**“Inequality has been the dominant trend in modern history.” Discuss.**

Inequality is currently defined by the United Nations as ‘the state of not being equal, especially in status, rights and opportunities”[[1]](#footnote-1). This concept has been woven into the social fabric of our global society in a myriad of forms, from social to political to economic. From primordial times to the current day, there have always been disparities between different factions and strata in communities small and large. The existence of inequality has proven both essential to the existence of civilizations but also a central cause for their disintegration, and no epoch in humanity’s history has characterized this better than the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, otherwise known as modern history, a period of time where revolutionary upheaval and struggle transpired extensively worldwide.

Its is worth noting that inequalities have been institutionalized into societal structures across the globe for eons, ever since the movement away from small, agrarian, settler communities and the ensuing emergence of complex civilizations, but it was only in more modern times that idea of inequality emerged a central point for debate and conflict. For example, the typical feudal system, widespread throughout Western Europe during the Middle Ages, was based upon principles of distinctive, incontestable discriminations between the lords, vassals, and fiefs. Looking eastward, the plethora of dynasties that ruled over the various regions of India, from the Chola Empire of the 13th century to the Mughal Empire of the 18th century[[2]](#footnote-2), all relied on the Hindu caste system to tightly confine and restrict different groups into tiers under the dogmas of religion, and conscribe each individual to a set role in society. The deep inequities of these systems went somewhat unnoticed by the populations that yielded to them; there were no upheavals for social justice, and precepts of human rights and individual liberties were unheard of.

A huge turning point for humanity was the 18th century Enlightenment, and the birth of the ideals of liberty, freedom and egalitarianism, culminating in the French Revolution, described by Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) as “nothing short of a regeneration of the whole human race”[[3]](#footnote-3). The Enlightenment period saw the norms and values that had governed western European societies for centuries come under intense scrutiny, which historian B.A Haddock argues was an ideological response to “accommodate the vast structural changes of urbanization and industrialization on a new scale [and] unprecedented population increases”[[4]](#footnote-4). Philosophers of the era dismantled the defining tenets of hallowed societal and political institutions, and reasoned that the inequalities in society that were always perceived as inevitable or God-given were no more above questioning then any other matter; as such, Rene Descartes’s ideas of empiricism were elevated to the level of politics and public discourse. As one the greatest of 18th century philosophers, Immanuel Kant, put it, “To everything criticism everything must submit.”[[5]](#footnote-5) For the first time in recorded Western history, the hegemony of political and religious leaders was weakened to a point where citizens had little to fear in making their opinions known, and slowly the idea of the collective rationality of the public constituting as the only legitimate source of political authority grew in popularity. This zealous revolutionary wave of modern day liberalism reached its zenith with the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, which confidently proclaimed that “men were born and remain free and equal”, enjoying “natural and imprescriptible rights”[[6]](#footnote-6). This new inception of ideals came into practice with the French Revolution of 1789-1799, (arguably the beginning of modern history) where, for the first time in Europe, the French monarchy was decimated by its own subjects, after having exerted dominion over the populous for so long based on the tacit assumption that hereditary rule and the inequalities of society were part of a natural or divinely ordained scheme of things. The German historian Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel described the Revolution as a “glorious mental dawn”; indeed, nothing perturbed traditional European establishments more than these new, rallying cries of liberty, equality, and fraternity for all men, everywhere. For the first time, inequality became a recognized obstacle for social justice.

The vindicated revolutionaries of France promulgated their ideals of equality throughout Europe and beyond, but not everyone was liberated so easily when such egalitarian principles were put into practice. Social equality was implemented incrementally across the globe; the 1868 14th Amendment of the American Constitution, for example, made bold avowals that no state shall “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property”[[7]](#footnote-7) but failed to recognise the mutual exclusivity of these principles with the ensuing Jim Crowe Laws that enveloped many southern states; similarly, the Chartist movement of the 1830s in the UK who demanded universal manhood suffrage seemed to neglect the equality of the opinions of the other gender among the British population.

The age of European colonialism during the late 19th and early 20th century was the possibly most striking way in which racial and social inequality prevailed in modern history. Through rampant, ravage expansion imperialists engaged for the first time with diverse social practices and economic relationships around the globe, which affected both ideas and practices of equity in different parts of the world. Inequality was embedded into the administrative machinery used by European empires, in particular the British, to subjugate natives and amass greater territory to enlarge their global clout. Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was manipulated by late Victorian social theorists like Karl Pearson and Benjamin Kidd, who applied the analysis of natural selection to different societies themselves in terms of nations and races rather than just individuals. This theory made inequality an integral dimension to the British colonial empire, as colonialists used this “scientifically sanctioned doctrine”[[8]](#footnote-8), as David Kennedy describes it, and their tangible technological superiority to justify their foreign policies of ‘gunboat diplomacy’ towards countries of desire, and the consequent systematic mistreatment of supposedly barbaric natives. Throughout the years that Britain controlled imperial territories, inhabitants had to suffer the indignity of being treated like inferiors by imperialists. For example, Cecil Rhodes, the entrepreneur and avid imperialist behind the De Beers diamond mining company, contended that the British were “the finest race in the world”[[9]](#footnote-9). He was undergirded his accession and governance of Africa by a fervent messianic ethos that Anglo-Saxons had both the right and duty (the ‘white man’s burden’, according to poet Rudyard Kipling) to dominate over Africa and beyond. This authoritarian conviction paved the way for the violent Boer War against the residents of South Africa in an attempt to assert British dominance, costing the lives of over 22,000 British troops, 25,000 Boers and 13,000 Africans, alongside 27,000 Boer civilians who died interned in the world’s first concentration camps[[10]](#footnote-10). Equally if not more cruel was the treatment of non-white peoples in dependent colonies; in 1942, the excessive exportation of grain to fund the British war effort cost the lives of some four million Bengalis in an state orchestrated famine, with prime minister Churchill leveling the blame upon the “beastly” Bengalis for “breeding like rabbits”[[11]](#footnote-11). This historical racial inequality in the domineering treatment of the British (and other European empires) towards nations of other races, plundering their resources for economic gain and maltreating aboriginals, left a legacy of trauma, division and disarray across many states globally and paved the way for economic and political instability after the withdrawal of colonialists, that would dominate regions like Central Africa, the Middle East and South East Asia for decades afterwards. As such, inequality reared its head again as a theme underlying the imperialist phenomena of modern history, as justification for the imposition of dominion of one society and culture over another.

Although these long-lasting racial inequities were one way in which the theme of social inequality embroiled itself into modern history, with long-lasting effects still tangible today, it is arguably overshadowed by the way in which the theme of economic inequality dominated modern history in the 20th century, inspiring an assortment of sporadic revolutions across the globe of an entirely different sort to that of the French two centuries ago. As globalization and industrialization raucously sprawled forward throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries, nations etched out further inequalities, both domestically in terms of distinct class boundaries, and internationally through the disparities in industrial and technological advancement between nations (effectuated from a previous century of rampant imperialism). Once again an ardent fervor for revolution was engendered, not by philosophers and scientists escaping the wrath of religion and institution, but by the continually disheartened workers at the bottom of social hierarches. They demanded communism, the acme of the crusade against inequality and one of the most fascinating ways that it intertwined itself with a key ideology of the 20th century, contributing both to its rise and demise. Followers and interpreters of Marxist dogma wanted to achieve full, pure equality by pursuing the ideal of freeing persons from inequality through “the dissolution of the individual”, as author Richard Pipes[[12]](#footnote-12) put it, and the abolition of private property. At its zenith, Communism embraced more than a third of the world’s population, including the largest country in the world (Russia), the greatest population in the world (China) and a myriad of other countries, from Vietnam to Angola to Cuba[[13]](#footnote-13), all of which were steeped in the ideology of pure equality. Although Marxist’s founding principle of communism was creating the fairest, most desirable utopian society, Communism in practice mutated into failure, as minority elites like the Bolsheviks of Russia and the Chinese Communist Party slowly jettisoned the basic canons of their theories as they became more suffused with power, and ended up repressing the workers they promised to emancipate. In trying to enforce equality, communist regimes created coercive apparatus that demanded superiority thereby negating this equality. Decades of tumultuous revolutions, sporadic purges of counter revolutionaries, and gross mismanagement from communist governments claimed the lives of over 94 million people in the 20th century, as regimes “turned mass crime into a full-blown system of government"[[14]](#footnote-14) all in the name of ‘achieving communism’. Inequality emerged again, not only as the foremost contradiction of applied communist theory, but also one of the key factors underlying the destruction of the rise of communism- the inequality that citizens of Communist states felt in the late 20th century between their own states and the more globalized, prosperous West whose citizens enjoyed more consumer goods and lavish lifestyles. The communist states’ hollow claims to superiority were superseded by the marked economic slowdowns they experienced during the 1980s, in particular in Eastern Europe- for example, from 1976 to 1988 the Soviet economy grew by an average of 2.0%, compared to 6.7% in the USA[[15]](#footnote-15). Communist citizens across the east felt dissatisfied and disillusioned with their system, which had, through isolation from the prosperous West, been neglected by the positive effects of globalism, and their dissatisfaction at this imbalance contributed in some part to the erosion and eventual decimation of the communist regime. In this way, inequality again acted a key antagonist in the world’s capricious affair with communism, which was indeed “the greatest fantasy of the 20th century”[[16]](#footnote-16).

With these examples, it is evident that inequality is a fluid concept, and has been accepted, utilized and challenged by different societies across different periods in modern history, underlying the key events mentioned and many more, both those related and disparate. By looking at the history of the issues of inequality, one intertwines the study of history with economics, political theory and sociology to explore how disparity and discrimination in society can both be beneficial and detrimental. Inequality can be seen as the dominant trend of modern history in the sense that it has acted as a catalyst, inciting conflicts and revolution by those who feel animosity towards perceived injustices and inequalities in society, far more quickly and powerfully so than in any other era of history, where inequalities were blindly accepted for being immutable. Simultaneously, inequality has also dominated history as a key way in which many government regimes enforced control and power over their societies, through dividing and ruling, enforcing clear social structure, and marginalising undesirable or insignificant groups. The legacy left behind from such history, in terms of the racial prejudice that exists as remnants of colonialist worldviews, is one way in which inequality remains very much an issue of the present as of the past. Similarly, the popularity of Communism is a reminder that although pure socio-economic equality is somewhat unachievable, economic inequality cannot be treated as an afterthought, as those who are neglected from the benefits of growth will not allow for their continual exploitation. The way in which inequality has been manipulated in the past has powerful echoes in today’s society; the atrocities of Empire and the violent revolutions of the oppressed in France show that inequality cannot be allowed to flourish, whereas the devastation that arose from Communism shows that it can never truly be extirpated. Although today’s world need only look back at the recent past to remind us how far we have come in our strive towards eliminating unfair inequality in society and establishing greater fairness and equity, that is not to say we are finished in our pursuit. Far from it; there is still more to be done.

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