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The Symbolic Dimension of Inequalities

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Luis Reygadas

Abstract

This paper explores how inequalities are produced, re-produced and contested through symbolic processes. The symbolic dimension of inequalities has been generally neglected; culture has been often viewed as a category less important than economy in the research on disparities. Sometimes culture is reduced to a legitimizing function of preexistent inequalities that were generated elsewhere (in the markets or as a consequence of public policies). In the standard view, it is as if only economics and politics are truly important for inequality, while culture is assigned only a secondary role. By contrast, I identify five symbolic processes that are key for the generation of inequalities and therefore could be also fundamental in efforts to reduce social asymmetries: (1) classification, categorization and creation of boundaries; (2) valuation, de-valuation and re-valuation; (3) relations between differences and inequalities; (4) production, acquisition and distribution of symbolic capital and (5) struggles over the legitimacy of inequalities.

Keywords culture and inequality | symbolism | difference and inequality | symbolic capital

Biographical Notes

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1. Introduction: Culture Matters¹

The struggles for the appropriation of economic and cultural resources are invariably symbolic struggles for the appropriation of those distinctive signs that are classed or classing resources, or for the conservation or the subversion of principles of classing of those distinctive properties (Bourdieu 1988: 247).

Symbolic processes are a fundamental component in the construction of equality and inequality. The distribution of goods and services never follows a culturally neutral, “rational” logic, nor does it adjust itself to the functioning of a perfect market, but rather passes through cultural filters, whose processes of valuation, classification, hierarchy, distinction, counter-distinction, equalization, and differentiation are all involved in determining what quantity and quality of wealth is received by each individual and each group within a society. Within each culture, as well as in relationships among persons with different cultural backgrounds, there is constant negotiation about the degree of inequality that is tolerable or desirable. Together with economic and political factors, culture is a central component of inequality. By this, I am not only referring to the uneven distribution of so-called cultural goods, but also to the symbolic aspects that pervade the mechanisms of appropriation of all type of capital. As anthropologist Marshall Sahlins stated, the material appropriation of nature is accompanied by its symbolic appropriation (Sahlins 1988). Social inequality is not only the expression of the asymmetrical distribution of advantages and disadvantages in a society, it also expresses the status of culturally mediated power relations.

There is a dispute regarding the legitimacy of the wealth appropriated by each social agent. What is for some a fair or legitimate appropriation is for others an expropriation or an illegitimate extraction. Wealth (at least the great proportion of it) is produced socially, but it is susceptible to private appropriation, which is why there are constant tensions and negotiations regarding what portion of wealth each agent deserves, which is one source of conflicting interests over distribution. But this opposition of interests about the distribution of wealth is also linked to social heterogeneity, cultural diversity, and differences in the criteria for legitimate appropriations, which in turn result in very different interpretations about what the most adequate distribution of wealth should be.

1 Translation from Spanish by Daniel Russell and Adriana Reygadas. Paul Talcott made valuable suggestions to improve the paper and provide greater accuracy. The author thanks his colleagues at *desiguALdades.net* for the rich academic exchanges and especially Marianne Braig, Sérgio Costa, Barbara Göbel, Göran Therborn, Juan Pablo Pérez Sáinz, Víctor Hugo Acuña, Juliana Ströbele-Gregor, Manuel Góngora-Mera, Rodrigo Rodrigues-Silveira, Bettina Schorr, Frank Müller, Jairo Baquero, and Renata Motta. He also appreciates the support during his stay from Anna Wickes-Neira.

“Property is theft”, Proudhon said in the 19th century (Proudhon 1993 [1840]: 13), while for many others, it is a perfectly legitimate compensation.²

In contrast, today’s libertarians proclaim that taxes, not property, are theft, contrary to those who see taxes as a mechanism of redistributive justice.³ I believe that it is not possible to find objective criteria to discern where simple appropriation ends and where expropriation begins. Marx used the labor theory of value to argue that the capitalist’s profit was the result of the surplus value produced by the worker, and therefore was an expropriation to be called into question. By contrast, neoclassical economists have attempted to show the legitimacy of corporate earnings based in part on the nominal contribution of capital as well in the process of production. There is no consensus on this matter among social scientists, much less among different social agents. This example underscores the essentially disputed nature of any distribution of resources and the resulting inequalities even among social scientists. What for some is a suitable and fair appropriation, for others is seen as an unjustified expropriation. Obviously, objective factors are taken into account in measuring or evaluating the contribution of each agent in a common enterprise (the number of hours worked and amount of investment, among others), but power relations and subjective and cultural factors are also decisive in measuring each one’s contribution (for example in determining the quality of work, the value of ideas, the degree of dedication, or the level of risk) and in thus determining what is appropriate.

It is no easier to establish legal or conventional criteria that are accepted by everyone, especially in societies as complex as today’s. In some sense, any appropriation is an expropriation. I do not say this as a moral judgment, but rather as a way to describe that the portion of wealth that each person appropriates can always be questioned by others, and is often the result of negotiations, struggles, agreements, or exchanges that bring to light power relations and different interpretations of reality. A certain degree of consensus can be arrived at, with regards to a given distribution, but it will always be provisional and will change along with modifications in the actors’ conditions, the power relations between them, and even their perceptions on the matter.

2 Nozick, drawing on John Locke, holds that anything not previously possessed which a person appropriates and works on is transformed into his property (Campbell 2002: 69, see also Nozick 1974). The problem is in knowing if today there is something that can be considered “not previously possessed”, or what the contributions of different individuals are in a collective enterprise.

3 “The libertarians are strictly opposed to any involvement of the state in the functioning of the market which, in their eyes, is nothing more than the complex interaction of voluntary transactions between free individuals. Tax, for them, is a pure and simple robbery, and the fact that it is perpetrated by the state, far from legitimating it, increases its criminal nature even more” (Van Parijs 1993: 97).

Fifty years ago, the majority of the population considered the traditional sexual division of labor in the household to be legitimate, with all that it represented in terms of the inequality between men and women, whereas today, that distribution is the subject of polemical dispute. Behind many contemporary battles over intellectual property, copyrights, free-trade agreements, and black-market economies, arguments can be found regarding the legitimacy of different agents' rights to appropriate, which their adversaries consider robbery or expropriation.

Out of the confirmation of the essentially disputed nature of appropriation-expropriation, an ethical and political discussion arises. Which appropriations are legitimate and which are illegitimate? How just or unjust are the existing inequalities? There are different answers to these questions, depending on each person's ideology, on their conceptions of fairness, or on the principles of justice they apply. Some would place efforts and work at the heart of the matter, while others would give greater importance to risk, status, rights, knowledge, to social welfare, to value added, to necessities, or to some other criteria. My intention is not to propose a new principle of justice to distinguish legitimate appropriation from illegitimate expropriation, but rather to analyze different agents' arguments that they face from their adversaries, and by doing so underscore the important role for culture in understanding inequality.

There are some inequalities that the majority of people consider fair. For example, if the winner of a lottery (in which the rules accepted by the participants were followed) becomes a millionaire, it would be difficult to find anyone to call this way of getting rich illegitimate (although there might be debate in this case over what would be the fair amount of taxes to pay). In contrast, there are other inequalities that are unfair for almost everyone, such as a public official illegally taking money from public coffers. Unfortunately, however, the majority of cases are not so clear-cut. Many would applaud a group of rural peasants that invaded the landlord's estate by force, but many others would condemn this action. Some consider the earnings of the large pharmaceutical companies to be immoral, while others find them to be fair compensation for their investments and many years of research. The intense conflicts and the heated discussions about pirating music and films demonstrate the lack of consensus about the legitimacy of those appropriations. The fairness or unfairness of the majority of social inequalities is subject to interpretation. My conclusion is not one of relativism, nor do I suggest that everyone should apply the criteria of fairness which suits them most. I believe that we should, as citizens, democratically establish the legitimate procedures for appropriation and redistribution, although such agreements would always be subject to interpretation and debate. The thresholds for tolerance of inequality vary from one society to another and from one historical period to another (Kelley and Evans 1993).

If there is not widespread consensus regarding certain levels or types of inequality, it is to be expected that distrust, hostility, different kinds of discord, protests, and even violence be produced among disagreeing sectors. It is important not only to describe and analyze social inequalities, but also to understand the subjective processes constructed around them.

As long as history has been recorded, people, things, and knowledge have been circulated, exchanged, distributed, and appropriated according to each society's specific rules, under the influence of economic, political, social, and cultural rules. Markets and other forms of exchange and interaction are embedded in both power relations and cultural traditions. They function according to historical and institutional courses in which many filters and conditions operate for the use, circulation, and distribution of goods and resources (Appadurai 1991; Crozier and Friedberg 1990; Myers 2001; Polanyi 1979; Thompson 1971).

In exchanges and interactions, there are different rules or conventions for different things or for different people. Some examples, taken from other societies, may help us to understand how this works even today. The forest-dwelling !Kung, a hunter-gatherer group, had different rules for the distribution of different kinds of food. For example, if a woman collected fruit or vegetables, she could consume them with her nuclear family. The same rule applied to small animals. However, when they killed an antelope, they shared the meat, which had to be distributed by the owner of the arrow that had hurt the animal:

The meat of the big game animals is shared by the whole band according to a system. Smaller animals, such as duikers, which are not enough to feed the whole band, are shared by smaller groups. Such groups are usually relatives, for example, an extended family. The plants foods that a woman gathers are shared with her immediate family and among other relatives and friends according to her wishes. Approval rewards those who are generous. Disapproval and reproach fall on the ungenerous who are said to be 'far-hearted', or like 'bags without openings'. Not to share as custom dictates is virtually unthinkable to the !Kung. When, for my own amusement, I suggested the idea of a hunter's hiding his kill from others, to eat alone or to give only to his wife and children, people screeched and cried, 'Oooo', and declared that lions take food for themselves that, way, not humans (Marshall 1999: 93-94).

Among the Tiv people as well, there were different spheres of exchange. Goods of basic consumption circulated in one, and luxuries and personal services in the other.

Each sphere had its own rules. A thing could only be exchanged for objects of the same sphere (Kopitoff 1991).

In societies where slavery was legitimate, people circulated as merchandise, and there were conventions that regulated their purchase and sale. In many societies, women circulated among different clans or family groups. They were exchanged for different commodities, according to mechanisms and equivalencies regulated by the society. All of these examples may sound strange or exotic, but at their base, they show something which is common to all cultures, including contemporary ones. The circulation of people and things is subject to cultural conventions, institutional frameworks, and power relations. We can find many contemporary examples. Just as there are things that are the object of private appropriation, there are others that, in accordance with laws and culture, are of public use and cannot be sold, such as national monuments, patriotic symbols, parks, nature preserves, and archeological and historical areas, some of which have been labeled by UNESCO as cultural patrimony of humanity.

We also have separate spheres of exchange in contemporary global society. One cannot exchange an invitation to dinner for a bank check; that would be a mixing of spheres of circulation that culture has separated (Myers 2001). There are also specific rules for the circulation of people. We need special documents to cross borders. Knowledge is transmitted along routes and according to rituals defined by traditions and institutions, which are not exempt from conflicts and confrontations. In short, in addition to competition for resources between people with different capacities, there are many social, political, and cultural considerations that regulate the circulation and appropriation of social wealth; hence the importance of studying the symbolic dimension of interactions and institutions.

Inequality is reproduced in the interactions that connect people. The regulations of those interactions are part of what is referred to as culture. Although many interactions are sporadic and isolated, others pertain to structured sequences and are produced within collective spaces (groups, companies, organizations, institutions, fields, etc.) that are unequal fields structured by power relations (Crozier and Friedberg 1990). Because a large part of social wealth is produced or circulates in collective settings, we need to study symbolic processes and power relations that regulate the appropriations produced within those spaces. The result is that culture matters for the understanding of inequality.

2. Symbolic Devices Producing Inequality

The relationship between symbols, power, and social groups is a classical subject in social science, one addressed early on by authors like Durkheim and Weber (Durkheim 1982 [1912]; Durkheim and Mauss 1996 [1903]; Weber 1996 [1922]). Durkheim and Mauss, in their work on primitive classifications, gave us the idea that, by way of symbols, societies and groups establish limits that define groups of relationships. Therefore, by classifying things in the world, relationships of inferiority/superiority and exclusion/inclusion are established between them in direct connection with the social order.⁴ The act of ordering, grouping, and separating objects, animals, plants, people, and institutions marks out differences, limits, and boundaries between them, defines hierarchies, and includes or excludes. By analyzing those operations in the context of power relations and of resource, privilege, and opportunity distribution, the study of inequality is taken up fully.

Similarly, the function of social closures, as Weber talked about them, is directly linked to symbolic operations that establish which characteristics are needed to belong to a status group to which a certain positive or negative social value has been assigned (Weber 1996 [1922]: 684-686). That assignation is a cultural process, although it may also be associated with economic or political factors. Weber goes even further to postulate the existence of ritual marks that accompany the makeup of many status groups:

[...] the distinction of status is guaranteed not only by convention and law, but also by ritual sanction to such an extent that all physical contact with a member of a caste regarded as 'inferior' is held to be ritually polluting for members of the 'superior' caste, a stain which must be religiously expiated (Weber 1996 [1922]: 689).

Relating impurity and stains with social classifications has been a resource employed in many situations. Perhaps no one has paid as much attention to this as Mary Douglas, who employed the analysis of the pure and the impure, of the clean and the contaminated, to understand the symbolic limits that separate groups. What is dirty is that which is out of place and which does not relate to the expected structure. By deciphering the symbolic structures with which a society distinguishes the unpolluted,

4 "Classify not only means to make groups. It means to arrange those groups according to very special relations. We represent them as coordinates or subordinates to one another; we say that these (the species) are included in those (the genus), that the latter subsume the former. There are those that dominate, others that are dominated, and others that are independent from one another. Any classification implies a hierarchical order for which neither the subjective world nor our conscience gives us the model" (Durkheim and Mauss 1996 [1903]: 30).

the clean, and the immaculate from the contaminated, dirty, or stained, much can be learned about that society's social structures (Douglas 1984). The case of the untouchables in the Indian caste system comes immediately to mind. However, in other societies, including ours, there are also cultural markers that associate social groups with order and disorder, with cleanliness and dirtiness, and with purity and contamination. Looking at the relations between social classes, between ethnic groups, and between genders through the window opened by Douglas is a way to discover subtle forms of exclusion and discrimination with effects on inequality that have not been adequately incorporated into the discourse dominated by economic and political dimensions.

In a very different register, Erving Goffman reflects on a particular type of blemish. Stigmas profoundly mark those who suffer them and define the special type of relations that should be established with them (Goffman 1986). Goffman is less interested in the symbolic structures that group and distinguish individuals and more interested in the actions and interactions through which individuals label themselves and others. It could be said that he focuses more on strategies of classification than on the classifications themselves. For him, the small acts of deference or putting down are the ones that, when they accumulate, make up large social differences (Goffman 1956).

In a study on relations between locals and outsiders in a small, working-class community in London, Norbert Elias analyzed the processes of stigmatization of the outsiders through which the members of the established group represented themselves as better human beings than the rest, establishing taboos to restrict off-the-job contact between the two groups and taking the leadership positions in local organizations. The group fantasies of praise and condemnation, along with the complementary relationship between group dignity (of their own group) and group shame (of the others), create an emotional barrier that is fundamental to the reproduction of asymmetries in power relations. Often, the excluded groups even experience their inferiority of power emotionally, as a sign of human inferiority (Elias 2006: 220-229).

Myths also play a role in the construction of inequalities, as Maurice Godelier shows in his study on masculine domination among the Baruya. In this New Guinea community, a complex mythical narrative consecrates the supremacy of men, to whose semen a number of virtues are attributed (it produces conception, nourishes the fetus, feeds the wife, strengthens initiated youth, etc.), while the menstrual blood is considered a harmful and dangerous substance. This narrative is extended into differences in bodies (the man's body is considered beautiful, they may use bands, feathers, and other decorations) and in spaces (there are double paths, with the men's paths elevated,

and an imaginary line divides masculine and feminine areas within the home). This complicated configuration contributes to the existence of gender-based discrimination in economic and political spheres (Godelier 1986).

Gender studies have contributed to understanding the cultural dimensions of inequality by showing that the asymmetries between men and women have been associated with symbolic constructions regarding what it means to be a man or to be a woman, along with the relationships of power between people of different sexes (Butler 1996; Comas D'Argemir 1995; Lamas 1996; Ortner 1979; Rubin 1975). Many cultures' worldviews are filled with oppositions of masculine and feminine, frequently over-valuing the positive qualities of men and under-valuing those of women, a fact that contributes to the production and reproduction of relationships of domination between the genders that goes beyond the political and economic dimensions of inequality that are also observed. Anthropologists as well have also shown how the subordination of women and systems of matrimony are at the center of many other social asymmetries (for example Godelier 1986).⁵

In a text on elites in Sierra Leone, Abner Cohen studied rituals of exclusivity that permitted one ethnic group to preserve their social, political, and cultural privileges. He speaks of the "mystique of excellence" and "elite cults" (Cohen 1981: 2) that allow a group to validate and sustain their privileged status by affirming that they possess uncommon and exclusive qualities that are essential for the collective society. The ideology of the elite is reified, developed, and sustained by an elaborate body of symbols and dramatic performances, which include manners, etiquette, ways of dressing, spoken accent, recreational patterns, customs, and rules about matrimony. That lifestyle is only acquired over long periods of socialization and training, in particular in informal social spaces, such as the family, peer groups, clubs, and extracurricular school activities. For Cohen, the symbolic work of the elites allows them to distinguish themselves from the rest of the population through decorum, elegance, education, and other attributes that, although subtle, permit them access to extraordinary privileges and rewards.

Similarly, in the analysis of taste, Pierre Bourdieu found some of the most subtle origins of class differentiation in contemporary societies. He went beyond the simple analysis of cultural consumption as a powerful marker of status to investigate class *habitus*, that is, the lasting schemes of thought that govern the behaviors and tastes of different social groups. Those schemes result in systems of classification that position

5 "The division of labor by sex can therefore be seen as a 'taboo,' a taboo against the sameness of men and women, a taboo dividing the sexes into two mutually exclusive categories, a taboo which exacerbates the biological differences between the sexes and thereby *creates gender*" (Rubin 1975: 178, italics in original).

individuals in determined social statuses, not only because of their money, but also because of their symbolic capital. A subject's position in the social division of labor is even inscribed in apparently insignificant details, like a way of speaking or of moving the body (Bourdieu 1988: 477, 490). The *habitus* create distances and limits which are converted into symbolic frontiers between social groups. Those frontiers fix a state of social struggles and of the distribution of advantages and obligations in a society. Furthermore, they bring about unequal transactions, given that the recognition of barriers of distinction leads to pacts and social relations in which differential obligations and rights are assumed. On occasion, the symbolic frontiers acquire a material reality that separates those included from those excluded.

The concept of fields, also proposed by Bourdieu (1988), helps us understand that the interactions among agents are produced in social spaces that follow certain rules, according to which, those who possess legitimate cultural capital receive the best benefits produced in their field. It is not, therefore, abstract capacities that allow them to appropriate the wealth generated in a field, but rather capacities that are exercised under power relations and are sanctioned, whether positively or negatively, by cultural processes.

Charles Tilly (1998) has made a detailed analysis of what he calls categorical inequality, which is to say, that which comes from the distinction of different socially-defined categories of people. According to Tilly, categories are produced culturally, around certain biological or social characteristics. The institutionalization of categories and of the systems of social closure, exclusion, and control which are created according to those categories are what make inequality last. The differences resulting from the existence of paired categories that clearly separate people into two groups are of particular interest:

The central argument runs like this: Large, significant inequalities in advantages among human beings correspond mainly to categorical differences such as black/white, male/female, citizen/foreigner, or Muslim/Jew, rather than to individual differences in attributes, propensities, or performances (Tilly 1998: 7).

Tilly criticizes individualist approaches to the phenomenon of inequality, that is, those that are centered on the distribution of attributes, resources, or possessions among actors. On the other hand, he proposes a relational perspective of inequality, which focuses on interactions between groups and individuals. He is interested in the creation of paired categories that establish boundaries between groups, create stigmas, and attribute qualities to the actors on each side of the boundaries (Tilly 1998: 66-71). The

boundaries can separate an organization or group's internal categories (such as those that divide management from workers), or they can distinguish external categories, common to an entire society (male/female, black/white). When the internal and external categories coincide, inequality is reinforced (Tilly 1998: 77-79). The use of delimited categories causes persistent inequality by connecting itself with the mechanisms of exploitation and opportunity hoarding. Categorical inequality has cumulative effects. In the long run, it affects individual capacities and lasting structures of asymmetric resource distribution are created along category lines. Considering that eliminating discriminatory beliefs and attitudes is not enough to eliminate inequality, it is necessary to transform the institutional structures that organize the flow of resources, burdens, and rewards.

Each of the authors reviewed up to this point parts from a different perspective, but all of them point out how symbols and power play a fundamental role in the creation and reproduction of inequalities. Not all inequalities have cultural origins; some of them come from the simple use of force or from material differences, while others can be argued to have biological origins. Nevertheless, even these latter inequalities are filtered through the symbolic fabric. For example, two men may differ in stature, physical characteristics, or skin tone for strictly genetic reasons (cases in which stature or other physical traits vary because of social reasons aside), but culture may label them as equals, or on the contrary, may establish hierarchies and valued differences between them. On this basis, different rights, obligations, rewards, punishments, and privileges can be recognized. Symbolic classifications by themselves are not enough for the production of inequalities, but they are almost always a necessary condition for their existence, in combination with specific hierarchies, institutions, and power relations. It is essential to identify the weight of cultural factors in the creation and reproduction of inequalities, without falling into culturalism or economic determinism.

Table 1 on the next page shows different symbolic operations and the effects of inequality they produce.

Table 1: Symbolic Devices Producing Inequality

Author	Symbolic devices	Inequality effects
Durkheim and Mauss (1996 [1903])	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classification, ordering, and grouping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hierarchies • Inclusion and exclusion
Weber (1996 [1922])	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attribution of qualities to groups • Ritual sanctions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unequal distribution of prestige • Social closures, monopolies
Douglas (1984, 1989)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualifications of purity and impurity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frontiers between groups • Prescription of adequate relationships between people of different groups
Goffman (1956, 1986)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stigmatization • Classification strategies; • Deference and putting-down 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclusion • Day-to-day reproduction of privileges and disadvantages
Elias (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stigmatization of newcomers; • Emotional barriers • Group fantasies of praise and criticism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclusion • Hoarding of positions of power • Feelings of superiority/ inferiority
Godelier (1986)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Myths • Symbolism of the body and of space • Rites of passage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender domination and subordination
Butler (1996) Comas (1995) Lamas (1996) Ortner (1979) Rubin (1975)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural construction of gender • Over-valuing and under-valuing • Gender taboos 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male domination • Gender inequalities • Exclusion of sexual orientations different from hegemonic ones
Cohen (1981)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rituals of exclusivity • Elite cultures • Mystiques of excellence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of elites • Distinction from rest of population • Access to extraordinary privileges, status, and rewards
Bourdieu (1980, 1988, 1990)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of habitus • Enunciation, separation and distinction • Distanciation • Creation of fields that legitimate certain types of symbolic capital 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems of classing • Class distinction • Limits and frontiers between social groups • Differential appropriation of symbolic capital
Tilly (1998)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paired categories, • Attribution of stigmas and qualities to categories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistent inequality • Exploitation • Opportunity hoarding

Source: Own elaboration.

Symbolic operations are performed in a variety of ways to achieve their effectiveness. Ritual is probably the most analyzed among them, given the enormous expressive strength that ritual dramatizations possess in their capacity to concentrate a large quantity of symbols that link emotions and prescriptions. The ritual is one of the most powerful tools for conferring status and legitimating privilege (Turner 1988; Kertzer 1988). Not everything can be reduced to ritual, however. The symbolic construction of inequalities also occurs in myths, in day-to-day routines, in discourse, in *habitus*, in narrations and attitudes, in the symbolism of the body and of space, in worldviews, and in countless symbolic actions that elevate, degrade, separate, and legitimate social distances and differences.

All of these symbolic devices can have decisive repercussions on the mechanisms that produce and reproduce social inequality. They can give way to discrimination and can segment the labor market. They can act upon the opportunities for learning and organize the distribution of resources among and within families, social groups, and organizations.

The insistence on the capacity that symbolic processes have for creating frontiers and differences helps us to better understand the dynamic of inequality, but it also entails risks. One of them is the overestimation of their legitimacy among all members of society, to the point that we could be led to think that subaltern sectors have simply accepted the place that the social division of labor has assigned to them.⁶ Another risk has to do with the fact that many contributions on the subject have focused primarily on the actions of the dominant actors in society. To explain, analysts have shown a special fascination with what the powerful do. Men subjugate women; local oligarchs concentrate and redistribute resources to increase their power and prestige; dominant castes erect symbolic frontiers and taboos to distance themselves from lower castes; elites hoard resources and protect their monopolies through sophisticated rituals; privileged ethnic groups denigrate those who are different; the bourgeoisie cultivate their symbolic capital to distinguish themselves from the masses and reproduce their privileges; and so on. Nevertheless, this is only one side of the coin.

6 As Pierre Bourdieu points out, “[...] the dominated tend from the beginning, to attribute to themselves what distinction attributes to them, rejecting what they are denied (‘that is not for us’), contenting themselves with what they are granted, measuring their hopes according to their possibilities, defining themselves as the established order defines them, reproducing in the verdict that they make about themselves the verdict that economy makes about them, destining themselves, in a word, to what, in any case, is theirs” (Bourdieu 1988: 482, insertions in original).

3. Symbolic Devices Promoting Reciprocity and/or Resisting Inequalities

It is indispensable that we also study what the dominated do to erode symbolic and material monopolies, to question the elites' rituals, to ridicule hegemonic strategies, to create alternative criteria of distinction, to mitigate inequities, to topple, overcome, or invert classifications and cultural frontiers, and to give ritual strength to resistance and rebellion. It is not enough to study distinction; we must also explore the processes of counter-distinction and deconstruction of inequality. To avoid falling into methodological traps, it is crucial to note that political and cultural processes can also work in the other direction, contributing to the limitation of inequalities, to the generation of solidarity, to the questioning of arguments that legitimate power, and to the erosion of the walls erected between groups.

Through symbols, human beings not only establish differences and boundaries in a continuous reality; they also do the opposite. They confirm continuities and affinities in realities that would otherwise be discontinuous, fragmented, and unequal. Just as many symbolic tools generate, reproduce, and reinforce inequalities, there are many others that limit or question them and which are fundamental in the construction of equity. On one hand, there are gifts and reciprocity, which reveal the existence of social mechanisms of equalization, compensation, and redistribution. On the other hand, there are symbolic elements of everyday resistance to inequality and imaginations and utopias in which social asymmetries are questioned or inverted.

Mario Vargas Llosa, in his novel *El Paraíso en la otra esquina* (*The Way to Paradise*, 2003), describes the egalitarian utopias that inhabited the European cultural environment in the 19th century by narrating the story of Flora Tristan, of Hispano-Peruvian origin and one of the first feminists, who lived in France, and of her grandson, Paul Gauguin. Both yearned for the paradise destroyed by the Industrial Revolution, but while Flora Tristan searched for it in the struggle for workers' and women's rights, Gauguin pursued it in the supposedly untainted world of the island of Tahiti.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski also searched for solidarity on other islands of the same sea. In his well-known text *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1995 [1922]), he made a decisive contribution to the study of reciprocity when he presented a detailed description of *kula*, a system of ceremonial exchange used by the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands. The system brings together a large number of people through bonds of reciprocal obligations in which ritual objects (shell bracelets and necklaces) are exchanged. Its objective is

not to earn or to collect, since the one who receives a *kula* object may only keep and exhibit it for a time, and then must donate it to another person associated to the circle.

This type of exchange, absurd to the eyes of the rational and calculating businessman, allowed Malinowski to formulate an early critique of the notion of *homo oeconomicus* and to point out how this activity contributes to the creation of networks of association and reciprocity that keep the peace and sustain the flow of social relations. Malinowski recognizes that among the Trobriand people, neither the desire for possession, nor the search for the prestige obtained by giving particularly valuable bracelets and necklaces are absent, but that those tendencies are regulated by norms and principles that guarantee the bonds between those associated to the *kula* circle. In other words, the logic of distinction, described above, is kept in check by the logic of reciprocity. As Godbout has shown, the *kula* holds as its essential object the appropriation of the power of giving, instead of the appropriation of objects (Godbout 1997: 143, 148). Even with regards to our own modern Westernized society, it could also be argued that the appropriation of wealth is regulated by norms that operate based on the acquisition of prestige, and that in some cases prestige is acquired through donations, rather than through collections.⁷

Two years after Malinowski, in 1924, Marcel Mauss published his famous essay *The Gift (Essai sur le don, 1924)*, henceforth mandatory reading for the majority of discussions on the matter of reciprocity. Mauss expanded on Malinowski's text, on Boas' writings about the *potlach* of the Kwakiutl, and on numerous ethnographical and historical sources on ritual exchanges in different cultures, to propose an ambitious interpretation of the importance of the gift-giving mentality in primitive cultures and even in modern societies (Mauss 1979 [1924]). Mauss holds that in the *kula*, the *potlach*, and other similar institutions, those who participate are not isolated individuals, but rather groups, tribes, families, and other collective subjects. Through such institutions, "cultures are able to substitute war, isolation, and stagnation with alliance, giving, and trade" (Mauss 1979 [1924]: 262). For Mauss, the symbolic processes that make up giving (ceremonies, taboos, belief in the *hau* or the spirit of things, rites, prayers, etc.) have a moral and social meaning. The essential objective, then, is the creation of a bond and the production of a feeling of friendship and of reciprocal respect (Mauss 1979 [1924]: 177, 199). In the study of ancient giving practices, Mauss finds arguments to postulate

⁷ For example, foundations donate university buildings which are in turn named after their donors or foundations, such as the Henry Ford Building at Freie Universität Berlin.

the necessity for a modern conception of equity, one that implies a redistribution of wealth and preservation of reciprocity.⁸

Many human interactions are evaluated in terms of a code of reciprocity. This does not, however, mean that the majority of social relations are reciprocal or just. On the contrary, asymmetries and inequalities are almost always present, although in many cases the agents involved in them believe that they should be reciprocal. Many inequalities are able to legitimate themselves when they are seen as the result of a pact in which there is reciprocity, in contrast to those that are considered illegitimate and the fruit of some imposition. The persistency of reciprocity in social interaction and in the discourses about it (everyday and academic) is related to the strength of the egalitarian narrative, a narrative that stands on a symbolic fabric as dense as the one that sustains the mechanisms of distinction.

Equality and difference are two sides of the same coin, but they are two opposing sides that express tendencies and countertendencies that pervade human groups. Victor Turner presented this confrontation in a suggestive way by referring to the potential that rituals have to create a *communitas*:

In human history, I see a continuous tension between structure and *communitas*, on all levels of scale and complexity. The structure, or all that which holds people apart, defines their differences, and constrains their actions, is one pole in a charged field, for which the opposite pole is *communitas*, or anti-structure, the egalitarian ‘sentiment for humanity’, of which David Hume speaks (Turner 1987: 274).

For Turner, in the “liminal” phase of ritual, the differences between the participants temporarily dissolve, while direct and egalitarian bonds are created between them (Turner 1987: 232). Those direct bonds ignore, revert, cross, or occur outside the differences of rank and position that characterize everyday social structures. According to Turner, ritual, by creating *communitas*, constructs an “us”, launching the message that we are all equal, even though it is a transitory message, so that society may

8 “Cultures, classes, families, and individuals may become wealthy, but they will only be happy when they learn to sit, like gentlemen, upon common wealth. It is useless to look any further for good and happiness, as it rests on this, on enforced peace, on measured work, alternately solitary and common, on wealth amassed and later distributed, on mutual respect, and on generous reciprocity taught by upbringing” (Mauss 1979 [1924]: 262). “First of all, we go back, and it is necessary to go back, to the customs of ‘noble spending’. It is necessary, just as in the Anglo Saxon countries and other contemporary societies, whether they be savage or very civilized, that the rich once again – freely or by force – consider themselves a sort of treasurers of their countrymen” (Mauss 1979 [1924]: 249).

later function in an orderly way within its structural logic of distance, inequality, and exploitation.

Despite their different points of view, these three anthropologists point in the same direction. In different societies, there is a mentality of giving that establishes obligations to give, receive, and return ceremonial gifts, which in turn create bonds of reciprocity between individuals and groups and which generate flows of goods, people, celebrations and rituals, some of which act as mechanisms of wealth redistribution. There are ceremonies, beliefs, myths, and rituals that make exchanges possible, and in so doing, produce circulation, bonds, obligations, redistributions of goods and people, and the formation of dense social networks. These cultural devices have equality effects, as they can limit the wealth of some, link the acquisition of status with compensation for the less favored, or legitimate appropriation by those less favored. The dynamics of gift indicate the presence, in the words of Godbout, of a *homo reciprocus*, who guides himself with egalitarian beliefs and principles of solidarity (Godbout 1997).

Identifying these symbolic devices allows us to recognize that in social life, there is a dimension of reciprocity, which had great strength in primitive societies and which still exists in many spaces and circumstances of modern life. However, that force should not be exaggerated, nor should we fall into the naïve belief that solidarity and egalitarianism are tendencies that are particular to certain individuals or social groups. *Homo reciprocus* is an ideal archetype, which can describe one dimension of social life – that which is oriented by giving norms – but there are other dimensions to consider, such as the profit maximization mentality that has been well described as part of another ideal archetype, *homo oeconomicus*. It may also be useful to recall the distinction that Dumont makes between *homo aequalis* and *homo hierarquicus* to point out that human beings are permeated by the tension that exists between the quest for equality and the zeal for obtaining superior status (Dumont 1977). It is necessary to go beyond the dualism that sharply separates gifts from merchandise, reciprocity from hierarchy, and primitive societies from modern societies, to see the interconnections between them and their involvement in the dialectic between equality and inequality.

Equality is not only constructed by way of reciprocity. Actions that oppose inequality must also be considered. In his memoirs, Gabriel García Márquez recalls hearing his mother murmur that there are thefts that God should pardon, because they were committed to feed children (García Márquez 2002). That phrase is an example of the symbolic tools that, under different circumstances, sustain, justify, and legitimate everyday resistance to inequality and the expropriations from below that exploited and excluded sectors carry out. In his famous essay on the subsistence riots of English peasants and

workers in the 18th century, historian Edward P. Thompson (1971) provided important analytical keys for studying the cultural fabric that sustains lower-class egalitarian practices. During the riots, which in general appeared in periods of scarcity and high prices, the workers confiscated grain, flour, or bread and forced the farmers, bakers, and sellers to sell them at an accessible price, or they simply sold them themselves and returned the money from the sale to the owners. In these actions, we can observe notions of legitimacy. The men and women who carried them out believed that they were defending their rights or traditional customs. The riots were guided by a “moral economy of the poor”, linked to ancient ideas of reciprocity:

[...] these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc. This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action (Thompson 1971: 79).

In addition to Thompson’s work, historical research offers a number of contributions for the study of everyday resistance against inequality. Among them, Eric Hobsbawm’s text on machinery destroyers in England stands out, showing how criticism of the Industrial Revolution is rooted in artisan traditions and in everyday opposition to mechanization and loss of control over the production process (Hobsbawm 1979). In other works, Hobsbawm analyzes the case of social bandits, supported and admired by peasants:

The essence of the social bandits is that they are peasants outlaws whom the lord and the state regards as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped, and supported (Hobsbawm 2001[1969]: 20).

Those social bandits expropriated, although on a minor scale, a portion of the wealth accumulated by the powerful. For the peasants, it was a just and valid taking-back. In the day-to-day activity of workers, similar disruptions, miniscule acts of social banditry, can be observed. Alain Cottureau (1980) conducted research on the everyday opposition of Parisian workers in the 1870s. In that research, through the narration of a foreman, Cottureau discovered how, through mockery, apparent laziness, drunkenness, and the workers’ family traditions, the tenacious resistance of a group of highly-skilled journeymen was expressed, so avoiding an increase in the rhythm of their work and

protecting the skills and secrets of the trade that their employers sought to take from them by any means. They also exalted their own abilities, which allowed them to demand high wages and conserve their power in the workplace (Cottureau 1980).

For his part, James Scott (1990) proposes the concept of “hidden transcripts”, to explain the cultural substrata that nourish varied and numerous underground resistance actions carried out by peasants, slaves, and other poor sectors. He argues that when they are in the presence of the powerful, they can follow a public script of respect and deference, but in the spaces hidden from the vigilant eye of the dominant class, subaltern sectors tend toward other types of discourse and develop day-to-day resistance behaviors that, in spite of their small scale, gain relevancy through the number of times they are repeated. These hidden transcripts have arguments that legitimate actions of resistance and therefore play an important role in limiting and assuaging inequality (Scott 1990).

“We must do away with extreme poverty [...] And with extreme wealth, as well!” (“¡Hay que acabar con la pobreza extrema... y con la riqueza extrema también!”) This phrase, which satirized government programs to fight destitution, could be read on the walls of Colombian cities during the 1980s. This is only a small example of the innumerable lower-class expressions in which the use of irony serves to criticize inequality and to question the symbolic classifications that sustain it. Popular cultures are full of utopian dreaming, mockery and satire of the rich and powerful, rebellious dramatizations, allegorical protests, imaginary figures that reject or invert domination, fantasies, and legends that, taken together, play an important role in breaking down the boundaries of inequality (Comaroff 1985; Gledhill 2000; Keesing 1992; Taussig 1980).

Faced with the boundary work that puts up barriers of inclusion for a few and exclusion for many, there is opposing work that undermines those walls, challenges established classifications, transgresses limits, and criticizes hierarchies and privileges: “Traces of rebellion against authority everywhere creep into the ritual that envelopes the mighty” (Kertzer 1988: 55). For his part, George Balandier (1994) has described popular mythical figures that utilize symbolic resources to alter, confound, or invert the established order. Through mockery, parody, ridicule, rule-breaking, limit-transgression, and symbolic inversion, disorder flourishes and the fissures, ambiguities, and contradictions of social stratification come to light (Balandier 1994).⁹ Balandier gives numerous examples from a variety of cultures. One of them is Ryangombe, a mythical hero in Rwanda, who came about in the context of a regime of absolute monarchy and acute inequalities:

⁹ For the role of parody and symbolic inversions in resistance to inequality, see also Gledhill 2000 and Keesing 1992.

Ryangombe was the one who transformed everything: non-egalitarian society into initiated fraternity, order into disorder, submission into superpowers. His cult did away with authoritarian relations and censure and promoted a theatrical negation of royal power and of its order, of fundamental inequalities, of domination based on sex and age criteria, of preeminence according to lineage, of rules that govern sexuality and decency (Balandier 1994: 94).

Over the past decades, a period in which many other inequalities have got worse, there have been significant advancements in gender equity, although there is still a lot of ground to cover. These achievements cannot be understood without taking into account the symbolic processes that have deconstructed the roots of unequal relationships between women and men. The field of gender studies have made a fundamental contribution to understanding resistance to inequity. A few of the many contributions have been the re-valuing of women, the questioning of patriarchal oppression, the de-naturalization of gender, and the deconstruction of hegemonic categories according to which men and women have been classified for centuries. All of them have eroded many male monopolies and have contributed to a greater equity in relationships between the genders.

Table 2 on the following page synthesizes some of the symbolic devices used to promote reciprocity or to resist, weaken, or limit inequality:

Table 2: Symbolic Devices Promoting Reciprocity and/or Resisting Inequalities

Author	Symbolic device	Equality effects
Malinowski (1995 [1922])	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Kula</i> ceremonial exchange 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of networks of association and reciprocity
Mauss (1979 [1924])	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donations as total social facts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of bonds between groups • Solidarity • Redistribution of wealth
Turner (1987)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liminality and ritual creation of <i>communitas</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporary dissolution of structural categories
Thompson (1971)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moral economy • Legitimization of subsistence riots • De-legitimization of speculative practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limitation of asymmetries created by the market • Redistribution of basic goods • Imposition of prices accessible to the majority
Hobsbawm (2001 [1969])	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idealization of bandits and heroes of the poor • Critique of mechanization and industrialization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of the demands of the dominated • Moderation of exploitation
Cottureau (1980)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mockery • Justification of laziness and alcoholism • Exaltation of worker's status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weakening of employer hierarchy • Reduction in intensity of work • Defense of control over their work
Scott (1990)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feigned deference • Hidden transcripts • Just or egalitarian utopias • Allegorical protests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Material rewards obtained • Legitimization and consolidation of everyday resistance • Barriers to inequality • Ritual redistribution
Balandier (1994)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge of established categories • Transgression, parody, ridicule • Symbolic inversion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of an initiated fraternity • Erosion of boundaries of inequality and limitation of power structures • Strengthening of demands for equality
Butler (1996) Comas (1995) Lamas (1996) Ortner (1979) Rubin (1975)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • De-naturalization of gender • Deconstruction of hegemonic classifications • Re-valuation of the feminine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dismantling of male monopolies • Advances toward gender equity

Source: Own elaboration.

4. Five Symbolic Processes Constructing/Deconstructing Inequalities

So far, I have described separately many symbolic devices that produce or contest inequalities (Tables 1 and 2). But those devices do not operate isolated, they interlace together to form strategies used to produce and reinforce inequality, opposed to other strategies that seek to reduce inequality. Then, if we combine several devices in a strategy, and also confront the opposing strategies, we can design a table that summarizes five main symbolic processes involved in the construction and deconstruction of inequality (Table 3).

Table 3: Five Symbolic Processes Constructing/Deconstructing Inequalities

Symbolic strategies in the construction of inequalities	Symbolic strategies in the deconstruction of inequalities
1. Classification, categorization and creation of boundaries	
Classification, categorization and boundary work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classification, ordering, and grouping • Paired categories • Creation of boundaries and limits between categories • Borders (material, legal, symbolic, visible, invisible, emotional) • Social closures • Crystal ceilings 	Reclassification and boundary trespassing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deconstruction of hegemonic categories • Alternative classifications • Inclusive categories, bridging categories • Egalitarian utopias and communitarian narratives • Ceremonial exchanges, gifts as total social facts • Liminality and ritual creation of <i>communitas</i> • Temporal dissolution of boundaries • Transgression, ridicule and parody (of categories and boundaries)
2. Valuation, devaluation and revaluation	
Overvaluing and undervaluing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attribution of positive and negative characteristics to categories • Overvaluation of one's own group, underevaluation of others' groups • Qualifications of purity and impurity • Stigmatization • Hierarchization • Distinction • Generalizations of superiority/inferiority • Rituals of exclusivity, mystiques of excellence 	Revaluing the subordinate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symbolic inversion of positive and negative characteristics • Overvaluation of the popular, underevaluation of the elites • Idealization of bandits and heroes of the poor • Critique of pureness • Resilience against stigmatization • Questioning of hierarchies • Counter-distinction, alternative scales of values • Claims of equality • Defense of popular culture, derision of the powerful
3. Relations between difference and inequality	
Conversion of differences in inequalities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grammars of identity and alterity • Selfing and othering • Cultural construction of gender, race and ethnicity • Racism, sexism, discrimination • Discourses of homogenization and assimilation • Hierarchization of differences • Grammars of exclusion • Levels of inclusion/exclusion related with sameness and otherness 	Recognition of difference <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assertion of the right to difference • Alternative selfing and othering • Deconstruction of gender, race and ethnicity • Anti-discriminatory discourse • Pluralistic discourses • Equality in the difference, intercultural equality • Grammars of inclusion • Disentanglement of inclusion and sameness
4. Production, acquisition and distribution of symbolic capital	
Construction of unequal individuals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narratives of essential differences • Creation of unequal <i>habitus</i> • Asymmetries in cultural, symbolic, and educational capitals • Symbolic distantiation 	Equalization of capacities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discourses of ontological equality of all human beings • Creation of equivalent <i>habitus</i> • Equalization in cultural, symbolic and educational capitals • Rapprochement
5. Symbolic struggles around the legitimacy of inequalities	
Legitimization of inequalities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Naturalization of inequalities • Justification of unequal results • Internalization of inequality's values, rules and structures 	Resistance to and delegitimization of inequalities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subversion • Moral economy of the poor • Legitimization of everyday resistance • Hidden transcripts • Allegorical protests • Ritual redistribution

Source: Own elaboration.

4.1 Classification, Categorization and Creation of Boundaries

First of all there are the processes of classification, categorization and creation of boundaries between categories, that are the basis on which many other symbolic processes work. On the side of the construction of inequalities, a fundamental strategy is classification of people in categories or groups, ordered in a hierarchic way. The separation between the groups must also be conserved, which is why the devices that establish limits and maintain social distances also come into play. Thus, the work of re-producing symbolic and emotional barriers creates social closures, produces situations of inclusion-exclusion, and maintains material, economic, and political limits that separate groups (Elias 2006; Lamont and Fournier 1992). On the basis of that separation, social closures, glass ceilings and many other ways of inclusion and exclusion can be created. Tilly's texts about categorical inequality clearly show this strategy.

At the same time, the opposite strategy heads toward equality, is the one of re-classification and border transgression. There are symbolic actions that dissolve, relativize, or suspend the differences between social actors, creating among them feelings and notions of equality, solidarity, friendship and belonging in a community. Leveling and egalitarian myths and narratives work in this way, whether they are religious, political, social, or philosophical in nature, as do the rituals that produce inclusion or *communitas* and symbolic processes that communicate that we are all equal. The groups that are at a disadvantage in the inequality relations can criticize hegemonic categories, propose alternative classifications, create more inclusive categories, or trespass and ridicule the categories and borders that separate them. The categories should not be seen as something static, but as historical classification and re-classification processes where different powers oppose and where the borders among groups are continuously redefined.

4.2 Valuation, Devaluation and Revaluation

The second process has to do with the relative value assigned to the categories (valuation, de-valuation and re-valuation). Here it is possible to identify a dominant strategy of overestimating one's own characteristics. Each agent tries to confer positive characteristics on the social group he belongs to. The over-valuing of the self, self-qualifications of purity, and those operations that present the privileges held as the result of divine providence or of the possession of special traits operate in this line. The mystique of excellence and distinction would also constitute variants of these mechanisms, in that they present gains in status as the result of effort, intelligence,

elegance, good taste, culture, education, beauty, or any other characteristic possessed by the group. As a complement are the symbolic tools that attribute negative characteristics to other groups, such as stigmatization, demonizing, labeling as impure, belittling, or under-valuing the external or the foreign. All of them legitimate the inferior status of the others by identifying physical, social, or cultural traits of lesser value or adequacy.

Just as for strategies against classification and categorization, working in the opposite direction, one can find the strategy of re-valuing the subordinate. This strategy produces a symbolic inversion of which are the positive and negative characteristics, re-values the popular, and criticizes the discourses of pureness and excellence. It also includes resilience against stigmatization and questioning of hierarchies. Re-valuing the subordinate implies a counter-distinction narrative, supported by alternative scales of value, opposite of that of hegemonic groups. The evaluation of groups and individuals is not a unidirectional power device, with only one regime of truth (Foucault 1977: 23), but a contested arena in where various groups dispute different regimes of value (Appadurai 1991).

4.3 Relations between Difference and Inequality

The third symbolic process points to the relation between difference and inequality. The hegemonic strategy is the conversion of differences in inequalities. The creation of a cultural and affective distance is fundamental to making distances and differences of another nature possible. The degree of inequality that a society tolerates has to do with how different the excluded and exploited are considered to be. In this sense, the strategy of turning those that are different into non-equals is fundamental. Here operates what Gerd Baumann (2004) calls the grammars of identity and alterity, that is, the rules of selfing of othering, the classificatory structures to define who belongs to the “us” and who is from the “others”. The cultural construction of gender, race and ethnicity is a very good example of these grammars. The homogenization and assimilation discourses exclude those who are different – or include them but as second class citizens – they also establish levels of inclusion/exclusion related with sameness and otherness.

The opposite strategy faces towards acknowledgement and respect of the right to difference. The acknowledgment strategy seeks that those who are different can participate in socially equitable conditions. In order to do that it deconstructs gender, race and ethnicity. It also includes alternative ways of constructing identity and alterity, whether it is affirming subaltern identities or promoting more open and flexible identities.

In this strategy the discourses in favor of pluralism and against discrimination, as well as all of those that follow an inclusive grammar, that break the link between alterity and exclusion are included.

4.4 Production, Acquisition and Distribution of Symbolic Capital

A fourth key process is the production, acquisition and distribution of symbolic capital. In the inequality pole of this process are the cultural devices that generate asymmetries in the educational, symbolic and cultural capitals distribution. The notion of *habitus* of Pierre Bourdieu (1988) expresses in a precise way how the symbolic structure of the contemporary societies produces individuals with deeply unequal willingness and capacities. The inequality of capacities is a social product, however, it has the appearance of being the result of the personal characteristics of the individuals. It is fundamental for distantiation, an inequality producing mechanism that Göran Therborn considers: “The main road to increasing inequality today. It is the most subtle of mechanisms, the one most difficult to pin down morally and politically” (Therborn 2009: 5).

The opposite strategy is the equalization of capacities. This strategy includes all the narratives about the ontological equality of all human beings. More important than narratives are the symbolic mechanisms that produce equalization in the cultural, symbolic and educational capitals. Achieving more equality in capacities is an inescapable requisite for fairness in contemporary societies. Asymmetries in *habitus* is one of the more stubborn features of inequalities, but there are also forces that push forward to reduce those asymmetries, specially the efforts of millions of individuals to catch up and get rapprochement.

4.5 Symbolic Struggles around the Legitimacy of Inequalities

Finally, there are the symbolic struggles around the legitimacy of inequality. Some of the strategies analyzed above (classing, overvaluing/devaluing, converting differences on inequalities, and constructing unequal individuals) contribute to the justification of inequalities, but a fifth strategy, aimed specifically at legitimization, could also be considered. It involves symbolic tools that present the particular interests of one group as if they were universal, that is, as if their satisfaction benefited the entire society. Discourses that naturalize inequality, or that consider it inevitable or normal, also fall in this category. For them to work, it is fundamental for the privileged to convince the rest of the society that the portions of wealth appropriated are legitimate rewards for contributions made in common enterprises (Kelley and Evans 1993). The

discourses that legitimize inequality are very powerful, however their strength must not be exaggerated. Most people disapprove of inequalities that are very large or that are not the product of effort. There are discourses that criticize inequalities and present them as the product of an abuse or result of an illegitimate process. Sometimes this criticism is not presented in a direct way, but as hidden transcripts and allegorical protests. Everything that contributes to legitimize equality and the actions that seek a more fair resource distribution must also be considered: the moral economy of the poor, the ritual redistribution, and the legitimization of everyday resistance against injustices.

Inequality is not a fixed and invariable state, but rather a configuration that results from the tension between contradictory tendencies, continuously reproduced but always challenged. Experts on reciprocity point out that the logic of distinction is present in ceremonial gift-giving and exchange, since giving is a way to acquire status and to obligate the receiver to acquire a debt with the giver. "There is no free gift," Mary Douglas noted with clarity (Douglas 1989: 99). Malinowski and Boas also demonstrated that in the *kula* and the *potlach* there was a competition for prestige. Gifts, like many other institutions, are permeated by the dialectic between hierarchy and equity. Here, again, Mauss serves as a lucid guide; he considers giving to be a sign of superiority. Gifts and frenetic consumption establish hierarchies between lords and vassals, but there is also a dimension of gratuity to the gift. It is not dominated by simple generosity, nor by a simple utilitarian interest, but rather, as Mauss points out, by a "sort of hybrid" (Mauss 1979 [1924]: 253).

Therefore, it is not that some societies are exclusively organized around community bonds, giving, and reciprocity, while others are only guided by competition, profit, and hierarchies. Rather, in the majority of cases, all of these elements exist in a contradictory tension, but with different levels of intensity and different composition. There is a continuum where hunter-gatherer groups are at one extreme – with commerce, hierarchies, and distinctions reduced to a minimum – and where contemporary capitalist societies are at the other – with mercantile exchange, the search for profit, and inequalities proliferating on all sides. However, in the former, there is exchange of women and certain competition for status, while in the latter, gift giving continues, albeit restricted and weak, along with many compensatory institutions and dynamics. It could be said that in the former, prestige is constrained by interpersonal bonds and egalitarian beliefs, while in the latter the logics of the market, the state, and hierarchies intrude upon reciprocity, but reciprocity has not disappeared completely, and on occasions it reappears and is reconstructed. In any case, between the two extremes, there are an enormous variety of combinations.

The cargo system in Zinacantan, in Chiapas, Mexico, illustrates the dialectic between distinction and equity. In this indigenous community, the members who want to ascend in the hierarchy do so by holding ceremonial positions, which obligates them to distribute a large part of their wealth among the members of their community, through significant expenditures for community festivities:

Mexican cargo system rites illustrate this ritual mixing of symbols of equality and hierarchy in a very different class of social system. Among the Indians of Zinacantan, an egalitarian ideology prevails, reinforced by the belief that those who grow wealthy must be witches and are to be dealt with accordingly. The cargo system is a complex ritual in which men can progress over the course of their lives up a hierarchy of offices in the communal ritual cycle. In order to occupy the higher rungs of this ladder, and thus acquire prestige, a man must be relatively wealthy, for the expenses connected with the ritual responsibilities are considerable. He must pay for a variety of community feasts and celebrations. Through these rites, the man is able to transform wealth into publicly recognized status, in spite of the otherwise tenacious adherence of the villagers to an egalitarian ideology (Kertzer 1988: 51-52).

It is useful here to recall Victor Turner's analysis of the connection between structure, counter-structure, and anti-structure, and their modification in the ritual field (Turner 1987). Bourdieu's description of the dynamic between classing, de-classing, and re-classing in contemporary societies is also pertinent (Bourdieu 1988). Both of them highlight the negotiated and disputed nature of boundaries and limits between groups of status and class, which must be constantly redefined. Norbert Elias also points out that the relations between established people and outsiders are subject to struggles for power equilibriums, in which the outsider groups tacitly or openly push for the reduction of power differentials, while the established groups push to preserve or increase those differentials (Elias 2006: 239).

Many rituals serve to elevate individuals' ranks, to allow them to acquire a superior status, and, in that sense, to give way to a variety of inequalities and hierarchies. Rituals can, however, equalize and balance as well. This same duality runs through all symbolic constructions. They exclude and include, elevate and denigrate, dissolve classifications as much as reinforcing them, erect and demolish boundaries, legitimate the powerful and question domination. There is no sense in attributing to cultural processes and devices an *a priori* function of producing equity or generating distinctions, since both possibilities exist and the effects of equality or inequality depend greatly on context, on

the symbolic dynamic, and on agents' interests and actions. Therefore, the dynamics of interaction must be analyzed in each concrete case.

Culture is a fundamental dimension of all social phenomenon. Culture does not only legitimize inequalities, it also constructs and deconstructs. In some cases the symbolic processes can produce inequality in a direct way. One of them is the one of the asymmetries in the access to symbolic goods (for example, education and culture), because in that case the symbolic devices directly generate an unequal distribution of such goods. Another case is what Göran Therborn calls existential inequality: "the unequal recognition of human individuals as persons. This creates an *existential inequality*, which allocates freedom and unfreedom in the pursuit of personal life projects, rights, and prohibition to act, and distributes affirmations and denials of recognition and respect" (Therborn 2006: 7, italics in the original). Here, the symbolic act (acknowledgment or lack of it) is also a direct way an inequality producing mechanism (although it can be accompanied by other mechanisms, for example of a judicial nature).

Despite this, in most cases culture is just one of the many components of the causal chain that produces inequalities. In general, the influence of culture is indirect and acts along with other factors. A good example of this is the analysis that Charles Tilly made about the relation between paired categories and persistent inequalities:

Categories do not in themselves produce deep, durable inequality. That depends on their combination with a second configuration: hierarchy. Categorical inequality depends on the conjunction of a well-defined boundary separating two sites with a set of asymmetrical social ties connecting actors in the two sites. [...] Categorical inequality survives, finally, to the extents that sites attach unequally to flows of resources that sustain their interaction (Tilly 1998: 99-100).

As it can be seen, the symbolic processes (creation of paired categories and border definition among categories) are entwined with a political process (establishment of a hierarchy), with a socio-institutional process (development of asymmetric social ties) and with economic processes (resource flow). The conjunction of these four dimensions – symbol, power, social tie and value – is the one that best explains the whole chain of production of inequalities. Accordingly, research of inequality will benefit tremendously if the symbolic dimensions are included in the analysis. It will gain even more if it finds the way to entwine cultural aspects with power relations, social interactions, and economic dynamics.

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