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Reflections on Inequality and Equality

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Inequality

Here are two observations:

- Since about 1975, there has been a shift, sometimes massively, towards more inequality in the distribution of income (and wealth) in most European countries. This shift seems to have been absorbed in society with little or no counter-reaction or difficulty.
- In late 2005 and early 2006 France exploded in social riots of almost revolutionary proportions. Those riots would seem to have something to do with inequality, but how and what kind of inequality?

These are simple yet puzzling examples. It seems to me that if we are to claim some theoretical understanding of inequality, we would have to be able to make sense of elementary observations such as these which are apparently totally contradictory. I take these observations as my test and will try to see if there is a way of reconciling them.

The purpose of this essay is exactly what the title says: to reflect. I have wanted to take a step back from current research and think again about core concepts. These reflections are grounded in my own recently published or completed work, both theoretical and empirical.¹ But presently I have wanted to reflect freely, and as naively as I have been able to, on the meaning of equality, inequality and the politics of egalitarianism.

My context is the contemporary European scene.

1.

I use this terminology:

- Those who are concerned with problems of inequality (such as myself), I call *egalitarians*, and their ideology I call *egalitarianism*. I want to suggest what we egalitarians should be concerned with, i.e. the practical meaning of egalitarianism.
- The term *inequality* refers sometimes descriptively to any distribution of goods or bads that deviates from an equal distribution, and sometimes normatively to unequal distributions that represent a problem from an egalitarian point of view.
- I attempt to escape that terminological confusion and will, when I refer to inequalities in the second meaning, mostly say *objectionable inequality*, by which I mean inequality egalitarians consider or should consider to represent a problem.
- Inequality is ultimately in *well-being*. The term *standard of living* I use as a narrower concept of economic well-being.

2.

Egalitarians are *against* inequality but (in spite of themselves) not always. There are two reasons to hold inequality to be objectionable:

- When it does harm to persons, be it in their dignity or their life chances.²
- When it is disruptive to society, be it in cohesion or efficiency.

If those two reasons define what makes inequality objectionable, it follows that we usually need more information to go on than about the shape of pertinent distributions in order to draw normative conclusions about problems of inequality. Inequality is not objectionable *only* by appearing to be severe in its degree, it becomes objectionable by the consequences that follow.

Are egalitarians also *for* equality? Sometimes, but (in spite of themselves) often not.

- For some purposes, equality is an imperative. That applies for example to fair participation in democratic politics, as in the principle of one person one vote.
- Since egalitarians are against inequality they will often be in favour of *more* equality, but that is not necessarily to say absolute equality; usually it is not.
- In the distribution of most goods and bads it is intellectually difficult to hold equality to be an operational goal, so much so that this is a position that is possible only for utopian revolutionaries. Practical egalitarianism is usually a matter of avoiding too much inequality, or, if you will, about ‘optimal inequality’.

When should egalitarians be ideologically radical and insist on equality? A first argument for equality comes from democratic theory: the equality that is needed for democracy to function reasonably well.³ In principle that means equal access to political participation and influence. In practice, however, the only political resource that anyone insists should be equal is the vote. All other political resources – e.g. information, skills, money, connections – are unavoidably distributed unequally, something democracy lives with pretty well.

A second argument comes from the theory of citizenship: equality of citizenship rights.⁴ In principle, universal citizenship means equal rights. That applies practically to human rights, equality before the law and democratic-political rights, to what might be called ‘basic rights’. Beyond that there are social rights such as the right to work, to education, to family formation, to health care, to cultural participation and so on. Here the meaning of ‘rights’ is ambiguous, never mind ‘equal rights’. For example if citizenship in principle includes a right to work, as is enshrined in some national constitutions, the practical meaning of that principle is usually little more than a duty on the government to engage in some form of employment policy and to provide some conditional support for the

unemployed. Furthermore, if citizenship implies equal rights, it should probably also imply equal duties but citizenship theory is conspicuously inarticulate about duties. All in all, citizenship theory is rather muddled about equality.

Beyond the principle of political equality – practically one person one vote – and equality of basic rights, no other practical aim is available to the egalitarian than not too much inequality. What makes inequality ‘too much’ is determined by the criteria of harm and disruption. There is too much inequality if someone suffers harm from it or if social or economic life is disrupted. Even though it is meaningful to speak of, say, the ethics of equality, practical concerns over inequality usually come down to instrumentality. Crudely, inequality is objectionable if and to the degree that bad consequences follow. Even when equality is an imperative, that also is for instrumental reasons. Political equality is an imperative because of the requirements of democracy, not for its own sake.

The ideology of egalitarianism, then, probably carries through to less equality in practice than many egalitarians might be inclined or want to think.

The reason the domain of equality is limited is not only that some inequalities are without normative importance, but also that there are relevant arguments against equality:

- **Impossibility.** Some goods just could not be distributed equally, say income. In some cases it is hardly possible to even formulate an operational meaning of equality. For example, the idea of equal access to health care could practically only mean equal treatment relative to need as defined by medical expertise, which really means a duty to provide care but not a right to receive it.
- **Freedom.** An attempt to extend the domain of equality quickly comes up against a risk of infringements in freedom from the political means that would be needed to attain the egalitarian goal.
- **Efficiency.** Attempts to impose equality might be prohibitively costly in social diversity and economic efficiency.

3.

Inequality of what? The general answer is things that matter to people in and for their lives, well-being in short. That answer can be taken further in two directions:

- inequality of chances
- inequality of conditions.

The thought model is that people go through life making choices. Their *chances* are defined by their situation in front of choice, by what choices they have and can make. That can range from almost no choice, as when life is dominated by the satisfaction of basic needs or

regulated dictatorially, to almost total freedom of choice, as in a life of affluence in a free society.

People's *conditions* are defined by their situation after choice, by the outcomes of the choices they have made or to where necessity has taken them.

It would seem that an idea of equality of conditions is utopian and practically irrelevant; the normative problem is too much inequality. It could appear less utopian to envisage a situation of equality of opportunity; at least that concept is much used in the literature. The principle of equal political rights is a case of equal opportunity. However, again beyond basic rights, not only equality of conditions but also equality of opportunity is pie-in-the-sky. For example, as long as there is some inequality of income, which there is and will be everywhere and for ever, even in an ideal egalitarian society, there is inequality of opportunity.

4.

Inequality is harmful when some people live with deprivations that cause them harm. That is best defined as chances or conditions that are such as to exclude those inflicted from a socially determined minimum level of well-being or participation in social life. This is effectively the European definition of poverty. Therefore, inequality is objectionable, firstly, if and to the degree it leaves some people in poverty.

Inequality could also be harmful to persons directly as a result of the structure of inequality and irrespective of poverty or not. The theory is that severe relative deprivation may be so offensive to the disadvantaged that it could be damaging to them, for example in their health.⁵ If so, some inequalities should be considered objectionable without resort to the argument of poverty.

This case of harm is difficult to establish because it depends on a complicated causal chain:

- the existence of 'objective' inequality,
- on something 'subjectively' happening in people's minds as a result of the experience of inequality and their own position in it,
- on harmful 'objective' consequences following from those 'subjective' processes.

In this theory of relative deprivation, then, it is neither by inequality as such nor by subjective responses to inequality alone that inequalities are objectionable but by the harmful consequences that follow from subjective experiences.

What kind of inequality might plausibly result in harm in this meaning? On this, existing theory is open and we can only speculate. Extreme inequality is probably not a persuasive answer. For example, I would guess that many users of *Google* think (as I do) of this magic, which is even free at use, as such a wondrous tool that no reward is enough for its inventors and that they are not begrudged their success as multi-millionaires. Rather, their success

becomes strangely a part of the larger fairy-tale. On the other hand, the same people might well find mega-bonuses for stockbrokers or profits derived from asset-stripping, even on a much lower scale, sickeningly offensive. It would seem that what makes inequality directly harmful (i.e. without resort to poverty) is rather the kind of inequality than the degree of inequality.

If even extreme inequality requires some additional 'quality' to be objectionable, intuition would suggest two possible criteria:

- When inequalities originate in processes that are unfair, rigged, monopolistic or unrelated to merit.
- When the benefits of inequality are used unproductively, dishonestly or in other ways outrageously.

One example of the first might be bonuses to business leaders that are disproportionate to business performance or without grounding in visible performance. What makes that objectionable in other people's eyes is that these business leaders appear to be taking out more than they have contributed to creating, hence taking from others. An example of the latter might be extreme wealth used for purposes other than further economic advancement, such as to 'buy' political influence. That appears objectionable because it is to use wealth in a way that diminishes other people's rights or opportunities. For example, when it is acceptable for rich people to use money as a political resource, the democratic vote is diminished in value. On the other hand, even extreme wealth that is used in economically or socially responsible ways might escape being considered objectionable.

5.

In economic theory, there has been much concern over inefficiencies that may follow from egalitarian policies. Although there are no doubt real trade-offs of that kind, there are also potential social costs following from inequality:

- A failure to invest in or maintain human capital, for example as a result of deprivations in education or health care.
- A failure to create or maintain a culture of co-operation and a feeling of common purpose.
- When distributional conflict is allowed to escalate into active confrontation or social unrest.

Social disruption is actual or potential. The observation of disruption after the fact is interesting and important, but more important, in the interest of prevention, is the understanding of potential disruption before the fact. From this follows a recommendation to research on inequality that it sets itself the ambition of developing instruments for the continuous reporting on sensitive social trends in the distribution of goods and bads.

Persons

Inequality can be between persons or between groups. Let's start with persons.

1.

A standard picture of inequality is by the distribution of income between persons (or households) as displayed in Lorentz curves or estimated by the gini-index. This is the kind of distributional information that is behind the observation of increasing inequality in European (and other) countries since about the mid-1970s that I mentioned as an example in the introduction.⁶ What does that information tell us?

Firstly, it tells us exactly what is displayed: the distribution of income as defined and measured between persons (usually in clusters of persons such income deciles). That is obviously relevant information in relation to concerns over inequality. Income matters to people and those people are the units of observation. When we see income distributions thus displayed changing, we know that something of relevance and possibly importance is going on.

But still, what does this information 'really' mean normatively speaking? That is surprisingly difficult to answer. The reason is that there are strong hidden assumptions wrapped into this way of displaying distributional information that makes it difficult to interpret. Those assumptions are:

- Income is an indicator of well-being.
- The income data that are used are reliable data on income according to a robust definition.
- All persons are the same in terms of their need or desire for income.
- Time stands still.
- The territory within which the income distribution is displayed, usually the nation-state, represents the relevant domain of inequality.

2.

Income is, firstly, at best a crude indicator of anything but itself. It does not represent a person's chances. Income is of course an important resource for people to make choice, but still affects their chances only in interaction with other resources such as knowledge, information and social links (often called 'social capital'). Nor does it represent a person's conditions. Even for people who live in market economies, there are important non-market sources of consumption, such as family production and social exchange. There is very little reason to believe that two people are equally well off in standard of living, and even less in well-being, from only the information that they are equal in income. Income is a measure of income, but a bad indicator of both standard of living and well-being. If we think of income as an indicator of standard of living or well being – and if not, what's the point? – there are serious problems of validity in the income approach.

The accepted theoretical definition of income is 'the sum of consumption and saving over a period'. Data to display income in a way faithful to that definition are hardly available. Efforts to measure 'full income' have proved fraught with pitfalls. Therefore, there is unavoidably a considerable distance between 'income' and 'income-as-we-are-able-to-measure-it'. Even at the bottom range of the distribution, among 'the poor', income-as-we-are-able-to-measure-it has proved to be a weak predictor of consumption or consumption power. Hence, not only are there problems of validity in the use of income as an indicator of anything but itself, there are also problems of reliability in the measurement of income as such.

All persons are far from being the same in their need or desire for income. Disabled people generally need more purchasing power than others to obtain the same level of consumption. Some people have a relatively strong desire for leisure and would want to sacrifice income for free time. Their well-being would paradoxically be low if they displayed high earnings as a result of a lack of freedom to opt for shorter working hours.

There are at least three ways in which standards of living may be unequal without that being interpretable as objectionable inequality:

- When standards of living are unequal in ways that corresponds to unequal needs.
- When standards of living are unequal as a result of different preferences and free choice.
- When unequal incomes or consumptions are part of a larger package of goods and bads that compensate for each other, for example in different combinations of income, work and leisure.

Together these criteria add up to a wide scope for unequal distributions of income and consumption that may still be compatible with equity in standards of living or well-being.

An example: In Norway women have achieved a very high degree of equity with men in education, employment and politics but there are still conspicuously few women in executive jobs in the private sector. Is that something egalitarians should object to? That

would depend on *why* there are not more women in executive jobs. If women are as motivated as men for executive jobs but are prevented from attaining such jobs by discriminating procedures of recruitment or otherwise, it would be a case of objectionable inequality. But if many women have decided that the rat race is not worth the effort and hazel and are therefore freely disinclined to aspire to executive jobs, there would in this observation be no problem of inequality. One hopes the latter is the case: women out of superior wisdom opting for a better quality of life.⁷

In life there is always movement and time never stands still. A snapshot picture of chances or conditions at a specific point in time gives some information but 'real' chances and conditions are best understood as spread out over the life-course. The correlation between people's situation at selected points in the life-course and the sum total of their situation over periods in the life-course, shorter or longer, is low. For example, the incidence of income poverty over a period is generally lower than its incidence at any point in time.

An example: Recent explorations of poverty in Scandinavia show relatively high incidences of relative income poverty among young people in their twenties.⁸ It has been suggested that this is spurious, reflecting a combination of more young people in education and fewer in work and more young people taking 'gap years' between studies and working.

The territorial issue is complex and has not been given much consideration in the literature. The nation-state is the 'obvious' geographical domain for considerations of inequality since it is the domain of public policy. But what, for example, is the true relevance of comparing inequality among 250 000 Icelanders who inhabit a distant island and 85 million Germans who live at the cross-roads of Europe? With European unification, is not Europe becoming the relevant domain of inequality, in particular if we think that economic and political unification leads on to increasing labour mobility and from there to the emergence of a European awareness or identification. With globalisation, is not also inequality becoming a global issue? Global inequality is in large measure discussed as inequality between nations. Is it not time to see it as a matter of inequality between persons on a global scale across the 'arbitrariness' of national boundaries?

3.

Do we 'really' know that there is 'really' more inequality from the data that show that the distribution of income has shifted towards more inequality? Even setting aside problems of reliability in the measurement, the answer is not straightforward. We know that there is more inequality of income as defined and measured, but we know less about what that 'really' means in normative terms.

If more income inequality is the result of mainly a minority of very rich becoming even richer, might this not be movements in, from the majority's point of view, 'another world' which is simply not part of their mental universe? If the majority of households in the same period have themselves experienced improvements in their standard of living, what need

is there to worry about super-rich people becoming more super-rich? It would seem irrational for 'ordinary people' to make themselves discontent over inequalities that are of little consequence in their own lives and thereby destroy what is otherwise a better life. Even if the way many households have improved their standard of living is by working more thanks to more female employment, is that not an additional source of satisfaction given that female employment is seen as a way to advance female emancipation?⁹

The hypothesis suggests itself that the reason the observed shift in income inequality is being absorbed in society with little or no counter-reaction or difficulty, is that this simply *is* a shift of little normative significance. Although there is more inequality as measured by the income approach, not much may follow from that shift *per se* in the form of more objectionable inequality. This hypothesis, with which many egalitarians will be uncomfortable, cannot be disproved with the help of only information on trends in (income) inequality.

Groups

The general approach to inequality between groups is to consider the situation of groups that are hypothesised to be disadvantaged. Such groups include:

- lower social classes
- the poor
- the elderly
- the young
- children
- women
- the disabled
- the peripheral
- minorities

What follows in this section is an attempt towards some generalisations on recent trends in European populations. These attempts are in the nature of broad hypotheses. They are supported by evidence and research reported elsewhere, but are also to some degree impressionistic.¹⁰ If there is some truth to these hypotheses, that would clearly be in the nature of truths with many exceptions.

In some directions in sociological theory it is hypothesised that inequalities thus understood tend towards stability in modern capitalism. I have elsewhere called this 'the stability thesis'. I have argued that the empirical evidence is for the most part not in its support.¹¹

1.

One aspect of industrial and post-industrial modernisation is that lower social classes, in particular the working class, shrink in size and that higher social classes, in particular the middle class, expand. This social mobility represents progress in terms of inequality in the sense that the number of people that are tied into disadvantaged class positions is reduced.

That, however, does not necessarily mean that those (fewer) persons who remain tied into disadvantaged class positions are also less disadvantaged. They may be equally or even more disadvantaged.

One way in which the disadvantage of the disadvantaged might increase is through an increasing subjective sense of deprivation. It might be felt to be worse to be among the unsuccessful when the many are successful.

My instinct tells me that what we might call 'the deprivation of the left-behind' may represent a serious form of contemporary objectionable inequality. 'Left behind' can mean two things, to be stuck geographically in areas from which the more successful move away or to be stuck socially when others are upwardly mobile. When these two effects combine, those left behind are socially deprived in a way that is geographically manifest and visible.¹² Possible extreme manifestations:

- A hardening in pockets of rough working class culture which expresses itself in life-styles designed to be provocative against 'the mainstream', including in loutish behaviour which borders on social unrest. Something like this would seem to have been on display in the 2006 local elections in Britain, including in advances in certain electoral districts for the British National Party.
- A further hardening of attitudes and behaviours in more or less organised thuggery, directed in particular against foreigners and immigrants and loosely associated with extremist and pro-violence ideologies, which clearly spill over into movements of violent social unrest. This has been visible, among other places in Europe, in certain areas in eastern parts of Germany.

The stability thesis applied to class inequality, however, does not generally go to subjective deprivation but to objective disadvantage. It has for example been hypothesised that expanded opportunities for higher education have not carried through to improved relative chances for children of working class families.

Class inequalities clearly persist on what is perhaps a surprising scale. However, the proposition that they exist unaffected in an environment of general upwards social mobility and expanding opportunities, such as in higher education – really that working class children are untouched in their life chances by social and economic modernisation – is neither credible nor supported by relevant analysis and empirical evidence.¹³

2.

Poverty as measured in relative income terms is without doubt of little validity as a measure of harmful deprivation. Poverty resides in the lives of persons as real deprivations in chances and conditions and needs to be established ‘from below’ and from evidence on real living conditions rather than indirectly ‘from above’ in more or less arbitrary cut-off points on more or less arbitrary distributions of income.

3.

Over a relatively short period, the living conditions of the elderly in European type societies has changed from widespread risks of poverty to relative privilege. This is a result of income security and longevity, resulting in a new form of life-course well-being that goes under the name of ‘the third age’.

The elderly as a group may well, statistically, be a low-income group in relative terms. But also the income needs of the elderly as a group are lower than those of younger generations. For example, many elderly are home owners with no mortgage and have good housing at low costs. In for example the Scandinavian countries, where pensions are on a relatively high average, pensioners also hold massive bank savings, something that might indicate that pensions are higher than needed to avoid objectionable inequality to the disadvantage of the elderly.

For society, ‘ageing’ represents various problems in the funding of pensions and the provision of care. For persons, however, ‘ageing’ means predominantly longer happy lives.

4.

It is sometimes thought that life chances for the young have become harder, for example in education, career entry and housing. As a generalisation, this is almost certainly incorrect. Most young people live in a world of opportunity and can with confidence look forward to better chances and conditions than their parents.

However, young people also face increasing expectations on their abilities to make good use of the opportunities that are on offer. What is increasing opportunity for most, is increasing difficulty for some. Those who are unable to keep up with social expectations in education, skills, ambition and self-organisation in a society that increasingly works on the expectation that citizens have a high level of skills and abilities to improve skills, are

at risk of social exclusion. In high youth unemployment rates in Europe, there is an extent of 'un-employability' in what is considered to be decent jobs. This is another case of 'the deprivation of the left-behind'.

5.

Trends in the standard of living of families with (small) children have probably not kept up with increases in the costs of children, in particular the increasing opportunity cost resulting from the two-earner expectation. At the same time, some children are affected negatively by changing family patterns, such as divorce, lone parenthood and informal cohabitation, both in current standards of living and future prospects.

6.

European women remain disadvantaged relative to men on various social dimensions, such as wages and careers, but not on all, for example no longer in education except possibly at the very highest level. This is a result mainly of changing attitudes among both women themselves and others, of liberalisations from the burden of housework (which has come to require much less time), and in some countries of affirmative action in education and (some) labour markets.

There are notable differences within Europe in advances in gender equity, in particular that in Southern European societies institutional arrangements and conventions are entrenched that make it difficult for women to combine the roles of wives, mothers and workers.

7.

For disabled persons, there has been progress in the recognition of rights. This is followed by a likely trend of improvements in practical arrangements to facilitate social participation for physically handicapped persons.

Whether there is also a trend of improved chances and conditions for mentally handicapped persons is more in question. During a period, the de-institutionalisation of mental care was probably taken too far and caused many mentally handicapped persons to be more or less abandoned to what was practically non-existent community care.

8.

Europe is experiencing massive population migrations, both within and between countries. These flows move from depressed areas to more prosperous ones. Geographical movement is often a condition of social advancement. One aspect of migration is that some do not follow the flows of progress, sometimes because they, for reasons of resources or attitudes,

are unable to benefit from the advantages offered by migration. The result, through selection and self-selection, is a combined social and geographical stratification which is the fall-out from advancement for those who are mobile and an accumulation of objective and subjective deprivation among some of those who are not.

Such social-geographical patterns of stratification have been observed, for example in the Afro-American population in the US and the black population in South Africa. Impressive and politically assisted upwards social mobility comes at the price of a new form of 'deprivation of the left-behind'. This is probably also a valid description of processes in, for example, parts of Eastern Germany and in some French *banlieues*.

9.

Population movements in Europe are also in the form of immigration from abroad. This is contributing to a rapid multi-cultural metamorphosis of European societies.¹⁴ One consequence of current immigration is that some 'new minorities' emerge as ethnically constituted underclass populations in the host country. If within-European migration results in deprivations of the left-behind, one consequence of increasing immigration from outside of Europe might be what we could call 'the deprivation of the not-included'.

10.

While inequality in Europe appears to have been increasing as measured by the income approach, many of the group comparisons seem to suggest an improvement, both in absolute and relative terms, in the standard of living and well-being of groups often thought to be the disadvantaged ones. That would seem to be supporting evidence in favour of the hypothesis that the apparent shift towards inequality as measured by income is of little normative significance. If an apparent increase in income inequality does not follow through to deteriorations in the standard of living or well-being of groups that are thought to be disadvantaged, does that not suggest that the observed shift in income inequality is spurious or of limited importance?

11.

Returning now to the 2005-6 riots in France, a reasonable interpretation is that these were a form of genuine revolt resulting from real causes in objectionable inequalities. The riots took place in the meeting ground of social deprivations of the left-behind and minority deprivations of the not-included. Young people from certain *banlieues*, often immigrants or second-generation immigrants, were protesting against having been left behind and not included. University students (but not students from the elite institutions) were protesting in fear of becoming left behind, at least compared to the prospects they 'should' have, because of a perceived low value of the university degrees available to them.

If this interpretation is pertinent, the near-revolutionary revolts in France were a sign of the force of these two forms of deprivation, in particular when they come together, for social disruption. The absorption of increasing income inequality with little counter-reaction could suggest that society does not react against inequality, but that is clearly a misinterpretation. The events in France are proof that modern societies are not immune to reactions against objectionable inequality.

Data

Issues in the measurement of inequality are a dialogue with the income approach.

1.

The income approach has much going for it: data are easily available and analysable and results are believed (if often erroneously) to be easily interpretable and politically relevant. If we are satisfied with the use of available income data for the measurement of well-being we should stick to the income approach because of the many and strong argument of expediency in its favour.

However, there are also good reasons to be not satisfied with income measurement of inequality, as rehearsed above. From income information, we simply know very little about how people have it and how that is 'really' distributed.

To illustrate, observe the following compilations on income measurement of poverty in Europe by Tony Atkinson.¹⁵ He starts with 'two cautionary tales'. The first one is a comparison of estimated incidences of poverty in France and the United Kingdom using data for 1984-85. Fifteen estimates are presented for each country, based on different methodological specifications, all in standard use in current research. For France, the incidence of poverty ranges from 5.3 to 22.5 per cent; for the UK from 1.7 to 25.0 per cent. By some specifications, the estimated incidence of poverty is higher in France than in the UK, by others it is higher in the UK than in France. The second tale is about trends in one country, Ireland, using data for 1987 and 1994. Six different trajectories are estimated, again depending on different methodological specifications. Three trends show the incidence of poverty to be increasing over the period and the three other ones show it to be decreasing, all at different rates.

The estimates included in these tales all make good sense and are based on solid data and derived from sound definitions and methodological choices. But their divergence shows that good income statistics on poverty do not even enable us to help those who only want to know the most elementary things: How much poverty is there in my country? More or less than there used to be? More or less than in a neighbouring country? From the extensive research summarised in Atkinson's tales we can say next to nothing with authority about the extent of poverty and how it compares between countries and changes over time.

2.

If the income approach is unsatisfactory, we need alternatives. The response to problems of reliability is to shift to direct measurement. Within the framework of economic standard of living, that would be to shift from income data to consumption data. Income is a measure of economic *chances*; consumption data display *conditions* directly.

The response to problems of validity is to shift from 'narrow' standard of living approaches to 'broader' approaches for the measurement of well-being. Relevant sources of data include:

- social indicators
- surveys of 'subjective' satisfaction
- time-use.

The general recommendation in shifting from 'narrow' to 'broader' approaches is to move from the measurement of well-being with the help of a single indicator (income) to batteries of multiple indicators. That brings us up against yet another advantage in the income approach compared to multi-indicator approaches. Income measurement is conclusive in this sense: we can always read out of the data with no ambiguity whether two people are equally or differently well off. Multi-indicator approaches do not have this conclusiveness: who is better off, the rich man who is not in good health or the healthy man who is not rich?

This is 'the index problem'. In the income approach, the index problem is by definition solved, methodologically speaking. In broader approaches, it is unresolved. For this reason, broader approaches to the measurement of well being sometimes appear to be incomplete and unpersuasive if the data are not pulled together into a composite index. I add an appendix with some comments on the index problem.

Conclusions

We egalitarians need to be a bit hard-headed about inequality. There is a difference between ‘inequality’ and ‘objectionable inequality’. Egalitarians should recognise that ‘inequality’ is not necessarily a reason for egalitarian concern and should invest effort into the identification of that which is objectionable.

1.

A snap-shot of distributions at any point in time will invariably display a range of inequalities, many of them apparently severe. That picture, however, gives very little information about objectionable inequality and will need to be picked apart for information that is pertinent to normative conclusions.

One way towards more conclusive information could be to look at *trends* rather than states of inequality. Recent trends in inequality, however, turn out to be inconsistent. While there has been a massive shift towards more inequality in the distribution of income between persons, there has at the same time been movements towards mainly, although not exclusively, a narrowing of differences in chances and conditions between social groups. Group comparisons probably contain more pertinent information as a basis for normative conclusions than do data on the overall shape of distributions, in particular income data.

2.

The bottom-line fall-out from objectionable inequality is poverty. The most used way of measuring poverty is with the income approach. Because of problems of validity and reliability, however, the income approach is by and large uninformative about the extent of poverty. Regrettably, no agreement is in sight about any alternative approach. Therefore, and in spite of massive research, we are pretty much in the dark about the extent of poverty in Europe.

Inequality can be objectionable irrespective of poverty if it is in other ways damaging. There is damage in this meaning to persons from inequalities which they have reason to feel are offensive. That probably depends more on the kind of inequality than on the degree of inequality. Inequalities are offensive when they result from ‘unfair’ processes or when wealth is used ‘irresponsibly’.

There is damage to society from inequality when it spills over into disruption. From recent experience in Europe, this is unlikely, again, to come from degrees of inequality but rather from specific forms of inequality. The prime candidates are ‘the inequality of the left-behind’ and ‘the inequality of the not-included’, and in particular when these forms of inequality converge.

‘Social exclusion’ is a competing concept to poverty for capturing the bottom-line fallout from objectionable inequality in affluent societies. Here I suggest that it may be fruitful to unpack exclusion into two very different forms: deprivation resulting from being left behind and deprivation resulting from not being allowed in.

3.

Recommendations for the politics of egalitarianism:

- On goals: Neither ‘equality’ nor ‘inequality’ are much to go by in practical policy. Only exceptionally can policies realistically aspire to equality. Often, inequality is in itself not a cause of egalitarian concern. Beyond the domain of basic rights, practical egalitarianism is about the avoidance of objectionable inequality. Be alert to the forms of deprivation I have called ‘left behind’ and ‘not included’.
- On data and information: Be extremely careful with policy implications derived from broad displays of the shape of inequality, in particular when drawn in the language of income inequality. Look to more detailed information on inequalities between groups, preferably measured more directly than by income.
- On poverty: Go back to first base yet again and reassess theory, concepts and measurement. Build the measurement of poverty from below, using data about how people live.
- On affluence: Explore wealth and the morality of responsible use. While poverty at the bottom of the distribution is always objectionable, wealth at the top of the distribution is objectionable primarily by its use. The avoidance of disruption in society as a result of inequality, and the fostering of a culture of co-operation and common purpose in spite of inequality, depends on the responsible use of wealth.
- On means: In the politics of egalitarianism, redistribution is an important but limited instrument. Redistribution is the appropriate response to poverty. Beyond that, the avoidance of objectionable inequalities depends as much on process as on result. Therefore, the regulation of markets for fair economic exchange is a second pillar in the politics of egalitarianism. Beyond that again, the avoidance of social disruption depends on the responsible use of wealth. Therefore, moral persuasion is a third pillar of the politics of egalitarianism.

One surprising (for me) result of these reflections is that a ‘conservative’ starting point, the insistence of separating out ‘objectionable inequality’ from ‘inequality’, leads on to rather ‘radical’ policy conclusions that go beyond the instrument of redistribution. The politics of egalitarianism is here seen to include two additional pillars: the regulation of underlying economic processes for fairness and moral persuasion of the holders of wealth and capital for its responsible use.

The Index Problem¹⁶

You aim to measure or portray something statistically. You have found out that you need several bits of information to do so. You have resolved what the appropriate indicators are and you have collected the relevant data which you have laid out in front of you. The question then presents itself of how to pull those data together into an unambiguous measure or a definite portrait of the thing you are interested in. That's the index problem, how to provide *one* answer to a question when that answer depends on several bits of data.

One way to do this is to aggregate the data into a single figure on a numerical scale. Let's call that 'indexing'. A well known example is the price index for the measurement of inflation, in which price movements on a ray of commodities are aggregated into a single overall price trend. A more exotic example is 'the discomfort index' suggested by the American economist Arthur Okun as the sum of the rate of inflation and the rate of unemployment.

The reason indexing is a problem is that it is often difficult to find a non-arbitrary way of doing it. That again is difficult because even if it should be clear what the appropriate indicators are that would go into the index, we may not know what weight to give each indicator. In the price index, the price of a commodity, say milk, is weighted by what proportion spending on that commodity makes up in average total household spending. That is a scientifically acceptable way of doing it because it makes good sense and because the weights are not decided by what the scientist might happen to think they should be. In the discomfort index, Okun just added the two figures he thought were the relevant ones, which is to say that he gave each indicator equal weight. That could possibly be said to be less scientific because it was just a convention he chose to use without justification in any guideline of authority as to the actual contribution of inflation versus unemployment to discomfort.

If we don't have an 'objective' criterion of weighting, an index will by definition be more or less arbitrary. (Even indices built on 'objective' criteria, such as the price index, are of course in some respects arbitrary, but I leave that aside here.) If that is the case, we might well ask if there is any point in trying to pull the data together in a composite index. The relevant information is there for all to see; why not just present it as it is without imposing on the data the straightjacket of an index? After all, if we collapse several bits of data into a single number, we lose a good deal of information in the process and that might seem careless if we know that the index we create is of dubious validity.

That is a strong argument against indexing, but it is not fully persuasive. For one thing, we *always* rely on conventions of some kind or other in any effort to measurement, and indexing is in that respect not extraordinary. As long as we use sensible conventions and explain the procedures, there is nothing unscientific in it. For example, a good scientific principle, if the weights are not 'objectively' known, is to go by the simplest possible

assumption. That would usually be to give each indicator the same weight unless there are good reasons that recommend a different convention. Okun's procedure, then, was pretty good science.

Furthermore, there are advantages in indexing. Some information goes lost, but something else is gained. If we just present an array of data and say that this is what the measure of the thing we are interested in is made up of and leave it at that, we and those we address ourselves to may well feel that we have not finished the job and told our story through to its conclusion. This is a very strong instinct in any empirical research, so much so that indexing is often seen to be the obvious and unquestionable final step in the research process. For example, if we define the standard of living as made up of income and leisure, the instinct will be to pull this into a single measure so as to be able to rank everyone on a final scale. Otherwise, it will be unresolved whether A is better off than B if A has more income than B but B more leisure than A. Anything that is unresolved is of course disturbing to the scientific mind.

By experience, the presentation of data in a cluster of indicators is often felt to be unsatisfactory and inconclusive. If you present the relevant data as a cluster of indicators rather than a single index number, although you are being more informative, you may find it difficult to make others interested in listening to you. If you pull it together into an index (and give that index a striking name), although you are being less informative, you are more likely to make people sit up and listen because what you have to say appears more authoritative and final. This is perhaps paradoxical since the index people are prepared to pay attention to may well be a less reliable basis for making up one's mind about the matter than being able to survey the whole range of data, but such is human nature when it comes to numbers. That's why many UN agencies regularly produce reports based on 'league tables' of countries in their areas of work. Everyone knows that any league table is bound to give a more or less arbitrary ranking of nations, but we also know that indices and league tables have to power to concentrate minds. There is nothing frivolous in this. For example the UNDP's Human Development Index has probably contributed to an improved understanding in the world of the problems of poverty and underdevelopment in a way that would not have been achieved had the scientist stopped short of aggregating their development indicators into an index.

So there are arguments for both solutions and we might ask: when to index and when not? One possible answer could be that indexing is only prudent if we have 'objective' criteria for the allocation of weights. Although that might be a good cautionary rule, it is probably not one many scientists would like to subject themselves to. If there are good substantive reasons to aggregate data into an index, and that includes a desire to make one's message heard, indexing can be done safely enough with the help of transparent assumptions even if we have very little to go on for deciding on the weights. That's not where the problem lies.

If we narrow the issue down to applied policy research (and set aside considerations that are exclusively scientific in basic research), what we should be guided by, I think, is the purpose of the enterprise. We are now in the business of informing citizens and decision-makers about matters relevant to the formation of opinions and policies. We can think of that job in two ways. We may imagine that the objective is to assist towards rationally informed decisions or to assist towards a rational political process.

In the first case, we should expect citizens and decision-makers to be in demand of the most conclusive possible information to go on. The scientist's job is then to tell them as precisely as he can how matters stand that are relevant to the decision problem. For example, if the Central Bank is considering whether or not to change the base interest rate, it needs to know how prices are developing. That includes a measure of total inflation, a price index in other words. The Central Bank needs much more information than this, but it is difficult to see how it could act rationally on interest rates without the help of a price index. The responsibility of the scientist must then be to be helpful and pull his price data together into an index as best he can. That's the solution that is in demand in the enterprise we are concerned with and it is to that solution the scientist should apply his craft. In the case of the price index this represents no great problem since a credible basis of weights is available. But the reason we should say that the scientific job here includes indexing is not that a credible technology is available. That is fortunate but is not the reason. What calls on the scientist to carry his measurement forward to an index is the nature of the demand for information that arises from the enterprise the research is seen to serve.

In the second case, the enterprise to be served is not limited to solving the decision-making problem at the end of a political process but goes to the rationality of the process itself. The job of the scientist is now not so much to guide decision-makers towards good decisions as (assuming we are in a democracy) to guide citizens towards rational deliberation. That is a job of extraordinary importance in a democracy where good decisions are by definition the decisions that result from a rational process of deliberation.

Rational deliberation depends, as does rational decision-making, on information, but not exactly on the same kind of information. While decision-making depends on disputes being closed so that decision-makers can get on with it, deliberation depends on disputes being opened up, encouraged and guided forwards. That would lead us to see the problem of indexing, and in particular of the weighting of indicators, in a new light. What it often means that weights cannot be allocated 'objectively' is that the business of weighting and thereby of indexing is in reality a normative and political problem. If the standard of living is made up of income and leisure, you and I will possibly have different opinions about the relevant importance of those two factors. If so, we should not think it is for the scientist to decide for us how they ought to be weighted. Rather, that is something we have to resolve ourselves through careful deliberation, or leave not agreed-upon. If applied research is seen to serve the rationality of the democratic process, which is to say the process of managing

normative problems, it should seek to lay out relevant issues for deliberation but not pre-empt the democratic nature of deliberation by seeking to impose 'scientific' solutions on what are in reality normative problems.

In principle, indexing without 'objective' criteria assumes that the process of deliberation over the normative problem of weighting has been completed so that we are ready to move forwards to decision-making on the basis of a more or less agreed-upon weighting of the arguments relevant to the decision at hand. In theory, therefore, indexing is recommended only if we can be confident that there has been adequate deliberation over the normative issues involved. If that is not the case, if the enterprise at hand is in stead that very deliberation, the recommended procedure would be to put relevant information before citizens without pre-empting deliberation by indexing prematurely. Indexing without deliberation might be described as a form of scientific transgression into matters that pertain to the democratic process. If indexing means the processing of data into an unambiguous measure or definitive portrait of an underlying concept, say poverty, that processing is now a political more than a scientific task.

Notes

- 1 Stein Ringen: *What Democracy Is For*, Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2007; *The Possibility of Politics*, 3rd ed., Transaction Publishers 2006; *Citizens, Families and Reform*, 2nd ed., Transaction Publishers 2005.
- 2 That applies obviously to those who are on the disadvantaged end. Inequality may also be objectionable and possibly harmful to those who do not suffer deprivation themselves, but I do not go into that.
- 3 On political equality, see Robert H. Dahl: *Political Equality*, Yale University Press 2006.
- 4 On citizenship, see Martin Bulmer and Anthony M. Rees eds.: *Citizenship Today: The Contemporary relevance of T.H. Marshall*. UCL Press 1996.
- 5 As argued in particular in Richard G. Wilkinson: *The Impact of Inequality: How to Make Sick Societies Healthier*, Routledge 2006; *Unhealthy Societies: The Afflictions of Inequality*, Routledge 1996.
- 6 See e.g. A.B. Atkinson: *Incomes and the Welfare State*, Cambridge University Press 1995.
- 7 On the Norwegian case, see Stein Ringen: 'Wealth and Decay', *Times Literary Supplement* 13 February 2004.
- 8 See Björn Gustafsson ed.: *Poverty and Low Income in the Nordic Countries*, Ashgate 1999.
- 9 For a recent discussion, referring to the US case, see Andrew Hacker: 'The Rich and Everyone Else', *New York Review of Books* 25 May 2006.
- 10 See footnote 1.
- 11 See *What Democracy Is For*, op. cit.
- 12 This idea of 'the deprivation of the left behind' is inspired by the theory of non-inclusion in a surge of combined social and geographical upwards social mobility as developed in William Julius Wilson: *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Chicago University Press 1987; *The Declining Significance of Race*, Chicago University Press 1978.
- 13 See Stein Ringen: 'The Truth About Class Inequality', *Czech Sociological Review* 2006, no. 3.
- 14 See Carl-Ulrik Schierup, Peo Hansen and Stephen Castles,: *Migration, Citizenship and the European Welfare State: A European Dilemma*, Oxford University Press 2006.
- 15 A.B. Atkinson: *Poverty in Europe*, Cambridge University Press 1998.
- 16 Adapted from *What Democracy Is For*, op. cit.

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