Chapter 2
The Debate Over Social Disparities and the Disparity Discourse

2.1 Terminology and Meaning

The analysis of spatial disparities has quite a long tradition in human geography and other social sciences; it has been among the major research issues of several disciplines for decades. Browsing the works written by geographers, economists, sociologists, or even experts of political sciences, one can find a great many contributions related to what is called spatial "differentiation", "disparity", "inequality", "injustice" or "unevenness". In the vast body of literature, however, the exact meaning of these terms, certainly all concerning the inhomogeneity of space and the peculiarity of places, remains unclear, especially as such expressions are often considered as synonymous, either explicitly or implicitly (Hinderink and Sterkenburg 1978). For this reason we find it important to have an overview of the various forms of geographical differences, and to introduce clear terminology first, which we can use in our essay to avoid misunderstandings.

In order to do so, the first point we must take into consideration is as follows: although many features of the geographical space can be regarded as related to social processes, not all the heterogeneity that exists in the physical space is socially created. That some regions (e.g. the Rocky Mountains or the Urals) are rich in certain mineral resources while others (e.g. the islands of Japan) are not, is the outcome of the uneven distribution of natural resources, a condition given independent from the spatially varying efforts of societies to use these resources. Neither the fact that Flanders is located on the coastline, while the Pamir Mountains or Tibet have no direct access to the oceans, is rooted in social factors. Thus, these phenomena, at least for their origin, cannot be lumped together with the spatial differences of life expectancy, income, or level of education, which are definitely produced by society. For this trivial reason it makes sense to distinguish between what Ward (2009a) calls "those characteristics over which there is a sense that their production is" at least partly "the result of human agency" (p. 380), and those over which there is not. This is the way Ward defines *spatial inequality* on the one hand, and *spatial differentiation* on the other.

The introduction of such a dual system might seem trivial. Still, the issue is not as simple as it might initially sound. For instance, there is no definite border line to set up between the two categories Ward refers to. Of course, several examples can easily be located either in one group or in the other. For the uneven spatial distribution of crude oil or iron ore, for instance, reasons are exclusively natural. In other cases, social factors play the decisive role. This stands for, let us say, striking disparities in literacy between the federal states of India. Here, de facto opportunities for women to enroll in formal education are very unequal in different regions, which is a result of various social (e.g. religious) factors.

Some examples are, however, difficult to explain in a black-or-white manner. In the Sahel, for instance, the progression and regression of the frontline of the desert and the famines they bring about are influenced by spontaneous changes of global climate as well as by the perpetually altering intensity of grazing. In such cases, the dividing line between naturally given and socially created gets blurred. For differences of climate or food-producing potential in this district, the question whether one can speak about spatial differentiation or spatial inequality is not easy to answer.

These uncertainties are fuelled by the fact that the border between the two categories is dynamic; it can vary from time to time, and even from place to place. For example, the access to international waterways is extremely uneven in space. For a long time, this unevenness was only shaped by natural forces. Since the frontline of the Po Delta was moving forward, the once important seaport Ravenna became further removed from the Adriatic Sea and gradually lost its role in commerce. This was a mere result of physical forces. But since then, due to the development of engineering, it has become possible to make access to international waterways for places which had been landlocked all over the former history of humankind. Typical examples for this are the canals in the Great Lakes region as well as on the East European Plain. Similarly, the ability of societies to influence physical forces varies on a broad scale at a given point in time. For instance, in several parts of the Earth (such as in Pharaonic Egypt, in Mesopotamia, in the Indus Valley, or in Ancient China) irrigation systems were established by societies as early as thousands of years ago. At a local level, this improvement could radically reduce the spatial unevenness of potential crop production between river banks and the surrounding areas. Yet, considering locally achievable technologies, similar investments were impossible to initiate in many countries even in the 1940s. Due to a lack of financial resources, technology, organizational methods, etc., such investments still proved to be nothing more than a dream in many African and Asian countries. Thus, whether one should speak here about the spatial differentiation or rather the spatial inequality of transportation and water supply (or, maybe, about both) is unclear. In consequence, the dividing line between spatial differentiation and spatial inequality is a blurred one, it is dynamic, and varies from time to time and from place to place. In other words, whether the unevenness of a given phenomenon belongs to the set of spatial differentiation or to that of spatial inequality, can only be decided in light of the context that we focus on during the research.

As can be seen, the dual categorization of Ward (2009a) is based on a technical distinction according to the existence or non-existence of human agency. This is, however, not the only way to distinguish between various forms of spatial unevenness. Another relevant question here can be whether a given form and level of unevenness is regarded as tolerable and "fair", or unacceptable und "unfair". Morrill (2001), for instance, follows this approach to differentiate between *spatial inequality* and what he calls *spatial inequity*. For him, spatial inequality refers to all forms of unevenness in space, whether they are brought into being by natural or social factors. In his words, spatial (in)equality is "without meaning" since "every bit of space is different from every other" (p. 14789). Thus, he argues rather for the analysis of spatial inequity, so forms of unevenness that are considered unfair and unacceptable. This notion seems compatible with many works that use the term *territorial (in)justice* and *spatial (in)justice* with respect to forms of spatial unevenness they consider as morally unacceptable (cf. Bromberg et al. 2007; Davies 1968; Pirie 1983; Reynaud 1981; Smith and Lee 2004; Ward 2009b).

However, if the distinctive line between unevenness resulting mainly from human agency and unevenness caused by the distribution of physical factors is blurred, it is extremely so for its "tolerable" and "unacceptable" forms. These categorizations are based on normative judgments that vary from time to time and from place to place; thus, they are extremely context-dependent. This can be presented well through Morrill's (2001) example about potholes. In general, potholes in an urban landscape tend to be found more in low-income level districts than in well-off surroundings. As Morrill puts it, "the conviction of poverty area residents [is] that since they pay taxes too, the potholes on their streets should have no lower priority than the potholes on the streets of the rich" (p. 14789). In their eyes, the spatially uneven distribution of potholes, and thus the varying quality of road infrastructure, is obviously "unfair". But those living in affluent districts might have a different opinion: since they pay more tax than poor residents do, they might find it just to get more back from the city through, for instance, infrastructural developments. Put simply, they might be convinced that their potholes do have higher priority since they have paid more to have all roads in their surroundings kept in good quality. This difference is based on the fact that the "justness" of given disparities can be judged in various ways (as we will explain this briefly in Sects. 2.3 and 2.4). One might prefer the idea of "the same to everybody", and argue for a spatially equal quality of roads. Others might follow "the same award for the same merit" approach, and since they find individual merits different, they also regard an unequal distribution of awards (good quality roads) as justifiable. The picture is made even more complex by the fact that among those arguing for the same award for the same honor, the interpretation of honor can also be highly different (cf. Sect. 2.4). Besides, although most people would certainly agree that there is a basic level of resources and services each human being has the right to get access to and to use irrespective of his/her place of living (such as basic education and healthcare), potential views about what exactly belongs to this category are dynamic and highly different to each other.

To differentiate between "just" and "unjust" forms of disparities becomes even more complicated if one takes into consideration additional aspects, not only the matter of distribution. Although the vast majority of literature dealing with inequalities solely concentrates on distributive aspects (Schlosberg 2004), the issue of justice goes beyond these. In the words of Young (1990), "distributional issues are crucial to a satisfactory conclusion of justice", but "it is a mistake to reduce social justice to distribution" (p. 1). As Schlosberg (2004) puts it based on Young (1990) and Fraser (2000), one can only speak about "justice" if those affected by the distribution of a given resource are recognized as being concerned, and if they are allowed to effectively participate in the decision-making about distribution. Thus, there is no universal formula by which "the just" distribution of a given resource could be calculated "from a point of nowhere" (Nagel 1986) for any contexts. Returning to Morrill's (2001) example, we could say that the spatial distribution of potholes, whether it is equal or not, is to be regarded as "just" only if it is the consensual outcome of a decision-making process, where all people affected are allowed to participate.

Considering these aspects, it is barely reasonable to hypothesize a rigid border between what are considered "fair" and "unfair" sorts of unevenness, and to do the same with "justifiable" forms of spatial inequality and "unacceptable" sorts of spatial inequity. Instead, it seems better to imagine a continuous transition zone between two theoretical extremes: the forms of unevenness that are considered as "acceptable" by the vast majority of society, and the sorts of unevenness that are commonly regarded as "unfair".

Here the question arises, what kind of relation is to be drawn up between the altogether four categories we already have (*spatial differentiation* vs. *spatial inequality* on the one hand, and *spatial inequality* vs. *spatial inequity* on the other). The Wardian spatial differentiation and spatial inequality might best be presented in their relation to the comprehensive set of spatial unevenness (see Fig. 2.1). Within this set, spatial inequality, which would not have come into being without human agency, can be defined as a subset. The complement of this subset includes spatial differentiation, which is also a kind of unevenness, but one resulting from natural conditions. The border of the subset entitled "spatial inequality" is, however, as it was presented, neither rigid nor static (hence it is depicted by a dashed line).

For the difference between spatial inequality and spatial inequity in Morrill's view (2001), this idea, at least after some minor changes, can also be integrated in the framework we have sketched up. In Morrill's concept, spatial inequality refers to every form of unevenness that is not produced by society *and* considered as "intolerable" at the same time. Consequently, this interpretation of spatial inequality embraces socially produced *and* morally "acceptable" forms of unevenness as well as what Ward calls spatial differentiation, which is an outcome of physical conditions. However, in our point the two Wardian categories are also worth being distinguished. Thus, it makes sense to use the term spatial inequality not for all phenomena lumped together by Morrill, but only for those that belong to Ward's homonymous category. So, integrating Morrill's concept in that of Ward does not

Fig. 2.1 The relationship of different forms of spatial unevenness. Category names without an *arrow* indicating the limits of their domains belong to (sub)sets that also include all subsets within their boundaries. *Source*: design by author
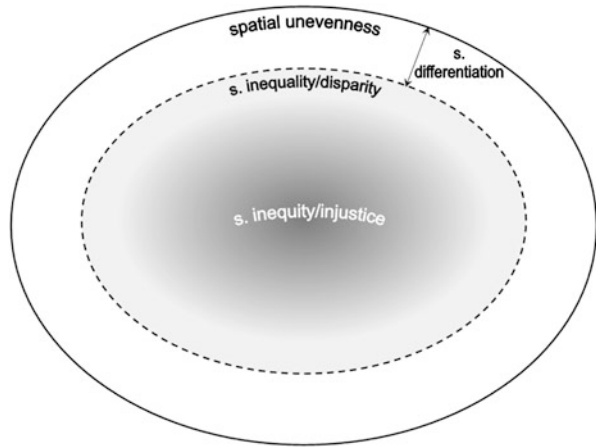
contradict the structure of sets we have presented in the last paragraph. However, a new subset needs to be added. Within the set of spatial inequality, we have to define a new subset for spatial inequity or spatial injustice. This new subset has no rigid border, but is rather surrounded by a zone of gradual transition starting from what is regarded as "not unjust" forms of spatial inequality (see Fig. 2.1).

At this point, we should also consider a further issue: is spatial injustice really a prefect subset of spatial inequality? Or can it maybe include certain forms of unevenness whose existence is independent from social factors? So, can spatial differentiation, created predominantly by physical conditions, be unjust? Actually, someone might resent suffering from the negative outcome of natural events. If a heavy storm damages crop production in a given area, local farmers will certainly be angry with this. Without a doubt, it will be hard for them to accept the enormous spatial unevenness in yields, and that their income for the given year will be much lower than that of other agricultural workers in other regions. And they might find this situation unfair in a sense that poor production indicators of the year do not mirror the heavy work they have invested in their lands. Still, it is atypical in scientific literature to call spatial unevenness created by physical factors "unjust". Even in the few articles where such a normative term is used, its strength is remarkably reduced by quotation marks in which the expression is placed (see, for instance, the "'Unfairness' of Nature" in Morrill 2001, p. 14790). This typological solution suggests that such a normative statement simply does not go here, since it would imply conscious malignancy.

Actually, to present natural processes as "unjust" is rather incompatible with those ideas that have shaped human societies' concept of nature over many hundreds of years. For the traditional worldview, nature and all physical processes were considered the creature of transcendent beings (in the Christian tradition, this role is posited for God). And, as these transcendent beings or at least the fact of their authority over humans was automatically judged righteous, natural events and their outcomes were counted *per se* as just. It is a typical example that for many decades

even harmful natural events, such as earthquakes, epidemics, and floods, were regarded as just divine punishments for immorality, ungodly behavior etc.[1]

The other concept of nature is a highly materialistic one, which denies the existence of any conscious transcendent creatures conducting natural processes "from above". Instead, it hypothesizes the existence of impersonal laws and regularities, along which nature "functions", but which are simply "given", thus, do not constitute conscious outcomes of anyone's agency. From this viewpoint, every natural phenomenon (even the uneven spatial distribution of physical circumstances) is produced by nature, which unconsciously obeys the natural laws to which it is subordinated. This approach gained extreme popularity foremost during the Enlightenment, and became a cornerstone of the theoretical building of what is called modern science. Of course, these concepts, the one might be called "Nature *with* God" and the other "Nature *without* God", are two extremes, between which a great variety of hybrid approaches is possible. For example, one might believe in a type of nature that mirrors a sort of agency and consciousness, but that is not established by "a God who concerns himself with fates and actions of Human beings" (Einstein quoted in Hinshaw 1970, pp. 659–660).

The most important point for us is that both characteristic approaches as well as their hybrids are based on a view of nature that excludes the possibility of consciously "unjust" outcomes. As Morrill (2001, p. 14789) puts it, spatial inequity or injustice means not that "the rules of the game" might produce uneven distribution, but that those human actors powerful enough "manipulate the law itself to get more" than they could expect otherwise. Since such a manipulation is out of the question in the case of natural processes, we can consider the category of spatial inequity as a subset of spatial disparity/inequality.

Of course, as the borders of the sets presented in Fig. 2.1 are dynamic, the uneven spatial distribution of a given phenomenon can migrate from the group of spatial differentiation not only into the subset of spatial disparity, but even to the subset of spatial injustice. Let us have the example of two cities at the opposite coastline sections of a bay. The fact that their potential commercial cooperation was strongly hindered by the body of water functioning as a natural barrier was regarded simply as a "given" some thousands or even hundreds of years ago. San Francisco and Oakland along the San Francisco Bay in California, or the Turkish cities of Istanbul and Üsküdar along the Bosphorus were typical examples for this. But as technology developed, it became possible to build gigantic bridges. The naturally "given" barrier was to be torn down. And thanks to the Golden Gate or the

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[1] In fact, this kind of reasoning still exists, even if it has been exiled by now from the domain of science due to changing power geometries in the production of knowledge. After the destructive 2011 earthquake in Japan, Tokyo's Governor called the disaster a "tembatsu" (divine punishment) for "egoism and populism" tainting Japanese politics and as well as the Japanese people (The Japan Times 2011). US conservative radio host Glenn Beck also interpreted the catastrophe as "a message being sent" by God to follow the Ten Commandments (Hartenstein 2011). Of course it speaks volumes that, unlike would have presumably happened some centuries ago, both persons had to face fierce criticism for their words.

Bosphorus Bridge, the dramatically uneven accessibility of these cities from towns on the same and on the other side was radically reduced. Technology has become a given, realization has become possible. But under these new circumstances, possible normative judgments about a given condition can remarkably change. For instance, maybe a second bridge over the same bay could also be established, but the project fails for political reasons since the government allocates the necessary money in other regions. In this case, all inhabitants still "waiting for the bridge" might think that the problem of uneven accessibility to San Francisco or Istanbul from their own town and from some other towns is not a purely physical issue any more, but rather the result of an unjust political decision. This is how a kind of spatial differentiation (location on this *or* that side of the body of water) can become regarded as a sort of spatial inequality, and even of spatial injustice (construction projects for certain towns to improve their accessibility and no investments in other towns that still remain isolated).

In conclusion, the various terms concerning the uneven spatial distribution of different phenomena can be conceptualized as it is presented at Fig. 2.1. Thus, the exact meaning of the categories can be defined, and will be used in our essay, as follows:

Spatial unevenness: the uneven spatial distribution of any given phenomenon.
Spatial differentiation: the spatially uneven distribution of a phenomenon, if it is predominantly a result of physical factors.[2]
Spatial inequality, spatial disparity: the uneven spatial distribution of a phenomenon, if it could not have been brought into being without some sort of human agency.
Spatial inequity, spatial injustice: the uneven distribution of a certain phenomenon in space, if it is regarded as "unfair" and "unjust". This category only includes forms of unevenness created by human agency.

In our study we basically concentrate on the issue of *spatial disparity* since we are mainly interested in the spatial aspects of social disparities, thus, those forms of unevenness in space that can be traced back to human agency. Due to this, spatial differentiation is important for us only to the extent it contributes to the emergence of spatial disparities. And this influence rarely proves decisive for social issues given that physical geography does not determine the social processes emerging at a given place. Instead, as (geographical) possibilism claims, natural conditions only offer *possibilities* for societies. And, although these opportunities might be remarkably different at various places (e.g. in a hot desert or a tropical rainforest), it is not determined but influenced by many factors which possibilities are utilized by

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[2] It is important to underline a terminological issue at this point for the dualistic meaning of "differentiation" in geographical research. Spatial differentiation is interpreted in our essay as *state of unevenness*, in line with the approach of Ward (2009a). In the theoretical literature dealing with *regionalization*, however, spatial differentiation has another meaning. It refers there to the *act* of "dividing up" space, so of differentiating, distinguishing various parts of the world from each other for analytical or administrative reasons. For the latter use of the term see Entrikin (2011).

society and which are not. In consequence, social processes and social disparities, together with their spatial imprints, never constitute direct, mechanistic outcomes of physical conditions (cf. Holt-Jensen 2009, pp. 62–66; Meusburger 2008, pp. 256–259).

Of course, while dealing with spatial disparities, we will in each case clarify whether in the actual context the given form of inequalities was regarded as neutral in moral sense, or as the matter of normative debate, and if the latter was the case, whether they were considered "tolerable" or "unjust". Thus, we will present whether certain sorts of spatial disparities belonged in their spatial and temporal context to the subset of spatial injustice, a normative category with negative connotations in terms of morality.

Beyond defining various forms of unevenness in space, for our analysis it is also highly important to clarify the relation between *spatial* and *social* disparities. For Osberg (2001), inequality research can be categorized according to "among whom" unevenness is measured. From this viewpoint, social disparities refer to inequalities between societal groups, e.g. men and women, members of various ethnic or religious communities, social strata with different level of education. The analysis of spatial disparities is to be regarded, however, as the branch that concentrates on the spatial dimension of social and economic inequalities,[3] hence, differences between people in certain geographical entities. Here the analytical focus is usually put on the different value of given social indicators in various countries, regions, cities etc. which, in fact, is not be interpreted as disparity between the geographical entities themselves but among the groups of people within these geographical entities. In other words, spatial disparity research is not about inequalities between spatial units, but about disparities between people within different domains of

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[3] In countries belonging to the former "Western" and "Eastern" Blocs during the Cold War, the meaning of the term "social and economic disparities" is somewhat different. In the former context, social disparities refer to differences in status and privilege, and to an unequal access to resources. On the contrary, economic disparities embrace the unequal distribution of economy in space through the division of labor and functional differentiation. In post-socialist countries, however, whether one speaks about "social", "social and economic" or "economic" disparities also has a political relevance and might mirror one's point concerning issues of the politics of science. This is because in the communist period Marxist-Leninist geography entitled "economic" all issues other than physical (Gyuris and Győri 2013). Such an approach was based on the concept that it was conscious work distinguishing human from animals, which led to an overemphasis of production and the subordination of "society" to "economy". For the same reason, to keep distance from the Communist system, many researchers began after the post-socialist political shift to argue for defining "social geography" as a "higher category" than "economic geography", where the latter was claimed only to be a subset of the former (Timár 2006). Although in many cases the hybrid term of "social and economic geography" was to follow Marxist-Leninist "economic geography", the use of this expression is often exposed to criticism by those firmly rejecting Marxism-Leninism. For such a term is either regarded by them as "logically incorrect" (since, for them, "economic" is a part of "social"), or as the proof of a pseudo-Marxist-Leninist stance (where keeping the adjective "economic" at the same level as "social" reflects an opposition to acknowledging "economy" as subordinate to "society"). In the recent work, we refer to "social and economic disparities" in the Western sense, without any implicit political notions.

geographical space. In the light of this, we have good reason to suppose that spatial disparity research inherited much from the social disparity analysis from which it emerged. This inheritance is most obviously manifest in the basic topic, the issue of disparities. Moreover, the way disparities are measured, interpreted, and even the (either explicit or implicit) intention of the whole analytical process is likely to show important similarities, regardless of whether it is about spatial or non-spatial aspects of social disparities. Thus, in a work focusing on the theoretical research of spatial disparities and on the functioning of this process it seems highly relevant and even necessary to have a closer look first at social inequalities, their analysis, and the characteristic features of the latter. For this reason, in this chapter we first concentrate on reasons for the emergence and development of social disparities, and second we present a critical overview of the academic debate with regard to this issue.

2.2 The First Emergence and Development of Social Disparities

Social inequality, which, in a general sense, can be defined as "differences among people in their command over social and economic resources" (Osberg 2001, p. 7371), is coeval with human societies. Dominance, division of labor, the need to co-ordinate complex systems, and differential evaluation exist in each society (Berreman 2001), even if their appearance, level and social function vary on a broad scale. Still, despite the seemingly omnipresent nature of social disparities, two major questions with regard to the issue have remained unanswered for a long time and fuelled fierce debates. The first question is technical, and concerns the origin of inequalities. The second question is moral, and is focused on the normative judgment of disparity: what are its pros and cons, and at what level can it be regarded as tolerable, or maybe even desirable? Both issues are crucial for an understanding of spatial disparities: one cannot come to terms with the phenomenon of spatial inequality if its sources are unknown and its normative relevance is unclear.

To answer these questions, we have to look back in human history over a long time for at least two reasons. First, although the size, complexity and differentiation of human societies have increased dramatically during the last few hundred years (cf. Fassmann and Meusburger 1997; Meusburger 1998a), the basic factors shaping social disparities had already emerged in much earlier phases of human history. Second, even if the number of scientific works in disparity research reached unprecedented levels in the last century, the major normative attitudes towards disparity already appeared thousands of years ago. Moreover, they crystallized not in a few decades, but over dozens of centuries of philosophical and political reasoning. To sum it up, the analysis of spatial disparities necessitates a detailed

investigation of how *social* disparities have been brought into being and which normative approaches have emerged over time.

2.2.1 The Origin of Social Disparities

For the origin of social disparities, the initial issue in corresponding debates was the role the emergence of social order played in the development of disparities. Here, two approaches diametrically opposed to one another emerged during the Enlightenment. One interpretation argued that disparities did not emerge as early as the human race did, they were only brought into being by society and social regulations. The other reasoning was that there had always been social inequalities, which, compared to their initial level, have not increased but rather reduced as society and its rules have become increasingly complex. These approaches were actually based on two fundamentally different concepts of human nature. The idea that disparities are nothing but a mere product of society implies that human beings do not "naturally" endeavor to gain mastery over others and create hierarchies. But if society with its regulatory power is considered rather a force to reduce disparities already "out there", this suggests that humans have a "natural" desire for hierarchies.

In the history of philosophy, both concepts have had numerous supporters, who have often been remarkably firm while forming their opinion. As Thomas Hobbes, for instance, put it in his *De Cive* (The Citizen) in 1642, "the naturall state of men, before they entr'd into Society, was a meer War, and that not simply, but a War of all men, against all men" (*Bellum omnium contra omnes*), fuelled by "the naturall proclivity of men, to hurt each other, which they derive from their Passions, but chiefly from a vain esteeme of themselves" (Hobbes 1987[1642], p. 49). The same idea, in a shorter form, also appeared in Hobbes's even more influential work, the Leviathan (Hobbes 1929[1651]).

Similar was the opinion of the Darwinian biologist Thomas Huxley, who differentiated between the "non-ethical man", "the primitive savage", a "mere member of animal kingdom" on the one hand, and the "ethical man", "the member of society" on the other. In his view, these two categories constituted two levels of the development of human society. The former referred to the individuals of pre-society humankind, while the latter was considered as brought into being only by well-organized societies and their norms. For the difference between them, in Huxley's words the "non-ethical man" "fights out the struggle for existence to the bitter end, like any other animal". His goal is to survive at the cost of others' lives; not to reduce disparities between himself and others, but to become winners in the competition, where many necessarily lose. The "ethical man", however, "devotes his best energies to the object of setting limits to the struggle" (Huxley 1888, p. 204) and "seeks the common weal as much as his own" (p. 205). In other words, for Huxley, the savage world of extreme disparities was followed by human society and its drive for mutuality and evenness.

In the meanwhile, other thinkers vehemently argued for the opposite. For instance, John Locke (1988)[1689] was of the opinion that the state of nature, preceding all governments, was a state of equality, "wherein all the Power and Jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than other" (p. 269). In his words, nothing is "more evident" under such circumstances "than that the Creatures of the same species and rank promiscuously born to all the same advantages of Nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without Subordination and Subjection" (ibid.). For him, the creation of a controlled, governed society means that the human quits this condition, since it, "however free, is full of fears and continual dangers" (p. 350), as one's property is exposed to the possible invasion of others. The establishment of a governed society is, thus, a step to protect each human's individual property, even at the cost of giving up the natural condition of equality. In this sense, governed society is about the institutionalization of an unequal social order that had not existed before.

Similarly, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1754) view, "savage man" was "the friend of all his fellow-creatures" (p. 67), since "nature has ordained [equality] between men" (p. 1). But later on, the emergence of civil society put an end to this. In Rousseau's view, the very beginning of this new era was when the first human "enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying 'This is mine', and found people simple enough to believe him" (p. 40). Due to this event, "equality disappeared, property was introduced" (p. 47). What is more, society and law "irretrievably destroyed natural liberty, eternally fixed the law of property and inequality" (p. 52). In this interpretation, society with its norms and regulations is but a means of those having broken the "natural law" of equality to establish and stabilize a privileged situation for themselves. In short, it is society being the source of social disparities.

As can be seen from these random examples, various thinkers have had *different views* not only of how social disparities had emerged, but also about the role played by society in the story. Furthermore, their arguments have often been quite radical. They presented the strive for disparities and the notion of equality as if one of them had been a main feature of pre-social human beings, while the other had only been belonging to humans living in a civil society. Contrasting the two approaches, with no doubt, served ideological and political interests for these philosophers. They could be used to legitimize the existing social order or, on the contrary, to criticize it through urging a return to pre-social norms and the establishment of a new order on their basis. The fact, however, that both attitudes towards equality were regarded as "natural" by many, also suggests that, in fact, both are strongly, inherently "human". This was also the point of Peter Kropotkin, who considered these controversial attitudes typical for all humans and, in a broad sense, for all animals. In his words:

"though there is an immense amount of warfare and extermination going on amidst various species, and especially amidst various classes of animals, there is, at the same time, as much, or perhaps even more, of mutual support, mutual aid, and mutual defence amidst animals to the same species or, at least, to the same society. Sociability is as much a law of nature as mutual struggle." (Kropotkin 1939[1902], p. 20)

Kropotkin tended to suggest the priority of mutual support over fight, thus, all humans' and animals' strive for bigger equity over their notion to produce disparity. It is a question that is hard (and, maybe empirically impossible) to decide. But his core thought that both sociability and struggle are "natural" phenomena seems to be confirmed by related research in the last decades. Psychologists Weisfeld and Beresford (1982) suggested in concert with their empirical findings that humans have a biological capacity for dominance hierarchization, which is the basis for the notion to compete for social success. Furthermore, anthropologists Tiger and Fox (1971) underlined that it is an inherent biological feature of humans to create hierarchies and accept dominance. These are biologically substantiated mechanisms to produce and reproduce disparities, due to which, as Berreman (2001) puts it, "dominance and differential evaluation exist in every society" (p. 7377).

Meanwhile and similar to all animals that form social groups however, humans try to keep disparities amongst individuals below a certain level to reduce inequalities. This is often regarded an outcome of expectations of the benefits and costs of belonging to the group. Potential benefits can be the assistance of the group in problems that can hardly or not be solved by one. Giving help when one is ill and unable to care for oneself, participating in the nurture of others' children, or providing protection against enemies that otherwise easily defeat an individual, can all be relevant forms of such support. These benefits are, however, not for free: one has to give up a part of one's individual freedom and, usually, accept a kind of dominance while joining the group. Therefore, there is a strong individual expectation that each member of the group can really take others' assistance for granted in certain situations. Thus, a sort of equity at this basic level and the trust that is promoted by the whole group is a necessary precondition for creating and sustaining cohesion within the social group. Consequently, the drive for reducing social and economic disparities is always present in groups, which often create specific social norms to maintain this notion (Csányi 2003). The outcome of these controversial endeavors is that societies are always characterized by *both egalitarian and anti-egalitarian behavior* of their members.

According to these ideas and findings, neither the idea of total equality of human beings before the emergence of society nor the concept of "savage" pre-social humans absolutely lacking any desire for mutuality can be substantiated. Thus, a notion for total equality among individuals is highly unlikely, neither for pre-social circumstances nor for the era after the emergence of society. Social disparities are always present. The level of inequalities and the way they are institutionalized, however, can be remarkably different in various societies. In societies with subsistence economies based on foraging and hunting, individual power disparities are rather moderate. Decisions concerning the life of the group are taken through a process of mutual communication, in which all members are involved, and they are based on common agreement (Boehm 1997). Distribution is based on the principle of "generalized reciprocity": economic pursuits and awards are always shared, even with those who cannot reciprocate right then (since they are ill, too young or too old, or simply as they sometimes return without prey at the end of the day due to

lacking fortune) (Sahlins 1968). The accumulation of personal possessions is strictly sanctioned (Woodburn 1982). In such societies, functional differentiation manifest in occupational roles are rare, and sexual division of labor is complementary with little or no differential evaluation (Berreman 2001). Thus, these societies are referred to in the literature as *egalitarian* (or *unranked*) societies (cf. Berreman 2001; Woodburn 1982). Although early human societal groups cannot be observed, such hunting and gathering societies are still to be found in sparsely populated areas of the globe (from the rainforests of the Amazon to the tundra in Northern Canada), and they are supposed to be rather similar to early human societal systems.

Of course, neither in these cases can one speak about total equity. During the process of common decision-making, for instance, the opinion of elders with large families is usually given greater consideration, as Woodburn (1979) revealed in the case of Hadza people in North Tanzania. No doubt there are no definite leaders in such societies who could impose one-sided control upon others, or who would have access to special means of coercion (Woodburn 1982). Still, a certain kind of hierarchy is to be found here, which ensures that in certain issues more credit is given to the word of some members of the society than to the opinion of others. That is why the views of elderly people, supposedly with more life experience, are given greater consideration. And that is why those that (at least seemingly) own particular forms of knowledge (whether it is technical or magic), such as magicians, have a better position in the hierarchy of decision-making than others (cf. Konrád and Szelényi 1978).

2.2.2 Intensifying Division of Labor and Its Implications on Social Disparities

In other words, total equality among human beings has never been the case, not even in early groups of humans. Yet, as the size and complexity of social systems increase, even the existing mechanisms that promote a kind of egalitarianism among individuals in certain issues get challenged. In consequence, social disparities begin to grow. A crucial point here is the increasing *division of labor*, which can be either *horizontal* or *vertical*.

The horizontal division of labor is usually brought into being by certain hunting and foraging activities, which necessitate rather complex preparations. For instance, some activities of hunting and gathering might need developed tools. Fishing on a lake or on the sea is impossible without suitable boats and weapons. Getting meat becomes much easier if herds of wild animals are corralled, for which fences need to be constructed and maintained. To make adequate tools for these activities, much more knowledge and expertise is needed than individuals had previously. Moreover, these tools can only be created by one who is allowed by the group not to participate in hunting so as to have time to focus on handicraft. That is how a horizontal division of labor becomes unavoidable. This process, however,

rather increases the specialization of work than the level of disparities. As the horizontal division of labor becomes more explicit, the work and life of a hunter and a craftsperson become increasingly different. But no hierarchy emerges among them automatically since both have crucial contributions to the survival of society. The prestige of their work and also the benefit they can realize is likely to remain very similar (Fassmann and Meusburger 1997; Meusburger 1998a).

This is not the case, however, for a *vertical* division of labor. For this, the job is divided in parts which, to be done, necessitate a different level of qualification. Thus, while some members of society are only concerned in the realization of manual tasks (e.g. hunting or gathering fruits), others get involved rather in planning and coordination (Fassmann and Meusburger 1997; Meusburger 1998a). A typical example is when the group shifts to an economic activity that produces benefit with a certain time-delay. As Woodburn (1982) underscores, the members of early hunting and gathering societies have a "direct and immediate return from their labour" (p. 432). They eat the food obtained the same day the hunt takes place, or in the next few days. They do not have to process or store food. Thus, they do not have to select anybody to protect stored food. Moreover, they need not find somebody who has the necessary knowledge as well as reputation to plan and coordinate storage and distribution. This is what Woodburn (1982) calls an *immediate-return system*.

However, this is no longer possible after a certain point in time. As the horizontal division of labor increases, many individuals see their labor resulting in real, material benefit only with a delay of days, weeks or even months. For instance, many "craftsmen" making the tools necessary for the hunt receive their "payment" only after the successful fight or gathering. Furthermore, as specialization increases, the amount of available food also rises. As a result, even hunters can benefit from the prey with a significant time delay since this much food cannot be consumed at once. Thus, in Woodburn's (1982) words, the *immediate-return system* is replaced by a *delayed-return system*. But this also means that the preservation of products for use during periods of delay as well as delayed-return activities themselves should be coordinated. And to those who have to assume the responsibility of coordination, a certain power should also be given, unless they were incapable of carrying out the task of coordination by requiring others to follow the rules. In a Luhmannian approach, the complexity of society reaches such a level due to diversifying economic activities that contingencies can no longer be dealt with successfully on the basis of spontaneous congruence of individual interests. Thus, *the medium of power should be introduced* to cope with the complex challenges of a more complex society (cf. Luhmann 1984), so to plan and coordinate the manifold tasks complex societies face.[4]

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[4] Although the concept of power itself is also difficult to describe and its definitions in the literature are manifold and highly diverse (for a detailed overview on various notions see Avelino and Rotmans 2009), we use the term here in a broad sense, accepting the definition of Avelino and Rotmans (2009). Their concept is similar to that of Parsons (1963, 1967) to some extent since they define power as the ability of actors to mobilize resources to achieve a certain goal. Differently to

The vertical division of labor also has direct and thorough consequences for disparities in space. Several activities that need low qualification (such as gathering) can be found virtually all over the "ecumene", the "inhabited world". Specific activities, however, which necessitate relatively few but highly knowledgeable workers, are to be found only in a small number of geographical locations, namely in the centers of political power and knowledge production (Meusburger 2000).

From the emergence of early delayed-systems on, human societies become more and more complicated in structure, what leads to *increasing social differentiation*. A decisive step here is when someone or a certain group tries to exclude others from the use of given resources, thus, to *transform property relations*. This can happen in hunting and gathering societies as well, if access to resources is scarce. As Lightfoot (1993) puts it, for instance, fishing for salmon plays an important role in the economy of several native tribes along North America's west coast. The annual runs of salmon, however, last for a short time, and few good fishing sites can be found. In consequence, not all individuals can personally gain access to fish, only a few. Since the few feasible sites can totally be controlled by a few, clans tend to emerge within the society, which, under the control of a charismatic chief, try to establish sole access to these sites while excluding all others. In other words, as soon as it becomes technically possible to appropriate resources that formed common property up to then, certain clans tend to do this. Apparently the norms of the group to enforce egalitarian behavior prove much too weak to prevent the fragmentation of society along different individual interests in case technical conditions to break these norms are given. If a given resource is not 'unlimited' anymore, so the impossibility of excluding some from its use is challenged, the thorough egalitarianism characterizing early hunting and foraging societies diminishes.

From the aspect of social disparities, an even more important shift occurs with the beginning of economic activities that necessitate the *permanent settlement* of the group (cf. Meusburger 1998a). The most typical example is raising plants (agriculture) after the invention of domestication. On the one hand, these activities intensify both horizontal and vertical divisions of labor, due to which norms and regulations necessarily become more complex. On the other hand, the geographical range of the group significantly decreases after settling down. The latter phenomenon reduces the potential amount of natural resources to access. For hunting and foraging societies, natural resources can be regarded as unlimited in a sense that the group simply moves if they run out of prey and forage at an exact location. Settled societies, however, cannot do that if they do not want to give up their lands and the buildings they erected. Under such circumstances, members of the group can only rely on resources to be found within a certain radius. Thus, these commonly held resources are scarce, while the number of potential users is large. These conditions

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Parsons, however, their understanding of resources is rather broad, not only including material resources, but all sorts of human, mental, monetary, artifactual and natural resources.

easily result in the overuse of resources (Lloyd 1968[1837]; Gordon 1954; Scott 1955).

This problem is known as the "tragedy of commons", after the article of Hardin (1968), in which he called academic attention to the far-reaching effects of this phenomenon. Hardin presented the fictive case of a pasture open to all with many herdsmen wanting to graze their cattle. In his interpretation, supposing that each herdsman tries to take individual advantage of the situation, they are likely to measure two factors, namely benefits and costs of grazing animals there. If one more animal is added to the herd, on the one hand, the whole benefit is that of the herdsman. On the other hand, increasing the size of the herd also leads to a faster degradation of the pasture, but this negative effect is shared by all the herdsmen. Thus, in sum, adding one more animal to the herd produces more benefit than cost for the individual. In consequence, each herdsman will be motivated to increase the size of their herd, which is to result in a catastrophe. For Hardin, the only solution to avoid a tragedy is to privatize commons or keep them as public property under permanent social control, since these property regimes guarantee unambiguous circumstances regarding the right to entry, and, thus, can *protect resources from overuse*.

Without a doubt, Hardin's argumentation disregards some important details. First, his concept considers humans as fully rational agents only motivated by profit maximization. This reasoning, based on the rational choice theory (which will be evaluated from a critical point of view in other chapters of this work), is far too simplifying. Furthermore, another important psychological aspect, which, although not mentioned by Hardin, must be at least as important as the factors he refers to. This is the way humans perceive the increase of groups: the number of new items is usually perceived in relation to the size of the whole group. If one has five cattle, adding one more might seem a radical increase as one's benefit rises by 20 %. Since the number of all animals grazed on the pasture is, however, more than 100, for instance, one additional animal seems to have no significant effect on the resource. Total consumption only increases by 1 %. So, adding one animal to the whole herd "does not matter". This way of thinking is the major reason for underestimating the negative environmental effects of certain activities, which can easily end in the overuse and degradation of resources. Second, as Feeny et al. (1990) presented, transforming the commons to private or public property is not the only way to control the access to given resources. Shared governance of communal properties can also prove a viable way if the community creates clear access rights and enforce their observance. But from the aspect of social disparities, these necessary additions do not change the main implications of Hardin's findings. After a while, the tragedy of commons can (and, actually, does) emerge in all societies having common property goods, and it can only be avoided through precisely defined rules on the access to them. This regulation, however, needs an even more explicit division of labor in a vertical sense and a stronger concentration of power in the hands of those responsible for enforcing the rules. And this is the process taking place in societies facing the challenge of scarce resources for the first time, and the process which fuels the growth of social disparities.

In general, the emergence of delayed-return systems and the transformation of property relations exert a decisive influence on social disparities. First, their result is the *intensification, institutionalization and stabilization of inequality structures*. Second, they also *increase the complexity* of social disparities.

2.2.3 Social Disparities and Power Asymmetries in Complex Societies

The rising complexity of social disparities cannot be separated from the increasing need to control the use of resources, which ends up in an *intensification of power asymmetries*. A typical early outcome of this tendency is the emergence of "big man" (or rarely "big woman") societies. Here someone, through personal charisma and persuasion, achieves a privileged status, due to which they get the right to decide who can use certain resources and to what extent. Somewhat similar are chieftainships, where this privilege is not achieved by but ascribed to someone due to their paramount position in their clan (Berreman 2001).

In "big man/woman" societies, the leader's privileged position is neither formal nor institutionalized. Thus, the future leader has to fight for his position after the old leader dies. Furthermore, he does not simply inherit the power from his predecessors, but has to achieve it on his own. It is possible, of course, that a leader-to-be is supported by the former "big man/woman", which can prove decisive in convincing other members of the group and getting their assistance. Thus, the "big man/woman" can influence to some extent whom he or she is followed by. But there is no institutional structure to automatically guarantee the power for someone due to their initial social position (such as for a crown prince in a kingdom). In other words, the system lacks institutional stability. In chieftainships, *power structures are institutionalized*, so the system—usually—does not change in general when the chief dies. His successors will have basically the same power due to their same position. Here, however, the power of the chieftain is limited to kinship, which is based on family relations. This problem is solved only in *kingships*, with an extended power of the ultimate leader (the king). The main innovation of the kingship is a high level of institutionalization combined with a much broader range than that of family relations. The power of kings does not result from kinship, but is ensured from two directions. First, by people whom economic privileges (such as land ownership) were given. In this respect, support and faith are reciprocation of economic benefits (Berreman 2001). Second, kings are legitimized by representatives of knowledge production (e.g. priests), who, in exchange for the political support they receive, create myths, which present the power of the king as in line with the will of transcendent forces and, thus, indisputable for everyday people (Meusburger 1998a, 2005; Stehr 1994). This sort of legitimization gained in influence particularly with the invention of writing. Due to this innovation, myths as well as regulations substantiating the power of the

king could be widely disseminated, even to a large population scattered over huge area. In a world only based on orally transmitted information permanent face-to-face contacts were crucial, and this sort of communication could only be efficient in societies with less than few hundred inhabitants. With writing, the need for perpetual personal contacts decreased, and the potential size of the system to be ruled and coordinated by one leader radically expanded (Anderson 1968).[5]

These tendencies are very important from the point of view of social disparities since they bring an *institutionalization of social inequalities*, due to which *inequality structures become more and more stable*. Regardless to the level of disparities amidst individuals, in early ranked (e.g. "big man/woman") societies power relations are very fragile. Even if the overall level of disparities is relatively stable, individual positions compared to those of others can change rapidly. A charismatic leader might totally lose the informally acquired power if his/her supporters do not trust him/her anymore. In the meanwhile, a new leader can rapidly emerge from the social periphery. In more differentiated societies, however, power structures prove much more—even if not totally—stable since they are well institutionalized. The king might make decisions with which many members of the society disagree. The king's position is still quite stable due to various institutional means, e.g. codified laws, or well-organized institutions indoctrinating people to accept the ruling order. Typical examples for the latter can be institutions of spiritual life (Assmann 2000; Meusburger 2005) and even education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Thus, the probability that a social movement deprives the king of his power is very low, if not zero. The same is true for the position of other, subordinated social groups. Neither their inner relations are likely to be radically transformed by the king (or to change spontaneously). This is foremost due to the institutional means which the leader's power is also based on.

The stabilization of inequality structures also continues in political regimes emerging after kingships. So it is even in plural parliamentary systems, where the main power is placed in the hands of elected persons and institutions (e.g. the parliament and an elected government) instead of those of a king. These changes might reshape power relations and inequality structures within society, but the level of institutionalization does not decrease. It is similarly ensured by the sophisticated legal system as by an ongoing institutionalization of economic interest groups (in companies, various organizations or trade unions, for instance). Education also does not loose its function to legitimize and sustain the ruling order together with its characteristic social disparities (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bourdieu 1998).

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[5] This does not mean that societal systems above a few hundred people cannot come into being at all without a written culture. But the efficiency of communication and, consequently, of coordination here is unavoidably much lower. The number of face-to-face interactions the instructions of the leader need to go through until they can be received by all subordinates dramatically increases, which radically increases the possibility of distortions. (Obviously, the same goes for reactions coming from the subordinates.) Hence, the emergence of a well-organized society and state is not possible without at least a certain fraction of society being literate.

While the emergence of delayed-return systems and the transformation of property relations bring about the institutionalization and stabilization of social disparities, they also result in the *functional differentiation* and, consequently, *increasing complexity* of society. More complex societies, whose economic activity is based on an intensifying division of labor, tend to produce more, create bigger reserves and develop more improved techniques due to which they can raise productivity. Then, these factors induce even faster growth thanks to positive feedback. This process permanently increases the complexity of society. And the broader spectrum the social activities embrace, the bigger is the need to specialize certain parts of society to fulfill certain functions. This leads to a rapidly increasing division of labor, horizontally as well as vertically.[6] In other words, a deepening functional differentiation within society becomes unavoidable. In Herbert Spencer's sociological approach, this differentiation is the main mechanism of societies to reduce their complexity, and to sustain efficient control over their more and more complicated inner processes (Villányi, Junge and Brock 2009; Vester 2009).

This differentiation ends up in the emergence of social strata,[7] whose members are linked by being similar in their abilities to mobilize different kinds of resources, whether these are human, mental, monetary, artifactual or natural (cf. Avelino and Rotmans 2009). These abilities can vary from one resource to another, and it is the specific combination of abilities that characterize a given social stratum. One stratum might be influential in mobilizing a certain resource, while its abilities regarding the mobilization of another resource are poor. Some typical examples of this are given by Bourdieu (1998), for instance, in his concept on the spaces of social concepts and lifestyles. This concept draws up a very generalized scheme of the social space. Bourdieu defines social positions as being determined by social capital, which is regarded as a function of economic and cultural capitals. Such an approach must be far too simple since the "capitals" one owes and thus the resources they are able to mobilize can be manifold, as presented by Avelino and Rotmans (2009). Still, Bourdieu's concept shows well how different the combinations of possessing various "capitals" can be. For instance, artists may have much cultural capital, but few economic. Industrialists, however, may be rich in economic capital but poor in cultural. Just as in these cases, most social strata are characterized by different abilities to mobilize different sorts of resources. Of

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[6] It is important to underline that the increase in the division of labor and the complexity of society is barely a balanced process at a permanent pace, but rather a series of rapid shifts with long and relatively "moderate" phases in between. The Neolithic Revolution or the Industrial Revolution, for instance, witnessed a thoroughly rising complexity of society otherwise unprecedented for much longer historical epochs (Meusburger 1998a). Still, although the process is volatile, the continuous increase in the complexity of society is to be regarded as a fact, just as that the amplitude of shifts increases and the duration of moderate periods between these shifts decreases over time.

[7] In this work we use the term "social strata" instead of "social class", which at least in the continental European context usually has a Marxist connotation.

course, it is not impossible that certain social actors can mobilize a wide variety of resources at the same time. These are the "power elites" in Mills's (1956) words. Yet, it is rather atypical that certain social strata have similar abilities to mobilize different sorts of resources.

The emergence of social strata is an implication of ongoing functional differentiation, sustained by the continuous intensification of the division of labor (especially vertically). Due to these tendencies, the need to efficiently coordinate society only remains possible through an increasing institutionalization of power relations and inequality structures. In the light of research findings in system theory, although social processes are never teleological (Ziemann 2009), the reorganization of a social system to a lower level of complexity is an "extremely unlikely process" (Luhmann 1997, p. 707). Thus, the probability that social inequality structures becoming more simple is rather low (Luhmann 1997).[8]

The differentiation of society and the institutionalization and stabilization of inequalities do not necessarily mean the polarization of societal power relations. The gap between the "power elites" and the most defenseless strata is not obviously bigger in the highly complex societies of our times than in chieftainships or "big man/woman" systems. It is enough to remember that in the latter, chief leaders are lords of life and death, and their subordinates are often exposed to brutal violence. Social disparities in more differentiated societies, however, also manifest themselves in more complex ways, and the diversity of their forms increases. Consequently, it becomes much more difficult to describe inequalities, to reveal the mechanisms producing and sustaining them, and to understand the reasons and goals of these mechanisms, than it is in more simple societies. Furthermore, inequalities become more visible, even in everyday life, due to their high level of institutionalization. They are mirrored, permanently reproduced and imposed on individuals through such an extremely wide variety of media (from legal acts to advertisements in mass media) that have been unprecedented before. As a result, and in concert with the increasing complexity of society, the topic of social disparities gains in popularity among thinkers and everyday people as well.

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[8] Although it is not absolutely zero. One of the few counterexamples was the *Treckboers* in South Africa. They were descendants of Dutch, German and French Huguenot immigrants, who had been farmers before leaving Europe. In South Africa, however, they were forced by unfavorable climatic conditions in the coastal regions to landlocked areas where their former economic activities were not to sustain any more. Thus, adapting to the aridity of their new land, they shifted to nomadic pastoralism during the eighteenth century (Waibel 1933). In fact, similar changes take place in societies that, after the fall of an empire they belonged to, witness a decline in administration, political uncertainty, and a decreasing complexity of societal structures (e.g. in the former Roman provinces of Britannia and Pannonia after the empire collapsed). Of course, such dramatic changes happen only in exceptional cases under extreme circumstances.

2.3   From Social Disparities to Their Analysis: The Tradition of Social Disparity Research

2.3.1   Conceptual Questions to an Analysis of the Debate Over Social Disparities

To reveal how and why the philosophical debate over inequalities emerged, and what the social importance of this question is, it is necessary to make a historical overview of concepts related to equality. At this point one has to consider that, as Livingstone (1979) has demonstrated, such historical overviews are prone to various fallacies and misinterpretations for various reasons.[9] One has to be aware that any historical overview is necessarily the result of some form of *selection*. Thus, we cannot and should not state that the forthcoming part of this work gives an all-embracing presentation of the history of concepts about equality and inequalities. Neither can it be totally representative and unbiased, since selection, after Weiner (1961), "necessarily involve[s] some interpretative presuppositions" (Livingstone 1979, p. 226). What we can say is that we have a number of authors and their texts on equality and inequality, which seem of sufficient quantity to allow us to establish some findings and draw some conclusions.[10] On the other hand, one has to be very cautious while *interpreting* texts. Here, Livingstone points at seven typical problems. These are expectation, idealization, harmonization, systematization, and (respective to the context) causation, orientation, and whether the given work was reflective or directive. Many (yet not all) are relevant to us here, so they are explained briefly.

Expectation results from the fact that history is always written backwards, so past thoughts are observed from a recent point of view. Here, the historian of ideas usually has some expectations "to bear upon what any writer has said" (Livingstone 1979, p. 227). In consequence, the historian often tends to put certain works and thoughts in a tradition which may have not existed when the idea was born, and in one where the thought might not match. *Idealization* is "the tracing of one idea through different historical epochs", which involves (either explicitly or implicitly) "an idealized type of the particular doctrine" (ibid.). A typical result is that a

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[9] Livingstone, actually, focuses on problems which emerge easily while the history of *geographical* thought is analyzed. From our point of view, however, many of his remarks have relevance for the history of any sorts of thought.

[10] In this study, the selection of philosophers mainly focuses on those conventionally regarded in political science, philosophy and history as key thinkers regarding equality and inequality. For this, we have found especially useful the works of Bluhm (2007) in Llanque and Münkler (2007), a broadly-used textbook in the university education of political science and political philosophy. A valuable overview of the history of the concept of equality is also given by Dann (1975) in Brunner et al. (1972). The latter series, which was published again in 2004 without modifications, counts as a much-cited scientific work in the disciplines of history, philosophy and political science.

thought (and its author as well) might be judged according to the extent it matches certain idealized concepts. This teleological approach can cover the real motivations of the author, and can suggest connections between ideas and people which simply never existed. Another potential problem is *harmonization*, when the observer from a present-day viewpoint tries to "supply a coherence which the writings appear to lack" (p. 228). This mistake is often linked to systematization, where certain thoughts arbitrarily taken out of their textual contexts are put together to form a seemingly coherent structure, which actually does not exist.

For the interpretation of context, another crucial issue is to consider whether certain authors basically *reflected* the dominant opinion of their era, and whether they were aimed at changing this opinion. It also needs to be determined whether a direct link existed between the ideas of different thinkers and, if these ideas were similar to each other, is it just by accident. Finally, each author had a specific social context, in which the direction of ideas was *oriented*. For instance, certain issues were possible to raise under certain circumstances, others not. Certain formulations were allowed by those in power and understandable for contemporaries, while others barely. Thus, while evaluating the concept of an author, the meaning it had that time should also be considered.

The relevance of these remarks for our analysis is manifold. We should not interpret the "evergreen" debate over equality as a cumulative teleological process, where existing concepts are getting closer and closer to a "perfect", "ultimate" stance. (Even if certain thinkers maybe thought so while dealing with the issue.) We cannot draw up a coherent tradition in this sense. Neither can we fully reveal the motives of any philosophers. Furthermore, we should keep from systematizing or harmonizing the thoughts of a given author (or maybe of multiple authors) arbitrarily. This endeavor, yet, does not contradict the need to identify certain similarities. What we should prevent ourselves from is creating a mistaken narrative for such resemblance. Causation is also to be avoided, although it is desirable to underline certain causal relations if they really existed. And finally, we should be aware that the opinions of different thinkers were strongly oriented by their social contexts. Thus, we should not focus on the different phenomena various authors might have spoken about to express their approaches to equality, neither on the differences of formulation. Instead, the emphasis should be put on their *main concept of equality*, and on *their normative attitude to this*.

Beyond all these, we have to emphasize one more thing, which is actually linked to the problem of contextualization, but, unlike in his later writings, is not yet explicitly mentioned in this early work of Livingstone (1979). Knowledge is not only embedded in certain social and political conditions, etc., but it is also linked to the place where it is created; knowledge is *geographically situated* (see Barnes 2004; Livingstone 2003a; Meusburger 2008; Shapin 1998). One implication of this for us is that we have to consider the geographical context of the authors whose concepts of equality we are analyzing. But it might be even more important to note that most European and American works on the history of thought about disparities and equality, be they written by philosophers, lawyers or political scientists, dominantly or exclusively focus on Western (European and North American)

thinkers (see Bluhm 2007; Dann 1975; Dryzek, et al. 2006 [especially Part VI]; Gaus and Kukathas 2004). It is important because the perception of, and, consequently, the approaches to social disparities might be different in Europe, in East and South Asia, or in Africa, for instance. This does not necessarily question the relevance of concentrating on "the West" in this work. From our point of view, such a "Western orientation" of one's focus is highly disputable if the objective is to give a spatially and historically complete overview of how equality has been defined and interpreted in various societies. However, the decision to concentrate on the contribution of Western thinkers can be justified in the actual work for two reasons. First, our research focuses on political and economic systems rooted in ideas belonging to the Western philosophical tradition (notably capitalism, socialism and communism). Second, although this tradition is not the only one in the world, the analysis of its structure and temporal changes can throw light on how the debate over disparities *functions*. (In other words, on questions such as who makes comments on the issue and why, which motivations and—even implicit— objectives they have while doing so, and which arguments they use to underpin their concepts.) Thus, we have decided to draw our attention to the debate over equality in the Western philosophical thought.

Of course, the question that arises at this point is what would be a feasible time-span for such an historical overview. We have decided to expand our focus to as far back as ancient Greece, the cradle of Western philosophical and political thought. Through this, it becomes possible to present two basic features of the debate over social equality. First, the questions of equality and inequality have emerged in highly different societies over many thousands of years. This fact indicates that the related dilemma has been relevant in virtually all Western forms of society. This indirectly shows that the underlying social phenomena are to emerge in all societal groups above a certain level of complexity. Second, since the factors which have brought the dilemma into being again and again have been remarkably similar in different societies, the characteristic viewpoints and arguments emerging in the debate are also timeless. Thus, to get a better understanding of the importance of equality for society and of how the debate over inequalities functions, we find it useful to analyze various concepts of equality in an historical perspective.

2.3.2   *The Roots of Social Disparity Analysis in Ancient Greece*

In ancient Greece, the issue of social disparities became popular especially in the Athenian democracy, emerging around 500 BC. Here, the term *equality*—together with freedom—was brought into focus due to its central role in the notions on which the democratic regime was based. Thus, thinkers drew attention to the essence of equality and inequalities, to the factors they were formed and perpetually reshaped by, and to issues concerning the "ideal" level of disparities. Concepts were mostly

motivated by observations on the way existing political systems—merely implicitly—handled the question of equality. Two examples to study were of special importance here, namely the Athenian democracy itself, and the authoritarian political system in Sparta as its counterpart (Bluhm 2007).[11]

To the issue of equality, particularly valuable contributions were made by Plato, the founder of the Academy in Athens, and his student, Aristotle. Both thinkers believed that great social inequality was a main factor in destabilizing political systems. For Plato, equality was a necessary prerequisite for the stability of state (cf. Pfetsch 2003), and Aristotle also considered disparity as a condition fuelling political tensions and disagreement. As the latter put it in his work *Politics*: "For faction is everywhere due to inequality...people generally engage in faction in pursuit of equality" (Aristotle 1998, p. 135).

Their stances on the optimal level and form of disparities showed important differences as well as remarkable similarities. In his work *The Republic* (*Politeia*), Plato drew up his concept on a utopian ideal state, while in *The Laws* (*Nomoi*) the "second best state" (Kuhn 1968), which was regarded not that abstract and unrealistic, was presented (Pfetsch 2003). Both concepts were based on the claimed notion of equality. In *The Laws*, Plato argued for a radically egalitarian, quasi communistic political system. As he described:

> "That State and polity come first, and those laws are best, where there is observed...throughout the whole State...that 'friends have all things really in common'. As to this condition...[in which] all that is called 'private' have become in a way 'communized'...and that all men are, so far as possible, unanimous in the praise and blame they bestow, rejoicing and grieving at the same things, and that they honour with all their heart those laws which render the State as unified as possible, – no one will ever lay down another definition that is truer or better than these conditions in point of super-excellence. In such a State...they dwell pleasantly, living such a life as this." (Plato 1961, p. 363)

In Plato's concept in *The Laws*, all land of the envisaged city-state (polis) is equally distributed among the slightly more than 5,000 land owners, a number regarded by him as optimal. This kind of equality is considered to guarantee an overall homogenization of society and, thus, to cease social tensions (Pfetsch 2003). Plato's concept shows obvious, although not absolute, similarities with the then political system of Sparta, where Spartiates, the free males, had equal political rights and equal access to material resources. Here, the individual possession of gold or silver was prohibited, and even females, subordinated to males, were handled as a kind of "commons": elderly males could deliver their wives over to younger males, and single males were allowed to "borrow" the wives of their

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[11] In a remarkable way, growing interest in social disparities did not lead to an increasing attention to spatial inequalities. Although social and spatial disparities are coeval, spatial inequality *as a problem* was brought into the focus of thinkers more than 2,000 years later than was the case with social disparities. While the debate over social disparities began in ancient Greece, a similarly significant attention was not paid to spatial inequalities until the nineteenth century. Reasons for this are to be discussed in Chap 3.

friends. Such elements, together with the common nurture of children by the state, were also present in Plato's concept (ibid.).

These very examples, even with their otherwise extremely communistic view, also reveal the severely constrained nature of social equality in the Platonist vision (cf. Strauss 1987). As can be seen, equality only refers here to free males of the higher classes. It is again a similarity with Sparta and its class society, where equality was the privilege of Spartiates. Here, all females were handled as simple "property", while helots, the lower class of Spartan society, were enslaved. In Plato's idealistic views, similar sorts of differentiation are also present (Pfetsch 2003).[12] This fact remarkably indicates a main feature of equality, namely that it is not an objective category but it is socially construed. It is the subjective decision of human beings whether they find a certain distribution of resources equal or unequal. Thus, the debate over social equality has an object that is normative not only in its interpretation, but also in its definition. For Plato, in his *The Laws* he gave a peculiar and controversial definition of equality, which he otherwise presented as desirable. In his view, this "Spartan-like" equality, which he regarded in dual sense, with *material (economic)* and *political equality* going hand in hand, was the key to political stability.

Of course, it should also be emphasized that Plato's concepts presented above refer to an ideal, imaginary situation. Thus, they are not to be seen as "technical guides" for the establishment of a perfect society (Pfetsch 2003). For a real society with real human beings, Plato construed another concept of equality. Here, he distinguished two sorts of equality, "which, though identical in name, are often almost opposites in their practical results" (Plato 1961, p. 413). The one was defined as "even results in the distributions" (ibid.); thus, giving the same to everyone, irrespective of their attributes. The other, "the truest and best form of equality", however, was presented as a *just* distribution, which took into consideration the individually varying honors of persons. As Plato put it: "for it dispenses more to the greater and less to the smaller, giving due measure to each according to nature; and with regard to honours also, by granting the greater to those that are greater in goodness, and the less to those of the opposite character in respect of goodness and education, it assigns *in proportion what is fitting to each*" (our emphasis) (ibid.).

From Plato's point of view, the first form of equality ("even results in the distributions") is also necessary in certain situations to reduce social tensions ("on account of the discontent of the masses") (p. 415). For him, however, the main goal of any state should be to strive for the second form of equality ("in proportion what is fitting to each"). With this, for "real-world conditions" Plato emphasized the importance of what nowadays are called *achieving society* and

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[12] Further criticism is levelled at the concept's controversies by Karl Popper (1945), who was convinced that Plato's views would unavoidably lead to tyranny. As Pfetsch (2003) puts it, however, Popper's critique is also one-sided and tendentious, and a detailed evaluation of his stance does not belong to the aims of the recent work. From our aspect, the main point is that in *The Laws* Plato was an explicit advocate of social equality instead of disparity, although (or even if) his concept about an ideal state was still not absolutely egalitarian.

meritocracy. The term achieving society means that those individuals contributing the most to the functioning of society should be paid better than others (Bolte 1979; Meusburger 1998a). Meritocracy rather means the principle that key positions with high responsibility in a social system should be filled by those with the best abilities and qualifications. This idea mainly serves a good functioning of the system and, thus, focuses barely on individuals but on the interests of the whole system (Meusburger 1998a)—for instance, through sustaining political stability. In Plato's concept, both these aspects emerged as foundations of a well-functioning real-world society.

For these reasons, Plato rejected tyranny as well as democracy since he considered both as challenging to the concept of "proportional equality", thus, as being incompatible with "political justice". Instead, he argued for a social order "between a monarchic constitution and a democratic" (p. 411). For him, tyranny produces "unjust" disparities, while democracy challenges the principle of "just" distribution through its drive toward equality. To sum it up, Plato, who outlined a utopian vision of an imaginary state with remarkable (but not exclusive and quite controversial) egalitarian notions, was no more an advocate of equal distribution if "real-world conditions" were taken into consideration.

For Aristotle, his stance on social equality was similar to that of his master for real-world conditions. While discussing the essence of equality, Aristotle introduced two different interpretations: one was based on *arithmetical* proportion, the other on *geometrical* proportion. Equality up to *arithmetical* proportion was based on the concept of regarding and treating all people as equal. Here, the equal distribution of a certain phenomenon among two persons was sharing it equally, giving 50 % to the one and 50 % to the other. The other definition of equality was derived from the idea of *geometrical* proportion. In this approach, equality means that the ratio of the awards distributed among A and B should be proportionate to the ratio of A's and B's merits. In other words, arithmetical equality was based on the concept of all being equal, while geometrical equality meant the distribution of honor based on merit (meritocracy). This differentiation was rather similar to that of Plato, and Aristotle's stance on which sort of equality to prefer also proved similar to that of his master while advocating for geometrical proportion. As Aristotle emphasized it through a judicial example: "[for arithmetical proportion (it)] makes no difference whether it is a good person who has defrauded a bad or a bad person a good, nor whether it is a good or bad person that has committed adultery" (Aristotle 2004, p. 87). This approach, instead, "looks only to the difference made by the injury, and treats the parties as equals" (ibid.), although they, in Aristotle's eyes, are not equal.

Aristotle's position against equal share of resources among individuals was also mirrored by his remarks on differences of property. He did not argue for any sort of economic equality, but handled related disparities as given, which implicitly means their acceptance. In his view, the heterogeneity of society is an unavoidable result of its distribution across various occupational groups (as one would say today, the division of labor). Farmers, craftsmen, traders etc. are all necessary parts of the community to which they contribute in different ways, just as in his interpretation

different organs do in the bodies of animals. But what is even more important is his conviction that different individuals have different merits, due to which not only their social roles, but also their material affluence vary on a broad scale. The major distinction here is between rich and poor, both of whom are considered as necessarily existing. And, Aristotle did not argue for a limitation of these disparities, but rather argued for "just" social circumstances in a sense that they should let everyone benefit from their work up to their merit. Thus, he preferred public property to common property, although with support for the common use of private property to some extent to avoid selfishness:

> "For if the citizens happen to be unequal rather than equal in the work they do and the profits they enjoy, accusations will inevitably be made against those who enjoy or take a lot but do little work by those who take less but do more. . . .These, then, and others are the difficulties involved in the common ownership of property. . . .For while property should be in some way communal, in general it should be private. For when care for property is divided up, it leads not to those mutual accusations, but rather to greater care being given, as each will be attending to what is his own. But where use is concerned, virtue will ensure that it is governed by the proverb 'friends share everything in common'." (Aristotle 1998, p. 32)

In general, the contribution of Plato and Aristotle to the issue of social equality and inequality included several ideas which later proved fundamental in the analysis of social disparities. Actually, the introduction of the topic into philosophy was a crucial step in itself. But the two thinkers also revealed important aspects of the problem, which have remained at the core of the analysis of social disparities. First, such a point was the distinction between equality as an *equal distribution of resources* on the one hand, and as distribution in concert with individual worth, thus, *equal award for equal merits* on the other hand—where the latter was considered varying from individual to individual, which hypothesizes an *a priori difference* amidst the members of society.[13] Second, they drew attention to the fact that social equality and inequality have *political as well as economic aspects*; thus, these phenomena cannot be interpreted purely either as jurisdictional or as economic categories.

2.3.3   Additional Concepts to an Understanding of Social Disparities: Ancient Rome

The ideas of Plato and Aristotle concerning social inequalities exerted much influence on philosophical thought in ancient Greece, and, after being transmitted

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[13] In this sense, the master and his student had quite similar attitudes regarding real societies under real-world circumstances. Thus, we agree with those researchers who interpret Aristotle as the person continuing and improving the concepts of Plato with a stronger emphasis on real conditions, instead opposing his master (on the debate over the relation of the notions of Aristotle and Plato, see Wiser 1983; Pfetsch 2003).

there, in Rome as well. They especially fertilized related debates in the Roman Republic, where significant social disparities in terms of rights and property posed a significant threat to political stability. Seemingly, a necessary prerequisite for the latter was to balance differences between the aristocratic upper class, the patricians, and the lower (but still free) class, the plebeians. Thus, the reason for dealing with inequalities was quite similar as it had been in Greece: to avoid political destabilization. The focus of debates was, however, somewhat different, foremost concerning the issue of equality before the law, while less attention was paid to the question of disparities of property. This relative one-sidedness of approaches could be traced back to the specific social circumstances in Rome. After the establishment of the Roman Republic in 509 BC, putting an end to the era of kingdom, the different legal position of the upper class, the aristocratic patricians, and the lower class, the plebeians, was a main source of social tensions. Patricians had many rights which plebeians were excluded from; for instance, they were the only group permitted to hold public office. In order to maintain this strict division, marriage between the two classes was also forbidden. It was a long process of social struggles (the "Conflict of the Orders") that—finally—gave plebeians the force of law in 287 BC, more than two centuries after the emergence of the republic (Raaflaub 2005). However, because plebeians had many more opportunities to earn a great deal of money in agriculture, handicraft or commerce, and thereby get ahead in the economy, there was much less property-related tension compared to those concerning rights. In consequence, the debate over equality also had a firm focus on legal issues instead of economic ones.

This specific, law-oriented debate over disparities lasted for a long time even after the legal equality of patricians and plebeians had been reached. Here, an especially important stance was taken by the Roman philosopher and statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero in the first century BC. For him, human beings are *by nature equal*:

> "There is no similarity, no likeness of one thing to another, so great as the likeness we all share. If distorted habits and false opinions did not twist weak minds and bend them in any direction, no one would be so like himself as all people would be like all others. Thus, whatever definition a human being one adopts is equally valid for all humans." (Cicero 1999, pp. 115–116.)

Based on this idea, Cicero argued for equality considered as an equal distribution of rights among individuals. The approach of interpreting equality as an equal distribution of a certain phenomenon was, as we have illustrated above, not new: it can also be found in the works of Plato and Aristotle. Still, Cicero's argument included a remarkable innovation. For Plato and Aristotle, the desirable (or, in the words of Plato, "truest and best") form of equality under real world circumstances was to dispense the same for equal merit, so, to give more to the "better" and less to the "worse". This reasoning was obviously based on the implicit conviction that human beings are different from each other with respect to merit. And, as distribution up to individual honors cannot be an equal one if human beings are different in merits, a certain level of social disparities seems an acceptable, or even just condition. Cicero, however, articulated another opinion by introducing the idea of

a priori similarity of human beings into philosophical thought. If individuals are equal by nature in their being human, rights should also be distributed equally among them; it is a *natural law* (Schwarz 2001). In fact, equality regarded as equal distribution was not a profoundly new category in Cicero's time, since it had already been referred to by Plato and Aristotle. But, unlike the latter thinkers, who found this sort of equality not desirable in real societies, Cicero was an advocate of it. Thus, *equality as an equal distribution* between individuals became presented as a relevant and, actually, *requested condition in real, non-imaginary societies*. This approach threw new light on the philosophical debate over disparities, and proved highly influential later on.

This reasoning, of course, cannot be detached from Cicero's personal ambitions and the general political circumstances of his era. Cicero was descended from a family belonging to the *equestrian* order, which counted as a part of aristocracy, but definitely had a lower rank and less privilege than patricians did. As an outcome of this, nobody in Cicero's family had ever had a public position before him (Cicero 1999). With this serious disadvantage, he could only enter public life after a long and hard period of studying and gaining fame as a barrister (Cicero and Sabine 1929). Even after getting involved in politics, Cicero remained an advocate of the equestrian order (Butler 2002). Later on, as a traditional republican politician he also confronted dictatorial attempts to exclude broad strata of Roman society from public life. For this, Cicero was driven to the periphery during Caesar's dictatorship, and he was proscribed and killed during the Second Triumvirate of Augustus, Lepidus and Marcus Antonius, which finally established the imperial order (Cicero 1999). To sum it up, Cicero's public and political career was a fight against the existing tradition and order, where some privileged were to get high positions, while others coming from lower strata (just as Cicero did) had few possibilities. Thus, Cicero's argumentation for a "naturally given" equality of individuals was a highly political project to create a world for the sake of those then underprivileged.

2.3.4 Thinking About Social Disparities Under the Aegis of Christianity

Besides the Greek and Roman traditions, the Jewish-Christian tradition also made significant contributions to the understanding of social disparities. Christianity gained much in popularity all over the Roman Empire during the first to fourth centuries AD, and was proclaimed the official religion of the *imperium* in 380 by Theodosius I. Thus, its teachings on equality began to dominate related thoughts in Europe. The Christian stance on this question was, however, not without controversies. In the Bible, statements for and against equality are also to be found. On the one hand, the lines of the Old Testament say that all human beings are descendants of Adam, who was created by God "in his image", and Noah, who was the only human survivor of the biblical deluge with his family. These ideas suggest that all human beings are brothers and sisters, and they are all similar to

God. This concept, which is frequently referred to in the New Testament as well (for instance when people are all called sons of the Lord, their Father), suggests that all humans have something essential in common, which makes them equal. On the other hand, however, many parts of the Bible seem to legitimize social disparities, even judging them just. A typical example is the words of Jesus on paying taxes to Caesar through which he is justifying social hierarchies and propagating their acceptance by those subordinated: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." (Mark 12:17). An even more explicit justification of inequalities is to be read in The Parable of the Talents, in the Gospel of Matthew: "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away." (Matthew 25:29).

Yet, the strongest influence on the evaluation of disparities was not exerted by these moral instructions, but by a remarkable shift in the level at which inequalities should be considered. In the words of Paul the Apostle, it is not the level of worldly differences that does matter, but the heavenly equality of all who believe in God and live in concert with his will. As he put it in his First Epistle to the Corinthians:

> "Let each man abide in that calling wherein he was called. Wast thou called being a bondservant? Care not for it: nay, even if thou canst become free, use [it] rather. For he that was called in the Lord being a bondservant, is the Lord's freedman: likewise he that was called being free, is Christ's bondservant. Ye were bought with a price; become not bondservants of men. Brethren, let each men, wherein he was called, therein abide with God." (1 Cor 7:20–24)

This stance is in concert with the words of Jesus in The Sermon of the Mount. Here he expressed the perfect uselessness of focusing on material necessities and their accessibility (and, implicitly but logically, their distribution) instead of concentrating on the belief in God:

> "Be not therefore anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? For after all these things do the Gentiles seek; for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matthew 6:31–33)

Similarly to Paul the Apostle, a strict distinction of equality in worldly and heavenly senses was also emphasized by the Christian Roman philosopher, Augustine of Hippo. In his book *The City of God* (*De civitate Dei*), he explains that perfect justice and freedom are not to imagine in worldly societies, only in heavenly ones, which one can enter after one's worldly life ends (Bluhm 2007).

Although this approach may help the poor and hopeless to believe in a better life coming (even if after death), and, thus, to better bear the hardness of life, it also questions the relevance of dealing with worldly disparities. As a consequence of this, in the medieval Europe dominated by Christianity and the Christian Church, the issue of "worldly" social inequalities was driven into the periphery of philosophical and political thought, where it remained for a number of centuries. This was absolutely in concert with the political interests of the ruling social strata since the phenomenon of inequality, which was through its very existence the reason for

the emergence of philosophical concepts on equality as early as in the ancient Greece, did not disappear. Although forcefully legitimized by the Catholic Church, the feudal society of medieval Europe was characterized by enormous social disparities. It was so in terms of dominion as well as political participation, since these were strongly intertwined. And these disparities were extremely stable as the differentiation between the nobles and those without legal privileges (and having strongly limited economic possibilities) was based on hereditary grounds (cf. Schreiner 2001). No wonder that those in power had firm interests in diverting people's attention away from inequalities produced by the ruling order. And this interest was shared by the Catholic Church as well since it also took enormous advantage of the existing order. First, since it had vast land properties and a lot of revenue from tithe, the church itself possessed remarkable worldly wealth. Second, the Catholic Church played a decisive role in legitimizing the ruling order and its representatives otherwise not belonging to the religious sphere (kings, nobles etc.) (Konrád and Szelényi 1978). Thus, the church was also strongly interested in maintaining the feudal order and its social disparities.

Still, social inequalities sometimes led not only to serious tensions, but also to social explosion. This was especially likely in times of war, when the burden of rising taxes, which were only to be paid by those not belonging to nobility, fell on the shoulders of the already poor lower strata. Sometimes these problems resulted in peasants' revolts such as the 1358 Jacquerie in France, Wat Tyler's 1381 rebellion in England, the Bohemian Hussite Wars of 1419–1434, György Dózsa's rebellion of 1514 in Hungary and the German Peasants' Revolt of 1524–1526.

Although these events did not re-launch the philosophical debate over the question of disparities in the short-term, certain processes began to point in this direction in the long run. The gradual intensification of international commerce, the increase of literacy, the invention of printing, and the accompanying streams of thought from various cultures led to an "intellectual and social ferment" in many urban centers. That, on the one hand, turned the interest of many of the educated toward some re-invented philosophical concepts from the Ancient Greece and Rome. On the other hand, it also made intellectuals more sensitive to certain social issues to which their ancient predecessors had drawn significant attention, such as inequalities and the lack of freedom (Schwarz 2001). It was especially the case as the Renaissance, in Burckhardt's (1860) words, brought the "emergence of the individual" (cited by Roeck 2001, p. 13155), thus, for instance, an increased interest in injustice lived and suffered by individuals.

These changes were also given impetus by the Reformation, which gradually, but significantly eroded the position of the Catholic Church, indoctrinator of the righteousness of the feudal social order. As Schilling (2001) puts it, relatively widespread criticism of the Catholic Church had already existed in the late Middle Ages. The Reformation, however, went even further since it "completely de-legitimized" the Pope and the Roman church and "unmasked" them as the "Antichrist" (p. 12892). Moreover, the serious loss of legitimacy and moral authority of the Catholic Church concerned virtually all social strata, even the lower ones. This was because the new teachings of the Reformation were disseminated through mass communication—foremost based on the new technology of printing

(Schilling 2001). In consequence, the control of the Catholic Church over what was permitted to be thought and published grew weaker and weaker. This process also undermined the church's long-lasting endeavor to justify the feudal social order and its significant disparities.

This process was even speeded up by the expanding power of secular actors at the cost of reducing the influence of the Roman church. Even before Luther and his famous 95 theses, the emergence and development of early nation states resulted in a "regionalization" of the church. Due to this new initiative, "national" churches within the one universal church were established all over Europe. The Reformation, however, was not aimed at a moderate increase of diversity within the universal church, but put an end to the very era of a universal church, which opened new ways for the secular state to gain in power. As a typical outcome, the sixteenth and seventieth centuries witnessed states getting new funds and property assets through secularization. They were also becoming more and more involved in activities crucial to the legitimization of power but that had been dominated by the Roman church up to then (such as education) (Schilling 2001). Furthermore, strengthening nation states were highly interested in the reformation of the feudal political and social order. They wanted to get rid of the system in which secular actors and institutions had needed the permanent legitimization and support of the Catholic Church, a non-secular actor (ibid.). These interests, logically, catalyzed the debate over basic issues which had been exiled from mainstream philosophical thought by religious orthodoxy for many centuries. This was also the case for the question of equity, to which a lot of attention was paid by many thinkers of the Enlightenment.

2.3.5 Concepts About Social Disparities in the Age of Enlightenment: The Case of England

The sixteenth and seventieth centuries brought the emergence of vivid philosophical debates over the issue of equity in many countries.[14, 15] These concepts had certain specific features due to their different social and political contexts, but

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[14] It is worth noting at this point that the United States was a remarkable exception, despite the manifold influence the American philosophical and political tradition exerted on national traditions in Europe concerning the issue of freedom. The 1776 Virginia Declaration of Rights, the cornerstone of the newly emerging US legal order, only stated that "all men are by nature equally free and independent" (which was a statement with limited "range", given that it referred exclusively to *white men* and in the succeeding decades proved in practice compatible with slavery). Equality is otherwise not mentioned in the bill, neither as equality before the law nor as an equal distribution of properties (Dann 1975).

[15] It should be underlined that the philosophical boom in Europe with regard to disparities rather meant the rapid gain of the issue in popularity than the emergence of a brand new topic. Reformation as well as anti-feudal peasants' revolts had already indicated the importance of the problem, and the slogans propagated by the leaders of Medieval anti-feudal revolts planted the seeds of philosophical debates later on.

similarities were also remarkable, at least for the major stances on the desirable form and level of inequalities. The first place to witness the increasing popularity of concepts on disparities was England. In the heart of all related concepts was a firm rejection of the social disparities produced by feudal society, especially the unequal position of different social strata before the law. The manifold privileges guaranteed to nobility allowed them to hold high offices, actively participate in the political life of the country through their right to vote, and possess great material wealth since they did not have to pay tax. Commoners, however, could not even dream about the same. These tensions, which strongly contributed to the English Civil War between 1642 and 1651 and to the deep transformation of the political system, motivated many thinkers to deal with the problem of social disparities and with the notion of equality. Their stances, however, although common to some extent in their criticism of the feudal order, mirrored different concepts of equality.

One characteristic approach suggested that individuals must be equal in their freedom, in their right not to be oppressed by others and, consequently, to be equal before the law and to equally participate in political decision-making. This argumentation was obviously motivated by the endeavor to undermine the political privileges of nobility, and appeared in many thinkers' works. Milton (1915)[1660], for instance, derived his reasoning from the Protestant idea that "the whole Protestant Church allows no supreme judge or rule in matters of religion, but the scriptures, and these to be interpreted by the scriptures themselves" (p. 34). This anti-hierarchical stance "necessarily inferrs liberty of conscience" (ibid.), a kind of liberty "best pleasing to God" (ibid.) and, thus, given to everybody. Since this freedom, for Milton, "will be more ample and secure to us under a free Commonwealth then under kinship" (ibid), the best is to establish a political order where everyone can openly form their opinion (which implicitly means the universal right to vote). A similar reasoning was that of John Locke, arguing that "all Men by Nature are equal" (Locke 1988[1689], p. 304). This equality was regarded by him "in respect of Jurisdiction or Dominion one over another", so, the "equal Right that every Man hath, to his Natural Freedom, without being subjected to the Will or Authority of any other Man" (ibid.).

These statements, however, were not intended to substantiate equality in a universal sense, thus, an equal distribution of everything among individuals. As Milton put it, "the other part of our freedom consists in the civil rights and advanc'ments of every person *according to his merit*" (our emphasis) (Milton 1915[1660], p. 37). Or, in Locke's words: "Though I have said above…That all Men by Nature are equal [in terms of jurisdiction], I cannot be supposed to understand all sorts of Equality: Age or Virtue may give Men a *just precedency*: Excellency of Parts and Merit may place others above the Common Level: Birth may subject some, and Alliance or Benefits others, to pay an Observance to those whom Nature, Gratitude or other Respects may have made it due" (our emphasis) (Locke 1988[1689], p. 304). Locke also states, as Bluhm (2007) reveals, that even if everybody is equal initially in terms of jurisdiction, the process of acquiring properties through work leads to a strong differentiation of society as its inner

relations become more and more complex. Considering all these, the argumentation of Milton and Locke seems rather close to the reasoning of *equal rewards for equal merits,* which was already presented in relation to debates over inequalities in ancient Greece. To the reasoning of Plato and Aristotle, the concepts of Milton and Locke were also similar in their (now explicitly articulated) conviction that individual merits are different, which unavoidably leads to unequal rewards. Everyone must be equal before the law and, based on their liberty of conscience given by God, they cannot be deprived of their freedom. But other individual attributes beyond this general one vary from one person to another. As a result, people can be rather different in, for instance, the credit given to their words or in the property they manage to acquire.

Some other thinkers, however, went further and argued for equality regarded as (some) equality in the distribution of resources amongst individuals. Proceeding from a radically Protestant, communistic interpretation of the Bible, they tried to argue for improving the situation of the poor and radically reducing or even abolishing social disparities in terms of property. For James Harrington (1656), for instance, freedom and political equality was only to be imagined if disparities of property (especially land ownership) were also equalized. As he wrote, this meant a distribution, by which "no one man or number of men, within the compass of the few or aristocracy, can come to overpower the whole people by their possessions in lands" (ibid.). An even more radical opinion was that of Gerrard Winstanley (1649). He also underlined that, by "the great Creator Reason", "not one word was spoken in the beginning [of time], That one branch of mankind should rule over another". But Winstanley went even further since he argued that equal freedom can only be reached through the common use of land, thus, if "the Earth becomes a Common Treasury again, as it must" (Winstanley 1649). For him, this necessitates the appropriation of private property and the introduction of common property (Bluhm 2007). In other words, the interpretation of *equality as equal distribution of resources* also appeared in seventeenth century England.

2.3.6 Enlightenment in France and the Issue of Social Disparities

During the eighteenth century, just like somewhat earlier in England, the issue of social disparities also became the focus of political and philosophical theorists in France. The reason was generally the same as in England: the aim to leave behind the feudal order together with its manifold social disparities. The first important contribution to the topic was made here by Montesquieu, who in his *The Spirit of Laws* (*De l'esprit des lois*) identified equality as a natural condition of relations between individuals. Moreover, he added that this equality looses as the society creates and institutionalizes certain forms of disparities, which can only be cured by laws (obviously by non-feudal laws). As he put it: "In the state of nature, men are

born in equality, but they cannot remain so. Society makes them lose their equality, and they become equal only through the laws" (Montesquieu 1989[1752], p. 114). With these words, he introduced the idea into the French discourse that all should be equal before the law, but he was not an advocate of equality in all spheres of life. He was for a "regulated" democracy, where "one is equal only as citizen", unlike in unregulated democracies where "one is also equal as a magistrate, senator, judge, father, husband, or master" (ibid.). Montesquieu's approach was rather that of "the same award for the same honor", which is incompatible with the legal disparities maintained by the feudal system, but is also not aimed at a total equalization of individuals.

In many of its main statements, similar was the opinion of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who is often considered as "the theoretician of a new revolutionary concept of equality" (Dann 1975, p. 1015), which motivated many during the eighteenth and nineteenth century revolutions all over Europe. He also stated that "men. . .are naturally as equal among themselves as were the animals of every species" (Rousseau 2002[1762], p. 82). For him, social disparities are created by the emergence of society, the division of labor and the introduction of property. Thus, inequalities are produced by society, which steadily increases these inequalities for the benefit of those who already have more (Dann 1975). The "system of disparity" (ibid., p. 1015), however, can be ended by the creation of "a moral and lawful equality", due to which individuals "become equal by convention and legal right" (Rousseau 2002[1762], p. 169).

Yet, Rousseau did not argue for total equality in all senses. He clarified the reason for this through an important theoretical step, an explicit and exact distinction of what he called natural or physical inequality on the one hand, and moral or political inequality on the other. For him, "natural, or physical inequality. . .is established by nature, and consists in the difference of age, health, bodily strength, and the qualities of the mind, or of the soul" (p. 87). Moral or political inequality, however, so "different privileges, which some men enjoy, to the prejudice of others, such as that of being richer, more honored, more powerful" "depends on a kind of convention, and is established, or at least authorized by the common consent of mankind" (ibid). Although physical inequalities cannot be abolished since they are given, the moral equality of individuals can be re-established and guaranteed by feasible regulations. In other words, physical inequality and social equality do not contradict each other (Dann 1975).

This argumentation might seem compatible with that of Montesquieu, but it includes a far-reaching innovation. For Rousseau, all disparities that are not directly given by nature are moral inequalities, which an enlightened society can eliminate. As an example, he cited the equality before law, and did not speak about a radical equalization of properties. Still, his stance can also be interpreted as an indirect justification of the latter. And this provided ammunition to those arguing for an extreme transformation of the existing social order. Abbé de Mably, for instance, made the point that social equality can only be reached through an equal distribution of land property (Dann 1975). The Jacobins also followed this reasoning, and projected their egalitarian visions over all spheres of society. For Gracchus Babeuf

(1796), a main Jacobin agitator of the French revolution, equality before the law was only "conditional equality". Instead of this, he wanted "real equality" including the abolition of differences "between rich and poor, great and small, masters and servants, rulers and ruled". A crucial and specific point here was "the community of goods". Babeuf vehemently argued for an equal distribution of virtually everything: "Let there no longer be any difference between people than that of age and sex...let...then be for them but one education, but one food. They are satisfied with one sun and one air for all: why then would the same portion and the same quality of food not suffice for each of them?" As can be seen, Babeuf and, in general, the Jacobins were for social equality regarded as an equal distribution of all resources. To justify this point, they claimed that all individuals are the same, not only respective to legal and moral, but also to basic material aspects; in Babeuf's words: "all have the same faculties and the same needs".

Of course, as the "conditional" equality of those regarding social equality as equality before the law was rejected by supporters of radical changes, the latter's extreme claims were also criticized by many liberal philosophers. de Condorcet (1796)[1795], for instance, agreed that the principal causes of social disparities are not purely jurisdictional ones, but also concern the material sphere. In his eyes especially important were the "inequality of wealth", the inequalities in the capability of securing the sources of subsistence to family members (especially descendants),[16] and the "inequality of instruction", meaning education (p. 259). This is why "there frequently exists a considerable distinction between the rights which the law acknowledges in the citizens of a state, and those which they really enjoy" (ibid.). De Condorcet also agreed that "these...kinds of real inequality must continually diminish" (ibid.). Yet, he was firm in rejecting any drive toward borderless equalization. As he put it, these inequalities "have natural and necessary causes, which it would be absurd as well as dangerous to think of destroying; nor can we attempt even to destroy entirely their effects, without opening at the same time more fruitful forces of inequality, and giving to the rights of man a more direct and more fatal blow" (pp. 259–260).

It is important to refer here to the member of the House of Commons in Great Britain, the political philosopher Edmund Burke as well, generally regarded as the "father of conservatism" (Kirk 1953, p. 21; see Lock 2006, p. 585). Although not being a Frenchman, he drew a lot of attention to the French Revolution, and his interpretation was very similar to that of French liberal philosophers. Burke underlined that social disparities are unavoidably produced by society, thus, they cannot be abolished. However, they are necessary for functioning of society, from which all individuals benefit, even those belonging to lower classes. As he put it, social inequalities are established by "the order of civil life...as much for the benefit of those whom it must leave in a humble state, as those whom it is able to

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[16] Landowners, for example, can leave their lands to their children, but employees cannot do the same with their workplace, which is their main source of income.

exalt to a condition more splendid, but not more happy" (Burke 1910[1790], p. 35). Consequently, he judged any attempts at total abolition of disparities "monstrous fiction", which, "inspiring false ideas and vain expectations", "serves only to aggravate and embitter that real inequality, which it never can remove" (ibid.). In his argument, the ignorance of this and the endeavor to eliminate all inequalities would destroy the very foundation of society (Dann 1975).

Another representative of this ideology is the relatively late interpreter of the French Revolution, the classical liberal thinker Alexis de Tocqueville. For him, a radical notion of equality can either result in anarchy or in tyranny. As he put it: "Equality produces. . .two tendencies: one leads men directly to independence and can push them suddenly as far as anarchy; the other leads them by a longer, more secret, but surer road toward servitude" (Tocqueville 2010[1835/1840], p. 1193). In his reasoning, equality as having equal access to all resources can cause an ultimate collapse of society on the one hand. On the other hand, if the power manages to get out of this equalization process, after a while it can crack down on the atomized mass of equal citizens, who become unable "to defend their independence against the aggressions of power" (p. 90). This does not necessarily mean the dominance of a small clique, but even a situation where the equalized majority oppresses those still considered "others" (Bluhm 2007). Thus, a radically interpreted equality as equal distribution of everything amongst individuals unavoidably fails to realize the high goals it sets for itself, namely equality in freedom and well-being.

As can be seen, the social and political processes of eighteenth century France and the French Revolution not only made the issue of social disparities popular. They also resulted in the emergence of two characteristic stances, which, as could be seen, both had their precedents in Western philosophical thought. One argued for a legal framework, which guaranteed that all were equal before the law, but not in terms of property. For the latter, disparities emerging if legal equality is guaranteed were considered "just" and tolerable. This concept was actually based on the notion of "the same reward for the same merit". Furthermore, it mirrored the sometimes implicit, but often explicit idea that since individual differences are given by nature, individual merits are necessarily different. The other intellectual stream defined equality as equal distribution of resources, whose goal was derived from a conviction that individuals are morally as well as materially common in their being human and in their basic human needs. Incidentally, these two concepts were not just "floating" in that time's common discourse, but both were strongly linked to certain societal groups and their interests. As Dann (1975) reveals, equality before the law, so the same award for the same honor was a main goal of the bourgeois middle class, standing against feudalism as well as against radical equalization of resources. To interpret equality as an equal distribution, "the same for everybody", became a popular slogan for lower classes, who were the main supporters of the Jacobin movement.

2.3.7   Increasing Importance of Disparity Issues in Central and Eastern Europe

In general, the same tendencies as described in France were to be seen in Germany, where the question of equality was brought into the focus of thinkers (again) by the French Revolution.[17] Many got inspired by fifteenth century anti-feudal rebellions of Thomas Müntzer and Michael Gaismair (cf. Goerz 1989; Macek 1988), while they took the eighteenth century point elaborated by the Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant. In this approach, all human beings are common in their autonomous reason, moral dignity and ultimate purpose, even if they are naturally unequal in physical sense. This idea motivated Kant to speak about the "unlimited equality of people" (Kant 1786; cited by Dann 1975, p. 1021), a concept also internalized by many who were touched by Kantian philosophy, such as the poet Friedrich Schiller, or the philosophers Friedrich Schlegel and Jakob Friedrich Fries (Dann 1975). Their understanding of equality, however, only referred to jurisdictional and political issues (to the equal right to express political opinion, foremost through the right to vote). As Schlegel put it, the "maximum [of the equality defined by Kant] would be an absolute equality of civil rights and obligations" (Schlegel 1966[1796], p. 12; cited by Dann 1975, p. 1023).

Meanwhile, however, the radical approaches becoming especially strong in the last phase of the French Revolution also influenced some in German areas. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, for example, followed the Jacobins while he was arguing not only for equal rights, but also for an equalization of property relations. In his view, "everyone as human being has their legal claim on property; this legal claim is equal for all" (Fichte 1806, p. 463). And this equal distribution of property should be guaranteed even if only possible in a state with total and violent control over society (Dann 1975).

Since a significant transformation of the feudal-type German legal order remained a vision before the revolution of 1848, both concepts of equality remained present in the related discourse. Their relation, however, became more and more competitive. Thus, they put a strong emphasis not only on their common rejection of feudalism, but also on their irreconcilable difference to each other. And, similarly as it had happened in France during the revolution, they were caught up by different social strata. As Dann (1975) reveals, the German civic class supported equality before the law, an interpretation of equality as giving the same to the same. Meanwhile, the underprivileged working class, which began to increase in size due

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[17] A detailed description of the discourse on equality in Germany from the late eighteenth century on (although with emphases different to those of our paper) is given by Dann (1975). We have to emphasize that neither the democratic idea of political equality nor democratic communities were without predecessors in German speaking territories (for the latter a peculiar example was the *Landsgemeinde*, an early form of direct democracy in Swiss cantons, and, until the Napoleonic Wars, in the Bregenzerwald Region of Austria). In intellectual debates, however, the topic had attracted little attention until the French Revolution.

to a gradual industrialization of many German areas, sympathized with the radically egalitarian notion of giving the same to everyone.

In 1848 and 1849, a revolutionary wave was overrunning almost the whole of Europe. This opened the door for many political endeavors inspired to a great extent by the preceding decades' concepts on equality. The events led to important changes in each society concerned. The revolution swept away serfdom in the last bastions of feudalism in Christian Europe, or catalyzed processes soon resulting in the same (serfdom was abolished in the Habsburg Empire in 1848 and in 1861 in Russia). Furthermore, important steps were taken to establish not only equality before the law, but also political equality. The circle of those having the right to vote gradually increased. In France and Switzerland, universal male suffrage was introduced in 1848. The same was achieved in German territories when the unified German Empire was proclaimed in 1871, and in the US through the 15th Amendment of the Constitution in 1870. In the United Kingdom the process of emancipation was slower, yet, the number of males with voting rights was raised in 1867 as well as in 1884.[18] The goals shared by all opponents of the old feudal order seemed to become reality gradually. This fact turned the attention of thinkers more and more towards the differences between the advocates of legal and political equality on the one hand, and those arguing for material equality on the other. The discourse on equality tended to focus on various attitudes towards material disparities. Here, the duality of the discourse with two competing interpretations of inequalities proved rather stable. Meanwhile, however, the basic arguments upon which intellectuals tried to substantiate their interpretation of equality changed.

2.3.8   Social Disparities in the Light of (R)Evolutionary Ideas: Darwin and his Reception in the Marxist Approach

For all competing approaches new inspiration was given by Charles Darwin's (1859) concept of natural selection and the evolution of species. Although the book did not discuss human evolution, its core idea of struggle for life quickly raised the attention of many social thinkers of all political ideologies. A number of supporters of laissez-faire capitalism were made similarly enthusiastic by Darwinian thoughts as many liberals, socialists, or even anarchists. In fact, many of them simply misunderstood, misinterpreted or had not even read Darwin's work (Paul 2009). But, as Paul (2009) puts it, they "found in his [Darwin's] ambiguities legitimation for whatever they favoured" (p. 220). Even as Darwin's next book on social evolution was released (see Darwin 1871), numerous intellectuals simply

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[18] A more detailed description of the extension of voting rights in various European countries is to be found in Acemoglu and Robinson (2000).

cherry-picked his ideas to substantiate the political concepts they found desirable (Paul 2009).[19]

In the post-1848 phase of Western history, some thinkers urged for the equalization of material wealth. For them, only the establishment of an equal distribution of property could guarantee social equality and peace. These already well-known slogans, however, needed new arguments for post-revolutionary times. Here an especially important role was played by Karl Marx, who interpreted human history as a long series of *class struggles* for resources. For the initial condition of society, he hypothesized a so-called primitive communism, a classless society with tribal (actually common) property and without institutionalized social disparities.[20] In his eyes, this natural condition was put to an end by those trying to suppress and exploit others to increase their own property and wealth. This became first possible when—following domestication—the division of labor (especially the vertical division of labor) took place. Since using weapons did not remain a necessary prerequisite for production any more (unlike in hunting tribes), certain societal groups could exclude others from having access to weapons, and made it their own privilege. This enabled the privileged group to suppress others and deprive them of owning property and forces of production—except from their physical workforce. After such a social transformation, antique, feudal and capitalist societies all brought about the existence and struggle of two classes. In ancient societies, the free and slaves were fighting against each other. In feudal societies, the dichotomy was based on the opposition of landlords and serfs. Capitalist societies witness class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. But finally, according to the theory, the proletariat defeats the bourgeoisie which opens the way for communism and a classless society (see Niedermaier 2009).

As can be seen, Marx's argumentation still strongly mirrored the influence of certain ideas of the Enlightenment. His idea of initial societies was that of an equal one, just as by Locke and Rousseau. And his goal was to re-establish classless relations under the aegis of communism, where social disparities would not be present any more. This objective was similar to already existing radical ideas of equalizing the distribution of resources amongst individuals. Related to this, Marx also internalized a concept that had been fostered by many in the preceding decades. He clearly confronted the notion of legal and political equality to "factual" socio-economic equality. To his eyes, the first was just a bourgeois concept to mask

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[19] On the spatially selective reception of Darwin's concept and the relevance of the geographical context for which aspects of the Darwinian concept were emphasized or ignored at given places also see Livingstone (2003b, 2006).

[20] This does not necessarily mean an absolute lack of inequalities. In Marxist interpretation, certain disparities can exist even within classless societies. Senior members of tribes, for instance, can have more influence on decision-making over the life of tribe due to the respect they enjoy. However, the forces of production are owned by the community, which, in the Marxist approach, means that nobody can be excluded from their use. In consequence, such deep and stable inequalities cannot emerge as those in class societies (see Niedermaier 2009).

the maintenance of real disparities, thus, something that should be rejected (Dann 1975).

The same stance was presented by Friedrich Engels in his *Anti-Dühring*. Here he stated that the notion of equality "*reduced* itself to bourgeois equality before the law" (our emphasis) in concepts of the great thinkers of the eighteenth century (Engels 1976[1878], p. 19). In contrast to this narrow interpretation, he argued that "equality must not be merely apparent, must not apply merely to the sphere of the state, but must also be real, must also be extended to the social, economic sphere" (p. 98). For him, this could mean nothing less than "the abolition of classes" (p. 99).

As mirrored by these concepts, Marx and Engels were advocates of equality regarded as an equal distribution of social and economic resources among individuals. With this they firmly distanced themselves from the interpretation of equality as equal reward for equal honor, and not only implicitly. In his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx explicitly judged the latter approach absolutely deniable. For him, if the point is, in his words, to give equal right for equal production, "the right of the producers is *proportional* to the labor they supply" (original emphasis) (Marx 2009[1875], p. 9). But "one man is superior to another physically, or mentally, and supplies more labor in the same time, or can labor for a longer time" (p. 10). In consequence, "equal right is an unequal right for unequal labor" (ibid.). And this was the point where Marx revealed why he firmly rejected this principle. His main argument was not to deny that individual contributions were different, thus, to suggest a sort of individual equality respective to abilities. Instead, he criticized the concept as it recognized "unequal individual endowment" as a "natural privilege" (ibid.). Thus, for Marx, the "equal right for equal supply" principle undermines social equality and justifies the maintenance of disparities. It legitimizes all kinds of individual differences through judging them "natural", while hiding their social reasons. Furthermore, as Marx argued, the "equal right for equal supply" concept of equality did not consider different individual needs. As he put it, according to this principle workers "with an equal performance of labor" (ibid.) would factually get the same. But if we consider that one worker might be married while the other is single, one might have many children while the other has none, their just needs to sustain their families are also different. Thus, to give the same to all workers with the same labor means to give more to some wives and children than to others. For Marx, the solution was simple: "to avoid all these defects, *right*, instead of being equal, *would have to be unequal*" (our emphasis) (ibid.). In these words, Marx explicitly articulated what we have already referred to in this paper. Namely, that the idea of "equal reward for equal honor" is based on the hypothesis of naturally different individual qualities, which are therefore automatically justified. Those arguing for equal distribution, however, do not believe in such a natural determination, thus, they judge unjust any social and economic differences between individuals. Furthermore, they even tolerate the inequality of rights as a prerequisite for an equal distribution. With other words, giving different award for the same merit can gain their acceptance if it results in an equal distribution of resources amidst individuals.

2.3.9   Social Disparities and "The Struggle for Existence": Anti-Marxist Interpretations of Darwin

Darwin's ideas not only gave inspiration to advocates of a radical equalization of society, but also to their opponents. Their notion to give the same for the same, which in their view would necessarily lead to unequal distribution due to different individual merits, could seemingly be substantiated by certain thoughts of the British naturalist. In his 1871 work on social evolution, Darwin adapted his original concept of natural selection for societal relations. As he put it: "Man, like every other animal, has no doubt advanced to his present high condition through a struggle for existence consequent on his rapid multiplication" (Darwin, 1981 [1871], p. 403). And if human society wants to avoid sinking "into indolence", "there should be open competition for all men; and the most able should not be prevented by laws or customs for succeeding best and rearing the largest number of offspring" (ibid.). In fact, as Paul (2009) shows, Darwin's concept of social evolution was not as one-sided as these citations might suggest. He had many comments for as well as against promoting individual competition in human society. That is why he could be interpreted positively by representatives of so many different political views. It is no wonder, of course, that the advocates for individual competition and the unavoidability of disparities concentrated on Darwin's corresponding statements.

As Hofstadter (1944) revealed, referring to Darwin was rather a common habit of laissez-faire conservatives in English-speaking countries. In their opinion, it was only natural that "the best competitors in a competitive situation would win" (pp. 6–7).[21] This stance was rather compatible with the idea of the same award for the same merit. Furthermore, just as Marx emphasized, it justified social disparities: the very nature of competition assumes that the award should be given to the winner, and equal distribution does not come into question. Such an interpretation of Darwinian ideas was even stronger in Germany, where Darwin's works enjoyed especially widespread popularity (Paul 2009). As Dann (1975) shows, many German thinkers stated that social equality (urged e.g. by the Marxists) would result in an overall equalization. Reflecting to equalizing notions,

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[21] This is the stance usually described as "social Darwinism" in the literature (Paul 2009). Yet, I do not use this term in the text since this extreme laissez-faire conservatism was basically not rooted in Darwin's ideas, from which they utilized many slogans. Instead, they could rather be traced back to some concepts of the "neo-Lamarckians" (Paul 2009; cf. Bowler 1990; Hofstadter 1944; Moore 1985). They followed the pre-Darwinian French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck in thinking that organisms acquire new characteristics as the result of a process of active adaptation to their environments (Paul 2009). It was their conviction that, as formulated by the British philosopher Herbert Spencer, "the whole effort of nature is to get rid of such [the "unfit"], to clear the world of them, to make room for better" (Spencer 1970[1851], p. 379; cited by Paul 2009, p. 232). The quick spread of this idea was partly thanks to the skyrocketing popularity of Darwin's works, which, although not "neo-Lamarckian", opened the way for other evolutionary concepts as well. That is why many superficial observers identified Darwinism with evolutionism (Paul 2009).

they envisaged a dark future with the authority of masses, where there would be no space left for the "natural aristocracy", which had emerged during the "struggle for life" (p. 1043) due to its better abilities.

One of the most well-known German philosophers of the late nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche was also influenced by evolutionist and Darwinian ideas, even if he referred to Darwin and Spencer as "worthy but mediocre Englishmen" (Nietzsche 2002[1886], p. 144). Nietzsche interpreted society as a mass of predatory human beings, who are generally irrational, and in a permanent fight with one another (cf. Bluhm 2007). In such a context, he confronted the "herd animal", the valueless commoner, as compared to the "noble", who succeeded in emerging from among the "pack" due to superior abilities. For him, social disparity was a necessary result of the differing qualities of individuals. Meanwhile, he regarded all endeavors to eliminate inequalities as attempts to destroy anyone better than the herd animal. For this reason, he harshly criticized the Christian concept of equality before God as well as socialist, communist notions. Nietzsche (2002)[1886] made this opinion explicit while discussing Christianity, "the most disastrous form of arrogance so far" (p. 57). In his words, the whole project of European Christianity was aimed to "stand all valuations *on their head*" (original emphasis) (p. 56). This was considered by him as a violent intervention in the natural process of a kind of social selection:

> "…crush the strong, strike down the great hopes, throw suspicion on the delight in beauty, skew everything self-satisfied, manly, conquering, domineering, every instinct that belongs *to the highest and best-turned-out type of 'human'* [our emphasis], twist them into uncertainty, crisis of conscience, self-destruction" (p. 56).

For Nietzsche, these attempts can directly be blamed for a deprivation of European society:

> "people who were not noble enough to see the abysmally different orders of rank and chasms in rank between different people…with their 'equality before God' have prevailed over the fate of Europe so far, until a stunted, almost ridiculous type, a herd animal, something well-meaning, sickly and mediocre has finally been bred: the European of today" (p. 57).

Nietzsche had a very similar approach to his days' socialist egalitarian concepts—or, in his words, to the aims of "today's socialist fools and nitwits". As he put it, the claim to "equal rights and equal claims" was a "brutalizing process of turning humanity into stunted little animals", or the "degeneration and diminution of humanity into the perfect herd animal" (p. 92). For him, such a goal "could all to easily end up as equal wrongs", or "in waging a joint war on anything rare, strange, privileged, on the higher man, higher soul, higher duty, higher responsibility, on creative power and mastery" (p. 107). Instead of such, Nietzsche was on the side of "greatness". For him, "greatness" was equal to "being noble, wanting to be yourself, the ability to be different, standing alone and needing to live by your own fists" (ibid). In other words, "greatness" in his eyes was something that few can reach, and if they reach it, great social disparities unavoidably emerge.

In general, Nietzsche's argumentation was based on an anthropologic-like hypothesis of an irrational, predatory and competing humankind. He had a specific concept of social evolution and selection projected onto a negative idea of humans. Under these circumstances, he regarded few to have "higher" qualities to emerge from the mass of "herd animals", which necessarily produces social disparities. These inequalities were actually justified by Nietzsche, since in his eyes the emergence of the "highest and best-turned-out type of" humans was the only alternative to a "total degeneration of humanity". Furthermore, derived from his negative idea of human, he even questioned the moral right of anyone to urge for equality. His reasoning was cynical but simple: "the non-possessers. . .are no better than the possessers and have no moral prerogative over them, for their own ancestors were at some time or other possessers" (Nietzsche 2007[1878], p. 166). With all these specific features, Nietzsche was a vehement opponent of equal distribution, and a firm adversary of any attempts to get anything away from those with "higher" abilities. Instead, he was for a kind of "equal reward for equal merit" approach, where he regarded individual merits extremely differently.

The late nineteenth century concepts of equality proved very popular and exerted a significant influence on politics in the next century as well. The socialist notion of establishing equality as an equal distribution of resources was internalized and explicitly propagated by key theoreticians of the international labor movement. This interpretation of equality became common among socialist and communist politicians as well, although the actual steps they wanted to take varied on a broad scale. While many (e.g. social democrats) believed in the success of gradual social reforms, others were much more definite (see Lenin 1961[1902]). Lenin, for instance, urged in his works for radical political steps to advance "from formal equality to actual equality" (Lenin 2004[1917], p. 85), thus, to promote material equality instead of equality before the law. And his endeavor, which was based on that of Marx and aimed at the creation of a classless society, gained remarkable political importance soon. After the success of the communist revolution in Russia and the proclamation of the USSR in 1922, communist egalitarian concepts officially became guiding principles of a country the size of a continent.

Meanwhile, the idea of equal reward for equal honor, which actually meant an unequal distribution at the end, also gained many supporters. Advocates of capitalism and liberal democracies were among them as well as leading figures of the newly emerging fascist and national socialist movements in Italy and Germany. Their approaches, of course, were dramatically different. For the former group, they promoted equality before the law, a necessary prerequisite for democratic circumstances. However, the idea of capitalism based on free competition was incompatible with any interpretations of equality as an equal distribution of resources. For extreme rightists, the Darwinian concept of natural selection that was often referred to gained a radical meaning. They emphasized the permanent competition between human beings, where the "stronger" should win and the "weaker" should fall, even in a strict biological sense. In fact, the national socialists rather used the Darwinian language simply to popularize their goals, and barely relied on Darwin's thoughts and notions (Evans 1997; Paul 2009). Yet, the idea of

equal reward for equal honor became for them a propagandistic means of legitimizing their racist aims to enslave or annihilate certain groups of humans.

2.3.10 Concepts About Social Disparities After World War II: Revaluation of the Individual Perspective

Although the extreme racist ideas of Fascism and Nazism ended up on the rubbish heap of history, the issue of equality remained in the forefront of political debates. After 1945, the Cold War also brought an ideological clash between the Western and Eastern blocs. Arguments on both sides could well utilize a number of already existing philosophical concepts to justify their goals. Thus, the number of concepts to make original contributions to the issue of disparities was rather moderate. The few important exceptions showed the influence of new philosophical ideas, which tried to see the world of a faceless mass society from the perspective of individuals, being threatened in their freedom by the increasing power of state bureaucracies (see Bluhm 2007; some characteristic examples are Fromm 1942; Arendt 1961; Marcuse 2007[1964]).

Especially important were the works of the American philosopher John Rawls, who was approaching the issue of equality from a new direction. He initiated the idea of an "original position", where individuals should agree on the moral principles of a societal order to come. Here, nobody knows what position they can reach in this order. As Rawls (2005)[1971] put it, they have to choose principles "behind a veil of ignorance" (p. 12). And, since nobody knows which principles would favor their own partial interests in their future positions, they will accept "fair" principles which all of them would judge just irrespective of their position-to-be. For Rawls, this "original position" is characterized by "the symmetry of everyone's relations to each other" (ibid). Consequently, the final principle they will agree on can only be to share resources equally. Only one exception was to be tolerated. If some happen to get less access to resources, it is legitimate to justify an unequal distribution in case it serves the needs of the less well-off and contributes to equalization. As he put it: "social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both...to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged" (p. 302). In short, unequal distribution can only be tolerated if it helps to demolish existing disparities. With this stance, the work of Rawls was generally based on a viewpoint that had been a characteristic one for a long time in the debate over equality. He interpreted equality as an equal distribution of resources, which was legitimized by the postulate that all individuals would be equal in an "original position".

The justness of this stance, however, was challenged by Nozick (1999)[1974], himself also a philosopher. He questioned Rawls's thesis that individuals would agree on an equal distribution in terms of giving the same to everybody. For him, it would only be possible under circumstances where nobody assumed that individuals could have different abilities. But such a situation is artificial and hardly

can emerge in real life. To illustrate this, Nozick cited the theoretical example of a group of students, whom are offered that they get the grades which they agree on among each other before the exam. Supposing that they are absolutely unaware of their different virtues (e.g. that some of them might be hard-working, others not, some might be clever, others less etc.), they are possible to accept a Rawlsian equal distribution of grades. But in real situations, students have some experience on the unequal capabilities of themselves and the other ones, on that some are prepared well, while others not etc. Thus, at least those with better abilities and more self-confidence would certainly not agree with the Rawlsian principles of distribution. With other words, in Nozick's eyes Rawls' concept presented an example perfectly out of touch with everyday life. For Nozick, it was derived from a much too abstract situation, due to what its principles of distribution were only to have relevance under abstract, imaginary conditions. Nozick, however, argued for another principle, where students would accept previously only a distribution of grades which met the expectations of all of them concerning their real potentials.

Furthermore, Nozick stressed that such a rejection of Rawlsian attempts to equality was not necessarily rooted in an unjust selfishness of individuals. Here he drew up the example of a talented basketball player, who received 25 cents from the price of each ticket of admission in each home game. In his opinion, even if one assumed an initially equal distribution of resources (here money), it is possible that one million persons would attend the games in the season. Thus, each of these one million people would lose 25 cents, while the basketball star would earn an extra sum of $250,000. This would lead to an unequal distribution, but to a just one in Nozick's eyes. It is the sovereign choice of the one million persons that to see the star is worth 25 cents for them. And it is their autonomous judgment that the basketball player deserves the quarter million dollars. In consequence, Nozick did not argue for an equal distribution, but to one which is accepted by all individuals concerned. In his words:

> "From each according to what he chooses to do, to each according to what he makes for himself (perhaps with the contracted aid of others) and what other choose to do for him and choose to give him of what they've been given previously. . .and haven't yet expanded or transferred. . . .From each as they choose, to each as they are chosen." (Nozick 1999[1974], p. 160).

As can be seen, Nozick was for a distribution where everyone received rewards according to their merit, which, due to manifold differences between individuals, cannot be an egalitarian one. It means that the contributions of Rawls and Nozick to the issues of equality and disparities, although being original in their firm focus on individuals, followed the two competing approaches that had existed for thousands of years. The concept of Rawls suggested that equality is to mean an equal distribution of resources among individuals, while Nozick argued for "giving the same reward for the same merit", even if this ends up in social disparities.

2.3.11   Thinking About Social Disparities: Summary of an Historical Overview

The historical overview of thinking about equality and inequalities lets us summarize some main features of the whole of the debate. As one can observe, the issue of equality has had quite a long tradition in Western philosophical thought, and a number of thinkers have dealt with the question. This remarkable interest has been motivated by the strong political relevance of the problem, namely the virtually omnipresent nature of social disparities and the tensions and struggles caused by them. Furthermore, the relation between philosophical thinking and politics has been mutual. Theoretical concepts have always mirrored their social and political contexts, while they have frequently been caught up by various political movements. Beyond these, related works have interpreted equality in different spheres (e.g. jurisdictional, political and economic).

Still they have had much in common regarding their general stances. For these, two sorts of reasoning have been used frequently, both of which have proved relevant in different contexts and over many epochs. One viewpoint has interpreted equality as an equal distribution of resources, based on the (sometimes only implicit) supposition that all humans are equal. The other approach has emphasized that equality should mean equal reward for equal merit. This concept is (explicitly or implicitly) derived from the assumption that individual abilities and, thus, honors are different. Thus, the notion of an equal distribution as end-state is challenged here, and the argumentation justifies an unequal distribution of resources, if it matches the notion of giving the same for the same. Most thinkers have referred to both approaches in their works, and also clarified their attitudes towards both. These stances were virtually always *for* one concept and *against* the other one. Despite various social, political, economic and geographical contexts, all thinkers have seemed to deal with the issue of equality as if it were a dilemma to decide and where the (only) "right" approach should be found. Their different arguments have been mobilized seemingly to find the answer to a question which had already engaged so many of their predecessors. Thus, the question emerges, which approach to equality and to disparities is "correct" and whose authors have been "right". In the following section we are focusing on this issue.

2.4   Which Equality? On the Legitimacy of Two Approaches

The philosophical debate over equality and disparities, to which the last section was devoted, might seem purely theoretical and isolated from the everyday problems of the real world. This is, in fact, not so: both approaches we have presented have very definite social and political implications. These are necessary to consider if we are investigating the arguments for and against the two viewpoints. From a practical

point of view, the concept of promoting equality as equal distribution is aimed at the reduction of social disparities, at decreasing the gap between those having more and less. This notion can be interpreted at different levels: in jurisdictional, political, economic etc. senses. In its most general sense, equal distribution refers to all of these. This concept is based on a simple assumption, which was already mentioned in the last section: that we all are human beings, so everybody is equal in their right to a humane life. And a humane life can only be guaranteed through adequate access to basic resources. "Resources" are to be interpreted here broadly. They include material goods and services such as food, clothing, housing, healthcare or education, but political and legal rights as well, including those frequently referred to as basic human rights. Of course, as Schmitt (2008)[1928] puts it, "the substance of equality can vary among…different historical periods" (p. 259). And since equality before the law and the equal right to vote have been achieved in Europe and North America over the last centuries, for several decades the most attention has been paid in the Western context to material or economic disparities. As Nagel (1991) suggests, recently material disparities form a decisive part of "a broader inequality of social status, personal freedom, and self-respect" (p. 5). Thus, the notion of equal distribution is most often manifest in the will to get closer to the state of material equality. For this reason, here we focus on this aspect of equality to present the two main approaches concerning the tolerable or desirable form and level of disparities. Spontaneous social, political and economic processes, however, seem to point to the opposite direction: towards concentration of more resources in the hands of few and, consequently, in the impoverishment of others. This tendency, if being uncontrolled, undermines the universal accessibility of basic goods, and ends up in a situation which is judged "unjust" by advocates of equal distribution. To avoid such an unacceptable ending, a strong state seems necessary which regularly redistributes the wealth produced by society in order to guarantee humane lives for everybody. This redistribution might be unpleasant for those possessing more, but is expected to guarantee a humane life for all individuals.

The rival interpretation of social disparities is basically different. This approach emphasizes that in a 'just' society individual returns from society should correspond to individual efforts to increase the total well-being of society. For several reasons, however, individuals do not contribute to overall social well-being to the same extent. Some might have better abilities, work harder, they are more creative, take more risks etc., and, consequently, create more and, thus, become wealthier. Others might have poorer abilities, work less, lack creativity, avoid risks etc., so they contribute less to society and have fewer resources. According to this social philosophy, such inequalities are not "unjust" since they are logical and natural results of unequal personal efforts. Taking this, any (e.g. state-controlled) redistribution of income and other revenues is "unjust" if it takes resources away from those who have more to give them to those having less. This would be a punishment for those who produce more and deserve being affluent, and an "unjust" support for those who have made less efforts and therefore do not deserve extra funding. Thus, the state should not redistribute resources among its citizens, but its task is to guarantee that everyone gets what they have "worked for" and "deserve". In other

words, equality of human beings should not mean an egalitarian distribution of resources (equality in distribution), but rather a principle of always giving the same reward for the same achievement (equality of judgment).

Of course, these two approaches are just schematized concepts, two extremes of a broad scale with many levels in between. There are certainly very few who would argue for an *absolute* equality of resources among individuals. Neither did the leaders of Soviet-type communist regimes, and not only because they ensured the privileged position of communist party members. In these systems, in accordance with notions of the leadership, wages, for instance, were higher in more productive branches, and individual differences of productivity were also considered to some extent for efficiency reasons (Sawer 1980). Similarly, the vast majority of those opposing the redistribution of resources to reach an equal distribution would certainly not judge "unjust" to help those who are starving, regardless to the reason for their extreme poverty.

The abstractness of these approaches might become even more obvious from another point of view. Both concepts can open the floor to tragic social processes if they are exaggerated and followed too strictly in practice. A system, which is aimed at an ultimate equalization of society, can undermine all individual efforts to improve (material as well as non-material) conditions of living. Furthermore, it would also destroy the regulatory mechanisms without which our society would collapse (see 2.1.). The notion to give the same reward for the same honor can also be abused to justify extreme disparities, and it can end up in callous regimes. The infamous slogan *"Jedem das Seine"* ("to each what they deserve") above the entrance gate of the Nazi concentration camp Buchenwald clearly indicates this. It is a normative question what is regarded "honor", and it is a question of power who are allowed to define it. And those in power might agree on a definition of merit which constitutes whole social groups "worthless" (on basis of religion, race, class etc.), and justifies these groups' annihilation.

As can be seen, life is far too complex to be administered along such simple principles. In consequence, most people are neither totally *for* nor *against* equality. It is not difficult to realize this if one focuses at a micro level instead of on "general issues" of inequality, which are actually alien to real life. In a small pottery business, if one employee makes only one pot a day, while another employee makes ten pots of the same quality, paying more money for the second potter does not seem "unjust"—not even for egalitarians, supposedly. If somebody is badly injured in a serious industrial accident and becomes profoundly unable to work, presumably anti-egalitarian ideologists would also find it "just" that they are helped by the society—even if they themselves might also be responsible for the accident. Furthermore, issues of equality and inequality also emerge in seemingly simple events of everyday life—even in sports, for instance. Let's have the example of football players on a pitch. For instance, a forward kicks the opposing team's goalkeeper in the head on purpose. Presumably very few will disagree with sending him/her off, thus, taking away from him/her the opportunity to play. Neither those having egalitarian conviction would be likely to protest. It also seems "just" and "fair"' that the cup and the money prize are given to the soccer league's winning

team instead of rewarding all teams similarly. Meanwhile, however, cups are given to teams, where each member's contribution to the final success is considered the same with this very act. Within the team, the honor of outstanding achievement is split among team members in an egalitarian way. This method certainly strengthens team spirit, but disregards the fact that each team member's effective individual contribution might be very different. Still, honor is equally distributed among the players, and fans do not find it a problem at all—even if many of them are likely to be anti-egalitarians *in general*.

Given these, there is no simple and *universally* valid answer to the question of which concept of equality is "righteous", for at least two reasons. First, both approaches to the issue of disparities lack universal validity. As presented, a (big large) variety of specific situations is possible where several egalitarian people would disagree with "giving the same to everyone". Similarly, it is easy to illustrate that anti-egalitarian people, who do not favor equal distribution (and redistribution as its means) in general, are still likely to support them under certain circumstances. In other words, although one can believe in the righteousness of egalitarian or non-egalitarian ideas, most people are likely to find their otherwise highly preferred macro-level general concepts unusable in numerous specific "real life" situations at the micro level. Thus, neither pro-equity nor pro-inequality argumentations are of universal validity. Their validity could only be judged in specific situations, and only respective to these specific situations.

Of course, one can still have a legitimate reason for preferring or rejecting egalitarian views—*not universally, but in general*. One can think that equality is the goal to strive for in *most* cases, apart from special (and relatively rare) examples. It goes without saying that the opposite reasoning is also possible. And, actually, these are the two approaches most people with different political motivations follow. But who is right? Here, another problem emerges, which makes it impossible to come to a decision. Namely that the issue of righteousness is not a matter of "objective" or, so to say, "scientific" analysis, but one of morality. And, from this point of view, neither of these two positions "seems obviously 'wrong', yet they are logically incompatible" (Saunders 2010, p. 13). Given that, one could say that both philosophical approaches are right in terms of their own criteria, and neither is right in a universal and exclusive sense. In other words, the question which concept is right is theoretically impossible to definitely decide, it can only be debated. Still, this undecidable issue is very popular, it can permanently raise the attention of many, and it frequently leads to heated debates. To understand this seemingly controversial phenomenon, we should investigate the political importance of the debate over inequalities.

2.5   Political Importance of the Debate Over Social Disparities

2.5.1   Problematization of Social Disparities for Political Identity-Making

To understand why the question of social disparities has proved "evergreen" over thousands of years, one should recognize the very central role equality issues play in the field of political ideas and ideologies. As can be seen in Sect. 2.3, from the very beginning the debate over social disparities was highly political in nature. A main goal of virtually all those contributing to the debate was to make political statements about disparities and about the political order that produced them. Besides, these thinkers were aimed at defining the form of equality they found desirable, thus, they automatically—even if sometimes only implicitly—set its realization as a political goal to strive for.

Actually, what most intellectuals contributing to the debate have done is, in a Foucauldian sense, the *problematization* of social disparity. For Foucault, problematization "does not mean the representation of a pre-existent object nor the creation through discourse of an object that did not exist. It is the ensemble of discursive and non-discursive practices that make something enter into the play of true and false and constitute it as an object of thought" (Foucault 1994, p. 670; quoted in Rabinow and Rose 2003, p. xix; also cf. with Castel 1994). More simply, it is "a way in which experience is offered to thought in the form of a problem requiring attention" (Rose and Valverde 1998, p. 545). In other words, many thinkers contributing to the debate over inequalities have argued that social disparity as the opposite of social equality is not a neutral phenomenon, but a problem that is to be cured. No doubt, various authors have problematized the issue in various ways. Some (such as the Jacobins or the Marxists) stated that the existence of any situations differing from an equal distribution of resources among individuals is a problem. Others (e.g. the representatives of bourgeois liberalism) claimed the lack of such an absolute equality not to be a problem, but they problematized the distribution of resources contradicting the "same reward for same merit" principle. As the example of the Catholic Church in the Medieval Europe shows, it was also not unprecedented that certain interest groups tried to de-problematize worldly social disparities.

Of course, this problematization has never been art for art's sake, but has served political goals. The problematization of all non-egalitarian distributions of resources (under aegis of the slogan "the same for everyone") has been consciously used by radical egalitarians to undermine the legitimacy of any systems not promoting such a principle of distribution. Those who problematized the lack of the "same award for same honor" principle did so to de-legitimize extreme egalitarian movements as well as ideologies that tried to de-problematize social disparities. Finally, those making attempts to de-problematize disparities had firm

interests in creating or sustaining a system which produced and institutionalized extremely large inequalities. Thus, the debate about equality and inequalities was basically used by each group as a virtual political arena, and statements about various forms of equality and inequality were specific means in a political fight. As Saunders (2010) underlines, "more than any other single issue, economic inequality has for generations functioned like a litmus test of political ideology" (p. 13.).

It is a question, however, how political interest groups can consider that the problematization of a phenomenon such as social disparity can efficiently contribute to the realization of their real-life political goals. The answer is closely linked to the fact that political goals are only to be put in practice if a mass, sufficient both in the number and determination of its members, can be convinced and mobilized to support the concept. And this is impossible without making people enthusiastic about the idea—an issue belonging to the domain of *identity-making*.

Although the term "identity", its meaning as well as its use are exposed to debates in social sciences and vary significantly with disciplines and approaches, some theoretical views are definitely worth consideration here.[22] According to related theories of social psychology, identity can be interpreted as a "social-dynamic product of broad social processes" (von Bogdandy 2003, p. 34). In other words, it does not emerge automatically but must be produced; its production involves various social processes; and once it is produced, it is not static but changes permanently.

As for elements of identity, we can refer here to the thoughts of Henri Tajfel, a main theoretician of social psychology. In his Social Identity Theory (SIT) he distinguished between the *social* and *personal* identity within the individual's self-concept. In Tajfel's view, these two categories do not separate from one another in one's self-concept, their distinction serves analytical goals only (Marxhausen 2010). For us, however, this differentiation is useful since social identity is especially important from the aspect of our current research.[23] For Tajfel, individuals structure their self-perceptions according to certain *categories*, which are socially produced. These categories can refer to various aspects of one's situation and context, such as gender, age, language, culture, biological features etc. Along these categories, individuals identify themselves as members of certain groups (e.g. the group of those of the same gender, same age, same language, same religion or same social status). Doing this, they construct groups in a cognitive way (Chryssochou 1996; Marxhausen 2010).

Of course, each individual belongs to different groups at the same time. Social identity is the sum of these social self-categorizations. In Tajfel's words, social identity is "that part of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their

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[22] The following five paragraphs are generally based on a more detailed overview in Marxhausen (2010, pp. 40–45).

[23] In contrast to social identity, personal identity is related to "specific attributes of the individual" (Turner 1982, p. 18.). Such attributes can be "competence, bodily attributes, ways of relating to others, psychological characteristics, intellectual concerns, personal tastes" etc. (ibid.).

knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) *together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership*" (emphasis in the original) (Tajfel 1982, p. 2.). The citation's second part is highly important. As Tajfel underlines, social identity is dynamic (it changes in time), situational and context-dependent (Marxhausen 2010). If one is a faithful Roman Catholic and lives in Sweden where this religious group only forms a small minority, his religious identity might be very important. But if he moves to Spain for a 1-year work project, his religious orientation might be less important in a country dominated by Roman Catholics. Thus, his identity might be determined there much stronger by his being Swedish, which can be a curiosity in the new location. And if he remains in Spain because, for instance, he finds his future wife there, this "identity in Spain" can become stable, even pushing the "identity in Sweden" in the background. But if he moves instead to a third country, for example, to China, his identity changes again in the new context. To cite Tajfel (1982, p. 2.) again, "the value and emotional significance attached" to various memberships by him can be remarkably different. Thus, it can be said that certain identifications and memberships are more, other ones are less important for him *in general*.

The main points of this argumentation appear in other related theories as well. John Turner's Self-categorization Theory (Turner 1982), which is based on Tajfel's SIT, presents a very similar point of view concerning identity, social identity and personal identity. However, he adds that the formation of groups also leads to a self-stereotyping of those "within the group" on the one hand, and to a stereotyping of "others" on the other hand (Marxhausen 2010).

An even newer concept, Breakwell's (1986) Identity Process Theory (IPT) uses another categorization to reveal the structure of individual identity. For her, "social identity is seen to become personal identity"; thus, their distinction is "purely a temporal artefact" (Breakwell 2004, p. 28.). Instead, she speaks only about individual identity but differentiates between its *content* and *value dimensions*. The former refer to all characteristics that make one unique, whether they were categorized as parts of "social" or "personal identity" in Tajfel's and Turner's concepts. Value dimensions refer to positive and negative values which are ordered to content dimensions. Although Breakwell's approach differs from older ones at several points, it also defines individual identity as a sort of product, a dynamic phenomenon, and reflects Tajfel and Turner while emphasizing that certain elements of identity have different hierarchical positions within one's identity (Breakwell 2004; Marxhausen 2010). In other words, the differing importance of different elements of identity is articulated in this concept as well.

The concepts and findings above are crucial to understand the political debate over social disparities. The reason is simple, whether we consider the views of Tajfel, Turner or Breakwell: the individual's political self-categorization and attachment to certain political groups can play a significant role in one's identity. Of course, it is only one aspect of identity. And, following Tajfel, the "value and emotional significance" attached to this membership can vary on a broad scale; for some it is important, for others not. Or, in Breakwell's words, political elements of individual identity might have stronger or weaker positions within the hierarchy of

one's elements of identity than other elements do. We have good reason to guess that politically relevant issues play a subordinate role in many people's individual identity. But it is not so in all cases: for politicians (or, more generally, those in power), political ideologists, analysts and all those whose lives are strongly intertwined with politics, political self-categorization or political elements of identity do unquestionably play a serious role in individual identity.

In the light of social psychological concepts, it is obvious that political self-categorization or political elements of identity are not constant: they can and often do change dynamically in the perpetual process of identity production. These changes might be far-reaching: political self-categorization can lose much importance in the individual's identity. Furthermore, if somebody, for instance, supported a certain political movement initially, but has neglected political issues for some years, their political identities are much more likely to change. The chance that they will become more open to alternative approaches grows, while it is also possible that politics-linked elements of their individual identities lose much in significance: one can lose all interest in political issues even if one was an enthusiastic supporter of a certain party in the last election. Similarly, as time goes on, someone might feel that they belong to another political group that they attached to some years ago.

The chance of such serious changes in individual identity cannot be eliminated, but it can be reduced significantly through a conscious control over factors that influence individual identity. And many are strongly motivated in sustaining their own as well as others' political self-categorization without significant changes. They also try to perpetuate an overall social context where as many people as possible find political self-categorization an important part of their individual identities.

First, politicians do this for very simple reasons. In a democracy, they try to gain the most votes in the next election in order to come to power or stay there. If their possible supporters lose interest in politics, they might stay home next time. Or, what is even "worse", after a while it might be the political opponent drawing these people's attention to political issues again, but along his or her own philosophies. Consequently, politicians try to convince people that their attachment to their favorite political group is a crucial part of their individual identities. Furthermore, they try to shape people's political self-categorization in concert with their own political motivations, since it is not enough that people pay attention to political issues; they should do it in a way which assures that they support the given political movement. In fact, politicians' interests in authoritarian systems are rather similar. It is true that their positions are not endangered by elections. Even if such occasions take place, they are absolutely formal and exert no real influence on political power relations. But authoritarian regimes also necessitate a sort of stable social background, so the leadership has to devote energy to sustain and shape people's political identity.

Second, sustaining the perpetual process of political self-categorization is an interest of those who do not belong to the political stratum directly, but actually live from the "politics business". They are non-politicians whose material existence strongly relies on the existence of political parties and of the whole political system.

Usually they are linked to different political groups or to their philosophies and goals, but all of them are common in their dependence on the political arena and on political groups which use it. They are the actors who participate in and benefit from the parties' various activities. This is also important for parties, who, due to this process, can create a supply for their political "products" (ideologies) in order to "sell them" (gain votes and/or legitimacy). This category refers to such actors as political theoreticians, analysts and journalists. If political issues did not owe a privileged position in the life of many, these dependents of politics would easily become unemployed. Consequently, they are profoundly interested in the maintenance of the "politics business" and people's interest in political issues.

Third, the first two groups' activities can (and, to some extent, usually do) result in the emergence of a special social stratum, whose members are highly enthusiastic about supporting a certain political group. They are everyday people, most of whom gain neither political position nor material surplus for their determination. And, in general, it is not their goal, actually. They are those who are touched so strongly by a political party, a charismatic political leader or his/her attractive objectives and initiatives, that they interpret the given political power's success or defeat as a serious personal issue. For such "political fans", political attachment becomes a disproportionately strong, even dominant part of their identities. They believe themselves strong if their party wins, and feel their own identities questioned if their beloved group loses in power. This stratum, which emerges both in democratic and authoritarian regimes, also has strong motivations to sustain politically relevant practices of identity production.

As can be seen, it is a firm interest of several actors to perpetually maintain practices of political self-categorization. These practices are manifold, and any attempt to say what belongs to them is necessarily arbitrary. Here we focus on one highly important practice. This is *participating in a sort of discourse,* in which politically relevant elements of individual identity can permanently be produced and reproduced through a mutual expression of political opinions.

2.5.2   Social Disparity Analysis as Political Discourse

The importance of discourse should not be underestimated in the process of political (or any form of) identity-making. As the representatives of discursive psychology emphasize, social categories, which are necessary prerequisites for producing identity, are constructed in social interaction and communication—or as one could say, in the discourse (Marxhausen 2010). Thus, although identity is produced only in a mental process within the individual, its "raw materials" (the categories, their meanings and values) are socially constructed in a discursive process (ibid.). This statement, of course, can be interpreted in reverse as well. As Taylor (1994) puts it, public discourse is crucial to the dialogic process through which individuals develop their identities. So if the goal is to sustain or strengthen the process of political self-categorization, it is necessary to establish and maintain

a discourse within which the social categories necessary for individual identity production can continuously be created and recreated.

For this, there are some necessary requisites. First, discourse should take place where political stances can be efficiently transferred to as many as possible. This must be about a topic which does not only have clear political relevance (so it is not only of common concern), but which can easily be understood by many people. Furthermore, these people should find the question important, even from their everyday micro-perspective. Of course, it is not easy to decide which issues meet this requirement. Several authors suggest that this is itself a matter of deliberation (Bohman 1996; Conover et al. 2002; Fraser 1992). However, even narrow interpretations such as that of Rawls (1997) argue that political questions of "constitutional essentials" and of basic justice are of common concern. These issues also have the advantage that they are controversial. Especially in debates over justice, it is easy to find relevant arguments for and against any ideas. And, as Lazarsfeld (1939) reveals, debates over openly controversial issues are especially efficient in motivating people. Those who already had an opinion about the question usually get strengthened in their views if they witness controversial debates. And those who were uninterested in political questions are much more likely to get interested by controversial issues, especially if they are easy to understand and form an opinion about. These are direct consequences of what Collins (1988) calls the positive functions of conflicts. For him, conflicts help societal groups to better feel their borders and strengthen them in their identity. Meanwhile, conflicts drive those alone to find allies, so many of them join groups they did not belong to before. From this aspect, political discourses in general (and the disparity discourse in particular) can be considered as discursive conflicts, and the typical patterns of behavior identified by Lazarsfeld (1939) (through which many [become] motivated) are logical results of what is explained by Collins (1988).

Second, the discourse should not only "reach" the masses, but offer them the opportunity to join. Consequently, as many as possible should feel that they are allowed to join the discourse, moreover, that it is important and reasonable to do so. Otherwise they cannot be called by the "politics business", whose idea of accelerating these people's political self-categorization fails. To convince people that it is worth "coming in", the discourse must seem to meet the standards of what political scientists call *democratic deliberation*. This means that the discourse must be (at least seemingly) *public*, *non-tyrannical* and *politically equal* (Conover et al. 2002). Public means that everyone has open access, and that they deliberate in a manner offering public reasons for their preferences (Bohman 1996; Rawls 1997). The discourse is also expected to be non-tyrannical, where the discussion cannot be "coerced illegitimately" (Conover et al. 2002, p. 24; cf. Bohman 1996; Dahl 1989). Thus, everybody is allowed to freely express their opinion. Finally, political equality is assured if all have equal access to arenas of the discourse, and they have equal opportunities to influence the deliberation (Bohman 1996; Knight and Johnson 1997). It should be underlined here that a perfect form of democratic deliberation does not exist in real life. Instead, what one can say is to what extent a given deliberation meets these requirements. In this sense, certain deliberations that

basically fulfill these expectations can be judged democratic. Furthermore, as has already been stressed, to promote people's political self-categorization, the discourse does not have to be democratic. It can be enough if it seems to be, if people believe that the discourse is democratic so their opinion matters. That is what many dictatorial regimes suggest through propaganda about their strongly arbitrary discourses, which they try to make attractive and worth joining for as many as possible, to get them there, under control.

The third point, strongly linked to the notion of political equality, concerns the *easiness of precise political self-positioning* within the discourse. Participating in a discourse can only help political self-categorization if it is clear which statement within the discourse is linked with which political position. If the vocabulary of the discourse is dominated by some simple slogans, whose underlying political meaning is obvious for all participants since they refer to characteristic positions, it is easy even for newcomers to position themselves within the discourse. Thus, they can categorize themselves easily in terms of political orientation. If such slogans and the underlying characteristic standpoints are missing, however, one might be misunderstood by others while trying to express one's opinion. Their words can even lead to a result which is diametrically opposed to what was expected. If these people cannot formulate their opinion properly, they might be assigned to a political category which they do not want and definitely do not belong to. This ability to translate one's views for others is crucial. People without this skill can only exert an insignificant influence in the discourse (Knight and Johnson 1997). Furthermore, as Conover et al. (2002) shows, the main reason for many not joining political debates is the fear of being misunderstood due to improper formulation.

In this sense, newly emerging discourses offer less possibilities for political self-categorization of individuals as such discourses are usually confusing and characterized by a huge number of unique positions. It takes time for some characteristic positions—together with their specific catchwords—to strengthen within the discourse and emerge from the mass of competing stances. From then on, newcomers are likely to choose and internalize one of these prefabricated characteristic positions instead of forming one on their own. Moreover, "veterans" of the discourse often also migrate towards newly emerging characteristic positions. It is so even if this characteristic position somewhat differs from their initial point of view, since joining it offers the opportunity to agree with many other people and get their support. Both behaviors are natural results of a simple psychological phenomenon called *social validation* (Cialdini 2008). In a certain situation people tend to look to how others act or what they have done to decide what to do. Thus, "if *many* individuals like us have decided for a particular idea, we are more likely to follow, for we find the idea more correct, more valid, than would be the case without their lead" since "if numerous others seem to find merit in something…people assume that it must have merit, and they act accordingly" (p. 203). In consequence, a few characteristic positions usually become stronger and stronger through positive feedback, while this process gradually pushes other stances to the periphery of attention or even sweeps them out from the discourse.

Therefore, "old", "consolidated" discourses can offer more space for easy political self-categorization than "new" ones, still emerging.[24]

To sum it up, many have the idea of sustaining individuals' perpetual political self-categorization in order to strengthen the role of political self-categorization in their individual identities. These actors are interested in establishing and maintaining a discourse that is thematically feasible and enables precise self-positioning in an easy way. But to create and maintain such a discourse is just a "minimalist goal", nothing more. No doubt, even this "minimalist goal" is highly important for those interested in the "politics business" since it is a necessary prerequisite for maintaining people's interest in political issues. In itself, however, it is just an effort to avoid having potential political supporters turn away from politics or become oriented towards rival political movements. But it is not simply keeping supporters that is important for the actors of "politics business". Convincing new supporters is similarly meaningful and the never-existing optimal state would be one where everybody would support the given political group. Thus, a politically relevant discourse is not only about the self-representation of political movements, but it is also a sort of battlefield where others' arguments should be defeated. This is expected to undermine the political rivals' identity-making capacity, and motivate their former supporters to change their political self-categorizations and align themselves with the winner of the discursive battle. So, the "maximal goal" is not only to introduce and sustain a feasible discourse, but to win it. In Foucault's related words: "discourse is not simply that which manifests (or hides) desire—it is also the object of desire: . . .discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized" (Foucault 1981, pp. 52–53).

And this is the point where one can understand the enduring nature of debates about equality and social disparities. It is actually a discourse, a very old and highly political one, about a moral issue which is easy to understand even for people having few connections to politics. In this discourse, political positions can be articulated efficiently by using a set of tried and well-tested slogans, which even "newcomers" can acquire without great difficulties. The question of which form and level of inequalities is desirable or tolerable will result in two possible characteristic answers, whose underlying political content is regarded as obvious. On the one hand, one can argue for equality as equal distribution. This position has been

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[24] The possible evaluation of "consolidated" and "emerging" discourses is thoroughly different if the question is to what extent they enable one to express one's own opinion without constraints. This is for at least two reasons. First, since "consolidated" discourses offer prefabricated slogans, newcomers are constrained to use these, although maybe none of these slogans is feasible in exactly grasping one's point of view. Second, in "consolidated" discourses slogans are so strongly and directly linked to characteristic underlying positions that using a slogan automatically pushes one into a characteristic political category. Thus, articulating sophisticated views and avoiding black-and-white thinking is very difficult or even impossible within these "consolidated" discourses.

seen as a proof of socialist political orientation for more than a century. On the other hand, the principle of equal reward for equal honor can also be chosen. For this, unequal distribution and social disparities are regarded not only as unavoidable but also, to some extent, desirable. Articulating the latter opinion has been considered for a long time as taking a conservative-libertarian stance. Thus, the social disparity discourse is an optimal field for actors of the "politics business" to permanently express their political positions and produce and reproduce their political self-categorizations. Due to this, they can raise the attention of possible supporters and enable them to articulate their own political views *within* and to steadily produce and reproduce their political self-categorizations *through* the discourse. Moreover, this process is likely to increase the perceived importance of political self-categorization within the possible political supporters' individual identities.

2.6 Science as Means of Legitimization in the Disparity Discourse

In the preceding section we have presented that the disparity discourse is a highly political one. Its main goal is to enable political movements and other actors of the "politics business" to show their positions and perpetually produce and reproduce their political self-categorizations. Through these, the floor is open for political self-categorization for all those who participate in the discourse, and who, supposedly, become or remain supporters of a certain political group and its ideology. Thus, the discourse has a number of participants, among whom some politicians and intellectuals are especially influential. But from our point of view, the most important question concerns the *role of science* in the discourse. This issue will be crucial to reveal and accurately interpret the political context and role of the scientific discourse about spatial disparities in forthcoming chapters of this work. For this reason, we find it necessary to present through a case study how the legitimate power of science can be (and actually is) (ab)used in the disparity discourse by representatives of competing interest groups. To reveal typical strategies, we are to focus on the political waves generated by and reactions given to a highly contestable book, which was written by scientists, and concerned an issue extremely sensitive for those within the disparity discourse.

2.6.1 Case Study of a Politically Contested Project by Representatives of Sciences: "The Spirit Level" and Its Reception

The work we are concentrating on is *The Spirit Level*, which was written by two epidemiologists, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, and was published in the

United Kingdom on 5th March 2009 (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010a). In the book, the authors begin their research by identifying a remarkable phenomenon of our times: the "contrast between the material success and social failure of many rich countries". To reveal causes, they conducted a thorough statistical analysis, the empirical heart of which is a considerable series of scatter plots. These are based on official statistics either released by global organizations such as WHO, UNESCO and World Bank or published as survey results of various acknowledged research centers. The majority of data sets focuses on 23 "rich countries" selected by the authors, and on the 50 US states. In most cases, axis X shows the value of "income inequalities", while axis Y stands for certain sorts of well-being indicators. The latter vary from life expectancy and high school drop-out rates to such sophisticated (and sometimes blurred) categories as "index of women's status" or "children's experience of conflict". In general, issues of health, education, violence and social mobility are especially emphasized. The function of scatter plots is to indicate a strong or weak relationship between selected variables. In order to make such connections more visible, the authors also depict (in their words) "best fit" regression lines.

The main findings of the two epidemiologists is that income inequalities seem negatively correlated with well-being indicators: put simply, "more unequal societies have more problems overall" (p. 25). And it does not only mean that "more unequal societies" have more poor and, thus, a lower average value, but high-income groups are also suggested to suffer from large disparities (as the subtitle of the book's second edition states, "equality is better for everyone"). In the authors' interpretation, this phenomenon has specific social and mental-psychological roots. As they underlined: "The problems in rich countries" are caused "by the scale of material differences between people within each society being too big. What matters is where we stand in relation to others in our own society." (p. 25). This fact is considered to have especially high relevance in unequal societies as "greater inequality seems to heighten people's social evaluation anxieties by increasing the importance of social status. . . .We come to see social position as a more important feature of a person's identity" (p. 43). As a result, in more unequal societies everybody is exposed to a kind of permanent and high level of stress, which, as a "chronic mobilization of energy" (p. 86), leads to severe health problems and social dysfunctions. That is how "inequality gets under the skin" (p. 31).

In terms of empirical substantiation, *The Spirit Level* left much space for possible criticism for several reasons, which will be dealt with later in this chapter. The book, however, was obviously aimed at raising interest. First, it is easy to read. The authors tend to avoid complicated and abstract academic language, present simple examples, and use a large variety of cartoon illustrations and witty citations. Second, it is not a monotonous description to read and be "done with": it sets direct political goals. For Wilkinson and Pickett: "The role of this book is to point out that greater equality is the material foundation on which better social relations are built." (p. 272). But, "a better society will not happen automatically" (p. 271), and the role of governments as main actors of income distribution (through wages

and taxes, for instance) is crucial at this point. Thus, "the task is now to develop a politics based on recognition of the kind of society we need to create" (p. 271). In other words, irrespective of the scientific quality of its argumentation, the book directly addresses political issues. And this feature makes it very important for us since our main point here is to not merely evaluate the book and verify or deny its findings. The objective is rather to show how *The Spirit Level* and its main statements were perceived and how they were reacted to by representatives of the disparity discourse.

In the light of the work's topicality and political relevance, it is no wonder that it soon raised the interest of several politicians. On 9th November 2009, David Cameron, then leader of the British Conservative party delivered a lecture at Kings Palace in London on major current political issues. The future Prime Minister of the United Kingdom attempted to draw up a new agenda for his party and, obviously, for a new Conservative-led government to be elected the year after. The task was rather large as the global financial crisis beginning in 2008, without doubt, not only marked the end of a long and characteristic period but also questioned the dominant economic philosophy. Any political forces with serious ambitions had no other choice than to find new and attractive aims for the coming years. In his speech, David Cameron moved to a rather remarkable direction: he referred to *The Spirit Level*. In Cameron's interpretation, this "research. . .has shown that among the richest countries, it's the more unequal ones that do worse according to almost every quality of life indicator". Thus, "per capita GDP is much less significant for a country's life expectancy, crime levels, literacy and health than the size of the gap between the richest and poorest in the population". And, for him, this fact does not only mean that improving the conditions of living of the poor increases the national average as well, but, according to the authors, the rich do also have a higher standard of well-being in a society with less disparities and weak social tensions. In the conservative politician's words, "as long as there is deep poverty living systematically side by side with great riches, we all remain the poorer for it". Consequently, the task was clear: "we should focus on closing the gap between the bottom and the middle. . .because focusing on those who do not have the chance of a good life is the most important thing to do". In other words, the main point was defined as to reduce disparities instead of boosting economic growth at any cost.

The opposition leader David Cameron's statements did not remain without reaction: Ed Miliband, a prominent politician of the Labour Party and then state secretary in Gordon Brown's left-wing cabinet practically repeated his rival's words very soon. As he proclaimed, "the gap between rich and poor does matter. . . .And it doesn't just harm the poor, it harms all of us" (as cited by Devichand 2010). Although issues of equality traditionally belong to popular slogans of left-of-centre political parties, Miliband's reaction seemed more specific as his second sentence directly referred to a main point of Wilkinson and Pickett in *The Spirit Level*. But the volume's 'political career' did not end at this point: it also influenced Harriett Harman, deputy leader of the Labour Party, in compiling her Equality Bill, which was aimed at changing the discrimination laws in the UK (Moore 2010). David Willetts, conservative Member of Parliament, formerly a young ideologist in

Margaret Thatcher's team and future Minister of State for Universities and Science underlined in one of his newspaper articles that Richard Wilkinson was one of the people whose works "persuaded [him] that inequality matters" (Willetts 2009). *The Spirit Level* not only became popular among British politicians: Sweden's Social Democratic Party leader Mona Sahlin also referenced the book during the election campaign in 2010 (Sanandaji et al. 2010).

The strong influence exerted on political discourse by the work of Wilkinson and Pickett was also mirrored by commentaries in journals. Polly Toynbee, columnist of the left-of-center newspaper *The Guardian* criticized David Cameron in ironic style for his speech at Kings Palace, but not because he had mentioned *The Spirit Level*. Just the opposite: she judged him "clever" to have referred to "the ground-breaking research". Her criticism was pointed at his political agenda, "a complete non-sequitur that contradicts all The Spirit Level's findings". In Toynbee's view, David Cameron's statement to "focus on the gap between the bottom and the middle" means nothing but to "leave the top well alone", which was regarded by her as a typical conservative approach. ("You could not be a Conservative if you thought you should narrow the gap between top and bottom.") (in this section, all citations are from Toynbee 2009). And, for Toynbee, it was just the opposite of everything the "ground-breaking research" was about.

The Spirit Level, however, had provoked a heated—and, actually, politically motivated—debate on the pages of newspapers well before it was referred to by David Cameron and other politicians. This debate was fierce and not free from harsh opinions on any side. Traditional political fault lines became apparent with elementary force. The first articles to speak in high terms of the book appeared just few days after its publication on 5th March, 2009. On the 14th, publicist Lynsey Hanley wrote a detailed review on *The Spirit Level* in the centre-left newspaper The Guardian, judging it a book-to-read due to its "inarguably battery of evidence" and "because its conclusion is simple: we do better when we're equal" (Hanley 2009). In her interpretation, Wilkinson and Pickett write about something we already know to some extent ("We know there is something wrong, and this book goes a long way towards explaining what and why."). But they do not only write about it: they also "form a *bank of evidence* against inequality that is *impossible to deny*" (our emphases). And they present (on in) the examples of "more equal" countries (e.g. Japan and Sweden) that "equality is a matter of political will". To sum it up, Hanley emphasized the book's *scientific quality* and the attractiveness of its main idea, but did not try to make use of it for direct ideological and political goals. The latter, however, also happened remarkably soon.

Just one day after Hanley's review, Will Hutton, vice chairman of think tank The Work Foundation and a "left wing campaigner" in BBC's interpretation (BBC News, 2010), highlighted some of the main points of the epidemiologists' work in *The Observer* (Hutton 2009). In Hutton's words, the connection of income disparities and social problems "is spelt out with stark clarity" by Wilkinson and Pickett, who "show beyond any doubt" that inequality "is not just bad for those at the bottom but for everyone". For the book's empirical substantiation, his opinion was definite: "The statistical causation is *unarguable*" (our emphasis). Then he

underlined that: "What is harder is to explain why [the causation exists]. Here Wilkinson and Pickett become more speculative." The seeming uncertainty on the book's evidence, however, proved temporary as Hutton finally came to the point: "The cumulative weight of the evidence makes the case hard to refute." In general, he exerted no criticism on the findings of the book, only on the optimism of its authors: "Just by revealing the wealth of data that shows how we are all damaged by inequality, they think we should be shocked into a transformation of our attitudes. . . .Until the current economic catastrophe, the appeal fell on largely deaf ears. . ."

In general, Hutton's opinion on the book was rather positive. A main reason was here the work's *scientific apparatus*. Besides, political overtones were also important. It speaks volumes that the reviewer embedded his thoughts on *The Spirit Level* in a more general text, which is essentially anti-neoliberal. The review draws up an "indissoluble link" between "Britain's growing social problems" and the "growth of income inequality", where the latter one is mainly derived from "the explosive growth of incomes at the top". Here, Hutton contrasts an "overstretched social worker" with the former Chief Executive of Royal Bank of Scotland, whose £700,000 pension is a symbol of "disproportionate City reward for failure". He harshly criticizes the payment practice of leading banks, and those financial leaders who still believe in the old system's righteousness. And *The Spirit Level* proves here a very useful work to reference since it seems to validate the reviewer's opinion through scientific findings.

The book won high praise from other critics as well. Roy Hattersley, Labour politician and former deputy leader of the party between 1983 and 1992 lauded *The Spirit Level* in the weekly magazine *New Statesman* (Hattersley 2009). In the article he firmly underlines the scientific quality of the work. In his words, the authors made their statements "on the basis of research – not hunch", and find a correlation between income inequality and social well-being which is "near to absolute". The benefit in creating a "more equal society" is, therefore, interpreted as a "rational conclusion to be drawn from the mass of evidence" that Wilkinson and Pickett assembled. And this is highly important as "it demonstrates the *scientific truth* of the assertion that social democrats have made for a hundred years – sometimes more out of hope than intellectual certainty" (words in italics are our emphasis). From this point of view, "the importance of *The Spirit Level* is that. . .it provides a vital part of the intellectual manifesto on which the battle for a better society can be fought". To sum it up, Hattersley speaks in high terms of *The Spirit Level* and presents it as the source of "scientific truth" in order to create scientific legitimacy for the socialist thoughts he supports.

By the way, he did the same as one of *The Observer*'s interviewees in the magazine's "Books of the year" poll (The Observer 2009). Here he summarized the main points of his opinion in a brief sentence: "[The Spirit Level] confirms, *scientifically*, what social democrats have always hoped was true" (our emphasis). In this poll, Hattersley was also supported by Tristram Hunt, historian and future Member of Parliament in Labour colours: she judged the work "a *statistically clinical* account of the benefits of social democracy for living longer, happier and more fulfilled lives". Thus, for her, *The Spirit Level* was a "very important book for

the intellectual regeneration of the left". The already tested strategy of presenting a politically attractive work as an indisputable source of scientific—and, consequently, "objective"—"truth" for self-legitimacy was used again by socialist think-tankers in their battle against (neo-)conservatism.

However, while such positive assessments were still appearing in the columns of newspapers, other journalists and analysts began to level serious criticism at the book. One of them was Richard Reeves, future Special Adviser to Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg in David Cameron's conservative-liberal coalition (Curtis 2010; Reeves 2011). Then, Reeves was already a director of the think tank Demos, an initially left-of-centre institution which he steered closer to right-of-centre political groups by appointing two senior Conservative politicians to the advisory board (Stratton 2009). In his critique on the pages of *The Observer*, he underlined two main weaknesses of *The Spirit Level* as scientific product (Reeves 2009). One was that the statistical findings of the book can be disputed, and sometimes seem rather weak. For him, "drawing a line through a series of data points signals nothing concrete about statistical significance" and, as the authors "do not provide any statistical analyses", the relationships they emphasize "can't be verified". His second point disputed any causal relationship between income inequalities and social problems. In his words, "the authors have simply scoured the data for signs of malignancy in unequal societies. ...Yet...It is not a causal relationship." Instead, he suggested that, "surely", it is the political culture that influences redistribution and income disparities on the one hand and general social circumstances on the other hand. Reeves's negative opinion on the scientific explanatory force of *The Spirit Level* was, therefore, obvious—and so was his attitude towards egalitarian political concepts as well. He made it profoundly clear: "it is a longstanding *psychological weakness* of many on the left to focus on the earnings of a fraction of high earners rather than the stubborn problems of those nearer the bottom" (our emphasis). After exerting harsh criticism on the work of Wilkinson and Pickett and making sarcastic judgments on left-wing political goals, the two points got intertwined in Reeves's summarizing sentence: "If you are a social democrat looking for some attractively presented evidence for your *prejudices*, The Spirit Level fits the bill. But if you want a deeper and more even-handed project to rethink egalitarianism for the current age", "you'd better to" turn to other publications on the issue (text in italics is our emphasis).

An even harsher article was written on the issue by Charles Moore, former editor of the centre-right newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* (Moore 2010). He exerted strong criticism on the authors of the book: he even refused to declare it a scientific work. According to him, Wilkinson and Pickett "starts with the unargued assumption that inequality is the cause of almost every misery, and then seeks, often interestingly but *certainly not scientifically*, to illustrate its point" (words in italics are our emphasis). Moore, however, did not deal with the quality of data or lacking statistical tests: he focused on the relationship of income disparities and "social illness". His argumentation was simple: the authors made a mistake when "decided that inequality is not a symptom of other things, but the root of all evil". In his point of view, this must definitely not be the case as disparities and all social phenomena

can be traced back to other factors, e.g. cultural ones. Thus, the overall findings of *The Spirit Level* must be false and misleading.

In this article, however, it became clear again that the critique was not only addressed to the book's empirical analyses, but to its possible political implications. Moore's criticism was not only attracted by the scientifically disputable interpretation of data sets. His main problem was that the "evidence-decorated" book presents "itself as non-ideological", although it is "a political tract, and. . .a surprisingly traditional socialist one". And, as such, it propagates smaller inequalities, although—for Moore—income disparities are not problems but rather necessary, moreover, "inevitable" temporary results of positive processes. At this point he emphasized that Japan, a country with low inequalities and few social problems according to Wilkinson and Pickett, can be that equal only because it keeps out foreigners. In the United States, however, income disparities are much higher as the US "offers opportunity" to millions of foreigners—among them to many poor people—and lets them immigrate. In Moore's words: "It is inevitable [that] there will be a huge gap in American society between those who have just got across the Mexican border, and those who have already 'made it'. But that need not be a problem so long as the opportunity is real." Nevertheless, Moore agreed with a major point of *The Spirit Level:* "The authors are surely right when they say the general tendency of extreme inequality is to make people fear and mistrust one another more." But in his interpretation, the real problem is not "that some people earn much more than some others". Instead, "worklessness subsidised by welfare" is what really harms as it leads to the emergence of an "underclass. . .which does not maintain economic relations with the rest of society at all".

To sum it up, Charles Moore followed a strategy similar to that of Richard Reeves. He harshly criticized a book whose politically relevant issues were unacceptable for him. The critique was intended to destroy the work's academic image and to show it "unscientific". Thus, its main points lost their scientific legitimacy, and could be attacked and defeated on the discursive battlefield of moral concepts, where they were placed under fire by the heavy artillery of conservative social philosophy.

An even more destructive critique of *The Spirit Level* was given by Christopher Snowdon, public health researcher and co-worker of the think tank Democracy Institute. In his book *The Spirit Level Delusion*, released in May 2010, he drew attention to several major problems, mostly concerning the book's scientific nature (Snowdon 2010). First, similarly to some former critics, Snowdon emphasized that inequality is itself a symptom of certain social problems, not the source of them. Thus, it is deceptive to interpret statistical correlation between income disparities and social "disabilities" as causal. Here, he also referred to a number of academic articles with the same finding. As Deaton (2003), for instance, writes: "there is no robust correlation between life expectancy and income inequality among the rich countries, and the correlation across the states and cities of the United States is almost certainly the result of something that is correlated with income inequality, but that is not income inequality itself" (p. 151). Second, Snowdon—just as Reeves—emphasized the lack of robust statistical tests in the work. But he went

even further: he stated that statistical correlation itself was a consequence of "cherry-picking" countries. He blamed Wilkinson and Pickett for having selected countries that seem to substantiate their hypothesis on positively correlated income inequalities and social problems. And, he also presented new scatter plots, where he depicted more countries than the epidemiologists did. The motivation is clear: these graphs tend to show a sort of—basically negative—correlation between income disparities and social deprivation indicators, which is just the opposite of *The Spirit Level*'s main findings.

Snowdon's criticism was more general, more detailed and more destructive than any of his forerunners. But it was no exception in the political sense. His book's political motivations are rather clear and not only due to its ironic subtitle (*Fact-checking the Left's New Theory of Everything*). For those who need more obvious orientation, it is given in the book's *Foreword* by Patrick Basham, founder of the Democracy Institute. For him, "personally, Wilkinson and Pickett's thesis brings back vividly unpleasant memories" of his undergraduate years, when his "'tax cutting equals economic growth equals more employment' economic model" was criticized as "an ungodly synthesis of the worst Reaganism and Thatcherism" by his "newly-minted Marxist feminist PhD" sociology tutor. About the tutor's "eighties-style socialist fundamentalism" he had thought at that time that "such thinking has had its day", but he "was wrong" (Snowdon 2010, p. 6). In his words, since the 2008 global recession "the Wilkinsons and Picketts of this world have enjoyed their intellectually lazy, empirically hazy days of summer". . . .Hence, the need for an intellectual push-back the likes of which Christopher Snowdon so comprehensively provides in this volume." (p. 7)

Some months after his book was published, Snowdon's name appeared again on the headlines of an article in *The Wall Street Journal* (Sanandaji et al. 2010). The essay was written by a group of four, three among them from Sweden. They were Nima Sanandaji and Tino Sanandaji, the president and the chief economist of the Swedish think-tank Captus, and Arvid Malm, chief economist at the Swedish Taxpayers' Association. All of them were representatives of institutions fostering conservative and liberal economic policy.[25] In this article, the main points of Snowdon's book emerged again. The authors emphasized the lacking scientific quality of the work. They blamed Wilkinson and Pickett for "conflating correlation with causation" and for "data-mining", where "an apparent correlation is actually the result of excluding inconvenient data". And, they underlined that according to their own calculations, "the level of income inequality had no impact on levels of life satisfaction". In this article, possible political overtones of *The Spirit Level* were also strongly emphasized. For the authors, the book (of by) Wilkinson and Pickett "purports to offer strong support for the claim that income redistribution creates social good. Unfortunately, this conclusion doesn't stand up to our

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[25] According to its official website, Captus is an "independent. . .free-market think tank that promotes the ideas of liberty such as free enterprise, low taxes and individual liberty" (Captus 2011).

research." Or, as they wrote later: the work "has an ideological appeal to many among the European left—but if something sounds too good to be true, it usually is".

At the same time, Peter Saunders, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Sussex University, published a long analysis on *The Spirit Level* (Saunders 2010). The work was released by Policy Exchange, a right-of-centre think tank in London, which is—according to centre-right *The Telegraph*—"also labelled as a 'neo-con attack dog'" (Helm and Hope 2008) by the centre-left. As for the author's political attitude, it is obviously no coincidence that his analysis is titled *Beware False Prophets*—a clear reference to Karl Popper's (1945) work *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, in which Plato, Hegel and Marx as "false prophets" become subjects of harsh criticism as "enemies" of liberal democracy. In other words, Wilkinson and Pickett were represented as "false prophets" by Saunders due to their pro-equality concept.

For *The Spirit Level*'s empirical content, Saunders emphasized the same shortcomings as his predecessors did. These were the lack of robust statistical tests, the arguable way of selecting 23 countries which seemingly prove the authors' hypothesis, and the misinterpretation of stochastic connections. Similarly to several other critics, Saunders underlined that any seeming correlation between income disparities and social problems is not causal, but "these differences probably reflect a deeper divergence" between cultures (Saunders 2010, p. 7). In his interpretation, altering cultural conditions also undermines Wilkinson's and Pickett's suggestion to create a more equal society through strong state redistribution of financial resources. First, because an overall communalist welfare system can only work in a country which is "ethnically and culturally homogeneous" (p. 120), which is actually not the case in such "unequal" societies as the US. Second, it is impossible to identify any certain methods how to organize redistribution since the societies analyzed are not "compatible". As he wrote, "grafting Sweden's tax and welfare system onto the USA, Australia or the UK would prove extremely difficult, and if attempted would almost certainly result in socially and economically disastrous outcomes" (pp. 121–122). In general, Saunder's work is a detailed review of Wilkinson's and Pickett's findings, and as such, it is much more sophisticated and methodologically more substantiated than most critiques on *The Spirit Level* from the political Right. Its main approach is, however, not new, since it bases its criticism on the argumentation that *The Spirit Level*'s quality does not meet scientific standards.

Up to the summer of 2010, right-of-centre critics of *The Spirit Level* apparently have identified all findings of the book that they found disputable. Thus, on 21st July, Matthew Sinclair could already give a summary of the criticism from the Right and its main points (Sinclair 2010). Sinclair, research director of the tax reduction oriented, definitely not pro-equity TaxPayers' Alliance, seemingly totally agreed with other conservative-libertarian critics. Thus, he came to a brief conclusion with which he was to totally crush *The Spirit Level*'s scientific image: "the book's claims...are simply *untrue*" (our emphasis).

As can be seen, *The Spirit Level* attracted great interest from both political sides, although with different results. Among those sympathizing with socialist-egalitarian views, the book soon became very popular as they could present it as a scientific piece of legitimacy of their social philosophy. Conservative and liberal thinkers, however, refuted the work of Wilkinson and Pickett, judged it empirically unsubstantiated and highly disputable in its argumentation and points—in short, unscientific. While these two points of view seemed irreconcilable, very few gave an evaluation which was not obviously influenced by personal political motivations.

One of them was John Kay, economist and advisory board member of the Institute for New Economic Thinking established "with a major donation from George Soros" (Kay 2011). As Kay wrote in his article in the *Financial Times* (Kay 2009), he was "sympathetic to [The Spirit Level's] basic stance". Nonetheless, he mentioned virtually all empirical weaknesses of the work which were emphasized in conservative critiques. Providing no "relevant statistical tests", interpreting simple statistical correlations as causal relationships were only some of these. Kay also drew attention to the limited incommensurability of different countries. For him, the US, Sweden or Japan, whether they are "more" or "less" unequal, are "societies which perform well in terms of their own criteria". Furthermore, he blamed Wilkinson and Pickett as they gave no evidence for their theory "that not just the poor but the rich are fatter when resources are distributed more evenly". And he added: "I suspect the claim that equality benefits everyone", even the rich, "is just not supportable". Clearly, this statement did not contradict Kay's "sympathy" for reducing inequalities. He only pointed at the fact that reducing income disparities, even if it might serve interests of the majority, simply cannot be good for everyone. Kay's review, however, differed from critiques from the Right. Although he identified several weaknesses of the book, he did not write that it would be "unscientific". Moreover, he underlined that Richard Wilkinson had made important scientific contributions to studies of the social determinants of health. Thus, in his interpretation *The Spirit Level* is a poorly substantiated work, whose empirical findings are hard to agree with. Yet, in his interpretation the book seemed merely an imperfect partial result of a long-lasting and valuable scientific research process than an unscientific political manifesto.

The Spirit Level was also reviewed in *Nature* by developmental biologist Michael Sargent (Sargent 2009). Obviously, the article was not intended to make an ultimate judgment on the book's main empirical argumentation, nor to focus on its political agenda. Instead, Sargent drew attention to the authors' "compelling case that the key is neuroendocrinological stress, provoked by a perception that others enjoy a higher status than oneself, undermining self-esteem" (p. 1109). In his words, this idea was presented not because it would be "true" or "false", but simply as it is "compelling", worth being discussed. For the suggested link between income inequalities and welfare, Sargent was critical. In his words: "In the past year alone, six academic analyses have been published in peer-reviewed journals, four of which contradict the hypothesis on statistical grounds. Yet Wilkinson and Pickett do not address these criticisms in their book." (p. 1109). Furthermore, "They might also have explained the occasional notable deviation from their theory, such as the

unexpectedly high murder rates in egalitarian Finland and the unexpectedly low rates in very unequal Singapore." (p. 1109). Still, Sargent did not write that *The Spirit Level* would unarguably be unsubstantiated, neither that its main suggestions would be. In his words, the idea "has been hotly debated for more than two decades" (p. 1109), and, in a logical way, two of the six academic analyses do not contradict it. Thus, the review in *Nature* showed the book being situated in a hot and still lasting scientific debate. From this point of view, *The Spirit Level* did not turn the scales to the advantage of egalitarians, nor did it do the opposite. It was no solution for the debate, but a "compelling" contribution.

Similarly to Sargent, Oxford sociologist John Goldthorpe (2010) also focused on methodological questions instead of political ones in his analysis. He briefly noted that his point of view on disparities was different to that of Wilkinson and Pickett, but this issue did not appear any more in the article, neither directly nor indirectly. In his words: "The dissenters' position on social inequality is somewhat closer to my own than is that of [Wilkinson and Pickett] but I do not intend here – and am in any event not competent – to take sides in the continuing, complex debate." (p. 732). Instead, emphasis was put on two questions: "First, is there good evidence of a contextual effect of social inequality, and more specifically of income inequality, on population health and in other respects? And, second, to the extent that this is the case, is there good evidence that this effect is produced by the 'psychosocial' processes that [Wilkinson and Pickett] invoke. . .?" (p. 737).

The first question played a crucial role in most critiques addressed at *the Spirit Level*, as many reviewers underlined that any statistical correlation between these phenomena must be a stochastic but not a causal one. Remarkably, however, Goldthorpe was not dismissive of the epidemiologists' position. He mentioned that some scientific research seemed to support the arguments by Wilkinson and Pickett (for instance, Marmot 2004). Furthermore, for him, "some evidence of a contextual effect can in fact be found – if not as one of a 'naturalistic' universal kind, then as one that operates under certain conditions and in regard to certain aspects of health" (p. 737).

It was the second question which Goldthorpe really found problematic. He referred back to Wilkinson and Pickett, according to whom it is "social status differences" (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010a, p. 43) that lead to well-being problems. Up to this point, Goldthorpe agreed with the two epidemiologists due to his own congruent research findings (c.f. Goldthorpe and McKnight 2006). But he also emphasized that Wilkinson and Pickett simply used income inequality indicators to grasp social status differences. And this was a crucial mistake in his eyes as "social stratification is not one-dimensional", so "status stratification cannot. . .be related to income inequality" (p. 740). As a result of this phenomenon, "the possibility exists that stress associated with status concerns may be intensified by a narrowing as well as by a widening of inequalities of a material kind" (p. 738). Considering this, Goldthorpe judged *The Spirit Level*'s main findings doubtful due to its "serious shortcomings" (p. 732), and argued for a more sophisticated analysis on the relationship between *status* differences and social welfare problems.

In summary, despite his important remarks, Goldthorpe did not level serious criticism at most issues which were otherwise strongly disputed by several dissenters of Wilkinson and Pickett's work. Furthermore, he did not deal with the book's potential political motivations. Instead, he emphasized a methodological problem which remained unrealized by all other critics, and argued for a better consideration of sociological research in other disciplines. Yet, he did not present *The Spirit Level* as unscientific, only underlined a serious weakness in it.

The reviews of Kay and Goldthorpe are remarkable from our point of view since they indicate that the book by Wilkinson and Pickett might be neither the unquestionable source of objective truth nor a pure political manifesto totally lacking scientific relevance. For reviewers having few personal political interests in the disparity discourse, *The Spirit Level* seems a work with important weaknesses but also with "compelling" new ideas worth being thought through. This reveals that material written by scientists (irrespective its scientific quality and substantiation) might not only get a decisive role in the disparity discourse. It also easily becomes a positive or negative subject of quasi-religious belief where it is expected to be worshipped or demolished. Thus, even if statements made by scientists can have a strong influence on the disparity discourse, they have little potential to "defend themselves" from being interpreted one-sidedly for purely political reasons.

2.6.2   Findings of the Case Study: On the Legitimate Authority of Sciences

As has been shown, the *The Spirit Level* quickly became a flash point. Its main argument about a suggested strong negative link between income inequalities and social well-being raised the interest of several columnists, analysts and politicians. Most reviewers wrote about the book in an enthusiastic tone, strongly motivated by their own political views on social disparities. Left-of-centre reviewers tended to present the findings of *The Spirit Level* as "scientific truths", which indisputably prove the righteousness of their ideological position. Right-of-center critics, however, questioned the work's validity, judged it "unscientific" and refuted its social political intentions. As a third group, some researchers criticized the empirical results as well as their interpretation by Wilkinson and Pickett, but did not present the whole work as "unscientific" and resisted joining the purely political debate on the book's political relevance.

Considering these, it becomes possible at this point to understand why *The Spirit Level* raised the interest of so many in the "politics business" and why did it spark a hot debate. With their pro-equity argument, the book's authors entered the social disparity discourse with an opinion necessarily becoming regarded there as a proof of socialist orientation. It is no wonder, therefore, that the position of Wilkinson and Pickett was judged "a surprisingly traditional socialist" "political tract" by the conservative journalist Charles Moore. But that two persons expressed their opinion

within a political discourse would not have resulted in a broad and heated debate. Actually, it was something more: a struggle to win the discourse. With its universalistic statement that equality benefits everyone *The Spirit Level* implied to have found something decisive that could put an end to a long debate. And this attempt seemed serious enough to gain extremely strong support from numerous columnists on the Left and attract withering criticism from journalists on the Right.

In fact, this enormous power of the book was a result of its authors' position. As Foucault underlines, different persons have different opportunities to participate in the discourse. He draws particular attention to what he calls "a rarefaction…of the speaking subjects" (Foucault 1981, p. 61). In his words, "none shall enter the order of discourse if he does not satisfy certain requirements or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so" (ibid., pp. 61–62). We should add that once within, different persons have unequal abilities in shaping the discourse: the opinion of some "does matter", that of others maybe barely or not at all. One reason is that one's ability to form an opinion which is regarded as substantiated by the participants of the discourse can vary on a broad scale. If a broadcast corporation performs non-representative polling in the street about inequalities and a requested passer-by argues either for or against equality, this position is usually not paid the same attention to as to that of a leading politician. The opinion of those who are considered to have more knowledge on the issue and more power to change actual conditions is more likely to "matter" in the eyes of many. The second factor is the relation of the speaker's view to their (supposed) own interests. If a Socialist MP argues for equity or a Conservative for inequality, their stances are simply judged "typical" and "obvious" as their fundamental interests are to represent their parties and the alleged voters. It makes a difference, however, when somebody seeming uninterested and "objective" explicitly supports one characteristic opinion within the discourse. And these are the factors making *The Spirit Level* so forceful since it is a contribution to a political debate *by scientists*.

In the last decades many philosophers and researchers have argued that scientific knowledge might be "simply one of a number of equally 'valid' modes of understanding" (Mercer 1984, p. 194, cf. Feyerabend 1993[1975]), thus, it has no supremacy over other modes such as "commonsense" (Mercer 1984, p. 194). In Laudan's words, "it is no longer viable to attempt to distinguish science from non-science by assimilating that distinction to the difference between knowledge and opinion" as "there is no difference between knowledge and opinion" (Laudan 1988, p. 340). Nonetheless, in certain contexts science still has a remarkable reputation (especially in western societies), which elevates it above alternative "modes of understanding". As Haraway puts it, science is often presented as "the real game in town" (Haraway 1988, p. 577). This almost (or sometimes profoundly) religious attitude towards science is the phenomenon of *scientism*, which is described by Stenmark as follows:

> "The overwhelming intellectual and practical successes of science have led some people to think that there are no real limits to the competence of science, no limits to what can be achieved in the name of science. There is nothing outside the domain of science, nor is there any area of human life to which science cannot successfully be applied. …Or, if there are

limits to the scientific enterprise, the idea is that science, at least, sets the boundaries for what we humans can ever know about reality. This is the view of scientism." (Stenmark 2008, p. 111)

Scientism is rooted in a presumption that among the various "modes of understanding" it is only science that is disembodied and has a universal scope, and that these aspects rigidly distinguish scientific from non-scientific knowledge (e.g. from folk knowledge, political thought, religion or ideology) (Shapin 1998, p. 5). Thanks to these specific features, science is claimed to have an "uninterested" position, a "view from nowhere" (Nagel 1986). Meanwhile, though, it is suggested as being able to reveal all aspects of everything we can find in reality, so its claimed position is "a view from nowhere and from everywhere" (Bourdieu 2004, p. 116). Thus, science is seen as the only mode of understanding to produce "neutral" and "objective" knowledge about the world; the only "agent for revealing. . .infallible knowledge" (Wunder 2008, p. 5). This is especially true for physical or natural sciences, which, as Thompson underlines, are on the top of "a quite explicit prestige hierarchy ranging from the 'hard', 'pure', 'tough', 'rational' 'objective' disciplines of the physical sciences through to the 'soft', 'emotional' and 'undisciplined' subjects such as sociology, economics, psychology, history and human geography" (Thompson 1981; quoted in Mercer 1984, p. 157).

These normative concepts of scientific knowledge can be traced back to seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In Livingstone's (2009) words, "it was in that era that the term [science] itself began to acquire a definition that linked it to a body of demonstrated truths and observed facts brought into coherence by their adherence to general natural laws" (p. 666). This attitude has been expanding since then, and not only among researchers. The scientific boom of the twentieth century has also not left popular culture unaffected. Popular scientific literature and radio and television programs have brought scientism "right into the living room of ordinary people" (Stenmark 2008, p. 111). Due to this "long-running expansionist policy" (Wunder 2008, p. 7), science is regarded as something supreme by broad strata of society. Therefore, to call something "scientific" is still "the most popular rhetoric for justifying claims of knowledge" (ibid.; cf. Bauer 1992). This fact gives a tremendous *legitimate authority* (Blass 2000) to the representatives of science, especially to those of natural sciences. And, as legitimate authorities "are extremely influential in directing human conduct" (Cialdini 2008, p. 205; cf. Blass 2000), people usually tend to accept scientific "expert's" guidance, sometimes unthinkingly, even if these instructions contradict their initial views (Cialdini 2008).

This extreme credit given to science made *The Spirit Level* so forceful in the social disparity discourse. Unlike most views expressed within the discourse, this book was intended not to mirror the *opinion* of politicians, journalists or political analysts. Instead, it was aimed at showing the *findings of two scientists*—or, what is even more, of two epidemiologists, *two doctors*. In accordance with this fact, Wilkinson and Pickett claimed not to try to convince readers through mere rhetoric. Instead, they used statistics "from the best sources" (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010b), such as WHO, UN, or World Bank. These were claimed to be processed by

mathematical methods and presented in scatter plots—certainly seeming pro-
foundly scientific to everyday readers. This sort of analysis could be interpreted
as an "objective", "unbiased" contribution to the otherwise politically infiltrated
debate on disparities—in other words, the creation of *analytical* knowledge. It was
definitely a "view from nowhere and from everywhere" (Bourdieu 2004, p. 116),
unlike the obviously politically embedded and biased positions of politicians or
political journalists, which belong to the domain of producing *orientation* knowl-
edge. In consequence, since the authors took a stance on one side in the disparity
discourse, this was likely to have serious implications on the positions of many
since they maybe tended to accept the scientists' (and therefore *the
"scientific"*) view.

No wonder that it was the book's scientific claim which attracted the most
attention from the actors in the "politics business". Those arguing for equality
never forgot to emphasize the scientific nature of *The Spirit Level*. Their methods
varied on a broad scale, from referring consistently to the work as "ground-breaking
research" (Toynbee 2009) (which is, in other words, "no hunch") to its explicit
presentation as the source of "intellectual certainty" and "scientific truth"
(Hattersley 2009). Meanwhile, the book's critics strongly disputed that the work
of Wilkinson and Pickett would have been scientific. They questioned at a mini-
mum the quality of data evaluation every time, arguing that the *method* the authors
used did not meet scientific standards—therefore, it was not scientific. A typical
reasoning is that of Reeves, for whom "the authors have simply scoured the data for
signs of malignancy in unequal societies", but as the relationships they suggest
"can't be verified", they "do not provide any statistical analyses" (Reeves 2009).
And since *The Spirit Level*'s analyses claimed to be statistical are presented as
not-statistical, indirectly—but obviously—the whole work is judged non-scientific.
But this kind of criticism was minor: some commentators simply and explicitly
regarded *The Spirit Level* an unarguably non-scientific work. For instance, Moore
writes that Wilkinson and Pickett argue for equality "certainly not scientifically"
(Moore 2010), while, in Sinclair's view, "the book's claims…are simply untrue"
(Sinclair 2010).

These statements clearly indicate that political journalists on both sides realized
The Spirit Level's remarkable potential to reshape power geometries within the
social disparity discourse. They also understood that a decisive point is whether the
book can be positioned within the circle of "scientific products" or whether its
scientific claim can be destroyed. In consequence, reviews from the political Left
argued for the scientific quality of the work, while right-of-centre critics judged it
non-scientific—and, thus, a sort of manifesto having no supremacy over any other
political opinions within the discourse, regardless of its authors' professional
background.

In summary, dealing with social disparities is a way to express political opinions
and, thus, to implement political self-categorization. Therefore, the existence and
perpetual maintenance of the social disparity discourse is a crucial interest of the
actors in the "politics business", whose political strength and efficiency depends
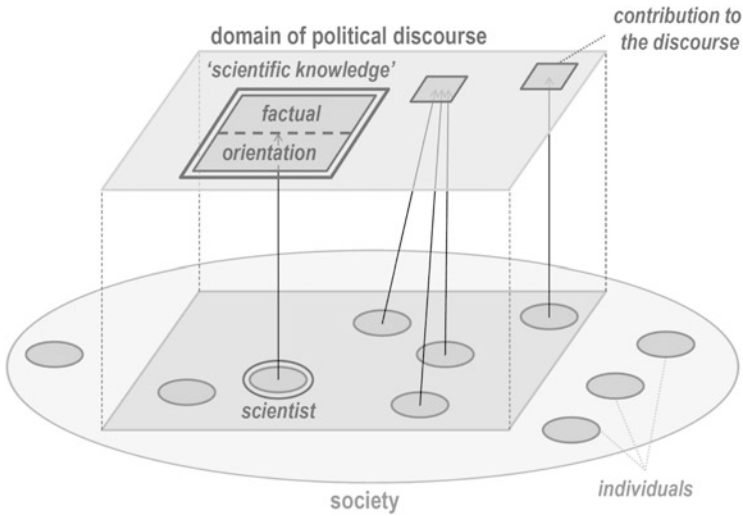largely on the number and determination of their supporters entering the discourse

Fig. 2.2 The role of science and scientists in political discourses. *Source*: design by author

and contributing to it. However, this discourse is not only a means to sustain the potential voters' political identity. It is also a sort of battlefield where competing interest groups can clash, rivals can be defeated and their identity-making capacity can be annihilated, or at least reduced. In consequence, each party makes serious attempts to find feasible weapons. And the influence their views have on the discourse is merely a function of their legitimate authority. Since science and the analytical knowledge it produces ("scientific facts") still have an outstanding reputation, each statement made by scientists within the discourse (even those in fact belonging to the domain of orientation knowledge) has the very potential to give a new direction to the debate and so it attracts serious attention (Fig. 2.2). No wonder that such statements quickly find themselves (in as) the focal point of harsh opinions. Here, one party emphasizes the scientific nature and "truth" of the statements, while the other tries to segregate them from the field of science in order to undermine their discursive power. In short, science as means of legitimization has a crucial role in the disparity discourse.

2.7 Changing Context and Altering Position of Slogans in the Disparity Discourse

The above sections revealed the highly political nature of the disparity discourse, and presented the crucial role played by science in it. In the light of reactions to *The Spirit Level*, however, one point is still unclear. As it was discussed, certain slogans have a strong political meaning in the disparity discourse. The use of such slogans

automatically puts those using them in certain political categories (e.g. "Socialists" and "Conservatives"). Thus, it seems illogical that any would try to make use of slogans traditionally belonging to the rival's vocabulary. Still, David Cameron virtually did so when he referred to the book by Wilkinson and Pickett in his 2009 speech. With this, he distanced himself from the typically conservative-libertarian non-equity argument and addressed his positive words to a work which explicitly argued for reducing social disparities, a typical socialist tract. Enthusiastic readers of the book might say that this "turn" was simply a result of its exciting argumentation, and Cameron was but one of those whom the work of Wilkinson and Pickett convinced about the necessity of reducing social disparities. No doubt, a book published "in the right place at the right time" can exert remarkable influence on many people, among them politicians as well. It is still unlikely, however, that—*ceteris paribus*—an interesting reading could lead to mentionable changes in a leading party's (or a party leader's) goals under demo-cratic circumstances. Therefore, it seems reasonable to look for other reasons, and to prefer a less "naïve" explanation.

In November 2009, the Conservatives' chances to win the coming elections seemed very good due to the Labour's serious trust deficit. Still, overall economic and social circumstances would have made it extremely risky to campaign for increasing economic growth even at the cost of inequalities. This typically neolib-eral objective had been very popular among conservative politicians since Reaganist and Thatcherist economic policies. As they emphasized, "growing inequality did not matter" as "a rising tide lifts all boats" (Devichand 2010). However, this reasoning could no longer be maintained for at least two reasons.

First, setting the objective of stable economic growth during a global financial crisis might have proved political suicide in the mid-term. When David Cameron made his speech at Kings Palace, preliminary statistics on the third quarter of 2009 still indicated a more than 5 % decrease of British GDP on an annual basis (ONS 2009). Government deficit as well as debt were skyrocketing, and reached 11.3 % and 68.1 % of GDP by the end of the year after a moderate 4.9 % and 52.1 % in 2008 (ONS 2011). The duration of the recession was impossible to predict, possible engines of a later economic recovery were unclear. No wonder that under such circumstances political leaders did not base their campaign on the slogan of stable economic growth. Its realization would have been uncertain, the risk of failing too big. Therefore, it was more secure to set an objective that can be achieved with less effort, even if it was not a traditionally Conservative one. Reducing disparities might seem feasible in this sense, as the distribution of the pie can be made somewhat more proportionate even if a bigger pie cannot be baked.

Second, politicians were not to ignore the many voices interpreting the financial crisis as the end of an economic epoch, which should be followed by something new. Harsh expressions as the "crisis" or "end" of neoliberalism were used in relation to the global recession rather by neo-Marxist intellectuals (cf. Brand and Sekler 2009; Brie 2009; Badiou 2010; Duménil and Lévy 2011), but not only by them. Joseph Stiglitz, definitely not a Marxist, similarly emphasized that the downturn could put an end to the era of "neo-liberal market fundamentalism"

(Stiglitz 2008). Economic recession, growing unemployment and decreasing incomes also made these views popular for many everyday people. The decline of neoliberalism as an idea became popular among many very quickly. Such tendencies have major relevance in politicians' eyes. If the years of crisis are presented as a shift from one economic (and social) paradigm to another, politicians also have to find new objectives and new slogans to retain their voters' interest and trust. At this point, a logical strategy can be to set a goal which seems to cure the most criticized features of the former policy. In the current case, most criticism was leveled at a dramatic widening of the income gap between various social strata and at the remarkably passive standpoint of the neoliberal state. Given these, some reduction of social inequalities with a certain assistance of the state might have seemed a feasible and attractive aim, even for non-Socialist political groups. No wonder that David Cameron moved in this direction (cf. "We need to use the state to remake society." [Cameron 2009]).

In general, *the structure of discourse* has *changed due to serious transformations in its* social, political and economic *context*. Thus, borders between those propagating and rejecting certain slogans have been blurred. The global crisis made many slogans unpopular, which all had been connected to the same political ideology. Consequently, the users of this ideology needed to give up a part of their old vocabulary and add new words to it, or reinterpret certain words to make them acceptable. This does not mean that these actors have also given up their self-identification as a group independent from its rivals. That Cameron used the idea of decreasing social disparities as a slogan to make his party more attractive does not equal their giving up conservatism and becoming socialists. The Conservatives still sustained their image as an independent party, whose solutions to given problems are diametrically opposed to those the Labour Party argues for. For instance, Cameron emphasized in his speech that the reduction of disparities and his party's other goals was not to realize by a "big government", but by a "big society" (Cameron 2009). For him, the role of the state is not to solve the people's problem in itself, but to "help stimulate social action" (ibid). This argument of supporting people to help themselves differs from the traditional socialist aim of a state to "fairly" redistribute resources. The notion of promoting "non-state collective action" instead of "centralized state solutions" also mirrored the conservative philosophy, not the socialist one. Thus, the global crisis, though exerting influence on the rival power groups' vocabularies in the discourse, did not dissolve the barriers between these groups. Inequality became regarded as a vital problem by all leading political movements, but their competition remained.

This finding is highly important from the viewpoint of our analysis. It shows that the disparity discourse (as a political one) can sometimes witness situations where the exclusive slogan of one group becomes a slogan for all competing parties. Such a change is especially likely to occur during great social, political and economic shocks, as will also be seen in Chap. 3 about spatial disparities.

2.8   Social Disparities and the Disparity Discourse: Sub-Conclusion

Social disparities considered as "differences among people in their command over [various sorts of] resources" (Osberg 2001, p. 7371) are present in every society. This is more than a pure result of individually differing biological characteristics. It is caused by a system of dominance and differential evaluation, which is brought into being by many factors as societies become more and more complex in interpersonal relations. In the latter process, an especially important change is marked by the emergence of delayed-return systems instead of archaic immediate-return systems. In these, the horizontal as well as vertical divisions of labor become necessary, which, then, necessitate social control over individuals' contribution to the labor process. An unavoidable step is that certain members of the group have to control cooperation. And to these members a sort of power has to be given as well, otherwise they cannot coerce everybody to follow the decisions the group has made. Another important event occurs in the history of social disparities when permanent settlements emerge. This shift not only deepens the division of labor, but also reduces the group's spatial radius. Because reaching scarce resources is the primary challenge, further intensification of social relations is needed to prevent abuse. From then on, over various epochs and different types of society, the intensification, institutionalization and stabilization of inequality structures become dominant tendencies. However, societies not only have sophisticated (and reasonable and necessary, rather than malevolent) practices to produce and reproduce social disparities, they also try to keep these under control. They try to avoid extreme inequalities and the huge tensions they cause since the latter could end up in the collapse of society. In other words, ideas to create and stabilize disparities on the one hand, and to reduce or hold them below a certain level on the other, are both present in every society.

These controversial forces driving social disparities made the issue highly interesting in the eyes of many thinkers as far back as several thousand years ago. From the beginning, many were of the opinion that inequalities above a certain level lead to social tensions which destabilize the state. Meanwhile, many emphasized that equalization also brings about severe problems which threaten the functioning of society. These practically irreconcilable views resulted in two alternative arguments. One stressed the importance of equality as equal distribution. This was based on the (either implicit or explicit) concept that all individuals have something inborn in common, which entitles them to be equal in the end state. The other view argued for equality considered as equal reward for equal merit (achievement principle). This idea was substantiated with the argument of individually differing honors, which should be reflected in rewards to avoid injustice. These two concepts have proved rather stable over time. Although among different social, political and economic circumstances and through different ways of formulation and justification, the dichotomy of these two points has been and remained at the heart of the debate over disparities.

Besides, dealing with social inequalities has always had a strong political relevance. On the one hand, the issue has been highly political since it focuses on power relations. But on the other, in the corresponding debate many ideas have been created which could well be utilized by various political ideologies. And, actually, the debate over disparities has been itself a discursive process that is political. The discourse over social disparities is an easy-to-understand issue of moral and politics, which can raise the attention of a great many. Due to this, it is a feasible means for the actors in the "politics business" (such as politicians, political analysts etc.) to make themselves visible for the masses, thus, to create and perpetually recreate their political identities. Meanwhile, the discourse can be entered virtually by everybody. That is how the actors in the "politics business" can also draw the attention of everyday people to political issues, to convince them about the importance of politics and, if possible, about the truth of the given political approach. Thus, the disparity discourse serves as a battlefield for different political groups. The latter are interested at least in sustaining their self-identity and the people's interest in politics, and ideally in winning the discursive battle and the support of the masses, while defeating their rivals. The direct relevance of the disparity discourse for political identity-making has been especially important since the emergence of modern mass societies, although it certainly was not insignificant before.

For the disparity discourse, science can have a very significant, even decisive role. As in all discourses, the influence given statements made during the discourse strongly depends on the position of those who made them. And, due to remarkable achievements of science in the last centuries, and especially in the last decades, science (especially "hard sciences") still has an outstanding reputation and is a force in arguments. In other words, although the often claimed superiority of science amidst various forms of knowledge has already been challenged from many sides, its representatives still have a remarkable legitimate authority. Thus, even a discourse of a moral nature can be strongly shaped by scientists and their statements. The disparity discourse is no exception. Once representatives of scientific life make their remarks concerning inequalities, their views are brought to the forefront of the discourse. There, those who agree with the normative content of the scientists' statement (or with the normative judgement the scientists' comment tends to substantiate, even unconsciously) tend to refer to this contribution, stressing its "objective", "inarguable", scientific nature. But those who reject the same normative ideas probably reject what scientists say and question the scientific nature of their statements. This has two remarkable consequences.

First, if some scientists aim to shape the political discourse, they are likely to speak in favor of the ideology or movement with which they sympathize, while easily hiding their political stances behind a mask of science). Second, irrespective of the political motivations of its authors (if they have so), comments presented as scientific often invoke extreme and irreconcilable reactions in the discourse. They face destructive attack from those opposing their potential normative meaning, while they are praised by those who can make use of them to substantiate their own political objectives. If the discourse is imbalanced, and dominated by a single

approach, the story is even more simple. Here, the difference between the general acceptance and rejection of a scientific contribution is not a matter of scientific quality (empirical accuracy, methodical correctness etc.), but whether it fits the political objectives of those in power. In other words, the more actors in the discourse they are convenient to, the greater the chance statements by scientists will be embraced and allowed to shape the discourse.