

Choices and Historical Processes: Elisa Reis in Conversation with Luciana de Souza Leão

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Abstract

In this interview with Luciana de Souza Leão, her former student, Elisa Reis discusses her intellectual trajectory and how it shaped her research projects and teaching in sociology. Specifically, they talk about Reis' work in political sociology, sociological theory, elite's perceptions of poverty and inequality, comparative methodologies, and the current politics of knowledge production in the Global South.

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1 Encountering Political Sociology

Luciana de Souza Leao: I wanted to start today by asking you if we could talk a little bit about your process of becoming a political sociologist. How did you get interested in this field?

Elisa Reis: Well, during high school, I was planning to be an engineer. But then I got involved in student politics and changed my mind. I learned about this undergraduate program where they taught sociology and political science at the same time and decided that was what I wanted. So, I moved to the Federal University of Minas Gerais, in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, which offered an undergraduate program on politics and sociology in the School of Economics. Unfortunately, in my very first day of class, the military coup took place. During the first days of the military dictatorship, the army was there occupying the building, and the experience of living under authoritarian rule deeply marked my cohort. The course itself was very much oriented towards social theory, with a strong French social science influence. We were reading French sociology of the time — like the two volumes of the *Traité de Sociologie*, edited by Georges Gurvitch (1957) — that you've never heard about in your generation. At the same time, we had a lot of influence of German sociologists, for example, one semester we were required to read a hundred pages of *Economy and Society* by Max Weber (1922) every week.

Along my course, I experienced the broader transition in Latin American social sciences from a French influence to North American influence. It was as if suddenly some of the younger professors came back from studying abroad, and they started teaching modernization theory and the mainstream political development literature at the time. That was what I was really reading most of my time. At that time, there was no master's program or PhD program in Brazil. It was just the undergraduate program, and we were supposed to be professionals once we finished high school or our undergraduate studies. And I was really nervous because I did not know what to do with my bachelor's degree. My father mentioned, "Oh, I could talk to a friend of mine who is in the Development Bank of Minas Gerais." But I knew I did not want that. And right at that moment I was very lucky to receive a fellowship in Chile. I accepted it immediately. I don't think I ever stopped to consider what on earth this fellowship was about. I mean, I didn't pay attention to the fact that I would be required to speak Spanish, which I had never spoken before. But I went and it was a wonderful experience.

It was a course on sociology of development, also very much oriented toward leadership skills. There were two levels. I was in the advanced level, which was a graduate course in development and there was a more basic course oriented toward forming leadership for the whole of Latin America. There were people from all over Latin America involved. It was exciting, and Chile was very attractive because I think everybody that had to go into exile from the other dictatorships in Latin America moved to Chile. Those on exile benefited from the fact that the country then enjoyed democratic stability, and also from the fact that several international organizations had offices there, so it was possible to find jobs. I spent the whole year of 1968 there, and when the fellowship finished, I had to go back to Brazil. As I told you, there was no master's and PhD program, so I was qualified to teach sociology at the university. And I got my first teaching job at the Pontificia Universidade Católica of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio) to teach sociological theory.

I was there until I moved to Cambridge for the PhD later on. But I also decided to enroll myself in a master's program that was starting at a private institute, called IUPERJ. So I did my master's course while I was teaching at the PUC-Rio and it was a master's program in political science because there was no sociology at the time. I finished very quickly because I had this

whole year in Chile, and they accepted my credits from there. I wrote a thesis on the relationship between the state and the coffee growers, seeking to show that as the powerful agricultural export sector managed to secure state support to protect coffee prices, the state managed to gradually transfer export generated resources to the incipient industrial sector. Furthermore, I argued that this process also contributed to the state building process itself, to the extent that the political authority played a mediating role between agrarian and industrial elites. As soon as I finished my master's, I got accepted to MIT for the PhD.

LSL: In 1972, you started your PhD in political science at MIT. If you could tell me a little bit — what was graduate school like in the early seventies being a woman? I imagine it was also a very male dominated department. What were some of the most formative experiences you had with your mentors, or some people that might have met in the Cambridge area that might have influenced how you think about sociology?

ER: Yeah, the thing you mentioned about being male-dominant, MIT was like that. I remember that the provost was talking to the whole '72 class and he was saying, "Oh, MIT has 7% women." And political science was strongly male dominated. But at that time that did not affect me as much as the fact that I was from South America. This is something curious. I never thought of myself as South American. I was Brazilian, but in the department, I became the token South American because there were no others. And there were very few foreign students — a couple of Canadians, one or two British. I think that was most of it. There were also the first Black students. There were maybe four or five including the previous classes, '70 and '71.

But I became a research assistant, which was very good in terms of integrating me. If I were not so shy, I would have benefited even more, but I was really shy. Still, being an assistant gave me some sense of security to interact. I was in committees recruiting professors. Besides, I was very much excited with the possibility of cross-registration with Harvard. And I think I did split my courses between MIT and Harvard. At MIT, talking about influences, Hayward Alker was someone that strongly influenced me, mostly because he was someone doing mathematics for political analysis, which was a real challenge for me because I didn't have very good training in math, but I decided I should have. And he was also teaching philosophy of science. And more than that, he was a friendly person. I mean, most of the students liked to interact with him. He was a very welcoming person. I recall that in the summer of 1973 he took a group of students to Chile for a two-months course in methodology. The Social Science Research Council funded this summer course that selected 20 people from Latin America studying in different US universities and brought us to Chile. This was right before the military coup in Chile. Very exciting times. A very nice life experience to be there at that time. Unfortunately, it ended very badly, but it was a good time to be in Chile to see how things could work.

Well, there were also other people that I found very inspiring later in my time at MIT. Susan Berger became my advisor because my previous advisor moved to another university, and Suzanne was really very helpful, mainly because she was not a Latin Americanist, so she would question me about everything. Nothing was taken for granted and that was very useful. There were also younger professors coming to MIT close to her like Charles Sabel and Joshua Cohen with whom I had some interaction. And at Harvard I was taking courses with Samuel Huntington and others. Some of the courses I took just as listener, but it was very helpful. Although I disagreed with Huntington about almost everything, it was very good to be in his class. He was an excellent professor.

I think these were the people who most impressed me. But there were also lots of people in the Cambridge area and from the Boston area who were very exciting. Like, I was so much

into Noam Chomsky. He was in linguistics at MIT but very active in giving public lectures and showing movies about the Vietnam War, all that stuff. There was also another experience, very interesting, which was the joint Harvard-MIT seminar, putting together scholars interested in political development. For two or three years, I was selected as a student representative from MIT. There was one graduate student from each of the universities. The system was that once a month they would invite someone from outside to give a lecture, usually big names, and we would have dinner together. It was exciting to meet senior folks, and also young scholars or people who were about to finish the PhD. I remember that Theda Skocpol presented her dissertation to us.

LSL: It's so interesting that the workshop was called "Political Development" because this idea of political development is not central anymore.

ER: Yeah, that's gone because there was some teleology. People were expecting that at some point all nations will end up converging to the same point. It was sort of a fatalistic idea to think that history has a self-direction, so it's good it's gone. But at the time, it was really the paradigm, in fact a paradigm that we students were already contesting. I like historical sociology because it denies that assumption that development follows a natural trajectory.

2 The Brazilian State as a Case

LSL: That leads us to the next topic. You are very well-known for your scholarship conceptualizing the Brazilian state as a case. This started with your PhD dissertation about the agrarian roots of conservative modernization in Brazil. And if you could tell us a little bit about how you chose this topic and where did this interest in the state as an analytical category come from? Is it related to what you were saying about the dominant thinking at the time — that modernization is going to happen in the same way everywhere? And the counterpoint brought by historical sociologists, suggesting that maybe that's not how history works. So if you could tell us a little bit about that. And I'm particularly interested hearing how you think about Brazil as a unique experience connected to these general trends?

ER: The state was already in my mind when I did my master's course. I remember reading Nicos Poulantzas and finding it very interesting that he thought that the state could be conceived as a political actor in itself, not just as the committee of the bourgeoisie. That already interested me and that's why I went to study the Brazilian coffee growers and industrialists being mediated by the state. But the choice of my dissertation topic at MIT (Reis, 1980) was strongly affected by the fact that Brazil had so much problem establishing a liberal democratic system. I think I was not the only one. Several of us doing PhDs at that time from different angles were questioning why democracy could not take roots in Brazil?

To me the possibility of looking at a trajectory was something really interesting because I didn't like the idea of history being a series of pre-set events. I like to think of processes because then you allow space for the actors' choices, for responsibility. I have learned that people choose things, that fatalism has no place in history; at every moment, confronting real situations, people choose, and they are responsible for the choices they make. So, I was trying to dig into history — what sort of choices did Brazil make that led to this authoritarian present that we were living? It was not only an intellectual inquiry, but also an existential issue. I had colleagues who had lost their lives fighting against the dictatorship. Besides, I knew what it was to be in class fearing you cannot say what you think because you may be taken to jail.

And so, it was a mixture of theoretical concerns and existential issues that led me to think of the vicissitudes of democracy in Brazil, and I decided to look at two important historical processes. One of them was the abolition of slavery. Slavery was so central in the colonization process, and it was maintained after Brazilian independence. So, of course, slavery had to have an impact on our choices for the future. And the other process was the trajectory of state building in Brazil. I was interested in exploring how these two processes intersected. This was the enigma I put to myself. I mean, I told you I was reading historical sociology — I was fascinated by Reinhard Bendix (1964). Perhaps Bendix was the scholar that most influenced me. Although I never met him personally, I read him with great curiosity and enthusiasm. I wanted to further explore ideas that greatly impressed me reading his work, and the focus on state building was something very important in his analysis, as well as the process of citizenship expansion. So, I thought if I look at slavery and state building, I may have a clue. I may have an interesting answer for the authoritarian reality we were facing in Brazil. And just at that moment, I started going to the Barrington Moore's class. I read his book on the agrarian roots of dictatorship and democracy (1966), and I thought that his focus was a good theoretical instrument I could use. I mean, at first, I thought of using his authoritarian model of modernization because Brazil was authoritarian. But in my perception, the theoretical component of the book is much better structured in terms of the democratic model, while authoritarian modernization and peasant revolutions were subproducts of his theoretical reasoning. So, what he really offered in theoretical terms was a model for democracy and it was fascinating to see how he put together countries with such different trajectories as France, England, and the US, through different process, all end up consolidating liberal democracy.

I mean the idea of staying at such a level of abstraction that these three historical cases could be seen as following a common path was something that I liked. I still like very much the idea of exploring how to merge theory and singularity. So, I decided to compare the question of slavery. I took the US as my comparison point. I said, "Could the very different process of abolishing slavery in Brazil and in the US help to explain the diverging political orders they developed?"

Moore had shown how abolition in the US was critical because it constituted a real rupture with the past. And I my hypothesis was that Brazil never had such a rupture because the state promoted a kind of an alliance between former slave owners and the new agrarian owners interested in an expanded labor force in coffee field. These new landlords could no longer count on new slave imports because the international slave trade had been forbidden at the time by foreign pressure. So how to solve the labor supply problem if new slaves were no longer available and coffee planters were eager to push the land frontier further and further in the Central South of Brazil? At the time, the old landowners of the Northeast had already sold their slaves to the new coffee growers of the Central South, both because their sugar cane plantations were decadent, and also because being an area of older colonization, the Northeastern landowners counted with a significant semi-servile population under their control. Actually, in the eve of slave abolition the old plantation owners had already sold their slaves to Southern farmers and their representatives in Congress were voting in favor of abolition. What they did not give up though was the control over their semi-servile labor force.

So, looking at the diverse interests at play, the state provided a solution that contemplated both the old and new large landowning sectors at the time. Paying for the costs to bring foreign migrants from Europe the state granted an abundant labor supply demanded by the Southern coffee planters, while assuring Northeastern landowners the maintenance there of the existing labor force, which they kept in some sort of extra-economic coercion. In a way, I think that this process reproduced the sort of reactionary coalition that Barrington Moore refers to when

discussing the authoritarian modernization path that took place in Germany. But going a bit further, I think that the abolition of slavery in Brazil was a process that created room for a spatial segmentation of the labor market with political and economic consequences in the long-run. Instead of integrating the whole labor force in the country, there was sort of an artificial boundary whereby in the South a predominantly labor economic coercion system took roots, while in the Northeast, the labor force remained for many more decades in semi-serfdom conditions. So that explains to some extent how liberalism was contained through that sort of conservative alliance sponsored by the state.

The German experience was actually nearly contemporary to the Brazilian one as political unification there took place more or less at the same time that Brazil consolidated its independence from Portugal. In both cases, there was room for this sort of precautionary strengthening of the state that Moore talks about. The state managed to become a strategic partner to both the new and the old elites, a sort of sponsorship that created room for a state less responsible to demands from below.

3 Inequality: The View from the Top

LSL: Another important part of your work, which perhaps you are most famous for in the international sphere, is your work on elites' perception of poverty and inequality. Starting with your 2005 book with Mick Moore that studied this topic in five countries of the so-called "Global South" (Reis & Moore, 2005) to your more recent work in Brazil and South Africa, you have done in-depth comparative research about how elites understand the social world. Why study inequality through the perspective of elites?

ER: Inequality too is an issue that mobilizes me both in theoretical terms and in existential terms. I mean, it bothers me to see so much inequality around me. Brazil, as you know, is extremely unequal. That is something that really bothered and bothers me in daily life. I wanted to try to understand it from the perspective of the elites. Most of the literature in sociology at the time I started this project was looking at inequality from below. There were many studies on how the poor manages to survive, how the poor sees his place in society, what are the distinctive elements of the culture of the poor, etc. I was not happy with this sole focus because I perceived it as some sort of a patronizing way of looking at the problem, a paternalistic approach that was often mobilized to appeal to philanthropy and I was not satisfied with that. I kept insisting that interests, not just ideals, have a place in people's attitudes towards poverty and inequality. So, if those who could help reduce poverty don't do it, it's because they are not negatively affected by it; or don't see opportunities to benefit for an expanded consumption market, so they don't have an interest in changing it.

I wanted to understand how elites rationalized the fact that they had so much, while so many others had nothing. I decided to investigate how elites explained to themselves how so much inequality exists, and what could lead them to accept redistributive policies. My focus on elites derives from the fact that they have some monopoly control over symbolic and material resources. And there was something else. I think the primary motivation I had was the fact that I wanted to know what holds society together if people experience such unequal conditions, such disparate life horizons. There is a basic theoretical question underlying this query: why do societies stay together? How can such an unequal distribution hold people together? Of course, I have no answer to that, but this is some I keep questioning in my present-day research.

LSL: And why did you study elites comparatively?

ER: First, I should also mention that I always went for an institutional definition of elites. I was not interested in the elite person I interviewed as an individual. As you know, there is great interest in the personal history of elites in the literature, but that was never what mobilized me. I wanted to talk about people who occupy key positions and why they make decisions in their day-to-day in their institutional context. I started with a Brazilian survey of elites, and then I organized a seminar here in Brazil and some foreigners in that seminar were very much interested in my work, and they asked me, “Would you like to explore the subject in comparative perspective?” Of course, I was interested. At that time, I was reading the book by Abram de Swaan (1988), *In Care of the State*, and they agreed that we could invite de Swaan to join the project.

The idea progressed and I brought de Swaan to Brazil for a couple of months and we started working together with the other country researchers. The selection of the five countries involved in the project was more or less casual. I mean, we looked for people interested on the subject that could make sense to incorporate. There were some criteria, of course. The countries selected were all very unequal and counted with quite large populations. The only exception was Haiti. Haiti was actually a case that I decided to include because I had some funds available and there was so little published about Haiti. So, I said, well, let me do something that might be useful. There was not even much data on Haiti, almost no data at all. And I knew someone who wanted to do a dissertation there. I contributed to his stay there, and he did the study for the larger project. But the other ones were The Philippines, Bangladesh, South Africa, and Brazil. Originally there was also India, but unfortunately the person who was in charge of India ended up deciding to focus on small farmers instead of elites.

It was interesting to compare because the differences help you illuminate a single case, as well as the contrasts. For example, looking at the four big countries, I realized how Brazil was similar to South Africa, comparatively to the Philippines and Bangladesh. Probably if I didn't have as many countries as we had, the four of them, I would have never thought of it. But the contrast tells you a lot. And that was even more illuminating when, 20 years later, I went again comparing Brazil and South Africa and realized that they were no longer so similar in some respects. They were still similar in many aspects but not in their interests. Let me explain. During the first study, Brazil and South Africa were both very much into the economic vision that you must grow faster to industrialize. Then later, you think of redistribution. When I repeated this study 20 years later, South Africa still thought that way, but Brazil did not. I mean not everybody in Brazil, but a significant part of the elites changed their position. Even part of the business elites was in favor of redistribution. So, it became very relevant to investigate what emerging conditions contributed to the change of perceptions among the Brazilian elites.

You asked me if the elites are similar everywhere. They are similar in the sense that they are all motivated by interests, and provided a window of opportunity to gain from redistribution emerges, they accept redistribution. Unfortunately those opportunities are not very frequent. But when they are available, it's possible to think of realistic redistribution strategies.

There's something curious about that comparative study we did in the five countries. At the time, my research partners were much more interested in studying poverty than inequality. I had to insist with them to put “inequality” in the book title. They said, “Well let's call it perceptions of poverty. This is what really matters”. In the end, I convinced them, and the book title included “poverty” and “inequality”. Well, now everybody is worried about inequality. I think the evolution of neoliberalism made all of us concerned about inequality because inequality reaches such a degree that we all must confront it. How is society possible if people have such

different life perspectives, life expectations, et cetera? I mean, I believe that inequality today is as relevant an issue as other existential problems such as pandemics, climate change, chemical weapons. I mean, all of that are things whose collective nature demand collective solutions.

4 Theorizing from the South

LSL: Another issue I would like to discuss is what does it mean to theorize from “the South”? You told us a little bit in your PhD trajectory about your relationship with theory, but could you tell us a bit more, at this moment of your career now, about your relationship with sociological theory. Why did you choose to teach it when you were such a senior professor? And what do you think are some of the challenges and opportunities of even using this word “theory” when you are not in the epistemic centers like Europe or the US?

ER: Look, I always thought of theory as something that must fulfill a role. You know, many people teach theory as a series of biographies of big names. I always refused that because I think the practice of theory is the practice of abstraction. And I like this idea. I told you that I like Bendix. One of the aspects that fascinated me about Bendix is that he treats concepts as sort of a theoretical exercise. And I agree with that. I think when you decide to conceptualize something, you do some abstraction. And if you are rigorous about it, it helps a lot in terms of creating intersubjectivity. When people read your work, they must know what you mean by this or that idea, by class, by group, by elite. So, I think I see “concepts” as the first degree of theorizing and I think if you stop thinking of theory as something ready-made, you can do theory wherever you are, North or South. They are articulation between concepts, between statements that help you to synthesize, somehow to abstract from the extreme complexity of reality.

And I like to teach theory because I think of it as an opportunity to show students that they don’t have to be deferential in the face of theory. They can do theory if they want. Unfortunately, it’s a path that not many people follow and the idea of being original is something that sometimes is taken in a very distorted way. People think that if they describe something original, they are being theoretically original. And that’s not enough. I mean, to be original you must establish a relationship between the things that you look at. And I think that by teaching sociological theory, I could tell students how exciting it can be to theorize. It’s something that not everybody likes. They think it’s the wrong way. I don’t think so. More and more, I’m convinced that we should teach students that they have to practice this exercise of abstracting to be able to understand similarities and that’s what theories are good for.

LSL: Yeah, thank you for saying that. It’s good to remind myself of the importance of abstraction, learning how to theorize, also connecting to concept building. Because many times, for example, with this contemporary push for post-colonial theories, there is a concern with the inequalities in the theory-making process: Who has a voice, which audiences hear you, etc. And because I am from Brazil, I am always pushed to answer, “What do you think about post-colonial theories?” And I always feel uncomfortable with this question because all the post-colonial push in the US seems to me completely disconnected from what is happening to sociology in Brazil. How do you react when people bring this type of debate to the table about all these inequalities that exist in theory-making?

ER: Look, this thing about post-colonial, I don’t like the expression itself because — contradictory as it may appear — it implies some deference to the colonial past. Well, I understand

that it has a role in academic communities. At my age, I can see how similar the post-colonial discourse is to the previous dependency theory. Better saying, they are not similar, but they fulfill a similar role for a significant part of the academic community. In the sixties and seventies, everybody was talking about dependency theory. The so-called “underdeveloped countries” at the time, or Global South in today’s terms, and later on also some scholars in the US and Europe, were thinking in terms of dependency theories. In retrospect, dependency theory was not a theory. It was a departure point, more like an angle to look at things. And that angle created some sort of a community, a common language among the Latin Americans for example. Actually, first Latin American, then the rest of the underdeveloped world at that time.

It’s interesting to have a common language. It’s also — in psychological terms — interesting that people create some strength when they think that they are mobilized against something. So I am from the South; I’m doing post-colonial work, but actually most of the post-colonial discourse is mainly a criticism of the theoretical status quo. And criticism is not enough. There’s very little theoretical formulation that actually contests what is seen as the old colonial theory. And there is one additional problem, with respect to the criticism of the so-called hegemonic theory. Actually, what is hegemonic is something that has its origin in the birth of social science as science.

There is a genealogical issue to be solved because social science as such was built in a given historical context. The first social scientists, like it or not, were in the colonial center. Now, in my view, not only us in the Global South, but everybody must take into account that we all belong to the same universe today. Even if there are a lot of asymmetries, we all belong to the same universe. We all have the same communication channels. So, we all must face this problem of how to overcome the birthmark of colonialism. And it’s not only the South that is affected by that. Think, for example, of the foreign migration issue today. It’s clearly the last chapter of colonialism. I hope it’s the last, that we find the solution, because what we are experiencing now are former colonies revamping the flow and coming to the old centers. Look, the people who migrate to Europe or who migrate to the US today, are people who are doing that because they are in a sense the surviving victims of colonialism.

It’s clearly the last reminiscence of colonialism. The reverse of the flow. And people feel that they go there because there is something that tied them together in the past, even though in very unfair terms. But they come to the old center because they were on the periphery before. So, the whole thing of colonialism, it’s a new problem for us all. It’s not just for those in the South. Unfortunately, it’s everywhere. I think the post-colonial theory is not very much focused in that.

As I see it in the US, for example, it’s mostly an offspring of the identitarian issue. And that is another problem we face today. The normal trajectory of individualism brought us to this stage in life where identity became the big issue. So, in a way, identity and post-colonial theory are not completely separate issues. They are both a problem derived from the process through which so-called modernization took place. And it’s interesting that modernity itself is no longer so central as it was a few years ago in the discussion of theorists.

5 What’s Next?

LSL: Changing a bit of gears, more recently, you’ve been involved in international forums, such as the International Panel on Social Progress and the International Science Council. And I’m curious as to what drove you to be involved in this type of initiative. What are some of

the things that you learned by being engaged in these forums? And if you can connect that — because I know a lot of the work on social progress connects to your current research agenda — what are some of the things that you are excited about?

ER: I think one of the things that mobilizes me is that I want to react against the ongoing pessimism I see around. Maybe it's naive, but I keep thinking that if I didn't believe that some change is possible, I would move on to do something else. I would stop doing social science because it would be too boring to be studying something that has no perspective to change. Of course, there are no ready-made recipes. But if you look at historical processes, you see where things went wrong, what could have been done better, why we are failing. And even if we are not getting better, it's important to know that it would have been possible if people had chosen different paths, acted differently. So that is something that always mobilized me — could be some personality trait, I don't know, but I refuse to accept fatalism.

Being involved in international organizations to me is a way to talk to other people, to look at how could we have done it better? And most of all, I like the possibility of dialogue with other disciplines. All scientific disciplinary activity is very lonely. We do very tiny things because reality is too complex. But if you listen to others, at least you can glance at the world of possibilities that exist. And how could we think of acting together? Like, for example, during the pandemic, I was involved in the international network of pandemic research. We opened to people all over the world the possibility to join together to talk about their own project. And so many interesting dialogues happened, putting together people working on health, science, environment, sociology. That is something that I think is rewarding.

Besides, I tend to believe that, at this point in societal life, science is being redefined. There is so much progress that science is creating — new possibilities, suggesting new paths, creating new disciplines — even if, to some extent, we are all very much caged in our disciplines. On the other hand, new possibilities in our dialogue are creating new disciplines. For example, biophysics or biochemistry, so many new combinations of disciplines that were born out of this. So, I like to explore this possibility. And both the International Panel of Social Progress and International Science Council are examples of that. There is also the World Academy of Sciences for the developing world (TWAS) where I am, which also has this objective to put people together to explore joint possibilities and think collectively.

LSL: But when you say you want to react against the pessimism, can you share some of the optimistic things that you are seeing? I teach global poverty at the University of Michigan. And if you look historically, there has been social progress if you treat the world as an average; but then you will see that there is geographical inequality because some places are actually worse than they were 50 years ago. But on average the world is better. So, if you take the long-term into consideration, we are better today. But if we consider genocides, pandemics, our climate crisis, there are also new existential threats and challenges. Given this current moment we are living — where we don't see globalization as necessarily the solution, but it's also not necessarily the problem — how do we think about progress, and how do we think about existential problems that we have to find a collective solution to?

ER: Look, it's not easy not to be pessimist when the existential threats are so obvious to all of us. I mean, some people will suffer more, but we are all going to suffer from climate change, for example. Yet, if we could take collective actions, we could mitigate it. How to do it, I don't know. But I agree with you, there is extreme inequality spatially or even in a place like the city I live in. But, as you say, on the average, there has been progress. Not only in material terms, but I think of issues like abolition of death penalties — it's been a progressive, positive change.

Less countries have death penalties nowadays. You also see a trend towards more rationality on things like gender differences, which still has such a long way to go, and has even suffered some setbacks, but thinking in global terms there have been improvements. Some these problems have been overcome in many places and issue-areas through participation of civil society.

I know it's not extremely operative, but if you think that today the United Nations is a place where hundreds of non-governmental organizations get together, it is something impressive. Maybe the progress they get is a very tiny progress, but it's still progress. They voice the concerns of those who could never voice their own concerns. So, you know that I was part of the team who published the book, *A Manifesto for Social Progress: Ideas for a Better Society* (Fleurbaey et al., 2018). I think we have examples in the book of possibilities for improving life conditions. And by the way, the International Panel on Social Progress is launching its second phase later this year. This time we are going to talk directly to people who act. I mean, we realize that we cannot remain secluded as thinkers. We have to be thinkers who have an open dialogue with "doers." And the idea is to offer them, not recipes, but some solid evidence that can be used for social policy, for example.

LSL: That's nice. Well, with this message of hope, I wanted to thank you Elisa, and I hope to continue these conversations in the future.

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