

REPORT ON THE MASTER THESIS

IEPS – International Economic and Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

Title of the thesis:	Equality in the Framework of Justice
Author of the thesis:	Kübra Aşık
Referee (incl. titles):	Mgr. Jakub Franěk, Ph.D.

Remark: It is a standard at the FSV UK that the Referee's Report is at least 500 words long. In case you will assess the thesis as "non-defendable", please explain the concrete reasons for that in detail.

SUMMARY OF POINTS AWARDED (for details, see below):

CATEGORY	POINTS
<i>Theoretical background (max.</i>	13
<i>Contribution (max. 20)</i>	10
<i>Methods (max. 20)</i>	10
<i>Literature (max. 20)</i>	15
<i>Manuscript form (max. 20)</i>	12
TOTAL POINTS (max. 100)	60
The proposed grade (1-2-3-4)	2.5

You can even use a decimal point (e.g. giving the grade of 2.5 for 60 points).

Comments of the referee on the thesis highlights and shortcomings (following the 5 numbered aspects of your assessment indicated below).

General comments:

The subject of the reviewed thesis is the relationship between justice and (primarily economic) equality. The thesis comprises mostly of a comparative critical analysis of the selected works of important contemporary political theorists – J. Rawls, G. A. Cohen, M. Sandel, and A. Sen – which focusses on the respective authors' conceptualization and understanding of (economic) equality and its role in their theories. This comparative analysis is then supplemented by a thematic discussion about the mutual relationship between (economic) equality and justice and concluding assessment of the reviewed theories. The author concludes that neither of the reviewed theories is compatible with her radically egalitarian understanding of the relationship between economic or material equality and justice, according to which justice requires (presumably total) material equality.

The author can be only commended for her choice of the thesis topic. The last two to three decades have been marked by a rapid growth of material inequality both within and among nation state societies. This development, which is concomitant with the global rise of neoliberalism, does indeed remind us of the importance of the issues of economic equality and distributive justice. Since the author focusses on the relation between equality and justice from a normative perspective, one can hardly raise any objections against the basic research design of the thesis. Nevertheless, the author's arguments and conclusions are often not as clear and persuasive as one would wish for. This remark pertains both to the critical analysis of the theoretical positions discussed in the thesis and to the outline of author's own understanding of the relationship between equality and justice in the concluding chapters. (For more detailed comments, see bellow.) Nevertheless, the thesis does meet criteria for MA theses and can be recommended for defence.

1) Theoretical background:

The thesis is grounded in, or indeed consists largely of a critical analysis of some of the most relevant contemporary theories pertinent to its subject matter. Nevertheless, given the author's radically egalitarian position, it might have been useful to also take into account other Marxist or post-Marxist authors (apart from G. A. Cohen), such as C. Mouffe, E. Laclau, or for instance S. Žižek. Since the author focusses primarily on a critical analysis of Rawls' theory of justice, it might have been useful to take into account libertarian / neo-liberal critiques of Rawls, e.g. from R.

Nozick. Nevertheless, the omission of these authors/theoretical positions from the discussion does not pose a serious issue.

What appears as a more serious problem is the way in which the author engages with the analyzed theories. On several occasions she appears to seriously misconstrue the theoretical positions she refers to and/or criticizes. As an example, let's take the principal points of her critique of Rawls. Her claim that Rawls' theory is inherently elitist because the parties in the original position are construed in such a way that they cannot be understood as representatives of "various segments of society" (p. 67) but rather resemble members of the intellectual elite is puzzling for more than one reason. First of all, the author apparently derives her claim that Rawls construes the parties in the original position as members of the intellectual elite from his claim that the parties are deemed to be rational, whereas rationality is to be interpreted in the "narrow sense, standard in economic theory, of taking the most effective means to given ends." (Rawls 1999: 12) In the mind of the present reviewer this hardly implies that the parties would be implicitly described as "people with ... rich intellectual background [who] are rational and reasonable enough to make decisions that is (sic!) for all in the society." (p. 67) Second, and more importantly, the author apparently misses the strictly *hypothetical* nature of Rawls' original position. The original position is obviously a thought experiment or a rhetorical device meant to justify Rawls' conception of justice; it is definitely NOT a model of *actual political deliberation* between representatives of various social strata and / or various economic interests.

As for the critique of Rawls' conception of fair equality of opportunity: The authors' assertion that Rawls fails to take into account e.g. the differences between educational opportunities open to children coming from privileged and underprivileged families (pp. 68-69) appears to be based on the misunderstanding of the difference between *liberal equality*, which Rawls criticizes, and *democratic equality*, which he promotes.

As for the more general critique of Rawls' *difference principle*. The argument that the difference principle is unacceptable because it actually "justifies inequality" is false for the simple reason that the very aim of the difference principle is to provide a criterion for distinguishing between legitimate (or justified) inequalities and illegitimate (or unjustifiable) inequalities. The author apparently rejects the difference principle because she regards *any* (material) inequalities as incompatible with just society. One has to wonder whether she sincerely believes that the least privileged members of society would prefer abolishment of material inequalities even at a price of actual drop of their standard of living.

2) Contribution:

The thesis presents a relevant discussion and critique of major contemporary political theories relevant to the subject matter of the thesis. Nonetheless, this discussion suffers from the above outlined shortcomings. In the concluding chapters, the author also outlines her own position with regard to the relationship between equality and justice. In its present form this outline nonetheless remains underdeveloped, unsubstantiated and generally unpersuasive. By claiming that economic inequalities are incompatible with just society the author appears to collapse the difference between the notions of equality and justice or, to put it differently, fails to pay due regard to other aspects of justice, such as desert, merit, effort or good will. Apart from that, it remains unclear how such total equality could be achieved either on national or global level.

3) Methods:

See above item 2.

4) Literature:

See above item 1.

5) Manuscript form:

The thesis is clearly and logically structured. Nonetheless, it does suffer from numerous typos, as well as grammatical mistakes, which could have been easily avoided.

DATE OF EVALUATION: Jan. 18, 2015

Referee Signature

The referee should give comments to the following requirements:

1) THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: Can you recognize that the thesis was guided by some **theoretical fundamentals** relevant for this thesis topic? Were some important theoretical concepts omitted? Was the theory used in the thesis consistently incorporated with the topic and hypotheses tested?

Strong Average Weak
20 10 0 points

2) CONTRIBUTION: Evaluate if the author presents **original ideas** on the topic and aims at demonstrating **critical thinking** and ability to draw conclusions based on the knowledge of relevant theory and relevant empirical material. Is there a distinct **value added** of the thesis (relative to knowledge of a university-educated person interested in given topic)? Did the author explain **why** the observed phenomena occurred? Were the policy implications well founded?

Strong Average Weak
20 10 0 points

3) METHODS: Are the **hypotheses** for this study clearly stated, allowing their further verification and testing? Are the theoretical explanations, empirical material and **analytical tools** used in the thesis relevant to the research question being investigated, and adequate to the aspiration level of the study? Is the thesis **topic comprehensively analyzed** and does the thesis not make trivial or irrelevant detours off the main body stated in the thesis proposal? More than 10 points signal an exceptional work, **which requires your explanation "why" it is so**.

Strong Average Weak
20 10 0 points

4) LITERATURE REVIEW: The thesis demonstrates author's full understanding and **command of recent literature**. The author quotes relevant literature in a proper way and disposes with a representative bibliography. (Remark: references to Wikipedia, websites and newspaper articles are a sign of **poor research**). If they dominate you cannot give more than 8 points. References to books published by prestigious publishers and articles in renowned journals give much better impression.

Strong Average Weak
20 10 0 points

5) MANUSCRIPT FORM: The thesis is **clear and well structured**. The author uses appropriate language and style, including academic **format** for quotations, graphs and tables. The text effectively refers to graphs and tables, is easily readable and **stimulates thinking**.

Strong Average Weak
20 10 0 points

Overall grading scheme at FSV UK:

TOTAL POINTS	GRADE	Czech grading	US grading
81 – 100	1	= excellent	= A
61 – 80	2	= good	= B
51 – 60	3	= satisfactory	= C
41 – 50	3	= satisfactory	= D
0 – 40	4	= fail	= not recommended for defence