

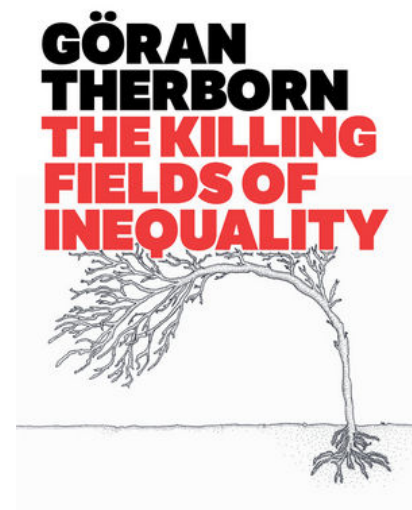
Book Review: The Killing Fields of Inequality by Göran Therborn

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*The global financial crisis has been a hotly contested political and economic topic for the last few years but how much do we really know about the forms of inequality that such crises produce and perpetuate? Göran Therborn argues in **The Killing Fields of Inequality** that human development is not simply determined by how wealthy an individual or nation is, but by an individuals' ability to function fully as a human being within the context of their environment; being able to choose a life that promotes dignity and well-being under the fundamental conditions of human experience and knowledge. In short, it's not all about the money, finds **Katherine Williams**.*

The Killing Fields of Inequality. Göran Therborn. Polity Press. November 2013.

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Inequality, or notions thereof, cannot be simply deduced by wealth alone, states [Göran Therborn](#) in his impassioned book that deftly challenges normative concepts of inequality and attempts to approach such concerns from a multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary perspective. Therborn – professor of sociology at Cambridge University and familiar to many through his highly-cited works including *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* – argues that theorisation about different types of inequality made great advances in the decades preceding the global financial crisis; however, such theories and observations (such as inequalities of health, lifespan, mortality, and their causal relationships etc.) have been relegated from mainstream academic debate. Whilst doffing his proverbial cap to the scholars of the past, Therborn proceeds to construct his own broader empirical analysis in order to uncover the ‘fields’ of inequality; namely, those violations of human capabilities that often go unexplored in current discourses.

Therborn presents the reader with a series of unsettling, and surprising, statistics that pull into perspective how other forms of inequality have a detrimental effect on individuals' lives. Inequality of opportunity in the US, as but one example, means that the life expectancy of white American men without a college degree fell by three years; the life expectancy of women in the same group fell by more than five years. African Americans with less than twelve years of education when compared to white Americans with more than sixteen years of education, experience a difference in life expectancy by up to twelve years. Therborn argues that only the AIDS crisis in South Africa and the reestablishment of capitalism in Russia have proven more deadly than the social polarisation that the US has experienced since the Clinton administration (p. 7).

Interestingly, Therborn's analysis of Western Europe, and indeed the UK, effectively deconstructs the notion that we in Europe experience more equality than other countries across the world; surprisingly, in Western Europe, Finland has experienced the steepest slope of inequality with 1,255 extra annual deaths among the low-educated and unemployed (p. 11). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Sweden is considered to be the most equal country in Europe. However, the book does not concern itself solely with the marginalisation of less-advantaged individuals in the West. Therborn's statistical analysis covers a wide range of issues from child malnutrition and mortality across Africa and South/South East Asia, to the legacy of oppressive regimes in the former Eastern Bloc and Latin America.

Therborn believes that the empirical evidence that he produces to support his theory that inequality kills is indisputable. However, whilst the numbers themselves might be solid, he contends that some areas remain unexplored, such as the psychosomatic mechanisms that link social status to health and longevity. Therborn believes that there is currently little theoretical reflection on the meanings and implications of inequality; conventional studies tend to focus on income only (though the author makes it clear that any serious scholar must also pay lip service to convention when undertaking such

studies). To fill this gap in our theoretical understanding of what constitutes inequality, the author has conceptualised three types of inequality that can have an insidious influence on the health and wellbeing of an individual, and deny them their ability to fully function as a human being. First, vital inequality - socially constructed means of inequality such as mortality rates, life expectancy etc. Next is existential inequality - according to Therborn, this constitutes denial of personhood, rights, dignity, respect, degrees of freedom and self-development. Finally Therborn offers resource inequality - the inability of human actors to act to their full capability (p. 48).

Perpetuating these fields of inequality are four mechanisms (p. 62) which work to polarise different groups of people in society; distanciation (a systemic process designed to discern 'winners and losers'); exclusion (the division of 'in-groups and out-groups);



A homeless man in Union Station, Los Angeles. Credit to [Elvert Barnes](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

hierarchisation (formal organisations of inequality) and exploitation (unfairly capitalising on the often physical labour of others). However, the author argues that these mechanisms are not entirely exclusive of each other despite a belief that all four can account for the generation of most kinds of inequality. Though, Therborn would not take it as failure if further mechanisms were uncovered; his methodology allowing for further analysis.

The good news is it's not all bad news. Whilst prevailing inequality seems incontestable because of its scale and influence on societal interaction, Therborn contends that it doesn't have to be that way. As the author argues that inequalities are social constructions, they can indeed be deconstructed in order to promote equality. Such a radical overhaul of society may seem like a distant possibility but Therborn advocates four mechanisms by which such visions can be achieved; approximation; inclusion; de-hierarchisation; and redistribution and rehabilitation (p. 64). Arguably, the most important way in which inequality can be challenged is by the promotion of *inclusion*; whereby the way is made clear for those formerly excluded from the body politic by ensuring rights and barriers against exclusion for all are upheld and maintained.

Whilst the book itself deals with some heavy subject matter, Therborn presents his case in an accessible and interesting format; peppered with sobering statistics and facts that may be surprising to some. For example, did you know that the life expectancy difference between the London Boroughs is the same as that between the UK and Guatemala? Or that the life expectancy difference between Glasgow's richest and poorest neighbourhoods is an unbelievable 28 years, the same as that between the UK and Haiti? (p. 112). For those unfamiliar with academic discussion of economics per se, *The Killing Fields of Inequality* is a great introduction to a current and contentious topic, one that should concern us all.

Katherine Williams graduated from Swansea University in 2011 in German and Politics, and is currently studying for a MA in International Security and Development. Her interests include the de/construction of gender in International Relations, conflict-driven sexual violence and grassroots feminist activism, being a co-founder of Swansea Feminist Network. You can follow her on Twitter [@polygluttony](#). [Read more reviews by Katherine](#) .