

Peter Scholliers, *Geschiedenis van de ongelijkheid* (Berchem: EPO, 2014), 216 p., ISBN 978-94-91297-4

How individuals maintain or enhance their position in society in times of social and economic change is a topic of interest to historians, economists and social scientists alike. There is a vast body of literature dedicated to a variety of issues connected with this overarching theme. Scholliers's *Geschiedenis van de ongelijkheid* [*History of Inequality*] is a useful addition to this. The author examines how different dimensions of inequality have been measured over time, and what conclusions were reached by those scholars researching these inequalities within and among countries over the past 200 years. The book's main argument is that inequality is a multidimensional phenomenon that should be studied in a variety of ways. Rather than one measure being superior to another, these measures present alternative approaches and will inevitably lead to different conclusions.

As the title indicates, Scholliers takes a fairly broad perspective. Nevertheless, the scope of the discussion is clearly set. Scholliers examines the development of socio-economic inequalities by tracing the debate on theoretical and methodological approaches of a subjective choice of 30 authors in the field of history, economics and social sciences. Based on the reasons underlying and the inspiration for their research and on the important stages in their academic career, the author aims to trace the historical development of the discourse on inequality and the picture that historians create from the past (p. 15). The well-known Kuznets curve, according to which in phases of economic growth income inequality first increases and then decreases, provides the underlying theoretical framework. The geographical focus is on Europe, and industrializing England forms the classical point of departure from which first a broader European and then a global perspective are taken. The book covers the period from c. 1789 to the present. While excursions are made into earlier periods and research on developments in the second half of the twentieth century is reviewed, much of Scholliers's discussion focuses on the development of social inequalities during the Industrial Revolution.

Real wages have been the dominant measure of inequality, and therefore this indicator of the standard of living in industrializing England forms the starting point of Scholliers's discussion. The driving question is whether the English working class benefitted from the Industrial Revolution. The widely accepted conclusion is that, since the end of the eighteenth century, periods of varying economic growth saw winners and losers, with quite pronounced differences between sectors and regions, and between men and women. This conclusion is the avenue taken to broaden the perspective. Would the question of winners and losers during periods of major economic transformation be answered differently if other measures of inequality were to be considered? In the following chapters Scholliers

discusses a range of alternative measures of inequality, including health outcomes, life expectancy, nutrition and literacy. His discussion of the methodological approaches is remarkably detailed, with the author taking the time to explain their relative advantages and disadvantages. While the wealth of detail can sometimes be overwhelming, the lucid writing makes it easily accessible.

One merit of this book is the range of substantive and methodological issues Scholliers addresses, ranging from the Kuznets curve to Sen's capability approach, and from the classic study of real wages to an assessment of nutrition. Yet this broad approach, covering a long period of time, across different social groups and within and across countries, somewhat hampers a systematical comparison of the alternative measures. The preceding discussion hints at support for the view that different measures tell different stories concerning inequality. A systematic evaluation of whether, and why, these different perspectives lead to different conclusions regarding the evolution of inequality would have been highly interesting. The book's very brief conclusion therefore leaves the reader somewhat unsatisfied. It would, for example, have been fascinating to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the Kuznets curve based on research using the alternative indicators. Having said that, Scholliers does, throughout this book, touch upon the implications of the findings presented and develops ideas on the possibilities offered by a comparative approach. One example is the challenge in understanding the relationship between the stagnation of real wages and the increase in life expectancy (p. 189).

This ambitious contribution sets out not only to cover a vast field of research but also to reflect on the role of the researcher in the evolution of the discussion. Overall, the rather clever idea of connecting the motives and backgrounds of 30 central authors in different fields in order to trace the academic debate loosens up the discussion. The nexus, however, between the (sometimes very brief) biographical sketches of the 30 main authors and their substantial contributions remains vague. Admittedly, a more substantial assessment of the role of the researcher in creating a historiography of inequality would probably have overloaded this volume.

Scholliers has done readers a service in tracing the debate on inequalities over a long period. He has produced a well-written work of reference that, hopefully, will provoke scholars interested in social inequality to think further about the potential that comparative long-term approaches to the study of the evolution of inequality over past centuries have to offer.

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