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Inequalities

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Introduction

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1 A Major Social Issue of Our Time

The growth and sharpening of social inequality at both a global and national level is a key theme of the current public and academic debate. This rise in inequality, one of the most significant social facts of the contemporary world, extends beyond the neoliberal era as its permanent legacy: it is also found in the chaotic transition to a historical phase marked first by a return to protectionism and then by the eruption of conflicts in various parts of the world.

The return of a theoretical and analytical interest in inequalities has arisen as a result of the subject's self-evident objectivity. It has attracted the attention of public institutions, the political class, and the mass media, who are concerned that the deepening of inequalities could act as a brake on economic growth or a threat to social cohesion. However, whatever (modest) solutions have been put in place, or, more often, only imagined, this process remains a structural and organic part of financially-driven capitalist accumulation, the result of a centuries-long process of the globalisation of capitalist social relations. And, at least for the time being, it does not seem to be affected by the end of the neoliberal era.

2 A Wide-Ranging Critical Analysis

The principle focus of *Inequalities* is the critical examination of this major historical-social issue, carried out within a global vision of the process of the production of inequality, and deepened through the confrontation between specific regional and national situations in various parts of the world.

Inequalities focuses on the multiple forms and dimensions of inequalities - economic, labour, class, educational, health, territorial, housing, legal, gender, racial, generational, environmental, and climate inequalities - as well as on 'new' inequalities linked to robotization and digitalisation. It also considers the examination of the causes, transformations, and social consequences of inequalities to be essential. Unlike many other social phenomena, the issue of inequalities does not permit any form of reductionism or of disciplinary monopolies, and so the Journal is interested in all contributions from across the social sciences and humanities.

3 The Globalisation of Social Polarisation - Some National Examples

The first issue of *Inequalities* is dedicated to the fundamental and primary form of inequality, class inequality, paying particular attention to the sharpening of social polarisation within nations.

In spite of slowing growth rates and huge differences between geographical areas and individual countries, and a general tendency to slow down everywhere, the world economy has greatly expanded since the 1980s, partly due to an increase in the world population. Over the long term, this global dynamic has led to relative convergence in development levels, with some large countries or areas in the Global South catching up with Western countries, thus reducing their historical 'backwardness', due to a dual and combined process: the deindustrialisation of the 'North' and the industrialisation of the 'South' (although aware of the risks of making any generalisations). But since the early twenty-first century, the process of expanding the production of goods on a global scale has come up against a series of stumbling blocks and serious disruptions, the most important of which were the great financial and production crisis of 2008-09 and the subsequent monetary crisis, pandemic emergency, and energy crisis. The entire international order has been thrown into crisis, firstly with the rise of protectionist drives and policies, then with the outbreak of war in Ukraine and in Palestine, and we have now entered, if not plunged into, an era of global uncertainty.

Just one phenomenon has managed to traverse, almost unscathed, the increasingly chaotic situation of the world economy and global

politics in all its different phases and across its various geopolitical areas: the process of social polarisation between the capitalist class and the working class who live off both formal and informal wage labour.

This process, which began almost half a century ago, has emerged in very different forms and at different levels of intensity depending on whether it is in Western countries, which are in more or less marked decline, or in emerging countries – it being understood that in all the principal countries the concentration of social wealth is accompanied by the centralisation of capital driven by global and national financial markets. On the same scale (as the other side of the same coin) we see mass expropriation from direct agricultural producers in the Global South, the unprecedented expansion of the ‘reserve army’ of labour and of workers who are paid below the value of their labour-power, and the growth of international migrations. These three social processes are interrelated but are not identical.

In Western countries, social polarisation has not only involved salaried workers, but also substantial sections of the middle classes and, through the increasingly extreme precarisation of labour, has also resulted in creeping mass impoverishment, partly covered by the huge indebtedness of working families and individual workers. And it is no longer possible to find exceptions to the rule, because – with different forms and at different levels of intensity – the intensification of social polarisation is affecting both traditionally liberal countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, and countries in which the welfare state was more widely extended (Germany, Sweden, France), as Bühr and Pfefferkorn show in this issue. Even Japan, which has historically been considered (relatively) immune from processes of social polarisation, has not escaped this trend, as Costalunga demonstrates in his article.

Instead, in the emerging economies, particularly in China, although hundreds of millions of people left absolute poverty, and there has been an increase in the purchasing power of workers’ wages and an expansion of the middle classes, there has also been a strong centralisation of socially produced wealth, which can be measured by the trends of the Gini index and by relative wage indicators. India, South Africa, Brazil (as Soares shows in this issue), have experienced significant (in the former case) or considerable development in the last twenty years, but this growth has made these countries more unequal internally than they had been previously. Indeed, the inequalities inherited from colonialism have been joined by new inequalities produced by globalization in its current financial form, in particular by the globalisation of neoliberal policies that have also involved ‘emerging’ economies. And neither has Russia escaped this dynamic of social polarisation.

Since the 2008-09 crisis, almost everywhere social inequalities have been reproduced in a more accelerated, extensive and acute

manner, visibly changing the shape of the established class structure in many countries. Generally speaking, the boundaries between classes have become stronger towards the top and have weakened towards the bottom, giving the development of inequalities a perpetual upward spiral motion, which seems to have clear structural roots and a multiplicity of effects on all spheres of the production and reproduction of social life. Starting with political power and the production of culture.

The sharpening of social polarisation within individual countries is thus a truly worldwide phenomenon, which is differentiated while at the same time being unitary and global. It is grafted onto and combines with the polarisation inherited from previous capitalist development, without however leading, as some thought it would, to the emergence of new social classes. Rather, it results in the transformation of the relation between the two fundamental social classes - the working class and the capitalist class - which has always driven and continues to drive the historical movement of the contemporary world.

This set of processes and contradictions are analysed and discussed in the articles in this issue. Michael Roberts, in "Inequality: The Economic Foundation," highlights the sharpening of income and wealth inequalities over the past four decades between and within countries. Alain Bihr and Roland Pfefferkorn, in their essay "Du système des inégalités aux classes sociales", point to the persisting division of French society into social classes and the exacerbation of inequality produced by neoliberal policies, emphasizing its systemic roots. In "Contemporary Slavery and Inequality in Brazil", Marcela Soares examines regional inequalities and social polarization in Brazilian society, also discussing contemporary slavery, seen as the most visible expression of super-exploitation and the result of the reinvention of hybrid forms of labour exploitation. Nicola Costalunga, in "The Japanese Myth: A Middle-class Society or a Reality Overwhelmed by Global Social Polarisation?", offers a new way of looking at Japan: in the wake of major structural transformations, in recent decades the country has been affected by greater polarization between social classes, ever greater economic disparities, and deepening inequalities between stable and precarious workers.