

Democracy and Inequalities

A Tampere Club Discussion Paper

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I. Introduction

In August 2005, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs presented its *2005 Report on the World Social Situation (RWSS)*. These reports are issued every other year, and usually have a particular focus indicated by a subtitle. That year's subtitle is *The Inequality Predicament*. The report "sounds the alarm over persistent and deepening inequality worldwide". Among other things, it refers to:

"the widening gap between skilled and unskilled workers, ... growing disparities in health, education and opportunities for social, economic and political participation [...] the inter-generational transmission of poverty [...] In developed countries, the income gap has been especially pronounced in Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States ... Inequalities in life expectancy have widened dramatically." (Quoted from the Executive Summary and other parts of the online press package)

Economic growth, it is observed, has not been able to reduce inequality:

"In fact, despite considerable economic growth in many regions, the world is more unequal than it was 10 years ago." (Factors taken into account include economic as well as non-economic ones: income, jobs; health, education, life expectancy, gender situation ...)

Just a week earlier, the German weekly *DIE ZEIT* printed an article under the title "One continent, two worlds" sounding a similar alarm, specifically about social inequalities within the EU. Among the data reported there, the following could be found:

* Average life expectancy in Cyprus is 76 years, in Estonia only 66 years.²

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2 Note that the difference here is 'only' one of 10 years. On the global scale, according to the data given in the 2005 RWSS, in 2000 only 83 out of a total

* Average purchasing power in the richest district within the EU (Inner London) amounted to 315% of EU average and 10 times the average purchasing power in the poorest district (Lubelskie, Poland), amounting to only 32% of EU average (Eurostat data).

The article, moreover, alleges that Princeton economist Paul Krugman expects social inequalities between world regions to increase rather than decrease. Jan Delhey, a sociologist from Berlin, is reported to conclude that “we will have to learn to live with much greater inequality as in the past”. All this leads the authors of the article to ask “the question no-one in Brussels dares to ask officially: How much inequality can the EU take?”

Earlier that same year, Tony Judt compared social indicators in the US and the EU, reporting among other things that

„the EU has 87 prisoners per 100,000 people; America has 685“ (37)

„Back in 1980 the average American chief executive earned forty times the average manufacturing employee [sic!]. For the top tier of American CEOs, the ratio is now 475:1 ... By way of comparison, the ratio in Britain is 24:1, in France 15:1, in Sweden 13:1.“ (37)

„In the US today the richest 1 percent holds 38 percent of the wealth ... Meanwhile one American adult in five is in poverty – compared with one in fifteen in Italy.“ („Following the OECD definition of a family income less than 50 percent of the mean personal income of the nation.“) (38)

„The US contains just 5 percent of the world’s population (and falling), but it is responsible for 25 percent of the world’s greenhouse gas output per annum.“ (39)

These three recent examples of concern publicly voiced over the state and trends of social inequalities, within and between countries and regions, manifest the topicality of the issue.

The purpose of the following remarks, however, is not an assessment of whether the alarm bells are rung for good reason or perhaps out of a false alarmism; rather, it is to offer an ideational toolkit for reflections

of 192 countries had an average life expectancy of less than 10 years less than that of Japan; of the remaining ca. 110 countries, again only about half had average life expectancies between 10-20 years lower than Japan; the other half had more than 20 and up to 50 years less of average life expectancy than Japan (most of these were in the 30-40 years bracket). Compared to 1990, there are now more countries in the best-off and in the worst-off groups and less in the middle ranges, i. e. the gap between the country averages has widened.

on the possible linkage between democracy and inequality. To this avail, some distinctions and connections will be recalled which may be useful as an analytical framework for the discussion which, I propose, can be divided into four sections for each of which I will formulate a thesis and an open question.

II. (In)Equality

There are hardly two people in the world whose situations are exactly the same with respect to anything, beyond the mere biological factors responsible for their belonging to the same species. Similarity is the great exception rather than the rule. And yet, (in)equality seems to be a quite natural matter of concern. This warrants a bit of analysis.

1) Natural and Conventional (In)Equalities

When Rousseau wrote about “the origin of inequality among men”, this implied that he viewed inequality as something that does not exist naturally but is, somehow, brought about in the course of events. Actually, he was concerned with very specific issues: he is not speaking of genes, but of power and wealth. He seems to sense that this needs some explanation, since he expressly explains that there are natural and conventional inequalities:

„Je conçois dans l’Espece humaine deux sortes d’inégalité; l’une que j’appelle naturelle ou Physique, parce qu’elle est établie par la Nature ...; L’autre qu’on peut appeler inégalité morale, ou politique, parce qu’elle dépend d’une sorte de convention, et qu’elle est établie, ou du moins autorisée par le consentement des Hommes. Celle-ci consiste dans les differents Privileges, dont quelques-uns jouissent, au préjudice des autres, comme d’être plus riches, plus honorés, plus Puissants qu’eux, ou mêmes de s’en faire obéir.“ (Rousseau, *Discours ...*, 1985, 47)

It is certainly no arbitrary choice that his essay treats only the latter; but he apparently does not see the deeper reason for that choice.

Tocqueville, in turn, with his strong hypotheses about the inevitable progress of equality in the world, didn’t think it necessary (as far as I remember) to mention the distinction between natural and socially established differences.

2) The Difference of Difference

Tocqueville thus avoided a confusion that Rousseau seems to have

fallen into: namely, that between *difference* and *inequality*. While the former is a value-neutral term of mere classification, the latter -- at least when applied to people, their features, or the treatment they receive -- seems to have a negative normative connotation, indicating the lack of a similarity that presumably *ought* to obtain (prescriptively) or *ought* to be assumed (ascriptively) – in short: the lack of an equality. Therefore, strictly speaking the opposite of difference should not be equality, but similarity or sameness.

That people ought to be similar rather than different is a claim rarely made; that people ought to be equal rather than unequal in some respect is a common claim.

Merely nominal, non-gradable differences cannot be candidates for a diagnosis of inequality, thus understood, because they offer no standard of comparison, as a basis for a negative evaluation. On the other hand, certainly not all gradable differences – i. e. differences that can come in various degrees – amount to inequalities: apples and pears *as such* are different in a non-gradable way; and they are different *as to their sweetness* in a gradable way, but not therefore unequal; people are different in a gradable way as to their income, wealth, talents, age, effective rights ..., and may be unequal in each respect (cf. Urmson 1961 on “grading”).

Natural differences that cannot be changed do not amount to inequalities either: By nature, people are all *different*, not unequal – on the contrary: equality is often ascribed to them (“... created equal ...”).

3) Equality/Inequality vs. Universality/Particularity

It also seems advisable not to confuse equality with the universality or generality of rules. The call for “equal justice”, e. g., refers to the *universality* of the normative claims of justice, not to *equality* in any substantial sense.

Felix Oppenheim (1981) has analysed the “egalitarianism” of rules: What does it mean that a rule is more or less egalitarian? In his view, the question arises with “rules of distribution” – of benefits and burdens – only. Since policies, in the last instance, are expressed in norms (rules, laws), his observations apply to distributive political decisions in general.³

Oppenheim wants to do away with the “favorable connotation of the word ‘equality’ which accounts for the tendency to confuse the descriptive

³ In fact, Oppenheim himself sometimes speaks of “policies” instead of “rules” in the course of his chapter.

content of egalitarianism with the moral notion of justice” (118). I think this approach is itself somewhat confused: ‘egalitarianism’ here refers to ‘equal treatment’, where ‘equal’ does indeed have a “descriptive content”; but that has little to do with the “favorable connotation of the word ‘equality’” (restricted as its application is to people and their situation).

In any case, Oppenheim makes useful distinctions between a “reference group”, i. e. “a class of persons to whom the rule is meant to apply”, and a “selected group”, i. e. “a subclass of the reference group to whom the benefit or burden is to be allocated” (96 f.), on the one hand, and “rules of selection” which “stipulate that members of the reference group who have a certain additional characteristic shall be selected” into the selected group, and “rules of apportionment” which “stipulate that the amount of some specified benefit [...] or burden [...] to any member of the selected group shall be proportionate to the degree to which he has a certain additional characteristic” (97). Both rules of selection and rules of apportionment can be more or less egalitarian in some sense; but egalitarianism means different things with respect to one and the other, which must not to be confused:

“Wrt [with respect to] a given reference group, a rule of distribution of fixed benefits or burdens is the more egalitarian, the greater the ratio of the selected group to the reference group.” (Oppenheim 1981, 99)⁴

“Inegalitarian rules of apportionment may also be called rules of proportionality, since they stipulate that the amount of some specified benefit or burden apportioned to any member of the selected group shall be a function of – or, synonymously, shall be proportional to – the degree to which he has a certain characteristic.” (ibid., 105)

Besides, any (rule stipulating an) exception to a previously existing rule of distribution is “necessarily inegalitarian” (ibid., 100).

To avoid confusion and misunderstandings, it seems advisable to stick to the language of universality and generality of rules for most of what Oppenheim calls their “egalitarianism”, using the latter only concerning the “apportionment” aspect.

4) *Equality and Justice*

Since Aristotle, certain kinds of equality – of treatment and distribution – have been regarded as the core elements of justice, and the cor-

⁴ This is not obvious: an alternative would be to look not only at the extent of the selected group but also at the extent of those left out of the selected group; Oppenheim argues, plausibly, against this alternative.

responding inequalities as unjust. Perhaps the most recent prominent manifestation of this close conceptual connection between inequalities and injustice is the fact that the title of Brian Barry's latest book on equality⁵ is "Why Social Justice Matters".

Concern about inequalities is fundamentally concern about injustice.

III. Democracy and Equality

What, then, has democracy to do with the issue of equality? The answer obviously depends to a great extent on what is understood by democracy and on what consequences this has for an answer to the question "why equality?"; only if that is understood can one see what bearings each conception of democracy has on the different dimensions of the "equality of what?" issue, such as:

- equal satisfaction of basic needs
- equal benefits/burdens
- equal chance
- equal access
- equal opportunity (Oppenheim 1981, 110 ff.).

I will here recall, very briefly, only a few versions of the concept of democracy that seem to make the greatest difference for the question "why equality?", and point out what that difference is.

1) Democracy as (the Political System of) Justice

If, in the most demanding conception, 'democracy' is understood as the name of a political system that is responsible for the justice of social arrangements, then certain kinds of equality, via their connection to justice, are conceptually necessary for a political system to qualify as a democracy. In this case, of course, the entire debate about which kinds of inequalities are unjust becomes relevant, in order to determine (a) what democracy ought, ideally, to be like and (b) whether and by what institutional means this ideal could be approximated.

⁵ As he explains in the Preface, *Culture and Equality* (2000) had originally been intended to include a first part on culture and a second part on equality, but never got beyond the topic of culture, and the new book is now "the second part of that projected book" (Barry 2005, vii).

2) *Democracy as Political Expression of Freedom and Equality*

On a widely accepted, less sweeping moral conception of democracy, equality does not come into the game indirectly, via justice, but directly: Freedom and equality are seen by many as the two values underlying claims for the moral superiority of democracy over other types of political systems.

But there are two different views about the relationship between the two values:

* One – prominent in the *liberal* camp – holds them to be basically incompatible, an increase in one always coming with the price of a decrease in the other. Trade-offs are possible, and the debate is about the optimal combination of degrees of liberty and equality.

* The other – pertaining to the *republican* camp⁶ – holds that even if liberty has axiological priority, equality (in some respects) is an enabling condition for liberty, and hence the two values must be realized together:

„Si l'on recherche en quoi consiste précisément le plus grand bien de tous, qui doit être la fin de tout système de législation, on trouvera qu'il se réduit à ces deux objets principaux, la liberté et l'égalité. La liberté, parce que toute dépendance particulière est autant de force ôtée au corps de l'État; l'égalité, parce que la liberté ne peut subsister sans elle.” (Rousseau, *Contrat social*, Livre II, Chap. XI)

Young (1996, 482 ff.) offers a useful overview over the different strands of thinking in recent scholarship about the relationships between democracy, liberty, and social equality. She distinguishes *Nozick* at one end (only liberty counts, and is incompatible with an active promotion of social equality), *Rawls* on a middle position (both liberty and equality count, and are compatible), and a bunch of others (*Ackerman*, *Goodin*,

⁶ For a quick reference to the distinctive traits of republicanism, cf. Knud Haakonssen, Art. Republicanism, in: R. E. Goodin and Ph. Pettit (eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell 1993, 568–574, with more references. The core argument is captured in the following sentence: „The contemporary revival of republican thought is centrally aimed at questioning [the] liberal democratic thesis [that the link between property and citizenship has been overcome], pointing out that the formal equality of citizens in the liberal democratic state is not reflected in the conduct of government, which instead is determined, not by the common weal, but by the particular, if not private, weal of interest groups and individuals“ (ibid, 570). For a more elaborate recent discussion, cf. Philip Pettit, *Republicanism. A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Oxford: Clarendon 1997 (note that the subtitle refers to freedom rather than equality).

Gutmann, Macpherson, Pateman, Sen, Sterba, Wellman) more recently arguing that liberty presupposes (certain kinds of) social equality:

“Equality can be best understood as compatible with freedom in this sense [of “an absence of domination and positive capacity for self-realization and self-determination”] ... Thus one aspect of contemporary democratic theory concerns articulation of the conditions of genuine democratic citizenship. People who are deeply deprived cannot be expected to exercise the virtues of democratic participation, and are seriously vulnerable to threats and coercion in the political process. Too often wealth or property function as what Michael Walzer (1982) calls ‘dominant’ goods: inequalities in these economic relations will generate inequalities in opportunity, power, influence, and the abilities to set one’s own ends. So serious commitment to democracy presupposes social measures that limit the degree of class inequality and guarantee that all citizens have their needs met ...” (Young 1996, 485)

At the opposite end of *Nozick*, Michael *Walzer* even seems to give precedence to equality over liberty, when (in the Introduction to *Walzer* 1999), he explains that the main consequence of the three ‘blind spots’ of liberal theory he identifies and treats in the book – “involuntary associations, social conflict, and passionate commitment” – is that they “make the struggle against inequality more difficult than it would need to be” (*ibide.*, 8). He is working, in his own view, towards a theory, “if at all possible, a liberal theory” in a “corrected”, “sociologically better informed and psychologically more open” version, that would be able to “explain and support” “democratic mobilization and solidarity” in favor of a greater concern with equality (*ibid.*, 9).

3) *Democracy as Popular Vote Plus Majority Principle*

If, instead, we take ‘democracy’ to mean merely universal suffrage, free competition for political office, and decision-making by majority, the range of conceptually relevant equalities is substantially reduced – basically, to equal opportunities for political participation.

However, equalities of other kinds may then still be empirically necessary conditions for the existence and stable persistence of a democratic system.

4) *Democracy and the Rule of Law*

‘Legal equality’ (or ‘equality before the law’) is often mentioned as an equality that is conceptually necessary for democracy to obtain. This can refer to several things:

* If it means that no-one should be exempted from the application of the law, it is a matter of an effective legal system rather than a matter of equality.

* If it means that legal provisions should not privilege certain social groups over others, it is a matter of Oppenheim's "egalitarianism of rules", concerning rules of selection or rules of apportionment. As pointed out above, the former refer to the generality of laws rather than to equality; only the latter directly involve equality as such.

IV. Democracy and Inequalities

These distinctions may perhaps serve as a useful analytical framework for an approach to our topic.

This topic has, I think, two sides:

We are, basically, interested in democratic systems and their institutions. The degree of inequality existing at any given point in time among the members (individual or collective) of a social system, with respect to all kinds of factors, may or may not have its causes in institutional features, of the same system or other social systems in its environment, and it may or may not have consequences for the institutional make-up of this same or other systems. (Such institutional causes or consequences may be usefully distinguished from other types of causes and consequences in the interplay between political democracy and the kinds and degree of inequality a democratic society displays.)

We may thus take on the topic with the purpose of contributing to the theory of democratic institutions, seeking to explain the emergence and persistence of democracies as far as it depends on (in)equalities; or we may take it on from the perspective of an institutional theory of (in)equality, seeking to explain degrees of (in)equality on the basis of democratic institutional factors. (And, of course, we can also combine the two and pursue, so to speak, an institutional theory of democratic institutions, seeking to explain whether and how democratic institutions can reproduce itself, at least concerning democracy's egalitarian prerequisites.)⁷

Under the label „Democracy and Inequality“, both types of questions are potentially interesting:

* In what way do (certain degrees of certain) inequalities in the various subsystems of a society affect the prospects of democratic

⁷ For an explanation of this distinction between institutional theory and the theory of institutions, cf. Diermeier/Krehbiel 2003.

institutions? To put it more bluntly: How much inequality (of what) can democracy take?

* And what effects might, or do, democratic institutions have on the equality or inequality found in the different social systems a society is composed of. In other words: What does/can democracy do to/about inequality?

Finally, it may be useful also to distinguish two general ways in which social inequalities may matter:

* An inequality may be a symptom, or indicator, of some kind of institutional failure.

* Or inequality may be a social bad in its own right.

Whether or not inequality is more than a symptom of some other bad, whether there are “Pathologies of Inequality” (Barry 2005, ch. 13) as such, at least from a democratic point of view, is one of the controversial questions we will need to discuss.

But for a start, we can use the idea that inequalities are symptoms of some kind of failure, and distinguish them according to whether they indicate a failure to implement:

1) Universal Principles and the General Rules of Democracy

Wherever a universal principle (e. g., a principle stipulating a universal right) is not effective, a corresponding inequality will eventually be found. Observed differences in life chances (health, life expectancy), when they accrue to (or: constitute) non-natural social groups, are often assumed to be such kinds of symptomatic inequalities indicating failures in the implementation of what are considered universal basic rights.⁸ The opposite implication does not hold, of course: not all inequalities – not even all social inequalities – indicate a violation of some universal right or principle. And it is often difficult to determine which inequalities are valid and reliable indicators for the violation of which universal rule.

One reason for this is that rules sometimes make things look more “egalitarian” than they, in fact, are:

⁸ By contrast, differences in the life expectancy of men and women, as they are in fact observed, may be (at least partly) natural -- although the fact that this gap recently has, however slowly, been closing seems to indicate that it is at least partly a non-natural difference.

“Logically, it is possible to make any rule fully egalitarian by defining the reference group so narrowly that it becomes identical with the selected group.” (Oppenheim 1981, 101)

Oppenheim discusses this using as an example precisely Dahl’s considerations about “political equality” as a defining characteristic of democracy and Dahl’s insight that this principle is empty as long as the reference group (the “demos”) is not specified (101).

Besides this formal failure, there may be failures of efficacy, in the sense that the effects of a (fully general) rule of equal apportionment fall short of the underlying principle’s intended ends. Notorious in the democratic context is the often raised problem of “permanent minorities” that may exist even where the voting rule is fully “egalitarian” in the formal sense. Majority rule is such a fully egalitarian rule: everyone’s vote is counted equally and, as such, has the same chance individually to come out on the winning side. But if there are social cleavages leading to fairly fixed differences in opinions/preferences/interests, collectively some group of people may not have the same chance as some other group ever to be among the winners of a vote. The contested question is, of course, whether and under what conditions this type of collective chance should matter in a democracy.

In any case, whenever notorious differences in social indicators are referred to as “inequalities” what may be implied is that some universal norm, which is taken to be so self-evident that it does not need to be mentioned, is not implemented in the respective social system. Particularly on the first, justice-oriented conception of democracy, such inequalities may then, furthermore, be a symptom of the fact that the democratic quality of the system is in jeopardy.

Thesis I: *To the extent that social justice is seen as a task of democracy, pronounced and persistent differences in social indicators, particularly concerning the life chances of people, are symptomatic inequalities indicating institutional failures that amount to a “defective” democracy.*

Question I: *Which types of inequalities constitute the corresponding catalogue?*

2) Conceptually Necessary Conditions for Democracy

One of the most prominent defenders of a conception of democracy based on the idea of the freedom and equality of citizens has, undoubtedly, been John Rawls. For Rawls, the very idea of democracy is based on the ascription of a certain equality to all citizens: their equality as

rational and reasonable agents, capable of developing and pursuing a conception of the good and a plan of life as well as a “sense of justice” and the motivation to act accordingly. The basic rationale for political democracy is, according to Rawls, this ascription. Abandoning it is to lose the point of democracy.

Obviously, such an ascription has substantial conceptual implications. In Rawls’s case, the full realization of the democratic ideal expressed in the ascription of freedom and equality to all citizens implies that the principles of social justice derived from that ascription must be implemented. (Hence, democracy is here not conceived from the outset as a concept including as a defining condition the realization of social justice; rather, democracy’s connection to social justice here follows from the defining conditions of freedom and equality.)

As a consequence of this conception, in *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement* (2001, § 42, 138-140) Rawls contrasts different kinds of political regimes, based on „different conceptions of the aim of the background adjustments over time“ (139), among them what he calls „property-owning democracy“ and „welfare-state capitalism“, particularly regarding their way of dealing with inequality. Of these two, only the former satisfies, according to Rawls, the two fundamental principles of justice, and it is of some interest to take a closer look at his arguments here:

“One major difference is this: the background institutions of property-owning democracy work to disperse the ownership of wealth and capital, and thus to prevent a small part of society from controlling the economy, and indirectly, political life as well. By contrast, welfare-state capitalism permits a small class to have a near monopoly of the means of production.

Property-owning democracy avoids this, not by the redistribution of income to those with less at the end of each period, so to speak, but rather by ensuring the widespread ownership of productive assets and human capital (that is, education and trained skills) at the beginning of each period, all this against a background of fair equality of opportunity. The intent is not simply to assist those who lose out through accident or misfortune (although that must be done), but rather to put all citizens in a position to manage their own affairs on a footing of a suitable degree of social and economic equality.“ (139)

“In welfare-state capitalism the aim is that none should fall below a decent minimum standard of life, one in which their basic needs are met, and all should receive certain protections against accident and misfortune ... / The redistribution of income serves this purpose when, at the end of each period, those who need assistance can be identified. Yet ... there may develop a discouraged and depressed underclass many of whose members are chronically dependent on welfare. ...

In property-owning democracy, on the other hand, the aim is to realize in the basic institutions the idea of society as a fair system of cooperation between citizens regarded as free and equal. To do this, institutions must, from the outset, put in the hands of citizens generally, and not only of a few, sufficient productive means for them to be fully cooperating members of society on a footing of equality. Among these is human as well as real capital, that is, knowledge and an understanding of institutions, educated abilities, and trained skills. Only in this way can the basic structure realize pure background procedural justice from one generation to the next.

Under these conditions we hope that an underclass will not exist; or if there is a small such class, that it is the result of social conditions we do not know how to change, or perhaps cannot even identify or understand. When society faces this impasse, it has at least taken seriously the idea of itself as a fair system of cooperation between its citizens as free and equal.“ (pp. 139 f.)

The Rawlsian is, of course, an extreme interpretation of the equality of citizens required by any conception of democracy. Other conceptions make much more modest demands, most uncontroversial among them the demand that citizens must have an effective chance of equal political participation. The latter implies two things:

- i) All citizens must effectively be able, and have a reasonable chance to, participate in political decision-making processes in certain ways; and
- ii) none should have a chance to participate in political decision-making in other ways -- unless elected or appointed to a public office.

But even this is more demanding than it may seem at first sight. Barry (2005), for instance, argues that certain kinds of social differences are, as such (not as symptoms of something else) inequalities which counter the equal-participation condition because they undermine the possibility that all citizens really be recognized as citizens of fully equal political standing (and that they recognize themselves as such). Material inequalities, thus, may not become so great as to make it impossible for some citizens to satisfy socially effective standards of ‘decency’ (which in all societies tend to be relative).

Thesis II: *On all conceptions of democracy, certain kinds and degrees of social inequalities are conceptually incompatible with a democratic system; in order to eradicate or prevent these inequalities, other inequalities may also have to be eliminated.*

Question II: *Which are those conceptually necessary democratic equalities, and which other equalities are implied by them?*

3) Instrumentally Necessary Conditions for Democracy and Its Stability

Besides those inequalities that are conceptually incompatible with democracy, it may be the case -- and is often argued -- that democracy can, empirically, not be expected to evolve or to “consolidate” (gain stability) if certain kinds and certain degrees of social inequalities persist in society. So the question here is: What inequalities (which, and how much) can democracy survive?

This question is, in fact, the main concern of Brian Barry in his already mentioned recent chapter on “Pathologies of Inequality” (Barry 2005, ch. 13). As is to be expected, he discusses the workings of positional goods, and presents a wealth of statistical data showing correlations (though not proving causal connections) between levels of (mainly: income) inequalities and all kinds of other social factors: crime and violence, health, trust, political influence (access to politicians, the media etc.), empathy ..., some of which are highly relevant for democracy:

“Let us ... imagine a society in which something approximating equal opportunity had been achieved. ... we would then have to take up the independent issue of the amount of inequality that would be consistent with social justice. There would still be no reason for accepting the assumption of the meritocrats that any size of reward is justifiable as long as there has been fair competition for it. ... you could hardly find differences in personal merit capable of justifying a scale of inequality that would tear apart the fabric of society.” (ibid., 185)

The upshot of the chapter is that inequalities (of certain kinds) are not only indicators, symptoms, of something that is going wrong, but are themselves a problem (regardless of whether it is an inequality on a high absolute level) because “inequality has undesirable consequences” (Barry 2005, 175). The reason why inequality – a relative standard – rather than some absolute standard counts is that “becoming relatively worse off can make you absolutely worse off, in terms of opportunities and social standing” (ibid., 173):

“the social pathology of a highly unequal society consists in the destructive effect that inequality has on social solidarity ... Disregard for the interests of others becomes the norm” (ibid., 183) -- clearly an effect that would undermine democracy!

In the same vein, the 2005 Report on the World Social Situation warns:

“Violence is often rooted in inequality ... [Inequality] can create social disintegration and exclusion and lead to conflict and violence. ...To prevent global conflict

and violence, attention should be paid to reducing the inequalities in access to resources and opportunities.” (RWSS 2005, Executive summary)

And the detrimental effects of social inequalities are not likely to go away in more affluent societies, since

“most goods have a positional aspect. And the wealthier the society becomes on average ..., the larger the positional element will loom, as the ratio of show to usefulness increases.” (Barry 2005, 177)

However, this may be, the more urgent problem for most currently existing societies are social inequalities of the kind where some parts of the population fall below certain minimal standards. This is often seen as the greatest threat to the legitimation of democracy. For instance,

“For Przeworski (1991) the crucial element in the survival of democratic regimes lies in their capacity to generate incentives such that political groups that lose still have more to gain from competing within a democratic framework than they do from overturning it.” (Apter 1996)

Thesis III: *The likelihood and stability of democratic regimes is negatively affected by certain kinds and degrees of social inequalities. The manifest institutions of democracy can be imposed by political will alone; but if the equality issue is not addressed, democracy will not be stable.*

Question III: *Which are the economic and non-economic inequalities involved in these problems for democratic stability? Do or don't they depend on absolute levels of resources?*

4) What Does/Can Democracy Do To/About Inequalities?

Whether or not we can expect democracies to produce more or less equality has been controversial at least since Rousseau and Tocqueville:

Tocqueville:

„Lorsqu'on parcourt les pages de notre histoire, on ne rencontre pour ainsi dire pas de grands événements qui depuis sept cents ans n'aient tourné au profit de l'égalité.“ (Tocqueville, I, 40)

„Le développement graduel de l'égalité des conditions est donc un fait providentiel, il en a les principaux caractères: il est universel, il est durable, il échappe chaque jour à la puissance humaine; tous les événements, comme tous les hommes, servent à son développement.

... Pense-t-on qu'après avoir détruit la féodalité et vaincu les rois, la démocratie reculera devant les bourgeois et les riches?“ (Tocqueville, I, 41)

„Le livre entier qu'on va lire a été écrit sous l'impression d'une sorte de terreur religieuse produite dans l'âme de l'auteur par la vue de cette révolution irrésistible qui marche depuis tant de siècles à travers tous les obstacles, et qu'on voit encore aujourd'hui s'avancer au milieu des ruines qu'elles a faites.“ (Tocqueville, I, 42)

“Les peuples démocratiques aiment l'égalité dans tous les temps, mais il est de certaines époques où ils poussent jusqu'au délire la passion qu'ils ressentent pour elle. ... La passion d'égalité pénètre de toutes parts dans le cœur humain, elle s'y étend, elle le remplit tout entier.” (Tocqueville, II, 140 f.)

“Je pense que les peuples démocratiques ont un goût naturel pour la liberté; ... Mais ils ont pour l'égalité une passion ardente, insatiable, éternelle, invincible; ils veulent l'égalité dans la liberté, et, s'ils ne peuvent l'obtenir, ils la veulent encore dans l'esclavage.“ (ibid., 141 f.)

„On peut concevoir des hommes arrivés à un certain degré de liberté qui les satisfasse entièrement. ... Mais les hommes ne fonderont jamais une égalité qui leur suffise. ...

Quand l'inégalité est la loi commune d'une société, les plus fortes inégalités ne frappent point l'œil; quand tout est à peu près de niveau, les moindres le blessent. C'est pour cela que le désir de l'égalité devient toujours plus insatiable à mesure que l'égalité est plus grande.

Chez les peuples démocratiques, les hommes obtiendront aisément une certaine égalité; ils ne sauraient atteindre celle qu'ils désirent. Celle-ci recule chaque jour devant eux, mais sans jamais se dérober à leurs regards, et, en se retirant, elle les attire à sa poursuite.“ (Tocqueville, II, 193 f.)⁹

Rousseau:

„à l'égard de l'égalité, il ne faut pas entendre par ce mot que les degrés de puissance et de richesse soient absolument les mêmes, mais que, quant à la puissance, elle soit au-dessus de toute violence et ne s'exerce jamais qu'en vertu du rang et des lois, et, quant à la richesse, que nul citoyen ne soit assez opulent pour en pouvoir acheter un autre, et nul assez pauvre pour être contraint de se vendre. ... Cette égalité, disent-ils, est une chimère de spéculation qui ne peut exister dans la pratique. Mais si l'abus est inévitable, s'ensuit-il qu'il ne faille pas au moins le régler? C'est précisément parce que la force des choses tend toujours à détruire l'égalité que la force de la législation doit toujours tendre à la maintenir.“ (Rousseau, *Contrat social*, Livre II, Chap. XI)

„dès l'instant qu'un homme eut besoin du secours d'un autre; dès qu'on s'aperçut qu'il étoit utile à un seul d'avoir des provisions pour deux, l'égalité disparut, la propriété s'introduisit, le travail devint nécessaire ...“ (Rousseau 1985, 101)

⁹ On Tocqueville, cf. e. g. Elster 1993, chs. 3 and 4 (101-191) – including some interesting quotations in English.

„de libre et independant qu'etoit auparavant l'homme, le voilà par une multitude de nouveaux besoins assujeti, pour ainsi dire, ... à ses semblables dont il devient l'esclave en un sense, même en devenant leur maître; riche, il a besoin de leurs services; pauvre, il a besoin de leurs secours, et la médiocrité ne le met point en état de se passer d'eux.“ (Rousseau 1985, 105)

„Le premier qui ayant enclos une terrain, s'avisa de dire, *ceci est à moi*, et trouva des gens assés simples pour le croire, fut le vrai fondateur de la société civile.“ (Rousseau 1985, 91)

The empirical findings as of today seem to be mixed (cf. the data in RWSS 2005). Can we say anything systematic at all about whether and what effects on social inequalities is to be expected from the institution of democracy?

There have been attempts to do so. Roemer (2005b) recently presented a paper that aims to show what happens in a competitively modeled democracy (with a number of other particularities) with

“the inequality of advantage that is conferred on children in a generation by their disparate family backgrounds, and more precisely, by the cultural and social differences of those backgrounds ... I believe that education is the main instrument our societies have to rectify those inequalities of family advantage ... My interest is in whether democratic processes will indeed engender the educational investments in disadvantaged children needed to [rectify those inequalities].” (Roemer 2005b, 218)

“We show that, whether the limit distribution of human capital is an equal one depends upon the nature of intra-party bargaining and the degree of inequality in the original distribution.” (Roemer 2005b, 217; but, of course, he shows this only for his, as he acknowledges, very unrealistic model; whether the result holds to some extent even under more realistic conditions is an open question.)

I do not dare to advance a thesis on this one – the question is obvious, and open for discussion.

V. References

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