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INEQUALITIES THROUGHOUT HISTORY IN THEORY AND PRACTICE – THE EXAMPLE OF SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

Inequalities have existed for as long as anyone can remember. They mostly had its ups, but sometimes also downs. The twenty-first century is the century in which societies should be organized so that inequalities are at a low level. They also have a positive side, because if there is formal equality, then it affects productivity, innovation, commitment, education, and the like. Inequality is most often looked at from the standpoint of income, although other forms are also very significant. The aim of this paper is to show that inequalities have always existed and that they will exist in the future, but at the same time to show that inequalities should be reduced to an acceptable level. When it comes to economic inequality, the balance of labor and capital must be taken into account. This paper aims to present inequalities in Serbia throughout its history. During the preparation of the paper, the methods of analysis, synthesis, description and deduction were used.

KEYWORDS

inequality, Serbia, history, poverty

INTRODUCTION

This paper was predominantly inspired by the discussions, thoughts and views of Thomas Piketty in his works "Capital in the Twenty-First Century", "Capital and Ideology", "A Brief History of Equality and Measuring Racism", "Overcoming Discrimination", as well as by authors such as B. Begović, B. Milanović and others. Inequality has existed since ancient times. The authors of this paper are of the opinion that inequality is natural, since people are not born exactly the same, but on the contrary, completely different, and there can never be two identical people, even if they are identical twins. However, this difference does not necessarily imply a difference in wealth as an irreconcilable difference and is measured by different indicators. One of those indicators is the Gini coefficient (Gini index, Gini ratio), which is most often used as a measure of wealth inequality, that is, wealth distribution. It was first introduced by the Italian statistician and sociologist Corrado Gini in his work Variability and Mutability. It shows the concentration of wealth, and it derived from the Lorenz curve. The Gini

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coefficient has a value from 0 to 1 (from zero to one hundred). The value of the Gini coefficient 0 (zero) implies that the wealth is equally distributed, that everyone has the same wealth value, and a high Gini coefficient represents an unequal distribution, that is, the Gini coefficient 1 (one hundred) implies that one person owns all the wealth, and the others do not own any value. This coefficient can theoretically be greater than 1 (one hundred) if the wealth of one person includes the negative wealth of others. The measurement of inequality can also be seen by the Quintile Share Ratio (or S80/S20). This indicator represents the ratio of total income received by the 20% of the population with the highest income to that received by the 20% of the population with the lowest income.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF INEQUALITY

Unquestionably, there was a continuous striving towards equality until the 18th century, but with different extents, if different spheres are observed. The pursuit of equality implied social, economic and political equality. If you look at the world today, it would not be wrong to say that it is unfair. But it is also not wrong to state that the second decade of the 21st century was fairer than the fifth decade of the 20th century or that people in 1900 strived for equality more than in 1850, etc. (Piketty, 2023). Therefore, it can be concluded that each subsequent era reduced inequality and increased equality. The extent of inequality throughout history and certain epochs depends on whether inequality is observed among social classes, income levels, labor and gender equality, educational opportunities, ethnic and racial origin, access to law and justice, etc.

However, whichever criterion is taken, the indisputable conclusion is that the largest number of regions and societies in the world strived towards increasing equality. Discussions about inequality often use the term "global inequality", which refers to the income disparities between all the inhabitants of the Earth at a given time (Milanović, 2023). From the Industrial Revolution at the beginning of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, global inequality continuously grew, and wealth was concentrated in the industrial countries of the Western world, which were also colonial countries at the same time. After that, global inequality began to decline thanks to the economic rise of China, today the second most populous country on the planet. It should also be noted that global inequality was at its highest level in 1988 when the Gini coefficient was 69.4 (Milanović, 2023).

In the second decade of the 21st century, the need for equality in areas such as human rights is particularly emphasized (the authors of this paper emphasize that the term "human rights" should be replaced with the term "men’s, women’s and children's rights" because if there are human rights then there should also be non-human ones, and that term is neither used nor is it possible to use it because one would not know what it refers to), gender equality, equal pay for the same job, etc. The pursuit of equality in the 21st century compared to earlier periods and eras is far more complicated and there are numerous contradictions, if it is viewed from different aspects in terms of scope and content. It should also be noted that there are still many inequalities in the 21st century, especially if they are looked at through status, power, closeness to the government, income, gender, etc. In addition, these inequalities have a cumulative effect and encourage further inequalities.

Today we can look at the history of inequality thanks to numerous valid studies that are available to all researchers in the world. One of the most important works in this field was published by Kenneth Pomeranz in 2000 in his book on "The Great Divergence" between Europe and China in the 18th and 19th centuries (Pomeranz, 2000). He points out that the development of Western industrial capitalism is very closely connected with the system of international division of labor (the authors of this paper add – with a globalist approach), the exploitation of resources (the authors of this paper add - other people's resources) as well as the military and colonial domination that Western countries have established over the rest of the world. This claim has been confirmed in theory by other authors such as Prasannan Parthasarathi, Beckert or works related to the new history of capitalism, as well as in practice during the Covid-19 pandemic and with the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

Namely, these two events showed that the Western European countries, as Pomeranz claims, developed on the basis of the exploitation of other people's cheap resources, cheap labor force, and cheap energy sources, when the Covid-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine interrupted trade flows, which enabled European countries, especially Germany, to develop economically and acquire enormous wealth. With the beginning of the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, the EU and the USA imposed many sanctions on the Russian Federation (14,000 sanctions, which no one can control whether they are implemented or not), which backfired mostly on the European countries themselves (mainly Germany), and the USA only profited from it, which for European countries resulted in a drop in the GDP rate, inflation, lack of consumer goods, non-functioning of the common market, etc. Thus, the dominance of Europe unequivocally showed to be a consequence of globalist changes in the world, the exploitation of other people's resources and colonial domination, all of which resulted in an increase in inequality between the rich and the poor.

As mentioned above, the topic of equality and inequality goes back a long way, and has been dealt with by numerous authors. For the purposes of this paper, we will mention only a few such as F. Cooper, C. Hall, E. Saada, P. Singeravelou, A. Stanziani, E. Labrousse, J. Bouvier, and many others. Interestingly, the topic of inequality-equality was addressed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who pointed out that private property is the cause of inequality (Piketty, 2023). The new economic and social history of inequality imposes at least two very significant conclusion (Piketty, 2023).

The first refers to the establishment of such relations in the area of property, tax policy, education, income, etc. at different stages of social and any other development in certain societies. These relations are always of a political nature, and established by the ruling oligarchy. It should also be said that all wealth has been created as a collective product, but that throughout the history of civilization, people have tried to create such mechanisms and rules through which they would distribute wealth and power, which is always done using a tool called political decisions. The second conclusion is the fact that at the end of the 18th century, a long-term movement towards equality, i.e., the reduction of poverty, began.

It should be noted that it is an ongoing process which will continue for many decades, and perhaps even centuries. The movement towards equality has been attempted through rebellions due to apparent injustice and inequality all over the world. The fight for equality (the authors of this paper emphasize - the fight to reduce inequality, because total equality will never be achieved, but objectively it should not even exist), is carried out by destroying the institutions that support the ruling oligarchy that encourages inequality in favor of the government and individuals and social groups close to the government. By destroying existing institutions and establishing new ones, the goal is to create fairer societies and reduce inequality. Some of the rebellions that were successful and led to a more just state are the peasants' revolts from the period 1788-1789, as well as the French Revolution.

These events led to the abolition of the privileges of the nobility. It is also important to mention Saint-Domingue's slave revolt in 1791, which led to the end of slavery. There are many other rebellions that aimed to free us from colonialism and foreign rule, as was the case in our region (the First and Second Serbian Uprising, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 in Sarajevo, two anti-fascist movements during World War II, etc.). Some of these were more or less successful, but their main idea was the establishment of a more just order and freedom from foreign exploitative rule.

SOME FORMS OF INEQUALITY

Previous theory and practice have shown that the core of the problem is the distribution of income from production between labor and capital. This problem used to be very pronounced and can be vividly presented if we take the ratio of farmers and peasants. Namely, there is an essential inequality between those who own land and those who cultivate it, that is, those who receive rent and those who pay it. Industrialization, instead of reducing inequality, increased it because production became more capital-intensive, on the one hand, but at the same time, democratic expectations related to a fairer distribution did not come true. Every rebellion during the 19th century aimed at reducing inequality and increasing wages ended in favor of the owners of capital, not labor - workers. Here we have to keep in mind the following: if the entire income from production was distributed according to any criteria to labor, then that company would not survive in the long term, on the one hand, and the capital owners would have no motive to maintain production.

Therefore, this is not about total equality, because owners of capital must and should be more equal than others, but it is necessary to find an acceptable balance between labor and capital, because without labor there is no capital either. Although this problem was noticed more than two hundred years ago, it still exists today. There are countless examples when capital owners minimally satisfy the interest of labor even though that labor brings them capital. However, in order to establish that balance, real and accounting transparency is needed (Piketty, 2015). He further points out that there can be no economic democracy without sufficient transparency and sharing of information. However, all that is not enough, the workers' right to vote in the competent authorities (Board of Directors or Supervisory Board) is necessary. In addition to membership in the Board of Directors or Supervisory Board, the knowledge of those workers who represent labor is needed, because it is quite certain that those who represent capital have enough knowledge and skills to ensure decision-making that benefits them.

Thus, the knowledge and skills of labor representatives are key to influencing those representing capital. When it comes to global inequalities, it should be borne in mind that the average growth will not significantly exceed the limit of 1-1.5%. That limit for developed countries is enough to maintain and increase their wealth. Underdeveloped and less developed countries with growth rates of 4-5% on an annual basis will continue to show inequality compared to developed countries that have lower growth rates, because they do not start from the same base (Piketty, 2015). Although inequality will never disappear, it can be reduced, that is, mitigated.

One of the instruments for reducing inequality is the establishment of a progressive tax system. But, even when establishing a progressive tax system, the motives and interests of capital owners must be taken into account. Any unreasonable progressive tax burden can backfire on the working population and leave them with nothing to do. Therefore, a progressive tax burden is desirable and necessary, but balanced with the interests and motives of capital owners. But science also has a stake in achieving balanced inequality. If science does not get involved in the study of the incomes of various classes in the 21st century, inequalities will not decrease, but, quite the opposite, will increase, as those who have a lot will never give up their wealth and will never fail to defend their interests and desire to increase their already great wealth.

Third co-author of this paper points out the following example: As the executive director of the Serbian Chamber of Commerce, he talked to a businessman from the private sector. He told him that his company was doing excellent, that he had a turnover of 45,000,000 euros, and that the net profit was 4,500,000 euros. The co-author asked him what his average salary was, and he said 250-280 euros. The co-author suggested him to increase the salary, but he said that he had no way to do so. When he reminded him that only a minute ago he said that he had a net profit of 4,500,000 euros, he said that he needed that money for other purposes. A few years later, his company had certain problems.

This is an obvious example of how capital owners protect their interests. It should be noted that Europe and the USA developed on the basis of other countries' resources, cheap labor and thanks to total or partial colonization of underdeveloped and less developed countries in Africa and Asia. However, the creation of wealth at the expense of the underdeveloped and less developed also resulted in the mixing of nations of different ethnicities. Income inequality stems from general social inequality and discrimination. So far, no universal method has been invented that would enable any society to avoid discrimination and inequality. In order for a society to work on finding a model of how to reduce inequality and abolish discrimination, that is, to establish such a form in which there will be equality of rights and opportunities regardless of origin, it is necessary to promote social equality in general. Social equality in general implies equal access to education, health care, housing, government services, etc. Thus, in order to reduce the inequalities associated with multiple ethnic-racial and national origins, it is necessary to resolve the inequalities in the social classes as a whole (Piketty, 2023).

The extent of inequality is very difficult to see. Some societies leave economic and financial issues to experts of questionable competence, despite the fact that the economy is always at the heart of politics (Piketty, 2023). Data on inequalities are incomplete because there are no difficulties in accessing tax data, administrative and banking sources, as well as the extent and content of assets of individuals, families, and companies. It should be highlighted here that access to data from which inequalities could be determined is not only related to rich countries but also to poor ones. However, despite numerous inequalities, there is progress in the world, which is visible in many areas, especially in computing and the IT sector, resulting in progress in many other branches of the economy, medicine, agriculture, mining, tourism and the like.

If you take a look at the field of healthcare alone, you can see how much progress has been made in just two centuries. In 1820, life expectancy at birth was 26 years, and in 2020 it was 72 years. At the beginning of the 19th century, infant mortality in the first year of life was 20%, and today it is 1%. This information should be taken with a grain of salt, because at the beginning of the 19th century, one mother gave birth to a large number of children, but today this is not the case. Many countries today encourage the birth of two or more children, while some countries (e.g. China) limit the number of children allowed per family. The life expectancy of children who survive their first year has increased from 32 years in 1820 to 73 years today. Today, pensioners stay in good health for more than 5 years (Piketty, 2023). These data lead to the conclusion that obvious progress has been achieved in the last two centuries. However, not the same progress was achieved in all countries, since in some countries there was significantly less progress.

The number of inhabitants on Earth has also experienced a huge progress. In 1700, there were 600 million inhabitants on Earth, and today there are close to 8 billion, with the tendency for that number to reach 9 billion in 2050. The purchasing power of 80 euros monthly per inhabitant in 1700 increased to 1000 euros on average per month in 2020 (Piketty, 2023). For the purposes of this paper, only some indicators of progress are listed. But this progress, which is shown through statistical data, cannot ignore the huge inequalities and weaknesses in societies.

Namely, although the average purchasing power per inhabitant was 1000 euros in 2020, there is still inequality between rich and poor countries. In poor countries, the average income was not 1,000 euros per month, but 100-200 euros, and in the richest countries, it was also not 1,000 euros per month, but 3,000-4,000 euros (Piketty, 2023). Therefore, inequality in the distribution of wealth is not a problem only in some rich and poor countries, but in the whole world. Namely, 40% of the world's population lives with less than $2 a day, and the richest 10% control 54% of the world's wealth. There is a tendency for the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer.

Inequality in the world is best shown by the fact that the five richest people in the world have doubled their wealth to 869 billion dollars since 2020, while in the same period 60% of the poorest, that is, almost five billion people, have further impoverished, according to the report of the Oxford organization that fights inequality to end poverty and injustice – Oxfam. This organization's report notes a dramatic increase in global inequality after the Covid-19 pandemic. This statement is proven by the data that the world's billionaires are richer by 3.3 billion dollars as of 2020, and that their wealth grew three times faster than inflation. From all these statements, it can be seen that as progress grows, so does the degree of inequality. One of the future tasks of the next generations is to reduce the rate of inequality in both developed and underdeveloped countries where inequalities are greater.

INEQUALITIES IN SERBIA

Since 2013, the Survey on income and living conditions (SILC) has been carried out in Serbia, so the conditions have been created to measure income inequality in the same way as in other European countries, especially with EU countries, so that it can be compared with them. In 2019, at the Conference of the American Economic Association, which gathers the most famous economists in the world, the question was – what are the problems that the whole world will face in the 21st century and what topic should be the focus of attention and consideration for economists. The largest number of respondents said that it is reducing inequality.

In their study, "Inequality in Serbia: Is there a problem in measurement or in public policies", Arandarenko et al. (2019) point out that the rate of relative poverty, which is a direct measure of inequality, and the Gini coefficient in Serbia are the highest or among the highest compared to all European countries. These data encouraged certain authors to dispute the SILC method, as well as the rate of inequality in Serbia obtained by this method, pointing out that it is not that high, but at the same time they do not state or determine how high it is by applying the Household Budget Survey (HBS).

However, it should be borne in mind that when applying two research methods (in this case SILC and HBS), data from the same survey must be analyzed, which means that there will be no consistent data if income data is analyzed from one survey and budget data from another survey. If the data from two different surveys are analyzed, different data are obtained and therefore it is not possible to draw valid conclusions. The authors of this paper believe that in the study of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia from 2015, when the results of the first survey using the SILC method were analyzed, it was accurately concluded that inequality is greater in Serbia than in other European countries, and that the consequence of this situation is the insufficient social security and the lack of progressive income taxation. Further analyzes showed that there were other very important reasons that were the cause of inequality, but insufficient social security and lack of progressive taxation still remain very relevant causes.

Table 1. Poverty and social inequality in Serbia

Description	Year				
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
At-risk-of-poverty rate in %	24.3	23.2	21.7	21.2	20.0
At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate in %	33.9	31.1	29.8	28.4	28.1
At-risk-of-poverty threshold (monthly average) in RSD	16.615	19.381	22.000	24.064	26.509

Source: The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

The at-risk-of-poverty rate and the at-risk-of-poverty threshold are causally related. The at-risk-of-poverty rate shows the percentage of persons whose income is lower than the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. In 2022, the at-risk-of-poverty threshold was RSD 26,509 on average per month for a single-member household. This data does not show how many people are really poor, but how many people have an income below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. For a household with two adults and one child under the age of 14, the at-risk-of-poverty threshold was RSD 47,715, and for a household with two adults and two children under the age of 14, it was RSD 55,668.

The at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion shows the percentage of people who are at risk of poverty, or are significantly materially and socially deprived or live in households with very low work intensity.

According to the data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia in 2022, 22.6% of persons aged 65 and older, 21.6% of persons aged between 55 and 64, and 17.9% of persons aged between 25 and 54 were exposed to the risk of poverty.

According to the type of household, the highest at-risk-of-poverty rate of 37.5% was experienced by single-member households aged 65 and over, while the lowest poverty risk rate was in households with three or more adults, that is, 15.4%.

When it comes to those who are unemployed, 49.2% of them aged 18 and over were exposed to the risk of poverty, 11.2% of those who are self-employed, while persons employed by an employer were exposed to the risk of poverty by 5.6%. The at-risk-of-poverty rate for pensioners was 19.7%.

Table 2. Indicators of poverty and social exclusion

Description	Year				
	2018	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**
At-risk-of-poverty rate, %	24.3	23.2	21.7	21.2	20.0
At-risk-of-poverty threshold (monthly average), RSD					
One-member household	16.615	19.381	22.000	24.064	26.509
Household with two adults and one child under 14	29907	34886	39600	43315	47715
Two adults with two children under 14	34892	40700	46200	50533	5566
At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate, %	33.9	31.1	29.8	28.4	28.1
At-risk-of-poverty rate before social transfers, %					
Social transfers are not included in income	29.6	28.3	26.7	29.5	25.3
Pensions and social transfers are not included in income	48.7	46.6	44.8	46.4	
Relative at-risk-of-poverty gap	37.4	32.1	27.1	28.3	25.7
Quintile share ratio S80/S20	8.6	6.5	6.1	5.9	5.5
Gini coefficient	35.6	33.3	33.3	33.3	32.0
Permanent at-risk-of-poverty rate	35.6	33.3	33.3	33.3	32.0

Source: The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

Table 3. At-risk-of-poverty rate by gender and age

	Total	**Male**	**Female**
Total	**20**	**19.3**	**0.7**
0–17	20.3	20.1	20.6

18–64	19.0	18.8	19.2
18–24	20.4	18.4	22.3
25–54	17.9	17.8	17.9
55–64	21.6	22.2	21.1
65 and over	22.6	20.0	24.

Source: The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

Table 4. At-risk-of-poverty rate by household type

All households without children	**21.2**	**19.8**	**21**	**20.9**	**20.8**
Single person household	34.3	31.8	34	36.5	35.4
Single person household, male	33.7	28.9	30.9	32	33
Single person household, female	34.8	33.8	36.1	39.4	36.9
Single person household, person under 65	37.2	32.7	37.1	36.3	32.1
Single person household, person 65 and over	32.6	31.2	32.2	36.6	37.5
Two adults	19.8	19.4	22.5	21.4	22.8
Two adults, both under 65	24.3	21.4	25.3	22.6	23.7
Two adults, at least one aged 65 or over	16.9	18.4	21	20.7	22.3
Three or more adults	17.4	15.7	15.1	14.3	15.4
All households with children	**26.8**	**26.1**	**22.3**	**21.4**	**19.2**
One parent with one or more children	36.5	41.6	31.9	34.7	33.8
Two adults with one child	24.1	23.9	18.4	16.7	15.7
Two adults with two children	21.3	19.1	18.2	18.6	19.7
Two adults with three or more children	53.6	51.9	37.2	38.8	26.6
Three or more adults with children	25.5	25.4	22.5	20.6	18.5
Single person household, male	33.7	28.9	30.9	32	33
Single person household, female	34.8	33.8	36.1	39.4	36.9

Source: The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

Table 5. At-risk-of-poverty rate by the most common employment status and gender (for persons aged 18 and over), 2022

Employed by an employer			Self employed			Unemployed			Pensioners			Other non-active		
Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
5.6	7.0	3.9	11.2	11.1	11.5	49.2	53.7	44.6	19.7	18.4	20.7	30.9	23.7	33.3

Source: The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

Indicators of material deprivation

Table 6. Rate of subjective poverty (Ability of the household to "make ends meet") in %

Description	Very difficult	Difficult	With certain difficulties	Quite easy	Easy	Very easy
	12.7	27.9	48.0	8.9	2.1	0.4

Source: The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

Table 7. The financial burden on the household budget due to housing costs in %

Description	Significant	Somewhat significant	Not significant at all
	49.7	45.5	4.8

Source: The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

CONCLUSION

Inequality between individuals, groups and countries has always existed. It can be measured and analyzed from very different aspects, but it is most often measured according to income, although other forms of equality-inequality can by no means be ignored. Equality before the law, equality in access to education, equality in access to healthcare, equality in access to government services, gender equality, etc. So far, there has not been a single instrument or method that would be universal for all countries and that would regulate equality. Inequality throughout history has had both its ups and downs. Today, inequality, especially in income, seems to be increasing as it can be seen and noted that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. In Serbia, inequality measured by the Gini coefficient is among the highest in Europe.

The reason for the increase in inequality in the world and in Serbia is that, among other measures, progressive taxation is not used. There are other measures in the area of social security that contribute to the reduction of inequality. These measures are mostly used by Scandinavian countries because their inequality is the lowest compared to other countries in the world. Economists believe that the main goal in the 21st century is to act towards reducing inequality. However, the current situation in the world (wars in a large number of countries, especially in Ukraine and Gaza) does not favor action in the direction of reducing inequality, on the contrary, it seems that it will continue to increase.

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