

# Debating *Capital and Ideology*: An introduction to the special issue

Poornima Paidipaty | Mike Savage 

Email: m.a.savage@lse.ac.uk

In 2014 the publication of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21st Century* sent shock waves through social science. His work proved inspirational not only because of his specific research findings regarding inequality, but because he offered a new vision of how social science can renew itself in the 21st century. His bold interdisciplinary platform, his use of new and rigorous methods, and his concerns to re-ignite the political relevance of social science have been profoundly significant. His new book which is the focus of this special issue, *Capital and Ideology*, continues very much in this vein.

We should put his contribution in context. The 1990s had seen the fluorescence of “big picture,” but ultimately rather empty and hyperbolic social science caught up with the giddy moment of globalization. The character of this work is captured very neatly in the *British Journal of Sociology*'s first issue of 2000, guest edited by John Urry under the clarion cry of “Sociology faces the millennium,” and which has become one of the most cited ever issues of the journal. This special issue included many of the sociological good and the great, with Manuel Castells, Immanuel Wallerstein, Gosta Esping-Andersen, Goran Therborn, Ulrich Beck, Bruno Latour, Barbara Adam, Saskia Sassen, and Mike Featherstone all reflecting on social change at the start of the 21st century. Well, what a very white and largely male list of authors this was!

Looking back at these contributions now, it is striking that despite being assembled to pronounce a bold new millennial vision for sociology, and social science more broadly, the papers actually exhibit profound intellectual exhaustion. Wallerstein was deeply critical of sociology's invocation of nebulous concepts of globalization and its reliance on “post-” concepts (such as post-industrialism, post-modernism, etc.), and placed this within a bigger crisis in which the very disciplinary specialization of the social sciences was becoming dysfunctional, and “essentially crippling the ability of the students to think as social scientists. We are turning them into skilled technicians.... the intellectual result is collective blinkers” (Wallerstein, 2000, p. 33). Esping-Andersen (2000, p. 60) ruminated that “the legacy of our classics may lose its power, the typologies and the conceptual vocabulary that generations of sociologists so tirelessly developed may become ineffective.” In some ways, this pessimism was endorsed by the kind of hyperbolic contributions of sociologists which read as if the authors were engaged in a kind of promotional exercise. This seems the best way to interpret Ulrich Beck's (2000, p. 81) proclamation for cosmopolitan sociology which could respond to the fact that a “new kind of capitalism, a new kind of economy, a new kind of global order, a new kind of politics and law, a new kind of society and personal life are in the making.” The contributors did not offer much in the way of new methodological repertoires, empirical analyses, or politically engaged reflections.

Sociology was not alone in envisioning vast, unbounded horizons for exchange, growth, and transformation at this time. From Arjun Appadurai's (1996) *Modernity at Large* to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's (2000) *Empire*,

---

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2021 The Authors. The *British Journal of Sociology* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of London School of Economics and Political Science.

many scholars at the turn of the millennial predicted a “brave new world” that was more international, interconnected, and economically expansive. While they were not wrong about the scope of the transformations being wrought by economic globalization, the shallowness of the appeal to cosmopolitanism and the “mobility paradigm” (see e.g., Sheller & Urry, 2006) starkly came to light as global geo-political tensions rose dramatically and as capitalism became increasingly turbulent. And indeed, in the first decade of the 21st century, this sense of pessimism deepened. The increasing anxiety about the status of social science was fueled by the challenge of big data (Savage & Burrows, 2007) and the uncertain status of science itself in an increasingly reflexive and insecure environment added to this air of anxiety. This introspective anxiety has been particularly acute within the discipline of sociology (see e.g., Holmwood, 2010; Savage, 2010).

Within this malaise, *Capital in the 21st century*, published in 2014, was a trumpet blast. It showed how ambitious, empirically rigorous research could engage a wider reading public who wanted to understand long-term trends and think about political responses in an informed way. It offered the renewal of a kind of historical social science that Wallerstein had demanded a few years before. Piketty did this by cutting out unnecessary insider references that would only appeal to fellow specialist economists, indeed he provocatively criticised the discipline of economics for failing to offer big picture analyses. Piketty's timely book pushed his readers to look far beyond the particularities of immediate events such as the sub-prime mortgage bubble by tracing the contours of a broader set of economic transformations. Starting in the 1970s, these had subverted the midcentury gains of Western welfare states and challenged the optimistic faith of the modernizing vision associated with the general rise of prosperity and a liberal political order. He showed that inequality had been steadily rising in most parts of the world and when observers paid attention to wealth (rather than just income) they would see that the situation was even worse. Most importantly, this was not simply an argument addressed to economists or policy makers. Piketty's original intervention, with its invocations of Austen and Flaubert, illustrates how concentrations in wealth correspond to concentrations in power, status, and influence. These trends—made visible through the technique of mapping top income shares—straddled social, political, cultural, and economic domains. The book's wide concerns and innovative methods helped open up a new space for engaged and interdisciplinary approaches to the study and remediation of inequality.

*The British Journal of Sociology* was delighted to respond with a special issue in 2014 to the provocation he posed by commissioning a range of articles that considered Piketty's book from different disciplinary vantage points. This added to the intellectual momentum that his book offered. Rather than simply a series of commentaries on a single book, this *BJS* special section was meant to serve as a model for the kind of interdisciplinary social scientific dialogue that Piketty's intervention prompted and promoted, and its papers have had significant importance in extending the reach of Piketty's work into a wider social scientific audience.

It is for the same reasons that we have commissioned a further special issue to engage with his new book *Capital and Ideology*, which was published in French in 2019, and in English translation in 2020, just as the COVID pandemic was taking hold across the world. In the seven years since *Capital in the 21st Century* was published, the increasing challenge of economic inequality which he helped to bring out has become ever more manifest and entrenched. This is evident not only with respect to trends in income and wealth which he concentrated on, but also with respect to resurgent racism, sexism, and xenophobia. It is striking that Piketty's new book itself broadens his agenda away from the economic to engage more broadly with these currents. In this respect, his book speaks to the way that the coronavirus pandemic has underlined the entrenched and compounding effects of economic, racial, and political inequalities.

In the new book, Piketty moves in important ways beyond *Capitalism in the 21st Century*. With its broad historical timeline and emphasis on ideological debates, the book extends past a critique of socio-economic models and references to mechanistic market-based “laws” that defined the first book. *Capital and Ideology* examines a much wider geographical reach and is more ambitious in surveying the overlaps between economic and status inequalities and the impact of long histories of slavery and colonialism on socio-economic disparities. The focus on ideology allows Piketty to point to the flexibility of human arrangements, and in a forward-looking manner, to suggest that societies always have more choices than are at first imaginable, even at the worst of times. The

work, despite the focus on a long history of inequality, is actually very future-oriented, and in a liberal outlook, optimistic. Solutions are possible, he wants to argue. We should not give up on politics, but instead recharge our intellectual tool kit informed by the best data, methods, and long-term historical understanding. What is more, he believes (with a door open to skepticism) that we already know some of the better solutions on offer. Here we have his suggestion for “participatory socialism” with stronger worker governance and power-sharing; progressive taxation; and universal education.

While this case is exciting and powerfully articulated, the book raises multiple questions about its methodology and perspectives. The contributors in this special issue have risen to the challenges which Piketty's *Capital and Ideology* raises, especially:

- a. The book's “global” reach: What about experiences outside the West? Particularly in Latin America and Africa? This is not simply to add more material and historical accounts, but to write from the perspective of different parts of the world and difference social experiences. How do we more effectively de-center the norms of Euro-American thinking about what progress and equality entail?
- b. The relationship between ideas and materiality. The concept “ideology” is not widely used in economics but has had huge discussion elsewhere in the social sciences. How effective and convincing is Piketty's deployment of the concept here?
- c. The relationship between economic inequality (of income and wealth), and categorical inequalities (notably of race, gender, and class). In *Capital and Ideology*, Piketty talks extensively about slavery and caste divisions, as well as about what he calls “ternary” distinctions (between clergy, aristocracy, and “commoners”) which might be construed as class divides. How successfully does he weave these different dimensions of inequality together, especially once attention is broadened from the economic sphere alone.
- d. The grounds of comparison: How do we think across so many different locations and disciplinary perspectives? What are the challenges involved in comparing so many cases widely over time and space? How can history and social science be brought together in an overarching quest to make sense of long-term trajectories?

These are huge questions, and it is a tribute to the importance of Piketty's work that he has the ambition to pose them in such a powerful and impressive way. This special issue was therefore commissioned by Poornima Paidipaty and Mike Savage to respond to *Capital and Ideology*, bringing together leading scholars who we thought would offer different, and critical, perspectives from a range of disciplines. Both of us work in the LSE Department of Sociology, and also in the LSE's International Inequalities Institute which was formed in 2015 to develop the kind of broad interdisciplinary and global analysis which Piketty's work elicits. In these spaces, we are working with and training a new cohort of scholars, activists, policy makers, and leaders who will continue to expose, explore and tackle social and economic inequalities, but this work comes with many challenges. How do we listen sympathetically to experts outside our own area of study, whose approach to social science and social disparity might be different from our own, and yet to do so critically, collegially, and constructively? How do we build programs, borrowing from disciplines that are not our first home? How might this add to our own scholarship and critical interventions?

The contributors we have assembled reflect these possibilities. We bring together a wide range of voices, both in sociology and outside, who speak to the scope and ambition of *Capital and Ideology*. The responses attend to the importance of colonial connections, issues of gender, and locations outside the Global North. They come from historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and economists.

Several contributors take up the grand historical and theoretical issues which Piketty raises. We start with Sanjay Reddy, whose work has long focused on the importance of expanding the repertoire of economics to include insights from philosophy, history, postcolonial theory, and anthropology, and much like Piketty, he believes that economics would benefit from embracing other social scientific frameworks. We then include a more specifically sociological engagement, through Nora Waitkus (who works on the research theme on “wealth, elites and tax

justice" at the International Inequalities Institute) and Mike Savage exploring how Piketty's focus on wealth and property offers a powerful and subtle way of unpacking inequality dynamics which avoid defaulting to easy sociological concepts of modernity. Pedro Ramos Pinto (who works on the global histories of inequality) and Poornima Paidipaty emphasize how we need to avoid seeing the period 1945 to the 1980s as a kind of social democratic "golden age" and show that inequalities built into this infrastructure have driven many of the more recent inequality trends. This is followed by Gurminder Bhambra, who has long insisted on the need for a global "connected sociology," (e.g., Bhambra, 2007, 2014) and emphasizes the need to register the impact of colonial and postcolonial histories, and the importance of excavating and attending these relationships in order to adequately understand and redress entrenched inequalities. This is followed by world historians David Motadel and Richard Drayton who turn their attention to how new currents of global history can interface with Piketty's work, while also raising questions about the national accounting methods which underpin the economics of Piketty and Kuznets.

The latter papers take up more specific claims which Piketty develops during his book. Leading political scientists Tarik Abou-Chadi and Simon Hix (who as LSE Pro-Director of Research, has been a major supporter of the International Inequalities Institute) reflect on Piketty's controversial claims about the rise of the "Brahmin left" and the dynamics of socialist and progressive politics today. Alpa Shah whose award-winning book *Nightmarch* (Shah, 2018) is a major contribution to understanding resistance in contemporary India, and Jens Lerche engage anthropological insights to reflect on the Indian experience and the entrenched inequality of race, class, and caste. The paper by Murray Leibbrandt, Fabio Diaz Pabon, Vimal Ranchhod from the African Centre for Excellence in Inequality Research in collaboration with Mike Savage analyses the South African case in order to confront some of the reasons why a range of progressive policies in line with those proposed by Piketty have thus far failed to reduce inequality. Diego Sánchez-Ancochea, drawing from his long history of work at the intersection of economics, political economy, and development studies, ask us to think more specifically about the particularities of inequalities in different parts of the globe, particularly in Latin America where disparity has been shaped by extractive economies, dependency, and dictatorship. Finally, Thomas Piketty has written a generous and thoughtful response to these papers and further emphasises the intellectual and political stakes involved in furthering the interdisciplinary study of inequality.

In concluding our introduction, we note that this special issue poses vital questions about the status of sociology itself. Disciplines provide scholarly homes, and yet we want to encourage more scholars to be un-homed. The postcolonial theorist Edward Said (2013) argued that criticism happens in exile, when one is not at home, but occupies a space that is constitutively outside. We applaud Piketty for moving in some ways much further from his own disciplinary home in economics, and we offer criticism in that same constructive sentiment, wishing to support this project and enlist sociology as an expansive and outward-looking force that is able to join this wider "big picture" thinking. While the conversation needs much more work, it reflects both the breadth and depth of what we think is possible, when we seriously engage with the multiple facets of global inequality. As COVID continues to disrupt everyday life across the globe, it also exposes the fragility of our social, welfare, health, and political systems, and stresses the urgent need for new models of interdisciplinary social science.

Overall, this conversation, between Piketty and his interlocutors, does not stand alone. It offers us a space for thinking more broadly as social scientists about our approaches and also about how to productively, sympathetically, analytically, and critically engage with one another, within and across our disciplines, in ways that might allow us to learn from other approaches and social locations and work to tackle inequality in new and bold ways. It also reminds us that political economy was always concerned with social and moral questions, with the relationship between political power, social status, and economic resources. It would benefit us to think across these divides, to interrogate our own tools, and to stitch some of these issues back together, rather than dissecting them as discreet separate concerns.

## ORCID

Mike Savage  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4563-9564>

## REFERENCES

- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization* (Vol. 1). University of Minnesota Press.
- Beck, U. (2000). The cosmopolitan perspective: Sociology of the second age of modernity. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 51(1), 79–105.
- Bhambra, G. (2007). *Rethinking modernity: Postcolonialism and the sociological imagination*. Springer.
- Bhambra, G. K. (2014). *Connected sociologies*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Esping-Andersen, G. (2000). Two societies, one sociology, and no theory. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 51(1), 59–77.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2000). *Empire*. Harvard University Press.
- Holmwood, J. (2010). Sociology's misfortune: Disciplines, interdisciplinarity and the impact of audit culture. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61(4), 639–658.
- Said, E. W. ([2000] 2013). *Reflections on exile: And other literary and cultural essays*. Granta Books.
- Savage, M. (2010). *Identities and social change in Britain since 1940: The politics of method*. Oxford University Press.
- Savage, M., & Burrows, R. (2007). The coming crisis of empirical sociology. *Sociology*, 41(5), 885–899.
- Shah, A. (2018). *Nightmarch: Among India's revolutionary guerrillas*. C. Hurst & Co.
- Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2006). The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and Planning A*, 38(2), 207–226.
- Wallerstein, I. (2000). From sociology to historical social science: Prospects and obstacles. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 51(1), 25–35.