

Inequality Generation & Persistence as Multidimensional Processes: An Interdisciplinary Agenda

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Rising inequality is widely seen as one of our most pressing social problems and a focal point for social science research.¹ Much of the concern, amplified by the argument in economist Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, centers on the prospect that inequality may take extremely durable forms.² It is not just that some are advantaged or disadvantaged, but that structures of advantage and disadvantage may become more self-reinforcing and cumulative.³ It is the persistence and deepening of inequality that raises many of the most troubling issues.

One reason to fear that inequalities may be increasingly durable is the declining effectiveness of key processes of equality generation. The "great compression" in social outcomes during the mid-twentieth century, witnessed across the affluent West, rested in part on core social arrangements that both facilitated more equal economic outcomes directly *and* expanded social opportunities. These arrangements included improved and greatly expanded mass education; continuing movement from rural to more densely populated areas that promised better economic opportunities and improved prospects for social integration; an expansion of access to citizenship and its

associated benefits; and a social and political system that worked to mitigate excessive inequalities by redistributing wealth and by creating a strong welfare state. Even as some forces might generate inequality, these countervailing processes served as critical correctives.

In addition to often reducing inequality directly, these broad developments frequently limited the extent to which economic inequalities carried over to other aspects of social life. Indeed, these countervailing processes were in many respects mutually reinforcing: for instance, when expanding educational opportunities pulled people toward urban locations that offered other social advantages, or when welfare states provided a modicum of material security that gave people greater opportunity to develop their skills.

This collection of essays is motivated by a recognition that these equality-generating social arrangements have attenuated and, in many ways, been supplanted by processes that are instead inequality-inducing. We stress that it is not just the case that economic outcomes have become more unequal. There have also been important changes in some of the core processes described above. In many instances, we find evidence that these forces have diminished in scope, effectiveness, or both. While access to formal citizenship has been expanded, this has often been accompanied by a fraying sense of mutual obligation; levels of income inequality have increased without an associated strengthening of the welfare state or demand for redistributive policies; systems of advanced education are trending toward reproducing inequality rather than encouraging social mobility; and many of the most vibrant economic centers now promote social closure rather than widened opportunity, with skyrocketing housing prices limiting the access of the disadvantaged to critical social resources.

In thinking about the durability of inequality, we thus find value in exploring how transformed economic conditions are potentially linked to other social, psychological, political, and cultural processes that can either counteract or reinforce the likelihood that inequalities become durable. Only by drawing on a wide range of expertise in the social sciences can such changes and interconnections be understood. Our interdisciplinary inquiry has grown out of a sustained dialogue within an international team of scholars, from a range of social science disciplines, who share an interest in the changing dimensions of social inequality. More important, they share a core conviction: that interdisciplinary work is positioned to bring to light connections among social phenomena that may be less visible to research anchored in a single discipline.⁴

At a moment when societies struggle to deal successfully with inequalities, identifying and exploring connections between economic, social, psychological, political, and cultural dimensions of inequality holds great promise. It can clarify why many forms of social inequalities appear so intractable, often deepening or broadening over time. It also can provide insights into the kinds of interventions that might attenuate, ameliorate, or counteract deepening inequalities. Our group is unusually well-equipped to fully deploy such a multidisciplinary approach to inequality, thanks to fifteen years of regular exchange concerning our respective disciplinary assumptions and analytical tools. This issue of *Daedalus* capitalizes on this asset to broaden the study of inequality and advance new perspectives for future research.

Two distinct sets of claims have developed out of our conversations. The first concerns the need to explore linkages, both temporal and across levels of

analysis, that may illuminate the sources of durable inequality. The second, building on the first, focuses on relatively underexplored aspects of contemporary social inequality: more specifically, the relationship between distribution and recognition as intertwined dynamics producing and reproducing inequality. In this introduction, we outline each of these basic claims, before introducing the individual contributions to the volume. Most of these essays draw on empirical case studies, although some authors also provide new interpretations of secondary data to reveal patterns that have been overlooked up until now. While the essays examine different aspects and types of inequality, as well as different time-scales and social settings, they converge on a set of complementary claims. Together, the essays demonstrate the benefits of an explicitly interdisciplinary analysis that explores linkages in over-time processes or across levels of analysis. Indeed, they are generally coauthored by social scientists who work primarily at different analytical levels (micro, meso, and macro) while focusing on different dimensions of social life (economic, political, cultural, or psychological). Each essay also provides an agenda for future research and identifies significant policy implications. To round off the issue, we invited commentaries by three leading social scientists from different disciplines to address the volume's substantive and applied implications.

At the heart of our contribution to the discussion of inequality is the identification and analysis of connections among social phenomena that may be most visible from distinctive disciplinary vantage points. We distinguish two important types of connections: one grounded in temporal relationships, the other in relationships that operate across different

levels of analysis. Connections grounded in a temporal relationship draw one's attention to dynamic processes. Connections that link distinct levels of analysis draw one's attention to important combinations of micro-, meso-, and macro-phenomena.

Analyses of rising inequality have tended to focus on wealth and income disparities and their immediate determinants. They often concentrate on either structural changes in the labor market (such as the loss of blue-collar jobs), in economic organizations (such as the financialization of firms and the sharp decline of labor unions), or on elite-driven changes to laws and policies (such as lower taxes and deregulation). Such forces are, of course, extremely important. Yet in adopting these foci, analyses may miss cultural and other dimensions of inequality and the factors and relationships that feed into them, which are more likely to be understood if inequality is seen as a multifaceted and multilevel unfolding process. A key potential contribution of our approach is the ability to identify forms of social relationships and intergroup processes that may intensify unequal distributions of resources, or cause them to spread from one social domain to another. Either the deepening or broadening of inequality potentially makes it more intractable. As these processes unfold, the factors that reproduce inequality may also shift, requiring that analysts attend to distinct social phenomena and relationships. We argue that in the post-Piketty era, it is imperative that students of inequality refocus their attention on such fundamental processes, which have many direct and indirect implications for inequality-reducing policy-making.

A number of prominent scholars have stressed the dynamic qualities of inequality.⁵ They build on sociologist Charles

Tilly's influential writing on "durable inequality."⁶ Tilly argued that a critical vehicle for the entrenchment of advantage and disadvantage is the development of dichotomous categorizations (white/black, immigrant/native, male/female). These rest on a series of distinct mechanisms operating in diverse settings (schools, firms, policies) that are built around such categorizations to produce social closure and opportunity-hoarding and allocate advantages and disadvantages differentially across categories. Sociologists such as Donald Tomaskovic-Devey and Dustin Avent-Holt are expanding our understanding of the role of organizations as loci for growing inequality, while others, like Rogers Brubaker, have taken issue with Tilly's claim that different types of categories (such as gender and citizenship) work in fundamentally similar ways in producing inequality.

An important aspect of our effort is to further develop this type of analysis. The essays in this issue show that the social relationships and cleavages, psychological conceptions of self and other, and political contestations that reproduce, intensify, or deepen inequality are often quite distinct from the ones that may have generated it in the first place. Recognizing these unfolding sequences may not only help identify distinctive sites that transform initial inequalities into durable ones, but also open the prospect of identifying possible policy interventions that might disrupt such vicious cycles.

We share the conviction that interdisciplinary analysis can help identify and explicate a variety of economic, political, social, cultural, and psychological mechanisms that tend to increase or intensify inequality in its various forms. In many cases, we can show how these mechanisms make important but underappreciated contributions to broader processes producing or reproducing inequality.⁷

In this volume, we pay special attention to a number of specific and common social mechanisms that illuminate how, over time, particular forms of inequality may be reinforced. Among these mechanisms are those of evaluation, legitimization, quantification, commodification, and policy drift. These mechanisms have been elaborated in particular disciplines, but they are quite useful for identifying specific linkages among social phenomena that may intensify inequality:

- *Evaluation* typically involves the categorization of individuals and goods as well as the legitimation of hierarchies.⁸ It establishes hierarchies of value and/or status between units and builds a consensus around the criteria on which such hierarchies rest. Evaluation is central to the creation of the standards of deservingness and meritocracy that increasingly guide the distribution of resources as well as recognition of status: that is, the two faces of inequality.
- *Legitimation* involves a bias to accept the perceived status quo as appropriate. It leads to the justification of society and its institutions as fair, particularly when injustices are evident, as such processes help to reduce discomfort and uncertainty and restore a sense of the world as a just place.⁹ It encourages the adoption of stratification beliefs, such as social mobility, meritocracy, and prejudice toward the poor.
- *Quantification* involves the introduction of metrics (quantitative measures of performance). While it is often advocated as an avenue to increasing accountability and fairness, quantification requires commensuration between entities of different natures.¹⁰ Such metrics can reinforce inequalities. They may devalue criteria that might have favored the disadvantaged and shift outcomes toward groups that have the greatest

capacity to adapt to the new guidelines for competition. What looks like fairness and the rewarding of merit may in fact compound existing inequalities.

- *Commodification* involves the transformation of resources that were once provided as public goods into ones available only as purchasable commodities. In a context of rising economic inequality, commodification can play a significant role in spreading that inequality to other domains. By gradually magnifying the implications of these income disparities for life chances and well-being, commodification processes can greatly intensify the long-term implications of purely economic inequality.
- *Policy drift* refers to the effects that follow when rules or regulations remain static while social conditions shift.¹¹ It is especially likely when political reform is obstructed (as it is in many current institutional arrangements) during a time of rapid economic change and weakening political commitments to equity. Because drift involves the interplay between (static) policy arrangements and (dynamic) social settings, it is a mechanism whose exploration explicitly requires an interdisciplinary focus. This low-visibility but important mechanism can intensify inequalities, for instance, when minimum wages or social benefits are not adjusted for inflation, or when regulatory arrangements fail to adapt to changing markets or social relationships.

Process-focused analysis is central to the essays to follow. Initial shifts in, say, economic allocations emphasized in standard accounts may be only one part of more multifaceted long-term developments that transform structures of opportunity. The long-term implications of economic changes may depend heavily on other forces they may trigger, or that

may coincide with them but are distinctive and produce important interaction effects. For instance, in this volume, David B. Grusky, Peter A. Hall, and Hazel Rose Markus, in “The Rise of Opportunity Markets: How Did It Happen & What Can We Do?” show how several of the mechanisms just noted, especially commodification, are at work in the current transformation of higher education, deepening social inequalities.¹² As ability to pay becomes more tightly linked to educational opportunity, economic advantages become self-reinforcing. As the particular skills that schools value – built into their systems of quantification and evaluation – become increasingly stratified by class, seemingly neutral structures become status-reinforcing rather than sources of mobility.

“‘Superstar Cities’ & the Generation of Durable Inequality,” the contribution of Patrick Le Galès and Paul Pierson, similarly focuses on how stunning new disparities in housing wealth in urban agglomerations can gradually intensify inequalities.¹³ In the emerging knowledge economy, economic inequalities have become increasingly intertwined with the spatial distribution of groups and social opportunity. Understanding the long-term effects of these spatial distributions requires the investigation of a variety of important sociological processes. Transformations that follow initial economic inequalities potentially generate more varied and extensive structures of inequality. High-quality job opportunities, advantageous social networks (including marriage networks), and the benefits of short commutes become concentrated in particular areas. Prohibitive housing costs lock out those who cannot draw on preexisting economic advantages. Policy drift plays an important role. Long-established housing policies have often been overwhelmed by the new dynamic of

rapidly escalating urban property values. The growing tilt of political power toward the already advantaged can worsen these inequality-intensifying dynamics. Political resistance to efforts to increase the availability of affordable housing can potentially bring the process of social closure full circle.

In their essay “Membership without Social Citizenship? Deservingness & Redistribution as Grounds for Equality,” Irene Bloemraad, Will Kymlicka, Michèle Lamont, and Leanne Son Hing consider how evaluations of deservingness are shaping the transformation of social citizenship across advanced industrial societies.¹⁴ They point to evidence that declining formal barriers to membership have coincided with a diminishing sense of shared obligations toward low-income groups, and identify various disciplinary explanations for this relationship. They also highlight potentially contradictory trends in the movement toward greater equality: just as membership boundaries based on ascribed characteristics (such as gender and sexuality and ethnoracial differences) have become less exclusionary than in earlier decades, deservingness judgments toward the poor have become fraught, with arguably less solidarity around redistribution.

Similarly, in “The Difficulties of Combating Inequality in Time,” Jane Jenson, Francesca Polletta, and Paige Raibmon analyze three cases in which reformers made claims in favor of disadvantaged groups for greater equality (for gender equality in the EU, the rights of indigenous peoples in Canada, and women and people of color in medical trials in the United States).¹⁵ In each case, activists proposed policies capable of overcoming the notorious equality/difference dilemma. That is, they sought to avoid the false dichotomy between assuming that disadvantaged groups have identical needs

to the advantaged, or that they are fundamentally different from them. The key to sidestepping this dichotomy lay in taking a *longue durée* view of the historical processes that caused and reproduced inequality. Yet, in the course of the reform process, various political actors either acquiesced to or were unable to prevent the rise of dehistoricized – often essentialist – views of the group in question, views that fundamentally undermined the reach, staying power, and effectiveness of the reform. Their essay illuminates how durable inequality can be unintentionally reproduced by collective efforts that aim toward equalization and destigmatization.

Finally, Leanne Son Hing, Anne Wilson, Peter Gourevitch, Jaslyn English, and Parco Sin, in “Failure to Respond to Rising Income Inequality: Processes That Legitimize Growing Disparities,” examine another puzzling paradox.¹⁶ Prominent public choice models contend that in a democratic political system, public demand for redistribution should prompt the strengthening of the welfare state, particularly under conditions of rising inequality. Instead, accumulating evidence more often uncovers the opposite pattern (increasing inequality *reduces* support for redistribution), suggesting that the democratic political process once expected to curb excessive inequality has become a system that instead may contribute to its durability. They further consider how psychological processes – often in interaction with emerging patterns of social, economic, and political inequality – lead people to legitimize rising inequality and redouble their belief in inequality-sustaining ideologies, with downstream consequences for intergroup judgments of deservingness. They also point to how inequality shapes political action, reducing participation among the economically disadvantaged, further

shrinking their influence on policy outcomes and reducing their trust in government to work on their behalf. All of these contributions have direct implications for addressing inequality.

A second focus of our interdisciplinary work explores how processes at the micro-, meso-, and macrolevels may interact to increase inequalities. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, collaboration between psychologists, sociologists, and political economists enables a more detailed and specific comprehension of the interface between individual action, cultural repertoires and institutions, and broader social forces, all of which are involved in the production and reproduction of inequality.

The *microlevel* refers to the intra- and interindividual degree of analysis occurring in personal interactions. The *macrolevel* refers to structural patterns of resources and society-spanning institutions (like governments) that characterize populations and societies considered in the aggregate. Much of what is studied in the fields of comparative politics and comparative sociology falls under this umbrella. By *mesolevel* we refer to institutions and cultural resources found in organizations, neighborhoods, and networks. While the mesolevel unfolds through ongoing micro-interactions among individuals, critical dynamics are often apparent only when different levels are incorporated within the same analysis.

Work on inequality often focuses on one of these levels, in part because disciplines often emphasize one level over others. Yet important dimensions of inequality may only be apparent when one examines linkages between two or more levels. For instance, Hazel Markus has shown how institutional (meso) processes with a seemingly egalitarian character governing access to higher education

(elite colleges admitting and educating meritorious low-income students free of cost) can be subverted at the microlevels (for example, by processes that stigmatize these students on college campuses). Sociologists Wendy Espeland and Michael Sauder have demonstrated how similar isomorphic organizational responses to the quantification of performance by individual law school deans accentuate inequality throughout the field of legal education.¹⁷ The result is an accelerated “winner takes all” trend, as each law school aims to improve its performance in terms of the very criteria they are being assessed on. The same happens in the American K–12 education system. The quantified performance of public schools, driven by isomorphic processes as well as macrostructures of public policy, is exercising a growing influence on microlevel home-buying decisions. This in turn feeds into the concentration of advantages in the top 20 percent of the population.¹⁸ In their contribution, Son Hing, Wilson, Gourevitch, English, and Sin outline how mesolevel phenomena – that is, the increasing wealth segregation of neighborhoods and socioeconomically homogenous social networks – affect microlevel phenomena – such as social comparison processes and perceptions of income inequality. Within-class social comparisons lead the poor (comparing with other poor people in their community) to overestimate their position in the income distribution and the rich (comparing with their wealthy neighbors) to underestimate theirs. In both cases, changes in these meso-environments lead individuals to underestimate inequality.

Identifying connections across levels often requires simultaneous consideration of distinct social realms. It might, for instance, demand attention to the interplay between microlevel psychological processes and mesolevel phenomena that

manifest themselves in the social, political, or economic realm. Even when social scientists grounded in a specific discipline do seek linkages across multiple levels, they may be unable to theorize adequately or write cogently about them for lack of training or disciplinary overspecialization. Even if they are aware of such connections, disciplinary incentives may strongly discourage them from pursuing or emphasizing them if they lie outside their field.

This is why multidisciplinary inquiry is a particularly promising path for broadening and enriching the study of inequality. Our group has been specifically designed to build the intellectual capacity to consider such linkages, including connections that cut across disciplinary divides. For instance, the contribution of Bloemraad, Kymlicka, Lamont, and Son Hing analyzes tensions between more inclusive membership and less support for redistribution across advanced industrial societies. They show how these tensions can be accounted for by mobilizing contrasting theoretical frameworks from political theory, psychology, and sociology. Moreover, by combining the analytical tools of spatial and political analysis, Le Galès and Pierson show that national institutional arrangements heavily condition both the capacity and willingness of local communities to respond to spatially reinforced inequalities. They argue that effective responses to these seemingly local challenges require the provision of resources and the imposition of constraints that are only likely to occur in some national political settings.

While we are interested in demonstrating the broad and diverse advantages of the interdisciplinary exploration of linkages, we place priority on exploring connections between social processes of resource distribution and cultural processes

of recognition. Echoing early arguments about poverty, some social scientists debate whether inequality should be conceptualized as an economic or a cultural phenomenon. More recent studies are resolutely moving away from such dichotomous framing to analyze how social structures (such as class formations) and cultural repertoires (such as frames, narratives, and institutions) enable and constrain access to various types of economic, social, and cultural resources.¹⁹ While social scientists increasingly reject the critique that cultural approaches to poverty are inherently conservative, a growing number have come to understand inequality and poverty as multidimensional: that is, they combine economic, cultural, spatial, and political dimensions.²⁰ This suggests that an interdisciplinary agenda for improving our understanding of inequality is particularly timely.

One of our premises is that meaning-making is central to the social processes through which unequal relationships are set into motion and reproduced. In approaching “inequality as a multidimensional process,” we underscore that inequality involves both the distribution of resources and narratives concerning the relative status and identity of groups (such as recognition and its counterpart, stigmatization). Differences in recognition are produced by narratives and manifested in the existence of pecking orders that are revealed through the display of status, expectations of deference, and a myriad of other signals. They are also legitimized and contested through equalization and stigmatization narratives and strategies. Thus, Jenson, Polletta, and Raibmon examine the ways in which efforts to combat inequality were undermined by the competing understandings of historical process and progression from which political actors operated. Particular understandings yielded quite different assumptions

about the sources of group disadvantage *and* about the ways in which past inequality would yield to future equality. For their part, Son Hing, Wilson, Gourevitch, English, and Sin consider how various narratives and ideologies, such as meritocracy, the American dream, and the belief in a just world, result in the heightened conviction that the economically disadvantaged in an unequal system must deserve their lot. As a result, spiraling economic disparities ironically dampen rather than energize calls for redistribution and a strengthened welfare state. Such psychological mechanisms ultimately limit efforts toward greater equality when it is most needed, and are among the mutually reinforcing factors that are at the center of our collective inquiry.

Issues of distribution have been the focus of the bulk of the vast social science research on inequality, with a focus on income and wealth cross-nationally or gender and ethnoracial groups.²¹ While there is increasing appreciation that access to resources may be contingent on recognition of individuals as full members of the community, the independent impact of stigmatization on inequality and poverty remains largely underexamined. For instance, stigmatization is a cause of inequality in the case of LGBTQ youth, who may be forced into homelessness as a result of intense family conflict around their sexual or gender identity. Our issue is part of a broader effort to more fully include the impact of stigmatization and recognition into our understanding of dynamics of inequality.²²

One step toward developing a more comprehensive and multidimensional approach to inequality is to investigate distribution and recognition in relation to one another. Research suggests that the relationship between recognition and access to resources may be much more complex and contingent than suggested

in debates pitting identity politics against class claims (as put in the original writing of social scientist Nancy Fraser on recognition).²³ We now know that recognition is about class as much as gender and ethnicity, that all groups aim to raise their position within a status order, and that the latter is often correlated with access to both symbolic and material resources. Such findings call for a step away from economic determinism, toward a broader reconceptualization of the relationship between the various aspects of inequality.

One of our objectives is to explore specifically how the construction of groups – particularly in terms of their perceived deservingness – may influence who gets what over the long term. This is examined in particular in the essay by Bloemraad and colleagues, which focuses on changed feelings of solidarity toward the poor in advanced industrial societies, feelings that have been declining in some societies precisely at a time when low-income populations are being asked to demonstrate self-reliance under the pressure of increasingly influential neoliberal standards of personhood.²⁴ The authors document a general pattern of growing recognition and inclusion of women, ethnoracial and religious minorities, and legal immigrants in advanced industrial societies over the last decades, if we focus on formal legal equality, social relations, and cultural inclusion. But at the same time, in various places, the poor are more frequently judged as undeserving of social support in the form of welfare redistribution. Mobilizing the analytical tools of their respective fields of specialization – political philosophy, social psychology, cultural sociology, and political sociology – these authors articulate a broad agenda for exploring these changes and the relationships between membership, identity, social inclusion, and redistribution. Linkages among micro-

meso-, and macrolevels are central to their argument: individual judgments of others draw on mesolevel cultural repertoires and institutions and on macrolevel public policies, which in turn influence macrolevel political contestation and resource distribution.

These essays also seek to deepen understandings of *how* cultural and institutional frameworks interact in the production of inequalities and equality. This is a topic that the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research's Successful Societies program tackled in two previous collective volumes.²⁵ Here we are especially interested in how certain kinds of cultural frameworks (such as those associated with ethnoracial inclusion) acquire legitimacy and become institutionalized, and how the operation of certain kinds of institutions (such as those associated with the welfare state) influence cultural frameworks of inclusion. This is particularly central in the essay by Son Hing and colleagues, which is concerned with how beliefs about merit are formed and in turn influence beliefs about the distribution of income.

We conclude with a methodological note. Readers will recognize that we are in conversation with a broader literature that treats multilevel process-tracing and configurational analysis as valuable tools for exploring the social world.²⁶ We are interested in understanding not only *how* things happen, but also *why* they happen.²⁷ Again, this conception of causality focuses on interactions among the micro-, meso-, and macrolevels as they evolve in space and time. It is intended to help define a broader agenda for the interdisciplinary study of inequality as social scientists realize the pitfall of considering social phenomena in isolation.

The essays included in this issue are the result of sustained collaborations

within the Successful Societies program, which has met three times a year since 2003.²⁸ Each team of authors developed their contribution through extensive discussions at meetings with the entire group over two years. Program members (Bloemraad, Grusky, Hall, Jenson, Kymlicka, Lamont, Pierson, Polletta, Raibmon, Son Hing, and Wilson) and advisory committee members (Gourevitch, Le Galès, and Markus) have created teams to attack a question of mutual interest. In all cases, authors focus on the core set of questions and theoretical concerns outlined in this introductory essay, and their contributions draw on a continuing conversation among members of the group. This results in a productive yet all-too-rare conversation drawing on insights from sociology, political science, social psychology, and history.

Our intensive collaboration, however, is not just intended to draw on insights from these specific disciplines. Rather, it seeks to specify some of the important advantages of sustained dialogue across disciplinary divides. Ultimately, the goal is to point to possible sites and strategies for meaningful interventions to disrupt the generation and reproduction of growing inequalities. To enhance this effort, we are including commentaries by three leading scholars/practitioners, each based in a different discipline, who have researched or participated in a wide range of efforts geared to inequality reduction.

In an insightful essay, political scientist Jennifer Hochschild praises our multidisciplinary approach to inequality but points out that we could well have paid more attention to properly political dynamics that feed inequality – and, historically, have at times diminished it as well. She rightly insists on the need to continue to explore equality-producing processes. Finally, she urges us to extend our agenda to the conditions under which

the relationships we identify would hold, and to pay even more attention to how time matters.

For her part, sociologist Katherine Newman focuses on our contributions to the role of deservingness, the legitimation of inequality, and spatial segregations as dynamics feeding inequality. She urges that more weight be placed on growing xenophobia in the analysis of the broadening of social inclusion over the last decades. She also points to the ways in which societies like the United States have attempted to counter the effect of spatial immobility and opportunity-hoarding by the rich by opening elite universities to the poor, even if it often appears to be too little, too late.

Finally, World Bank economist Vijayendra Rao locates our contributions in the context of the competing paradigms that have structured the discipline of economics in the past few decades. He spells out how much an approach to inequality focused on processes, instead of outcomes, has to contribute to the broad enterprise that is the study of inequality. He urges us also to consider the global South and the ability to “give voice” in our attempts to broaden policy interventions addressing inequality beyond the well-traveled paths of scholars studying more affluent societies.

Bringing our analyses of “inequality as a multidimensional process” into dialogue

with social scientists working in policy and applied settings is particularly appropriate at a time when Robert Shiller, president of the American Economic Association, has turned his attention to “narrative economics” and when leading foundations such as the Gates, Casey, and Ford Foundations are focusing on narratives as crucial to the study of inequality and mobility.²⁹ This signals the growing importance of moving away from narrow approaches to causal analysis of inequality that seek to isolate single causes and effects, in order to focus on intersecting and complex causal pathways as they manifest themselves over time in the real world.

Each essay in this issue explicitly addresses the policy implications of their analysis. We maintain that in the long run, it is not simply the distribution of resources that matters, but the highly varied social processes that influence what people can and cannot do with those resources, as well as how individuals and groups make sense of (and therefore respond to) these distributions. In many cases, disrupting or attenuating some of these related social and cultural processes may be an essential part of any effort to tackle intensifying inequalities of material resources. Compared with direct efforts to generate redistribution of resources, they may also represent more plausible targets.

AUTHORS' NOTE

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ By inequality, we refer not only to the unequal access and distribution of material and social resources (the most common focus of studies of inequality), but also to corollary status orders that signal unequal recognition (stigmatization and discrimination) for various segments of the population.
- ² Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).
- ³ Thomas A. DiPrete and Gregory M. Eirich, “Cumulative Advantage as a Mechanism for Inequality: A Review of Theoretical and Empirical Developments,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 32 (2006): 271–297.
- ⁴ See also Leslie McCall, Derek Burk, Marie Laperrière, and Jennifer A. Richeson, “Exposure to Rising Inequality Shapes Americans’ Opportunity Beliefs and Policy Support,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114 (36) (2017): 9593–9598.
- ⁵ See, for example, Andrew Abbott, *Processual Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Rogers Brubaker, *Grounds for Difference* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015); Leslie McCall, *Complex Inequality: Gender, Class, and Race in the New Economy* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Donald Tomaskovick-Devey and Dustin Avent-Holt, *Relational Inequalities: An Organizational Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). For the perspective on intersectionality, see, for example, Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” *Signs* 38 (4) (2013): 785–810.
- ⁶ Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
- ⁷ In our definition of process and mechanism, we build on Michèle Lamont, Stefan Beljean, and Matthew Clair, “What is Missing? Cultural Processes and Causal Pathways to Inequality,” *Socio-Economic Review* 12 (3) (2014): 598; “Mechanisms are usually treated as a chain of events that mediates between a cause and effect. To identify or formulate a mechanism means to explain what links a certain initial condition (X) to a certain outcome (Y). In contrast, processes can be studied without presuming any set cause or outcome. Here, analytic priority is given to describing the properties of a generative process or chain of events rather than to explaining an observed association between two variables.”
- ⁸ Michèle Lamont, “Toward a Comparative Sociology of Valuation and Evaluation,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 38 (2012): 201–221.

- ⁹ John T. Jost and Orsolya Hunyady, “The Psychology of System Justification and the Palliative Function of Ideology,” *European Review of Social Psychology* 13 (1) (2003): 111–153; and Melvin J. Lerner, *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion* (New York: Plenum Press, 1980).
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