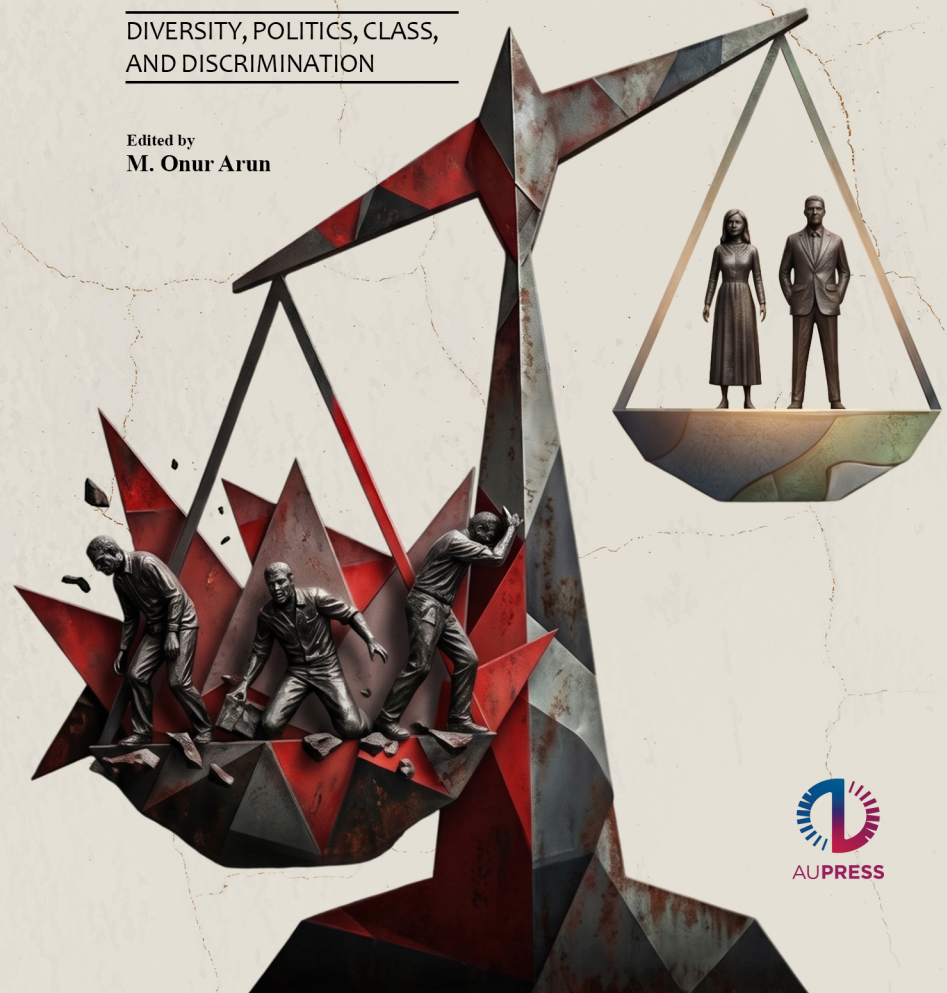
Exploring (In)equalities and (In)justice

DIVERSITY, POLITICS, CLASS, AND DISCRIMINATION

Edited by
M. Onur Arun



AUPRESS

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AUPRESS Yayınları/AUPRESS Publications
Exploring (In)equalities and (In)justice: Diversity, Politics, Class, and Discrimination

Editör/Editor
M. Onur Arun

Tasarım/Design
Can Barış BAYRAK

E-ISBN: 978-625-93043-3-5
AUPress Yayın No/AUPress Publication Number: 3
Yayıncı Sertifika No/Publisher Certificate Number: 80692
Temmuz, 2026 / July, 2026

Yayıncı/Publisher
Anadolu University Press (AUPRESS)
Yunus Emre Kampüsü Eskişehir/TÜRKİYE
+90 (222) 335 05 80 / 2588
http://aupress.anadolu.edu.tr
aupress@anadolu.edu.tr

Kategori/Category
Sosyoloji, Siyaset Bilimi/Sociology, Political Science

Yayın Dili/Language
İngilizce/English

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Consumer Culture and the Making of the "Symbolic" Middle Class in Unequal Neoliberal Societies

Alejandro Marambio-Tapia[1]

Introduction

Neoliberalism, as a global political–economic project since the late twentieth century, has deepened income and wealth inequalities by prioritizing market competition, deregulation and fiscal restraint over social protection and collective consumption. These policies have shifted bargaining power toward capital and higher-income groups, enabling the top strata to capture disproportionate gains from growth while within-country inequality has risen or remained stubbornly high in many economies, especially Anglo-American ones. In this context, class positions are increasingly defined not only by income or occupation but also by unequal access to housing, education, health and other commodified goods that were once partly de-commodified through welfare states or public provision. Neoliberal reforms in areas such as higher education and health care illustrate this dynamic: user-fees and privatization expand markets while reinforcing class stratification, as affluent groups can secure premium services and lower-income groups face debt, insecurity and truncated life chances (Schor, 2016; Kwon, 2018; Tyler, 2015; Wacquant & Wacquant, 2020; Harvey, 2007)

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These structural shifts reshape consumption both materially and symbolically, intensifying class-based differences in what people can buy and how they orient themselves to consumer culture. Rising inequality widens the gap between the consumption standards of elites and those of the lower and middle classes, but globalized media and marketing simultaneously diffuse aspirational lifestyles that few can afford, generating what Juliet Schor (2016) calls an "aspirational gap" in which status competition and debt-financed consumption become pervasive. At the same time, basic consumption—food, housing, energy—has been increasingly organized through liberalized markets and financialized circuits, producing class-differentiated consumption bundles: for example, healthier diets, "green" products or secure housing are disproportionately available to higher classes, while poorer groups are channeled into cheaper, precarious and often more harmful options. Taken together, neoliberalism does not simply increase inequality; it actively reorganizes class relations through the sphere of consumption, making access to goods and services a central terrain on which contemporary social hierarchies are produced, experienced and contested.

From the perspective of consumption, the symbolic middle class is crucial for understanding how neoliberalism reorganizes stratification through access to goods and services. Studies on middle classes and consumption in Latin America show that consumption becomes a central language for "proving" middle-class belonging: gaining access to specific neighborhoods, brands, schools or leisure practices becomes as important for identity as having a stable income, even when this is financed by debt and involves significant vulnerability. Neoliberalism, then, produces a scenario in which the middle

class expands discursively (many people locate themselves there) at the same time as material inequalities intensify; the notion of a symbolic middle class helps to capture this gap between objective position and self-image, and to show how consumption and neoliberal subjectivity (merit, entrepreneurialism, fear of "falling" among the poor) sustain this imaginary place in the social structure (Ariztía, 2016; Mac-Clure et al. 2014; Marambio-Tapia, 2017)

Over the last four decades, Chile has often been portrayed as one of Latin America's most emblematic cases of neoliberal modernization. Economic growth, the expansion of mass consumption, the diffusion of private credit, and the consolidation of a service-based economy have all contributed to reshaping everyday life. At the same time, however, these processes have unfolded alongside persistent social inequality, labor precarity, and deep asymmetries in wealth, protection, and access to social security. The result is a particularly revealing social formation: one in which large sectors of the population have accessed goods, services, and lifestyles associated with social mobility, and to some extent the "imperial mode of living" (Brand &Wissen, 2017) while remaining structurally exposed to weak welfare protections and chronic indebtedness.

This chapter examines how such a configuration has transformed the relationship between class, consumption, and the understanding of the own social position in Chile. More specifically, it explores the ways in which working-class identities are interpreted and self-interpreted through categories that migrate from politics and markets into the everyday life of households. In this context, "middle class" operates not only as an analytical or statistical category but also as a

symbolic and moral language through which people seek recognition, respectability, and social belonging. Within this framework, this work puts forward the argument that the persistent circulation of middle-class narratives within the working class must be understood in relation to the structural features of its milieu which is, in this work, Chilean society: financialized consumption, a low-productivity service economy, and high levels of indebtedness (Marambio-Tapia 2017; Marambio-Tapia 2023; Pérez-Roa, 2019). In line with this, the central claim developed here is that these dynamics have contributed to the formation of what we call a symbolic middle class.

The concept of the middle class does not refer to a stable and what is allegedly identified as an "objective" class position. Rather, it points to a form of self-understanding and social legitimacy in which sectors of the new working class, particularly the "service proletariat", organize their aspirations, practices, and moral evaluations around repertoires associated with middle-class life. These repertoires include disciplined consumption, future-oriented sacrifice, domestic order, educational investment, and the capacity to manage debt as a normalized aspect that is anticipated for social reproduction. The symbolic middle class is therefore not a statistical category but a social form which is in fact a historically situated mode of belonging in which precarious material conditions coexist with aspirations to middle-class normality.

This argument builds on and extends several strands of literature. Research on Chilean social stratification and middle classes has demonstrated a form of complexity regarding the class identification in a highly unequal neoliberal society (Méndez 2008; Barozet, 2011). Relevant studies in economic

sociology and the sociology of consumption have illuminated how markets, household practices, and consumer cultures reshape everyday forms of action and judgment (Ariztía 2014; Zelizer 1994). Studies on debt have further demonstrated that indebtedness is not merely an economic condition but a moral and political relation that shapes subjectivities, obligations as well as forms of social inclusion (Lazzarato 2012; Pérez-Roa, 2024; Marambio-Tapia 2022, 2026). Yet the connections between these literatures remain relatively underdeveloped. We in fact know too little about how consumption and indebtedness mediate both the objective and subjective dimensions of class formation in Chile, probably because class tend to be neglected in economic discussions along this century and also because debt is mainly approached as separated device from consumption dynamics.

One of the broader theoretical contributions of this argument lies in reconnecting two lines of inquiry that often remain separate: social stratification and economic sociology. Stratification research has generated valuable analyses of class structure, occupational differentiation, income inequality, and social mobility. Economic sociology has demonstrated how markets are socially embedded and how economic practices are shaped by moral norms, institutions, and cultural meanings. However, the everyday relation between class and debt remains insufficiently explored at their intersection, which illustrate a crucial gap that needs to be further explored due to the fact that contemporary inequality is increasingly mediated by financial instruments. This is because of that debt is not simply a household-level variable but is more of a class-associated relationship configuring and structuring the access to goods, opportunities, and respectability. It affects

temporal horizons, emotional life, domestic organization, and political subjectivity. In this regard, through exploring the indebtedness in a more insightful manner by considering it not only as an economic mechanism but also as a symbolic process, we gain a richer account of how class is reproduced and transformed.

The Chilean case demonstrates why this integration is vital to be considered in a more detailed manner. If we focus only on objective indicators, we may miss the symbolic effects of market inclusion. If we focus only on cultural identities, we may understate the structural role of finance and labor precarity. The concept of the symbolic middle class helps hold these dimensions together. It draws attention to how material vulnerability and symbolic aspiration are co-constituted through the infrastructure of consumption and debt. It foregrounds the ways in which being addressed as consumers, having access to credit, or entering new consumer markets can produce a sense of status and distinction that sits uneasily with persistent job insecurity, low wages or exposure to sudden downward mobility. In this sense, symbolic middle-classness is not a mere illusion, but an effect of concrete institutional arrangements—credit systems, housing markets, consumer technologies—that invite people to imagine themselves as securely integrated into the market while keeping them structurally exposed.

This concept also draws attention to how material vulnerability and symbolic aspiration are co-constituted through the infrastructure of consumption and debt. Access to mortgages, instalment plans, digital platforms and branded goods enables households to perform middle-class lifestyles and differentiate themselves from "the poor," but it often does so by binding

them into long chains of obligation and risk that reproduce their dependence on volatile labor markets and financial actors. Symbolic middle-class identities are thus sustained by practices—homeownership on credit, private schooling, branded consumption—that simultaneously signal social mobility and deepen exposure to crisis, making the experience of class increasingly contradictory. Thinking in terms of a symbolic middle class, then, allows us to analyze how neoliberal capitalism manufactures hope, respectability and belonging through consumption at precisely the point where structural inequalities and precarity remain entrenched.

This perspective also challenges simplistic binaries between "real" and "imagined" class. Symbolic middle-class identity is not unreal simply because it does not correspond neatly to stable affluence. It has real effects on individuals' behaviors and aspirations as well as social distinctions between social actors and politics. At the same time, it is constrained by objective conditions that cannot be washed away. A rigorous sociology of class must therefore analyze the interplay between structural position and symbolic mediation, rather than privileging one at the expense of the other.

Furthermore, the notion of the financial consumer deserves central attention. The financial consumer becomes a figure through which ambiguous social positions are expressed and legitimized. This figure is not reducible to rational market agency. It is a moral and class-based subjectivity shaped by institutions, advertising, household obligations, and labor discipline. Understanding this subject is essential for grasping the textures of inequality in contemporary Chile.

Qualitative interviews and life-history approaches argue that consumption choices, payment modes, and ownership

markers operate as central cues for claiming middle-class status in Chilean social life. Households often mobilize credit to sustain visible markers of "decent" life and group belonging; thus, consumption mediates subjective class by enabling performances of status even amidst fragile finances. (van Bavel & Sell-Trujillo, 2003) Several studies document a shift from detachment (debt as moral failure) to normalization (debt as necessary leverage) across cohorts and classes in Chile. This evolving moral economy allows indebtedness to be framed as responsible planning or social investment, contributing to the widespread identification with "middle-class" lifestyles sustained by credit. (Marambio-Tapia, 2023)

This chapter seeks to contribute to that conversation. First, it discusses class as both structure and representation, showing how objective locations in the division of labor and the distribution of resources are inseparable from the ways in which these locations are symbolically constructed, morally evaluated and politically narrated. This provides the conceptual grounding for treating class not only as a position, but as an ongoing process of classification and self-understanding.

Second, the chapter analyzes the transformation of the Chilean working class and the emergence of the service proletariat as a key fraction within it. It traces how deindustrialization, labor market flexibilization and the expansion of low-wage services have reconfigured working-class livelihoods, producing new forms of employment that combine formal inclusion with persistent precarity. Third, it examines the role of financialized consumption in processes of subordinate inclusion and shows how this is attached to a moral economy of indebtedness, in which access to credit and consumer goods is conditioned on household discipline, sacrifice

and the promise of mobility. Finally, the chapter develops the notion of the symbolic middle class, considering the implications of this perspective for the study of inequality and political mobilization in contemporary Chile: by foregrounding the gap between structural position and self-identification, it aims to illuminate how narratives of respectability, aspiration and fear of decline shape both the reproduction of neoliberal order and the possibilities for its contestation.

Class, Representation, and Legitimacy

Class analysis has long been divided between approaches that privilege objective location and those that emphasize subjective experience, symbolic boundaries, or cultural distinction. Yet this opposition is often misleading in the sense that it treats structure and culture as analytically separable, when in practice they are mutually constitutive. Social classes are never merely objective positions in the division of labor or the distribution of resources. They are also socially represented, morally evaluated, and politically narrated. As Crompton argues, class remains central not only because of material inequalities but because these inequalities are lived through systems of meaning, legitimacy, and classification (Crompton 2008). Individuals do not simply occupy positions; they interpret them, justify them, and compare them to the positions of others (Seim & McCarthy, 2023).

This point is especially relevant in a society like Chile, where the social order has been reorganized around market logics while preserving profound hierarchies of wealth and power. In such contexts, class identities are often marked by ambiguity and tension. Households may experience material improvement relative to previous generations—greater access

to formal employment, credit, or consumer goods—while continuing to face insecurity, volatile income, and limited social protection (Pérez-Roa et al., 2025). They may not identify themselves as poor, because they have consumer goods, schooling trajectories, or homeownership aspirations that serve to differentiate them from older images of deprivation and marginality (Marambio-Tapia, 2023). At the same time, these gains are frequently underpinned by indebtedness and exposure to crisis, so that upward mobility is fragile and reversible rather than consolidated. But nor do they enjoy the stable conditions, institutional guarantees, and intergenerational security historically associated with consolidated middle classes. The result is an intermediate space in which social location becomes a matter not only of objective indicators but of symbolic struggle over who counts as "middle class," who is at risk of "falling back," and how inequality itself is named and contested (Halewood, 2023).

The category of the middle-class acquires particular power in such a context. It functions as a language of respectability and moderation, allowing people to claim dignity without identifying either with elites or with stigmatized poverty. It suggests effort, family responsibility, prudent aspiration, and social decency (Marambio-Tapia, 2022). This helps explain why "middle-class" often circulates as a self-description even among sectors whose working and living conditions remain fragile (Méndez 2008; Marambio-Tapia 2017). In this sense, the middle class is not merely a sociological stratum; it is also a normative horizon and a culturally available script of belonging.

This symbolic dimension does not remove structural inequalities though. Rather, it mediates how they are

experienced. Following Bourdieu, one might say that class is lived not only through economic capital but also through symbolic classifications and embodied practices of distinction (Bourdieu 1984). Yet in Chile, those practices are deeply entangled with mass consumption and access to credit. To illustrate, the capacity to consume, to furnish a home, to educate children, to dress appropriately, to celebrate family milestones, and to project a respectable future become central to how households present themselves and imagine their place in society. The issue is not simply what people own, but what ownership and consumption allow them to claim socially (Moulian, 1998; Longhurst & Savage, 1997).

This is why a purely distributional approach to inequality is insufficient and why such an approach remains, *albeit* partly, non-explanatory regarding what just society is, which can be observed by looking at the normative and analytical claims of certain philosophical approaches (see Arun, 2023; Arun and Özdemir, 2024). Therefore, one must also attend to the symbolic processes through which people make sense of their social location and to the moral vocabularies through which that location is legitimized. In the Chilean case, the figure of the middle-class is one of the most important such vocabularies.

The Transformation of the Working Class: From Industrial Worker to Service Proletariat

The social formation of the Chilean working class has been profoundly transformed by neoliberal restructuring. As many societies, industrial employment has declined in relative importance, while commerce, retail, logistics, private services, care work, food provision, cleaning, security, and

platform-mediated labor have expanded. This does not mean that the working class has disappeared. Rather, it has been recomposed under new conditions.

Drawing on the concept of the service proletariat in this regard is useful because it preserves the class dimension of these occupations while simultaneously acknowledging their specific organizational and cultural features. Workers in retail, delivery, call centers, administrative support, cleaning, transport, and care remain dependent on wages, exposed to managerial control, and structurally vulnerable (Rogers, 2022; Bernardi & Garrido, 2008). Their position is still proletarian in the sense of dispossession from the means of production and dependence on selling labor power. Yet unlike the classic industrial proletariat, they often work in fragmented environments marked by emotional labor, customer orientation, flexibility, individualized assessment, and precarious schedules.

These transformations matter for class identity. The industrial workplace historically offered spaces in which collective experience, organizational density, and visible antagonism could foster stronger class identifications. Service work, by contrast, often individualizes both labor and aspiration (Antunes, 2025). Workers are interpellated as service providers, team members, flexible employees, or entrepreneurial selves rather than as members of a class. Their worth is frequently measured through customer satisfaction, emotional discipline, and self-management. In such settings, collective class languages may be weakened while individualized repertoires of effort and advancement gain strength.

At the same time, the service proletariat remains deeply exposed to the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. Low wages, unstable contracts, long commutes, household

dependency on multiple earners, and the outsourcing of social risk to families generate chronic pressure. The household becomes the main arena where these contradictions are absorbed and managed. Consumption, budgeting, and indebtedness are therefore not secondary matters (Stillerman, 2023). They are central to the social reproduction of the contemporary working class.

This helps to explain why class identity in Chile can no longer be considered only through occupational categories (Elbert & Pérez, 2018). What matters is how labor conditions interact with consumer culture, domestic obligations, and financial infrastructures, producing ways of life that are not captured by job titles alone. Workers in services do not cease to be workers because they consume more or because they aspire to middle-class lives; they remain dependent on wages, subject to managerial control, and exposed to dismissal or income volatility. But their sense of self may increasingly be organized around domestic provision, disciplined consumption, and future-oriented sacrifice rather than explicit worker consciousness or collective class identities. Providing for children, securing a home, or "managing" debts can become central moral projects through which people make sense of their position, even when their structural power in the labour market remains limited. This post-industrial working class in Chile is especially important here, showing how narratives of mobility and credit use mediate class self-understanding in households that remain structurally vulnerable (Marambio-Tapia, 2017). At the level of everyday life, being "a good worker" is tightly entangled with being "a responsible provider," and both are increasingly measured through the capacity to access and sustain particular consumption standards.

The point, then, is not that working-class identity disappears. It is that it becomes refracted through other social languages, among which middle-class discourse is especially powerful. In a context where public policy, advertising and political rhetoric celebrate "entrepreneurial" families and self-reliant consumers, identifying as middle class offers moral recognition and distance from stigmatized images of poverty, even for those whose material conditions remain precarious. The service proletariat is a working class whose relation to itself is mediated by markets, household finance, and moralized consumption: its members come to see their worth in terms of creditworthiness, self-discipline and the ability to "move up" through education and homeownership. Rather than grounding identity primarily in shared exploitation or collective struggle, class is experienced through comparisons of lifestyle, fears of downward mobility, and the constant work of sustaining a respectable consumer profile. In this sense, contemporary working-classness in Chile is articulated through middle-class idioms of aspiration, responsibility and choice, even as the underlying structure of inequality that defines it as working class remains intact.

Financialized Consumption and Subordinate Inclusion

One of the most distinctive features of Chilean neoliberalism has been the centrality of consumption financed through credit. Private indebtedness has become a common mechanism through which households access goods, services, and opportunities. Consumer loans, department store cards, bank credit, installments, educational debt, and other financial instruments have extended the reach of consumption far

beyond what current income alone would permit. In that sense, financialization has not only affected macroeconomic governance or corporate strategy; it has entered the fabric of everyday life (Pérez-Roa et al., 2022; Pérez-Roa, 2024)

This expansion of credit has often been celebrated as democratization. Households that were once excluded from many consumer markets have gained access to home appliances, furniture, clothing, education, transportation, digital devices, and forms of leisure previously associated with upward mobility (Marambio-Tapia, 2022). Yet such access has been highly unequal in its terms and consequences. For affluent households, debt may function as leverage, investment, or liquidity management. For lower-income and working-class households, it more often operates as compensation for insufficient wages and inadequate public provision. In these contexts, credit finances not only as an aspiration but also an ordinary necessity of the survival.

This is why it is useful to consider debt and credit in terms of subordinate inclusion (Marambio-Tapia, 2021). Households are included in consumer society, but through relations that reproduce vulnerability, like being indebted which is asymmetric relationship between creditor and debtor They gain access to social participation via obligations that extend into the future. They can consume, but their consumption is conditioned by interest rates, repayment schedules, penalties, and the constant threat of over-indebtedness. Inclusion is therefore real, but subordinate. It grants belonging while intensifying dependence.

Consumption is never just about the acquisition of goods. It is also about classification, recognition, and the organization of social relations (Warde, 2005). In Chile, access to

consumption has been central to how households construct ordinary respectability. To furnish a living room, buy school supplies, maintain appropriate clothing, host family celebrations, or invest in children's education is not simply to consume. It is to participate in the social norms of decency and normal life. The expansion of credit therefore affects not only material living standards but also symbolic inclusion (Pérez-Roa, 2018; Marambio-Tapia, 2022; Sisto, 2009, Stillerman, 2004).

This is particularly significant in a society where welfare protections are purposively constrained in line with neoliberal transformation that has aimed to adjust the economic and social structure of the context to global market needs and many dimensions of social reproduction are commodified. Housing, education, healthcare, pensions, and even routine household life are deeply mediated by markets. Under these conditions, the consumer becomes a key social figure. Access to a decent life increasingly depends on being able to navigate the market, compare options, make payments, and remain creditworthy. The citizen is partially reconstituted as a financial consumer.

This process has inevitable class effects since consumption financed through debt enables households to enact certain forms of middle-class normality, it can blur the boundary between objective position and symbolic identification. A household may remain precarious in labor-market terms while nonetheless inhabiting a consumer world associated with advancement. This does not erase inequality, yet reorganizes how inequality is lived and narrated.

In this regard, debt, as a normalized vehicle for everyday consumption, is not merely a contractual or financial relation.

It is also a moral one. To understand the social life of indebtedness in Chile, it is necessary to examine the values and justifications through which households interpret borrowing, repayment, sacrifice, and legitimate need. This is what may be called the moral economy of indebtedness (Marambio-Tapia, 2023; Pérez-Roa, 2019).

In mainstream discourse, debt is often framed as an issue of individual behavior: some households are prudent, others irresponsible. Such narratives obscure the structural conditions that make borrowing necessary in the first place. But they are effective because they resonate with moral distinctions that people themselves use. Not all debts are viewed equally. Borrowing for education, housing, healthcare, or children's needs is widely seen as more legitimate than borrowing for wasteful or ostentatious consumption. Debt can therefore be justified when linked to family obligation, improvement, care, or dignity (Pérez-Roa, 2019; Marambio-Tapia, 2023; Pellandini-Simanyi et al., 2015)

This moral coding matters to a great extent. It means that indebtedness is not always experienced as simple failure. On the contrary, it can be lived as evidence of commitment, sacrifice, and responsibility. Households may feel burdened by debt while simultaneously viewing it as necessary and morally warranted. A parent who goes into debt to provide for children is not merely a debtor; they may be a morally respectable actor doing what is required to sustain family life. In this way, the legitimacy of indebtedness is embedded in practical ethics of provision and social reproduction.

Indebtedness in Chile is tied to broader processes of normalization and to the formation of financial subjectivities that justify debt through moral narratives of effort and necessity

(Marambio-Tapia 2021; 2023). This is consistent with wider arguments in the sociology of debt. Lazzarato (2012), for example, emphasizes that debt produces a governed subject oriented toward obligation, guilt, and future conduct. Yet in the Chilean case, this subject is not simply imposed from above. It is actively reproduced within households as part of everyday struggles to maintain dignity under precarious conditions.

The moral economy of debt also individualizes structural contradiction. Rather than asking why wages are insufficient or why key goods are commodified, households are encouraged to ask whether they are budgeting correctly, planning adequately, and exercising discipline. Debt is normalized insofar as its management becomes a marker of moral competence. The good subject is not the one who avoids debt altogether, but the one who manages it responsibly.

This dynamic is central to the formation of the symbolic middle class. If debt can be framed as a respectable instrument of provision, then financialized consumption can become compatible with narratives of self-improvement and family decency. The household need not see indebtedness as a sign of class subordination. It may instead interpret it as the price of maintaining a middle-class standard of normality.

The Symbolic Middle Class

The notion of the symbolic middle class is proposed here to capture a specific configuration of classed self-understanding in Chile. It refers to the situation in which sectors of the working class, especially the service proletariat, interpret themselves through middle-class values and aspirations despite remaining structurally vulnerable. The term "symbolic" does not mean illusory or unreal. It means that such middle-

class condition is mediated through representation, moral legitimacy, and social performance rather than secured through stable structural positions. As argued previously, financialized consumption is the key device that underpinned these mediations.

The symbolic middle class is built through several interconnected processes. First, the expansion of consumption has made many goods and practices associated with middle class life more widely accessible, even if through debt. Second, public discourse has elevated the middle class into a normative ideal of citizenship through liberal-meritocratic values such as hardworking, orderly, responsible, future-oriented, and deserving of reward (Arun, 2022). Third, poverty remains heavily stigmatized, making the middle class an attractive language of distinction for households seeking recognition without claiming elite status. Together, these processes create the conditions under which households can locate themselves symbolically in the middle even when they remain economically fragile.

This formation is sustained in everyday life. It appears in domestic investments, educational aspirations, consumer choices, home decoration, child-centered sacrifice, and narratives of effort. It also appears in the ways households draw boundaries between themselves and others. To identify as middle class is often marking distance from dependency, disorder, or perceived irresponsibility. It is a way of claiming moral worth. Class belonging in Chile is entangled with authenticity, distinction, and the desire for recognition (Méndez 2008; Stillerman, 2023).

At the same time, the symbolic middle class is marked by instability. Unlike historically consolidated middle classes

built on the secure employment, property ownership, savings, and institutional protection, this formation often rests on fragile labor and permanent financial pressure (Pérez-Roa et al, 2025). Its continuity depends on the successful management of debt, the avoidance of crisis, and the maintenance of appearance. A single shock—job loss, illness, family rupture, or credit default—can threaten the entire arrangement. This fragility is constitutive, not accidental.

The symbolic middle class therefore captures a central contradiction of neoliberal social order. It allows structurally subordinate groups to experience forms of dignity, progress, and normality. But it does so through mechanisms that in fact deepen their vulnerability. It offers symbolic incorporation while reproducing material insecurity. This is why the concept is analytically useful: it helps explain how middle-class narratives can become widespread in a highly unequal society without implying that class inequality has been resolved. Rather than treating such self-identifications as mere false consciousness, it is more productive to see them as practical responses to historically specific conditions. Households use available cultural scripts to make life intelligible and to seek legitimacy in contexts where formal rights are weak and market participation is central. The symbolic middle class names this practical labor of recognition.

Re-considering Chile through the lens of the symbolic middle class has important implications for how inequality and politics are understood. If social actors experience themselves as respectable consumers and responsible debt managers, then inequalities may be tolerated, justified, or individualized in particular ways. The language of effort and aspiration can stabilize neoliberal order by translating the

structural vulnerability into personal challenge. It encourages households to interpret hardship as something being managed privately rather than contested collectively. This helps explain why strong objective inequalities may coexist with blurred self-identifications of class and limited class-based political articulation. When middle-class discourse becomes the dominant language of legitimate belonging, workers may see themselves less as members of a collective class and more as families striving to remain respectable in a competitive society. The service proletariat may experience exploitation and insecurity, but these experiences do not automatically translate into explicit working-class consciousness.

However, this symbolic order is not uncontested. Its legitimacy depends on the continued plausibility of its promises. If disciplined consumption, educational investment, and indebted sacrifice iteratively fail in securing the stability, then the moral economy of debt can begin to crack. What was once narrated as responsible striving may come to be seen as entrapment, abuse, or structural injustice. In this sense, the symbolic middle class is not only a mechanism of adaptation; it is also a potentially unstable terrain of politicization.

This is where the link between debt and political mobilization becomes especially important. Debt individualizes suffering, but it also produces shared experiences of stress, humiliation, and blocked futures. Under certain conditions, these experiences can be collectivized. People may begin to recognize that their difficulties are not personal failures but expressions of a broader system of unequal inclusion. The politics of debt emerges precisely at this threshold, when private sacrifice becomes publicly intelligible as structural dispossession.

The Chilean case suggests that inequality today must be analyzed not only through income or occupation, but through the everyday infrastructures of consumption and finance. These infrastructures shape how people imagine their social location, what they take to be fair, and what kinds of demands they consider legitimate. The symbolic middle class is therefore central not only to understanding social reproduction but also to understanding why moments of political rupture may emerge from apparently individualized and domesticated forms of hardship.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the contemporary Chilean social order has generated a distinctive way of experiencing and narrating class among sectors of the working class, especially the service proletariat. In a society marked by financialized consumption, indebtedness, and labor precarity, many households have come to interpret themselves through the moral and symbolic language of the middle class. This does not mean that they have ceased to be working class in structural terms. It means that class identity is increasingly mediated by consumer practices, debt management, and aspirations to respectable normality, such that the boundaries between "working class" and "middle class" are lived as fluid, contested and often contradictory. In this sense, Chile offers a particularly sharp illustration of how neoliberal capitalism reorganizes class not only at the level of income and employment, but also at the level of everyday self-understanding.

The concept of the symbolic middle class helps to illuminate this condition. It captures the coexistence of material fragility and symbolic inclusion, of structural subordination and

moral claims to decency, of working-class vulnerability and middle-class aspiration. It shows how the expansion of markets and credit has transformed not only access to goods but also the language through which social positions are understood and legitimized. To speak of a symbolic middle class is therefore not simply to name an "illusion", but to analyze a specific configuration in which households are incorporated into consumer and financial circuits that recognize them as solvent subjects while simultaneously reproducing their dependence and insecurity. This vantage point makes it possible to grasp why many working-class families resist being called "poor," insist on their respectability, and yet remain exposed to sudden downward mobility.

At the same time, the chapter has emphasized that this symbolic formation is unstable and politically significant. It rests on indebted inclusion, household discipline, and the uncertain promise that sacrifice will secure belonging—working harder, budgeting more tightly, and complying with market norms as a route to permanence within the middle. When that promise falters—through unemployment, over indebtedness, illness or broader crises—the legitimacy of the arrangement may weaken, opening space for critique, resentment and collective mobilization. The symbolic middle class is thus a terrain of consent but also of potential disaffection, in which experiences of humiliation, stalled mobility and broken promises can be translated into new forms of protest or withdrawal. Understanding how people narrate their class position, and what they feel entitled to expect, becomes crucial for interpreting the dynamics of political stability and rupture in post dictatorial Chile.

The study of class in Chile therefore requires more than a conventional stratification approach. It demands sustained attention to the social life of consumption, the moral economy of debt, and the symbolic struggles through which inequality is lived. Bringing social stratification into dialogue with economic sociology makes this possible. It allows us to see that debt and consumption are not peripheral to class analysis but among its central contemporary mediations: they shape how people map themselves onto hierarchies, how they judge others, and how they imagine the future. In Chile, as in other highly financialized societies, class is increasingly experienced through the household budget, the installment payment, the effort to remain respectable, and the burden of making precarious lives appear secure. The notion of a symbolic middle class is one way of naming that condition and, at the same time, a reminder that any adequate account of class today must take seriously the infrastructures, imaginaries and moral grammars through which people are invited to live as "middle class" while remaining structurally subordinated.

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Inequality in the Turkish Education System: Lasting Effects of Policy Changes, Economic Crises, and the School Closures

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to investigate how social inequalities in Türkiye are reproduced in the education system through an analysis of national and international secondary data with a particular objective aiming to investigate the effects of various policy changes, economic crisis and Covid-19 school closures on students who are from dissimilar socio-economic backgrounds.

Over the past few decades, the Turkish education system has undergone numerous policy shifts, many of which are complex and difficult to track, even for professionals in the field. These policy changes, however, may play a significant role in shaping academic outcomes and influencing how socio-economic disparities are reproduced through education. One major area of reform has been the tracking of students. In 1997, a rigid tracking system was implemented at the secondary school level, significantly limiting university access for students in vocational and technical schools -a policy widely associated with reinforcing existing social inequalities. This restriction was loosened in the 2000s, marking a shift toward greater educational mobility. Another important policy transformation concerns the allocation of students to secondary

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schools based on standardized exam performance. From 1990s to mid-2010s, the proportion of students placed in schools according to central exam scores increased dramatically, reaching 100 percent at its peak. In 2017, however, a new regulation capped this rate at 10 percent, signalling another dramatic shift in the landscape of educational inequalities.

Another key development is the steady expansion and promotion of private education. Over the last two decades, the number of private schools has grown significantly at all levels, which has been supported by policies incentivizing their proliferation; and this has raised concerns about access and equity. Despite the potential of these changes to shape educational and social inequality, their actual impacts remain underexplored in existing relevant literature and often largely overlooked in policy discussions.

In addition to these reforms, Türkiye has faced a severe economic crisis since 2018, marked by skyrocketing inflation and a sharp depreciation of the national currency. Evidence suggests such crises disproportionately harm disadvantaged populations and thus potentially deepen educational disparities among social groups.

Finally, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Türkiye has implemented one of the longest periods of school closures globally. Recent studies have shown that extended closures exacerbate learning losses, especially among students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

This paper aims to evaluate the impact of all these policy changes, economic crisis and pandemic school closures on the reproduction of social inequalities.

Theoretical Background

Regarding the aims and research questions of this chapter, in this section, I would like to summarize the theoretical framework related to inequalities, particularly in the field of education. As in other sub-fields of sociology, there are two main approaches in the sociology of education even though there are quite a number of segmentations under these approaches.

The first approach to the inequalities in education is the functionalist approach. One of the first to theorize inequalities in education was Talcott Parsons (1959). Parsons defines the main functions of education systems as socialization and allocation. According to him, schools serve as one of the main socialization institutions for individuals in modern stratified industrial society. Students are prepared for their future roles in the society as adults at school. This preparation includes both technical requirements of a job as well as social norms that is expected to be obeyed by individuals.

Moreover, pupils also learn the meritocratic social stratification systems through schooling as well. In one of the canonical works of the functionalist literature, Davis & Moore (1945) argue that inequalities in the society are functional. Some positions in the society are more important than others, they require more education, talent and hard work in line with meritocratic distribution of valued positions as well as positions of power. Hence, holders of these positions are rewarded with higher prizes. Education, in this sense, is the best medium to train and allocate the individuals to the best fitting positions in the society. In this sense, education also functions as the main meritocratic mechanism which takes shapes in line with normative principles of the libertarian value

distribution mechanism (Arun, 2022a, pp. 1020-1026; Arun & Özdemir, 2024, pp. 195-196).

Functionalist approach in education lays the ground for the Human Capital Theory (HCT). Due to being the main theoretical foundation of policies implemented by international organizations like the World Bank, HCT has strong influence on education policies across the world. Firstly formulated with the works of Schultz (1961; 1963) and Becker (1964), HCT assumes education as an investment like economic capital. Individuals invest in their education to receive better economic gains in the long run. So, it is assumed that the education systems provide the skills necessary in the labour market. To develop these skills, individuals spend their money and time in education. As they get higher levels of education, they are more probable to get better rewarding jobs in the labour market. Hence, another assumption of the HCT is that there is a strong correlation between education and income.

Nevertheless, both the functionalist approach to education and HCT have been criticized on various grounds. For example, one of the first critiques was from Dewey (1962) who argued that functionalists only focus on social functions of education instead of individual development. Moreover, central assumptions of the functionalist approach are also criticized for the fact that not all the best rewarding jobs in the labour market are requiring high education (Tumin, 1953) or the education system is only functional for certain groups in the society (Bowles & Gintis, 1975). Similarly, HCT also have taken criticisms like that the relationship between education and income is not always positive (Berg, 1971; O'Toole, 1975), the contents of the education system are not always relevant to the needs of the labour market (Collins, 1979; Spence, 1973) and

non-economic dimensions of education such as race, gender, culture and history are ignored (Block, 1990; Fine, 2002).

The second major theoretical approach to the inequalities in education is the conflict theories. Distinguished from the functionalist approach and taking as a counter position to it, these theories focus on conflicts within a social structure instead of cohesion that functionalist tend to emphasize more. As a response to the increasing popularity of the functionalist approach and the HCT in the 1960s and 70s, Bowles and Gintis (1976) objected to the meritocratic assumptions of these theories and argued that schools are only functional for the reproduction of existing social hierarchies since there is no relationship between skills and wealth, and expansion of schooling does not necessarily mean less income inequality.

While Bowles and Gintis used a Neo-Marxist theoretical framework, there were also responses from Neo-Weberian approaches. Collins (1979) also challenged the foundational assumptions of the functionalist approach and demonstrated that the contents of schooling are very loosely connected to the needs of the labour market, and schooling only serves for the social closure against the lower socio-economic groups' upward social movement towards the upper strata of the society. According to Collins, the expansion of schooling leads to a credential inflation and as increasing levels of education expands among the social strata, individuals from the upper strata of the society occupy even higher levels of education to protect their advantage (Collins, 2011).

Starting from the 1970's there were also theories opposing the functionalist view from a culturalist perspective which can also be classified under the conflict approach. One of the earlier of these is the code theory of Bernstein (1961; 1962; 1971).

He argued that the language used in and the curricula taught in schools are fitting more to the culture of upper classes. Through this structure, pupils from different classes are tracked early in the education system and it leaves little room for social mobility.

Similar to Bernstein, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) claimed that the education system is reproducing the existing social structure and inequalities. The cultural capital of the higher classes, which is the language, values, knowledge, tastes, manners of the dominant strata, is rewarded in the education system. Thus, the pupils from advantaged groups succeed very easily and can hold their advantageous positions. Yet, an important aspect of their perspective also involves that, in addition to the formal mechanisms like tracking or selection of students, pupils from lower strata also self-exclude themselves (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 42).

Conflict theories in the sociology of education is criticized for over-emphasizing the role of the social structure. Scholars like Sarup (1978) criticized especially Marxist approaches for overlooking micro level relations such as the interactions between the pupils and the educators. Giroux also made a (1983) similar criticism, arguing that the conflict approaches to education are ignoring the agency of individuals and regarding both the teachers and the students as the passive subjects of a dominant capitalist structure.

In this study, my theoretical framework to a large extent overlaps with the conflict theories. Although, I admit that education can be an investment for future gains and it might be one of the channels for social mobility; in this paper I deliberately focus on conflicts between different social groups, investigating educational differences between people from

different social strata and structural reasons behind the inequalities in education. Thus, rather than adopting a narrow equality-of-opportunity framework (Arun, 2022b, pp. 276-277), this study approaches educational differences between social strata as issues of structural inequality, emphasizing the conflictual relations through which educational advantages as well as disadvantages in this area are reproduced and maintained.

Data and Methods

To this end, I made use of national and international education data from various sources. To depict the educational inequalities across the world I drew upon aggregated data from the reports and datasets of certain international organizations. For example, country level student data were taken from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to compare the Turkish students with the rest of the world. To track the impact of Covid-19 school closure data were taken from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Other country level data such as school droputs and child labour are taken from United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and International Labour Organization (ILO). For the Turkish case, I used data from public institutions such as the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and the Turkish Statistical Institute (Turkstat) along with international exam data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of OECD to display the inequalities between different social groups using descriptive statistics. In some cases, such as the comparison of private and public schools or university entry rates of different secondary level schools I made novel statistical analyses with the data

from OECD PISA and Student Selection and Placement Centre of Türkiye (ÖSYM) respectively.

The Effects of Recent Policies on Educational Inequalities in Türkiye

Policy changes in education may have profound and long-lasting effects on social inequalities. Türkiye has experienced almost continuous, desynchronized and incompatible changes for the last few decades. However, the outcomes of these shifts in education policies in terms of social inequalities have been mostly unheeded. In this section, I would like to discuss some of these recent changes with regard to their relation to social inequalities. First of these changes is the tracking of students due to previous achievements or standardized exams. In most of the developed countries, such policy changes are implemented gradually. Neverthelesss, in Türkiye tracking and standardized exam applications in education have been changed countless times and usually in opposing directions. It is even possible for some pupils to experience several different implementations during their education time. Another major policy change was the expansion and promotion of private schools. There has been a boom of the number of private schools both in primary and secondary education for the last couple of decades. Moreover, some recent contextual shocks such as the economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic had also substantial effects on education and thus on social inequalities. In this section, I discuss these effects using secondary data.

Tracking of students and central examinations

Tracking in education refers to the allocation of pupils to different tracks of education (e.g., academic, technical,

vocational, etc.) according to their previous success, skills or choice. The extant literature shows that in education systems where there is tracking, the effect of socio-economic background of pupils to their success is higher (Bol et al., 2014; Brunello & Checchi, 2007; Burger, 2016; Hanushek & Wößmann, 2006; Suna et al., 2020; Van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010). Moreover, research has also found that the more, and the earlier, tracking an education system leads to a deeper inequality (Horn, 2009; Marks, 2005); yet as countries shift from a tracked education system to a comprehensive one inequality decreases (Duru-Bellat & Kieffer, 2000; Gamoran, 1996; Meghir & Palme, 2005; Pekkarinen et al., 2009; Van De Werfhorst, 2019).

There are findings parallel to the international literature in Türkiye as well (Bölükbaş & Gür, 2020; Kara, 2016; Niehues et al., 2019). The education system in Türkiye has undergone several transformations for the last few decades. Some of these changes are directly related to tracking. In the early 1990's, there were Anatolian High Schools after five years of primary schooling, and Science High Schools after eight years of primary and middle schooling. Both were selecting their students via central exams. Thus, these schools had a homogenous student profile consisting of the most successful pupils in the country. The proportions of these selective schools both at the middle and secondary levels were below two percent (Bölükbaş & Gür, 2020, pp. 1–2; MEB, 2024b, p. 81) at the beginning of the 1990's. In 1997, a big reform was implemented that increased the compulsory years of schooling from five to eight years. With this reform, a strict tracking system was implemented as well. By 1998 the share of students in selective high schools had reached over 20 among all students at the

secondary level. Moreover, vocational schooling was strictly tracked where there were very limited opportunities for their students to continue to post-secondary education other than vocational colleges. In the following decade, although the route for university was eased for vocational track, the share of selective schools reached to 50 percent by 2013 (Gür et al., 2013, p. 7). In 2012, compulsory schooling was increased to 12 years consisting of four years of primary, four years of middle and four years of secondary levels. Starting from 2014, with a new transformation, all students were tracked before secondary level via a national central exam. This policy was pursued until a U-turn in policy in 2017. With this policy, only 10 percent of students were tracked in selective schools and the rest was oriented towards high schools in their neighbourhoods. Since then, the number of selective public schools has been increasing again. By 2024, the rate of students in selective schools among public secondary school students was over 20 percent (MEB, 2024a). Thus, in a relatively short term, education policies regarding tracking in Türkiye has undergone lots of policy changes which were not in accordance at all. Moreover, there is no indication that policy makers take into consideration the social inequality aspect of these policies. The only exception is the capping of the share of selective schools at 10 percent in 2017 (Özer et al., 2020). Although, this policy was a big step towards decreasing inequalities, the increasing rate of selective schools and further tracking since then shows the lack of persistence in education policies.

Varying degrees of tracking in the Turkish education system for the last few decades had a big influence on inequalities. For example, recent research in the last couple of decades in Türkiye, show substantial differences between school types

in Türkiye (Alacacı & Erbaş, 2010; Özdemir, 2016; Özer & Suna, 2021). Students from selective schools have been performing much better either in international tests like PISA, TIMMS and PIRLS (Alacacı & Erbaş, 2010; Özdemir, 2016) or in national exams for middle school to high school transition (Özer & Suna, 2021; Suna et al., 2020) and secondary to tertiary transition (Şahin et al., 2012).

On the other hand, students in Vocational Education and Training (VET) are lagging behind to enormous degrees. Previous research showed that tracking homogenized the profile of students in these schools and created a negative reputation (Özer & Suna, 2021, p. 857). Especially, between 2014 and 2017 when all the students were allocated to different school types according to their central exam scores, VET schools became the type of schools at which students who could not be placed to any other type of schools are attending (Bozgeyikli, 2019, p. 10). It was also revealed that selection into these schools are highly affected by socio-economic status (Özdemir, 2016, p. 207). Moreover, using the data of all secondary school students in Türkiye, Özer & Suna (2021) revealed that students in VET schools have lower levels of family income, lower parental education and lower parental occupational status. Furthermore, the effect of socio-economics background on school performance was higher in the periods when there were higher levels of tracking (Özer & Suna, 2021, p. 865).

Privatization of education

Since the foundation of the Republic, Turkish education system relied heavily on the state investment. Although various public and private institutions introduced their own education systems during the late Ottoman period; in 1924, it is

decided to manage all schools under MoNE and to provide education only by the state (Ak Küçükçayır & Cemaloğlu, 2016). Despite the fact that there are few schools which was remained to be funded privately, they have been under the control of MoNE. Until the 2000's the share of private school students among the student population remained as an exception. Though, privatization of education started with private tutoring after the introduction of standardized exams for transition between different levels of education in the 1980s and the 1990s. Finally in 2007 with a law easing the foundation of private schools and providing incentives to be paid by the government to the parents sending their children to private schools (Taşkın, 2010), the number of private schools at all levels skyrocketed. The share of students attending private schools at the primary level was only 0.6 percent in 1998/1999. In 2022/2023 it reached to 6.1 percent (MEB, 2024b, p. 47,115). During the same period it rose from 4.5 percent to 12.9 percent at the secondary level (MEB, 2024b, pp. 74-75,116). Among OECD members, Türkiye is ranked fourth after Chile, Sweden and Hungary in terms of the rate of increase in the share of students in private schools between 2000 and 2018 (OECD, 2020, p. 161).

However, the international literature on private schools underscore that increasing share of privately funded education increases school segregation and social stratification (Alegre & Ferrer, 2010; Macpherson et al., 2014; Zancajo et al., 2022). On the other hand, recent data show that private schools do not seem to provide an academic advantage for the students attending.

For example, PISA has been conducted by OECD to measure the maths, reading and science skills of 15-year-old

students across the world since 2000. The latest PISA was conducted in 2022. While the math scores are compared, students from private schools seem to perform better than their peers in public schools. However, if one takes into account the socio-economic status of the students and the average socio-economic status of the schools, the results reverse in almost every country except from Finland and Canada (OECD, 2023a, p. 6). In Türkiye, a representative sample of over 7000 15-year-old students were included in PISA 2022. Even when the raw averages of PISA maths scores of students from public and private schools are compared; students from public schools perform slightly better, though the difference is not statistically significant. When the socio-economic status of the students is taken into account the widened gap is statistically significant. There are similar results for reading and science tests as well (My own calculations).

On the other hand, university admission rates show that students from private schools in Türkiye still have a higher probability of entering university. In 2025, 43.5 percent of students from public Science High Schools are placed in an undergraduate programme (ÖSYM, 2025). This rate was 44.4 percent for private Science High Schools. The difference between them is small and these schools include only a minority of the student body at the secondary level in Türkiye. The highest number of students are from Anatolian High Schools. These schools are public and contains almost 40 percent of all students participated in the university exam in 2025. 18.5 percent of students from Anatolian High Schools are admitted to undergraduate programmes (excluding distant education). This rate is 33.5 percent in private schools where the medium of instruction is a foreign language. These schools can be

regarded as the private equivalent of Anatolian High Schools. Thus, the probability of a student from a private school is almost two times of a student from a public school. However, it should be noted that there are many foundation universities for which students have to pay large amounts of tuition fees unlike the free public universities. Thus, graduates of private schools are also more likely to select foundation universities and the overall admission rates from private secondary schools are likely to be higher. Obviously, this is also another source of inequality in terms of reaching tertiary education. Moreover, due to the fact that we cannot have access to the micro data for university admission to check individual and school level socio-economic background variables, it is not certain that the advantage of private schools would persist after controlling for socio-economic background variables.

Despite the lack of proof that private schools provide better quality education, a recent qualitative study show that the higher rate of placement in central examinations are one of the reasons parents have in their decision to send their children to private schools (Kurada & Özdemir, 2022, p. 87). Several other studies also underlined foreign language education, safety and hygiene as reasons for their selection of private schools (Gülünay, 2022; Kurada & Özdemir, 2022; Yüzüak Özdemir, 2016). The fact that many factors other than the quality of education play a role in parents' choice of private schools is another dynamic in reproducing social inequalities. Today, a middle class parent in Türkiye may feel the need to send their children to private schools and spend large amounts of money for these schools regardless of the quality of education. Hence, an extraordinarily high amount of cash is flowing to private education. Among OECD countries

Türkiye (along with Mexico) is one of the last countries in terms of total expenditure in education per student at all levels (OECD, 2025, p. 270). Moreover, the share of private expenditure on education in Türkiye is 20.3 percent which is above the OECD average (OECD, 2023b). Hence, it can be concluded that Türkiye has not been spending on education as much as other OECD countries; and through the policies promoting private schooling, the share of private spending within this amount has been increasing. This policy is highly likely to increase inequalities in terms of educational opportunities without any increase in the quality of education.

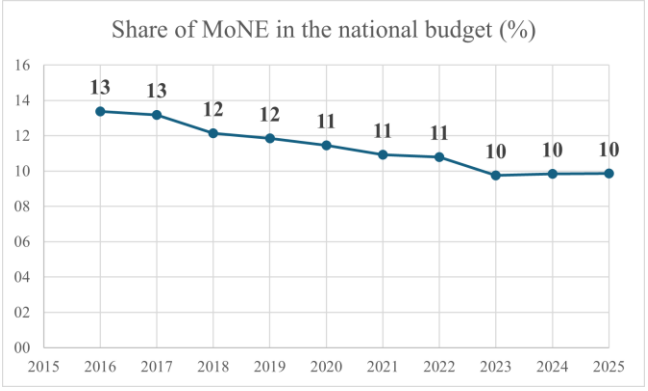
Lasting effects of economic crisis

While the above mentioned education policy changes have been taking place, Türkiye has experienced lots of political and economic turmoil. One of the most substantial of these was the economic crisis in 2018. The extant literature identifies two distinct outcomes regarding the effects of economic crises on educational inequalities. On the one hand, it has been shown that due to declining government spending on education, declining real wages and declining family sources children may drop out from education and move into the labour force (Fallon & Lucas, 2002; Salazar et al., 2020). On the other hand, as a result of declining wages the opportunity cost of education may decline as well (Lindemann & Gangl, 2025; Torche, 2010).

In 2018, Türkiye experienced a huge financial crisis which led to high unemployment rates, many companies going bankrupt, negative growth rates and high inflation (Akçay & Güngen, 2022; Orhangazi & Yeldan, 2021). A significant outcome of the crises was on the government spending on

education. Share of MoNE in the national budget has decreased from 13 percent to 10 percent since 2017 (MEB, 2025) (See Graph 1).

Graph 1. Share of MoNE in the national budget, 2015-2025 (%)



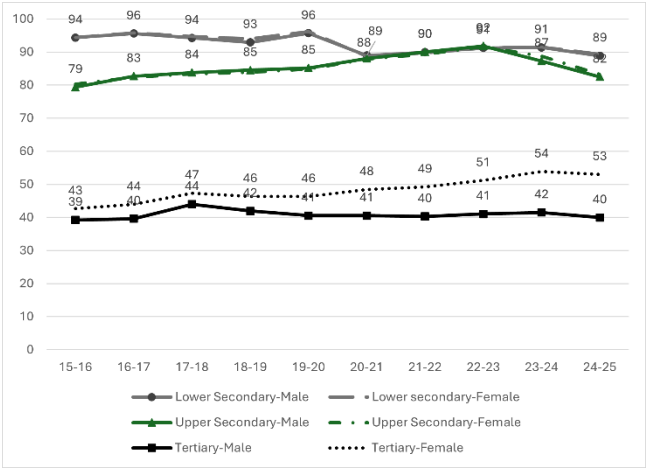
Source: (MEB, 2025, p. 246)

The effects of economic downturns on educational participation are deeply stratified and reflect underlying class and gender inequalities. As Torche (2010) demonstrates, economic crises tend to widen educational disparities by generating divergent responses across social strata: while children from the most disadvantaged households are often withdrawn from school due to intensified reliance on their labour, middle-class families may increase educational investment as the relative returns to schooling rise amid declining wages and shrinking employment opportunities in low-skilled sectors. Rather than operating as neutral shocks that are equally influential on all social strata, economic crises thus function as mechanisms that reproduce and intensify pre-existing inequalities in educational access by deepening disadvantaged

class positions of lower socio-economic groups *vis-à-vis* upper socio-economic groups.

Graph 2 illustrates that net enrolment in primary education declined sharply after the 2019–2020 academic year. While this decline coincides with the Covid-19 pandemic and may partially reflect its disruptive effects, it also reveals the vulnerability of compulsory education to broader socio-economic shocks. Secondary education follows a distinct trajectory: enrolment increased steadily until 2022–2023, after which a noticeable decline is observed for both girls and boys, suggesting a delayed but systemic response to prolonged economic instability.

Graph 2. Net enrolment in education by gender in Türkiye (%)



Source: (MEB, 2025, p. 3)

The most striking stratification emerges at the tertiary level. Following the 2018 economic crisis, net enrolment in higher education began to diverge sharply by gender. Until the 2017–2018 academic year, enrolment trends for men and

women moved in parallel, with women maintaining a modest advantage. However, from 2018-2019 onward, women's enrolment continued to increase gradually, while men's enrolment declined. This trend is in line with the cases of Brazil and Colombia after the economic crises in the 1980s (Torche, 2010), the US (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013, p. 53) and with many OECD countries after the 2008 economic recession (OECD, 2012). This divergence can be interpreted in a way that highlights the gendered organization of labour markets and household survival strategies under crisis conditions. In Türkiye, men are disproportionately positioned as primary breadwinners, and economic downturns intensify pressures on young men, particularly those from working-class and disadvantaged households, to exit education and enter the labour market. Educational withdrawal, in this sense, constitutes a gendered form of crisis management rather than an individual choice.

At the same time, the Turkish labour market, which had already been structured by persistent gender inequalities, has even become increasingly exclusionary for women, offering limited employment opportunities and declining real wages. Under these conditions, consistent participation in education may represent a rational, albeit constrained, strategy for women to postpone labour market entry and enhance their qualifications in anticipation of future opportunities. This pattern reveals how gendered labour market structures shape educational trajectories in divergent ways, reinforcing the role of education as both a site of inequality reproduction and a temporary buffer against labour market exclusion.

Taken together, these trends suggest that economic crises in a neoliberal context do not merely reduce educational

participation in aggregate terms but reconfigure educational pathways in ways that deepen social stratification.

School closures and learning losses during the pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic affected many areas of the social life as well as education. Starting from March 2020, lots of countries went into lockdowns and face-to-face education was stopped for months in many countries. Two thirds of all countries worldwide kept schools closed for at least three months for the majority of students during the pandemic (OECD, 2023c, p. 63). In Türkiye, schools were closed more than 40 weeks and it is among the countries that had the longest school closures throughout the world (UNESCO, 2021). Despite efforts to compensate for the learning losses through distant education and employing technological solutions, the amount of learning losses totalled a great amount. More troublingly, these losses were not equal across children from different social groups.

Comparing PISA 2022 data with long term trends calculated via former PISA exams, Jakubowski et al. (2025) estimated a decline of 14 percent of a standard deviation in mathematics scores. Moreover, they showed that already disadvantaged social groups such as boys, immigrants and students who had already been underperforming experienced higher losses. In another study, using Skills-Adjusted Mean Years of Schooling (SLAMYS) introduced by Lutz et al. (2021), Özdemir et al. (2022) projected that learning losses due to Covid-19 school closures would increase the skills gap between adults from the Global North and the Global South in the upcoming decades. In Türkiye, schools closed for more

than 40 weeks, and Özdemir et al (2022, p. 7) estimated about a 1.4 SLAMYS decrease for cohorts affected from school closures. This is one of the highest losses among the 45 countries investigated in the article and equals to the gains in SLAMYS for Türkiye between the years of 2000 and 2015 (Lutz et al., 2021, p. S.I. 21). However, these estimations and projections are countrywide and do not capture within country inequalities. It is quite possible that the effects of Covid-19 school closure were diverse across social strata and existing socioeconomic gaps were widened.

One of the gaps that widened and became more apparent during the closure of schools is the digital divide. OECD (n.d.) defines the digital divide as the "unequal access to digital technologies, particularly concerning internet connectivity and device availability, alongside disparities in infrastructure, skills and affordability" and a new source of inequalities of opportunities in education. PISA 2022 results revealed that more than half of the students in OECD countries reported that they experienced problems with internet access to a digital device when they needed it (OECD, 2023c, p. 341). The rate is higher in Türkiye. Türkiye has the highest score of "Index of problems with remote learning" among OECD countries (OECD, 2023c, p. 341). About a quarter of students in Türkiye said that they had problems with access to a digital device when they needed it at least once or twice a week and more than 30 percent said they had problems with internet access at least once or twice a week. During the pandemic, MoNE (2020, p. 19) also reported that only 39 percent of students from disadvantaged groups has internet access. These indicate even more skills loses and inequalities of adult skills within Türkiye.

Another source of increasing inequalities during the pandemic school closures is the increased rate of student drop outs and the risk of permanent disengagement from education. Azevedo et al. (2021, p. 19) estimated that worldwide 10.7 million would leave school due to income shocks due to the pandemic. Moscoviz and Evans (2022, p. 8) reported that older children and girls were tend to drop out more. For Türkiye, Graph 2 above shows a visible decrease in enrolment especially in lower secondary education between 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 schools years. The drop in the net enrolment of girls is 7.4 percent while it is 5.7 percent for boys.

Reports by various international organizations during the pandemic pointed out that many children across the world were pushed into child labour or increased household duties due to economic recession and school closures during the pandemic (Arcia et al., 2022; UNESCO et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2021). ILO and UNICEF (2021, p. 8) reported that there were 160 million children worldwide in child labour in early 2020 just before the pandemic, and estimate that 8.9 million children would be in child labour by late 2022. This means the loss of decades long progress in the combat against child labour. Several studies conducted after the pandemic confirm that child labour increased after the school closures in various middle and low income countries (Biscaye et al., 2022; Candrawati & Auwalin, 2024; Habib et al., 2024; Makino et al., 2024; Mohammed, 2023). For Türkiye, there are no official statistics or ad-hoc research on the issue. Turkstat (2020) conducted a survey on child labour back in 2019 and estimated that 720 thousand 6-17 year old children had been engaged in an economic activity. Unfortunately, this survey has not been repeated since then. On the other hand, various small scale

studies pointed out that children of refugees, undocumented migrants, Roma community, seasonal agricultural workers and children living and working on the streets were much more vulnerable during the pandemic and many went permanently into labour during the pandemic school closures (Bahar Özvarış et al., 2020; ERG, 2020; Gungor, 2021; Kontaş Azaklı et al., 2025).

Girls from poor families also affected from pandemic school closures. Several studies showed increased early marriages, teenage pregnancies and sexual abuse for girls during the pandemic (Arcia et al., 2022; Asanov et al., 2021; ILO & UNICEF, 2021). Increased domestic demands for girls during the pandemic lockdowns and school closures were also noted (ILO & UNICEF, 2021; UNICEF, 2021). Several reports published in Türkiye described similar patterns for girls in Türkiye as well (Aygüneş & Ok, 2020; ERG, 2023; Torun, 2024). It is clear that the pandemic school closures have lasting and gendered impacts on the inequalities of education.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have examined how shifts in education policy, alongside changing economic and social conditions, have shaped educational inequalities in Türkiye. Although Türkiye has experienced numerous policy reforms within a relatively short period, these changes have lacked coherence and continuity. More importantly, reducing social inequalities has not appeared to be a central motivation underlying these reforms. This policy orientation can be traced through the declarations of the National Education Assemblies, which have been convened by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) since 1939. While these declarations

are not legally binding, they are intended to guide educational policymaking in subsequent years. Notably, over the past three decades, references to educational inequality have been largely absent from these documents. The main exception is the 20th National Education Assembly held in 2021, whose declaration opened with resolutions under the heading "Equality of Opportunity in Basic Education" (*20. Milli Eğitim Şurası Kararları*, 2021). This emphasis can be linked to the influence of Mahmut Özer, who was Minister of Education at the time and whose academic work has explicitly addressed educational inequalities (Özer et al., 2020; Özer & Suna, 2021; Suna et al., 2020). However, following Özer's departure from the Ministry in June 2023, policies aimed at reducing social inequalities appear to have been sidelined once again, with policy documents offering few, if any, explicit references to this goal.

The most recent policy developments reinforce this assessment even further. Measures such as the early tracking of students through the re-opening of middle-level vocational schools, the expansion of vocational education centres that integrate students—predominantly from disadvantaged backgrounds—into the labour market (Kayıkçı & Aksoy, 2025; Taşkın & Ernas, 2025), the growing share of selective secondary schools, and the expansion of private schooling across all levels indicate that equality is not a priority for MoNE. Taken together, these policies tend to channel students from lower socio-economic backgrounds into vocational tracks that lead to early labour market entry, limited skill acquisition, and lower expected lifetime earnings. By contrast, students from more affluent families are increasingly directed toward private education, which often entails substantial financial costs

despite the absence of consistent evidence of superior educational quality.

At the same time, broader social and economic conditions in Türkiye further constrain the potential for reducing educational inequalities. As discussed earlier, the 2018 economic crisis produced enduring and gendered effects, contributing to the reproduction of existing inequalities through increased dropout rates. Similarly, school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic generated learning losses that were unevenly distributed across social strata, disproportionately affecting already disadvantaged students.

In sum, from a conflict-theoretical perspective, education in Türkiye emerges as a central arena in which neoliberal austerity, labour market segmentation, and welfare retrenchment intersect to reproduce social inequalities across generations. Yet the absence of causal identification in this chapter does not imply that the relationship between policy choices and inequality patterns is indeterminate. Instead, the evidence points toward a probabilistic causal mechanism: early tracking into vocational education, when combined with weak school-to-work linkages and low social mobility returns, systematically depresses lifetime earnings for disadvantaged students (Bar-Haim & Feniger, 2022; Borghans et al., 2020; Ozer & Perc, 2020). This mechanism is likely to operate independently of family background to the extent that tracking assignment correlates with socio-economic status even after controlling for prior achievement—an empirical proposition that future research could test using longitudinal microdata from MoNE.

The argument gains further clarity through comparative lens. Unlike OECD countries that have successfully reduced educational inequality by delaying tracking (e.g., Finland's

comprehensive schooling until age 16) or by combining upper-secondary vocational education with strong welfare supports (e.g., Germany's dual system after non-selective lower secondary), Türkiye's current trajectory moves in the opposite direction. Early tracking, rising private enrolment, and weak social protection do not resemble the social market economies of continental Europe. Rather, Türkiye's model increasingly aligns with liberal residual welfare regimes—such as charterised school systems in parts of the United States—yet hybridised with strong centralised state steering. This configuration is not one that merely tolerates educational inequality; it actively produces it through institutional design.

While causal claims cannot be established on the basis of descriptive trends alone, the patterns documented in this chapter highlight the importance of politically informed and historically grounded research that situates educational outcomes within broader struggles over resources, risk distribution, and social reproduction.

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News Coverage of Inequalities in Education[1]

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Introduction

Defined as the unequal distribution of access to resources and rewards, such as wealth, status, power, and knowledge, produced in society among individuals or social groups, social inequalities stand as one of the foremost global challenges that the modern world both exacerbates through its own dynamics and is compelled to resolve (Marshall, 1999). While existing economic systems are the primary forces that produce and deepen social inequalities, other factors contributing to deepen the existing inequalities include state policies, the culture that influences social behaviour, the media, which plays a significant role in shaping this culture, and educational systems that operate in coordination with all these dynamics.

Social inequalities operate across a highly broad spectrum. Income inequality, gender inequality, disparities based on language and ethnic origin, regional and spatial inequality, inequality based on cultural and social capital, disability, and the recently emerging digital divide are the primary forms of these disparities. These types of inequalities do not affect individuals in a single dimension of everyday life. In many instances, multiple inequalities intersect, affecting individuals

[1] This book chapter is based on data collected as part of the TÜBİTAK 3005 research project, 'Developing Education Journalism in Türkiye' (Project Number: 222K185). The authors would like to thank TÜBİTAK for their support of this research.

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across multiple dimensions of everyday life and further deepening their experienced disadvantages (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 1991; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016). That is to say that an individual may experience the effects of multi-dimensional inequalities due to various sociological factors involving, *albeit* not limited to, ethnicity, gender, class, religiosity and religious belonging simultaneously. These inequalities create a state of systematic disadvantage to which individuals are frequently subjected within the family, the workplace, schools, and other social domains.

Social inequalities possess the potential to reproduce themselves through their multifaceted and intertwined nature. In the reproduction of inequalities, educational processes play a significant role alongside culture and behaviours, the actions and discourses of economic actors, the legal and institutional policies of states, and the content disseminated by the media. Although individuals enrolled in educational institutions are allegedly provided with equal conditions and opportunities, they continue to experience pre-existing inequalities while also encountering new forms of disparities within the education process.

This study focuses on how inequalities experienced within educational process are reflected in news content. Within this framework, news related to education across ten different news portals was scanned, and news texts covering any form of educational inequality were included in the scope of the study. All in all, the chapter primarily seeks to answer how various forms of inequalities affecting students are portrayed by the Turkish news media. In relation to this primary focus, two subsidiary questions are placed at the centre of the analyses of the quantitative and qualitative data the study involves: First,

it follows the question, what forms of educational inequality are represented in the news texts, and to what extent are they reflected? Second, how are educational inequalities contextualized and portrayed within the news texts?

Before proceeding to the findings presented in line with the purpose of responding on these questions, it will be useful to address the issue of inequality in education within the context of Türkiye and to focus on how social inequalities are presented in news coverage.

Inequalities in Education and the Pursuit of Equality

Efforts to eliminate inequalities within the education system in Türkiye and to provide an equal and equitable educational environment for all individuals constitute a major agenda item in terms of discursive, legal, and political steps. Legally, the National Education Basic Law No. 1739 (1973) is in effect as a fundamental text aiming to secure and maintain equality in education. At the same time, the Constitution emphasises that education is both a right and a duty, preventing families from obstructing children's right to education for various reasons. Furthermore, ensuring equitable access to education and safeguarding the right to education for all citizens are key priorities reflected in development plans, National Education Councils, government programmes, and political parties (İnan & Demir, 2018). There are various policies pursued by the state to ensure equality in education. Providing scholarships to students in need, offering dormitory facilities to those lacking accommodation in their place of study, distributing free education and textbooks in schools under the Ministry of National Education (MEB), abolishing tuition fees in universities, implementing conditional cash

transfers to prevent women and children from being deprived of education, and launching other campaigns are prominent policies for ensuring educational equality. As the issue of equality in education is a global area of struggle, it is also on the agenda of international organisations. For example, in the "*Haydi Kızlar Okula*" (Let's Go to School, Girls) campaign, UNICEF (2003) collaborated with the MEB to organise nationwide campaigns encouraging girls to attend school. Accordingly, UNICEF (2026) and the UN state that they contribute to the shaping of state policies in the context of equality by working for the healthy and safe development of children and equality in education in various countries.

Although states and non-governmental organisations carry out studies to reduce inequalities observed in education, various researchers report that disparities remain at highly significant levels both internationally and nationally. One of the most common and prominent types of disparity in the field of education is income inequality followed by gender inequality. In certain situations, these disparities intersect with other forms of inequality, further deepening the negative impacts (Ferreira & Gignoux, 2010; Yıldız & Gültekin Karakaş, 2019; Kesik & Şahin, 2020; Korlu et al., 2024; Education Reform Initiative, 2025).

To begin with, the share of public sector resources allocated to education in Türkiye constitutes a key indicator of how income inequality is reflected in the education system. Public education expenditure in Türkiye, at 2.6 per cent of GDP, remains below both the global average (4.5 per cent) and the average for upper-middle-income countries (4.9 per cent). Disaggregated by educational level, the share allocated to preschool education is particularly low, falling significantly below

the global average (Korlu, 2025). With regard to income-based inequality in education, it is reported that children from low-income families have more limited access to quality education and tend to experience shorter durations of schooling (Ferreira & Gignoux, 2010; Yıldız & Gültekin Karakaş, 2019). Furthermore, 19.3% of students in Türkiye reported skipping at least one meal per week in the past 30 days due to financial constraints. The qualitative disparities in access to quality education stemming from income inequality are also reflected in student achievement. According to the PISA 2022 results, the score gap between advantaged and disadvantaged schools is approximately 82 points, corresponding to an equivalent of three to four years of schooling (Korlu et al., 2024).

Income inequality does not affect students in isolation but rather interacts with inequalities in economic status. Students from low-income and low social status backgrounds face significant barriers in accessing quality education and encounter employment challenges even with the education they attain (Ferreira & Gignoux, 2010; Kandemir & Kaya, 2010; Kesik & Şahin, 2020). In analyses based on the differences between students' family income levels and their achievement levels in national and international examinations conducted in Türkiye, it is evident that income inequalities lead to inequalities in achievement (Cingöz & Gür, 2020). This situation directly affects the future of students, causing those who receive low level and low-quality education to encounter low income and unstable working conditions (Sarıdaş & Çelik, 2022). Accordingly, family background and uneven cultural capital and network relations of the family bring forth unequal achievements. Those who have an upper class family background seems moving upward on social ladder and this is

mistakenly considered as a meritocratic achievement (Arun, 2022).

Studies on income distribution inequalities also point to the existence of spatial and regional disparities (Yıldız & Gültekin Karakaş, 2019). Research on these issues indicates significant differences in schooling and graduation rates across educational levels, generally favouring certain regions over others – particularly when comparing the central regions of Türkiye with the Southeastern and Eastern Anatolia regions (Selim & Ok, 2022; Education Reform Initiative, 2025). At a more localized level, analyses further reveal pronounced disparities in educational opportunities and access between rural and urban areas (Nerse, 2020).

As mentioned above, another important dimension of educational inequality is gender. Reports by the Education Reform Initiative (2025) indicate that girls' access to education continues to lag behind that of boys due to factors such as security concerns, domestic labour responsibilities, and limited household income. Moreover, girls' enrolment rates decline in provinces in the Southeastern Anatolia region, suggesting that gender inequality becomes more evident when intersecting with spatial and regional disparities. Sociocultural norms, economic constraints, interpretations of religious beliefs, and negative family attitudes are among the primary factors contributing to higher dropout rates among girls, particularly in eastern provinces and rural areas (Teyfur & Teyfur, 2023). Additionally, Bumen and Atmaca (2025), in their review of studies on gender inequality, demonstrate that such inequalities persist across multiple dimensions, ranging from curriculum content to school culture.

Inequality in News Texts

The extent to which social inequalities are represented in news texts, as well as the manner in which the media frames these inequalities, remain central concerns in both contemporary debates and academic research. A review of the existing literature indicates that income and gender inequalities are among the most frequently examined topics. In addition, studies analysing news coverage of asylum seekers constitute a growing body of recent research that engages extensively with issues of inequality.

In media coverage of income inequality, poverty and income disparities are often addressed in ways that are detached from their broader political-economic context. Poverty is frequently framed as an individual issue, with its structural causes largely overlooked. Moreover, some news narratives reproduce a marginalizing discourse that attributes poverty to individual failings, implying that it results from personal shortcomings (Akay, 2010; Gökalp, Ergül, & Cangöz, 2010), which in fact aligns with the underlying reasoning of the neoliberal transformation of economic structures of modern industrial societies. A similar pattern is evident in television broadcasting. On channels aligned with right-wing, conservative, and neo-liberal perspectives, poverty is often dramatized, framed as an individual problem, and at times portrayed as a source of social disorder or crime. Proposed solutions are typically confined to the realm of philanthropy rather than addressing structural causes (Boztepe, 2019). Similarly, Araslı (2023) found that news coverage of poverty within the context of income inequality varies across media outlets. While Sabah and CNN Türk predominantly focus on social assistance, they tend to overlook the broader challenges

associated with poverty. In contrast, Sözcü and NTV place greater emphasis on wage increases and rising product prices, with Sözcü also featuring poverty-related news more frequently. From a different perspective on media representations of poverty, Nuh and Yıldırım (2025) argue that traffic accidents involving seasonal agricultural workers are typically categorized as routine news and narrated in a tragic and emotional tone centred on the outcomes of the incidents. However, they highlight that the structural inequalities underlying these events—such as transportation difficulties and hazardous working conditions—are largely absent from media coverage.

Regarding gender inequality, the findings of studies examining the representation of gender in the media are largely negative. Women are frequently portrayed as objects of consumption and framed within sensationalized contexts, whereas men are typically represented as strong, dominant, and resilient (Vatandaş, 2020; Söğüt & İlhan, 2021). Moreover, women often appear in the media either as victims or perpetrators of violence (Acar et al., 2023). Analyses further indicate that news coverage involving female victims is shaped by ideological positions and a predominantly patriarchal perspective (Avcı & Güdekli, 2018; İnam & Şahin, 2020). When gender representation intersects with migration, these portrayals take on an even more problematic dimension, with migrant women being marginalized through an emphasis on perceived vulnerability and helplessness (Şen & Özlü, 2025). Additionally, quantitative analyses reveal that male representation in news texts significantly exceeds that of female representation (Özdemir & Koçer, 2025).

As another salient topic, studies examining the media representation of asylum seekers indicate that a strong emphasis is placed on their difficulties in meeting basic needs and their limited financial resources. In addition, the language used in some news coverage—particularly when asylum seekers are associated with issues such as social security and crime—has the potential to negatively shape public perceptions of migrants (Pandır, Efe, & Paksoy, 2016). Findings from other studies (Gölçü & Dağlı, 2017; Alp, 2018; Livberber, 2021; Gezik, 2022) reveal that representations framing asylum seekers as threats to economic stability and social security are prevalent, that they are frequently constructed as "the other," and that discriminatory language is commonly employed. The ideological orientations of media organizations emerge as a key factor underlying variations in how different outlets portray asylum seekers (Tok, 2025). Overall, the literature suggests that media coverage aimed at raising awareness about the inequalities experienced by asylum seekers remains largely insufficient.

Although a substantial body of research addresses inequalities within educational settings, studies examining the extent to which and how these inequalities are represented in the media remain limited. Existing research in media studies has primarily focused on specific groups, such as asylum seekers and children at risk; however, no studies have been identified that systematically examine other forms of educational inequality and its representation in media. For instance, discursive differentiation regarding refugee children is observed on the political level, and the political stance of media outlets affects their attitudes towards the policies applied regarding migrants (Yüksel & Hiçdurmaz, 2022). When education is

directly involved, the media is generally seen to articulate the educational successes of refugee students and the problems affecting this success (Toprakçı & Kaçar Özkan, 2024). Kahveci and Paksoy (2021) also determined that refugee students are generally featured with positive representation in the media, and that news texts cover the successes of these students, the problems they experience in education, and the assistance and other activities organised for them. In another study, Altuntaş and Altınova (2015) argue that children at risk—particularly those exposed to violence, exploitation, and abuse—are not adequately represented in the media, with coverage largely limited to cases in which children appear as either perpetrators or victims of specific incidents. Similarly, Ekşioğlu Sarılar (2018) finds that children are often portrayed in news bulletins through sensationalized language or with an emphasis on their emotional vulnerability, with insufficient regard for children's rights.

In summary, scholarly research on the media representation of educational inequalities remains notably limited. This may, in part, reflect the insufficient attention these issues receive in media coverage. However, beyond the relative scarcity of such reporting, the manner in which educational inequalities are framed is of greater significance. Evidence suggests that media portrayals of the challenges faced by disadvantaged groups, as well as the educational policies that contribute to inequality, can function to normalize and legitimize these disparities (Mercan Küçükakın & Engin Demir, 2022).

Sample and Method

The population upon which this research is based consists of 9059 news items focusing on education. These items were published by ten news portals based in Türkiye across the years 2020, 2021 and 2022. Listed in alphabetical order, these portals are birgun.net, cumhuriyet.com.tr, haberturk.com.tr, hurriyet.com.tr, milliyet.com.tr, sabah.com.tr, sozcu.com.tr, yeniakit.com.tr, yenicaggazetesi.com.tr and yenisafak.com. They were selected to ensure a balance and to reflect the broader perspective of the Turkish news media, taking into account their web traffic figures, political stances and ownership structures. All 9059 educational news items were scanned and reviewed to determine whether they contain the concept of inequality. Beyond merely searching for the explicit term, the titles and contents of the items were thoroughly examined to assess their suitability for the sample. Subsequently, 55 news items were selected for inclusion in the study.

The research employed both quantitative and qualitative content analysis. All 55 news items were analysed quantitatively by coding the specific category of inequality present in each text. Furthermore, these items underwent qualitative analysis to explore the portrayal of educational inequalities not solely through numerical data but also within the context of the journalistic language utilised.

Findings

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative data derived from the news coverage sample. The two subsections below detail the findings by referring to the specific Turkish news portals and examining how they covered different inequalities in education.

Quantitative Aspects

Table 1 below presents the name of each news portal alongside the number of items they published concerning inequalities within education news coverage during the years 2020, 2021 and 2022. The figures indicate that the distribution of news items across news portals is notably unbalanced.

Table 1.
Distribution of news items concerning inequalities in education across news portals

News portal	**Frequency**	*%*
BirGün	20	36.4
Hürriyet	9	16.4
Cumhuriyet	9	16.4
Sözcü	*5*	9.1
Milliyet	4	7.3
Sabah	3	*5.5*
Yeniçağ	2	3.6
Yeni Akit	2	3.6
Habertürk	1	1.8
Yeni Şafak	0	0
Total	*55*	100

Among the news organizations examined, the BirGün news portal stands out as the outlet most extensively focused on issues of inequality. This emphasis can be attributed to its left-leaning editorial stance and its particular interest in education-related coverage. Hürriyet and Cumhuriyet follow,

each publishing nine items during the same period. A notable pattern emerging from the data is the predominance of a critical stance toward the government among the top four news portals. Of these, only Hürriyet is generally aligned with the current government in Türkiye, whereas BirGün, Cumhuriyet, and Sözcü tend to adopt a more critical position, particularly regarding educational policies. In contrast, the contribution of pro-government outlets to the overall coverage is relatively limited, with a total of only 19 items addressing inequalities. Moreover, Yeni Şafak, a major pro-government newspaper and news portal, did not contribute any items to the sample.

Another quantitative metric that elucidates how educational inequalities are represented in Turkish news portals concerns the various types of inequality. To obtain these data, all news items within the sample were coded according to the specific category of inequality on which they focused. Table 2 demonstrates this distribution.

Table 2.
Distribution of inequality categories in education coverage

Inequality category	**Frequency**	*%*
Economic Inequality	27	49.1
Gender Inequality	10	18.2
Physical Inequality (Disability)	7	12.7
Religious/Belief and Cultural Inequality	6	10.9
Digital Inequality	*5*	9.1
Total	*55*	100

The thematic distribution of the total *55* news items examined within the scope of the research reveals that the media concentrates on specific focal points when reporting on inequalities in education. As seen in the distribution within the table, the most frequently coded category among education news was the 'Economic Inequality' category, which was coded 27 times. This strong emphasis on the economic dimension of education indicates that economic problems hold a significant place in the media's narrative of inequality. The second most frequently coded category is the 'Gender Inequality'. When observing both the top two most frequently coded categories and the types of inequality throughout the entire table, it is evident that news contents frame unequal opportunities in education around macro level systemic crises, policy deficiencies and financial difficulties rather than individual or local problems.

The categories regarding the problems about the integration of disadvantaged groups into the system are located in the middle band of the frequency distribution. The category of 'Digital Inequality' (f=*5*) ranks last among the focused types of inequality. This situation demonstrates that the issue of students' access to technology and distance education is less important for the Turkish media compared to other types of inequality. Although the analysed sample covers the Covid-19 pandemic period, the digital divide associated with distance education appears to have remained overshadowed by other forms of inequality. A broader examination of the table indicates that specific rights-based issues—such as the rights of students with disabilities, girls' participation in education, and debates surrounding faith-based curricula—achieve a certain degree of visibility in the media. However, these topics do not

attain the same level of prominence as more general structural and economic inequalities.

Qualitative Aspects

In this section of the data presentation, the qualitative findings are detailed with reference to each category of inequality. The inequalities are evaluated both within their broader social context and in terms of how they are constructed through news discourse. The categories are listed below in descending order according to their prevalence in the quantitative figures.

Economic Inequality

In the news coverage, economic difficulties stemming from physical access to schools feature prominently. It is particularly emphasised that the record increases in school transport fees create a 'black hole' in family budgets. In this context, the high transport fees in both state and private schools are criticised, and the demands of parents to bring these fees under control are conveyed (News item-1). The issue of economic inequalities also possesses representations that encompass fundamental existential problems such as nutritional deficiency in schools. In reports based on the statements of parents, it is relayed that students remain hungry and thirsty at school and even faint (News item-26). In the framing of these issues by BirGün news portal, there are strong direct criticisms aimed at the political power.

In news portals with an oppositional and critical editorial stance, economic inequalities in education are addressed with a problem-oriented approach, and the government's failure to produce solutions in the face of rising costs is frequently criticised. While the dimensions of the problem are conveyed

to the public through the concrete negativities experienced by parents and tradespeople along with dramatic price increases in stationery products, the harsh criticisms directed at the government by the political opposition over these issues occasionally sit at the centre of the news contents (News item-22, News item-23, News item-45).

In education related news coverage, economic inequalities are generally associated with primary and secondary education levels and presented through a student and parent-oriented narrative focusing on the increases in canteen, transport and stationery prices. In some cases, albeit rarely, the economic grievances experienced by university students, the protests they carry out regarding these problems and the interventions they face can also become the subject of news (News item-18). Furthermore, the inadequacy of the *KYK* (Higher Education Credit and Dormitories Institution) is criticised within the context of university students' accommodation problems. It is argued that priority should be given to the construction of student dormitories rather than luxury housing in public investments so that the right to education, which is a constitutional right, can be fully exercised (News item-49).

In certain situations, the anti-government broadcasting policy of news portals supersedes even the problem of inequality in education, and the issue can be instrumentalised as a political tool (News item-17). In addition to this, government policies are directly pointed out as the main entity responsible for the injustices experienced in education. It is argued that public education is being disqualified, there is a departure from the right to free education specified in the constitution and the state's share in education is decreasing, leaving its place to the private sector (News item-28, News item-35). In

this context, the distribution of public resources is questioned, drawing attention to the allegations that sufficient resources are not provided to students through practices such as the transfer of the Ministry of National Education budget to specific foundations and the budget allocated to the vocational education projects of the Presidency of Religious Affairs being greater than that allocated to universities (News item-34, News item-36). Besides, asserting that the Ministry of National Education supports private schools, it is emphasised that the uncontrolled increases in the prices of these institutions victimise parents, and it is stated that these provided incentives create a clear disadvantage against students receiving education in state schools (News item-37, News item-38).

Economic inequalities are not solely limited to students but also encompass an educational staff dimension. Although the income injustices of teachers working in private educational institutions, and the protests they carry out with the demand for a base salary find a place in some news contents, this situation is ignored by news portals supporting the government (News item-27). Reports prepared by non-governmental organisations reveal that hundreds of thousands of children remain outside the education system. Although the reports suggest a multidimensional investigation of the issue, the media prefers to explain this situation directly through poverty (News item-48).

When income inequalities in education intersect with spatial and regional limitations, the inequality can deepen further. However, in the narrative constructed within the news contents, the inequalities in question are reported not as a problem but mostly with a language focused on individual sacrifice and solutions. The practice of teachers travelling

from village to village to teach lessons, particularly during crisis periods such as the pandemic, so that students living in rural and geographically remote areas are not deprived of state education is highlighted. This is presented as a positive reflection of the devoted efforts of educators and the state's endeavour to reach disadvantaged groups (News item-21).

Institutional inequalities in education fundamentally further deepen the problem of income inequality. These inequalities are shaped through the discourses of decision makers and structural implementations. Through official discourse, the strategic goals of the Ministry of National Education regarding reducing achievement differences between schools and strengthening equality of opportunity by using the budget more fairly are conveyed to readers in a positive framework (News item-5). Conversely, structural problems in the country are fiercely criticised in oppositional news portals. In particular, the disappointments experienced by unappointed teachers, protests directed at the Ministry, comparisons made with other occupational groups and debates regarding the *KPSS* examination are brought to the agenda (News item-15). Another dimension of inequality at the institutional level is related to the allocation of the education budget. Stating that the continuously increasing financial incentives provided to private schools create a direct mechanism of discrimination, the criticism is made that these substantial allowances actually correspond to the salaries of thousands of unappointed teachers (News item-32).

In the critical news contents covered on BirGün news portal, the differences in education expenditures between different socioeconomic segments of society (News item-40) and the widening gap in the number of students per teacher

between state schools and private schools are presented as the most important indicators reinforcing economic inequalities (News item-39). Especially during the pandemic period, the fact that students in state schools had to continue with distance education while some private schools commenced face to face education is a significant indicator. While this situation is shown as a serious inequality in the context of students' right to access public education, it is also framed as an ethical problem in terms of private school owners continuing their commercial activities (News item-42).

The Transformation of Inequalities into Success Stories

In news contents, inequalities originating from education are occasionally represented in the format of success stories that feed individual motivation rather than as a structural grievance. The fact that young people who grow up under difficult conditions in large families and cover their own educational expenses by working in the fields achieve great examination successes, leaving behind their peers with much better socioeconomic conditions, is conveyed with praise (News item-6). Similarly, a student who works as a waiter in their family's restaurant and does not attend any private courses becoming the national champion in central examinations is presented as an individual victory. This picture is evaluated by official authorities as proof that education in state schools is sufficient on its own and as an exemplary role model for other students (News item-9). Such individual success stories can often be instrumentalised to prove the validity of the education system and to implicitly give the message that inequalities in education are not actually an obstacle.

It is also observed that socioeconomic inequalities are not always presented within the framework of a success story. The efforts of children who have to work in the fields with their families to follow online lessons with the help of a mobile *EBA* vehicle are reported as a concrete indicator of this situation. At the same time, a perception is created in such news reports that official authorities are making an effort to eliminate inequalities (News item-8).

Gender Inequality

News concerning educational inequalities also encompasses issues bearing a gender dimension. For instance, the marriage of a young girl is linked to the situation of hundreds of thousands of children who are of compulsory school age but do not attend school, and it is treated as part of a broader and systematic problem within the education system. In this context, the ineffective implementation of laws is criticised, and increasing the deterrent nature of penalties is demanded (News item-10). Allegations of harassment by educators towards students and the subsequent trials are among the critical issues addressed in the media within the context of gender inequality and the abuse of power asymmetry between teacher and student (News item-11, News item-31).

The problem of gender inequality is not solely limited to student victimisation but is also associated with management levels in the education sector. The fact that the proportion of female administrators in key institutions such as the MEB, YÖK and TÜBİTAK remains at exceedingly low levels is interpreted as an indication that the 'glass ceiling' problem has not been overcome in the educational bureaucracy (News item-13).

The schooling situations of girls are framed differently according to the ideological stances of the news portals. In news portals with an oppositional stance, the inadequacy of the Ministry of National Education in tracking female students who remain outside of school is brought to the fore with language that directly criticises the political administration (News item-24, News item-44). Conversely, in news portals aligned with the government, the issue is represented with a more solution-oriented perspective. The rights provided to girls through the statements of political leaders, increasing schooling rates and state efforts to reintegrate absentee students into education by persuading them are conveyed to readers through a positive narrative (News item-19, News item-33, News item-54).

Disability

Contents addressing inequalities due to physical differences in education news are largely shaped according to the political stances of the news portals. News portals close to the government focus on the elimination of these inequalities rather than the victimisation created by inequalities due to physical differences in education. A positive framework is presented, suggesting that physical disadvantages are overcome through existing government policies and high-level institutions such as YÖK, legal regulations against discrimination are implemented and protective measures are taken for disabled students. Hürriyet news portal in particular has published education news that constructs this framework (News item-3, News item-4, News item-7). Conversely, the oppositional BirGün news portal exhibits a completely opposite attitude, publishing critical news based on a human rights institution

finding the Ministry of National Education in the wrong for violating the prohibition of discrimination regarding disabled individuals (News item-25).

Disability is reported not only in the dimension of students but also through the difficulties disabled teachers experience in their appointment processes and criticisms that they fail to receive the structural support they expect from the Ministry (News item-30). In allegations of discrimination towards inclusive education students in educational environments, it is asserted that the problem originates mostly from individuals or teachers rather than being systemic. However, the inability of parents to make their voices heard in their pursuit of rights harbours an implicit criticism directed at the functioning of the educational bureaucracy (News item-47).

Debates on constitutional equality of opportunity in education also find a place on the political agenda, and opposition parties remind the public through BirGün and Cumhuriyet news portals that education is a fundamental right, expressing their readiness to solve the problems of disadvantaged children (News item-41, News item-50).

The career journeys of individuals who receive medical education and rise to become specialist doctors despite their severe physical disabilities are delivered to the reader in the form of inspiring stories showing that obstacles can be overcome with individual perseverance (News item-14). The actors in such success stories are presented as a source of inspiration for disabled students, giving the message that obstacles can be overcome through individual struggle.

Religious/Belief and Cultural Inequality

Debates shaped around compulsory religion classes manifest themselves in some news portals with the criticism that the teaching of religious culture is increasingly transforming into compulsory religious education. It is explained in the news texts that faith-based practices are frequently the subject of lawsuits. The pursuit of rights by parents demanding their children be exempted from compulsory religion classes and the decisions of the Constitutional Court (AYM) regarding the 'violation of freedom of religion and conscience' are presented to the public both in news texts and in comprehensive analysis articles (News item-2, News item-12, News item-16). In an opinion column, it is claimed that religious education is imposed on all students, and the supreme court issuing violation of rights decisions with delays lasting years is criticised with the argument that the state almost 'remains a spectator' to this inequality (News item-29).

In news portals possessing a language that openly supports the political power, such as Yeni Akit, the issue is approached from the exact opposite perspective. Accordingly, the supreme court decisions regarding the violation of rights are characterised as a 'scandal', and steps towards removing these classes from the curriculum or relaxing their compulsory nature are explained as an indicator of injustice and inequality towards pious segments of society (News item-55).

Inequalities based on language and identity in educational processes occasionally enter the agenda of news portals in Türkiye through practices originating abroad. A student in a school in Germany receiving an administrative penalty for speaking their mother tongue of Turkish during break time is harshly criticised in a news text published on Cumhuriyet

news portal on the grounds of clear discrimination, abuse of authority and the violation of fundamental language rights (News item-52).

Digital Inequality

The transition to distance education with the pandemic period dramatically rendered the inequalities in students' opportunities to access technology visible. According to the data reflected in the news, the fact that only a certain percentage of students worldwide could benefit from this process reveals the extent to which the digital divide based on financial inadequacies damages the principle of equal opportunity in education (News item-20). Problems of digital access have been addressed not only at the primary education level but also in the context of higher education students lacking a computer and internet connection. The failure of university administrations to produce a solution to this situation was criticised in the coverage (News item-43).

In news items appearing on oppositional news portals, a critical language regarding digital inequalities is constructed by asserting that the technical obstacles students encountered during the distance education process were ignored by the Ministry of National Education (News item-51). Conversely, in news contents supporting government policies, a framework focused on the solution of the problem is drawn once again. Accordingly, new digital moves carried out at the Ministry level are brought to the fore, and it is emphasised that technology is a mechanism that provides access to education for disadvantaged groups and reduces inequality (News item-53).

Conclusion

This research is built upon an extensive population focusing on 9059 news items related to education published across ten news portals based in Türkiye during the years 2020, 2021 and 2022. Among these news texts, 55 items focusing on the issue of inequality in education were identified to constitute the research sample. When the size of the accessed sample is compared to the extensive population to which it belongs, it demonstrates that news portals operating in Türkiye do not exhibit a sufficient level of interest in the issue of educational inequalities. This situation constitutes a significant obstacle to the formation of social awareness required to resolve various problems based on inequality within the education system.

One of the striking findings accessed within the scope of this research is that news portals in opposition to the political power show much more interest in problems related to inequality in education. News items regarding educational inequalities published on BirGün, Cumhuriyet, Sözcü and Yeniçağ news portals amounts to 66% of the total number of news items in the sample. Although the other six news portals in the sample consist of news organisations close to the political power, the impact of these news portals on the news agenda concerning educational inequality is limited. For oppositional news portals, the issue of inequality in education is treated as an important social problem and lays the groundwork for producing striking topics to criticise the government. For news portals close to the political power, news contents concerning educational inequalities are shaped through examples where the government, the MEB and all components of the education system somehow find a solution to the problems.

News contents regarding the transformation of inequalities into success stories present important findings encountered in the sample that require discussion. In such news, individual success stories often attempt to prove how well the education system actually works for the development of students. According to this narrative, inequalities in education cannot constitute an obstacle for a devoted student to achieve success. Within this framework, news texts, sometimes explicitly and sometimes through implicit messages, nullify the possibility of criticising the errors and flawed policies related to the education system that could be the source of educational inequalities by using success stories. Success stories displays a language that attempts to prove that the system continues to offer opportunities to students, even if a student appears to experience the deepest of educational inequalities.

In conclusion, this study examines how Turkish news media portrayed educational inequalities. By analysing *55* relevant articles from ten major news portals, the study highlights a significant disparity in how different outlets frame systemic failures versus individual triumphs. Findings indicate that while economic and gender-based disparities are the most reported issues, media attention remains disproportionately low relative to the scale of the problem. Left-leaning and oppositional outlets frequently criticize government policies, whereas pro-government media often present state initiatives as successful solutions. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that news stories often transform structural disadvantages into individual success narratives, which can inadvertently legitimize existing inequalities. Ultimately, the study suggests that Turkish journalism often fails to provide a comprehensive critique of the structural barriers hindering student success.

Based on the findings and the discussion presented in this study, future research should expand the scope of inquiry into the media representation of educational inequalities by addressing several key gaps. First, there is a need for more systematic analyses that move beyond a limited focus on specific groups—such as asylum seekers or children at risk—to encompass a wider range of structural inequalities. In doing so, future studies should adopt an intersectional perspective, examining how multiple dimensions of disadvantage—such as income, gender, and ethnicity—interact and are simultaneously constructed in media narratives. Additionally, the relative neglect of the digital divide, despite its heightened relevance during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, calls for more in-depth investigation into how digital inequalities are framed and why they remain overshadowed. Comparative research across different media formats, including television, print, and social media, would also provide valuable insights into whether dominant narratives—such as the emphasis on individual success over structural constraints—persist across platforms. Furthermore, future studies could explore the relationship between media representations, public awareness, and policy outcomes, particularly in terms of whether critical coverage contributes to meaningful educational reform. Finally, incorporating audience reception approaches would help illuminate how individuals with differing ideological orientations interpret media portrayals of inequality, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the societal impact of these narratives.

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Appendix (The Data)

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Ontic Injustice and the Limits of Liberal Justice in India: A Critique through the Lens of Caste

Aditi Aditi[*1]

Introduction

Contemporary theories of justice largely function within the liberal paradigm. The dominant understanding of justice in this paradigm focuses primarily on individual gains or losses, burdens or entitlements among individuals conceived as free and equal moral agents (Rawls, 1971; Bidadanure & Axelsen, 2025). The conditions of justice focus plainly on individuals harms or gains, burdens or entitlements, making structures almost inconsequential for the establishment of conditions of justice and relies on incomplete social ontology. Predominantly, issues of justice concern itself with how the individual is treated. We often find issues of justice arising in circumstances where there are potentially conflicting claims on freedom, opportunities, resources, and so forth. An appeal to justice is then required to resolve such conflicts by determining what each person is entitled to have. The belief here is that attending to the individual, specific, and concrete problems, we can work progressively as a whole to reach the ideal situation of justice someday. In such a framework, individuals are treated as discrete units of distribution, prior to the social and institutional relations in which they are embedded. Social

[*] The author does not use a surname. In many South Asian contexts, surnames function as indicators of caste location and the inherited social identity. The absence of a surname bears an unintended yet relevant connection to the centrale concern of the paper.
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structures appear as external constraints or facilitators of individual action rather than as constitutive of persons themselves.

Theorists of distributive justice often explicitly take into account issues of justice beyond the distribution of material goods. It extends itself to cover cases such as that of self-respect, opportunity, power, and honour. In doing so, the principles of distribution treats nonmaterial goods as identifiable things or bundles distributed in a state pattern among identifiable, separate, individuals. This process of reifying patterns with individualism at the centre obscures issues of power, domination, and oppression. In context to this incomplete social ontology, caste poses a distinctive challenge to the liberal paradigm of justice because it is not merely a system of unequal distribution or misrecognition. It is a form of social organization that assigns moral worth, purity, and labour as intrinsic properties of being, fixed by birth and sustained through every day social practices. In caste society, individuals do not enter social cooperation as equals; rather, equality itself is what is structurally denied. This renders distributive remedies insufficient, since the very notion of the "person" presumed to be the beneficiary of justice is itself hierarchically constituted. This paper then argues that the ontological position adopted by the liberal paradigm of justice limits the apprehension of certain form of injustice, particularly those structured by caste. By putting emphasis on possession over relation, the distributive paradigm obscures how social hierarchies shape what individuals can do, be or become. It fails to account for how persons are historically and structurally accounted through relations of power involving caste, race, gender and coloniality.

To capture this deeper dimension of injustice, the paper draws on Katherine Jenkins's concept of ontic injustice (Jenkins, 2020). Jenkins defines the concept as "in which an individual is wronged by the very fact of being socially constructed as a member of a certain social kind. To be a member of a certain social kind[2] is, at least in part, to be subject to certain social constraints and enablements, and these constraints and enablements can be wrongful to the individual who is subjected to them, in the sense that they inflict a moral injury" (2020, p. 188). Extending Jenkins's account beyond gender and race categories, this paper draws on structural accounts of injustice (Young, 1990) and social ontology (Haslanger, 2012), and argues that caste constitutes a paradigmatic case of ontic injustice: it organizes social reality by conferring unequal ontological status through birth, thereby shaping who can appear as a full social person at all (Ambedkar, 1936/2014).

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section examines the distributive paradigm and its limitations. The second section elaborates the concept of ontic injustice in purview of the concept of caste. It analyses caste as a paradigmatic instance of ontic injustice while taking the case of migrant workers during COVID-19. The final section turns to Ambedkar's conception of fraternity as an ontological reorientation of justice beyond liberal frameworks.

[2] The term social kind is mainly used by social scientists and social theorists in forms of explanation of phenomena. The phenomena in question can be both social and natural phenomena. The term can be defined as "a collection of phenomena defined by a property or feature that is a social property or feature. For instance, it includes money, with the defining feature being money, waiters (being a waiter), refugees (being a refugee), and recessions (being a recession)" (Asta, 2017, p. 1).

Distributive Paradigm and Its Ontological Assumptions

Classically, justice has been considered as one of the four cardinal virtues. Philosophical discussion of justice traces back to Plato's various dialogues, most substantially in Republic. Plato evokes the idea that justice in the city (polis) is the same thing as justice in the individual, just "writ large." (LeBar, 2024) He explores this idea through the sociology of the city, identifying three distinct classes: the guardian class, the auxiliary class, and the merchant class. Similarly, he argues, that the psyche of the individual has three parts: a reasoning part to rule, a "spirited" part to support the rule of reason, and an appetitive part. Plato eventually seeks to show how an individual with a healthy and harmonious soul wouldn't lie, kill or steal. According to him, justice in the city is made up of every component "having and doing its own," and since the smaller is equal to the larger, justice in the individual is made up of every component of the psyche working independently. Thus, Plato considers justice a master virtue (LeBar, 2024), as it ensures that both the city and the psyche function harmoniously—each part fulfilling its role—thereby fostering wisdom, courage, and self-discipline[3].

In contemporary discourse, the concept of justice is largely shaped by the liberal tradition. Such a concept of justice restricts the meaning of social justice to the morally proper distribution of benefits and burdens among the members of a society. This view of justice is labelled as distributive justice. Distributive justice focuses on justice in ideal theory,

[3] Plato's account differs from that of modern distributive theorists as justice for him was about the social order of society, mainly the harmony and proper functioning of it.

institutions, and domestic borders. The key task in this paradigm is to identify the principles and institutional arrangements that would characterize a perfectly just society and ensure the fair distribution of goods and burdens among its members, making questions of justice primarily about distribution patterns rather than social processes and relations which these patterns are entrenched[4]. This paradigm refers to the theoretical framework of justice primarily developed through the work of John Rawls (1971). For Rawls, justice is assessed in terms of the morally proper distribution of benefits and burdens among society's members. The distributive model sees social justice and distribution as co-extensive concepts. For instance, Rawls defines a "conception of justice as providing in the first instance a standard whereby the distributive aspects of the basic structure of society are to be assessed" (Rawls, 1971). In this model, the economic, political, and social framework of each society's institutions, policies, laws, and its other qualities leads to different sorts of distributions of benefits and burdens on its members; and these frameworks, which are the result of human political processes across societies, are dynamic in nature. The reason regarding why the structure of these frameworks is important is because the distributions of benefits and burdens derived from them affect people's lives in a fundamental manner.

The concept of injustice often plays a limited role in the distributive paradigm. This is because by focusing primarily on individuals and the distribution of goods among them, the distributive paradigm tends to view injustice as a problem of unequal holdings or entitlements. Focusing only on

[4] For a related critique of ideal-theoretical approached to justice, see (Arun, 2018).

distribution of entitlements and burdens obscures the structural nature of many forms of injustice, for instance, the ways in which social and institutional arrangements and historically constructed relations of power systematically produce injustice. Here, injustice is not simply a product of unfair distribution of goods and benefits but of those rules, norms and social processes which shape what individuals are able to become, do, or access in a given society. Critics such as Iris Marion Young (1990) and Elizabeth Anderson (1999) have argued that defining injustice solely in terms of distribution or redistribution without analysing the structural conditions of social relations can overlook the mechanisms of domination, marginalization and exclusion that constitute social inequality and hierarchy. Justice here is looked at the end goal of ethics, in which the first hurdle is injustice which can simply be avoided if we maintain happiness as our end goal or the fair allocation of goods and burdens amongst the individuals in a society. As a result, construing justice or for that fact even injustice simply in individualistic terms risks offering moral repair without structural transformation.

Anderson (2019) in her work *What is the Point of Equality?* argues that certain expressions of distributive paradigm such as luck egalitarianism, focus on developing a system for distributing goods and aid under conditions of scarcity, while failing to uphold one's dignity, self-respect, and sense of equality with others in doing so. Anderson argues that the larger movement for equality is mocked by luck egalitarianism. It does not satisfy the most fundamental requirement for any theory of equality, which is "that its principles express equal respect and concern for all citizens" (Anderson, 2019, p. 472). It appears to fail to do so because it creates morally

repugnant results by perhaps stigmatizing the people it aims to assist (such as the disabled), presenting assistance as a way to make up for inferiority rather than as a sign of equal respect (Anderson, 1999)[5]. Implementing a system to compensate people for bad luck would require them to provide evidence of their misfortune, evaluate this evidence, and pay people to the extent that they are inferior (in relevant ways) to the rest of us. This is because luck egalitarianism only addresses inequality related to bad brute luck. Additionally, it can allow those who are thought to be at fault for their situation to be neglected, which appears at odds with our moral intuitions of social assistance and compassion. Furthermore, luck egalitarianism presupposes that individuals can be held responsible for their choices because alternative options are available making disadvantage avoidable. However, this understanding of choice is sociologically thin. Choices and decisions are often shaped by socio-economic factors, institutional constraints, norms, culture and other broader social structures. Judging individual choices devoid of such factors "could be a pattern of methodological inquiry assuming individuals as beings existing/living spatially detached from time and place" (Arun, 2023, p. 760), thereby obscuring structural conditions under which those decisions were made.

In his book *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Michael Sandel makes the case that a distributive paradigm involves an ensemble of possessive relations in which the nature of the possessing subject is prior to and independent of the goods possessed; the self-underlies and remains unchanged by

[5] Anderson's critique indicated the shift from distributive egalitarianism and towards relational egalitarianism, where the main focus is on quality of social relations rather than allocation of resources.

alternative distributions, making justice only about the appropriate pattern of the allocation of entities among such antecedental existing individuals (cf. Sandel, 1982)[6]. Additionally, Sandel contends that expanding the notion of distribution beyond tangible products reifies institutional norms and social relationships, prioritizing substance above relationships. When people are thought of as social atoms, something recognizable and assignable must be dispersed, logically before social relationships and institutions.

Young (1990) argues that the distributive model of justice implies an incomplete social ontology which makes her critique of the paradigm distinctive. By contending that injustice encompasses not only economic structures but also social interactions, institutional processes, cultural norms, power dynamics, and identities—such as gender, racism, disability, and forms of marginalization—Young broadens the scope of relevant social ontology[7]. Young then contends that the distributive paradigm separates from social processes and reifies the social, which is best understood as ties and rules than as tangible objects. Even if the paradigm is still questioned by some, it only goes so far as to describe justice in distributive terms[8]. The premise also includes the idea that people or other agents

[6] Sandel's critique grounds itself in a demand for communitarian version of justice as he argues that in distributive logic there is little space for conceiving person's enablements and restraints as a function of their relations to one another. He argues that it would be better to replace it with a sense of self that as a product of an identity as shared with others.

[7] Young's critique differs from most Marxist critiques of distribution because her aim in comprehending structural injustice is not solely to focus on political economy or class relations. Instead, her work goes beyond that and incorporates gender, race, disability and cultural imperialism into the social ontology of injustice.

For example, David Miller, while advocating for a more egalitarian understanding of justice than that which traditional theories suggest, restricts the discussion of social justice to "the manner in which benefits and burdens are dis tributed among persons, where such qualities and relationships can be investigated" (Miller, 1976, p. 19). Similarly, Kai Nelson articulates a notion of radical egalitarian justice exclusively in terms of distribution (Neilson, 1979).

are nodes, or points in the social field, to which larger or smaller bundles of social goods are allocated. The distributive paradigm thus functions on the basis of a sort of social atomism, where individuals are externally related to the goods they possess and their only relation to one another that matters from the point of view of the paradigm is a comparison of the amount of goods they possess.

Social ontology becomes important here because without social ontology we cannot understand the depth of normative judgments of justice (Young, 1990, p. 25). The distributive paradigm assumes that social evaluations are based on what people own, how much they possess, and how those quantities are compared. The exclusive emphasis on possession misses people's behaviours, the institutionalized rules that govern them, the ways in which their positions are shaped by institutionalized interactions, and the ways in which their collective acts have a cascading influence on their lives. The distributive paradigm is criticized for prioritizing content above relationships and tending to view people as social atoms. As a result, it logically places content before institutions and social relationships. What is obscured here is that more than often these individual identities and capacities themselves the products of social processes and relations.

For Young, the problem with distributive paradigm does not only consist of an incomplete social ontology but also lies in conflating discussions of justice with the language of distribution i.e., when the concept of justice and distribution are taken as coextensive (Jenkins, 2015, p. 260). The allocation of income, wealth, offices, posts, and other things is the main focus of theories of distribution. According to Young, this inevitably obscures the institutional context, especially the

additional questions of "the justice of decision-making (sic) power and procedures that cannot be collapsed into deliberations about the proper material distribution of things" (Young, 1990, p. 20).

Under ideal conditions, it doesn't seem to be difficult to examine the fairness issue from the standpoint of distribution. This is due to the fact that in ideal circumstances, all of the racial, cultural, and gender-related injustices that make up that history are eliminated from the theory. It may be appropriate, or at least not inappropriate, to begin with distribution issues in such an abstract scenario, allocating material goods in accordance with principles that, when adhered to, produce a just end-state pattern that can be used as a benchmark for evaluating real-world institutions. Following the establishment of the principles of justice (in terms of distribution), the institutional setting takes shape (Jenkins, 2015, p. 261) This is in keeping with Rawls' own stipulation that accounts of justice "presuppose a moral conception of institutions" (Rawls, 1999, p. 95). Therefore, the distribution of goods that institutions are able to secure should be used to gauge their "moral" standing.

However, can this kind of abstract theory assist us in identifying the inequalities that define our institutional setting or appropriately acknowledge the significance of power? According to Young (1990), the distribution of power is an obvious example of the deceptive and unfavourable effects of expanding the notion of distribution beyond tangible products. When we think about power in terms of distribution, we are thinking of it either openly or implicitly as something that each agent possesses in varying degrees. By doing this, we will obscure the reality that power is a relationship rather than an

object, that it is a relationship in which the exerciser communicates objectives and meets with the consent of others.

But can such abstract theorisation help us in locating injustices that characterise our institutional context, or properly recognize the relevance of power? According To Young, "distribution of power is a clear case of misleading and undesirable implications of extending the concept of distribution beyond material goods" (Young, 1990, p. 30). When we think about power in terms of distribution, we are thinking of it either openly or implicitly as something that each agent possesses in varying degrees. By doing this, we will obscure the reality that power is a relationship rather than an object, that it is a relationship in which the exerciser communicates objectives and meets with the consent of others. Furthermore, the greater structure of agents and acts that mediates between two agents in a power relation is typically overlooked when treating power as a kind to be distributed as a dyadic relation. Furthermore, concentrating only on the distribution of power hides the structural phenomenon of domination associated with it, in which individuals are routinely denied the opportunity to influence their own behaviour or the circumstances surrounding them.

Young's critique of the distributive paradigm becomes particularly important when read through the lens of caste. Caste is not a system that distributes advantages and disadvantages among already equal persons; it is a social order that assigns moral worth, purity, and labour as intrinsic properties of being, fixed by birth and sustained through every day social practices (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). Individuals do not participate in social cooperation as equals under such a structure, and distributive remedies are unable to address the underlying

injustice involved. The liberal paradigm's failure to apprehend this reality points to the need for a conception of justice that attends not only to outcomes or recognition, but to the ontological conditions under which persons are constituted. Furthermore, distributive theories tend to reify social life by translating complex relations into objects of possession, treating goods, opportunities. But caste cannot be understood in such terms, since in a caste system it is not simply the case that certain groups have less access to resources, but that the social relations themselves assign differential moral worth, purity and labour as intrinsic features of being. The liberal theories of justice simply tend to overlook the dynamic processes such as that of endogamy, occupational inheritance and everyday practices of exclusion, by plainly focusing on end-state patterns.

Caste as a Marker of Ontic Injustice

Construing the question of justice or for that matter even injustice exclusively in the liberal distributive terms obscures crucial questions of social relations and domination. A theory of justice which tends to focus simply on the evaluation of effects of given institutional forms and relations and not on evaluating the institutional structures themselves fails to account for injustices which go beyond the distribution. Where injustice is embedded in the very constitution of social persons, justice must be theorized at the level of social being itself. To articulate this aspect of injustice, this paper draws on Katherine Jenkins's concept of ontic injustice (Jenkins, 2016; 2018) and extends it to the context of caste relations. Jenkins introduces ontic injustice to describe harms that arise "in which an individual is wronged by the very fact of being socially

constructed as a member of a certain social kind. To be a member of a certain social kind is, at least in part, to be subject to certain social constraints and enablements, and these constraints and enablements can be wrongful to the individual who is subjected to them, in the sense that they inflict a moral injury" (2020). In cases of ontic injustice, these constraints and enablements can be wrongful as they are in contradiction to the individual's moral entitlements.

Developed primarily in relation to gender identity, ontic injustice names a form of wrong that is neither distributive nor merely epistemic: it concerns the mis-constitution of social reality such that certain modes of being are rendered unintelligible.[9] It is the way in which Jenkins' reading on ontic injustice specifically addresses the issue that is particularly pertinent within the context of this paper: her argument that injustice can function at the level of and through social practices that determine who can exist as a legitimate social subject (Jenkins, 2018). This paper extends this argument by proposing that the ontic injustice inherent in caste is not only philosophically analogous with ontic injustice in other social formations but also structurally distinct. While ontic injustice has been illustrated mainly through the denial or incongruence between identity and being, the reality of being in the context of caste is one that varies along the grades of personhood. Rather than merely misrecognize individuals as equal, what passes for the social reality in the context of the Indian caste system is one that distributes unequal moral, civic, and social value as inherent qualities of being. In this way, the

[9] Ontic injustice, even if it overlaps with epistemic injustice, it remains distinct from it as it is concerned with one's constitution as a social being and not limited to one's status as a knower.

reality of ontic injustice explains that caste produces both unequal results and unequal kinds of person.

The injustice captured at the heart of this concept is that of moral injury (Hampton, 1992, p. 1666). The moral wrong here entails in an individual being a certain kind of social being, where what it means to be that kind of social being is to be subject to morally inappropriate constraints and enablements. Even if a particular member of that kind does not individually face any moral wrong, they are still susceptible to injustice, even if the arbitrary inference of another through injustice is inflicted never takes place (Pettit, 1996). This kind of moral wrong or injustice then affects every member of the social kind even if they haven't personally experienced such wrongs. Apart from the risk of moral harm which entails ontic injustice, for Jenkins what sits at the heart of this concept is the concept of moral injury as termed by Jean Hampton (1992, p. 1666) which is plainly understood to be an 'affront to value or dignity'. For Hampton moral injury leads to diminishment, which she describes 'an "objective" phenomenon, by which I merely mean. . . that it is not something that can be identified with any psychological experience of victimization. Instead, it is something that we "read off" the effects of immoral behaviour' (1991, p. 1674). There is no actual reduction in moral worth but rather the appearance of a reduction in moral worth. In such a case, the person undergoing injustice does not actually come to have lower moral worth as a consequence; rather, the way they are treated gives the false impression that they have lower moral worth than they really do (Jenkins, 2020, p. 193).

Hampton argues that diminishment in turn harms a person's ability to see or realize their worth. When someone is

treated in a way that is inconsistent with her entitlements based on her moral worth, value realization is harmed. When someone is portrayed as having less moral value than she actually has, it damages the acknowledgment of value. For instance, an unsuccessful attempt to subject someone to humiliating violence still gives the impression that this kind of treatment would have been appropriate and, therefore, that she has a lower moral value than she actually has. The victim has experienced moral harm if either type of value damage takes place. Accordingly, Hampton defines moral injury as "damage to the realization of a victim's value, or damage to the acknowledgement of the victim's value, accomplished through behaviour whose meaning is such that the victim is diminished in value" (1991, p. 1679, emphasis in original).

By basing her assessments of potential instances of moral damage on her earlier commitments on the moral worth of humans, the concept of moral injury specifies a type of harm or wrong that anyone who already subscribes to an account of the moral worth of humans should admit. Therefore, the idea of moral injury is predicated on a modest metaethical commitment: one must not hold a conception of the value of various kinds of beings that holds that a person's moral worth is solely determined by how they are socially represented. This is because such a conception would imply that it is impossible for a person's moral worth to be incorrectly represented as being lower than it actually is (Jenkins, 2020, p. 194). What is being pointed out here is then that for there to actually be an idea of moral damage to gain traction, there must be a discrepancy between societal representation of moral worth and true moral worth.

For Jenkins, therefore, it is the concept of moral injury which ultimately captures the wrong of ontic injustice (2020, p. 194). A person experiences a moral injury, which manifests as harm to the recognition of her worth, when she is subjected to limitations and privileges that permit treatment that is much less than what she is ethically entitled to. In addition to the wrong of being put in danger of material and psychological suffering, this injury is wrong. According to Jenkins, interpersonal behaviour is only one type of treatment, and moral injury is achieved through treatment rather than behaviour. Even if this treatment is typically not comparable to the actions of a particular individual, someone who has been socially created as a member of a particular human kind has been subjected to some sort of treatment. Rather from being the result of natural processes, the treatment is a result of human social arrangements and thus falls under the purview of justice issues.

Understanding caste as ontic injustice is consistent with structural accounts of social ontology. As Iris Marion Young argues, social structures position individuals within relations that systematically enable or constrain their capacities for action and participation (Young, 2006). These structures are productive as they shape what individuals can do by shaping who they are taken to be. Similarly, Sally Haslanger's account of social structures as real and causally efficacious supports the claim that caste hierarchies are not reducible to individual attitudes or distributive arrangements, but are embedded in material, institutional, and normative practices that make caste *socially real* (Haslanger, 2012). Because caste creates social being through hierarchy, it is a prime example of ontic injustice. By defining labour, pollution, and purity as ontological

markers, it establishes early on who is limited to a diminished mode of being and who can appear as a full social person. According to this concept, ontological subordination is the primary cause of injustice rather than unequal access to opportunities or resources. Because the distributive paradigm assumes the very equality that caste systematically denies, it is unable to see this harm.

The condition of migrant workers during the COVID-19 lockdown is a paradigmatic example of ontic injustice as the injustice sustained here was not simply due to unfair allocation of resources but grounded itself in the very reality of social arrangements and beings. Migrant workers were not merely denied wages, transportation, food, or shelter; rather, they were socially positioned as disposable labour whose suffering could be rendered publicly tolerable (Stranded Workers Action Network [SWAN], 2020). Applying Jenkins' concept of ontic injustice, we can comprehend that the injustice here lies in the way migrant workers were constituted as a social kind subject to morally inappropriate constraints and enablements. They were treated as bodies whose weariness, dislocation, and death did not carry the same moral urgency as those of more socially privileged groups, implying an implied diminution of value. The institutional systems controlling labour, mobility, housing, and welfare portrayed migrant workers as lives that might be abandoned in times of difficulty, even in cases where no one specifically intended harm. This is what Jenkins, through Hampton's notion of moral injury, identifies as damage to the acknowledgment of value. Social systems incorrectly portrayed the workers as having less value than others, normalizing types of pain that might otherwise seem unacceptable, but the workers did not actually lose moral

worth. Images of workers dying on highways, traveling hundreds of kilometres, or being sprayed with disinfectant show not just a failure of legislation but also a social ontology where some people are already viewed as disposable and always at risk.

Additionally, the migrant worker crisis also demonstrates the limits of distributive understandings of power and injustice. What the distributive paradigm misses out is that the migrant workers structurally occupied oppressed positions within the social and institutional relations, and not merely that they possessed fewer or lesser resources. Young's critique of construing power as some kind of stock to be distributed throws light on the structural nature of injustice here. Power here existed through institutional relations that enabled some groups to gain a superior position which entailed the power to determine the conditions of life and mobility of others. Employers, contractors, governmental laws, urban infrastructures, and caste-coded labour arrangements continued to systematically limit the autonomy of migrant workers. As they were unable to affect the institutional constraints controlling employment, mobility, housing, and survival itself, their vulnerability resulted from systemic relations of dominance. The liberal paradigm with its focus only on distribution and redistribution obscured the phenomenon of domination in the case of migrant workers. The injustice consisted itself in the structure of social organization in which caste based labouring populations remained exposed to injustice while possessing minimal control over the conditions of the particular situation.

By situating caste within the framework of ontic injustice, this section reframes the problem of justice in India as one

that cannot be resolved through redistribution alone. What is captured here is the need for transformation of the relevant social ontology that sustains oppression and hierarchy. This reorientation prepares the ground for Ambedkar's critique of liberal justice, which directly targets the ontological foundations of caste and insists on their radical transformation.

Fraternity beyond the Liberal Individualism

Justice as such cannot be achieved through redistribution or institutional reform alone, if caste exemplifies ontic injustice by constituting persons as hierarchically unequal kinds of beings. What is then required is a transformation of the social ontology that sustains caste. it is precisely this insight that animates B.R. Ambedkar's critique of caste and his broader conception of justice. Ambedkar's theorization of caste consistently rejects the liberal assumption that social justice can be secured through formal equality or procedural fairness. Ambedkar's engagement with justice departs fundamentally from liberal egalitarianism in its point of departure. Liberal theories take the moral equality of persons as a given and ask how institutions should be arranged to distribute rights and resources fairly among them. Ambedkar, by contrast, begins from the recognition that in caste society, moral equality itself is absent (Chadha, Sridhar, and Shah, 2018; see also Jaffrelot, 2005).

Ambedkar's critique does not merely target unequal outcomes but also the social conditions under which equality could even become meaningful. In caste society, individuals do not stand in relations of reciprocity or mutual recognition; they are positioned within a graded. Given this Ambedkar rejects reformist or distributive approaches to caste injustice.

Measures that seek to redistribute goods or opportunities, while politically necessary, remain insufficient because they operate within a social order that already presupposes unequal being. As Ambedkar argues in *Annihilation of Caste*, caste is not simply a division of labour but a division of labourers- a system that fixes social identity and value prior to individual choice or merit (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). Justice, therefore, requires dismantling the social order itself and cannot simply consist of rearranging benefits within this social order.

Ambedkar's emphasis on annihilation of caste can be best understood as a demand for ontological reconstruction, rather than moral reform or institutional adjustment. As the comparative philosophy analysis of Ambedkar and Rawls makes clear, Ambedkar identifies a fundamental blind spot in liberal justice: its reliance on a background assumption of social cooperation among equals, an assumption that caste society structurally forecloses (Chadha, Sridhar, and Shah, 2018). Where Rawls treats the basic structure as regulating cooperation among already-constituted equals, Ambedkar argues that the basic structure itself produces inequality at the level of social being. It is in response to the liberal model of justice that Ambedkar introduces fraternity as a foundation principle of justice. His ideal society is based on the values of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. Fraternity, for Ambedkar, is not a supplementary civic virtue or affective bond; rather it is the ontological condition of a just society. In his constitutional thought, fraternity is explicitly described as the principle that secures the unity of social life by affirming the moral interdependence of persons (Ambedkar, 1949/2014). Unlike liberal individualism, which treats individuals as atomised agents amongst whom only relations of distribution of benefits and

burdens exist, fraternity asserts that persons are constituted through relations of mutual recognition and shared social being.

Ambedkar draws the idea of fraternity not from the French revolutionists but from the Buddhist concept of maitri. For Ambedkar fraternity forms an important part of any given society where "an ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts. In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. In other words, there must be social endosmosis. This is fraternity, which is only another name for democracy. Democracy is not merely a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards one's fellow men (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, pp. 57-58)." Then, fraternity represents an ethical perspective in which members assume responsibility for maintaining non-hierarchical social relationships and acknowledge each other as equals. Without fraternity, equality is only nominal and liberty turns into dominance. Despite the existence of rights and distributive plans, social interactions nonetheless perpetuate exclusion and humiliation[10].

In their magnum opus titled *Experience, Caste and the Everyday Social* Guru and Sarukkai argue that fraternity has a significant role in everyday social interactions, which are based on instinctive reactions that we recognize as moral, such as the sense of belonging (Guru and Sarukkai, 2019). The ethical is

[10] Fraternity for Ambedkar differs significantly from liberal civic solidarity as it is grounded in social transformation rather than procedural coexistence.

not something that sits outside society and judges it from above. It is something that helps constitute social life from within. The way people relate to one another morally is part of what makes society what it is. We cannot understand caste, hierarchy, or exclusion only by looking at institutions. There has to be an inward move where we also have to look at everyday moral orientations: who is considered worthy of respect, who is seen as disposable, who is trusted, who is feared, who is pitied, who is ignored. The moment of the formation of an experience of the social is also one that is primarily marked with the cognition of the ethical. Even in the face of such institutional oppression and exclusion, individuals live and enjoy together, making the interactions. It is the interactions within the everyday socials of their lives that sustain them (ibid).

Moreover, they construe that everyday social experience shows that individuals and the social cannot be neatly separated. On the one hand, individuals help construct society. On the other hand, people behave as if "the social" itself were an independent agent that controls them. Individuals often act as though they are merely carrying out what their caste, class, ideology, or community demands. At the same time, social groups are treated as if they were autonomous entities with their own intentions and agency. This produces a strange situation in which individuals appear powerless, while "society" appears powerful and person-like.

Sarukkai and Guru (2019) address this tension between the individual and the structure by locating the centre of ethical action. They argue that society is made up not only of individuals but of multiple "socials". These socials are not fixed rather they change and overlap. What matters is that these

socials interact with each other as relatively autonomous entities. These are social formations such as caste groups, classes, ideological communities, professional groups, religious groups, and so on. Individuals belong to many of these at once. For Guru and Sarukkai, ethical social action primarily happens at the level of relations between these socials, not just between individuals. When we reduce everything to individual behavior, we misunderstand how society works. They do not deny the importance of individuals. But they ask: when is an action really an individual's own, and when is it just the voice of the social groups inside her? They suggest that an individual fully becomes an individual only when her actions create something socially new. A person is truly acting as an individual when she breaks existing social patterns and helps form new social relations or new communities. Individuality, for them, is not independence from society, but the capacity to transform it, such that a moral social order exists first as a hypothesis and becomes real only when people live it out through action.

An ethical social order should be then organized around humanity, mutual respect, peace, friendship, and shared ownership of social life (ibid). But this is difficult in contexts where dominant groups assume that others exist only by their "courtesy". Minorities are often made to feel that their public presence depends on permission from the privileged. The social is not just a network of institutions but an embodiment of virtues such as friendship and emotional generosity. However, this ethical project was disrupted by caste, which imposed isolation and hierarchy. Caste created a holistic system in which each group defined itself through separation from others. Over time, all social groups became contaminated by this

hierarchical logic. Caste is then sustained not only by rules but by shared emotions. The basic emotions of caste are repulsion, contempt, and exclusion. Caste creates a strong sense of belonging, which feels natural to those inside it. Due to this, people internalize caste emotions and rarely use discretion to soften them. The rigid rules of caste prevent empathy and open interaction by blocking moral exchange. It turns moral values into fixed, non-negotiable goods. As a result, ethical resources such as friendship cannot circulate freely between groups. Maitri is not charity or patronage from above. It is an unconditional and reciprocal relationship. A Dalit does not seek maitri as an object of pity. Maitri does not flow downward from those with power. It requires equality in everyday practices, such as sharing food, space, and homes. In such relations, caste pride is replaced by ethical connection.

In Ambedkar's Neo-Buddhist framework, maitri is the highest human value. It is not something given in advance. It must be continuously created through reflection and compassion. Its purpose is to annihilate hatred and restore *manuski*, or dignity. Maitri requires active emotions which lead to transformation of social relations. Maitri works only when emotions motivate structural change in how groups interact. For maitri to function, certain conditions are required. One is open communication. People must communicate suffering as well as joy. Another condition is the presence of "passionate subjects" who participate in others' suffering, not merely in happiness. It is grounded in shared vulnerability. In maitri, people accept moral values regardless of who proposes them. A Dalit, woman, or tribal person can be a legitimate source of universal values. These values are not validated by social status. Maitri rejects both domination and self-denial. It requires

mutual recognition without power. The concept of maitri then functions as a normative good that must be continually sustained by individuals and collectives. Institutional and everyday socials must be reorganised around it (ibid).

Fraternity understood as maitri is the ontological counter-principle to caste. In such a scenario where caste society enacts ontic injustice by conferring hierarchical being through purity, pollution, and inherited status, fraternity seeks to reconstitute social relations on the basis of equal moral worth and interdependence. Justice, on this account, is not primarily a matter of distributing goods or securing fair procedures, but of transforming the relations that make personhood possible in the first place. Fraternity thus enacts what may be described as ontic justice: the collective reconstruction of social ontology such that equality is produced rather than merely assumed.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the liberal theories of justice, structured around a distributive paradigm, rest on an incomplete social ontology. By conceiving individuals as discrete moral agents prior to social relations, liberal justice obscures how persons are historically and structurally constituted through hierarchies such as caste. As a result, it is inadequate to grasp forms of injustice that operate not merely through unequal distribution or misrecognition, but through the constitution of social being itself. To capture this deeper dimension, the paper drew on Katherine Jenkins's concept of ontic injustice and extends it to the context of caste. The term "ontic injustice" refers to the harms that occur when social arrangements give people unequal ontological standing, determining who is able to exist as a complete social subject at all. Insofar

as it structures social life through graduated hierarchies of purity, labour, and moral worth that precede and condition access to goods, rights, and recognition, caste has been demonstrated to be a prime example of ontic injustice. Despite being politically vital, distributive remedies are insufficient because they function within a social ontology that is created by caste.

Ambedkar's critique of caste exposes the central presupposition underlying liberal justice: the assumption of ontological equality. Equality is affirmed in theory but not in practice in the caste-based society. Therefore, it is better to interpret Ambedkar's appeal for the abolition of caste as a call for ontological transformation rather than just institutional reform. His concept of fraternity, which grounds justice in interdependence and mutual acknowledgment rather than atomistic equality, articulates a relational alternative to the liberal individualism. This work has attempted to demonstrate that issues of justice cannot be sufficiently addressed without consideration of social ontology by emphasizing caste as a location of philosophical inquiry rather than empirical illustration. The idea of ontic injustice causes justice theory to change its emphasis from allocation to constitution, from what people possess to what society allows them to be. Although the Indian context has shaped the argument, its consequences go beyond caste. Racial, gender, and colonial differences are shaped by hierarchical social ontologies in ways that also contradict liberal justice's tenets.

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Producerism as a Right-Wing Legitimation of Unequal Resource Distribution

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Introduction

The issue of unequal distribution of resources refers to a situation where resources such as wealth, income, land, education, healthcare, or natural resources as well as positions of power are not shared evenly among people, groups, or regions. Instead, some individuals or communities have far more access to these resources than others, leading to disparities in living standards and opportunities (Pleinen, 2022; Beckert, 2024). Income inequality where a small portion of the population controls a large share of the total wealth, while many others struggle to meet basic needs is one of the most relevant indicators of unequal resource distribution. Inequalities in access to resources such as housing, education, healthcare, etc. are evident on a global scale, but can also be observed within nation-states (e.g. Thompson, 2012), regions (Lee et al., 2016), and cities (e.g. Bolton and Breau, 2012; Lau and Gordon, 2017), such as where these entities differ greatly in access to resources like clean water, technology, or medical care.

Existing inequalities in access to resources are both legitimized and criticized. While criticism argues that inequality results from a system of power, meritocratic approaches fail to acknowledge the fact that, in practice, not everyone starts

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from the same position (Arun, 2022; 2023), and that extreme inequality, visible in a situation in which basic needs are unmet while others accumulate surplus is morally unjustifiable. Others defend inequality arguing that access to resources in general as well as income in particular reflects an individual's productivity, skills, and effort. Considering the inequality from this perspective, it is seen as fair since it is assumed to reward contribution of the person to societal wealth (Mankiw, 2013). Another position argues that income differences provide incentives for individuals to invest in education, work harder, innovate, and take entrepreneurial risks. In addition, unequal income is justified explaining that entrepreneurs take on uncertainty and risk; high returns compensate for potential failure.

The issue of unequal access to resources is the subject of controversial public debate. The perception of this question depends in no small part on their class background, but also on the subjective social status (Haddon and Wu, 2022; Melli and Azzollini, 2025). Yet, Kitsnik (2023, p. 623) argues in her research covering 34 OECD countries that "for explaining individual tolerance of unequal income distribution, individual-level acceptance of inequality-legitimizing narratives combined with subjective social position is more relevant predictors compared to contextual factors capturing socioeconomic conditions and inequality. Moreover, the impact of narratives that legitimize inequality on accepting unequal income distribution remains consistent and robust across various geographical, socio-economic, and cultural contexts".

Italian philosopher of law and political scientist Norbert Bobbio offers one of the clearest and most influential interpretations of the left-right political divide, and he centers it

almost entirely on attitudes toward equality. According to his seminal book titled "Left and Right. The Significance of a Political Distinction" (1987), there is a fundamental distinction between left and right: The left prioritizes equality while the right accepts or justifies inequality. According to Bobbio, the left sees inequalities as socially constructed and unjust, believes they should be reduced through political action, and supports policies like redistribution using taxation and welfare, equal access to education and healthcare, and labor protections. In contrast, the right views many inequalities as natural, inevitable, or even beneficial based on the underlying assumption that they result from individual effort and achievement, as well as tradition and social order.

The legitimacy of access to and the extent of resource use are often—particularly by right-wing political actors—linked to the prior provision of a service, which is seen above all in hard work and a willingness to perform. In this perspective, only such a behavior can serve as the basis for holding resources, such as those provided by the welfare state, but also regarding the appointment of top positions in business, government, and politics. Political power and economic goods are vested in individual people based on their performance, as measured through examination or demonstrated achievement.

While the concept of meritocracy is often cited (Mulligan, 2018) in moral justification of inequalities in the broad literature, this text particularly focuses on the approach of producerism—according to which access to resources should depend on whether the individuals or groups in question have previously been productive themselves, that is, whether they have contributed to the social wealth of the society that is now

expected to provide them with support. This will be done with a particular focus on right-wing political forces who have gained political significance and influence in numerous countries over the past twenty years.

In the following discussion, I will clarify how "producerism" is conceptualized by right-wing protagonists taking the respective outline by U.S. researchers Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons (2000) as a starting point. I will then present a concise overview about the variation of right-wing producerist thought over time and space, also adding some further remarks from a historical perspective, drawing on German history. While producerism manifests itself differently in various historical contexts, there is always a deep connection to historical developments and (hegemonic) self-perceptions within the respective society. The chapter ends with some reflections and conclusions about the relevance of producerist narratives and interpretative frameworks in current political debates.

Producerism – A Basic Conceptualization in U.S. Context

When turning to research on (right-wing) populism, there are numerous proposals to understand it as a strategy, an ideology, or a structure of argumentation (see Skenderovic, 2017). At this point, I would first like to refer to an article by Sebastian Reinfeldt (2013), who, drawing on a semiotic figure developed by the French linguist Algirdas Greimas, speaks of a populist quadrilateral. It is characterized by a dual opposition that gives rise to the right-wing populist concept of the people: One of the discursive oppositions consists of the juxtaposition of "those up there" ("the elite") on the one hand and the vast

majority of the population on the other; the other opposition highlights the distinction between the "we" comprising mostly native capable citizens and taxpayers and the "not-we," to which various groups can be assigned (ibid., p. 50).

The U.S.-based researchers Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons (2000) have developed an analytical perspective on the significance of producerism in right-wing populism. In their analysis of right-wing populism in the United States—whose supporters they identify, in social-structural terms, as primarily belonging to the middle and working classes—scholars assume that these groups see themselves as being under pressure from two sides: on the one hand from the "elites," and on the other from the "lower classes." Both are perceived, in their own specific ways, as "unproductive" and/or "parasitic," while the hardworking people count themselves among those who generate societal wealth. In this interpretation, which distorts social reality to the point of caricature, the "elites" are often cosmopolitan-minded liberals who are said to control the education system and the media, or members of the internationally oriented financial sector—both groups, it is claimed, are not, due to their wealth, dependent on work (hard) for a living or are said to exploit the "productive" segments of the population.

It is obvious that such a perspective is highly compatible with antisemitic modes of thought, which categorically distinguish "productive" industrial capital from "parasitic" financial capital (Postone, 1980, pp. 106–113), but also with pre-industrial prejudices against people of Jewish faith (Carneiro, 2020, pp. 157–167; Koper, 2024). The producerist paradigm is complemented by a specific and multifaceted portrayal of the unproductive—because "lazy," "dangerous," or "sinful"—

underclasses (Katz, 1995; Stevenson, 2018; Wacquant, 2022). In the U.S. context, this perspective evokes, not least, the stereotype of the "welfare mom"—that is, the Black American woman who, as a single parent, raises her children on public assistance (Asen, 1996; Wimberly, 2000; Owen, 2016). Even more so than Catherine McNicol Stock (1996), who, in her highly readable study of radicalization processes in rural areas of the United States, views producerism as a form of populist criticism of the elite that intersects with racism and nationalism, Berlet and Lyons (2000) argue that producerism necessarily links criticism of elites with an attack on racialized subordinates. They emphasize that the concept of producerism can draw on various discursive traditions that are deeply rooted in U.S. history. These include, in addition to anti-elitism—characterized by explicit distrust of politicians, the powerful, the wealthy, and so-called high culture—anti-intellectualism, which views scientific rationality and logic with suspicion, as well as majoritarianism—the notion that the will of the majority takes absolute precedence in matters of governance, thereby rendering minority rights meaningless (see Arun, 2018, pp. 232-233)—often also an evangelical moralism as well as a nativist Americanism, according to which immigrants bring customs and cultural practices that are harmful to "America."

Right-wing populism, with its producerist narrative, channels outrage and anger—combined with elements of conspiracy ideologies—against "those at the top," while simultaneously mobilizing repressive forces against "those at the bottom" through prejudice and stereotypes, often casting the latter as "the Others." Depending on the specific movement—in the U.S. of the 1990s, particularly white nationalism,

Christian nationalism, and anti-government libertarianism—as well as the concrete socio-historical context, the producerist paradigm's designation of enemies targets different groups: "the lazy" (African Americans, immigrants, people of color, welfare moms), "the sinful" (non-heteronormative beings, feminists, pro-choice activists), or "the dangerous" (labor activists, groups advocating for racial/social justice).

In the United States, as early as the early 20th century, producerism became associated with antisemitic rhetoric, as seen in the cases of Henry Ford and the right-wing radio host Father Coughlin (see Wang, 2021). The Tea Party movement, which emerged in 2009, also drew on racially charged producerist concepts. The movement was both a driving force behind shifts within the Republican Party and an expression of them; with Fox News—the most-popular prime time news channel in the U.S., which is closely aligned with the Republican Party (see Bard, 2017; Stelter, 2020) and has effectively become the mouthpiece of the Tea Party movement—such producerism gained significant media traction in the context of the debate over the causes of the 2007–2008 financial crisis and the measures necessary to address it. In this context, Fox News presented itself as a protector and advocate of traditional moral and economic principles, particularly in reference to "hard work" and professional qualifications. In this way, moral and political connections were established between entrepreneurs and workers without addressing their differing material interests (Peck, 2012).

Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph Lowndes (2016; 2019) have shown that, despite its strong ties to racist ideologies, producerism serves as a flexible reference point. In the wake of the financial crisis in the United States, there were

fierce political attacks on public sector workers and their union representatives. Unlike earlier campaigns, the smear campaigns were not limited to racialized wage earners; rather, this time white workers themselves were the focus of attacks from the right, as they were morally and characteristically defamed as lazy, unproductive, and idle. The group named Americans for Prosperity, which is close to the Tea Party, was particularly aggressive. For example, lifeguards employed by the California municipality of Newport Beach were personally attacked on the grounds that their allegedly high salaries, excessive pensions, and early retirement schemes constituted an exploitation of taxpayers, and that they themselves were vain and preoccupied with showcasing their physicality.

The fact that even such a professional group was attacked in this way as unproductive and parasitic is astonishing in light of the heroization of first responders in the U.S. following 9/11; HoSang and Lowndes point here to a long tradition of anti-statist politics in the U.S., as a result of which the redistributive state as a whole was stigmatized through its association with racialized wage dependents. In the face of the severe economic crisis, this discriminatory practice was also applied to segments of the white population in order to further delegitimize and weaken the power of labor unions.

Even though the producerist paradigm is contextualized and, since the late 19th century, anti-Chinese attitudes and acts of violence in the wake of immigration to the western United States did not cite alleged "laziness" as a reference point, but rather presented "great diligence" as a threat in the competition for jobs (see Saxton, 1971 and 1990; Lew-Williams, 2018), it cannot be overlooked that populist and far-right actors also invoke these modes of thought in other nation-state contexts

and political cultures. In North America and Europe, producerist narratives are rooted in different ideological traditions. Abromeit (2016) locates these in Europe particularly in physiocracy, Proudhonian socialism, and Sorelian syndicalism.

Producerism -Examples and Historical References in European Context

With regard to the socioeconomic ideas of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Philip Rathgeb (2021) has demonstrated that the unifying element of the proposals for tax cuts, the weakening of trade unions, and welfare chauvinism can be found within the producerist paradigm. Central elements of right-wing populist ideology—such as nativism (resulting, among other things, in the exclusion of non-citizens from welfare state benefits), authoritarianism (resulting, among other things, in a punitive attitude toward those who allegedly or actually violate the social norm of willingness to work), and anti-elitism—are linked to the distinction between "tax-paying doers"—a category that includes entrepreneurs and the majority of wage earners—and the "self-serving takers," for whom immigrants, but also the "corrupt elite," serve as examples. In terms of policy measures, this distinction leads, on the one hand, for example, to discrimination in access to welfare state benefits, to attacks on trade union power (see also Mosimann et al., 2019), and to calls for privatization, as this would break up the "party cartel." On the other hand, business owners and employees are promised tax cuts, and the (male) core workforce is offered the prospect of social security benefits. This perspective also clearly incorporates a gendered

dimension through the figure of the man as the family's main breadwinner.

In Belgium, the right-wing nationalist Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), much like Italy's far-right Lega Nord, applies the producerist paradigm based on regional criteria. In doing so, it relies on deeply entrenched negative stereotypes about the "lazy," economically dependent, and predominantly French-speaking parts of the country that benefit from the productivity of the Flemish regions (Beland and Lecours, 2005). Abts et al. (2019) view the N-VA's policies as a blend of neoliberal market radicalism—with its emphasis on individual responsibility and performance (or willingness to perform)—and a welfare-state-style producerism that makes access to support services contingent on who is responsible for the need and whether efforts are being made to escape the situation of need. Finally, those who have contributed (more) to the social security system should also be given priority and receive better support. The N-VA argues in a culturally deterministic manner that Flemish Belgians are wealthier because they are more hardworking than people in the Walloon part of the country (ibid., p. 858).

With regard to the Yellow Vests movement in neighboring France, Guerra et al. (2020) identified, within the framework of producerist interpretive models, a strong critique of the elite that is also accompanied by an advocacy of a traditional work ethic, in which receiving social benefits is viewed as dishonorable; "the people," who should have priority access to the wealth generated, are most likely represented in socioeconomic groups such as skilled workers, small business owners, or truck drivers. A downward demarcation is not disproportionately prevalent when compared to the entire French

population. Economic populism, which sees the restoration of national sovereignty in economic matters as a means of overcoming the "betrayal of the corrupt elites" against the people (see Meny and Surel, 2000; Canovan, 2005), simultaneously conveys narratives about the "good old days" when "true values" still mattered.

In their study of the economic policy profiles of right-wing populist parties such as France's National Front (FN), the Swiss People's Party (SVP), and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Ivaldi and Mazzoleni (2019) highlighted the close link between economic and cultural-moral stances. The producerist paradigm is consistently present, although certain variations can be observed depending on the specific ideological tradition to which each party belongs and the context-specific opportunities for mobilization. While the FN and UKIP, for example, locate the "productive" more strongly among the lower middle class and in working-class circles, the SVP tends to associate them with the middle class and individual entrepreneurs. For the SVP, the term "parasites" primarily refers to the (long-term) unemployed, whereas for UKIP and the FN, it is more clearly applied to immigrants. In the case of the FN, criticism of economically based power is also closely linked to conspiracy theories targeting a "globalist elite."

For the Portuguese right-wing party Chega, Mendes (2021) has analyzed that in its "programmatic documents, producerism interacts with a radical neoliberal orientation in economic and social policy. Chega takes issue with the redistributive functions of the state altogether, defining the current fiscal system as 'extortion', encumbering those who work hard" (p. 346).

In Germany, too, the producerist paradigm is a regular feature of the rhetoric of far-right actors. The following examples from various decades illustrate this point clearly and invite further reflection: In 1977, the People's Socialist Movement of Germany called for a rally in Munich; it's flyer bore the slogan "Against Marxism and Exploitation—For the People's Community and Achievement." In 1992, the Friends of Freedom for Germany distributed stickers with the slogan "Germany. No Place for Parasites!". During a PEGIDA rally in Munich in 2016, flyers were distributed bearing the inscription "The Arab wants prosperity without work like the reds and left-wing social parasites" (Nerdinger, 2017, pp. 260-263), and the monthly party newspaper of the National-Democratic Party of Germany ran the headline "Meritocracy vs. Feminism" in October 2020, as if women's careers were determined independently of their qualifications and performance.

At the same time, it is part of the traditional programmatic framework of the far right to interpret the right to work as a duty to work and to demand a corresponding labor service. This objective is linked to the ideological elevation of "work" as "service to the people and the nation" (see Virchow, 2007, pp. 178f.) rather than a good life. Translated into concrete political measures, this means for the far right, among other things, that all long-term unemployed and recipients of transfer payments are to be conscripted into labor service following the paradigm that no one should earn without having previously rendered a service.

A historical analysis reveals a specific racist conception of work and achievement: To the extent that work was declared a "German virtue" in the Prussian-Protestant spirit, or even claimed to be an expression of a specific "racial quality" (see

Axster and Lelle, 2018), "laziness" and "sloppiness" came to be viewed as manifestations of an "un-German spirit"; accordingly, numerous racial nationalist movements in Germany adhered to a concept of work that viewed labor as a sacrifice for and service to the nation and the national community.

If one traces the historical roots of such producerist positions, various connections can be found in the German-speaking context, which can only be briefly touched upon here. In addition to overtly Social Darwinist arguments used to justify the imperial regime's colonial policy, the colonialist regimes of violence—in line with contemporary racist attributions—also had the stated goal of teaching the population of the African continent, who were accused of "godless idleness," to "work properly" (see Gronemeyer, 1991). In the construction of the "other" as unwilling to work, the self-portrayal of Germans as particularly diligent and hardworking simultaneously came to the fore; the cultural-missionary mantra of colonial propaganda therefore declared Germans to be particularly suited to "educate" the population in the colonized territories (see Schubert, 2003; 2011).

Nazism, whose Reich Labor Service—as a continuation and radicalization of trends within the labor camp movement of the Weimar Republic (see Dudek, 1988)—adorned the gates of its camps with the slogan "Work ennobles," described itself, in accordance with this understanding, as the "State of Labor." In her book on the tradition of work in Germany, historian Joan Campbell (1989) presented evidence how several actors during the Nazi regime "attempted to put the works community on a biological footing by defining the Betrieb [company, F.V.] as an expression of the race soul, essentially distinct from the capitalist, alias Jewish, enterprise" (p. 352). Such ideas

could build on narratives that had already been disseminated by Protestant nationalists during the Weimar Republic in which alleged 'Jewish attitudes' to work had been denigrated (ibid., p. 353).

Conversely, those who were labeled as not hardworking or unwilling to work were stigmatized (Hörath, 2014), persecuted, and in many cases subjected to "extermination through labor"—for example, in the socially racist so-called "persecution of the asocials" (see Allex and Kalkan, 2009; Allex, 2017) and the "euthanasia" murders, but also in the Holocaust. While the notion of the "productive German" and the "greedy Jew" was already an integral part of racial nationalist thinking in the 19th century, under the Nazi dictatorship, labor served as "an instrument of humiliation, torture, and extermination" for those who, "like the Jews, were excluded from the 'national community' from the outset" (Wildt, 2019, p. 221). At the same time, Nazi leaders like Robert Ley, head of the Deutsche Arbeitsfront (German Labour Front), which aimed to organize all working (Aryan) Germans, proclaimed that work is the twin sister of struggle. Unemployed individuals, therefore, could not take part in the struggle for survival of the German people. Ley concluded that the goal of National Socialism was to create a society based solely on work and achievement (see Lelle, 2024, pp. 33-38).

The racist attributions of laziness, which were also directed at other social groups—such as the Sinti and Roma—have a long tradition (see Horváth, 2005; Hund, 2014). Under the Nazi regime, this resulted in the murder of approximately 500,000 Roma and Sinti people. Racist stereotypes remain widespread to this day; right-wing populist figures, in particular, continue to stoke such prejudices (Kourova and Webb,

2020). In Germany, derogatory, producerist debates are currently directed primarily against people from Southeast Europe (Leko et al. 2025).

Producerism as the Legitimization of Unequal Resource Distribution

In the debate over unequal access to resources, particularly those provided by social welfare systems, the question of need and deservingness is raised on the one hand, while on the other hand the issue of performance or the (prior) contribution of those in need—or at least a visible demonstration of their willingness to contribute—is brought up. In a cross-national study, Fenger (2018) demonstrated that in Belgium, France, Sweden and the Netherlands 'elderly' and 'ordinary' people are considered to be in need of assistance by right-wing parties. Trump in his first term mostly referred to veterans. In contrast, refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers were unanimously labeled as undeserving. Like in Germany and in the Czech Republic, right-wing parties produce narratives that offer a "sense of 'us' and 'them' in terms of commitment to hard work and productivity, a reassurance that the self is among those who have struggled, tried hard, and proven their worth in this process" (Hilmar, 2023, pp. 300-301). Unequal resource distribution, mostly in the form of access, limited access or denied access to social welfare benefits as a means of redistribution is legitimized citing the alleged productive or non-productive character of a particular individual or a social group. Historically, in most cases the unequal resource distribution affects so-called "undeserving" individuals, which are typically non-natives, or those who are seen as "unwilling" to work.

Deservingness (Oorschot, 2006; Meulemann et al. 2020) and producerism are best understood as relationally intertwined concepts rather than distinct analytical categories. Producerist narratives provide a normative framework through which deservingness is evaluated, while judgments of deservingness simultaneously reproduce and reinforce producerist distinctions between those perceived as economically productive and those deemed dependent or unproductive. In this sense, producerism does not merely inform deservingness; it actively constitutes the criteria through which deservingness is recognized and allocated. Conversely, discourses of deservingness serve as a mechanism through which producerist values are translated into social and political judgments about entitlement, welfare, and citizenship. Their relationship is therefore mutually constitutive: producerism supplies the moral logic that structures deservingness, while deservingness operationalizes and legitimizes producerist hierarchies in everyday political discourse. This is where the connection becomes explicit. Studies of welfare populism show that producerism works as a moral logic through which deservingness is assigned. Citizens are viewed as deserving not simply because they are needy, but because they are perceived as workers, contributors, taxpayers, or productive members of society. Conversely, those seen as non-contributors are cast as undeserving (Kochuyt et al. 2023). Radical right political actors such as the Sweden Democrats "narrative of restoring the producers' well-being mostly revolved around a sense of general dissatisfaction with the present societal situation, as well as the specific issues of immigration, healthcare, elderly care, and waste of tax money" (Evertsson, 2023, p. 45).

Conclusion

Producerism is a central element of several right-wing populist discourses. Political actors frequently portray society as divided between "ordinary hard-working people" and groups that allegedly exploit them. At its core, producerism distinguishes between those who are perceived as contributing to society through work, production, or tax-paying and those who are seen as living off the efforts of others. Right-wing producerism often targets welfare recipients, immigrants, or bureaucratic elites. Thereby, producerism is a powerful concept that fuels social division and is frequently exploited by right-wing populist forces. It is politically relevant because it provides a powerful moral framework for allocating or refusing rights, resources, and recognition.

Producerism shapes debates about who deserves social benefits. Welfare recipients who are seen as workers, contributors, or people temporarily in need are often viewed as more deserving than those perceived as unwilling or long-term unable to work. This is one reason why welfare policies increasingly emphasize employment, activation, and reciprocity. Here, producerism functions as a moral criterion for deservingness: social rights become tied to perceived economic contribution rather than need alone. The narrative of producers is, however, conceptually vague. Regarding a conceptual definition, the producers are primarily defined in opposition to the so-called takers. This may, in part, provide an explanation to how right-wing populist parties has attracted support from both sides of the ideological left-right spectrum.

Producerism influences ideas about who belongs to the political community, too. Economic contribution is often treated as evidence of commitment, responsibility, and worthiness. As

a result, access to welfare benefits, residence rights, citizenship, or public recognition may become linked to labor-market participation and productivity. The political significance of producerism lies not merely in its emphasis on work but in its capacity to define moral worth. Producerism transforms economic activity into a criterion of social value. It therefore plays a crucial role in determining who is considered deserving, who belongs to the political community, and whose claims on collective resources are regarded as legitimate. Rather than conceptualizing deservingness and producerism as separate phenomena, this study treats them as co-constitutive dimensions of a single moral-political framework. Deservingness is articulated through producerist assumptions about contribution, labor, and productivity, while producerism gains social and political force through judgments about who is considered deserving or undeserving. Each concept derives much of its meaning from the other: producerism establishes the moral boundaries of deservingness, and deservingness functions as the practical expression of producerist valuations. Their relationship is therefore not merely complementary but constitutive, with each continuously shaping, sustaining, and reproducing the other.

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Administrative Justice: Clarifying the Distiction between the Philosopher-King and the Prophet-King

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Introduction

The questions of who should govern and by what right have captured political thought since antiquity. At the heart of this inquiry lies a deeper question: *What kind of knowledge qualifies a person to rule?* This question that refers to overarching philosophical root of the concept of authority is the primary focus of this work. In some traditions, authority arises from superior rational insight; in others, it flows from divine mandate. These two paradigms crystallise into the enduring archetypes of the *philosopher king* and the *prophet king*. The philosopher king, developed most explicitly in Plato's *Republic*, embodies the ideal of governance by a ruler whose contemplative wisdom grants access to the eternal forms and, above all, to the Good. Justice arises from rational ordering, and administrative justice is the craft of harmonising functions within the polity. The prophet king, by contrast, presides over a polity constituted by divine instruction. Kings such as David and Solomon in biblical and Qur'anic narrative do not rule by philosophical deduction, but by revelation and divinely conferred wisdom. Administrative justice consists not in rational design, but also in faithful implementation of divine law.

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Modern states-whether secular or religious-inherit both legacies. Administrative law, public ethics, and theories of political obligation continue to reflect these classical tensions. Yet existing scholarship often treats philosopher-kingship and prophet-kingship as incommensurable alternatives. This chapter intends to argue that they are better understood as *rival epistemic models of authority*, each grounded in a comprehensive metaphysics and each generating distinctive administrative consequences. The exploration for achieving the mentioned task proceeds in four major steps. The first step analyses the rationalist model of the philosopher king. The second examines the revelatory model of the prophet king and the ways in which scriptural traditions conceptualize administrative justice. The third step tries to develop an expanded comparative framework and to integrate the political philosophy of al-Fārābī, whose theory of the prophet-philosopher represents one of the most ambitious attempts to synthesise reason and revelation. The fourth and last major step concludes with contemporary implications, including technocracy, religious constitutionalism, and the enduring problem of administrative legitimacy.

Before going any further, it would be useful to bear in mind that the present study draws on primary sources in public-domain translations-e.g., Plato and Aristotle in the Jowett translations (1885, 1888), the *Qur'an* in the Yusuf Ali 1934 edition, the *Hebrew Bible* in the King James Version, and Maimonides in Friedländer's 1904 translation. Al-Fārābī's works are analysed through paraphrasing and scholarly interpretation. Where relevant, Arabic or Greek terms are noted to clarify philosophical nuances. The analytical method in this work is comparative and genealogical one, meaning that instead of

assessing which model is the correct one, the chapter traces the distinctive logic and administrative implications of each tradition.

The Philosopher King: Rational Authority and Administrative Justice

The figure of the philosopher king is arguably the most influential product of classical Greek political imagination. Plato's *Republic* presents the philosopher ruler as one who possesses knowledge of ultimate reality, and whose governance expresses the rational structure of the cosmos. Administrative justice, in this model, is not merely procedural accuracy; it is the harmonization of the state according to the metaphysical order apprehended by reason. If we follow Plato's line of thought through some steps, the first step to be taken would be the epistemic foundations; but regarding the aim of the chapter, the discussion will be limited with the konwledge of the good.

Plato asserts that no political order can be genuinely just unless it is ruled by those who have ascended from the cave of illusion to the realm of the forms. According to him, only philosophers possess such a knowledge. Their claim to rule is therefore epistemic, not hereditary or divine. Plato famously declares this argumentative position as follows: "Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, ... cities will never have rest from their evils." (Plato, *Republic*, 473d)[2]. For Plato, the knowledge that justifies rule is not empirical expertise but metaphysical insight—grasping *to agathon* (the Good) itself

[2] See Jowett trans. 1888/II: 235.

(Plato, *Republic*, Bk VI) This is the ultimate foundation of justice; all administrative decisions must reflect this transcendent order. The Good functions as both an ontological first principle and a normative criterion for governance.

Philosophers, having ascended through dialectic to knowledge of the forms, are uniquely capable of legislating in a way that harmonizes the internal structure of the polis (Plato, *Republic*, Bk VII). Their administrative authority is grounded in the dictum that *knowledge is the rightful basis of rule* – a position Aristotle later qualifies but does not wholly abandon. The second step will be with regard to that Plato insists that true rulers must be distinguished not only by intellectual capacity but by moral character (Plato, *Republic*, 486b-e). Philosophers must be incorruptible, moderate, courageous, and oriented toward the common good. Their education-stretching over decades-is designed to shape the soul to desire truth rather than personal gain. In Book VI of the *Republic*, Socrates claims: "There is no ruler of a state worthy of the name, except the philosopher." (Plato, *Republic*, 484b)[3]. This assertion is not elitism for its own sake; it is a structural claim about human nature. Since most people live among appearances rather than realities, only those trained in dialectic can discern the true interests of the city. This rational discernment distinguishes philosophical rule from democratic opinion, oligarchic self-interest, or tyrannical appetite.

In Plato's thought, it is reasonable to consider administrative justice as harmony. Justice for Plato is fundamentally *functional differentiation*—each part of the city performing the role for which it is naturally suited (Plato, *Republic*, Bk IV).

[3] See Jowett trans.1888/II: 256.

Administrative justice reflects this conception. The magistrates must assign tasks in accordance with the natural aptitudes of citizens and maintain proper balance among the classes. Socrates declares: "Justice is having and doing what is one's own." (Plato, *Republic*, 433a)[4] On this view, administrative injustice occurs when functions are misallocated—when those unsuited to rule do so, or when rulers act like private individuals. The philosopher king's administrative role is therefore to preserve harmony between the rational, spirited, and appetitive elements of the polity. This functionalism has far-reaching implications: bureaucratic offices must reflect the division of labor dictated by the city's constitution. Administrative competence becomes a moral imperative. However, Aristotle has some critical remarks on this issue. Although Aristotle criticises Plato's communalism and metaphysical idealism, he retains the idea that superior reason justifies political authority. He argues: "He who is able to exercise foresight is by nature a ruler, and he who is able to do things with his body is a subject." (Aristotle, Politics, I.5)[5]. Here, administrative justice emerges from *practical wisdom* (*phronēsis*)-the capacity to deliberate well about means to achieve the good life (Aristotle, *Politics*, VI.12). Unlike Plato, Aristotle situates governance within the framework of constitutional law rather than a metaphysical hierarchy of classes. Nevertheless, he maintains that the virtuous person is best suited to rule. He also highlights that rule must be according to law: "Law is order, and good law is good order." (Aristotle, *Politics*, I.2)[6] The philosopher ruler, then, is not a solitary genius imposing ideal forms, but a custodian of

[4] See Jowett trans.1888/I: 134.
[5] See Jowett trans. 1885: 12.
[6] See Jowett trans. 1885: 7.

constitutional order. Administrative justice is delivered through stable institutions governed by rational principles. Therefore, administrative justice in ancient Greek thought is widely seen as a rational craft.

For both Plato and Aristotle, governance is a *technē*—a craft requiring specialised knowledge (Plato, *Republic*, 345c-d). This stands in contrast to democratic egalitarianism, which assumes that all citizens are equally competent to deliberate on political matters. The craft analogy reinforces the need for trained administrators whose judgments are guided by rational principles. Plato's model is particularly technocratic: magistrates must be selected through rigorous testing to ensure their rational stability (Plato, *Republic*, Bks II-III). Administrative failures are interpreted as epistemic failures—errors in grasping the proper order of the city. Aristotle tempers this by emphasizing mixed constitutions and citizen participation, yet he still places administrative excellence in the hands of those with superior virtue and rational insight (Aristotle, *Politics*, III.11-13).

As a concluding remark for this section, it is possible to say that discussions and major views on justice are grounded by a metaphysics of reason and governance Underlying Greek political rationalism is the conviction that reason (*logos*) is the organizing principle of the cosmos (Aristotle, *Politics*, I.2). Administrative justice must therefore mirror cosmic order. The philosopher king becomes the political analog of the soul's rational faculty—guiding, restraining, and harmonizing lower elements. This cosmological grounding differentiates the philosopher king from later secular technocrats. The philosopher rules not by empirical science but by contemplative

knowledge of being (Plato, *Republic*, 508d-509b). He is a moral and metaphysical exemplar.

Summarising what has so far been said, in the rationalist model of the philosopher king, *authority arises from knowledge*, justice is *functional harmony*, and administration is a *rational craft*. Plato and Aristotle differ on the extent of philosophical rule, but they agree that governance must reflect reason's supremacy over appetite and impulse. This model stands in stark contrast to the prophet king, whose authority is grounded not in metaphysical contemplation but in divine revelation. The second section will explore that alternative paradigm and examine how scriptural traditions conceptualize administrative justice in the context of kingship chosen and guided by God.

The Prophet King: Revelatory Authority and the Divine Law

Whereas the philosopher king grounds political legitimacy in rational insight, the prophet king rules by virtue of *divine designation* and *moral exemplarity*. The epistemic model shifts from contemplative ascent (Platonic dialectic) to revelation (*wahy*, *nubuwwah*), from metaphysical reasoning to obedience to divine command. In this tradition, law is not discovered by human intellect alone; it is *given*—transmitted by prophets, confirmed by miracles, embodied in sacred ordinances, and preserved in scripture. The present section aims to examine the prophet king in three interlocking traditions:

1. The *Qur'ānic* portrayal of David (Dāwūd) and Solomon (Sulaymān);
2. The *Hebrew Bible's* depiction of the anointed king; and

3. The *philosophical-theological* reconstruction of prophetic authority in medieval Jewish thought, especially Maimonides.

Before going any further, it would be useful to state that revelation-as regards the prophet-king-is seen as the epistemic foundation of governance. Revelatory rule differs from philosophical rule in its *source of knowledge*. The prophet king does not claim authority because of superior dialectical skill or metaphysical contemplation, but because he is chosen and instructed by God. The locus of certainty is not the philosopher's ascent to the forms but the divine descent of guidance to the prophet[7]. Revelation thus reconfigures political epistemology in the following aspects: 1. Knowledge of the Good is received rather than discovered; 2. The law is revealed rather than reasoned out; 3. Administrative justice is an act of obedience, not invention; 4. Legitimacy flows from divine authorization, not epistemic superiority.

The prophet king therefore embodies a form of charismatic authority, but one disciplined by divine law. He is neither free to legislate arbitrarily nor required to justify his rule on purely rational grounds. His role is that of *vicegerent* (*khalīfah*, *mashiaḥ*)-one who governs *on behalf of* divine sovereignty. Within the Qur'ānic Model of the Prophet King, the chapter will be limited with the stories of David and Solomon (or, Dāwūd and Sulaymān); because he Qur'ān provides one of the most explicit articulations of the prophet king, particularly in the stories of these two. These figures are portrayed not merely as political rulers but as prophets, recipients of wisdom, and judges whose authority flows directly from

[7] See the contrast in epistemic authority between reason (Plato) and revelation (Scripture)

God.David-in some verses-symbolises vicegerency and just judgment.

In Sūrat Ṣād, God directly appoints David as His representative: "O David! We did indeed make thee a vicegerent on earth: so judge between men in truth..." (Q 38:26-Yusuf Ali, 1934). This verse encapsulates the Qur'ānic vision of administrative justice in the following respects: 1. Divine appointment ("We made thee a vicegerent"), 2. Moral duty ("judge between men in truth"), 3. Fear of injustice ("follow not the lusts of thy heart"), and 4. Eschatological accountability. Unlike Plato's metaphysical ascent, David's authority stems from divine decree. His administrative task is not to impose a rational ideal but to implement God's commands with integrity. And, Solomon is referred to, concerning inspired judgment.

Solomon's kingship likewise merges political and prophetic authority. A striking example appears in where David and Solomon judge a case: "To Solomon We inspired the right understanding..." (Q 21:78-79-Yusuf Ali, 1934). This passage indicates that administrative decisions arise from *divine guidance*, not philosophical reasoning. Solomon is praised not for logical deduction but for receiving correct judgment (*fahhamnāhā*) through divine instruction. This implies that judicial insight is a gift from God, situating administrative justice within the supernatural economy of revelation.

Concerning prophetic authority and law, the *Qur'ān* affirms that prophets are recipients of *ḥikmah* (wisdom) and *fasl al-khiṭāb* (decisive speech). Of David, it says: "And We gave him wisdom and sound judgment in speech and decision" (*Qur'ān* 38:20-Yusuf Ali, 1934). Such descriptions reinforce that prophetic kingship is inseparable from divine instruction.

Administrative justice thus entails fidelity to revelation; the prophet king does not innovate law but embodies it.

When The Biblical Model is the case, on the other hand, we confront a rather different form of authority, which we can name as "the anointed king": The Hebrew Bible similarly portrays the king as anointed (*mashiaḥ*)-chosen by God and endowed with the spirit needed to rule justly. For instance, in the form of divine selection, David's anointing signifies the transition from human political selection to divine designation: "And the Lord said, Arise, anoint him: for this is he" (1 Samuel 16:12-KJV)[8]. The king's authority is established not by rational demonstration but by prophetic testimony. Administrative justice thus proceeds from covenantal fidelity.

Another striking example here could be Solomon's wisdom as gift. In 1 Kings 3, Solomon requests wisdom, and God grants it: "Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart..." (1 Kings 3:12-KJV) Similarly: "And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much..." (1 Kings 4:29-KJV). Solomon's famous judgment of the two women (1 Kings 3:16–28-KJV) illustrates the *charismatic and inspired* nature of prophetic judicial authority-wisdom not attained through philosophical education but bestowed through divine grace. Nevertheless, it would not be a good idea to underestimate the fact that the prophet-king is not superior to law. Unlike the philosopher king, who in some interpretations may stand above the law by virtue of superior knowledge, the biblical king is bound by divine law. Deuteronomy 17:18–19 commands that the king write for himself a copy of the Torah and "read therein all the

[8] KJV is the abbreviation for King James' Version.

days of his life" so that he may rule righteously. Administrative justice therefore requires the king to be the *first subject of the law*, not its author.

Considering administrative justice within the revelatory paradigm may lead to affirm that administrative justice under prophetic kingship exhibits four distinctive features: 1. Law as Revelation, 2. Judgment as Moral Discernment (Divinely Guided), 3. Accountability to God, 4. Administration as a Form of Worship.

Now, we will see what we refer to by each feature: Law derives from God, not human deliberation. The king does not legislate in the philosophical sense; he *executes divine commands* (Deuteronomy 17:18–19). The Torah and Qur'ān alike portray kings as guardians of revealed norms. Prophetic judgment frequently involves inspired insight (*ruaḥ*, *wahy*). The ruler discerns hidden truths through divine assistance, not through the dialectical rationalism of the Greek tradition. Unlike Plato's philosopher king, who may theoretically escape accountability to the masses, scriptural kings are judged by God and punished when unjust, as seen in David's repentant psalms and Solomon's downfall in later years (2 Samuel 12; 1 Kings 11-KJV). In Islamic and biblical traditions, to govern justly is to fulfill a religious obligation. Administrative duties—adjudicating disputes, protecting the weak, enforcing law—constitute acts of obedience to God and manifestations of divine mercy[9]. This sacralization of administrative justice gives prophetic kingship a moral depth that differentiates it sharply from philosophical technocracy. The sacralized form of administrative justice is most clearly seen in the middle ages, the

[9] See the Qur'ānic emphasis on justice (Q 4:135; Q 16:90).

period in which Moses Maimonides (Musa Ibn Meymûn, 1138–1204) had intellectualized the prophetic kingship: In the medieval period, Maimonides offered an unparalleled synthesis of biblical revelation and Aristotelian rationalism. His political philosophy reframed prophecy as an *intellectual phenomenon*, aligning the prophet with the philosopher while preserving divine transcendence. What he had achieved by doing so could be summarized in three steps, titled as follows: 1. Prophecy as emanation and intellectual perfection, 2. Moses as the Supreme Prophet-Lawgiver, 3. Administrative Justice in Maimonidean Thought. Now, let us clarify what we refer to by each of these steps.

In *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides asserts: "Prophecy is, in truth and reality, an emanation sent forth by the Divine Being through the Active Intellect." (Maimonides, 1904: 238)[10]. This Aristotelian reinterpretation renders prophecy part of the natural order in the following ways: 1. The prophet's intellect is perfected to receive emanation from the Active Intellect, 2. His imagination translates this emanation into images and laws comprehensible to the people. Prophetic authority thus incorporates both *rational* and *imaginative* dimensions (Maimonides, 1904: 244)[11].

Maimonides distinguishes Moses as the only prophet who received revelation without imaginative mediation: "The prophecy of Moses our Teacher is distinguished from that of others by its being accompanied by perfect intellectual apprehension." (Maimonides, 1904: 233)[12]. This elevates Moses above philosopher and prophet alike: As a philosopher, Moses

[10] The Guide For The Perplexed, II.36.
[11] The Guide For The Perplexed, II. 45.
[12] The Guide For The Perplexed, II. 35.

apprehends metaphysical truth directly;and, as a prophet, he receives divine law without symbolic distortion. For Maimonides, Moses is the archetype of the prophet king-even though Moses never became king in the monarchical sense. His authority is total because it rests on unparalleled intellectual communion with God.

Maimonides conceives administrative justice as the application of divine law to produce moral and social perfection (Maimonides, 1904: 312-321)[13]. Yet he also insists that the law has rational aims—social order, moral discipline, and intellectual development (Maimonides, 1904: 310)[14]. Thus: The *ends* of governance are rational (human flourishing), the *means* are revelatory (Torah), and, last but not least, the ideal ruler is both wise and obedient. This becomes crucial for al-Fārābī, whose project in Islamic philosophy attempts to merge the Platonic philosopher king with the prophetic model. The following step will explore his synthesis in depth.

The concluding remarks fort his step are as follows: The prophet king embodies an epistemology of *revelation* rather than reason. His administrative authority arises from divine appointment, and his judgments reflect divinely inspired moral insight. Biblical and Qur'ānic traditions portray kingship as a sacred office bound to divine law, accountable to God, and oriented toward moral transformation of society. Where the philosopher king legislates based on metaphysical knowledge, the prophet king governs by implementing revealed law. Where the philosopher seeks harmony based on the structure of the soul, the prophet seeks righteousness based on the will of God. Yet these models need not be wholly

[13] The Guide For The Perplexed, III. 27-31.
[14] The Guide For The Perplexed, III.26.

incompatible—as Maimonides shows, they can be intellectually interwoven. Part III will develop this comparative framework and incorporate an extended analysis of *al-Fārābī*, whose vision of the prophet-philosopher represents the most ambitious synthesis of these traditions.

Comparative Framework: Reason, Revelation, and the Architecture of Authority

The distinction between the philosopher king and the prophet king is not merely historical or theological-it also has a conceptual dimension. These two figures represent competing models of *epistemic authority*, *legal validity*, and *administrative justice*. Each model expresses a comprehensive view of human nature, the cosmos, and the moral foundations of political life. This section develops a systematic comparison of these two traditions and integrates the political theory of *al-Fārābī*, whose synthesis remains one of the most profound contributions to political philosophy in any tradition.

The comparative analysis proceeds in five areas (and five fundamental questions): 1. Epistemology: How does the ruler know?, 2. Legitimacy: By what right does the ruler govern?, 3. Law: What is the source and nature of legal norms?, 4. Administration: How is justice concretely implemented?, 5. Ends of government: Toward what does governance aim?

By structuring the comparison along these axes, we can see not merely differences of emphasis but two distinct-and at times conflicting-visions of political ontology.

The most fundamental distinction between the philosopher king and the prophet king concerns the source from which each derives authoritative knowledge. In the philosophical tradition, political authority is grounded in the ruler's

capacity to attain rational knowledge of ultimate reality. For Plato, the philosopher king rules because he alone possesses knowledge of the Good, attained through dialectical ascent (Plato, *Republic*, Bks VI–VII.). His authority derives from the superiority of his cognitive faculties. Even Aristotle, though more moderate, ties political rule to *phronēsis*, the intellectual virtue enabling correct practical deliberation (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.5–12).

This model rests on the following three assumptions: 1. *Reality is rationally intelligible* through philosophical inquiry, 2. *The Good is discoverable* by those trained in dialectic, and 3. *The capacity for such knowledge is rare*, concentrated in philosophical elites. Thus, epistemic superiority becomes political superiority.

By contrast, the prophet king derives authority from truths communicated through divine revelation rather than philosophical inquiry. That is to say, the prophet king's knowledge does not arise from philosophical exertion but from divine revelation. God discloses truths, commandments, and judgments that no rational ascent could attain. David and Solomon do not *discover* justice—they *receive* it (*Qur'ān* 21:79; 38:26). Moses, in Maimonides' account, receives revelation with unparalleled clarity (Maimonides, 1904: 233)[15]. The following three characteristics define revelatory epistemology: 1. *Knowledge is vertically transmitted* (from God to prophet), 2. *Truth is authoritative because divine*, not because rationally demonstrated, and 3. *The prophet's epistemic privilege is charismatic*, not intellectual. Thus, revelatory authority rests on divine initiative rather than human achievement.

[15] The Guide For The Perplexed, II. 35.

These contrasting epistemological foundations generate different expectations regarding governance and administrative practice. Rational authority favors philosophical education, deliberative processes, and constitutionalism based on practical wisdom; where as revelatory authority favors prophetically grounded law, charismatic leadership, and moral righteousness over technical skill. The two models therefore produce distinct administrative practices and expectations.

The divergence between the two models becomes even more evident when the basis of political legitimacy is examined.

Within the Platonic framework, the ruler's legitimacy rests primarily upon superior knowledge and wisdom. Shortly saying, legitimacy in the Platonic model is epistemic (Plato, *Republic*, 484b-487a). A ruler governs rightly because he knows rightly. This gives rise to a paternalistic model of rule: the many obey because they lack philosophical insight. No divine sanction is required; knowledge is self-validating.

In scriptural traditions, however, legitimacy derives from divine election rather than intellectual excellence. In biblical and Qur'ānic traditions, legitimacy is *theological*. The king is anointed (*mashiaḥ*) or appointed (*khalīfah*) by God (1 Samuel 16:12-KJV; *Qur'ān* 38: 26). His right to rule is grounded in divine choice, not human wisdom. This has two consequences: 1. A morally upright but unlearned king may be legitimate, and 2. A brilliant but impious ruler may be illegitimate. Legitimacy depends on divine will, *not* rational capacity.

The contrast between reason and revelation also shapes fundamentally different understandings of law.

For the philosopher king, law emerges as an expression of rational order directed toward the common good. In Plato,

law ideally becomes unnecessary once the philosopher rules directly; nevertheless, the *Republic* and *Laws* depict law as the rational structuring of social life (Plato, *Laws*, I-XII.). Aristotle likewise grounds law in rational deliberation about the common good (Aristotle, *Politics* III.11–13). Law is a *human craft*, perfected through wisdom.

For the prophet king, by contrast, law is understood as a manifestation of divine command that precedes human judgment. In the biblical and Qur'ānic visions, the king is **subject to** law, not its originator. He must copy it, study it, and enforce it faithfully (Deut. 17:18–19). The Qur'ān portrays prophets as proclaiming God's law, not legislating their own (*Qur'ān* 5:44-48). Law is divine discourse, not philosophical discovery. These differing conceptions of law reveal two competing foundations of normative authority. Where the philosopher seeks *rational sufficiency*, the prophet seeks *revelatory obedience*. The source of normativity differs starkly: when norms emerge from human nature and reason, we are talking about a *rationalist* perspective of normativity; when norms emerge, on the other hand, from divine command and covenant, we take *revelation* as central. This divergence has profound implications for administrative justice.

The practical administration of justice reflects these deeper disagreements concerning the nature of authority and law. In the philosophical model, administration is primarily conceived as a rational and technical craft. Administrative justice in the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition is an exercise in ***technical rationality***. Governance is a craft (*technē*), requiring structured training, division of labor, and clear institutional roles (Plato, *Republic*, 345c-d).[41] The administrator is akin to the physician healing the body politic, the captain steering the

ship, and, the craftsman producing order. Here, we see justice as harmony. Under prophetic rule, administration assumes a moral and covenantal character shaped by obedience to divine law, i.e. administration is fundamentally *moral* and *covenantal*. Key features include: 1. Adjudication as obedience to God-e.g., Solomon's inspired judgment (1 Kings 3: 16-28-KJV). 2. Protection of the vulnerable as a divine mandate (*Qur'ān* 4:135). 3. Accountability not only to citizens but to God (David's repentance) (2 Samuel 12-KJV).[44] Administration is thus an extension of prophecy. Although both traditions seek justice, they define and pursue it through markedly different administrative principles. While philosophical administration aims at rational coherence, prophetic administration aims at moral fidelity. Both seek justice, but each defines it differently. The philosopher considers justice as a functional harmony; whereas, the prophet defines justice as fidelity to divine command. This divergence stands at the core of classical debates on political authority.

The ultimate purpose of political authority further illuminates the distinction between the two paradigms. For the philosophical tradition, governance aims principally at the realization of human flourishing. For Aristotle, the purpose of the polis is to enable human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) (Aristotle, *Politics*, I.1).[45] Plato similarly envisions a just society in which the soul's rational order is mirrored in the political order (Plato, *Republic*, IV).[46] The end of governance is the perfection of human nature. For the prophetic tradition, governance is ultimately directed toward righteousness and fidelity to divine covenant. In biblical and Qur'ānic traditions, the goal is not simply flourishing but *righteousness* (Hebrew: *ṣedeq*, Arabic: *ʿadl*). The polity exists to uphold God's law, cultivate moral

virtue, and sanctify communal life (Amos 5:24; *Qur'ān* 16:90).[47] The end of governance is alignment with divine will.

Al-Fārābī and the Prophet-Philosopher Synthesis

No medieval thinker attempts a deeper reconciliation of these two paradigms than Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 950), the founder of Islamic political philosophy. His daring project is to reinterpret the Platonic philosopher king through the lens of prophetic revelation, producing a new political archetype: *the prophet-philosopher-king*.

Al-Fārābī begins his synthesis by reinterpreting Platonic political philosophy within an Islamic metaphysical framework. In *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* ("The Virtuous City"), al-Fārābī adapts Plato's metaphysics to an Islamic worldview:

- The First Cause replaces the Form of the Good (Walzer, 1985).
- The Active Intellect (a Neoplatonic concept) mediates divine emanation (Walzer, 1985).
- Prophecy becomes a natural faculty of perfected souls (al-Fārābī, 1985).

For al-Fārābī, political order mirrors cosmic hierarchy. Just as the cosmos emanates from the First Cause, the virtuous city emanates order from its supreme ruler.

This reinterpretation culminates in a new conception of the ideal ruler who combines philosophical wisdom with prophetic authority.

Al-Fārābī identifies twelve qualities needed for the ideal ruler, including wisdom, moral virtue, imaginative power, and the ability to receive emanation from the Active Intellect (al-

Fārābī, 1985). From these criteria emerge two types of leadership:

1. The **philosopher king**—akin to Plato's ruler, who apprehends metaphysical truths.
2. The **prophet king**—who receives divine images through his perfected imaginative faculty (al-Fārābī, 1985).

The ideal ruler *combines both*: He is a philosopher who knows ultimate truths **and** a prophet who can translate them into symbolic legislation accessible to the masses. This is the **synthesis** that Plato never envisioned and scripture never systematically articulated.

The key to al-Fārābī's synthesis lies in his understanding of prophecy as a mediating link between reason and revelation. Al-Fārābī argues that prophecy is not opposed to reason; it is the **imaginative articulation** of truths known to the philosopher (al-Fārābī, 1985). The philosopher apprehends intelligible forms directly; the prophet receives the same truths in imaginal form suitable for lawgiving. Hence the philosophical truth is abstract and intellectual; whereas the prophetic truth is imaginal and symbolic; but both derive from the same metaphysical source. Prophecy becomes a *political necessity*: the masses cannot grasp philosophical abstractions, but they can follow symbolic law grounded in revelation. On this basis, al-Fārābī presents legislation as the symbolic translation of philosophical truth into forms accessible to society. For al-Fārābī, divine law (*sharīʿah*) is the *translation* of philosophical truths into practical norms (al-Fārābī, 1985). The prophet-philosopher legislates by expressing metaphysical insights in the form of rituals, prohibitions, obligations, narratives, and moral directives. Administrative justice thus becomes the

rational application of symbolic law to achieve the perfection of society.

A comparison with both Plato and the scriptural traditions reveals the distinctive character of al-Fārābī's project. Al-Fārābī is in harmony with Plato concerning the following principles: 1. The ruler must possess superior knowledge, 2. Political order mirrors cosmic order, and 3. Justice is the harmony of the community under rational guidance. Al-Fārābī follows the path of the scripture when he says that: 1. The ruler receives divine assistance, 2. Law (*sharīʿah*) has sacred authority, and 3. The ruler's imaginative power is essential to guiding the people. However, Al-Fārābī rejects Plato's secular rationalism by insisting that revelation is metaphysically grounded, not arbitrary.He *also* rejects literalist interpretations of prophecy by insisting that revelation is rationally structured, not merely miraculous. Al-Fārābī's synthesis preserves the rational foundation of law, the divine authority of law, and, the symbolic communicability of law. It is highly a difficult task to identify a model of kingship in antiquity, which better integrates reason and revelation. The practical implications of this synthesis become especially visible in al-Fārābī's conception of administrative justice. Under the prophet-philosopher, according to Al-Fārābī: 1. Administration is rational in its aims (human perfection), 2. Administration is revelatory in its means (symbolic law), 3. Rulers must interpret law dynamically to preserve the city's moral order (al-Fārābī, 1963), 4. Lower administrators imitate the ruler's virtues and judgments (al-Fārābī, 1963). This produces a hierarchical but coherent administrative system grounded in metaphysics, ethics, and revelation, as well as in political craft. The Farabian model thus yields a unique conception of administrative

justice: *rational-revelatory governance directed toward human perfection*.

The comparative analysis reveals deep structural differences between the philosopher king and the prophet king-but also surprising areas of convergence. The Platonic vision emphasises rational harmony; the scriptural vision emphasizes divine righteousness. Yet both require rulers of exceptional virtue, both sacralize justice, and both elevate governance above mere political expediency. Al-Fārābī demonstrates that these traditions need not remain separate. His prophet-philosopher synthesizes Greek rationalism with Islamic revelation into a unified framework of political legitimacy and administrative justice. This synthesis not only bridges ancient traditions but also provides conceptual resources for evaluating modern debates in political theology, technocracy, and constitutional design. The next and the last step will explore those contemporary implications.

Contemporary Implications of the Two Models

Administrative justice today is shaped by a tension that mirrors the ancient distinction between the philosopher king and the prophet king: *Should public administration be grounded in technical rationality, or in moral-normative commitments that transcend administrative craft?* The former echoes the Platonic ideal of rational rule; the latter draws from biblical and Qur'ānic notions of divinely grounded justice. Contemporary governance-characterised by large bureaucracies, technocratic expertise, and complex democratic norms-still relies on at least four inherited assumptions from these earlier traditions.

Many contemporary forms of technocratic governance continue to reflect important elements of the philosopher-king ideal. Modern technocracy revives certain aspects of the philosopher-king model. Administrative agencies often operate on the premise that policy should be determined by those with specialized knowledge, data-driven analytical capacity, rational decision-making structures, and technical expertise.

This is precisely the Platonic conviction that the most knowledgeable should rule. Contemporary theorists such as Herbert Simon argue that administrative judgment requires *bounded rationality*, not divine insight, yet it still presumes a stratification of cognitive roles (Simon, 1997).

The contemporary administrator resembles a "mini-philosopher king": selected for expertise, expected to deliberate impartially, and tasked with creating rational systems that promote welfare.

Yet Plato's concern remains relevant: rational expertise does not necessarily supply *moral orientation*. Expertise alone cannot solve questions of justice—such as what ends the state should pursue, whom it should prioritize, or how it should define fairness.

At the same time, modern public ethics preserve significant aspects of the prophet-king tradition. Conversely, modern public administration is increasingly framed by *rights discourse, ethical norms,* and *moral obligations* that resemble the prophetic model. Concepts like human dignity, accountability, equity, anti-corruption ethics, procedural fairness, and stewardship are not derived from technocratic rationality, but from moral traditions deeply indebted to biblical and Islamic notions of just kingship.

Administrative justice today often lives in a prophetic register, among the following principles/executions: 1. Protecting the vulnerable is a legal mandate (Simon, 1997; Wolterstroff, 2010), 2. Public officials are morally accountable to constitutional norms (analogous to divine law), 3. Social equity frameworks mirror prophetic imperatives for righteousness, 4. Oversight bodies function as moral guardians, echoing prophetic admonition.

Modern constitutionalism may therefore be understood as an attempt to reconcile these two competing legacies. Modern constitutional government integrates aspects of both models. That is to say, when we're talking about independent agencies, judicial expertise, evidence-based policy, and rational-bureaucratic structures (in the Weberian sense), the philosopher-king elements are the case. On the other hand, when we're talking about constitutional supremacy (law above rulers), moral rights that constrain public power, public accountability, and duties of justice that transcend technocratic calculation, then the prophet-king elements are the case. Constitutions impose normative frameworks that administrators must obey-much as Deuteronomy required kings to copy and study the law Daily (Deuteronomy 17: 18–20-KJV). Constitutions thereby function as secularized versions of divine command: higher laws that ground political legitimacy.

Al-Fārābī's synthesis offers a particularly useful framework for interpreting this modern convergence of expertise and morality. That is, Al-Fārābī's philosopher-prophet-king offers a conceptual lens for interpreting modern governance. His model suggests the following three aspects: Political legitimacy requires both *knowledge* and *moral purpose*, law must be

both *rational* and *symbolically communicable*, and administration must balance *expertise* with *ethical commitment*.

Modern democratic governance, at its best, mirrors this synthesis; because: Legislatures articulate normative visions (prophetic function); courts interpret laws rationally and impartially (philosophical function); administrators implement policy with expertise but within moral-constitutional boundaries (synthesis). Al-Fārābī thus offers a powerful framework for understanding how technical administration must be grounded in normative commitments if it is to produce justice rather than mere efficiency. Taken together, these considerations point toward a more integrated normative theory of administrative justice. Below is a suggestion for a three-layered framework for a modern theory of administrative justice:

1. Rational Foundations (As the Heritage of Philosopher-King) require the existence of competent expertise, deliberation, evidence-based decision-making, and bureaucratic professionalism;
2. Moral Foundations (As the Heritage of Prophet-King) require the existence of equity, protection of vulnerable populations, ethical accountability, and rule-bounded authority
3. Integrative Principles (Farabian Synthesis) include law as rational and normative, administration as both technical and ethical, and, does take into account human flourishing as both moral and rational aim

Such an integrated model avoids the technocratic reductionism of pure rationalism and the theocratic rigidity of pure revelation. Administrative justice requires both *technical expertise* and *moral purpose*.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to examine two archetypal models of political authority-Plato's philosopher king and the scriptural prophet king-and has made an effort to explore their implications for *administrative justice*. Each model represents not only a political ideal but a comprehensive epistemology, moral psychology, and theory of law. The *philosopher king*, grounded in rational ascent and intellectual virtue, offers epistemic clarity, structured governance, as well as rational administration. Yet, it risks moral detachment and technocratic elitism.

The *prophet king*, on the other hand, grounded in divine revelation and moral righteousness, provides a rich sense of justice and social compassion, along with transcendent norms. However, it risks charismatic arbitrariness without institutional structures. Neither ideal is sufficient on its own. Administrative justice requires both the *rational competence* celebrated by Plato and the *moral accountability* emphasised by scripture.

Al-Fārābī's synthesis, i.e. the prophet-philosopher, demonstrates that these traditions can be unified. Law may be given through revelation while remaining rationally intelligible. Governance may aim at human flourishing while remaining morally grounded. Modern administrative systems, whether consciously or not, often operate within the Farabian synthesis, in the following parametres: 1. Expertise (philosophical), 2.

Constrained by constitutional norms (prophetic), 3. Directed toward human welfare (synthetic).

This chapter has suggested that contemporary administrative justice should continue to cultivate a synthetic model.

Effective governance requires: *knowledge* without arrogance, *law* without rigidity, *morality* without fanaticism, *efficiency* without technocracy. The challenge for the current/modern states is not to choose between rational and revelatory paradigms, but to recognise the enduring value in both. Administrative justice-like justice itself-is achieved when the technical and the moral, the rational and the normative, the philosophical and the prophetic, operate not as rivals but as *partners* in the pursuit of the common good.

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The Moral Politics of Sanctuary: Legitimacy, Visibility, and Authority

Jonathan Leif Basilio[1]

Introduction

What would come to be known as the birth of the modern U.S. church sanctuary movement can be traced to the early 1980s, when *Southside Presbyterian Church* in Tucson, Arizona, offered shelter to Central American refugees whose asylum claims were being routinely denied under the Reagan administration (see Perla and Coutin, 2010). Joined by like-minded individuals and organizations, the effort soon spread nationwide, broadening into a "decentered movement" (Kebede, 2001), a loosely coordinated network of "sanctuary communities" (Marfleet, 2011) committed to protecting refugees and challenging the exclusionary asylum policies of the period. But the movement also drew on earlier traditions of protection and dissent. Many of the early activists were inspired by the "Underground Railroad," the interracial network of abolitionists who provided fugitive enslaved African Americans with escape routes and material assistance (Beck, 2018; see also Crittenden, 1988). In the 1970s, Latin American liberation theology's core message of God's "preferential option for the poor" and the church's mandate spread across many faith communities. Church involvement in anti-war activism, including efforts to protect draft resisters, and the immediate impact of the civil rights movement also shaped the broader

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moral milieu (see also Marfleet, 2011: 449-452). Some municipalities also adopted sanctuary-style positions. Berkeley passed the earliest known sanctuary policy in 1971, declaring itself a "city of refuge" in support of conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War. Los Angeles adopted the first policy directly tied to immigration in 1979, which prohibited officers from inquiring into residents' immigration status (O'Brien et al., 2024: 52). Although it draws from these normative foundations, the contemporary church sanctuary movement has taken a direct anti-deportation orientation. In light of the state's increasingly aggressive and mediatized immigration regime, it has also come to employ more strategic forms of public visibility to augment its protective work.

Edith Espinal's forty-month refuge at *Columbus Mennonite Church* in Ohio, between 2017 and 2021, is among the longest and one of the most high-profile cases in the country. She crossed the border from Mexico as a teenager, settled in Columbus, where she worked, married, and raised three U.S.-born children (Eshun, 2019; see also Edith Moreno v. Sessions III, 2017). She tried to obtain lawful status a number of times, but her prospects dimmed after receiving a final deportation order. She entered sanctuary at the church following a congregational vote (CMC, 2017). Her stay began in the first year of the Trump administration and continued into Biden's first year in office. When the church decided to publicize her story, it used a narrative of deservingness to underscore the injustice of her predicament. That visibility, as is often the case in public sanctuary campaigns, made her vulnerable to wider scrutiny and legal pressure. Yet through the church's advocacy, and with the help of allied organizations and community supporters, she received an "Order of Supervision" in 2021 that

allowed her to leave the church (CMC, 2017); she later obtained temporary protection from deportation and a visa in 2023 (D'Eon, 2023).

To put Espinal's plight in perspective and contextualize this chapter, we can discern a political inflection point in California's Proposition 187 in 1994 that sought explicitly to deny public services, medical care, and public education to undocumented immigrants. Although the measure was struck down in federal court, its passage unwittingly galvanized widespread opposition. Many municipalities adopted or renewed sanctuary-style protections, but that momentum was largely concentrated at the local level, as sanctuary was still peripheral to national politics during this period (O'Brien et al., 2024: 50). Then a pivotal moment came in 2015 after the fatal shooting of Kathryn Steinle in San Francisco, long associated with local non-cooperation policies, by an undocumented immigrant. Trump, during his campaign, used the tragedy to portray both the city and the idea of sanctuary as figures of government failure and immigrant threat. After getting elected, he elevated this indictment into a "national political flashpoint" and made it a feature of his anti-immigrant platform (O'Brien et al., 2024: 50). He signed Executive Order 13768 in 2017, only days after his inauguration, to defund the so-called sanctuary jurisdictions (O'Brien et al., 2024: 50; see also Gulasekaram, Su, and Villazor, 2019); meanwhile, federal immigration authorities conducted choreographed, high-profile raids for "maximum public spectacle" (Corral, 2023: 1529), a logic not lost to critics who describe them as "publicity stunts" staged for "optics, not public safety" (Gambino and Singh, 2025). In defiance, additional municipalities across the country declared themselves "sanctuary cities." Also important, many

churches acted on their deeper ethical obligations—church sanctuaries doubled during this period. A recent source estimates that there were roughly 400 before and 800 after Trump's election in 2016 (Meredith, 2025). This upsurge undoubtedly amplified the movement's civic presence, but it also brought its structural predicament to the fore. Because church sanctuaries lack the formal authority to bring about enduring and substantive change, their influence derives primarily from moral invocation and the attention they draw to the injustices of the state's deportation apparatus. Although genealogically linked to the 1980s sanctuary movement, Espinal's case reflects the anti-deportation focus within contemporary church sanctuaries. The question that remains, then, is how sanctuary can sustain its moral legitimacy under the scrutiny of state power, which retains a monopoly on legality, and especially when visibility itself is wielded by both institutions. Being constrained in part by limited capacity and in part by strategic calculation, sanctuaries must decide whom to protect, leaving them with only limited latitude to extend refuge to some while leaving others exposed.

These tensions are rooted in a broader regime of deportation. Mass deportation has a long history in the United States, and in recent decades it has also intensified as a central instrument of immigration regulation (Hagan, Rodriguez, and Castro, 2011; cf. White House, n.d.). Sanctuary emerges under conditions of deportability (De Genova, 2002), where migrants may be socially embedded but remain vulnerable to removal. In this sense, deportability extends into the wider condition through which immigration law comes to generate cumulatively injurious effects across work (Corral, 2023), family and school (Menjívar and Abrego, 2012; Gallo, 2014),

reaching outward as well into the risk of family separation (Dreby, 2013), the strain borne by immigrant families and communities (Hagan, Rodriguez, and Castro, 2011), decisions about where to reside (Capps et al, 2011), and the broader deportation worries borne by mixed-status households (Lai, Hoffmann, and Waldinger, 2022; see also Abrego and León, 2025). It is within these conditions that the urgency and the limitations of sanctuary become apparent, and it is these dynamics that the framework I describe below clarifies.

I use Espinal's story as the main analytic prism to identify some of the frictions that arise, particularly in how matters of moral legitimacy, strategic visibility, and formal authority intersect and diverge. To sort out how these ideas relate, I assemble a Legitimacy–Visibility–Authority (LVA) schema, not to present an exhaustive typology of sanctuary, but first, to bring together what scholars have identified in relation to sanctuary's moral framing (Coutin, 2000; Ticktin, 2011), performative spectacle (Su, 2020; Corral, 2023), and local and municipal -level resistance to state enforcement (Varsanyi, 2010; Paik, 2017; Gulasekaram, Villazor, and Su, 2019), respectively. And second, to address three specific areas: (1) the extent to which sanctuary's moral legitimacy and public visibility affect the state's ability to exercise power; (2) how the state seeks to diminish or eliminate the challenge presented by sanctuary; and (3) how the politics of deservingness limit and potentially undermine sanctuary's reach.

The LVA Framework

The perceived moral credibility of sanctuary represents its **legitimacy (L)**. Doctrine, public-facing rituals, religious idiom, and other forms of religious expressions can be used to

reinforce this credibility in religious settings; sanctuary actors can also make use of the language of charitable concern or humanitarian and rights-based discourse for the same purpose (see, for example, Coutin, 2000, 2021; Lippert and Rehaag, 2012; Ataç, Rygiel, and Stierl, 2016).

Yet this moral credibility is often entangled with judgments about the worthiness of those receiving shelter. Protective interventions often turn on moral distinctions between the "deserving" and "undeserving" (Fassin 2012: 212; Aru and Belloni, 2024). Although deservingness is not identical to legitimacy, institutional judgments of entitlement rest on assumptions about who is defensible within the social body (see Willen, 2012), and it is through frames of deservingness that those in need of protection come to be publicly perceived as worthy of sympathy or defense (Ambrosini, 2023), helping shape how legitimacy is sustained in public life. As a result, for example, irregular migrants are often judged through displays of hard work or moral respectability and, in formal settings, through their ability to produce "semiofficial proofs of presence, certificates of reliable conduct" (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2014: 241) or other emblems of social worth that make them appear less deportable. In turn, the credibility of sanctuary itself can become tied to the protectees' deservingness, such that protection is relatively easier to defend when its beneficiaries can be cast as deserving.

Visibility (V) describes how the work of sanctuary is dispersed to its intended public. From hiding and protective obscurity to deliberate display (Lippert and Rehaag, 2012), sanctuaries often consider which forms of visibility will be most useful for gaining support and which may instead expose actors to harm. But they must also manage information

based on the audience, context, and risk (Albu, 2023). For this reason, sanctuary's visibility is necessarily selective and often partial, and also contoured to the conditions of each media environment it uses. Media platforms each have their own rules and policies, preferred formats, sharing dynamics, algorithms, as well as their own publics. As Geboers and Van De Wiele (2020) show, for example, retweeting helps shape what circulates most widely, not only at the level of the message itself or as an endorsement of it, but also in terms of what is most shareable and most likely to resonate with fellow Twitter users.

Visibility is contested, however, as the state apparatus also uses the same as a tool of surveillance, deterrence, or attrition. Sanctuary actors navigate these dynamics by staging what is shown, to whom, and in what moral register, knowing that visibility can mobilize solidarity while also intensifying surveillance or possible backlash.

Authority (A) refers to the capacity of the institution to protect, prevent deportation, or deter removal. Municipal ordinances (Ramakrishnan and Wong, 2010) and university policies (Ahranjani, 2018), for instance, provide a degree of protection for their constituents, but they remain vulnerable to federal challenge. The case of international doctoral student Rümeysa Öztürk, who was taken into custody by immigration officers as she was leaving her off-campus apartment, is a recent example. Despite the university's subsequent legal and public support for her defense (Tufts University, 2025), it was not enough to prevent her detention. The removal proceedings against her were eventually terminated after DHS was found to lack legal grounds to deport her (ACLU, 2026; Gerstein and Cheney, 2026).

Legal status can only be conferred by the federal government, although non-federal actors are not obliged to enforce federal immigration policy. This leaves a structural gap between local and institutional acts of protection and legally enforceable rights, such as lawful status, which is fundamentally what sanctuary seekers often need most. As Mercado (2024) cautions, protective work at the local level may help some immigrants, but it can remain structurally entangled with the deportation regime itself. In New York City, for example, sanctuary discourse is used to legitimate law-enforcement practices and campaigns to provide universal representation in immigration court are treated as protection even as the broader machinery of detention and deportation remains intact, thereby helping "entrench, extend, and obscure immigration enforcement" (Mercado, 2024: 282). By contrast, church-based sanctuary may draw on legal advocacy and other means of support, but its ability to protect primarily relies on moral pressure, public suasion, and, more acutely, on the state's willingness, however temporary, not to act—but the problem of deportability remains unresolved.

Where Legitimacy (L), Visibility (V), and Authority (A) align, they help clarify how sanctuaries and other oppositional institutions function. A sanctuary, for instance, may possess strong legitimacy and high visibility while exercising little to no coercive power. Accordingly, I treat sanctuary not as a fixed moral category but as a dynamic configuration of L, V, and A, to foreground its inherent contradictions and enable comparison across distinct sanctuary formations.

The typology below (Table 1) offers a portable heuristic for mapping and comparing various types of sanctuaries and their relationships within the LVA field.

Table 1: LVA Typology

Type	Configuration	Examples
Moral sanctuary	High L, High V, Low A	Faith-based shelters appealing to religious or ethical duty
Technocratic sanctuary	High L, Variable V, Moderate to High A	Non-cooperation ordinances at the municipal level; inclusive-services statutes
Insurgent sanctuary	Contested L, Variable to Low V, Situational A	Underground networks; runway blockades; disruptive acts of civil disobedience
Spectacular sanctuary	Variable L, High V, Low A	High-profile, media-driven cases aimed at exerting moral pressure

The categories may overlap in practice and shift over time. For example, in broad terms, Espinal's refuge began as a *moral sanctuary* that later assumed a *spectacular* form, but it did not achieve full *technocratic* influence. In applying the LVA framework to Edith's case, we clarify the underlying cross-pressures and processes through which her moral appeal and visibility generated provisional protection, while also revealing the structural limits of what her church could secure due to its lack of enforceable authority.

Moral Legitimacy and Public Visibility as Resistance

The Latin term *sanctuarium*, meaning a sacred or inviolable space, evokes the biblical "cities of refuge" described in Numbers 35:9-28, which designated places where individuals fleeing persecution could take refuge. In medieval England and some parts of Europe, fugitives could claim protection

from authorities by knocking on church doors, invoking the church's mandate, and remaining within the sanctuary for up to forty days (Helmholz, 1990). These earlier forms of refuge point to a longer sanctuary tradition that was grounded in moral and sacred authority rather than in the state's regulation of asylum and legality. Providing shelter amid the threat of deportation, in this sense, is a logical continuation of that older protective ethic. By viewing the act as a sacred obligation, sanctuary actors position themselves as obeying a higher law.

This was evident early in the 1980s when congregations publicly declared their churches as "sanctuaries," in the process also borrowing language from civil disobedience discourse and liberation theology (see Coutin, 1993; Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, 2009; Behrman, 2021). Sanctuary workers from different denominational and religious backgrounds also developed an ecumenical culture that allowed them to collaborate across theological and institutional boundaries (Coutin, 1993). The workers drew upon theologies that emphasized a "merciful" and "hospitable" God and a broader biblical call to welcome the "resident alien" or to show mercy for immigrants and refugees (Beck, 2018: 133). The Columbus Church was clear as to why they took action in Edith's case: "Our decision was grounded in the memory of when we too sought sanctuary from violence… along with one of the most basic teachings of any faith: 'Love thy neighbor'" (CMC, 2021). The appeal to interfaith solidarity and neighborly love notwithstanding, the church's Anabaptist tradition of peace and non-violence also gave it added credibility.

Sanctuary movements make use of public visibility as well. Contemporary sanctuaries often purposely seek media

attention as a strategy to generate concern about the injustices of immigration and, more directly, to deter aggressive enforcement. Analytically, this publicity also changes how the situation comes to look from below. In Rancière's (2010) terms, visibility work disrupts the "distribution of the sensible," or the common-sense order wherein deportation is understood as normal or even morally unremarkable. Sanctuary efforts destabilize this by casting deportation as a contestable wrong. Sanctuary thus becomes a performance of dissent through spectacle. As a "social drama" (Turner, 1974), it creates a liminal, theatrical space where dominant norms (e.g., the assumption that deportation is routine) are suspended and contested through acts of witness, ritual, and storytelling.

Another function of this visibility is that it forces deportation to appear as something that must be answered for. To borrow Forst's (2012) idea of the "right to justification," sanctuary not only refuses to treat removal as administratively self-evident but further insists, quite rightly, that those whose lives are disrupted by state power are owed reasons for the use of that power. Fraser's (2008) account of the frame of justice is also useful here as she moves the question from what is owed alone to who is entitled to make justice claims at all, and under which boundaries those claims can be heard. Thus, sanctuary's foregrounding of migrant exclusion is a crucial step in justice work, insofar as it attracts attention and grants migrants—who often remain socially invisible in the recognitive sense (Honneth and Margalit, 2001)—recognition by acknowledging them as persons whose social and legal exclusion constitutes a grave moral injury (Basilio and Arun, 2022).

Espinal, her family, and church supporters engaged with the media and sympathetic public officials. Her story was

broadcast to a wide audience by way of press interviews, rallies, prayer vigils, and a documentary film ("A Shelter for Edith"). Their emphasis on her identity as a hardworking mother and community member had a positive mobilizing impact. It rallied Ohio neighbors and elected officials to her side. Congressional Representative Joyce Beatty introduced a private bill that, if enacted, would have granted Espinal lawful permanent resident status and protected her from deportation (Beatty, 2019).

In its ideal form, sanctuary's ethical resonance draws from this synergy of legitimacy (the why) and visibility (the how). In this process, the church's legitimacy and visibility are mutually reinforcing. Spiritual witness becomes a political spectacle, and through it, faith-based narratives of refuge are able to interrupt the punitive visibility of state enforcement. In other words, the moral narrative furnishes the rationale for resistance (i.e., why it is right), and visibility supplies the form (i.e., making sure people see and care). By openly protecting those whom the state seeks to cast out, sanctuary activists aim both to expose the state's failure in its duties of justice and to mobilize popular support that is translatable into political pressure. The goal is to force government actors into a dilemma. Would they risk an enforcement action in full view (which may backfire and undermine public confidence) or tolerate the sanctuary, thus conceding, at least temporarily, to the movement's moral claims? This use of overt visibility and spectacle to create a legitimacy crisis for the state is central to sanctuary politics.

However, such affective appeals can only go so far, and only for so long. The activists' use of "spectacles of sympathy" or those public performances of vulnerability and ethical

appeal can collide with the state's own displays of enforcement, what Lippert (2006) refers to as "spectacles of sovereignty." Such a confrontation gives rise to a hypothetical: Will the government drag a peaceful mother out of a church? Given historical precedent, the answer could be no, not least because of legal restraint, but because of public morality and optics. Even so, the regime can also make plain use of the optic of enforcement, often to engender fear, evoke patriotic sentiment, or even moralize its own punitive legality. As Wilson (2026:146) notes in a different context, the use of the "visuality of the 'crimmigrant other'" by the state, where migrants are criminalized and cast as threatening figures, can help "absolve itself of moral responsibility for migrant suffering." In this milieu, the traditional sanctuary model can fall short, even appear, at times, almost unsustainable if the state's inflexible enforcement is also depicted as a "moral duty" (see SBS News, 2019). Recent state messaging makes this clearer. For example, during Trump's second term in office in 2025, a government campaign framed deportation through fusing the languages of patriotism, criminality, and civic duty; this included multimillion-dollar self-deportation ads and appeals for "patriotic" Americans to help remove the "worst of the worst" from the country (DHS, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). In the same year, ICE reported receiving over 15,000 calls per month through its tip line (ICE, 2026). From this perspective, the duty to protect the country from "alien enemies" is such that the exercise of state power itself becomes a display of moral authority (cf. Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Prolonged political polarization and ongoing anti-immigrant narratives can also lead to public apathy and hardened sentiments against other related issues (Levi, Grimalda and

Reggiani, 2023). Media attention, which tends to operate in predictable cycles, often leads to waning public interest because of "issue fatigue" (Gurr, Schumann and Metag, 2022), "psychic numbing" (Slovic, 2007), or even general annoyance (Schumann, 2022). Repetitive portrayals of migrant suffering accumulate and risk becoming ambient. Mejía and Ono (2020), in their examination of television representations of undocumented immigrants, suggest that simplified media portrayals can obscure the complexity of migrant lives, and call for fuller contextualized representations to clear away misconceptions about migrant experiences, support sanctuary efforts, and oppose punitive deportation policies.

The moral sanctuaries I describe negotiate their normative standing by aligning themselves with transcendent values (such as faith, human rights, and family unity) and by using their visibility to amplify these values as a moral challenge to the state. However, simultaneously, the same moral language also becomes susceptible to co-optation by the state in its own framing of enforcement as a moral spectacle.

Structural Limits: Moral Sanctuary and State Forbearance

There are readily apparent limits to what moral sanctuaries can accomplish. Churches (as do local municipalities) cannot legally halt federal deportation orders and, at best, only delay or symbolically resist them. Thus, a person in sanctuary is always in a precarious position because the sanctuary's protection is predicated on the state tacitly permitting it to continue; that is, sanctuary is structurally dependent on its forbearance for its existence (Bauder, 2017).

Espinal was unable to leave the church's confines without risking immediate arrest. She was relatively safe only so long as she remained on "sacred ground" and immigration agents adhered to their own "sensitive locations" policy, which discourages enforcement activity at churches, schools, hospitals, funerals, weddings, public demonstrations, and other locations considered sensitive (ICE, 2011; DHS, 2021a). There was no court order or law preventing ICE from taking her. As an ICE representative clarified in 2019, individuals like Espinal who are in sanctuary are still "subject to final orders of removal and...remain in the United States in violation of law" (ICE statement, quoted in Aguilar, 2019). Thus, it was a combination of agency discretion, public pressure, and perhaps ethical reluctance that caused them to refrain from acting against her.

This vulnerability became apparent when the first Trump administration sought to test sanctuary's limits. In mid-2019, ICE began issuing massive civil fines to sanctuary residents for "willfully" failing to depart, which, in Espinal's case, amounted to a staggering $497,777. These large civil fines were used as a coercive tactic. "My fear is that they're gearing up toward going after the churches... trying to intimidate my client and others," Espinal's attorney stated (Lizbeth Mateo, quoted in Ebbs and Flaherty, 2019). Another lawyer felt that, if ICE was willing to impose a fine on "a destitute mother who's been sitting in a church," then "what's going to stop them from breaking down the door and dragging her out?" (David Bennion, quoted in Ebbs and Flaherty, 2019). Other high-profile sanctuary residents were also issued hefty civil fines.

After Biden took office, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the federal agency that oversees ICE, voided all

outstanding civil fines in April 2021 (DHS, 2021b). However, the crux of the matter remains that sanctuary survives on executive restraint. This fragility was visible not only in Espinal's case, but also in prior and later instances where that restraint was tested or withdrawn. In 2018, for example, ICE agents lured Samuel Oliver-Bruno, an undocumented man living in a church sanctuary in North Carolina, to a bogus immigration appointment and arrested him in the presence of a crowd of church supporters who were physically surrounding the ICE van in protest. He was deported shortly thereafter (Shimron, 2018). The incident demonstrated that the "sacredness" of sanctuary is not inviolable if the regime chooses to ignore its moral and political costs. In January 2025, DHS revoked the Biden-era guidance limiting enforcement actions in or near "protected areas," including houses of worship (DHS, 2025d). By August 2025, reports had identified at least 10 instances of immigration action on or immediately near church grounds (Religion News Service, 2025).

Espinal was able to walk free in February 2021 only because a new administration changed its enforcement priorities. ICE officials told Espinal she was "no longer a priority" for deportation (Shimron, 2021). In effect, her liberty came through the discretionary reprieve of the very agency that had originally demanded her removal. Had the 2020 election gone differently, Espinal might very well have remained in sanctuary or been deported. Because the protection sanctuary provides is ultimately contingent on the political climate and priorities of state actors, it is inherently unstable. As Bagelman (2016) argues, sanctuary often becomes, of necessity, a "suspended state," in which rights are deferred, and migrants are left to wait. In this sense, sanctuary fulfills its protective

rationale not by eliminating deportability, but by suspending its immediate execution.

Selective Visibility and the Politics of Deservingness

The effectiveness of sanctuary's visibility hinges on who is perceived as morally intelligible, that is, who can be identified with, empathized with, and defended. Building on Lamont and Molnár's (2002) insight that moral boundaries organize social inclusion, I suggest that this logic helps explain why sanctuary is extended to some, but not all, who need it. Understandably, because it relies heavily on moral suasion and broad support, sanctuary movements have tended to make selections of this kind, effectively drawing boundaries around who the "right kind" of sanctuary subject is.

Typically, those chosen for public sanctuary campaigns are individuals who can easily elicit empathy, such as parents of U.S. citizen children, people with strong community ties, those without criminal records, and those who often embody ideals of piety or service (Yukich, 2013). Yukich's study of the New Sanctuary Movement noted that activists deliberately construct the image of the "model immigrant," as a law-abiding, family-oriented, and contributing to society, as a counter to criminalizing state narratives (Yukich, 2013: 306–308). Another way of understanding this dynamic is through the logic of desert in justice theory. The principle of desert holds that people are due goods not only on the basis of what they need or their equal standing, but also in light of what they are taken to deserve on the basis of their conduct, effort, or character (Miller, 1999). We see a vernacular form of this logic in sanctuary politics: those who can be presented as socially or morally exemplary are easier to cast as deserving of protection.

Viewed in this sense, sanctuary tends to distribute protection on the basis of public worth rather than equal standing. It is worth pointing out, however, that this dynamic is not driven by moral principle alone but also by pragmatic and strategic considerations.

Espinal's case is telling in this regard in how sanctuary boundaries and visibility were navigated. From the movement's perspective, and in many ways more broadly, she was an ideal sanctuary candidate. She had been living in the U.S. for over 20 years, had established a family and community, and had no criminal record. She was described as a devoted mother, her children are U.S. citizens, and she was an active church member. She was also presented as someone who had attempted to "do things the right way" by filing asylum applications that were ultimately denied. The congregation and Espinal's advocates emphasized these elements each time they spoke about her. Local press coverage portrayed her as a mother trying to avoid being deported and separated from her children (Foley, 2017; CMC, 2021). The documentary on her life narrates that she missed her daughter's high school graduation to illustrate the emotional toll of her extended period of refuge (Leahy and Leahy, 2021).

A crucial downside to this moral economy of deservingness (cf. Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2014; Willen, 2012; Fassin, 2005), as pointed earlier, is that it can reinforce the distinction between "deserving" and "undeserving" immigrants (see also Yukich, 2013; Villazor, 2010). I note two problematic consequences here. First, individuals who do not fit the mold (such as single men, people with prior convictions, various asylum seekers without church connections, and so on) may find it harder to access sanctuary or sympathy (Vargas, 2020;

Houston and Morse, 2017). Because dominant narratives often racialize and gender the figure of the "deserving immigrant," privileging, for example, the hard-working Latina mother or the exceptional DREAMer (that is, an undocumented youth perceived as innocent and accomplished), this can position other individuals as invisible or more suspect (Coutin, Chacón and Lee, 2024). For example, the case of José Chicas, the Salvadoran minister who spent about 1,300 days in sanctuary, longer than Espinal's stay, was especially vulnerable to hostile public framing because of a prior DUI conviction and a domestic abuse charge (Melkonian-Hoover and Kellstedt, 2018: 65-66). Second, the process of filtering will continue to reinforce narratives that conflate undocumented status with criminality by implication, suggesting that only explicitly non-criminal immigrants deserve protection. Thus, when sanctuary policies are configured around these distinctions, the very goals of protection and inclusion they aim to achieve can be undermined.

Coutin (2021) has criticized the persistent distinction between "political refugees" and "economic immigrants," emphasizing how such categorizations can reinforce stratification at the cost of group solidarity. The 1980s Sanctuary Movement grappled with this as well. As activists framed Central Americans as innocent refugees of U.S.-backed wars, and this was a compelling claim, it did not easily extend to other migrant groups (Coutin, 2000). By centering immigrants deemed most morally palatable and publicly defensible, such practices risk reproducing broader social prejudices through moral boundary-drawing at the edge of empathy, prompting, alongside Nicholls (2024), the sharp question of whether this is "sanctuary for all" or "for the deserving" only?

The cost, then, for individuals who fall outside the bounds of public sympathy, lies in the normalization of their deportability (Yukich, 2013; De Genova, 2002). For example, during the first Trump administration, ICE often defended its targeting of an individual by highlighting any blemish in that person's record (Goldin, 2025). Sanctuary campaigns would typically counter that the flaws were offset by that individual's redeeming characteristics and community contributions (Yukich, 2013). This back-and-forth of "respectability politics" (Sharpless, 2016), however, essentially undermines the "universality" of human rights and dignity.

Sanctuary leaders are well aware of these tensions. Some have attempted to mitigate them by broadening the moral frame, for example, by linking individual cases to collective struggle, or by explicitly articulating solidarity through slogans like "Your Fight Is Our Fight" / "Luchando con usted a cada paso del camino" (New Sanctuary Coalition, 2025). Espinal's advocates used her platform to promote discussions of the need for immigration reform and bring attention to the thousands of deportations tearing apart families like hers. Yet, as with many issues involving media coverage, attention gravitates to personal stories with a face and a name. The inherent nature of visibility is that it creates a focal point for a particular issue by focusing attention on one particular aspect while ostensibly obscuring others.

Following the typology I describe in this chapter, "spectacular sanctuary" turns one person into a symbol that may eclipse others or more complex realities. Even when framed in universalist terms, such as "Sanctuary for All" (Nicholls, 2024) or "No One is Illegal," the pragmatic demands of mobilization require that sanctuary movements will be limited to

the extent that they may reflect prevailing social norms, despite the intent to be oppositional.

Conclusion

Even though sanctuary constitutes a moral intervention against legal exclusion, its contradictions are inherent to it, and the LVA framework helps to clarify them. Sanctuary must make visible the people it intends to protect, but this very act can also undermine that protection. Further, sanctuary's moral standing does not come with coercive power; it can expose injustice and offer moral and conditional refuge, but it cannot legalize those under its shelter. And where sanctuary must rely on deservingness to make protection publicly intelligible, it risks reinscribing the very distinctions it seeks to contest.

Insofar as sanctuary is unable to secure definitive protection, the burden of responding to injustice is displaced from the state onto moral actors. Sanctuary's labor, on the one hand, compensates for the law's exclusionary force—there is indeed a genuinely protective capacity at work, and in many real and consequential ways, sanctuary succeeds in what it sets out to accomplish. Thus, the work of sanctuary lies not only in its interruption of removal but also in restoring or reconfiguring everyday life so that precarity no longer wholly dictates the terms of survival. This is evident in the work of *Columbus Mennonite Church* on behalf of Espinal, as well as in coalitional formations, such as the Metro *Denver Sanctuary Coalition*, which mobilizes its "communal power" to secure tangible political gains, including court-issued stays for undocumented migrants and pressure for migrant-protective legislation aimed at eliminating ICE deportation detainers (Mejía and

Ono, 2020: 114). On the other hand, and paradoxically, the labor of sanctuary reveals how the state benefits from extra-legal actors who absorb and manage the injuries that legality itself produces. What we have then is a situation in which the source of the injury remains the source of the remedy. But unless it provides that remedy, whatever it does instead can only aggravate the wound.

As I have argued in this chapter, sanctuary is limited to the extent that it depends on the regime's tolerance for the refuge it affords while leaving intact the structures that make such refuge necessary in the first place. Thus, even when sanctuary achieves concrete results, it must continue to move toward forms of structural leverage that are not reducible to moral appeal alone. An important step in this direction is for sanctuary to continue the work of redefining what it means to be considered worthy by altering the terrain on which worth itself is publicly and institutionally recognized; otherwise, sanctuary efforts may continue to reproduce the very distinctions they seek to dismantle. What such recontouring might look like lies beyond the scope of this chapter. For now, as long as sanctuary remains a morally necessary response to legal exclusion rather than a transformation of the legal conditions that engender it, it will remain essential yet insufficient.

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Class Discrimination: Symbolic Power, Respectability, Invisibility, and the Emotional Regimes of Class Discrimination

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Introduction: Reframing class discrimination

Class is among the oldest forms of social inequality, yet it remains one of the least theorised and least regulated dimensions of discrimination in contemporary policy and organisational frameworks (Colaiacovo et al., 2025). While gender, race, disability and sexuality have gained visibility through equality legislation, class continues to be treated as a diffuse social concern rather than a structural injustice that restricts life chances. In the United Kingdom, the rhetoric of meritocracy and levelling up has masked the persistence of entrenched hierarchies (van de Werfhorst, 2024). In Türkiye, rapid neoliberal restructuring has produced new forms of symbolic exclusion that are moralised and emotionalised (Özdemir, 2024). In both settings, inequality is sustained not only through material disparities but also through symbolic and affective mechanisms that make hierarchy appear legitimate and deserved.

We argue that class discrimination must be understood as a cultural and emotional formation rather than a purely economic condition. It is reproduced through everyday acts of recognition and misrecognition (Wacquant, 2013). Drawing

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on Pierre Bourdieu's (1989) concept of symbolic power and Beverley Skeggs' (1997; 2004) analysis of respectability, we suggest that class is expressed through distinctions of taste, tone and behaviour that determine who belongs, who is respected and who must demonstrate worth. These distinctions are embedded in speech, dress, posture and educational credentials, each projecting middle-class norms as universal measures of value (Loveman, 2005).

In neoliberal societies where success is individualised and failure psychologised, class difference is recast as a deficit of aspiration, confidence or cultural fit (van Dijk et al., 2020). Responsibility for inequality is displaced onto individuals who are expected to cultivate resilience, gratitude and soft skills while navigating structural disadvantage (Var Öngel et al., 2024). Our comparative analysis of the United Kingdom and Türkiye identifies what we call emotional regimes of class discrimination: patterned expectations and emotional norms that reinforce hierarchies of worth. Working-class individuals are made visible as objects of correction yet remain invisible as legitimate agents of change (Jokela and Fuller-Rowell, 2022).

This chapter contributes to current debates on equality, diversity and inclusion (Özbilgin et al., 2011) by reinstating class as a core dimension of injustice. Although UK equality law does not recognise class as a protected characteristic, surveys by the Social Mobility Commission (2023) and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2023) reveal persistent barriers to recruitment, progression and belonging. Similar processes operate in Türkiye, where occupational hierarchies and moral codes of *saygı* (respect) and *edep* (propriety) define social worth and marginalise those associated with manual

labour or rural backgrounds (Özdemir, 2024). These findings indicate that class discrimination is transnational in scope but locally articulated through distinct moral and cultural idioms.

By emphasising the symbolic and emotional dimensions of inequality, this chapter moves beyond economic explanations to explore how hierarchy is felt, narrated and normalised. We examine how working-class and economically marginalised individuals navigate institutions dominated by middle-class sensibilities and the unspoken codes that define professionalism, articulation and aspiration (Amis et al., 2018). These expectations generate emotional injuries of shame, imposture and self-censorship (Fowler, 2020). Comparative evidence from the UK and Türkiye shows how neoliberal and post-authoritarian discourses converge in framing inequality as a personal rather than institutional failure (Erensü and Madra, 2022).

Finally, the chapter advances a shift from social mobility to social accountability. The former assumes that individuals can transcend class boundaries through effort and adaptation, leaving institutional structures unchallenged (Haveman, 2025). Social accountability, by contrast, calls on organisations and states to recognise their complicity in reproducing inequality and to take responsibility for dismantling it. This perspective aligns with emerging work in critical management and diversity scholarship that emphasises institutional reflexivity and recognition-based justice over symbolic compliance (Zhao et al., 2025).

Theoretical Groundings: Class, Symbolic Power, and Emotional Regimes

Class discrimination operates both as an economic hierarchy and as a social relation sustained through shared meanings, moral evaluations and emotional attachments. To understand how it functions, this analysis draws on three interrelated perspectives: Bourdieu's (1989) account of symbolic power, feminist studies of respectability and classed identity, and sociological research on the emotional organisation of inequality. These frameworks help explain why class continues to shape everyday life even when societies claim to value merit and equal opportunity.

Bourdieu's (1989) theory of practice provides a foundation for understanding how class is reproduced through daily interactions. The power to define what counts as legitimate knowledge, taste or behaviour constitutes symbolic power. It operates through schools, workplaces and media institutions that reward those who possess the right cultural capital and penalise those who do not. Symbolic power is most effective when it appears natural (Loveman, 2005). The ability to speak in a certain accent, to display ease in professional settings or to recognise valued cultural references is read as a sign of talent rather than advantage. In this way, inequality becomes moralised and distinctions of class are mistaken for differences in personality or effort.

The concept of *habitus* is central to this understanding (Bourdieu, 1984). It refers to the durable dispositions that shape how people act, speak and interpret the social world. When individuals from working-class backgrounds enter middle-class environments, their *habitus* may not align with dominant expectations of expression or behaviour. This

mismatch generates what Bourdieu (1989) called symbolic violence, a quiet internalisation of inferiority reinforced through everyday gestures of correction, amusement or exclusion (Wiegmann, 2017). A recruiter's emphasis on fit or a colleague's laughter at an accent may seem inconsequential, yet these moments accumulate to affirm who is accepted as belonging.

Feminist scholars such as Beverley Skeggs, Diane Reay and Imogen Tyler expand this analysis by highlighting the moral and emotional dimensions of class. Skeggs (1997; 2004) shows how respectability functions as a moral economy through which middle-class values are confirmed and working-class women are cast as excessive or vulgar. These judgements often become internalised, shaping self-presentation and self-worth. Respectability therefore operates as both a mechanism of control and a horizon of aspiration. Reay's (2004) research on education illustrates how classed emotions emerge within institutions that describe themselves as merit-based. Working-class students frequently experience shame, anxiety and impostor feelings in elite educational settings. These emotions are not private weaknesses but reflections of social distance between classed histories and institutional ideals of confidence and composure. Emotional styles such as calmness and assertiveness are valued, while pride in manual skill or community solidarity is quietly discounted. Tyler's (2020) analysis of stigma further shows how class is inscribed on bodies and identities through what she calls state-cultivated stigma. This mechanism embeds inequality in political and economic structures, ensuring that those marked by stigma remain marginal while exclusion appears both legitimate and natural.

Arlie Hochschild's (1979) concept of emotional labour adds another dimension to this picture. In contemporary workplaces, employees are expected to display enthusiasm, patience and flexibility. For those from working-class backgrounds, this expectation often includes an additional demand to perform gratitude and humility alongside competence. The requirement to appear grateful functions as a subtle form of control, maintaining deference towards those who hold greater cultural or economic privilege.

In Türkiye, comparable patterns operate through the moral idioms of *edep* (propriety) and *saygı* (respect). These values organise social hierarchies that intersect with class. Individuals from rural or lower-income backgrounds are expected to remain modest and deferential, particularly in formal or bureaucratic settings. These norms are strongly gendered. Women are judged through ideals of purity and family honour, while men are evaluated by their composure and capacity to provide. Assertive speech or visible ambition can invite moral criticism or social exclusion. Symbolic power in this context is sustained through moral as well as aesthetic regulation.

Across both the UK and Türkiye, class distinctions are reinforced by what Reddy (2001) describes as emotional regimes: socially organised systems of feeling that define which emotions are legitimate. Middle-class institutions elevate self-control, confidence and restraint as universal virtues, while anger, pride or frustration expressed by working-class individuals are interpreted as unprofessional. These emotional codes maintain the authority of those who embody them with ease and marginalise those for whom such performances are difficult.

The subtlety of these processes helps explain why class discrimination often goes unrecognised. Unlike gender or racial prejudice, class bias is frequently misread as a matter of taste or cultural preference. It is reproduced through emotional expectations embedded in interviews, meetings and classroom exchanges. Emotional regimes act as a hidden curriculum, teaching individuals how to feel, how to show feeling and when to suppress it. Those who fail to follow these unwritten rules often face limited advancement, diminished confidence or quiet withdrawal.

Class therefore operates as both a material and symbolic structure (Meliou et al., 2024). It shapes access to resources and defines the moral and emotional boundaries of belonging. Symbolic power translates hierarchy into cultural and emotional codes that appear legitimate. Respectability turns inequality into moral difference, while emotional regimes secure conformity through learned self-restraint. Class discrimination endures precisely because it rarely needs to be named. It circulates through tone, gesture and atmosphere, sustained by shared expectations that render inequality ordinary. The next section builds on these foundations to examine how symbolic power and emotional regimes shape everyday experiences of class in the UK and Türkiye.

Approach and Context

Understanding how class discrimination operates requires a perspective that brings theory and observation into dialogue. The analysis that follows draws on evidence from the UK and Türkiye, combining quantitative indicators with qualitative accounts. The aim is interpretive rather than predictive: to examine how inequality is experienced, narrated and made

to appear natural. The empirical material is used not to measure discrimination but to reveal the symbolic and emotional structures through which it is sustained.

Two main strands of evidence inform the discussion. The first comprises surveys and reports on social mobility and class inequality in the United Kingdom, including the *State of the Nation* series by the Social Mobility Commission, the Sutton Trust's (2024) studies on access to elite professions, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission's reviews of workplace inequality. These studies show that people from working-class backgrounds remain under-represented in senior professional roles and continue to face barriers to progression even when education and experience are comparable. They also highlight how cultural fit, accent and self-presentation influence perceptions of competence and leadership potential (Friedman and Laurison, 2020).

The second strand draws on research and statistical evidence from Türkiye that reveal enduring hierarchies of occupation, education and region. While class is seldom discussed directly in public discourse, the distribution of income and employment continues to reflect entrenched social divisions. Qualitative work highlights how migration from rural to urban areas generates new forms of symbolic and moral exclusion. Ideas of refinement, restraint and modernity operate as boundaries of belonging, shaping how individuals from different backgrounds present themselves and are judged. These expectations extend class distinctions beyond material status into the moral and emotional fabric of everyday life.

Qualitative work from both contexts shows how class is felt and negotiated. In the United Kingdom, research on higher education and creative industries illustrates how

working-class students and professionals often feel displaced within environments that reward ease and confidence (Reay, 2025). Friedman and Laurison's (2020) study demonstrates that accent and self-assurance still shape professional advancement, with those from working-class origins facing a persistent "class ceiling" that limits progression and contributes to pay gaps of around 16 per cent even where qualifications are equal. In Türkiye, comparable studies show how young employees from working-class families entering corporate sectors learn to perform urban refinement and modesty. The discourse of "becoming modern" signals transformation not only in skill but in demeanour and emotion.

The comparison treats the UK and Türkiye as distinct yet connected cases of neoliberal transformation (Özbilgin et al., 2024, 2026). Both have expanded higher education, valorised individual achievement and weakened collective solidarities. Yet the moral languages that legitimate inequality differ. In the United Kingdom, meritocracy and professionalism serve this function; in Türkiye, morality and respect do so. In both, class discrimination endures where inequality is reframed as a question of personal character rather than institutional structure.

Class is rarely named directly. It has no legal protection equivalent to that for gender or race, and its effects surface indirectly through data on pay, education, and occupational mobility. Reading these patterns critically means looking beyond numbers to the meanings and emotions that sustain them (Sheehy-Skeffington, 2022). When people with comparable credentials earn less because of their background, it reflects symbolic devaluation. When individuals feel out of

place, it reveals emotional norms that translate structural differences into self-doubt.

Such an interpretive stance allows quantitative patterns to be read alongside lived experience. A recent Sutton Trust study (2024) found that most respondents in the UK acknowledged that class strongly shapes opportunity, yet many regarded it as an uncomfortable topic. In Türkiye, public language substitutes lifestyle or culture for class (Akçaoğlu, 2022), but everyday speech still marks a difference. Words such as *köylü* (villager) or *avam* (commoner) carry moral undertones, showing how hierarchy is reproduced through language itself.

A comparative lens makes these dynamics visible without turning them into measures of national difference (Heath et al., 2024). British narratives of respectability revolve around self-improvement and merit, while Turkish ones centre on propriety and social harmony. Both moralise inequality and conceal its structural roots. The purpose is not to rank societies but to trace the shared emotional logics that make exclusion seem reasonable.

The analysis is also reflexive. Class research is produced within academic institutions that are themselves stratified. Scholars and policymakers often occupy privileged positions and may inadvertently reproduce the hierarchies they study. Recognising this requires attention to positionality and to the emotional dynamics that accompany the act of representing inequality (Kantek, 2025).

Seen in this light, the approach integrates statistical evidence with interpretive insight to show how class discrimination is maintained through symbolic and emotional structures that render inequality ordinary. The comparison

between the UK and Türkiye offers a way to understand how these mechanisms are differently configured yet similarly effective across cultural and institutional settings.

Symbolic Violence and Respectability Politics in Neoliberal Contexts

Symbolic violence remains one of the most enduring yet least visible mechanisms of class discrimination. It works through the internalisation of norms that make hierarchy appear natural. In neoliberal settings, this logic deepens as people are encouraged to read their position as a matter of merit. Respectability provides the moral language that sustains this illusion. Together they translate inequality into virtue, producing compliance without coercion.

In workplaces, symbolic violence operates through the culture of professionalism. Professionalism is presented as neutral but rests on classed expectations of language, dress and composure. Research in the UK shows that polished accents, ease in conversation and cultural familiarity are taken as signs of competence, while direct speech or regional tones are treated as a lack of refinement. Bias rarely needs to be spoken. Familiarity itself becomes the measure of belonging.

Such expectation of fit generates quiet strain. Working-class employees learn to adjust tone, vocabulary and appearance to seem professional, engaging in constant self-monitoring. Success seldom removes this tension; it often feels performed rather than lived. The demand to earn dignity through middle-class manners captures the emotional force of respectability politics (Sayer, 2010). Respectability separates those deemed disciplined and deserving from those marked as careless or excessive. In Britain, talk of hard-working

families moralises inequality, turning poverty into a question of attitude (Snee and Devine, 2018). Gratitude, flexibility and good humour become moral requirements. In the workplace, this translates into emotional regimes that prize positivity and compliance. Dissent risks being coded as negativity.

Service and customer-facing jobs make these pressures visible. Workers must project warmth even in the face of condescension. Studies in retail and hospitality show how politeness, patience and cheerfulness operate as forms of class discipline. The smile that masks irritation and the moderated accent that avoids ridicule are gestures through which hierarchy is reproduced (Shulga et al., 2025). Additionally, universities mirror these dynamics. Expanded access has not removed class barriers; it has refined them. Students from working-class backgrounds often describe feeling out of place amid unspoken codes of speech and confidence (Reay, 2021). British universities reward ease and assertiveness, qualities nurtured by middle-class upbringing. In Türkiye, elite institutions value urban sophistication and linguistic polish (Erbil et al., 2023). Here, respectability merges with modernity, privileging those fluent in cosmopolitan styles of self-presentation.

Neoliberal aspiration extends this logic. Success is framed as self-improvement, turning ambition into a moral duty. Yet those who aspire visibly are often judged as overreaching. In Britain, the upwardly mobile are accused of trying too hard; in Türkiye, they risk being labelled arrogant or disloyal to their origins. Pride invites suspicion, humility suggests inadequacy. The emotional tone of aspiration is tightly policed. Spatial and aesthetic cues reinforce these boundaries. Office layouts, social events and dress codes signal who fits the culture. Knowing how to navigate wine lists or small talk about travel serves

as a quiet test of belonging. Many from working-class backgrounds describe anxiety in such spaces. In Türkiye, similar unease surfaces in corporate environments that mimic Western lifestyles. Taste becomes a language of exclusion. Accent and vocabulary also remain potent markers of class (Erbil et al., 2023). In Britain, regional voices are still treated as less credible. In Türkiye, local dialects evoke rurality and lack of refinement. Many learn to smooth or conceal their speech to be heard. The process feels practical yet erases parts of the self. Turkish respectability draws on moral rather than secular codes but produces parallel exclusions. The figure of the *saygın insan*, the respectable person, embodies wealth, moderation and adherence to gendered propriety. Women are judged by modesty and decorum, men by authority and restraint. Emotional control becomes a sign of moral worth.

Across both contexts, neoliberal workplaces reward emotional compliance. Positivity, adaptability and resilience are celebrated as professional virtues. Structural inequality is reframed as individual weakness. The language of emotional intelligence and self-management disciplines workers to internalise insecurity as personal failure. Media narratives reinforce this order. Stories of self-made success glorify perseverance while masking structural barriers. In Türkiye, as in Britain, failure to advance is interpreted as lack of effort or gratitude. Shame replaces critique. Symbolic violence rarely takes explicit form. It accumulates through tone, gesture and silence. A pause after an accent, a patronising smile, an absent response in a meeting, all signal exclusion. Over time, these encounters shape self-perception. People begin to withdraw or pre-empt rejection. Hierarchy becomes self-sustaining.

Still, cracks appear. Humour, irony and collective pride offer quiet refusals. In Britain, campaigns celebrating working-class voices challenge narrow ideals of professionalism. In Türkiye, popular culture occasionally affirms working-class authenticity (Güngördü Belbağ and Erbil, 2025). These countercurrents reveal that respectability's grip is never complete. Neoliberalism intensifies these emotional hierarchies by turning self-discipline into virtue. People are urged to manage themselves endlessly while institutions evade responsibility. Symbolic violence thus forms the emotional infrastructure of the neoliberal order (Erbil et al., 2023). It ensures that inequality feels deserved and civility becomes the price of survival. Understanding such a process requires recognising its consensual nature. Symbolic domination depends on shared belief rather than force. Many uphold class norms in the name of quality or civility. The task of critique is to expose how these habits of tone and feeling reproduce hierarchy and how they might be undone.

Emotional Regimes of Class Discrimination

Class inequality endures not only through structures and norms but through the emotions that order social life. Emotions are social acts: they bind people into relations of respect, shame, gratitude or resentment. Through these emotional ties, inequality becomes both natural and self-regulating (Reay, 2004). Class, more than other hierarchies, often works through a moralised emotional language that turns structural disadvantage into private feeling. The emotional regimes of class discrimination are the patterned expectations that dictate how working-class people should feel, display emotion and interpret the emotions of others.

Shame is the most pervasive of these feelings. It emerges when one's sense of worth collides with social standards of respectability. In both the UK and Türkiye, people from working-class backgrounds describe embarrassment and self-consciousness in middle-class settings. These are not fleeting insecurities but signs of a broader emotional order that privileges certain ways of speaking, dressing and behaving (Inglis et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2013). In Britain, children learn early to soften accents and conceal poverty; in Türkiye, dialect, clothing or family background can trigger quiet mockery under the guise of modernity.

Shame acts as a form of governance (Parker and Pausé, 2019). It converts anger into self-blame. A young professional who feels uneasy at a corporate event may see the discomfort as a personal flaw rather than a symptom of class exclusion. Students who struggle in elite settings often read their alienation as lack of confidence, not institutional bias (Chiu et al., 2025). In this way, shame silences critique and individualises inequality. Closely linked to shame is the demand for gratitude. Those who cross class boundaries are often expected to show appreciation for being allowed in. Gratitude appears virtuous but performs a disciplining function: it reminds people of their place within a moral hierarchy (Erbil, 2025). In Britain, scholarship students or employees from modest backgrounds often feel compelled to express gratitude rather than raise critique. In Türkiye, the moral idiom of *şükür* (thankful acceptance) serves a similar role (Erbil and Özbilgin, 2024). Gratitude replaces justice, keeping power intact beneath the language of kindness.

This emotional economy is most visible in mentorship and diversity programmes framed as acts of benevolence

(Özbilgin et al., 2025). Participants are encouraged to celebrate opportunity rather than question its conditional nature. Those receiving support are praised for humility; those providing it are affirmed as generous. The hierarchy between giver and receiver remains intact (Roscigno, 2019). Resentment forms another layer of this emotional order. It arises when people recognise inequality but feel unable to confront it. It couples awareness with impotence. In both Britain and Türkiye, resentment often surfaces among those who see advancement blocked or others favoured through cultural privilege. Yet it rarely becomes class consciousness. It is redirected: toward migrants, urban elites or imagined moral decline. The energy of resentment sustains division instead of solidarity.

Humiliation marks the deepest wound. It occurs when social identity is publicly devalued, when an accent draws laughter or a gesture is read as ignorance (Timming, 2017; Maindidze et al., 2025). In Türkiye, humiliation often takes moral form: reminders of one's supposed lack of refinement or virtue. Such experiences leave traces that shape conduct and self-protection. Anticipating humiliation leads to silence, avoidance and retreat from public life (Varman et al., 2023).

Managing these emotions demands continuous labour. Working-class individuals must display composure and optimism in institutions that quietly undermine both. They learn to mask anger, hide shame and perform gratitude. This discipline of feeling becomes a condition of survival (Bhave and Glomb, 2016). Yet the capacity to show or suppress emotion is unevenly distributed. Those with cultural security, typically the middle class, can express frustration or vulnerability without sanction. For others, the same emotions invite reproach. Emotional inequality mirrors the material one.

Gender deepens these patterns. Women from working-class backgrounds are often tasked with maintaining harmony, soothing others and absorbing tension. In Britain, care and administrative workers are praised for empathy but not authority (Eaton-Williams and Williams, 2023). In Türkiye, modesty and restraint govern women's emotional expression, and deviation risks being labelled unfeminine (İlhan et al., 2025). Men, in turn, are expected to appear stoic and self-controlled. Each must conform to emotional scripts that affirm class hierarchy.

Media and public culture reinforce these codes. In Britain, reality television often portrays working-class people as excessive or undisciplined, dramatising emotional reform as moral progress. Turkish dramas tell parallel stories in which the poor must learn composure and civility. These representations moralise restraint and present emotional self-correction as the path to respectability. Institutions sustain the same logic. In meetings and interviews, calmness and confidence are rewarded, while anger or fatigue are deemed unprofessional. This selective regulation protects those who already feel at ease. Working-class individuals must continually translate their emotions: anger into civility, exhaustion into enthusiasm. Every act of translation reaffirms who belongs.

Across both societies, the moral vocabularies differ yet the emotional logic aligns. In Britain, civility and composure define virtue; in Türkiye, propriety and respect serve the same role. Both discourage expressions of frustration among the less privileged, treating emotional restraint as proof of worth. These regimes are culturally specific yet structurally alike, legitimising inequality through the moralisation of feeling (Garthwaite, 2016). Resistance to these expectations often

takes quiet, collective form. Humour, irony and shared storytelling reclaim dignity. In Britain, humour transforms humiliation into solidarity; in Türkiye, irony and wit expose injustice without direct confrontation. Such practices sustain emotional countercultures built on authenticity and mutual care.

Seeing class through emotion clarifies its endurance. Material inequality can be redistributed; emotional inequality is harder to name or undo. Institutions reward composure, confidence and gratitude as if they were neutral virtues. Challenging this requires emotional literacy: recognising that feelings are structured by power, not simply by personality.

Contemporary wellbeing initiatives often intensify the problem. By teaching workers to manage stress and practise resilience, they shift attention from structure to self. The more people learn to regulate emotion, the less likely they are to question the causes of distress. Emotional justice would mean creating conditions where one does not need to perform calm or gratitude to be treated with dignity. In both Britain and Türkiye, new movements seek to name class as an axis of exclusion. Unions, advocacy groups and researchers now address emotional inequality directly, calling for recognition of accent bias, living wages and inclusive education. These efforts point toward a politics that values authenticity over polish and solidarity over civility.

Emotional regimes, viewed this way, form the connective tissue between culture and institution. They reveal how inequality is not only enforced but felt: how shame, gratitude, resentment and humiliation reproduce hierarchy from within. To dismantle class injustice requires transforming not only

structures of wealth and status but also the emotional expectations that make those structures feel inevitable.

Comparative Perspectives: Class, Culture, and Recognition in Türkiye and the UK

Class discrimination takes different cultural forms yet rests on similar emotional foundations. The UK and Türkiye reveal how inequality is moralised through distinct vocabularies of virtue, professionalism and meritocracy in Britain, propriety and respect in Türkiye. Each turns composure and gratitude into signs of moral worth, converting structural hierarchy into emotional discipline. Table 1 summarises the key points of comparison between the two contexts.

Table 1. Comparative features of class discrimination in the United Kingdom and Türkiye

Dimension	United Kingdom	Türkiye
Moral language legitimising hierarchy	Meritocracy and professionalism	Respect (*saygı*) and propriety (*edep*)
Emotional regime	Civility, restraint, and composure	Modesty, gratitude, and deference
Dominant discourse	Fairness and individual achievement	Morality and social harmony
Cultural expression	Accent, polish, and confidence	Urban refinement and moral virtue
Visibility of class	Acknowledged yet depoliticised	Rarely named but morally encoded
Mode of recognition	Conditional: earned through conformity	Hierarchical: granted through obedience
Gendered expectations	Composure and politeness as professionalism	Modesty for women; authority and composure for men
Resistance	Accent-diversity and working-class pride campaigns	Humour, irony, and digital counter-voices

Policy focus	Protected traits exclude class; framed as mobility	Equality before law; moral language obscures class
Shared logic	Inequality moralised as character difference	Inequality moralised as moral order

In Britain, class discrimination is rooted in the post-war ideal of meritocracy, the belief that effort and talent determine success (Themelis, 2008). What began as an egalitarian project has become an ideology that conceals structural advantage. Elite schools and universities continue to convert economic privilege into cultural legitimacy through networks, polish, and confidence (Brown et al., 2016). Professionalism provides the moral vocabulary of this order. It presents itself as neutral yet rewards those who display middle-class habitus, whose accent, tone, and composure signify competence (Wilkins and Burke, 2015). Recruitment in law, finance, and media often depends on informal assessments of fit, where ease and restraint are mistaken for merit (Ashley and Empson, 2013).

Symbolic power in Britain rests on an emotional grammar of civility and restraint (Thomas, 2018). The ideal professional is calm and self-contained. Working-class ways of speaking or using humour are often reinterpreted as signs of a lack of discipline or refinement. These judgements appear harmless but sustain hierarchies of tone and affect (Cameron et al., 2018). To speak too directly about class breaches an unspoken rule of conduct. Civility may replace justice as the moral basis of public life, turning critique into a question of manners. However, civility could also be mobilised as a basis for social cohesion, democracy, and inclusion (Boyd, 2006). Class remains discussable but not deeply felt, translated into

technical concerns such as mobility or skills rather than power and exclusion.

In Türkiye, inequality is expressed through a moral rather than secular idiom. The language of *saygı* (respect) and *edep* (propriety) shapes the emotional logic of class difference. Respect is assumed for the educated, urban, and affluent, while those of humbler origin must earn it through deference and restraint (Sehlikoglu, 2016). The politics of respect transforms hierarchy into virtue, where questioning authority risks being seen as insolent or ungrateful (Erbil, 2025). *Edep* reinforces this structure through behavioural codes of modesty and composure, with strong gendered expectations. Women are expected to display moral purity and self-restraint; men, composure and authority (Berktay, 2019). Those attempting to cross class boundaries must perform these emotional expectations to gain legitimacy.

Upward mobility is publicly celebrated but emotionally constrained. Gratitude is expected from those who advance, functioning as a moral marker of worth. Employees from rural or working-class backgrounds are expected to show thankfulness for opportunity and loyalty to superiors. Displays of pride or ambition are discouraged as arrogance. Britain moralises professionalism (Brecher, 2010); Türkiye professionalises morality (Özbilgin et al., 2024). The emotional labour of respect and restraint becomes a substitute for structural change.

The absence of explicit class language in Türkiye gives hierarchy a more intimate power. Distinctions of taste, speech, and cleanliness serve as proxies for class, while media and everyday discourse reinforce hierarchies that associate refinement with self-control (Yalkin and Özbilgin, 2024).

Recognition flows from authority downward rather than among equals. Inequality appears as moral order, and dissent is interpreted as emotional excess (Özbilgin and Yalkin, 2019).

Across both contexts, hierarchy is sustained through emotional governance rather than formal exclusion. Civility and respect convert domination into moral order by rewarding composure and sanctioning visible frustration. Belonging depends on affective compliance. These moral and emotional systems do not erase class but make inequality appear legitimate.

Gendered codes reinforce these expectations. In Britain, professionalism links calmness to competence; in Türkiye, propriety ties modesty to virtue. Emotional control is unequally distributed, and failure to sustain it invites judgement. Challenges to these norms remain limited. Campaigns for accent diversity or working-class visibility in Britain, and feminist or youth-led humour in Türkiye, question the moral economies of civility and respect yet operate within institutions that reproduce them. Acts of disruption are often reinterpreted as rudeness or disrespect.

The boundaries of these systems, however, are shifting. In Britain, the inclusion of class background in workplace diversity surveys signals growing awareness of structural inequality (Kirton and Greene, 2021). In Türkiye, movements centred on solidarity, care, and community have begun to articulate alternative moralities that reject deference (Yalkin and Özbilgin, 2024). Both show attempts to reclaim dignity without reproducing respectability. Despite their distinct vocabularies, both contexts depend on the emotional conversion of hierarchy into virtue. Meritocracy and professionalism in Britain, morality and propriety in Türkiye, turn inequality into a question

of personal conduct. Working-class individuals internalise shame, gratitude, or indebtedness, while institutions remain unexamined.

At the policy level, neither framework addresses this emotional order. Britain's equality legislation omits class, while Türkiye's law recognises only formal equality. Policy debates emphasise redistribution or access but overlook the symbolic and affective practices that preserve hierarchy (Borén et al., 2021).

Recognition in both societies depends on moral valuation. People from working-class backgrounds are acknowledged only when they conform to emotional norms of civility or respect. Dignity becomes conditional on composure. Addressing this condition requires rethinking institutional ideas of competence and virtue. In Britain, this involves confronting the emotional hierarchies embedded in professionalism; in Türkiye, it involves questioning moral hierarchies that equate loyalty with worth (Özbilgin et al., 2024).

The comparison reveals a shared architecture of symbolic and emotional domination. Inequality is sustained not only through material difference but through the emotional labour demanded of those seeking legitimacy. Justice depends on institutional accountability: a readiness to examine which feelings are rewarded and which hierarchies are reproduced through them.

From Social Mobility to Social Accountability

The emotional architecture described earlier extends into the institutional sphere. For decades, social mobility has served as the dominant policy and organisational response to class inequality. It promises that with effort, the right skills,

and perseverance, individuals can rise through the social hierarchy. This narrative has animated countless interventions in education and employment, mentorship schemes, widening participation drives, and talent pipelines, while quietly depoliticising inequality. By framing mobility as a matter of personal striving, institutions deflect attention from the structural and symbolic mechanisms through which advantage is reproduced.

The discourse of mobility is sustained by the moral and emotional orders outlined earlier. It valorises aspiration, gratitude, and resilience, while discouraging frustration and critique. Those who advance are praised for perseverance; those who do not are urged to adjust expectations. The emotional economy of mobility operates as a subtle technology of symbolic power. It invites working-class individuals to internalise middle-class norms rather than question their dominance.

Social accountability offers a counter-frame that shifts attention from individual ascent to institutional responsibility. It asks why the ladder remains so steep and why those who climb must shed aspects of their identity to be accepted (Peruzzotti, 2025). In the social accountability tradition, Tekeste and Özbilgin (2026) recently introduced the notion of recognition-based accountability (RbA), a form of social accountability that recognises the uneven nature of power among social cohorts with a view to addressing power disparities through accountability measures. This reorientation aligns with broader movements in equality and inclusion that prioritise recognition, belonging, and reflexivity over representation alone. In workplaces, social accountability requires scrutiny of recruitment, evaluation, and reward systems that reproduce classed assumptions about competence and

authority. Hiring practices that privilege confidence and fluency, or performance reviews that reward self-promotion, are not neutral procedures but manifestations of cultural capital. An accountable organisation recognises these patterns as systemic rather than incidental and redesigns them to value a wider range of communication styles, forms of knowledge, and emotional expressions. In higher education, accountability extends beyond access. Widening participation has increased numerical representation, yet the emotional and cultural climate of universities often remains exclusionary. Classed expectations shape academic language, interaction, and ideals of independence. A socially accountable university would attend to these conditions by fostering environments where students from all backgrounds can participate without concealing their histories. This involves revising pedagogy, diversifying staff, and addressing the everyday emotional labour of imposture and restraint.

The emotional dimension of accountability is decisive. Institutions must acknowledge that inequality is lived through feeling as much as through income or status. Working-class individuals often bear the burden of emotional adaptation: appearing composed, grateful, and resilient in the face of subtle exclusion. Accountability redistributes this responsibility. Instead of expecting individuals to absorb discomfort, it cultivates collective emotional literacy, an institutional awareness of how norms of civility, tone, and composure produce inequality.

Social accountability also requires a revision of merit. Meritocratic systems celebrate outcomes that fit existing norms, ignoring the social conditions that enable performance. Accountability exposes achievement as relational,

produced through networks of support and institutional culture rather than isolated talent. In doing so, it dismantles the myth of the self-made individual and reclaims merit as a collective rather than personal good.

Policy design would also shift under this approach. Governments anchored in mobility rhetoric focus on skills and employability, leaving symbolic and affective hierarchies untouched. Accountability broadens the frame: it treats recognition, dignity, and emotional wellbeing as central indicators of equality. In Britain, this would mean embedding class consciousness into equality legislation and organisational audits, extending bias and inclusion training to encompass classed emotional hierarchies. In Türkiye, it would involve questioning the moral vocabularies of respect and propriety that legitimise hierarchy, acknowledging class as a legitimate axis of disadvantage, and creating participatory spaces that counter deference with mutual regard.

Across both contexts, accountability redefines aspiration as a collective horizon rather than an individual race. It links ambition to responsibility, encouraging institutions to create conditions where people can aspire without assimilation. Emotional equity becomes a measure of justice: no one should have to perform gratitude or suppress pride to be treated with respect. Ultimately, social accountability reconnects class inequality with the ethics of recognition. To recognise another is to affirm their worth without requiring transformation. Institutionalising recognition through accountability replaces the moral economy of gratitude with one of mutual respect. It demands that dignity be treated not as a reward for achievement but as a condition of social life.

Conclusion: Towards Class-Conscious Equality Agendas

Class discrimination persists because it is woven into the moral and emotional fabric of social life (Honneth, 1982). It is sustained not only by material hierarchies but also by the symbolic orders that determine whose voice is credible, whose behaviour appears respectable, and whose emotions are acceptable (Sayer, 2002). Across the UK and Türkiye, moral vocabularies such as civility and meritocracy in one, and propriety and respect in the other, transform inequality into virtue and hierarchy into moral order.

This chapter has shown how symbolic power, respectability, and emotion sustain class boundaries. Symbolic violence works through ordinary interactions that offer belonging to some and unease to others. Respectability politics converts inequality into moral difference, encouraging those with less power to perform gratitude and restraint in exchange for limited acceptance. Emotional regimes reinforce these hierarchies by assigning specific feelings to social positions: shame to those considered lacking, confidence to those already secure. The cultural expressions differ across contexts, yet the emotional logic remains constant.

The comparison between Britain and Türkiye reveals that class is governed through emotional regulation rather than direct exclusion. In Britain, civility and professionalism uphold composure as a social ideal. In Türkiye, respect and propriety establish moral hierarchies that reward deference. Both systems suppress frustration and reward calmness as a sign of virtue. Class remains visible yet depoliticised, interpreted as a matter of personality or aspiration rather than structural injustice.

Addressing class discrimination requires more than redistributive policy or the pursuit of mobility. It demands a transformation in how institutions define value, virtue, and belonging. Economic reform without emotional reform leaves the moral structure of inequality untouched. The shift from social mobility to social accountability outlined in this chapter provides one way forward. Mobility treats success as an individual achievement, while accountability locates responsibility within the organisations and social systems that reproduce exclusion. It insists that dignity should not depend on middle-class codes of conduct and that respect should not rely on composure or silence.

Embedding accountability within institutions requires reflexivity and recognition. Reflexivity calls for an examination of how tone, appearance, and style are rewarded as signs of competence. Recognition requires valuing lived experience alongside credentials. A class-conscious equality agenda would therefore treat emotion as a core dimension of justice, understanding that shame, imposture, and humiliation are social injuries rather than private shortcomings. Universities and workplaces would not only monitor representation but also address the emotional realities that accompany entry from different social backgrounds.

Such an agenda also redefines leadership. Ethical leadership requires awareness of the emotional hierarchies one sustains and a willingness to question how expectations of civility, gratitude, and restraint reproduce distance. Leadership for inclusion involves creating spaces where voice, pride, and anger are not punished. Emotional justice is inseparable from institutional responsibility.

The comparative evidence presented here shows that class is a transnational condition shaped by shared neoliberal ideals of endurance and self-management. Yet both Britain and Türkiye contain traditions of solidarity, humour, and collective care that challenge these ideals. Reviving such traditions is essential for building institutions grounded in authenticity rather than assimilation.

Future research and policy should take the emotional dimensions of inequality as seriously as its economic indicators. Measures such as income, occupation and education reveal disparities in opportunity, yet they capture only the surface of what inequality means in lived experience. The emotional consequences of class, feeling respected, dismissed, or out of place, are central to how inequality is reproduced. Scholars should investigate how emotions such as shame, gratitude and self-doubt shape participation in education, work and public life, and how institutions reward certain emotional performances as signs of competence or civility. Policy frameworks, meanwhile, must move beyond metrics of access or attainment to include emotional wellbeing, belonging and dignity as indicators of equality. This requires new tools for assessing how organisational cultures make people feel, and how respect or disregard is distributed across social hierarchies. Recognising emotion as part of justice changes the terms of equality itself. Fairness cannot be achieved only through redistribution; it must also involve transforming the emotional climates that define who is valued, who is heard and who must remain composed to belong.

Class discrimination persists because it is embedded in tone, gesture, and expectation as much as in material disparity. The work of equality must therefore extend beyond

redistribution to include the democratisation of emotion. Social accountability provides a framework for this shift by reminding institutions that fairness cannot rest on composure or conformity. A class-conscious equality agenda would allow people to speak in their own voices, to belong without disguise, and to find dignity in recognition rather than imitation.

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From Neoliberal Silence to Adaptive Capitalist Governance: The IMF's Evolving Discourse on Wealth Inequality

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Introduction

With 189 member countries worldwide, the IMF has played a decisive role in shaping the rules of global capitalism, particularly in the domains of global monetary cooperation, financial stability, and international trade, for nearly eighty years. Established at the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference under the intellectual leadership of J. M. Keynes and H. D. White and having a profound impact on the living conditions of quite a large population across the globe, it broadly aimed to promote Keynesian principles until the late 1960s. During the so-called "golden age of capitalism" (roughly 1940–1960), the IMF largely refrained from market fundamentalism and can be said to have operated within the framework of "embedded liberalism" (Ruggie, 1982).

From the late 1970s onward, however, following the decisive victory of capital over labor and the broader transformation of global political economy, the IMF underwent a profound ideological shift (Clift & Tomlinson, 2012). The institution adopted and actively promoted neoliberal principles, imposing policy frameworks that systematically exacerbated inequality both within and between countries. In particular, the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) and austerity

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measures imposed on developing countries in times of crisis significantly deepened economic inequalities (Forster et al., 2019). SAPs typically required governments to cut public spending, privatize state-owned enterprises, and open markets to foreign competition as conditions for receiving IMF financial assistance, while austerity measures more specifically targeted the reduction of public deficits through spending cuts and tax increases (Stiglitz, 2002; Blyth, 2013). Therefore, fiscal consolidation, privatization, deregulation, and market liberalization were advanced by the IMF as universal remedies, despite their socially regressive consequences.

Paradoxically, in recent years the IMF has emerged as a prominent global actor emphasizing what it now terms an "inequality crisis," producing a growing body of public statements, working papers and policy reports on the issue (Hebous et al., 2024). Critically engaging with this apparent shift, Mariotti et al (2017: 10) argues that the IMF has abandoned the "neoliberal economic dogma" it once uniformly prescribed to all countries without exception. According to the Oxfam (2019), the IMF has recently acknowledged that two core principles of neoliberal policy, which can briefly be addressed as unrestricted capital mobility and austerity measures –understood as fiscal consolidation through reduced public spending– have failed to deliver sustained economic growth. Today, the IMF openly acknowledges that these policies have substantially intensified economic inequalities. Moreover, the institution now recognizes that rising levels of economic inequality have translated into political inequality, leading to the capture of democratic processes by the interests of the wealthy (Oxfam, 2019: 46). In addition to these, it has become apparent that economic and political

inequalities are fueling public discontent and contributing to a growing backlash against democratic institutions. This is in fact to a certain extent acknowledged by the IMF officials. In a recent *IMF Staff Discussion Note*, Cihak and Sahay (2020) underline that "inequality of income, wealth, and opportunities is giving rise to populism and anti-globalization sentiments" (p. 4).

In fact, the existing literature has to some extent examined the IMF's evolving stance toward inequality over the past decade (Nunn & White, 2016; Mariotti et al., 2017). However, these studies have focused either on inequality in general (with reference to its various dimensions) or exclusively on income inequality in a narrow sense. Moreover, the IMF's increasing engagement with *wealth inequality* has received comparatively little scholarly attention, even though the institution has recently produced a notable number of statements and publications addressing the extreme concentration of wealth. Over the last decade, the IMF has – at least, partially- shifted its analytical focus from income alone toward a more explicit consideration of wealth, understood in terms of assets and net wealth distribution[2].

This chapter seeks to fill this gap in the literature by examining the IMF's changing attitude toward wealth inequality. The central argument advanced here is that the IMF's emerging concern with wealth inequality does not stem from a normative commitment to distributive justice. Rather, the institution has begun to take wealth inequality seriously

[2] Income is a flow variable, referring to earnings from labor and capital over a period of time, whereas wealth is a stock variable, defined as the accumulated value of financial and non-financial assets owned by an individual or household at a given point in time, net of liabilities (Ranchhod & Jana, 2025).

because extreme concentration of wealth constitutes a *systemic risk* that threatens the future stability of capitalism itself. Put it differently, in order to safeguard capitalism and secure the system's long-term viability, the IMF has been compelled to tackle with the issue of wealth inequality and the social group, the rich elite, which were previously avoided from confronting it in its programs and discourses. To be more specific, the IMF has recently begun to acknowledge the damaging consequences of excessive wealth concentration at the top. In a more stylized fashion, one might say, the IMF has started to criticize capital in order to save capitalism. This study interprets this development as a form of adaptive capitalism governance – a recalibration of institutional frameworks in response to system-threatening contradictions, rather than a genuine ideological transformation.

This article employs a qualitative, interpretive analysis (Yanow, 2000) of the IMF's public statements, working papers, staff notes, blog posts and other policy-related texts, drawing on insights from discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008) and critical political economy traditions (Jessop, 2002; Harvey, 2005). The analysis focuses *primarily* on official IMF publications, complemented by selected public interventions by senior IMF officials. Rather than conducting a systematic content analysis, the study reconstructs the evolving ways in which the IMF problematizes wealth inequality and articulates policy justifications in response to systemic crises. The aim is not to measure the frequency or internal consistency of particular claims, but to identify shifts in the institution's underlying rationalities and justificatory frameworks. In doing so, the study traces a consistent pattern: the IMF moves from silence on wealth inequality, to cautious acknowledgment, to

increasingly explicit concern – yet without ever framing the problem in terms of rights, dignity, or fairness. Each step in this arc corresponds to a worsening of systemic conditions, rather than to a shift in the institution's normative commitments.

At the beginning, it is necessary to acknowledge two important limitations of the study: First, the IMF has so far produced only a limited number of publications that *explicitly* address the wealth inequality. Therefore, the selected material represents a small subset of the institution's overall output, and the analysis is subject to a degree of selection bias. This limitation, however, does not undermine the central goal of this study, since the analysis is concerned with identifying a paradigmatic shift rather than documenting a fully consolidated institutional position. Paradigm change is typically a gradual and uneven process, revealed through the emergence of anomalies that the dominant framework can no longer adequately explain (Kuhn, 1970). From this perspective, the IMF's increasing engagement with wealth inequality is interpreted as a response to the growing anomaly of extreme wealth concentration, which challenges its long-standing neoliberal paradigm. At the same time, it must be emphasized that systematic analyses of a new paradigm are rarely possible before that paradigm has become fully consolidated. For this reason, it would be premature at this stage to offer a comprehensive or definitive account of the IMF as an institution *taking a stand against* the wealth inequality. Nevertheless, the IMF's recent interventions highlighting the wealth inequality remain analytically significant because they function as anomalies within the institution's long-standing neoliberal framework. These interventions are therefore important not

for their coherence as a new doctrine, but for what they reveal about shifting institutional sensibilities and the erosion of earlier certainties.

A second limitation of the article concerns the nature of the sources analyzed as the informational source of the primary argument in this study. Much of the empirical material consists of IMF working papers that disclaim institutional responsibility. Formally, the arguments advanced in these texts bind only their authors and do not represent official IMF positions. If this caveat were taken at face value, however, it would render any systematic analysis of IMF discourse virtually impossible. Moreover, the vast majority of authors of these working papers are permanent staff of the IMF, most of whom are senior economists within the institution. The IMF should not be understood as an abstract or monolithic entity, but rather as an institution that constitutes itself through the discourses and practices of its staff and stakeholders. On this basis, the article proceeds from the assumption that the publications under analysis are meaningful expressions of the IMF's evolving institutional outlook. At the same time, the gap between the institution's rhetorical positions and its operational practice – well documented in the literature on IMF conditionality – remains a central tension that the analysis must hold in view throughout.

Theory and Background

Until the early 2010s, the IMF to large extent claimed that rising inequality constituted a necessary trade-off for achieving higher economic growth, which is in fact rooted in the normative ideological position of the neoclassical economic theory. According to this view, distributional concerns were

subordinated to efficiency and growth imperatives. The so-called (re)distribution mechanism, which is designed to reach lower-income groups through trickle-down logic of markets, is essentially a function of efficiency and growth. However, quite recently, the institution revised this stance and began to argue that inequality represents a significant obstacle to economic growth and macroeconomic stability. While still recognizing the equity-efficiency trade-off, the IMF have begun to argue that equality-enhancing measures vis-à-vis redistributive policies can actually be pro-growth. In an IMF staff discussion note, Ostry et al. (2014: 4) empirically show that "lower net inequality is robustly correlated with faster and more durable growth, for a given level of redistribution." Drawing on this IMF staff note, Inman (2014) argues that "the IMF has debunked the old myth that redistribution is bad for growth and demolished the case for austerity. That redistribution efforts - essential to fight inequality- are good for growth is a welcome finding. Low tax and low public spending are clearly not the route to prosperity."

It is necessary to note that a series of "real" political-economic developments lie behind the IMF's recent discursive shift. Most importantly, the 2008 global financial crisis marked a critical turning point, as it fundamentally challenged the prevailing rules and assumptions of global capitalism. In the aftermath of the crisis, both academic and policy debates witnessed a shift away from the neoclassical orthodoxy toward (new- and post-) Keynesian theories. This transition was in large part driven by the fact that many advanced economies, most notably the USA, were able to stabilize their economies in the short run through Keynesian state intervention, including fiscal stimulus and expansive monetary policy.

A second factor behind the IMF's changing rhetoric was the bottom-up pressures and social movements. In particular, Occupy Wall Street played a significant role in politicizing inequality and placing distributional issues at the center of public debate in the US, thereby exerting pressure on economic institutions to reconsider their positions. Finally, leadership changes within the IMF also mattered. The appointments of Christine Lagarde in 2011 and Kristalina Georgieva in 2019 contributed to a reorientation of institutional priorities. Both leaders made strong public statements highlighting inequality as a central economic and political problem shortly after assuming office.

A growing body of literature has examined this apparent transformation in the IMF's approach to inequality. Nunn and White (2016) ask whether the IMF's high-level rhetorical commitment to reducing inequality has translated into concrete policy action. Empirically, they draw on the IMF's policy publications, operational guidelines, and policy advice in eleven member states involving seven borrower countries and four non-borrower ones. While the authors consider inequality in multiple dimensions such as income, wealth, opportunity, lifetime, intergenerational, and educational inequality, the IMF publications they analyze overwhelmingly tackle income-based measures with wealth inequality receiving little to no attention. According to Nunn and White (2016), the IMF's increased emphasis on excessive inequality stems from the recognition that inequality constitutes a macroeconomic risk capable of undermining long-term growth and generating financial instability. Nevertheless, they argue that this shift remains largely superficial, concluding that the IMF's commitment to inequality reduction reflects "*more talk than walk*"

and remains confined to the rhetorical level (Nunn and White, 2016: 187).

Nunn and White (2016: 188) situate this development within what they describe as a "new global politics of inequality". Over the past decade, major international organizations including the World Bank, the OECD and IMF have shown growing interest in inequality. The authors attributed this renewed interest to several interrelated dynamics: bottom-up pressures such as the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring (2010–2011); anti-austerity mobilizations in countries such as Greece and Spain; the rise of far-right parties (e.g., the Five Star Movement and Alternative for Germany); and the electoral success of populist-authoritarian leaders, most notably Donald Trump. In response to these pressures, the IMF proposed a range of inequality-reduction measures and designs in its publications, including progressive income taxation, expanded social safety nets and conditional cash transfers, improved access to education for low-income households, active labor market policies, and more effective taxation of multinational corporations (ibid.: 201–202). From a macroeconomic perspective, the authors argue that the IMF's changing rhetoric reflects a growing perception that inequality has reached a particular level at which it poses a *systemic risk* to global markets, rather than merely representing an unfortunate byproduct of economic liberalization. Noting that inequality is increasingly framed by international organizations as a serious *negative risk* and drawing on Cammack (2015), they note that the current phase in the history of capitalism as a world system is characterized by the near-completion of the world market, a condition that renders the system more unstable

and crisis-prone and demands more than rhetorical legitimation alone (ibid.: 213–214).

Despite the rhetorical shift, Nunn and White (2016: 198) conclude that meaningful policy change has not followed, because in practice the IMF has continued to apply neoliberal prescriptions in borrower countries, particularly through consultations to the Article IV in which fiscal considerations mostly dominate inequality and distribution, the latter remain "at best a second order consideration when it comes to programmes and reviews" (p. 209). It is likely to argue that this gap between rhetorical performance and policy outputs is not merely an institutional failure. It reflects a structural logic: the IMF engages with inequality only when it becomes a threat to the system it was designed to protect. Systemic risk, in this sense, functions as the IMF's threshold of concern – inequality matters institutionally not when it causes human suffering, but when it destabilizes markets, suppresses demand, or erodes political legitimacy. Nunn and White (2016) explain the disconnect between the rhetoric and practice through the concept of "organized hypocrisy" referring to "*mainstreaming gaps*, or discrepancies between what the [institution] claims are its priorities...and what it actually does to pursue these goals" (ibid.: 212). Like other international organizations, the IMF faces mounting pressure, especially from the below, to adapt to new political and social demands; yet its entrenched neoliberal ideology, institutional culture, and operational routines continue to resist substantive change.

Similarly, Mariotti et al. (2017) from Oxfam argue that the IMF has recently made substantial progress at the level of research and discourse in addressing inequality. Based on a systematic analysis of IMF publications, Mariotti et al. (2017: 2)

summarize the institution's core analytical conclusions as follows: inequality harms economic growth rather than constituting a necessary precondition for it; redistribution through taxation and social spending does not necessarily undermine growth and may in fact support it; neoliberal policy choices - most notably fiscal austerity and capital account liberalization- have contributed to rising inequality; gender equality promotes economic growth; and declining unionization alongside weakened labor protections is associated with greater inequality. Despite this discursive and analytical shift, Mariotti et al. (2017) emphasize that the IMF's anti-inequality rhetoric has failed to translate into a concrete policy agenda. To substantiate this claim, they examined fifteen Article IV consultation "pilots" designed to integrate inequality analysis into the IMF's surveillance framework. Article IV consultations constitute the IMF's primary mechanism for monitoring member states and shaping domestic policy choices, and these pilots were intended to serve as the institution's flagship initiative for operationalizing its inequality agenda. Their assessment reveals a substantial gap between rhetoric and practice: none of the fifteen pilots resulted in the "systematic inclusion of inequality in policy discussions" (Mariotti et al., 2017: 3).

Both accounts provided by Nunn and White (2016) and Mariotti et al. (2017) underline that the IMF tackles the wealth inequality not from the perspective of distributive justice, but through an instrumental and rational logic. In this framework, wealth inequality is increasingly depicted as a systemic risk for the reproduction of global capitalism, rather than as a moral concern regarding if people can maintain a decent lives or not under the given programs and their policy implications.

Despite the existing studies tackling IMF's varying approach towards inequality, it is necessary to recognize that the contemporary literature makes a special distinction regarding the IMF – the institution has never defined itself as a "development" organization but always claims to be "monetary" organization (Chletsos & Sintos, 2022: 272). In that respect, the IMF decision-making reflects the interests of its major shareholders – i.e., Western governments, and the design of IMF programs is shaped by their preferences. Empirical evidence for the disproportionate influence of the American and other G5 governments is well-documented (Lang, 2020: 602). These governments hold the largest formal voting power in the Executive Board. Their interests include ensuring debt repayments and public spending cuts in program countries, protecting creditors from financial losses, as well as pushing for trade and financial liberalization to expand export and investment opportunities. Beyond governments, multinational firms based in major shareholder countries also have commercial interests in less regulated labor markets, lower taxes, and privatizations in developing countries (Ibid.: 603). Given this primary agenda, it is reasonable to assume that inequality always remains a secondary concern for the IMF. Nonetheless, the IMF's growing attention on inequality in recent years signal a broader structural shift worth examining. This structural shift, however, should not be interpreted as ideological conversion. Rather, it reflects what can be described as adaptive capitalism governance: the incremental adjustment of institutional frameworks in response to system-threatening contradictions, without fundamentally challenging the underlying accumulation regime. The IMF's growing engagement with

wealth inequality is best understood within this logic – as a recalibration, not a rupture.

IMF's Public Statements on Wealth Inequality: Lagarde and Georgieva

It is quite striking that the IMF's former Managing Director Christine Lagarde began her speech at the Inclusive Capitalism Conference with a reference to Marxist critique of capitalism in 2014. She reminded that "capitalism, in its excesses, carried the seeds of its own destruction, the accumulation of capital in the hands of a few, mostly focused on the accumulation of profits, leading to major conflicts, and cyclical crises" (Lagarde, 2014). She continued that capitalist system characterized "by *excess*—in risk-taking, leverage, opacity, complexity, and compensation [...] led to massive destruction of value [...] associated with high unemployment, rising social tensions, and growing political disillusion – all of this happening in the wake of the Great Recession" (Lagarde, 2014). She argued that worsening of income and wealth inequalities over the last decades –especially with reference to a deep divide between top 1% and the rest– has weakened the meritocracy, democracy and human rights. In order to dry the "the root of social evil," she calls for inclusive capitalism – including progressive income taxation, "*without being excessive*", and much more use of property taxes, improving access to education and health, developing active labor market programs and in-work social benefits.

In her 2015 speech *"Lifting the Small Boats,"* Lagarde frames wealth inequality as an economic risk rather than a moral failure. While acknowledging the dramatic concentration of wealth, she stated that "the combined wealth of the

world's richest 1 percent will overtake that of the other 99 percent" and explicitly rejected to condemn wealth itself by adding that "it is not immoral to enjoy one's financial success" (Lagarde, 2015). Instead, the problem is defined in terms of *inequality of opportunity*: excessive wealth concentration leaves "millions of people" with little chance to earn sufficient incomes, producing what Lagarde calls by borrowing from Pope Francis "an economy of exclusion". Moreover, Lagarde insists that "a certain level of inequality is healthy and helpful", as it generates incentives to "compete, innovate, invest". Invoking John Maynard Keynes's concept of "animal spirits", she reaffirms entrepreneurship and differentiation as central drivers of prosperity. Redistribution is therefore justified only conditionally with reference to that policy must reduce *excessive* inequality while minimizing adverse effects on incentives to "work, save, and invest". In the logic presented by her, wealth inequality is governable insofar as it threatens growth and efficiency. Although Lagarde's public statement remains careful not to alienate capital/ists, it nevertheless represents a progressive shift when viewed against the IMF's previous silence on wealth inequality.

Lagarde's framing is significant in another respect: it introduces an analytical distinction between wealth as such and *excessive* wealth concentration, which becomes a recurring feature of the IMF's subsequent discourse. This analytical distinction is not morally neutral. By affirming that wealth itself is not immoral, the institution shields capital from normative critique while selectively targeting its most destabilizing extremes. The systemic risk logic thus operates as a protective frame: it legitimizes concern about inequality while

simultaneously insulating the broader structure of capital accumulation from scrutiny.

Nearly a decade later, Kristalina Georgieva, the current president of the IMF, advances a more urgent diagnosis, while remaining within a similar analytical frame. In a public speech at King's College in 2024, Georgieva argues that tackling inequality is "vital for the next century of growth," emphasizing that economic gains have been disproportionately captured by wealthy groups and countries (Partington, 2024). Georgieva explicitly adopts a Keynesian stance, warning against "waiting for market forces to fix things over the long run" and calling for policy action in the short run to address market failures. She discusses the notion of wealth beyond economic capital to include "nature, people and social fabric," yet the justification remains macroeconomic: persistent inequality undermines growth, resilience, and crisis management in an era of overlapping shocks.

Georgieva's invocation of Keynesian logic is notable, but it also reveals the limits of the IMF's discursive shift. The concern is not redistribution for its own sake, but the restoration of macroeconomic conditions – demand, resilience, growth – that extreme inequality erodes. In this sense, Georgieva's Keynesianism is also very instrumental: it prescribes redistribution as a stabilization tool rather than as a claim about justice or rights. This positions the IMF's current approach closer to a managed capitalism framework than to a genuine post-neoliberal one.

After all, in many different comments, Lagarde and Georgieva have warned that rising inequality poses a threat to economic growth. These remarks do not signal a complete break from neoliberal ideology. Rather, both previous and

current directors frame inequality as a systemic risk that must be managed – not by challenging capitalism, but by securing its long-term viability.

Analysis of the IMF Publications on Wealth Inequality

In numerous publications in the last decade, the IMF recurrently stressed that wealth is more unequally distributed than income (Coady et al., 2015, Čihák & Sahay, 2020). In advanced economies in the early 2000s, the Gini coefficient for wealth is estimated at around 0.89, indicating an extremely unequal distribution, with wealth inequality exceeding income inequality by approximately 30 percent (Davies et al., 2008: 7-10). A staff note by the IMF reports that by 2019 global wealth had reached approximately US$360 trillion, which is around 420 percent of global GDP, with nearly half concentrated in the hands of the top 1 percent (Čihák & Sahay, 2020). Although wealth inequality declined briefly during the global financial crisis, it rose again in subsequent years. Drawing on an Oxfam estimates, the same IMF staff note underlines that the combined wealth of just 26 individuals equaled that of the poorest 3.8 billion people worldwide in 2018. Coady et al. (2015) from IMF specify that wealth concentration is particularly pronounced in Switzerland and the United States, where the top 1 percent owns more than one-third of total household wealth (p. 40). A recent IMF blog post reveals that the top 10 percent of the households holds 56 percent of the total wealth whereas the bottom half holds 5 percent as of the fourth quarter of 2023 in the Euro area (Ahnert et al., 2024). In an article in *Finance and Development (F&D)*, flagship publication of IMF, Stanley (2022) points to the fact that wealth inequality has

recently becomes much more "extreme." Drawing on a recent estimate from *World Inequality Report*, he stresses that 10 percent of the global population holds 76 percent of the total wealth, and bottom half of the population owns just 2 percent. While such "extreme inequality" becomes increasingly salient in advanced countries, it is still most acute in developing economies (Čihák & Sahay, 2020: 26).

In 2015, an edition of articles by the IMF authors, titled as *Inequality and Fiscal Policy*, recognized wealth inequality explicitly as a problem that has serious repercussions in terms of macroeconomic stability, growth and efficiency. In this collection, Coady et al (2015) show that inequalities hinder potential long-term growth, destabilizes economies, and makes them vulnerable to crises. They frame wealth inequality not in terms of claims (in line with egalitarian forms) of distributive justice but as a macroeconomic and/or efficiency problem, demonstrating that the wealth inequality is not a moral failure for the IMF, but more of a threat to the future of capitalism. To alleviate this problem, they point towards wealth taxation; "the increase in wealth and inequality of wealth in many advanced economies may indicate there is more scope to increase wealth taxation, which tends to be less distortive" (Coady et al., 2015: 52). They argue various forms of wealth taxation through instrumental-rationality with the purpose of minimizing market distortions, maintain incentives and achieving growth and efficiency in the long run (Coady et al., 2015: 52). This framing marks a key moment in the IMF's discursive shift. By integrating wealth inequality into the language of macroeconomic efficiency rather than social justice, the institution effectively redefines the problem: wealth concentration is harmful not because it is unfair, but because it

distorts markets and constrains growth. This framing has important policy implications – it sets the boundary of acceptable intervention at the point where redistribution ceases to threaten capital formation, rather than at the point where inequality ceases to cause harm.

In an article in *Finance & Development*, the IMF's official magazine, Shaxson (2019) discusses the detrimental impacts of extreme wealth concentration and offshore wealth. He argues that wealth concentration in tax havens leads to financial instability, trigger rent-seeking further, and threatens democratic and institutional corrosion. Shaxson (2019: 7) underlines the fact that ultra-wealthy have shifted vast amounts of wealth that ranges from approximately $8.7 trillion to as high as $36 trillion into offshore tax havens. He frames tax havens and offshore finance as systemically harmful: "Allowing capital to flow freely across borders carries risks, including the danger of financial instability in emerging market economies" (ibid). He underlines the fact that wealth inequality is on the verge of deteriorating the existing global financial architecture, stating that "[m]ost advanced economies... are past the point at which financial sector growth is beneficial" (ibid.: 9). The IMF's criticism of offshore wealth and elite tax avoidance is not motivated by concerns over distributive justice though, in spite of involving some references to democratic erosion. Rather, as shown in Shaxson's account, the institution's engagement with wealth inequality in the context of tax havens is driven by the recognition that offshore wealth accumulation generates financial instability and renders the capitalist system unsustainable, even within the advanced economies.

In an IMF working paper, Dao (2020) analyzes wealth inequality in terms of saving, consumption, and external

imbalances. Dao (2020: 2) highlights that "Germany's success on global export markets needs to be viewed against the background of its high wealth inequality to shed light on the drivers behind the rise in private savings and accumulation of current account surpluses". To be more specific, export-driven income gains were not evenly distributed; most gains were captured as corporate profits accruing to the top 10 percent in Germany. While rising profits flowed to the owners and shareholders of corporations, the households at the bottom of the distribution did not gain any real income increase, which presumably led to weak effective demand and household consumption. While lower and middle-income households spent most of their income on living costs and rents, the top 10 percent that already enriched through export-driven profits continued to accumulate wealth. These conditions basically created a vicious cycle: high-income households save more and increase their wealth, which generates more capital income, widening inequality further over time. The inheritance tax reform in 2009 reinforced this self-perpetuating dynamic by increasing exemptions for intra-family business transfers, primarily benefiting the wealthiest households in Germany. Dao (ibid.: 28) remarks that "income–wealth inequality loops are self-reinforcing... top-biased income growth results in even higher wealth inequality".

Drawing on Dao's analysis, one may argue that extreme wealth concentration at the top *vis-à-vis* weak effective demand at the bottom poses a serious challenge to the functioning of markets and the sustainability of capitalism. In additions, Dao's analysis of Germany also illustrates how the systemic risk argument operates at the international level, not just domestically. Wealth concentration at the top suppresses

household consumption, depresses domestic demand, and channels surplus into financial assets and exports – ultimately contributing to global imbalances. In this way, wealth inequality is not merely a distributional problem within a single country; it becomes a source of international macroeconomic instability. This connects the micro-level dynamics of wealth accumulation to the broader structural concerns that motivate the IMF's institutional mandate, reinforcing the systemic risk logic at the core of its evolving discourse.

As part of the IMF's *How to Note* series, in "How to Tax Wealth", Hebous et al. (2024) investigate wealth taxation in terms of efficiency, macroeconomic stability, fiscal capacity, and sustainable growth in the long run. This is one of the few texts of the IMF staff that directly tackles wealth inequality as a first-order policy problem. The article begins by stating that "high income and wealth inequality is one of the major challenges of our time" (Hebous et al., 2024: 4). After mentioning Swiss Leaks in 2015 and the Panama Papers in 2016, they state that wealth inequality and taxation have recently come to the forefront of the IMF agenda. The authors argue "large share of wealth stems from endowments, past rents, income that might have avoided or evaded taxation, or even from criminal activity." (8) They acknowledge that excessive wealth concentration has recently been realized through rent-seeking behavior *vis-à-vis* wealth bias in policy making (ibid.: 21). They suggest that "well-designed tax policy" could minimize negative growth effects (ibid.: 5). However, they also underline that capital income taxes are "generally more efficient than wealth taxes" (ibid.: 19). It is because automatic stabilizers work better through capital income taxes than wealth taxes and wealth taxes create a serious risk for capital formation (ibid.: 20). On

the other hand, by exception, they argue that only wealth taxes narrowly targeted at the super-rich could be feasible, given the relatively small number of ultra-wealthy distorts market competition.

As illustrated by Hebous et al. (2024), the IMF's preference for capital income taxation over direct wealth taxes indicates that concerns of efficiency take precedence over normative claims of distributive justice in its approach to wealth inequality. This instrumental-rationality logic implies that redistribution is acceptable only insofar as it serves for capital accumulation. The preference for capital income taxation over direct wealth taxes also reveals how the systemic risk logic shapes not just the *diagnosis* of wealth inequality but also the *boundaries of acceptable policy*. Measures that might significantly reduce wealth concentration — such as broad-based recurrent wealth taxes – are treated with caution or rejected on efficiency grounds, while more limited interventions are endorsed. This pattern suggests that the IMF's concern with wealth inequality is calibrated: strong enough to acknowledge the problem but constrained by a prior commitment to preserving the conditions of capital accumulation.

In *Fiscal Monitor*: *A Fair Shot*, the IMF (2021: 28) also acknowledges that "various aspects of inequality [income, wealth, opportunity] are mutually reinforcing and create a vicious circle"[3]. On this basis, the IMF (2021) argues that effective policy responses should combine both pre-distributive

[3] IMF recurrently emphasized the interdependency of different forms of inequalities in the last decade. For example, in the amid of Covid pandemic, the IMF's deputy chief and senior economist recall that "various aspects of inequality -in income, wealth, educational attainment, gender, health, opportunities- are closely related and mutually reinforcing" and pre-distributive and re-distributive policies should address all simultaneously (Amaglobeli & Thevenot, 2022).

and redistributive interventions to address income and wealth inequalities. Nevertheless, rather than prioritizing wealth taxes, which had been previously considered, this report primarily recommends increasing the progressivity of income, inheritance, and property taxes. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the IMF (2021) also considers the introduction of new taxes on excessive corporate profits. Only in cases where these measures prove insufficient does the institution suggest that wealth taxes may be considered for advanced economies (ibid.: 13). For developing countries, by contrast, the emphasis is placed on strengthening existing tax capacity, particularly in order to finance social spending (ibid.: 13). The IMF further notes that wealth taxes have become less common in recent decades due to significant implementation challenges. Indeed, among OECD countries, only four of them, namely France, Norway, Spain, and Switzerland, currently levy a recurrent wealth tax. While the IMF (ibid.: 37) acknowledges that wealth taxes can reduce income inequality, enhance intergenerational mobility, and may have positive long-term effects on economic growth[4], it also highlights substantial trade-offs. In particular, difficulties related to asset valuation and the collection of reliable third-party information weaken enforcement and limit effectiveness. For these reasons, the institution advises that, before introducing wealth taxes, countries should first focus on closing existing tax loopholes in capital income taxation, increasing the progressivity of income taxation, and making greater use of underutilized

[4] In a case study on Norway, IMF staff estimates that income inequality would have been 1 Gini point higher without a recurrent wealth tax (Berg & Hebous, 2021). Further, the IMF estimates that 1 percent wealth tax on the richest 1 percent of the population could significantly curb wealth inequality and yield fiscal revenues amounting to up to 0.4-0.6 percent of GDP (Fiscal Monitor, 2021).

property, inheritance and estate taxes to curb dynastic wealth accumulation (IMF 2017, 2021). Only if these measures fail to achieve policy objectives should wealth taxes be considered, with careful attention to design and implementation challenges. The IMF's cautious approach to wealth taxation reveals an underlying tension between its recognition of wealth inequality as a systemic risk and its continued commitment to preserving the conditions necessary for capital accumulation.

As a part of IMF working paper series, Berg and Hebous (2021), investigates the impact of wealth tax in Norway in terms of "equality of opportunity." Their empirical analysis discloses the fact that parental wealth creates unequal prospects for earning income and perpetuates intergenerational inequalities. Net parental wealth of NOK 1 million (approximately USD 120,000) increases children's future annual wages by approximately NOK 14,000 (about USD 1,700). A parental wealth does not only affect wages but also risk-taking behaviour, wealth offsprings presumably taking higher risks and awards – that would further deepen income and wealth inequalities. For that reason, they conclude in the absence of the wealth tax the wage distribution would be more unequal in Norway. They also raised concern for the repercussions of wealth inequality in developing countries: "If wealth entails a 'privilege effect' on the income of the children in a country with a relatively strong provision of public goods -especially health and education-, this raises the question whether this effect is even more pronounced in countries with lower provision of public goods" (Berg & Hebous, 2021: 18). The novelty of this study is that IMF, for the first time, frames wealth inequality within the context of *equality of opportunity*.

Lastly, in a very recent IMF working paper, Rockall et al. (2025) analyze the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on income and wealth inequality. They estimate that high-income workers are much more exposed to AI compared to low-income workers, who presumably occupy with manual jobs. Therefore, AI has a potential to reduce wage inequalities between high- and low-income workers. Nonetheless, they further estimate that AI significantly increase wealth inequality through higher returns to capital. "The greater AI adoption ... leads to an even larger increase in the return on capital ... [which] results in substantially higher capital income for the highest-income households" (Rockall et al., 2025, p. 40). The high-income workers who are seriously exposed to AI are also the ones with significant capital holdings and benefit from higher returns on AI-related investments. With the adoption of AI adoption, wealth inequality will rise substantially – 7.18 percentage points in the Wealth Gini. This account discloses that even growth-enhancing technologies, like AI, would intensify wealth inequality through capital returns, creating a structural tension between productivity, efficiency, and distribution.

Discussion

The analysis presented in this study reveals a consistent pattern across the IMF's public statements and staff publications: the institution engages with wealth inequality not as a question of justice or rights, but as a question of systemic risk. The public statements of Lagarde and Georgieva, together with numerous IMF staff publications, trace an arc in which the institution moves away from silence on wealth inequality, to cautious acknowledgment, to increasingly explicit concern

– yet without ever framing the problem in terms of fairness or distributive justice. Each step in this arc is driven by a worsening of the systemic conditions the institution monitors: financial instability, weak effective demand, and political polarization. The IMF's engagement with wealth inequality is therefore reactive and risk-driven, calibrated to the threshold at which inequality begins to threaten the system, rather than to any normative standard of fairness or justice.

This pattern is visible across the different types of IMF output analyzed here. In public speeches, Lagarde and Georgieva both acknowledge extreme wealth concentration as a serious problem, yet both are careful to affirm that wealth itself is not immoral and that a certain degree of inequality is economically functional. In staff publications, the IMF frames wealth inequality as a drag on growth, a source of financial instability, and a driver of global imbalances – as demonstrated in the analyses of Coady et al. (2015), Dao (2020), and Hebous et al. (2024). Even the IMF's most direct engagement with wealth taxation, as in Hebous et al. (2024), ultimately prioritizes capital income taxes over direct wealth taxes on efficiency grounds. Throughout, the boundary of acceptable intervention is drawn not at the point where inequality causes human harm, but at the point where it begins to threaten capital accumulation and market stability.

This instrumental logic can be understood from two complementary theoretical perspectives. From a Keynesian standpoint, the IMF's shift is meaningful but limited. Keynesian theory places effective demand at the center of macroeconomic stability: when wealth accumulates excessively at the top, household consumption weakens, investment opportunities shrink, and the economy becomes vulnerable to crises.

Under such conditions, redistribution is justified not as a moral claim, but as an economic tool – necessary to sustain consumption and restore the conditions for growth. The IMF's post-2008 embrace of expansionary fiscal policy, and its calls for redistribution during the COVID-19 pandemic, are consistent with this logic. However, as Georgieva's Keynesianism illustrates, redistribution is endorsed as a stabilization instrument rather than as a structural transformation. The IMF prescribes enough redistribution to restore effective demand, not enough to challenge all wealth inequality.

A Marxist reading adds a further dimension. Harvey's (2003, 2005) concept of "accumulation by dispossession" captures how capitalism reproduces itself partly through the concentration of wealth and the dispossession of lower-income groups. Yet when dispossession intensifies beyond a manageable threshold, it begins to undermine the social and political conditions on which capitalism itself depends: consumer markets shrink, political legitimacy erodes, and the liberal property order faces challenges from below. In this context, the IMF's cautious endorsement of redistribution and wealth regulation can be read as a mechanism for restoring consent and managing social conflict, rather than as a challenge to capitalist relations. The institution, in effect, criticizes the excesses of capital in order to preserve capital. This also helps explain the gap between the IMF's rhetoric and its policy practice that Nunn and White (2016) and Mariotti et al. (2017) document: the institution's rhetorical concessions to inequality reduction serve a legitimizing function, while its core programs continue to prioritize fiscal consolidation and capital-friendly policies.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the IMF's evolving discourse on wealth inequality reflects what can be described as adaptive capitalism governance: the incremental adjustment of institutional frameworks in response to system-threatening contradictions, without fundamentally challenging the underlying accumulation regime. The institution does not offer a new economic order. It offers a recalibration – enough to prevent systemic rupture, but not enough to alter the structural conditions that produce extreme wealth concentration in the first place.

Conclusion

This study has examined the IMF's changing attitude toward wealth inequality over recent decades, focusing on the institution's public statements and staff publications. The central argument advanced here is that the IMF's growing concern with wealth inequality does not reflect a normative commitment to distributive justice. Rather, the institution has begun to take wealth inequality seriously because extreme concentration of wealth constitutes a systemic risk – a threat to macroeconomic stability, effective demand, political legitimacy, and the long-term viability of capitalism itself.

The empirical analysis supports this argument across multiple dimensions. At the level of public discourse, both Lagarde and Georgieva frame wealth inequality as an economic and political risk, while carefully avoiding any language of rights or moral obligation. At the level of staff research, IMF publications consistently consider wealth inequality as a macroeconomic problem – a source of financial instability, weak demand, and global imbalances – rather than as a matter of fairness or justice. At the level of policy prescription, the IMF

endorses redistribution cautiously and conditionally, always subordinating it to concerns about efficiency and capital formation.

These findings contribute to the existing literature in two ways. First, by focusing specifically on wealth inequality rather than inequality in general, the study identifies a more recent and less examined dimension of the IMF's discursive shift. Second, by tracing the systemic risk logic across different types of IMF output – speeches, working papers, staff notes, and flagship publications – the study shows that this logic is not confined to a few isolated texts but represents a coherent, if still evolving, institutional rationality.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge what this study does not claim. The IMF's engagement with wealth inequality remains uneven, and as Nunn and White (2016) and Mariotti et al. (2017) have shown, the gap between rhetoric and operational practice remains large. The institution has not abandoned its neoliberal orientation. What has changed is the threshold of concern: wealth inequality has become visible to the IMF not because the institution has changed its values, but because the scale of wealth concentration has reached a point where it can no longer be ignored without risk to the system the IMF is designed to protect.

Future research could extend this analysis in two directions. First, a systematic comparison of how the IMF frames wealth inequality across different country contexts – advanced versus developing economies – would reveal whether the systemic risk logic is applied consistently or selectively. Second, a closer examination of the relationship between the IMF's rhetorical shifts and its program conditionalities (e.g., Article IV consultations) would shed further light on the gap

between discourse and practice. Such research would deepen our understanding of how global economic institutions adapt – and how much they do not – in the face of rising inequality.

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Chapter Abstracts

Consumer Culture and the Making of the "Symbolic" Middle Class in Unequal Neoliberal Societies

Alejandro Marambio-Tapia

The aim of this study is to examine the ways in which working-class identity can be interpreted and self-interpreted through the use of categories that migrate from the political sphere or the market into the everyday lives of working-class households in Chile. Over recent decades, these households have co-existed with both material and symbolic aspirations for social inclusion through consumption. Alongside the structural conditions of Chilean society, particularly its financialized consumption, low-productivity service economy, and high levels of indebtedness, the persistent circulation of discourses and narratives about the "middle class" within the working class takes on meaning within the moral economy of the new working class or "service proletariat" constituting a "symbolic middle class". Currently, the literature connecting social stratification studies with the subfield of economic sociology or the social study of the economy is rather scarce. While some valuable contributions address consumption and the middle classes (Aritzía, 2016; Méndez, 2008; Marambio-Tapia, 2017), they do not focus on the specific dynamics of consumption-indebtedness. The argument presented here is that both phenomena contribute to a key understanding of Chile over the last 40 years, particularly in terms of the objective and subjective behaviour of its social stratification and the notions of inequalities as well as political mobilisation. A social structure is characterized not only by objective material positions but also by how this structure is represented, perceived, and legitimized (Crompton, 1997). The proposal is that this somewhat ambiguous understanding of social positions, particularly among the working class, and more specifically the so-called "service proletariat", is legitimized and expressed through the figure of financial consumers. This subjectivity is shaped by their own moral economy, which tends to justify indebtedness.

Keywords: Inequalities, middle-class, service proletariat, indebtedness, chile.

Inequality in the Turkish Education System: Lasting Effects of Policy Changes, Economic Crises, and the School Closures

Caner Özdemir

The aim of this paper is to investigate how social inequalities in Türkiye are reproduced in the education system. Through the analysis of national and international student exam data I try to investigate the effects of various socio-economic variables on student achievement and how these effects are moderated by policy changes, economic crisis and covid school closures. Over the past few decades, the Turkish education system has undergone numerous policy shifts, many of which are complex and difficult to track—even for professionals in the field. These policy changes, however, may play a significant role in shaping academic outcomes and influencing how socio-economic disparities are reproduced through education. One major area of reform has been the tracking of students. In 1997, a rigid tracking system was implemented at the secondary level, significantly limiting university access for students in vocational and technical schools —a policy widely associated with reinforcing existing social inequalities. This restriction was relaxed in the 2000s, marking a shift toward greater educational mobility. Another important policy transformation concerns the allocation of students to secondary schools based on standardized exam performance. From the 1990s to the mid-2010s, the proportion of students placed in schools according to central exam scores increased dramatically, reaching 100 percent at its peak. In 2018, however, a new regulation capped this rate at 10 percent, signalling yet another dramatic shift in the landscape of educational opportunity. A third key development is the steady expansion and promotion of private education. Over the last two decades, the number of private schools has grown significantly at all levels, supported by policies that incentivize their proliferation—raising concerns about access and equity. Despite the potential of these changes to shape educational and social inequality, their actual impacts remain underexplored and often overlooked in policy discussions. In addition to these reforms, Türkiye has faced a severe economic crisis since 2018, marked by skyrocketing inflation and a sharp depreciation of the Turkish Lira. Evidence suggests such crises disproportionately harm disadvantaged populations, potentially deepening educational disparities. Finally, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Türkiye implemented one of the longest periods of school closures globally. Recent studies have shown that extended closures exacerbate learning losses, especially among students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This paper aims to evaluate the impact of all these policy changes, economic crisis and pandemic school closures on the educational inequalities and to investigate their impact on the reproduction of social inequalities through education.

Keywords: Educational inequalities, privatization of education, education policies, school closures, Covid-19.

News Coverage of Inequalities in Education

Alaaddin F. Paksoy, Hakkı Kahveci, Simge Süllü Durul

News coverage of education frequently oscillates between narratives of individual success or systemic failure. While some media content addresses tangible issues—criticising structural deficiencies, administrative shortcomings, and the physical degradation of schools—the media often neglects the intrinsic link between these systemic problems and the multifaceted inequalities students encounter. These disparities are frequently rooted in economic, gendered, ethnic, and physical disadvantages. A comprehensive understanding of these inequalities is essential for addressing the structural crises within education. This chapter examines how the news media in Türkiye represents, or misrepresents, the educational inequalities that undermine students' right to quality schooling. The research specifically focuses on disparities affecting the student population. The study's sample comprises education-related news articles published by ten prominent Turkish news portals between 2020 and 2022. These outlets were selected based on their web traffic, political orientation, and ownership structures. The chapter addresses the following research question: 'How are the inequalities affecting students portrayed by the Turkish news media?' Utilising both quantitative and qualitative content analysis, this study explores whether media discourses serve to expose or, conversely, to justify existing inequalities within the education system.

Keywords: Inequality, education, media, news coverage, education journalism.

Ontic Injustice and the Limits of Liberal Justice in India: A Critique through the Lens of Caste

Aditi Aditi

The distributive paradigm of justice assumes an incomplete social ontology. Such a paradigm implicitly assumes that individual agents lie as points in a field among whom different proportions of good are distributed. Social justice in this paradigm then makes possession of goods as their central focus. A focus solely on possession obscures thinking about what people are doing, the role of institutions, and how their relations amongst each other is structured by these institutions. This assumption embeds a social ontology where individuals are prior to social and institutional relations. The model then encounters an ontological error as it erases the structural and historical constitution of persons through caste, race, gender, and coloniality. This paper focuses primarily on how liberal notion of justice obscures caste reality while demanding social justice. To account the injustice perpetuated by the liberal notion of justice, the paper develops the concept of ontic injustice. The purpose of ontic injustice is to capture the harms that go beyond distribution of goods and focuses on how the structural constraints and enablements conceive as a function of individual's relations to one another in a hierarchical order. Caste proves to be a paradigmatic case of ontic injustice as it organizes the social itself. The caste system defines purity, pollution, and labour as intrinsic properties of being, assigning moral and civic worth through birth. Such a structure cannot be addressed through distributive remedies, since it predates and underwrites the very notion of the "person" who is supposed to benefit from justice. B.R Ambedkar's critique of caste reveals that liberal notion of justice presupposes ontological equality of persons. Ambedkar's notion of justice calls for transformation of the social by annihilating the caste system. In this context, he turns to the idea of fraternity which exposes the atomistic view of the liberal theory of justice. The role of fraternity is to show how individuals are mutually constituted through social relations and that social justice can be achieved only when these relations are transformed through interdependence and not on hierarchy. Justice on this account then calls for transformation through collective action, interdependence rather than liberal individualism.

Keywords: Social justice, distributive paradigm, caste, fraternity, Ambedkar.

Producerism as a Right-Wing Legitimation of Unequal Resource Distribution

Fabian Virchow

Producerism is a political and social ideology that emphasizes the value and virtue of those who produce tangible goods and services, such as workers, farmers, and small business owners, over those perceived as non-productive or exploitative, such as financial elites, bureaucrats, or welfare recipients. In this way, it is central to right-wing populist rhetoric that directs anger and rage of the middle-classes (broadly understood) against the "elites" on the hand and the "underclasses" on the other hand. Both groups are portrayed stereotypically, and the selection according to which particular groups are becoming target of producerist statements might change according to the historical tradition and political culture of a given country, but also depending on the specific political context. Producerism consists of several frames which include moral superiority of producers, anti-elite sentiment, and a populist tone. The chapter begins by explaining what is meant by producerism and how this perspective fits into the right-wing populist/far right worldview. Several examples are then used to illustrate how variably producerist rhetoric can be used. It directs its critique towards the "elite" (might be "the rich", the European Union, "the Jews' –depending on the particular historic situation the producerist talk is embedded in), whereby the elite is said to exploit "the hard-working people". At the same time, producerism directs anger and rage against the underclasses and particular social groups (again, those can vary according to the particular historical circumstances) who are said to also exploit the hard-working people. In several cases, the producerist narrative turns into a kind of conspiratorial story in which both the elite and the underclasses/migrants have joint forces against "the people". Producerism addresses issues of social justice explicitly, therefore this trace is followed by determining the respective understanding of justice in producerist discourse and placing it in the theoretical debates on social justice.

Keywords: Social justice, producerism, inequality, resource distribution, right-wing populism.

Administrative Justice: Clarifying the Distinction between the Philosopher-King and the Prophet-King

Hüseyin Fırat Şenol

This chapter attempts to investigate the conceptual and historical distinction between two archetypes of political authority, namely the "philosopher-king" and the "prophet-king"; and to analyse how each generates a distinctive model of administrative justice. Whereas the philosopher king derives legitimacy from rational insight into the nature of the Good, the prophet-king grounds authority in divine revelation and moral exemplarity. Each model articulates a different epistemology of governance, a different jurisprudential foundation, and a different approach to the interpretation and administration of law. Drawing on classical Greek philosophy (Plato and Aristotle), biblical and Qur'anic traditions, and medieval Islamic and Jewish political philosophy (especially al-Fārābī and Maimonides), it aims to examine the conceptual tensions and complementarities between reason and revelation as bases of political rule. The first section can be considered as an introduction for the methodological framework and analyses the Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of the philosopher-king as the apex of rational administrative order. In the second step, we examine the revelatory model of the prophet-king and the ways in which scriptural traditions conceptualize administrative justice. The third major step develops an expanded comparative framework and integrates the political philosophy of al-Fārābī, whose theory of the prophet-philosopher represents one of the most ambitious attempts to synthesize reason and revelation. The fourth and the final step concludes with contemporary implications, including technocracy, religious constitutionalism, and the enduring problem of administrative legitimacy.

Keywords: Justice, philosopher-king, prophet-king, Plato, Aquinas.

The Moral Politics of Sanctuary: Legitimacy, Visibility, and Authority

Jonathan Leif Basilio

Church-based sanctuaries have become important sites of moral witness and protection under the U.S. deportation regime. Parsing the literature often involves examining sanctuary's ethical commitments, legal significance, and visibility practices, yet an account of how these elements operate together warrants further attention, given that they are mutually constitutive and structure its contestatory force and limits. Drawing on Edith Espinal's experience at Columbus Mennonite Church (2017–2021), one of the longest-running and most visible sanctuary cases, I examine the tensions inherent in offering refuge under conditions of deportability. I identify three interrelated dimensions of sanctuary—Legitimacy, Visibility, and Authority (LVA)—to show how sanctuary's capacity emerges through their interaction and, in turn, how moral witness seeks to undercut state power, how asymmetries in authority constrain that effort, and how deservingness politics can further blunt sanctuary's oppositional potential.

Keywords: Politics, sanctuary, legitimacy, visibility, authority.

Class Discrimination: Symbolic Power, Respectability, Invisibility, and the Emotional Regimes of Class Discrimination

Mustafa Özbilgin, Ebru Soytemel, Cihat Erbil

Class inequality endures through both structural hierarchies and emotional regulation that make domination feel legitimate. Across the United Kingdom and Türkiye, moral vocabularies such as civility, professionalism, propriety and respect translate social hierarchy into virtue. Drawing on theories of symbolic power, respectability and emotional regimes, the analysis shows how emotions like shame, gratitude and restraint act as instruments of governance. They shape how people from working-class backgrounds navigate institutions that reward composure and gratitude while penalising frustration and pride. In Britain, professionalism and meritocracy moralise hierarchy through the language of civility; in Türkiye, propriety and respect perform the same function through moral idioms rooted in modernity. Recognition in both settings remains conditional on emotional conformity, linking dignity to restraint and gratitude. The discussion calls for a shift from social mobility to social accountability. Whereas mobility individualises responsibility and conceals structural privilege, accountability places the duty of change on institutions. By recognising class as both a symbolic and emotional injustice, equality agendas can move beyond representation to embrace dignity, recognition and emotional justice as foundations of inclusion.

Keywords: Class discrimination, emotional justice, meritocracy, social accountability, symbolic power.

From Neoliberal Silence to Adaptive Capitalist Governance: The IMF's Evolving Discourse on Wealth Inequality

İbrahim Kuran

During the 1980s and 1990s, the IMF largely excluded wealth inequality from its official agenda, prioritizing macroeconomic stabilization, fiscal consolidation, and liberalization within a neoliberal framework that assumed trickle-down distribution through market-led development. In recent decades, however – especially in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic – the IMF has increasingly incorporated wealth inequality into its public statements, research, and policy discussions. Examining the IMF's evolving discourse on wealth inequality, this article argues that this shift is driven not by concerns for distributive justice, but by the recognition that extreme wealth concentration constitutes a systemic risk to macroeconomic stability, effective demand, and the long-term viability of capitalism itself. Drawing on IMF publications and public statements – including speeches by Managing Directors and staff publications ranging from working papers to flagship reports – the study traces an arc in which the institution moves from silence on wealth inequality to increasingly explicit concern, yet without ever framing the problem in terms of rights, dignity, or fairness. The analysis shows that the IMF's policy prescriptions remain constrained by a prior commitment to capital accumulation: redistribution is endorsed cautiously and conditionally, and direct wealth taxes are treated with scepticism on efficiency grounds. These findings suggest that the IMF's engagement with wealth inequality reflects a form of adaptive capitalism governance – a recalibration aimed at preventing systemic rupture, rather than a normative commitment to reducing inequality. The gap between the institution's rhetoric and its operational practice further confirms that wealth inequality remains a secondary concern, addressed only when its scale poses a measurable threat to the system the IMF is designed to protect.

Keywords: IMF, wealth inequality, capitalism, critical political economy, adaptive governance.

Author Biographies

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Alejandro Marambio-Tapia

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