

12. Untangling economic and political inequality: the case of South Africa

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This contribution proposes three lenses through which political inequality can be understood: voice, representation and influence. Using the example of South Africa, the contribution goes on to explore how political inequalities are created and reinforced. The analysis demonstrates how socio-economic inequalities powerfully shape all three dimensions of political inequality. Poor communities have responded to this exclusion through the use of protest in order to disrupt their political marginalization as well as their socio-economic exclusion. South Africa illustrates the deep interconnections of economic, social and political inequalities, ones which can only be broken through new forms of political action.

Introduction

Understanding the interrelationships between political and other forms of inequality is a critical challenge for social scientists, policy-makers and activists alike. For those concerned with building and deepening democracy, a fundamental premise is that while broad social and economic inequalities may exist in society, they will be countered by the relative equality of all citizens to exercise voice in the future of their own affairs. From a rights perspective, the provision and protection of equal political rights is seen as a prerequisite to the realization of other socio-economic rights. And from a development perspective, the recently approved Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10 on reducing inequality includes the objectives of achieving political inclusion and voice within and between countries, as well as those that speak to countering economic and social inequality alone.

But while the normative imperatives for political equality are high, our empirical understanding of where, when and how social and economic inequalities affect the distribution of political inequality is relatively limited. Social science research is largely based in Western democracies, particularly the USA. Against this backdrop, this article seeks to review the meanings of political inequality. We then consider South Africa to understand further how intersecting social, economic and political inequalities affect political voice, representation and power today.

What do we mean by political inequality?

Unlike economic inequality, with its widely understood measures of inequality such as the Gini coefficient of income, there are few common measures of political inequality across contexts (Dubrow, 2010). At least three different measures are commonly used.

The most common approach is to understand political inequality as differences in political voice and participation (sometimes also referred to as civic or voice inequality). These are often measured through indicators of who votes or otherwise participates in both formal and informal processes of governance. Such literature usually argues that economic and social inequalities impede political voice and participation in a number of ways. They may weaken subjective incentives to participate, through eroding trust in government institutions, or contribute to a sense of powerlessness or an internalized acceptance of the status quo. They may weaken group-level cooperation and coordination, reducing the possibilities of collective action and mobilization (Justino, 2015). Or they may contribute to the creation of external obstacles to participation, through the lack of resources of those at the bottom to engage, the creation of political and administrative barriers, or through the hard powers of coercion and violence against those who would challenge inequities in the status quo.

For others, however, political inequality is understood less in terms of who participates and more in terms of political representation and inclusion, for instance who gets to the political table. Measures of political inequality in this area point to a lack of representation in political office on the basis of race, gender, class, ethnicity, disability or other forms of discrimination. Regarding intersecting inequalities, this body of work argues that even though voice may be exercised, it fails to translate into real presence at key forums and arenas of power. Other studies also highlight the point that elected representatives, many of whom are themselves very wealthy, overwhelmingly respond more favourably to those at the more affluent end of the economic ladder than to those at the bottom, making the imperative of more equal and inclusive forms of representation even more critical if more equal outcomes are to be achieved.

A third, more fundamental measure of political inequality has to do with inequalities of power and influence in determining decisions about the distribution of social and economic resources. Here, inequality is seen in terms not just of who participates or is represented in political processes, but of who benefits. As Robert Reich, former US secretary of labor, puts it, growing inequality is shaped less by the market, technology or the behaviour of ordinary citizens, and more by 'the increasing concentration of political power in a corporate and financial elite that has been able to influence the rules by which the economy runs' (Reich, 2015, p. 27). As their influence often exists beyond nation states, these elites have the ability to shape patterns of inequality not only within countries, but across countries as well.

In reality, these three ways in which economic and social inequalities shape political inequality are mutually reinforcing: who gets into the game and who sits at the table affect how the game is played, who wins and who loses. Inequalities of political opportunity shape inequalities of outcomes, and unequal outcomes allow the powerful more scope to restrict opportunities, leading a UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights to comment, 'Material deprivation and disempowerment create a vicious circle: the greater the inequality, the less the participation; the less the participation, the greater the inequality' (Carmona, 2013, p. 5).¹

If this is the case, how then is the 'vicious circle' of political and economic inequality to be broken? Despite the ability of elites to shape both political opportunities and outcomes, there are political counter-narratives in the face of rising inequality, such as the Occupy movement, landless people's movements, food riots and youth revolts. These examples suggest that the relationships of economic and political inequality are not one-way or linear. What is needed though is a far more nuanced and developed understanding of the new politics of inequality in the face of its contemporary forms.

South Africa

South Africa offers one important arena to understand how social, political and economic inequalities interact. Over the course of the past twenty years of democracy, South Africans have become less poor but more unequal. More than half of the population survives on less than R779 (US\$67) a month, or R26 (US\$2.20) per day, and patterns of poverty and inequality continue to be heavily racialized. Black African households, which account for more than three-quarters of all households, earn less than half of the country's total annual household income.

While poverty has endured and inequality has deepened, the African National Congress (ANC) has at the same time fostered the development of a new Black elite through the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) programme. This programme has attempted to deracialize the economy but as many commentators have observed, it has also been part of a strategy to forge an economic elite loyal to the ANC (Southall, 2004). It means that economic power and political influence are often closely tied to connections with the ANC. Such relations, often referred to as patronage or clientelism, not only exist in the political elite but permeate everyday lives, affecting patterns of participation and representation in the new democracy.

Since 1994 the government and civil service have been deracialized, and women account for 40 per cent of seats in parliament, a proportion that ranks South Africa among the best in the world for the representation of women. Furthermore, multiple levels of participatory governance have been created in recognition of the key role civil society has in the democratization process. However, there have been limits to the effectiveness of the participatory model in promoting political voice and genuine inclusion.

Participatory mechanisms are largely confined to local governance, and civil society is generally excluded from shaping macro-level policy. While statutory bodies such as the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) were established as forums in which government, labour, business and civil society could negotiate on national-level economic and development issues, government has the discretion to appoint who represents civil society within the chamber, and consequently which voices are heard.

At the local level, ward committees, non-partisan advisory bodies to local councillors, were introduced to strengthen political voice and representation. Data from Afrobarometer suggests that South Africa can be characterized as having an 'active' citizenry, with over half of those surveyed in 2011 reporting they had attended at least one community meeting in the last year. However, spaces of participatory governance have increasingly become channels for party political interests in which local political rivalries and factionalism predominate, allowing little room for alternative community voices to contribute to the development agenda (Ngamlana and Mathoho, 2013). The ANC's political dominance means that there is a danger that political power is taken for granted and less consideration is given to the need to be responsive and accountable to constituents. This, coupled with deepening economic inequalities, means that many South Africans, particularly Black South Africans, feel deeply estranged from democracy. A common theme, recurrent in interviews with Black South Africans living on the socio-economic margins, is that 'democracy is only for the rich'.

As a result, alternative political expression and voice are being found increasingly through protest. South Africa has been dubbed the 'protest capital of the world'. Protests commonly emanate from impoverished townships and informal settlements concerned with the inadequate provision of public goods such as housing, water and electricity, and often involve marches to local municipalities, the focal point of much protest activity. A growing proportion of protests have also embarked on disruptive or even violent tactics, including the barricading of roads and the burning down of local amenities such as clinics. While the protests centre on demands for public goods, they are often an expression of the democratic deficit that is particularly acute in areas of poverty.

They often seem to be partly a reaction to frustrated attempts to exercise political voice in institutional channels (Alexander et al., 2014).

While protest is frequent in South Africa, it is commonly fractured and disconnected. Unlike elsewhere in the world, protesters rarely gather in central urban spaces, the result of the enduring legacy of apartheid geography, and protests are rarely coordinated across different areas despite the common elements of their demands. One of the reasons for this is the acute resource challenges, material and otherwise, which mainly unemployed community activists face. A common strategy to disrupt community mobilization is for politically connected local elites to offer employment opportunities to activists. As one activist explained, 'That is why we have lost many cadres that are strong leaders because stomach politics at the end of the day is a bigger issue. I can be an activist but at the end of the day I have to eat.'² This highlights the point that the ability to challenge economic inequality requires political voice, but the ability to forge this voice is intersected by the very same inequalities.

Conclusions

The example of South Africa illustrates all three forms of political inequality discussed earlier. Citizens participate, yet increasingly it seems that the democratic measures to deepen voice and representation have themselves been captured by elites in the new system. In the midst of such political capture, new formations are emerging such as the Economic Freedom Fighters and the United Front, which seek explicitly to challenge economic inequalities. Yet their challenges from below may well be limited. South Africa's growing inequalities are shaped and maintained by rules of the game over which local citizens have little influence. South Africa illustrates the deep interconnections of economic, social and political inequalities, links which can only be broken through new forms of political action.

Notes

1. Quoting Council of Europe (2013, p. 125).
2. Interview by C. Runciman, February 2010.

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