

The rise of the (in)visibilization society

La emergencia de la sociedad de la (in)visibilización

Ana Cárdenas Tomažič

Institut für Soziologie,

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU Munich)

Ana.Cardenas@soziologie.uni-muenchen.de

Abstract

Social structures, institutions, and practices of social visibilization and invisibilization have systematically contributed to the production and reproduction of power relations, power abuse, and resulting social inequalities in capitalist societies. However, today we are increasingly living in what I term the "(in)visibilization society". Social structures, institutions, and practices of (in)visibilization are taking place on a global scale, growing exponentially, and becoming the main components of contemporary societies. This article outlines the main trends regarding the rise, contradictions, and challenges of this new social order.

Key words: capitalism, domination, social inequalities, emancipation, and social media.

Resumen

Estructuras, instituciones y prácticas sociales de visibilización e invisibilización sistemáticamente han contribuido a la producción y reproducción de relaciones de poder así como de abuso de poder y desigualdades sociales en las sociedad capitalistas. Sin embargo, crecientemente estamos viviendo en lo que he llamado la "sociedad de la (in)visibilización". Estructuras sociales, instituciones y prácticas sociales de (in)visibilización están ocurriendo a nivel global, creciendo exponencialmente y volviéndose componentes centrales de las sociedades contemporáneas. Este artículo esboza las principales tendencias relativas al surgimiento, las contradicciones y desafíos de este nuevo orden social.

Palabras claves: capitalismo, dominación, desigualdades sociales, emancipación y social media.

The (in)visibilization of social inequalities

Social structures, institutions, and practices of social visibilization and invisibilization have systematically contributed to the production and reproduction of power relations, power abuse, and resulting social inequalities in the majority of capitalist societies. This is the case not only in what Agamben (2005) terms “state of exception”, in particular dictatorships, but also in liberal democracies of capitalistic societies. In fact, capitalistic expansion and accumulation has historically and systematically relied on the production and reproduction of social inequalities, in particular relating to slavery, prison labor and many other forms of (in)visibilized human exploitation, as stated by, among others, Angela Davis (e.g. Davis 1998), Frantz Fanon (e.g. Fanon 1961), and Karl Marx (Marx ([1867] 2008).

In this context, social invisibilization and visibilization structures and dynamics are interdependent. In fact, the invisibilization of any form of human exploitation and extinction and, therefore, of human suffering (of a person, a social group, and/or whole societies) is always linked to social structures and dynamics of visibilization. Those with the power to make decisions affecting the lives and living conditions of other human beings, do so to also make their own power visible. They are aware that it is highly probable that any harm they inflict on other persons will go unpunished. This dynamic of domination is a precondition and also a consequence of this social order.

With the modernization of societies, the legal system – and specifically the criminal justice system – became supposedly the social institution par excellence to render visible and penalize violations of social inequalities, among others. In 1948, the Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) established a legal and moral foundation for the worldwide fight against social inequalities. In this context, legal evidence (i.e. the material proof of a legal violation) has become central to making social inequalities visible as a form of social injustice.

However, capitalist societies still perpetuate the (in)visibilization of social inequalities, and the judicial system is a core institutional pillar responsible for reproducing this social order. A clear example of this dynamic is the global increase in income and wealth inequalities over recent decades (World Inequality Lab 2018), both of which are linked to the discriminatory structure and functioning of labor markets (e.g. Cárdenas Tomažič 2019), as well as the growing incapacity of welfare states to compensate for them (e.g. World Inequality Lab 2018). Moreover, increasing incarceration trends in all of their forms, such as prisons and jails (e.g. ICPS/ICPR 2018) as well as detention centers and refugee camps (e.g. IOM 2018), are the most evident and cruel proof of a social order that at the global level is trying to (in)visibilize social inequalities which mostly affect poor population, in particular specific racial and ethnic groups who are systematically segregated across labor markets worldwide (e.g. Cárdenas Tomažič 2018, 2019).

The (in)visibilization society

Currently, these (in)visibilization dynamics seem to be changing in relation to the rise of what I term the “(in)visibilization society”. Social structures, institutions, and practices of visibilization are taking place on a global scale, growing exponentially, and becoming the main components of contemporary societies.

The emergence of this social order is embedded in what Manuel Castells (1990) refers to as the “network society”. This society is based on the development and massification of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which progressively enable global communication – in other words, interrelationships and the production and exchange of information around the world. The network society is thus a global social order where technological infrastructures link people and organizations.

Since Castells first propounded his concept of the network society, technological change has continued and the visibilization

possibilities of our interrelationships, in particular the audio-visual opportunities to (re)present and (re)produce them, have become immense. With the advent of the 21st century, access to the Internet and smartphones, despite important regional differences, has increased exponentially worldwide (ITU 2019), enabling people to generate and disseminate information and images instantly. In addition, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube have become part of the digital infrastructure enabling individuals to express themselves not only in written, but also increasingly in audiovisual forms, which have historically formed part of the mass media oligopoly.

The digitalization of society and the rise and development of social media means that we now live in a world that not only increasingly allows us, but also forces us to make ourselves more visible – to live in a state of constant audio-visual self-portrayal. The neoliberalization of contemporary societies has seen the emergence of a neoliberal subjectivity related to social processes of activation (e.g. Lessenich 2009) and singularization (Reckwitz 2017), which has, not surprisingly, contributed to audiovisual self-representation and even self-branding via social media on a massive scale (e.g. Scolere et al. 2018).

However, the (in)visibilization society also gives us a potential opportunity to render others more visible, in particular those who have been invisibilized for centuries. Moreover, this new social order seems to constitute a new spatial and temporal space for challenging and changing the (in)visibilization structures and dynamics of social inequalities. But are we taking advantage of these visibilization opportunities?

To a certain extent, this is the case. In recent years, social movements such as Black Lives Matter, Ni Una Menos, #MeToo, the Gilets Jaunes, and #FridaysForFuture have been visibilizing different forms of social inequality through their protests and, in particular, social media. These channels have challenged the (in)visibilization of social inequalities that have been characteristic of mass media representations (e.g. Servaes/Oyedemi 2016).

The killing of George Floyd, which occurred on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, represented a turning point in the (in)visibilization dynamics of social inequalities. George Floyd, a Black man, was suffocated by a police officer accompanied by three colleagues on the street, in broad daylight, and in clear view of everybody who was at that moment and place. They acted within and reproduced forms of racist (a)normality and (di)sociability that have structured capitalist societies and social inequalities for centuries, without imagining the social consequences of their actions. The murder was filmed by a 17-year-old witness and subsequently spread around the world becoming a viral symbol of centuries of worldwide racial inequalities and related class and gender disparities. The video also became a key piece of legal evidence in charging all four police officers within days – an unprecedented event for a society in which the police have enjoyed absolute impunity, a trend typical of the (in)visibilization dynamics of social inequalities worldwide.

Amid the global Covid-19 pandemic, which has also highlighted and reproduced multiple existing social inequalities, this moment of visibilization also drew attention to the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and innumerable other racially motivated killings in the US and in former colonialist societies, such as France, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Germany. The current wave of anti-racism protests in the United States and worldwide is a response to the murder of George Floyd and other racially motivated killings, and a manifestation of persistent human suffering, pain, and powerlessness, aspects of which have been rendered visible over the last two months.

Contradictions and challenges of the (in)visibilization society

As a result of these events, social inequalities are becoming visible within the (in)visibilization society. However, the dominant social order is still a capitalist society with its own contradictions. This means that social competition and social inequalities go hand-in-hand within the (in)visibilization society, a dynamic that affects both the possibilities and limits of (in)visibilizing social

inequalities. In concrete terms, although today we have infinite resources to visualize social problems resulting from social inequalities such as poverty, incarceration, homelessness, and starvation, these issues are still rarely presented visually in the media, on the Internet, and in particular on social media in comparison to the myriad competitive images of products and ourselves. In addition, while we have increasing possibilities to visualize social inequalities, we mostly encounter such images only in passing – seeing rather than actively observing and perceiving. This would imply paying more careful attention and attempt to understand the experiences of those human beings whose lives are characterized by any form of social inequality.

The (in)visibilization society, thus, reproduces the fictional or rather inhuman character constituent, according to Marx (2007 [1932]), of all capitalist societies. In the digital world, as in the analog world, we mainly position ourselves socially by visibilizing our commodified self in a competitive manner. This means that we feel we need and have to position ourselves in the middle of the analog and digital world by suppressing our relational capacity with nature – with every being, including ourselves and other human beings. Accordingly, the (in)visibilization society has developed its own form of alienation: digital alienation. The more images we produce of ourselves as a commodity, the more we lose the capacity to perceive and to represent “the others” and their living conditions and experiences. This is particularly the case for all those who challenge this commodified world and our commodified self when their marginalization or rather invisibilization becomes visible. Systematic perception and representation of social inequalities within the digital world would thus signify recognition of the discriminated “others” as human beings, while cancelling out the competitive logic in which we all live, or rather in which we, more or less, have accepted to live.

The social structures and dynamics of invisibilization and the visibilization of social inequalities are still closely interrelated within the (in)visibilization society. There are – and will continue to be – social dynamics of domination, or rather of (in)visibilization, regarding current social inequality trends and the development of social movements based on them. Police repression and online hate speech are evident manifestations of these social dynamics. In this sense, the personal (Nevett 2020) and social costs that filming and spreading audiovisual information and organizing collectively can produce will continue to be key silencers, or rather invisibilizers, of a social order that remains unwilling to change. Current social movements against racism in former colonialist societies are the best example of this. However, it is clear that the public debate and the social struggle for more social justice is shifting from an oral and written dispute to a more (audio)visual one.

The visibilization of social inequalities in the (in)visibilization society is thus an everyday struggle, and one that is transforming the digital world into a contested terrain. Consequently, the challenges that we face in the (in)visibilization society are to learn to perceive social inequalities, and to use technological tools and social networks in a more emancipatory and transformative manner in order to combat them. The possibilities of resistance and social justice today depend more now than ever on our capacity to make visible the invisibilized. This seems to be happening right now.

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