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Inequalities

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Writing from Zanzibar

It is not easy to imagine inequality. What you see depends very much on where you are sitting and to where you are looking. One of us wrote this while living in Zanzibar, the Indian Ocean islands which put the *zan* into Tanzania, *Tan* came from the German colonial name for mainland Tanzania, which was Tanganika. Zanzibar Town, like Bristol in the United Kingdom, was a key port for the trading of people as slaves amongst other tradable entities. People were stolen from the mainland of Africa to be sold into an international slave trade. That the grandeur of these cities is built on such exploitation of other people is sufficient to make one uneasy when admiring the magnificent buildings that remain from this period. Slavery, the ownership of one person by another person, is an extreme example of inequality, an inequality of rights, of consumption and ability to command goods where one person is commanding and the other *is* the 'goods'.

The other one of us was sitting in Sheffield while we were trying to work out what to say. Sheffield is that city in England that came to be a city because it was for a short time the place in the world best-known for making steel. As he writes the remaining men still making steel, mostly employed in the Stocksbridge plant, were laid off because of the after-effects of the economic crash of 2008. That steel was often used to make arms, more recently it was used in making cars. The city emphasises cutlery rather than weaponary production, however it was not spoon manufacture that meant Sheffield was bombed during World War II. Steel making was not invented in Sheffield although some children in Sheffield are taught this. The techniques of turning iron into steel were developed in China after having first been brought from villages in Africa, where smiths first made rudimentary steel in furnaces, now long forgotten. Usurping history is another extreme example of inequality.

Inequality is a broad concept that takes many forms, but can be generally thought of as an uneven distribution of power. There exist inequalities in access to health care, in how law operates and that people doing the most dangerous, most boring or hardest of jobs often get the least pay. Inequalities are easily observed in the differences in what people are able (have the power) to do, to choose, to use, and the places that they are able to go. Is it unequal that one of us is writing from a tropical island whereas you may be reading it in a dusty library? Is it unequal that the other one of us has to hear about how tropical that island is? Probably not: inequality has to be distinguished from differences in identity, and life in most tropical islands is not particularly enviable. Just as equality does not mean sameness (although in Kiswahili[1] the word *tofauti* is used to mean 'different' and 'unequal' and extra explanation is needed to specify the meaning). There is probably a relatively small difference in your and my ability to command goods and to choose the direction of our own lives, thus we are not unequal but do have different experiences.

This is just a short entry, so here we will focus on economic inequalities. Various people have stressed the importance of looking at a broader range of variables, however it is our contention that many of the inequalities that exist today can be traced back to people's means – in subsistence societies this may take the form of livestock and land, but in many parts of the world means primarily means money. Examples include politicians 'buying' votes and voters 'buying' politicians (economic power relates to political power), and richer people affording better health care and more nutritious food (economic

[1] Kiswahili is the main language spoken in Zanzibar.

power relates to life expectancy). Thus those with money can often translate this money into other forms of power and advantage. However the power of their money depends on what their money is worth compared to that of others.

Inequality and consumption

The concept of inequality is important to understanding the actions and positionings of individuals, when studying consumption. Someone who is rich is able to command goods and services in a very different way to someone that is poor. Income, whilst not necessarily determining identity or style, does affect how much and what someone can consume. Inequalities also affect the relationships between people, typically with poorer people producing / servicing and richer people consuming, which can herald additional inequalities in human rights, pay and respect (see: Klein, 2000). There are also inequalities in the negative effects of consumption, for example people in poorer countries are said to soon be the first to suffer from climatic changes brought about by others' consumption of carbon.

> "We call ourselves 'consumers' and fail to see the irony. To consume is to devour and to destroy. I imagine that historians of the 22nd century might look back with incredulity that we could have called ourselves so comfortably 'the consumer society', plundering and consuming the earth as if it were some limitless larder."
>
> Right Reverent James Jones, 2009
> Thought for the day, BBC Radio 4

Hopefully those same future historians will look back to the inequalities that we live with today in the same way that we now reflect on past (and sometimes contemporary) forms of slavery. Unfortunately it often takes time for it to become socially desirable rather than avant-garde to say that exploiting others for one's own advantage is unacceptable. It can take time to even use those terms to think about our unequal societies. Recent research entitled "Unjust Rewards" investigated the attitudes of workers in the financial district of the City of London, and shows some of the intriguing justifications that people devise for their own wealth. Some of these super rich people felt that they were successful because of their skill and hard work, based on the idea that everyone has an equal chance to choose their career and fortune. As such they felt that those people who make the wrong choice or do not work hard have no right to complain (Toynbee and Walker, 2008).

An even more recent opinion piece, from Clive James, suggests that attitudes towards wealth have changed, and that valuing money for it's own sake is a thing of the past. Throughout his discourse Clive James expresses confusion about what someone would actually do with their millions or billions, and argues that people with too much money look silly, especially when they do ridiculous things like star in perfume adverts to earn money they can't possibly need:

> "I hereby predict that from now on, starting today, nobody will look good who gets rich quick. I can predict more than that, in fact. Even getting rich slowly is going to look silly, if getting rich is the only aim in mind. Getting rich for its own sake will look as stupid as bodybuilding does at that point when the neck gets thicker than the head and the thighs and biceps look like four plastic kit-bags full of tofu. And on the men it looks even worse." (James, 2009)

This critique of wealth is an essential companion for more established critiques of poverty, if inequality is going to be successfully challenged. This is because inequality, as we delineate later, is bad for the rich, the poor and the in-betweeners, not just for those who initially appear to loose out most. The quicker we accept that amassing our own reserves occurs not only at the expense of others, but also at the expense of ourselves, the sooner this ridiculous, dysfunctional form of social organisation will desist.

A nugget of intellectual context

Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote a ‘Discourse on the origin of inequality’ in the eighteenth century. He argued that inequality is something that is created and sustained by human society, which did not exist amongst men in nature (Rousseau, 1754 (2004)). Rousseau also argued that the powerful construct institutions to keep peace and stability, protecting their property, and remains an opinion held by many today (it is often said of the Welfare State). Such construct can be seen at the level of international institutions where voting structures do not necessarily reflect population size, but the political, economic and military power of the country (see: Monbiot, 2003). An alternative is greater equality. For instance, historical utopian socialisms have proposed an equality which is “very far from homogeneity or conformity; it means the protection of freedom through equal civil and political rights and distribution according to need and not ability to pay.” (Sutcliffe, 2005, p.2).

Geographies of inequality

Inequality is a highly geographical phenomenon, as often rich and poor people occupy different physical spaces, or - if they are in the same place - they are likely to be play different roles. The highly spatial nature of inequality makes it relevant to geographers and particularly suitable for mapping. Maps can quickly show uneven distributions of goods, money, access to communications and much more between individuals, groups and national population. When Booth and his research team drew his ‘poverty’ maps of London, he was mapping inequality. The maps show 7 social classes, ranging from the poorest to the well-off, or in his terms from the “Vicious and semi-criminal” to those with “Good ordinary earnings” to the “Upper middle and upper classes”. Zooming out, the maps below show global distributions of net imports and net exports of toys, measured economically using Purchasing Power Parity. Similar trade maps showing dozens of varieties of goods and services can be found at www.worldmapper.org. These examples of mapping exemplify the range of scales at which inequalities exist.

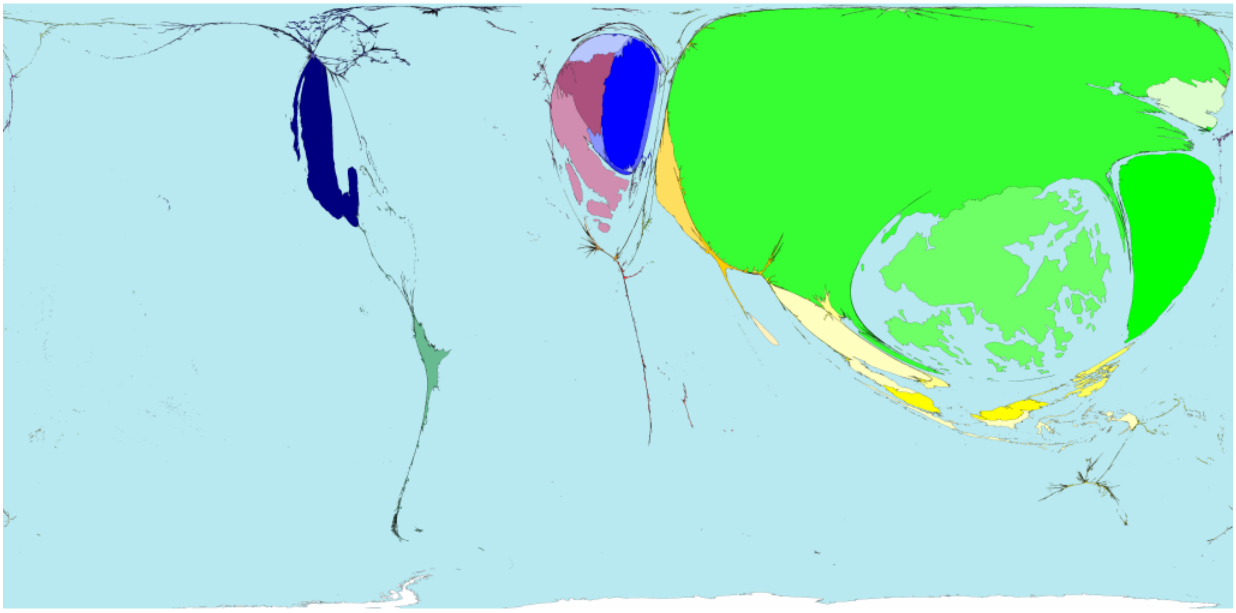

FIGURE 1. NET EXPORTS OF TOYS IN 2002. Territory size shows the proportion of all net toy exports (measured in US$ Purchasing Power Parity). Source: www.worldmapper.org

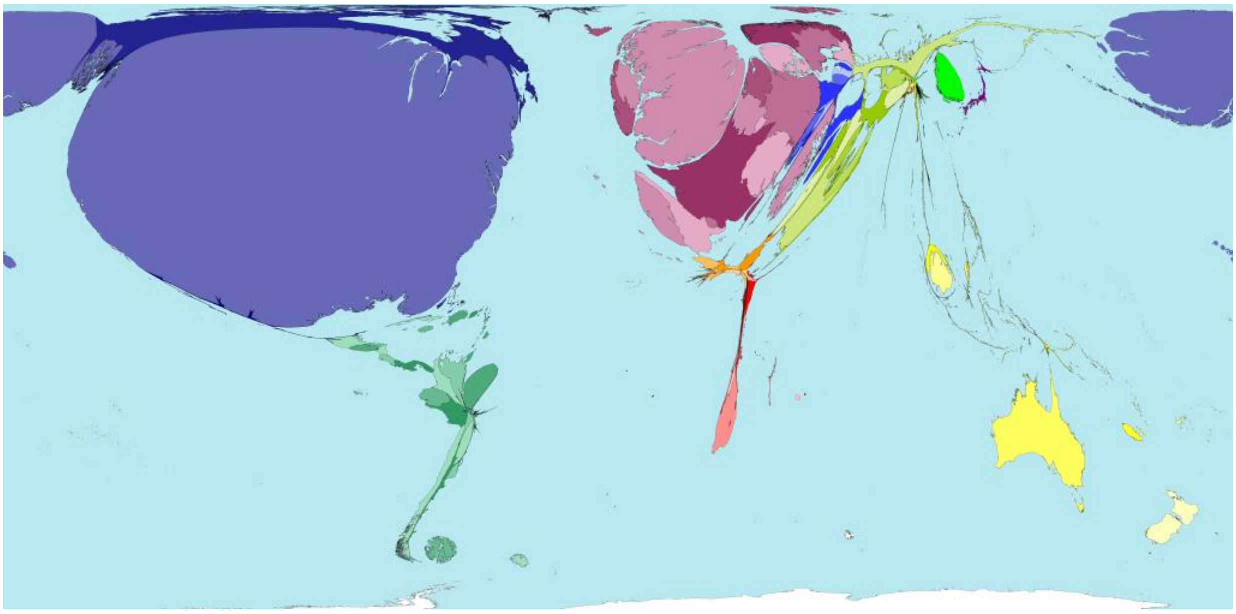

FIGURE 2. NET IMPORTS OF TOYS IN 2002. Territory size shows the proportion of all net toy imports (measured in US$ Purchasing Power Parity). Source: www.worldmapper.org

Methodological issues

Although inequality has many forms it is often measured in economic terms. Common measures include the Gini co-efficient and ratios of the earnings of the richest to those of the poorest. The Gini co-efficient measures income inequality on a scale of 0 to 1: 0 is perfect equality as everyone has the same earnings (or whatever); 1 is “perfect” inequality, for example where, where one person gets 100% of total earnings and everyone else gets nothing. Country level Gini co-efficients never reach these extremes. Comparing earnings of the richest and poorest deciles (10%) or quintiles (20%) of the population produces a ratio of earnings of the rich to the poor. Comparing the richest and poorest deciles by definition produces larger ratios than does comparing quintiles. The different measures of economic inequality, different types of inequality and multiple scales on which to measure it can add ambiguity to debates about how inequalities are changing.

At the world level inequality can be measured using international data which uses the country as the unit of analysis; global data compare individuals in the whole world population. The international comparison, between countries works on the assumption that everyone within a country shares the national average, gave a ratio of 30:1 of income of the richest 10% to poorest 10% in 1997. A global comparison of individuals, irrespective of their country, shows greater inequalities of 63:1. Comparing incomes using both these methods shows increases in inequalities leading up to 1997. (Sutcliffe, 2005, p.8). Bigger inequalities are shown when global comparisons are made because the very richest people in the world are being compared to the very poorest, as extremes are not moderated by national averages.

Contention: what causes inequality?

The causes of inequality are the subject of some disagreement, some blame poverty on those who suffer it, whereas others acknowledge how the structure of society can produce inequalities. A case in point would be ex-World Bank economist Paul Collier's work on who he frames as the apparently hopeless and problematic bottom billion. In identifying what causes poverty Collier looks within countries (Collier, 2007) overlooking the history of international inequalities, especially 500 years of underinvestment in poorer countries combined with net wealth transfer from the poor to rich world (Monbiot, 2003, p.20). Research spanning 2 centuries shows that most poverty has structural causes (Gordon, 2004, p.15). For example, the rich and powerful often use their position to keep themselves in a privileged state, as was argued in the 1700s by Rousseau. Examples of this are that the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation are all skewed in favour of the rich (Monbiot, 2003, p.15-16).

Contention: is inequality bad?

There are many arguments against inequality, stating that equality is preferable because it can allow people to use human resources more fully, it could create a larger market for goods, and that policing costs would reduce. However others stress that redistribution is desirable because of the central component of social justice, independent of consequences (Sutcliffe, 2005, p.4-5). Social justice here could pertain to rights, health and the conviction that people are equal so deserve equality. In contrast some argue that inequality is good, because it stimulates competition, it motivates, it is selective, and it rewards. Rousseau suggested that "inequality easily gains ground among base and ambitious souls" (p.47) people who have more concern for themselves than for living in a functional society.

It is rarely discussed that inequality afflicts the rich as well as the poor. Is this an intentional secret, or are people who do not enjoy the wealth that many have sought scared to admit to it? In his book ‘Affluenza’ Oliver James documents some negative outcomes of being rich, which include depression and paranoia (James, 2007). Living unequally as a rich person means you may feel threatened by others who have less, and feel depressed because you probably look for fulfilment in objects of social status and how others respond to these, rather than in the engaging in enjoyable activities. An example of paranoia, or even justified fear, is the gated communities of rich people in South Africa (amongst other countries). Placing spikes, barbed wire, high walls, CCTV and security guards between oneself and others is illustrative of societal breakdown and distrust, which is psychologically unhealthy for all involved.

Richard Wilkinson and colleagues have strongly made the case that amongst rich countries, those that are more equal are also more healthy (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2006). This theme to Wilkinson’s work has continued with Kate Pickett, they argue that in rich countries “Average standards cease to matter, but whether you are doing better or worse than other people, where you come in the social pecking order, continues to be important – for health, happiness, and for a large array of social problems.” (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009, p.13). This clearly answers the question of whether poverty is the only problem of inequality. Inequality in and of itself is detrimental to society.

Inequality and policy

Discussion of inequality is arguably more politically charged than those of poverty. Poverty conceptually focuses on ‘problematic’ segment of society; inequality is concerned with society as a whole so everybody is under the microscope. Poverty and inequality are related because the poor are those with less when resources are unequally distributed. Focusing on poverty rather than inequality conceals the role of the rich and middle classes, almost conceptually excusing them for the poverty that is part of the society in which they live. An example of this is the Millennium Development Goals that focus on the poor rather than inequalities (Amin, 2006). As such, meeting the

Millennium Development Goal for reducing the mortality rates of under five years does not necessarily lead to reductions in the gap between the under fives mortality in the richest and poorest quintiles of the population. Sometimes the differences can actually increase (Moser et al., 2005).

Future direction

A couple years ago one of us presented a paper about mapping health inequalities at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Before starting to speak, a senior member of the department sighed, declaring, a little too dismissively perhaps that "everyone is talking about inequalities now", like the new intellectual fashion. As demonstrated above, inequality has been a topic of discussion for hundreds of years, and that it remains an academic concern is to be applauded. The other one of us had a similar, is less personally painful experience in the United States in 1995, when he found that only half a dozen academics in an American conference of over 5000 attendees were interested in coming to a key-note session on inequality (Dorling 2006). Inequality matters. If as academics we want to contribute new ideas to society, develop constructive ways of understanding ourselves and challenge inequalities, we should collaborate with wider society to confront a major injustice of our times.

Not only *where* we are writing from, Zanzibar Town and Sheffield, is significant. But also *when* we are writing. We are writing in the aftermath of the 2008 crash, which gives a particular perspective on wealth. Contrast Polly Toynbee and David Walker's work on the arrogance of city workers just before things turned bad for them, with Clive James' certainty that "excess wealth is gone like the codpiece". If you don't know what a codpiece is then James' point is well made, as the codpiece – a decorative covering for mens' genitals - is not just unfashionable and out-dated, but also strange. To take a longer view the world became much more equal from 1929 to about 1978. Unfortunately now in 2009 world inequality is looking more and more like it did 1929. Inequality has reduced before, and can certainly be reduced again.

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