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An Interview with Göran Therborn*

By **María José Álvarez****

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María José Álvarez (MJA): What are we talking about when we talk about inequality? What is your definition of inequality?

Göran Therborn (GT): Inequality is a historical social construction which allocates the possibilities of realizing human capacity unequally. It is a historical social construction; it is not something which is given by nature or by God. There are differences which are given, but the important thing about inequality is the unequal allocation of possibilities to realize your human capability.

MJA: And which are the most unequal countries according to that definition and why are they so unequal?

GT: Well, South Africa is the most unequal of all the countries in the world. Although we have to differentiate here: There are three basic kinds of inequality which interact; they are interdependent, but they don't always go together. Vital inequality refers to inequality of life and death. It can be measured through infant mortality, or life expectancy, or health expectancy, the number of years you can expect to live without serious health problems. And there is existential inequality, which refers to issues of dignity, humiliation, recognition, respect or ignorance, and marginalization. Important manifestations of existential inequality are racism, sexism, patriarchy. And certainly there is inequality of the sources, income and wealth, of course the most important ones, but we also talk of inequalities of power, or social contacts. But on the whole, South Africa is probably after all the most unequal of all countries in the world. It is certainly the most unequal with respect to income distribution and wealth distribution.

MJA: And racially as well.

GT: That's right. In many ways, of course, South Africa has dismantled apartheid, and whether it is the most racist country in the world, [...] I'm cautious to say. There is lots of everyday racism, racism as an effect of apartheid, but it is primarily, I think, an effect of poverty. Poor people in South Africa are overwhelmingly black and they are very poor. And also in terms of other aspects of existential or of vital inequality, South Africa is not worse than other countries. But after South Africa, there comes Latin America, most of Latin America, including Colombia, and again, it is an enormous inequality of income and wealth. There is certainly more racism and sexism in Latin America, than there is in North America.

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So the most unequal country in the world is South Africa. Latin America is the most unequal continent in the world, despite the equalization in the first decade of 2000, from 2000 to 2012. And also the vital inequality here in Colombia, and in Brazil is enormous: the gap in life expectancy, or in child mortality.

MJA: And what are the consequences of that inequality? You said that inequality kills. How does it kill and what are other consequences of inequality?

GT: Well, inequality kills in many ways. It starts already in the uterus, before the baby is born—a baby [born] to a poor mother, or an undernourished mother. It is not only bad nutrition, because it is the same phenomenon, in a smaller proportion, in the rich countries, that babies of poorer class or lower class mothers tend to be underdeveloped as fetuses and they are born underweight, and in some countries like India, seriously underweight. And this has lifelong consequences, when we are talking about probability here. There are always individuals that can be lucky, but already, this difference in fetus development at birth slows and tends to truncate your development as a child, your motor development and cognitive development. And secondly it increases the risk of a certain type of diabetes and a certain type of heart disease at late middle age or early old age [that] predisposes you to an earlier death. So this is one way in which inequality kills; unequal uterine development.

But there are also many other ways. We know, for instance—we have assembled a large number of studies in Europe and North America about this—that unemployment kills. It increases the risk of mortality and the link [to] social and economic stress which affects the hormones in your body, which in turn weakens your immune system and makes you more susceptible to all kinds of infections and diseases. Unemployment also has effects indirectly by producing stress-coping mechanisms that are unhealthy, like smoking or too much drinking. For instance, the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, the former Soviet Union, caused four million extra deaths in the course of the 1990s, and that was an effect of unemployment, impoverishment, humiliations, loss of sense of life, and the collapse of the healthcare system. And that is a second way.

We also have interesting and remarkable studies which show that hierarchical organizations have detrimental effects. There are now two famous studies of the central government bureaucracy in London. These people are all stably employed and they have been [in the past]. In the analysis, they have been controlled for smoking, for alcohol consumption, and for body mass, for healthy diets. Even after all of those controls, the people lowest on the hierarchical ladder die first, and the people at the top die last. And the mortality probability, or the mortality risk, follows quite exactly the bureaucratic

ladder. It is not just a difference between the top and the bottom, but there is quite a hierarchy. So we do know that low status and stressful work, particularly stressful work when you don't control your work situation and you are also under external pressure, this has very detrimental effects on your health and increases your risk of a premature death. And these are just three examples of how inequality kills.

MJA: Can we do something to reduce inequality or are there successful experiences of high reduction in inequality? What can Latin America do? And I'm thinking about Colombia in particular.

GT: Well, when you go to income inequality, we have European experiences of reduction of inequality which are quite significant. On the whole, the distribution of market income, I mean, before taxes and before benefits, the distribution of market income in Latin America, North America and Europe is similar, strikingly similar, so the main difference is the governmental policies.

In the United States a bit less than a fifth, say about a sixth of the total of inequality of the market income is taken out by taxes and various benefits. In Germany it is about a third and in Scandinavia it is about 40%. In Brazil it is now, after three periods of progressive presidencies, less than though close to ten, 10%. In Colombia I think it is almost 0 or 2%. So for once, if the rich in Latin America could be made to pay taxes, like they do in, I'm not talking about Sweden, [but] take, for example, Germany or France, or for that matter, even if they could be made to pay as much taxes as they do in the United States, that would reduce income inequality considerably.

With respect to human development and human capacity, it is important to intervene in very early childhood, what is called in Spanish *la primera infancia*. And there are attempts [to do so]. Even here in Colombia I have seen there are *jardines infantiles*. I don't know how far they go, but one very crucial thing you have to do in order to promote equal human capability is you have to intervene before school age, before the age of three, basically. You have to give kids of poor parents some extra support, some kind of tutoring, some kind of cognitive stimulus. There are some small experimental projects, the most well known are in Philadelphia in the United States, which have been quite successful. Anyway, I think this is something which is being done in part by progressive Latin American politicians and social administrators. The importance of early childhood interventions to stimulate under-stimulated children that is something.

Other interventions are needed with respect to healthcare. There again there are positive tendencies going on in Latin America. I mean, we have seen life expectancy has increased considerably in Latin America in the last 10, 15 years or 20 years. So, for instance, the

millennium goals of reducing infant mortality... The most progressive and the most positive one, was that infant [or] child mortality among the poorest fifth of the population was reduced the most, and that's a general pattern. That's a very positive thing.

This is again being taken up in the new [goals of the 17th Session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development]. Many things can be done, and of course [they] are also important, and what is just beginning to be implemented in Latin America is to approach the long term effect of racist discrimination, both with respect to indigenous peoples and to [those] you call *afrodescendientes*. And on that, I think, we have seen some quite noteworthy progress particularly in Bolivia, where indigenous peoples are actually the majority of the population, I mean, it's time, in terms of the majority being recognized. You cannot call yourself democratic [otherwise].

And as you may know, Brazil has finally taken up the discrimination of *afrodescendientes* quite seriously. It has developed a quota system for access to higher education, because in Latin America it is a striking fact that the extreme poverty is extremely concentrated among either indigenous peoples or *afrodescendientes*.

MJA: What do you think of Cuban and Venezuelan attempts to reduce inequality? Is there a route for Latin America?

GT: Well, every country will have to find its own path, but the achievements of Cuba with respect to health and education are absolutely staggering. Cuba is a very poor country, but it still has longer life expectancy than the United States, and it has the best educational system, with the best educational results in Latin America, so in terms of healthcare and education, Cuba has really been very successful. Where they haven't been as successful is on the economy. We even have the word of Fidel Castro saying that "our economic model doesn't even work for us". So it is not an economic model [to follow], but in terms of health and education it is worth looking at. I'm not saying it is something to be imitated but it is certainly worth looking at, and looking at with respect, because the results are all actually quite striking both in healthcare and in education.

I think it was certainly overdue in Venezuela, to try to attack the enormous inequalities in [that] very rich country, but very rich when the oil price was high. There were very important improvements in health in the *barrios* of Venezuela —where the highly paid doctors never went— but in political and economic terms it is now extremely mismanaged. I mean, it is under heavy pressure because of the enormous dependence on the oil price and the oil price has gone down, but the crisis has suddenly been of mismanagement.

But Cuba and Venezuela and Bolivia are not something [to disregard]. We were used to [seeing] people [be scared] away from doing something about inequality. The achievements of Cuba in healthcare and education are absolutely staggering, the best ones in Latin America. And Bolivia, which has been an extremely unequal country, and actually run by a white or more or less white *mestizo* elite [...] ever since independence, has really now started the process of equalization. Bolivia has actually had the largest reduction of economic inequality in Latin America in the last 15 years, comparable to the achievements of the Swedish Welfare State between late 1940s and 1970s, but it still is a very unequal country. Bolivia is not without its problems and social conflicts, but one of the things that the Bolivian government has stressed is that you have to combine egalitarian policies with sound economics, and they have done that, so far at least; so even though Bolivia is also hit by the fall of oil and gas prices, it is doing better than Brazil.

MJA: You know, in recent years several agencies such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank have been claiming that Latin America is a middle income continent and that the middle classes are growing and that we have become a middle income region. What do you think about that discourse?

GT: The middle class discourse is all over the world, it is everywhere. The middle class, is said to be the class of the new century. And the reason for that is because a segment of the population has now got income enough to buy consumer durables: cars, for instance, and gadgets, and shop fast food and processed food at supermarkets. And this is something which [matters] to business consultants, and the World Bank and the Inter-American Bank.

Serious people analyzing this are already pointing to the fragility of this so-called new middle class in Latin America. In the Brazilian economy, serious Brazilian economists have stressed this for quite some time and it is now becoming clear with the beginning of an economic crisis in Latin America, even in Brazil. This so-called middle class is heavily in debt.

And in Africa, it's already being realized now. Just before coming here, I saw an analysis in a business paper, the *Financial Times* I think, that business enterprises and business consultancies have concluded that this middle class in Africa is largely a myth. I mean, it is a very tiny proportion of the population, so many of these corporations [that sell] consumer durables of various kinds are now pulling out of Africa, and the number of shopping malls or plans for shopping malls are being reduced.

So this kind of middle class discourse is a global one. You find it in Asia, in Africa and in Latin America, and it's basically given by business interests in order to boost consumption of fashion, processed food, and cars, and it's a very distorted picture. It is true that in Latin America the consuming middle classes have grown in the last 15 years, grown considerably, but this is only a small part of the picture. Now there are also recent figures showing that the number of people in poverty and the number of people in extreme poverty in Latin America today is actually larger than it was in 1980.

MJA: In absolute numbers.

GT: In absolute numbers. As a proportion of the population it is lower, but in absolute numbers it is higher. And in itself it is quite interesting that the process of equalization in Latin America from 2000 to 2012 or -13, even in most of the best cases, the only thing achieved was bringing Latin America back to the amount of inequality that existed before the era of the military dictatorships. That was the case in Argentina, in Uruguay, in Chile, in Brazil. Bolivia is a bit different.

MJA: Yes, we are returning to the levels of the 70s. And changing gears from your main topic to your

discipline, you know we will soon be starting a Master's program in Sociology here at the Universidad de los Andes, and perhaps a Sociology Department in the future. How do you see Sociology as a discipline? Do we have something to say in this context?

GT: I see Sociology primarily as a very fertile field of opportunity. I mean, Sociology is a very open discipline, very ecumenical. It is a territory which has an enormous number of borders with all kinds of disciplines: Medicine, Philosophy, History, Politics, Economics, and so on. This is a great strength and a great potential of Sociology, because whatever you are interested in the social world is something you can do in Sociology. This kind of openness, of hospitality, is also a risk for Sociology, and has to be used with responsibility because there are not really any shortcuts to knowledge. As a sociologist, you can study, if you get a formal sociological education, the basic tools to study almost anything in the social world, but you have to be aware of the specialized knowledge around you in the surrounding disciplines, and not think that as a sociologist you can float upon the most specialized disciplines. So I think this is a really great opportunity for Sociology as an area with open horizons, and hospitable to all kinds of ideas. This is a possibility that we have to treat with responsibility.