

Let's talk about the Future of Equality

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FUTURE FORUM

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Predicting the future of equality and inequality is no part of a philosopher's job. But it is part of a philosopher's job to tell us how one should try to shape it.

What are unjust inequalities?

Inequality arises in many dimensions: income and wealth, health and life expectancy, access to public services and quality of the environment, power and status, respect and esteem. It exists between individuals and between households, between genders and between races, between regions and between countries, between age groups and between generations. It can be assessed on a snapshot basis or over the lifecycle and using a wide variety of indices. Some of these inequalities are repugnant. Others are tolerable, legitimate, desirable or even indispensable.

How can philosophy help us to orient ourselves in this chaotic forest of intermingling inequalities? First and foremost by reflecting on the question of what a just world would be like and subjecting to discussion explicit answers to that question. And these answers should provide us with some guidance in the mess of the real world, when and where collective decisions need to be taken about policies and institutions, when and where individual decisions need to be taken about which causes we should serve and which struggles we should join. I shall here briefly sketch my conception of social justice and illustrate the guidance it can offer on three fronts on which I have and intend to remain militantly active: the introduction of an unconditional basic income, language policy and the reconquest of urban public spaces.

What inequalities would still exist in a just world? Very simply: those that can be sensibly ascribed to people's individual responsibility and/or can be reasonably expected to improve the prospects of the worst off. Justifying inequalities that satisfy the first condition postulates a conception of justice that can be phrased in terms of possibilities, opportunities, chances — what I shall call real freedom — rather than in terms of welfare, income or any other category of outcome. Justifying inequalities that satisfy the second condition postulates a conception of justice that takes efficiency considerations in so far as it considers making the worst off as well off as possible more important than making them, as far as possible, as well off as the better off.

Combining the two aspects yields a conception of distributive justice as “real freedom of all” or, more exactly, as “maximin real freedom”: the institutions must be designed so as to sustainably maximize the real freedom of those with least real freedom, their capacity to do whatever they might wish to do. Inequalities that do not contribute to this maximization are unjust and must be eliminated. This is the conception of justice that I am prepared to defend, with a number of qualifications which I shall dispense with here.¹

Before considering some illustrative implications, it may be useful to point out how this conception differs from a meritocratic conception of justice, i.e. one that requires the impact of social background on success to be neutralized, and therefore success in life to be exclusively determined by merit, understood as the conjunction of talent and effort. Firstly, justice as real freedom for all does not need to assume that what is commonly regarded as talent and effort can be neatly detached from the family and social background. Secondly, it regards talent as no more “deserving” than social background, as no less a part of the very unequal possibilities which different people enjoy and which social justice requires to be distributed more equally. Thirdly, it does not rely on some shared notion of “success” but leaves wide open the space of what people may want to do with their lives wide open. Finally, it makes room for efficiency considerations by abandoning strict equality not in favour of proportionality (to talent and effort), as the meritocratic conception does, but in favour of a sustainable maximin.²

These differences are no less relevant if one wants to understand the relationship between justice as real freedom for all and social mobility, also commonly associated, if not identified, with social justice. Perfect social mobility across generations can be understood as the absence of correlation between the economic status of parents and that of their children. It is neither sufficient nor necessary for the achievement of justice as real freedom for all. It is not sufficient because equalizing real freedom requires addressing inequalities that stem from other sources than family background, such as innate talent, whether one was born a boy or a girl, the eldest or youngest among the siblings, whether one entered the labour or housing market at a good or a bad time, and many other contingencies. Perfect social mobility is also unnecessary because real freedom must be construed as the possibility to pursue the realisation of many conceptions of the good life, not only the most lucrative one, and how much importance one attaches to economic success relative to other goals at least as meaningful is bound to be affected by family background. Equating the equalisation of real freedom and perfect social mobility could only make sense against the background of an unjustifiably narrow view of what life is about. Therefore, how just an institutional arrangement is cannot be measured by how little the children’s economic status is correlated with their parents’ economic status. It is given by how much real freedom is enjoyed by those who, for whatever reason, related or not to their social background, are least really free to pursue the realisation of their conception of the good life, whether or not economic success is central in it.

How can unjust inequalities be reduced? Three illustrations

Obviously, guided by this conception of justice, one will be more directly interested in attacking injustice by lifting the bottom than by chopping off the top. In particular, one is bound to pay close attention to whether societies guarantee a minimum cash income to all their members and to how they do so. If what matters is real freedom and not just purchasing power, it is important that this minimum income should not be granted in a way that traps its beneficiaries in unemployment because of the loss incurred if they get a job. It is equally important that it should not be granted on condition that its beneficiaries should be willing to accept any job and stick to it, however distasteful. It is even more important that it should not be granted in a way that stigmatizes its intended beneficiaries, at the risk of deterring them from claiming them. And it is important that it should be paid in a reliable, regular, secure way, so as to reduce the stress that would hamper the exercise of their real freedom. Unsurprisingly this reasoning leads effortlessly to a very simple idea, mostly regarded as insane four decennia ago when I started advocating it but now surprisingly popular: the idea of an unconditional basic income, strictly individual, universal and obligation-free: no household test, no means test, no work test.³

However, introducing such a basic income and sustainably boosting its level is not all that is required to reduce inequalities deemed unjust by the standards of real freedom for all. There may be a freedom-based presumption in favour of cash. But there are also decisive considerations in favour of giving part of the universal basic income in kind, at the very least in the form of universal and compulsory health insurance and education. But in our superdiverse cities even more than elsewhere how much children get out of compulsory education, how much 10 or 12 years of schooling boost their real freedom, is heavily dependent on their linguistic competence, and hence on the formal and informal language policies enacted at school and at home. In many places, the ruling consensus was that parents whose native language differs from the school language should learn the school language and speak it with their children and that schools should do all they can to keep languages other than the school language out of their classrooms and playgrounds. In the light of converging scientific evidence, urgent efforts must be made to break this perverse consensus. Parents communicating with their children in a language they cannot speak competently makes it more difficult, not easier, for the child to learn the language of the school. And repressing the use of languages other than the school language at school hinders the development of a positive attitude towards that language at least as important for effective learning as sufficient exposure to it. Spreading appropriate linguistic attitudes and policies is therefore one important way in which some of the children with the most disadvantaged family backgrounds can acquire the linguistic skills most useful locally and, thanks to these skills, the substantive competences they need, whatever they would like to do later. Moreover, if parents consistently speak their own native languages with their children and if teachers value their pupils' multilingual competence, more local residents will end up proficient in languages that will enable them to keep in touch with the regions of the world from which their families originate. Promoting appropriate multilingualism in the linguistically superdiverse context of our European cities is another cause

to which I shall keep devoting a lot of time and energy, and one of no less local importance for the real freedom of many of those with least real freedom than the advocacy of an unconditional basic income.⁴

As a third illustration, take the reconquest of urban public spaces, so that they can serve enjoyable immobility, and not just sustainable mobility. In 2012, I published under the title “Picnic the Streets” an opinion piece that invited fellow Brusselers to join me in an action of civil disobedience : a weekly picknick in the middle of Brussels’ central lanes and squares, at that time functioning as an urban motorway that cut Brussels’ city centre in two. The ensuing tenacious mobilization of young Brusselers with the most diverse backgrounds eventually led to the pedestrianization of Brussels’ central lanes, no doubt the most tangible transformation I shall have helped achieve in the course of my life. What was the argument? That ecological constraints will force us to live packed more densely in our cities, with the consequence that private spaces will become more expensive and smaller and the availability of enjoyable public spaces more important than ever. If nothing else, the lockdown will have made us aware of how much the free use of public spaces meant for households stuck in small apartments, not least by the standard of real freedom. People’s real freedom is not just a matter of what they can do with their money or with the spaces and goods they possess privately. It is also a matter of what they enabled to do and who they are enabled to meet and befriend thanks to public parks and car-free squares and thanks to streets safe for children to play and for cyclists to ride.

What is the point of fighting unjust inequalities locally if they are above all global?

So far so good. A conception of justice as real freedom for all can guide us, in the chaotic mess of multidimensional inequalities, so that we can address appropriately, if opportunities offer themselves to us, inequalities that matter particularly, for example in the dimensions of income, education and space. But the examples I took were all about fighting inequalities in developed societies. Aren’t the worst inequalities, those least justifiable by the standards of real freedom for all, at the global level? It is certainly often said and widely believed that the bulk of worldwide economic inequality is inter-country rather than within-country inequality. Thus, in his authoritative treatment of global inequality, Branko Milanovic (2016, 133) concludes: “It turns out that we can ‘explain’ (in a regression sense) more than two-thirds of the variability in incomes across country-percentiles by only one variable: the country where people live.” Can one nonetheless justify focusing on the alleviation of within-country inequality in relatively rich places? One can try.

Firstly, some hold that such an egalitarian conception of justice can only make sense at the level of particular countries, or “peoples”.⁵ But this is, frankly, a view I find difficult to adopt. To motivate my reluctance, I like to narrate something that happened to me in Owerri, Eastern Nigeria, in early November 2005. When I said that I had to leave because I needed to catch a plane back to Belgium, one of the boys — whom I shall call “Stanley”, as every third boy in Eastern Nigeria seemed

to be called that — said he wanted to come with me. His mum would never let him, I replied. Not true, Stanley said, she would love it if he moved to wealthy “Belgium”, there believed to be a German city from which good quality second-hand cars are imported into Nigeria. Anyway, it is not possible, I then told him, and he asked me why. I stuttered something, which neither he nor I found convincing and which I hastened to forget. But I had given a fair question a dishonest answer. The true answer was that current institutions protect an inequality that can be justified in neither of the two ways mentioned before: the inequality between his expected fate and mine cannot be ascribed to different ways we chose or shall choose to use equal possibilities, and the inequality between his possibilities and mine cannot possibly be justified as needed to boost his. Some people see as a third acceptable justification: “He is just a Nigerian”, whereas I am a Belgian.” I don’t. Whether with Stanley or with my next-door neighbour, inequalities can only be justified in the same two ways. Distributive justice is global justice.

There is, however, a second way one could try to justify a focus on within-country inequality. Using data more recent and different from those used in Milanovic’s book, Lucas Chancel (2021) reached a conclusion very different from Milanovic: instead of accounting for only a third of worldwide inequality, within-country inequality now accounts for three fourths of it.⁶ Part of the huge gap between these two estimates can be explained by the exact definition of the income variable: disposable income per capita for Milanovic, pre-tax income per adult for Chancel, with the former being more relevant for an assessment of how just the current distribution is. Moreover, both Milanovic and Chancel use Purchasing-Power-Parity coefficients to deflate inter-country inequalities, but not within-country inequalities even when there are significant inter-regional differences in the cost of living. It is therefore not so sure that, sensibly measured, global inequality owes more to within-country than to between-country inequality. Even if it does, however, a conception of global justice as maximal real freedom for those with least of it still needs to give some sort of priority to addressing between-country inequality as most of the least really free worldwide are uncontroversially located in the poorer countries of the world.

This must be borne in mind when proposing or discussing inequality-reducing measures for relatively affluent countries, such as the three mentioned above by way of illustrations. But it does not make those measures pointless for the pursuit of global justice. Firstly, although the prospects of the world’s worst off are not improved by measures that reduce inequalities in wealthier countries, removing these inequalities can nonetheless be regarded as a progress towards greater global justice since they cannot be justified by their contribution to improving the prospects of the worst off. Secondly, what is being done to reduce unjust inequalities in the context of more affluent countries and cities — whether introducing a basic income, managing linguistic diversity more effectively or reconquering public spaces — can serve as experiments from which useful lessons can be drawn in the context of less affluent countries and cities.

In addition to these two general reasons, there can be some specific reasons why some inequality-reducing measures proposed or implemented in the North may be of worldwide relevance. In the case of basic income, for example, it is not only that, contrary to what I initially thought, a universal basic income may turn out to be no less realistic in countries like South Africa, India or Kenya than in the EU or the US. On top of that, the interdependence between member states of the European Union is motivating proposals for an EU-funded eurodividend that would benefit some of the worst off on the continent, while the increasing awareness of the climate crisis has kept triggering proposals of global carbon taxes and dividends.

Local language policy in wealthy cities of the sort sketched above provides a very different example. On the one hand, it aims to foster good integration in the local social and economic environment thanks to successful education made possible by an efficient learning of the school language. On the other hand, and inseparably, it aims to preserve a strong link with the countries of origin made possible by an efficient transmission of the home languages. To the extent that both objectives are attained, one cannot only expect a significant flow of remittances to keep reaching places unlikely to attract capitalist investment or development aid. In addition, a diaspora strongly connected linguistically both to the host community and the community of origin can play a key role in creating and maintaining the trust required by fruitful trade and investment relations for the benefit of the less affluent countries from which they emigrated.

All this illustrates how our actions can and should help shape the future of equality, by endeavouring to help reduce unjust inequalities in places and sectors in which we happen to be able to do something about them. We should not feel inhibited in our efforts because these inequalities are not the worst in the world. But we should not lose sight of the big picture. In particular, we Europeans must bear in mind an unbalance that is bound to dominate the future of equality in our part of the world. In 1950, the population of Europe (Russia included) was about 550 Mn, that of Africa about 230 Mn. The projection for 2050 is 710 Mn for Europe, 2480 Mn for Africa. Combined with climate change, it is hard to see how this demographic explosion could fail to trigger, in many parts of Africa, a frantic scramble for water and other vital resources. Adding to this that Africa's GDP per capita is estimated to be about 6% of what it is in Europe, it is should be clear enough that if inequality in our hemisphere is not to take unbearable proportions, many bold and clever steps will need to be taken in matters of migration, technology transfer, transnational redistribution and many others. If inequality in our part of the world is not to take explosive proportions, many steps will need to be taken. Those mentioned above, in so far as they are of more than local significance, are a small part of the solution — if there is one.

Notes

¹ See Van Parijs (1995, 2021).

² Along these various dimensions, the way in which justice as real freedom for all differs from meritocracy is largely parallel to the way in which Rawls's (1971) conception of distributive deviates from it by adding the difference principle to the principle of fair equality of opportunity.

³ See the comprehensive overview of the history, ethics, economics and politics of unconditional basic income in Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017).

⁴ The job of the recently created Brussels Council for Multilingualism, which I was invited to chair, is to help the Region of Brussels-Capital achieve its objective of enabling all those growing up in Brussels to communicate in French, Dutch and English by the time they leave secondary school, while encouraging the transmission of the hundreds of native languages present in the Region. The spreading of the school-and-home policy described above is one of the tools to be used in the service of this objective.

⁵ They include John Rawls, the founding father of contemporary philosophy, in the last book he wrote (Rawls 1999).

⁶ "Forty years ago, nationality mattered more than class in accounting for global inequality. Today, class matters more than nationality. The Theil index of pretax national income inequality accounted for slightly more than half of global inequality in the early 1980s and only about a quarter today. Put differently, in order to predict the position of an adult in the global distribution of income, it is more useful to know her income group rather than her nationality." (Chancel 2021). Chancel's data are from 2017, whereas Milanovic's were from 2008, and they relied more heavily on tax returns and less on household surveys, which enabled him to capture better the top incomes. In an recent article, Milanovic (2021) himself points out the fast increase of inequality within many countries, not least in China, where the Gini coefficient of inequality now exceeds significantly that of the United States.

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He chairs the Advisory Board of the Basic Income Earth Network, which he co-founded in 1986, and the Brussels Council for Multilingualism, set up by the government of the Region of Brussels-Capital in 2020. He coordinates with economist Paul De Grauwe, the Re-Bel initiative ("Rethinking Belgium's institutions in the European context"), which he co-founded in 2009. An opinion piece he published in May 2012 under the title «Picnic the Streets» triggered the civil disobedience movement that led to the pedestrianization of Brussels' central lanes. His books include *Evolutionary Explanation in the Social Sciences* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1981), *Le Modèle économique et ses rivaux* (Droz, 1990), *Qu'est-ce qu'une société juste?* (Seuil, 1991), *Marxism Recycled* (Cambridge U.P., 1993), *Real Freedom for All* (Oxford U.P. 1995), *What's Wrong with a Free Lunch?* (Beacon Press, 2001), *Just Democracy. The Rawls-Machiavelli Programme* (ECPR 2011), *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World* (Oxford U.P. 2011), *After the Storm. How to Save Democracy in Europe* (Lannoo 2015, ed. with L. van Middelaar), *Basic Income. A radical proposal for a free society and a sane economy* (Harvard U.P. 2017, with Y. Vanderborght) and *Belgium. Une utopie pour notre temps/Belgium. Een utopie voor onze tijd* (Académie royale de Belgique/Polis, 2018).

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