

review of:

Gilberto Antonelli and Boike Rehbein (eds)

Inequality in Economics and Sociology: New Perspectives

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In October 2017 the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel (to give the award its full name) recognised Richard Thaler's revolutionary contribution to Behavioural Economics, for showing that human agents do not always act in a rational manner. This is something social scientists have always suspected, so Antonelli and Rehbein's edited text, 'Inequality in Economics and Sociology' is a timely and provocative attempt at building bridges (p.7) between the two disciplines. Antonelli and Rehbein propose that inequality is back in public discourse (p. 1) and only Sociology can treat the subject with due reflexivity and humility (p.2) rather than reductively, the way Economics does.

The subjects of work and work participation emerge as cornerstone themes from the outset, as do arguments for widening the conceptual lens on inequality beyond Gini coefficients and Lorenz curves (to pick on two quantitative indicators). Capitalism, exploitation and inequality are topics familiar to WES readers, and the authors follow familiar theoretical paths. In traversing the inequality terrain, the volume compares Economics and Sociological conceptualisations (Part I), global manifestations caused by wealth distribution and class division (Part II), ethnic, spatial and demographic dimensions (Part III) and concludes with a practical and researcher-friendly overview of major quantitative and qualitative approaches to its study (Part IV).

Having challenged the assumption that inequality goes beyond economic growth and wealth distribution (pp.8-10) in the short and introductory Part I, Part II seeks to consider the impacts of globalisation on inequality. Surprisingly, it does not connect with macro-level debates on, for instance, neoliberalist deregulation, labour market segmentation or postmodern individualisation. Instead, Antonelli (p. 33) offers an overview of economic models and international GDP trends. Souza (p. 68) moves into class analysis and detects inequality in the fragmentation of Brazilian lower classes, their limited access to cultural capital and the resultant emergence of an 'under-proletariat' or 'precariat'. Stoll (p. 81) finds similarities in the social, political and cultural diversity of the 'middle class' in Brazil and Kenya, while Hartmann (p. 98) argues that even within the 'global elite' there is cultural inequality and barriers to international mobility.

Part III stays true to its projected course and opens with Silva's (p. 111) description of inequality as a composite phenomenon caused by the intersectionality of class conflict (outlined in Marxian theory) and tensions in the social production of gender (informed by Queer theory). Weiß (p. 122) considers the 'class mobility paradox' (p. 126) of migrant workers who suffer exploitation in dirty, dangerous and demeaning (3D) jobs in their host country, while at the same time having above average incomes compared with their fellow-citizens at home. Jodhka (p. 131) describes the reproduction of inequality through prejudice and discrimination (p. 143) in India's caste system and this is mirrored in Maré's (p. 148) chapter on the justification of race-related inequality through capitalist and colonial exploitation, and Krishna's (p. 162) chapter on the rural-urban income divide in India. Inequality becomes personal as Kinville and Pedrini (p. 174) trace its reproduction through education, skill formation and resulting labour market participation, concluding that skill inequality in polarised labour market limits social capital access to those at the bottom. Leoncini (p. 188) shows that while digital technologies increase efficiency and improve productivity, this neither produces economic parity, nor leads to a reduction in global inequality.

These individual chapters present important perspectives and demonstrate the need to expand the conceptual boundary of inequality away from Economists' focus on growth and efficiency (p. 1). The multi-disciplinary narratives of contributing authors apply Economics and Sociological lenses in close sequence, yet without coalescing into the aspirational 'transdisciplinary research agenda' (p.7) Antonelli and Rehbein seek. Perspectives on class conflict (Chapters 4 and 5 of Part II) do not quite extend into a discussion on global inequality, nor is a novel theoretical framework put forward to connect the inequality dimensions of gender, race, caste or innovation (Chapters 7, 9, 11 and 13 of Part III). Marxian, Weberian and Bourdieusian lenses are frequently deployed in order to discuss worker commodification and social segmentation as processes producing and re-producing inequality. Nevertheless, they seem somewhat out of place when combined with data on GDP trends, productivity and income distribution, and do not achieve a true fusion between Sociology and Economics.

This is perhaps understandable, given that Antonelli and Rehbein's text is a formidable undertaking which offers a rich kaleidoscope of perspectives, against which inequality is discussed, dissected and re-constructed. As a consequence, the volume is byzantine in its fragmented complexity, yet bold and ambitious in equal measures and, undoubtedly - a step in the right direction.