

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 en-