

# Inequality Kills

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## Book Review

Göran Therborn. *The Killing Fields of Inequality*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013. Hardback: \$40.00 Paperback: \$19.95 Kindle: \$9.99

Inequality is unnatural. By nature, humans are equal. Genetically, as Harvard biologist Stephen Jay Gould put it, there's not a dime's worth of difference among people.[i] Inequality is a social construct. And, according to University of Cambridge sociologist Göran Therborn in *The Killing Fields of Inequality*, [ii] it is best defined as a denial of human dignity, a denial of everybody's human potential to develop. Moreover, its consequences are dire: humiliation, ill health, subjection, exclusion from knowledge, anxiety, poverty, powerlessness, lack of self-confidence and exclusion from life-chances as well as the resources to act and participate in the world. Inequality always means excluding some people from something, ultimately life itself. Death comes earlier to the poor; inequality kills.

After Auschwitz and apartheid, there's at least general recognition, however immaterial and nominal, that humans are equal. But what, asks Therborn, is meant by equality, and what equality is desirable? Therborn's definition is "equality of capability to function fully as a human being," which must entail "survival, health ..., freedom and knowledge (education) to choose one's life-path, and resources to pursue it." [iii] Such a capability approach to equality allows Therborn a basis for analyzing struggles against inequalities, "which should be seen as multidimensional barriers to equal human capabilities of functioning in the world." In this sense, inequalities are violations of human rights.

## Forms of Inequality

What are the forms of inequality preventing people from living a life worthy of human dignity? Therborn notes three broad interacting dimensions. First, human beings are *organisms*, minds and bodies, susceptible to pain, suffering and death, who can therefore suffer from *vital inequality*, "socially constructed unequal life-chances," which can be assessed through the study of mortality rates, life expectancy and health expectancy. Second, humans are *persons*, with selves, living their lives within social contexts. *Existential inequality* is the "unequal allocation of personhood, i.e. of autonomy, dignity, degrees of freedom, and of rights to respect and self-development." Third, humans are *actors*, capable of acting towards aims, but their goals can be thwarted by *resource inequality* (or, simply, economic inequality), providing agents with unequal resources to act. Resources can most easily be tracked by following the money trail, but one's first resource is normally one's parents, their wealth, their knowledge and their support.

## Uneven Playing Field

What are the mechanisms which produce and reproduce such inequalities? Therborn notes that liberals make much of the distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome, favoring the former, while opposing the latter. Though this was a radical idea two hundred years ago, such a dichotomy between the two is "a sociologically untenable ideological construction" because what liberals call "achievement" is in fact dependent on the systemic rules of the game. And the playing field is skewed at birth. Therborn analyzes four mechanisms designed to keep it that way. The first he calls "distantiation," that is, what liberals call "achievement" is blind to everything

but the so-called achieving individual, telling us nothing about her relations to, and dependence on, others, “about the social script defining ‘achievement’,” or about the contexts of rewards and opportunities.

This is what is meant by distantiation. A moves ahead of, or *distances* herself from, B because of A’s better preconditions, such as more affluent parents, private education, constant ego-stroking and the like. And the distance between A and B, given the institutions through which both must maneuver, is only likely to grow over time, because the system not only defines “winning,” it is geared to producing winners and losers, as well as the distance of rewards and opportunities between them. But there are contextual variables other than systemic arrangements, which further put paid to liberal individualist ideology that success is the singular achievement of the successful individual. “Human beings emerge as adult actors with different health and vigor produced by their childhood.” Actors are bound to differ in self-confidence facing risks and uncertainties, given differential access to information and parental support. “In this way, through actor formation, social distances – of school achievement, job careers, social standing – tend to be reproduced over generations.”

A second mechanism producing inequalities is plain, old-fashioned exploitation, which is “the worst form of inequality.” A derives her advantages over B because of the valuables that B provides her with. Slavery and serfdom were classical examples. Capitalist exploitation, though less obvious, is based on an asymmetrical appropriation of the fruits of human labor, and is in this sense exploitative as well, an assessment which, Therborn claims, “will be rather non-controversial among egalitarians.” Two other mechanisms producing inequality are exclusion, barring the advance or access of others to social goods, a set of hindrances including discriminations of various kinds such as “glass ceilings,” and “hierarchization,” institutionalized rankings of social actors through formal organizations which open the door to the included, while shutting out the excluded, which may also take less institutional, more cultural forms through value systems and aesthetics of “taste” and “style.”

### **Today’s Unequal World: Vital Inequality**

In measuring the three forms of inequality, Therborn employs two metrics, inter-national and intra-national. The three types of inequality are unequally distributed throughout the world, but, while vital inequality between nations (inter-national) has generally been declining, within nations (intra-national), after dropping in the ‘50s and ‘60s, it has once again begun to climb, resulting in “a stability of class inequality of life and health.” Therborn cites two chief causes of the resurgence of such life-and-death class inequality: first, growing economic insecurity and polarization, along with lack of respect on the job and control of one’s life and work situation; second, what is generally misnamed “lifestyle.” As Therborn notes, the latter should be better termed “life-options,” not so much a choice of style as a perspective on options. People who have little control of their basic life situation – finding or maintaining a job, paying the bills – may be less prone to control the health of their bodies, to notice and to follow expert advice on alcohol, tobacco, exercise and diet than those who have a sense of controlling their lives. And, at the heart of vital inequality is a negative asymmetry of information; whereas in existential and resource inequality it is usually the disadvantaged themselves who are best informed, the opposite is true when it comes to diet and health.

Premature adult mortality and socially unequal risks for it are driven mainly by cardiovascular diseases. The major causes of heart and blood vessel diseases are known even to lay people: smoking, animal fats, cholesterol, obesity, lack of exercise. But the most vulnerable know the least what food and medical treatment – what “lifestyle” – are best for them. Moreover, the asymmetry of information, in part a result of increasingly unequal systems of education, one private, the other

public, runs even deeper to the psychosomatic effects of social stress, of social hierarchies, and lack of control of one's work and life-situation. And to make matters even worse, limitations of lay knowledge are compounded by constraints of choice – “not a choice between a good healthy job and a bad risky job, but between a bad job and no job at all.” Furthermore, some of the means to cope with such stress – perhaps granting momentary relief or oblivion – have dire long-term consequences on the body, e.g. alcohol, fats, sweets, nicotine, narcotic drugs. Therborn's meticulously researched book is peppered with data, backed by copious studies, including many by various committees of the United Nations. For instance, to illustrate growing vital inequality in wealthy states, he looks at life expectancy among adults in London. The results are startling. “If you travel east on the underground Jubilee line [in London, moving from upper middle-class to working-class neighborhoods], life expectancy of the residents is decreasing by half a year at every stop.”

### **Existential Inequality**

Unlike vital and resource inequality, existential equality, though far from complete, is largely a success story. The defeat of racist fascism in World War II, culminating in the 1948 UN Charter on Human Rights, gave impetus to the struggle for human rights. But it was not until the 1960s, after the South African Sharpeville massacre and the development of the American civil rights movement, that momentum quickened in the struggle against racism. And, as Therborn puts it, “without social strength, without sustained social struggle, there can be no existential equalization.” The '60s witnessed the expansion of the struggle for recognition and respect into gender, sexual and settler-indigenous relations, eventually encompassing the disabled as well. In contrast to income and vital inequality, existential equality, in the aforementioned forms, appears to be gathering force in the early twenty-first century. But the picture becomes clouded with the emergence of a new form of such inequality, intertwined with vital and resource inequality, viz. the “marginalized” or “underclass” excluded from the labor market. In the UK, they're known as “chavs,” while the American conservative, Charles Murray in his 2012 bestseller, *Coming Apart*, heaps existential scorn upon a new “lower class” of “the unmarried, lazy, dishonest and godless.”

### **Resource or Economic Inequality**

Resource or economic inequality, in stark contrast to existential inequality, has soared over the last thirty-five years. Though world polarization among countries has not stopped, inter-national inequality declined somewhat with post-World War II decolonization. But within nations economic inequality has risen significantly since 1980. Brought on by deindustrialization, the weakening of labor and trade-union strength, financialization of capitalism, deregulation, and a relative decline in social spending, the world has been brought back to pre-WWII, gilded-age levels of inequality.

Therborn surveys three theories on the causes of the steep rise in economic (or, as he calls it, “resource”) inequality: globalization, technology and politics, and, though the three are interconnected, he settles on the neoliberal politics of the 1% (a percentage made famous by the Occupy movement but which might be extended to 5 or 10% with no alteration in the basic oligarchical point) as the principal factor. The political movement was driven at the top by the expansion and concentration of capital and at the bottom by policies to keep the poor down and “softened up to accept anything.” The methods – and there are many – include “high involvement management” (which some workers less euphemistically labeled “management by stress”), precarious part-time employment, off-shoring or foreign direct investment (FDI) in the endless search for cheaper, more exploitable labor, freeing of financial and currency markets, and, most significantly, strike-breaking and union-busting.

Class warfare from above has succeeded in diminishing the resources, concentration and cohesion of labor and ensuring that the top 1% of income earners in the United States, one of the most unequal

of nations, more than doubled their appropriation of national disposable income from 1979 to 2007, while the bottom 80% lost, and in fact the lowest 40% of full-time workers have seen their paychecks decline each year from 1980 through 2005. Particularly noteworthy in the United States is the limited equality of opportunity, so vaunted by liberals. The rags-to-riches myth is just that ... a myth. High intra-generational inequality is connected to high inter-generational inequality. Inequality of opportunity is positively correlated with inequality of outcome.

How is it possible for existential equality to make progress amidst growing levels of economic inequality? Therborn notes that a crucial difference between the two is that the latter is usually a zero-sum game while the former is usually not. As a privileged beneficiary of existential inequality you can bask in the deference forced upon your subordinates, satisfied that the “unworthies” are kept in their place, while economic inequality means unequal command over resources, with which you can buy whatever you want. Though existential inequality can be used to maintain and enhance economic inequality, existential equalization need not change the advantageous life chances of economic inequality. Existential inequality has been decoupled from resource inequality because powerful elites have found the issue “a gift of costless egalitarianism.” A Black Lesbian single mother or an Inuit seal hunter can be granted a crack at their life-dreams without challenging inequality of resources one whit. Moreover, “existential income discrimination does not make much sense to financial capital.”

### **Economic Inequality=Political Inequality**

Hand-in-hand with economic inequality, the movement toward political equality has been stopped or reversed due to deunionization, “monetary electioneering” and what Therborn calls the “social dissolution of popular classes.” What others call an oligarchy, ‘dollarocracy” or kleptocracy, Therborn labels a “dictat-ship,” not quite synonymous with dictatorship, but close. What he means is that a political *Diktat* does not require a dictatorship for economic elites to exert their political will. In a dictat-ship, like the United States, there may be competitive elections and a diversity of media; you may vote as you wish and say what you like but with no effect. “Virtually all U.S. senators, and most representatives in the House, are members of the top 1 per cent when they arrive, are kept in office by the top 1 per cent, and know that if they serve the top 1 per cent well they will be rewarded by the top 1 per cent when they leave office.”[iv]

In a study conducted by Princeton University political scientist, Martin Gilens, it was found that neither Democratic nor Republican senators responded positively to any opinion from the lowest earning third of the population and were only moderately responsive to the middle third. When income groups diverge in their preferences, the poorer half of the population has no chance of winning. Only the most affluent 30% stand any chance and the top 10% trumps everyone.[v] Like existential equality, allowing the populous to cast a vote every now and again need be no threat whatsoever to unequal distribution of resources.

### **Possible Futures: Historical Egalitarianism**

Inequalities are social constructions, and that which is constructed can be deconstructed through struggle. The French Revolution and American War of Independence of the late eighteenth century, the Russian, Chinese and Cuban revolutions of the twentieth century, while certainly falling short of an egalitarian utopia, have left us legacies of equalization. The two world wars and the labor upsurge of the Depression also spawned game-changing regimes. Therborn maintains that, in addition to such violent revolution, profound economic crisis and industrial war, far-reaching peaceful social reform has been possible, and this, he insists, “is obviously the experience most relevant to the current world.”

He cites two examples of what he calls peaceful reform movements, the first major, the second, minor. The first was the major advances in vital, existential and economic (resource) equality of the "golden era" of capitalism from 1945 to about 1980. "1968" was part of this larger movement, which was also a global phenomenon, spawning the end of institutionalized racism, the women's movement, as well as the economic independence and growth of China and South Asia.

The second, minor, example adduced by Therborn, is the Latin American one, which, since 2002, has been bucking the global tide of inequality. The economic context of both periods of substantial peaceful equalization was economic growth coupled with more or less full employment, while the political context in both cases was the discrediting of right-wing liberalism (laissez-faire capitalism), which was associated with mass unemployment in the Depression and Latin American economic dislocation in the '80s and '90s, on the one hand, and the disappearance of right-wing authoritarianism, fascism in the first major episode and military juntas in the second minor one, on the other. But Therborn holds that, while the political precondition is a necessity for a future reform movement, the economic one is not. And, since in the wake of the Great Recession we've not yet cleared the field of right-wing liberalism (on the contrary, we're witnessing the "strange non-death of neoliberalism"), the task of any egalitarian reform movement must be an ideological battle for the hearts and minds of the 99%.

### **Battlefields of Future (In)Equality**

The three forms of inequality are interconnected, but it is economic inequality which is the principal culprit because of its devastating social, political, as well as psychological and medical effects. The egalitarian focus, Therborn maintains, must be on the multidimensional violations of, and socially constructed hindrances to, the capabilities of humans to flourish and develop. Therborn claims that the three institutions of contemporary inequality are family, capitalism and nation. The *family* is the conveyor belt of inequality. With the necessity of higher education in the rich countries people of the same education tend to marry each other (class homogamy: like marrying like), resulting in a widening gap in parenting. Therborn proposes that a guideline in redressing familial class divides would be a new emphasis on *the rights of children* to a good enabling childhood, which would mean massive investment in public education, pre-school child care, and "restrictions on 'freedom of choice' of exclusivist schools."

*Capitalism* is the key generator of contemporary inequality, because it divides people into property-owners, property-less workers and, increasingly, the unemployed – "distancing people, excluding or subordinating many, and exploiting the labor of others, as well as our common environment. Its inherent ripping asunder of the social fabric is currently gaining a new dimension, the drive towards a social 'precariat' in permanently insecure and marginal employment." But Therborn, who once upon a time advocated democratic socialism, now believes capitalism is "going to stay, for the foreseeable future." The best egalitarians can strive for in the current conjuncture is reform to restrain the "animal spirits" of the owners of the earth's resources. This can be done by demanding two kinds of rights, *rights of labor* and *rights of citizens*. Rights of labor would include the right to decent work, decent pay, decent treatment and safe working conditions, but most importantly it would mean the right *to* labor – "the right to a job, to a non-precarious livelihood." Rights of citizens would mean the rolling back of "dictat-ships" and the forging of real popular democracy in order for citizens to stand a fair chance of regulating capitalism. Citizens' rights would mean economic and social regulation through popular self-determination, individual social rights to life-course development, "from childhood possibilities to pensions and old-age care...."

The *nation*, forged in the American and French revolutions, proclaimed the equality, however qualified, of its citizens. But in the era of globalization and transnational corporations, "national cohesion and equality have been dumped for national attractiveness to foreign capital...."

Egalitarians must demand a new concept of the nation as a human collective living together in a common civility, “not only tolerating its members letting their capabilities flourish, but collectively committed to supporting and promoting those capabilities in their vital, existential and resource aspects.” And this collective must include immigrants.

### **Resources of Hope—Egalitarian Forces Today**

While economic and political contexts are of course important, social struggle is essential. And Therborn finds four broad groups who, he believes, will continue the modern egalitarian movement. First, and historically the most significant, is the labor movement, which, though now in retreat except for China and Latin America, was the backbone of economic and political egalitarianism in the recent past, and will be indispensable to the more socioeconomically heterogeneous movement of the twenty-first century. Second will be the urban poor, precarious workers, middle-class employees and peasants in what used to be called the third world and in the rich centers of capitalism “the new servant class” in the service sector. Third, the immigrant sub-proletariat and fourth a substantial part of the professional middle class, both of the latter in the Euro-American zone. Identity movements might also be counted upon to join in the egalitarian struggle.

Few would argue with Therborn’s claim that the central actor in the struggle for modern egalitarianism was the working class or his contention that indeed “the twentieth century was *the* century of the working class ....” But he goes on to note that, while labor was the principal force in the battle for democratic and social rights, it was never in a position to carry out its full transformative program; moreover, he insists that in the twenty-first century, while the working class will remain essential, “the chances of equality will hinge primarily not on the strength of the labor movements ..., but on the ... middle classes.” Therborn acknowledges that this “class” is amorphous and can only be defined as “the non-rich and the non-poor” and that it lacks social cohesion, but he insists that there are promising signs that it may ally with the other three groups in its “anger at the oligarchy,” as evidenced particularly in the 2011 Occupy Movement. Moreover, Therborn is optimistic that a global egalitarian movement may develop:

Though the principal cause of internal, rich-country inequality has been the weakening of labor, it is not unrelated to “globalization,” which has extended the power of Euro-American economic elites. The world has been pried open to rapacious forces in the South as well as in the North, boosting Southern national income, from which crumbs have fallen to the poor. But this also creates new possibilities for the struggle for our future. A class dynamic of intra-national polarization is operating both North and South, which may connect social movements across the equator. A new pathway for such connections is now running through consumer-*cum*-trade-union concerns in the North with exploitative, outsourced suppliers from the South, bringing pressure most directly on the big Northern retailers, like the biggest and most vicious, Walmart, and designer brands like Apple or Nike.

*The Killing Fields of Inequality* is not only useful in its delineation of the forms of contemporary inequality but in its comprehensive compendium of evidentiary data. Moreover, Therborn’s attempt to discern the new twenty-first century agency of egalitarianism is original and helpful. Yet Therborn appears both too optimistic and too pessimistic. Too optimistic in his belief that capitalism can be reformed in a manner egalitarians advocate. True, during the so-called golden era of 1945 – 1980 very significant restraints were placed on capital in the interests of the collective welfare. But this was an anomaly, made possible by unprecedented rates of growth, during which the whole pie – profits, social spending, wages and productivity – was able to expand. When the slice of the pie going to the corporations failed to satisfy the economic elites, the neoliberal counterrevolution, commencing in the late ‘70s and gathering force through the last three decades, was launched, ratcheting up inequality to what has actually been more the norm of the historical capitalist system.

Reforms will only be conceded when they do not jeopardize the profits of the 1% whom Therborn calls “resource owners.” Too pessimistic in its assessment of the ability of the working class and the potential allies Therborn notes to enact more far-reaching systemic transformation. Nevertheless, Therborn has carried off a *tour de force* on the most pressing issue of our time—the killing field of mounting global inequality.

Therborn ends his comprehensive survey with a poignant question for his readers: “The battle is about to start. Nobody knows how it will end. Which side will you be on?”

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[i] Stephen Jay Gould. *The Mismeasure of Man*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996.

[ii] Göran Therborn. *The Killing Fields of Inequality*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013.

[iii] Therborn employs the definition of well-known moral philosopher Amartya Sen. *The Idea of Justice*.

[iv] Joseph E. Stiglitz. “Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%,” *Vanity Fair*, May, 2011.

[v] Martin Gilens. *Affluence and Influence*. New York: Princeton U. Press, 2012.