression may have a political root is not to deny the medical-neurological causes of the pathology, but neither is it to adhere to the naive belief that a psychologist could take charge of the contradictions of a system that crushes people and aggravates their weaknesses. Politicizing illness means not being satisfied with resisting or anesthetizing problems, but re-reading them in their

multidimensional sphere, encompassing causes and effects of both an individual and, indeed, collective nature. Repoliticizing mental illness is a collective act that is good for everyone because it tries to act on dimensions that are scientifically marginalized but central to all existence. And the same thing should be done in every aspect of the social issues affected by inequality: culture, work, education, discrimination, violence, etc.

If the goal is to make all life to matter, the only way is to give attention to the ones that are yet to matter. It means building a happy society that gives everyone the right to be unhappy, because a happy society is one that takes care of all those left behind, regardless of cause or cost.

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