

Inequality by Numbers: the making of a global political issue?

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Inequality as a political issue was catapulted into political debate across the world in October 2011, when activists occupied Zuccotti Park in Wall Street, New York – the world’s leading financial centre - claiming to speak on behalf of the 99%, and against the 1%. Not long after, the runaway success of a book on economic history, Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*, confirmed that inequality had become a key political topic. First published in 2013, *Capital* has sold millions of copies in multiple languages and was for a while one of the most discussed books on both sides of the North Atlantic.¹ And this attention is spread even more widely, as the Pew Global Attitudes Survey shows. Its 2002, 2007 and 2014 waves, covering nations across the world, asked respondents to choose the ‘greatest threats to the world’ from a list including the spread of nuclear arms, infectious disease, pollution and the environment, religious and ethnic hatred and the ‘growing gap between rich and poor’. In 2002, only respondents in two nations in the sample (Poland and India) placed inequality as their top concern; by 2014 those in ten nations, including the United States, France and Germany, had chosen this issue as their foremost concern.

This chapter asks how and why inequality rose to the top of political concerns. A common explanation is the impact of the work of academic economists – especially of Piketty himself. In December 2012, even before Piketty published *Capital*, the US journal *Foreign Policy* put the French economist and his colleague Emmanuel Saez’s 24th in its list of Top 100 Global

Thinkers for having created ‘the graph that occupied Wall Street’ – a graph resulting from their work from the early 2000s showing the take off in the incomes of the top percentile in the US income distribution.² While *Foreign Policy*’s boast has to be taken with a pinch of salt, the coincidence between the work of economists and the mobilization of social protest is worth considering. Why and how did the *Occupy Wall Street* (OWS) movement chose the ‘1%’ as its enemy what were the reasons for the sudden success of Piketty’s work (which after all had been around since the early 2000s)? Despite the effects of the 2008 financial crisis, which were serious and continue to affect millions of people, it is not clear that there was a sudden spike in income inequality in the western countries at the time – if anything, there were slight reductions in the levels of within country inequality in richer western nations where the 99% movement took hold.³ So, although growing income disparities were a feature of many countries, the politics they generated were seldom expressed in the language of inequality. Even after 2008, this emphasis on economic inequality as mobiliser of protest was also not used to the same extent across different parts of the world. The ‘We are the 99%’ slogan and associated arguments was principally a feature of the US (and to an extent British) manifestations of the cycle of protest opened up in 2011.

This chapter is an attempt to think historically and transversally about the dynamics that led to the emergence of inequality in a particular framing – that of personal distribution by percentiles. Drawing work from several disciplines, it argues we need to seek an explanation in the interaction of three different processes: first, the trajectories of techniques and expertise used to describe the world; second, the western middle classes’ experience of inequality, the insecurity and anxieties it produces; and finally, the emergence of transnational protest movements, starting with the Global Justice Movement, and their

attempts to articulate a critique of capitalism that would connect across very diverse constituencies, interests and ideologies.

In a recent paper, Daniel Hirschman has explored the making of the ‘1%’, arguing that the ‘regimes of perceptibility’ of the economics profession – i.e. its theoretical assumptions and measurement tools - contributed to making the accumulation of incomes at first invisible, and more recently revealed as a series of ‘stylized facts’ about inequality.⁴ Building on scholarship on the co-construction of statistics and society, Hirschman refers us to the importance of knowledge in creating political issues. But on its own, the production of ‘stylized facts’ is an insufficient basis for political action. Such knowledge can, however, be used to frame interpretations of circumstances and conditions. The concept of ‘framing’ was developed in social movement studies to explore the agency of political actors in mobilising constituencies by constructing identities, highlighting issues, diagnosing causes and strategies for addressing them. Framing mediates between the material conditions and mental states of potential constituencies and their purposeful collective action.⁵ Yet not all frames gain acceptance with those to whom they are addressed: ‘resonance’, or the extent to which frames are adopted, depends on multiple factors, including the trustworthiness of its proponents and of the ‘facts’ that underpin it.⁶ It is in this last regard that this chapter makes a contribution, linking the availability of a growing body of authoritative knowledge about inequality, presented in a format and language that is currently considered legitimate and objective, to the political entrepreneurship of social movements in contexts (particularly the United States and the United Kingdom) where wide constituencies were open to such arguments.⁷ In short, this chapter seeks to explain the creation of a political issue through the interaction between socio-economic conditions, the tools producing social knowledge, and the political agency through which the two are combined. It argues these processes came together in a moment of

political opportunity afforded by the transnational financial crisis of 2008 and beyond. However, it also argues that the combination of these three factors has contributed to a discussion of inequality that is too narrow and, ultimately, liable to be ‘nationalised’, crowding out a more global approach to its causes. And in that sense, it may have played into the hands of the kinds of nationalist politics we see gaining strength across many western democracies.

i. Inequality Knowledge

The wording of the question in the Pew survey mentioned above is ambiguous: respondents were asked about how far they saw the growing gap between rich and poor as a threat to the world. But does this refer to global inequality, in the sense of either inequalities of income and resources between individuals, regardless of where in the world they live; or inequalities between countries in terms of national income aggregates; or are respondents primarily concerned about inequalities experienced within their own countries?⁸ This matters, since it either displays a growing awareness of global disparities, or simply the return of the politics of distribution to national debates.⁹ Although related, these three ways of seeing inequality are different political problems. Additionally, the Pew questionnaire leaves out other dimensions on which humans can be considered unequal: in terms of health, quality of life or education. How we define and describe inequality matters. The topic returned to the political agenda in 2011 in the language of economics – as inequalities of income between individuals. This is result of the growing weight of economics in public life, but also of the changes in the way economics itself looks at inequality. Over the last century the language of politics and policy has become increasingly quantitative, and the discipline of economics has grown in

status as the means and ends of government, with consequences for the kinds of ‘inequality’ knowledge available.¹⁰

For most of its two centuries of existence, the discipline of economics tended to pay little attention to questions of distribution between individuals, making the form in which inequality has now appeared in debates difficult to establish. In the last twenty years, however, it has increasingly come to focus on inequality between individuals.

Since choices in definition and measurement matter, it is important to consider how the production of knowledge about inequality has changed over time. While ranking of people and countries in terms of income is a relatively recent phenomenon, seeing the world in terms of hierarchies has a long history. However – particularly in the western tradition – these differences were attributed to prior characteristics, such as birth, function or holiness. They were justified for being natural or ‘god given’, or at least required to tame man’s ‘natural instincts’. At different points in time, such beliefs have been challenged by alternative accounts of human ‘nature’; and in western thought the idea of natural law (and humankind’s equality before it) emerging from the eighteenth century laid the foundations for a challenge on such justifications for inequalities of power, status and wealth.¹¹ It was also around this time that, aided by novel ways of representing society quantitatively - such as social tables and pioneering censuses - and visions of the economy promising progress and abundance, that some voices (including Paine and Condorcet) argued it would be possible for human societies to match the equality of human nature with a reduction of inequality of wealth through redistribution.¹² Despite that radical moment, and even as the wealth gap between the imperial and industrial powers and the rest of the world grew, global and national inequalities were most often represented and explained in civilizational and racial terms, i.e. that some

racism or social groups were inherently, and hereditarily superior to others, and such explanations of difference were also central to the emerging 'sciences of man' of the nineteenth century, including sociology and economics.¹³ The assumption that inequalities of income and wealth reflected natural inequalities contributed to a generalised lack of attention to individual distribution in the emerging discipline of economics. Nonetheless, classical economists were interested in differences in income between countries and, principally, between 'factors' of production, that is *functional* distributions.¹⁴ Seeing inequality functionally means asking how income is allocated to each factor of production (such as labour and capital) in relation to its contribution to the production process. For instance, Classical economists such as David Ricardo and Karl Marx, were more concerned with differences in aggregate income between classes - say labourers or the owners of capital - than with more fine grained accounts that took into account individuals, and social roles other than those of direct production (including gender and race, for instance).¹⁵ Despite the 'marginalist revolution' in economics from the late nineteenth century onwards leading the discipline to focus on the role of individual actors in markets, the neoclassical approach it produced was largely uninterested on individual incomes, regarding them as determined by productivity and demand.¹⁶

The onset of the Great Depression and mass unemployment in the 1930s sparked renewed concerns about poverty and, to an extent, inequality. Nevertheless, the approach taken by recently created statistical offices on both sides of the Atlantic continued to focus on functional distributions of income. The influence of Keynes's economic ideas was significant, providing a way to combine liberal and classical economics concerns with efficiency with a justification for redistributive interventions aimed at full employment and supporting labour's share of national income.¹⁷ Such understandings were reinforced by New

Deal era liberal corporatism (and in Europe by the development of equivalent neo-corporatist institutions after the war), where labour unions became a mediator for political and social citizenship, contributing to institutionalising the male breadwinner model through employment-based access to welfare. This model directed the attention of policy makers and statisticians to aggregates of labour income, and away from questions of personal distribution.

The United States emerged from the Second World War as the world's largest industrial producer and exporter, experiencing a continued period of economic growth, job creation, and rapidly rising standards of living. This 'Golden Age' gradually spread to Western Europe under the *Pax Americana* and the aegis of a new network of international economic institutions. The thirty years from the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s, while not eradicating poverty, undoubtedly improved living standards across western Europe and North America. By 1958 J.K. Galbraith could assert: '[F]ew things are more evident in modern social history than the decline of interest in inequality as an economic issue (...) inequality has ceased to preoccupy men's minds.' For the author of *The Affluent Society* the cause was simple, if misguided: "increased production is [seen as] an alternative to redistribution."¹⁸ Recent reconstructions of patterns of income and wealth distribution show that the period between the end of the Second World War and the 1970s saw an almost unprecedented reduction in economic inequality across the West, driven by rising levels of employment and income; tax and transfer policies that alleviated market inequalities, as well as the through the effect of the World Wars and inflation on accumulated wealth.¹⁹ The 'Golden Age' took the sting out of inequality as a political issue. The intellectual and disciplinary lenses of the economics profession, as well as generalised belief that inequality had been falling since the end of the

war meant that there was a lack of systematic and sustained interest in constructing measures that spanned the entire population, although a few lone voices spoke against this disregard.²⁰

Lacking reliable indicators and the interest to use the existing data on inequality meant that once patterns of inequality started changing, these were largely invisible to the public. The economic troubles of the 1970s and 1980s – including rising poverty and unemployment – prompted a ‘rediscovery of inequality’ in the 1980s.²¹ Nevertheless, despite this fresh breath of interest, the issue failed to grip the public’s moral imagination during the 1980s and 1990s. Politics was, in part, to blame: even if by the 1980s many economists, statisticians and campaigners were demanding greater attention to the measurement of distribution, there is evidence that governments, particularly those directed by a re-energised form of economic liberalism, actively diverted their efforts, contributing to the public’s ignorance of changing inequalities.²² Politics was also emmeshed with statistical knowledge in other ways: as O’Connor points out in her analysis of the United States, the prejudices of several generations of politicians, economists and statisticians meant that available distributional data, built around the model of the white male worker was blind to the workings of structural inequalities of race and gender. As such, ‘inequality knowledge’ did not intersect with ‘poverty knowledge’ that showed a concentration of deprivation amongst women and African-Americans – allowing the New Right to fill the void with renewed arguments about the cultural roots of poverty, diverting attention away from inequality.²³ Nonetheless, despite the limits of the available data, evidence on evolution of inequality was mounting. By the early 1990s, a number of studies pointed towards a sustained increase in inequalities and to the likely growing share of income of the top percentiles of earners.²⁴

The historical digression above shows on the production of inequality knowledge evolved towards the point when, in the the early 2000s, Piketty and Saez could produce their graph showing the rise in top income shares. Their work generated considerable academic and some press attention, and by that point it can be said that representation of inequality as personal distribution of income was well established. However, this does not mean it had become a political issue. Citation analyses reveal that the ‘take-off’ in interest in the paper happened only *after* 2011 and the mobilisation of OWS.²⁵ Why did this knowledge fail to make an impact over the 1990s and 2000s? McCall’s analysis of media attention to inequality in the US between 1980 and 2010 reveals that, despite some spikes in coverage, there was limited media discussion. McCall attributes this to the interplay between the availability of data - which increased throughout the period, with little impact on the level of media coverage – and the framing of the problem. Attention to inequality only flared up when it was tied to a narrative of its impact on the middle class, going against cherished American narratives of equality of opportunity.²⁶ While these ‘peaks’ of inequality-related media discussion recede into insignificance in the face of the post-2011 level of attention, they suggest the emergence of this issue is less related to its actual incidence than to the ability of critical actors to change the narrative. What was different about 2011 was the way in which a new political actor was able to draw on the mounting economic data about inequality and reframe it in relation to the anxieties and sense of insecurity of part of the middle classes, under growing pressure from two decades of ‘winner takes all’ model of globalisation.

ii. Global insecurities: the western middle class and global inequality

There is evidence that growing income and wealth inequalities within western nations have not only affected the relative position of the poor, but also led to a ‘hollowing out’, or

‘stretching out’ of the middle class.²⁷ If in Britain there are indications that welfare was able to keep the income share of the bottom half relatively stable, in the US the incomes of the bottom 50% have been consistently degraded between 1980 and 2014, with the post-tax income growth of the bottom standing at just 21% over the period (but just 4% for the lowest quintile), while the figure for the top 1% is 194% (and treble that for the top 0.001%).²⁸ Other data suggests that the United States and Britain saw the largest declines in the income share of the middle classes in rich nations between the 1980s and 2010, and at the same time some of the largest gains accruing to the top 5%.²⁹ So, while the middle and lower middle classes of western nations are absolutely better off than thirty years previously, their gains were small, especially compared the rewards accruing to those at the top. Opportunity and mobility have been curtailed, and perhaps more significantly, there has been a shift in *who* earns, and *how* they earn. Lower-skilled but previously ‘good’ jobs have been degraded in terms of pay, conditions and security, and women and migrants have entered the workforces of western economies in greater numbers, challenging the position of ‘native’ male workers. The combination of increased economic uncertainty for the middle classes and a sense that traditional social hierarchies of class and gender are changing is said to be behind a turn to socially conservative positions – ranging from increased support for nationalist parties, the British ‘Brexit’ vote, or the election of Donal Trump to the US presidency. Several authors have linked these political choices to anxieties over status, especially for a those in the lower middle classes – and of men in these groups - whose status derived from their role as main breadwinners and embodiments of national self-imagination. Such dynamics are undoubtedly important, but it is worth asking whether the drivers of status anxiety are purely national, and affect only the lower middle classes.

The self-imagination of western nations is intrinsically bound up with a hierarchical view of the world; one that places the ‘west’ in a position of superiority vis-à-vis other parts of the globe. While globalisation is often invoked as the cause of economic changes affecting western middle (and particularly lower middle) classes, its effect on political choices is seldom explored. Yet, arguably, citizens in these countries are also increasingly aware of their position in a globalised economy. During the first decade of the new millennium, according to a PEW survey of US citizens, a majority of respondents saw the emergence of China as a world power as a ‘major threat’. Tellingly, in 2009, as the effects of the global financial crash were felt, the proportion of US respondents seeing China as world’s leading economic power (44 %) overtook those who saw the US as the leading economy (27%) for the first time.³⁰ Making such comparisons requires knowledge about global inequalities – a social imaginary of ‘stylized facts’ about the distribution of wealth across nations and, for instance in discussions about the Asian ‘middle classes’, about personal distributions of income on a global scale. Just as with knowledge about within country inequalities, the availability of such knowledge required the development of conventions and tools of measurement over several decades.

Between the Second World War and the 1980s, the question of global distribution of incomes gradually came to the attention of the field of development economics, encouraged by the establishment of international organisations tasked with advising and directing national policy makers in a changing, decolonising world in the 1940s and 1950s.³¹ An emerging constellation of international organisations, from the World Bank to the United Nations, found in GDP estimates a system of comparison and abstraction that made their global remit manageable. And, for newly independent post-colonial nations, it offered a means to comprehend and modernize the nation. Whether the “household” was the most appropriate

unit of analysis everywhere, the degree of monetization of different forms of production and exchange, the complexities of each national context were lost in the universalizing flattening of GDP calculations. The development of the concept of a global economy and of the possibility of comparison revealed, in Speich's words, "a sensational new view of the world as a place of enormous poverty," and of vast inequalities between nations.³² This vision of inequality was a double-edged sword. While it constrained an understanding of a diverse and complex world within a western-derived productivist and ostensibly de-politicized model; it also helped reveal an exploited "Third World," producing stylized facts that could be used to mobilize anti-colonial and post-colonial movements.³³ While the centrality of poverty and distribution within the World Bank waned during the heyday of structural adjustment agendas in the 1980s, the Bank continued to be a key producer of statistics on global distribution of incomes, particularly after 2000.

The measurement of inter-personal inequality on a global scale continues to present greater logistical challenges than estimates of personal income distribution in wealthier nations (which are also data-rich).³⁴ In recent decades, however, a body of work on global personal distributions of income has offered a new picture of both startling inequalities, but also of the changing position of the western middle classes which, combined with the dissemination of other 'stylized facts' about the narrowing gap 'emerging' and 'established' economies, has fed anxieties and insecurities that contributed to the politicisation of inequality.³⁵ If in the 1960s such data reinforced the idea of an impoverished 'third world', by the early twenty-first century, it fed a sense of anxiety and insecurity about the subversion of global hierarchies. Since the turn of the millennium, western media have recurrently deployed statistics about the size and wealth of Asian middle classes or predicting the point in time at which large emerging economies will 'overtake' western nations.

With the rapid growth of large countries in the South, particularly China and India, first from the 1980s, and especially from 2000 onwards, the idea of a new global middle class has appeared. 'Middle classes' in these developing countries have narrowed the gap that separates them from those in the west. In comparative terms, the middle and lower middle classes of the rich west have been the 'losers' in this process, seeing their incomes grow by the smallest proportion across the global distribution – if not stagnate completely.³⁶ In absolute terms, this global 'middle class' is still significantly poorer than the middle and even lower middle classes of rich western nations; but this is scant consolation for Europeans and North Americans who compare their prospects to those of the generation that preceded them and feel increasingly insecure about the future. Preserving living standards in the global north is now likely to require enduring more precarious forms of employment; working longer hours, and for a longer period before retirement than in previous generations.³⁷ This rebalancing of global distribution interacts with the rise of insecurity in rich western nations in ways that are of significance to understand the conditions of politicisation of inequality.

The experience of insecurity, whether it is linked directly to the experience of economic deprivation or simply to its threat, has the potential to bring to the fore questions of fairness and desert.³⁸ In the wake of Donald Trump's election to the US Presidency, much has been made of his appeal to the 'white' working class, and similar arguments have been made out the Brexit supporting electorate in Britain. But precarity and insecurity have also affected a growing cohort of young people who a few decades previous would bear the hallmarks of entry into the middle and upper middle classes: urban, holding professional qualifications, and often children of parents who were themselves securely middle class. And it was this

constituency in particular that embraced the message of the OWS movement, and which helped put inequality on the agenda in 2011.³⁹

iii. From the Global Justice Movement to Occupy Wall Street

Occupy Wall Street – the occupation of Zuccotti Park, a small square in New York’s financial district, between September and November 2011 – was the moment when the framing of the ‘99% vs the 1%’ brought inequality centre stage, particularly in the United States and Britain. Contrasting the accumulation of resources in an elite with the experiences of everyone else was a remarkably successful proposition, and one which arguably helped OWS reach a wide audience, providing a pithy message that 24h news media could package and broadcast. It was the movement’s choice of this frame that transposed ‘stylized facts’ produced by academics and other experts to a much wider audience giving a political edge to the concerns of the western middle classes.

However, it was not a given that anti-austerity movements would choose this particular frame to highlight the injustices of neo-liberal agendas. European anti-austerity movements such as the Spanish *Indignados* (which inspired the creation of OWS) mobilised around issues that differed from the US or British Occupy. While economic issues were central to these mobilisations, they tended to be articulated in terms of social rights of citizenship, rather than in terms of economic inequality, arguably because the experience of inequality in those countries was different to that of the more liberalised economies of Britain or the United States.⁴⁰

Why OWS ended up focusing on economic inequality is related to the way it emerged from a diffuse network of activists linked to anti-globalisation campaigns of the previous decade. In terms of overlap of issues, tactics and often of activists, the OWS was an inheritor of anti-globalisation mobilisations from the late 1990s known as the Global Justice Movement (GJM), linked to the protests at the World Economic Forum in Seattle in 1998, and to the various World Social Forum (WSF) meetings in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The GJM was in many ways a novel movement, reflecting the emergence of a global imaginary, linked by the frame of ‘anti-globalisation’ – more precisely, by opposition to a market-driven globalisation - and by the aim to promote an ‘alter-globalisation’ founded on democratic accountability and a commitment to human rights.⁴¹ In that sense, it was a social movement in part informed by the picture of global disparity revealed by the growing body of knowledge produced since the 1980s. Yet its arguments were rarely articulated through the lens of income inequalities: GJM and WSF debates tended to focus instead on the operation of social inequalities (including those of race and gender), and how these were connected to questions of power, with money an intervening variable, not the focus of attention. The adversaries of the GJM were corporations, governments and systems, more than the rich as individuals.⁴²

While it served as the entry point to left-wing activism to a generation, the GJM as a global movement lost steam after 2005, as some activist groups waned and participation at social forum meetings dropped; even if pockets of activism persisted.⁴³ Some of the causes of this decline were cyclical: its novelty faded somewhat, and with it the attention of international media; other issues such as the Iraq war diverted supporters; and protest fatigue was undoubtedly a factor. But there were also significant internal debates and divisions that contributed to the deflation of the movement. The GJM’s diverse constituency had been

brought together by the opposition to a capital-led globalisation; but there was less agreement on the strategies and principles to build an alternative. Eschle has highlighted the differences between marxist critics of globalisation, who emphasised its economic dimension and those who took a more intersectional approach, concerned with gender, race and other forms of identity as vectors of oppression.⁴⁴ The GJM was divided on how to articulate these identities and strategies, on whether to call upon individuals as exploited workers or as excluded and oppressed minorities - questions that have characterised debates across the left since the 1970s.⁴⁵ There was also disagreement over who should be the target of claims: transnational corporations and international organisations, or national governments? At what level should solutions and redress for injustice be sought – what are the responsibilities of the nation-state, and how do these relate to powerful transnational actors, be them other nations or corporations? ⁴⁶ By the early 2000s, beset by rifts, the GJM turned towards more local forms of action and anti-capitalist movements did not manage to mobilise in the numbers or with the visibility they had in around the turn of the millennium. Although present in some mass protests such as the anti-war demonstrations of 2004, their ability to energise large transnational protests seemed to have gone. ⁴⁷

A decade later, after 2010, a new wave of protest flared up in different parts of the globe. Anti-regime protests in Tunisia sparked mobilisations across North Africa and the Middle East, including in Egypt and Syria. By the Spring of 2011, mass protests had also appeared in the Southern European countries most affected by the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis. Soon similar protests followed in other parts of the world, including Occupy Wall Street. These movements were heterogenous, rooted in local conditions, but also linked by an emulation of ideas, imagery and tactics, which included the use of social media as a tool of mobilization and the occupation of public space as a means to garner visibility.⁴⁸

While many of the supporters that flocked to Zuccotti Park were new to protest, the core of activists and organisations that put the occupation in place had been active in challenging neo-liberal politics in the US for some time, and many had links to GJM.⁴⁹ However, the great majority of the latter's activists were younger and had few ties to earlier movements.⁵⁰ But they could draw on the earlier movement's ideas, tactics and experience.⁵¹ The groups that initiated OWS, had continued to face the same dilemmas of the earlier cycle, in particular how to construct a political subject and a mobilising identity that could both connect the disparate cores of activism and go beyond them to mobilise much more widely. A detailed account of OWS recounts how this problem came to a head in discussions over the creation of New York City General Assembly, by groups that were aiming to follow up the radical magazine *Adbusters*' call for the occupation of Wall Street: '...the would be occupiers were unable to settle on a single demand. (...) The anarchists opposed any demands that addressed themselves to states, parties, or elected officials. (...) Conversely the populists, pragmatists and democratic socialists opposed demands that did *not* address what they saw as the root causes of the crisis, namely neo-liberal economics and the top-down politics of the "1 percent".'⁵² Gould-Wartofsky suggests that the need to find a message that could square such differences opened up the way for the 99% slogan. Whether or not it was the academic and activist David Graber, who personally invented the frame of the 99 vs the 1%, his account shows how it usefully addressed the problem. Graber was in contact with the *Adbusters* editorial team, who had launched the #OccupyWallStreet meme. Seeking ways to give the event a broader appeal, Graber recalled having read a column by the Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz referencing the Piketty and Saez data on inequality. Graber says that '...it also struck me that since 1 percent effectively was what we referred to as "Wall Street," this was the perfect solution to our problem: who were the excluded voices frozen

out of the political system, and why were we summoning them to the financial district in Manhattan (...)? If Wall Street represented the 1 percent, then we're everybody else."⁵³ As several commentators have noted, the frame of the 99 vs the 1% was one of the key to the OWS' mass success and one of its shortcomings. It echoes the call by the influential left theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to create a 'populist reason' and construct a mass democratic subject based on an expansive collective identity.⁵⁴ It was a 'floating signifier' to which supporters could attach their own meaning: a survey of occupiers and supporters show that most often cited reason for joining OWS was 'inequality/the 1%'.⁵⁵ As one interviewee stated: 'There was total clarity who the bad guys were'.⁵⁶ The combination of a popular frame, occupation tactic, location, and a savvy media strategy gave OWS impact and placed inequality firmly on the agenda.⁵⁷ Media outlets in the US provided extended coverage to the occupation, and accompanying it was a spike in mentions of 'economic inequality' and although the rate of mentions dropped after the end of OWS, the issue was established, as were mentions to the '1%'.⁵⁸

This framing of the issue of injustice through economic inequality addressed a political dilemma facing anti-capitalist protesters. But it was only available in this form because of the accumulation of 'stylized facts', in Hirschman's term, about income distribution generated by economists during the previous decade. Piketty's graph did not 'occupy Wall Street', but OWS could not have existed in the same way if it had not been able to point to statistics that had been slowly making their way from academic papers to mainstream publications via radical magazines such as *Mother Jones*.⁵⁹ The 'Occupy moment' – and the longer politicisation of inequality it generated – has to be explained by this triangulation between knowledge, audience and political agency. However, the pivotal use of the 99 vs 1% frame also had costs, which we can relate at least partially to the movement's failure to sustain

mobilisation. It also contributed to narrowing those debates, emphasising the economic dimensions of inequality over its social and political causes and helping to ‘nationalise’ inequality as a political issue, to the neglect of its global dimension.

iv. Problematising the 99% vision of inequality

When visiting the Occupy camp outside St. Paul’s Cathedral in London during the early part of 2012, one of the posters that grabbed my attention was a sign occupiers had posted in a corner of the square. Neatly made, it reproduced a London street sign but read ‘Tahrir Square, EC1’, the local postcode. In the spirit of many of the protests of the time, it playfully encapsulated the solidarity and recognition that protesters in London offered to their Egyptian counterparts. However, it also suggested how these protests – for better and for worse – nationalised repertoires and strategies. This was also what happened to the issue of inequality. The success of the 99 vs 1% slogan – particularly in the US and in Britain - had two significant effects: firstly, it reproduced the focus on quantitative, economic aspects of inequality even whilst trying to highlight their political dimension; and secondly, it diverted attention from questions of global inequality which had been central to the Global Justice Movement.

Critics and supporters alike have suggested that the breadth of the 99% identity label, its ‘populist’, homogenising appeal, made it difficult for activist to negotiate diversity within the movement. Juris et al noted the existence of cleavages between white, middle class activists, more at home in the individualised forms of activism that characterised OWS, and the traditionally more ‘communitarian’ politics of ethnic minority activists. This led to the

internal dynamics of various Occupy camps becoming increasingly fraught, as participants tried (unsuccessfully) to raise issues of class, race, sexual orientation and gender within the movement, and as strategic issues.⁶⁰ Such difficulty in acknowledging social difference can also be related to the way in which the quantification of inequality has led us to individualise it: popular websites invite viewers to input their income details, positioning them in percentiles of distribution; and campaigning organisations such as Oxfam name the eight individuals whose combined wealth is equal to that of 3.7 billion of the world's population.⁶¹ Seeing inequality through the lens of aggregates is not necessarily superior to seeing it in individualised terms: both have the potential to reveal important dynamics (Piketty, for instance, uses both methods his work). But the choice has consequences for what inequalities are made visible, and for the politics that can flow from it.

A second important aspect of OWS was its national focus. In this sense, it was closer to the anti-austerity movements witnessed in Europe - with an emphasis on national discourses, national sovereignty and symbols - than to the GJM movements that preceded it.⁶² Despite its global projection, OWS focused more on the complicities between the US financial and political systems than on inequality as a global problem. Some US Social Forum activists (from the GJM tradition of activism) were highly critical of OWS for failing 'to generate an analysis of the global causes of inequality that could guide and sustain activism over time.'⁶³ This leads to the question of who the '99%' are, and how far is the global south part of the picture. If not part of the global '1%', the western middle classes are not far off that percentile in terms of wealth and income – Milanovic estimates that 12% of the US and 5% of the UK population are amongst the global 1% in terms of income.⁶⁴ Displacing the blame for the world's ills towards the ill-defined '1%' helps the upper middle classes of western

nations to continue ignoring their complicity in processes that generate and reproduce inequality and injustice on a global scale.

Inadvertently, Occupy's left populism parallels that of right-wing movements such as the Tea Party or, more recently, Trump's 'Make America Great Again'. This is not to suggest a moral equivalence between the two; rather that for very different reasons both sought to mobilise visions of a 'people' that were primarily constructed against an ill-defined elite, rather than prompt an engagement with the political and social processes that produce inequalities. And while OWS was never 'nationalist' in an exclusionary sense, its 'nationalisation' of inequality was also a missed opportunity to bring the transnational dynamics of disparity into play in a more focused way.

This chapter has explored the interaction between social knowledge, socio-economic conditions and mobilisation. By deploying 'stylized facts' produced by economists and technocrats, social movements were constitutive of the way in which inequality became a political issue. The importance of bringing the issue of inequality to the fore at this moment cannot be underestimated, but the terms under which it is framed matter. Causes of inequalities can and have been sought in differentials of power; in socially constructed boundaries of class, race or gender (to name but a few), in the operation of multiple overlapping institutions and rules that assign rewards and access to resources.⁶⁵ Such processes operate across vast spaces spanning borders and continents, and the 'nationalisation' of inequality stands in the way of understanding them, but also of the critical need to give voice to those who most suffer by it. As Nancy Fraser reminds us, representation is particularly problematic when flows of people, commodities, power, and the social and economic effects of their activity spill across the borders of territorialised sovereignty.⁶⁶

These transnational factors are deeply implicated in the creation of global inequality, but recede into the background when the debate becomes multiple distinct debates about national inequalities. A further problem with the framing of the debate on inequality is its ‘monetization’, or a narrow focus on inequalities of income or wealth. This makes it translatable in the language of economics – but, as Timothy Mitchell reminds us, ‘[t]o fix a self-contained sphere like the economy requires not only methods of counting everything within it, but also (...) some method of excluding what does not belong.’⁶⁷ And what does not belong, or is not easy to bring back into the language of economic inequality, is power, politics and social constructs such as gender, race and borders, all dimensions that contribute to create and perpetuate lived inequalities.

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