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Foreword

Psimmenos Iordanis

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FOREWORD

In the early 1980s, during an adult education course in Industrial Sociology at the UK Darlington Cooperative Society, students thought of the study of social inequalities as something more than an account of the losses people suffered. The dividing lines and limits imposed on people's life chances by the Thatcher government were crucial for the understanding of social inequalities, but as it was argued it only was half the story. Having to complete an essay assignment on the local textile mill, students discovered that the other half lay in the ways people *translated* economic realities into social values, family and community bonds and made plans for the future. Understanding social inequalities as something more than an act of *stealing* which is so pervasive in Capitalism, allows one to go deeper than what after all appears quite obvious. By contrast, the study of social inequality as a dynamic process which generates and transgresses dividing lines, freedoms and opportunity limits and which also penetrates people's moral spheres, everyday rituals and social expectations, is crucial.

With this in mind, the present issue on "Contemporary Social Inequalities" is about current forms of social deprivation and the meanings they have for new underprivileged groups of people.

It is a comparative study of social segregation and discrimination which extends beyond aspects of income variations. It aims at exposing inequalities which penetrate people's life styles, uses of material and symbolic goods, and which shape their social and moral interaction with communities, employers and social institutions in general. These inequalities are expressed at various levels and contribute to the social positioning and mobility prospects of people.

Two parallel lines of enquiry are covered by the analysis. The *first* asks questions about the conceptual level of social inequalities and how far welfare and economic realities pose a challenge to the existing theoretical and measuring premises on which sociologists and social policy experts in general base these analyses. The *second* line focuses on the bottom-rungs of the social and labour market strata of society. The issue here is to go further than the apparent constraints people experience and

ask questions relating more to the ways they comprehend and respond to social inequalities.

There are a number of reasons why such an intellectual quest is an attractive and a valuable exercise. *First* of all, beyond any doubt most research suggests that we live in a period of crucial transformations which not only raises the number and levels of life chances and of social status constraints, but also produces instabilities due to unfulfilled expectations and/or due to the rise of new demands and perceptions of how one advances in economy and society. Old and new social boundaries seem to render dated or even obsolete yesterday's plausible schemes and thoughts about social deprivation and how one is to bypass it through the acquisition of skills, efforts, knowledge or other *mobility credits*. In short, the increasing gap, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, between people's social positions and their expectations for welfare and material distribution of resources, nurtures new social grievances or conflicts, and new *strategies* to attain what is desired.

Following from the above, there is a *second reason* to pursue such an enquiry. Existing traditions concerning the study of inequalities in capitalist societies have mostly concentrated their efforts on the understanding of how the *system of deprivation* functions at a macro or institutional level neglecting at large the question of how such a system is received at the other end. Adding to the existing value of the above traditions of thought, the present analysis offers a critical understanding which combines the above with a micro-sociological "*lense*" on how individuals and groups of people perceive inequalities and what they do with what they have perceived. That brings us to the *third reason*. So far most studies have treated with little more than contempt people's *informal strategies* of survival and of social advancement. The understanding in this issue is that *informal* or *hidden* from formal institutions actions and perceptions of *mobility* and of *social solidarity* not only inform us of everyday *life in the margins*, which is in itself valuable for social policy, but also of how class, gender, race or other dividing lines shift. People's understanding and social action against social barriers is full of innovations and traditions which re-order *affiliations*, *identity* and the values of *solidarity*. Lastly, there is a *fourth reason*, which underlines the social significance of the above. Over the years knowledge has been accumulated on why welfare deprivations persist even at times of economic growth and what their social effects are on people. With few notable exceptions (i.e. Beynon and Glavanis, 1999; Therborn, 2006; Tilly, 1998; Turner, 1986), little has been said or written on non-economic rela-

tions or parameters which underlie the system of deprivations. From the cases analysed in the present study it becomes more than clear that *legal constraints, emotions, motives, beliefs, or mores*, are essential for the understanding of contemporary social inequalities.

Following from the above, the collaborative venture of this study begins with three insightful theoretical articles on Contemporary Social Inequalities. Robert Pinker sets forth to analyse a long debated issue in Social Policy and Sociology circles, concerning the limits of market-driven, behavioural and radical perspectives in order to explain and provide an answer to contemporary social inequalities. In his article “*Social inequality, poverty and social redistribution*” he shows why and how freedoms and social policies for the advancement of individual and public welfare are not necessarily mutually supportive. In a fashion which is reminiscent of Gunnar Myrdals’ analytical approach of the tensions involved between the liberal creed for mobility and equality of opportunity, Pinker reminds us that a search for *unitary* answers to this problem is rather futile.

In line with this, Dimitris Venieris in his article “*Social policy versus inequality*” engages in a theoretical discussion of the challenges that modern and postmodern social policy perspectives pose to the advancement of equality. Without ignoring the importance of personal choice and of social redistribution, Venieris concentrates on a critical synthetic view of social welfare embedded both in the cultural, political and social tenets of life of various groups. This can be achieved through a system of welfare which incorporates social participation at the level of welfare provisions, into a system which motivates people for more equality.

Christoforos Skamnakis, in his article “*Inequality and social protection at the local level: undermining or reinforcing social policy?*”, explains how local authorities are confronted with a dual problem insofar as social services are concerned. On the one hand, the role of local authorities in social protection is increasing and on the other E.U. social policies and the Greek State further interfere with decision and implementation procedures. Further deregulation and centralisation processes make social policy measures at local level; a rather complex issue, which seems to suffer from both accountability, immediacy in terms of response to needs, and a huge bureaucratic inertia.

In the article “*Out of work, out of leisure, out of place: moral regulation, citizenship and volunteering in the rural idyll*”, Alan Law, Maureen Harrington and Michael Wearing examine the social trajectories between work and social identities. Through a research based in New South Wales, the au-

thors explain how social alienation as a condition of joblessness weakens, and what happens to the sense of belongingness amongst regional migrants. Through the case study of work “*volunteers*” the authors explore a crucial for contemporary society aspect of social inequalities, that of identity formation. Going through a process of inclusive and exclusionary understanding of the *self* and its relationship to economy and society migrants discover new forms of cultural attachments and meaningful variants of work.

The article written by Alan Felstead looks at the social consequences of recent forms of work and employment restructuring. “*Changes in the quality and inequalities of work in Britain: new measures and emerging trends*” provides a theoretical and methodological critique upon which one can start examining contemporary inequalities insofar as the quality of work is concerned. In contrast to the rise of a *methodological individualism*, of *rational choice* theories and of a *functionalist* understanding of labour markets, Felstead examines the notions of *skill* and of *quality of work* according to the position and the experiences of workers. This is of paramount importance for the study of the newly formed organisational modes of work.

Panagiota Georgopoulou, in her article “*The digital divide profile of Greece: One step further*”, argues that while Greece faces the problem of digital divisions to great extent, this issue has largely been addressed in superficial and asocial frameworks within contemporary Greek social research and discourse. In particular, the author questions the dominant official research conducted for the country by the “Observatory for Greek Information Society” contending that the Greek digital divide is reduced to its technological and voluntary aspects. In contrast, the paper emphasizes the socio-economic context within which digital divisions arise and provide a social mechanism for more pressing and deeper social inequalities.

Following from the above critical analysis, Michalis Psimitis, in his article “*Collective identities vs Social Exclusion: the December 2008 Greek Youth Movement*” examines the processes involved in the formation of a social group and a counterculture. Through a Marxist-Weberian understanding of social action, the author answers a crucial question for Contemporary Social Inequalities, that of what brings people together. Using the example of December 2008 riots, Psimitis presents thoroughly how a heterogeneous group of people with diverse social backgrounds came together. Their involvement in rioting produced a meaningful interaction, powerful enough to produce a collective identity and an understanding of common norms and objectives.

Vassilis Arapoglou and Thomas Maloutas, in their article “*Segregation, inequality and marginality in context: the case of Athens*”, explain how ethnic and racial clustering in urban environments is neither obvious nor unproblematic, as a premise. Rather, through their analysis of the Athens case the authors show that immigration has contributed to a reduction of spatial segregation and to an increase of areas of living, distinguished by the levels of social deprivation and lack of social amenities in terms both of housing and of public services. Their understanding is that, in order to explain contemporary social stratification systems, one needs to move beyond a vertical understanding of privilege and of social differentiation.

George Kandylis and Karolos Iosif Kavoulakos, in their article “*Framing urban inequalities: racist mobilisation against immigration in Athens*”, explore the cultural tenets which support inequality and construct the politics supporting spatial segregation. The authors explain how racism in the urban neighbourhoods of Athens is built through a process of mixing class identity with ethnic and social characteristics. Inequality which explains the social positioning of unprivileged groups, is used by native groups as a powerful tool for the promotion of community solidarity. Using a framing analysis the authors explore the strategic linkages between anti-immigration and racist movements and current urban inequalities.

Social control as an explanatory notion of social inequalities is the theme of Sophia Vidalis’ article “*Inequalities and crime*”. In line with the tradition of radical criminology, the author argues that institutional inequalities are to be understood not only in reference to institutional limits but also in relation to prejudices, stereotypes and cultural manifestations of discrimination. Using the example of the penal system, Vidali conceives of the production and reproductions of inequality as a system which can be elucidated through an analysis of the internal cultures or subcultures of the social control agencies involved. Looking at the current socialisation and “reform” of individuals and social groups of people, Vidali argues that we live in a period of *humanitarian crisis* which undermines the value of liberty, justice and the constitutional notion of equality.

Educational inequalities extend above and beyond the gates of the schooling or higher education system. Eleni Prokou, in her article “*The aims of employability and social inclusion / active citizenship in lifelong learning policies in Greece*”, argues that adult education suffers from both market and bureaucratic aims and modes of organisation. Lifelong learning needs, in addition to concentrate on how to combat socio-economic exclusion via measures which empower individual status and mobility pro-

pects. So far, the Greek state seems to challenge the mission of lifelong learning through an increasing privatisation and a strict vocational role of education centres.

How do occupational norms and values shape people's welfare? Following a Marxist-Weberian approach, Iordanis Psimmenos, in his article "*The welfare orientations of immigrant domestic workers in Greece*" argues that there is more to economic and institutional barriers which make state welfare unattainable. By referring to the job tasks and relationships involved in domestic work, the author explains how a counter-culture of social welfare arises. He puts emphasis on the notion of *welfare orientations*, arguing that marginalisation is also the outcome of job established habits, bonds and values.

Finally, it is hoped that this special issue will be of interest to a wide range of academics and students. This is more than true, since each article contributes towards a dynamic and multi-faceted approach to the way structural barriers determine life chances and the way these are comprehended and lead to new patterns of social behaviour. Social interaction and social action provide a substantial proposition concerning the understanding of social inequalities and their present manifestations.

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Iordanis Psimmenos