

Interview with José María Herreros, representative of Attac Spain

1.- Why does Attac Spain participate in an observatory on the fair distribution of wealth?

It would be anomalous if we did not participate. In one way or another and with the intensity and presence that our resources allow us, we are present in forums, groups, observatories and platforms with which we share objectives. If we are talking about the fair distribution of wealth, the achievement of which cannot be conceived apart from tax justice, a demand that forms part of our DNA as an organisation, we are there.

2.- Why is the accumulation of wealth and the resulting inequality it generates a problem?

If we speak on a global scale, some of its consequences are clearly perceived. The suffering of the billions of people who suffer situations of poverty, scarcity and lack of all kinds of rights, both material and social, compared to the 1.1% who accumulate 45% of the world's wealth should be a reason for us, as a society, to ask ourselves some questions and at least understand the migratory flow, apart from armed conflicts, which causes this inequality.

In more advanced societies, to say the least, the consequences are different. In addition to poverty as we have always known it, that is, the absolute lack of material means, so necessary socially to be able to practice Christian charity and, at certain times of the year, to undertake food collection campaigns and other paraphernalia to appease our consciences, a new form of poverty is beginning to spread: the working poor. People whose income, even if they work and have a roof over their heads, does not reach the minimum level considered the poverty line. Or if they do, their expenditure on housing, food, electricity or other forms of energy keeps them below that level. A state that does not allow you to access almost any right, not being able to go to the cinema sometimes, not being able to buy toys at Christmas, not being able to consider any kind of activity that entails a minimum cost. That makes you live in a continuous emotional tension generated by not knowing how to extend the little money you have to buy food until payday, how you are going to pay the rent or the electricity bill, because if you pay one you stop paying the other. If it is hard for an adult, it is even harder for the children who grow up in this environment, with parents overwhelmed by this constant tension. Learning processes, social skills, the absence of role models, the inevitable family tensions that this generates and, what is worse, the implicit feedback that these situations carry: it is known that 90% of people who are born poor die poor, no matter how intelligent and hard-working they may be. In turn, 90% of those who are born rich, even if they are idiots and lazy, die rich. Enough, therefore, of using such false concepts as meritocracy to justify the dizzying increase in inequality.

At the social level, this structural inequality undermines any form of social contract. It generates political disaffection and is the ideal breeding ground for the growth of

extreme right-wing political options, as we are seeing not only in countries such as Hungary, Poland, Brazil and the USA where they have come to power, but also in Spain and in neighbouring countries such as France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Greece.

If we add to all this the physical deterioration as a consequence of material deprivation, the mental health problems caused by anxiety and depression, its economic effects and the inefficiencies of all kinds generated by societies with high levels of inequality, we should conclude that if the struggle for social justice and the distribution of wealth were not a moral duty, it should be at least by the simple calculation of its economic and social costs.

3.- What are the proposed solutions?

In order to propose solutions, it is important to be clear about the causes and origins of inequality, which is certainly not an atmospheric phenomenon, nor is it something anthropologically natural, as certain ideological positions try to make us see more or less subtly. Thomas Piketty in his latest book *Capital and Ideology*, historically reviews the justifications and structuring of social inequality from ancient slave societies to current neoliberal ones and dismantles the meritocratic discourse with which they try to justify it. Growing inequality, he concludes, is the fuel that feeds conflict, and its causes are neither economic nor technological but ideological and political.

As indicated above, inequality deconstructs societies, exacerbates distrust of others, generates individualistic and liquid communities, and ultimately deactivates any process of a transformative and emancipatory nature. And it is precisely because the process is designed in this way by the neoliberal 'think tanks' that it is so difficult to put into practice measures that we all have in mind, such as fair tax systems in which those who have more pay more, that put an end to the so-called tax havens, that put an end to the opacity of the financial system that allows them, investments in basic public services such as health and education, laws that guarantee and protect the social advances achieved, such as public pensions and labour rights, gender policies, Universal Basic Income? All of these measures can be implemented almost overnight because they are technically and materially perfectly possible. They only depend on political decisions and these are taken on the basis of social pressure.

And therein lies the difficulty. Neoliberalism, through fear, has imposed itself culturally and is taking over the institutions. The role of uncertainty, as Keynes warned, shapes and determines our position in the face of what is happening. Almost unconsciously, we have assumed the excessive greed of a few, conveniently disguised as progress, as the engine that drives our societies. We have been led to believe that economics is science when in reality it is a belief that, as with religions, turns thinkers into believers. This unbridled capitalism has seamlessly occupied the horizon of what is thinkable and has done so while generating endless wars, environmental catastrophes that are endangering our subsistence as a species and unprecedented levels of inequality, among other achievements.

Such is the cultural hegemony achieved with the support of the mainstream media that, as Groucho Marx said in *Goose Soup*, we believe more what we are told than what we see with our own eyes. The 'fact kills story' has been pulverised. Never have so many reports been published warning about the increase in inequality, its causes and consequences, from the Ombudsman to FOESSA, including such unsuspecting entities as Cáritas and Intermón Oxfam. The answer: either they are ignored or those who produce them are disqualified as dangerous and destabilising, depending on who is in power at the time. And if something goes wrong or threatens to go wrong, there is always the option, never better said, of low fare.

What can we do? At Attac we are always proactive. First, be aware of the situation. Do not lose heart. Try to recover the story and do it projecting the future. Science fiction has always been inspired by science to create plots, but nowadays there has been a reversal and it is science that is inspired by science fiction. Let us be able to imagine a different future whose story shapes and transforms our culture, our beliefs and our way of seeing the world and we will begin to take steps to transform reality. Expressed more prosaically, as a graffiti on a wall in Buenos Aires put it: 'less realities and more promises'.

If we are talking about inequality, let's start by demanding a Universal, individual, unconditional and sufficient Basic Income. It is financially possible, as various studies and proposals have shown. Its first consequence would be the eradication of poverty and the reduction of inequality, but it would also affect many other areas such as protection against labour abuses, citizen participation, access to social rights and the possibility of deciding what kind of life we want to lead and with whom we want to do it, among others.

Why Universal Basic Income, a reformist measure? Because of its transformative potential. It would generate a positive political feedback process. We would be more socially and politically concerned.

As César Rendueles explains in his book *Against equal opportunities. An egalitarian pamphlet*, the more equality we achieve, the more and better equality we want. It transforms us, it radically alters the way we see ourselves and our relationship with others. When we think of ourselves as equals, increases in autonomy generate renewed aspirations for recognition as we deepen our sense of our own dignity. Economic equality can be many things but it surely means understanding the economy as something that happens as we bathe our young children as much or more than when we produce energy or consumer goods.

We are not going to storm the skies. It is just about starting to re-appropriate our future, which is no small thing.

