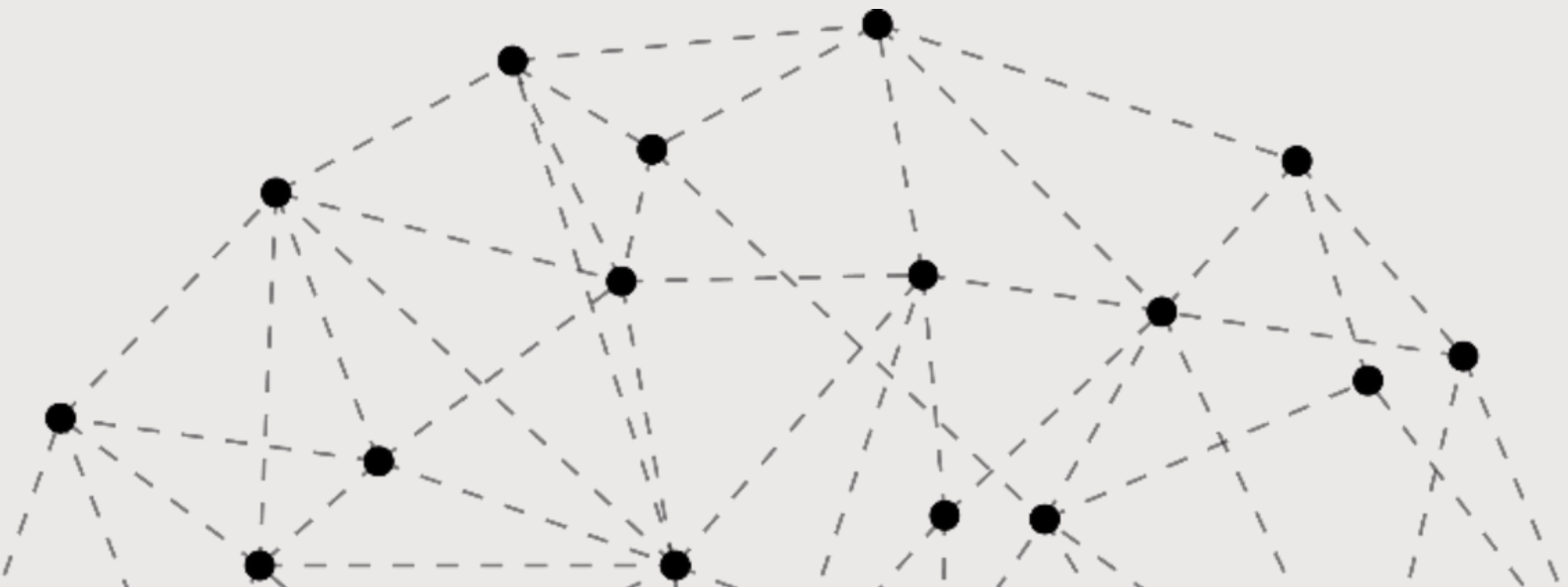


**InterAgency Institute**  
BEYOND INSTITUTIONAL BOUNDARIES

# **INEQUALITIES VERSUS MERITOCRACY: A RHETORIC ABOUT JUSTICE AND OPPORTUNITY**

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## Policy Statement

Social inequalities are difficult to define in the literature, as there is no universal definition or explanation for their emergence or persistence. The key to understanding inequalities is to view them from the perspective of individuals. Individuals absorb reality differently based on their actual interactions. We form our relationship networks due to our primary socialization with our families, as different abilities, preferences, and attitudes are passed down from an early age. It is imperative to consider the family unit when framing individual behavior. Differentiated actions also occur in other contexts: the territory (regions, cities, towns), chosen friends, organizations we belong to, and schools are examples of interactions that influence individual identity.

## Background

Inequalities affect individuals at all levels of their socioeconomic, political, and cultural lives. We live with people who vary in height, eye color, and skin color, among other things. Those characteristics alone do not affect an individual's social position in society or his or her life opportunities. Therefore, social inequalities result from the unequal distribution of goods, services, and opportunities.

It's not just a variable, but variables that impact individual destinies. Social differences between individuals are naturalized in societies, especially when it comes to access to resources, including wealth, income, and school diplomas, which hide the origins of inequalities in the form of social naturalization, especially regarding resources.

In the context of inequalities, life opportunities force individuals to occupy particular places. While explanations suggest inequalities are inevitable (in distributing goods, resources, and power), inequalities seem natural or even necessary. According to Bourdieu, social groups are differentiated by symbolic products that range from arts to letters. Habitus is deeply internalized and does not require individual awareness to function effectively. As a result, habitus leads individuals to adopt practices that reflect their social status. For taste homogenization and class distinctions to be achieved, habits must be embodied (Le Sens Pratic, 1980).

Social opportunities are defined by the deep and invisible mechanisms that demarcate individuals' lives, determining their successes and failures. Meritocracy is commonly used to naturalize these social advantages and disadvantages. As one of the principal indicators of social hierarchy in modernity, meritocracy penetrates social life and has a guaranteed place in public life.

To understand the meaning of meritocracy to social inequality, it is helpful to recall the story of Robson Crusoe, written by Daniel Defoe in 1719. An Englishman abandoned on a desert island, Robson Crusoe has more successes than failures in his story. It suggests that everything can be transformed and that the protagonist is rational and has qualities that reinforce individual effort, resignation, and optimism. As Defoe describes capitalism, a man with good virtues, especially those related to business, will prosper in any environment or society. In contrast, a man with few virtues will remain the same. What is the treatment of "Friday," the second protagonist in the plot?

The example above clarifies the role of meritocracy in society. In meritocracy, success is measured by talent, skill, and effort. In this sense, meritocracy implies that social inequality leads to unequal merits rather than prejudice or social discrimination. Social inequalities and oppression, for example, have reduced racial minorities and low-status classes to underprivileged conditions, causing them to lack merit. Since talent is often seen as a matter of privileged status, the standards to achieve merit are based on their interests and training.

## Findings

In personal appreciation or talent, meritocracy is linked to the most common understanding of equality of opportunity (or competitive equality) that involves eliminating attributed disabilities. Nevertheless, meritocracy advocates a system of selecting people reasonably and efficiently. In other words, those with merit receive incentives and rewards, as demonstrated by Robson Crusoe, who, in addition to being a well-oriented "economic" man, exhibited discipline, work methods, and long-term conduct.

Robson Crusoe's merit was turning an unimportant and poor island into a successful venture. As a result of the European paradigm, "Friday" represents the idea of acculturation, sale, and elimination of anyone who does not fit into capitalism. According to colonial traditions, "Friday" civilizes himself and learns to speak, obey, and follow his religion and his master's rational instructions. By targeting minorities (for example, poor people, black people, women, etc.), it perpetuates social inequalities, injustices, and social exclusion.

## Conclusions

There are inequalities everywhere, but why do people experiencing poverty tend to be the most affected? Lower classes? Poverty is a stigma, and people experiencing poverty are excluded from social life constantly. Poverty has many faces and continuously changes, making presenting just one portrait difficult. The greater the risk of poverty, the more people are deprived of status, assets, political participation, and public policies.

According to the modern liberal vision, development, industry, and science would lead to social success. However, due to competition, living conditions, and a lack of social mobility, the monopoly of economic and social goods has resulted in an increase in income concentration. Modern capitalism has developed a consumerist character based on mass production, which is contradictory and reveals poverty.

## Recommendations

A combination of economic, political, and cultural factors still causes Brazilian poverty and exclusion. The assumption that poverty and inequality can be eliminated through simple "political will" or only through the redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor is naive. It is necessary to address Brazil's most significant correlate of income inequality: education. Brazilians will inevitably occupy lower-quality and, consequently, lower-paying jobs without educational credentials.

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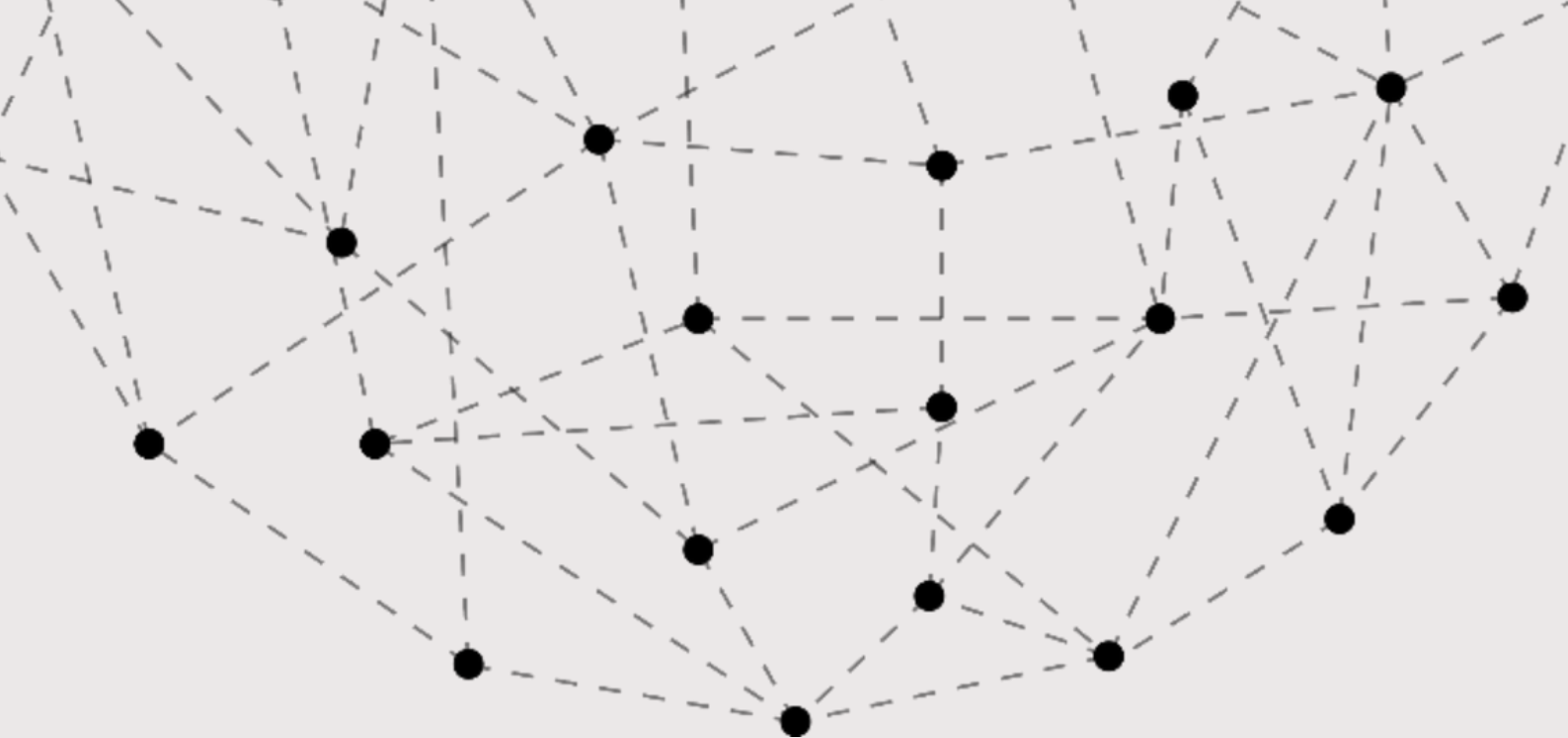
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