



The Production and Reproduction of  
**SOCIAL INEQUALITIES**

# Inequality Seminar: Review & Take Aways

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FOR THE RESEARCH UNIT “THE PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION OF SOCIAL INEQUALITIES: GLOBAL CONTEXTS AND CONCEPTS OF LABOR EXPLOITATION”

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This Research Unit is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.



# COURSE STRUCTURE



- Course title “Inequality: Forms of inequality in the contexts of labour and migration in the 20th and 21st century”
- Lecturers: Prof. Dr. Ulrike Lindner, Department of History; Prof. Dr. Michaela Pelican, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology; University of Cologne
- Theory course for advanced MA students in history (n=10) and social anthropology (n=23)
- 14 sessions (1,5h), including introduction and conclusion
- Each session: 1 basic reading for everyone, 1 or 2 student presentations (PPTs with voice-over), discussion in class (via zoom)
- 3 thematic blocks: I. Basic readings; II. Social inequalities in the context of globalization, urbanization and mobility (anthropological approaches); III. Social inequalities and labour relations (historical approaches)
- Case studies on labour and migration: Labour migration to the Gulf States; Global Care Chain; Bonded labour/Indentured labour in the Caribbean and South Africa; German labour force during industrialization and German labour movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; ILO



# APPRAISAL OF SELECTED APPROACHES AND AUTHORS

- Theory overview: Anja Weiss
- Mechanisms of Inequality: Göran Therborn
- Capabilities approach and capacity to aspire: Amartia Sen, Martha Nussbaum, Arjun Appadurai
- Epistemic inequality: Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni
- Entangled inequalities: Sergio Costa
- Classical Marxism and neo-marxist approaches
- Capital in the 21st century: Thomas Piketty
- Main Take aways for the Research Unit “The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities”



# THEORY OVERVIEW

## ANJA WEIBS



- University of Duisburg Essen
- Sociology: Macrosociology and transnational processes
- Has published primarily in German; informative review of the debate on social inequality in sociology (often focused on national scales); highlights global inequality and transnational perspective
- Recent interview, 2020, Das Neue Berlin: "Mit Anja Weiß über die Soziologie globaler Ungleichheiten". <https://dasneue.berlin/2020/10/01/1652/>





## INSIGHTS

- Theorization of (social) inequality has mainly been driven by sociology, economics, and philosophy; relevant for our research unit and our potential to make a theoretical contribution from a historical and anthropological perspective
- Inequality as a topic in European philosophy since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, most important theories: Marx with a focus on exploitation in capitalist economy and on capitalist relations of production, Max Weber with a focus on ownership classes versus purchasing classes, Bourdieu with a focus on social distinction and habitus etc.
- General problem of classical inequality theory: Rather Eurocentric, focussing on the nation state, only few works with global outlook, consequences of colonization are hardly integrated in the analysis

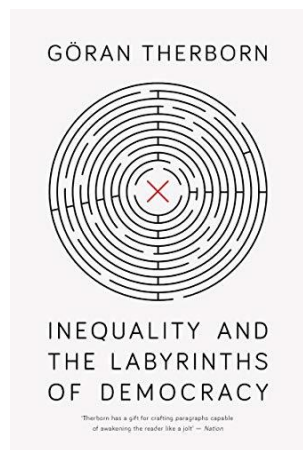
### References:

- Weiss, Anja (2017): Kapitel 2: Soziale Ungleichheit. In: A. Weiss. Soziale Globale Ungleichheiten. Berlin: Suhrkamp, S. 23-49.
- Publication in English: Weiss, A (2018). "Contextualizing global inequalities. A sociological approach." In: Korzeniewicz, RP/ Wallerstein, I (ed.). The World-System as Unit of Analysis: Past Contributions and Future Advances. New York, pp. 75-85.

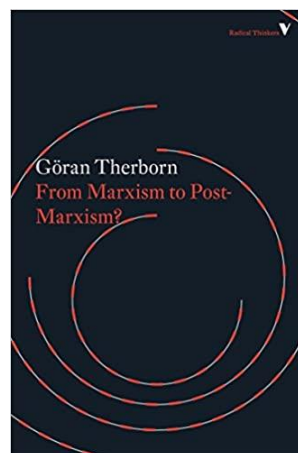


# MECHANISMS OF INEQUALITY (GÖRAN THERBORN)

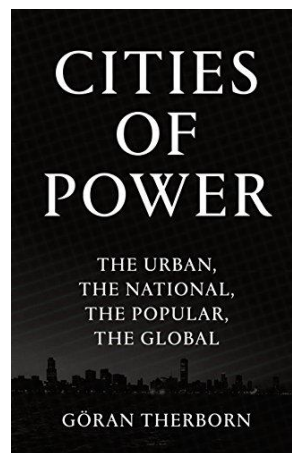
- Professor Emeritus of Sociology, University of Cambridge
- “He has worked in and on all the populated continents of the world. His works have been published in at least twenty-four languages. He is also a civic intellectual, with a lifetime commitment to universal freedom and equality, a supporter of anti-imperialist and egalitarian social movements, as well as a writer of and on Marxist and Radical theory.” (<https://www.therborn.com>)



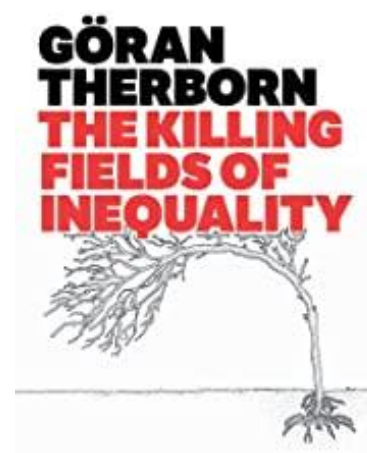
2020



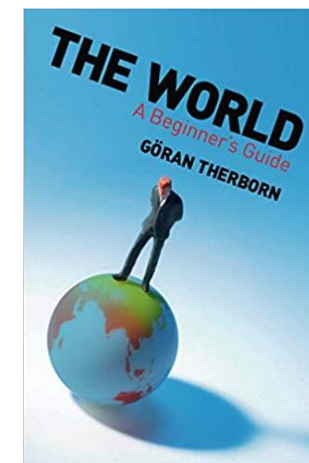
2018



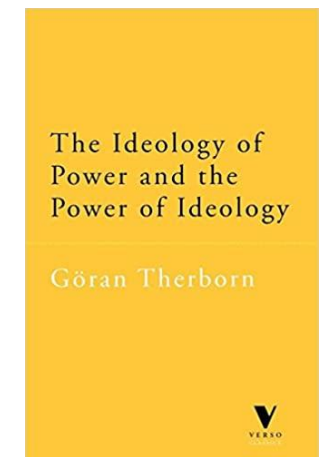
2017



2013



2011



1999





## INSIGHTS

- Therborn follows Tilly (1999) in assessing inequality with a relational approach, by looking at the organisation of social relations; central to our research unit, as an interesting and workable continuation of Tilly.
- Possible theoretical framework for the study of inequality, applicable to various examples/case studies discussed in the seminar
- Relevant distinction between vital, existential, and resource inequality
- Central mechanisms of inequality genesis and promotion (and their counter-mechanisms): distancing (approximation), exclusion (inclusion), hierarchization (de-hierarchization), exploitation (redistribution/rehabilitation)
- Critique of Therborn in the seminar: somewhat Eurocentric bias, uncritical use of the terms “developed/underdeveloped countries” in his examples

### References:

- Therborn, Göran (2013). The Killing Fields of Inequality. Cambridge: Polity Press. Part II: Theory. S. 35-66; Part V: Possible Futures. S. 151-184.
- Tilly, C. (1999). Durable Inequality. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California Press.



Table 3 *The roots, dynamics and interactions of the three kinds of inequality*

<i>Kind of inequality</i>	<i>Roots &amp; dynamics</i>	<i>Interactions</i>
Vital	Population ecology Status system Medical knowledge	Sending: impact on Resource inequality Receiving: major impact from Existential & Resource inequality
Existential	Family–sex–gender system Ethno-racial relations Social status system	Sending: major impact on Vital & Resource inequality Receiving: major impact from Resource inequality
Resource	Economic, political & cognitive systems, ecology & performance	Sending: impact on Vital & Existential inequality Receiving: impact from Existential inequality, & from Vital inequality

Human beings are *actors*, capable of acting towards aims or goals.

From this we can derive three kinds of inequality.

1. *Vital inequality*, referring to socially constructed unequal life-chances of human organisms. This is being studied by assessing mortality rates, life expectancy, health expectancy (expected years of life without serious illness), and several other indicators of child health, like birth weight and body growth by a certain age. Surveys of hunger and malnutrition are also used.
2. *Existential inequality*, the unequal allocation of personhood, i.e., of autonomy, dignity, degrees of freedom, and of rights to respect and self-development. This was given a pregnant legal formulation in a British common law ruling in 1923 (on Canadian women): ‘Women are persons in matters of pains and penalties, but are not persons in matters of rights and privileges’ (Munroe n.d.).
3. *Resource inequality*, providing human actors with unequal resources to act. This is where most inequality discourse begins, with the arrival of the first pay cheque, disregarding the fact that by then many bodies have been buried, and many lives have been stunted for ever by humiliations and degradations. However, the central importance of resource inequality is undeniable. Resources of action are of several kinds, although following the money trail of income will take us quite far. As Michael Sandel (2012: 3) has pointed out recently, these days there are ‘not many’ things that money cannot buy. But your first resource is normally your parents, their wealth, their knowledge and their support. We shall pay our respect to them below, by looking into (in)equality of opportunity and social mobility.





Table 4 *Inequality mechanisms and their interactive dynamics*

Mechanism	Dynamics	
	Direct agency	Systemic dynamics
<i>Distanciation</i>	Running ahead/ falling behind Outcompeting Social psychology of success/ failure	Reward structuration and normation, e.g. 'Winner takes all', 'Matthew effect', 'Star' system Returns to scale Information/ opportunity structuration
<i>Exclusion</i>	Closure, hindering, opportunity hoarding discrimination, monopolization	Membership boundaries, entry thresholds Cumulation of advantages Stigmatization Citizenship/property rights
<i>Hierarchization</i>	Super-/sub- ordination Patron/client relations Put down/ deference	Organizational ladder, status/ authority distance Hierarchy of family roles Systemic centre and peripheries Ethnic/racial/gendered hierarchies Generalizations of superiority/ inferiority
<i>Exploitation</i>	Extraction Utilization Abuse	Polarized power relations Asymmetric dependence Tributary systems

Table 5 *Equality mechanisms*

	Direct agency	System dynamics
<i>Approximation</i>	Catching-up Using new opportunities	Compensatory capacitation Affirmative action
<i>Inclusion</i>	Migration Claiming membership	Entitlements, human rights Anti-discrimination laws
<i>De-hierarchization</i>	Collective organizing Collective bargaining Networking	Empowerment, democratization Organizational/ institutional flattening Internal re-qualification possibilities
<i>Redistribution &amp; Rehabilitation</i>	Political organization & demands Philanthropy Political organization & demands	Taxation, social transfers & services Public rectification, compensation

Additional material:

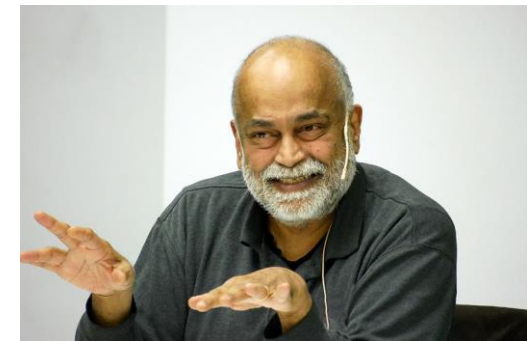
- Presentation on “Killing Fields of Inequality” (2013): <https://www.therborn.com/recent-speeches/>
- ‘Opus Magnum: How the Pandemic is Changing the World’, Thesis Eleven, online July 6, 2020. <https://thesiseleven.com/2020/07/06/opus-magnum-how-the-pandemic-is-changing-the-world/>



# CAPABILITIES APPROACH (SEN/NUSSBAUM)

## CAPACITY TO ASPIRE (APPADURAI)

- Amartya Sen: economist and philosopher, Prof. emeritus Harvard University; focus on welfare economics, economic and social justice
- Martha Nussbaum: philosopher, Prof. emeritus, University of Chicago; focus on political philosophy, ethics, social justice
- Arjun Appadurai: anthropologist, Professor at New School in NY City; focus on globalization, space-time relations



# EPISTEMIC INEQUALITY (SABELO NDLOVU-GATSHENI)



- Chair of Epistemologies of the Global South, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Bayreuth; <https://www.accord.org.za/people/sabelo-j-ndlovu-gatsheni/>
- Decolonial thinker, politics of knowledge in Africa, history, development studies
- Latest major publications: *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (Routledge, 2018); *Rethinking and Unthinking Development: Perspectives on Inequality and Poverty in South Africa and Zimbabwe* (Berghahn Books, 2019) coedited with Busani Mpofo; *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa: Turning Over A New Leaf* (Routledge, 2020).





## INSIGHTS

- Sen/Nussbaum, Appadurai, Ndlovu-Gatsheni are the only texts that address vital inequalities (in Therborn's terminology: stunted lives)
- Capabilities approach of Sen/Nussbaum: focus on people's capabilities (rather than resources/forms of capital) and basic conditions to realize a meaningful life (minimal definition); people's ideas about "meaningful life" can differ
- Appadurai builds on Sen/Nussbaum. He focuses on poor people's "capacity to aspire" as culturally embedded and in need of political recognition (Taylor), and how this capacity can be strengthened. Draws on ethnographic examples of working with poor people in India

### References:

- Appadurai, Arjun (2004): *The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition*. In: Rao, Vijayendra and Michael Walton (eds.): *Culture and Public Action*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. S. 59–84.
- Nussbaum, 2003: *Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice*. *Feminist Economics* 9(2-3): 33-59.





## INSIGHTS

- Ndlovu-Gatsheni brings in the additional dimension of epistemic inequality, which is not addressed by any of the other authors in the seminar. His focus is on the disastrous effects of colonialism on development in Africa, using a decolonial approach. He asks to recognise the voices of others/Africans as equals and as "in charge of their own ideas of development"
- Epistemic inequality important for our research unit: promising addition to Therborn's model of vital, existential and resource inequality; a factor that produces and reproduces inequality through distantiaion as a mechanism
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Appadurai are an interesting match: whereas Appadurai highlights the need to support "the poor" in realising their potential, Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls more strongly for people to be taken seriously as forgers of their own future, and to acknowledge the negative effects of colonisation and take on responsibility.

### Reference:

- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo (2018): Chapter 1: Rethinking Development in the Age of Global Coloniality. In: Mporfu, Busani and Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (eds.). Rethinking and Unthinking Development: Perspectives on Inequality and Poverty in South Africa and Zimbabwe. New York: Berghahn Books. S. 27-49.



# ENTANGLED INEQUALITIES APPROACH



- “*desiguALdades.net* (2009-2016, funded by BMBF) is an interdisciplinary, international, and multi-institutional research network on interdependent inequalities in Latin America. Its specific research profile emphasizes multidimensionality and global interdependencies of social inequalities in Latin America.” (<https://www.desigualdades.net>)
- Key proponents: Sergio Costa, Manuela Boatca, Marianne Braig, Barbara Göbel (members of the Latin American Institute, Free University Berlin) etc.
- Series of Working Papers (more than 100) that integrate theoretical contributions and analyses of social inequalities and global interdependencies in different parts of Latin America ([https://www.desigualdades.net/Working\\_Papers/index.html](https://www.desigualdades.net/Working_Papers/index.html))
- Members are closely connected to the Maria Sibylla Merian Centre Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America (Mecila) that started in 2017 (<https://mecila.net/en/homepage>)





## INSIGHTS

- Entangled Inequalities approach brings together different dimensions of inequality in the analysis, which are visible and mutually reinforcing especially in Latin America: economic inequality, the historical dimension of slaveholding societies, and the resulting inequalities in terms of property and race hierarchies, political measures, and changing ideologies
- Complex approach, which is explored in specific case studies (e.g. Brazil); works decidedly against the privileging of one form of inequality (e.g. economic or existential inequality) in the analysis and relates them to each other
- In the seminar: general overview of theoretical approach, case study Brazil.

### Reference:

- Costa, Sérgio (2011): „Researching Entangled Inequalities in Latin America. The Role of Historical, Social and Transregional Inequalities“, *desiguALdades.net Working Paper Series*, No. 9, Berlin.



# **HISTORICAL MATERIALISM: LABOR AND INEQUALITY, NEO-MARXIST INTERPRETATIONS OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS**

- **Marx:** Power relationships between capitalists and workers are seen as inherently exploitative, will inevitably create class conflict. Marx believed that this conflict would ultimately lead to a revolution in which the working class would overthrow the capitalist class and seize control of the economy. Marx was read in the seminar as a highly important reference for the analysis of labor and inequality until today.
- **Neo-Marxist interpretations of the “Return of inequality”:** Revolutions in Russia (1917) and China (1949) engendered fear of revolution in Europe as a trigger for welfare state reforms and betterment of the working class in the course of the 20th century (Therborn’s neo-marxist argument) besides other reasons for social reform. After the collapse of communism in 1989/90 this fear fell away, huge global labour markets opened up (India China) and neoliberal ideology took centre stage, with negative consequences for the status of workers worldwide and for the model of the social welfare state.





# NEO-MARXIST APPROACHES

- Jan Breman (sociologist, University of Amsterdam): the Social Question as a labour issue; examines how capital dominates the economy internationally today. Points to the absence of international labour movement/trade unions. Financial capital in his view more dominant than capital in Marx's time. Critique of global inequality and multinationals against which no union can compete.
- David Harvey (human geographer and social theorist, City University of New York): neo-marxist, extending marxist analysis to neoliberalism on a global scale; focusing on labour exploitation and accumulation by dispossession (of land, property, labour and citizenship rights) on a global and transnational scale.

## References:

- Breman, J. et al (2019): "Introduction. The Social Question all over again" and "Postscript. The Social Question in Its Global Incarnation." In: Breman, Jan et al. (eds.). The Social Question in the Twenty-First Century. University of California Press. pp. 1-22 and pp. 244-251
- Harvey, David (2019): Anti-Capitalist Chronicles: Accumulation by Dispossession. Democracy at Work, Lecture (22 mins.). <https://www.exploring-economics.org/en/discover/anti-capitalist-chronicles-accumulation-by-disp/>



# CAPITAL IN THE 21ST CENTURY (THOMAS PIKETTY)



- French economist, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS)
- Public intellectual, political advisor to British Labour Party, leader of research lab
- Focus on long-term economic inequalities; wealth and income inequality; historical perspectives and transregional comparison; focus on Europe (in particular France)
- Famous for his critique of the "Kuznet curve"

Fellow colleagues (with a perspective on global inequality):

- Gabriel Zucman, Berkeley
- Branko Milanovic, World Bank

Film adaptation of Piketty's book: *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 2019, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5723056/>





## INSIGHTS

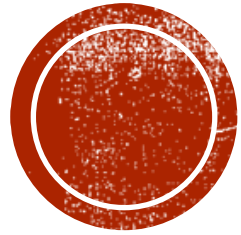
- Piketty strongly focuses on resources (inherited wealth, wealth accumulated over generations; i.e. the production of wealth through rent, not labour). He argues that wealth accumulates exponentially, and that income derived from work does not match the growth of wealth. This development increases inequality substantially within and between societies.
- Provides a historically informed economic analysis starting from the French Revolution, focusing on Europe. In his later book (2020), he includes a globally comparative perspective.
- He sees the solution in state/policy measures: Social reforms, different taxation of wealth and assets, expansion of the welfare state and the education system. Profoundly social democratic vision, change not by revolution but by reform
- Therborn (chapter V) sees the solution not only in a welfare state but he also hopes for a change of mindset of the global middle class towards more solidarity and towards a consent to redistribution
- Ideas about social reforms and the power of working/middle class may be relevant for our research unit, if we think about formulating policy relevant recommendations

### References:

Piketty, Thomas (2014): Kapital im 21. Jahrhundert. München: Beck. Einleitung 13-55.

Piketty, Thomas (2020): Capital and Ideology. Harvard University Press.





# MAIN TAKE AWAYS FOR THE RESEARCH UNIT



The Production and Reproduction of  
**SOCIAL INEQUALITIES**



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# INSPIRATION FOR THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A) Theorization of (social) inequality has mainly been driven by sociology, economics, and philosophy; shortcomings of classical inequality theory: Eurocentric, focussing on the nation state, no global outlook, consequences of colonization are hardly integrated

- basis for our theoretical contribution from a historical and anthropological perspective

B) Therborn's mechanisms of inequality follow Tilly in assessing inequality with a relational approach, by looking at the organisation of social relations and at the mechanisms that produce and reproduce social inequalities

- successful and more practical continuation of Tilly; also provides suggestions on how inequality can be ameliorated/reversed (equality mechanisms)

C) Decolonial approach and focus on epistemic inequality (Quijano, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, etc.)

- promising addition to Therborn's model of vital, existential, and resource inequality; a factor that produces and reproduces inequality through distantiaion as a mechanism
- contribution to overcoming the Eurocentric bias in much of inequality research

D) Capabilities approach of Sen/Nussbaum and Appadurai's capacity to aspire

- relevant for our actor-centred approach; compatible with decolonial perspective/focus on epistemic inequality



# FURTHER RESOURCES / RECOMMENDATIONS

- Research group “Overcoming Inequalities in a Fractured World: Between Elite Power and Social Mobilization”, 2018-20, UNRISD, <https://www.unrisd.org/OvercomingInequalities>; example for a different branch of inequality research focusing on the rich and their views on wealth and inequality
- Lecture Series of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies on Wealth and Social Inequality, Summer 2021, <https://www.mpifg.de/downloads/MPIfG-lectures-2021.pdf> ; with lectures by: Mark Savage, Fabian Pfeffer, Eva Maria Gajek (podcasts: [https://www.mpifg.de/aktuelles/Veranstaltungen/podcasts\\_en.asp#2021](https://www.mpifg.de/aktuelles/Veranstaltungen/podcasts_en.asp#2021))
- Seminar series on the past and present of slavery, organised by the Bonavero Institute of Human Rights and moderated by Samantha Knights QC, University of Oxford. Part 1: The History of Slavery <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/events/panel-discussion-history-slavery>; part 2: Immigration and Empire <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/events/panel-discussion-immigration-empire>; part 3: Modern Slavery <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/events/panel-discussion-modern-slavery>
- Mark Savage. 2021. The return of inequality. Harvard University Press.

