

## **Inequality as Social Process: Reflections from a South Asian experience**

### **Introduction**

Colleagues on Council and elsewhere think it is a good idea for the President of the DSA to present a plenary conference address sometime during their term of office. I have accepted this honour with some natural trepidation. It is difficult to engage one's colleagues with something interesting after all this time. Any successor to me should note this new obligation before they accept nomination as President!

Before I proceed further, I should observe that the task of leading the DSA is not easy, indeed quite a challenge. It relies upon the pro bono efforts of some, and the underpaid efforts of others. Nevertheless, I believe it is a vitally important part of the development landscape, a contributor to a global public good. With our widespread colonial past, we in the UK have had a special part to play globally in understanding the problems of poor people in poor countries as they try to realise their wellbeing ambitions. Ireland has used its own history as a colony to develop a renowned commitment to international development. It is in this sense that I am proud to be a *diwan* of the DSA of the UK and Ireland and to reaffirm our joint ethical commitments to the wellbeing of the excluded, marginalised, oppressed and poor—everywhere.

Today, in the plenary sessions for this conference, these ethical commitments are focussed upon inequality as a multi-dimensional threat to the wellbeing of most of the world's population. Rather like the VW sponsored film clips about 'seeing film differently', I hope to display inequality in a different way, rather than only dwell upon its destructive significance for the poor or track trends in gini coefficients, or engage in definitional discourse. And I feel that my exposure to the countries of South Asia have helped me enormously to understand the pervasiveness and persistence of inequality in countries like the UK.

### **Inequality and the problem of Order**

To begin with, I think there is an intimate connection between inequality and the problem of order in society. And although the world is full of conflict and contestation, it is the prevalence of relative order which actually has to be explained rather than disorder. For most societies across the world, there seems to be a central conundrum: with such deep and in

many cases deepening inequality, how is order, political and social, maintained? Furthermore with increasing communications and urbanisation, the sense of relative deprivation is always increasing, adding to political volatility and thus adding to the problem of order. Following Hegel, the state of course plays a central role in the maintenance of societal order. And I, alongside others like Schaffer and Douglas North, argue that it does so through the management of access to the resources which the state can mobilise, as well as presiding over highly unequal distributions of property and status, deploying in some combination: violence, ideology and legal codes. But there is the additional argument that the social reproduction of inequality is itself a contributor to unequal order, well calibrated to a Marxian account of the state as primarily representative of dominant property holding classes and resource controlling elites.

### **Inequality: a universal human need?**

Ideologically, I acknowledge that there are many elites, not least in the present UK cabinet and their supporters in the right wing media, who openly regard inequality as the driver of economic progress, as the core imperative of humans as competitors rather than humans as co-operators. Certainly humans are, ontologically, social beings with aspects of their wellbeing intrinsically articulated through the enjoyment and pleasure of status in a quasi zero sum game. At the same time, as remarked by Severine Deneulin, a personal sense of wellbeing is also a function of the common good, that others around us share in some happiness too. This seems to be the dilemma of the human condition—too little inequality does not accord status, while too much of it (as pride and prejudice) pricks the conscience and disturbs both sense and sensibility. In so alluding to Jane Austen, I am celebrating her insight into the social-psychological processes whereby inequality is reproduced as the order of society. In the early 90s, my friend Ian Gough, with Len Doyal, identified autonomy and health as universal human needs, but I have already added security and perhaps, perversely, inequality is a candidate too.

Of course, like many, I formally disapprove of inequality. I do so because it seems related to unfairness, injustice, and a variation in lifechances de-linked from personal efforts and behaviour. But do I really disapprove? As academics and professionals, we all enjoy the conferment of status through letters and titles. Indeed we strive for them. And however humble in our rhetoric and body language, we like nothing better than recognition. We are defined, for example, by peer group recognition expressed through various forms of acclamation. The UK has always been particularly impressive in finding ways to differentiate, to salami slice, even within its honours system. It always amuses me how the British reproduce their class system wherever they go, whether in the air or in diplomatic missions abroad. I have just witnessed, indeed been part of, the installation of the Earl of Wessex as the new Chancellor of Bath University. Deconstructing the procession order in terms of finely grained distinctions of rank, calibrated to the wearing of increasingly exaggerated regalia was a sheer ethnographical delight!

## **Inequality: Bad for All?**

Formal disapproval of inequality arises from certain objectivities. It is associated with poverty, with low rates of economic growth, with exploitation, with precarious rights, with injustice, with the under-development of potential, with oppression and suppression. According to Wilkinson and Pickett (in *The Spirit Level*), it is not only the poor who suffer in more unequal societies, everyone does. A similar point to Deneulin's.

‘Across whole populations, rates of mental illness are five times higher in the most unequal societies compared to the least unequal societies. Similarly, in more unequal societies people are five times as likely to be imprisoned, six times as likely to be clinically obese, and murder rates may be many times higher.’

Inequality also has horizontal as well as vertical forms. One of my predecessors, Frances Stewart, has written about that. And consider the Orwellian speak of apartheid apologists arguing for separate development on racial lines, having already commandeered most of the rich natural resources for the whites—the vertical interacting with the horizontal. Charles Tilly's analysis of *Durable Inequality* relies heavily upon the notion of categorical inequality expressed through exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation and adaptation. A further dimension of horizontal inequality is the geography of it, as understood by Gunnar Myrdal in his *Theory of Undeveloped Regions* referencing Europe (1954), and later the *dependistas* merging geography with international political economy in their analysis. Those geographical variations, reflective of class and economic activity, persist strongly in both the Indian sub-continent, the UK and everywhere else.

## **Offsetting the labour theory of value**

Clearly we understand inequality as economic classes under dominant modes of production—primarily feudal then capitalist, both entailing gendered discrimination and thus double layered inequality. We understand the labour theory of value, whereby the surplus value of labour is appropriated by owners of the means of production for profit as consumption or re-investment. We understand that surplus value appropriation can be absolute or relative, respectively increasing rates of exploitation coercively or through technology. In Marxian theory, relative surplus value entails a rise in the organic composition of capital in the labour process to the point where profit has a tendency to fall unless offset by further opportunities for absolute exploitation offered by colonialism, imperialism, and *inter alia* political repression especially in the realm of trades union regulation. We also know, following Polanyi, that such commodification trends can, in their extreme, lead to political volatility, requiring elites to make concessions through de-commodification tactics whether in labour regulation or welfare to compensate for the infra-subsistence wages and insecurity offered by owners of capital. The welfare state in the UK had such origins, as studied by colleagues in social policy. There are lessons for today's emerging middle income societies, and the DSA with the SPA has made a start in exploring common intellectual agendas between the multi-

disciplines of development studies and social policy. I guess the core issue here is whether these decommodification welfare regimes represented only a brief period of sanity in capitalist development, and they are subject, in the words of Dudley Seers, to the limitations of the special case.

### **Political Implications of the new working class**

Do we need to be reminded that class is therefore more than economic categories, more than stratification and crucially about relationships? It is refreshing, in a perverse sense, that class has re-entered the discourse of British politics, maybe because we have reverted to a cabinet of public school, Oxbridge types oozing privilege in their upbringing and attitudes. At least it is sharpening awareness of the deep inequalities in British society to the point where a recent survey indicates that 60% of the population regards itself as working class. So all that post-modern, Marcusean embourgeoisification, social science seems to have withered on the vine of objectivity—less than 10% in the UK still own more than 75% of its wealth, the bottom 50% of the population measured by income own 10% of the nation's wealth. Thus we have to be critically alert, in a Foucauldian sense, to a stratification discourse which promulgates the natural order of things with a bit, usually over-estimated, of social mobility to keep the masses in hope. While there is plenty of ideology to this effect, it would seem to be breaking down if the majority of people are returning the 'working class' tag instead of being conned by the aspirational identification with the middle class.

Of course in the UK, today's working class is different from the old—now more lumpen and precarious than an advanced guard of unionised proletarians, and thus less able to project their own party, or at least a party representing their interests, into government from time to time. New Labour signified the final break between workers' interests and political representation, a reflection probably of the steady disappearance of the organised proletariat. Today's fragmented, atomised working class provides the social basis for fascism, or at least populism, an identity significantly reinforced by racist othering. The present immigration discourse in the UK, heralded by the Daily Mail as well as the Murdoch media, is an especially disgusting version of this particular brand of post-modernism, designed for the base motives of a fearful, insecure and alienated workforce: casual, part-time, especially female, zero-contract, kowtowing to elites for survival.

### **The limits of stratification discourse: need for good sociology rather than bad political economy**

All this lies within a stratification discourse. You are where you are either because that is your inheritance or because you deserve to be—legacy or agency, and your rights are circumscribed accordingly. For a while, possibly confined only to my generation, there were opportunities to escape these labels through education as the rise in the organic composition of capital demanded skills in technology and management. But now graduates stack shelves

in Tesco's. My argument is that the stratification discourse of inequality, in all its forms, does us a profound disservice by diverting our attention from 'how' questions about the reproduction of inequality and all that goes with it. Relationships in other words. Inequality is a process, not a state of affairs. It requires videogenic not photogenic analysis. (And it is certainly not a pretty sight.) Too often, the genuinely sociological is squeezed out in favour of second class political economy.

### **What and How Questions: modifying determinism**

But let's stay with political economy a little longer since I am enough of a Marxist to accept an element of determinism within modes of production analysis. In other words, there are objective conditions, created over time, to do with property and interests which underpin institutional configurations of power—the base of superstructure. The problem, however, with much Marxian discourse is that it stays with the 'what' questions, rather than the 'how' questions. For example, a 'what' question asserts that the state represents the property owning interests of the dominant class in any era/mode of production. That is 'what' the state does. But it does not tell us 'how' it does that. It does not engage with the process question.

Some Marxists and more Weberians have had a stab at the how question, but without much sociological imagination! Marcuse and Althusser stand out through one dimensional man and the ideological instance, respectively. And of course the critical theorists like Habermas. And then Foucault and other post-structuralists like Derrida. All to be respected as part of the shift from the 'what' to the 'how' side. This was how I got into labelling—to engage with 'how' questions. I got there, initially, via Althusser who asserted a logical and empirically backed truth that straightforward oppression cannot be sustained. It is too expensive to manage because it continually reproduces a bigger problem to manage. The first Henry Tudor (*The Winter King*) finally realised that, as did Gorbachev and of course De Klerk, and so many more. Perhaps the finest example of the ideological instance at work was Goebbels, since he was not defeated by internal implosion. Of course he was able to take othering to another, incredible, dimension. Never underestimate the value of de-humanisation and demonising. Clearly Cameron, Osborne, Gove and co do not, though a relief that Teresa May is prepared to abandon the pilot 'go home' vans! I think I, and later others like Ros Eyben and friends, have proved the power of labelling and am having that proof continuously reinforced by global events.

### **Labelling and Access**

The labelling thesis was an incremental realisation of Schaffer's work on access. The maintenance of apparently legitimate inequality is central to the management of scarcity in any society, especially where expectations of rights, entitlements and justice force claims upon the state as part of its own continued existence. Goods and services have to be rationed, and better or more politically efficient to do so if the queue appears to be legitimate, self-

evidently correct and reached objectively, or rather apparently so. That is where labelling is indispensable to a theory of access. It is an exercise of power, through state led authoritativeness backed up by pseudo-science, to retain inequality and reproduce it. Polly Toynbee's recent piece in *The Guardian* on 'sanctions', i.e. concocted reasons for withdrawing benefits from the needy, is a good example of ideological discrimination masquerading as rational technique.

The centrality of the question of access explains the significance of North's work on the limited access state, and, with Wallis and Weingast, the significance of their book—*Violence and Social Orders*. Their argument about coalitions of elites hoarding rent-seeking opportunities (akin to Tilly's 'opportunity hoarding' in his explanations of durable inequality) through increasingly codified practices, with threats of violence becoming less manifest and more latent, remind us of the centrality of the state in the process of reproducing inequality. But, in my view, the state needs help from more subtle, embedded social processes in order to preside successfully over systems of restricted rights and injustice.

### **Epistemology: the looseness of the structure of things**

This returns us to the more sociological 'how' questions to elucidate the 'what' questions derived from political economy. I believe that we need a combination of the 'what' and 'how' questions to understand the 'why' question and its significance for well-being. The 'how' question requires some attention to epistemology.

In the early 90s, I recall John Harriss, another DSA predecessor, leaning over to whisper to me at a conference initiated by Barbara Harriss, Ben Rogaly and Sugata Bose in Kolkata. We were collectively exploring *Sonar Bangla* across West Bengal and Bangladesh in the presence of a CPI(M) phalanx of state leaders. For the phalanx, the only valid explanations of agricultural progress were to be found deterministically in changing the relations of production and access to the principal means of production via land reform. The Left Front Government was proud of its record in this respect. My analysis, regarding Bangladesh, was that land reform was virtually useless in a highly plot fragmented agrarian topography and that more attention needed to be given to entrepreneurial initiatives via irrigation and other agricultural services—agency in other words, with eventual implications for changing control over the primary means of production via control over the second means: i.e. water, and then other agricultural services. Having glanced at my paper before I presented it, John whispered that 'it was a bit pomo'. That was when I realised that, together with my earlier work on labelling, derived from Althusser and Foucault, that I had truly entered my post-Marxian phase.

I was confirmed, as it were, in this epistemological shift by Giddens' structuration and, coincidentally, Norman Long's 'actor-oriented epistemology'. Essentially that is where I have stuck. This position is a subtle one, as it does not remove deterministic potential from institutions, but it reminds us that they have fluidity and are structurally susceptible to human

agency. As Michael Ondaatje observed (*In the Skin of a Lion*), he was impressed ‘with the looseness of the structure of things’.

### **The malleability of caste**

Nowhere is this epistemological stance, this looseness, on better display than the institution of caste in South Asia and around the world in other forms and vocabularies. For this plenary session, I accepted the challenge to reflect upon my experience in South Asia, having indicated that I wanted to approach the problematic of inequality from a social process perspective. So you would expect me to mention caste, though it is not be my central theme in that obvious way. The main point I want to make about caste here is that it has always been malleable, with a permeability of boundaries and categories. More popularly, it has usually been discussed within a stratification discourse about inequality rather than through relationships and interdependencies, expressed, for example, as ‘*jajmani*’. Thus much of the ‘sanskritisation’ analysis of mobility describes the conversion of material goods and material success into symbolic and positional goods (i.e. status) in order to re-calibrate or reconcile status frameworks, thus re-establishing order within the core institution of caste rather than a complete rejection of it. A process of accommodation, in other words. While many modern, educated, urbane people in the sub-continent wish to present caste as an anachronism, it is alive and well as a framing set of codes, as a frame of meaning (Collins), enabling, on occasion, actors to claim progressive deviance from strict caste endogamy although proximate endogamy in terms of social class is the usual substitute.

### **Limits to the opiate value of caste**

There can be little doubt that the historical layers of the institution of caste, represented in both its Great (*varna*) and Little (*jati*) Tradition forms (see Redfield), have operated as a powerful ‘ideological instance’ in successive epochs, facilitating latent, and thus apparently natural, forms of exploitation, oppression and control as a supporting pillar to more manifest, frequently violent, modes of domination and suppression. How else could such a combination of deep poverty and inequality be managed and sustained? If something like caste had not existed, it would have had to be invented as a tool of agrarian management! Ah—but it was! No state or elites with their retainers could otherwise police such widespread societal injustice. But even then, I do not believe that such depths of material inequality can be simply overcome by notions of *dharma* and *karma*, with the promise of positive reincarnation. Religion surely is an opiate, but in itself insufficient to offset glaring injustice. There are too many examples of protest and riot and more organised revolt to have that degree of faith in the opiate function of religion. For me, such stratification cannot be sustained by ideology and belief alone. In other words, there is another way of looking at caste as a set of interactive, hierarchical relationships expressing the mutual needs of social actors from across the social topography.

### **The ambiguity of jajmani and clientelism: mutuality and inequality**

OK, so that is a reference to clientelism within a framework of differential access to the means of production and exchange. But it is not so simple as patron-clientelism, with the patron dominant. The key is the mutuality of needs circumscribing the exchange of services—a division of labour, entailing organic interdependence. Within the caste system and the notion of *jajmani*, there has always been an ambiguity whether this exchange is between actors of different status or class, and whether the recipient of service is always socially superior to the provider. At this point, the sociologist has to say: ‘it all depends’. The potter or the blacksmith will serve social and ritual superiors as well as inferiors—everyone needs pots and tools. But the superior may be able to offer, as payment, access to land or ritual services, whereas the inferior can only offer labour and menial duties. Each ‘offer’ reveals and reproduces a set of status indicators, manifested through symbols, body language, forms of speech, styles of dress, immediacy of the offer, and choice options. In other words, relationships have their transactional content which expresses mutuality, but also significantly have their social content which expresses whether this mutuality is vertical or horizontal. This duality describes the social division of labour everywhere.

### **Caste as a global metaphor**

I said a moment ago that I did not intend to focus excessively upon caste, even though I am calling on my South Asian background. I see caste as emblematic of wider rationales for inequality. And indeed, I see caste everywhere and thus almost as a pervasive metaphor for the social processes whereby inequality is reproduced. For me, Jane Austen wrote about caste, as did Trollope, perhaps more obviously. Although I have never watched, I understand *Downton Abbey* is deeply and essentially about caste. Dickens, Evelyn Waugh, the list is endless. So much English literature is about caste, including of course E.M. Forster. Spend a weekend in Bath or hundreds of similar, especially southern UK cities, and you can see the acting out of caste by a cast of actors. Social segregation by choices of locale, clothing, entertainment, restaurants and cafes, by deportment and language is strong. There is a wide gulf just between Classic FM and Radio 3!

### **The persistence of rank: the myth of separation of economic and social domains**

The puzzle, it would seem, is why this sense of rank persists and appears to be broadly accepted by all parties as the natural social order, even under conditions of generalised commodity production where clientelism is supposed to give way to impersonality—a separation of the social and political domains from the economic. This separation is, after all, the essence or rather myth of bourgeois liberalism—the idea that social and political equality is possible alongside economic inequality. However I am with Barrington Moore who observed in 1969 in his *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* that it is not possible to democratise society without democratising property relations. Therein lies the key to

present acceptances of rank. The economic, social and political domains are not separate but permeable and interactive, as Weber understood. And it is rarely possible for property to be substituted by another determinant such as education in the allocation of status hence the Goldthorpe findings, repeated in many other studies, about the low ceilings to social mobility. The routes to elitedom do not abound. See also John Harris's piece this week in The Guardian 'Grammar Schools and the Delusion of Social Mobility'.

But if social mobility has no clothes, so also is generalised commodity production a myth. I dwell for a moment on the UK and globally before returning to South Asia. The UK continues to move further away **from** a proletarian (i.e. organised and scarce labour) based manufacturing model with labour appearing as a commodity in the marketplace, negotiating with capital with some success. Instead, it continues with a post-modern destruction of that working class, and **towards** a proliferation of non-unionised small businesses increasingly devoted to services. Thus features of pre-industrial patron-clientelism, we might even say the hierarchical aspects of *jajmani*, have returned both in the relation between owner/employers/managers and workers, but also in the service relation between workers and their customers (clients in another sense). Workers are less protected, contracts are looser and open-ended with respect to duties. Labour is casualised and flexible, especially for women. Guy Standing has developed these conditions further into his idea of the 'precariat'. These trends are reinforced by the internationalisation of capital which encourages a race to the bottom in terms of labour relations and standards, since loyalties to local workforces and national contexts disappear.

### **Personalised commodity relations: a global convergence?**

Thus inequality increasingly appears not just as differences in property, wealth, or income rewards, but also in the developing cleavage between being secure and insecure. Earlier forms of 'Polanyian' decommodification through social insurance, safety nets and social protection are being steadily eroded and dismantled as the increasingly neo-liberal state mirrors and enshrines the transformation from proletariat to precariat. We are thus re-entering a hybrid era of personalised commodity relations, with the ever present threat of insecurity as a consequence of flooded, de-skilled labour markets being managed through excessive loyalty (in contrast to voice or exit) and subservience. And this hybridity is especially gendered, with women highly represented in the precariat. So, is the social reproduction of inequality in the UK becoming more like we used to analyse it in South Asia? Are we seeing some convergence? Is this a key feature of globalisation?

But if the UK political economy looks like some kind of return to pre-proletarian forms of inequality under conditions of post-agrarianism and now post-industrialisation, with little recourse to the rents of empire to offset the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, then the countries of South Asia, despite various forms of economic advance, seem unlikely to pass through a proletarian stage (*pax my paleo Marxist friend, the late Bill Warren*). Instead, they

retain clientelism, essentially representing the pre-proletarian hybrid as **personalised commodity relations**. This, I think, is the core of my argument.

### **The example of garment workers in Bangladesh**

Even if we consider a large, labour intensive manufacturing sector like the garments industry in Bangladesh (which I know Naila Kabeer knows a lot about, so I speak with further trepidation) we are not looking at a truly proletarian workforce, despite its tag of being in the organised employment sector. Predominantly female shopfloor workers are managed by men, male supervisors and other layers above them, in the workplace, deploying aspects of patriarchal tradition which pervades the world outside the factory for those same women. Their lives are controlled by labour recruiters, *sardars*, as well as by men in their families (husbands, brothers, fathers), sometimes even receiving directly the wages of these women, and if they are living in the surrounding slums, then male *mastaan* will be controlling space and other livelihoods services in those slums and dormitories. Certainly their labour is being bought and sold as a commodity, but not as a commodity in open, free, perfect market conditions.

Rather their opportunities and access to work and employment are strongly socially mediated through segmented local networks of extended kin, and complicated sets of obligations and dependencies entailing regional identities through rural migrant streams and brokers managing and policing livelihoods nodes within different parts of the city. Those forms of social mediation outside the workplace are seamlessly replicated inside it, with implicit second and third dimensions (i.e. a reference to Lukes and respectively more or less agency) of control over behaviour, reproducing docile and quiescent compliance to low wages, long working hours, poor sanitation and safety conditions—in other words, the intensification of the absolute surplus value of their labour. The management of the commodity, labour, occurs through highly personalised, non-rights based extra-economic relationships demanding the privileging of loyalty over voice and exit.

Even in conditions where a greater element of self-employment and informality obtains (I also learn from Nandini Gooptha's work), whether in the service sector, or garbage collection and extraction, or shrimp cultivation, or semi-precious mining (e.g. lapis lazuli), or petty trading, or even just begging, similar forms of social mediation and controls over access to space and opportunities prevail.

### **The Peasant Analogue**

Many years ago, Brian Roberts wrote *Cities of Peasants*, and in other papers I have referred to the 'peasant analogue' to describe these personalised aspects of market relations in post-agrarian transitions. This continuation of agrarian social practices, projected into urban industrialised settings, places a certain kind of personalised 'net' over bourgeois liberal

expectations of modernity in which freed labour is supposedly de-linked from intimate hierarchy and supposedly no longer interlocked with other domains of human interaction. I use the term 'net' because it conveys both networks and entrapment, and was used as the title of a famous study by BRAC in Bangladesh. In the recent past, many observers have seen such nets as transitional, or in Riggs language 'prismatic', that is hybridity as a temporary refraction until closed, intimate economic relations metamorphise into open ones between strangers, liberated to interact by reference to universal rather than particular codes and role performance.

In contrast, I suggest that the hybridity and the temporary is, in fact, the permanent condition of today's post-agrarian, middle income societies. Even in the higher skill end of middle income labour markets, and indeed in long established rich societies too, merit may be a necessary condition but is certainly no longer a sufficient condition of access, if it ever was. Networks and connections, and conformity to the subtle messages of class identity, have become as important. This world is essentially comprised of implicit clubs.

It would be fun, ethnographically, to stay with the description and analysis of clubs, but I must resist that temptation on this occasion. This is because I want to focus more upon the regime and reproductive aspects of the peasant analogue.

### **The Faustian quest for secure livelihoods**

A decade ago, I wrote a piece on the *Faustian Bargain: Staying Secure, Staying Poor*. So, how do we, a community in favour of freedoms and rights for all, deal with the possibility that the majority of people are induced to opt for inequality and thereby reinforce it? And furthermore, they are prepared to opt for informal inequality and dependency, with little statutory, rights based protection. They have been atomised and disorganised by elite classes, supported by the state, whereby The Strawbs 'you can't get me, I'm part of the union' hardly applies. And the social movements of civil society have limited impact. In this context, I have thus been fascinated by the mafia and have written about intermediation societies (*Labels, Welfare Regimes and Intermediation: Contesting Formal Power*). Under conditions where the notion of rights and correlative duties to uphold them are weak, where, in North's language, the limitation of access is uncodified, then the relation between resource controllers and resource/service users bring other intermediation institutions into play to manage that access such as the mafia, or in Bangladesh the *mastaan*. *Pirs* across the subcontinent perform similar functions. In committing their livelihoods to these institutions, people are in effect defining a certain kind of welfare regime and through repetitive dependency reinforcing an informal, non-rights based, personalised system of access to the resources and services they need.

In so doing, people learn to adopt behavioural patterns to introduce as much security into those essentially insecure arrangements as possible. They do so both via the 'presentation of self in everyday life' (Goffman) and by seeking moral attachments of resource controllers to

their needs and interests. When I read Sen or Nussbaum about ‘capabilities and freedoms’ I do wonder what world they inhabit or envisage. They presume a problematic but nevertheless liberal state and open society, within which they offer a very normative account of what those capabilities need to be for successful functioning—as if the structure is in place but the capacity to interact with it is missing. Nussbaum is prepared to specify those capabilities while Sen leaves the logical box empty to allow for the possibility that societies may be otherwise than open, liberal, with rights based justice—though he does not actually write about such societies. If my proposition that ‘hybrid, intermediation societies replete with Faustian bargains are the permanent rather than temporary state of affairs’ has a ring of truth, then we have to think differently about the capabilities necessary for survival—perhaps summed up more as ‘loyalty’ rather than ‘voice’ behaviour. In other words—the quest for moral attachments via a servile, deferential presentation of self. In my Faustian bargain piece, I deconstruct the behaviour of the hypothetical beggar in these terms. For me, this is a metaphor for the social reproduction of inequality more widely.

### **Creating moral proximity in the insecure world of actual hybrid capitalism**

I have also written about ‘concentric circles of moral proximity’, drawing upon Edward Banfield’s *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* and his thesis of amoral familism, and Bailey’s work on moral community, later adapted by Scott into the ‘moral economy’. My ‘concentric circles’ is an ethnographical tool to differentiate between people’s moral and instrumental attachments on a scale of remoteness or proximity from ego. We have been told that the essence of modern, open, mobile society characterised by generalised commodity relations is that strangers can occupy universal roles, adhere to matching universal behavioural codes and thus interact efficiently with each other. Thus people can successfully interact with each other instrumentally through relationships stripped of other moral or friendship content. But in the insecure world of actual hybrid capitalism characterised by personalised commodity relations, such instrumental attachments are not reliable or dependable. Rather, key actors for one’s own survival at the remoter, instrumental edges of the concentric circles have to be drawn further into ego’s inner circles where stronger moral attachments obtain. The logic is obvious: if you are instrumental to me, then I must be instrumental to you with no certainty of a mutual interest multi-period game with you. But to draw in such key actors requires a sacrifice of one’s own personal autonomy, a circumscribing of one’s potential freedoms, and an acceptance of inequality.

## **Solving organisational problems: not just a prerogative of resource controllers**

In this way, I offer a counterpart to Charles Tilly's analysis of durable inequality. From the stance of resource controllers or exploiters, he argued over a decade ago that:

‘people who create or sustain categorical inequality..rarely set out to manufacture inequality as such. Instead they solve other organisational problems by establishing categorical unequal access to valued outcomes. More than anything else, they seek to secure sequestered resources...But once undertaken, exploitation and opportunity hoarding pose their own organisational problems: how to maintain distinctions between insiders and outsiders; how to ensure solidarity, loyalty, control and succession; how to monopolise knowledge that favours profitable use of sequestered resources. The installation of explicitly categorical boundaries helps to solve such organisational problems, especially if the boundaries in question incorporate forms of inequality that are already well established in the surrounding world. Emulation and adaptation lock such distinctions into place, making them habitual and sometimes even essential to exploiters and exploited alike.’ (p 11)

My earlier work on authoritative labelling examined how categorical boundaries for rationing resource allocation were established and legitimated to the point where in a Foucauldian sense they become natural frames of meaning, mental models akin to Bourdieu's ‘habitus’. The normalisation of discrimination on non-obvious grounds. But whereas Tilly's categories are more intrinsic and habitual, with longer histories, like gender, race, ethnicity and migrant requiring less exercise of the ideological instance, I saw many other categories which required more continuous authoritative effort to implant and maintain them in the popular mind—like the deserving and undeserving poor. It is by engaging with these ‘how’ questions that North's limited access state, i.e. the sequestering of scarce resources, is made operational. This explains how the ‘sanctions’ referred to by Toynbee are applied.

But my counterpart to Tilly is to argue that the exploited are also complicit in this social reproduction of limited access through their induced, Faustian, acceptance of personalised commodity relations. They too are trying to solve organisational problems—i.e. making their livelihoods secure as possible in an uncertain and informal environment of permanent insecurity.

## **Re-thinking capabilities in the real world: loyalty**

And this becomes the emic account of how informal security regimes of South Asia emerge and are sustained. These are the contemporary hybrid, intermediation political economies, characterised by weak states and strong but deeply unequal societies, easily able to rely upon historically established categories like caste (though malleable) combined with incentives for the majority to accept other forms of rank order as the precondition of access to resources,

services and opportunities. Any capabilities argument then has to be redefined in order to manage that access behaviourally—i.e. the diverse expressions of loyalty rather than voice. But with the acceptance of that kind of social order goes alienation, dehumanising shame and humiliation—a denial of the dignity which we all crave and only some of us globally enjoy.

### **Don't give up the fight: looking for voice**

My journey is almost over. But remember, even in these crushing conditions, humans retain agency and a capacity to make history. I was recently in Soweto at the Hector Pietersen Museum which documents the 1976 uprising of black students refusing to be taught in Afrikaans instead of English. Who would have thought that those students would prevail, even though another 14 years were required to formally dismantle apartheid? Trade unions in the UK can still put millions on the streets to protest about cuts to welfare arising from banker delinquency, and keep an alternative to unfair austerity in play. Al-Qaeda can upset the cosy deals between the US militarised economy and so-called Saudi royals. Faith identities, whether Islamic or Pentecostal, offer dignity to large numbers of dispossessed globally. Though always under threat of suppression or incorporation, civil society movements have not disappeared. Indeed in parts of South Asia they are particularly strong. And we should not forget 'unruly politics' as highlighted by Naomi Hossain. Even Lizzie Bennett stood up to Lady Catherine de Burgh! And Bob Marley sang to us: 'don't give up the fight'.

In the UK there are rights to restore. In South Asia, they remain to be created.