

65. Equality as a valued social norm, inequality as an injustice

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Social attitudes to inequality are a critical factor in the politics of change. Unless inequality itself is seen as a problem, and equality is held as a social value by politicians, activists and the public at large, there will be no agitation or support for corrective measures. Is inequality bad in and of itself, and is equality a valuable end? Few would argue for a society of completely equal outcomes. Inequality that results from differences in effort and ability is widely accepted as legitimate, as both a just reward and a necessary incentive for hard work. So what kind and what level of inequality is unacceptable? At what point does public opinion turn to finding inequality excessive or extreme?

In much of the economics literature, these questions have been approached on the basis of self-interested median voters framed in rational choice theory, whose support for redistribution depends on their relative income position. People at the lower end of the income distribution are more likely to vote for redistributive policies which, when supported by the 'median voter', would lead to policy change (see e.g. Alesina and Rodrik, 1994). They reject inequality caused by unfair advantages of birth and connection (Alesina and Angeletos, 2005). This approach neglects two important and interrelated factors: social norms valuing equality, and the effect of income inequality on political power.

Inequality is inherently about fairness and social justice. Regardless of their position on income distribution, many view extreme inequality as morally wrong and unfair, a position that forms part of their ethical values (Sen, 2000). Such views are often socially constructed, and shaped by cultural norms. Societies vary in the value they place on equality, and in their rejection or tolerance of inequality.

Inter-country variations – consistently observed in surveys¹ – can be explained less by factors such as levels of economic development, levels of inequality, and the nature of active redistributive policies, than by history and cultural beliefs. Using data from twenty-six countries, Lubker (2006) found that intolerance for inequality and public support for redistribution are not driven by the level of inequality, but instead by social justice norms. Suhrcke (2001), in a study of Europe, found important differences between East and West, attributable to a historically entrenched cultural norm. Reducing inequality and winning public support for redistribution therefore requires shifts in cultural values.

Inequality regarded as social injustice is concerned with wealth that leads to political capture. Indeed, contemporary advocates for attacking inequality, from the protesters (Ortiz et al., 2014) to Joseph Stiglitz (2012) to Oxfam (2014), do not argue that inequality is excessive in the abstract, but as it relates to structures of power and the working of markets and politics. The grievance is not just against the distribution of income and wealth in itself, but with the perception that it is driven by policies and institutions that are unfair, pitted in favour of the wealthy, and active in perpetuating a vicious circle of ever-increasing inequality.

Note

1. Such as the World Values Survey (www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp) and the Social Inequality Survey of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) (www.issp.org/).

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This article features in the World Social Science Report 2016, UNESCO and the ISSC, Paris.

The World Social Science Report 2016 was published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France and the International Social Science Council (ISSC), 1 rue Miollis, 75732 Paris Cedex 15, France.

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Original title: *World Social Science Report 2016 –*

Challenging Inequalities: Pathways to a Just World – ISBN 978-92-3-100164-2



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The *World Social Science Report 2016* is a collaborative effort made possible by the support and contributions of many people. It was financed by generous contributions from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), UNESCO, as part of its Framework Agreement with the ISSC, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), as well as the European Science Foundation (ESF), Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), the Research Council of Norway, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, and the Swedish Research Council.

Graphic and cover design: Corinne Hayworth

Typeset and printed by: UNESCO

The World Social Science Report 2016 was prepared by the ISSC and the IDS and co-published with UNESCO

The Report is available online at: en.unesco.org/wssr2016

Hard copies are available from UNESCO Publishing:

http://publishing.unesco.org/details.aspx?&Code_Livre=5160&change=E

This report should be cited as follows: ISSC, IDS and UNESCO (2016), *World Social Science Report 2016, Challenging Inequalities: Pathways to a Just World*, UNESCO Publishing, Paris.



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The Report is supported by The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)