

## PROSPECTS FOR COMBATTING CAUSES OF INEQUALITY

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Many indicators show how inequality has increased and how young people in particular have been affected. But what does this inequality depend on? What are the causes of this inequality affecting young people? This is far too little discussed and yet, to turn the development of increasing inequalities, the causes have to be combatted. The relationship between the causes of inequality affecting young people and the attempts to combat them is what this paper deals with.

The paper draws upon Citispyce (Combating inequalities through innovative social practices by and for young people in cities across Europe), an EU-project which I have taken part in since the start. Citispyce has been devised against the backdrop of research which shows the disproportionate impact of the global economic crisis on young people across Europe. It is a 3 year FP7-funded project (2013-15), coordinated by Aston University in Birmingham UK, and involving a total of 13 partner organisations from 10 cities in just as many countries across the EU; Athens, Barcelona, Birmingham, Brno, Hamburg, Krakow, Malmö, Rotterdam, Sofia and Venice. The key question is how policymakers (at local, national and EU levels) might be assisted in their objectives to tackle inequalities through learning from innovative strategies developed for and by young people. At an early stage, we agreed to distinguish between symptoms and causes of inequality, giving priority to the latter. Thus, at the core of the project is the relationship between the causes of inequality and practices that combat them.

In this short paper, I will use the opportunity to try out some ideas and provisional conclusions from Citispyce in the context of the EuroMemo

## Prospects for combatting causes of inequality

conference. I am doing this because I believe that economic and social policies should be much better interlinked. For this reason, I hope that writing and presenting this paper in the context of the EuroMemo conference will be beneficial to both Citispyce and the work with this year's Euromemorandum. Let me underline, however, that the views presented here are my own and they do not necessarily represent the Citispyce project. We still have a lot of work to do before we can present a result. At the centre of that result, as I see it, should be to present an understanding of causes. Without such an understanding, we cannot know what to combat and thus, we cannot make assessments of to what extent initiatives, practices and strategies are innovative.

### What is a cause?

According to the philosophy that I represent, the concept of cause refers first of all to what an object is like and can do, regardless of whether it does it and gets an effect. For example, we are able to talk and work, but we don't necessarily do it, at least not all the time. Yet, we have these so-called causal powers, or potentials, to do it and when we for example talk, someone may very well interrupt us and thus prevent that potential of ours to get an effect. The abilities to talk and work are examples of potentials that inhere in individuals.

Potential can also inhere in other single objects, like for example a decision. Obviously, that is why decisions are taken, namely to cause effects. A highly relevant and timely example of a cause in this sense is the decision taken by the Eurozone leadership on the night of July 13 to grant a third bailout to Greece on conditions of further austerity measures. As shown by works in the Citispyce project, the past years of austerity policy have already caused a lot of social inequality, having consequences for in particular young people. As new austerity measures await, so do probably more social inequalities. I want to underline "probably" because it hasn't happened yet and thus we cannot know if it will happen, but still we can assume that such a potential inhere in the decision.

The decision on the night of July 13 is a clear and easily understandable example of a cause and more specifically one which might affect young people. But what if we want to know the cause of this cause? Then, it becomes more complicated. Why did the Eurozone leaders make a decision that can be expected to worsen the situation for many Greek people, especially the young ones? Is it because they wanted to? Or because they had to, being forced to it? These question calls for a view of the relationship between structure and agency.

If we believe that the structures of the Eurozone forced the leadership to take the decision to increase austerity in Greece, we would probably be adherents of structuralism. A structuralist would claim that the Eurozone is having constraining structures, leaving the Eurozone leaders with no other option than to make the decision, no matter their personal beliefs or agendas. In contrast, if we believe that the leadership was free to take any decision they wanted to, we would probably be adherents of voluntarism. With regard to the former, the whole structure would need to be replaced in order for a practice to be innovative, while in the latter case, it would be sufficient to replace the persons.

## Prospects for combatting causes of inequality

Structuralism and voluntarism have for centuries been the opposing poles in the thinking of structure and agency/actors. The perhaps most well known effort to put a focus on the relationship between structure and actor is the one by Giddens in his structuration theory. In short, the structuration theory perceives the relationship between structures and actors as interrelated and a duality; i.e. two sides of the same thing. Actors (or agents – which Giddens sees as the same) and structures are not two sets of phenomena that exist independently of each other. According to Giddens, however, they cannot be studied in their interrelationship, but so-called ‘methodological brackets’ need to be put on the different sides of the duality in order to study each one of them and their properties in separate. This methodological bracketing is what the criticism has targeted.

### Structures are made by actors

We first need to clarify what we mean by structure. A structure can be defined as a pattern or composition of internally related objects. The internal relations among these objects mean that they become something else by being interrelated. For example, a house becomes rented property when it is owned by a landlord. Furthermore, these objects can only be understood in relation to each other. Within a social structure there are particular positions associated with certain roles. Such a role in the example above is the landlord and another one is the tenant. In their roles they contribute to reproducing the structure. The social structure would not continue to exist without them making it. When they reproduce the structure, for example the tenant paying the rent and the landlord taking care of maintenance work, they also experience the constraints and powers or lack of power associated with their particular role. Structures contain constraints as well as opportunities, they both constrain and enable, but this content also depends on the actors doing them, their potential, ideas, wills, interests, strategies etc.

Structuralism does not take this dependence of structures on the actors into consideration. Conversely, voluntarism or bracketing actors is untenable because actors don’t act in a vacuum but always in specific situations. Such situations can be highly structured, and then the actors also play a clear role. Other situations can be less structured but seldom totally unstructured. Our daily life consists of entering, reproducing and leaving different more or less structured social relations with other persons in specific contexts. It is in these situations that actors make constructions, express an interest, choose the one brand of coffee instead of the other etc. To be sure, actors have a lot of potential which may be explored apart from specific situations, but this potential has to be used for us to know more about the existence of it and we cannot fully anticipate the use of it in the specific situation. A skilled or perhaps even a wise actor may just as well transcend what seemed impossible for the predecessor.

Instead of being seen as fully fixed and predetermined, the constraints and opportunities of a structure should be understood in relation to the actors that make them. By both constraining and enabling, structures can be seen as selective. They promote certain actions at the same time as they are limiting – or even preventing – others. This selectivity, however, is not only dependent on the inherent properties of the structure but also on the strategy that guide the actor in reproducing the structure. The selectivity can thus be described as strategic. The selectivity of the structures must, therefore, be analysed in relation to the actors who actualise them, their interpretations,

## Prospects for combatting causes of inequality

ideas, views, strategies etc. Conversely, the actors must be analysed in relation to the structures they make and exist in, characterised by more or less structured social relations.

Hence, rather than seeing structures as unambiguously constraining and enabling, they should be seen as containing variations, enabling different actors to pursue their roles in the structure more or less differently. That is why we need researchers who on the basis of their research can say to these actors that “I know that you’ve got good intentions and you may not be aware of it, but when you reproduce these structures, in your routines, you actually exclude other people. For that reason, couldn’t we work together to try to change the structures?”.

The social structures of the Eurozone is an interesting example of the dependence on actors’ construals and capacities. To be sure, the Eurozone consists of constraints as well as opportunities but the actualised content of these properties depends on the actors making them as well. One of the actors on the night of July 13 was the German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble. In his construal of the structural constraints, Greece’s loans cannot be written off. Accordingly, that was the construal that he acted upon. Others construed it differently, but representing the leading economic power in the Eurozone, Schäuble possesses a strong potential.

## Causes can be structural, semiotic and actorial

I started by clarifying how causal powers may inhere in an individual, like abilities to talk and work. This is examples of a particular kind of cause which we may call actorial. It can be both individual and collective. The actors around the negotiating table on the night of July 13 were both. I then presented the decision taken on that night as another example of a single object which a potential inheres in. In the previous section, I showed how more complex potential inheres in the social relations and structures which are formed by individuals. An example of that is how the structures of the Eurozone caused the decision on further austerity measures. The potentials that lay behind and caused this decision cannot be reducible to an individual actor like the German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble, although he does have a lot of power and thus an actorial potential. The decision derives also from the interdependent relations with the other actors, rules, legislations, personalities, competences, technicalities, premises etc. The interdependence means that these components cause each other as internally related objects of the structure, but they can also cause emergent effects outside the structure. The effects can be said to depend on how the structure works, or, with another word, its mechanisms.

The decision taken by the Eurozone on the night of July 13 is an example of how a structure may cause an external effect, in that case increasing the inequality affecting young people in Greece. But how can it be that the actors of the Eurozone have created such structures that cause devastating effects for young people in Greece? And how could it be that they, in addition, maintain and defend these structures, even though the negative consequences for young people become apparent? This actualises another type of causes, namely those that can be called semiotic. Semiosis is an umbrella concept for how we make sense and meaning of the world. It includes everything that has to do with meaning and incorporates other terms related to meaning – such as discourses, genres and styles. Examples of

## Prospects for combatting causes of inequality

semiosis are religion, science, culture and ideology. We may also call them contexts of meaning.

Semiosis should be put on an equal footing with structuration and that can be done by taking an ontological point of departure in the complexity of the world and the need to reduce this complexity to be able to go on. This reduction of complexity is done in two ways – by structuration and by semiosis. Such a theory enables us to understand that not only structuration may cause effects but also semiosis. To be sure, semiosis is about making sense and meaning, in line with what representatives of hermeneutics and phenomenology states, but added to making meaning, semiosis may also cause effects. This is due to another view of causality. When hermeneutics and phenomenology rejects causality, it is a certain view of causality they reject, the one associated with empiricism.

Contexts of meaning have to be produced and reproduced by actors to exist. To the extent that they exist, they both constrain and enable, just like social structures. It might belong to the implicit view of a certain discourse to “blame the victims”. If so, that is not a fallacy but a constituent part of the discourse. That is what it consists of. That is one of the constituent parts which make it hang together. If an individual adopts such a discourse he/she adopts that view of people as well. A self-sufficient and ambitious individual may just as well try to establish his/her own view, but we need to make sense of the world, not only in one of its aspects but in many and these aspects also need to hang together, not contradict each other, at least not too much. Who has got the time and energy to make up their mind in all these respects? Not many, and to at least some extent all of us listen to others and cling to what is “in the air”.

We may then very well contribute to the exclusion of other people, but perhaps, just as in the case of structures, unintentionally, because it belongs to the reproduction of this context of meaning to cause such an effect. Thus, even in this case it may be worthwhile to address these actors, saying “I know that you’ve got good intentions and you may not be aware of it, but in your routines you actually reproduce a meaning of life, including a view of people which excludes some. For that reason, couldn’t we work together to try to change this meaning of life (discourse)?”

## Symptoms and causes of inequality

Reality intrudes on us and provides us with something to experience. It might be the flames of discontent at the Syntagma Square, the unemployed young people walking the streets of Barcelona, the large number of young people in Malmö lacking rental housing or refugees drowning in the Mediterranean. Our experiences always concern only certain aspects of reality, belonging then to the certain level of reality called the empirical. We respond by trying to make sense of it, using words and language but also particular concepts and understandings, inherent in contexts of meaning. Such contexts of meaning casts light on some aspects of the experiences while other aspects remain in the dark. Hence, the contexts of meaning differ in what they cast light on but also on what light they cast. In other words, our understanding matters for what we experience and how we experience it.

What we see and experience should be regarded as only a certain level of reality, called the empirical. We make sense of these experiences by understanding them as expressing something else, i.e. by treating them as

## Prospects for combatting causes of inequality

symptoms. As such, the experiences express a specific content which belongs, in turn, to another level of reality, called the actual. This level comprises the actualisation of the potentials, which in turn belong to the most basic level, what is called the real. The real includes it all, i.e. not only what appears to be and what has been actualised, but also what an object can achieve by virtue of its nature, the impact it can generate or the liabilities it contains, whether it then actually generates effect or not.

The division of reality in these three levels implies a specific view of causality which is different from the classical cause-effect relation made famous by David Hume, where a cause can be said to exist only when it gets an effect, also being successional to the cause. In contrast, a cause should be regarded as something that has a potential to cause an effect, whether it causes that effect or not. It needs not always precede an effect. A cause can also have no effect at all if it is counteracted by other causes, for example when somebody interrupts us talking. Different causes can also be interdependent, thus forming a mechanism. Going back to the Greece-Eurozone example, we still don't know the consequences of the decision made by the Eurozone leaders. The decision is an example of a potential, something that surely exists and can be expected to have an effect, but which has not yet been fully actualised, apart of course from in many people's minds.

The actualisation of potentials always takes place in specific, contextual and concrete situations. There, different potentials combine to produce effects which should be regarded as emergent as they cannot be derived from only one of the potentials. An explanation of a certain event, like for example the decision taken by the Eurozone leadership on the night of July 13, needs to take the context into consideration. We need to examine the potentials and their properties at higher levels of abstraction, apart from the concrete situations and contexts where they get actualised. By doing that, we can understand that causes inhere in individuals and other single objects, as mentioned above, but also in how both social structures and contexts of meaning work, i.e. their so to speak structural and semiotic mechanisms. But then we need to carry out empirical investigations of concrete situations in order to explain what happens and why.

### What have we achieved so far in Citispyce?

The theoretical framework presented above means that we have to produce knowledge, firstly on the potentials, and secondly on the contextual actualisations of them. Firstly, what knowledge have we in Citispyce acquired about the potential causes, such ones which practices at the local level actually combat or at least have the opportunity to combat? Secondly, what knowledge have we produced about the actualisation of such causes in each one of the cities; how they play out and get modified? Thirdly, what answers does this enable us to produce to the key question in the proposal about how policymakers (at local, national and EU levels) might "be assisted in their objectives to tackle inequalities through learning from innovative strategies developed for and by young people?"

To start with the first question, we have produced knowledge on several potential causes, associated with for example neoliberalism, growth models, work organisations and welfare regimes. We have also studied how such potential causes get actualised in the different national contexts, which relates to the second question. Such actualisations depend on the existence of



## Prospects for combatting causes of inequality

institutions, cultures, power relations etc. Therefore, it is possible to identify, for example, four main types of neoliberal regimes that developed in the 'neoliberal epoch' beginning in the 1970s. All of them emerged in reaction to the crisis of post-war settlements. The most radical was the neoliberal system transformations in the states that emerged from the former Soviet Bloc, among them Poland, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria. Next follows the neoliberal regime shifts of which Thatcherism is the prime expression. The third form comprises restructuring processes that were primarily imposed from the outside (southern Europe), while the more pragmatic neoliberal policy adjustments constitute the fourth type. Germany, The Netherlands and Sweden belong to this last group.

A major reason for this success of neo-liberalism is that finance capital has become its main beneficiary. The political project of neo-liberalism has made the European economies in general more financialised. In the European Union, neo-liberalism has put its imprint on European policies since at least the establishment of the Single European Act in 1986. The Euro has been crucial in the neo-liberal project, urging the member states to strengthen competitiveness by increasing flexibility as well as promoting temporary and part-time work. All Eurozone countries have joined this race to the bottom and it has been won by Germany. Because of that race, countries across Europe now diverge. This is the divergence that now increases rapidly simultaneously as the countries converge in being imprinted by neoliberalism.

In Citispyce, every team has produced reports on their cities and the situation of young people. All of these reports from across Europe display effects of the neo-liberal project, most obviously in the reports on Birmingham and the cities in Eastern as well as Southern Europe. Furthermore, it appears in the far-reaching labour market reforms in Germany, driven by the principles of activation and workfare. It has put a decisive imprint on the transition of the Dutch welfare state. Neo-liberalism shows itself clearly in the austerity measures pursued with the intention to "solve" the crisis, for example the excessive use of fixed-term contracts towards young people. In the sense of being increasingly imprinted by neoliberalism, the European societies now converge.

Furthermore, we have been able to point out effects of the different growth models in Europe. On that basis, we have seen how the growth model of dependent financialisation in the south of Europe has made young people with a job particularly vulnerable due to their employment in the most dependent sectors. We have seen some aspects of what it means that labour markets with a low share of the type of organisation called discretionary learning don't tend to foster creative producers and demanding consumers. We have seen how labour markets with weak regulations make people insecure. But we have also seen how highly regulated labour markets protect the ones included while making it difficult for young people without a formal education to get a job.

What knowledge, then, have we produced on the contextual actualisations of potential causes in each one of the cities, how they play out and get modified? This has turned out to be difficult. For example, we haven't studied how financialisation causes inequality and exclusion in particular neighbourhoods. Is it by fuelling speculation in housing which causes a housing shortage for those who can't afford it? Is it by being successful in issuing consumer credits and thus getting young people trapped by debts? We have no answers, at least not yet. The lack of answers to the second

## Prospects for combatting causes of inequality

question makes it difficult to answer the third, the one about how policymakers (at local, national and EU levels) might “be assisted in their objectives to tackle inequalities through learning from innovative strategies developed for and by young people?”

However, Citispyce has resulted in a rich material. In all the cities, two urban areas and the services provided for young people there have been studied in more detail. Many young people have been interviewed on their life situation in more general terms. Pilot projects and case studies have been carried out in order to identify socially innovative practices. However, an extensive analysis of this rich empirical material remains to be done. We need to find out what it tells us about the relationship between the local actualisations of causes and how they might be combatted.

## Conclusions

The discussions on inequality deals far too little with the causes. Many indicators highlight symptoms, making us appalled, but what do these symptoms express? What are they symptoms of? What are the causes behind them? That depends on what we mean by a cause. In this short paper, I have claimed that causality does not in the first place concern a relationship between discrete events in the sense of cause and effect. By a cause, I mean something which has the potential to cause an effect, whether it does it or not. Such a cause may inhere in an individual or a decision. All such causes could be called single. They inhere in a single object or individual, for example a decision taken in Brussels. To combat them would mean to replace the individual or change the decision.

Causes can also, however, be complex by inhering in relations, both structural and semiotic. Such causes depend on the ways these structures and semiosis operate, or, with another word, their mechanisms. They are made at the local level by many actors. Therefore they can also to some extent be changed at the local level and should not be seen as fully determined by decisions taken at central levels in for example Stockholm or in Brussels. The causes generated by the way these structures and semiosis operate also depend on how the actors construe their roles, what they want to do and the strategy that guides them. There is always a scope for variations, although sometimes very narrow.

Where does this lead us, then, in terms of problems and solutions of inequality? What are the prospects for combatting causes of inequality? I will draw three general conclusions which have to be complemented with more specific ones when the extensive analysis of the rich empirical material from Citispyce has been done. My hope is that these three general conclusions can contribute to facilitate this analysis.

In this paper, firstly, I try to represent a perspective that in brief could be called relational. I would claim that such a perspective should itself be seen as one of the solutions. It should be contrasted to a perspective which individualises and treats societal phenomena in separate. Actors of various kinds that blame the crisis in Europa on for example unemployed, beneficiaries, populations in certain areas, refugees, immigrants in general or even whole countries, reproduce a semiotic cause of inequality. Another characteristic of the same perspective is seeing young people affected by inequality as the problems, blaming the victims. For that reason, in order to become innovative, social practices have to include opportunities to learn



## Prospects for combatting causes of inequality

and develop knowledge on the relations and interdependencies, between different categories of people, parts of a city or parts of Europe. Basically, it is about pursuing another approach to knowledge, which sees the potential in young people's experience and knowledge, regardless if it has been graded or not.

Secondly, what we have found in Citispyce is how various different causes, inherent in labour markets, welfare regimes and the spatial structures of the cities, tend to individualise the victims of inequality by separating them from the rest of society. The containment of the affected, separated in neighbourhoods and even countries contributes to causing inequality. It paves the way for stigmatizing such neighbourhoods and indeed countries which reinforces the separation. That makes these people in separate neighbourhoods or countries unable to realise that they may have a common interest and indeed, it prevents them from doing something about it collectively. Furthermore, it blocks off the favoured from the disfavoured and prevents them from understanding each other as well as realising each other's potential. Practices that aspire to become innovative, should open up opportunities for young people from different parts of a city and even across Europe to get to know each other and about each other's situations as well as to work together, favouring a collective empowerment.

To combat inequalities, thirdly, both single and complex causes have to be addressed; both the ones inherent in specific decisions and the ones inherent in policies or imaginaries as well as in for example the structures of growth models or welfare regimes. In order to be successful, we need knowledge on both these two main types of causes, the single as well as the complex ones. Obviously, it is not sufficient with statistics and quantitative facts. We also need more qualitative knowledge on the mechanisms and how they cause inequality. Such knowledge is possessed by the young people affected by inequality or at least the seeds of it in terms of experience which might be processed into knowledge. Many actors who play roles in the structures or the contexts of meaning possess it as well. These are the ones that I referred to above when I highlighted the need for researchers to work together with such actors, trying to explore the variations, possibilities for change and how to make a difference. For similar reasons, researchers should work together with young people as well.

Such collaborations can be signified by the concept of knowledge alliances. The European Commission uses the term in Europe 2020 but with a narrow definition, limited to alliances between "education and business". The concept was redefined by the Commission for a Socially Sustainable Malmö (the "Malmö Commission"), meaning collaborations on equal terms between researchers and stakeholders from, for example, public, voluntary and private sectors as well as from the community at large. The Malmö Commission began its work in February 2011 against the backdrop of increasing health inequities and many years of unsuccessful attempts at a reversal. Its main source of inspiration was the WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health. When the final report of the Malmö Commission was presented two years later, in March 2013, 31 background reports had been produced and around 2000 persons had been involved. The creation of knowledge alliances is the second of the two overarching recommendations that the Commission's final report consists of. The City of Malmö has since then taken this recommendation on board and knowledge alliances are about to be established on a larger scale.

## Prospects for combatting causes of inequality

I want to finish by asking three questions to the EuroMemo Group, drawing on the three conclusions above. Would it be possible, in the forthcoming EuroMemorandum, to suggest as solutions:

- 1) A relational perspective, including an approach to knowledge which sees the positive potential in young people's experience and knowledge, regardless if it has been graded or not?
- 2) A collective empowerment which opens up opportunities for young people from different parts of a city and across Europe to realise that they may have a common interest, supporting them in doing something about it collectively.
- 3) The creation of knowledge alliances, in line with the definition made by the Malmö Commission?