Manufacturing Social Solidarity

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Understanding Inequality

Looking out over the world, both the rich industrial nations as well as the less developed countries, it is striking how large differences there are in social, economic and political equality. Measures of political, social and legal rights as well as respect for human rights vary enormously between countries (Bohara et al. 2008; Donnelly 2003). The same goes for measures of economic inequality and measures of social well-being such as poverty, literacy and population health. It is also the case that there is not only variation between countries but also huge

variation within countries regarding most measures of social, economic and "de facto" political equality (Piketty 2015, Pontusson 2005; Jefferson 2012; Norris 2012; Therborn 2013). Another example is the variation in the percentage of children that live in poverty which is much lower in some countries than in others although they have the same level of general prosperity. In fact, some very rich countries have more children living in poverty than countries that are not so prosperous (Halleröd et al. 2013). In addition, in all democracies, possibilities to influence public policy vary systematically with social class and economic resources. Moreover, the overall development within most of the rich capitalist market oriented countries is that inequality has increased over the last two or three decades (Piketty 2014; OECD 2011; Therborn 2013). Social solidarity, understood as a practice that increases equality in equal treatment by the state and in overall life chances is thus something that varies a lot both between and within countries. From a normative perspective on social justice, all this is certainly problematic but from an empirical social science perspective, this variation can be used for explanatory purposes to answer the following question: What makes some societies more prone to social justice than others?

The normative starting point for this article is based on the results from several empirical studies showing that for a vast majority of people, human well-being would be improved if political and social inequality would decrease (Radcliff 2013; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Hall and Lamont 2009). The problem is how this can manufactured given a) available knowledge and b) resources? This article is an effort to summarize the policy relevant results of a large amount of both philosophical and empirical research into this problem since it is my firm believe that both types of research are needed for answering the question of how to "manufacture" social solidarity.

A second point of departure for this article is that the level of solidarity in a country is not culturally determined. For example, the Nordic countries are not more egalitarian and less corrupt than Italy, the UK, Kenya, Brazil, Hungary or the US because there is something special with the Nordic culture. This is an often heard argument, for example, John Roemer argues that the reason the Nordic countries developed more extensive system of redistribution is due to the educational and

cultural homogeneity of their population (Roemer 2009). The problem is that his argument is empirically unsubstantiated and from what is known from the historical research about history of class structure in the Nordic countries, inaccurate. For example, Finland had very low levels of education well into the first decades of the 20th century and a severe conflict between the Finnish and Swedish speaking population (Uslaner and Rothstein 2016). Moreover, the country endured a gruesome civil war in 1918 in which, as a percentage of the population, more people were killed than in the Spanish Civil War during the 1930s. The broad based political support for redistribution was instead constructed "from above" by the universal (or near universal) design of the policies (Rothstein 1998). The same broad based support for universal type of social policies can be found in the UK for the National Health Service (Klein 2010) and in the United States for Social Security (Béland 2005). It is thus the institutional design of the programs, not the specific national culture that determines the type of a country's social policies. In political terms, designing institutions is thus the sophisticated equivalent to designing policies (Tsebelis 1990). This is because institutions (understood as formal rules and "standard operating procedures" in organizations) have a large impact on what future agents come to understand as being in their interest and/or being in line with their social norms. To be more precise, if increased social justice is the goal, thinking about how to design the institutions that deliver the policies is of the outmost importance.

What should social solidarity be about?

Anyone who is interested in a more equal and just society needs to be in possession of a correct understanding of "the nature of the problem". To achieve this, one has to answer three questions. The first is the "what is it" question, namely what should equality be about? The second is the "how to get it" question, that is, what can be expected from (the vast majority of) humans when it comes to their propensity for solidarity. The third question is about strategy, namely how to make social solidarity politically (electorally) sustainable.

The first question – equality of what? – has turned out to be complicated (Sen 1979). In an era of "conspicuous consumption" and increased individualism and social heterogeneity, it is difficult to argue that the government has a responsibility to equalize all or even most forms of consumption. First, consumption cannot be an end in itself and secondly, we should reward ambition and maybe also talent. The best answers to the question "equality of what" have been given by liberal right-based philosophers such as John Rawls, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (Rawls 1971; Sen 2010; Nussbaum 2001). They differ in certain important respects, but they agree that equality should be about guaranteeing access to a specific set of goods and services that are important for people in order for them to be capable to realize their various potentials as human beings. The central term for Rawls is "primary goods", and for Sen and Nussbaum "capabilities". The terminology implies that the problem is not to equalize economic resources or social status as such, but to ensure all individuals a set of *basic resources* that will equalize their chances to reach their full potential as humans. Standards are access to high quality health care and education, basic food and shelter, equality in civil and political rights, equal protection under the laws, basic social services and social insurance systems that support people that for various reasons cannot generate enough resources from their own work, support for persons with disabilities, etc. The set of such capabilities enhancing goods and services can of course vary, but it is important to realize that equality, as a politically viable concept, has to be about specific things.[1] There is simply no way we, by political means, can equalize the ability to be a skilled musician, to be creative, to be loved, to be an outstanding researcher, a good parent or a first rate ballet dancer. What *is* possible to do by political means is to increase the possibility for those who happen to have ambitions in these (and many other) fields to realize their talents even if they have not entered this world with huge endowments. This can be done by giving them access to a certain bundle of goods and services that are likely to enhance their capabilities of reaching their full potential as human beings.

[1] Increased equality in the work life and in the family is for sure also important, but for reasons of space, I leave this out.

One implication from this that is very important is that *equality should be about individuals, not collectives* such as classes, groups, clans or tribes whether these are based on social class, occupation, kinship, religion, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientations or any other form of collective categorization. One reason for this is that many of these community belongings or identities are floating and that branding individuals (especially children and young people) into such collectives by administrative means can result in gross violations of their human rights (Okin and Cohen 1999; Talbott 2005; Neier 2002). A second, and more important argument, is that there is no guarantee that the majority in groups like these will not oppress or exploit individuals that are put under their surveillance or, even worse, jurisdiction (Talbott 2005; Rawls 2005). In sum, arguments for increased equality should not be based on utilitarian group theory but on theories about individual rights.

It should be emphasized that the idea of giving all citizens equal access to a set of primary goods or basic resources that will increase the likelihood that they can fulfil their potential as human beings is in itself problematic. The reason is that while some "basic resources" are mostly procedural (equal protection under the laws, civil and political rights), others are substantial (health care, education, social services, social insurance schemes). The substantial type is problematic because the majority's preference for whatever set of such primary goods/basic resources can be seen as very controversial for various minorities. Even such a, usually uncontroversial, "primary good" as access to secondary education has been contested by ethnic-religious groups (e.g. the Amish group in the United States) as a threat to the survival of their culture since it dramatically increases the risk that their children/daughters will leave their communities. The problem is of course that the children deprived of such education will have to forsake many roads in life in which they may have realized their potential. There seems to be no perfect solution to this problem other than that this calls for a fair amount of tolerance and respect for human rights in the implementation of any set of "primary goods" policies.

Reciprocity is the main template for human behaviour

When striving for a more equal society, it is important to start from a correct understanding of "human nature", especially if you want your reforms to have a lasting (sustainable) impact. Ideas about the "basic human nature" have had a long history in the social sciences that has now, I believe, finally been resolved mostly by experimental research (Fehr and Fischbacher 2005; Henrich et al. 2001; Gintis et al. 2005; Bicchieri 2006; cf. Ostrom 1998). To make a long story short, the idea of man as a "homo economicus" has simply been refuted by this type of research. The results from laboratory-, fieldwork-, and survey research speaking against man as a utility-maximizing rational agent is by now overwhelming. Self-interest is for sure an important ingredient when people decide how to act, but it is far from as dominating as has been portrayed in neo-classic economics. Moreover, it would be impossible to create solidaristic or cooperative institutions of any kind (including democracy, the rule of law and respect for property rights) if individual utility-maximizing self-interest would be "the only game in town". The reason is that such individuals would always fall for the temptation to "free-ride" and if a majority do this, such institutions would never be established and if they existed (for some other reason) they would soon be destroyed. If all agents act out of the template prescribed in neo-classic economic theory, they will sooner or later outsmart themselves into a suboptimal equilibrium. Also known as a "social trap" this is situation where all agents will be worse off because even if they know they would all gain from cooperation, lacking trust that the others will cooperate, they will themselves abstain from cooperation (Rothstein 2005b).

However, this new experimental (and to some extent field) research does not present humans as benevolent altruists (Henrich and Henrich 2007; Bicchieri and Xiao 2009). True, there is altruistic behaviour, but it is usually restricted to very small circles of family and close friends. Or it is simply too rare and also too unpredictable for building sustainable systems for solidarity at a societal level. This lesson is important since it tells us that trying to mobilize political support for

increased equality by referring only to peoples' altruistic motives is likely to fail (Svallfors 2007). What comes out from this research is instead that *reciprocity is the basic human orientation.* The central idea here is that people are not so much motivated "from the back" by utility-based calculations or culturally induced norms. Instead, human behaviour is to a large extent determined by forward looking strategic thinking in the sense that *what agents do, depends on what they think the other agents are going to do* (Gintis et al. 2005). Experimental studies show that people are willing to do "the right thing" but only if they can be convinced that most others are willing to do the same (Bicchieri and Xiao 2009). Thus, the idea of reciprocity recasts fundamentally how we should understand and explain human behaviour. Instead of looking backwards to what causes variation in utility-based interests or culturally induced norms, the important thing is to understand how people's forward looking perceptions about "other people" are constructed. Historical experiences and "collective memories" certainly play a role here, but research also shows that people update their perceptions based on new information (Boyd et al. 2010).

Regarding the prospect for solidarity, results from research show that most people are willing to engage in solidaristic cooperation for common goals even if they will not personally benefit from this materially (Levi 1998). However, for this to happen, three specific conditions have to be in place. First, people have to be convinced that the policy is morally justified (substantial justice). Secondly, people have to be convinced that most other agents can be trusted to also cooperate (solidaristic justice), that is that other agents are likely to abstain from "free-riding". Thirdly, people have to be convinced that the policy can be implemented in a fair and even-handed manner (procedural justice) (Levi 1991; Rothstein 1998). For the first issue, the work from the philosophers mentioned above will come in handy. The second requirement, which is as important for generating support for solidarity for policies for increased equality, has to be resolved *by institutional design* where knowledge from research in policy implementation and public administration in general are needed. For example: It is not difficult to argue that universal access to high quality health care and sickness insurance qualifies as a "primary good" in the above mentioned sense. However, if a majority cannot be convinced that a) most people will pay the increased taxes required for producing these goods, or that b)

the good will not be delivered in a manner that is acceptable, fair and respectful, they are not likely to support this policy (Rothstein et al. 2011). If the health personnel are known to be corrupt, unprofessional or disrespectful, support for this policy will dwindle. The same goes for sickness insurance. People are likely to support insurance for people that are ill, but if perceptions of misuse or overuse (that is, "free-riding") become widespread, support will decline (Svallfors 2013; Rothstein 2011). In other words, *solidarity is conditioned on the institutional design of the systems that are supposed to bring about the policies that will enhance equality*. This has been formulated in the following words by John Rawls:

> A just system must generate its own support. This means that it must be arranged so as to bring about in its members the corresponding sense of justice, an effective desire to act in accordance with its rules for reasons and justice. Thus, the requirements of stability and the criterion of discouraging desires that conflict with the principles of justice put further constraints on institutions. They must not only be just but framed so as to encourage the virtue of justice in those who take part in them (Rawls 1971, p. 261).

The central idea in this quote is how Rawls specifies that for making a solidaristic system sustainable, we have to be aware of the existence of a "feed-back mechanism" between people's support for just principles and their perceptions of the *quality of the institutions* that are set up to implement these principles (Kumlin 2004). Recent empirical research strongly supports Rawls argument in the sense that individuals' perceptions of forms of unfairness (or inefficiency) in the public services influences political views about support for social solidarity. Using survey data for 29 European countries that includes questions about the fairness of public authorities (health sector and tax authorities) as well as questions about ideological leanings and policy preferences, Svallfors (2013) has shown the following: Citizens that have a preference for more economic equality but that lives in a country where they perceive that the quality of government institutions is low, will in the same survey indicate that they prefer lower taxes and less social spending. However, the same "ideological type" of respondent but who happens to live in a European

country where he or she believes that the authorities that implement policies are basically just and fair, will answer that he or she is willing to pay higher taxes for more social spending. This result is supported in a study using aggregate data about welfare state spending and quality of government for Western liberal democracies (Rothstein et al. 2011) – the higher the quality of government the more countries will spend also when they control for variables that measures political mobilization and electoral success from left parties. To summarize my interpretation of these studies – citizens that live in a country where they perceive that corruption or other forms of unfairness in the public administration is common are likely to be less supportive of the idea that the state should take responsibility for policies for increased social justice even if they ideologically support the goals such policies have. The most likely reason is that they will believe that their solidarity will not be reciprocated.

It is important to realize that reciprocity also has a dark side. History and many contemporary events as well as experimental evidence show that "ordinary people" are willing to engage in the most horrible atrocities to other people (again, also if they do not personally benefit from their actions) if they are convinced that those "other people" would otherwise harm them. However, bad reciprocity also exists in less dramatic (and horrible) circumstances. Distrust in other agents or in the institutions may lead to a vicious circle that can break any system or policy set up to increase solidarity. Again, Rawls did clearly see this problem between institutional design and support for justice (which has sadly been neglected by most of his followers in political philosophy):

> For although men know that they share a common sense of justice and that each wants to adhere to existing arrangements, they may nevertheless lack full confidence in one another. They may suspect that some are not doing their part, and so they may be tempted not to do theirs. The general awareness of these temptations may eventually cause the scheme to break down. The suspicion that others are not honoring their duties and obligations is increased by the fact that, in absence of the authoritative

> interpretation and enforcement of the rules, it is particularly easy to find excuses for breaking them (Rawls 1971, p. 240).

It is clear that Rawls pointed to the problem of reciprocity in the form of trust in others ("confidence") and that he argues that it is the existence of institutional arrangements that can handle "free-riding" and other forms of anti-solidaristic and opportunistic behaviour that are needed to avoid that systems based on principles of justice break down.

Thus, we arrive at the conclusion that regarding justice, the basic nature of human behaviour – reciprocity – can go both ways. On the one hand, the idea of reciprocity stands against the cynicism about human nature that has been central to interest-based theories that has dominated most economic approaches in the social sciences (Ostrom 1998, 2000). On the other hand, reciprocity is also in conflict with a naïve idea about human nature as genuinely benevolent, which many equality-enhancing policies have been built on. Instead, reciprocity tells us that if we through the design of institutions can make people trust that most other agents in their society will behave in a trustworthy and solidaristic manner, they will do likewise. If not, they will defect, even if the outcome will be detrimental to their interests.

That reciprocity can go in different directions is also what we see if we take just a simple look at most of the rankings of countries' performance that have now become abundant. The level of corruption, to take just one example, shows staggering differences between countries (Rothstein 2011). This particular "social bad" also serves as a good example of why reciprocity is a better starting point for understanding human behaviour than its rivals. If we relied on cultural explanations, we would have to say to our sisters and brothers in, for example, Nigeria that the extremely high level of corruption in their country is caused by their corrupt culture. Or if we started from interest based explanations, we would be unable to explain why the huge variation of corruption exists without relying on either genetic or cultural explanations. However, if we base our explanations on the idea of reciprocity, the explanation for the high level of corruption in, for example, Pakistan is that the institutions in place makes it reasonable for most people to

believe that most other agents will be engaged in corrupt practices, and thus they have no reason not to engage in these practices themselves (Rothstein 2010). Simply put, it makes no sense to be the only honest policeman in a thoroughly corrupt police force. It is important to underline that, contrary to what is taken for granted in neo-classical economics, we have absolutely no reason to believe that societies (or any group of agents) are able to produce the type of institutions that they would prosper from. A quick look at available measures shows that a vast majority of the world's population live under either deeply or fairly corrupt public authorities (Holmberg and Rothstein 2012). This, it should be added, turns out to have devastating effects on their prosperity, social well-being and possibility to launch policies that will increase equality.

Enters Social Trust

A central conclusion is thus that reciprocity, as the baseline for human agency, can go in two directions. One will result in more solidaristic cooperation for increased equality and thereby increased human well-being. The other one is exactly the opposite resulting in all sorts of bad outcomes such as high levels of corruption, discrimination, civil strife, massive exploitation and ethnic cleansing even in democratic societies (Mann 2005). Given what is known from the record of human history, it is not advisable to be naïve in these matters. We should never forget that even societies known for their high level of civilization have shown themselves to be capable of the worst imaginable forms of atrocities.

The most important thing we need to know is then what it is that makes reciprocity turn bad or good. Theory and research gives a reasonably clear answer to what determines the direction reciprocity will take society, namely the level of social or generalized interpersonal trust. Simply put, if most people in a society believe that most other people in that society can be trusted, they have good reasons to support policies that are based on solidarity and thereby will increase equality as it has been specified above. However, if they believe that most people should not be trusted, the outcome will be the opposite (Svallfors 2013; Rothstein 2011).

As with corruption, research on social trust (and the related concept of social capital) has increased tremendously since the mid-1990s. This is in part because empirical research shows that high levels of social trust at the individual level is connected to a number of important factors such as tolerance towards minorities, participation in public life, education, health, and subjective well-being. At the societal level, high trust societies have more extensive and generous social welfare systems (Rothstein and Uslaner 2005). However, how to understand a concept like social trust is not easy; obviously when asked in surveys, most people do not really know if most other people in their society can be trusted. One interpretation is that social trust is an expression of optimism about the future (Uslaner 2002). Another interpretation is that when people answer the survey question if they believe (or not) that most other people can be trusted, they are in fact answering another question, namely that they are making an evaluation of the moral standard of the society in which they live (Delhey and Newton 2003). Both interpretations should be seen as answers to the central question for the way in which reciprocity will turn, namely what people believe about what other people will do if they try to engage in some collaborative effort with them. Again, the notion of reciprocity says that what people do depends on what they think other people will do, and this is likely to be determined by how they think about other people's trustworthiness, which of course can be seen as how they interpret the general moral standing of their society. For the case of creating a more equal society, the results are quite clear. Although not a perfect correlation, societies with more interpersonal trust have more political, economic and social equality, including gender equality (Rothstein 2005b). It is important to note that I am here referring to what is known as generalized trust, that is, trust in people in general of whom there is no way to have anything that comes close to perfect information. This is different from particularistic trust which refers to trust in small groups of friends, clans or (social and professional) cliques. Such inward or group-based trust can often lead to severe social conflicts that are detrimental to human well-being (Mann 2005).

An important result from recent research is that people from cultures where interpersonal trust is very low do not keep their low social trust when they have moved to a society where interpersonal trust is high. Instead, they update their trust

in other people based on new information of how trust-relations operate in their new society (Dinesen 2011). Most important for the issue discussed here is how they perceive the trustworthiness of other agents in their new society and especially how they perceive the fairness of the public institutions that exist in their new society (Dinesen 2011). This shows that propensity for social solidarity is not culturally determined but can be influenced by institutional design.

Political Institutions, Social Trust and Social Justice

How then, can generalized trust be generated? Again, recent empirical research gives a reasonably clear answer to this question. A high level of generalized trust is caused by what has been called high quality government institutions, especially the institutions that implement public policies (Stolle 2003). The central basic norm for these institutions is impartiality. This implies that things like discrimination (whether based on ethnicity, gender, class, etc.), corruption (in its many forms), clientelism, nepotism and political favouritism are very rare or non-existent when public officials or professionals implement public policies. Social trust is thus not generated "from below", for example from civil society or voluntary associations, but "from above", by how people perceive the fairness and competence of government institutions (Rothstein 2011). Thus, *designing institutions that implement public policy is to create (or destroy) social trust*. The reason for this effect is that when people make up their mind if most people in their society can be trusted, they make an inference from how they perceive the authorities. If the local policeman, schoolteacher, social insurance administrator, judge or doctor cannot be trusted (because they discriminate against people like you, or ask for bribes, or give preferential treatments to some groups, etc.), then it is reasonable to assume that neither should you trust "people in general" in your society. And vice versa, if they are known to be honest, impartial, competent and fair, then it is likely that this will spill over to "people in general". Moreover, if the public authorities are known to be engaged in the type of "bad" practices mentioned above, then many people will come to think that in order to get what they need in life (immunization to their children, building permits, employment in the public sector, etc.) most people will

have to be engaged in these kinds of bad practices, and thus they should not be trusted (Rothstein 2011) The empirical evidence from both experimental and survey research gives a very strong support for this theory of how social trust is generated "from above" (Rothstein 2013).

For social policy and many other policies that are intended to cater to increased equality in the above mentioned sense, this has a number of implications regarding institutional design. The most important is to strive for universal systems and avoid, as much as possible, all systems that are directed to supporting specific groups and/or entail bureaucratic discretion (Rothstein 2002). Universal programs, like for example universal child allowances, universal pre-schools and schools, universal pensions, universal health care, are to be favoured instead of specific programs directed to specific groups like "the poor", to certain minorities, or to women, etc. The reasons for universalism are fivefold: First, universal systems entail a minimum of (if any) bureaucratic discretion. Thereby, not only corruption, but all forms of bureaucratic intrusions connected to needs-testing can be avoided. Secondly, since universal programs in principle cater to "all", they will include the middle class and thereby almost automatically secure a political majority and thereby make the program politically sustainable. Programs that are built solely on interest group mobilization will always be vulnerable to interest-based counter-mobilization. Universal programs also avoid an "us and them" division of society. Thirdly, universal programs avoid the problem of stigmatization of specific groups and individual "stereotype-threat" that was mentioned above. Fourth, although they give benefits also to "rich" people, universal programs turn out to be very redistributive, more so than programs which "take from the rich and give to the poor". The reasons are that the benefits are usually nominal in money or costs of services, but taxes are either proportional to income or progressive (Korpi and Palme 1998; Rothstein 1998). Even when universal programs are income-related, such as for example many pension systems in more developed countries, there is usually a "cap" which makes them redistributive. Fifth, universal programs, especially when it comes to services like education or elderly care, will usually be of high quality since the need to keep the more well-to-do people "on board" will make it difficult for politicians to lower the quality of the services if they want to

stay in power. In sum, universal programs have the capacity to "generate their own support" as stated by John Rawls above.

Admittedly, there are policies when universal institutions will not work. It is difficult to have a universal policy for active labour market policy since each unemployed person is different and will need different types of support in order to find a new job. The same goes for much of social assistance to dysfunctional families since each decision of whether or not to take a child into custody must be based on a professional judgement of the specificities of the particular case. In these areas, it is important to try as much as possible to use other means to ensure impartiality and fairness in how decisions are made in the implementation process. High quality training for professionals and civil servants, systems for accountability and control, possibilities to appeal, are but a few such possibilities.

Conclusions

The result from using the constructive theory approach for the problem of how to increase social solidarity can be summarized in one sentence. *High quality of government institutions will increase the level of social trust, which will make reciprocity turn into solidarity, which in turn will increase the possibility for creating sustainable social solidarity.* The most counterintuitive result from this analysis is perhaps that in order to support the "needy", "poor", or "discriminated" one should avoid policies that are directed specifically at these groups. Because of their lack of interest in the implementation issues and also research about public opinion about support for policies for social justice, many well-known political philosophers have failed to see this. The issues about how people perceive the fairness, impartiality and justice in the implementation of policies for social justice have been greatly underestimated. When striving for increased social solidarity, universal policies are much more likely to be implemented in ways that are considered fair, impartial and just than are policies that are targeted to specific groups. Moreover, it is countries that "taxes all" and "supports all" through universal programs that succeeds in redistribution while countries that "taxes the rich to give to the poor" fail to do so. The logic is quite simple, services and

benefits intended “for the poor” are likely to be “poor” services and benefits thereby increasing stigmatization of the group one wants to support. If the “middle class” is left out of the system for social solidarity, there will neither be an electoral majority for policies for social solidarity nor enough taxes to pay for such policies. To paraphrase Rawls, such a system for social justice will be unable to generate its own support.

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