Introduction

WHAT IS THE CHALLENGE OF INEQUALITY?

At the start of the twenty-first century, inequality was largely viewed as a minor, specialist concern. Economic growth linked to deregulation and marketization, the fall of communist regimes, globalization, the rise of digital communication, and the expansion of knowledge-based economies in the previous two decades had generated a heady millennial excitement about the promise of economic and social advance. The looming problem of climate change notwithstanding, the twenty-first century seemed to mark the arrival of the good life for many.

This optimistic world now looks very foreign. There are numerous reasons for this change of mood, ranging from intensified geopolitical tensions across the globe in the aftermath of the "war on terror,' to the intensifying climate crisis, and to declining confidence (in many parts of the world) in the robustness of democratic structures and civil society. In the past decade, the topic of inequality has become the central hook on which to hang the anxieties that this pessimistic perspective has engendered. One redolent moment was President Barack Obama's pithy rendition in 2013 of income inequality as "the defining challenge of our time." Inequality became a way of summarizing a basket of bleak problems under one banner that could link fallout from the austerity politics unleashed across the world in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash to the sense of malaise that was provoked by entrenched and sometimes growing divisions in such areas as social mobility, health, politics, and well-being.

This book is written out of my sense that inequality does indeed open a crucial, pathbreaking agenda that speaks to the broader ills of our time. And yet, the term has also become massively overloaded, piled with more freight than it can possibly bear. We may have grasped the scale, but we have not yet understood the full nature of the challenge that inequality poses. As a label, inequality proliferates across so many axes, in such varied contexts, that it can degenerate into a relentless listing exercise. Far from being productive, this can then lead to an infinite regress toward a fatalistic pessimism: Inequality is so entrenched, it's everywhere, so what can we do about it? In this respect, as in others, it can echo the climate crisis debate. Or, in contrast, it can facilitate an overly eager set of policy tools designed to "fix" the problem—what has been identified as a nascent inequality industry. As Atossa Araxia Abrahammian (2018) put it, "since 2008, wonks, politicians, poets, and bankers have all started talking about inequality. But are they interested in making us more equal?" Has inequality simply become the latest banner around which experts can mobilize new kinds of professional skills (commanding good salaries and career prospects as they do so)? And what do we make of the fact that inequality has risen to the top of the agenda at the same time that economic growth in many parts of the world has reduced poverty to its lowest level in recorded history? Is there is a danger that inequality seems like distant and irrelevant bleating to the many people around the world whose economic and social situations have actually been improving, sometimes substantially? Is it simply the latest manifestation of a liberal elite bubble mentality—a symptom of the very problem that critics of inequality are supposed to draw attention to?

My book is animated by the view that we need a more robust sociological framing of the inequality debate to broaden our understanding of the full scale of the challenge it entails. I pursue the ambitious argument that we are witnessing the emergence of an inequality paradigm, which fundamentally unsettles long-term assumptions about the direction and nature of social change.

Truly bringing out the challenge of inequality therefore requires us to disrupt conventional paradigms—what the eminent historian of science Thomas Kuhn identified as "normal science"—by provoking a revolutionary reassessment of our overarching assumptions. In these terms, inequality can provoke a revolutionary phase that disrupts the conventional "growth" and "modernization" paradigms that have dominated social science since the Second World War.

This is how Thomas Kuhn (1977: xvii) distinguished between periods of normal science and revolution:

> Scientific development depends in part on a process of non-incremental or revolutionary change. Some revolutions are large, like those associated with the names of Copernicus, Newton, or Darwin, but most are much smaller, like the discovery of oxygen or the planet Uranus. The usual prelude to changes of this sort is, I believed, the awareness of anomaly, of an occurrence or set of occurrences that does not fit existing ways of ordering phenomena. The changes that result therefore require "putting on a different kind of thinking-cap," one that renders the anomalous lawlike but that, in the process, also transforms the order exhibited by some other phenomena, previously unproblematic.

Inequality has come to prominence precisely as the anomaly that troubles conventional social scientific models. This revolutionary moment is not only one of revelation but also is disruptive and provokes critical reactions from those wedded to conventional models. In this Introduction, I trace this revolutionary moment across three independent domains: first, the relationship between rich and poor; second, the nature of social scientific expertise; and third, the vision of progress itself. These three themes might appear to raise entirely different issues. That is my point. Inequality disrupts our perceptual frames, breaking down older silos of expertise, and encouraging surprising and unanticipated new understandings. In fact, these three themes are Russian dolls, nested inside one another. We are on an exciting journey indeed.

1: Turning the Telescope: The Rich as a Social Problem

If we are to isolate one moment when the challenge of inequality to conventional paradigms crystallized, May 2011 is a good contender. This was when the Nobel laureate economist Joe Stiglitz published his article "Of the 1%, By the 1%, For the 1%" in the magazine *Vanity Fair*. Stiglitz (2011) pulled no punches:

> Americans have been watching protests against oppressive regimes that concentrate massive wealth in the hands of an elite few. Yet in our own democracy, 1 percent of the people take nearly a quarter of the nation's income—an inequality even the wealthy will come to regret.

His article was short, sensationalist. In directing its ire against top earners, he continued a long and distinguished American muckraking tradition of castigating robber barons and selfish plutocrats. Yet the article also unsettled conventional wisdom about the nature of contemporary social problems.

Previous American efforts for social advancement had directed their energies on how to reduce poverty. Indeed, this preoccupation with diagnosing and measuring poverty had been fundamental to social policy throughout the globe since at least the eighteenth century (for example, Roy and Crane 2015). Legions of economists and social reformers have identified poverty reduction as a central policy goal, and welfare reform throughout the twentieth century had made the alleviation of poverty and deprivation their central concern. This momentum continued into the latter decades of the twentieth century. During the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson had even declared a "war on poverty." Since the 1980s, this current had shifted into alleviating "social exclusion," as it morphed into a fixation on improving the employability and marketability of those most vulnerable in the labor market. Policy interventions across the world questioned entitlement to benefit and began to champion conditional cash transfers, such as under Clinton's "workfare" reforms of the 1990s (see Peck 2001), but extending to many parts of the globe in the first decade of the twenty-first century.[1]

But Stiglitz pivoted his telescope away from those at the bottom of the economic hierarchy and instead directed his gaze up toward the celestial constellations of the superrich. Rather than exhortations to improve the lot of those at the bottom, he offered indictments of high earners as the real problem. This switch of direction was assisted by a simple but powerful methodological tool—a new economic language of "income percentiles," which allowed him to differentiate the disproportionately high incomes of the top 1 percent of earners from those in the bottom 99 percent. Here he was following the trail blazed by Paul Krugman, Thomas Piketty, and Emmanuel Saez, who had charted how the fortunes of top earners had mushroomed in the United States in previous decades.[2] He was thereby championing a stylized fact, which came to have great resonance with fellow Americans—that there was a small wealthy elite whose fortunes were completely out of kilter with ordinary Americans who, by contrast, were struggling to get by.[3] Indeed, when visiting Edmonton in 2018, where I participated in a focus group reflecting on class divisions in Canada, I was struck by the considerable popular resonance among its participants of the theme that "1 percenters" were in a world of their own. The language of "income percentiles" had moved well away from the economists' calculations and entered popular consciousness.

A few months after Stiglitz's article, an outburst of popular protest, Occupy Wall Street, took this message of economic excess into the heart of the world's dominant financial center in New York.[4] This movement also embraced the language championed by economists, emphasizing that "we are the 99 percent." Parallel protests in leading financial centers across the globe soon followed. Gitlin (2013: 9) emphasizes the historical significance of Occupy: its "terminology ('1%,' '99%') entered into popular lore so readily because it summed up, albeit crudely, the sense that the wielders of power are at once arrogant, self-dealing, incompetent, and incapable of remedying the damage they have wrought; and that their dominance constitutes a moral crisis that can only be addressed by a moral awakening." As one Occupy slogan had it: "THE SYSTEM'S NOT BROKEN, IT'S FIXED."

This targeting of "the 1 percent" was powerful because it made inequality concrete. A small but tangible group of superrich individuals could be identified as the culprits of inequality, and by extension as responsible for social "bads" of numerous kinds. This change was important: Since the early twentieth century, economists had used the Gini coefficient as an aggregate metric that summarized inequality using a single number, usually ranging between 0.6 and 0.3.[5] But this generalized abstraction lacked a focused target. In contrast, talking about the share of income taken by the top 1 percent signaled a specific group of people comparable to the poor in previous historical periods: observable individuals whose behavior and morality is a matter of public concern. In the years since 2011, this public "naming and shaming" of highly paid individuals has become a well-worn and effective repertoire. In 2017, when British Labour Party peer Lord Adonis questioned the high fees of over £9,000 charged for undergraduate study in most British universities, he realized that the most effective way of forcing this point was by criticizing the high pay of university vice chancellors. This sparked off a media feeding frenzy identifying those who were most lavishly remunerated. The success of this approach was brought home when a proposal to reduce the defined pension benefits of academic staff in 2017 provoked an ultimately successful strike, in which the disproportionate benefits of vice chancellors became a powerful mobilizing tool to whip up anger at pension reform proposals.

Stiglitz's contribution therefore marked a fundamental reorientation. Yet he was no leftist upstart. Ostensibly, Stiglitz followed a long line of hallowed economists used to giving their expert counsel in boardrooms and council chambers (Fourcade 2009; LeBaron 2011; M. Reay 2012). This dominant culture built up over the twentieth century had come to have huge sway over government and business life to the extent that it had become completely normalized in policy-making circles. Gentlemen economists (such as John Maynard Keynes) had given way to a more technocratic formation, trained in Chicago School monetarism and its later derivatives, who devised powerful interventions across the globe.[6] Stiglitz certainly had this pedigree: He had been a chief economist at the World Bank and a chairman of President Clinton's Council of Economic Advisers. His academic prowess, with his Nobel Prize and his named professorship at Columbia University, could not have been any more stellar. And yet, by articulating ideas that resonated with growing distrust and popular protest, he was fracturing the very discipline of economics of which he was a leading champion.

Occupy Wall Street shared Stiglitz's scorn for any economic rationale that might justify the burgeoning incomes of the 1 percent. They disputed the view that very-high earners were to be understood in the way that they might think of themselves, as heroic movers and shakers of a dynamic global economy. Instead, they were viewed as a narrow and selfish group whose greed has multiple negative implications for everybody else. "But one big part of the reason we have so much inequality is that the top 1 percent want it that way," Stiglitz (2011) crisply noted, pointing to how taxation policy had been remade in their favor during Ronald Reagan's presidency. Their selfishness, narrowness, and greed were not a private matter: it damaged social well-being at large. This reframing of inequality forced moral concerns onto the public agenda in ways that challenge the hold of purely scientific and technical expertise. Stiglitz's ideas, simply expressed in one popular article, pulled together a critique of wealthy elites as a profound dysfunctional challenge.

Since this intervention, "elite bashing" has become a major current of both academic and more popular discourses. This reversing of the telescope to look at the rich, rather than the poor, as the overwhelming social problem is of great pertinence. The rise of "elite studies," which this intervention inspired, is a major theme in recent social science and will surface time and again in my book. But this approach also opens up onto further issues. We need to open up the first Russian doll to see what lies inside.

2: The Crisis of Social Science

A profound reshaping of social scientific knowledge is currently taking place. Compared to the natural and medical sciences, the social sciences have been remarkably conservative. Whereas it is routine for natural scientists to pool their disciplinary skills to hone their capacity to address specific problems, social scientists largely default to their disciplinary homes, ultimately writing as economists, sociologists, political scientists, and so forth. Where interdisciplinary fields have emerged (such as in development studies, or in research on health, education, or social policy), they are defined as "applied" areas, which convey less status than in the "core" social science disciplines.

Playing to the comforts of one's home disciplinary audience was a powerful device when the social sciences were growing fast, as they were for much of the twentieth century. But the rise of big data and the growing interest of natural scientists in social interventions have entailed more external scrutiny of the success of social science. Massive social and technical changes of recent decades call into question the intellectual silos that were forged in the nineteenth century but still dominate universities around the globe. Would we want to retain the distinction between anthropology (originally forged to study colonial societies) and sociology (which developed rather later to study developed metropolitan nations) in these postcolonial times? Wouldn't we ideally want a closer encounter between economics and political science, given the simultaneously political and economic tumults we have lived through? Aren't all our concerns fundamentally geographical and historical to the extent that hiving these off as separate disciplines is fundamentally disabling? Why aren't there social science departments dealing explicitly with the climate crisis? Or inequality?

These silos were massively challenged by Thomas Piketty's (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century.* This showed how economists such as Piketty could move out of their home discipline and encourage a broader debate between economics and the social sciences that had been largely absent in previous decades. And indeed, many social scientists have seen the issue of inequality as one that allows them to make common cause. More than any other social science issue, it has generated the kind of intense cross-disciplinary synergy that cuts into an emerging interdisciplinary space. A cursory tour of leading figures who have energized the debate on inequality would include such economists as Tony Atkinson, Amartya Sen, Joe Stiglitz and Thomas Piketty; such gender scholars as bell hooks and Dorothy Smith; such sociologists as John Goldthorpe, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michele Lamont; such legal and critical race scholars as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Williams; such epidemiologists as Michael Marmot, Richard Wilkinson, and Kate Pickett; such political scientists as Robert Putnam, Kathleen Thelen, and Paul Pierson; such geographers as Danny Dorling; and such social policy researchers as John Hills. And so on—this list is not intended to be exhaustive, and my apologies to those who are not on it. My point is that in a short period of time, the issue of inequality has come to straddle specific disciplines and has inspired social scientists to work together in an unprecedented way.

We need to contextualize the gravity of this shift in terms of the strange history of the social sciences, which during the twentieth century, came to exert huge and unprecedented authority.[7] At the end of the nineteenth century, the most powerful forms of knowledge were religion and the humanities on one hand, and the natural and medical sciences on the other. Social science departments hardly existed in any universities, though the seeds of their later development were germinating, notably in the graduate schools of American universities. Many who were later lionized as the founders of social scientific thinking—Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Max Weber, Auguste

Comte, W. E. B. Du Bois—actually saw themselves as working in the fields of philosophy, history, and law, whereas others (such as Karl Marx) had no academic foothold at all. Although toward the end of the nineteenth century, a few figures were beginning to argue for the need for a distinctive social science—for instance, the French champion of sociology, Emile Durkheim—these individuals remained few and far between.

Andrew Abbott (2001b) has drawn attention to the significance of "fractal divides," whereby apparently new forms of knowledge actually reproduce older axial divisions. The new is drawn from the seeds of the past. In this manner, as the social sciences took on organized disciplinary forms from the early twentieth century, they reproduced older tensions between the sciences and humanities. The two earliest disciplines, economics and anthropology, took their intellectual models from the sciences and the humanities, respectively. Thus they came to institutionalize the split between naturalist and hermeneutic perspectives. These two disciplines have proved to be most cohesive and internally closed among the social sciences. The fields of political science (sometimes referred to more amorphously as "government") and sociology developed somewhat later, and became caught in these fractal oppositions. They were characterized by endemic bitter disputes among their ranks between those championing quantitative and qualitative perspectives, a situation that has often led to chronic infighting and introspection.[8] A further twist was that social psychology increasingly abandoned its location in the social sciences and became more closely allied to the medical and natural sciences, while economic history largely folded back into the broader discipline of history.

The paradox of this disciplinary formation was that whereas social life was generally seen as necessarily embodying exchange, interaction, reflexivity and open systems, the social science disciplines themselves were singularly unable to articulate such principles between (or sometimes even among) themselves. Each discipline deferred to its own canonical thinkers, its own preferred methodological tools, and operated largely independently of one another. Each sliced the social world in its own image: economists defined, measured, and analyzed the economy, operating independently of other circuits of social life; political scientists addressed the dynamics associated with political institutions; and sociologists competed with anthropologists to address more diffuse analyses of social and cultural relations.[9]

This intellectual space was also hierarchical. During the course of the twentieth century, economics became increasingly dominant (in Paul Samuelson's words, as the "queen of the social sciences"), becoming hugely influential in governing nations, businesses, and organizations of all kinds. Pitching against this hegemonic position, other social science disciplines sniped at the limited vision of instrumental "homo economicus" that this discipline seemed to champion. They had much less success, however, in dislodging economics from its primacy.

From the latter half of the twentieth century, this tension was overlain by a further differentiation between "pure" and "applied" social sciences. As states, businesses, and organizations of all forms became increasingly complex, their demands for expertise led to the expansion of the fields of social policy, management, health, education, and development. By the later twentieth century, these fields had often dwarfed in personnel and resources the pure social sciences, testifying to their powerful role in the rise of knowledge economies—what Nigel Thrift (2003) called "knowing capitalism."[10] This put in place an intellectual pipeline in which the applied social sciences enacted the expertise, concepts, and methods that had been forged in the crucible of the pure social sciences.

This social science assemblage was remarkably successful during the twentieth century, especially its second half, but was suddenly to come under huge pressure during the early twenty-first century. In the wake of the dramatic digital advances, the beloved methodological tools that the social sciences had championed—the sample survey, ethnography, and the qualitative interview—rapidly came to look dated and arcane (see Savage and Burrows 2007; Halford and Savage 2017). Vociferous and well-funded proponents of big data claimed that social research could be done much more quickly and effectively using the digital data sources left behind by administrative and commercial records. Why bother commissioning a sample survey when you could look at your own transaction data and very quickly work out in detail what was happening? The rise of big data caused growing anxiety about the status of social scientific knowledge, compounded by well-publicized examples of natural and information sciences deciding that they could now do social science using their computational skills without the need for much social scientific intervention.

It is in the context of this challenge to their intellectual authority that the theme of inequality allowed social scientists to stage a brilliant riposte. By mobilizing a bold new stream of research that combined new forms of large-scale quantitative data analysis with qualitative theoretical insight, and yoked to a moral concern with the injustice of inequality, social scientists could seize on a big-picture story that had pretty much entirely evaded the attention of big data evangelists. The new social science of inequality trumpeted a bold, big, and commanding vision. By contrast, proponents of big data failed to deliver on the knowledge revolution that they promised, because their technically skilled findings were trivial, often defaulting to startling visual displays but with no defining narrative.[11]

This new big-picture social science provoked by inequality researchers met a huge public demand from large audiences trying to make sense of the rapidly changing world they were living in. Inequality provided the kind of overarching narrative that could string together economic boom and bust, globalization, political logjam and dysfunction, and wider feelings of malaise. The result has been a remarkable upturn of popular interest in social science. In the United Kingdom, the most prominent example is Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Sprit Level* (2010), which was a runaway best seller and prompted huge academic and policy debate through its message that unequal societies produced more social problems. Even though this book generated critical responses from some social scientists who saw it as too simplistic, this did not detract from its power to show that inequality mattered.

The same point became even more clear in 2013 with the publication of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century.* A dense data-driven tome laying out long-term trends of income and wealth inequality in numerous nations was not an obvious candidate to sell two million hardbacks. Nonetheless, this book captured the public imagination to a remarkable extent and catapulted Thomas Piketty to superstar status. This was not the kind of attention that social scientists had normally enjoyed, and it easily exceeded the attention that any big data exponents were attracting.

These two books reveal the breakdown of the fractal divide that had imprisoned the social sciences since their inception. These were works of sophisticated data assemblage that demanded considerable technical skill. But they also had a clear moral tone and drew on wide-ranging theoretical, historical, and interpretative reference points. They are simultaneously quantitative, qualitative, historical, comparative, theoretical, political, and moral. They mark a profound reordering of social scientific expertise and a new urgency about how the social sciences can be publically and politically engaged.

These books are the tips of an iceberg. We can glean the size of the body of ice resting below these prominent iceberg tips by reporting the frequency of inequality terms in academic journal output. Table I.1 uses the web of knowledge to identify the frequency by which academic articles address certain core topics over the past five decades. For each topic, I have listed the name of the leading discipline that uses such terms, and the extent of the lead that this discipline enjoys over its nearest rival.

Table I.1 shows the hold of the fractal split which I have discussed above: some terms—"economic growth," "economic development," and "globalization"—are dominated by economists, whereas the competing terms "modernity" and "neoliberalism" are dominated by research in history, sociology, political science, and education. "Economic inequality" is distinctive, because it hardly existed as a topic field until 2000, and its early proponents were from the humanities and sociology.[12] However, it was economists who came to champion the concept from the early years of the twenty-first century; but even though they drove the inequality charge, their position never became as dominant as that for the topic of "economic growth." Table I.1 also shows that for every term chosen for examination, there was a decline of disciplinary dominance between 2000 and 2017. This is true for those terms (such as "economic development" or "growth") that were part of the canon of economics itself. Inequality thus appears to be a Trojan horse for a wider breakdown of disciplinary specialization in the social sciences.

This splintering of the fractal divide in the social sciences extends beyond the take-up of the topic of inequality. Central categorical divides—notably race, gender, and class—which were previously taken up mainly by those in qualitative disciplines (sociology, anthropology, history, some geography, and political science), and which stood in tension with economics, have also become increasingly frequently used across the social sciences.[13]

I don't want to overstate my case. Disciplinary framings in the social sciences remain powerful: We can see this from the rising numbers of references to such terms as "economic growth" in the web of knowledge. But the direction of traffic is nonetheless clear. So, the second element of my introduction sees the success of the inequality issue as challenging the disciplinary specialization of social scientific expertise itself.

Table I.1: Social science keyword trend in social science disciplines, 1980–2017

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2017
Economic Growth	160 Economics 50% (37%)	204 Economics 49% (36%)	1,632 Economics 37% (29%)	5,182 Economics 36% (25%)	11,586 Economics 29% (20%)
Economic Inequality	8 Humanities 33% (12%)	33 Sociology 33% (16%)	332 Economics 30% (14%)	1,054 Economics 29% (10%)	2,553 Economics 23% (12%)
Economic development	350 Economics 36% (16%)	429 Economics 34% (17%)	2,635 Economics 15% (6%)	9,282 Economics 19% (6%)	21,075 Economics 16% (7%)
Modernity	57 History 14% (2%)	212 Sociology 17% (7%)	608 History 16% (1%)	1,356 History 15% (6%)	2,509 History 15% (6%)
Neoliberalism	(1)	(3)	62 Political science 29% (10%)	446 Geography 22% (4%)	1,542 Education 15% (3%)
Globalization	(0)	39 Economics 21% (5%)	1,063 Economics 15% (3%)	3,180 Economics 15% (5%)	4,611 Economics 12% (1%)

Note: Percentage figures in parentheses represent the % lead of the dominant discipline over the nearest rival. The table presents the number of articles with stated keywords, followed by name of discipline with highest percentage of references.
Source: Web of science.

We need to go a step further than this. Inequality is an anomaly that questions the core guiding values underpinning projects of modernization, growth, and development over recent decades. In this respect, it comes to dispute visions of progress and growth that have characterized both expert and popular thinking in the decades since the core values of liberal modernity became dominant. It is this which reveals the true gravity of the stakes at play. Let us now open a third layer of the Russian doll.

3: Equality as a Transcendental Ideal

Here is a puzzle. Why has inequality caught the attention of powerful and wealthy elites rather than those who are actually on its receiving end, those who are subject to the deprivation, marginalization, and economic hardship that inequality brings? For it is the "great and the good"—or at least some of them—who have nailed their colors most proudly to the inequality mast.

A few years ago, I was invited to speak at a conference of bankers and fund managers. On the plane, I reflected on the irony that I had not been invited to such events before becoming director of the International Inequalities Institute at the London School of Economics, and I was in no doubt that such invitations would stop once I stepped down. As I arrived in one of Europe's most glamorous and historical cities, I was shown to my luxurious hotel room, whose windows opened onto a stunning baroque square. The workshop began the following day in a desultory manner. By lunchtime, I had come to the view that this event was designed to be an undemanding day out for hardworking finance professionals, who could relax while indulging in low-key networking in an elegant five star hotel. And all on business expenses, of course. In the afternoon, however, the mood changed when I spoke about inequality. This was not because I said anything startling or profound. I recall with some embarrassment using the hackneyed metaphor of inequality being about whether people got a larger or smaller portion of the pie. But this did not matter. Attention pricked up. Affluent, elite, finance workers were fired up by talking about inequality, and they did so with passion, both in the session and later, when they came to talk to me about their own lives and experiences. They convinced me about the sincerity of their feelings on the topic. Not for the first time, I pondered the conundrum of why such elite people, the beneficiaries of inequality, felt so vested in the topic, which you might think they would prefer to sweep under the carpet.

On the way home, the answer came to me. Inequality mattered to this privileged audience, because it spoke to a world that they could no longer predict or control. They no longer knew what lay in store for their loved ones, what world their children would inherit, whether their best-laid plans would deliver. The rules of the game, oriented toward a market-driven business logic (and that had shaped the world since the 1980s) could no longer be taken for granted. Their familiar world was disintegrating around them.

This vignette helps make sense of why business elites seem so vested in the topic of inequality. Consider the World Economic Forum, whose annual event in Davos, Switzerland, has become the major global summit of corporate business leaders. Before 2011, its annual "Global Risks Report" focused on largely systemic issues: disease, climate change, and economic shocks.

These are not risks that these leaders can be held to be directly responsible for. Beginning in 2012, societal risks became more significant—"severe income disparity" was seen as the main risk from 2012 to 2014, which then morphed into bleak concerns with state collapse and terrorism, along with migration. By 2017, their prognostications had become yet grimmer. Inequality now played an even more central role, and the language became dystopian, citing increasing polarization, profound social instability, and no less than four kinds of governmental failure.[14] The executive summary noted that "this year's findings are testament to five key challenges that the world now faces. The first two are in the economic category, in line with the fact that *rising income and wealth disparity is rated . . . as the most important trend* in determining global developments over the next 10 years" (WEF 2017: 11). The account is littered with gloomy overtones:

> Despite unprecedented levels of peace and global prosperity, in many countries a mood of economic malaise has contributed to anti-establishment, populist politics and a backlash against globalization. The weakness of the economic recovery following the global financial crisis is part of this story, but boosting growth alone would not remedy the deeper fractures in our political economy. More fundamental reforms to market capitalism may be needed to tackle, in particular, an apparent lack of solidarity between those at the top of national income and wealth distributions and those further down.

The World Economic Forum thus took up the language of economic inequality that such economists as Stiglitz had made popular, but expanded its remit: "profound social instability" now occupies central stage in their global risk map. And this, we should remind ourselves, is the view from the world's leading business elites. But inequality also has the power to mobilize across contexts and gain buy-in from diverse agents in civil society, philanthropic, and campaigning organizations. Oxfam's 2017 briefing report, timed to influence that year's Davos meeting of the World Economic Forum, argued that "left unchecked, growing inequality threatens to pull our societies apart. It increases crime and insecurity, and undermines the fight to end poverty. It leaves more people living in fear and fewer in hope" (Hardoon 2017: 1).

The irony is that—on the face of it—popular forces appear less bothered about inequality than elites do. Populist politicians do not directly criticize economic inequality as such. Much of their ire focuses on immigration and threats to national sovereignty. And although there is an anti-elite discourse in much of populist politics, this is largely directed against political establishments, with the result that very wealthy business elites—Donald Trump in the United States, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Cyril Ramaphosa in South Africa—have become popular leaders by surfing this wave.

How do we make sense of this paradox that political protest against inequality appears to be muted at the very time when inequality has been trumpeted by elites as an entrenched social problem? The growing concern with economic inequality represents a loss of faith in the prospect of progressive social change, and this awareness is especially marked among numerous elites who previously endorsed a progressive view about the prospects for economic and social change. Its currency is thus part of a wider disenchantment with the overarching principles of modernization and growth that have guided social development over recent decades.[15] It departs from progressive, evolutionary accounts and instead offers a dystopian account of regression and the return of historical forces that had previously been seen as banished to the shadows.

It is telling that inequality, rather than equality, has become the central rallying cry. Equality is one of the major modern transcendent values that has been prized as central to the modernizing progressive vision. The historian Jürgen Osterhammel, commenting on the significance of the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789, reflected that: "Almost everywhere (perhaps with the possible exception of Japan), people in all subsequent epochs have appealed to liberty, equality, self-determination and human and civil rights" (Osterhammel 2014: 532). Changing the terms of debate from "equality" to "inequality," however, abandons the prospect of equality and instead repositions thinking around limiting the damage of excessive inequality.

Deflecting attention away from equality toward inequality has been a powerful move because it can engage a wide constituency of interests. It repositions egalitarian ideals in an era when transcendental values of any kind are losing their hold. Amartya Sen's (2009) brilliant reflection of concepts of justice is a revealing pointer of this current. Sen argues that justice should be construed not in terms of overarching principles (however these might be defined) but through a comparative lens that distinguishes differences and variations among people in differing situations. He criticizes theories of justice, notably that of the eminent liberal political theorist John Rawls, who elaborates "justice as fairness," by deploying a version of transcendental social contract theory that has formed the basis of liberal thinking since Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Rawls's version used the "original position," a thought experiment in which people in an ideal presocial state had to imagine what kind of society they would support if they did not know in advance the position they were to be allocated to within it. Rawls's argument was that people would choose a society that not only embraced freedom but also in which inequalities were not ascribed, since they would be mindful of the possibility that they might initially be placed at the bottom of any unequal social order. They would therefore support a liberal model in which there were meritocratic possibilities of social mobility.

Sen argues that this approach to justice defaults to a narrow instrumental concern with the extent to which effective procedures are in place to ensure that such transcendental principles can be enacted. The result is that it loses sight of the actual outcomes and practices that exist in specific societies. It can be maintained that this is exactly what has happened in recent decades: Formal legal procedures to deal with different aspects of discrimination are now commonplace, but attention to actual social outcomes is more muted. Sen (2009: 17) draws on Indian jurisprudence concepts of *niti* and *nyaya:*

> The former idea, that of *niti,* relates to organizational propriety as well as behavioural correctness, whereas the latter, *nyaya,* is concerned with what emerges and how, and in particular the lives that people are actually able to lead.

In pursuing this concern with *nyaya,* Sen directs attention away from abstract principles of justice (such as those of Rawls) toward a concern with identifying better and worse actual outcomes across numerous cases.[16] Sen's argument is prescient, because it is precisely in this comparative spirit that the inequality paradigm has gathered force by documenting the accumulating evidence of how people's actual lives have been blighted by forces generating inequality. By avoiding transcendental (which thereby become abstract and procedural) discussions about how equality itself should be constituted, our attention is directed to concrete and specific situations—lives as they are actually lived. Developing the concept of the "1 percent," for instance, allowed inequality to be made concrete and thus directs attention to actual specific issues rather than to general principles.

The appeal of this argument is therefore to reposition social critique on a nontranscendental basis that disputes the overarching paradigm endorsing values of modernization and growth. Rather than history being seen as a backdrop that we have somehow left behind, this allows us to recognize it as part of who we are, and where we will go. It is the social counterpart of the environmental sensitivity regarding the implications of climate change for long-term sustainability. Indeed, this highlighting of inequality leads us, above all, to a recognition of the vital need for long-term social sustainability. Intergenerational justice, as well as our commitment to the as-yet unborn, becomes the overarching political goal.

4: The Stakes of the Inequality Paradigm

I have emphasized that there is more to the inequality paradigm than meets the eye. Indeed, there is more to the inequality paradigm than inequality. This is amply clear from the two trailblazing books that introduced the significance of inequality to broader audiences. Wilkinson and Pickett (2010), and Piketty (2013) argue that inequality matters by demonstrating that social advance is *not* produced by continued economic growth. Thus, Wilkinson and Pickett emphasize that the world's most economically advanced nations do not necessarily have fewer social problems: In fact, poorer but more equal nations score more highly with respect to good health and well-being. This theme picks up on the extensively discussed "paradox of happiness" that the economist Richard Layard has made famous: Increasing prosperity does not lead to more overall happiness once a certain threshold of economic development has been reached. Piketty's argument is captured in his famous formula $r > g$, namely, that returns to capital will exceed the growth rate—and therefore, that more growth will only enhance the relative gains of those with the most capital, leading to enhanced inequality and a vicious and reinforcing circuit. The more growth there is, the more

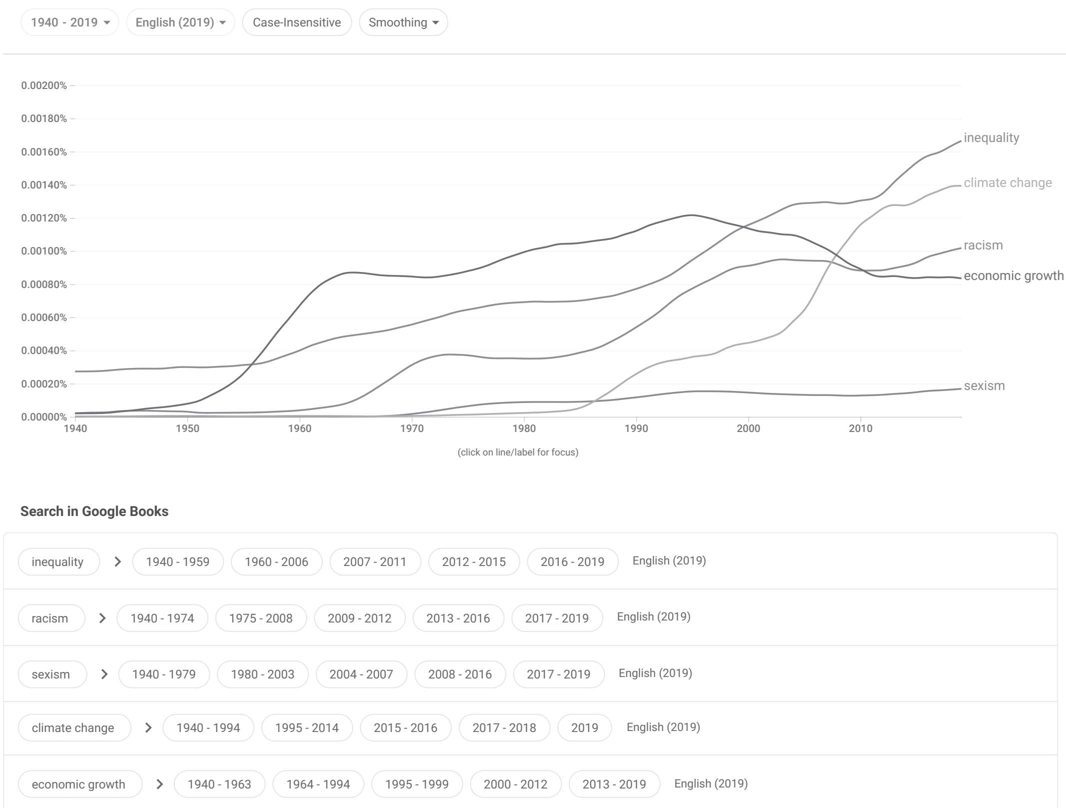

FIGURE I.1: Frequency of the terms "inequality," "racism," "sexism," "climate change," and "economic growth" in English, 1940–2019

Source: Google Ngram.

we will actually get those who are already economically privileged to do even better.

We get a sense of the stakes involved in this new framing by recognizing how inequality competes in popularity with other organizing social science terms. Here, the appeal of the inequality mantra is inversely related to beliefs in modernity, progress, and growth. Google Ngram Viewer reveals the frequency of the terms "inequality," "racism," "sexism," "climate change," and "economic growth" in English in recent decades, and the trends are revealing (see Figure I.1).

Figure I.1 shows that references to inequality are not themselves new. Indeed, from the 1940s to 1960, they easily surpassed the other terms, none of which generated much interest at all. This all changed around 1960. This was the period in which "modernization" and "development," driven by the United States and burgeoning international development bodies (such as the World Bank and the International Development Fund), was promoted as the panacea for ills of all kinds. This was the same period when the social sciences were refocused on concerns promoting growth (see, for example, Wallerstein 2000). "Economic growth" accordingly came to eclipse "inequality" in usage.

But this has changed in recent years. "Economic growth" plateaued in its significance by the 1980s and subsequently dropped off. From the 1970s, "racism" and "sexism" also became much more prominent, especially the former term, which by the later 1990s had overtaken both "inequality" and "economic growth" in its currency. From the mid-1980s, "climate change" also began its steady march to prominence. In recent years, "inequality" had resumed its appeal—and at a much higher proportional level than fifty years ago. It has become increasingly prominent at a time when racism, climate change, and (to a lesser extent) sexism have also become more marked concerns. A set of gloomy, indeed scary terms have come to the fore at the same time that economic growth has become a less dominant theme.

But the situation differs around the globe. The world's most common language, Chinese, reveals a different picture. After a brief time in the late 1960s, when inequality was much discussed, interest in it fell considerably, and concerns with economic growth were paramount. Racism and sexism hardly figure anywhere in Chinese-language discourse. Even climate change operates in a very subdued way. This is ostensibly a much more positive outlook focused on the value of economic growth—which has indeed been such a marked feature of the Chinese experience in recent decades.

Inequality and economic growth operate as mirrors of each other: where the latter dominates, the former is subdued, and vice versa. The Chinese concentration on economic growth has been at the expense of the sensitivity to inequality, which has proliferated in anglophone sources. If we compare the situation in the Spanish language, the second-most popular language in the world, we find something of a hybrid between the English and Chinese situations. Inequality did not figure as an issue at all until the 1970s, but since that time, it has dramatically increased in significance (with a dip in the early 1980s). In this respect, the theme of inequality is clearly shared with the anglophone world. However, economic growth has also been an enduring theme, rising very fast from the 1960s, and after the year 2000, it was equally as significant as the theme of inequality. Racism and sexism are also much less salient terms than in the English language, testifying to their distinctive profile within the anglophone sphere.

These simple comparisons reveal that inequality is also a geopolitical issue that plays out differently across the globe. It is most discussed in the United States in particular, as well as in Europe, rather than in those areas of the world where economic growth has been a key driver in recent decades. It is therefore, in certain ways a highly Western-centered discourse, even while it appears to be critical of the record of many Western nations. This is a paradox I will unravel further as my book progresses.

Let me pull these threads together. The inequality paradigm has come into prominence not just because inequality has somehow got inexorably worse. Or because a specialized field of research has matured. Instead, it repositions social science research in a more powerful and compelling way. It offers the promise of linking specific identifiable topics (such as the prominence of the superrich) to a bold interdisciplinary social science that breaks out of disciplinary silos and disputes the progressive modernizing agenda that has dominated academic and policy thinking since 1950. It is the challenge to progressive futuristic thinking that is of particular note. Since the eighteenth century, the dream to look toward a bold new future when past problems are left behind has been persistent and pervasive. This way of thinking is bound up with the fundamental ordering of modern conceptions of time, in which past, present, and future are ontologically distinct, so that the future is unknowable on the basis of past experience. This assumption has been the vision undergirding such diverse groups as communist revolutionaries, neoliberal free marketeers, anticolonialist movements, religious fundamentalists, and technocratic reformers. In everyday life, it is also marked in the routine hold of therapeutic and self-help repertoires on our consciousness as we routinely strive to become "better" people. Teasing out the broader significance of inequality is to depart from this kind of mundane accelerationist thinking, because it sees the build-up and accentuation of historical inequalities as marking the return of older formations into the active life of the present. The more societies appear to modernize, the more their pasts actively confront them. Inequality matters, because it carries the weight of history with it. This is the overarching theme of my book.

My argument may seem to follow a well-worn path that laments the loss of hope and certainty, but ultimately I take a very different path. Recent decades are littered with proclamations of the emergence of postindustrialism, globalization, risk society, and such like, which insist on the acceleration of our society into something new and uncertain that has broken from past moorings and become more unstable.[17] These epochalist accounts are profoundly unhelpful. Rather than moving into some brave new postindustrial and affluent era, the past is catching up with us. The bold dream of breaking free from the shackles of the past and ushering in a new dawn—the vision that has been paramount across much of the globe since the eighteenth century—is fading. Instead, we are left with a world littered by centuries of accumulated economic, social, and cultural debris, in which the power of these heaps, accretions, and wrecks has an increasing hold on the present and future. In this respect, the analogy between inequality and the climate crisis is very apt. Just as our future prospects are driven by the weight of carbon deposits and associated environmental detritus that cannot be effaced, so the true recognition of inequality forces us to acknowledge the weight of past historical social and economic forces that constrains our futures. It thus places the fundamental question of sustainability at the center of our thinking.

It is in this spirit that I will draw out the wider stakes involved with invoking inequality in order to infuse a broader sociological reflection on the course of contemporary social change. The inequality paradigm opens a dark window onto the nature of social change today. The view from this window may appear bleak: It clouds liberal progressivist ideals about the power of modernization and development to address the world's ills. But this is also a view that offers succor by suggesting new perspectives attuned to the damage caused by inequality. It champions the need for a politics of social sustainability.

5: Outline of the Book

I have endeavored to write a book that is accessible and can be read by those without prior knowledge of specific fields of study and yet also does justice to the many and varied issues challenges. It will already be clear that I dispute the view that inequality is a distinct topic that can be understood in a self-contained way. In fact, it is also about how we investigate the social world, our methods and concepts, and how we construe history and social change more broadly. If we are to understand why inequality has become such a pressing and urgent topic, we need to synthesize across many fields of study and not default back to narrow framings, measurement tools, or perspectives.

Accordingly, each chapter discusses a discrete topic and seeks to introduce key issues in recent research for a broad readership. None of the chapters can cover all the important contributions in each field, but I hope they serve as effective introductions to these topics. The originality of my book, however, lies in the way I link these topics together. Therefore, to appreciate my argument as a whole, this book needs to be read from cover to cover. Although I hope readers who want a succinct discussion of particular topics can use the index to find the where in the text where they are discussed. I would urge readers to recognize that the juxtaposition of topics rarely considered together is the most important feature of my book.

Readers should bear in mind the ordering of the chapters, which builds my argument sequentially. The first part of my book introduces the key theoretical frames that underpin my core arguments about time and historicity. My intention is both to introduce the thinking of influential theorists on inequality, ranging across such canonical figures as Thomas Piketty (Chapters 1 and 3), Pierre Bourdieu (Chapter 2), and Karl Marx (Chapter 3), but more particularly to bring their arguments into dialogue with one another. The sequencing here is not to be conflated with analytical priorities. I don't start in Chapter 1 by considering the economics of income distribution because I somehow think that this is the foundation and every other aspect of inequality is derived from it. Far from it, in fact. Instead, I start with this dimension because crucial contributions from economists help highlight why the topic of inequality has leapt to the fore, but also because of the limitations of this work. My book therefore proceeds in the manner of a Russian doll: each chapter peels away to reveal another, and each one takes us closer to the heart of the doll.

Chapters are organized in three overarching Parts. The first part excavates the main conceptual issues and lays the platform for the argument I will use in later chapters to explicate the significance of inequality. Part 1 has an overarching argument, emphasizing how inequality needs to be placed in the context of space and time (scale and history, to use alternative terms). Each chapter will add a bit more to my primary claim that we need a better appreciation of history if we are to truly recognize the challenge of inequality. I show that there has been more success in bringing out a spatializing approach to inequality—the "stuff" of inequality—and that we need to complement this with a much richer appreciation of time, temporality, and history. I show that although there is frequently a genuflection to the significance of time, this approach tends to be reduced to linear measures that ultimately limit them. I see Chapter 3, where I recapitulate the importance of the concept of capital and accumulation and the concepts of time that come with this as the intellectual crux of the book.

Part 2—on the geopolitics of contemporary inequality—offers a synthesis of global inequality. These chapters cover varied topics. These are the power of ranking procedures and the weakening of nation spaces (Chapter 4); the reemerging power of empire (Chapter 5); the muted contemporary significance of social class, the enduring power of racism and sexism, and the rise of visceral inequalities (Chapter 6 and 7); and the growing significance of cities as crucibles of inequality (Chapter 8). Chapter 9 considers the significance of technological advance and innovation. Although these topics appear diverse, I argue that we can—and must—synthesize across them to unravel the renewed power of history and forces from the past. This leads to the recognition that modernizing projects, which in the later twentieth century seemed to carry all before them, are increasingly fragile. We are witnessing the return of older historical forces.

Part 3 of my book pulls these lessons out to address the contemporary politics of inequality. I seek to broaden our understanding of the range of stakes that this requires, so that rather than focusing on policy devices, or specific campaigns or movements, we recognize better the need for an all-encompassing politics of social sustainability. Thus, Chapter 10 reflects on the weakening of policy solutions amid the decline of the national political field, and my conclusion in Chapter 11 pushes home my arguments about the need for a politics of sustainability.

My book therefore navigates a long and hazardous journey, though with a clear destination to aim for. For those who get lost along the way, I have provided two integrating devices. Readers who lose their moorings are encouraged to consult either of these compasses. First, I include a brief glossary at the end of this book. This lays out the main terms which I use in the analysis and indicates where in the book these terms are elaborated. I hope readers will be able to use this if they need advice about my underpinning arguments.

My second device is indeed a thread, along the lines of Theseus's thread when finding a way out of the Minotaur's labyrinth. I deliberately emphasize the way that inequality researchers have used innovative visualizations to make their arguments. This use of visuals is at the heart of the appeal of inequality research. In different chapters, I consider how visual motifs are central to the arguments that inequality researchers make, and that we learn a great deal by understanding the affordances that visualizations offer. I hope this will be a golden thread that offers a way through the labyrinth of issues that I discuss.

These reflections on what visualizations can and can't convey is not meant to be a presentational device, or a means to dumb down the argument. Instead, they presage a new kind of social scientific narrative that proves highly resonant. I will analytically use different kinds of visualizations to pose big issues about how time and space are treated in different schools of inequality research. Here, I take heart from the words of the great Victorian cultural critic, John Ruskin, whose own brand of Tory radicalism proved fundamental in challenging the economic logic of industrializing capitalism in the later nineteenth century: "the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to *see* something, and tell what it *saw* in a plain way" (Ruskin 1856: chap. XVI). In thinking about how to elaborate the significance of the inequality paradigm, it struck me that the lever that researchers had been pulling to remarkable effect was that of the telling visualization. The differing chapters of this book show how this visual repertoire is a major and telling feature of this new social science, and I hope that readers will reflect on the power of visuals to construct this new sensitivity.

This is important, because conventional social science has characteristically downplayed the role of visualizations (see Jay 1993). Here again is a contrast with the natural sciences: in a very famous essay, Bruno Latour (1986: 21) reflected that in science, laboratory practice could be ordered

> not by looking at the scientists brains (I was forbidden access!), at the cognitive structures (nothing special) nor at the paradigms (the same for thirty years), but at the transformation of rats and chemicals into paper . . . all these inscriptions, as I called them, were combinable, superimposable and could, with only a minimum of cleaning up, be integrated as figures in the text of the articles people were writing.

It struck me that the original use of visuals has been fundamental to the success of the inequality paradigm in a way that is highly original in the social sciences, and these visuals have become the exemplars behind the forging of a new perspective. They allow us to do justice to Kuhn's insistence that older scientific paradigms are not disproved by external testing. Kuhn is clear that paradigms require exemplars that demonstrate the value of new ways of rendering the world, and powerful visual repertoires have become central motifs for researchers to show that inequality matters. They point to a way of conducting social science that deploys a "symphonic aesthetic," which replaces the linear, instrumental, and variable-centered focus of conventional perspectives. It pursues its analyses through recurring melodies—repeated motifs, deft drawing, and highly stylized narratives. As my book proceeds, I especially show how the use of lines carries enormous power. The doyen of social science visualization, Edward Tufte, has emphasized the power of "sparklines" in visualizations, and I will show how it is inequality researchers who have forced this point home. But there is more to the power of lines then skilled design principles. As Anne Seymour's foreword to the artist Richard Long's book *Walking the Line* puts it,

> Our world is made up of lines, from comet tails to DNA. Everything is connected. Everything is sequential. Everything that moves, from a snail to a lava flow leaves a line, a trace of passing. A line can be fate, a commitment, a fact, a relationship, a place. Some lines are well trodden paths, some intersect, some pass at a distance, some return to their origins. We all walk the line. We have an end and a beginning which

> is joined to a much longer invisible line in the past and in the future. (Seymour 2009: 9)

The chapters in my book take up specific visualization to introduce the substantive stakes involved in thinking about inequality. Some of these use lines, but others don't: This contrast in visual repertoires will turn out to have considerable bearing on the issues revealed. "Walking the inequality line" (to coin a phrase that I will unpack in later chapters) recharges the social scientific repertoire, elaborates new synergies with researchers in the humanities and natural sciences, and appeals to a wide public audience. It leads to a politics of social sustainability. The stakes are high indeed.