

Inequalities

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Introduction

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Summary 1 A Major Social Issue of Our Time. – 2 A Wide-Ranging Critical Analysis. – 3 The Globalisation of Social Polarisation. – Some National Examples.

1 A Major Social Issue of Our Time

The growth and sharpening of social inequality at both a global and national level is a key theme of the current public and academic debate. This rise in inequality, one of the most significant social facts of the contemporary world, extends beyond the neoliberal era as its permanent legacy: it is also found in the chaotic transition to a historical phase marked first by a return to protectionism and then by the eruption of conflicts in various parts of the world.

The return of a theoretical and analytical interest in inequalities has arisen as a result of the subject's self-evident objectivity. It has attracted the attention of public institutions, the political class, and the mass media, who are concerned that the deepening of inequalities could act as a brake on economic growth or a threat to social cohesion. However, whatever (modest) solutions have been put in place, or, more often, only imagined, this process remains a structural and organic part of financially-driven capitalist accumulation, the result of a centuries-long process of the globalisation of capitalist social relations. And, at least for the time being, it does not seem to be affected by the end of the neoliberal era.

2 A Wide-Ranging Critical Analysis

The principle focus of *Inequalities* is the critical examination of this major historical-social issue, carried out within a global vision of the process of the production of inequality, and deepened through the confrontation between specific regional and national situations in various parts of the world.

Inequalities focuses on the multiple forms and dimensions of inequalities – economic, labour, class, educational, health, territorial, housing, legal, gender, racial, generational, environmental, and climate inequalities – as well as on ‘new’ inequalities linked to robotization and digitalisation. It also considers the examination of the causes, transformations, and social consequences of inequalities to be essential. Unlike many other social phenomena, the issue of inequalities does not permit any form of reductionism or of disciplinary monopolies, and so the Journal is interested in all contributions from across the social sciences and humanities.

3 The Globalisation of Social Polarisation – Some National Examples

The first issue of *Inequalities* is dedicated to the fundamental and primary form of inequality, class inequality, paying particular attention to the sharpening of social polarisation within nations.

In spite of slowing growth rates and huge differences between geographical areas and individual countries, and a general tendency to slow down everywhere, the world economy has greatly expanded since the 1980s, partly due to an increase in the world population. Over the long term, this global dynamic has led to relative convergence in development levels, with some large countries or areas in the Global South catching up with Western countries, thus reducing their historical ‘backwardness’, due to a dual and combined process: the deindustrialisation of the ‘North’ and the industrialisation of the ‘South’ (although aware of the risks of making any generalisations). But since the early twenty-first century, the process of expanding the production of goods on a global scale has come up against a series of stumbling blocks and serious disruptions, the most important of which were the great financial and production crisis of 2008-09 and the subsequent monetary crisis, pandemic emergency, and energy crisis. The entire international order has been thrown into crisis, firstly with the rise of protectionist drives and policies, then with the outbreak of war in Ukraine and in Palestine, and we have now entered, if not plunged into, an era of global uncertainty.

Just one phenomenon has managed to traverse, almost unscathed, the increasingly chaotic situation of the world economy and global

politics in all its different phases and across its various geopolitical areas: the process of social polarisation between the capitalist class and the working class who live off both formal and informal wage labour.

This process, which began almost half a century ago, has emerged in very different forms and at different levels of intensity depending on whether it is in Western countries, which are in more or less marked decline, or in emerging countries – it being understood that in all the principal countries the concentration of social wealth is accompanied by the centralisation of capital driven by global and national financial markets. On the same scale (as the other side of the same coin) we see mass expropriation from direct agricultural producers in the Global South, the unprecedented expansion of the ‘reserve army’ of labour and of workers who are paid below the value of their labour-power, and the growth of international migrations. These three social processes are interrelated but are not identical.

In Western countries, social polarisation has not only involved salaried workers, but also substantial sections of the middle classes and, through the increasingly extreme precarisation of labour, has also resulted in creeping mass impoverishment, partly covered by the huge indebtedness of working families and individual workers. And it is no longer possible to find exceptions to the rule, because – with different forms and at different levels of intensity – the intensification of social polarisation is affecting both traditionally liberal countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, and countries in which the welfare state was more widely extended (Germany, Sweden, France), as Bihr and Pfefferkorn show in this issue. Even Japan, which has historically been considered (relatively) immune from processes of social polarisation, has not escaped this trend, as Costalunga demonstrates in his article.

Instead, in the emerging economies, particularly in China, although hundreds of millions of people left absolute poverty, and there has been an increase in the purchasing power of workers’ wages and an expansion of the middle classes, there has also been a strong centralisation of socially produced wealth, which can be measured by the trends of the Gini index and by relative wage indicators. India, South Africa, Brazil (as Soares shows in this issue), have experienced significant (in the former case) or considerable development in the last twenty years, but this growth has made these countries more unequal internally than they had been previously. Indeed, the inequalities inherited from colonialism have been joined by new inequalities produced by globalization in its current financial form, in particular by the globalisation of neoliberal policies that have also involved ‘emerging’ economies. And neither has Russia escaped this dynamic of social polarisation.

Since the 2008-09 crisis, almost everywhere social inequalities have been reproduced in a more accelerated, extensive and acute

manner, visibly changing the shape of the established class structure in many countries. Generally speaking, the boundaries between classes have become stronger towards the top and have weakened towards the bottom, giving the development of inequalities a perpetual upward spiral motion, which seems to have clear structural roots and a multiplicity of effects on all spheres of the production and reproduction of social life. Starting with political power and the production of culture.

The sharpening of social polarisation within individual countries is thus a truly worldwide phenomenon, which is differentiated while at the same time being unitary and global. It is grafted onto and combines with the polarisation inherited from previous capitalist development, without however leading, as some thought it would, to the emergence of new social classes. Rather, it results in the transformation of the relation between the two fundamental social classes – the working class and the capitalist class – which has always driven and continues to drive the historical movement of the contemporary world.

This set of processes and contradictions are analysed and discussed in the articles in this issue. Michael Roberts, in “Inequality: The Economic Foundation,” highlights the sharpening of income and wealth inequalities over the past four decades between and within countries. Alain Bihr and Roland Pfefferkorn, in their essay “Du système des inégalités aux classes sociales”, point to the persisting division of French society into social classes and the exacerbation of inequality produced by neoliberal policies, emphasizing its systemic roots. In “Contemporary Slavery and Inequality in Brazil”, Marcela Soares examines regional inequalities and social polarization in Brazilian society, also discussing contemporary slavery, seen as the most visible expression of super-exploitation and the result of the reinvention of hybrid forms of labour exploitation. Nicola Costalunga, in “The Japanese Myth: A Middle-class Society or a Reality Overwhelmed by Global Social Polarisation?”, offers a new way of looking at Japan: in the wake of major structural transformations, in recent decades the country has been affected by greater polarization between social classes, ever greater economic disparities, and deepening inequalities between stable and precarious workers.

Introduzione

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Sommario 1 Una grande questione sociale del nostro tempo. – 2 Un'analisi critica a tutto campo. – 3 La globalizzazione della polarizzazione sociale. – il test di alcuni Paesi.

1 Una grande questione sociale del nostro tempo

Una delle tematiche centrali del dibattito internazionale, sia scientifico che pubblico, è senza dubbio la crescita, anzi l'acutizzazione delle disuguaglianze sociali sia a livello globale che a livello dei singoli paesi. Questa crescita impetuosa costituisce in effetti uno dei fatti sociali più importanti del mondo contemporaneo, anche al di là dell'era neoliberalista, come un suo lascito permanente anche in questo caotico passaggio ad una fase storica contrassegnata prima dal ritorno del protezionismo e poi dall'esplosione, in più punti del globo, di conflitti bellici.

Il ritorno alla ribalta della tematica teorica e analitica delle disuguaglianze si è imposto da sé, per la sua ineludibile oggettività ed auto-evidenza, attirando l'attenzione delle istituzioni statali, del ceto politico, dei mass-media, preoccupati che l'approfondimento delle disuguaglianze rappresenti un freno alla crescita economica e una minaccia alla coesione sociale. Sta di fatto, comunque, quali che siano i (modesti) rimedi messi in cantiere o, più spesso, solo ipotizzati, che questo processo è strutturale ed organico all'accumulazione capitalistica a dominante finanziaria, a cui ha messo capo il plurisecolare processo di mondializzazione dei rapporti sociali capitalistici. E, per il momento almeno, non appare intaccato dall'esaurimento dell'era neoliberalista.

2 Un'analisi critica a tutto campo

La Rivista *Inequalities* mette al centro della propria attività proprio la disamina critica di questa grande questione storico-sociale, e lo fa all'interno di una visione globale del processo di produzione delle disuguaglianze, arricchita dal confronto tra le specifiche situazioni esistenti nelle varie aree del mondo a livello 'regionale' e dei singoli paesi.

Inequalities presta attenzione alle molteplici forme e dimensioni delle disuguaglianze: economiche, lavorative, educative, territoriali, 'razziali', abitative, giuridiche, generazionali, simboliche, ambientali, climatiche, di classe, di genere, di salute, di salute ambientale, nonché alle 'nuove' disuguaglianze legate ai processi di informatizzazione, robotizzazione e digitalizzazione. Allo stesso tempo questa Rivista considera come suo compito essenziale interrogarsi sulle cause, sulle trasformazioni e sulle conseguenze sociali delle disuguaglianze. Più di molti altri, questo fenomeno sociale non sopporta nessuna forma di riduzionismo, o di monopolio disciplinare, per cui la Rivista guarda con interesse agli apporti provenienti da tutte le scienze sociali e umane.

3 La globalizzazione della polarizzazione sociale – il test di alcuni Paesi

Il primo numero di *Inequalities* è dedicato alla fondamentale, primaria forma di disuguaglianza, la disuguaglianza di classe, con particolare attenzione all'acutizzazione della polarizzazione sociale all'interno delle nazioni.

Seppur con tassi di crescita assai differenti a seconda delle aree geografiche e dei singoli Paesi ma in tendenziale rallentamento ovunque, dagli anni Ottanta ad oggi l'economia mondiale si è fortemente espansa – anche per effetto dell'aumento della popolazione totale. All'interno di tale dinamica globale si è registrata, sul lungo periodo, una relativa convergenza nei livelli di sviluppo, con alcuni grandi Paesi e aree del Sud del mondo che hanno recuperato terreno rispetto ai Paesi occidentali riducendo i propri 'ritardi' storici per effetto di un duplice processo combinato: la deindustrializzazione del 'Nord' del mondo, l'industrializzazione del 'Sud' del mondo (pur con tutte le cautele che generalizzazioni del genere impongono). Ma dall'inizio del XXI secolo il processo di espansione della produzione di merci alla scala globale è andato incontro ad una serie di inciampi e di acute perturbazioni che hanno avuto nella grande crisi finanziaria e produttiva del 2008-09 e nelle successive crisi monetarie, pandemiche, energetiche, i loro momenti salienti. Con il montare delle spinte e delle politiche protezioniste prima, con l'esplosione della guerra in

Ucraina e in Palestina poi, è andato in crisi l'intero ordine internazionale – e si è entrati, se non sprofondati, in un'era di incertezza globale.

In questo tumultuoso e sempre più caotico cammino dell'economia e della politica mondiale, un solo fenomeno ha attraversato, pressoché indenne, le diverse fasi e aree geopolitiche: il processo di polarizzazione sociale tra la classe capitalistica e la classe lavoratrice, che vive di lavoro salariato in modo sia formale che informale. Il fenomeno, iniziato quasi mezzo secolo fa, si è presentato in forme e intensità molto differenti a seconda che si tratti dei Paesi occidentali, in declino più o meno accentuato, o dei Paesi ascendenti – fermo restando che in tutti i principali Paesi la concentrazione della ricchezza sociale si accompagna alla centralizzazione del capitale impulsata alla scala planetaria e delle singole nazioni dai mercati finanziari. Mentre alla stessa scala (come rovescio della medaglia) assistiamo all'espropriazione di massa dei produttori agricoli diretti nel Sud del mondo, all'espansione senza precedenti dell'«esercito di riserva» e dei lavoratori remunerati al di sotto del valore della propria forza-lavoro, alla crescita dimensionale delle migrazioni internazionali – tre processi sociali legati tra loro, ma non identici.

Nei Paesi occidentali la polarizzazione sociale ha coinvolto, oltre i lavoratori salariati, anche settori consistenti delle classi medie e, attraverso una precarizzazione sempre più estrema dei rapporti di lavoro, ha assunto anche la forma dello strisciante impoverimento di massa, in parte coperto dal vertiginoso indebitamento delle famiglie lavoratrici e dei singoli lavoratori. E non è più possibile, oramai, rinvenire eccezioni alla regola, perché l'inasprimento della polarizzazione sociale sta interessando – con forme e intensità diverse – sia i Paesi tradizionalmente liberisti come Stati Uniti e Regno Unito, sia i Paesi nei quali lo stato sociale aveva conosciuto una maggiore espansione (la Germania, la Svezia o la Francia), come mettono in luce nel loro saggio Bühr e Pfefferkorn. Ma neppure il Giappone, che storicamente è stato considerato (relativamente) immune dai processi di polarizzazione sociale, è risultato estraneo a questa tendenza, come evidenzia Costalunga nel suo scritto.

Nei Paesi ascendenti, invece, la Cina in primo luogo, a fronte di un'uscita di centinaia di milioni di persone dalla condizione di povertà assoluta, di una crescita del potere d'acquisto dei salari operai (e non solo) e di un'espansione dei ceti medi, si è verificata comunque una forte centralizzazione della ricchezza socialmente prodotta, misurabile dall'andamento dell'indice Gini e dall'indicatore dei salari relativi. Anche India, Sud Africa, Brasile (come evidenzia Soares in questo numero), che hanno conosciuto negli ultimi vent'anni un notevole (nel primo caso) o considerevole sviluppo, la crescita economica nazionale ha reso questi Paesi internamente più diseguali di un tempo. Alle disuguaglianze ereditate dal colonialismo si sono aggiunte, infatti, nuove disuguaglianze prodotte dall'attuale tornata della

globalizzazione, in particolare dalla mondializzazione delle politiche neo-liberiste che ha coinvolto in pieno anche le economie 'emergenti'. E neppure la Russia si è sottratta a questa dinamica.

A partire dalla crisi del 2008-09, poi, le disuguaglianze sociali si sono riprodotte pressoché ovunque in maniera più accelerata, estesa ed acuta, modificando visibilmente in molti Paesi la stessa conformazione consolidata della struttura di classe. In linea generale, da un lato i confini tra le classi si sono irrigiditi verso l'alto, dall'altro, invece, si sono indeboliti verso il basso, dando alla progressione delle disuguaglianze sociali il carattere di un moto perpetuo discendente a spirale, la cui forza in apparenza irresistibile ha evidenti radici strutturali, e una molteplicità di ricadute in tutti gli ambiti della produzione e riproduzione della vita sociale. A cominciare dal potere politico e dalla produzione di cultura.

L'acutizzazione della polarizzazione sociale interna ai singoli Paesi costituisce, perciò, un autentico fenomeno mondiale, differenziato ma nello stesso tempo unitario e globale. Che si innesta sulla polarizzazione ereditata dalle precedenti vicende dello sviluppo capitalistico e si combina con essa, senza tuttavia comportare, come si è da qualche parte sostenuto, la nascita di nuove classi sociali. Si tratta, piuttosto, di una trasformazione della composizione e dei rapporti tra le due fondamentali classi sociali della società capitalistica attraverso cui passa il movimento storico del mondo contemporaneo – la classe lavoratrice e la classe capitalistica – oggi sempre più in formato mondiale.

Questo insieme di processi e contraddizioni sono analizzati e discussi negli articoli di questo primo numero. Michael Roberts, nel suo "Inequality: The Economic Foundation", evidenzia l'acutizzazione della disuguaglianza reddituale e di ricchezza avvenuta negli ultimi quarant'anni tra Paesi e all'interno dei Paesi. Alain Bihr e Roland Pfefferkorn, nel loro saggio "Du système des inégalités aux classes sociales", evidenziano la persistenza della divisione della società francese in classi sociali e l'acutizzazione delle disuguaglianze prodotta dalle politiche neoliberiste, sottolineandone le radici sistemiche. In "Contemporary Slavery and Inequality in Brazil" Marcela Soares esamina le disuguaglianze regionali e la polarizzazione sociale nella società brasiliana per discutere anche della schiavitù contemporanea, considerata come l'espressione più visibile del supersfruttamento e il risultato della reinvenzione di forme ibride di sfruttamento della forza lavoro. Nicola Costalunga, in "The Japanese Myth: A Middle-class Society or a Reality Overwhelmed by Global Social Polarisation?", presenta un'immagine inedita del Giappone: sulla scia di importanti trasformazioni strutturali, negli ultimi decenni quel paese è stato interessato dalla crescita della polarizzazione tra le classi sociali, dall'incremento delle disparità economiche e della disuguaglianza tra lavoratori stabili e precari.

The Globalisation of Social Polarisation Within Nations

Inequalities: The Economic Foundation

Michael Roberts
Independent Researcher

Abstract Inequality takes many forms, but it starts with inequality of wealth and incomes. From that flows inequality is social mobility, life expectancy, educational attainment and even happiness. And the inequality of wealth and income is very extreme – both within countries and between rich and poor countries. The gaps are hardly narrowing, if at all. Behind extreme inequality is the concentration of the bulk of wealth in the form of the ownership of productive capital in just a few adults in the world – no more 1% of 8bn people. That concentration has arisen because of the economic structure of the capitalist mode of production as it has spread across the world in the last century. While that basic structure remains in place, redistribution policies for income and wealth will be inadequate. A fundamental change in the social and economic formation of modern economies is required.

Keywords Inequality. Income. Wealth. Capital. Economy.

Summary 1 Inequality of Wealth Between Countries. – 2 Inequality of Wealth Within Countries. – 3 Income Inequality Between Countries. – 4 Inequality of Income Within Countries – 5 The Causes of Economic Inequality. – 6 Mainstream Theories. – 7 Distribution Theories. – 8 Marxist Theories. – 9 Ending or Reducing Inequality.



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Economic inequality is the foundation of all forms of social inequality. Inequality of personal wealth and income is high between countries and within countries. It has risen in the last 40 years. Wealth begets more wealth and so drives more inequality in wealth and income. There are three main theories of the cause of economic inequality: the mainstream neoclassical; the distributional; and the Marxist. All recognize that rising income from increased capital concentration is at the heart of economic inequality. But only the latter sees that as a consequence of the structure of the capitalist economy and the ownership of the means of production. The mainstream offers no significant solutions for curbing or reducing inequality; while redistribution solutions are inadequate. Only a change in the economic and social structure of modern economies could provide the foundation for an irreversible reduction in economic and social inequality.

Social inequality takes many forms: inequality of incomes and wealth; inequality between genders and in the household; inequality due to ethnicity, disability and health; and in life expectancy and age. There is inequality in all aspects of social needs in housing, transport, communications, education and medical support.

But all these forms of social inequality are, in the last analysis, due to economic inequality – defined as inequality among humans in the amount of personal wealth they own and in the incomes they receive. The inequality in these categories is a result of the workings of the market economy, where ownership of the means of production of goods and services that humans need is in the hands of a tiny minority. That small minority can therefore obtain the lion's share of personal wealth in the world within each country they live in and from that they can extract the largest share of income derived from the wealth of society.

1 Inequality of Wealth Between Countries

Most discussions on inequality, whether between nations globally or within nations, take place around income. Data and papers on inequality of income are profuse, particularly on the rise in most major economies since the 1980s and the cause of it.¹ But discussion and analysis of inequality of wealth does not get so much attention. Yet, in all economies, wealth is significantly more unequally distributed than income.

¹ See bibliography.

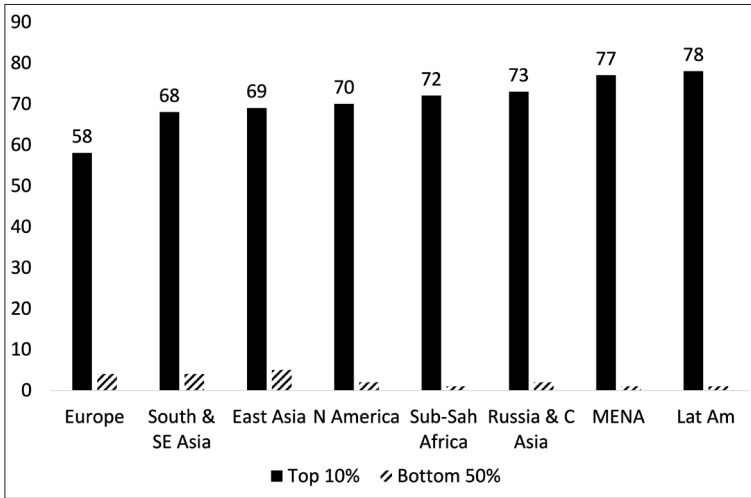


Chart 1 Share of total household wealth by region (%). Source: WIR 2022. <https://wid.world/methodology>

The *World Inequality Report (WIR) 2022* shows that the world has become more unequal in wealth in the last 40 years.² In 2021,

after three decades of trade and financial globalisation, global inequalities remain extremely pronounced... about as great today as they were at the peak of Western imperialism in the early 20th century.³

The global concentration of personal wealth is extreme. According to the WIR, the richest 10% of adults in the world own around 60-80% of wealth, while the poorest half have less than 5%. The top 10% in Latin America capture 77% of total household wealth versus 1% for the bottom 50%. In Europe, the top 10% own 58% of total wealth versus 4% for the bottom 50% [chart 1].

This is a similar result to another important survey of global wealth. According to the UBS *Global Wealth Report*, 1% of all adults in the world own 44.5% of all personal wealth, while more than 52% have only 1.2%.⁴ The 1% are 59m adults, while the 52% are 2.8bn.

² Produced by the World Inequality Lab, run by Thomas Piketty and a group of over 100 analysts from around the world, the report has the most up-to-date and complete data on the various facets of inequality worldwide: global wealth, income, gender and ecological inequality.

³ The World Inequality Report 2022: <https://wir2022.wid.world/>.

⁴ The authors are James Davies, Rodrigo Lluberas and Anthony Shorrocks.

The vast majority of rich and very rich people live in the so-called ‘Global North’. Inequalities between nations have declined slightly since the end of the cold war, but this is mainly due to the rise in living standards in China. The underlying story of inequality of wealth remains. If you own a property to live in and, after taking out any mortgage debt, you still have over \$100,000 in net assets, you are among the wealthiest 10% of all adults in the world. That’s because most adults in the world have no wealth to speak of at all. And apart from the phenomenal rise of China, personal wealth and power remains in the rich bloc of North America, Europe and Japan with add-ons from Australia. Just as this bloc rules over trade, GDP, finance and technology, it has nearly all the personal wealth.

The extremes of inequality in personal wealth are revealed in the table below. Globally, in 2000 median average wealth was \$1590 per person, just 5% of mean average wealth, startling proof of inequality. That measure of inequality was reduced a little to 10.2% of the mean average in 2022, but still very low. The difference between median and mean average growth was lowest in China and India, but this ratio has worsened in the last 20 years [\[chart 1\]](#).

2 Inequality of Wealth Within Countries

Inequality of wealth has also been rising *within* most countries. In 1912, Italian sociologist and statistician Corrado Gini (Gini 1997) developed a means of measuring wealth distribution known as the Gini index or coefficient: its value ranges from 0 (or 0%) to 1 (or 100%), with the former representing perfect equality (wealth distributed evenly) and the latter representing perfect inequality (wealth held in few hands). And when you use the Gini index for both income and wealth for each country, the difference is staggering.

Take a few examples. The Gini index for the US is 37.8% for income distribution (pretty high, globally), but the Gini index for wealth distribution is 85.9%! Or take supposedly egalitarian Scandinavia. The Gini index for income in Norway is just 24.9%, but the wealth gini is 80.5%! It’s the same story in the other Nordic countries. The Nordic countries may have lower than average inequality of income, but they have higher than average inequality of wealth.

Here are the top ten most unequal societies in the world in terms of personal wealth [\[chart 2\]](#).

You might expect to find some of these countries listed here in the top ten: i.e. they are very poor or ruled by dictators or military. But the top ten also includes the US and Sweden. Indeed, the US stands out as the leader in the top G7 advanced economies in terms of wealth (and income) inequality.

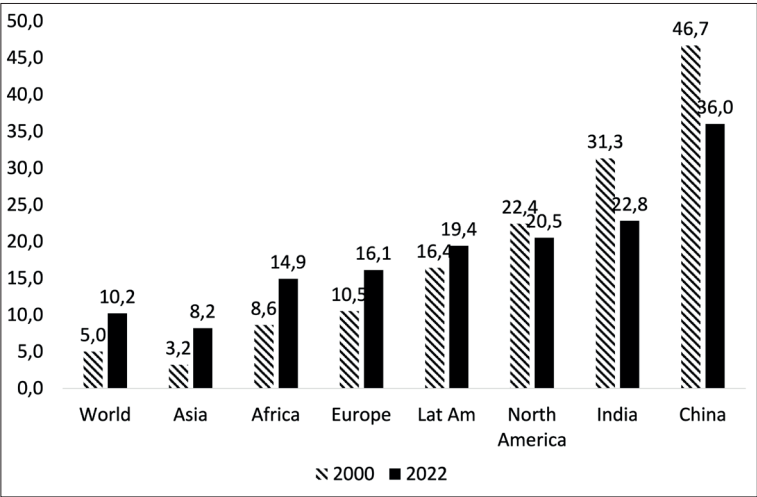


Chart 1 Ratio of median to mean average wealth. Source: UBS Global Wealth Report 2023

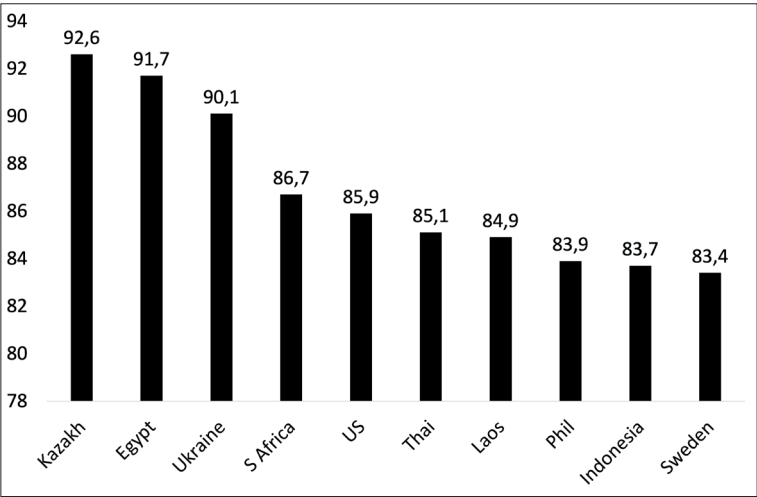


Chart 2 Wealth Gini index (%). Source: World Economic Forum

In the US, wealth has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the super-rich (Saez, Zucman 2014). The top 0.01% of American households have 5.5% of all personal wealth; the top 1% have staggering 35.1% and the top 10% have 73.4%, according to the latest US Federal Reserve survey 2023 on consumer finances. There remains, however, a discrepancy for the top 0.01%: it's 9.3% in Saez and Zucman (2020) vs 7.1% in Smith et al. (2021).

Moreover, more wealth begets more wealth. The Bank of Italy (2016) found that the wealthiest families in Florence today are descended from the wealthiest families of Florence nearly 600 years ago. The same families are still at the top of the wealth pile starting from the rise of merchant capitalism in the city states of Italy through the expansion of industrial capitalism and now in the world of finance capital.

The majority of billionaires that accumulated wealth in 2022 did so through inheritance as opposed to entrepreneurship (*Billionaire Ambitions Report* 2023). In the US, \$150.8 bn was inherited by 53 heirs in 2022, exceeding the 84 new self-made billionaires' total of \$140.7 bn. "This is a theme we expect to see more of over the next 20 years, as more than 1,000 billionaires pass an estimated \$5.2 trn to their children", said Benjamin Cavalli (*Global Wealth Management* 2023).

And talking of the shockingly high inequality of wealth in 'egalitarian' Sweden, research (Black et al. 2019) from there reveals that good genes don't make you a success but family money, or marrying into it, does. People are not rich because they are smarter or better educated. It is because they are either 'lucky' and/or inherited their wealth from their parents or relatives (like Donald Trump). This Swedish study found that "wealth is highly correlated between parents and their children" and

comparing the net wealth of adopted and biological parents and that of the adopted child, we find that, even prior to any inheritance, there is a substantial role for environment and a much smaller role for pre-birth factors. (Black et al. 2019, 6)

The researchers concluded that

wealth transmission is not primarily because children from wealthier families are inherently more talented or more able but that, even in relatively egalitarian Sweden, wealth begets wealth. (6)

In the twenty-first century, inequality of wealth has risen significantly. Indeed, the wealth of the 50 richest people on earth increased by 9% a year between 1995 and 2021, with the wealth of the richest 500 rising by 7% a year. Average wealth grew by less than half that rate, at 3.2% over the same period. The growth rate in net household

wealth among the poorest half of the world's population was 3-4% a year between 1995-2021. The poorest half of the world's population captured only 2.3% of overall wealth growth 1995-2021. The top 1% obtained growth in wealth averaging 3-9% a year and took 38% of total wealth growth 1995-2021. The top 0.01% of adults increased their share of personal wealth from 7.5% in 1995 to 11% now. And the billionaire population increased their share from 1% to 3.5%.

Inequality of wealth around the world may have reached an irreversible tipping point. The UK-based House of Commons Library (Byrne 2018) reckons that, if current trends continue, the richest 1% will control nearly 64% of world's wealth by 2030. Based on 6% annual growth in wealth, they would hold assets worth approximately \$305 trillion, up from \$140 trillion today. This follows a report released earlier this year by Oxfam (Hardoon 2017), which said that just eight billionaires have as much wealth as 3.6 billion people – the poorest half of the world.

The two years of the pandemic have only accelerated inequality. During the first waves of the Covid-19 pandemic, global billionaires' wealth grew by \$3.7 trn. According to World Health Statistics (2022), this amount is "almost equivalent to the total annual spending on public health by all governments in the world before the pandemic – approximately \$4 trn". Since 2020, the richest 1% have captured almost two-thirds of all new wealth – nearly twice as much money as the bottom 99% of the world's population (Christensen et al. 2023).

In a new study of Italian inheritance tax records (Acciari et al. 2021), researchers found that the wealth share of the top 1% (half a million individuals) increased from 16% in 1995 to 22% in 2016, and the share accruing to the top 0.01% (the richest 5,000 adults) almost tripled from 1.8% to 5%. In contrast, the poorest 50% saw an 80% drop in their average net wealth over the same period. The data also revealed the growing role of inheritance and life-time gifts as a share of national income, as well as their increasing concentration at the top. The huge wealth of a few individuals is getting larger because it can be passed onto relatives with little or no taxation.

We can break personal wealth down into two main categories: property wealth and financial wealth. A larger section of the population has property wealth, although this is very unequally distributed. But financial wealth (stocks and shares, bonds, pension funds, cash etc) is the province of a tiny number of people and so is even more unequally distributed. The richest 1% of US households now own 53% of all equities and mutual funds held by American households. The richest 10% own 87%! Half of America's households have little or no financial assets at all – indeed they are in debt (Federal Reserve 2022). Due to the huge rise in the prices of property and financial assets over the last 20 years, fuelled by cheap credit and reduced taxation, this concentration of personal wealth has increased sharply.

But the concentration of personal wealth in the advanced capitalist economies is nothing compared to what is happening in the poorer nations of the world. A study compared the inequality of wealth in South Africa against similar ‘emerging economies’ (Chatterjee et al. 2020). Extreme wealth inequalities in South Africa have got worse, not better, since the end of the apartheid regime. Today, the top 10% own about 85% of total wealth and the top 0.1% own close to one-third. South Africa continues to hold the dubious honour of having the worst wealth inequality among the major economies of the world. The South African top 1% share has fluctuated between 50-55% since 1993, while it has remained below 45% in Russia and the US and below 30% in China, France, and the UK.

3 Income Inequality Between Countries

Even though inequality of personal wealth is more extreme, income inequality is still very high. The global economy has doubled since the end of the Cold War, yet half the world lives under \$5.50 a day, primarily because the benefits of growth have largely gone to the wealthiest.

The WIR finds that the richest 10% of the global population currently takes 52% of global income, compared with just an 8% share for the poorest half. On average, an individual from the top 10% of the global income distribution earned \$122,100 (£92,150) a year in 2021, whereas an individual from the poorest half of the global income distribution makes just \$3,920 a year, or 30 times less! Indeed, the share of income presently captured by the poorest half of the world’s people is about half what it was in 1820, before the great divergence between western countries and their colonies. Almost half of the people in the global top 1% are Americans. Depending on the year, 10-11% of the richest Americans are in the global top 1%.

The share of global income going to the top 10% highest income holders in the world has fluctuated at around 50-60% over the last 200 years and was at its highest in 2000. The share of income going to bottom 50% of income holders has averaged no more than 10% over 200 years and was near a low of 7% in 2020. Global income inequality has always been high and shows no appreciable downward trend in the last 100 years.

Mostly everyone who is interested in global inequality has come across the famous elephant graph, originally developed by Branko Milanovic and Christoph Lakner using World Bank data (Lakner, Milanovic 2015). The graph charts the change in income that the world’s population has experienced over time, from the very poorest to the richest 1%. The elephant graph suggests that the biggest gains in income have gone to the middle-income percentiles of the world’s population, followed by the top world incomes [\[chart 3\]](#).

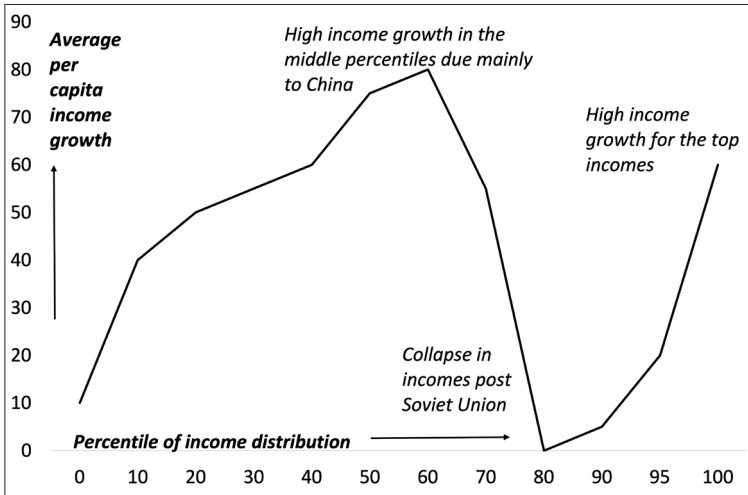


Chart 3 The elephant graph: growth in average per capita income 1988-2008.
Source: World Inequality Database

The British think-tank Resolution Foundation analysed the elephant chart (Corlett 2016). The Resolution Foundation found that faster population growth in countries like China and India distort the graph. There is not really any elephant shape. A revised analysis that removes the effect of different population growth shows that the lower income groups did see real incomes rise since the late 1980s, although nowhere near as much as the top 5-10% of income earners.

4 Inequality of Income Within Countries

If we look within countries, then the share of income going to the top 1% of earners has risen substantially since the 1980s everywhere. According to the World Inequality Database, in Russia, the income share of the top 1% fell suddenly after the Russian Revolution of 1917, and stayed low during the Soviet period. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, it took just a decade for the top 1% income share to reach higher levels than during the days of the Tsars.

In the UK, the rich did very well in the nineteenth century. However, in the twentieth century, the income share of the top 1% fell steadily, reaching a low-point in 1980 (7%). Since 1980, it has risen substantially again. In the US in the 1800s, the top 1%'s income share was lower than in many European countries. Like the UK, the US had

decreasing inequality in the post-WW2 period. But since the 1980s there has been a dramatic increase in the top 1% income share. In 2021, the share is higher than in 1820.

Social Democratic Sweden saw a significant decline in income inequality during the first half of the 20th century, but again, since the 1980s inequality has risen. China was highly unequal until the 1949 revolution but then inequality rose sharply after the opening-up of the economy in the Deng period from the 1980s. In Brazil the very high inequality of income has hardly altered in 200 years. India's inequality of income was relatively low until the last 30 years and now it matches that of Brazil, much higher than China.

That's the rich end of the income scale. At the poor end, McKinsey (2016) found that in 2014, between 65-75% of households in 25 advanced economies were in income segments whose real market incomes – from wages and capital – were flat or below where they had been in 2005. According to the latest report by the US Census Bureau, households at the 10th percentile – those poorer than 90% of the population – are poorer than they were in 1989. The 3.4% of income that households in the bottom fifth took home in 2015 was less than the 5.8% they had in 1974. Indeed, there are still 43.1 million people living in poverty in the US. The US poverty rate has hardly budged since the 1980s.

In contrast, CEO pay has skyrocketed 1,322% since 1978 (Mishel, Kandra 2021). CEOs were paid 351 times as much as a typical worker in 2020. In 2020, the ratio of CEO-to-typical-worker compensation was 351-to-1 under the realized measure of CEO pay; that is up from 307-to-1 in 2019 and a big increase from 21-to-1 in 1965 and 61-to-1 in 1989. CEOs are even making a lot more than other very high earners (wage earners in the top 0.1%) – more than six times as much.

There is substantial evidence that income inequality in America rose throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Piketty et al. 2018). The top 1% of taxpayers' share of after-tax-and-transfer income rose from 9% in 1960 to 15% in 2019.⁵

⁵ Auten and Splinter (2023) at the US Treasury department reckon that inequality has barely budged, with the top 1% receiving 9% of after-tax income in 2019, up only slightly from 8% in 1960. Both studies use official tax data, so the difference in results is due to the imputation assumptions adopted for income gained by the rich but not taxed. After studying both research results, William Gale et al. (2023) at the Brookings Institution conclude that “the preponderance of evidence suggests that income inequality has increased, both in the US and in other countries”.

5 The Causes of Economic Inequality

We can discern from the data that high inequality in wealth is closely correlated with high inequality in income. Using the World Economic Forum (WEF) index, there is a positive correlation of about 0.38 across the data: the higher the inequality of personal wealth in an economy, the more likely that the inequality of income will be higher [chart 4].

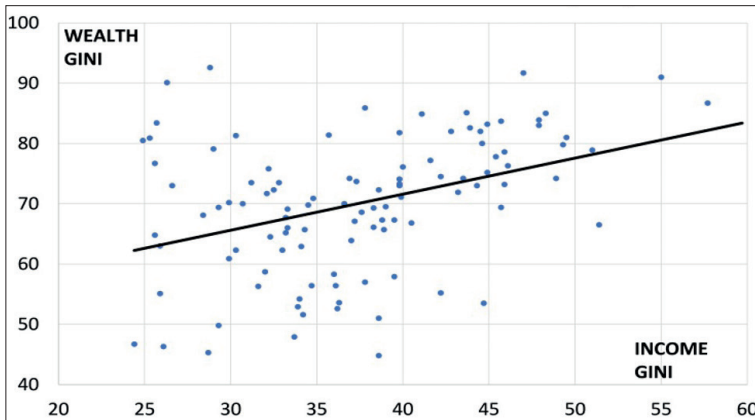


Chart 4 Relation between wealth and income inequality – a country database.
Source: World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness report, author's calculations

The question is which drives which? This is easily answered. More wealth begets more income. A very small elite owns the means of production and finance and that is how they usurp the lion's share and more of the wealth and income.

There are three main theories of income distribution in modern economies. First, there is the hypothesis of a wave of rising and then decreasing inequality as developed by Simon Kuznets. The second are distribution theories e.g. Thomas Piketty's theory (2014) of unfettered capitalism that, left to its own devices, maintains an unchanged rate of return and sees the top earners' share of capital income increasing to the point that it threatens to swallow the entire output of the society. Then there is Marxist theory that inequality of wealth and income is due to the increasing concentration of ownership of capital.

6 Mainstream Theories

Nobel laureate economist Simon Kuznets (1955) argued that as an economy develops, a natural cycle of economic inequality occurs, represented by an inverted U-shape curve called the Kuznets curve [chart 6].

According to Kuznets, an economy develops, inequality first increases, then decreases after a certain level of average income is attained. When an economy becomes mature, there is democratisation and various redistribution mechanisms such as social welfare programs. Then countries move back to a lower level of inequality.

The Kuznets curve is not borne out in reality. During the rapid economic growth between 1965 and 1990 in eight East Asian countries inequality decreased; and when growth slowed after the 1990s inequality of income rose. The Kuznets curve is turned upside down.

In 2007, Ben Bernanke, the then head of the US Federal Reserve, discussed why there were inequalities of wealth and income in the US (Bernanke 2007). He argued that it was basically down to education; and with equality of educational opportunities for all, inequalities of outcome in income; health, life expectancy etc can be reduced. However, the OECD published a report that concluded a young person's educational attainment, future earnings and life expectancy depend more than anything else on whether that youngster was born into a rich or poor family. The ability to improve on your parents' status and wealth if they are poor is very low in France, Italy, the UK or the US (it's slightly better in the Nordic countries, Australia and Canada). The OECD found that the more your parents earn or own, the better the children will do. This matters much more than the school that kids go to or the job opportunities there are in their area - indeed, children's chances of going to a good school or college or their future earnings depend most on their parents' status.

Greg Mankiw, author of the most widely used textbook on economics by university undergraduates argued that the top 1% had a rising share of income in the last 40 years because of the growing gap between the skills and education of workers. 'Skill-biased technical change' has increased the demand for skilled labour and so incomes for the skilled have risen faster than the unskilled. Moreover, the skills and cleverness of the 1% are inherited: "smart parents are more likely to have smart children". It is an irreversible genetic inequality.

But genetic differences are not the same as inheritance. Genes may be passed on, but there is no reason why large incomes or wealth should be passed on from parent to child. The top 1% of income earners can perpetuate their income status for their children, not because of their genes but because they can pass on their income and wealth.

Clearly, inequalities of income and wealth are partially due to better education and skills for individuals to earn more money or gain higher income levels from work. And there are many other factors

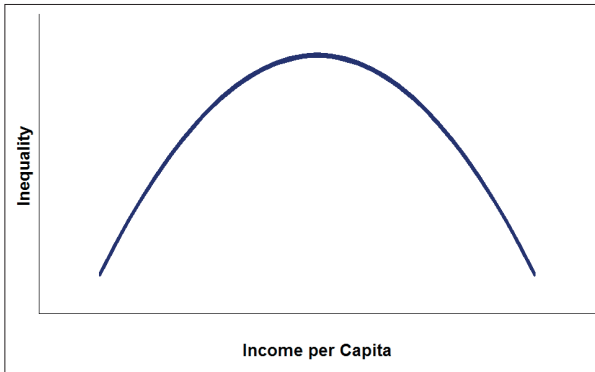


Chart 6
Kuznets curve.
Source: Kuznets

that have driven up inequality of incomes in the advanced economies since the 1980s: the collapse of unions and the transfer of manufacturing jobs to the global south.

Automation is an important one. Many workers – particularly, men without college degrees – have seen their real earnings fall sharply. Acemoglu et al. (2022) finds that more than half of the increase in inequality in the U.S. since 1980 is at least related to automation, largely stemming from downward wage pressure on jobs that might just as easily be done by a robot. Automation under capitalism means significant job losses among those without educational qualifications (education is now more and more expensive) and hits the lowest paid.

7 Distribution Theories

Tony Atkinson was the founding father of modern research into inequality. Atkinson (2013) dismissed these mainstream economic explanations as “neoclassical apologia”. The biggest rises in inequality took place *before* globalisation and the automation revolution got underway in the 1990s. Atkinson pinned down the causes of inequality to two. The first was the sharp fall in direct income tax for the top earners under neoliberal government policies from the 1980s onwards. The second was the sharp rise in capital income (i.e. income generated from the ownership of capital rather than from the sale of labour power). The rising profit share in capitalist sector production that most OECD economies generated since the 1980s was translated into higher dividends, interest and rent for the top 1-5% who generally own the means of production.

Thomas Piketty (2014) looked at the accumulation and distribution of wealth over the last 200 years. He found a rise of income going to capital in the form of profits, rent and interest. The central issue was a distributional one (Roberts 2015). The net rate of return

on capital (r) outstrips the growth of net national income (g). This inequality $r > g$ implies that “the past will tend to devour the future” (Piketty 2014, x) : wealth originating from the ownership of capital grows more rapidly than wealth stemming from income from work. Even an “apparently small gap between the return on capital and the rate of growth can in the long run have powerful and destabilising effects on the structure and dynamics of social inequality” (77).

Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman (2019) show that currently America’s 400 billionaires pay less in all taxes relative to their incomes than the bottom 50% of wage earners.

The US tax system is not progressive. For the top 400 income holders (billionaires) the effective tax rate is 23% while it is 25-30% for working and middle classes. America’s tax system is now technically ‘regressive’ and is “a new engine for increasing inequality. (10)

Saez and Zucman argue that there are three main drivers of declining progressivity: the collapse in capital taxation; allowing tax avoidance loopholes and outright evasion and; globalisation with tax havens and competition to reduce taxes for foreign investment.

8 Marxist Theories

Marx’s view on the reason for inequalities of personal wealth and income was not dissimilar to that of Piketty. But he considered that any distribution of the means of income and wealth was only a *consequence* of the distribution of the conditions of production. The capitalist mode of production rests on the fact that the material conditions of production are in the hands of non-workers in the form of property in capital and land, while the masses are only owners of their personal condition of production, of labor power.

Following Marx, Ian Wright (2005) dismisses the mainstream causes of rising inequality. Instead, the causes of rising inequality must be found in the very nature of the capitalist mode of production. As Wright puts it, “capitalism is a system in which one economic class systematically exploits another. And its economic exploitation – not housing, tax policies or low wages – that is the root cause of the economic inequality we see all around us”.

Wright develops a model of capitalism that is based on this principle of entropy in a market economy.

Maximising entropy under the single constraint of conservation of money yields an exponential distribution of wealth. So the first cause of inequality is what Adam Smith called the higgling and haggling of the market. Since people are free to trade, entropy increases and the distribution of money becomes unequal? (32)

	1918	1929	1945	1973	1979	2007	2012
<i>Tax-units (%)</i>							
Capitalist class	9.1	7.6	2.5	1.0	0.8	1.8	1.4
Managerial class	28.8	19.4	8.1	10.6	13.3	16.8	14.2
Working class	62.1	73.0	89.5	88.4	85.9	81.5	84.4
<i>Income share (%)</i>							
Capitalist class	38.3	39.7	16.7	7.7	7.4	23.3	22.1
Managerial class	29.3	25.0	18.8	26.5	30.2	31.9	31.8
Working class	32.3	35.3	64.5	65.8	62.4	44.8	46.1
<i>Average income ratios</i>							
Capitalist class to Working class	8.1	10.8	9.3	10.5	12.4	23.9	29.0
Capitalist class to Managerial class	4.2	4.1	2.9	3.1	3.9	6.9	7.0
Managerial class to Working class	2.0	2.7	3.2	3.3	3.1	3.5	4.1

Table 1 Summary class statistics US 1918-2012. Source: Mohun 2016, 358

but “markets are not the only cause of the inequality we see in capitalism”. The other aspect is exploitation of labour for a profit. Capitalists accumulate profits as capital.

Firms follow a powerlaw distribution in size. And capital concentrates in the same way. A large number of small capitals exploit a small group of workers, and a small number of big capitals exploit a large group of workers. Profits are roughly proportional to the number of workers employed. So capitalist income also follows a powerlaw. The more workers you exploit the more profit you make. The more profit you make the more workers you can exploit. (32)

Wright’s analysis accords nicely with the empirical evidence. Simon Mohun (2016) showed that Marx’s class analysis, which rests on the ownership of the means of production (between the owner of the means of production and who exploits those who own nothing but their labour power), remains broadly correct, even in modern capitalist economies like the US. He found that the working class – i.e. those who depend on wages alone for their living – still constitute 84% of the working population. Managers earnings high wages constitute the rest, but only 1.4% can live off rent, interest, capital gains and dividends alone. They are the real capitalist class [\[table 1\]](#).

This group gained most during the last 30 years of rising inequality. Their income has risen in the post WW2 period from 9 times the average income of the working class to 29 times, while managers’ incomes have risen from 3.2 times to 4.1 times workers’ income. So rising inequality is primarily the result of income coming from capital, not work.

Marx’s general law of accumulation of capital is that, over time, capital as represented as the stock of fixed assets owned by capitalists

(structures, equipment, technology patents etc), would rise relative to the cost of employment of human labour. This offers a good gauge of the underlying concentration of capital (Marx 1867) [chart 7].

One study shows how far that has gone in the recent period. Three systems theorists at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (Vitali et al. 2011) developed a database listing 37 million companies and investors worldwide and analysed all 43,060 transnational corporations and share ownerships linking them. They built a model of who owns what and what their revenues are, mapping out the whole edifice of economic power. They discovered that a dominant core of 147 firms through interlocking stakes in others together control 40% of the wealth in the network. A total of 737 companies control 80% of it all. This is the inequality that matters for the functioning of capitalism – the concentrated power of capital. The main cause of rising inequality has been a growing concentration and centralisation of wealth, not income. And it has been in the wealth held in the means of production and not just household wealth that has generated a power law in inequality at the top.

The view of mainstream economics is that the so-called ‘developing’ or ‘emerging’ economies would over time close the gap in terms of wealth and output per person – and also in terms of human well-being (eg in education, health and general prosperity). This would be achieved by following the example of the major industrialised and urbanized economies represented by the G7 top economies or those within the OECD club. The theory was that through a combination of private enterprise, competitive markets and free trade and capital flows from the rich to the poor, the economies would eventually ‘converge’. That theory has not been vindicated by any significant reduction in the gap between rich and poor countries globally – as the evidence above on wealth and income per person shows.

The UN has created a human development index (HDI) which attempts to measure progress in wider terms by including in its index not just economic growth but also life expectancy, educational advancement and other components of economic prosperity (REF). Are the HDIs of the rich and poor countries converging?

If we look at the largest so-called emerging economies by population, including the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), as you might expect, China has achieved the greatest improvement in its HDI of all countries. From a lowly 0.48 in 1990, China’s HDI reached 0.77 in 2021, a rise of 59%. Compare that to India, which started pretty much at the same HDI level as China but reached only 0.63 in 2021, a rise of 46%, but still way lower than China [table 3].

If we exclude China and India, then the world average was 19pts behind the OECD average in 1990. In 2021, the gap was 17pts. So there has been hardly any progress in closing the gap in 30 years. And the countries of the Global South chosen here are mostly the

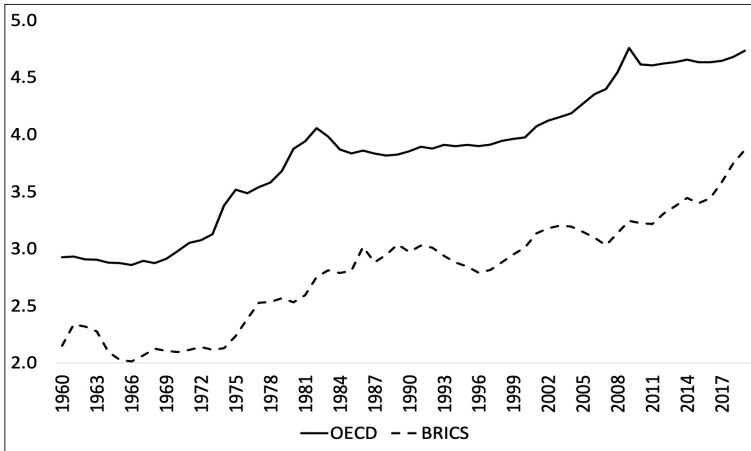


Chart 7 Rising organic composition of capital (ratio of stock of fixed assets over employee compensation) = rising concentration of capital. Source: EWPT 7.0 series, author's calculations

	1990	2000	2010	2021
US	0,872	0,891	0,911	0,936
Russia	0,743	0,732	0,796	0,822
Brazil	0,610	0,679	0,723	0,754
China	0,484	0,584	0,691	0,768
India	0,434	0,491	0,575	0,633
OECD	0,795	0,84	0,875	0,899
World	0,601	0,645	0,697	0,732

Table 3 Human development indexes 1990-2021. Source: Human Development Report 2022

best performers, not the poorest and weakest. Despite the greatest period of growth in international trade and capital flows, called by mainstream economics the 'Great Moderation' or 'globalisation', there has been minimal convergence between the top economies and the rest.

Indeed, divergence is now operating since the COVID pandemic. Every year a few different countries experience dips in their respective HDI values. But a whopping 90% of countries saw their HDI value drop in either 2020 or 2021, far exceeding the number that experienced reversals in the wake of the global financial crisis.

The mainstream theory of economic development cannot explain this. The World Bank concludes that the main limitation to ending extreme poverty and reducing global inequality is the failure of a transfer of resources from the rich countries to the poor.

The World Bank explained it this way:

Suppose that the real GDP growth for the developing world as a whole is 5% per year. If 10% of this growth accrued to the 21% of the developing world's population who are extremely poor, and this 10% was distributed equally, extreme poverty would end in one year. (World Bank 2006)

And yet, far from resources being transferred from the rich to the poorer countries to reduce global poverty, the opposite is the case. According to UNCTAD (2020),⁶ net resource transfers are from developing to developed countries, averaging \$700bn a year, even after taking into account foreign aid assistance.

Contrary to mainstream theory, free international trade does not lead to economic convergence but to increased transfers of profit, interest and rent from the poorer, less technically developed economies to the richer, more developed economies. International trade takes the form of 'unequal exchange' from trade and financial flows. According to various authors the transfer of value from the periphery to the G7 bloc is equivalent to approximately 1% of GDP each year and 10% of export revenues (Carchedi, Roberts 2020). Ricci (2021) finds that there was a transfer of \$865 billion in 2007 (1.9% of GVA and 9.1% of exports); Liang and Su (2021) estimate \$563bn in 2014 (1.4% of GDP); and Hickel, Sullivan and Zoomkawala (2021) \$2.2trn in 2018 (7% of GDP) or \$62trn at constant prices since 1960!

Developing countries have forked out over \$4.2tn in interest payments alone since 1980 – a scale that dwarfs the aid that they received during the same period (REF). Another big contributor is the income that foreigners make on their investments in developing countries and then repatriate back home. But by far the biggest chunk of outflows has to do with unrecorded – and usually illicit – capital flight. Developing countries have lost a total of \$13.4tn through unrecorded capital flight since 1980. Most of these outflows take place through the international trade system. Basically, corporations – foreign and domestic alike – report false prices on their trade invoices in order to spirit money out of developing countries directly into tax havens and secrecy jurisdictions, a practice known as “trade misinvoicing”. Currently, international development assistance is a little over \$100 billion a year, five times less the annual income flows out of the poor countries to the rich.

The World Bank estimates that 60% of low-income countries are heavily indebted and at high risk of debt distress. Debt burdens are crushing many developing countries. Amid the biggest surge in global interest rates in four decades, developing countries spent a record

⁶ <https://unctad.org/publication/trade-and-development-report-2020>.

\$443.5 billion to service their external public and publicly guaranteed debt in 2022, the World Bank's latest International Debt Report shows (World Bank 2023). The increase in these costs has shifted scarce resources away from critical needs such as health, education and the environment.

9 Ending or Reducing Inequality

Given these explanations for inequality of income and wealth in modern economies, what policy actions are possible to curb or reduce inequality?

The Kuznets hypothesis suggests that nothing can or needs to be done about inequality as it is a necessary part of economic development and will naturally recede as economies mature and as education, skills and technology expands. The Piketty hypothesis argues that on the contrary inequality will rise in modern economies, so governments must intervene to reverse that process. Piketty advocates an annual tax on the top 1% of wealth holders; progressive taxation of incomes, an end to tax evasion and avoidance schemes by the rich; the closure of 'tax havens' in countries, a global minimum tax on corporate profits among other measures.

The redistribution theorists' main proposal to reverse rising inequality of wealth and income advocated by the authors is a wealth tax. Saez and Zucman estimate that with a 10% wealth tax above \$1 billion, US wealth inequality can return to its 1980 level. This would also generate revenue to pay for health and education services. For example, the wealth tax proposal of Democrat candidate Elizabeth Warren starting at 2% above \$50m of wealth to 10% for billionaires would raise 1% of GDP and would eventually "abolish billionaires gradually". If there was a 90% top rate, it would "abolish billionaires now".

But there is a weakness in Saez and Zucman's policy proposals. They only deal with redistributing income and wealth after the event. But rising wealth and income inequality is not due to regressive taxation in the main, but to the structure of investment, production and income in the capitalist economy, namely the exploitation of labour by capital.

Income inequality from wages and profits (market income) has been high – in the US with a gini coefficient of 0.45-0.55. It has been ameliorated by redistribution policies of taxation and social benefits, but inequality in personal disposable income is still high 0.35-0.40 and rising. The lower the inequality of market incomes, the lower the inequality of disposable incomes – but the former drives the latter (IMF Fiscal Monitor 2017) [\[chart 8\]](#).

The Marxist view is that policies aimed at reducing inequality by taxation and regulation, or even by boosting workers' wages, will not achieve much change while inequality of wealth stems from the

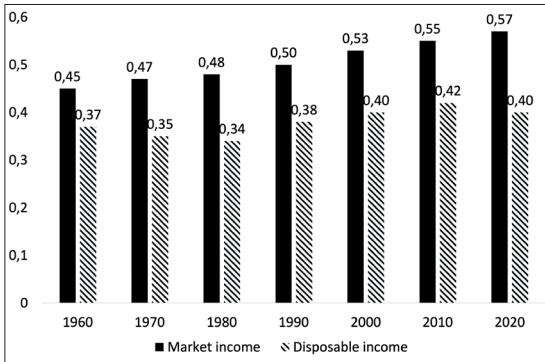


Chart 8
US inequality
of income Gini coefficients.
Source: World Inequality
Database

concentration of the means of production and finance in the hands of a few. The Marxist model argues that the policy target should not be solely or even mainly a redistribution of unequal wealth and income. The policy target should be the removal of private ownership of the means of production and its replacement by common ownership. The distribution of income and wealth cannot be changed in any material way until the system is changed.

The issue is the abolition of the mode of wealth generation, not ‘after the event’ alteration of income and wealth distribution. As Marx put it when discussing wage inequality (Marx 1865), “to clamor for equal or even equitable remuneration on the basis of the wages system is the same as to clamor for freedom on the basis of the slavery system”. Equality in the sense of “to each according to ability or effort or contribution” should be replaced with equality in the sense of “from each according to ability, to each according to need”.

What flows from economic inequality are the other modes of social inequality. Poverty and inequality are linked (Roberts 2023). Both are the result of exploitation of labour by capital nationally and globally. What that means is that policies aimed at reducing inequality of income by taxation and regulation, or even by boosting workers’ wages, will not achieve much impact while there is such a high level of inequality of wealth and when that inequality of wealth stems from the concentration of the means of production and finance in the hands of a few. UN Rapporteur on global poverty, Philip Alston (2020) concluded that “using historic growth rates and excluding any negative effects of climate change (an impossible scenario), it would take 100 years to eradicate poverty”.

As income inequality in the USA increased over the past four decades, socioeconomic gaps in survival have also increased (Bor et al. 2017). Life expectancy has risen among middle-income and high-income Americans, whereas it has stagnated among poor Americans

and even declined in some demographic groups. Growing survival gaps across income percentiles reflect an increasingly strong association between low income and poor health. Rising inequality including unequal access to technological innovations, increased geographical segregation by income, reduced economic mobility and increased exposure to the costs of medical care have reduced access to health support among low-income Americans. There is a widening gap in mortality rates that can be connected to increased inequality of income and wealth (Case, Deaton 2023).

Economic inequality is caused by the monopoly over the means of production, the ownership of property and the control of finance that is in the hands of the 1%. Without changing this, it will not be possible to curb or end the other forms of social inequality in any significant way.

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Du système des inégalités aux classes sociales

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Abstract On the basis of data provided by the public statistics apparatus, a methodical analysis of the inequalities existing between social categories is able to support the thesis of the persistence of the division of French society into social classes. In recent decades neoliberal policies have accentuated these inequalities. In addition, French society, like all others, is crossed by other cleavages. We will return briefly to these elements in the first section (1). We will then recall the theoretical stakes raised by the concept of social classes, in other words the problematic to which this concept intends to respond and the terms in which it meets it (2). Finally, we will draw from this analysis of inequalities some general conclusions: first those concerning their systemic nature; second, the fact that they always result from a conflictuality involving policies, private and public; finally, the fact that these inequalities are confronting collective subjects (3).

Keywords Social inequalities. System of inequalities. Social categories. Social classes. France.

Sommaire 1 Tournant néolibéral, clivages de classes et autres clivages sociaux en France. – 2 Classes sociales: un concept controversé. – 3 La persistance des classes sociales comme faits sociaux totaux au sein de la société française contemporaine.



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Menée sur la base des données fournies par l'appareil de la statistique publique, une analyse méthodique des inégalités existant entre catégories sociales est en mesure de conforter la thèse de la persistance de la division de la société française en classes sociales. Au cours des dernières décennies les politiques néolibérales ont accentué ces inégalités. En outre la société française, comme toutes les autres, est traversée par d'autres clivages. Nous reviendrons brièvement sur ces éléments dans la première section (1). Nous rappellerons par la suite les enjeux théoriques posés par le concept de classes sociales, autrement dit la problématique à laquelle ce concept entend répondre et les termes dans lesquels il y répond (2). Enfin, nous dégagerons de cette analyse des inégalités, quelques conclusions générales : en premier lieu celles concernant leur caractère systémique ; ensuite, le fait qu'elles résultent toujours d'une conflictualité mettant en cause des politiques, privées et publiques ; enfin le fait que ces inégalités mettent aux prises des sujets collectifs (3).

1 Tournant néolibéral, clivages de classes et autres clivages sociaux en France

Les historiens futurs retiendront sans doute comme une de ses caractéristiques principales de la société française de la fin du xx^e siècle et du début du xxi^e le ralentissement, l'interruption, voire le retournement de la tendance pluri-décennale antérieure de réduction des inégalités entre catégories sociales. Souvent encore mal mesurée par les données statistiques disponibles, inégalement accentuée selon les différents domaines ou dimensions de la vie sociale, cette inflexion a été confirmée par différentes synthèses réalisées par des auteurs de sensibilités diverses consacrées à la question au cours des dernières années.¹ Cette inflexion ne doit rien au hasard. Pour l'essentiel, elle a été le résultat de la mise en œuvre, à partir de la fin des années 1970, de politiques néolibérales qui se sont succédées et aggravées, de manière quasi continue depuis lors. Fondées sur l'idée que la crise ouverte quelques années auparavant est essentiellement due à une insuffisance d'une offre handicapée par un coût salarial trop élevé, ces politiques ont eu pour objectifs et pour résultats le développement du chômage, de la précarité et de la flexibilité de l'emploi, la stagnation voire la baisse des salaires réels, partant une évolution du partage de la valeur ajoutée plus favorable au capital, une déréglementation progressive ou brutale des différents marchés, un

¹ Bihr, Pfefferkorn 1999 ; 2014 ; Piketty 2001 ; 2013 ; 2019 ; Collectif Manouchian 2012 ; Dubet 2014 ; Galland, Lemel 2018 ; Savidan 2018 ; Sainsaulieu et al. 2019.

démantèlement rampant des systèmes publics de protection sociale et une régression plus générale de l'intervention régulatrice ou correctrice de l'État dans tous les domaines, tous facteurs propices à cet épanouissement de la liberté des plus « forts » qui a pour contrepartie une dégradation de la situation des plus « faibles ». Avec, pour effets globaux, un ralentissement de la hausse du pouvoir d'achat de la masse salariale globale, coïncidant avec une augmentation souvent importante des revenus non salariaux, notamment des revenus des placements financiers, le développement de poches de misère dans des banlieues déshéritées, des anciennes régions industrielles abandonnées ou des zones rurales délaissées, la multiplication des « nouveaux pauvres » et des « sans domicile fixe » (SDF), deux néologismes produits originaux de l'époque, vivant de la mendicité et de l'aide dispensée par les associations caritatives, faisant pendant à la multiplication des *golden boys*, déployant leur génie spéculatif sur des marchés financiers rendus de plus en plus incontrôlables. La mise en œuvre de ces politiques a clairement signifié la rupture du compromis fordiste, qui avait fourni le cadre socio-institutionnel de la croissance économique que nous avons connue au cours des « trente glorieuses », compromis dont les termes avaient été à la fois imposés par un mouvement ouvrier sous hégémonie social-démocrate et accepté par la frange éclairée du patronat. Par divers mécanismes contractuels ou législatifs, ce compromis avait institué la répartition des gains de productivité entre le capital et le salariat, puis progressivement entre les catégories sociales, que ce soit sous la forme d'une hausse de leur pouvoir d'achat ou d'une généralisation de la protection sociale. En dépit d'inégalités persistantes, cette répartition n'en avait pas moins contribué à réduire les écarts sociaux. C'est à cette dynamique que la rupture de ce compromis a mis fin. Les politiques néolibérales ont précisément eu pour but d'en démanteler l'armature institutionnelle, opération nécessaire à la remise en cause de ses acquis sociaux (Bihr 1991).

Nous ne traiterons ici que des seules inégalités entre catégories sociales, même s'il existe aussi des inégalités entre hommes et femmes, entre classes d'âge et générations, entre nationaux et étrangers ou encore entre espaces sociaux (villes et campagnes, centres et périphéries, régions) qui, certes, recoupent celles existant entre catégories sociales sans pour autant se réduire à ces dernières. Cependant, si les inégalités entre hommes et femmes² et celles entre générations³ ont très tôt fait l'objet de synthèses plus ou moins abouties, les inégalités entre Français et immigrés, et plus largement les inégalités ethno-raciales, n'ont fait l'objet d'investigations systématiques

² Bihr, Pfefferkorn 2002 ; Pfefferkorn 2016 ; Bessière, Gollac 2020.

³ Chauvel 2014 ; Peugny 2013.

que plus récemment.⁴ Il en est de même des inégalités territoriales.⁵ Au-delà de leur caractère systémique, les inégalités se déclinent aussi bien suivant la classe, le sexe ou le genre, que la « race » ou la couleur, la génération ou la classe d'âge, l'espace ou le territoire. Le *Dictionnaire des inégalités* propose une telle perspective : les renvois entre les entrées suggèrent des relations entre l'ensemble de ces inégalités (Bihr, Pfefferkorn 2014). Ajoutons que, depuis deux décennies, de plus en plus de travaux dans les sciences sociales tentent d'articuler ces inégalités, sinon entre toutes, au moins entre deux d'entre elles : inégalités de classe et de « race », inégalités de sexe et de classe, inégalités de classe et de générations, etc.

2 Classes sociales : un concept controversé

Le concept de classes sociales n'a pas cessé de diviser et d'opposer sociologues, économistes, historiens, politistes, etc. De même il n'a cessé de faire l'objet de controverses et de querelles entre eux. Querelles au caractère passionné voire passionnel, dans la mesure où les enjeux n'en ont jamais été seulement théoriques (académiques) mais qu'ils ont toujours compris et qu'ils continuent d'ailleurs à comprendre une dimension politique, au sens à la fois large et restreint du terme. Pour en saisir les enjeux théoriques (les seuls qui nous occuperons ici), il faut commencer par restituer la problématique à laquelle ce concept et les théories qui le reprennent et le développent prétendent répondre.⁶

2.1 La problématique

On peut la formuler en ces termes : comment expliquer ou interpréter ces traits caractéristiques des sociétés contemporaines qui en font simultanément des sociétés segmentées, des sociétés hiérarchisées et des sociétés conflictuelles ?

- Des sociétés segmentées en ce que ces sociétés présentent de nettes différenciations internes, que tous les individus ne s'y ressemblent pas, ne présentent pas les mêmes caractéristiques sociales, ne possèdent pas les mêmes attributs sociaux. Plus précisément encore, cela signifie qu'il se forme à l'intérieur

⁴ Migreurop 2012 ; Safi 2013 ; Beauchemin, Hamel, Simon 2016.

⁵ Backouche et al. 2011 ; Oberti, Préteceille 2016 ; Michel, Ribardièrre 2017 ; Bruneau et al. 2018.

⁶ Les éléments qui suivent ont fait l'objet d'une publication dans une précédente version dans Bouffartigue 2015, 47-61.

de ces sociétés des groupements d'individus partageant des manières de vivre, de faire, de penser identiques, similaires ou équivalentes et qui les différencient d'autres groupements du même genre (ce qui légitime le fait de les regrouper ainsi).

- Des sociétés hiérarchisées en ce sens qu'elles ne font pas seulement apparaître des groupements différents, mais encore des groupements inégalement dotés en ressources sociales. Par là, il ne faut pas entendre seulement les ressources matérielles : les flux de revenus et les stocks de patrimoine, l'espace à occuper et le temps à vivre, etc. Mais aussi bien des ressources sociales et politiques : la multiplicité et la diversité des rencontres et des réseaux de socialisation (associations, syndicats, partis, communautés religieuses), le pouvoir de se faire entendre et de défendre ses intérêts et ses droits, des positions institutionnelles valant des privilèges, etc. Ou encore des ressources symboliques : les diplômes scolaires, la maîtrise des différents savoirs et des références culturelles, la capacité de se donner une image cohérente du monde, des autres et de soi, voire la capacité de l'imposer ou de la proposer à d'autres.
- Enfin des sociétés conflictuelles. Car ces différenciations et hiérarchisations internes ne vont pas de soi, au double sens où d'une part, elles résultent de conflits entre les différents groupements auxquels elles donnent naissance. Et d'autre part, elles provoquent de tels conflits, ces groupements ou du moins les individus les constituant entrant en rivalité les uns avec les autres pour, selon le cas, conserver ou améliorer leur position relative dans les différentes hiérarchies précédentes (dans l'ordre de l'avoir, du pouvoir et du savoir). Conflits dont l'enjeu est l'appropriation des ressources sociales (la richesse, le pouvoir, la culture) ; mais aussi la légitimation de l'ordre social : la définition de ce qui est juste et injuste, acceptable ou inadmissible, souhaitable ou non du point de vue précisément de la répartition de ces ressources sociales entre l'ensemble des membres de la société.

La question générale qui se pose dès lors – et à laquelle le concept de classes sociales entend, parmi d'autres possibles, répondre – est la suivante : quelle est la nature et quel est le statut de ces différents groupements auxquels donnent naissance les précédents processus de segmentation, de hiérarchisation et d'opposition conflictuelle ? Et, en ordonnant les réponses par rapport au concept de classe sociale, il n'y a somme toute que trois réponses possibles à cette question.

2.2 Les classes sociales sont tout

Dans cette perspective, les précédents processus de segmentation, de hiérarchisation et d'opposition conflictuelle donnent naissance à des classes sociales au sens plein du terme, c'est-à-dire à des groupements qui présentent au moins les trois caractéristiques suivantes :

- Leurs membres individuels partagent des conditions sociales d'existence identiques, proches ou du moins similaires : par exemple, du point de vue de leur insertion dans les rapports sociaux de production, notamment sous le double angle de la propriété des moyens sociaux de production et de la division sociale du travail ; du point de vue de la source, de la nature et du montant de leur revenus monétaires ; du point de vue de leur niveau de formation générale et professionnelle ; etc.
- Leurs membres individuels partagent *une culture commune* : un ensemble de manières de vivre, d'agir et de penser ; un mode et un style de vie propres ; des valeurs (intellectuelles, morales, esthétiques) communes. Sur la base de quoi il existe une intensité particulière des relations sociales entre eux (par exemple sur la base du voisinage, du partage des mêmes pratiques, de la fréquentation des mêmes lieux de loisirs ou des mêmes associations, sur la forme éventuelle d'une certaine tendance à l'endogamie). L'ensemble aboutissant à une conscience plus ou moins vive donnant à leurs membres le sentiment de constituer un groupement particulier, distinct des autres groupements de même nature (des autres classes sociales) ; ce qu'on appellera une conscience de classe. Chaque classe forme ainsi en quelque sorte un monde social à part.
- Ce groupement constitue enfin un acteur collectif, capable de s'organiser (sur un plan professionnel, syndical, politique) pour défendre les intérêts communs de ses membres ; plus largement, pour infléchir la dynamique d'ensemble de la société ; à la limite pour exercer le pouvoir politique (assurer la direction de la société par le biais de l'Etat).

En un mot, dans cette perspective, les classes sociales constituent ce que, à la suite de Marcel Mauss (1873-1950), on pourrait nommer des « faits sociaux totaux » au double sens où :

- d'une part, il s'agit de groupements macrosociologiques : des groupements qui se forment au niveau de la société globale ; dans et par les processus qui structurent la société dans son ensemble (par exemple la division du travail, la distribution et redistribution de la richesse sociale, l'organisation du pouvoir politique) ; et qui, de ce fait, se trouvent aussi être des acteurs majeurs de l'organisation, du fonctionnement et du devenir de cette société, en un mot : des acteurs de l'autoproduction de la société ;

- d'autre part et surtout, en tant que l'ensemble des déterminations (qualités, propriétés, caractéristiques, processus, etc.) de la société globale se réfractent en elles : on en retrouve la présence et la marque, à chaque fois différemment accentuées.

Autrement dit, chacune des classes sociales constituent une partie de la société globale dans laquelle se réfracte, d'une manière à chaque fois particulière, le tout de la société. Position commune, par delà tout ce qui les séparent, à des approches aussi diverses que celles de Karl Marx (1818-1883), de Maurice Halbwachs (1873-1945), de Georges Gurwitsch (1894-1965) ou de Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002).

2.3 Les classes sociales sont quelque chose

Dans cette perspective, les processus de segmentation, de hiérarchisation et d'opposition conflictuelle qui structurent les sociétés contemporaines donnent naissance à différents types de groupements sociaux (macro-sociologiques), dont les classes sociales ne constituent qu'une forme particulière ou un type particulier, parmi d'autres possibles différents d'elles. Autrement dit, les classes sociales existent bien, mais pas comme des « faits sociaux totaux » : toute la segmentation, la hiérarchisation et la conflictualité de la société ne se condensent pas en elles. Les classes sociales ne sont pas tout, tout au plus quelque chose.

Exemple typique de cette position : Max Weber (1864-1920). Selon ce dernier, les classes sociales ne seraient qu'un principe parmi d'autres de segmentation et de hiérarchisation de la totalité sociale. Il est ainsi amené à distinguer :

- « Les classes sociales » qui n'existent, selon lui, que dans l'ordre économique. Ce sont des ensembles d'individus qui partagent une même situation économique (une même situation sur le marché, une même probabilité de pouvoir s'approprier ou non des biens économiques d'un certain type, par le biais d'échanges marchands) et, par conséquent, des intérêts économiques communs ; et qui peuvent, éventuellement, défendre ensemble ces intérêts, encore que cela ne soit pas nécessairement le cas. Plutôt que de classes sociales, il faudrait donc parler de classes économiques (Weber utilise le plus souvent le mot sans qualificatif). Ces classes ne sont, selon Weber, ni nécessairement des communautés (des groupes dont les membres sont liés par la conscience de leur commune appartenance et de leur commune possession d'un certain nombre de biens matériels ou symboliques) ; ni, par conséquent, nécessairement des acteurs collectifs, des acteurs capables de peser sur la dynamique sociale globale. Le fait de partager un commun intérêt économique ne

conduit pas nécessairement les membres d'une même classe sociale à agir de pair, de manière concertée et organisée.

- « Les groupes de statut » qui existent dans l'ordre social. Weber soutient l'idée que toute société se définit aussi par la manière dont se distribuent en son sein le prestige et l'honneur. De ce fait apparaissent selon lui des groupements d'individus qui partagent une même évaluation positive ou négative de leur dignité sociale. Ce sont donc des groupements d'individus partageant un même honneur, un même prestige lié, selon le cas, à la naissance (exemple : une origine aristocratique), à la profession (exemple : la vedette du spectacle ou du sport), au niveau d'instruction (exemple : la possession du titre de docteur) ; ou, au contraire, un même déshonneur, une même indignité, une même stigmatisation (exemple : le hors-la-loi, le drogué, l'infirme).
- Enfin « les partis politiques » qui existent dans l'ordre politique comme rivaux dans la course au pouvoir, dans l'occupation de l'appareil d'Etat (à ses différents niveaux) et l'exercice du pouvoir d'Etat. Ce sont donc des groupements d'individus, qui partagent une même conception du monde et défendent les mêmes positions (propositions) politiques, les mêmes orientations gouvernementales ; et qui se coalisent de manière à s'assurer les conditions de leur mise en œuvre dans et par l'appareil d'Etat. Groupements qui, tant par leur organisation hiérarchique interne (leurs appareils, leurs permanents) que par leur liaison étroite avec l'appareil d'Etat, acquièrent une certaine autonomie à l'égard des groupes sociaux (classes économiques ou groupes de statut) qu'ils représentent.

Selon Weber, classes sociales, groupes de statut et partis politiques ne coïncident pas nécessairement au sein des sociétés contemporaines, sans être pour autant nécessairement imperméables les uns aux autres. Par exemple, une condition statutaire peut reposer sur une situation de classe, même si elle ne se réduit pas à elle seule ; exemple typique : les professions libérales. En fait, ces trois types de groupement relèvent de trois échelles différentes de valorisation, de trois hiérarchisations qui se recoupent sans pour autant nécessairement se superposer : l'une dans l'ordre de la richesse, l'autre dans l'ordre du prestige, la troisième dans l'ordre du pouvoir. Si la thèse précédente présupposait la réunion en un même groupement (la classe sociale) des trois caractéristiques de la communauté d'intérêt économique, de la communauté de style de vie et de la communauté de valeurs et d'actions politiques, la thèse weberienne au contraire présuppose que ces trois caractéristiques relèvent de trois modes et types de groupement différents.

2.4 Les classes ne sont rien

Dans cette perspective, les processus de segmentation, de hiérarchisation et d'opposition conflictuelle qui structurent les sociétés contemporaines ne donnent naissance à aucun groupement social réel. Ils ne mettent en jeu que des individus, qui peuvent certes partager certaines caractéristiques communes (une même position dans l'ordre de la richesse, du pouvoir ou du prestige) mais sans constituer pour autant des groupements sociaux réels. En effet, dans cette perspective :

- Nulle discontinuité, nul fossé, nulle barrière infranchissable ne séparent des groupes relativement fermés sur eux-mêmes. Au contraire, on insistera sur l'incessante circulation des individus entre les différentes positions sociales, autrement dit sur 'la mobilité sociale' (intra- ou inter-générationnelle).
- La hiérarchie sociale se présente comme 'une sorte d'échelle continue' de positions (déterminées par la richesse, le prestige, l'instruction, le pouvoir, etc.) donnant au mieux naissance à des couches ou à des strates sociales. La société se présente dès lors à l'image d'une coupe géologique ou d'un mille-feuille, comme un empilement de couches ou de strates, comme un dégradé de positions, allant des plus enviables (celles des individus qui ont le plus de fortune, de pouvoir, d'instruction et de prestige) vers les moins enviables (celles des individus les moins bien lotis : les plus pauvres, les plus dépourvus de pouvoir, ceux qui sont relégués dans les situations jugées les plus indignes). Entre ces couches ou strates, il y a de simples différences de degré (du plus et du moins), mais aucune différence de nature, de simples différences quantitatives mais non pas qualitatives.
- À la limite, si l'on y tient absolument, on peut appeler ces couches ou strates des classes, mais au sens purement logique ou mathématique du terme. Ces « classes » n'ont d'existence que parce qu'on (le sociologue, l'économiste, le statisticien) les distingue, plus ou moins arbitrairement, de celles qui se trouvent immédiatement au dessous ou immédiatement au dessus d'elles, en introduisant des discontinuités (des limites) théoriques dans le continuum des positions sociales. Ce sont des catégories plus ou moins artificielles, des agrégats ou collections d'individus réunis tout simplement parce qu'ils possèdent en commun un certain nombre d'attributs sociaux ; mais sans que cette commune possession fasse apparaître aucune réelle communauté de vie, de pensée ou d'action entre eux. En aucun cas, il ne s'agit de groupements sociaux réels : par exemple, leurs membres ne possèdent pas de conscience d'appartenance commune ; et ils ne sont pas capables d'une action collective organisée en vue de défendre des intérêts communs ou des valeurs communes.

- Quant à la conflictualité sociale, elle se réduit à la concurrence entre les individus pour l'accès aux différentes positions (aux différents échelons) de la hiérarchie sociale. Pas de lutte de classes opposant des groupements réels macro-sociologiques ; mais une intense et constante lutte des places dans laquelle s'opposent des individus.
- En fait, dans cette perspective, le seul acteur réel de la vie sociale est 'l'individu', un individu essentiellement individualiste, c'est-à-dire atomisé, séparé des autres individus par la lutte concurrentielle qui l'oppose à eux, principalement pour ne pas dire exclusivement préoccupé par ses intérêts singuliers, et ne pouvant d'ailleurs compter que sur lui (ses propres ressources) pour s'assurer, conserver ou améliorer sa position sociale. En définitive, c'est cet individualisme, caractéristique de la société capitaliste, qui empêcherait la constitution de classes sociales à proprement parler, au sens de groupements sociologiques réels, dotés d'une réelle unité sociale. Individualisme qui se manifeste notamment par la lutte concurrentielle entre les individus à l'intérieur d'une même « classe » ; comme par la possibilité qui leur est donnée de changer de « classe » (en fait de position sociale) au cours de leur existence ou dans le fil des générations.

Cette position a largement inspiré la sociologie américaine, en donnant naissance à de multiples études de stratification sociale, découpant la société en strates ou couches, par opposition aux classes. L'exemple classique en est l'analyse de la stratification sociale développée par William Loyld Warner (1898-1970) et son équipe dans la monumentale monographie qu'ils ont consacrée à une petite ville du nord-est des États-Unis (la Nouvelle Angleterre), *Yankee City Studies* (5 volumes parus entre 1941 et 1959). Cette analyse distingue ainsi six « classes » (ou strates) : upper-upper class, lower-upper class, upper-middle class, lower-middle class, upper-lower class et lower-lower class, distinguées essentiellement sur la base de l'occupation professionnelle de leurs membres, de leur niveau d'instruction et du prestige social dont ils jouissent, ce dernier critère étant prédominant. Stratification qui a été étendue à l'ensemble de la société américaine ; et qui s'est largement popularisée aux États-Unis, au point de servir encore couramment aujourd'hui aux individus pour se classer mutuellement.

3 La persistance des classes sociales comme faits sociaux totaux au sein de la société française contemporaine

Les différentes positions précédentes sont mutuellement incompatibles. Il est donc inévitable de devoir choisir entre elles. Ce choix demande évidemment à être justifié, aussi bien que n'importe quel autre. Le problème est qu'une pareille justification ne peut, au mieux, qu'être partielle. Car, quelle que soit la position choisie, les raisons de ce choix ne sont qu'en partie des raisons théoriques : des raisons que l'on peut théoriquement exposer, expliquer ou argumenter. Pour partie, ce choix ressortit toujours aussi à des raisons en définitive politiques ou, si l'on préfère, idéologiques.

En effet, à travers le choix de l'une ou l'autre des positions précédentes, c'est toujours aussi une certaine vision du monde social qui est proposée, aussi bien du monde tel qu'il est que du monde tel qu'il devrait être. Donc une vision non seulement descriptive mais encore normative. Par exemple, choisir entre l'une ou l'autre des positions précédentes revient, par exemple, à :

- valoriser plus ou moins l'autonomie de l'individu par rapport à ses déterminations sociales (origines, position actuelle dans la hiérarchie sociale, relations à ses pairs, etc.) ;
- accentuer plus ou moins les inégalités sociales, en en faisant selon le cas des barrières plus ou moins infranchissables ou, au contraire, des échelons plus ou moins continus le long desquels on peut descendre ou monter ;
- valoriser plus ou moins l'action collective et les conflits collectifs comme facteurs de transformation sociale.

Quel qu'il soit, le choix effectué entre les trois positions précédentes n'est jamais entièrement réductible à des arguments théoriques ni déductibles de pareils arguments ; en lui s'expriment aussi des choix éthiques et politiques qui relèvent de la subjectivité de l'individu qui effectue le choix ; mais aussi plus largement de clivages et de conflits collectifs. Cela rejoint ce que nous disions plus haut en ouverture de notre propos : les débats et controverses sur le concept de classes sociales ne sont pas seulement des débats purement théoriques mais aussi des débats politiques.

Cependant, cela ne signifie pas qu'il est inutile, bien au contraire, de tenter de justifier, autant que faire se peut, par des arguments théoriques et des analyses empiriques, la position adoptée. Simple-ment, il faut avoir conscience que les arguments ainsi avancés et échangés ne décident pas complètement, totalement, de la valeur de la position défendue.

Cela dit, notre choix se porte sur la première des trois thèses précédentes : celle qui considère que les sociétés contemporaines donnent

naissance à des classes sociales considérées comme des « faits sociaux totaux ». Cela revient à dire que les processus de segmentation, de hiérarchisation et d'opposition conflictuelle qui caractérisent les sociétés contemporaines (en nous en tenant ici au seul exemple de la France) continuent à y donner naissance à des groupements macro-sociologiques présentant toutes les caractéristiques des classes sociales au sens entendu par la première des traditions précédentes. Nous fondons l'affirmation de cette persistance sur les conclusions auxquelles nous sommes parvenus au terme d'une étude aussi exhaustive que possible des inégalités entre catégories sociales, telles qu'elles peuvent être appréhendées à travers la nomenclature des catégories socioprofessionnelles de l'INSEE (Institut nationale de la statistique et des études économiques) sur la base d'une exploitation secondaire d'un très grand nombre de données produites par l'appareil statistique public⁷ (Bihr, Pfefferkorn 1999 ; Bihr, Pfefferkorn 2021). Nous condons ici les principales de ces conclusions en renvoyant le lecteur aux ouvrages eux-mêmes pour le détail des résultats.⁸

3.1 La société française reste une société segmentée en groupes sociaux distincts

Contrairement à ce qu'affirment bon nombre de discours tant vulgaires que prétendument savants, il n'est pas vrai que l'on a assisté en France, au cours de ces dernières décennies, à une uniformisation des modes et des styles de vie. Au contraire, la société française reste 'une société segmentée', dans laquelle des groupes sociaux divers continuent à présenter de forts contrastes dans leurs modes et styles de vie respectifs. Cette tendance s'est même fortement accentuée depuis l'entrée dans le XXI^e siècle.

Pour ne prendre que l'exemple des pratiques de consommation, celles précisément qui sont censées avoir subi les plus nettement l'effet de l'uniformisation de la consommation marchande au cours des décennies précédentes, toutes les études sociologiques à leur sujet montrent que non seulement les différentes catégories socioprofessionnelles ne consomment pas les mêmes choses (les mêmes biens et services) mais encore qu'ils ne les consomment pas de la même manière. Autrement dit, leurs pratiques de consommation tout comme leurs objets de consommation sont différents. Cela tient :

⁷ Nous nous sommes aussi appuyés à titre complémentaire sur un grand nombre d'enquêtes sociologiques empiriques, tant statistiques qu'ethnographiques.

⁸ On y trouvera aussi une discussion des limites qu'impose une pareille nomenclature à l'analyse de la structure de la société française contemporaine, tout comme de la valeur des données statistiques disponibles.

- d'une part, bien évidemment, aux inégalités de niveau de vie, de pouvoir d'achat, de revenu disponible ;
- mais aussi, d'autre part, à des différences de normes de consommation : à niveau de vie identique, à pouvoir d'achat identique, les membres des différentes catégories socioprofessionnelles n'effectuent pas les mêmes choix de consommation, ne privilégient pas les mêmes besoins, ne manifestent pas les mêmes priorités en terme d'aspirations. Autrement dit, leurs pratiques de consommation sont conduites et organisées en fonction d'échelles de valeur différentes. Différences de normes de consommation qui renvoient en définitive à des différences d'habitus comme l'a montré Pierre Bourdieu.

3.2 La société française reste structurée par un puissant système d'inégalités

Notre étude a établi, en second lieu, qu'il n'est pas vrai non plus que l'on a assisté à une réduction uniforme et continue des inégalités entre catégories sociales au sein de la société française contemporaine. Au contraire, nous avons ainsi pu montrer que :

- Premièrement, il n'y a aucun domaine de l'activité sociale qui ne soit marqué par des profondes inégalités entre catégories sociales, souvent anciennes, quelquefois plus récentes. Ces inégalités ont en outre eu tendance à s'accroître de manière très significative à partir de la fin des années 1970 et davantage encore au cours des deux dernières décennies.
- Deuxièmement, ces inégalités forment système en ce sens qu'on ne saurait les expliquer et les comprendre indépendamment les unes des autres tant elles se déterminent, s'engendrent et en définitive se renforcent réciproquement.
- Troisièmement, et de ce fait, il se produit des phénomènes de cumul d'avantages ou, au contraire, de cumul de handicaps : l'avantage sur un plan appelant l'avantage sur d'autres plans ; tandis que, inversement, le handicap dans un champ suscite des handicaps dans d'autres champs. Avec pour résultante générale de fortes polarisations entre la base et le sommet de la hiérarchie sociale. Nous sommes donc bien loin d'une « moyennisation » de la société telle qu'elle a pu être théorisée en France, dans le sillage du courant stratificationniste étatsunien, par Henri Mendras, Alain Touraine ou d'autres qui postulaient l'épuisement ou la canalisation des conflits de classe. La constitution d'une hypothétique vaste « classe moyenne » englobant les 4/5, si ce n'est les 9/10, de la population n'est rien d'autre qu'une vue de l'esprit dont la nature idéologique est évidente.

- Enfin, ces inégalités tendent à se reproduire de génération en génération ; l'égalité des chances dans l'accès aux meilleurs postes (aux postes les plus prestigieux et les mieux payés) étant un pur mythe ; la mobilité sociale étant globalement beaucoup plus réduite qu'on ne le croit, en se limitant pour l'essentiel à des « courts trajets » ascendants, descendants ou tout simplement latéraux.

Ce qui importe ici évidemment, ce n'est pas tant la persistance d'inégalités entre les catégories sociales ; ni même leur universalité (le fait qu'elles couvrent tous les champs de la pratique sociale) ; que leur caractère systémique et les phénomènes consécutifs de cumul d'avantages au profit des certaines catégories et de cumul de handicaps au détriment d'autres catégories. Le tableau reproduit en annexe fournit une illustration saisissante de ces phénomènes de cumul et des fortes polarisations sociales qui en résultent.

3.3 Une lutte des classes et non pas une simple lutte des places

Enfin, comme bien d'autres par ailleurs, notre étude de la dynamique des inégalités sociales a montré que la persistance de ces inégalités, tantôt amoindries, tantôt au contraire, et de plus en plus, aggravées, résultent de conflits opposant les différents groupes sociaux pour l'appropriation de l'avoir (de la richesse sociale), du pouvoir et du savoir (des ressources culturelles). En particulier :

- Tant que, en gros de la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale jusqu'au milieu des années 1970, dans un contexte de croissance économique relativement forte et continue, les salariés et notamment les plus 'modestes' d'entre eux (ouvriers et employés) ont su s'organiser (syndicalement et politiquement) pour lutter, ils ont non seulement pu obtenir une amélioration globale de leurs conditions de travail et d'existence mais encore ils ont su imposer une réduction globale des inégalités sociales.
- Au contraire, à partir de la fin des années 1970, dans un contexte de crise économique structurelle, de montée du chômage, de développement des formes d'emploi précaire, de délocalisation d'une partie des activités production des formations centrales (les pays dit « développés ») vers les formations périphériques (les pays dit « en voie de développement ») ou semi-périphériques (les pays dits « émergents »), la capacité d'organisation et de lutte des salariés dans le premier type de formation s'est affaiblie, leur situation s'est globalement dégradée et les inégalités ont recommencé à s'y aggraver, notamment sous l'effet des politiques néolibérales impulsées par les gouvernements successifs sous la pression directe des milieux industriels et financiers.

Autrement dit, à chaque fois, les inégalités et les hiérarchies consécutives ne sont pas seulement les résultats spontanés et automatiques de la dynamique économique, pas plus d'ailleurs que de la simple concurrence à laquelle se livrent les individus pour l'accès à un ensemble de biens rares. A chaque fois, au contraire, elles sont aussi les résultats volontaires de politiques publiques et privées, sur la base de rapports de forces entre les différents groupes sociaux. Ce qu'en d'autres temps on hésitait à nommer tout simplement la lutte des classes...

En définitive, la représentation de la société française qu'autorisent les résultats de notre analyse du système des inégalités est bien celle d'une société à la fois segmentée, hiérarchisée et conflictuelle ; dont les divisions, inégalités et conflits qui la traversent opposent non pas des individus en tant que tels mais des groupements d'individus partageant précisément une commune position (à la fois objective et subjective) dans la société ; position qui commande leurs possibilités (inéga-
gale) de s'approprier ou non avoir, pouvoir et savoir, conduisant à une accumulation d'avantages à un pôle et une accumulation de handicaps à l'autre pôle ; processus sur la base desquels ces différents groupes entrent en lutte les uns contre les autres en s'organisant (plus ou moins) à cette fin, selon des rapports de force qui fluctuent historiquement. Dans ces conditions, les concepts de classes, de rapports de classes et de luttes des classes nous paraissent conserver toute leur pertinence pour l'explication et la compréhension de la persistance des phénomènes de segmentation, de hiérarchisation et de conflictualité au sein de la société française contemporaine, comme plus largement dans l'ensemble des sociétés contemporaines.

Annexe – Tableau synoptique des inégalités

Ce tableau fournit une vue synoptique de la position des différents groupes et catégories socioprofessionnels au sein du système des inégalités. Les indices statistiques donnant une vue synthétique des inégalités entre ces groupes et catégories ont été sélectionnés à partir d'éléments empiriques variés. Ils permettent de situer chacun d'eux par rapport à la moyenne de l'indice prise en compte. Pour ce faire, nous nous sommes appuyés sur un travail antérieur, dont les conclusions demeurent cependant largement valables au regard des évolutions enregistrées au cours des dernières décennies, ainsi que sur des données plus récentes, parfois difficiles à rassembler.

Les regroupements de certains groupes de PCS (artisans et commerçants regroupés avec chefs d'entreprise ; ou agriculteurs exploitants agrégés aux autres indépendants) constituent un obstacle à l'accès à des informations plus précises. Plus gênant encore, dans de nombreuses publications émanant d'institutions publiques, trop souvent la nomenclature des PCS n'est plus mobilisée.

Tableau 1 Représentation synoptique de certains indices d'inégalité entre groupes ou catégories socioprofessionnelles. Source : Bihr, Pfefferkorn 2021, 61-4

	AE	ACCE	INA	CPIS	PI	EM	OU	
	APC	GI	PL	CS	QO	ONQ		
1. Taux d'emploi stable	+	=		++	+	-	=	--
2. Taux de chômage	++	+		+	+	-	-	--
3. Taux d'emploi à temps partiel	=	=		+	=	--	+	--
4. Niveau de vie moyen	-	=	++	++	+	=	-	--
5. Part des revenus patrimoniaux*	++		++	+	=	-	-	-
6. Transferts nets reçus	-		-	--	-	+		++
7. Effet d'ensemble du mécanisme redistributif*	-	-		--	-	++		+
8. Revenu disponible par ménage*	+		+	++	+	-		--
9. Taux de pauvreté*	--		--	++	+	-		-
10. Montant des dépenses par unité de consommation	-		+	++	=	-		--
11. Patrimoine moyen	++	+		++	+	=	-	--
12. Patrimoine financier médian	+	=	++	++	+	=	-	--
13. Patrimoine immobilier	+	+		++	+	=	--	--
14. Taux de possession de la résidence principale	++	+		+	+	=	--	--
15. Indice de surpeuplement du logement	++	+		+	+	-		-
16. Exposition à des postures pénibles ou fatigantes	-	-		++	+	-	--	--
17. Espérance de vie à 35 ans des hommes	+	+		++	+	=	=	--
18. Consultations de médecin spécialiste	-	-		++	+	+	--	--
19. Renoncement aux soins dentaires (raison financière)	+	=		++	=	-	-	-
20. % d'élèves de CP arrivés en 4e sans redoublement	+	+	++	++	++	+	=	-

21. % de bacheliers 10 ans après l'entrée en 6e	+	+	++	++	++	+	-	--	--
22. Taux d'étudiants en CPGE classes préparatoires*	-	-		++	=	-		--	
23. Recours à une femme de ménage	-	+		++	-	--		--	
24. À l'aise avec Internet	=	+		++	++	+		-	
25. Degré de liberté à l'égard de la télé**	+	+		++	+	-		-	
26. Pratique de la lecture**	-	-		++	+	--		--	
27. Part du poste « culture » dans le budget à montant de consommation égal	-	=		+	=	-		-	
28. Représentation des catégories sociales à la télévision	-	-		++	-	--		--	
29. Taux de départ en vacances	--	=		++	+	=		--	
30. Taux d'adhésion aux associations (hommes)	+	-		+	+	=		-	
31. Taux de participation à la vie politique	+	+		++	+	-	-	--	
32. Indice de représentation à l'Assemblée nationale	+	+		++	-	--		--	

Légende : ++ : position la plus favorable ; + : position plus favorable que la moyenne ; = : position équivalente à la moyenne ; - : position moins favorable que la moyenne ; -- : position la moins favorable. AE = agriculteurs exploitants ; ACCE = artisans, commerçants et chefs d'entreprise ; APC = artisans et petits commerçants ; GI = industriels et gros commerçants ; INA = indépendants non agricoles (artisans, commerçants, chefs d'entreprise et professions libérales) ; PL = professions libérales ; CS = cadres supérieurs ; CPIS = cadres et professions intellectuelles supérieures ; PI = professions intermédiaires ; EM = employés ; O = ouvriers ; OQ = ouvriers qualifiés ; ONQ = ouvriers non qualifiés ; nd = non disponible.

* Les données publiées regroupent d'une part agriculteurs exploitant, artisans, commerçants et chefs d'entreprise de plus de 10 salariés et ne distinguent pas ouvrier qualifiés et ouvriers non qualifiés.

** Les données publiées regroupent en outre les ouvriers et les employés.

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Contemporary Slavery and Inequality in Brazil

Pureza's Complaint and Struggle

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Abstract This article briefly presents the feature film *Pureza*, which is based on a true story, to help analyse the contemporary forms of slavery in Brazil that reveal the permanent movements of capital expropriation, noticeable in the exploitation and oppression of a race-based labour force characterized by patriarchy, that migrates in order to survive. In this sense, we examine regional inequalities, social polarization and the particular aspects of the Brazilian social formation for the discussion of contemporary slavery, which is seen as the most visible expression of superexploitation, as well as the result of the reinvention of hybrid forms of exploitation of the labour force.

Keywords Slavery. Dependent capitalism. Expropriations. Superexploitation. Oppression.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 *Pureza*, Regional Inequality and the Permanence of Slavery. – 3 The History from Slavery to Superexploitation. – 4 Considerations.



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1 Introduction

The aim of presenting the film *Pureza* in this article is to demonstrate the violence of capitalist exploitation and oppression¹ by drawing on historical and structural concepts of the socio-economic foundations of Brazil, as well as on conjunctural dynamics of the contemporary phase of capitalism. Therefore, as a means to contribute to the analysis of the contemporary forms of enslavement of human beings in Brazil, we present, in the first part of the article, the character and a bit of the film's plot, listing the regional inequalities and social polarization of the Brazilian reality and the countertrends of the contemporary phase of capitalism, which deepen the driving factors of contemporary slavery² and promote the historical-social downgrading of what is understood as dignity. The extreme violence of the exploitation of the workforce has guaranteed the country's economic growth in Brazilian agribusiness, which uses enslaved labour combined with high technology. Demonstrating the great social polarization in the Latin American reality. In the year 2023, 3,151 people were rescued from contemporary slavery. The number is the highest since 2009, when 3,765 people were rescued. Despite this increase, the data shows how the country has regressed in the recent period because the number of labour inspection auditors is at the lowest level in 30 years. Data on contemporary slavery in Brazil (from 1995 to 2023), show that, out of the 63,400 people rescued, rural work leads to the largest number of people rescued, mainly in the harvesting of coffee and sugar cane (Wellton 2023). In the second part, we address the transitory or hybrid forms of exploitation of the labour force, as permanence and rupture threads with the colonial slavery, establishing superexploitation, and how those racialized individuals are

1 We do not understand the relationship between exploitation and oppression as if there were an ontological priority of exploitation over oppression or vice versa. We identified that the universal categories of capitalism - as an "articulated and contradictory totality of exploitation, domination, and alienation relations" (Arruzza 2015, 55) - must be analysed in their concrete and historically established forms. In this sense, analysing the working classes requires looking at them at the level of the concrete socio-historical process, where oppressions are constituted as structuring mediations of the exploitation of labour surplus value.

2 The International Labour Organization (ILO), when referring to contemporary forms of slavery, uses the term *modern slavery* based on the Protocol (P029) to the Forced Labour Convention No. 29, 1930 and Recommendation (R203), which provides guidance on the application of the Protocol. In this regard, unlike the Brazilian legislation (according to Law 10803/2003 supplementary to article 149 of the Brazilian Penal Code), the ILO does not consider exhausting working hours and degrading conditions as slavery. It is worth pointing out that we characterized it as contemporary slavery and not *labour analogous to slavery*, according to our law, because we consider it a way of emphasizing the permanence and rupture threads of the socio-historical wage-earning process of the Brazilian labour force. Debate opened by Figueira 2004.

the most impacted by the lack of modernization of their labour condition. Neoliberal macroeconomic policies guaranteed the transformation of production processes and, as a result, labour relations, further harming the working class with the increase in informality, precariousness and outsourcing. The neoliberal offensive resulted in greater social polarization. The analytical thread of this text is the founding expropriations of capitalism and its way of maintaining itself through the exploitation and oppression of the working classes, in which contemporary slavery is one of its perverse aspects.

2 **Pureza, Regional Inequality and the Permanence of Slavery**

The preview of the feature film *Pureza* in Rio de Janeiro was on 28 April 2022. I personally met Pureza Lopes Loyola, a potter born in the city of Presidente Juscelino, state of Maranhão. Pureza is today a 76-year-old woman who expresses a lot of candor and extreme strength in her eyes. Over her three-year saga in search of her son from farm to farm in the South of the state of Pará in the 1990s, she told me how her feet, despite often bleeding, endured long and hard journeys. And she told me that she won the battle of having her son back home, and what she could do for others, what she did and what she keeps doing, such as her mobilization with the Pastoral Land Commission (*Comissão Pastoral da Terra*) and her denunciations in Brasília.

The work of fiction *Pureza*, directed by Renato Barbieri and featuring impeccable acting by actress Dira Paes, is a film inspired by the real drama of Dona Pureza, which brings touching elements of the tragic reality of most of the Brazilian working classes. The cycle of exploitation and oppression violence, which the bourgeois society spreads out in our territory in such an unequal way, may seem unreal to many 'privileged' people in large capital cities. The film tells not only the story of her search for her son, but also the lives of thousands of workers who are subjected to contemporary forms of slavery in Brazil.

Dona Pureza courageously visited several farms in search of her son, who she knew was suffering. And, during her journey, she worked as a cook on the farms and saw up close the enticement of *groomers* (also called *gatos*, or cats) and the brutality of foremen to expropriate as much as possible from the rural workers, many of whom were tortured and lost their lives while claiming for the minimum dignity. Therefore, the film features the extreme conditions of contemporary slavery, which generally comprises, besides the violation of labour rights, various types of violence and humiliation, as well as the

shame of returning home with fewer resources, insufficient remuneration for the workers to support themselves, lack of hygiene,

exposure to occupational risks and contagious diseases, and even risk of murder. (Leão 2016, 3931)

On the one hand, the resident of the city of Bacabal, state of Maranhão represents, in this film, many other enslaved women in vital reproductive labour on the farms, and, on the other, the mothers and families who agonize when a relative does not return or disappears when migrating to “earn a living”.

The work of fiction does not directly address the issue of Brazilian regional inequality, but the contemporary forms of slavery are made possible due to the migratory processes of thousands of people in search of alternatives for survival. In this regard, we highlight that life expectancy in the state of Maranhão is one of the lowest in our country (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2020), and such state is known to be the place of origin or birth with the highest rates of people rescued from contemporary slavery in Brazil. Within the Northeast region it accounts for the highest number of rescues. From 1995 to 2021, 3,474 people were rescued from contemporary slave labour conditions (Radar SIT 2021).

A major International Labour Organization survey (2018) carried out in Maranhão estimated that, in 2017, there was at least one person aged 18 or older subjected to contemporary slavery out of 16.2% of the households visited in Maranhão. In 6.2% of the households there was an individual subjected to forced labour, 10.4% in degrading conditions, 3.8% subjected to exhausting working hours, and 1.6% under debt bondage.

The bonds are seen in the “necessity”,³ in the transitory or hybrid forms of exploitation of the labour force, such as partnership contracts, the traditional debt bondage or the “new” modality, in which the delivery worker gets into debt to rent a bicycle, or in the online app store, to buy the bag, the vest and, still, they have to hire an internet service to work and, in the end, those companies try to convince that there is no employment relationship.

Between 2012 and 2019, we can affirm that there was an average of one occupational accident every 49 seconds and one death resulting from them every three hours and three minutes nationwide (Ministério Público do Trabalho 2019). The Southeast region accounts for the highest rate of occupational accidents from 2016 to 2018 with the number of 917,043 (total with and without Communication of Work Accident) as opposed to the North region, which is 75,475 (Instituto Nacional do Seguro Social 2018).

The social security expenditure on occupational accident in Brazil from 2012 to 2020 was over BRL 100 billion and, in this period,

3 See Moura 2009.

more than 21,000 deaths from occupational accidents were recorded, which represents a rate of 6 deaths for every 100,000 formal employment contracts. Brazil ranks second in work-related deaths among the G-20 countries, second only to Mexico, with eight deaths per 100,000 employment contracts. In Brazil in 2020, serious occupational accidents reported to the Ministry of Health rose by 40%, and applications for sick leave due to anxiety, stress, depression, among other problems that affect mental health rose by 30% (ILO 2021).

Also in this respect, a survey carried out by the ILO with the World Health Organization (WHO) shows that long working hours increase the number of deaths from cardiovascular diseases. Between 2000 and 2016 there was a 29% increase in the number of people who died from heart diseases and strokes worldwide. The common point in all these deaths was that the weekly working hours of these people exceeded 55 hours (Pega et al. 2021), i.e., their life funds were compromised.

The working hours of the rescued people typically exceed the statutory 44 hours and – something that is increasingly being verified – is that long working hours and lack of sufficient rest between shifts, which characterizes as exhausting working hours, have become commonplace in the lives of the working classes, as the case of female household servants and delivery workers can evidence. Although we see the increase of underemployed people in the Brazilian statistics due to insufficient hours worked,⁴ we see, on the other hand, people who are busy with long working hours and lack of sufficient rest to replenish their physical and mental energies. It is worth highlighting, within Karl Marx's (2017a, ch. 23) understanding of the General Law of Capitalist Accumulation, how investment in increased productivity and intensity, to ensure higher rates of exploitation and profit, but also as a counteracting movement,⁵ promotes the existence of a surplus labour force population, which sets pressure on the overwork of the occupied part of the working classes, and in turn, this overwork increases the ranks of relative overpopulation.

Even though the exhausting working hours is one of the types of contemporary slavery, according to article 149 of the Brazilian Penal Code, precisely because it violates human dignity due to the damage to life. Such typification is under dispute and has not been mostly absorbed by the Judiciary Branch, even though the decisions suggest

⁴ “In the 4th quarter of 2021 in Brazil, the unemployment rate was 11.1%, while the compound rate of labour force underutilization reached 24.3%. The consolidated result of such measures by Large Regions points out the Northeast as the region where the highest measures of the labour force underutilization were observed and, in the South Region, the lowest” (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística 2021, 7).

⁵ Marx (2017a; 2017b) refers to counteracting influences that act on the general law in such a way as to nullify or attenuate the fall in the profit rate, giving it a trend nature.

undignified conditions, even describing the degradation in great detail, it can be seen that the Court is still conservative when it comes to expressly acknowledging the existence of labour conditions analogous to slavery. (Miraglia 2020, 130-1)

It is believed that, just because of the naturalization of the length of working hours and degrading labour conditions, contemporary slavery is masked and, consequently, undignified labour conditions become commonplace, characterized only as violations of the labour legislation and not as a crime, in a country where the working classes have no choice, because the 'need' is stronger to dismiss a work contract and starve to death.

Our cultural melting pot and the objective conditions of the working classes, structured by the specific features of dependent economies, as well as historical and structural expropriations, lead to the naturalization of the violation not only of rights, but also of these people's life fund. Therefore, exhausting working hours is acknowledged by the Brazilian Superior Labor Court as

an offense to the worker's fundamental right [and] does not admit the existence of labour conditions analogous to slavery, characterizing the situation as a breach of health and safety standards. (141)

The naturalization of the vilification in the workplace for the working classes, in particular the racialized and regionalized ones, as the case of the Northeast, with the extension of working hours, with little or no rest, night shifts without weekly rest, and sleeping on the job without any facilities, are recurrent during the inspections carried out by the Special Mobile Inspection Group.⁶

Wages that do not correspond to the historical and moral value of workers, that are unable to ensuring basic rights, and that motivates workers to sleep either on the streets or in their own workplace in order to save money and be able to survive. This is what the manager of a company answered, in a rescue operation in the city of Rio de Janeiro: that the people rescued from contemporary slavery would rather sleep in the company to save money and, as migrants from the Northeast, they had to save money to return to their hometown (Sakamoto 2021).

⁶ It comprises inspectors from the Brazilian Ministry of Labor and Social Security, Federal Police chiefs and agents, and prosecutors from the Brazilian Public Labor Prosecution Office, (Ministério Público do Trabalho - MPT). In addition, under certain circumstances, it may include Federal Highway Police agents, members of the Attorney General's Office, the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) and the Brazilian Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA).

Another important reflection is that, although the movie *Purezza* represents a fact that occurred in the 1990s, current data from the Brazilian Research Network on Food Sovereignty and Security (2022) show that we have gone back to that decade's starvation figures, because more than half of Brazilian households (58.7%) are under food insecurity status. From the last quarter of 2020 to the beginning of 2022, the percentage of people under situation of severe insecurity rose from 9% to 15.5%, which means starvation, and such condition is even more serious in rural area households (18.6%). However, the quantity of starving people in urban areas is heartbreaking, comprising 27,405 million human beings. The situation is even more worrying in the North and Northeast regions of Brazil, because people with very severe food restrictions live in 25.7% of the households in the North region and in 21% in the Northeast region.

Ethnic-racial inequality is evident in the data on food insecurity, with the difference that, in 10.6% of the households, where interviewees identified themselves as white, there is food insecurity. In the case of households whose residents self-declared as black or brown, the percentage was 18.1%. Likewise, we identified that women-led households have the highest percentage of food insecurity (34.2%) as opposed to 26.4% of men-led households.

Translating it into Brazilian population figures, 125 million people out of a total of 213.3 million inhabitants are facing food insecurity, and approximately 33 million of them are in a situation of starvation, characterized by severe food insecurity, in which women, black, and residents of the North and Northeast regions of Brazil are the most affected.

Such data reveal that this food insecurity scenario can further worsen the working conditions in Brazil, because the need for survival makes people submit themselves to any opportunity that comes along in order to have something to eat. In the current context, after the labour counter-reform and the continuous setbacks legitimized by Jair Bolsonaro's government,⁷ the situation of unprotected and de-regulated employment contracts facilitate the submission of people to contemporary slavery.

Relating to the food insecurity data above, the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic was just when we had a significant number of 1,959 rescued people, the highest figure since 2013.⁸ The state of Minas Gerais had the highest number of people rescued, followed by

⁷ See the news report "Bolsonaro government program to eliminate 432,000 jobs, say 27 Ministry of Labor auditors". <https://urbsmagna.com/programa-do-governo-bolsonaro-vai-eliminar-432-mil-vagas-dizem-27-audidores-do-ministerio-do-trabalho/>.

⁸ The Brazilian labour inspection staff is lagged, "even given its immense relevance, Labour Inspection has been neglected and weakened. In the last ten years, for instance, there

Goiás, then São Paulo and Pará. Nearly 90% (89%) of the people rescued were in agriculture and cattle work, led by the coffee sector (310 persons), which also had the highest number of children and adolescents. After the coffee sector, garlic production had a high number of rescues (215), followed by charcoal (194), land preparation (151), sugarcane (142) and beef cattle raising (106).

Data on contemporary slavery in Brazil (from 1995 to 2022), show that of the more than 60 thousand people rescued, cattle-raising – one of the activities mostly responsible for the deforestation of the Amazon Rainforest –⁹ leads the general ranking of people rescued from contemporary slavery (31% of the total, MPT 2020) and the values of the labour force in this sector do not allow for decent wages, in constitutional terms. For most Brazilian agribusiness entrepreneurs this does not matter, because the cycle of their capital takes place overseas, so it does not matter if the Brazilian working classes are receiving a salary that does not allow them to survive, or whether they are under exhausting working hours or under degrading conditions. The 2018 Dirty List on slave labour was occupied by almost half of agribusiness economic sectors, and between 2003 and 2014, 80% of the people rescued worked for agribusiness.

During the new Coronavirus pandemic, with the rise of the dollar, Brazilian agribusiness celebrated its profits by prioritizing the foreign market, while more than half of the Brazilian population is facing food insecurity. Agribusiness has benefited both from government tax incentives, such as the Kandir Law, and from the devaluation of our currency, due to our dependence on foreign exchange. Due to that, agribusiness has increased the export of primary products causing a shortage of food for the domestic market, which is one of the causes of the increase in the price of the basic food basket.

In the 2021 rescues in urban activities, 210 people were rescued, mostly in the real estate and civil construction sectors (108), and 27 people were rescued in household work (in 2020 there had been only three). On May 13, 2022, the day Brazil celebrates the Abolition of Slavery, the rescue May 13, 2022, the news reported the rescue of an elderly woman who had been in such conditions in a house in the northern area of Rio de Janeiro, for 72 years!

In 2021, the ‘profile’ of those rescued workers was similar to other surveys and inspection data: 90% are men, 80% are black, 47% are from the Northeast, and 6% are illiterate (Sakamoto 2022). Even though there is a male majority in rescue operations, we have to face structural elements such as the invisibility of reproductive labour and

has been a reduction of about 45% in the number of Auditors and almost 70% of the budget resources of the area” (Sindicato Nacional dos Auditores-Fiscais do Trabalho 2022).

⁹ See Escobar 2020.

its outsourcing to black women, who experience conditions that are very close to colonial slavery in the performance of household work. As well as the inviolability of private property of the so-called “traditional Brazilian family”, which hypocritically claims that such workers are like family to them, to justify the lack of wages and rights.

This information also shows the naturalization of the vilification in the workplace for the working classes, in particular the racialized and regionalized ones, as the case of the people from the Northeast region, with the extension of working hours, with little or no rest, night shifts without weekly rest, and sleeping on the job without any dignified conditions.¹⁰ Under conditions of superexploitation of their labour force, workers are pushed to the limit of compromising their own survival both in the violation of their consumption fund and in the erosion of their life funds due to strenuous working hours, combined with threats and physical and/or psychological violence.

The naturalization, the need of the working and subordinated classes and the escalation of violations to their humanity require the examination not only of the conjunctural dynamics elements of capitalism, but also of the historical and structural components of the Brazilian social formation.

The understanding of the special way in which the socio-economic laws of capitalism are realized in the Brazilian dependent economy allows us to clarify the main aspects of contemporary slavery, outlined by article 149 of the Brazilian Penal Code, as the most evident expressions of the superexploitation of the labour force. It is also understandable that contemporary forms of slavery are the result of the permanence and recycling of transitory or hybrid forms of exploitation of labour force in the historical process of commodification of labour, in the transition from the Brazilian slaveholding colonialism to dependent capitalism.

Reflection on production chains and the local labour situation goes back to rescuing the tendentious laws of dependence, such as “value transfers as unequal exchange” linked to the “splitting of the phases of the capital cycle”, which are expressed in our export trade policy. For example, data on exports of agribusiness commodities, which in the year to date, between January and October 2022, the sector represented 48.5% of Brazil’s total foreign sales in the period.¹¹ The articles that stand out are soy, meat, corn, sugar and alcohol complex, forestry products and coffee. Many of these crops were and are produced using labour under contemporary conditions of slavery. Proven

¹⁰ New report by Sakamoto 2021.

¹¹ See the report on the federal government website: <https://www.gov.br/pt-br/noticias/agricultura-e-pecuaria/2022/11/com-vendas-de-us-14-25-bilhoes-exportacoes-do-agronegocio-batem-recorde-em-outubro>.

in the most recent release of the “slave labour dirty list”, because of the 289 employers, including individuals and legal entities, who are part of the current list of those caught with enslaved labour force, 172 have a National Classification of Economic Activities (Cnaes) of rural activities (Wellton 2023). The production chain of these commodities for export must be well monitored, considering that they historically benefit several corporations at the expense of conditioning workers to contemporary slave labour and violations of environmental legislation.

The discipline of the workforce for Brazilian manual labour has always been very close to articulated slavery, often to the cruelty normalized by the bourgeoisie. Due to our regional inequality and hierarchies, created both by racialization and unequal development, the fringes of the working classes that have been most sacrificed have been black and northeastern ones. We just need to check the profile of the people rescued over these 28 years of Labour Inspection. In 2022, of the 2,575 people rescued, 92% were men, 29% were between 30 and 39 years old, 51% lived in the Northeast, 58% were from the Northeast, 83% declared themselves as black (black and brown), 15% as white and 2% as indigenous (Sakamoto 2023).

A survey (Rossi 2022), carried out in 2022, identified that among the ten large mega cattle ranchers in Brazil, only one does not have environmental and labour problems. Nine of these mega ranchers have at least one farm in the Legal Amazon and one raises cattle near the biome, the majority are heirs to land purchased with incentives from the business-military dictatorship.

If on the one hand we see agribusiness using ‘archaic’ forms of exploitation of the workforce, on the other, according to Fabiana Scoleso (2022), Brazilian agribusiness is completely intertwined with outsourced services from Agrotechs, which make it possible – through Big data, the use of cameras, drones, smart rovers and sensors – climate monitoring and control of sowing operations, irrigation, use of pesticides, soil analysis and harvest time, as well as the connection of agricultural machines to GPS’s, avoiding errors and excessive use of inputs and resources.

In the process of transnationalization and greater control with appropriation-expropriation of capital by hegemonic nations, the expulsion of small farmers, riverside populations, quilombolas and indigenous people is also guaranteed for the expansion of export commodities such as soybeans and corn. Or the integration “of family farming with the cooperative system and digital agriculture, subject to platform systems that are controlled by big capital, by large corporations” (Scoleso 2022, 163).

We identify how our dependent condition deepens the disarticulation of our productive structure with the vital and historically determined needs of the working and subordinate masses, because it

compromises our food sovereignty and deepens the food and nutritional insecurity of the Brazilian working classes (Soares 2023).

3 The History from Slavery to Superexploitation

We understand contemporary slavery in Brazil as the result of conjunctural dynamics, as well as historical and structural components, permeated by the determinants of dependent economies in the world market. From this analytical point of view, in the light of some specific features of the Brazilian reality, we present some structural and systematic characteristics of our socio-economic formation, which explain the condition of the Brazilian working classes.

It was during the transition period from colonial slavery, with the coexistence of free and enslaved people, to the generalization of free labour, that a heterogeneous labour market was established. The transitory forms of exploitation of the labour force with traces of subordination and slavery-like violence, together with the incentive to European immigration and Brazil's eugenics policy, consolidated the permanence of Black people in a labour position of semi-slavery. The eugenics policy ensured lowered wages, which in turn predominantly ensured that the payment of the black labour force did not correspond to its reproduction needs.

The establishment of bourgeois modernization in our country occurred in a segmented and slow manner, and in regions where it was inevitable, in connection to distinct measures of silencing the opposition, either through explicit repression or through co-optation.

According to Florestan Fernandes (2009, 67), when industrialization began in the nineteenth century, only the most dynamic economic sectors and regions managed to adapt and 'normalize' labour relations to the capitalist 'standards' of commodification of the labour force. On the other hand, other economic sectors became "the internal centre of dependence and underdevelopment", for lacking "vitality". They ensured the superexploitation to share the surplus with the dominant external bourgeoisie and the high privileges of the internal bourgeoisie. In an analysis of this historical and structural process, Vânia Bamberra (2019, 77) states that the specialization of the peripheral economies as single commodity producers caused the modernization, and the possibilities for production to become varied through industrial progress, a productive variety directed towards

overcoming the specialization and the international division of labour under hitherto existing forms, thus asserting the law of unequal and combined development. (77)

Even though industrial progress in dependent economies

challenges and opens doors for overcoming the international division of labour, industry needs the export sector as a condition to perform its own process. (77)

In the second industrialization process, just before the post-World War II monopoly integration phase, we can see that a “pattern of capital reproduction” had been established, which enabled autonomous development. As stated by Jaime Osório (2012): an industrial pattern, in its internalized and autonomous stage, established from the second half of the 1930s until the 1940s. Ruy Mauro Marini shows us that, in this period, the possibilities of an autonomous industrial development in Brazil were provided, but this stage was split by the deterioration of the bases that enabled such process, because

the complementariness that had existed until then between industrial development and agribusiness-export activities became a true opposition. (2013, 76)

Therefore, the integration to international capital took place in the industrial pattern that had been started in a domestic and autonomous manner. In the pattern of reproduction process of capital integrated with foreign capital

[T]he dependent industrialization –, which is followed by the subordinate integration of production systems, [reinforces] the separation between the productive structure and the needs of the broad masses. (Luce 2018, 230)

These are some of the historical and structural components that included our country in the global market,¹² as a dependent economy, which clarifies how the superexploitation of the labour force works both as a mechanism used by the Latin American bourgeoisie to make up for the specific trend laws of dependent capitalism, such as the “transfer of value as unequal exchange”, in its relationship with the foreign, hegemonic and imperialist bourgeoisie, and

12 Marini (2013), Bambirra (2019) and Fernandes (2009) had a historical, concrete and dialectical understanding that the underdevelopment of periphery and dependent countries is not an anomaly or a stage to be overcome, but such dependence derives from the expansion of the global market, centralized by the hegemonic countries, in the unequal and combined development of capitalism.

promotes the deterioration of the terms of trade between economies in the global market.¹³

Adrián Sotelo Valencia (2021) recovers Marini's analysis to highlight the specific features of dependent economies, such as the conditions of foreign capital, international trade, technology, and even technical and scientific development, which is the monopoly of the large imperialist centers. Therefore, in the reality of dependent economies, the relative surplus value is established in dynamic branches, with a predominance of large, private domestic and international investments, which reproduce the cycle of structural dependence (monetary, exchange rate, technological and financial). The forms of extraction of absolute surplus value, along with the superexploitation of the labour force, become possibilities for certain bourgeois groups, which do not operate with the exploitation of the relative surplus value, to set pressure on the capitals that operate in it, in order to use superexploitation as a means to obtain, additionally, extraordinary profits.

Thus, to compensate for the transfer of value as an unequal exchange, the local bourgeoisie needs to exploit the labour force to the fullest, by extending the working hours, increasing the intensity and productivity of labour. In addition, they take away part of the workers' consumption fund in order to add it to the accumulation fund, as well as part of their life fund. What does it mean? Part of the labour required, i.e. that which is intended for the reproduction of labour force, is taken away, causing the worker to receive less than their historical and moral value for reproduction, thus compromising their future years of life.

Therefore, the superexploitation of the labour force must be understood as an expropriation that manifests under different forms, but we point out that when superexploitation occurs through the prolongation of the working hours, as well as through the increase of intensity beyond normal limits, we can identify its most brutal forms in the exhausting working hours of contemporary slavery. In such situation, the workers lose their consumption fund and their life fund, also seen in the degrading conditions to which they are subjected.

13 On this double nature of superexploitation, refer to Leite, Alves (2022, 17, emphasis added): "Because the greater the distance between market prices and value, the greater the transfer of value overseas and, therefore, the more intense must be the action of the domestic compensation mechanism (the superexploitation of labour force), thus increasing the volume of goods sold. Such trend to produce more and more explains the fall in prices of primary products in relation to manufactured goods [...]. Therefore, following Marini's argument in *Dialectics of Dependence*, "the deterioration of the terms of trade is a consequence of the superexploitation of labour in connection with unequal exchange". This seems to be what the author suggests as the secret of unequal exchange".

Such procedures constitute a recurrent practice by employers, legitimized by the legal and formal apparatus to remunerate the labour force below its value, as can be seen in the setbacks caused by labour counter-reforms.¹⁴

When we present the category of superexploitation of the labour force¹⁵ we do not mean to define it as a synonym of degradation of labour conditions or lack of capitalist development, but to see it as an exploitation that impacts the workers' consumption fund and/or life fund and as a structural and systematic trend, as a special categorical content of dependent capitalism. In this sense, we seek to show that contemporary slavery is not simply the result of "archaic" remnants, but it must be understood as a result of the conformation of our process of commodification of the labour force in dependent capitalism.

Thus, it is worth pointing out another previous historical process of expropriation of peoples and bodies when Florestan Fernandes (2009) points out how colonial slavery was fundamental for the emergence and development of the capitalist market and when the "commercial/industrial revolution" accelerated domestic modernization, the predominant labour relationships of colonial origin became an obstacle to the domestic expansion of the market, requiring the commodification of the labour force. However, transitory or hybrid forms of exploitation of the labour force have been established, merging under the innovation of "past" forms of conditioning men and women, whether they were black men and women or white immigrants. Even if, in the historiography of labour, we see several cases of white immigrants in conditions very close to those of colonial slavery,¹⁶ it is possible to identify that, in this modernization process, there was a predominance of the permanence of the black working class in the most brutal and subordinate forms of exploitation of the labour force.

Even because the commodification of the Brazilian labour force was engendered amidst the enslaved work of black men and women, who were fundamental for the consolidation process of the world capitalist economy. Until the mid-1850s, the enslaved labour force could be found in export agriculture, ports, overland transportation, trade, and factories. As

in the most diverse activities, from household services to the most specialized crafts, from the heavy work of transporting goods to the varied street trade. (Mattos 2009, 17)

¹⁴ Laws 13467/17 and 13429/17 have set back the Brazilian labour law. On this discussion, see Krein 2021.

¹⁵ See Luce 2018.

¹⁶ See Alencastro 1988.

This period was an important milestone in the transition from slavery to the generalization of free labour.

Clóvis Moura (2020) analyses that the enslaved people – still under the ‘full slavery’ regime (approximately 1500 to 1850) – were in occupations that were, later, ‘reinvented’ during the transition period of coexistence among free, enslaved, and freed people. In the historical course of colonial slavery, the author points out two different periods, the first being the ‘full slavery’ regime aforementioned and, the second, which was simultaneous to the passage to dependent capitalism, identified by the author as ‘late slavery’ (1851-88). It was precisely during this period of capitalist modernization and commodification of the labour force that a Brazilian eugenics policy was established with the encouragement to ‘migratory outbreaks’ from Europe, thus forming a white labour force. Therefore, the condition of semi-slavery was consolidated for black people, in addition to their almost permanent place in the ranks of relative overpopulation. In this process “levels of conditioning and limitation arise that will create gaps in the worker coming in from abroad” (Moura 1983, 133).

In view of the English legislation that prohibited the trafficking of enslaved black African people, which “maintained the classification of crime of piracy for the importation of slaves and established new measures for the repression of the traffic, which had already been prohibited” (Coutinho 2015, 28), since the Law of 7 November 1831, that forbade the importation of slaves. Thus, in 1850, the enactment of several laws that indicated the transition from slavery to free labour escalated, as a product of the external pressure for modernization as well as the result of the struggle and resistance of the black population that fled that hateful situation.

We can note this period of coexistence and transition to free labour in Decree No. 1566 dated February 24, 1855, in its Article 6, Paragraph 6, which provided for the director of the Rio Novo Agricultural Colonial Association in the state of Espírito Santo, when establishing the coffee culture, to import foreign families to inhabit their lands. This director was in charge of:

Paragraph 6 – Engaging or hiring the required national or foreign workers, as possible, to assist in the services of the establishment of the slave forces of the Association, as to the prompt preparation of the deadlines, as per paragraph 2 of art. 3.¹⁷

¹⁷ Available at CECULT, in the Database “Legislação: Trabalhadores e Trabalho em Portugal, Brasil e África Colonial Portuguesa”. See: <https://www2.ifch.unicamp.br/cecult/lex/web/legislacao/425.html>.

The historical and structural elements of slavery in Brazil, led from the “late slavery” phase to free labour, as stated by Moura (2020): a “permanent social and ethnic barrier” against former slaves, which establishes, even today, an enormous racial and ethnic inequality existing in our country.

The notorious Land Law of 1850 assured the privileges of the dominant classes, because the law concerned granted and expanded the land as private property only to the agricultural oligarchies, which became bourgeois, thus establishing the current exclusionary latifundia system. The Land Law of 1850 prevented

the commoners and the populations that were about to leave the state of captivity from having access to it. It also established dependency mechanisms for the landless people that last to this day. (Moura 2020, 115)

From the 1950s on, former slaves were often absorbed as free labour force on farms in São Paulo. However, according to our regional inequality, in contrast, in the Northeast there was the guarantee of housing and weekly pay at low or no cost (Moura 2020). Practices of exploitation of the labour force are very close to those that we currently find within the types of contemporary slavery, such as debt bondage. Similar to the reality of several black female household servants rescued in 2021, which expresses the movement of expropriations, through the exploitation and oppression connected to the patriarchal-racist-capitalist thread,¹⁸ in the outsourcing of reproductive labour.¹⁹

We can also analyse the Law of the ‘Free Womb’ of 1871 and the ‘Sexagenarian’ Law of 1884, which had an “almost innocuous and even delaying connotation, announcing the radical condemnation that weighed on the slave labour regime” (Werneck Sodré 2011, 123-4). The ineffectiveness of these laws, which led to the gradual liberation of the black people, becomes evident when we consider the life expectancy of those enslaved people, in particular those who worked in hard manual labour. Under State inspection, for five years the former slaves

18 “The node formed by the patriarchal-racist-capitalist system comprises a fairly new reality, which was built in the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries, and which is not only contradictory, but also governed by an equally contradictory logic” (Saffioti 2000, 73).

19 Social reproduction “encompasses activities that sustain human beings as *embodied social beings* who need not only to eat and sleep, but also to raise their children, take care of their families, and maintain their communities, all while pursuing hopes for the future” (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, Fraser 2019, 106, emphasis added).

had to keep service lease contracts to obtain income, because if they lived in vagrancy they were forced to work in public establishments. (Coutinho 2015, 29)

On this path, the ‘Sexagenarian’ Law reveals much more the lack of accountability of the masters towards the slaves with

the granting of freedom, which meant a special kind of ‘freedom’: to die of hunger, as a result of early disability acquired. (Gonzalez 2020, 61)

The purpose of every legislation that came to ‘free’ enslaved people was the “discipline” of the labour force, to banish “vagrancy”.²⁰ Because they forced the freed people to reside in the municipality where they received their freedom,

remaining in the company of their former masters, [to combat vagrancy] by means of the duty to work for 3 more years as compensation for his freedom, rendering services to their former masters. (Coutinho 2015, 31)

Prison was the main instrument of criminalization for the freed black people and expressed the authoritarian State, which condemned the freed ones without occupation or who did not comply with their labour contracts (Coutinho 2015).

Furthermore, in our regional inequality, all those laws for the liberation of black men and women from colonial slavery – in the historical process of commodification of the labour force, passing through the Brazilian Consolidation of Labour Laws (CLT), the Rural Worker Statute of 1963, even reaching the achievements of the Federal Constitution of 1988 – demonstrates, along this trajectory, the permanence of work conditions close to semi-slavery, serfdom, peonage, forms of enslavement of male and female indigenous and black people, varied conditions such as “sharecroppers, settlers, partners, wage earners, day labourers, among others” (Ianni 2005, 127).

This labour heterogeneity can be understood due to the unequal modernization process, which occurred in inevitable sectors, and, in turn, mediated by historical and founding expropriations of capitalism, such as patriarchy²¹ and colonial slavery, which structured our socio-sexual and ethnic-racial division of labour, evident in the data of labour and income conditions in contemporary Brazil.

²⁰ See the discussion by Moura 2020; 2021.

²¹ See Arruzza 2015.

Lélia Gonzalez helps us analyse that

gender and ethnicity are manipulated so that, in the Brazilian case, the lowest levels of participation in the labour force, ‘co-incidentally’, belong exactly to women and the black population. (2020, 27)

In view of these arguments, in the case of contemporary slavery in Brazil, 80% of the victims rescued between 2016 and 2018 are black people and 90% are men. In spite of this, we have to question the invisibility of reproductive labour, both because it is not recognized as labour and, in turn, the devaluation and naturalization of its performance by being carried out by women, and because household work is trivialized as being done in degrading conditions and, generally, with exhausting working hours.

We identified that we must face the non-recognition of reproductive labour as work²² and the performance of such labour in degrading conditions and/or with exhausting working hours, as it can be seen: Firstly, in the invisibility of reproductive work carried out by women, especially in rural endeavours as a guarantee of food, among other vital aspects for the daily labour of rescued workers; and secondly, the difficulty of inspecting the working conditions of female household servants, who ensure all the social reproduction in the residence of the ‘traditional Brazilian family’.

In this sense, the superexploitation of the labour force is a fundamental category, but it is not

sufficient, to reflect upon the economic and social formations of dependent capitalism, whose more complete understanding must also incorporate the power and oppression relationships. (Ferreira 2018, 228)

Because the subordination of the working classes under dependent capitalism is that of expropriation of both the means of subsistence and the living conditions, without guaranteed rights, which put them in a position of selling their labour under the worst conditions, mediated by ethnic-racial, gender, and sex oppressions.

22 It is of fundamental importance to point out that the tasks performed mostly by women to ensure the social reproduction must be recognized as labour; however, it is not necessarily productive labour. What we can see is, by platforming the work of female household servants, it is reinforced so that, when such work is performed mediated by algorithms, it becomes work on demand and paid per piece, thus ensuring the extraction of surplus value and turning it into productive work. On the “industrialization” of the services sector, see Antunes 2018.

Under such perspective, we point out that labour precariousness, structural racism, and patriarchy make up these constituent elements of the dynamics, which permanently re-establish themselves as an “ontological node”, renewing themselves even with the constant advance of the productive forces. It is a remarkable fact that today, under algorithmic control, and in a broad historical consolidated ground of precariousness and mystification of precariousness, it is easier to break the rules of employment relationship and deepen the superexploitation (Soares 2022).

Therefore, identifying how the expansion, expropriation and the search for capitalization of all spheres of life with the ceaseless productive restructuring, are realized mediated by the particular socio-historical features of dependency, is crucial for our analysis.

We can identify some specificities of the Brazilian workforce in the long trajectory from Brazil-Colony to Republican established through the extermination and expropriation of indigenous peoples and the enslavement, restriction and control of black African bodies. These were condemned after Abolition - or already during the delaying policies, which reduced the supply of enslaved black labour - to semi-slavery due to eugenic policies of extermination and purposeful lowering of wages for black labour; encouraging white European migration to “whiten the nation”; to the Land Law of 1850 and the absence of agrarian reform.

In this sense, we highlight the particularities of the dependent relationship established in Brazil’s insertion in the international division of labour, in its Imperial to Republican period, which engendered formal independence and relative autonomy that constituted an autocratic state essence, as well as shaped the dominant classes-dominated their fascist expressions. Explicit situation in the need to condition the working classes to super-exploitation, with the deepening of the hierarchies of the social division of labour with evident racism and misogyny and with the use of force or co-optation, to restrict speech and the struggle for rights, manifesting in a extreme the fundamental elements that capitalist accumulation requires

We have elucidated²³ that capitalist expropriation is not limited to means of life and territories, it affects bodies by racializing them and, in turn, hierarchizing them in the social division of labour through the social construction of a supposed sub-humanity, legitimizing enslavement. Or in the control over the female body to generate lives or not and guarantee the development and maintenance of the workforce, in an invisible way and, therefore, not paid for their

23 Fontes 2018 and Boschetti 2020 primary and secondary expropriations; in reading oppressions as expropriations we have the authors: Bhattacharya 2017; Arruzza 2015; Vogel 2022.

reproductive work. The ‘splits’ between production and reproduction, between manual and intellectual work, among others, engender hierarchies, modify the social division of labour, form branches of knowledge²⁴ and apparently fragment reality, clouding the apprehension of the capitalist social totality.²⁵

In this sense, misogyny, as well as eugenic standards, materialize

both in the white-Western aesthetic and cultural use as a parameter of humanity and in the exclusion or inequality of access to informational technologies. (Lippold, Faustino 2022, 71)

In Brazil, from the legal-parliamentary coup to the government of Jair Bolsonaro, an ultra-neoliberal “agenda” was implemented with an authoritarian and reactionary bias, with an open anti-social, racist, patriarchal and fascist policy, which deepened the process of deregulation and financial innovations to continue the subjection of capitalist dynamics to the logic of fictitious capital. Driven, even, by the use of technological innovation, through algorithms and artificial intelligence with their bots disseminating fake news and class, misogynistic and racist hatred.

However, it was in the nineties of the twentieth century that the destructive neoliberal “model” was initiated in our country, for the restructuring and reordering of capital on a global scale, which even today aims to roll back, with more intensity, the system of social protection, established in the Federal Constitution of 1988.

The neoliberal offensive, during the 1990s, promoted a fall in real wages, due to the decrease in formalized employment in companies and public services and the increase in small and precarious enterprises, micro-enterprises, home-based work, and work self-employment on the street, among other survival strategies in a context of extremely high unemployment produced by neoliberal counter-reforms.

With the promulgation of the Federal Constitution of 1988, through the establishment of fundamental labour rights, the aim was to homogenize the limits of the working day, in order to regulate it and define guidelines for the length of the working day in the 44-hour week, as well as guaranteeing intra-day and inter-day breaks. In this sense, it was believed that a “standard day” would be ensured for all Brazilian working classes.

²⁴ See Lukács 2020.

²⁵ The analysis of the Theory of Social Reproduction helps us to interpret the capitalist social totality of exploitation, expropriation, oppression and alienation. In addition to reflecting on socially determined hierarchies that subordinate people and condition them to superexploitation.

However, the discourse of the so-called State management reform brought the alleged “modernization” of labour legislation and the Federal Constitution, which aimed to destroy rights not accessed by a large part of workers. Because for our bourgeoisies with a predominantly fascist, racist and patriarchal profile, the most impoverished fringes of the working classes never fit into the Brazil they seek to build.

Therefore, in this decade, changes to the regulation of working time began, seen in the progressive release of work on Sundays, the incorporation of the time bank, the extension of the working day to up to 12 hours for certain segments, and in agreements to reduce intra-workday time, such as reducing the lunch break. In other words, there was already a deconstruction of rights that had never been accessed by a large part of the working classes,

to give companies greater freedom to manage working time according to what is most convenient for the dynamics of their economic activity. (Krein, Abílio, Borsari 2021, 254)

Along this path, the political-ideological apparatus of neoliberal macroeconomic policies guaranteed the transformation of production processes and, as an effect, labour relations, with the increase in informality, precariousness and outsourcing, reducing the forms of hiring the workforce with guarantee of labour rights and expanding temporary and/or intermittent contracts. This entire offensive against the working classes focused on encouraging self-employment, voluntary work, and the increase in cases of contemporary slave labour, in addition to the weakening of trade union organization.

4 Considerations

The feature film *Pureza* highlights the importance of studying the theme, by showing the regional inequality and social polarization in our country through the understanding of how the characteristics of dependent economies reveal structural features of labour precariousness, in an endless recycling of transitory or hybrid forms of exploitation of labour force, which are expressed in contemporary forms of slavery, mostly experienced by Brazilian racialized and/or gendered migrants.

Furthermore, the movie and data demonstrate how Brazilian economic growth is expanding at the expense of the enormous destruction of the rights of the working classes, increasing super-exploitation, that is, new forms of violation of the workers’ consumption fund and living fund, as well as ‘new’ contemporary forms of enslavement.

Pureza's love for her son turned her into a symbol of the fight against contemporary slavery in Brazil and worldwide, which was expressed through the Anti-Slavery International award she received in London in 1997. The movie and her history inspire us, as well as the histories of so many other fighters who are engaged in this battle, and motivate us to not only research the topic, but also to unite in the defense of the rights of the working classes in their heterogeneity and diversity.

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The Japanese Myth: A Middle-Class Society or a Reality Overwhelmed by Global Social Polarisation?

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Abstract Japan has historically considered itself immune to social polarisation dynamics. The Japanese have also traditionally self-perceived as a homogenous middle-class society. Contemporary Japanese social reality is however quite different. The last 25 years have seen several structural changes, like the increase in inequality between regular and non-regular workers. Along with growing disparities, Japanese society's self-perception as a homogeneous middle class has started to be challenged. Nowadays, inequalities generate an exploitative relationship involving five distinct social classes. This paper attempts to analyse the social polarisation issue in Japan while taking into account the serious structural-demographic transformations that it has been experiencing over the last 40 years.

Keywords Japan. Homogeneous middle-class society. Shakai kakusa. Social polarisation. Income inequalities.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Japanese Rise: The Transformation into a Homogeneous Middle-Class Society. – 3 Japanese Social Reality: Preliminary Data and Ongoing Transformations. – 4 Inequality perception and social transformations. – 5 Social Polarisation and Inequalities in Japan: *ichi oku sōchūryū* vs. *shakai kakusa*. – 6 Contemporary Japan: a true class society? – 7 Conclusions.



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1 Introduction

Japan has historically (self-)considered itself immune to the social polarisation dynamics that have determined the inequalities and strong class division present in many European countries and the United States. This unique Asian country, after a ‘late’ process of industrialisation (Dore 1973) and a rapid late-comer effect in the last century, quickly joined the highest ranks of the economically advanced countries. Despite this transformation, Japan, and the Japanese, have continued to perceive themselves as a homogenous middle-class society,¹ both socially and culturally, as well as ethnically (Chiavacci 2008).

Contemporary Japanese social reality is however quite different. The last 25 years have seen structural changes in the income distribution of Japanese households: the median income across all age groups has been decreasing, partly due to the average ageing of households (from 20% to 36%) and the increase in single-income households (from 26% to 38%). The same process occurred for low-income households, which increased for all age groups except for the 55-64 one (Cabinet Office 2022). Wage inequalities² have worsened since the 1990s, in parallel with the deterioration of the employment situation as a result of the structural population ageing and the increase³ in non-regular workers.⁴ Confirming this progressively growing disparity trend are the OECD data on the Gini coefficient of initial income (10th among OECD countries), the poverty rate (10th) and the Gini coefficient of disposable income (11th). Indeed, many countries ranked above Japan are developing countries (OECD 2023d). Besides the increase in inequality between regular (*seiki rōdōsha*) and non-regular (*hiseiki rōdōsha*) workers, gender inequality (*jendā fubyōdō*) remains an important factor of social disparity.

Along with these growing disparities, the over-emphasised self-perception of Japanese society as a homogeneous middle class has

¹ *Ichī oku sōchūryū*, literally “100 million all in the middle class”.

² In this case, household income gaps and individual wage differentials. Variables considered relevant for a study of inequality growth are income distribution and inequalities in opportunities and outcomes (employment and career advancement, educational attainment), while other related issues may be inequality reduction policies and the relationship between equity and efficiency. Other indicators may be consumption and wealth levels, although less precise than income (Tachibanaki 2006, 1-2).

³ The exponential increase of non-regular workers can be considered the most important transformation in Japan’s working life since the 1960s. See Gordon 2017, 9.

⁴ Shinozaki 2006; Komamura 2008. The term encompasses a wide variety of employment types, i.e., part-time workers, contract workers, dispatched workers, part-time students (*arubaito*), etc. For a more in-depth look at the different types of so-called ‘bad jobs’, see Kanbayashi, Takao 2016.

started to be put into question. Indeed, *shakai kakusa*⁵ has become increasingly prominent in recent decades,⁶ starting with the wave of neoliberal structural reforms (*kōzō kaikaku*) of the then Prime Minister Koizumi in the first half of the 2000s, which led to a staggering increase in inequality⁷ and poverty,⁸ and an ‘intra-competitive’ molecularisation of labour. The Japanese homogeneous middle-class self-perception has *de facto* been gradually broken down, to the point that more than half of the population perceives itself as “living lower than a middle-class life”.⁹ This perception first came into the public domain during the 2007-08 global economic crisis,¹⁰ reaching full maturity in 2010 with the recognition of a socially divided society with growing economic inequality (Hashimoto 2018; 2021), and finally achieving a new peak of awareness in the latest OECD survey on inequality perceptions (OECD 2021a).

It is also important to consider the Japanese social polarisation process in its structural mechanisms. Feeding disparities and inequalities in contemporary Japan generate an exploitative relationship involving – at least – three distinct social classes. According to a Marxist perspective, the Japanese working class is still subaltern to the capitalist class and the ‘broader’ middle class. However, this subalternity affects the lowest areas of society the most, including non-regular (low-wage) workers, the unemployed, female workers (Hashimoto 2018; 2021) and immigrants, resulting in a new underclass subject to the dynamics of social polarisation. It is precisely the latter who are positioned at the lowest end of the country’s social hierarchy (Shipper 2008), involved in a broader process of reproduction of class stratification recently amplified by the pandemic and post-pandemic period, which has affected low-income groups the most (Kikuchi, Kitao, Mikoshiba 2020).¹¹

The questions this paper seeks to answer are: is social polarisation a current process in today’s Japan? In what forms is it present,

⁵ Literally ‘social disparity’. It is interchangeable with the terms *kakusa no kakudai* (social and economic disparity) and *kakusa to fubyōdō* (economic disparity and inequality), which are commonly associated with the concept of *bundan* (division).

⁶ As early as the late 1990s, inequality in Japan began to be assessed at a higher degree than in the US (Tachibanaki 1998).

⁷ Two types of inequality were the sharp internal division between different categories of workers (regular, non-regular, etc.) and citizens (standard and socially vulnerable), and the marked imbalance of power between capital and labour in favour of the former. Both have led to an increase in inequality that goes beyond the simple analysis of income differentials. Ninomiya 2006.

⁸ Ninomiya 2006; Komamura 2008, 67-8; Gordon 2017.

⁹ JILPT 2022; 2023, 35; NHK 2022.

¹⁰ Although it was already partially perceived earlier (Kosugi 2008).

¹¹ In particular women in non-regular workers’ positions (JILPT 2020).

and how has it escalated over time? And, lastly, how does the variable of migrant workers, but more generally of the wider underclass, possibly increase the distance between an unreachable capitalist class and an increasingly poor working class (blue-, and white-collar workers, alike)? The answers to these questions will also have to take the serious, and now seemingly irreversible, structural-demographic transformations that Japan has been experiencing for at least the last 40 years into account.

The structure of this work is as follows: the first section aims to describe the transformative processes that Japan underwent during the phase following the end of WWII, leading it to become an economic power and a society based on social, cultural and ethnic homogeneity; the second section, through the analysis of the available data, aims to report on the current reality of Japanese society and on the internal transformations taking place; the third section investigates the theme of the perception of inequality experienced by the population, linking it to the socio-economic dynamics of recent years; the fourth section tries to make a comparison between the two antithetical visions of a Japanese society characterised by marked overall homogeneity and, negatively, by clear tendencies of polarisation and inequality; the fifth section deals with the theme of class and how it can be found within Japanese social structure; the conclusions envisage a synthesis of what has been presented during the paper, while taking structural demographic changes brought about by the rapid population ageing into account.

This paper's methodology is based on primary and secondary sources analysis. Part of the data is derived from calculations already elaborated in other papers, while the statistical datasets are taken from various published Japanese and international institutional sources. Although social polarisation and stratification topics have already been extensively dealt with in Japanese and international literature, this paper attempts to systematise these issues by cross-referencing past and present data and sources.

2 The Japanese Rise: The Transformation into a Homogeneous Middle-class Society

Japan has been steeped in rhetoric, used since the second half of the last century, that identifies it as consisting of a homogeneous, mono-ethnic society,¹² generically middle-class, and characterised by a strong component of social mobility determined by a meritocratic (education) system (Chiavacci 2010, 48; Chiavacci, Lechevalier 2017, 300). However, Japanese society, as well as its self-perception, was not always like this. Looking at its recent history, the early post-war years were the scene of intense class struggles and grassroots labour activism (Gordon 1998). Before the Meiji Restoration (1868), Japan was characterised by a rigid hierarchy,¹³ where social mobility or marriages between people of different statuses were impossible (Lie 2003, 70-1).¹⁴ This system, albeit to a lesser extent, remained partially active during the first half of the last century. Before WWII, a class system was in force where the hereditary elite were positioned at the top and the population below them (Lebra 1993, 57-60). More recently still, the country was commonly described as a *tate shakai* (vertical society) (Nakane 1970, 87), and a class-stratified one (Steven 1983, 319). As far as inequality is concerned, the Gini coefficient at the end of the 19th century first saw a gradual improvement until the late 1930s, and then worsened significantly in the post-war period, in a context of already strong income differentiation between cities and rural areas (Minami 2008, 7-9) and intra-labour wage gaps (11-12).

This was until the 'official' political and social paradigm shift in the mid-1960s (Chiavacci 2008, 6; 2010, 48). From there arose the strongly self-perceived idea of a general middle-strata¹⁵ and middle-class society (Kosugi 2008, 2; Tachibanaki, Urakawa 2008, 21), free of class divisions (Lie 2003, 70-3), especially in comparison with European socio-economic systems (Dore 1987). This 'success' came about due to a series of progressive reforms initiated in the post-war period that legally erased status divisions and forced the dissolution of family-owned monopolistic conglomerates (*zaibatsu*). Extensive land

12 Literally *tanitsu minzoku shakai*. The concept of *tanitsu minzoku* (culturally homogeneous population) covers language, ethnicity/race and religion, while implying the uniqueness of the Japanese people. Lie 2003; Kowner, Befu 2015, 391-3.

13 The so-called *shinōkōshō* model, consisting of a fourfold caste structure (in order samurai, peasants, artisans, merchants), in addition to an 'outcaste' sub-level (Caroli, Gatti 2017, 101).

14 A subdivision-based on 'class' and 'race' was already present in this hierarchy, and saw the presence of an initial underclass composed of racialised minorities (Baber 2023).

15 Literally *chū kaisō* (Murakami 1984, 167).

reforms against agricultural monopolies were implemented,¹⁶ while taxes on personal wealth that directly affected previously existing inequalities were imposed (Minami 2008, 13). Structurally, this balance was underpinned by a strong division of gender roles (Gordon 1998; Ochiai 2003), which was fundamental to achieving economic growth and societal harmony (Lebra 1984).

Japanese growth in the second half of the last century, itself not supported by a redistributive welfare system but by a developmental productivist model centred on economic growth and (shared) productivity, was the basis of an extremely egalitarian and affluent society,¹⁷ also due to fair and meritocratic opportunities for social mobility (Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 1-2). This model, which required a constant commitment of the individual,¹⁸ was called the 'Japanese way of life' (Chiavacci 2007, 41-5; Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 3). It was embedded in an industrial relations system delineated by the 'three sacred treasures',¹⁹ composing the so-called 'Japanese-type capitalism' (Albert 1991; Gordon 1998), itself characterised by a distinct component of social cohesion and income equality (Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 23). At the same time, it was a very young and numerically expanding society, thus relying on a large workforce (6). The vision of a corporate-centred and gender-divided society had become the standard, partly due to a strong cultural bias (Gordon 1998, 200). If a minimal presence of inequality was perceived by the population, it was considered a necessary sacrifice in the name of efficiency and economic growth (Tachibanaki 2006, 1).

The strong division of gender roles, consistently with a corporatist and familist welfare state model, attributed to men the duty of the country's economic prosperity, while women necessarily had to be responsible for family management. This welfare model was centred on the 'replacement' role of women in care and was embedded in a social 'pact' that served to balance social mechanisms during the last century's economic growth. According to a functionalist perspective (Spencer 1863; Durkheim 1895; Parsons, Bales 1955) of the gender role, it was this initial division that had a persistent impact on the subordinate position of women in contemporary Japanese social stratification, as well as the resulting structural gender inequality.

A systemic equilibrium – however internally 'unequal' – was thus acquired, both in social and labour market spheres. All this was

¹⁶ Completely transforming the tenant farming system through confiscation in 1946 of farmland from large and absentee landowners (Lie 2003, 72; Minami 2008, 13).

¹⁷ A mass society (*taishū shakai*). Choi 2013.

¹⁸ The so-called *risshin shusse*.

¹⁹ Namely lifetime employment, seniority wage, and enterprise unions systems, in addition to harmonious labour-management relations. Nakamura 1993.

underpinned by the extraordinary Japanese economic growth that began in the second half of the 1960s,²⁰ indicating that Japan's harmony model was efficient and potentially durable. At the same time, however, the Gini coefficients on household income (divided into initial²¹ and equivalent redistributed²² income), together with various indicators of wage differentials (gender, enterprise size and industry type), showed that since 1952 income disparity has progressively increased. This trend shows that economic inequality has been present since before the historical crises of the Japanese economic system, albeit to an insufficiently significant extent (Hashimoto 2021, 164-5).

3 Japanese Social Reality: Preliminary Data and Ongoing Transformations

The first half of the 1990s, with the beginning of the 'lost decade' (1992-02)²³ following the bursting of the speculative bubble in the real estate market, marked the outset of perpetual economic stagnation²⁴ and social decline (Funabashi 2015). These transformations have been accompanied by a steady population reduction process, which was also caused by a sharp decrease in the fertility rate (OECD 2023ba). The decline in the working-age population, which started in the 1980s, has in turn increased the proportion of population groups (divided by age) affected by wage and income dispersion (Ōtake 1999, 12).

What was surprising, however, was the tardiness in recognising the structural inequality that permeates Japanese society. The political interest in the issue started in 2006 (Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 2), including the 'public' perception of the problem. The effects of the long economic stagnation were belatedly perceived in terms of socio-economic inequality, overshadowed by the demographic crisis and the recognition of its transformation into a structural fact (Schoppa 2006). Despite this, the perception of society's precariousness and socio-economic vulnerability has affected all social strata,

²⁰ Uninterrupted at least until the 1973 oil crisis, then resumed until the early 1990s (Lie 2003, 73).

²¹ This is income before tax, before adjustments of social insurance payments.

²² Income calculated after subtracting tax payments, and social insurance and social benefits to pensioners and households in need.

²³ In Japanese *ushinawareta jūnen*.

²⁴ That, together with low real wage growth, has led to a sharp deterioration in the population's economic conditions. Wage growth stood at 1.05 times greater from 1991 to 2021, far below many OECD countries. Cabinet Secretariat 2023.

with serious consequences on the perceived security of the population (Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 23; van Houwelingen 2016).

The scholarly community has been active on the subject since the 1990s, which has been further revived during the first lost decade (Lise et al. 2013, 583; Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 7-14). Scholars have split into two strands: those who have considered inequality as already present in Japanese society, with slight changes from an already present stratification (Hara, Seiyama 2005; Sato 2007), and those who have identified actual breakpoints with the country's egalitarian past (Allison 2013; Kariya 2013). However, the literature agrees that, at least since the 1990s, there was no longer a perfect symmetry between economic growth and middle-class society (Chiavacci 2008).²⁵ In particular, Tachibanaki's (1998) work on income distribution and Satō's (2000) work on social mobility had a lasting impact on the public debate (Chiavacci 2010, 56-7; Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 7). Despite being criticised from a methodological point of view (Hara, Seiyama 2005; Ishida 2008), they made the limits of social upgrading of Japanese society at the expense of the already existing middle class clear. Indeed, the focus at the time was on the middle class, not yet identifying the issues of social polarisation and the various underclasses.

Economic stagnation and the demographic crisis were responded to by politicians who, in contrast to the egalitarianism principles adopted so far, opted for mechanisms of liberalisation, deregulation and competition, not only between companies but also between workers (Tachibanaki 2006, 6). As a consequence, the harmonious system of industrial relations was also changed founded on a performance-based wage system (which, however, preferred rewards to employees rather than wage increases), especially in large companies, also changing the paradigm of wage compensation principles (Shinozaki 2006, 6; Tachibanaki 2006, 5). Unemployment (especially of young people and workers close to retirement), until then very low (2% in 1991), increased substantially by starting to affect particular segments of the population, – reaching 8% of people between 60 and 64 years in 2001, and 10% of people between 20 and 24 years in 2003 (Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 12-14).²⁶ This phase can be considered a prelude to real social polarisation, at least as the public recognition of the problem in the 2000s revealed.

²⁵ Already in the 1980s, economic inequality began to be a relevant trend, stimulating scientific debate at the time. Hashimoto 2021, 165.

²⁶ Currently, Japan's unemployment rate remains one of the lowest among OECD countries (2.7%), well below the OECD average (4.8%). OECD 2023f; 2023g.

4 Inequality Perception and Social Transformations

In the first half of the 2000s, the term *shakai kakusa* came into the public domain, coinciding with the neoliberal structural reforms during the three consecutive terms of Prime Minister Junichirō Koizumi's LDP government (2001-06). Indeed, concomitant economic growth has resulted in a general growth of inequality, benefitting only the upper class (Matsubara 2005). In 2006, inequality gained traction in the scientific and political debate (Shinozaki 2006, 4; Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 2; Hashimoto 2021, 163) and became even more important since the global economic crisis of 2007-8 (Kosugi 2008). At the same time, Japanese society was invested in the relatively conscious transformation from a 'general middle-class society' to a 'gap' or 'divided' society,²⁷ along with growing polarisations in the labour market and social integration (Chiavacci 2010, 57; Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 14). In 2010, the awareness of having become a divided society, particularly from the point of view of income differences, reached full maturity (Hashimoto 2021, 163).

In this context, there was a marked division between regular workers, placed in the primary segment of the labour market,²⁸ and outsiders²⁹ who were in the secondary one, where the demand for labour consisted mainly of flexible, low-cost and low-skilled workers, easily dismissed during economic fluctuations. Moreover, the latter group has increased constantly since the 1980s. Extending segmentation beyond the labour market dimension,³⁰ the former group can be placed in the group of the so-called *kachigumi*, i.e. the winners, while the latter is in the group of the *makegumi*, i.e. the losers.³¹ This stratification process was not dissimilar to what was taking place, through liberalisation policies, within Western economic systems (Minami 2008, 14). In addition to these mechanisms, the hinge of socio-economic differences between rural periphery and urbanised areas became wider (Higuchi 2008), remaining unaltered to this day.

²⁷ A *bundan shakai*. Ishida, Slater 2009; Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016; Ide, Furuichi, Miyazaki 2016.

²⁸ Japanese labour market characteristic is its distinct segmentation into regular and contingent occupations (*seiki koyō* and *hiseiki koyō*, respectively), the former solidly protected by legislation and various forms of employment adjustment. Kikuchi, Kitao, Mikoshiba 2020, 6. The second group of workers tends to be more susceptible to displacement and dismissal during economic downturns and business cycle, especially in the case of foreign workers. Endoh 2019, 327-8; Kitao, Mikoshiba 2020; Yokoyama, Higa, Kawaguchi 2021.

²⁹ Mainly non-regular workers, but the concept was extendable to new categories such as *neet*, 'freeter' and atypical workers.

³⁰ For example, to social citizenship. Saitō 2006.

³¹ Ishida, Slater 2009, 7-8; Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 15-16; Chiavacci, Lechevalier 2017, 302.

Although public awareness of inequality has increased, the long-standing population's perception of being a middle-class society has remained partly intact. In the recent *NHK/JILPT Joint Survey on Life-styles and Attitudes* (2022),³² more than half of the respondents stated that they perceived themselves as “living lower than a middle-class life”,³³ while less than 40% will not be able to reach their parents' standard of living. One of the paradigms of Japanese success in the last century, the *risshin shusse*, now seems to be over, as one of the main perceptions of respondents is that it is no longer possible to become affluent through hard work.³⁴ At the same time, despite the perception of general economic hardship, 55.3% of the respondents indicated that they felt themselves to be between the ‘upper-middle’ and ‘lower-middle’ class,³⁵ indicating a yet persistent self-recognition of belonging to the broader middle class (JILPT 2023, 38).

In turn, the growing inequality perception does not match the concern. Inequality in Japan has increased dramatically, but concern about it is below the OECD average (2021a). This discordance might be explained by the population's strong belief in opportunity equality and a perceived less importance of external factors (such as family background, etc.), albeit declining in recent decades (OECD 2021a, 1). The policy's part in reducing inequality is generally seen as secondary (2),³⁶ de-emphasising the government's role and relegating this task to the very nature of Japanese society and its innate perceived ‘meritocracy’.

This difference between perception and concern creates a short-circuit between perceived reality and the signs of social polarisation within Japanese society, the subject of the next section.

³² The complete file, in Japanese, can be found at: <https://www.jil.go.jp/press/documents/20220916.pdf>.

³³ Middle-class life means, at least in the perception of the majority of respondents, an annual income of “more than 6 million yen”, or approximately USD 57,000. While this may not seem high, the absence of economic growth since the 1990s should be considered. Hashimoto 2021, 174; JILPT 2022; 2023, 35.

³⁴ 65.6% of the total (JILPT 2023, 41). The perception of inequality is indeed more pronounced in contexts where there is a devaluation of the association between hard work and sufficient quality of life, as well as characterised by economic inequality and low intergenerational mobility (OECD 2021a).

³⁵ The results are lower for the 20- and 40-year-old age groups, while among non-regular workers the consideration of not being able to live well at present was prevalent (64.2%). JILPT 2022, 17; 2023, 38.

³⁶ This is not the case for the idea of the need for government intervention to support the unemployed and for progressive taxation. The popular demand for such policies is, respectively, almost equal and well above the OECD average (2021a).

5 Social Polarisation and Inequalities in Japan: *ichi oku sōchūryū vs. shakai kakusa*

Social polarisation, and socio-economic inequalities, are determined by the strong differentiation of wages, which vary according to labour frameworks. These differences in wages³⁷ are caused by a combination of factors, such as global economic competition (external pressure), demographic and skills recruitment issues, and, above all, by the polarisation between regular and non-regular workers (Shinozaki 2006, 7; Zhiyong, Kohei 2023, 3) in an already extremely segmented context by the presence of many small and very small enterprises, thus causing a marked differentiation of starting employment conditions (Lechevalier 2016).

If social polarisation has become structural, it is normal to ask whether and how social mobility in Japan, supported by its meritocratic education system, has changed.³⁸ Indeed, the school system, extremely selective in terms of results, but at the same time considered very egalitarian, has also undergone a strong liberalisation process, giving greater weight to individual choice and market opportunities.³⁹ Even though socioeconomic starting conditions and family social capital have always been determinants of educational achievement (Bourdieu 1986; Israel, Beaulieu 2004), a loss of meritocratic filtering as a function of the market has occurred, with the consequent creation of further inequality and social class reproduction.⁴⁰

At the same time, the ageing of the population has created an extremely elderly society, with major difficulties caused by inadequate pensions and a meagre welfare system. The social pact of the second half of the last century is not currently suited to safeguarding the population from the current social transformations. The combination of the structural population ageing and the increase in the number of non-regular workers, in parallel with the progressive deterioration of the macroeconomic situation (Tachibanaki 2006, 5) since the 1990s, have been decisive determinants of economic and wage

³⁷ At the same time, strong wage differentials have been used instrumentally to maintain a low unemployment rate. Ōtake 1999, 11.

³⁸ This, in turn, offered a particular perception of the creation of 'non-status', especially in the form, considered objective, of entrance examinations. Lie 2003, 72.

³⁹ A relevant fact is the enrolment ratio in private vs. public institutions, which is extremely significant in pre-school and post-secondary levels, although low in primary and lower secondary levels. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology 2016; Saito 2016. Notably, tertiary education sees 79% of students enrolled in a private university, compared to the OECD average of 17%. Public spending on education also stood at 7.8% (2019), below the OECD average (10%). OECD 2022.

⁴⁰ Kariya 2010; 2013. Kikkawa (2009) defined the *gakureki bundan-sen* (dividing line based on people's educational background) as decisive in the formation of socio-economic gaps in Japan.

inequalities, i.e. household income gaps and individual wage differentials of Japanese workers (Ōtake 1999; Shinozaki 2006; Chiavacci 2010, 57) and the labour-related growth in the poverty rate (Kosugi 2008, 4; Tachibanaki, Urakawa 2008). These processes have led to the emergence of a growing pool of working poor.⁴¹

The role of women is also peculiar in the labour market. Despite the steady increase in female labour market participation since the 2000s and paradigm shifts in the Japanese family structure,⁴² structural difficulties⁴³ remain evident. First of all, the increase in women's participation has not led to a reduction of gender gaps in employment conditions. The presence of women in corporate management is still extremely low (OECD.Stat 2023d), while gender pay and employment gaps remain wide.⁴⁴ Part-time work is still the most common form of female employment (OECD.Stat 2023c).⁴⁵ Two-thirds of the non-regular workforce are women, further fuelling the duality of the already highly divided domestic labour market (OECD 2017; OECD.Stat 2023c; Watanabe 2018). Gender segregation is also evident in work and class categorisation: marked differences in the same job category and position (authority, possibility of promotion, assigned duties, etc.) can lead to different class positioning, which is almost always lower for women (Hashimoto 2018; 2021, 10).

⁴¹ Komamura 2008; Sekine 2008. Assuming that the unofficially defined poverty line in Japan is ¥2,000,000 per year, i.e., a public assistance worker's salary level, in 2022 there were about 17.5 million of them (including regular and non-regular workers), i.e., about 30.7%. Statistics Bureau 2023a.

⁴² As income earners in households increased through the growth of female labour market participation, there was a parallel decrease in the number of household members and an increase in single-income households. This transformation has exacerbated income differences between household types. Tachibanaki 2006, 5.

⁴³ In 2015, it reached 64.7%, above the OECD average (58.5%). However, the hours worked remained more or less the same, with only part-time job hours increasing. OECD 2017.

⁴⁴ In 2022 it ranked fourth among OECD countries (OECD 2017; 2023b; OECD.Stat 2023a; 2023b). The combination of class and gender in the difference in individual income reveals how a man in the highest social class earns on average more than four times a woman in the working class annually (¥7,850,000 vs. ¥1,844,000 in 2015), showing how economic inequalities are trans-dimensional (SSM 2015). In this sense, as the difference is more than double in favour of men and greater than the sum of the difference between different social classes (see later sections), the gender problem in Japan, including female labour exploitation by male labour, appears to be deeper than class differences (including inter-class exploitation) (Hashimoto 2018; 2021, 13).

⁴⁵ Originally, part-time work emerged as a requirement of employers in the 1960s-70s, and not as a direct result of the transformation of women's lifestyles during the Japanese reconstruction and economic growth of the second half of the last century. If part-time work for women constituted around 10% of the national workforce in the 1970s, this was mainly due to market demands – particularly labour shortages – and was an *ad hoc* form of employment for women. The categorisation and differentiation of labour coexisted with Japan's multiple economic and socio-cultural demands (Ueno 1987, 80).

Current data indicate that Japan experiences *shakai kakusa* even more clearly when compared to other OECD countries. Social indicators (OECD 2023e; OECD.Stat 2023e) such as the poverty rate (10th highest),⁴⁶ the Gini coefficients on initial income (10th), and disposable income (11th) show that the country is in an unenviable position (top 20% of the lower bracket), especially when compared to Western countries (Hashimoto 2021, 165; OECD 2023e; OECD.Stat 2023e). The Gini coefficient, which for Japan stands at 0.334, only finds developing countries such as Brazil, China, South Africa, Mexico, Chile, Costa Rica and Turkey, or special cases such as the U.S., in a worse position.⁴⁷ The significant income inequalities in Japanese society, which Tachibanaki identified more than two decades ago (Tachibanaki 1998; 2006; Tachibanaki, Urakawa 2008), have become even more structural. The poverty rate, in contrast to the low unemployment rate, is now a persistent problem in the working-age population (Zhiyong, Kohei 2023, 2) and the post-retirement group. Even more serious is the poverty risk of single-parent households, especially single mothers, who are both economically and socially vulnerable (Sekine 2008, 55-6; Tachibanaki, Urakawa 2008, 37-8; Abe 2021, 23). The high level of economic disparity is first reflected in the Japanese gender disparity (Hashimoto 2018; 2021, 13). These disparities are linked to the type of employment that determines the wage gap (Sekine 2008, 55), which in turn expands the polarisation between regular and non-regular workers – mostly women – and, thus, between different classes.

The upper classes (capitalist class)⁴⁸ have an income almost two and a half times⁴⁹ higher than the lower classes (working class),⁵⁰ although it barely reaches the 6-million-yen threshold perceived as the minimum to lead a middle-class life (JILPT 2022; 2023, 35). Even more serious is the difference between individual and household income within the working class, where regular workers earn, respectively, 3,698,000 yen and 6,303,000 yen annually (2015), non-regular workers 2,269,000 yen and 3,908,000 yen (about 1.6 times less than regular workers), with a poverty rate, in order, of 7.0% and 27.5%.⁵¹ The pandemic also hit non-regular workers the hardest (Nakamura 2023). These social class differences, inter- and intra-groups, are the subject of the next section.

⁴⁶ Japan's relative income poverty rate is 0.16, equal to Mexico, Latvia and Korea, and lower than Chile (0.17) and the United States (0.18). OECD 2023e; OECD.Stat 2023e.

⁴⁷ South Korea is also slightly worse, with the Gini coefficient at 0.339 (OECD 2023e; OECD.Stat 2023e).

⁴⁸ The poverty rate of this social class stood at 4.2%, which is not the lowest among Japanese social classes. See the next section for the class breakdown.

⁴⁹ ¥6,044,000 (2015). SSM 2015.

⁵⁰ ¥2,626,000 (2015). SSM 2015.

⁵¹ 38.7% overall. SSM 2015.

6 Contemporary Japan: A True Class Society?

So far, the social and economic inequality present in Japanese society has been analysed. The use of official national and international data corroborates the fact that Japan is an unequal and polarised society. The situation is summarised by describing the country as a *shakai kakusa*, or disparity society. However, the term *shakai kakusa* only describes an unequal distribution of social resources (Hashimoto to 2021, 165), without explaining the actual structure of social polarisation and its production and reproduction mechanisms.

Hashimoto (2018; 2021), used the concept of class to give analytical clarity to these issues. Through a Marxist perspective applied to social theory involving units of analysis at different levels (macro,⁵² meso⁵³ and micro)⁵⁴, he identifies the ‘class’ unit as the most important intermediate component for social, economic and political investigation in capitalist societies.⁵⁵ Therefore, Hashimoto used an analytical and structuralist Marxist theoretical approach to establish the Japanese society class structure, while developing a method for operationalising and measuring the national class system (Hashimoto 2021, 166). This theoretical method is based on the division into four classes (Hashimoto 2003; 2018; 2021), a method followed in turn by the analysis of the class theories of Poulantzas (1974), Wright (1978), and Roemer (1982). These classes are bourgeoisie (capitalists), new petit bourgeoisie (new middle class), proletariat (working class), and old petit bourgeoisie (old middle class), which represent the classes of contemporary capitalist societies divided by two types of coexisting modes of production, simple commodity production⁵⁶ and the capitalist mode of production.⁵⁷ The former is represented by the old middle class (disconnected from the dynamics of capitalist exploitative relations), while the latter includes the capitalist class, the new middle class, and the working class, positioned respectively according to their effective⁵⁸ capacity to control the means of production and in the various relations of mutual exploitation (Hashimoto 2021, 166-8). The capitalist class is clearly at the top of capitalist society,

⁵² National level, e.g., the country’s economy.

⁵³ Intermediate level.

⁵⁴ Household or individual level.

⁵⁵ Other intermediate units, such as gender, ethnicity and social groups, are not independent of the concept of class. Mann 1986; Hashimoto 2021, 166.

⁵⁶ Characterised by a low value of organic composition of capital.

⁵⁷ Characterised by a high value of organic composition of capital.

⁵⁸ By this term both the power to dispose of or use the means of production and the legal possession of those means is meant (Hashimoto 2021, 167).

despite having the lowest numerical value.⁵⁹ The new middle class is in second place, tending to be less conservative than the capitalist class and characterised by high degrees of well-being derived from better occupations than other workers.⁶⁰ The old middle class⁶¹ and the regular working class⁶² can be compared in income levels, making them vertically close. However, while the former are gradually decreasing, the latter tend to increase. These archetypal demarcations fully correspond to the class divisions present in contemporary Japan.

In the Marxist tradition, the concept of class⁶³ is linked to the group of people who share the same place in the social production processes and, consequently, the same relationship to the means of production. Class relations of production and power are thus determined by distribution and consumption. These mechanisms determine more or less extensive groupings, consisting of social structures in which shared values and interests are present, which in turn are determined not by income or status, but by property relations. Shared interests subsequently determine a series of social behaviours, causal for further, new, social processes. Hashimoto sees the concept of class as fundamental to analysing Japanese society as it underlies all its current disparities and inequalities (2021, 165), while it helps to describe Japan as a real class society. In doing so, he expanded the initial four-class classification (Hashimoto 2003), adding one⁶⁴ directly from the working class, the ‘underclass’ (Hashimoto 2021, 168).⁶⁵ Made necessary by the transformations of the no longer organic working class through its precarisation and fragmentation, it is mainly composed of non-regular (low-wage) workers, the

⁵⁹ It is also gradually declining, from 6.2% in 1992 to 3.5% in 2017. Statistics Bureau 2017. Hashimoto summarises this class as “economically privileged, contented, and politically conservative” (2021, 182).

⁶⁰ It, unlike the capitalist class, is numerically increasing, rising from 18.3% in 1992 to 22.8% in 2017. Moreover, its poverty rate is the lowest of all classes, standing at 2.6% in 2017. Statistics Bureau 2017. Hashimoto defines this class as “affluent and contented”, but not “politically conservative” (2021, 184).

⁶¹ This class is mainly composed of small entrepreneurs. Like the capitalist class, it too saw a gradual decrease from 1992 to 2017, i.e., from 19.0% to 9.9%. The poverty rate stood at 17.2% in 2017. Statistics Bureau 2017. It is defined by Hashimoto as a “traditional and conservative middle class”, albeit one that is constantly changing in “political character” and in a constant process in which it is “decomposing and shrinking in size” (2021, 186).

⁶² Hashimoto defines this class as “satisfied with their lives to some extent”, denoting a “certain level of income” and “standard of living” (2021, 184).

⁶³ For explanations of the concept, see Marx, Engels 1976; Satgar, Williams 2017.

⁶⁴ With this division into five different classes, Hashimoto’s work overlaps with the division used later in the NHK/JILPT survey (2022). See section 4.

⁶⁵ For more on the meaning of the term, see Crompton 1993, Edgell 1999, Esping-Andersen 1999. In the Japanese case, 45.4% of the members of this group are employed in manual work, while 18.4% in the service sector (Hashimoto 2021, 180).

unemployed,⁶⁶ female workers⁶⁷ and immigrants, whose wages and living conditions are significantly lower than those of regular, working class, labourers. Subordinated in the dynamics of capitalism just like the rest of the working class, but due to the neoliberal policies of the 1990s and the progressive decline of trade unions, they are a section of workers lacking the generational reproductive capacity typical of Marxist theory and particularly weak concerning their ability to 'sell' their labour power regularly and at fair value.⁶⁸ The underclass represents the bottom of the hypothetical pyramid (Minami 2008, 14) which, in the Japanese case, is represented by the highest levels of poverty rate and lowest individual and household income. The levels are even lower in women⁶⁹ as well as in the cases of immigrants.

The results from quantitative analysis of annual individual and household incomes were, first and foremost, confirmation of a real division into classes, reflected in a clear separation in status and the relationship to the means of production. The underclass is the weakest and most vulnerable to poverty, in addition to being in constant growth (from 6.1% in 1992 to 14.4% in 2017; Statistics Bureau 2017). The working class, at the same time, is the quantitatively largest one, although the regular part has been declining slightly in recent years.⁷⁰ However, it does not experience the same exploitative dynamics as the underclass.

These last two social classes fully represent the contemporary Japanese transformative pattern. Although there has been virtually no major change in the country's overall social stratification since 1955, as noted by the latest National Survey of Social Stratification and Social Mobility (SSM)⁷¹ conducted in 2015, the transformations within the

66 Young people tend to be among the non-regular workers. A large proportion of the unemployed are young people in the 15-24 age group (5.2%), almost twice as large as the prime-age and older workers (25+, at 2.4%). OECD 2023f, 9.

67 Hashimoto excluded part-time housewives from his schematisation, as they were less vulnerable due to their husbands' salaries (2021, 168-73). Moreover, he also decided to exclude members of the underclass over 60 years old, as they are often retired and whose poverty index is relatively low (181-2).

68 Marx 1867; Marx, Engels 1887; Hashimoto 2018; 2021, 8-9.

69 Men's individual and household annual income amounted to ¥2,130,000 and ¥3,838,000 respectively in 2015 (poverty rate 28.6%), and women's to ¥1,603,000 and ¥3,028,000 respectively (poverty rate 48.5%). SSM 2015. These data indicate that both groups are positioned at the lower end of Japan's social polarisation, but placing women in a worse socio-economic status.

70 It decreased, at least for regular workers, from 41.1% (1992) to 34.5% (2017). Over the same period, the entire working class (regular and non-regular) increased slightly from 56.6% to 61.9%. Statistics Bureau 2017.

71 In Japanese 2015-*Nen SSM chōsa kenkyūkai*. It is a survey conducted every ten years (since 1955), the seventh survey of which was completed in 2015. It collects data to allow researchers to examine the mechanisms that generate social inequalities and

social classes have led to a new overall paradigm. While the working class has numerically declined, there is a relative improvement in incomes (individual and household), including an improvement in poverty rate levels. At the same time, as the number of non-regular workers increases, their incomes progressively decline, along with an overall socio-economic deterioration, including greater difficulty in horizontal and intergenerational social mobility (SSM 2015). From a perpetual division between classes, the most relevant transformations appear to be intra-class. Despite the evidence of inter- and intra-class polarisation, Japanese capitalism appears to be more notably imbalanced, and relatively exploited, by gender than by class, especially in subordinate labour categories (Hashimoto 2021, 175). The high gender gap in Japanese society thus reflects not only the marked differences inherent in different areas of society (work, family, welfare, social and political participation) but also how it fuels economic disparities and class divisions, to the point of being considered a class attribution⁷² peculiar to the traditional social structure (Araújo Nocado 2012, 158).

Ultimately the division in the model into (at least) five classes is confirmed, possibly adding the part-time housewife working class as it has its characteristics – which can be associated, if unrelated to family income, to the underclass –, and in general taking the different position of women compared to men into account. Thus, Marxist class categories are relevant in describing contemporary Japan, which may be defined as a class society – or new class society –, seeing the relevance of the underclass (Hashimoto 2018; 2021, 24-6).

The question remains as to whether to place migrants in a subclass as opposed to the underclass, regarding the Japanese peculiarities on this issue. There is no doubt that the majority of migrant workers in Japan belong to the underclass. However, the relatively small, albeit growing, number of migrants and their top-down categorical differentiation (Shipper 2008) undermines a possible re-location analysis. The same argument can be adapted to racialised minorities,⁷³ phenotypically indistinguishable from the Japanese population, but also embedded in a process of dialectical intertwining of race and class that involves the production, and reproduction, of socio-economic inequalities (Baber 2023). Just like the native underclass, immigrants and racialised minorities have limited access to material and immaterial resources, which are monopolised by the

to see how they have changed over the years on a large scale. For more, see: <http://www.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/2015SSM-PJ/index.html>.

⁷² Although differentiated according to the social class of belonging, creating a further class verticalisation within a category already generally subordinate to men. Uno 1993.

⁷³ These are the Ainu, Okinawans, and *burakumin*, but the concept could be extended to the Korean and Chinese *zainichi* and partly to the South-American *nikkeijin*. For more on the topic, see Weiner 2009; Baber 2023.

upper classes (Weber 1978). The only certainty is that, excluding high-skilled workers and a few other categories, the foreign labour force in Japan is functional in feeding the pool of low-skilled, low-cost non-regular workers,⁷⁴ and consequently decisive in widening the social polarisation already present in the country. Conclusively, women, migrant workers and racialised minorities constitute the most recent and flexible functional ‘reserve army’ for the Japanese labour market, with no prospect of imminent change.

7 Conclusions

Over the past 70 years, Japan has undergone a constant transformation process. It has gone from post-war misery to the prosperous 1970s-80s, only to fall back into almost perpetual stagnation. Within this transformative framework, inequality in Japan is strongly linked to the process of population ageing,⁷⁵ the degree of which is precisely more marked in older age groups (Ôtake 1999, 9; Shinozaki 2006, 5; Tachibanaki 2006, 5) due to their greater exposure to the risk of falling into poverty (Nakamura 2023) and social isolation (Sekine 2008, 51).

The rapid ageing of the population,⁷⁶ already with the highest proportion of elderly people among the OECD countries (2024), has put extraordinary pressure on the Japanese pension system as well as on the health system (Siripala 2023), as the overall social safety net is set to grow from 2030 onwards (Moriyama 2022, 21). The risk of worsening living conditions (NHK 2022), and consequent further accentuation of social inequalities, is very real. The employment rate among pensioners is the second highest in the world⁷⁷ and the highest average effective retirement age among OECD countries. This trend is driven more by maintaining the same economic living standards rather than improving them (Moriyama 2022, 20-1), often reflecting pre-retirement socio-economic status (23), but also by a decrease in social security programmes since the mid-1980s (Oshio, Usui, Shimizutani 2019). This age group is (historically) at high risk of poverty (Tachibanaki 2006, 18; Tachibanaki, Urakawa 2008, 22), especially in this context

⁷⁴ For a more detailed discussion, see Costalunga 2023.

⁷⁵ In addition to the labour force ageing (Ôtake 1999, 12).

⁷⁶ Projections indicate an increase from the current 29% (2022) of citizens aged 65 and older (out of the total population) to 30.8% (2030) to 37.1% (2050). Statistics Bureau 2023b. Their employment rate was 25.2% in 2022 (Statistics of Japan 2023).

⁷⁷ For citizens aged 65 and over Japan ranks fourth, after Iceland, South Korea and Indonesia (OECD 2023c; Siripala 2023). In 2017, the ratio of persons engaged in work in the age groups 65-9, 70-4 and 75 and above were, for men, 56.3%, 37.5%, 16.3% respectively; while for women were 35.4%, 21.6%, 6.6% (Statistics Bureau 2017).

of difficult pension financial sustainability.⁷⁸ The elderly group's poverty risk is at 20%, and incomes are less than half the median household disposable income (OECD 2021b, 1). Even in the case of work after retirement, the greatest disparities are between regular and non-regular workers, and in the economic and social accumulation of gender – in this case even widening it –.⁷⁹ The old-age period becomes a mere extension of the income inequalities experienced during the previous working career. 48.5% of the population aged 60 or older fall into the underclass, becoming non-regular workers after a career as a regular one (SSM 2015; Hashimoto 2021, 179-80).

As for the issue of migrants in Japan, although the positioning of most of them is clear, it requires further investigation in light of the fluidity of the subject's political management. The discourse on national identity, adamantly linked to the notion of homogeneity and mono-ethnicity, has so far only been partly shaken by events that are spatially separate and temporally suspended from everyday life. Japanese self-perception, in this case referring to the concept of 'Japaneseness' (Lie 2003), has experienced attempts at re-branding its socio-nation ideas through sporting events (such as the 2019 Rugby World Cup) or the positioning of 'winning' athletes (as in the case of tennis player Naomi Ōsaka), without going beyond individual situations. This immobility is also attributable to the socio-economic and, consequently, class positioning of migrants, while society is incapable of disentangling ethnicity from cultural racial categorisation (Aruudou 2015) and top-down politics on the part of the Japanese government (Shipper 2008).

Given these considerations, Japan can be regarded in all respects as a class society, at once immobile and progressively changing. The Japanese middle class has not only shrunk internally, but its decline is proportionally higher than the OECD average (Shinozaki, Takahashi 2023, 26-7). The myth of the *ichi oku sōchūryū* now seems to have come to an end in favour of an increasingly pronounced *shakai kakusa*, in which social polarisation and class division have become the norm. In today's Japanese society, not only is the initial class position important in determining the future citizen's positioning given the lack of real interclass mobility (Hashimoto 2018), but the apparent structural immobility has produced new sub-classes with the effect of exacerbating the internal societal division (Hashimoto 2021). From this point, it remains necessary to assess whether other transformations, such as

⁷⁸ The estimated net future replacement rate is 39%, calculated on the average salary of a full-career worker (compared to 62% of the OECD average). Fujiki, Reilly 2021, 1; OECD 2021b.

⁷⁹ Japan's gender pension gap is the widest among OECD countries, increasing the risk of old-age poverty for women. Moriyama 2022, 23-34.

the increase of foreign presence in the country, and new forms of consciousness on social (and potentially class) issues can lead the new underclasses towards revamped common 'emancipatory' actions.

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