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Raquel Sosa Elízaga¹

1) International Sociological Association and Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM), México

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Addressing Inequality

Raquel Sosa Elizaga¹

International Sociological Association and UNAM

Abstract

The global sociology currently faces one of its greatest challenges: to contribute to the debate about the most serious problem which all societies have faced in recent years. The rising inequality has led to many initiatives for reflection, discussion and evaluation of public policies in order to combat poverty. Particularly, the fact that the Millennium Goals are supposed to accomplish their significance by 2015 provides the International Sociological Association (ISA) the unique opportunity to contribute to those goals through their own analyses and proposals. Over many years, the ISA has promoted the integrated debate of its members on issues related to inequalities: from different perspectives such as education, health, social movements, public policies, gender problems and violence, among others. The overlapping and accumulation of inequalities has been, so to speak, the natural environment from which the ISA can take part in this international debate. This article identifies the work lines approved in the Association Program Committee Meeting held in Mexico in 2011, in the process of the Association's Congress in Yokohama in 2014.

Keywords: inequality, sociology, public policies, millennium goals

This paper aims to present a general reflection on the current problem of inequality, as well as to propose the topics around which the Program of the 18th International ISA Congress may be carried out, according to the directives set down at the meeting held in Mexico City in March 2011. This document starts by assuming that the Congress can and should foster a debate about the conditions and possibilities that sociologists have, both academically and professionally, to face what constitutes the crucial challenge of the 21st century: the confrontation and eventual elimination of the processes of structural inequality that affect millions of human beings today.

The main objectives of this document are: a) to contribute to the global debate on the dimensions, dynamics, perspectives for analysis and options for surmounting inequality at the beginning of the 21st century; and b) to stimulate the generation of proposals that could be considered at national, regional or international level, whenever public policies tend towards this goal, as long as they involve an ethic of solidarity and commitment to justice, equality, tolerance and inclusion of diversity.

Inequality in the present global context

The instability and uncertainty that characterise the world today have their origin in the fact that an immense and vertiginous accumulation of wealth by a few has precipitated the dispossession, impoverishment and exclusion of millions of human beings in all latitudes of our planet. Even though it is true that not a single society has been free of this historical condition, we must accept that throughout the 20th century, particularly in its last three decades, social polarization has been aggravated by a tragic combination of institutional intolerance, war, socio/natural disasters and the neglect, relegation or even dismantling of models of social organization centered on the value and defense of common and public services and institutions. This has come about with the adoption of market paradigms built upon the principle of the accumulation of private gains, which has become the driving force and organizational basis for social life in most countries of the world. In this

context, the accumulation and overlap of all types of injustice, not only complicates or impedes the realization of legitimate aspirations and rights of the inhabitants of the earth to live in a dignified manner, but it also condemns thousands of defenseless human beings to death.

Great changes have taken place in the last thirty years, if we start counting from the moment when the Eastern European regimes, which had remained relatively stable during the post-war years –with the exception of the crises in Hungary and Czechoslovakia– began to show the signs of deterioration that led to their irreversible crises and the disappearance of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Kennedy, 1997; Hobsbawn, 2007). The impact of this *débaçle* has been explained by various colleagues as a social *trauma*, a change that was very difficult to assimilate and which profoundly affected social relations, civil and political organizations, the economies and culture of the societies that emerged from it (Alexander et al., 2004). Solutions to this crisis were varied: autonomous regimes were consolidated in some of the territories that used to integrate the USSR, while in other countries, transitions towards régimes leaning on those of Western Europe -from social-democracy or labor, to conservatism-occurred. Nevertheless, the real watershed came, no doubt, with the prolonged war that resulted in the destruction of the former Yugoslavia: a hundred thousand victims and nearly two million displaced persons were the result of the most devastating experience in the memory of contemporary Europe (Glenny, 1999).

Meanwhile, international confrontations and political readjustments initiated by the invasion of Iraq by Kuwait extended their mantle to the future with the great escalation of continued violence suffered in parts of Asia and North Africa, from the Six-Day War and the War of Yom Kippur, to the United States' invasion of Afghanistan. Contemporary crises of governments in Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan and Iran, as well as the immense international war operation in Libya, threaten to leave in their wake thousands of displaced persons, refugees, dead, wounded and disabled. These will constitute the fundamentals of extreme inequality, anger and intolerance in wide areas of the planet (Fisk, 2006).

In the other extreme of the world, Latin America, the war in Nicaragua and the end of the Sandinista régime set off a wave of oligarchic restorations in most parts of the region, although many were thinly disguised as democracies with legitimate social support (Ruiz Contardo, 1995). In Central America alone, the massacre of indigenous peoples in Guatemala by the governments of Efraín Ríos Mont and Romeo Lucas García (Figueroa, 2011), the war that lasted more than ten years in El Salvador and the continued US intervention that culminated in the invasion of Panamá, left a count of hundreds of thousands dead, missing and refugees, who add to the important increase in numbers of migrants to the U.S. since then (Selser, 2010; 1989; Roitman, 1988). Latin America's nineties were marked by the most radical capitalist reform occurred during the 20th century, and this was coupled by outbreaks of violence, increased insecurity, the production and traffic of drugs, and recurrent economic crises, which undoubtedly contributed to make this region the most extremely unequal in the world (Salgado, Gutierrez, & Huamán, 2011).

In Africa, the slaughter of a million Tutsies in 1994 shuddered the world, and greatly increased the tragic share of the period. This episode highlighted the possible consequences of intolerance, struggles for power and a combination of foreign presences determined to impose their economic structures and culture (Williams, 2011; Prunier, 2010). If South Africa set an example of civility and an unparalleled effort to overcome the effects of discrimination, racism and exclusion, it is true that poverty and inequality continue to be a serious ballast in a land sown by conflicts, here as in the other countries in the region (Motta & Nilsen, 2011). And no less can be said of the intense and ferocious confrontations held in India and Pakistan, nor of the critical events in China, South Korea, Cambodia, Malaysia and the Philippines (Slater, 2010).

Any listing is incomplete, but it is clear that these years' international scenario throws an image of violence, power struggles, intolerance, unlimited greed and unimaginable lacks. But if we consider as well the serious situation that the planet is going through, due to the destruction and devastation of natural resources which are essential to life by water contamination, wasteful use and confrontation over the control of oil

and minerals, the overcrowding of urban settlements, massive migration, the destruction of important cultural resources and of the world's heritage, we cannot but be alarmed and feel obliged to contribute not only with the explanations, but also with as much as we can to surmount a situation that threatens every living being on Earth. The inequality in the recognition of ethnic or gender differences, preferences or orientations; of access to indispensable goods and services for the existence of a dignified human life, as well as the constraints in the access to symbolic assets, generate violence and deepen social conflicts. At the same time, survival in extreme situations and war increase the exclusion of vulnerable groups and, consequently, add to inequality.

None of this is foreign to the Northern countries, where, as a consequence of neoliberal globalization in the last four decades, there has been a systematic process of dismantling the welfare states, aggravated by the fact that governments' response in face of the present crisis – which implies injecting resources into the banks and reducing public expenditures – has resulted in aggravating income concentration, while a serious deterioration of democracy can be seen everywhere as a result of the increased dictatorship of financial capital and the perception of renewed threats to *global order* (Chomsky, 1999).

A brief summary of changes occurred should, for this reason, take into consideration the reconfiguration and unbalance of power at different levels, which includes the consolidation of financial/speculative capital as the central axis of power on a global level; the relativization of state power in many spaces, given the emergence of power factors within and over the states, that can be of a public, private or civil nature, such as the large transnational enterprises, which are more powerful than most of the nation states; the existence of communities of nations like the European Union, the African Economic Community, ASEAN, the Area of Free Trade ANSA-China, UNASUR, etc; the new dimensions of regionalization with multi-national states, and the strengthening of regional and local autonomies, among others; the reopening of the struggle for international hegemony with the emergence of the BRICS and other forces, while traditional powers' economic and political leadership are in crisis; and new forms of social

unconformity and struggle, including those of originary peoples, women and youth, that manage to confront traditional powers with new strategies, tactics and instruments, through new forms of social and political identity, from families and communities, as well as novel ways of exerting citizen rights.

It seems evident that the mechanisms used to apply new global designs, such as multilateral and bilateral agreements for free trade, most notably the World Trade Organization, have greatly contributed to inequality, because they grant benefits to capital, but they limit the rights of the people. When capital can move freely, while people are repressed if they attempt to do likewise, the correlation between forces is radically altered in favor of capital, and workers cease to be able to negotiate collectively, then greater inequality is generated. Movements of *indignados* against a capital dictatorship that first offers credit benefits to its clients and then strips them of their goods, have spread throughout the United States, Europe, Africa and Latin America, and are a good example of this.

Neither should we lose sight of the relation between the environmental crisis of the planet and the increase of inequality. While the major responsibility for climatic change lies with those who are the greatest consumers, the principal victims are the populations with the least capacity for response to critical situations. One example is the present famine in Somalia, as a consequence of the extreme drought that has lasted for over three years, and whose causes are attributed to global climatic change. Inequality appears in this initial interplay of processes of the contemporary world in all its crudity, intensity and extension.

The place of Sociology in our trans-disciplinary effort

To make an accurate diagnosis of the present phenomenon of inequality, as well as the oppression and the risks that contemporary societies face, is, as our original reflections suggest, an urgent task, way beyond the scope of academic sociology. We do have to consider that the process of dismantling public systems has affected universities as institutions particularly in the role they should play in the production of

knowledge-, but it has also had a detrimental effect upon the formation of scientists and intellectuals, by limiting their critical and creative capacities, as well as by confining their possibilities of having a say in the processes for planning and executing projects that might be crucial for the transformation of society (Wallerstein, 1998; 2001; González Casanova, 2001). All this, as we know, is part of the deterioration of education in general, at all levels, as well as of the risks that threaten the existence of a public space from which social welfare could be conceived and implemented.

In order to carry out the task of diagnosis and the elaboration of proposals to overcome inequality, the contribution of experts, wherever they may be found (in academia, governments, civil and social organizations) is required, but above all, it is also equally urgent that we manage to listen to the voice of citizens and communities, so that we can properly assume their demands and propose possible solutions so as to guarantee the continuance of human life in the world.

In a certain sense, the knowledge of the difficulties being faced by millions of human beings today should lay the foundations of an ethical crusade: the reunion with the best of the human condition will allow us to reach a global agreement on the principles that would make the continuation of human life on this planet viable. This will mean facing natural risks and disasters caused by the inconsiderate and predatory exploitation of nature, as well as obsessive industrialization, but above all, redirecting our decisions so as to achieve sustainable life, an equal distribution of wealth, respect, inclusion and tolerance for diversity, the exercise of individual and collective basic rights, the recognition of community and peoples autonomy, the respect for identity, liberty, tolerance, creativity and the principle of solidarity as the basis of new forms of coexistence.

These ideas about how to face the problem of survival of the planet, of all living beings, of organized intelligence, undoubtedly constitute a formidable ethical challenge, but it is also an unparalleled stimulus to deploy our critical potential, memory, creativity and will. To dismantle an inherited, expensive, inefficient and dangerous form of exercise of power -an edifice based on the drive for individual gain and the

preservation of privileges, at the cost of the welfare of the majority- the energy of multiple actors is required, as much as the unleashing of consciences and the breaking of perverse links with the status quo, stubbornly placed above the needs and demands of the societies in which we live.

Aware of the risks produced by the destruction of the social fabric, the state of neglect suffered by millions of human beings that barely survive, and the magnitude of the deficiencies that prevent most of the human beings from realizing their imagination, intelligence and sensitivity potential in order to achieve an improvement in their living conditions, their families and their communities, the United Nations issued a statement in the year 2000. Supported by 147 governments, it established the *Millenium Goals*, which were meant to be fulfilled by the year 2015 (UN, 2000). Although this initiative has drawn criticism because it is considered to be the *minimum point* of departure for governments, since it only deals with the consequences –extreme poverty, childbirth mortality, the spread of HIV-AIDS, to mention but a few of its objectives–, and not the deeper roots of inequality, it has really contributed to make a larger public aware of some of the more alarming aspects of this phenomenon. Specifically, the *Millenium Goals* have proved to be an inspiration for sectors that, one way or the other, have the power to determine the future of their countries through governing the processes of decision making and the design of public policies. Additionally, in recent years, we have witnessed important initiatives that share the concern about the need to transform and radically improve life on the planet. Among other valuable contributions to this debate, we must recognize that of the *World Social Forum*, which gathered recently nearly 60,000 people in Dakar, in order to discuss and confront possibilities and alternatives for a better life on Earth (WSF, 2011). On the other side of the planet, the *World Conference of the Peoples on Climatic Change and the Rights of Mother Earth*, held in Cochabamba, Bolivia in early 2010 (Acuerdo de los Pueblos, 2010) also constituted a milestone in the promotion of alternatives that can guarantee both the continuity and dignity of human beings, and the respect and care of nature.

The International Sociological Association: guidelines for a debate on inequality

An incredibly sensitive community of academics and professionals such as the International Sociological Association, aware of the social transformations taking place in the world, cannot and should not be absent from this debate. The great tradition of multi, inter and transdisciplinary works in which the most complex problems of the present day world are addressed; its unique condition of being academically, scientifically, regionally, institutionally and organically plural make it ideally qualified to face the challenge of contributing to this international exchange, from which an intellectual and moral force can emerge in order to achieve drastic changes in the manners, forms of reasoning and scopes of the decisions to be taken in the world to ensure the preservation of human life and societies.

The experience acquired at seventeen international congresses, dozens of conferences, seminars, forums and, above all, through the meetings of research committees and national associations, has produced many fruitful initiatives, among which we may highlight traditional and virtual publications of the highest scientific quality and world-wide recognition. We must also mention the systematic contributions made by 24 of the 55 research committees in our Association, two of the thematic groups and one of the working groups, for whom the study of the problem of inequality has been fundamental throughout many years. Of course, not a single one of the rest of our groups and committees is unconcerned about this situation of risk.

It is the responsibility of the Association's Program Committee to propose the fundamental guidelines upon which the semi plenary sessions of our future World Congress must be organized; to promote and receive initiatives for the *ad hoc* and *integrative* sessions; to share with our colleagues the recognition of distinguished sociologists that have made relevant contributions to sociological debate, in the *authors meet critics* sessions; and to support the Local Organizing Committee, who is responsible for thematic sessions in which a deeper historical and contemporary knowledge of society, as well as of the sociological

traditions of the Japanese institutions that collaborate in this effort, will be acquired.

In order to be significant, this effort must be collective in every sense. It is the role of the Presidency of the Association to propose the *presidential sessions* in which the points of view of the most renowned experts on the subjects under discussion are put forward. The research committees, working and thematic groups, together with the Vicepresidency of Research Committees are responsible for the organization of the *regular* and *integrative* sessions. And, it is the role of the Vicepresidency of the National Associations, in collaboration with the National and Regional Associations, to participate in the organization of the *ad hoc* sessions where the debate among different sociological communities will take place. All told, it appears to be an extremely favorable situation to carry out a broad and rigorous debate on the state of inequality in the world today and in the future; the problems involved in the different expressions of inequality, their dynamics and their global, regional, national and local dimensions; and the alternatives that can be proposed to solve this serious disequilibrium in our present and future world.

With these elements, this Vicepresident for Program proposes the members of the Association an initial agreement on the fundamental guidelines for the academic debate on the general subject of *Facing inequality*, that we will have during the Congress. This proposal, of course, does not aim to restrict in any way the freedom of all members of our Association and potential participants in the future Congress to assume their own initiatives on the same or different topics in the process of organizing academic debates in our event. We will make our best to guarantee that the sessions we have to take care of will contribute to our purpose, expressing each and every question in depth, complexity and diversity, by incorporating the knowledge of different sociological traditions, as well as the critical and analytical capacity of the colleagues who will actively participate in this part of the program. But we would also be extremely pleased if these guidelines stimulate the members of our Association to develop initiatives that can enrich the debate on how to face inequality in other sessions of our Congress. For

this purpose, we will count on the experience and talent of our colleagues, as well as on the relationships they may have with relevant social actors and experts in the different fields of knowledge, whose contributions to social studies have been widely recognized.

1. ***The Dimensions of Inequality.*** Inequality in the world includes multiple dimensions and appears as an increasingly complex phenomenon, one which is difficult to unravel. It can be measured in terms of gender, family, community or generation; of distribution of income or human development; of gender, preferences or orientations, cultural diversity, ethnic origin, national or regional; of migratory status, displacement or refuge; of dispossession, deterritorialization or impoverishment; of access to goods, services or resources; of vulnerability due to situations of natural disaster, war or violence; of the double pain suffered by women, indigenous people, the youth, migrants and displaced, among many others, caused by violence and exclusion; of deprivation from the exercise of the rights of citizenship and sovereignty. It is a fact that inequalities overlap and aggravate in the world, while experts find it increasingly difficult to identify and name the links among its different dimensions and dynamics. In this sense, for example, we cannot obviate that racism has become a device for the naturalization of inequalities, as for the unequal, hierarchical construction of different forms of knowledge, so that knowledge proceeding from the more favored members in today's unequal society is considered privileged or superior. Similarly, if we refer to *dispossession* -to give but two examples-, we cannot ignore the seriousness of the deeply unequal appropriation-use-exploitation of the natural resources of a planet with limited load capacity, where the abundance of some is only made possible by the deficiency of others.

2. ***The Dynamics of Inequality.*** In a world where different perspectives of organization, the availability and distribution of the work force, ways and means of production, distribution and exchange of goods and services, ideologies and knowledge are articulated and/or confronted; where millions of human beings are

displaced daily in search of means for survival, fleeing from conflicts where their integrity is threatened, or are forced to abandon their homes in disaster zones; in which young people, women, migrants and members of originary peoples suffer a double pain caused by exclusion and violence; in a world where strategies for power, resistance and search for alternatives are formulated and practiced at all levels, the knowledge of the processes through which inequality is generated, reproduced or intensified is both complex and fascinating. It presupposes the identification of spatialities and temporalities in order to understand the scope of conflicts, confrontations, ruptures and discontinuities. The fields in which inequality is expressed, are also meaningful, as they include science and law, as well as art and culture. Inequality also presupposes the organization of resistance, the formation and consolidation of social movements, the creation of languages and networks, building imaginary scenarios. True and deep knowledge of the processes of construction and possible deconstruction of inequalities, as well as of the individual and collective actors that produce or confront them, is urgent, in order to intervene in policies and practices that have either generated or aggravated them.

3. ***Sociology and the Debate about Justice.*** We are at a stage of human history where the accumulation of knowledge, the experience of forms of social and institutional organization, the formulation of concepts, categories and models of thought must face the great challenge of explaining and contributing to the solution of crises in practically all ambits of social life. The scopes and consequences of such crises are unpredictable, but they undoubtedly test our capacity to sustain, question, propose and imagine paradigms of civilization. These paradigms should be oriented towards forms of social relations, territorialization of social life, recognition and inclusion of the others; formulation of principles and values conducive to a more harmonious and sustainable reproduction of our communities. This is the direction in which the debates formulated by some authors (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Sen, 2010; Bourdieu, 2003; Harvey, 2006; Wallerstein, 1996; Quijano, 1990; Amin, 2011; De Souza Santos,

2006; Therbon, 2010) among other more, are relevant, and illuminate our hopes of contributing to propose conditions for the survival in dignity and peace to the human beings who inhabit our planet.

4. *Alternatives to Inequality.* We must recognize that contemporary societies inherit important struggles against inequality, the results of which are stimulating, although they may not be considered definitive. The pressure exerted by important mobilized sectors of society has allowed the opening of a wide spectrum in which legality and legitimacy for the reversion of inequality is based: from human rights to public policies for *equalization*, Sociology is obliged to recognize the existing links among basic social demands, the requirement for the establishment of human rights, the recognition of peoples', women', youths', and *others'* rights, the enforceability of these rights, social empowerment and the building of new forms of citizenship.

Formulated in this general manner, the guidelines for debate presented by this Vicepresident for Program constitute an initial effort oriented to stimulate what could well be one of the most enriching debates in contemporary Sociology, as well as a real contribution to the idea of '*can think, can do*' that has motivated our colleagues, ever since knowledge of Sociology gained scientific status in our world.

Notes

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Raquel Sosa Elízaga is Vice-President for Program of the International Sociological Association and member of the Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, México.

Contact Address: Direct correspondence to the author at Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos, Edificio "E", 1er. Nivel, Cubículo 127, Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, Circuito Mario de la Cueva s/n. UNAM, Ciudad Universitaria, Delegación Coyoacán, México D.F. CP. 04510. E-mail address: rsosa@unam.mx