

## ***Discourses supporting socio-economic inequality in Kenya, Mexico and the UK***

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### ***Abstract***

Socio-economic inequalities are often studied at the country or local level, which offers insight into local dynamics and perceptions. This paper considers discourses of inequality within and between countries, enabling a consideration of the web of connections between places and ideas. The three study countries are spread along a continuum with varying national wealth and diverse regional locations: Kenya, Mexico and the UK. This international comparative approach identifies some key discursive ways of supporting inequality that persist in diverse neoliberal settings. Specific discursive devices include the focus on personal aspirations, opportunities, denial of problems, discrediting alternatives and framing inequality as being natural.

### ***Key words***

Socio-economic inequality, attitudes, discourse, international comparison, discussion groups, Kenya, Mexico, UK, Bourdieu

### ***Introduction***

Socio-economic inequality influences many details of how people's lives are lived, and inequalities often overlap so that those who are less well-off financially generally tend to have lower status jobs, fewer years in education, worse health, and ultimately shorter lives. This social gradient can be observed at global, national and sub-national levels. The rationales and justifications for socio-economic inequalities at the local and national scales are quite well documented (Polet, 2007; Corbridge, 2004; Reis and Moore, 2005; White, 2007; Plehwe and Mills, 2012). Popular challenges by social movements to the injustices associated with inequality have been well documented, as have the 'global social dialogues' of international institutions (Yeates, 2009; Chatterton & Gordon, 2004; Wright, 2008). Less attention has been paid to how people without a specific interest in inequality make sense of the inequalities at the world level. An exception is recent work on international perceptions of meritocracy (Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2010; White, 2007). I posit that an assemblage of particular understandings bolsters inequality, influencing personal politics, aspirations, and beliefs about what is desirable and even possible for society.

Instead of investigating the views of activists, politicians, or business people, this paper considers the views of secondary school teachers in three neo-liberal countries that span a spectrum of wealth: Kenya, Mexico and the UK. This selection of countries enabled me to access the arguments and logics

surrounding inequality from people who are positioned along a continuum of world inequality. As agents act “with points of view, interests, and principles of vision determined by the position they occupy in the very world they intend to transform or preserve” (Bourdieu, 1996, p.2), and coming from different vantage points their perspectives on socio-economic inequality may differ. Yet these same people are entangled within a neoliberal approach that considers “that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (Harvey, 2005/2009, p.2).

This paper identifies some facets of international understandings of the economy and society that have come to act as barriers to reducing economic inequality (after Fairclough, 2009). These discourses come from a varied group of teachers with their own class-based interests, but bear resemblance to the ideas of neoliberalism (see Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009). Other ideas and discourses that emerged in this research, but are not the focus of this paper, challenge current levels of inequality. Understandings of socio-economic inequality that may enable its persistence include perceiving the processes that lead to inequality as being desirable and natural; and seeing inequality as being vast and unstoppable.

#### ***Literature: discourses of inequality and the spread of ideas***

Neoliberalism is accompanied by social values that justify and sustain its existence, and the foundational value of neoliberalism is individual freedom (Harvey, 2005/2009). The idea of the individual is central to western philosophy, economics, politics and religion. Whilst not inherently problematic, individualism can be associated with loss of agency and solidarity when it becomes narcissistic and self-absorbed (Thake, 2008), so could exacerbate inequalities. Other beliefs about how society works are also prone to framing inequality as desirable and unavoidable. It is suggested that the majority in power in most rich countries believe that elitism is efficient, exclusion necessary, prejudice natural, greed good and despair inevitable (Dorling, 2010b). These tenets bolster the preferred moral story of rulers, “that we are decent folk trying to do our best” (Ignatieff, 1998, p.288). A materialist perspective can explain why more powerful members of society hold such views, yet these ideas are not confined to those at the top of the social hierarchy.

Since the late 1970s the shift towards political and economic neoliberalism has seeped into general understandings, aiming to preserve the capitalist economy. Dominant classes persuade subordinate classes that their values embody the natural order (Gramsci in Jackson, 1989). Neoliberal thinkers have worked to bridge cultures, span countries, and engage the global South (Plehwe and Mills, 2012). The trope that ‘capitalism works’ whereas socialism has been ‘demonstrated’ not to work is a dominant view (Levitas, 2007, p.300). Shifts towards neoliberal policies tend to take the form of apparently technical adjustments, and are justified as being economically rational choices rather than by ideological arguments about a preferred system (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999; Ferguson, 1990). As such, market principles rather than

welfare ideals often determine resource distribution (Smith and Easterlow, 2004). My own theoretical perspective is critical of the impact that inequality has both on societies and individuals, and draws on neo-Marxist and post-Marxist approaches.

The concepts of neoliberal globalisation need *passeurs* (carriers) to transport these logics, values, and modes of organisation (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999), and it is to these transporters of the “common sense” of the period that I now turn. The strict loan conditions of the International Monetary Fund since the 1980s have brought neoliberalism to many countries including Argentina, Mozambique and the Philippines, often enriching the wealthy at the expense of the poorer majority (Chatterton and Gordon, 2004; Harvey, 2005/2009). Conservative think tanks and University of Chicago economists have played a role in naturalising and spreading neoliberal thought since 1979 (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999; Harvey, 2005/2009), at a time when Deng Xiaoping made steps towards liberalizing the Chinese market in 1978, Margaret Thatcher became British Prime Minister in 1979, and in 1980 Ronald Regan became President of the United States. Another set of *passeurs* are the media and education, with their great potential to educate and motivate the public (Rosenblatt, 1996; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999).

Inequalities embodied in hierarchies often appear natural when there is close “correspondence between the social order and the principles of its arrangement” (Bourdieu, 1972/2009, p.164). System justification theory proposes that people are, often sub-consciously, motivated to support the status quo through resisting change (Jost et al., 2004). Coping strategies to make injustice more bearable similarly defend inequalities through categorisations such as the lazy poor and the industrious rich (Bamfield and Horton, 2009). Forms of concealment of ideas and concepts surround most social practices. These include *isolation* (practices are separated from wider society and historical context); *conflation* (practices are not differentiated); *eternalisation* (practice appears unending rather than historically bounded); *emphasising natural causes* (obscures the social causes); *overlooking interrelations* between practices; and *hiding conflicts of interest* between differently positioned subjects (Urry, 1981). Karl Marx considered that the concealment enacted by ideology not only hides one’s own interests from oneself as false consciousness, but also hides one group’s interests from others thus representing ruling class interests as those of the whole society (Marx in Jackson, 1989). Focusing on three capitalist countries, this paper identifies neoliberal discourses that bolster economic inequality.

### ***Methodology***

Discussion groups suit the aims of this research, because they involve semi-public discussion of inequalities, thereby accessing the social nature of knowledge (Goss & Leinbach, 1996). I conducted 9 discussion groups in Kenya, 8 in Mexico and 7 in the UK. Group sizes ranged from 2 to 8 people. School teacher participants were mostly recruited at their school and already knew one another. The discussion groups were one-off meetings and lasted for roughly 90 minutes. To maximise diversity teachers included trainee teachers to retirees; those working in towns, cities and rural areas; those teaching richer

and poorer students; and included state and private schools. In discussions teachers referred to many sites of inequality, ranging in scale from the home and school, to comparing countries and continents. Seven topics were addressed: what inequality means; participants' awareness of world inequalities; what causes inequality; the importance of inequality as a world issue; visualizations of world inequality were used as material for discussion; positive and negative aspects of inequality; and frequency of discussions about inequality (for Discussion Guide see text box, for a more detailed methodology see Barford, 2010). The discussion groups in Mexico took place in Spanish, those in the UK and Kenya were conducted in English.

### **Discussion guide**

#### **Introduction:**

1. Welcome and thank participants. Hand out informed consent forms.
2. Explain topic is how teachers in diverse place think about world inequality.
3. Give information about PhD thesis & publications. Note that data are made anonymous, by removing people's and schools' names. Explain the audio recording and ask if this is OK.
4. Suggest guidelines for discussion: I ask questions followed by discussion. There is no order for speaking, but just one person speaks at a time. Note that it will take roughly 1 hour, and check if anyone has to leave early.
5. Invite questions before we start. Collect consent forms; offer refreshments.

**OPENING:** Ask name and the place they were born.

**INEQUALITY:** What does the word 'inequality' mean to you?

**SCALE:** Now I would like to ask more about inequality at the world scale. How aware are you of this in your daily life?

**CAUSES:** In your opinion, why do some people have few opportunities, whereas others have many? Is inequality inevitable?

**IMPORTANCE:** How important an issue is inequality, compared to other issues like global warming and terrorism?

**MAPS:** I would like you to tell me what you think works, or doesn't work about these images. How useful are they in learning about inequality?

**GOODS, BADS:** What are the good things and bad things about inequality?

**CONVERSATION:** How often do you talk about these issues, with your friends, family or colleagues?

*Text box: Discussion Guide*

Analysis evaluated how interviewees positioned themselves and others, what words allow the speaker to do, and how topics are prioritized (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Using *emic* themes arising from the data made less expected findings possible (Goss & Leinbach, 1996). I identified several discursive repertoires<sup>i</sup> about the value and necessity of inequality (Jackson, 2001). Comparing within and between countries highlights absences and presences of ideas, experiences and approaches. The findings presented here are not generalisable to the research countries because of the comparatively small size and participants not being selected in order to be representative. These findings are best understood as illustrations of some of the wider understandings of socio-economic inequalities. Note that interruptions of main speaker are shown

in square brackets.

### ***Findings and discussion***

Below I present themes that emerged in discussions about inequality. These are at times contradictory and open to critique, yet give insight into understandings and values on the topic of inequality.

### ***Aspirations***

Some participants claim that inequality motivates. Inequality, they say, encourages healthy competition and struggle, and promotes development. According to some Kenyan participants this increases productivity, improves the quality of products, encourages hard work, leads to good quality services, altogether making Kenyans “pull our socks up” and move ahead. Similarly in Mexico, several participants argued that inequalities motivate, create competition and set challenges, resulting in hard work. In the UK inequality is reported to make us do things, to drive growth, and urges us to develop which some teachers described as being “obviously good” (UK 7, rural private school); overall stimulating a desire to better oneself. In all three countries the benefits of inequality were acknowledged as being work, competition and progress. The motivating mechanism is identified as observing others’ success, which generates a desire to “catch up” or even “move ahead”. The possibility to dream is highlighted as an advantage of inequality: “it gives you an opportunity to dream, to aspire and to work towards.” (Kenya 7, British-system private school). In the UK Conservative, Liberal Democrat, and New Labour political parties have argued that some inequality is essential to encourage aspiration (Sheldon et al., 2009).

When teachers spoke about their own lives they were often aspirational, talking hopefully about the future. This aspiration took the form of making comparisons up the social hierarchy, demonstrating that their sights were set on upward social mobility. Aspirations were at times explained self-consciously and critically; several Mexican groups suggested that acting self-interestedly reproduces inequalities. The saying “first me, then me, and afterwards me” arose several times, in a conscious critique of this mentality. Nevertheless this “me, me, me” mentality was exhibited within those same groups.

“If you have purchasing power, you buy the best. You take the finest, it’s a status symbol, social status. If you have you’re in one social class, if you don’t have then you’re in another social class. If you have less you, you will be classified by your [accumulation of goods] accumulation of goods. And ultimately you will be unhappy because you are always trying to be something that you can’t be. You start to want to have a car, holidays, [a house] houses. What happens when poor people have credit cards? We buy more [than we can afford] than we can afford, then [then we have problems paying,] with problems, exactly. Why, because you want to create the fantasy that you have! You wanted to go to next social level. And when you wake up and find that no, on the contrary, that you haven’t got a higher status you, you are affected by it because you’re in debt.”  
(Mexico 6, rural government school)

In the passage above the speaker gains certainty when he says that one will be unhappy because of always wanting what one cannot have. His certainty suggests that he felt strongly about that possibly well-rehearsed point. His speech slows when giving examples of what people want, and becomes more eloquent when referring to the fantasy of ownership. That status symbols are important is explained by the Mexican proverbs: *you're worth what you have* and *you're treated according to your appearance*. This emphasis on appearance and possessions explains wanting the best, to reflect being the best. Unfortunately desire for material goods often conceals the often exploitative conditions of production (Howarth, 2000).

Aspiring to lifestyles higher up the social hierarchy was seen as detrimental to pupils, the obliging subjects of some of teachers' social commentaries. Parental wealth can be a source of easy money for young people, winning them respect and role model status (see quotation below). Parading wealth to which others aspire reinforces the illusion that the wealthy can have more and more, irrespective of the impact this has beyond their lives (Creegan, 2008).

"You see young people, teenagers, driving these big cars from their parents. They have no idea why they came about, and so, they become like role models, people adore them and they wish they were like so and so, and some of them may be so dense in school so it makes kids feel 'why worry?' I mean you don't have to work too hard in school, I mean if your parents are rich they'll give you a big car. And, and, it's something that people adore. Or wish they could have."  
(British-system fee-paying school, Kenya)

Amongst British teachers, being relatively rich compared to other participants, explicit ambition was replaced by complacency: "I'm a smug overweight bastard like anyone else you know. I have a pretty good life ... inequalities are fine by me." (Urban retired teachers, UK). This participant had previously discussed his concern about inequalities, but argues that he benefits from being high up the hierarchy; a contradiction also acknowledged in the title 'If you're an egalitarian, how come you're so rich?' (Cohen, 2001). Still, affluence comes with its own psychologically damaging impacts (James, 2007).

Instead of aspiring to improve their social position, UK participants placed a greater emphasis on consuming in an individualistic manner. In one group of urban trainee teachers a participant said that despite knowing cheap clothes are probably produced in sweatshop conditions, he likes buying nice clothes that are cheap. This attitude reflects the nested form of Western responsibility, termed a *Russian doll geography*, where caring for home first, then place, then nation is acceptable (Massey, 2004). A difficulty in thinking about the ethics of caring is that it is not clear to whom or where our obligations lie (Robinson, 1999). As found by other researchers, the UK groups bought into consumerism and distanced themselves from negative consequences of inequality (Thake, 2008). Kenyan and Mexican groups spoke of aspirations whereas UK groups, who are very rich in world terms and quite rich in UK terms, spoke of consuming whilst often avoiding talking about its effects.

### ***Focus on opportunity***

Several groups from each country defined inequality partly as inequality of opportunity. An opportunity is “a time, condition, or set of circumstances permitting or favourable to a particular action or purpose.” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2009). The opportunities of greatest interest to participants were jobs, education and access to money, all indicators of success; a lack of opportunity means conditions that are not conducive to attaining these. It might be that equality of opportunity is ‘more apparent than real’ (Marmot, 2004/2005, p.257), as opportunity is the possibility rather than the outcome. Aspirations also influence what is seen as opportunity. The success of a minority may be interpreted to mean that everyone has that opportunity, which shifts the onus onto individuals to exploit that.

Lack of opportunity rather than structural inequality was often identified as being problematic. Teachers in a Kenyan British-system private school linked poverty to lack of opportunity by positing the latter as the main problem and describing how rich parents pay for their children to go to university even when they fail their exams. Establishing this connection between wealth and opportunity provides a blame-free way of explaining oneself: “I have not had the opportunity to travel much” (Mexican urban government school) presents opportunity as an external limitation on behaviour, rather than something that individuals can create. ‘Limited opportunity’ appears to be a euphemism for poverty borrowed from a discourse of rights and stripped of its critical edge.

A spatial dimension to opportunity was highlighted: in my discussion groups Kenyans spoke about the greater opportunities in the UK (compared with Kenya), and Mexicans about opportunities in Canada (compared with Mexico) and the city (compared with the countryside). “Mexico has very clearly marked inequalities. In other countries there is more equity and more opportunities, not in Mexico” (Mexican urban government school). Migration for opportunities is significant for Mexican society and there is a view that things are better in the United States. Speaking in terms of migrating ‘for opportunities’ rather than simply ‘for work’ sounds aspirational, aspirations being esteemed. Opportunity thus means capability to meet basic needs; this even applies to access to water: “There are not the same opportunities in the countryside as in cities, there are extreme examples when people don’t have water.” (Mexican urban teachers). The double meaning of opportunity, basic needs on one hand and desires for wealth on the other, creates the misconception that these wants are comparable and that aspiring is the solution to both.

The success of someone from a humble background is a trope implying widespread opportunity. This myth is politically conservative, as it requires no major changes. Rags to riches narratives support the view that success reflects individual merit, but of course overlooks the educational and social advantages of children from better off families (Devine, 2004; Toynbee and Walker, 2008/2009). The successes of a few poor people can be misinterpreted as meaning that any failure is personal rather than societal, overlooking the demands of capitalism for a flexible, low-paid workforce. The wealthy people who are seen as most deserving are those who rose from humble origins and

succeeded by their own merit (Bamfield and Horton, 2009):

“A mentality could be a reason as to why we have poverty. Especially in Kenya. Or in Kibera where I’ve lived for almost 20 years of my life. Er, there is one person, a great industrialist today, he is called Chris Kirubi, although a little bit proud, one day he was saying ‘I myself, Chris Kirubi, does not wear second hand clothes’, the other day he was quoted as saying he can take a jet to the UK, you know, do his studies there. After 3 days he comes back to Kenya. But he is damn rich, he is rich. But Chris Kirubi grew up in the slum. He is one of the kids who had nothing at all. He was also an orphan, but he was totally poor. He came from a very very humble background. But I don’t think he had that kind of mentality which I, he did not, I stick to the fact that, and he did not stick to that mentality towards ‘I don’t have’, ‘I’m not going to have’ yeah, he grew out of that mentality. That slum mentality and poverty mentality. And today we can see where he is, he can fly to UK and back any time.”  
(Kenyan NGO-supported slum primary school)

The quotation above suggests that with the right mentality you can escape poverty. What is missing is that Chris Kirubi is an exception; 1 billion slum dwellers (Davis, 2006/2007) testify to rags to riches not being the norm. Yet personal optimism combined with a desire to believe that things will get better, makes the success of those with such a modest starting point appear, at least initially, particularly inspiring. Yet equating opportunity with freedom for social mobility resonates with values of personal freedom. Neoliberalism is able to exploit desire for freedom whilst overlooking social justice (Harvey, 2005/2009). Rags-to-riches stories subtly position those who remains poor as responsible for ‘their’ poverty.

Talk of opportunity and mobility is part of the new global vulgate (*la nouvelle vulgate planétaire*) of globalisation, flexibility and identity, whilst overlooking capitalism, exploitation and domination (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2000/2002). Focusing on opportunities highlights procedural equality, avoiding questions of outcome or justice (Rowlingson, 2010). Yet even social mobility is greater in more equal countries (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). However it is the appearance of and belief in the possibility of mobility that encourages public acceptance of a focus on opportunities and the placing of responsibility for success on the individual. The myth of meritocracy presents career and financial success as reflections of ability and effort rather than an advantageous starting point. Participants thus construct themselves as being active within the system but unable to change the wider social structure.

### ***Denial***

The myth of the happy poor promotes the idea that inequality is not as bad as it seems, and presenting oneself as average (i.e. not rich) seems to excuse responsibility for inequality. These arguments are particularly attractive because people dislike feeling guilty about living comfortably (Toynbee and Walker, 2008/2009) and denying that inequality is problematic frees people to continue as they are. Marshall Sahlins suggests that hunter-gatherer societies, conventionally assumed by anthropologists to have bourgeois impulses limited



by their paleolithic tools (i.e. desires for luxury material goods but without the means of getting these), are misjudged as being poor; they balance needs and material goods by possessing only what they can carry (Sahlins, 1972). Nevertheless, when intersecting with modern societies hunter-gathering people find themselves in politically and economically weak positions (Suzman, 2004), wanting more and lacking more (Sahlins, 1972). The myth of the happy poor reduces guilt, necessarily overlooking the politically and economically weak positions of poor people within modern society.

“In Chiapas there are people who are happy with \$2 per day.”  
(Mexican urban teachers from different schools)

“Who are we to say to people who live on one dollar a day, it’s probably very hard for me to say this because I’ve never lived on one dollar a day, but some people might just be genuinely happy with that, they’ve got enough for them to stay healthy and, ok, maybe that’s very extreme, but you know who are we to say ‘POOR THEM’”  
(British urban trainee teachers)

The happy poor are constructed as being geographically and socially distant, either abroad or rural, which allows them to be imagined as having different needs from the research participants. The Mexican quote above refers to the district of Chiapas that is relatively poor and home to many indigenous people. That the people of Chiapas are happy with \$2 a day is based on their needs being different from those of the speaker. A similar comment from Kenyan urban trainee teachers suggested that \$2 is *too much* in the countryside. Amongst a group of British urban trainee teachers the idea of the happy poor took the form of a warning against patronizing pity, as though pity and apathy were the only possible responses to poverty. Again there is no discussion of the possibility of social change.

Part of the thinking that the poor are happy comes as an inversion of the often-challenged idea that wealth brings happiness. This false opposition ignores the mental stress caused by lack of material means. Elevating happiness to the position of the arbiter of right and wrong diminishes the importance of justice. If the poor were all happy, if everyone were happy, would gross differences in life chances be acceptable? Moving the discussion away from the moral and the material, happiness can depoliticise the debate. Happiness can also be deceptive because bearing adversity cheerfully does not mean there is no adversity (Sen, 2010).

Denying one’s wealth avoids responsibility for inequality, because whilst the rich are sometimes blamed for their greed and the poor for their laziness or low aspirations, there is greater silence surrounding the middle classes who are nevertheless aspiring, consuming, and sustaining unequal values. People generally perceive themselves to be average (Bamfield and Horton, 2009), and even city high-flyers, amongst the top 0.1% of UK earners, denied they were rich when asked (Toynbee and Walker, 2008/2009). Positioning oneself as average or below average is a way of excusing oneself of responsibility according to existing explanations of inequality. At a British rural private school

one teacher derided another for being posh and shopping at a high-end British supermarket. One Mexican group commented: “you can see inequality when driving, and soon a ‘Hummer’ stops beside your modest car.” This variation on working class pride contrasts with the aspirations to grandeur expressed elsewhere. When several reference groups are invoked people can simultaneously occupy positions of relative wealth and relative poverty. For example, Mexico is typically contrasted with the United States, not Guatemala:

“And I saw lots of contrasts with Mexico, it is very clean, well ordered, very educated, a 1st world country. And in Mexico, like they say, well it’s another thing. This is an inequality.” (said forcefully)  
(urban government school, Mexico)

Mexico, a powerful and wealthy state in many respects, was portrayed as the antithesis of the cleanliness and order of the United States, which is particularly poignant because many Mexicans who take cleaning jobs in the USA.

### ***Discrediting alternatives***

The conviction that there are no alternatives is an effective justification for continuing as we are, because we have no choice. The *no alternatives* argument juxtaposes capitalism with “communism, which didn’t work”, which generally concluded this topic of discussion. Saying “communism didn’t work” implies that capitalism is working, and it implies that there are only two options in this binary political thinking which overlooks the many other possible ways in which societies and communities can be structured; this echoes Margaret Thatcher’s claim that “there is no alternative” (Thatcher, 1980; Watts, 2007; Harvey, 2005/2009). The argument that communism did not work, so cannot work, frames the discussion in extremes. It implies that capitalism is working without actually saying the word capitalism, a word that is more commonly employed in critiques of inequality. The implicit contrasting of capitalism and communism means talk about our existing social organization occurs without naming it. Not naming something makes it harder to identify and challenge. Instead an alternative form of social organization is specified as being unsuitable.

Discursively destroying the ideal of equality, by associating communism and equality, is another way of abolishing alternatives. The argument that greater equality would not work rests partly on the conflation of equality and sameness, where being identical is deemed a necessary but undesirable aspect of equality. This reasoning is also based on a deep-seated belief that we should be differently remunerated, which makes equality unimaginable.

“There’s no way ... people will be equal.

*Facilitator: no?*

It’s not going to be.

*Facilitator: never?*

They cannot be equal. It’s just some semblance and having to accept some certain things and you push on with life and you are just going to say that we are going to be equal, nobody’s going to accept.”

(high-achieving urban government school, UK)

The flat denial of the possibility of equality, or even moving a little nearer to equality, above shows how strongly the idea of greater equality can be rejected, on one's own and others' behalf. Perhaps this group had become cynical over time having observed unpleasant politics, concluding that the best thing was to accept the status quo in the Kenyan context where critical voices, such as that of author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, are strongly discouraged. Abolishing alternatives allows inequalities to persist, avoiding social thinking and critique by focusing inwards on oneself. The use of unqualified phrases such as "no way", "cannot", "nobody" presents a world of no alternatives to inequality and no desire for alternatives.

The idea of 'working' or functioning contributes to this series of dualisms: capitalism works, communism does not. Yet there is little discussion of what it means for something to work or for whom it works. A Kenyan urban trainee teacher said of Tanzanian socialism, "Socialism in Tanzania was abhorred and was deemed to have failed. Why? Because socialism was not on the right side of the politics of the day", but the resultant strong Tanzanian identity as opposed to the conflict and tribalism in Kenya now benefits Tanzania. Gandhi's ideas were also deemed *to not work* by one British teacher:

"I don't know whether Gandhi would agree with you there, but there you are  
I'm sure he wouldn't!  
He wanted everybody to make their own clothes. And wear a bed sheet  
(scoffs)  
Yeah but the world would not work if Gandhi ruled it [Yeah.] Well maybe.  
Dunno"  
(urban fee-paying girls school, UK)

Gandhi's thinking is undermined by mocking his views as backwards and likening his clothing to a bed sheet, which makes him seem silly. The idea that the world would not work under Gandhi demonstrates how the statement that something will not work discourages further discussion. It also illustrates how a partial understanding can still undermine alternatives: Gandhi did not want to 'rule', the concept of Swaraj expressed a preference for self-governance at the village level (Gandhi, 2005). Although another participant considered that Gandhi's philosophy could work, the discussion did not contemplate what ends we are working towards. The conversational demolishing of alternatives to inequality can discourage discussion about social change and possible utopias.

"Yeah, yeah, I mean I don't know how everyone can be, can go and find that amount of money and be wealthy, I suppose everyone can't be poor as well, but it's not shared. Um, but I don't know if you could share it or not, I don't know how it would work. I suppose that would seem unfair perhaps to people who have earned their money, and then it gets shared out more. And then there are people who haven't earned their money but they probably haven't had the circumstances to earn it. It's quite complicated. [laughter]"  
(urban trainee teachers, UK)

The trainee teacher above seems to be considering for the first time whether it would be possible to share wealth more equally. Whilst there exist many possible ways to redistribute wealth such as taxes, income caps, and smaller income differences, these were absent from his discussion. Concern about whether sharing could work centred on whether it would be acceptable to upset the rich. Again the suggestion that this is all very complicated closes down discussion on this topic, rather than opening debate to resolve the complication. Stopping short of a solution without examining other possibilities reinforces the impression of there being no alternatives. Chatterton and Pickerill (2010) argue that finding alternatives is often messy as opposed to being a coherent single argument, thus the requirement for a coherent alternative is asking for more than is needed.

### ***Seeing inequality as natural***

Identifying the 'natural' as causing trends and events obscures the social causes, and eternalisation makes a social practice seem timeless rather than temporally bounded (Urry, 1981). Both increase the impression of inevitability. Naturalisation of inequality takes two tacks: one is that human nature is to be unequal and the other is that natural resources are unevenly distributed which makes us unequal. This is backed up by concealment through eternalisation: "inequality has been a process forever, since pre-history" (Mexico urban middle class government school) which reiterates naturalness by showing persistence and inertia. Inequality is presented as widespread and deeply ingrained, forming "the basis of all our institutions" (UK retired urban teachers). Concepts of innate behaviour and preference for looking after a small group of other people, your family, justified selfishness, competitiveness, and inequality in terms of human nature:

"I've got a little boy who is three, just thinking about things like Christmas, I'm, you know, quite happy to go into somewhere like 'toysRus' and spend 100 pounds on a toy for him. But when I'm going to buy a present to go to a party for someone else's child, then it's like a maximum 20 pounds. And so it's just a natural response to, you know, it's ok if it's going to be in MY house, for MY son [evolutionary drive, yeah] yeah"  
(rural fee-paying school, UK)

Using natural instinct to explain the buying of expensive toys, not part of a natural state, transposes desires to secure basic needs to consumer spending. This behaviour is more easily justified by human nature than it would be by socialization. However the naturalness of inequality is challenged when the character of early humans is interrogated. In the eighteenth century Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that inequality is created and sustained by human society and did not exist amongst people in nature (Rousseau, 1754/2004). A similar thesis argues that during prehistoric times mobile hunting groups were egalitarian, due to weaker group members joining forces to dominate the strong (Boehm, 1999). The naturalness of inequality seems to be more a feature of contemporary ideology than historical and pre-historical reality.

Resource distribution and acts of God were identified as extra-human causes of inequality. Only in Kenya were acts of God identified as causes of inequality, causes that are too large to struggle against. Note that some Mexican groups mentioned discrimination within their local Catholic Church. Uneven resource distribution was mentioned as an act of God and in a secular explanation of the naturalness of inequalities. However, inequality is something humans can consciously alter and attributing it to nature denies people's agency. The following examples show how human actions influence resource access, which is an important aspect of resource distribution. Oil-rich Nigeria has a very large poor population due to lack of distribution of resources (Achebe, 1983/1984); famines do not simply result from crop failure but from economic relations, such as the British still taking food from Ireland during the potato famine of 1845-52. HIV/AIDS was also considered to be a purely natural problem (Kenyan rural Catholic girls boarding school). Whilst acknowledging physical differences, it is time to "banish the bogeyman of geographical determinism" (Sachs, 2005, p.58) from our understandings of inequality.

"As much as it exists and it is very much with us, and you can't do away with inequality, and a good example is in the forests, a very natural environment, a very natural forest, you have those big trees that are able to grow up and get sunshine and carry out photosynthesis, and you have the small trees that will have to coil around it, so that they have to depend on the big trees for the sunlight for them to, so we can't be equal."

(high-achieving urban government school, Kenya)

This analogy compares society to an ecosystem, promoting ideas of equilibrium with each person performing a role that complements others. Naturalness is emphasised through repetition of "very natural". The big trees correspond to the big men, or powerful people, whose success is attributed to their ability to grow or take opportunities, reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher's reference to 'tall poppies' who were encouraged to do the same. The dependence of "smaller people" upon the *big men* refers to tribal and family responsibilities to help the others. This is persuasive because in imagining the structure of a forest, society is simplified and its functionality is highlighted. An imaginative leap is needed to compare society to a forest, after which all that is said about the forest applies directly to society. The forest is described in positive terms of trees reaching up for sunlight to photosynthesise. Note how using a scientific concept adds credibility, yet there is no further explanation of the similarities between the forest and society.

The human nature argument attributes selfishness to survival situations, despite sharing often promoting survival. Identifying natural forces positions people as being passive and moved by human nature, natural distributions and natural diseases. The supposed naturalness of inequality comes with reluctance for change: "So we may not be able to change, it would be hard to change completely" (Kenyan rural government school). In fact, inequality is entirely manageable, as evidenced by differing levels of equality between countries. People are socialised into certain preferences, but just because it is what we individually have always known does not mean it is natural. Presenting

inequality as natural bolsters inequality as it can be hard to challenge “the irresistible authority of a law of Nature” (Marx, 1872, p.10 of Chp.14). This authority stems from nature being presented as a powerful and unalterable force; if something is natural we can renounce responsibility for it. Naturalising gives a sense of security embedded in a logic of nature.

### **Conclusion**

The above arguments support and defend inequality along neoliberal lines, acting to justify existing economic and political arrangements. Similar discourses were exhibited between countries, and the techniques of isolation, eternalisation, naturalization and hiding conflicts of interest are modes of concealment that render social practices ideological (Urry, 1981, p.60- 61). The particular conjunctions in which these values were expressed varied: Kenyans use the UK as a comparator whereas Mexicans cite the United States. When speaking of the happy poor, British participants referred beyond national boundaries whereas Mexican and Kenyan participants more often spoke about their compatriots. Whilst the “grammar” expresses similar logic, the “vocabulary” is context-specific.

The adoption of aspects of this neoliberal logic by people in all three countries shows how effective it is and the barrier to social change that it presents. Above are some possible responses from three continents to the question: “Why not make things better? It is in all our interests.” (Marmot, 2004/2005, p.266). The responses, like the Marmot review, could be more aspirational for society as a whole (Marmot et al., 2010; Pickett and Dorling, 2010). I have shown a widespread aspiration to improve one’s own lot, concern with social mobility rather than social change, and optimism for the future that discourages talk of change. That inequality is presented as unproblematic, “not my responsibility”, the only viable option, and created by natural forces, also blocks talk about change.

The discourses presented here exist alongside less conservative approaches. Framing debates about inequality in terms of the social and health outcomes, extending human rights to include socio-economic rights, and thinking in terms of social justice (Pogge, 2008; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009), enables other discussions about inequality. This might include seeing inequality as a problem, clarifying the major causes, and understanding inequalities to be avoidable and manageable. Identifying these discourses can help us to question how they justify economic inequalities. Specifying the ways in which neoliberal logic becomes common sense enables its critique.

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### **Biography**

Anna is a Geographer at the University of Cambridge, and a Bye Fellow at Murray Edwards College. Her interests span social and health geographies, with a focus on inequality and international comparative research. She is currently researching infectious diseases amongst forced migrants with Professors Andy Cliff and Matthew Smallman-Raynor. Anna is about to start a new research project with Dr. Mia Gray, focusing on how austerity in the UK, Canada and the United States impacts upon employment patterns. Anna

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<sup>i</sup> The term *discursive repertoire* draws on Stanley Fish's concept of repertoire, which is the "making sense of the world through systems of intelligibility shared by members of the same interpretive community" (Fish, 1980, p.230 in Jackson, 2001, p.206-7). Peter Jackson notes that groups and individuals relate differently to these discursive repertoires and do not necessarily agree with a whole discourse just because they agree with one part of it (Jackson, 2001, p.206-8).