



## Análise Social

versão impressa ISSN 0003-2573

### **Anál. Social no.212 Lisboa set. 2014**

#### FORUM

### **The killing fields of inequality**

*Interview with Göran Therborn\* by Sofia Aboim\*\**

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In this brief, though illuminating interview, with Göran Therborn, we start our discussion by reviewing the key arguments of his most recent book, *The Killing Fields of Inequality* (Polity, 2013). In his well known sociological style and following the robust guidelines of his work, Göran Therborn brings inequality to the fore, expanding the inquiry into the roots of inequality, undoubtedly one of the key problems of our time, if not the most important. Indeed, always favouring a comparative and global perspective, Therborn's book presents us with a wide and insightful examination of the various dimensions of inequality in a rare combination of theoretical developments, historical substantiation, and empirical evidence. If exploring the causes and dimensions of inequality is of major importance in Therborn's work and in this book in particular, the strong points of *The Killing Fields of Inequality* rely on his capacity to find compelling answers to a few of the most inescapable questions about inequalities. Why has inequality risen, as it is today, and cannot be ignored by social scientists, Therborn discusses the meanings of inequality, its damaging consequences, and shows us why we should care about inequality and seek alternatives. In a conversation carried out by e-mail, the initial motto of the conversation evolves into an assessment of inequality-reproduction, which includes conflict, the re-emergence of class as a key analytical concept, the expansion of inequalities to the global economy, the restructuring of the global and globalization processes, in and beyond Europe and the current state-of-the-art, and the reshaping of old categories of thought.

Göran Therborn is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Cambridge (UK) and Affiliated Professor at Linnaeus University (Sweden), as well as the current Editor-in-Chief of the journal of the European Sociological Association.

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*European Societies*. Author of many books including the classic *What Does the Ruling Class Do When it Rules?* (2008), he is one of the most cited and influential contemporary Marxian sociologists. His work is notable for his development of topics concerned with the general political and sociological framework, namely the intersection between class, the state apparatus, and the formation of ideology. Defining his intellectual commitment to universal freedom and equality, Göran Therborn has been exemplar in combination of relevance with critical thinking and engagement on a global scale.

SOFIA ABOIM - *The subject of your most recent book is as compelling as it is shocking. Inequality kills, you say. Sobering and unambiguous evidence. Inequality has for long been a key topic in your reflection throughout your career. Can you explain why you have written this book? What is the main message, what have you added to your former work?*

GÖRAN THERBORN - Inequality has been an object of outrage in my life, but for a long time it was not a topic of reflection. The inequality produced by capitalism, imperialism, racism, and sexism appeared self-evident. My main tasks were to understand the powers which sustained it, and to organize the fight against it. So I wrote *What does the ruling class do when it rules?*, and *The ideology of power and the power of ideology*. I also wrote extensively on parameters of class struggles and class relations of power. Inequality became an intellectual preoccupation as the prospects of cutting it down receded, with central de-industrialization and the working class and social movements in decline.

My serious thinking about inequality was inspired by a 1988 lecture by Amartya Sen, whom I had met in 1987. He asked the question, *Inequality of What?* But there came other issues on the agenda first. There was the question of how to be neglected by the Nordic left and by Nordic scholars, when most of the Northern countries were just beginning to experience the 1990s. *European Modernity and Beyond* (of 1995, updated into a 3<sup>rd</sup>, French edition in 2009) was my attempt to do this. I committed to write a book on a particular dimension of inequality, patriarchy, and sexism, *Between Sex and Power: Women, World, 1900-2000* (2004, Brazilian edition *Sexo e Poder*, 2008)

Sen's work set me thinking about the multidimensionality of inequality. In that direction, I also began to work on health and social medicine, the only fields in which inequalities of life and death were systematically studied. In 2002, at a Congress in Brisbane I organized a couple of semi-plenary panels to bring this out. Expanded into a two-volume book, *Inequalities of the World* (2006). At Cambridge, in the mid-2000s, I started to work focusedly on inequality. My book began as a series of lectures to my Master students at Cambridge. The somewhat later outbreak of the financial crisis suddenly brought inequality into the mass media, for a while. And everybody immediately seemed to be talking about it, was, the income share of the top 1 per cent and the bonuses of the bankers who had produced the crisis.

Thank God for revelations, but the momentous outrage did not change anything. The caravan of financial crisis is moving on, at an unhampered speed. And all other issues of inequality remain, not only in existence but also in conventional imagination.

My book has three main aims. First, to address fundamental theoretical problems of inequality, its relationship to power, its difference, its multidimensionality, its social mechanisms, and the corresponding processes attacking it. Second, to provide an empirical overview of the three main kinds of inequality, historically and currently, globally. Third, to draw attention to the seriousness of inequality's consequences by highlighting its lethal effects.

SA - *The title reminds us of a 1984 British film about the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, which immediately led to death to mind. When we live in times of increasing inequalities, which forms of violence can we expect? What is your opinion the worst case scenario?*

GT - *The Killing Fields of Inequality* is meant to draw your attention to the fact that inequality kills. It is not just about violence.

The killing capacity of inequality includes:

Sexist selective abortions and child neglect, clearly evident in post-Communist Caucasus, China, Pakistan, and South Korea.

Environmental exclusion and marginalization, into barren lands, slums without sanitation, sea level rise, flooding and landslides, pollution.

Exploitative working conditions, exposure to fatal accidents, to fires in locked premises.

Exclusion/Marginalization from access to preventive and curative health care.

Exclusion/Marginalization from the labour market: in Sweden in the 1990s unemployment in premature death by 50%; in Finland the life expectancy of unemployed people in the 1990s-2000s by 50%.

Subordination, degradation, humiliation: Among permanent employees of the British central bureaucracy and among the employees of the City of Helsinki, the likely death dates follow the people on the lowest rungs die first, those on top last. After controls for smoking, alcohol, and body mass index.

Unequal distribution of knowledge, of (un)healthy diet and body composition.

SA - *And how could we avoid it? Do you see signs of hope in today's world? From the Arab Spring to the protests against inequality across the globe, quite a lot has been discussed. Which elements are positive in contrast to inequality?*

GT - What little short-term hope there is comes from Latin America. The early 21<sup>st</sup> century has turned out to be a turning point in Latin American history. How far it will go, and how sustainable it is, are open questions. However, for the first century the results are impressive, with a reduction of the Gini coefficient of ten percentage points or more in Colombia (-14 points 2002-11), Nicaragua, and Venezuela. In Ecuador the reduction was nine points, in Peru and Brazil seven (data from CEPAL).

SA - *You mention exclusion as the worst form of inequality. Can you elaborate on this idea further explain the different forms of inequality that you identify?*

GT - No, exploitation is the worst form, always morally indefensible. You have to deny it, rather than deny the mechanisms of inequality form a scale in which the later/higher ones include the former with adding more. Distantiation most directly refers to individuals, groups, nations running away from the rest – or falling behind. Exclusion means putting up barriers of access, membership, citizenship, fees, or ethnic/racial or gender criteria. Subordination means organizations of human life by means of superordination and subordination. Exploitation means that the benefits of A are due to the contribution of B. Because of their different moral implications you find these mechanisms in ideologically sensitive interpretations of history. For instance, was the modern wealth of Europe due to the industrial revolution in Europe (distantiation), the monopolistic practices of the European empires impeding competition (exclusion), the asymmetry of the Modern world system (hierarchization), or the European plunder of conquered colonies (exploitation). The mechanisms are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

SA - *What are the most dangerous threats to equality? Do you think we should fear the downgrading of development in the Global South? Should we be concerned with new forms of inequality in the global economy?*

GT - The increasing power of capital is the main threat, It does not mean fascism, but capitalist political popular classes are kept unorganized and divided, corporate money its tightening its grip on political political agenda. The United States is the trailblazer, where Southern states (most recently Tennessee) corporate investment on the condition that no trade union is allowed, and where the Supreme Court r restrictions on corporate financing of political campaigns and elections, now running into billions of c

SA - *What is the role of ideology in the reproduction of inequality?*

GT - Ideology operates in three different modes, as I analysed in my book a long time ago, in terms of Good/bad, What Is (Im)Possible? Mainstream ideology in the North Atlantic area has now acknowledged and that is bad (at least rather bad). Alas, it is held that it is not possible to do much about it, given the growth, or other pressing item on the agenda.

SA - *As a Marxist and left-wing scholar, what do you think is more important in the Marxist legacy? To wh recover Marx and Marxism to interpret contemporary dynamics of inequality?*

GT - Two things, above all, are important. A focus on the dynamics and mutations of capitalism. Here *the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* is a most welcome important contribution, although I think he misses dimensions of i complexity of its historical development. Secondly, in all fields of social and cultural study, the Marxia crucial, i.e., the attention to tensions, contradictions, and conflict.

SA - *You state very clearly that sociology has not been concerned with inequality. Some would argue that yo sociology to mainstream functionalism, for instance, and that you have ignored what is commonly called you defend yourself from such criticism?*

GT - Sociologists have certainly studied various aspects of inequality, and in some branches inequalit investigations on racism and sexism/patriarchy. However, I think it is telling that the ISA (International Association), among its more than 50 research committees, has not one on inequality. The nearest the stratification , a functionalist geological import. An impressive technical sophistication has been to m problematic of mobility or inequality of opportune , but hardly anything on inequality killings and s

SA - *Your theory of modernity has presented an alternative to famous proposals, such as that from S.;N. Ei multiple modernities. Why is the concept of entangled modernities more operative?*

GT - Eisenstadt made a valuable attempt to free himself from the unilinearism of functionalist modern multiple modernities is a cop out, without any analytical edge. It is merely recognizing that not all m the United States. I have argued, most recently in *O Mundo* (Brazilian edition 2014) that modernity wo specific, singular time culture, to which there have been several historical pathways in the world, whic which have enduring effects on modern societies. In other words, I am trying to develop a global expl: modernity and its variants.

SA - *Do you think that historically and socially we are on the verge of a paradigm shift toward a different e*

GT - I do not see any clear evidence of it. But we should probably expect one. The classic canon of soc dichotomies of social change envisaged by male European authors of the 19th-early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Con global, and multi-faceted sociology is likely to challenge that.

SA - *Against this backdrop, which future can you envisage for Europe?*

GT - Europe will limp along, but it has lost its élan. Its handling of the financial crisis means that it can't be a successful social model. Its provocation of the Ukrainian crisis, by intervening in favour of one half of the other, has shown – as did its earlier participation in the economic war against Iran – that it has no grand project of peace, although German diplomacy is currently trying to prevent a full-scale return to the Cold War. The Obama administration (isolating Russia). A key test will be the transatlantic trade negotiations, with a special, privileged adjudication process for corporations, making it possible for them to challenge and overturn legislated rules, on environmental, health, and safety risks, among other things.

SA - *Do you think that in the near future we will have two or more Europes, with some countries – such as Greece – by impoverishment? Would you agree that the current scenario is constructed upon a very clear power hierarchy?*

GT - The two Europes are most likely to divide inside countries, between a prosperous cosmopolitan entertainment class, on one side, and ordinary people on the other. Sure, the EU handling of the crisis is the most neoliberal north-central European power elite.

SA - *In your opinion, what would be the best way out of the crisis?*

GT - An egalitarian revolution.

SA - *Finally, what do you think should be the key lesson for social scientists and the social sciences?*

GT - Never underestimate the pettiness of most contemporary politics – neither the pettiness of its myopia, nor that of its inertial staying power.



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