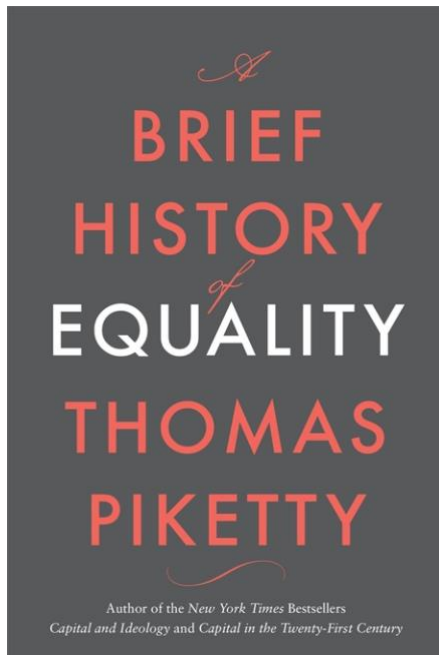


A BRIEF HISTORY OF EQUALITY

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Piketty, Thomas (2021) *A Brief History of Equality*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press.



Equality is key to global development. This is the hard fought for conclusion of over twenty years of research by Thomas Piketty from L'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). Distilling down his three tomes of macro-economic analysis - *Top Incomes in France in the Twentieth Century: Inequality and Redistribution, 1901-1998* (2001), *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) and *Capital and Ideology* (2020) - into this brief history, he collates evidence for his contention that 'equality is a battle' in the historic 'transformation of power relationships' (Piketty, 2021a: viii). The point being made

and arguably proven is that there has been a historic trend towards global equality, albeit disrupted by war, economic depression and the fight back by elites. For Piketty, 'progress' can be registered across citizens' legal status, income differentials, educational attainment, welfare systems and the accrual of rights, across national boundaries and timelines, and between societies. On a global scale, equality can be seen to be being made.

Piketty comes from a long tradition on the Left who have sought to analyse patterns of socio-economic development and shifts in class relations

within that. Very much in the continental network which has its provenance in the Annales School going right back to the 1930s, the methodology is informed by an economic systems approach that looks to, for example, changes to tax regimes, income distribution, property and inheritance laws, profit margins and de/regulation, to survey changes to class relations over time. This methodology has also been significantly enhanced by the computerisation of a myriad of datasets through the likes of the World Inequality Database (WID, 2022), which can knit together research on a global stage to highlight reutilisations and patterns of development, discerning not only pressures on socio-economic activities but positive interventions.

There is an assertive voice throughout this text, and it comes from the authority of a highly respected academic. The positions taken are solidly stated throughout and backed up by research: ‘Inequality is first of all a social, historical, and political construction’ (Piketty, 2021a: 9). For Piketty, the systemic nature of inequality and indeed socio-economic injustice is within the sphere of political engagement, change or reaction. The caveat to progress is that social movement in its most egalitarian form has been contested at every point and has struggled for every advance. Lifting from the ‘history from below’ tradition also - although I do think it could have been name-checked better - what we can see in Piketty’s thinking is the potential of human agency to change circumstances and systems for the better. Indeed, collective agency, including the ‘accumulation of knowledge’ (education), is what he argues has brought equality forward and framed a human development process. His historic reference points emphasise this process, looking forward from the Enlightenment’s fulcrums of ‘Liberté, égalité, fraternité’ and the French Revolution, he cites the Saint-Domingue slave revolt of 1791, global independence struggles and the ongoing fight to decolonise, the civil rights movements of the 1960s, through to Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and Fridays for Future. The message is very strong, that agency and social movements remain central to the process of egalitarian building through human history.

Interestingly, anticipating the influence of fields such as development education and a pedagogy for democratic citizenship, he positions education at the centre of this movement towards global equality. It is seen as an essential

social activity capable of combating dehumanisation in all its nefarious guises. In this education liberates. ‘Historically, it is the battle for equality and education that has made economic development and human progress possible, and not the veneration of property, stability, and inequality’ (Piketty, 2021a: 139). Later, he notes that ‘the diffusion of knowledge has always been the central tool enabling real equality, beyond origins’ (Piketty, 2021a: 176). It is great to see faith in the role of education as a force for progress and equality through history.

While absolutely following Piketty in his optimism and call to arms, there remains a niggling caution from the field which deserves more attention, issues that will need to be picked up on in respect to Piketty’s thesis and indeed the profiling of equality in the balance of human development. Particularly, there are the extremities of reversals vis-à-vis progress. For example, climate change and its implications anticipate a historic juncture in human development. If the rich world, the global North, does not act on this, the ramifications will be catastrophic for all, and especially the global South – equality goes into reverse. Action on this, as many have pointed out, would require unprecedented multi-level international interventions to mitigate the effects – and it does not look as if this is coming soon. Furthermore, COVID-19 saw another reversal to equality, with the global divide becoming very evident at every wave of the pandemic as seen through inequality in vaccine distributions, necropolitical care provision disparities, inequity across all health systems and protectionism in medical supplies on a global scale (Oxfam, 2022).

Beyond this, but just as challenging, there is the changing nature of global conflict and the technologies emanating from this. The outcomes are something that development timelines cannot anticipate. For example, according to the World Economic Forum, in 2020 global foreign aid was a mere \$161.2 billion (WEF, 2021), and yet in 2021, according to Statista, \$2.11 trillion was spent on military expenditure (Statista, 2022). The trajectory of this culture of war through market expansion and the political economy behind it, suggests that states in permanent conflict will become more common - a market need - and the means of military engagement hypercomplex.

The impact on human development (as portrayed by Piketty) of factors such as the lack of genuine mitigations on climate change, protectionism in its necropolitical forms and changing patterns of warfare, could be more difficult than his march towards equality suggests. The drive of his brief history though is to send a message out on the continual grinding need for affirmative action and change. In this motivational aspect of the book, he offers a very hopeful intervention. Without saying too much about it - he does this in other books – Piketty understands that history breaks at times and often it is for the good (Piketty, 2021b; Piketty and Vauchez, 2018). His appeal, as noted in the last paragraph of the book, is for ‘Citizens’ to ‘help grasp the changes that are occurring’ (Piketty, 2021a: 244). Education has an important role to play in seizing these opportunities.

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