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A journey exploring history, economics and literature with Marco Baliani

THE FACTORY OF INEQUALITY: FROM JANE AUSTEN AND BALZAC TO PIKETTY

In the 19th century, despite the hopes generated by the French Revolution, inequality was based on two pillars: income – usually from land or government securities – and a good marriage. Inheriting wealth was decisive if one wished to belong to the part of society – around 1% of the total – that did not work, the segment described in the books of Jane Austen or Balzac. At a certain point, the era of inherited wealth and assets then seemed destined to disappear. Around the middle of the 20th century, the "myth" became rather the meritocratic idea of achieving success thanks to one's own efforts and as the result of a good profession.

Today, in the 2000s, the importance of origin, family assets, legacies and inheritance seems to have become fashionable again, if indeed it ever truly declined. The proof lies, for example, in the rigorously wealth-related criteria for access to the best American universities: in practice Harvard and other universities of this kind are attended only by the children of the wealthiest 2%. All this is described by Thomas Piketty in his book "Capital in the 21st century". However, yesterday the subject was addressed on the stage of the Teatro Sociale by the actor Marco Baliani.-

In a fascinating journey over more than two centuries of history, on the trail of the dazzling fictional insight that puts the spotlight on the glory and misery of a rigorously class-based society in Europe from the beginning of the 19th century, the reading by Baliani, directed by Claudio Longhi and accompanied by the accordion music of Olimpia Greco, combined economic data from Piketty's book with characters in the books of Jane Austen and Balzac. On the one hand, there was the reality of a world where only a small share of the population had access to certain privileges, a comfortable home, horse and carriage to move around and servants, thanks to an income worth around 20-30 times the average income of an ordinary citizen (when even the most profitable professions, in the field of law, made it possible to earn just 5-8 times more than the average), on the other there were the middle classes described by Balzac, involved in risky operations to increase their assets and thus approach the "true" aristocracy, or the young women described by Jane Austen, whose first and main concern was to make a good marriage.

At a certain point all this seemed to disappear, to the extent that the America of self-made men, the ultimate meritocratic society, at least officially, could afford to look with barely concealed contempt at Europe, where there certainly appeared to be much less social mobility and where the old aristocracies continued to perpetuate their privileges and fortunes. However, by the beginning of the 21st century, the weight of family origin, and the assets that it can transmit to new generations, would once again seem to be decisive. The basis of wealth has broadened a little, and the wealthy 1% of Jane Austen's England has become 15% in America today (although naturally the percentage of the real super-rich is much smaller). However, there would still seem to be a long way to go towards a fairer society that guarantees everyone the same opportunities. -

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