

Contrasting Conceptions, Discourses, and Studies of Economic Inequalities

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Having been largely ignored for decades, the issues of economic and social inequalities have regained mainstream political attention in the Western capitalist countries in recent years. The inequality and austerity trends of recent decades pose significant challenges and implications for the prevailing models of liberal and electoral democracy, the structures and distribution of power, and in turn for understanding the role and practices of professional journalism and news media. Clearly, different conceptualizations, definitions, and framings of inequality and socioeconomic justice are central to the conduct and outcomes of such struggles over the future shape of the social order. This article begins by introducing the topic and competing conceptualizations of inequality. The second section, *Modern Political and Economic Discourses and Inequality: Liberal and Others*, provides a brief, if selective, overall review of how inequality matters have been addressed and understood in modern political economy as well as the more recent field of economics. The third section, *Communication Studies and Inequalities: An Initial Review*, outlines the results of a brief but systematic review of how socioeconomic inequalities are addressed in the relevant academic disciplines. The final section comprises some brief conclusions and implications.

Keywords: inequality, liberalism, economics, political economy, communication, journalism, news media, politics of distribution

Economic Inequality Matters

“The outcome of individual economic freedom can be great inequality, which hollows out realistic notions of democracy” (Wolf, 2016, p. 3).

Having been largely marginalized or ignored for decades, the issues of economic and social inequalities have reentered the stage of mainstream political attention and debate in the Western

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heartlands of the capitalist system over the past couple of years. One marker and indicator of growing attention to "inequality matters" was the surprisingly large sales and media attention paid in 2014 to a lengthy academic book largely comprising data on trends in the distribution income and wealth in the major capitalist economies (Piketty, 2014).

Another is that an outsider highlighting the issues of growing inequalities, Bernie Sanders, went very close toward winning the candidate selection process as the Democratic Party nominee for the 2016 presidential election in the United States. It is also notable that he did so despite strong opposition from what he defined as "the corporate media" (Sanders, 2016) and from the Democratic Party machine. Indeed, the primaries leading up to the presidential election in the United States, the election itself, and the presidential election in France in May 2017 clearly signal a widespread popular rejection of the established liberal-centrist political parties.

Furthermore, the political role of inequality is belatedly being recognized post-Brexit by the economic elite. Shortly after the UK Brexit referendum, the London-based *Guardian* reported that "Bank of America Merrill Lynch (BAML) immediately called Brexit the 'biggest electoral riposte yet to [the] age of inequality'" ("How bad can Brexit be," 2016, p. 2). Investment group Pimco, which manages \$1.5 trillion of bonds, warned clients about the "battle against inequality." Meanwhile, French giant Axa (with €666 billion under its belt) concluded that "UK voters have taken their frustrations about income inequality out on the EU" ("How bad can Brexit be," 2016, p. 2).

Renewed attention to economic and social inequality in recent years should be regarded as no surprise or accident. It unfolds against the background of a major financial crash that emerged in the north Atlantic core in 2007–2008 and a subsequent slow, partial, and highly uneven "recovery." The majority of the populations in many countries in the core of the capitalist system face relatively sluggish economic growth, declining stagnant incomes, state expenditure, and policy regimes orientated toward "austerity" (and the threat of deflation). Many countries and regions in Europe are witnessing extremely high unemployment, a key shaper and marker of other dimensions of the overall distribution of welfare and power. The financial sector, however, is doing very nicely again thanks to massive state nurturing and supports. So too are the economic elites, with the markets for luxury goods frequented by the wealthiest booming away.

Although capitalism may be characterized as a system in perpetual crisis, here we may note the line of both staunch critics (e.g., Marx) and defenders (e.g., Schumpeter) of capitalism who identify certain periods (such as the present) as marked by particularly pervasive crises and intensified restructuring pressures. These include struggles over the contours of deep, strategic, and multisided changes amounting to new socioeconomic, technical, and political "paradigms" in which the issues of inequalities and distributional stakes are of central importance.

In combination with other socioeconomic and institutional changes, the inequality and crisis, attendant slow growth, and austerity trends of recent decades pose some significant challenges and implications for the prevailing models of liberal and electoral democracy, the structures and distribution of power as well as for understanding the role and practice of professional journalism and news media.

Clearly, different definitions, conceptualizations, and framings of inequality and socioeconomic justice are central to the conduct and outcomes of such struggles over the future shape of the social order. These are also central to identifying and understanding the specific set of political economic ideas that inform or underpin journalistic practices and news-making discourses in the contemporary media landscape; they also inform those now most responsible for the education of media professionals in the higher education sector. Thus, in the next section, *Modern Political and Economic Discourses and Inequality: Liberal and Others*, we examine the spectrum of significant political-economic perspectives in the modern era.

In response to the argument that economic inequality represents only one “narrow” conceptualization of inequality, we believe it valid to focus on economic dimensions of inequality in this article because of their links to certain significant political developments such as those sketched above. Indeed, we believe this is now not merely valid, but a priority theme precisely in light of the recent work on long-run trends in economic inequality.

First, the recent works of Piketty (2014) and others on long-run trends in economic inequality pose significant questions and implications for certain key assumptions about the political economic character and outcomes of liberal democracy in the advanced capitalist world, dating back to the mid-20th century at least. Such research, in turn, also poses strategic and novel challenges to certain key assumptions underpinning mainstream political discourse and its political communication practices, including the operations of the mediated public sphere.

Second, economic inequality has been largely ignored by mainstream media and policy discourse in the mediated public sphere for more than 40 years (prior to 2014–2017), despite this being precisely the period of continuing and deepening trends in economic inequality.

Third, we further observe that economic inequality trends since the 1970s have also been marked by a relative neglect or “significant silence” in the media and communication studies field. The economic dimensions of inequality were noted and discussed by some of the early critical scholars of the modern media system (Preston, 2009). But over time, the field appears to have become increasingly neglectful of the economic dimensions of power and inequality and their implications for the political aspects of democracy or projects toward greater social justice. This neglect of material economic inequalities is but one of the costs of the so-called “cultural turn” in many domains of academic discourse that happened to coincide with the rise of neoliberalism from the 1980s.

Fourth, we further observe that the communication studies field is generally defined as a major site for the education and training of news-makers and other media professionals (given the contemporary division of labor prevailing in academic sector). This field thus bears a particular relation to the specific forms of political economic thought and reasoning that animates or informs professional journalists and other news workers in the contemporary mediated public sphere. At the same time, however, although the role and responsibilities of the communication studies field in this regard are real and significant, they must also be viewed in light of the multiple layers of influences on contemporary journalism and news media. The latter include the invisible “cultural air” that journalists and media professionals inevitably, if

not always consciously, breathe, appropriate, and reproduce in their daily work routines, often comprising default or taken-for-granted assumptions or claims based on highly specific (contestable but rarely contested) political-economic positions (Preston, 2009). In what follows, especially in the work of second section, we hope to indicate alternative conceptualizations of economic inequalities and to make such default assumptions and unquestioned positions more manifest and visible.

Thus, in this article, we start by observing that although economic inequalities have been marginalized or ignored for decades, these issues have reentered the stage of mainstream political attention in recent years, if only sporadically. In the next section, we briefly review how inequality matters have been addressed and understood in the political economy literature in the modern era, as well as in the more recent field of economics. We attempt to track the roots of the idea of inequality in selected key writers from the classic liberal and critical literature on economics, as well as certain recent critiques of economic inequality. The third section traces inequality as a topic in academic research in the social sciences over recent decades, drawing systematic searches of relevant databases. The section titled *Qualitative Analyses of Inequality as Topic in Communications Research Literature* briefly considers some qualitative aspects of work on inequality in the communications studies field. The final section draws out some conclusions.

Modern Political and Economic Discourses and Inequality: Liberal and Others

The Production and Distribution of "Wealth" and Welfare

This section provides a selective and brief review of how the accumulating body of knowledge in the modern social science and humanities (SS&H) domain tends to engage with inequality, especially economic inequality. In turn, of course, this knowledge domain, especially political economy, economics, sociology, and cultural studies fields, provides key intellectual resources and starting points for the relatively new field of communication and media studies that has become institutionalized from the late 1940s on. Here, we observe that from the early modern era, many of the key works in the SS&H knowledge domain—and especially in the political economy field—have displayed a strong interest in issues related to the production and distribution of income, wealth, and welfare.

Adam Smith and Classical (Modern) Liberal Takes on Inequality Matters

Adam Smith celebrated the then-emergent capitalist mode of production, especially given what he viewed as the productive potential of its attendant division of labor in leading to greatly enhanced wealth and welfare for all. For Smith, the division of labor was the most significant factor in economic progress, albeit one complemented by a positive balance between "productive" and "unproductive" activities or labor. For Smith, the division of labor accounts for "the superior affluence and abundance commonly possessed even by [the] lowest and most despised member of Civilized society, compared with what the most respected and active savage can attain to" in spite of so much "oppressive inequality" (Smith, A. 1776/2003, as cited in Schumpeter, 1954/2006, p. 182).

Adam Smith is widely read and taken as one of the first to advance an early version of the "trickle down" theory of capitalism. In this respect, too, he laid down the template for most of the

subsequent streams of liberal political economy or economic science in tending to focus on and celebrate the idea that the rising tide of capitalist prosperity lifts all boats. The implied corollary is that matters of the distribution of the wealth and income are optimally dealt with by market forces; so, inequality in modern capitalist society comprises a secondary or marginal concern at best. Smith's treatment helped to frame a major and continuing modern source of economic inequality, which more recent economists call "the functional distribution of income" (Galbrith, 2016, p. 14). Contemporary liberal "Keynesian" economists consider the latter as "that part of inequality explained, if not actually justified, by the operation of economic principles" (Galbraith, 2012, p. 17).

Marx and Other Radical Critics of Liberal Political Economic Discourse

Adam Smith's optimism about the virtuous circle between high wages for workers as some sort of "necessary effect and cause of the greater prosperity" (cited in Schumpeter, 1954/2006, p. 184) was not shared by Karl Marx. In essence, Marx problematized most of what liberalism took as valid, legitimate, and functional (if not fair) forms of economic inequality. For example, Marx emphasized that the fundamental cleavage in capitalist society lay between those who owned and controlled (productive) capital and the majority who did not: The latter had no option or "freedom" but to sell their labor power to the minority group of capitalists.

Marx (1864/2000) observed and documented how the period from 1848 to 1864 was "unrivalled for the development of its industry and the growth of its commerce" in all the "industrious and progressive" countries of Europe (p. 1). Yet, "the misery of the working masses" had not diminished but deepened despite the apparent prosperity of that particular period, in part because of recent political defeats and weakness of the labor movement, according to Marx (p. 1). He further argued that in all countries of Europe, class inequalities were growing at that time with "the great mass of the working classes . . . sinking down to a lower depth," while "those above them were rising in the social scale" (p. 3).

From the 1840s, Marx actively supported the extension of the vote and liberal notions of citizenship rights to the working class at a time when these were resisted by the dominant strands of liberal economic and political thought. But he argued that the potential benefits of such formal political reforms would be, at best, rather limited, partial, and temporary in an era when capitalists owned and controlled the major levers of economic power. He viewed this as especially so when the majority of the workers faced low and precarious living standards compared with capitalists and all sorts of social relations were increasingly subject to the naked cash nexus (Marx, 1848/1967).

Marx's methodology, historical materialism, lent itself to long-run, systematic, and nuanced accounts of how the sources, meanings, and discourses around economic inequalities (as well as the scope for potential remedies) are themselves highly historically contingent (Mandel, 1977). As is well known, Marx placed emphasis on the structural contradictions between the growing potential of the modern, socialized production system to meet the material needs of all and the inequalities arising from an economic elite's ownership and control of the means of production.

Of course, the categories of capital and labor and attendant issues of economic inequality have animated new social movements and have been at the very heart of major political struggles in Europe for most of the century between the 1840s and the 1930s, but this became much less the case in the late 1900s. Rather surprisingly, however, recent years have seen a growing interest in Marx's ideas and writings as the issues of economic inequalities, and capitalist crisis tendencies have become increasingly hot topics of political and economic debate (as we will see below).

Classic Political Liberalism and the Neoclassical Turn in Economics

In liberal discourse, a radical separation of the political and economic domains has been presumed or prescribed from the outset (e.g., Hume, 1777/1987). A predominant focus falls on power as related to formal politics and political institutions, whereas "economic" forms or other sources of power are rarely addressed explicitly. When it comes to economic matters such as differential wage/salary levels, living standards, or other aspects of the distribution of income and wealth, classic liberal pluralism tends to assume that these are essentially economic matters, which are "private," to be largely (and optimally) settled via the play of competition, skills, and negotiation between individuals in the market or workplace. Hume (1751/1987) favored the growing trends toward unequal distribution of property, fearing that perfect equality would destroy the ideas of thrift and industry. The later liberal pluralist model tends to downplay, if not ignore, the existence and relevance of class inequalities based on unequal ownership and control of property and wealth, especially in the form of capital, land, money, or other economic resources (Crouch 2011; Harvey, 2014b; Sayer, 2015).

In earlier stages of capitalist modernity, including most of the 19th century, proponents of economic liberalism tended to treat inequalities in property and wealth ownership as natural, functional, and legitimate. They took market-based competition between individual economic agents (whether workers, manufacturers, or merchants) as the optimal and fair (if not "natural") means of establishing the levels of workers' wages and the distribution of national wealth and income (Mill, 1870/1909). Indeed, many classic liberals generally opposed the collective efforts of workers to form trade unions and associated social movements to advance their claims or protect their interests (Zinn, 2008).

When it emerged in the early 20th century, neoclassical economics embraced many of the foundational ideas and assumptions of classic economic liberalism as it sought to polish its scientific veneer while introducing a more mechanical mode of, and approach to, economic and political analysis. The neoclassicals reframed capital as a physical entity that paired with labor to produce output. This approach to conceptualizing capital facilitated a mathematical treatment of "the production function" whereby profits and wages could be treated as the respective "marginal products" of each factor (Galbraith, 2012, pp. 112–113).

Changing Liberalism Since 1900: Keynesianism and Neoliberalism

The underlying principles, definitions, and practices of the political and economic faces of liberalism have been much modified over the course of capitalist modernity in Europe and beyond, usually

in response to pressures from social movements representing working-class interests and pushing for reforms in unexpected directions relative to the dominant economic dogmas and ideologies of prior times.

Indeed, multiple struggles in the industrial and political *arenae* eventually served to win workers' rights to collective self-organization and representation in the workplace as well as in the parliamentary arena. Such rights and practices served to greatly reduce economic inequalities between the major classes (Musto, 2014; Zinn, 2008). The successive political and social mobilizations of the labor movement also ensured that the dawn of the 20th century witnessed new, indeed more egalitarian, norms and social standards related to money budgets (wage levels) and time budgets (length of the typical "working day"), at least compared with conditions prevailing throughout the prior century (Preston, 2009).

We may note that over the past century, the history of reforms to the classic liberal pluralist model as it relates to economic inequalities and distributional matters can be summarized as a movement in two parts or stages: first, the establishment of Keynesianism (alongside an expanded welfare state) as the default political economy model for liberal pluralism throughout most of the Western world, from the late 1940s to the 1970s. The second comprises the latter's displacement, performed by the rise of neoliberalism.

Keynes and the Keynesian/Social Democratic Regime

Keynes's theory of demand management, developed during the 1930s Depression, was based on a positive view of the potential of government action, especially in periods of recession or slump, and drew on the idea that markets were not always self-clearing or self-balancing. Keynesianism was reformist, but it did not seek to control markets or transcend capitalism; rather, "it sought to sustain them at levels avoiding self-destructive booms and slumps alike" (Crouch, 2011, p. 13).

The introduction of the Keynesian, welfare-state regime (or social democratic order) that prevailed in much of the Western capitalist world from the late 1940s to the late 1970s owes as much to accumulating political pressures from below (the labor movement in its various political and economic strands) and a specific geopolitical configuration.

In terms of economic inequalities and class stratification, the main effect of the Keynesian, welfare-state regime was to not only raise the consumption capacities of the majority of the working class, but also to enhance the opportunities for (especially intergenerational) social mobility. The political viability and legitimacy of the model were boosted by academic research suggesting that there were long-run trends toward shrinking inequalities in the advanced capitalist countries. In certain respects, it may be said that the Keynesian, social democratic model defined and constructed inequality efficiency as "interdependent" (Crouch, 2011).

Since the 1980s, however, most of the political parties and groups/actors formerly self-defining as "social democratic" have shifted from prioritizing policy and structural reforms designed to tame capitalism and improve the working and living conditions of the 99% toward embracing policies and "reforms" that actively promote the sway of markets, capitalist power, and economic interests.

Neoliberalism and Inequality: Theories and Policy Practices

The second key change within liberalism over the past century that is particularly relevant to economic inequalities and distributional matters comprises the introduction and ever-onward march of neoliberalism since the late 1970s.

In sum, this shift comprises a regime marked by “capital-friendly dispositions” alongside related “ideologies” and policy practices (Arrighi, 2007, p. 46). In practice, if not necessarily in its founding principles, neoliberalism has favored and supported the rise of the financial services sector, as well as a distinct revival in the role and fortunes of a species whose demise Keynes had presumed or wished for, *the rentier*.

In language and ideas highly reminiscent of the classical, elite forms of political liberalism that prevailed for most of the 19th century, the most active and self-conscious propagandist of neoliberalism, Hayek (1960/1978) argued that the only form of equality (worthy of consideration) is that of “equality before the law” (pp. 84–86). To care about any form of equality other than “equality before the law” is nothing more than “merely idealizing envy” (pp. 84–86).

The most significant effects of neoliberalism, in line with the intentions of its original proponents, have been to undermine the organizational capacities, political values, and policy supports that had previously enabled the working class to achieve a modest reduction in economic inequalities and increased social mobility—if only for a temporary period (Crouch, 2011; Preston, 2001).

Neoliberalism has meant a highly selective and partial “rolling back” of the scope of the state in favor of the sway of commodity relations or “market forces” whereby legislators are advised (or expected) to accommodate rather than countervail the interests and power of increasingly concentrated capitalist agents. In many respects, neoliberalism has sought to undermine the limited reforms toward a more egalitarian social formation that had been achieved not least in the era when Keynesianism held sway.

The period since the outbreak of the “great Western” financial crisis has been one of growing economic inequalities as well as relatively slow growth. After borrowing large sums to clear the debts of private-sector banks, governments in many EU member states have adopted “austerity” policy regimes that have operated to further amplify material inequalities between the working classes and the elites. Thus far, the years since 2008 in many European countries have witnessed not merely the “nondeath” of neoliberalism (Crouch, 2011), but also its amplification and related growth of economic inequalities.

Minding the Gap: Alternatives to Liberalism’s Separation(s) of Economy and Polity

As already noted, liberalism’s hegemony in discourse around political economy matters was severely challenged by various strands of radical Marxist and anarchistic thought posing very different views on the costs–benefits balance of capitalism and advancing more egalitarian principles for the production and distribution of wealth, income, and welfare, especially during the 1880s to 1980s.

We also briefly note the development of other alternative strands of political economic thought since the late 19th century that radically depart from the dominant orthodoxies of classic liberal and neoclassical economics. Although detailed treatment is not possible here, we must briefly flag and note the emergence and role of various strands of "institutional," "evolutionary" political economy, as well as elements of the German "historical school" and, indeed, some early works of the Frankfurt school. Despite internal differences, these are noteworthy because they distance themselves from core methodological and theoretical principles of the dominant neoclassical school of liberal economics. First, they tend to recognize, if not emphasize, the embedded or interwoven character of political and economic processes, and so reject the liberal tendency to treat those as inherently or necessarily separate domains. Second, their approaches are simultaneously historical and systematic in scope and highly attuned to temporal specificities when it comes to the analysis of political, economic, and social phenomena (e.g., inequality). They readily support, if not explicitly engage in, analyses that are attentive to various forms of institutional change, including significant "new combinations" of interrelated economic, organizational, technological, institutional, and policy-related innovations (Preston, 2001, 2009). Furthermore, this alternative tradition of historical, evolutionary, and institutional political economy presents a fruitful intellectual platform not only for newly emerging, radical strands of *heterodox* economics and political economy in the early 21st century, but can also contribute to better understandings of the increasingly interwoven relations between economic processes and mediated communication.

Recent Radical Critiques of Economic Inequalities

We also observe more recent critiques of economic inequalities that are radically distant from the dominant liberal school of economic thought. These draw on diverse strands of Marxist, anarchist, evolutionary, and other heterodox political economy traditions of thought, but many tend to highlight that economic inequality involves much more than merely an excessive quantitative imbalance in the distribution of wealth and income. They often prompt us to think beyond and beneath the essential but blunt strategic concepts such as capitalism, financialization, the onward march of large corporations (monopoly and oligopoly), and neoliberalism. They help identify a further array of more specific institutional factors and forces driving the recent increase in inequality in core capitalist countries.

Some of these highlight a complex array of more specific forces including globalization, technological change, the rise of winners-take-all markets, and financial liberalization. Some of this work also identifies a huge increase in rent extraction on the part of the business executives who control a large part of the economy's resources and in extraordinary earnings in the financial sector (Wolf, 2015; see also Harvey, 2014b). Some also point to a number of related or entwined political factors, not least the pro-free-market turn across the world since about 1980, and, more broadly, "a decline in the egalitarian ethos that held sway in many countries in the mid-20th century" (Wolf, 2015, p. 11).

One of the more compelling critical analyses and academic challenges to the onward march of inequalities appeared some months prior to the publication of Piketty's (2014) much more widely publicized work. In *The Killing Fields of Inequality*, Göran Therborn (2013) mobilizes a considerable body of empirical data to support his analysis, but his book also draws on the author's many decades of prior research to engage more than Piketty with theoretical conceptualizations of economic and other forms of

inequality as well as their social ramifications. For Therborn, inequality is about much more than the size of wallets, relative income, or wealth resources. He argues that inequality comprises "a socio-cultural order, which . . . reduces our capabilities to function as human beings, our health, our self-respect, our sense of self, as well as our resources to act and participate in this world" (p. 2).

Therborn demonstrates that he has little tolerance for the default assumptions that (growing) inequalities are legitimate, inevitable, beneficial, or even just as commonly found in much social science and journalistic discourse. He declares that inequality is a violation of human dignity as it involves the denial of the possibility for everybody's human capabilities to develop and flourish (Geier, 2014). Therborn views inequalities as "multidimensional barriers" to human functioning in the world, which amount to serious violations of human rights. Therborn's account argues that inequality takes many forms, and its effects are multiple, including not merely poverty and reduced material life chances, but also premature death, ill health, humiliation, discrimination, exclusion from educational opportunities and knowledge, and many other aspects of social life, as well as involving powerlessness, stress, and insecurity.

Therborn's account differentiates between three fundamental kinds of inequality: vital, existential, and resource inequality. First, vital inequality refers to the impact of inequality on life and health, and this connects with the "killing fields" of the book's title and his emphasis that "inequality kills," literally. For him, this aspect of inequality is best analyzed by looking at mortality and life expectancy rates, hunger, and malnutrition. Second, existential inequality concerns the unequal allocation of personhood and engages with aspects of autonomy, dignity, and degrees of freedom, as well as differences in terms of the right to be respected. Third, there is resource inequality whereby individuals have unequal resources to act and perform to their potential because of unequal access to various kinds of material and nonmaterial resources such as income, wealth, knowledge, and health. In contemporary discourses, this dimension is the one that is usually taken and understood as the core of inequality, whereas the concept of existential inequality is less well established in the social sciences.

Several of these recent analyses transcend a purely quantitative frame or fix and serve to highlight aspects of economic inequality that have been neglected in most liberal and Keynesian approaches or treatments (e.g., Crouch, 2011; Hudson, 2014; Sayer, 2015). We briefly note some of the most relevant, nonquantitative dimensions. First, there is the point that material inequalities matter more than before in today's deeply commodified social order, in which money or credit comprise the "key" to access crucial resources that enable survival and reproduction and determine the level and quality of life in our social world.

Second, some argue for a return to classical theory and the notion of productive and nonproductive activities, examining whether income is truly "earned" or deemed to be earned productively (Crouch, 2011; Harvey, 2014a; Hudson, 2014; Sayer, 2015). Thus, it is now increasingly important to interrogate qualitative aspects of economic activities, especially some of those greeted as "new" economic or value-generating activities. For example, making money by privatizing public monopolies and cutting services, or simply price gouging to cover higher costs of interest and dividends, management fees, higher executive salaries, and stock options is treated as economically productive as building new factories and hiring employees (Crouch, 2011; Harvey, 2014b; Hudson, 2014; Sayer, 2015). In this light, the issue of

earned and nonearned income is increasingly important in a period that could be described as the strange nondeath of the rentier, a theme neglected by Piketty (2014) and so weakening his take on remedies for inequality (Hudson, 2014, p. 191). Another important issue is that of working and contractual conditions increasingly becoming both more precarious and unequal.

Furthermore, the issue of concentrated wealth and property-based wealth and power now poses major and growing concerns. Some note growing cracks in liberalism's persistent (ideological) insistence on separations between the economic and the political or the private and the public spheres, especially when power rather than merit operates as a major factor in the determination of unequal income and wealth (Sayer, 2015). Indeed, as Crouch (2011) observes, political power and economic wealth are now "mutually convertible currencies" (p. 47).

We believe it is important to note these theoretical issues as many studies of journalism, most notably since the 2008 crisis, have found the industry to be wanting in its coverage of economics and business (Manning, 2013; Schechter, 2009). We maintain that an important aspect of this is that wider journalism seems to be unaware of economic theories and ideas outside the neoliberal orthodoxy (Chakravartty & Schiller, 2010). Moreover, this lack of critical knowledge has had major repercussions for policy debates postcrisis—for example, leading to the framing of the crisis as solely an issue of government spending and ignoring important economic issues such as underconsumption, itself an issue of inequality.

It has also been noted that journalism missed the crisis (Harber, 2009; Schiffrin, 2011), again seemingly underlined by ideological assumptions of market infallibility alongside an antiregulatory frame.

We maintain that mainstream journalism's lack of attention to, or knowledge of, heterodox political theory indicates an absence of economic pluralism in general and an uncritical mindset when it comes to framing and reporting economic and business affairs. This has had a major impact in narrowing the scope of policy discussions in the public sphere both before and after the 2008 crash, a significant blind spot that requires attention by scholars in journalism and communication schools.

Into the Mainstream: Piketty and Other Neo-Keynesian or Social Democratic Contributions

This is the setting in which Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* proved to be a significant, if surprising, "media event" when published in 2014. We focus on Piketty's work as it has had more impact, at least in terms of sales and media attention, than any other economic text since the financial crisis. Piketty's book was hailed as "the publishing sensation of the year" because its "thesis of rising inequality tapped into the zeitgeist" (Giles, 2014, p. 1) and "electrified" the postfinancial crisis public policy debate, even turning its French author into a "rock-star economist" according to one of many 2014 newspaper articles referring to the book (Giles, 2014, p. 2).

Drawing on his analysis of a pioneering and enormous corpus of data on income and wealth distribution, Piketty demonstrates empirically that the deep structures of inequality and capital have

clearly not been improved by “modern” economic growth in the manner presumed by mainstream economics since the 1950s. Piketty shows that the rate of return on capital exceeds the rate of growth of output and income, meaning that capitalism automatically generates arbitrary and unsustainable inequalities that radically undermine “the meritocratic values on which democratic societies are based” (p. 1).

Piketty’s study identifies a number of policy recommendations that may help retard such systemic risks and so may enable democracy to “regain control over capitalism,” aiming to ensure that “the general interest takes precedence over private interests while preserving economic openness and avoiding protectionist and nationalist reactions” (p. 1). Piketty argues that one should be “wary of any economic determinism in regard to inequalities of wealth and income” (p. 20). This is not least because the history of the distribution of wealth “has always been deeply political,” (p. 20) and the only certainty, Piketty seems to suggest here, is that inequality cannot be reduced to any automatic, technological, or purely “economic mechanisms.”

Although his book’s popularity and his own rise to fame may be quite unique, Piketty is not alone. For many years prior to the appearance of Piketty’s (2014) book, various Marxist and critical economists had been producing studies that highlight the significant growth in economic inequalities since the late 1970s, but these never received much academic or media attention (Preston, 2001, 2016).

Also striking and new is the growing attention to inequality matters and their economic implications among mainstream liberal economists over the most recent years. This recent growth of interest in inequality matters on the part of mainstream liberal economists is certainly as welcome as it is noteworthy. For many decades, they have tended to neglect such issues just as eagerly as their liberal pluralist counterparts in the fields of political science, according to Wade (2014), and just as eagerly as their academic colleagues across the SS&H domain who basked in the cultural turn over precisely the same period (Preston, 2001). We may also note here that there is little work to date investigating whether or how such neglect is shared within the political communication, news-making, and journalism studies fields (Preston, 2009).

Communication Studies and Socioeconomic Inequalities: An Initial Review

Academic Studies of Inequality Matters

In this section, we present some highlights from our project’s initial review of how the relevant academic research literature tends to engage with economic inequality matters. The areas of academic research most relevant to our project compose the SS&H disciplines, with particular attention to the fields of economics, politics, political economy, and the relatively young field of media and communications studies. As discussed above, this is of particular relevance to research and teaching in communication and journalism studies today.

First, we outline the results of a brief but systematic review of the relevant academic knowledge base, examining whether or to what extent it treats and engages with economic inequalities. Second, we move on to address more qualitative aspects concerning how the research literature tends to define, frame, and treat such inequalities. We are aiming here to develop an initial review of whether and how the

relevant research literature tends to recognize, frame, and treat socioeconomic inequalities (later work will address their implications for the analysis and practices of the media in “liberal” democracies).

Inequality as a Topic in Academic Research, 1970–2015

First, we set out to assess the relative prominence of inequality as a key topic in the overall corpus of papers published in all academic journals, covering the whole spectrum of disciplinary fields (i.e., including the natural and physical sciences as well as SS&H fields). To this end, we turned to the Scopus database and identified the total numbers of articles published (in successive five-year periods) between 1970 and 2015, as well as the share of the total number of articles that had *inequality* as a core topic or keyword (see Figure 1)

The key finding that emerged here is that inequality has not been a major topic as the share of academic research papers explicitly engaging with inequality matters amounted to only 0.21% of the total in the 1970–1974 subperiod and accounted for a slightly higher 0.57% of all published academic articles in the 2010–2014 subperiod and for 0.62% in 2015. The data here certainly indicate an overall growth trend over time in the numbers of inequality-related articles when measured as a percentage of published academic journal works. However, this overall trend clearly starts from a very low percentage in the 1970s and serves to highlight that, in line with tradition and predominant role of liberal political and economic thought discussed earlier, equality and inequality matters are not treated as topics of keen interest or worthy of serious discussion (e.g., Schumpeter, 1954/2006).

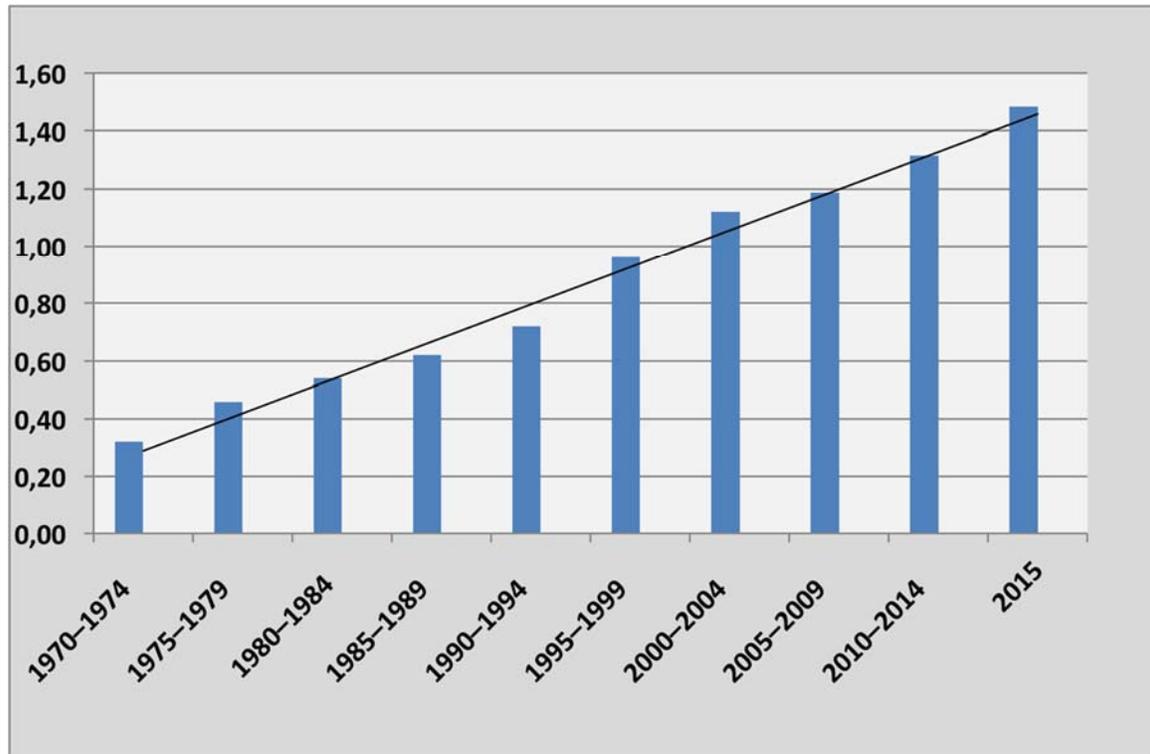


Figure 1. Percentages of inequality-related items in all published work in Scopus database, 1970–2015 (June 2016).

Inequality as a Topic in Social Science and Humanities Fields

Next, we turn to our headline findings for the SS&H research fields, the subdomain of all academic research and knowledge more directly engaged in research on political, economic, cultural, and political themes and topics. This domain embraces and informs the still relatively young but growing field of media and communication studies.

Table 1. Inequality-Related Items in Social Science and Humanities Fields, 1970–2015. (June 2016).

Period	Inequality-related items (%)	Total Publications in Scopus database (N)	Scopus articles with inequality as topic (n)
1970–1974	0.32	68,348	220
1975–1979	0.46	112,411	517
1980–1984	0.54	154,134	833
1985–1989	0.62	204,870	1,273
1990–1994	0.72	274,080	1,975
1995–1999	0.96	379,025	3,647
2000–2004	1.12	538,415	6,029
2005–2009	1.19	998,302	11,858
2010–2014	1.32	1,551,917	20,413
2015–2015	1.48	342,355	5,076
TOTAL: All Years.	1.12	4,623,857	51,841

Table 1 shows the key data for all published items in SS&H fields, broken down by five-year subperiods for publication years 1970–2015 as recorded in the Scopus database of publications. The data record all published items (articles, chapters, books, etc.) in the SS&H fields having the words *inequality* or *inequalities* in their title, abstract, or keywords as recorded in the Scopus database. The findings again indicate that the number of articles, chapters, books, and so on published during 1970–2005 with *inequality* as a keyword or topic is fairly small in relative terms compared with the large and increasing numbers of all articles listed in the relevant databases of published academic works.

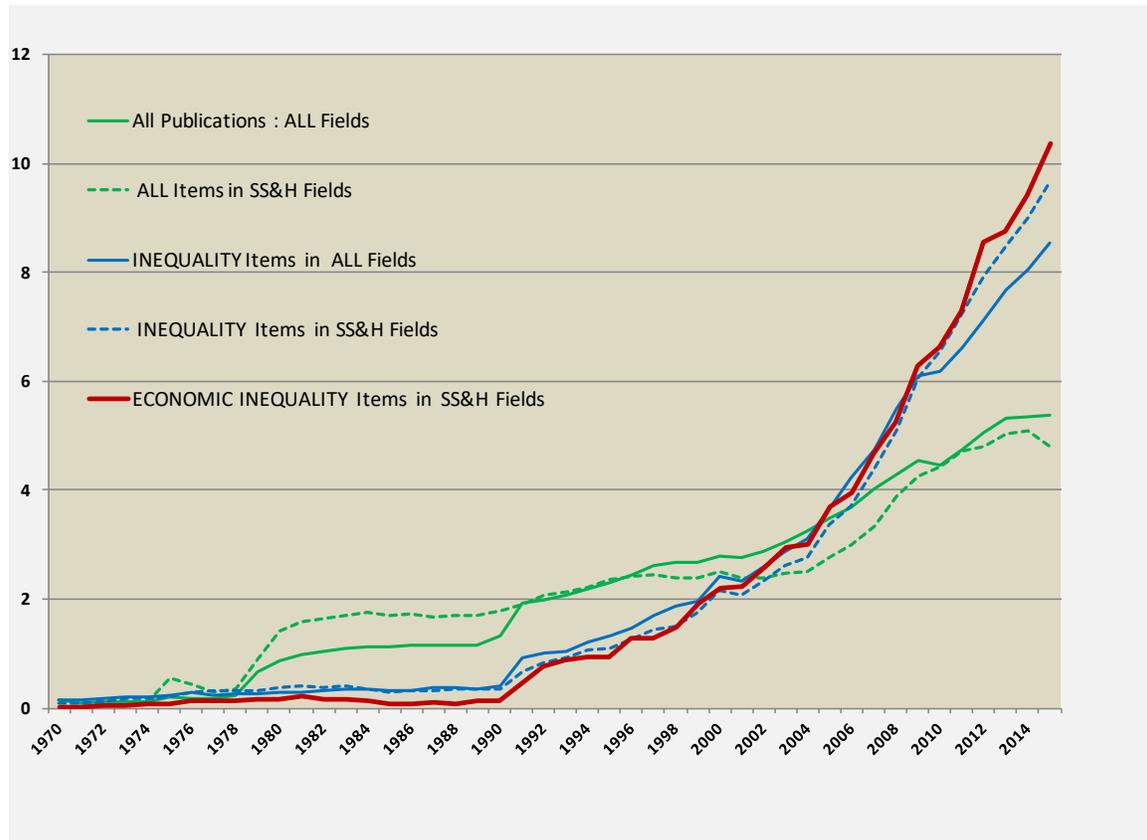


Figure 2. Changing percentages of economic inequality items in social science and humanities (SS&H) fields in the Web of Science database, 1970–2015 (June 2016).

We also explored the role and prominence of published academic works that specifically engaged with the theme of economic inequality in recent decades. It should be noted that the economic inequality category here refers to all recorded publications that were tagged as having both (1) *inequality* as a topic and (2) either *economic*, *economy*, or *wealth* or *income* as a title, keyword, or registered topic.

As indicated in Figure 2, there has been a steady growth in the percentage of articles having economic inequality as a key focus or theme when measured as a percentage of all publications in the SS&H fields (this time, based on our search and analysis of data drawn from the Web of Science database). We also find that the number of articles dealing with inequality and/or economic inequality as a topic has grown steadily in each five-year period since 1970. Indeed, this exercise indicates that, when measured as a percentage of all articles published in each five-year period, the number articles with inequality and/or economic inequality topics has grown steadily across each five-year period since 1970.

Inequality as a Topic in Media and Communication Studies Fields

It is difficult to undertake detailed quantitative analyses of publications by topic or keyword in the communication and media studies field over the 1970–2015 period because of the low numbers of relevant “hits.” This is not surprising especially given that this was a relatively new field during the earlier decades we were covering; therefore, the numbers of publications are much lower than those in the longer-established SS&H fields such as politics, economics, sociology, and anthropology.

Table 2. Inequality in Communication and Other Social Science and Humanities Fields in the Web of Science Database, 1970–2015 (June 2016).

Field	Inequality-related publications (<i>N</i> = 49,917)		Economic inequality-related publications (<i>N</i> = 21,253)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Economics	12,036	24.11	7,694	36.2
Sociology	7,702	15.43	2,800	13.2
Political science	3,119	6.25	1,295	6.1
Education educational research	2,649	5.30	625	2.9
Social science—interdisciplinary	2,159	4.32	834	3.9
Geography	1,721	3.45	874	4.1
Urban studies	1,158	2.32	571	2.7
Women’s studies	1,124	2.25	267	1.3
Area studies	1,118	2.24	500	2.3
Industrial relations/labor	1,063	2.13	314	1.48
Social issues	1,048	2.10	353	1.6
Anthropology	1,039	2.08	283	1.3
History	954	1.91	263	1.2
International relations	905	1.81	452	2.1
Public administration	830	1.66	391	1.8
Management	734	1.47	239	1.1
Business finance	581	1.16	360	1.7
Business	505	1.01	247	1.2
Ethnic studies	503	1.01	137	0.6
Family studies	438	0.88	167	0.8
History of social sciences	394	0.79	191	0.9
Communication studies	393	0.79	102	0.5
Philosophy	380	0.761	75	0.35
Humanities—multidisciplinary	348	0.697	72	0.34
Ecology	285	0.571	125	0.6
Ethics	265	0.531	73	0.34
Information science/library science	233	0.467	65	0.3
History/philosophy of science	174	0.349	25	0.12
Archeology	172	0.345	42	0.19

However, the findings from our analysis of the relevant databases clearly indicate that both the numbers and percentages of published works in the communication and media studies field engaging with inequality matters are rather small, and those concerned with economic inequality matters are even smaller.

Table 2 also clearly indicates the paucity of relevant publications in the communication studies field compared with other SS&H disciplines, measured both in absolute terms and as a share of all publications in the SS&H domain of academic knowledge.

Table 3. Summary: The Paucity of Publications on Inequality, 1970–2015.

Measure	Scopus	Web of Science
All publications, <i>n</i>	40,237,999	38,555,813
Publications with inequality or inequalities as topic, <i>n</i>	166,933	154,480
Publications in social science and humanities fields with inequality/inequalities as topic, <i>n</i>	51,841	49,917
Inequality-related items, %	0.41	0.40

In summary, Table 3 brings together some of the key findings related to our work with the two major databases for publications over the 1970–2015 period. In broad terms, we observe that the issues to do with economic, class, or related social inequalities (other than specific conceptualizations of gender, race, and sexual orientation) do not feature prominently in the mainstream research literature in the field of media, communication, and journalism studies. Despite the enormous growth of that field over recent decades, generally only those adopting political economy approaches to media studies engaged in economic inequality issues or related aspects of the production and distribution of economic resources, including wealth and income. The majority of the field has tended to treat such concerns as of marginal concern or with benign neglect.

To put it briefly, much of the relevant academic field continues to favor cultural over material analytical perspectives and still opts for the politics of representation over that of distribution. The data suggest that the field generally neglects the significant shifts toward greater inequality in the economic and political environment in recent decades.

Qualitative Analyses of Inequality as a Topic in the Media and Communications Research Literature

Aspects of Inequality Discussed in the Communications Literature

For our brief qualitative study of the communication studies literature, we reviewed and coded the top-50 most-cited journal articles on inequality from the communications field. The articles were coded based on a simple typology of inequality centered on three broad types: (1) socioeconomic inequality (e.g., class and income); (2) ascribed inequality (e.g., racial or sexual inequalities); and (3) others, such as cultural, educational, and health inequalities. Although the sample is small, these 50 articles have

clearly impacted the literature, and we believe that they offer a useful indicator of orientations and trends in the discipline.

As expected, many articles discuss more than one dimension of inequality; therefore, we coded the dominant theme in each journal article. The coding therefore was necessarily crude, and it should not be read that research in which the dominant concern was one area did not include discussions on other aspects of the typology.

Although the three broad types are comprehensive, such inequalities are not so easily pigeonholed, and the various inequalities link and intersect with one another as discussed in the growing literature on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 2008). Clearly, issues such as class and race can be linked, as can gender and income levels. Moreover, there are various layers to privilege and inequality, and issues such as social, educational, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) are often less available to immigrant communities and other less privileged socioeconomic groups.

Although crude, the picking apart and exploring of dominant themes in studies in inequality are useful exercises as they give a clear indication of the types of inequality that are being explored, or indeed not being explored, in SS&H work.

Media-Centric Studies of Inequality

Among the publications and journal articles concerned with communications and communications technology, it is unsurprising that articles focusing on media technologies and communications-centric articles feature very prominently. Research studies focusing on the “digital divide” are very common within this cohort. Indeed, these compose some of the most cited, with five of the top-10 cited articles in communications studies specifically looking at this issue (e.g., Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Papacharissi, 2002; Selwyn, 2004).

Of the top-50 most-cited communications articles concerned with inequality, 14 were articles on the digital divide. These had topics such as international digital divides (Hanafizadeh, Saghaei, & Hanafizadeh, 2009); digital divides among young people based on gender and class (e.g., Livingstone & Helsper, 2007); Internet skills around gender, age, and education levels (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011); class disadvantage among youth (as an aspect of digital inequality); and inequality based on gender and cultural background (Gui & Argentin, 2011), among others. Murdock and Golding (1989) critically engage with information poverty and political inequality, and many other much-cited publications are highly media centric, including studies of inequalities related to media effects on voting and incumbency advantage (Prior, 2007) or the effect of the Internet on political participation (Anduiza, Cantijoch, & Gallego, 2009).

Socioeconomic Typologies

Three of the top-50 articles were concerned with socioeconomic and space issues. These include the role of websites in electoral campaigning across the European Union (Lilleker et al., 2011) and core-periphery relations (Gillespie & Robins, 1989), the latter also addressing the structure of international

news flows. Others examine how the periphery is dominated by the core or otherwise marginalized in news exchanges (e.g., Kim & Barnett, 1996). The question of power and ideology comprises an important issue for scholarship on inequality in communication studies and includes research on manipulation (van Dijk, 2006), the seventh most-cited article in the series, and issues of political orientation and communications (Thorisdottir, Jost, Liviatan, & Shrout, 2007).

Race and Gender Inequalities

Racial and gender inequalities are frequently encountered themes. For example, many of the articles coded as “digital divide” embrace these aspects of inequality. Therefore, articles coded for gender and race inequalities include articles in which gender and race are the dominant concern.

Of the top 50, 10 were coded in this manner, five for each category. This included research on “the gendered blogosphere” (Harp & Tremayne, 2006) and gendered Internet use across life stages (Helsper, 2010). Articles with race coded as the dominant theme included articles on political discourse and race (Augoustinos, LeCouteur, & Soyland, 2002), racial attitudes after Obama’s election (Hutchings, 2009), and the framing of racial inequality and discrimination in the press (Gandy, Kopp, Hands, Frazer, & Phillips, 1997).

Health, Communications, and Inequality

Another important area in communication studies of inequality issues is that of health (with nine of the most-cited articles in the top 10). Typical key themes here include the knowledge gap (Gaziano, 1997); the role of the Internet in health information, with one study finding that Internet users tended to be from younger and higher income demographics (Koch-Weser, Bradshaw, Gualtieri, & Gallagher, 2010); and message effects and outcomes in health communications in terms of class (Viswanath & Emmons, 2006).

Conclusions and Implications

Reason is a service station of power. It is, first and foremost, a factory of might . . . defined as the subject’s capacity to reach objectives despite resistance. . . . Power is a sworn enemy and suppressor of symmetry, reciprocity and mutuality . . . through sealing up . . . divisions and immunizing inequalities of distribution against dissent and appeals from those at the receiving end of the operation. (Bauman, 2011, p. 131)

We have presented a brief, if selective, overall review of how inequality matters have been addressed and understood in the fields of modern political and moral economy, as well as the more recent field of economics. We have observed that liberalism has always been somewhat uncomfortable, “shy,” or reluctant to engage with economic inequalities and their implications for a modern democratic order or their relation to political equality.

In this article, we have addressed the key trends and changes in economic and political thought, and in so doing, aimed to present a more heterodox view of economics and society. This we maintain is increasingly relevant in this era of growing inequalities, austerity, and political turmoil. Furthermore, this is particularly relevant for those engaged in communication and journalism studies given the growing role of the mediated public sphere. We have outlined the development of modern political economic thought up to the hegemonic rise of neoliberalism, and then engaged with some heterodox economic theories to demonstrate that economics and economic theory are contested fields. We have outlined a brief quantitative and qualitative study of the study of inequality in the arts and social sciences and specifically communications. We have done so to explore and highlight significant silences in the literature around socioeconomic inequalities.

Following Bauman and many others before us, we are very mindful that ideas and competing conceptualizations of economic and social inequalities matter a lot. Naming default positions, other comfort zones, or significant silences and addressing the spectrum of competing ideas and conceptualizations are vitally important, not only with regard to understanding and communicating the nature, extent, and implications of such inequalities. Rather, these are also crucial when it comes to mobilizing support for, realizing, and performing the kinds of radically novel political projects required to stop the inegalitarian counterrevolution that has been unfolding over the past four decades. Indeed, they are especially important for any projects aiming to move on toward the effective construction and realization of a more truly democratic and just social order.

One of the key blocks to such progress is the pervasive if not willful neglect of the economic dimensions of power that pervades media discourse and many studies of political communication, including news-making processes, a striking silence in this era of advanced monopoly or highly concentrated capital, including in financial sectors.

Growing inequality and attendant concentration of wealth in contemporary society imply that power, rather than merit factors, is intrinsically linked to structural and other inequalities. In sum, inequality is not merely an economic issue, but is also a core political issue in our time.

We also observed the reversal of the progressive reductions of economic inequalities evident in the relatively short era of the Keynesian, welfare-state capitalism (mainly the late 1940s to the late 1970s), which has emerged as one of the most visible outcomes and powerful expressions of a veritable "counterrevolution" effected by neoliberalism. This is a "reversal" that has significant political and economic ramifications.

For one thing, the kinds of mass electoral democracy accepted by political liberalism (however reluctantly, at first) since the turn of the 20th century had long been regarded as more than merely formal, if rather limited, steps toward a more egalitarian order. Many liberals, no less than radicals (including Marx), had long regarded mass electoral democracy as providing a substantial and real base for "further progress in the distribution of power and other forms of substantive equality," if not indeed, signaling "the beginning of the transformation of capitalism" (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, & Stephens, 1992, p. 10).

Today, we witness the widespread diffusion of the formal, more visible institutions of the liberal political or electoral democracy, while at the same time witnessing the decline or decay of the very spirit and essence of that always-limited form of democracy. Furthermore, the onward march of economic inequalities unfolds amid austerity and the "strange non-death of neo-liberalism" (Crouch, 2011) despite a major financial crisis visibly stoked by neoliberal ideas and policy practices.

Our long-run historical review of relevant thinking and practices suggests that we appear to be in a sort of mid-1930s moment in some respects, especially with regard to conditions in those countries that did not succumb to fascism. Essentially, the current conjuncture is one in which the old is cracked and broken, but a new sociotechnical and policy paradigm (or sustainable regime of accumulation) is not yet born. We might usefully recall Gramsci's (1971) commentary with some trepidation that "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born, in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (p. 276).

On the surface, as Crouch (2011) suggests, the old regime appears to be still in full command and its elites' favored theories, default ideas, values, and typical practices appear to be still in place, performing its paradigm and operating its business as usual. Yet, beneath the surface gloss, many contradictions, tensions, and cracks abound, if not even veritable "monsters" (Žižek, 2012).

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