

# Talking About Global Inequality

Personal  
Experiences  
and  
Historical  
Perspectives

**Edited by**

Christian Olaf Christiansen  
Mélanie Lindbjerg Machado-Guichon  
Sofía Mercader  
Oliver Bugge Hunt  
Priyanka Jha



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Sofía Mercader · Oliver Bugge Hunt ·  
Priyanka Jha  
Editors

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Personal Experiences and Historical Perspectives

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## PREFACE

The book you now hold in your hands is the result of a long and rewarding journey. In September 2019, we started working on our research project, ‘*An Intellectual History of Global Inequality, 1960–2015*’, based at Aarhus University in Denmark. The project would investigate the historical relationships between peoples’ location in the world and how they have thought about global inequality. Global inequality is of obvious, key concern today. It is therefore hugely important to learn what people in the past thought about it. Excited about studying the thinking on global inequality in the past, we were equally enthusiastic about doing a *different* kind of intellectual history. This time around it was going to be one which, for once, was truly more concerned with the history of thought in the ‘Global South’ than in the ‘North’.

Yet, as we set out to uncover the myriad intellectual genealogies of global inequality, the unlikely entanglements, and surprising migrations of ideas across countries and continents, a new idea emerged. What if we did not just listen to the voices of the past, but also to those of the present? Wouldn’t it be exciting to learn how intellectuals and scholars from around the whole globe think about global inequality, *today*? What if we posed these people the same five questions on global inequality, giving them time to carefully think through their answers, and write them down?

These were the questions and the original idea which shaped this book. The very first person to answer our five key questions on global

inequality was Simon Reid-Henry, Professor of Historical and Political Geography at Queen Mary University of London, and author of *The Political Origins of Inequality*. If we had any doubts about our idea, our interview with Simon—an oral interview still available as a podcast on the research project’s website (<http://global-inequality.com>)—erased all doubts about its viability. It was fascinating to hear Simon’s story and his reflections on Britain as a class society, on doing research in Cuba, and much more. It left us eager to learn more.

And so our journey continued. A journey and a team effort, with shifting commitments and involvements along the way, as it needs to be. If this book is the product of an idea, then, it is also the product of many people’s thinking, work, openness, and kindness. During this journey, we have accumulated quite a few debts. We would like to thank all our contributors for their wonderful contributions and their patience, our editors at Palgrave for helpful comments and advice, and the anonymous reviewers for their critical support. We would also like to thank speakers of our monthly research seminars, Frederik Møller Rosendal for his valuable help and work as student assistant, and our intellectual history colleagues at Aarhus University. We want to thank Independent Research Fund Denmark for supporting our research.<sup>1</sup> Last, but not least, allow us to thank all of those people who voiced their concerns about inequalities—past *and* present.

Aarhus, Denmark  
 Aarhus, Denmark  
 Aarhus, Denmark  
 Frederiksberg, Denmark  
 Varanasi, India

Christian Olaf Christiansen  
 Mélanie Lindbjerg Machado-Guichon  
 Sofia Mercader  
 Oliver Bugge Hunt  
 Priyanka Jha

<sup>1</sup> Independent Research Fund Denmark, Sapere Aude Research Leader Grant, case number 8047-00068B.

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# Introduction: Talking About Global Inequality

*Christian Olaf Christiansen, Sofia Mercader,  
Mélanie Lindbjerg Machado-Guichon, Oliver Bugge Hunt,  
and Priyanka Jha*

*Talking about Global Inequality* is a book of interview essays with nineteen public intellectuals and scholars from all over the world reflecting on some of the biggest questions of our age: what is global inequality, what causes it and how should we deal with it? By reading their responses to

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these questions, we learn how the contributors' personal background, and the places they have worked and lived, have shaped their views on global inequality, a topic they all engage with in their professional, academic lives. We learn about the causes of global inequality, the historical factors that have shaped the world into an unequal place, and the challenges that humanity is confronted with in the face of the widening gap between the poor and the rich. This book aims at showing that thinking about and discussing global inequality demands us to learn about how this long-lasting phenomenon is and has been experienced, and thought of, in different countries across all continents. The contributors to this book all offer their own viewpoints and theories in connection to their personal experiences and background by answering five key questions:

1. What is your background and how did you become interested in global inequality?
2. What is global inequality?
3. How have the places in which you have lived and worked influenced your view on global inequality?
4. What are the main historical causes of global inequality?
5. What are the most pressing contemporary challenges concerning global inequality, and how do we deal with them?

With the aim of including as many perspectives as possible, accommodating both very known and lesser known individuals as well as different genders and age groups, the invitation to participate in this book was partly premised on the contributors' geographical area of expertise, country of birth and nationality. The author's home-discipline was also a factor we considered in the selection process. Readers will be able to discover myriad viewpoints on the question of global inequality, as interviewees are experts in disciplines ranging from history to economics, philosophy to sociology, literary studies to anthropology, intellectual history to political science. Hence, we hope to demonstrate that the topic of global inequality can be approached from multiple angles, both quantitative and qualitative, and that each perspective has something valuable to say on its causes and effects. By doing so, this book aims at transcending the traditional boundaries between research and research dissemination, between our interest in the past and our interest in the present.