

# INEQUALITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COGNITIVE SCIENCE

## ABSTRACT

*Social inequality incorporates those differences which are emphatically experienced and morally valued by the members of a community. This is true of differences which are perceived as strategic by them. Moral ranking is needed to translate biological differences of a gregarious nature into inequality of a social kind. But once cultural contents in the mind are established, it functions as an emergent, contributing on its own to various social extensions (for example profession or residential status). A significant difference exists between the two ideal-type forms of inequality. Inequalities embedded in biology are more likely to be evaluated as self-evident and non-problematic, as they represent an integral part of our experiencing of ourselves. We experience our gender and age (that is sensate, feel and think it) directly, and as a result tend to take it for granted. It is an altogether different matter when it comes to inequalities of a predominantly sociocultural kind. These are more likely to be perceived as arbitrary and as a result subject to constant contention.*

*Key words: inequality, social cognitive science, cultural contents in the mind, social forms, gender and age*

## 1. Introduction

When the founding fathers of sociology set to the task of creating and maintaining the borders of their new science, the approach was understandable. A clear distantiating from natural science (social construction of sociocultural phenomena) as well as from the remainder of social sciences was needed (it neglects the mind as well as the body of the person). Unfortunately, this task of the classics had desirable (at least from the standpoint of sociologists making a career in the academic, political etc. worlds) as well as unintended and undesirable consequences (for our understanding of man). With habitualized linguistic use, simplistically borrowed from everyday commonsense

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\* Gregor Tomc is a lecturer at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, teaching Introduction to cultural science, Sociology of youth and Sociology of creativity. His predominant research interests are social cognitive science and cultural policy.

understanding of reality, a perception of sociocultural phenomena as objective facts of a segment of the world became hegemonic in sociology. There is 'out there' a 'garden of social life' intended for our cultivation. We may be aware of the mistakenness of the commonsense view but still cling to it because of the reified language use. Sociological terminology in which we think our sociability seduces us, time and again, more or less unconsciously, to the often unintended consequences of classical sociology.

Sociologists who in a disciplined fashion maintain the borders of their discipline have elaborated a perception of the social actor as a non-organic being, without a mental life (this is the domain of psychology) or a body (this is the domain of natural sciences). Even when they are aware of these dimensions of social actors, they advocate a complementaristic approach (Devereux, 1991: 25). Complementarism is not so much a new paradigm as a set of methodological instructions. A complementarist advises us to observe a human being first as a biological organism, then as a mental being and finally as a social actor. Once the separate analysis had been made, they should subsequently be somehow fused. The solution seems to us to be far too simple. The analysis of organism, mentality and sociability can only be distinguished on an abstract-analytical level. In reality, they always represent a totality of what it means to be human being. As a result, what we need is a satisfactory theoretical paradigm which will answer the question: how are these levels interconnected in our experiencing of the world.

In our opinion, a new science of man is needed which will be an integration of various existing disciplines, a new science which will transcend the existing reductionist approaches. Sociologists too must step outside the borders of their discipline. A possible consequence of such a distancing and redefinition of classical sociology is what we call cognitive social science. This novel approach will be illustrated in the case of social inequality.

## 2. Cognitive social science

Georg Simmel (1993) introduced a distinction into social science which is also fruitful for our deliberation: between form and content.

Cultural contents and social forms are maintained and modified throughout our entire lives in an interaction of perceiving ourselves, others and other. Perception with the mediation of our senses effects the process of shaping of neuronal networks in our physical brains, thus creating cultural contents of our minds. Once formed they influence all our further perceptions. Our gregarious biological nature is being continuously socialized with the cultural contents of the mind. Culture generates form, but we must be careful not to distinguish them too rigidly. Once constituted, the forms themselves become a part of cultural contents, are internalized. On the other hand, through our sociability, our culture is continuously being externalized, projected onto our relations with others and other.

Cultural contents of human beings can analytically be distinguished on three basic domains of experiencing the world (we are here roughly following Kant): sensations,

with which we judge phenomena on the continuum of (dis)pleasure in me; feelings with which we judge on the continuum of good and bad for me out there; and thinking with which we judge truth and falsehood for me out there. The hegemonic human social forms which evolved from them were aesthetics, morality and knowledge, respectively.

Mentality in the brain can be perceived schematically as divided into three segments: on inflows of information with the aid of (at least) five senses; their classification with the aid of sensations, feelings and thoughts; and finally as outputs in forms of activity. Activity can further be distinguished into learning (where output serves as an endogenous information for neuronal network redefinition) and effects on the environment.

These process can be perceived as vectorial coding of neuronal networks in the brain (Churchland, 1996: 21). Let us illustrate the process with some illustrations. The first example is of tasting (with the help of four sensors, sweet, sour, salty and bitter) a peach. When we bite a peach, its juices come into contact with receptors on our tongue, leading to chemical stimulation which is reflected in a neuronal taste of a peach. Namely, we have a multidimensional abstract mindspace in our brain devoted to taste, and a specific domain is reserved for peach taste. Whenever it is activated, it is translated in our consciousness into a peach-taste-for-us. We modify this segment of our mind space with every new tasting of a peach, thus creating an increasingly complex cultural content. As a memory of past tastings it can also be activated independently of relevant empirical situations (as Proust knew well). We see how culture in the mind is created with sense information inflow and how it eventually evolves as a relatively autonomous, endogenous information inflow. The second illustration will be of sight perception, which is hegemonic for humans. With every perception of a triangle, a neuronal succession of the same shape is repeated (less likely) or an activation occurs which generates our experiencing of that triangle (more likely). An increasingly sophisticated abstract mind space is thus being formed (which is why we are able to experience triangles of all kinds, even very imperfect ones), modified throughout our lives. As with taste, once abstract sightscapes are formed in the mind, they influence all our perception.

What is true of peaches and triangles also holds for social phenomena. From the first day of its lives, human babies experience their parents and other significant others with their sensations and feelings (while their thinking dimension of cognizance is still very rudimentary), creating and maintaining valuations which are then externalized as social relations. Berger and Luckmann (1979: 76) call this process habitualization: "Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort, ipso facto, is apprehended by its performer as that pattern." The general term social mindspace for these phenomena was, to our knowledge, first introduced into sociology by Zerubavel (1997).

Every human being capable of sensing social relations as something inherent to its being, and who can morally value itself and others in a community of others is a social being. Or to put it differently: by sensing social relations we create the community as a commonsense reality in ourselves; by morally valuating, we structure it into segments

of relevant experience. This is the source of our taken for granted assumptions regarding the objective reality of social relations.

As in the case of peaches and triangles, our cultural contents in the mind which generate society are embedded in sociability, in concrete social relations which are interpreted. Whether or not we develop an awareness of a certain form depends on at least two factors: on how close it is to some concrete sociability (for example a group like the family as opposed to an institution like the state), as well as to the importance that we learn to attach to it (for example the relative inarticulateness of class identity as opposed to ethnical identity).

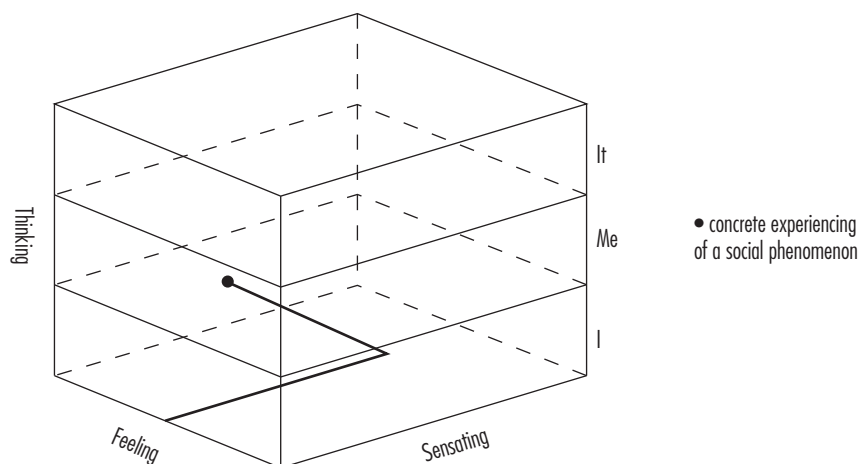
A normal person capable of sensation and empathy is conscious of certain basic social forms. A child soon learns to distinguish some habitualized patterns of relations, connects them with certain actors, creating the family form, which he is then able to recognize in other similar situations. The process which began on the unconscious level of culture gradually, with increasing language competence evolved into a conscious awareness. As the child attaches strategic significance to family learning, the abstract social mindspace is elaborated. This implies not only the likelihood of awareness of the form but also the ability of recognizing it in other highly variable states (for example an imperfect family without a crucial member is still easily recognized as such).

But this is an exception to the rule. Numerous other relations with others never emerge on the level of awareness in most people. Although they have a sufficient level of unconscious experience to function competently in most situations, many members of community would have a hard time defining institutions like democracy or elections or even the state. Significant differences exist among people concerning their levels of social consciousness. This becomes for example evident if we ask them to self-place themselves in a class structure. Even though they belong, according to some material indicators, into the same category of people, their self-positionings may vary significantly. The reason for this is obvious: social phenomena are culturally created, they depend on how we appropriate our sense inflows, they are the intersection of what is given to us as well as of what we make of it. In this sense, we do not live in identical social communities. We only think that we do, because we automatically conclude that our experiencing of others is basically identical with the experiencing of others.

We can schematically depict a person as the interaction of sense perception; of sensations, feelings and thoughts; on levels of individual, others and other. To paraphrase G.H. Mead: a person is constructed from the dialogue of I, me and it. Any relevant perception is classified in this vastly complex abstract mindscape, creating concrete experience upon which we act.

### Scheme 1

#### Schematic depiction of a person



How can inequality be interpreted in this context? Its source lies, as we observed, in the perception of difference in our relation with others and attaching a certain emotional significance to it. But of course every difference is not assigned equal significance. An important aspect of cultural learning is recognition of patterns of social differentiation. Or in other words - only some emotional valuations of difference emerge through habituation as moral valuations. In a hypothetical archaic society, for example, differences in material possession are less significant than differences in access to mystical revelation, making shamanic persons hegemonic. In a Greek polis, a person learned to value differences in rhetorical and logical capabilities above capabilities of mystical valuation, making rational philosophers hegemonic. In modern communities, differences in material possession become crucial, making capitalist industrialists hegemonic. Culturally relevant differences learned in the mind generate social structures, extensions of our mindscape, which represent dimensions of social inequality.

### 3. Gender and age

Members of every community have learnt of numerous dimensions of inequality, some of which they are aware of. In our present analysis we are only going to deal with two dimensions embedded in our biological organism, with gender and age. The reason for this is self-evident: social scientists are most uneasy when dealing with them as they threaten the commonsense borders of sociology as a distinct scientific discipline. As a result they know least about what to do with them.

In mainstream social science an opinion prevails according to which people are culturally constructed beings and that our biological heritage is an archaic sediment

which can for all practical purposes be excluded from the analysis. Even more, taking the biological factor into consideration in social analysis can be interpreted as politically incorrect, even reactionary in some circles, as it supposedly naturalizes or petrifies existing social inequalities. To speak of nature is tantamount to defending the status quo.

On the formal level we can respond by stating that as scientists we are not interested in the political (in)correctness of our statements but simply of their truth or falsehood. As Alice Rossi wrote (Moir and Jessel, 1996: 129): "Diversity is a biological fact, while equality is a political, ethical and social percept."

If these two levels of cognizing are confounded, we are in effect translating phenomena into problems, rational thought into moralizing. The idea that earthquakes are morally responsible for their destructiveness will not even cross the mind of a seismologist, but a sociologist who condemns natural differences as ideologically reactionary is often applauded by his colleagues in the name of political correctness.

Biological differences cannot simply be reduced to social differences. If we only take gender as an example, it becomes obvious that numerous differences are embedded in biology. Thus the data for Slovenia indicate that there are more males in those areas of politics which favour more aggressive behaviour. Thus, there are 4.7% mayoresses, 8.8% women members of parliament, 16.6% women ambassadors, 10.0% women heads of governmental offices, 27.0% women state secretaries and no women ministers. But, on the other hand there are more women in judiciary, where it seems that their greater moral sensitivity is to their advantage: 63.8% women judges, 50.9% persecutors, 66.6% audit judges and 44.4% supreme court judges (*Mladina*, 1999). For similar reasons, there are more women in teaching jobs than men. Women give precedence to cooperation with others. There are more boys in rock subcultures because they tend to favour more aggressive behaviour etc.

The 'magical stick' of socialization as an explanation for these and numerous other examples simply seems improbable to us. Cultural contents of socialization has changed significantly throughout modernity yet some patterns of social behaviour nevertheless seem to persist. Also indicative is the case of particular groups favouring more egalitarian forms of socialization (for example in kibutz communities) which do not seem to alter biological differences in a significant manner. The American sociologist Walter Gove concludes from differences in rates of deviance (Moir and Jessel, 1996: 83): "Sociologists have no good explanation for why deviance is primarily a male phenomenon."

The demand for women quotas in politics is problematic for several reasons. The first one is that as we have seen, women are not excluded from active politics but only from some segments of it. If we accept the fact that certain biological factors influence our social life, then a possible implication of quotas would be that we are institutioning a social arrangement which forces women to compete in an area of public life where they have less marked interests and/or capabilities. And thirdly, such an arrangement implicitly fetishizes male moral valuations as superior by making certain positions in political life as self-evidently superior. It could be said that this type of feminism problematizes biological nature to affirm male culture.

This somewhat longer introduction seems necessary in order to avoid possible objections to the effect that we are trying to legitimate social differences with a supposedly eternal biological nature. The dilemma between the 'democratic spirit of culturalism' and the 'conservative nature of biologism' is imaginary. In the analysis which follows, an attempt will be made to elaborate biological gender and age differences and their influence on cultural content in human minds, which in turn influence our social forms. It is not being claimed that social forms are determined by our gregarious nature but simply that our behaviour is a combination of biological as well as of emergent qualities. Different aspects of our behaviour are specific combinations of both levels.

Gender and age differences are relevant dimensions of stratification in all known human communities. Differences in their cultural interpretation of course exist: they can contribute to a more efficient integration (for example initiation rituals in adolescence in some archaic communities, whereas prolonged schooling contributes to a widening generation gap between youth and midage life cycles). But we are nevertheless dealing with different interpretations and not with cultural elimination of biology. This implies that we must always take biological differences (of gender and of age) into consideration together with differences of culture.

Let us first analyse the gender gap. Differences between men and women are evident on at least three levels. The first one is the level of perception. Women hear better, see better in the dark and are more sensitive on the infrared side of the light spectrum. They are also more sensitive to pain, they are better at tasting bitter and prefer sweets. We could go on enumerating such differences which are probably behind commonsense claims that women have a better 'intuition' (Moir and Jessel, 1996: 17-19). From the sublime heights of theoretical sociology these differences may appear to be trivial but one must take into consideration that our senses are our primary sources of information regarding the phenomenal world, including the world of social 'objects'.

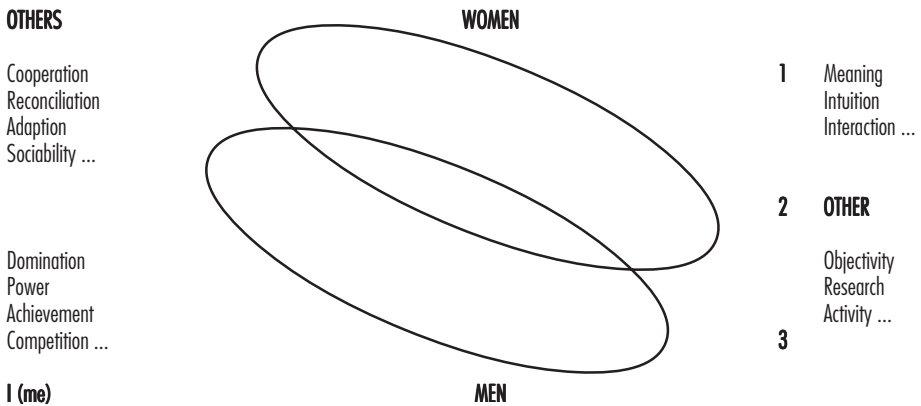
The second important difference exists on the hormonal level. If the embryo is female it develops without greater commotions. But if it is a male embryo, an eruption of male hormones occurs in the sixth week, influencing neuronal networks in the brain - in neurotransmitter levels, neural connections as well as in cell and nuclear volumes (Moir and Jessel, 1996: 24). (The second eruption of male hormones in males occurs in adolescence, of which more will be said later.)

The third important gender difference can be observed on the neuronal level of the brain. As a rule, a person is better in those skills in which his brain is a specialist. In language skills, male brains are more diffuse which is why women are on the average linguistically more capable. On the other hand, visual space perception of males is more specialized which is why they are, for example, on the average superior in space orientation. Emotions in women are more diffuse and women have a more developed connection of right and left hemispheres (corpus callosum). The right hemisphere which controls emotions is better integrated with the left one which controls verbal skills. This is why males, in comparison to women, tend to be more emotionally introverted yet at the same time more emotionally intense (Moir and Jessel, 1996: 43 - 46). A

possible implication of this is that women tend towards emotional thought whereas men tend towards emotionally more neutral, rational thought.

Neural brain differences also generate different abilities: men are better in mechanical skills and in abstract tasks, women are better in social interactions and verbal skills. Men are more interested in careers and power, women in morality and cooperation. He is interested in things and their structure, she in people and their feelings (Moir and Jessel, 1996: 44 - 49).

## Scheme 2 The gender difference



Domain 1 represents those properties which are biologically more characteristic of women, domain 2 those where no differences can be observed and domain 3 those properties which are more characteristic of men. Each individual is a specific combination of all three domains. The sociocultural tradition of a community as we experience it is of course important: it can either stimulate male aggressiveness and domination (patriarchal cultural arrangements) or hinder it (modern communities). But the intermediary domain 2 cannot be extended at will as it is in the last analysis embedded in the biological gender difference.

To sum up: biological gender differences are important. At least three levels can be distinguished: of sense perception, on the hormonal level and in neuronal networks. Cultural differences are embedded in our biology, but once they appear, they exert their own influence on our experiencing of the world. In short, it is more rational and impersonal in men and more emotional and social in women. The differences are culturally learned, but according to our biological properties. As it is in all likelihood impossible to reconstruct the 'original' set of biological characteristics which generated specific male and female cultural adaptations, it is a result also practically impossible to say what segments of gender repertoires of behaviour are biological and which cultural. In millennia of human development, they have interacted to the extent where it makes



more sense to speak of gender biological/cultural properties. Two specific, gender based sets of biological/cultural repertoires evolved in human history. No amount of socialization will ever do away with the basic fact that 'you can encourage aspiration, but you cannot inject ambition'. Men and women simply invest their human capital differently because they are different (Moir and Jessel, 1996: 187). It is not only or foremost a thing of culture if there are more women teachers and secretaries, that there are more men scientists and politicians, or that there are more mothers than fathers raising children on their own, that there are more housewives than housemen etc. To a certain extent, the world appears similar to both sexes (domain 2), but on another level also significantly particular (domains 1 and 3). As the world which we experience is the only world we know, we can conclude from this that men and women live in only partially overlapping social worlds. This is the basis of the permanent conflicts between genders, but on the other hand also of their mutual fascination and attraction.

The second relevant biologically embedded dimension of stratification is age. The following phases of the life cycle will be distinguished:

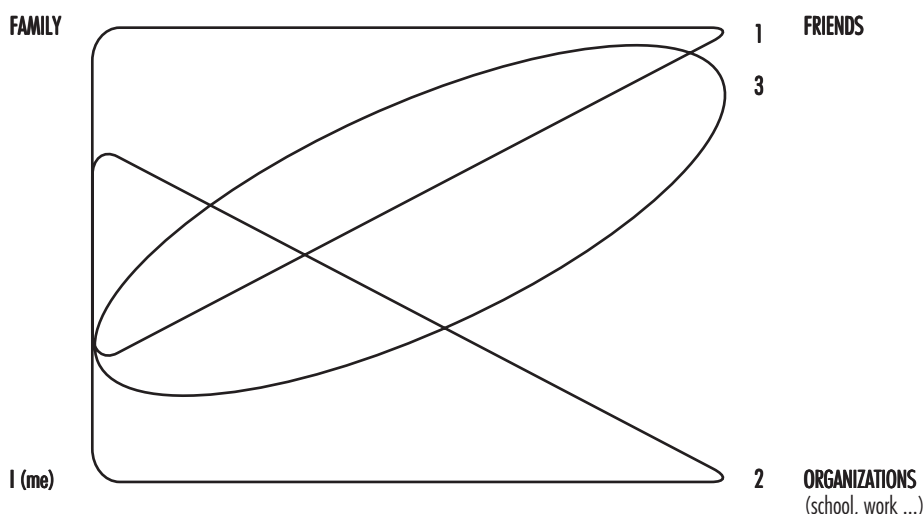
- as an embryo, a human being is exposed to different hormonal influences, while on the neuronal level it is at the very beginning of development and as such totally dependent on the mother;
- in the infant, an equilibrium is being maintained, while on the neuronal level a rapid development takes place, making it dependent on the primary group of parents and other significant others;
- the child is still in a hormonal balance, whereas the attained level of neuronal development enables it to socially extend into the community outside the family circle;
- in adolescence another hormonal imbalance occurs, creating important differences among boys (testosterone) and girls (estrogen and progesterone), while on the neuronal level only certain parts of the brain are still less developed (prefrontal cortex which in midage restrains emotional outburst with rational cognition etc.);
- in midage hormonal activity is stabilized while the person attains full neuronal development (even though important degenerative processes are already taking place, they are probably compensated by extensive learning processes in the mind);
- while at old age, sometime after fifty years of age, a hormonal approach of genders is taking place (levels of testosterone are dropping in males and raising in women after menopause), while on the neuronal level accelerated processes of degeneration are occurring.

Biological differences in age influence our experiencing of the world. Let us take young people as an illustration: without taking hormonal characteristics of adolescence or the underdeveloped prefrontal cortex into account, it will be difficult to fully appreciate their cultural preferences (for example their rebelliousness) and the social forms they create (for example subversive youth subcultures). Without taking into account the biological properties of male adolescence, it will be difficult to comprehend why some subcultures are predominantly male events (for example heavy metal rock subcultures). We are of course not claiming that rock subcultures can be reduced to the biological

level. Certain sociocultural phenomena which young people experience in their life worlds (school system, urban life mass media, standard of living, leisure time, new technologies etc.), which they internalize in their minds and later recognize in other young people, are important factors contributing to the generation of any youth subculture. Probably just as important is a conducive aesthetic event (in the case of punk subculture the creativity of a band called The Sex Pistols). In short, a youth subculture is a number of young people who on the level of consciousness experience themselves and each other as belonging to a common social form. But in order to do that, they have to be young. The whole process is embedded (but not determined) in biological youth and the aggressiveness, non-conformity and directness, which stimulate a radical interpretation and experience of the social world.

### Scheme 3

**Differences in experiencing the social world by three family members**  
(1= mother, 2= father, 3= adolescent)



The mother attributes greatest significance to social interactions in the circles of family and friends (even at the workplace she attributes greater significance to sociability). The father attributes greatest significance to the workworld and his career in it (the stress is on achievement while social ties are to a large extent of an instrumental nature). The adolescent compensates for existential dependence on parents by seeking greater autonomy in peer groups. But an even more crucial difference in comparison with his parents is in the extent of social interaction: for the parents, the most intensive part of cultural learning and social interaction is behind them, whereas the adolescent is in the middle of this process. His social world is as a result wider as well as more intensive, which is why his sociability as a result often seems exaggerated or even compulsive to elders. In comparison, people in midage and old age are more self-reliant,

self-confident and self-centered, their social worlds shrinking, narrowing and becoming increasingly routinized. We see that perception of social phenomena as well as extent of social participation differ significantly between adolescents and older people. Their experience of the social world is really significantly different. As a result, sociocultural differences which are embedded in them often seem so insurmountable (for example children vs parents) or intolerable (adolescents vs parents). Because children are helpless, we have learned to experience their difference as attractive, because adolescents are not, we have learnt to experience their difference as threatening.

## 4. Conclusion

Sociological reductionism misses the point of inequality embedded in biological differences. The dilemma of inequality based on ascriptive barriers on the one hand and of inequality based on achievement on the other is to a large extent imaginary as the two can only be separated on an abstract-analytical level (for example, gender and age are undoubtedly ascriptive factors, yet they significantly influence our achievement potential etc.). Sociological reductionism mystifies this fact. This has led our reductionist to at least two unintentional consequences of the theorizing: let us call the first one conspirativity of the social and the second one demonization of the natural.

Conspiratorial theorization of the social occurs when our reductionist is faced with the fact that efforts of greater levelization of starting positions do not lead to greater equality. Our reductionist begins to search for 'deep structures' of socialization, a 'background of traditional values' (in analogy to Chomskyan search of a supposed 'deep grammar' behind the 'language instinct') which inhibit all efforts of implementation of a meritocratic cultural arrangement. The crucial point we want to make is that the imperative is based on a certain moral perception characteristic of modernity and not on a perceived scientific theory. Our sociological reductionist thus functions as a moral and not a scientific agent. All demands for quotas are moral claims and should be treated as such. But even their morality is not as self-evident as it might seem at first glance. As was already mentioned, the imperative may force categories of people (in our case for example women or young people) to compete where they have smaller capabilities and/or interests. And what is only the other side of the same coin: a difference may simply indicate preference and not discrimination (for example disinclination to participate in politics by young people). Furthermore, the extension of the application of the system of quotas to other domains would be reasonable but its consequences would in all likelihood be perceived as undesirable by the majority of the public. Most people would probably agree that gender and age equality in categories of engineers, scientists, surgeons, pilots, chess players, prisoners or alcoholics, for example, are unacceptable. And last but not least, if the system is applied to gender and age groups, why not also to other categories of people (for example the handicapped, old, rural, retarded etc.).

The other unintentional consequence of sociological reductionism is demonization of the natural. According to our reductionist, this inevitably leads to a petrification of existing inequalities. It would imply a polarization of the modern community, with an elite of most capable on top and an underclass of biological marginals at the bottom, the worst possible inequality since it would exclude mobility. But the reasoning behind it is in our opinion mistaken. As was already pointed out, there is no such thing as pure biology or pure culture in a human being. Only a sociological reductionist perceives the world as divided into two poles. In reality, both factors are overlapping, as the biological brain is overflowed with culture of the mind and culture of the mind only exists in the physical brain. But the reasoning is also mistaken for an additional reason: the complexity of cultural contents in our brain have generated an analogous complexity of social forms of human community. Even in the simplest archaic community numerous dimensions of differentiation exist. As a result, a community with one elite and one underclass is hard to imagine (a worker may be subordinate in the workworld but is superordinate in the family etc.). There are also numerous status incongruities (a politician ranks high on power but low on prestige etc.).

Social inequality incorporates those differences which are emphatically experienced and morally valued by the members of a community. This is true of differences which are perceived as strategic to the members of community. Moral ranking is needed to translate biological differences of a gregarious nature into inequality of a social nature. But once cultural contents in the mind are established, it functions as an emergent, contributing on its own to social extensions. Numerous social inequalities are predominantly the result of such cultural contents (for example education, profession or residential status). A significant difference exists between the two idealtype forms of inequality. Inequalities embedded in biology are more likely to be evaluated as self-evident and non-problematic, as they represent an integral part of our experiencing of ourselves. We experience our gender and age (that is sense, feel and think it) directly, whereas we know about the other gender or age groups only from second-hand experience, what we have been told about them. We are at home only in our own gender and age, whereas others are to us in the last analysis alien. We find it difficult if not impossible to problematize that which we take for granted. Perhaps this is the reason for the relative unpopularity of radical feminist critiques of gender inequality (the majority of women does not perceive the differences as inequalities, or in other words does not culturally structure them into social problems) or for the similar absence of radical youth subpolitics (most youth subcultures have an affirmative attitude towards adolescence, despite sociocultural marginality). It is an altogether different matter when it comes to inequalities of a predominantly sociocultural nature. These are perceived as arbitrary and are as a result subject to constant contention, arbitration and attempts of legitimation.

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