



## Beyond capital? The challenge for sociology in Britain

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### Abstract

This article offers a 'local', British, reading of Piketty's landmark book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, suggesting that the challenge it offers to sociological approaches to inequality is more fundamental than hitherto recognized. The variations in 'national trajectories' exposed by Piketty reveal Britain to be anomalous in terms of standard approaches to the path dependencies embedded in different welfare regimes. Using the recent work of Monica Prasad on 'settler capitalism' in the USA and the tax and debt-finance regime associated with it, the article suggests that colonialism and empire and its postwar unravelling has had deep consequences for British social stratification, albeit largely neglected by British sociologists. Finally, it points to the fact that the form of tax and debt-finance regime that has become reinforced in Britain is at the heart of recent radical reforms to higher education. These are the currently unexplicated conditions of our future practice as sociologists and, therefore, an obstacle to building a critical sociology on the foundations laid out by Piketty.

**Keywords:** Debt-finance; inequality; patrimonial capitalism; politics of knowledge; settler capitalism; welfare regimes; Piketty

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Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) is a major contribution both to social science and to public debate. Uniquely for a book that makes few concessions to a wider readership either in length or technical argument, it has received broad media coverage, especially in the USA.<sup>1</sup> Coverage has been less extensive in the UK, though the *Financial Times* devoted considerable space to it – perhaps indicative of the *FT*'s global and North American audience – with its economics editor, Chris Giles, seeking (unsuccessfully) to rebut its claims.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, on the face of it, the substance of the book is not that novel, even if it is argued with great skill and verve. It painstakingly sets out data on the distribution of income and wealth across the history of capitalism and projects those

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distributions into the future. Some of this on income inequality is known from previous work by Piketty and his collaborators (Atkinson and Piketty 2007), though the data on wealth across different countries is new. The force of the argument is to challenge Kuznets's (1953) theory that the maturing of capitalism and long-term economic growth would bring about a decrease in income inequality (and, by implication, also of wealth).<sup>3</sup> Kuznets presented data for the years 1913–1948 and his analysis was seen to be further reinforced by postwar developments up to 1975, a period Piketty describes as the '*trente glorieuse*'. It is Piketty's contention that the trend came to an end in the late 1970s and was itself the contingent product of two world wars, rather than something intrinsic to the logic of capitalism itself.

However, rebutting a theory first published in 1953 would hardly seem to be the basis of a *succès de scandale*, especially when the financial crisis of 2008 and the Occupy movement, not to mention the top incomes data base developed by Piketty and his colleagues (Alvaredo et al. n.d), had already brought the extent of widening inequalities since the 1980s to global attention. Indeed, many other commentators, including OECD (2014) in a recent report, have pointed to those inequalities and social divisions as possible threats to social order and democracy, especially in the context of cuts to public expenditure and the politics of austerity pursued by many governments since 2008. But perhaps that is the point. Piketty's book appears to have found a moment when financial elites had begun to have renewed confidence in their ability to weather calls for regulation and to convince political elites of the necessity of paying the 'market price of excellence'. The book challenges this idea.

Instead, Piketty shows the inertial power of wealth to accumulate and for top incomes to convert into assets. The likely future of capitalism is to continue the present trend of widening inequalities in incomes and wealth (especially the latter) and, further, not only will the fortunes of the 10 per cent outstrip the 90 per cent, but this will be even more pronounced for the 1 per cent and the 0.1 per cent. In other words, the logic of capitalism is to produce a patrimonial order where inheritance increasingly triumphs over merit. It is this latter point that has exercised North American readers (and readers of those media that serve elites) since it challenges the self-understanding of US society as egalitarian and a place where success is open to all who have the will to seek it. This self-understanding, Piketty suggests, may once not have been without foundation, but is now exposed as a self-deceiving myth no longer descriptive of American realities. I will return to this.

Piketty's book marks a significant moment for economics. But what is its significance for sociology? Untypically for an economist, Piketty does not promote economics over other social sciences and he looks forward to his arguments being complemented (even challenged – he is a generous advocate of debate through disagreement, which is one of the reasons why Giles's 'refutation' fell flat after some initial exultation) by contributions from other

social scientists. It is here that there is a danger that sociologists respond by feeling confirmed, rather than challenged; that Piketty tells us what we already know and that there is no need to re-think our own categories and approaches. Indeed, the presentation of his data on distribution in terms of ‘deciles’ seems crude compared with the sociological interest in classes as *social relations*. It opens up a sociological response, similar to that of some Marxists,<sup>4</sup> that Piketty provides a wealth of data, but a rather limited analysis of the mechanisms that produce the distributional effects he observes. Equally, feminists have responded that there is little address of gender issues in the book and that it is disappointingly ‘business as usual’ here, too.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the separate merits of these arguments, I want to suggest that the situation is otherwise and that taking Piketty’s arguments seriously will set us some new questions, some of which, if, truly, we knew this stuff, should already have been motivating our research.

I also want to suggest that there are some deep issues in the sociology and politics of knowledge lurking in Piketty’s text that also need our attention. After all, the sociology that seemingly ‘knows about inequality’ was crafted under the ‘jurisdiction’ of the second downward turn of the Kuznets curve; that is, it was a product of, and committed to, reducing inequality and the modernization of institutions in the light of that trend. What is sociology’s jurisdiction when the trend has reversed?

Piketty has two suggestions to mitigate the tendencies of capitalism he describes. One that has received a lot of coverage is his proposal for a wealth and capital tax, a proposal that would benefit scrutiny from a sociology of fiscal regimes. The other proposal is for increased public investment in education, including higher education. This has received little coverage, yet processes of financialization and the opening up of higher education to venture capital investment and for-profit providers are proceeding apace, especially in England where many of the readers of *BJS* practice their craft. What will it mean to practice sociology under a regime of patrimonial capitalism? That is, to practice it in institutions that mirror external inequalities rather than mitigate them, where highly paid (top 1 per cent?) senior managers outsource services to achieve savings to increase ‘value’ to students made to carry the very debt that provides institutions a large part of their revenues? How do we argue for a different kind of tax regime when the institutions in which we work are embedded in the very tax and debt-finance regime that is at issue?

Piketty writes as if social scientific knowledge could be simply gathered under the tenets of professionalism and objectivity, but these drew their force from a perception of knowledge serving an inclusive public policy. Savage and Burrows (2007) write of the rise of ‘big data’ as calling into question sociology’s older jurisdiction and its standard methodologies and concern with causality. This jurisdiction was formed in the 1950s and 1960s and it carried British sociology’s postwar expansion forward. They suggest that it is now exhausted and they call

instead for attention to ‘descriptive assemblages’, and Savage writes elsewhere in this symposium of Piketty’s book as an example of this new turn to ‘description’.<sup>6</sup> However, the question is not simply one of how to practice sociology in the context of commercial interest in, and access to, data that was previously mainly of interest to social scientists and policy-makers, but also of sociology’s purposes; that is, the question of sociology’s jurisdiction is not simply knowledge *of what*, but knowledge *for what*, or more precisely, *for whom*?

It is clear that financial elites have responded that Piketty’s book is not for them, but whose purposes does it then serve? The answer is uncomfortable. While Piketty is critical of Kuznets, he is, none the less, sympathetic to the reduced inequalities the latter attributed to the logic of capitalism, rather than to public policy. But Piketty does not see these preferred outcomes as a direct consequence of policy directed at the specific issue of inequality. According to him, they derive from the disruptions of two world wars and their damaging consequences for wealth accumulation as well as public policies designed to rebuild economies and infrastructure, contingencies whose re-occurrence none would wish.

This seems to me to be the pessimistic undertone of the book, that progressive policies are primarily associated with deeply damaging events. However, in calling on other social sciences, what otherwise appears as exogenous to his account is potentially rendered endogenous, that is as part of an integrated theory in which the *logic* of capitalism is reinterpreted as a specifically *political* economy. However, it remains that the sensibility that would animate this re-engagement is precisely that of the *trente glorieuse*; that is, the very jurisdiction that Savage and Burrows suggest is exhausted. It is this exhaustion that also needs to be addressed, deconstructed, and a new progressive spirit animated. In what follows, I will try to suggest what this might mean in the context of British sociology.

Piketty presents his data in terms of multiple cross-national cases. The patterns are very similar in terms of the direction of trends, but there are significant differences between countries. The USA appears currently to be an outlier in terms both of income inequality and wealth inequality, while in north European social democracies, such as Sweden and Finland, these inequalities are more narrowly distributed, notwithstanding that they have also got wider since the 1980s. Other European countries, such as France and Germany, are closer to Sweden and Finland, while the UK is closer to the USA. However, there remain sociological puzzles, even as Piketty sets it out. Until the 1970s, the USA had rates of income tax much more progressive than those of the countries to which it is most directly contrasted, and continues to have corporate taxation that is higher than that found in most European countries. Similarly, regulation of corporations is more aggressive in the USA than in Europe with the latter placing a greater emphasis on lighter-touch, self-regulation.

Given his interest in long-run trends and in the underlying logic of capitalism, Piketty remarks on these differences without addressing their implications for the construction of public policies that would mitigate the tendencies he is otherwise describing with such care. Let me stress here that I do not regard this as a ‘gap’ in Piketty’s text, but something that emerges from it as a space for the contribution of other social sciences to provide complementary accounts. Indeed, there has been some comparative sociology and political economy on the topic of cross-national variations, albeit little within the UK, notwithstanding its status as a ‘critical case’. For example, drawing on the work of Esping-Andersen (1990) scholars have described the different welfare regimes that capitalist economies have sustained, distinguishing between liberal, market-oriented regimes, social democratic and corporatist-statist regimes. The UK is assigned to the former category, with Sweden and Finland in the social-democratic type and France and Germany in the corporatist-statist type. The extensive literature that has grown up around this typology (and its extension to delineate new types) is, for the most part, concerned to set out the social structures and constellations of interests that have become institutionalized to establish path-dependencies for the development of public policy in the face of seemingly similar external pressures. More recently, the literature has addressed the stresses that globalization has placed upon these structures (Esping-Andersen 1996). And, of course, there have been other arguments setting out the ‘varieties’ of capitalism that embed its ‘logic’ differently (Hall and Soskice 2002).

There isn’t the space here to discuss these debates in any detail. Suffice to say that one perceived problem has been that of ‘methodological nationalism’ (Beck 2000), where social structural factors identified in one case are not carried over into other cases. The explanation of differences becomes, by default, ‘cultural’ – for example, as when it is noted that the ‘liberal’ cluster is populated by the USA, UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, and, thereby, might alternatively be described as ‘Anglo-American’. In effect, ‘culture’ operates as determining the strongest of path dependencies, simply because it is the ‘backstop’ explanation (and what could be harder to change than ‘culture’?). Yet, just as we might argue that attitudes towards inequality are explained by different inequality regimes rather than being the explanation of them, so ‘culture’ as an explanation of varieties of welfare regimes may simply be a failure of sociological will to provide the appropriate social structural account from which understandings attributed to ‘culture’ derive.

In this context, the great failure has been to explain the putative ‘laggard’ nature of the USA in a manner consistent with explanations of the ‘progressive’ nature of social democratic regimes. Resolving this problem has recently been undertaken by Prasad (2006; 2012) seeking to account for different tax regimes, inequality and poverty reduction. According to her, the liberal model is characterized by poor poverty reduction and a trade-off between taxation

and credit, with debt-finance playing a major part in the provision of personal welfare (e.g. housing, medical care and higher education). Paradoxically, the liberal model was, in the past, associated with a stronger commitment to progressive taxation and greater state intervention to regulate corporations, in contrast to either social democratic or corporatist-statist models, which achieved greater success in poverty reduction, but have historically had less reliance on progressive taxation (Prasad 2012).

More significant than Prasad's updating of the liberal model to account for its most recent neo-liberal manifestation, however, is the way in which she explains its underlying features as deriving from the role of agrarian interests. The latter have also been seen to have had a significant role in determining the nature of the social democratic model (Baldwin 1990). In each case, they bring a distinctive egalitarian orientation into interaction with other interests (for example, those deriving from labour). In this way, Prasad offers a Polanyian extension to the more usual and narrower class-based accounts of other approaches; land, money (credit) and labour are all important and, in particular, what is important is the interests formed around particular settlements of their interaction. In other words, her achievement is an integrated account of different welfare regimes without reliance on 'cultural' factors or attributions of 'exceptionalism' (that is, being the 'exception' to the factors otherwise attributed causal power).

Equally interesting, for present purposes, Prasad's arguments are fully consistent with the data presented by Piketty, as well as providing an explanation of the puzzle about the USA to which he also draws attention. Yet, for the 'local' readership of the *BJS*, a different puzzle must remain. In the 1950s and 1960s, and in particular from the US perspective, the UK was regarded as 'socialistic'; that is, closer to social democratic Sweden than even to France or Germany in terms of universal welfare benefits, relatively narrow income differences and a public health system. By the 1980s, it was being firmly placed in the liberal cluster and, recently, has come closest to the USA among other members of that cluster. If welfare policies otherwise demonstrate path dependence, the UK seems to have switched paths. How do we explain this?

In my view, this question is of crucial significance to our own sociological practice. The dominance of neo-liberal public policy within the UK since the 1980s has generated a form of sociological fatalism and resort to simple 'logic of capitalism' arguments. Indeed, the danger is that Piketty's book, notwithstanding the recognition of differences among countries that are significant to the question of what might be done about excessive inequality, merely reinforces a pre-existing inclination to think that there is nothing puzzling to explain. However, if any supposed 'exceptionalism' requires non-exceptional explanation – superbly provided for the USA by Prasad – then there is the issue of the 'exceptionalism' of the UK to address. It is surely one of the failings of British sociology that it has, by and large, not even posed the question, let alone provided any answers.

In fact, without directly addressing the British case in these terms, Prasad's explanation of the USA strongly points us in the direction to look for the answer to the puzzle about Britain. Significantly, what has been neglected by others addressing the comparative sociology of welfare regimes is that the liberal cluster, with the exception of Britain, is made up of 'settler capitalist' countries (i.e. USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia). For Prasad, it is precisely the status of the USA as a 'settler capitalist' country that serves to constitute the agrarian interests that are so significant in its subsequent development, as well as providing an explanation of a lower range in the distribution of wealth and inequality for much of the nineteenth century (as documented by Prasad and by Piketty alike). Of course, Britain is not a 'settler capitalist' country, but it is a country that settled and provided settlers, thereby, creating interconnections with settler capitalist economies and shaping its own political economy through colonial encounters. Yet these interconnections and encounters have largely been neglected in comparative studies of welfare and policy regimes.

The charge of 'methodological nationalism' previously noted is associated with what Beck (2000) calls the 'second age of modernity'; that is an age of globalization that extends beyond the nation-state societies that have been sociology's object of study. However, as Bhambra (2014) has pointed out, the world was always-already interconnected through colonialism, while the recent emphasis on globalization displaces the significance of those colonial histories in present interconnections and in the constitution of national policy regimes. Instead, it becomes an argument about the externally pressing logic of capitalism and risks to a 'European' welfare model without any recognition of that model's colonial implication in the different varieties of capitalist development. Once again, Piketty's book potentially plays to a well-established trope within sociology. Colonialism has only a shadow, albeit acknowledged, presence in Piketty's book and much of his data on national wealth and income distributions is presented without direct engagement with the colonial entanglements of the national economies whose data is being presented, notwithstanding the international context of markets, investments, assets and their returns.

If, as Bhambra (2007) also argues, sociology in general has failed to address colonialism in its standard accounts of modernity, that failure is particularly egregious in Britain, given its history of colonialism and the coincidence of the break-up of Empire and the expansion of sociology in Britain in the postwar period. Here I return to British sociology's postwar 'jurisdiction' and just what might be exhausted about it. It seems clear that British sociology in the 1950s and 1960s was motivated by a concern with inequality and the 'sclerotic' nature of British institutions. This was evident in its interest in empirical studies of community, poverty, education and social mobility and in a general interest in citizenship and participation. It is particularly well-expressed in T.H. Marshall's (1950) articulation of social rights of citizenship and the 'war'

between citizenship and social class. However, the hidebound nature of British institutions that sociologists sought to ‘modernize’ was also tied up with a status order that exhibited the entrenched inequalities of a patrimonial capitalism of the late nineteenth century and the inter-war years. It is precisely that patrimonial capitalism which was formed by Empire and its unravelling after the Second World War that facilitated the challenge to the local institutions that depended on its privileges and ‘dignities’. These concerns are barely registered in mainstream British sociology. For example, Runciman (1997) argues that the institutional modes of production, coercion and persuasion characteristic of British society were all fully formed by the First World War and have remained relatively stable since then. Empire forms no part of his account, and, given the stability attributed to that settlement, it would seem that the end of Empire has had no impact either. I draw attention to Runciman’s account precisely because it is typical of how Empire and its demise has been treated within a British sociology that might otherwise have treated it as central.

Of course, that status order was also gendered and the development of British sociology into the 1980s brought feminist challenges to initial formations of the problem of inequality and ‘British’ society within sociology. However, these critiques did little to challenge the insularity of British sociology’s conception of Britain as it developed through the 1980s and 90s to the present. Indeed, I suggest that they contributed to a division in approaches to inequality – between concerns with the ‘objective’ nature of class inequalities and the ‘subjective’ lived experience of inequalities. According to the former, class inequalities had precedence over those of gender and ethnicity and differences attributed to the latter could usually be reduced to the class inequalities that underlay them. At the same time, the lived experience of inequalities was understood to take place in the intersection of class, ethnicity and gender and their specific cultures. In this way, ‘ethnographies’ of inequality enriched understandings of its negotiation in particular contexts, but what was displaced was engagement with the macro-level processes operating through those contexts.

Indeed, class analysis in British sociology became a narrow and specialized field of British sociology. Its primary concern was the theoretical (deductive) specification of the class relation (defined in terms of the employment contract), the construction of a typology of occupationally-based economic classes, and empirical studies to demonstrate the explanatory power of such a framework in accounting for a variety of dependent variables (for example, health, educational achievement, mobility and the like) against counter arguments of the decline (or even, death) of class. Of course, it is precisely such an approach that is likely to be claimed to be superior to Piketty’s inductive approach and his presentation of his data on inequality in terms of decile shares.<sup>7</sup> It should be clear, however, that class analysis has eschewed the study of wealth and that by addressing class ‘structure’ it has also ignored the



underlying processes of political economy through which that structure is reproduced and changed. In short, class analysis in Britain is defined by the absence of a concern with the comparative political economy of class.

This absence is particularly telling in light of any expectation that the discipline might comment on the pressing issues of the day. Sociology may be disposed to account for structures rather than events, but events are shaped by structures and potentially shape them in their turn (as in Piketty's suggestion that reduced inequalities noticed by Kuznets can be attributed to war and policies of reconstruction). Issues of comparative political economy and welfare regimes have relevance not only to what British sociology might have been saying about widening inequality, or about the financial crisis and responses to it. They are equally relevant to understanding the rise of UKIP and Euro-scepticism, as well as to the emerging differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK. The place of finance in British political economy has its origins in Empire, just as the divergence of British welfare from its path in the 1980s coincides with the end of a political economy of (Imperial and) Commonwealth preferences and entry into the European Union, or EEC as it then was (Holmwood 2000). This, in turn, began the process of disrupting the bonds of union within the UK.

Would anyone write now, as Runciman did so recently, conflating English and British society, on the grounds that the

distinctive characteristics of [Scotland, Wales and Ireland] are largely irrelevant to the modes of production, persuasion and coercion of an English society whose dominance of them in all three dimensions was, by 1900, indisputable. [1997: 4]

Are British 'values' so self-evident in their embedding within institutions such that the citizens of the UK's non-English societies have 'hardly less tenuous a connection with its central institutions than did the roles of their grandparents' [Runciman 1997: 4]? I think the answer is no, but the deeper problem is that British sociology has largely been silent in the face of the deeper meanings of devolution and other pressing public issues precisely because it has not engaged systematically and critically with the socio-economic context of its own practices.

It should be clear by now that I do not regard sociology's postwar jurisdiction of concern with inequality and hierarchy to be exhausted, but to have been far too narrowly framed. We urgently need an expansive comparative and inter-connected political economy, but it is one that we must now produce in a polity dominated by antagonism to taxation and public services and financed through debt. When we read Piketty with our students, as we should, will we be able to explain how we came to a situation in which those who teach them paid no fees, while those they teach are heavily in debt?

However, we must now speak of sociologies *in Britain*, rather than *British sociology*, for, notwithstanding the outcome of the Scottish referendum, one of the consequences of devolution (and its further extension) is that our sociologies are no longer practiced in a common context or with common objects in mind. Whereas in Scotland sociology can address a forward-looking political community, in England, in contrast, public debate remains captured by the past. More to the point, in England, sociology is no longer practiced in a public university system, whose expansion in the 1960s was coterminous with the expansion of sociology itself. Indeed, the marketization of the university is associated with the displacement of the democratic functions of university education (Holmwood 2011). How are we to re-invigorate sociology's jurisdiction, when that jurisdiction in England is increasingly at odds with the centralized research strategies of funding agencies and university managements, where providing useful knowledge for clearly specified beneficiaries is the basis of funding decisions and audit measures (Holmwood 2010)?

Piketty's book sets out a research agenda for social science, but it also implies a political and normative agenda. The latter needs to address global issues and interconnections in the past as well as the present. But we need to grasp them in their local contexts and recognize that the 'same' processes will have different consequences deriving from local social structures and interests. Indeed, the arguments necessary to build a 'coalition' to address the inequalities of patrimonial capitalism will differ depending on past path dependencies and new paths taken. One problem, however, is that the emphasis on the 'global', and formulaic hostility to methodological nationalism, will potentially lead us toward a bland 'internationalism', rather than *a globally-aware localism*. The new market regime of higher education stresses the role of universities in an international knowledge economy and audit measures stress international rankings. Whereas, in the past, 'professional standards' and the aspiration for 'objective knowledge' could occur alongside a 'value-relevant' project of modernization and democratization, the 'internationalization' of professional standards occurs alongside their regulation by market forces that are themselves at issue.

Howard Becker's observation about sociology's public position is more potent now than when he first posed it:

we provoke the charge of bias, in ourselves and others, by refusing to give credence and deference to an established status order, in which knowledge of truth and the right to be heard are not equally distributed. (1967: 242)

Are we willing to provoke? Or will we allow ourselves to be nudged into acquiescence by the rewards of a higher education system that is increasingly integral to the status order of patrimonial capitalism?

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## Notes

1. For a discussion of the US reception of Piketty's book, see Antonio (2014).
2. See, 'Piketty's Findings Undercut by Errors', *Financial Times*, May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2014. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/e1f343ca-e281-11e3-89fd-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3ANbz2>
3. Fte, and Howard Reed 'Piketty, Chris Giles and Wealth Inequality: It's All About the Discontinuities' *Guardian Data Blog*, May 29<sup>th</sup> 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/may/29/piketty-chris-giles-and-wealth-inequality-its-all-about-the-discontinuities>.
4. An earlier article with Saez (Piketty and Saez 2003) had challenged Kuznets's account in the context of US data on incomes between 1913 and 1998.
5. See, for example, Kunkel's (2014) otherwise excellent review in *London Review of Books*.

6. See, for example, the discussion organised in the special section of *The Nation* magazine, 'The Curve' (on the intersection of feminism and economics), August 6<sup>th</sup> 2014: <http://www.thenation.com/blog/180895/how-gender-changes-pikettrys-capital-twenty-first-century>.
7. The arguments were first developed in his blog, 'Sociological ruminations on Piketty', July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014: <http://stratificationandculture.wordpress.com/2014/07/01/sociological-ruminations-on-piketty/>.
8. I have in mind Goldthorpe's [2010] response to Hills et al [2009] and Wilkinson and Pickett [2009] – books similar in some ways to that of Piketty – where each is instructed in the necessary 'truths' of class analysis.

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