

# Equality and difference: a conceptual discussion mediated by the counterpoint of inequalities

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## ABSTRACT

This article attempts to clarify and discuss two concepts, difference and inequality, in its complex relation with the concept of equality. The intention is to consider the historicity and reciprocal relations between the three concepts, and mainly the displacements between the axis of inequality and the plane of difference. The starting point is the semiotic analysis of the three notions. In one of the article's sessions, some dystopic movies and literary works are briefly discussed as examples that can help in the understanding of some of the real problems of inequalities in our societies. The article's conclusion approaches the problem of indifference, a new concept that completes a semiotic square with the four concepts in reciprocal relations.

## KEYWORDS

equality; inequality; difference.

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## *IGUALDADE E DIFERENÇA: UMA DISCUSSÃO CONCEITUAL MEDIADA PELO CONTRAPONTO DAS DESIGUALDADES*

### RESUMO

O artigo busca esclarecer e discutir dois conceitos, desigualdade e diferença, em sua ligação complexa com o conceito de igualdade. A intenção é considerar suas relações recíprocas e a historicidade de cada uma das expressões e, principalmente, os deslocamentos entre o eixo da desigualdade e o plano da diferença. O ponto de partida é a análise semiótica das três noções. Algumas construções fílmicas e literárias de distopias são brevemente discutidas como exemplos que podem favorecer a compreensão das desigualdades em nossas sociedades reais. O desfecho do artigo aborda o problema da indiferença, um novo conceito que completa um quadrado semiótico com os quatro conceitos em relações recíprocas.

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

igualdade; desigualdade; diferença.

## *IGUALDAD Y DIFERENCIA: UNA DISCUSIÓN CONCEPTUAL MEDIADA POR EL CONTRAPONTO DE DESIGUALDADES*

### RESUMEN

Este artículo intenta aclarar y discutir dos conceptos, diferencia y desigualdad, en su compleja relación con el concepto de igualdad. La intención es considerar la historicidad y las relaciones recíprocas entre los tres conceptos, y principalmente los desplazamientos entre el eje de la desigualdad y el plano de la diferencia. El punto inicial es el análisis semiótico de las tres nociones. En una de las sesiones del artículo, se discuten brevemente algunas películas y obras literarias distópicas como ejemplos que pueden ayudar a la comprensión de algunos de los problemas reales de las desigualdades presentes en nuestras sociedades. El final del artículo conduce el enfoque al concepto de indiferencia, un nuevo concepto que completa un cuadrado semiótico que dispone los cuatro conceptos en relaciones recíprocas.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

igualdad; desigualdad; diferencia.

We might define the subject of this study — a follow-up of my lecture presented at the 38th Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Educação (ANPEd) National Conference — as a problematized discussion about the concepts of inequality, difference and equality, as well as the potential interrelations amongst them. In particular, we will approach the contrasts and movements that might occur between inequalities and differences, mainly the situations wherein the differences are treated as inequalities and vice-versa. We claim that there are often all kinds of concrete and symbolic violence and oppression present in the movements and transformations of differences into inequalities, or the other way around. To evidence the contrast between the concepts of inequality and difference, we will also discuss other parallel topics, such as utopias and dystopias, as well as point out some historical examples. Finally, we will search the concept of indifference to complete what we call here the *semiotic square of inequalities and differences*.

## UNEQUAL AND DIFFERENTIATED SOCIETIES

We all live in unequal and differentiated societies. The more general the context of human life in the contemporary world, more continuous is the perception of this condition. In fact, during the past two centuries, the perception of movements — almost always harmful — between the concepts of inequality and difference has been intensified in human sciences and society as a whole. Moreover, the visibility of the unequal and differentiated aspects of our societies is also increasing, which may be explained by the contribution of several technologies developed between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, such as photography, radio, television, computers, internet, and digital resources. Nowadays, we clearly perceive inequality and difference in large scale, as well as the interconnections and movements between them, both locally and globally. Therefore, in our viewpoint, the need for continuous discussion about these two concepts and their potential relations seem to be a quite relevant requirement.

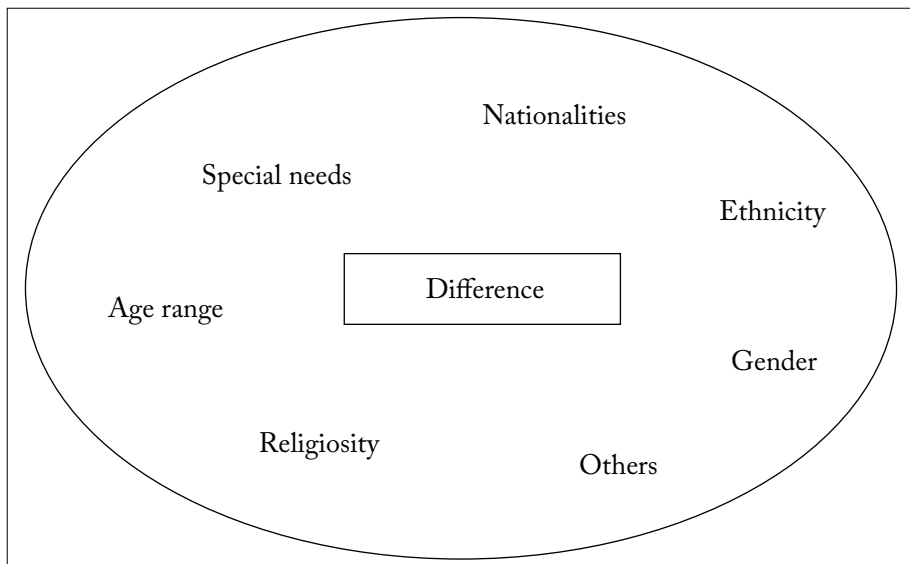
It is not new to say that most historically known societies, everywhere and in all times, have been produced as systems where most of their inhabitants have to simultaneously resist social inequalities and fight for the right to affirm their differences. In the long run, the standard is societies full of privilege or unequal constraints regarding distinct social groups — either defined or definable by categories such as social classes, caste, or others — and however varied be the mechanisms used to establish these groups, such as the economic factors which rule capitalist societies, or family and bloodline distinctions which structured several ancient and medieval societies. Likewise, when we evoke Native American societies or indigenous peoples from other parts of the world as counterexamples of societies where social stratification is mitigated, we still find entrenched inequalities in them: gender inequality, constraints imposed to different age ranges, negligence and prejudice against the disabled, inequalities toward people

with differentiated looks in relation to the more usual, standard ones. So we can ask ourselves: has there been, until now, a society that has not been affected, from top to bottom and from side to side, to a greater or lesser degree, by social inequalities of any kind?

We can and should obviously dream of societies literally without inequalities, but, so far, this can only be part of a utopic horizon. Nevertheless, it is possible to think about social actions, legal achievements, solidarity tools, and social projects to minimize inequalities. Meanwhile, we also live in a world full of differences — a positive and stimulating aspect of human life, we believe. As far as differences are concerned, social struggles are usually meant to improve the right to empower them. Between inequalities and differences, the wider picture of unequal and differentiated societies throughout history have been constantly redesigned and renewed. The unequal and the different, we may say, have long taken the main scenario in most social formations, staging an eternal contradance, whose steps echo everywhere.

Let us consider the great variety of differences in the human and social world we live in, evoking some preliminary examples. The world of difference is depicted in Figure 1, in which one we can see various types of differences, such as nationality, ethnicity, genre, age range, religiosity, and physical characteristics. On the other hand, the world of inequality is represented by Figure 2, which shows several forms of inequality as well.

When talking about inequality in a capitalist society, the first aspects that come to mind are economic inequalities, which evoke the notions of poverty

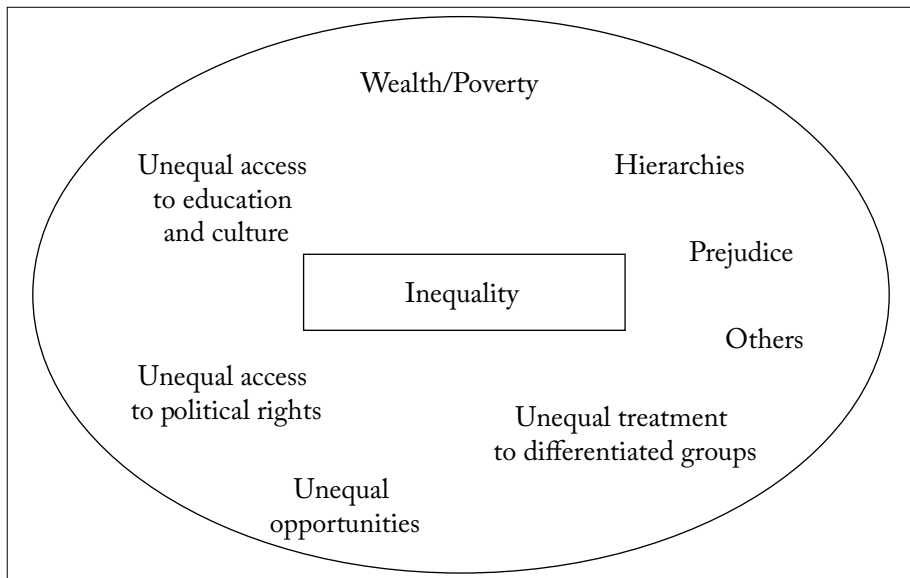


**Figure 1 – Examples of difference.**  
Author's elaboration.

and wealth. However, there are also unequal job opportunities, unequal access to education and culture, several types of hierarchy, prejudice, and particularly the unequal treatment toward differentiated groups. By the way, the latter allows us to see very clearly that there is a possible, but not necessary, interconnection between the world of difference and the world of inequality. The contrast between the unequal and the different, and their eventual interactions, will be further discussed.

Aside from inequality and difference, a third concept — equality — also lives in the human imagination in the political, social, economical, religious and literary world. The human nature that is common to everyone — regardless of the social inequalities we have endure or the differences we have to fight for — makes human beings think about social equality as one of their main values. Thus, the overlapping worlds of the unequal and of the different are intersected by the concept of equality all the time. The most peculiar aspect is that both the dichotomy between equality and inequality and the dichotomy between equality and difference can be seen as opposing conceptual pairs. However, if equality can be confronted both in relation to inequality and in relation to difference, these oppositions involve the configuration of fields with totally distinct meanings in each case.

This article aims to propose a more specific, distinctive concept between inequality and difference, and show how they interact with each other and with the concept of equality. We claim that the increasing need to work on the precision of these two concepts — and the types of pos-



**Figure 2 – Examples of inequality.**  
Author's elaboration.

sible oppositions allowed in relation to the concept of equality — have become imperative in the modern era, in particular from the 20<sup>th</sup> century on. However, our intention is not to provide an overview of the authors' stances about this matter, but rather propose a specific approach to the three concepts. It is beyond the scope of this article to historically map or examine the increasing demand of a better understanding of the distinction between the concepts of inequality and difference as of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and more intensely the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, these issues deserve further study in other opportunities.

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century was mentioned, we would like to remind the renowned excerpt from the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1792-1778) — *Discurso sobre a origem e os fundamentos da desigualdade entre os homens* (1754) — who argues that “nature makes men equal, but society makes them unequal”. In sequence, he adds:

I argue there are two types of inequality in the human species: one, which I call natural or physical inequality, because it is established by nature, which consists of the difference of ages, health, physical strengths and qualities of spirit or soul; the other, which can be called moral or political inequality, because it depends on a type of convention established or, at least, authorized by men's consent. (Rousseau, 1978, p. 235-260)

Nowadays, Rousseau would possibly not sustain this argument in terms of a parallelism between two kinds of inequality — natural and moral — but rather between two orders: differences and inequalities. What Rousseau calls natural inequalities — age, physical characteristics, and others — include what we may now call differences (though there are not only natural differences, but all types of cultural differences as well). Political inequalities (as well as economic and social inequalities) consist of inequalities per se. Here, we present two distinct orders: the order of differences and the order of inequalities, each one opposed to the single notion of equality, which will be detailed further in the article. Maybe Rousseau could have made, if this was a conceptual demand of his own time, a little more complex statement, such as:

Nature made men equal as to their humanity, and different as to their characteristics and peculiarities; Society, on the other hand, besides adding new differences, instituted the aspect of inequalities in the human world. (adapted from Rousseau)

In order to support the more complex statement above, we would like to point out that, even back in Rousseau's time, the authors of *Encyclopedia* claimed that, despite all natural differences and several social inequalities produced in the political world, there is also a natural equality, which included all men and women in a common human nature.

In the *Enciclopédia* words, it is possible to think of a “human nature” that is “common to all men which are born, grow up, survive and die in the

same way” (Jaucourt, 2015, p. 201).<sup>1</sup> That is, beyond a myriad of differences established at birth and throughout the life development of each specific human being, and despite the various inequalities that may be established through the social and political world, there is a minimum human condition that equal all individuals. For example, everyone undergoes the experience of death and birth. Although we are born and die in unequal conditions of comfort and medical assistance, everyone is predestined to be born and die. Likewise, even if human beings have distinct movement possibilities at their disposal as to their health circumstances and socioeconomic condition, the laws of the physical world act equally upon them. Moreover, if in any instance there are distinct airs to be breathed and environments subject to more or less pollution and insalubrities, the essential need to breathe unifies the human race. Up to a minimum limit, there is an unwavering human equality above all types of differences and social inequalities.<sup>2</sup>

## EQUALITY, INEQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE

There is a subtle distinction between these two contrasts. When considering the pair “equality vs. difference”, we must have in mind the order of the modalities of being: one thing is either equal to another, at least in a certain aspect, or it is different from it. In a set of a certain number of individuals, for example, their equality or difference regarding sex, professional, ethnic aspects etc. seem evident. The opposition between equality and difference under a semiotic perspective belongs to the order of the contraries, involving two modalities of opposed beings.

It is worth pointing out that, although we place the dichotomy between equality and difference in the modalities of being, we are not referring to essentialist theories here. According to this semiotic argument, the being is neither previously given nor remains immobilized after its constitution. As we will see later, even if the differences are established in the modality of being, they are also still subject to historic duty and the cultural world. They are historic and social constructions even with the differences seen as natural at first sight, such as genders and age, as well as all types of cultural differences such as religiosity, nationality, and many others.

1 This discussion can be found in the *Encyclopédia* under the entry “natural equality”, signed by philosopher Louis de Jaucourt (1704-1779).

2 There is a disagreement in naming between Rousseau and Jaucourt. What Rousseau calls “moral or political inequalities” are those established among men by convention and circumstances of social and political life. He opposes them to the “physical or natural inequalities”. Jaucourt talks about “natural or moral equality” to name this minimum natural human condition that is common to all men and women. He also claims that, in the face of the natural condition inherent to all human beings, there is or there should be a kind of moral responsibility guided by conscience and understanding that, at the furthest limit, we are all naturally equal (and morally solidary and responsible for one another).

Let us now turn to the distinction between the kinds of opposition involved in the contrasts relative to “equality and difference” and “equality and inequality”. While the contrast between equality and difference is placed in the plan of being, the contrast between equality and inequality refers, in most cases, not to an essential aspect, but rather to a circumstance, even if such circumstance is apparently perpetuated inside certain political systems or specific social situations. Moreover, inequality needs to be always considered in relation to any aspect, and we can compare it between two or more individuals or among social groups. Two or more individuals are treated equally or unequally in relation to some aspect or right, as long as one or the other is being granted more privileges or constraints. This can happen regardless of their being equal or different as far as sex, ethnicity, or profession is concerned. If it is true that women have unequal treatment in relation to men in job opportunities, that is, a case of gender inequality, it is also possible to give unequal treatment to two men with the same essential characteristics (age, profession etc.). Thus, inequality and difference are not necessarily interdependent notions, though they may retain well-defined relations in certain social and political systems.

Different from the opposition by contraries established between equality and difference, the opposition between equality and inequality belongs to the order of contradictions. While contradictions are always circumstantial, contraries are opposed on the level of the modalities of being. Contradictions are generated inside a process, have a history, and come out in a certain moment or situation. In particular, we can say that contradictory pairs are dialectically integrated in the processes they emerge from. On the other hand, contraries do not mix (love and hate, truth and lie, equal and different), and thus mark very clearly the abyss between them. We will soon discuss the relevant implications of the distinction between contraries and contradictions.

For the purpose of this article, we claim that differences are inherent to both the human and natural world. Overall, the occurrence of all kinds of differences in the social world is linked to its own diversity, which integrates human beings concerning both their personal characteristics (sex and age) and external issues as well (a hometown or a citizenship linked to a country, for example). It seems obvious that there will always be men and women, several ethnic variations, and individuals of several ages and professions. On the other hand, if the differences are inevitable and desirable, we can expect them to be socially treated with less inequality one day. Therefore, social struggles are not oriented to eliminate differences, but rather to eliminate or minimize inequalities.

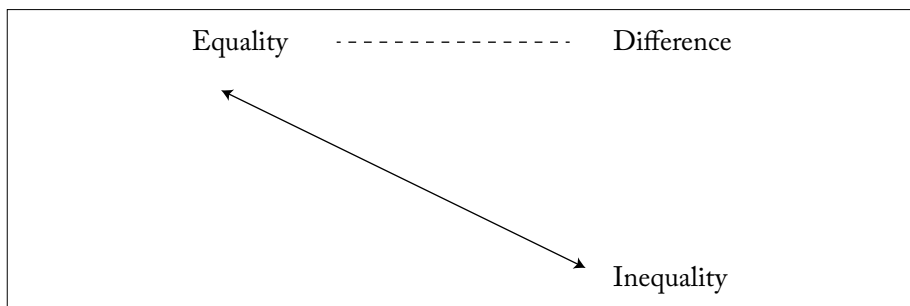
In addition, something that obliges us to talk about circumstances when we minding questions related to inequality is the fact that any inequality imposed to a group or individual is subject to historic circumstantialities that are reversible in the last instance. The human group deprived of certain rights can reverse its situation through their own social actions, as well as the actions of



others. Meanwhile, in the world of differences, we would have an overwhelming reality concerning the biologic opposition between men and women, even if it is presented as more complex through the occurrence of other sex differentials. Thus, human beings are subject to go through different ages with no possible reversibility, and we cannot fight this, even in cases where it is possible to minimize or postpone the gradual effects of the passing of time on the human body. To illustrate what has been discussed so far, we would like to present below a preliminary semiotic triangle (Figure 3), which corresponds to a half semiotic square that will be completed later.

In this triangle, equality is horizontally related to difference in a coordinate of contraries referred to the plan of the modalities of the being. On the other hand, equality is also diagonally related to inequality through an axis of contradictions referred to the plan of circumstances. The indication of bi-laterality (the line with two arrows), in the contradictory axis of the relation between equality and inequality shows that these poles are self-reversible, and that there is a possible movement along the equality axis. In turn, there is no possible reversibility in the coordinate of opposition related to equality and difference, in general; furthermore, all movements on the plain of differences must appear through jumps to another position. In short, inequalities are all reversible concerning changes of state; quite contrarily, the reversibility of differences must occur only occasionally. Overall, when there is a change of one difference to another (for example, a change of one nationality to another), it happens through a jump movement to another position, instead of a displacement through the spectrum of gradations.

We will now give some examples to illustrate the aspects related to gradations and the possibilities of reversibility affecting the axis of inequalities. Let us consider wealth first. Between the wealthiest man and the most miserable one — the one deprived of any assets at all — there can be all possible gradations and situations in which the wealthiest man loses his wealth and even faces poverty, or those in which ones the poor man can increasingly accumulate wealth and become rich. The inequality related to wealth allows reversibility and gradations between its extremes. Similar arguments



**Figure 3 – Semiotic equality triangle.**  
Author's elaboration.

can apply to inequality related to freedom of movement. On the one hand, there is a man who can go everywhere (the one who hypothetically holds the most power, wealth, and prestige) and, on the other hand, there is a man who cannot go anywhere (as, for example, a prisoner in solitary confinement). Between these extreme limits, there are gradations and reversibilities (the dictator can be arrested, and the prisoner can be released one day). We could give endless examples to evidence this same behavior concerning inequalities related to freedom of speech, access to goods and services, loss of legal rights, imposition of spatial segregation, and many other situations. Likewise, in the relation between two individuals, or even in the comparison of a same individual in two different moments, several situations show that inequality can only be understood as something relative (strong/weak, educated/uneducated, rich/poor).

Under the sociocultural scope, we can discuss what nationality is. Although it is possible to imagine there are nationalities for all countries in the world, there is not a gradation between the North American and the Brazilian nationalities, or between the Australian and the Chinese nationalities, for example, since these nationalities establish the abyss that separates them as clearly differentiated modalities of being. The individual belongs either to one nationality or to the other. In addition, the change of one of these nationalities to another, or the transference of an individual who migrates from one of these modalities of being to another, does not consist of a gradual process, but rather a jump movement to another place. If anything, an individual is only used to getting himself some benefit only once in life. A similar argument can be developed for religious differences and others.

One again, it is important to point out some exceptions that do not affect the conceptual standard being developed here. In case of differences related to nationalities, cases of double nationality, for instance, refer to two overlapping modalities of being (two differences). There are individuals who hold two legally acknowledged nationalities and others who built their self-image with an overlapping of two essences regarding nationality. There are also individuals who legally belong to one nationality but feel cultural or emotionally part of another (two modalities opposed between the subjective desire and the individual's legal frame). Finally, there are stateless persons, legally deprived of a "national difference", but who can still feel they belong to the nationality being denied to them. Meanwhile, let us consider that all these cases correspond to oscillations and ambiguities that still happen in the plan of differences (of the modalities of being). This does not imply, of course, that differences such as stateless persons do not produce social inequalities in the countries they live in, or that differences such as double nationality do not create specific privileges, which also concern inequalities, that is, inequalities established over differences.

## REDUCING INEQUALITIES AND AFFIRMING DIFFERENCES

The contrast between inequalities and differences also becomes evident when we think about the possibilities of eliminating inequalities and

eliminating differences. Eliminating inequalities, or at least reducing inequalities, is a perfectly possible project, besides being a legitimate horizon. The proposal of eliminating inequalities or, at least, minimizing inequalities, is found everywhere in democratic societies; and the perspective of radically eliminating inequalities corresponds to the well-known example of utopias in literature.

Eliminating differences is a problematic idea. In the real world, it is found in extermination and eugenics projects and, more often, in dystopia. We believe that it is possible to propose a new definition of dystopia from several kinds of relations established between inequalities or differences, or both. There is an example of “radical inequality” dystopia in the film *Metropolis* (1927), which shows a world divided in two unequal parts of humankind: the dominant class living on the surface, and the working class living in the underground. Likewise, the novel by H. G. Wells, *The time machine* (1895), depicts a world divided into a fragile and infantilized part of humankind — the Eloi, who live on the surface — and another brutal part of humanity that lives in the underground: the Morlocks. One difference feeds on the other: while the Morlocks literally devour the Eloi, the Eloi owe their relaxed existence to the work carried out by the Morlocks in the underground.

We can also find interesting dystopias of “planned differences”, as in the work of Aldous Huxley, *Brave new world* (1931), in which one of the differentiated groups are produced by careful genetic engineering. On the other hand, Plato’s *A República* (2016) — as far as utopia or dystopia is concerned — depicts a world wherein the differences are planned through education, a rigorous system in which iron, brass, and gold souls emerge. More recently, this kind of dystopia can be also found in *The divergent series* film trilogy (2016), which shows the world divided into five factions (or five differences, according to our concept): those who work, those who generously make donations to society, those who produce knowledge, those who produce honesty, and those who fight.

One example of dystopia regarding the elimination of gender differences is showed in the film *No men beyond this point* (2015), in which the author-cinematographer speculates on a “world without men”. Although it is not seen as a dystopic work, but rather a reflection developed through a pseudo-documentary, traces of dystopia can be perfectly identified in the film. Comic book lovers can also find a similar example of dystopia in the comic book series *Y: the last man* (2002-2008) (Vaughan, 2002), which focuses on the misfortunes of the only survivor of a male gender in extinction.

An example of utopia that proposes the elimination of some ages is seen in the science fiction film *Logan’s run* (1976). Inspired by a novel with the same name (1967), it depicts a dystopic world wherein no one would ever reach the age of 30, which is only made possible due to a sophisticated system of mass murder to kill everyone older than that. Similarly, there are other examples of dystopias that propose the elimination of ethnic differences.

We can still consider dystopias which, instead of eliminating differences, aim to create new differences, but with the purpose of enslaving them, or any other sinister purpose. This is the case of the film *The island* (2004), directed by Michael Bay, which depicts a small community where its inhabitants do not know they are clones and that, one day, will have their organs extracted to benefit human beings who had originally served as models to them. Let us call this group “dystopias of enslaved differences. They are films or books that introduce scenarios of clones, androids, and robots — new differences created to be somewhat enslaved or exploited. The inversion is also possible, in case of dystopias that ended up being dominated by these new differences and, lastly, reversed the domination game by starting to enslave or, through radical inequality regimes, to exploit the human beings who were once their creators. The film *Matrix* (1999) is one of the most famous examples of this kind of dystopia.

Most of these dystopias share one thing in common: they are nightmares supported by the project of eliminating differences and are mostly based on systems that maximize inequalities. In some of them, on the other hand, differences are submitted to cruel inequalities, or can be even created for a brutal exploitation in order to be submitted to radical inequality.

We will now discuss a brief contrast between utopia and dystopia to help us better understand inequalities and differences and their possible interactions. While the utopic horizon points to the possibility of eliminating social inequalities, the dystopic horizon evokes the perspective of radicalization of inequalities. In addition, while the utopic horizon tends to produce the promotion of differences, the dystopic horizon introduces the perspective of elimination or oppression of differences. Let us put forward this comparison to discuss how disturbing the project of eliminating differences is, and how the perspective of eliminating inequalities sounds already very natural, even if only as an unreachable horizon. In the real and historic world, we often flirt with the utopic horizon, either imaginarily or in an abstract perspective, which is, in most cases, contradicted by the reality of everyday life. At the same time, we often dangerously approach the dystopic horizon, and reality mostly presents itself as more cruel or scaring than a dystopia. Other significant situations may include the Nazi concentration camps or the modern slavery of the slave trade, not to mention other more recent examples.

## MOVEMENTS BETWEEN INEQUALITIES AND DIFFERENCES

We now resume real life. An important aspect to be considered in the history of the relation between difference and inequality is the possibility that a certain contradiction concerning inequalities becomes socially seen as an opposition related to differences. The most famous historic example is the opposition between freedom and slavery. If we consider slavery as the deprivation of freedom, we can immediately locate this pair of contradictions in the circumstantial axe of inequality. A slave is someone who lost their freedom.

Slavery, or the condition of being a free human individual, constitutes each a state, a circumstance (these two notions — slavery and freedom — interact reciprocally as contradictions and not as differences). We can even consider slavery as a radical inequality *per se*. With slavery in the beginning of modern times, we are not so far from the dystopias of the radical inequalities seen in the cinema or literature, such as in the film *Metropolis*. As we are discussing examples of modern Atlantic slavery for now, we will explain the possibilities of movements between inequality and difference.

Social stratification in Colonial Brazil was based on the imaginary movement from the unequal notion of a slave to a coordinate of contraries founded under the perspective of the difference between free men and slaves. In this last perspective, the claim is that an individual does not *become* a slave, but *is* a slave. This radical inequality — slavery — a phenomenon known since ancient times but with distinct characteristics, turned into difference by the Atlantic slave trade in modern times. Treated as a difference in the eyes of the slave trade, slavery is also intertwined with other historically constructed differences. Thus, the black, the African, and slaves all become a single ball of yarn in the logic of colonial modern slavery.

It is no wonder that, in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the abolitionist discourse was committed to reverse this situation, proposing the transference of the notion of slavery from the plan of differences to the contradictory diagonal of inequalities. In the eyes of the abolitionist discourse, a slave should not be seen as someone who was a slave *per se*, but rather as a human being who, subjected to radical inequality, became a slave. To reverse an inequality is easier than to remove a difference.

## WOMAN: GENDER DIFFERENCES AND THE FIGHT AGAINST SEXUAL INEQUALITY

Difference can also be considered a type of inequality in order to meet certain social projects of domination. For example, the opposition between men and women, as seen previously, should necessarily be understood as a contrast between two differences and be placed in the horizontal of contraries. In medieval philosophy, the idea that a woman was an incomplete man (as well as children were an incipient adults) was recurring. In this case, a natural sex difference, or a cultural gender difference, is summarized as an inequality in the source. Similarly, childhood — an age difference — was seen at the time as an age inequality.

The medieval idea that a woman is an incomplete man (*mas occasionatus*) is an Aristotelian legacy, which expanded and gained power in the Middle Ages, particularly in Saint Thomas Aquinas's thought (1227-1274 A.C.).<sup>3</sup> *Summa theologica*

3 This excerpt is in *Summa theologica* I.q. 92, a.1 ad 4. For more about this axiom — *femina est mas occasionatus* —, see Winandy (1978, p. 865-870).

addresses his characterization of the woman as an incomplete man deprived of his essential characteristics, as far as the physical aspects and alleged superior qualities are concerned. Therefore, the woman as a *mas occasionatus* or a “failed male” is seen by Saint Thomas Aquinas as a merely passive container for the man’s reproductive and single power.

The proposals of Saint Thomas Aquinas for the understanding of human sexuality, and the argumentation about the existence of a hierarchical distinction between the two sexes, derive from old classic sources in a well-adjusted combination of two concepts. First, Aristotle’s concept of a “chain of being” (338–322 A.C.), which saves men the maximum degree of metaphysical perfection and relegates women to a secondary role, and second, the concept of “anatomic body parts” promoted by Galeno (129–200 D.C.), a physician and researcher in Ancient Rome. The result is a pattern of perception of both male and female anatomies as variations derived from a physiological and solely male anatomical model, in which male genitals are faced outward, while female genitals are internalized (implying inferiority and incompleteness, according to this model).<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, Aristotle had already a biological approach that established a natural inequality between both sexes from the beginning. According to the Greek philosopher, the unequal difference between male and female genders derives from its own process of fecundation operated by the semen, which naturally seeks to dominate the female reproductive substance. When this domination is fully established and the fertilized egg reaches maturation without flaws, the outcome is the male individual. On the other hand, the woman corresponds to a development that does not achieve completeness. In the Aristotelian perspective, any flaw which occurs in the process — either because of the semen’s failure to dominate the female reproductive substance or any other reason — results in an “unfinished” or “frustrated” male, or, most properly, a woman.<sup>5</sup>

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4 According to Lacker in *La Fabrique du Sex* (1992), the one-sex model predominated until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when another project emerged, wherein male and female genders as seen as clearly differentiated regarding their anatomic and physiological aspects (Ceccarelli, 1999, p. 2). On the other hand, in the following centuries, the attempts to consider the female genitals as a graphic representation of male genitals did not disappear totally. The anatomy of the clitoris, for example, is still compared to the penis to this day. In Letter 75, Freud claimed that the clitoris was an erogenous masculine zone present in the feminine body. “For at that period [puberty] a further sexual zone is partly or wholly extinguished in females, while it persists in males. I refer to the male genital zone, the region of the clitoris, in which, during childhood, sexual sensitivity seems to be concentrated in girls as well as boys” (Freud, 1990, p. 371).

5 Aristotle believed that, in the fertilization process, the semen always sought to dominate the female reproductive organ. If successful, it would produce a male child. In half of the cases though, the semen itself was dominated, either because it was weak or because the female substance stopped its action or any other reason. In this case, a female child was born (Winandy, 1978, p. 865–870).

As to the implications of what now seems to be an odd perspective about the sexes, nature itself would have treated human beings unequally at the origin, creating complete and incomplete beings. Therefore, a natural hierarchy is created, reinforcing social and political hierarchies in which the complete being — the man — is in a higher position than the incomplete one — the woman. In fact, this ancient and medieval ideology about gender distinctions and relations did not disappear totally in medieval times, but still prevailed somehow until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> It was only in the Age of Enlightenment that a more conscious and detailed systematization of the anatomic and physiologic differences between the sexes was considered for the first time: the woman was no longer seen as derived from the man, or as an “incompleteness” of the man, which allowed some of the Enlightenment philosophers to denaturalize sex inequality and acknowledge the need for women’s social and political space. Even then, after a relatively short period of assessing women’s differences in the French Age of Enlightenment, there were still several authors who supported, more inflexibly, the idea of the incompleteness of the woman in relation to man, or the existence of a natural sex inequality.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), one of the most misogynist modern philosophers, is the author of several essays that promote a view of gender relations based on the displacement of sex differences from de plain of differences to a supposed plain of sex inequalities, which he considered natural ones. The philosopher often expresses a conception of the female sex as “naturally unequal” (and not only “naturally different”) in relation to the male sex:

For nannies and teachers in our early childhood, women presented themselves particularly as adequate, since they are childish, foolish, and short-sighted. In short, they are big children: a species of intermediate stage between child and man, this one a real person. (Schopenhauer, 2004, p. 7)

As is clear in this excerpt, Schopenhauer considers the female, as well as the childhood levels of human development, both as inequalities in relation to the adult man. Other unequal perspectives support his misogynistic philosophy, such as the text in which he states that “[the woman] is above all, a short-sighted mind, as far as her intuitive intelligence sees accurately what is close, but on the other hand, she has a narrow vision cycle, in which what is distant stays out; that is why everything which is absent, which is past or is yet to come, acts upon women much more weakly than on us (Schopenhauer, 2004, p. 14).

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6 In the Renaissance, some authors identify the emergence of a differentiated perception between both sexes, going beyond the model of the single pattern with two variants. See Bourdieu (2005).

Whether the primary foundations of a contrast between sexes based on differentiation and not on natural inequality — a subject that till needs to be more systematically investigated by scholars — were in the Renaissance or in the Age of Enlightenment, the fact is that this possibility to take the discussion about sex genders to the plan of differences was a very important step to improve women's rights and no longer keep them in an alleged plan of natural inequalities imposed by nature in the origin or by an unequal God. Here, the symbolic violence that arises from the treatment of difference as inequality is removed, and, therefore, we can now discuss the problem of undifferentiation, the subtle gesture to disregard differences to impose inequalities, as we shall see further.

Undoubtedly, if it is possible to identify a male bias in literature, which changes female difference into natural inequality, it is also possible to consider the opposite: an anti-male bias in literature, which conceives the male gender as inferior to the female one. There is at least one well-known discourse that inverts the Aristotelian thought and scholastic principle that states that the woman is the incomplete man, and, quite contrarily, claims that the man is really the one who is an incomplete woman. It comes from the American feminist activist Valerie Solanas (1936-1988), who published the *SCUM Manifest* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century:

Man is a biological accident. The Y gene (masculine) is an incomplete X gene (feminine), that is, an imperfect set of chromosomes. In other words, man is an incomplete female, an abortion with legs, failed in the gene phase. Being a man is being deficient, emotionally limited; masculinity is a disease and men are emotionally weak beings. (Solanas, 2004, p. 2)

In addition to turning idea of natural inequality between sexes around against the male gender, the feminist author also proposes an ideal society not controlled by men and run exclusively by women. In its most perfect and best form, men are eliminated and women can finally live in a world of equality according to the feminist principles they advocate. Once again, we approach the dystopic horizon of elimination of differences. The author does not propose the elimination of gender inequalities but, literally, the elimination of one of the sex differences.<sup>7</sup>

## THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DIFFERENCES

Another relevant issue worth pointing out, which can be often misunderstood, is that inequalities are always circumstantial and historical. It does not

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<sup>7</sup> Some analysts consider the *SCUM Manifesto* a satirical piece with the purpose of attacking patriarchal society, but many see the manifesto as a literal and effective statement. Although the acronym SCUM stands for "Society for Cutting Up Men" in the manifesto, it can also refer to the English term "scum" meaning "slag" or "riffraff".



mean, however, that differences are not also historical constructions. We claim that differences are historical and social constructions in two ways: on the one hand, there is an external social construction of differences while, on the other hand, there is an internal social construction of such differences. In the external construction, society decides which differences will be relevant to compose the more general picture of the socially perceived differences. At the same time, each difference is also internally constructed under several perspectives and is constantly renewed.

Even if there are differences clearly perceived as natural, we should consider that, on most occasions, the social selection of what is regarded as relevant differences is in itself also a historical product, even in its so-called natural aspects. Apart from sex and age differences, which seem to impose themselves naturally in the foreground, there is a great diversity of biological specificities that are not socially perceived or appraised, while others can be. Why are differences of skin color socially selected as marked differences in modern societies, even causing prejudice and identity formation, but, for example, differences of blood types are not? In his huge diversity inside the species, all human beings present various differences among themselves and various grouping possibilities. These endless distinctions can be either part of an apparently natural order, or a clearly cultural one. However, not all natural and cultural differences are, in fact, considered social differences, as some of them often remain only as simple distinctions that do not create effective groupings, stratifications, mechanisms of discrimination, affirmation of social identity, and so on. Some of the many differences that may emerge among individuals come from nature. Nevertheless, the perception and selection of some of these natural differences in order to transform them into criteria that significantly affect the social life of individuals and population groups belong to the cultural sphere.

The most controversial aspect is still race, and we will use it to illustrate the internal construction of differences. According to the scientists who retrieved the biological history of humankind through the Human Genome Project,<sup>8</sup> it seems increasingly evident that race is simply a circumstantial concept. There have always been tendencies and attempts to divide humanity into race groups — in 3, 5, thirty or even in thousands of micro-races (Olsen, 2001, p. 48). Nevertheless, these divisions have always consisted of arbitrary acts, no matter how their perception is entrenched in men and women in society, and how this have allowed them to be intensively lived in the social relations.

The social construction of the concept of black, as opposed to white, does not come from nature at all. It is not really a natural difference, but rather

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8 The Human Genome Project was founded by James D. Watson in 1990, supported by an initiative of the US Department of Energy. Then, several laboratories in the world joined the project.

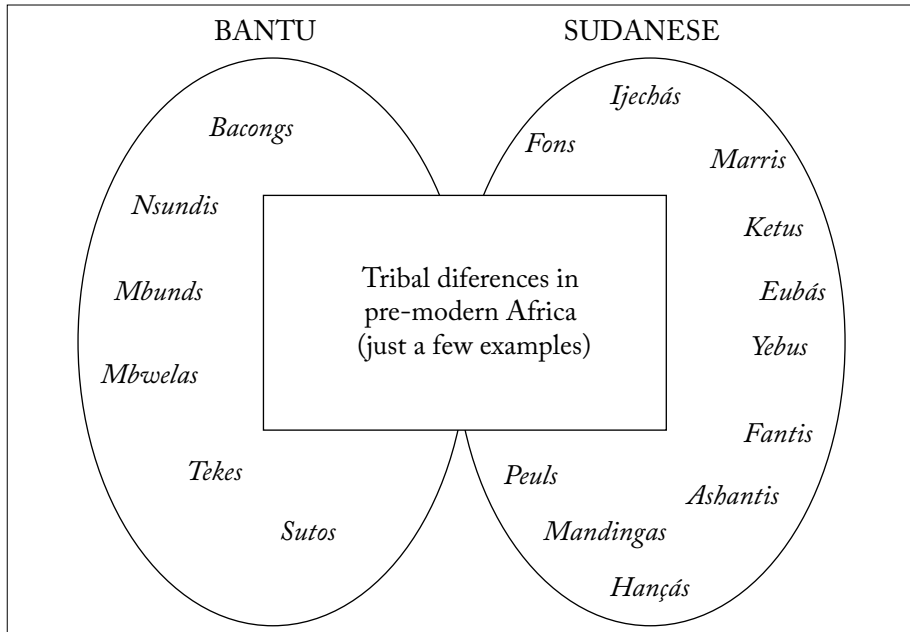
a cultural and historical one, however much we have been used to it in modern societies. Let us consider sub-Saharan Africa in the early modern period. The African continent was then inhabited, as it is today, by a large number of ethnicities, each one with its own language, customs, and identity patterns. Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the original inhabitants of Africa did not see themselves — neither the other inhabitants of Africa — as black. In fact, black was a white construction, since Africans surely saw themselves as belonging to very different and often reciprocally hostile ethnic groups. Africa was a universe shared and disputed by several ethnicities that acknowledged and differed themselves from one another. Many of them were used to being at war with one another and, as a sub-product of war, the defeated were often enslaved and inserted in a local system of captives, being kept apart from their original communities. These internal forms of slavery previously existent in Africa were used by the European colonizers to create a new Atlantic system of race-based slavery. Within the limitations of this study, discussing the details of this history is beside the point, but we also highlight that the rivalries and ethnic differences that already existed in Pre-Modern Africa were skillfully exploited in the development of the African border of slave trade, which, in fact, was run not only by the Europeans, but also by individuals coming from Africa itself (Figure 4).

The original division by tribal differences of the African peoples also went through other sociocultural scrambles and identity entanglements due to the slave trade. As the prisoners from the tribal fights were arrested in several points in Africa — and then taken to specific ports in Angola, Congo, and other places where the commercial slave trade warehouses were located — we can see here the emergence of the so-called “ethnicities from the slave trade”. For instance, the Condolese or the Angolan ethnicities did not exist in Africa. This “ethnic” identity emerged with the slave trade. However, this did not prevent new identities from being formed, nor the Africans transferred to the Americas for compulsory work from reconsidering their idea of belonging to these diasporic ethnicities, or even new rivalries and hostilities among black slave groups from emerging, due to their definition according to these new differences (Figure 5).

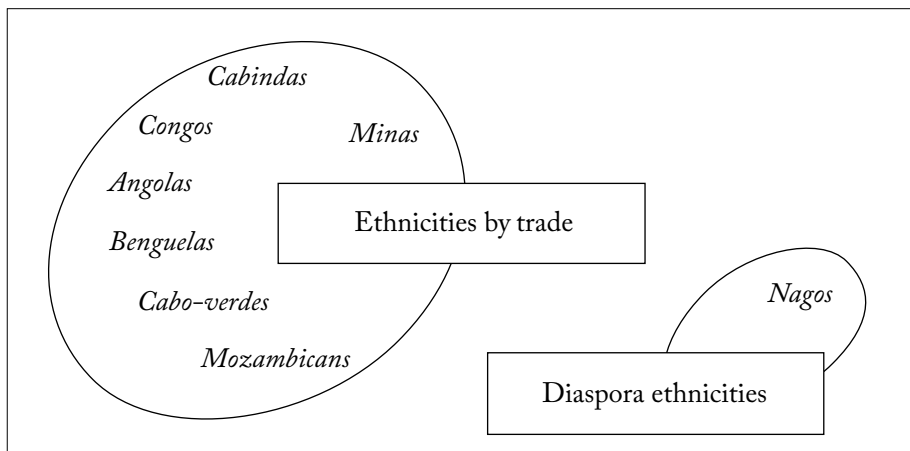
By the way, black peoples from Africa did not see themselves as Africans either. Africa was also a European construction. For example, the African macro-regions — the north, center, south and east parts, as well as the Atlantic coast — were perceived by their inhabitants as much differentiated geographic and cultural regions. The European white man was the first to evaluate these peoples from an ethnic and continental identity framed in a single place, since this issue was not posed for the Black Africans then.

The deconstruction of the diversity of black ethnicities and different African cultural realities, throwing them into a single race located in a single, large space, imaginarily homogeneous, in addition to being perceived as inferior by this part of humankind, was the first step in this process. At the same time, Africa was also considered as removed from civilization, and a new concept

of slave was built. These aspects constituted the ideological background of the construction of the slave system in the Americas. Several historically construed inequalities and differences were thus interwoven to support one of the most cruel domination system history has ever seen.



**Figure 4 – Examples of African ethnicities.**  
Author's elaboration.



**Figure 5 – Ethnicities created by trade.**  
Author's elaboration.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the contribution of the Swedish naturalist Lineu (1707-1778), efforts were made to categorize humankind into large races (white, black, yellow, and red), and to consolidate the perspective that individuals from the various sub-Saharan peoples belonged to a single black race. On the other hand, 19<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882) contributed to impose and consolidate a hierarchy that extended above those racial differences that arose from the slave trade. The book in which Gobineau developed his system is called *The inequality of human races* (1853-1855). This is a meaningful title for the arguments discussed here on the movements and interactions between inequalities and differences. The author does not develop his ideas in terms of different human races, but rather uses the idiomatic expression “unequal human” races, advocating, consequently, a natural hierarchy of human races and somehow a naturalization of inequality. Nature, in his viewpoint, created “unequal races”, not different races.

Over time, the imaginary contrast between a white race and a black race, among others, was consolidated and extended beyond the slavery period. Nowadays, we can talk about a Black Movement which fights against prejudices that are still present in our society, and which is radically opposed to social inequalities created by the historic slavery heritage. In this new context, being identified as black (or to affirm this difference) is part of a liberation stance (fight against inequality). In the past, the ideological construction of the notion of a black man served for the domination purposes of European men.

Modern Biology, History, and Anthropology have contributed to a critical debate about the concept of race. To acknowledge that races do not exist — or that they are cultural and historical constructs — does not mean to deny the social existence of racism. Even if races do not exist biologically, racism exists simply because it is construed and renewed daily by the dominant perception of a world whose population is distributed in races. Therefore, the scientific notion of race — prone to be unauthorized by modern scientific fields — is hand in hand with the sociological notion of race supported by social movements that fight against the so-called racial inequalities. The sociological concept of race thus remain in our everyday life, in social movements, and through achievements in legal and constitutional rights against race and discrimination crimes.

## THE CONTINUOUS RENEWAL OF THE RECONSTRUCTION OF DIFFERENCE

In addition to a social selection of difference, or to an external construction of difference, there is, always and inevitably, an internal construction of difference within each selected or construed difference derived from nature or cultural facts.

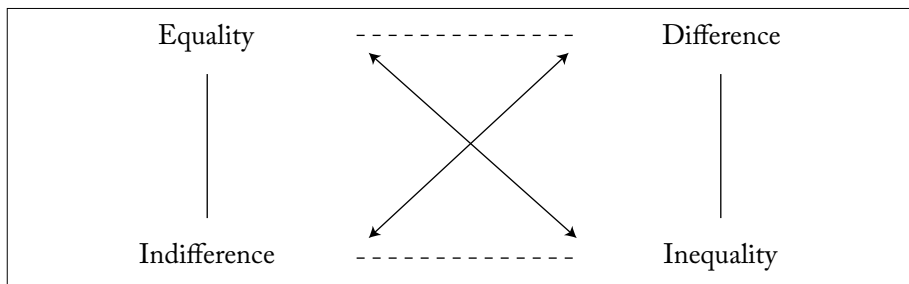
Even when we accept or acknowledge a difference, there is still a final social construction lying in the details according to which each difference is construed mainly in relation to other differences in the same conceptual group. Simone de Beauvoir's quote that "no one is born, but rather becomes, a woman" means that in addition to the biological and physiological aspects of gender differences, each society and culture construes internally what must be demanded from or supported in woman, according to certain behaviors or patterns (Beauvoir, 1967, p. 9). Both historically and culturally, there is a continuous renewal and a possibility of transformations involving what being a woman is in a given society or culture in a particular time.

The game between inequality and difference appears once again in the plan of the internal construction of differences. For example, those who daily insist on age discrimination in the workplace have the habit to reiterate the elderly's poor physical condition, while setting aside positive aspects such as the relevance of experience of the aged worker for a task's required performance.

## INDIFFERENCE

Before, we showed an incomplete Figure 3, which can now be completed to depict a perfect semiotic square with the notion of indifference, considered as contradictory opposition to difference. Indifference or undifferentiation means to ignore, discuss, or despise differences. The complete semiotic square of inequality and difference is presented below (Figure 6).

This semiotic square with the indifference axe included allows us to see equality and difference from other angles. On the one hand, indifference can mean undifferentiation, the deconstruction of oppressive difference (or even inequality) with subsequent elimination of discrimination to restore equality. On the other hand, indifference can be used as a domination strategy to impose deconstruction of unwanted identity patterns, in order to subdue and



**Figure 6 – Semiotic square of indifference.**  
Author's elaboration.

even enslave.<sup>9</sup> In these last cases, the idea of indifference can be used with a negative meaning: to ignore or disregard significant and relevant differences, to be indifferent to something (by alienation or contempt).

It is worth pointing out that indifference, particularly in the negative meaning, can also produce other kinds of social injustice. Let us consider, for example, that a certain part of any population is usually constituted of disabled people, or people with several types of special needs. In this sense, bad indifference reintroduces the problem of inequality in a distinct way. If there were not special platforms for people with impaired physical mobility, they could not reach certain places and would go through an unequal experience. Similarly, if sign language was not used in television programs, most deaf people would be deprived of access to information.

These examples show that not considering differences — that is, being indifferent — may take the problem of social inequality to another level. At schools, most student desks have right-handed tablet arms, assuming that most students are right-handed. There is often at least one left-handed desk out of twenty right-handed ones. If there were not any left-handed desks, left-handed students would face additional difficulty or inconvenience to perform writing activities. In this case, they would experience inequality in relation to accessing such activities.

Discrimination also involves the possibility to treat human beings previously submitted to unequal conditions equally, but only apparently, and in a negative way, which often occurs in detriment to socially underprivileged classes. In this sense, a more delicate issue, involving indifference or the manipulation of indifference and the resistances toward them, is the so-called “affirmative action policies”, implemented more recently in history to fight racism and other forms of discrimination. What are affirmative action policies — like quota systems, which reserve spots in higher education institutions for some discriminated sectors — if not a form of resistance against indifferenciation that happens in the sense of disregard for the effective differences and inequalities, which ends up establishing a kind of inequality that looks like equality?

Affirmative action policies aim precisely to provide a discriminated group with differentiated treatment to compensate for inequalities resulting from racism and other forms of discrimination. This accounts for the use of terms such as “affirmative action”, “positive discrimination”, and “compensatory policies”. The assumption is that, in some cases, giving an apparently undifferentiated treatment to all as to the access to higher education or to the workplace implies that, in fact, some social groups are benefitted at others’ expenses. This explains why, in this damaging conception, the notion that in

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9 This was the case of the process of implementation of the slave trade: by disregarding African ethnicities (tribal differences) through indifferenciation, it turned to the standardization of all enslaved African peoples into a new category, the black.

most societies there are already previous inequalities to be considered in the universe of possibilities of access to higher education or to the workplace is not understood (or is rejected).

In countries where racism exceeds the limits, as in the United States, the habitual conditions of access to the workplace or high quality education poses a difficult problem for Afro-descendants, children and grandchildren of Latin American migrants, and other minorities. That is why some of those countries are pioneers in public policies to promote the inclusion of Afro-descendants, by forcing employers to plan their hiring policies, as well as universities, to implement the quota system, and the media to reserve a certain percentage of representation of minorities. In this theoretical viewpoint, affirmative action policies aim to fight indifferentiation or disregard differences and previous inequalities. In Brazil, where racism is less explicit though equally harmful, the discussion about the need for affirmative policies is still at an early stage.

## FINAL REMARKS

The problem of inequality in the modern world involves several other aspects that are beyond the scope of this study, such as, for example, inequalities on national unit levels. Anyhow, we made an attempt to show that fighting inequality should be preceded first and foremost a very clear and precise understanding of what inequality is in the philosophical, sociological, anthropological, historical and human sense. On the other hand, there are issues related to the fight for affirmation of differences that might be conducted together with the fights against social inequalities regarding ethnicity, age, sex, and other differences. We claim that it is also crucial to understand what distinguishes inequality and difference. As seen here, a more systematic study of the relations and potential interactions between inequality and difference in several social contexts and historical periods — and in several other areas such as sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and education — may allow us a better understanding of how the most subtle or the most explicitly cruel domination systems often make use of several displacements between the ambits of inequality and difference, making one be interpreted as the other, in order to better pursue domination. The relations between inequalities and differences emerge here as real fields of study, demanding their own concept and methodologies.

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*Received on November 23, 2017*

*Approved on January 31, 2018*

