CHAPTER 1

Querying Urban Inequalities

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Quot capitum vivunt, totidem studiorum millia.¹
(Quintus Horatius Flaccus)

Today, equality—of opportunity, of access, of the right to compete for whatever goal one chooses to pursue—seems as utopian as ever. As socio-economic and political inequalities grow increasingly strong, complex and ramified, and in many cases implicit or disguised, it is topical to understand their impact on associated life. In a world that is becoming predominantly urban, this book is a concerted effort to meet this challenge in the light of ethnographic evidence from geographically diverse cities. A preamble is necessary.

¹In English this is usually rendered as ‘there are as many thousands of pursuits as there are individuals’ (Horace, Satires 2, 1, 27).

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The significance of ethnography to the development of new theoretical approaches is of course not a new concept, nor is the point that it is ethnographic knowledge that gives scientific grounding to socio-anthropological theorization (Pardo and Prato 2018: 2). What for many social scientists tends to be a basis for analysis—specifically, gathering information about individuals or households from surveys, the relevant literature and documentary sources, including those available online—normally constitutes the preliminary, ‘armchair’ phase of anthropological research. This phase is normally followed by long-term fieldwork in well-defined settings, based on participant observation, non-structured interviews with privileged informants and construction of in-depth case studies of significant people, groups, circumstances and events as chief means of gathering evidence.

Ethnographic knowledge helps us to chart the distribution of power across the social and political system, and to recognize how formal rules often operate to the advantage of some groups and to the disadvantage of others. Wary of both narrow empiricism and unjustified abstraction (Leach 1977: xvi ff.; Harris 1986: Chapter 1; Pardo and Prato 2018; Pardo 2018), we put to the reader that in the field of inequality ethnographically-based analysis significantly contributes to our understanding of the empirical processes that mark the ugly core of this greatly varied and theoretically complex field of enquiry and lend ambiguity to its nuanced frontiers. As an unbiased source of well-informed ideas about human beings in society, it offers a valuable contribution to critical thinking and the development of ideas, and helps to strengthen the reach of scholarly findings into the broader society.

Equality Versus Levelling

As Pardo indicates in this book, ‘Anthropologists classically investigate the causes of inequality and injustice contextually up, down and sideways’. The essays brought together in this book typify this approach in engagingly diverse ways. A strong field of anthropologists and fellow ethnographically committed social scientists have contributed revised and expanded versions of select papers intensely discussed at the conference on ‘Urban Inequalities: Ethnographic Insights’ that took place in Corinth,
Greece, in June 2019.\(^2\) Theirs are engaged reflections on significant variations of urban inequality in Europe, Russia, the Far and Middle East, North Africa, India and the USA that help to chart theoretical directions on the genesis, impact and ramifications of this phenomenon and of the changes in its dynamics.

Before proceeding, we must note that in early 2020, when most contributions to this volume were finalized, the age of Covid-19 pandemic had not yet fully developed. The impact of this pandemic on individuals and society is the object of separate studies, including a Special Issue of *Urbanities-Journal of Urban Ethnography* on ‘City Life and Beyond in Times of Pandemic’ (Prato ed. 2020) and the forthcoming Workshop on *Legitimacy: The Right to Health*.\(^3\) Relevant to this book, however, Prato’s open *Message* of March 2020 to the international scholarly community\(^4\) raised dynamics of inequality that will be discussed in detail as we proceed. She pointed out that some people have been affected more than others by the pandemic, casting serious doubts on the rhetoric that the virus hits humankind ‘indiscriminately’; a rhetoric that has proved to have short legs but that for a while has dominated the public discourse as it drew apparent strength from the news of famous people hit by the infection.

Here, we keep a sharp eye for processes of access, inclusion and exclusion that determine factual membership of society. A primary aim is to eschew conceptual confusion between *equality* and *levelling* (Lukes 1987; Pardo 1996: 173 ff.; Martin 1977), in light of the empirical difference between the ideal distribution of rights and their actual distribution.

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\(^2\) This conference was organized by the International Urban Symposium—IUS, the IUAES Commission on Urban Anthropology and the University of the Peloponnese: Department of Social and Educational Policy, Postgraduate Program of Social Policy. It was endorsed by City, University of London, the Municipality of Corinth and the Greek Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Welfare. We are grateful to these institutions for their financial and logistic support. The contributions to this volume have benefited from the discussion of the papers during the conference and from the feedback from anonymous reviewers for the Series ‘Palgrave Studies in Urban Anthropology’. Revised versions of several other papers discussed at the Conference will be published in two special issues of *Urbanities-Journal of Urban Ethnography*.

\(^3\) See: https://www.internationalurbansymposium.com/events/2020-2/.

\(^4\) The full text of this Message is available at https://kent.academia.edu/GiulianaPrato/Papers. This *Message* prompted a debate that, in turn, stimulated scholars to contribute their views and comments, now edited by Prato (ed. 2020).
From various perspectives, levelling is debatable and susceptible to self-contradiction (Weber 1978: 983–986; Beetham 1987; Ingram 1987). As it has been forcefully argued (Tocqueville 2000 [1945]; Stankiewicz 1980), it is a perverse feature of democratic power, whereby the utopian erasure of difference is peddled to citizenship in the guise of some egalitarian promise.

Through detailed accounts, the chapters address old and emerging forms of social, economic and political inequality in urban settings, including between socio-economic groups and between sexes. From different perspectives, they engage with the analytical difficulties raised by the widespread finding that what is contemptible, exploitative, unfair from one (political, social, economic, moral, cultural) point of view—say, an ordinary person’s—may be considered to be more or less acceptable, appropriate, convenient, instrumental from another point of view—say, a ruler’s, a technocrat’s, an élite group’s, an ideologue’s, a legislator’s. In the belief that inequalities need to be understood on the ground and in depth, the resulting studies address central aspects of this problem of how they are received and understood across society.

In many cases, we find, inequalities gain strength from the machinery that, as masterfully elucidated by Hannah Arendt’s (1951) work on the politics of élite formation and totalitarianism, operates behind oppression to sustain arbitrary legislation and selective rule. In many cases, a primary role in their chronicity is played by the pursuit of social, cultural and political hegemony by élite groups who embrace the control society model, pining for a world where the degradation of independent citizens’ capacity distinguishes those more inclined to toe the dominant political line, who are certified to be more moral. This intersects with Ernest Gellner’s work on ‘the new social contract’ (1969: Chapter 2), where he identified one condition that needed to be satisfied for a government to retain the loyalty of citizens: those in power should be ‘co-cultural’ with the rest of society, and with Eric Voegelin’s concept of ‘existential’ representation (1952) based on shared values and symbols that are culturally and historically rooted. As Prato (2019: 32) has pointed out, this kind of representation is accomplished through a ‘relationship of obligation between the rulers and the ruled’, which ultimately entails ‘the “rulers” obligation to act in accordance with—not only on behalf of—the intencio populi because, he [Voegelin] says, people’s will constitutes the “substance” of contemporary democracy’. Yet, across the world élite groups claim to ‘know better’ and combat ordinary people’s ‘false consciousness’. In their drive
to dominate, they fail to recognize that in order to function the power to regulate, administer and make decisions that affect people’s lives must be more than just tolerated in the broader society. It must enjoy legitimacy. Here lies a key point with which ethnographers are all-too-familiar. The entrenchment and magnification of discrimination and inequality is one of the most disruptive by-products of a ‘power to command’ that lacks authority (Weber 1978: 946 ff.) because it lacks ‘co-culturality’ with ordinary people and, ultimately, legitimacy (Weber 1978: Chapter 10). These failures, we shall see, have serious consequences.

The ageless problem of inequality has been defined in many different ways, which reflect competing theoretical stances. In the knowledge that they take on a major task, the participants in this collective effort walk through different conceptual avenues as they develop their descriptive analyses across a wide range of social settings. Their work is intended to contribute to an in-depth—hopefully actionable—understanding of socio-economic, cultural and political forms of inequality as they develop in diverse urban settings, and of the varied and complex ways in which individuals deal with this essential distortion of associated life. A combined reading of their contributions brings to light the key points that inequalities are by no means linked exclusively to underdevelopment, poverty and powerlessness; that they are certainly not a prerogative of ‘weak’ states; that their dynamics reach into the social dimension, as well as the bureaucratic, political, economic, legal and moral dimensions; that in many cases they underscore more or less explicit drifts to authoritarianism and tyranny; and, most importantly, that neither inequalities nor the relationship between norms and interest (particularly self-interest) are fixed or un-negotiable, especially though not exclusively because what is legal is not always regarded in the broader society as moral and legitimate (Pardo and Prato 2019).

As a thoughtful lover of praxis, Hannah Arendt acutely pointed to human diversity as she wrote, ‘men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world’5 (1998: 7), which mirrors Horace’s earlier quote on the diversity of human inclinations and interests. As ethnographers and social human beings, we know that, beyond diversity, the problematic of inequality deeply affects life in Western and non-Western settings in the context of a progressively worsening global scenario marked by adverse

5 Here the words ‘men’ and ‘man’ are, of course, intended to indicate ‘human beings’.
conditions—including trade wars, hugely increased uncontrolled migration and human trafficking, and abuses of power—that compound the continuing economic crisis and the expanding gap between a privileged few and the rest of the population. It is therefore significant that, as several ethnographies suggest, changes in the urban situation help to keep the balance of inequality in power relations unstable (Pardo, Spyridakis, Prato, Abraham, Shokeid, Atalay, Nugent and Suhail, Armstrong and Bell in this book). In line with important dynamics outlined earlier, attention is paid to processes of economic development and redistribution—of political economy, that is, rather than politics—and of ideological indoctrination. We encounter examinations of the nature and ramifications of the kind of change promised by what Pardo (in this book) has identified as a political rhetoric promoted by rulers historically adept at talking democracy while ‘riding roughshod over ordinary people’s instances, and bent on teaching the “populace” what to think, do, even feel’. Several case studies suggest that, as actors’ resource options improve, their dependence on the ruthless speculation of the ‘socially superior’ decreases, and so does the scope of inequality. In other words, it is analytically useful to recognize that, in the complexity of real life, ‘as inequality is redefined in significant areas of exchange and action, […] the associated power relations (and their internal imbalance) also become open to redefinition’ (Pardo 1996: 168).

It ought to go without saying that while it is true that democracy is a fragile and imperfect achievement (claims to perfection belonging to authoritarian regimes) with a tendency towards self-destruction (Lively 1975; Stankiewicz 1980), it is also true that the democratic set up remains, in all its variations, one to which no better alternative exist. It may well be that democracy is more resilient than some expect but an important question stands (Pardo and Prato 2019: 2):

As today the “fundamental accord” between the ruling élite and the rest of society so accurately theorized by Gaetano Filangieri […] appears to be both more needed and more chimerical than ever, the question arises: how much more governance failure before legitimacy is withdrawn and, consequently, democracy is jeopardised?

Particularly relevant to our concern, Filangieri’s philosophical insights (1782, Vol II: Chapters 35 and 36) make it difficult to ignore that outstanding inequalities, their production and entrenchment, and the legislative and executive performances that go with them, jeopardize this
fundamental accord; in many cases, they prevent its establishment, even its conception. Considering that the definition of citizenship across society is inevitably diversified (Barbalet 1988; Marshall 1950, 1964), the scholarly work developed in this book robustly prove that prodding the diverse explicit and larval forms of inequality is of urgent importance in a global scenario vastly marred by a gap between citizenship and governance that in many cases appears to be entrenched—perhaps unbridgeable. It highlights the unique value of a methodological paradigm that grapples with the need to address empirically the necessary (Lukes 1991: 31–32) balance between ideological interventionism and indiscriminate liberalism (Strathern 1985; Fuller 1964; Pardo 1996: Chapter 7).

In a democracy, in every action or opinion there ought to be present a universal conception of freedom, equality and justice. Naturally, this applies to governance and the law. One does not need to get embroiled in the perennial dilemmas that complicate the agency-system(structure) debate (Abrams 1982; Giddens 1979) to accept that the quality of law, bureaucracy and politics is crucial to the relationship between agency—individual and collective—and ‘the system’. Ethnographic experience in dealing with inequalities suggests that if it is true that ‘the system’ needs ‘agency’, it is also true that it refers to ‘agency’ in name only; subdued, that is, and line-toeing.

It may be a fact of associated life that much legislation is diseased by degrees of arbitrariness and much governance is crippled by inefficiency (by failure or design) and dereliction of duty. Yet, for both to stand, in the long run, neither can afford to be seen to be consistently tarnished by bias and unfairness. To the empirical observer unfettered by the opposing claims of formal and substantive rationality, it seems obvious that the ‘all men are created equal’ clause is widely made to become in our political existence a machination that obviates the reality of life as it is actually lived and thus a reality of inequality. Equally obviously, neither inequality nor power can be explained strictly in terms of ‘social closure’, intended as the exclusion of the socially ‘inferior’ from access to the privileges and resources of the socially ‘superior’; a concept that cannot indeed be said to be beyond dispute (Spyridakis and Feronas, Pardo, Armstrong, and Bell in this book). There is a strong point to the criticism, in current social theory, of the concepts of predetermined power relations, the inevitable reproduction of inequality and the encroachments of social position through social closure. We are invited to acknowledge that in capitalist society it is easy to exaggerate the power of any one group
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(Martin 1977; Harris 1986; Pardo 1996, 2012) and stumble into a polarized view, including the—theoretically dialectic and complex—hegemony vs subalternity one.

We might accept that ‘social relations may well be everywhere marked by an imbalance of power, tending sometimes to the extreme, that there are distinctions (and specific inequalities in means) among individuals and therefore restrictions (cultural, economic and political) on their action and access to resources, and that attempts to impose such restrictions may well be continually made’ (Pardo 1996: 16). We might also accept that in a democracy coercion is generally not a fundamental value, that governing by consent is a desirable aim and that inequality may well be ineradicable but cannot be said to be unmodifiable. Rulers, we know, may try to make people accept their rule as morally, as well as legally and politically, legitimate. They may work to identify the morality of the state with their own morality, perhaps unaware that those who consider themselves morally superior easily cross into fanaticism. Yet, not always these attempts are successful and when they are usually only partially so, having to come to terms with the tension between agency and the system that underscores life in any given democratic society. The obvious question, then, is whether restrictions are part of a relationship between agency and system determined by instances of dominance established and reproduced by the socially superior or whether we should accept that ordinary people are not inevitably constrained or manipulated into subaltern ideals and goals. However dear the ‘false consciousness’ view may be to a certain view (Craib 1985: Chapter 8), it may be advisable for our analysis to steer away from the belief that ordinary people are basically powerless puppets who are unwittingly manipulated into ethical stances and actions which serve adverse interests and appreciate, instead, that their action over time may help to redefine relations of dependence and competition because it may help to modify both inequality and the organization of the social system.

It may be useful to acknowledge, in our analysis, that the principle of freedom of thought and of action—a key principle, that is, of associated life in a democracy—not only protects difference but increases it, for it underpins the freedom of the individual to use their talents to manage their lives and achieve their goals. It is precisely to this freedom that Horace (Satire 2, 1, 25–27) enlighteningly refers when he asks ‘are not all mankind to different pleasures, different whims inclined?’ and, in support of his argument, mentions the different sport inclinations of the twins
Pollux and Castor—‘born from the same egg’, but one enjoys boxing, the other is passionate about horse riding.

Anthropologists have argued that rather than succumbing to the negative effects of abuses of power, of governance driven by ideology and selective interests, of misguided and unfair legislation, of adverse economic policies, of élitist curbing (often well-organized, systematic) of merit and talent, and so on, ordinary people may well find ways to develop strategies that both help to better their lives and benefit more than the self. Specifically, it has been pointed out that:

socio-economic constraints and inequality are not rigidly set and self-perpetuating. They have to reckon, instead, with two important processes fundamental to what Tocqueville described as the fragmentation of social class in modern democracy […]: the pressure of cross-cutting, shifting alliances and interests […] and the increasing depolarization of social relations […] — the individual construction of position in relation to other individuals. (Pardo 1996: 15)

The theoretical bearing of this quote will be unpacked as we proceed. For now, let us say, in short, that ethnographic analysis has the power to bring out complex dynamics which would seem to suggest the usefulness for politics to encourage a neo-Smithian approach to individual competition that benefits society as a whole (Prato 2018: 98). This requires explanation.

As he wrote in the century of Enlightenment, the relationship between the individual and society was a central problem in Adam Smith’s moral philosophy (1778). Particularly interested in analysing human nature and how it influenced economic choices, he identified ‘enlightened’ self-interest, limited government and free-market economy as three basic elements that a nation would need to bring about universal prosperity. Central to his theory was the belief that people promote the public good through economic choices, which constitute an ‘invisible hand’, a driving force of the free-market. It is beyond the scope of this Introduction to discuss in detail Smith’s theory. It is, however, worth summarizing its main points to see how, while having influenced the late eighteenth-century Liberal doctrine with its aspiration to collective welfare through

6 According to Smith an invisible hand would ‘promote an end which was no part of his intention’ (1778: 35).
individual prosperity, his theory differs from the contemporary neoliberal approaches and ‘universal templates’.

Smith followed Hobbes in believing that human beings are essentially self-interested. However, he also believed that, guided by ‘rational’ thinking, they realize that it is in their self-interest to work in cooperation with others; in such a framework he argued that competition is good for the prosperity of society because it stimulates an increase in production and exchange; keeps prices, production costs, profits and interest rates low; and monitors the abuse of monopolies. The positive aspect of market competition was later significantly elaborated by Vilfredo Pareto in his theory of welfare economics and a more equal income distribution (1971 [1906]).

For Smith there is no natural conflict between individual interest and the interest of the whole society; when operating through a free-market, human beings’ self-interest produces the greatest possible good for the entire nation. In contrast, when governments, or other organizations intervene to regulate or control prices, trade and commerce, they prevent the proper functioning of the market and the common well-being. However, while advocating a limited government intervention in the economic field, Smith believed that the government should be responsible for crucial parts of social welfare—such as universal education, public works, the enforcement of legal rights and the punishment of crimes—and that governments should intervene to prevent people from acting on their short-term interest to the detriment of society. Although critical of some aspects of Smith’s laissez-faire politics,7 the influential eighteenth-century social reformer and utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham seemed to share this view, as he advocated individual and economic freedoms while claiming that the government should take responsibility for the welfare of its citizens. As he explained in his 1843 *Tracts of Poor Laws and Pauper Management* (Bentham 2012), partial state’s intervention in ‘pauper management’ should combine with the financial support of a large number of small investors.

Foreseeing future political developments, Smith also cautioned against large bureaucratic forms of government because there was a danger that they would generate further poverty by envisaging a new way of ‘draining money from the pockets of the people’ (Smith 1778: 474). He noted that

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7 In particular, in his Letters to Smith (published in 1787 in *A Defence of Usury*), Bentham seemed to be in favour of ‘freely floating’ interest rates (Bentham 2012).
governments and bureaucratic apparatuses generally do not act in a fortui-
tous and beneficial way; politicians, bureaucrats, regulators, those who
exercise legal force have their defined goals which they pursue through
legal coercion; in contrast, the economic forces occur voluntarily until
government policies inhibit them. In so doing the government affects the
‘invisible hand’, not the other way around, as the critics of contemporary
neoliberalism would have us believe. As Prato (2018) has argued, contem-
porary neoliberalism and the attendant market deregulation do indeed
need a supporting political apparatus that attempts to impose trendy, or
‘smart’ templates to empirically different situations.

It must be noted that the ‘philanthropic liberalism’ that transpires from
Smiths’ and Bentham’s approaches differed politically and ideologically
from the present-day neoliberal rhetoric on citizens’ empowerment and
participation. With reference to her Albanian ethnography, Prato (2011)
has observed how discourses on ‘democratization’, ‘participation’ and
‘empowerment’ have widely become part of a strategy of ‘tutoring people
to build their capacities and become self-dependent, responsible citizens
who can take care of their own welfare and govern themselves’ (Sharma
and Gupta 2006: 21), in a context in which supranational ‘quasi-state-
like’ institutions attempt to ‘regulate the conduct of states, economies and
the people at supranational level’ (Sharma and Gupta 2006: 6). Several
ethnographies in this book show that when the state fails in its ‘reg-
ulatory’ tasks, the outcome could be unhealthy competition, between
individuals, groups and entire communities.

**Domination, Liberty and Equality**

Domination is only a special case of power relations (Weber 1978: 941–
955); it cannot be assumed to be their prerequisite (Simmel 1964:
181–183; Lenski 1987). And we know that in real life the processes of
domination, liberty and equality are problematic and ambiguous. F. A.
Hayek (2011 [1960]: 150) observes,

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8 We are all familiar with how the policy of ‘empowering people’ has led to an explo-
sion of start-up initiatives, new models of philanthropic trust-funds and self-employment
schemes. This strategy has allowed governments to contain unemployment statistics but
has tragically fired back during the 2020 pandemic, as lockdown measures and social
distancing were imposed.
From the fact that people are very different it follows that, if we treat them equally, the result must be inequality in their actual position, and that the only way to place them in an equal position would be to treat them differently. Equality before the law and material equality are therefore not only different but are in conflict with each other; and we can achieve either the one or the other, but not both at the same time. The equality before the law which freedom requires leads to material inequality. Our argument will be that, though where the state must use coercion for other reasons, it should treat all people alike, the desire of making people more alike in their condition cannot be accepted in a free society as a justification for further and discriminatory coercion.

Hayek’s reasoning is that if the ‘equality before the law which freedom requires leads to material inequality’ (2011 [1960]: 148), liberty is ‘bound to produce inequality in many respects’ (ibid.). This raises the classical question ‘whether humankind is able to cope with this environment without losing its uniquely human character’ (Stauth 1992: 232), which carries to its logical conclusion the conflict between equality and liberty (Lukes 1991: Chapter 4; Pardo 1996: 173–177).

To reiterate a key point, in this volume it is frequently shown that some forms of urban inequality may be entrenched, though not necessarily ineradicable. A serious analysis cannot afford to interpret one aspect of a situation as its cause: it is uninformed (or badly informed) judgement, instrumental ideology, hegemonic push to conform and similar obnoxious drives that help to turn systems of inequality into ‘the norm’ that do the damage. In some cases, these narratives may be observable. In other cases, they may be unapparent, disguised. They are, however, not transcended. Even when politicians, party activists and the media dissolve in excitement about fashionable monist claims, we note, most people tend to keep their distance, leaving open to question the extent to which the public buys into them. This inevitably urges one to ask: What is it that makes (some) people accept them as given, as indisputable? In his The New Science of Politics (1952), Eric Voegelin teaches that each people, in the course of constituting itself as a people, attempts to answer the question, What do I assert as true, as good, as meaningful, as beautiful? Different structural positions, we know, inform different ideas about what is fair, the most obvious being the imbalance of power between rulers and the ruled and the inequality between the financially and socially better-off and their fellow urban dwellers.
Ruling according to particular interests (Lukes 1977: Chapter 10; Stankiewicz 1980) is a fundamental limit to democracy that directs us to consider the injustice and discrimination induced by mismanagement of power that perpetuates inequality, exploits it and privileges the interests of the few. As Hayek put it, the equality of the rule of law is ‘the only kind of equality conducive to liberty and the only equality which we can secure without destroying liberty’ (2011 [1960]: 148). Yet, the law is notoriously arbitrary, not always fair and in many cases ambiguous and contradictory; in Saltman’s apt words (1985), it is all-too-often ‘a ass’. Democracy is harmed, fundamentally, by the attendant breach of equal rules of moral and social conduct—what Tocqueville called the mores of democratic society (2000 [1945]). It follows that for our analysis to stand on sufficiently strong ground it must recognize the contentious character of lawyers’ law (Weber 1978: 760 and Chapter 8). We need to identify—and deal with—the empirical complications generated by the moral relativism of the production, interpretation and implementation of the law as an apparatus that, we note, regulates the partial control of a partial order. Inevitably, this key concept in the social sciences (Fuller 1964; Saltman 1985) stresses that law, like politics, cannot be superimposed on the social context (Hamnett 1977: 4; Pitch 1983: 120 ff.; Strathern 1985; Pardo 2018).

Questioning the products of marked asymmetries of power becomes inevitable, as we encounter in the field the moral laxity, the pursuit of vested interests and the abuse of power that undergird practising double standards, passing legislation to the benefit of rulers and their friends and allies at the expense of the many, and abusing power in public and private life. The abuses of power, double standards in the exercise of power, biased legislation and moral laxity that underscore inequality are key aspects of a ‘political pathology’ (Friedrich 1989: 19), a perverse betrayal of citizenship that affects most seriously associated life and the relationship between citizens and the democratic state (Pardo and Prato 2011). It would obviously be unhelpful to treat this betrayal as a dysfunctional aspect of state organizations. Ostensibly legal (or made lawful through ad hoc legislation), it drives mismanagement of responsibility in the exercise of public power at various levels. It involves interests and modes of exchange deeply rooted in the moral cesspit of society. Perhaps it is inseparable from the modern state, as perhaps is the interaction between power (and its asymmetries) and its expedient (dishonest, self-serving, and so on) exercise. Perhaps the favour enjoyed by selected individuals
or groups is an indelible mark of modern society, where politics and arbitrary morality intermingle. The attendant ramifications and implications, even the impact, may not always be immediately obvious but they do contribute to a view of the state and of its institutions as dubious, illegitimate entities (Pardo and Prato 2019).

This distinctive form of corruption of the democratic system and the inherent moral choices in legislation and government, we note, have been the object of extensive anthropological analysis, as have the prejudices and discriminations that, flying in the face of what in many societies are constitutional rights, mar relationships between the sexes and between social or age groups, and the life of residents in underprivileged urban areas. Officially endorsed deceits of language quite aside, they inform inequalities as acutely as other important forms of encroachment. Ruling by the simple dichotomy between conformity to and deviance from formal rules (Moore 1978: Introduction) comes, here, immediately to mind. In the field, we observe less obvious, though not always hidden and certainly far from innocuous, sources of inequality and injustice which are brought to bear by the marginalization imposed by those in power and their sycophants on the unaligned voice, the free-thinker, the critic, the independent, the contrarian. As noted by Shokeid, Nugent and Suhail, Pardo, Prato, Atalay, Abraham and Varelaki in this book, a careful observer also finds it difficult to overestimate the empirical role played by attempts to put a spin on the damage done at various levels by the parochialism (conceptual, ideological or moral) and condescension that inform the production, and diffusion, of prejudice and stereotype.

Extensive ethnographic evidence shows how this kind of determinism undergirds a corrupt relationship between economic policy and dominant political ideology as a ‘special case of power’ (Weber 1978: Chapter 3; also Prato 2018) that promotes stereotypical views and the attendant mistreatment of large proportions of ordinary people as second-class citizens. As Pardo’s and to an extent Shokeid’s and Spyridakis and Feronas’ ethnographies (in this book) suggest, the de facto exclusion from fundamental rights of citizenship of large proportions of citizens may be a direct consequence of the translation into policy and legislation of obtuse ideology. Although even in the most notoriously difficult instances there are individuals who manage to cope, this mistreatment undermines the relationships between the state and grassroots conceptions of that state because it leads to the entrenchment of socio-economic inequality (Pardo, Spyridakis and Feronas, Aly, Prato, Varelaki, Atalay, Abraham in this
book), making citizens’ attitudes towards the state and its officials more problematic and dialectic (Gupta 1995: 377) than they can be safely deemed to be in a democracy.

Elsewhere (Pardo and Prato 2011), we have pointed out the distinction made by Philip Abrams (2006 [1977]) between the ‘state system’ and the ‘state idea’. For Abrams, the idea of state is ‘first and foremost an exercise in legitimation—and what is being legitimated is, we may assume, something which if seen directly and as itself would be illegitimate, an unacceptable domination’ (2006: 122). This distinction between the state (and its institutions) and the actions of government is fundamental in anthropological analysis, bearing in mind that the state comes into being through the actions of those who rule and through citizens’ daily experience of the effects of such actions. This underlies the earlier point that in some cases this process drives unhealthy competition not only among individuals guided by short-term interests but also between cities; a competition that engenders environmental degradation, further economic downturn and disease and death across extensive territories (Prato, Nugent and Suhail; also Spyridakis and Feronas, Varelaki in this book). Across a broad geographic spectrum, we will encounter ideologically-biased economic policies that more or less explicitly or slyly meet national and supranational élite groups’ active interest in maintaining such mistreatment. And we will study in detail policies that have not only generated regional divides and inequalities among cities but also adverse conditions that in the long term have affected entire countries (Prato, Shokeid, Nugent and Suhail, Pardo, Spyridakis and Feronas, Rosbrook-Thompson and Armstrong in this book). Reminding us of Adam Smiths’ warning, the bullying of the heavily indebted Greece by supposedly strong supranational bodies—the European Union and the International Monetary Fund—has had appalling consequences that are not yet as well-known as they need to be (Spyridakis and Feronas in this book).

Reading through the chapters, two important issues come to the fore that are critical to a meaningful comparative analysis. First, the importance of a theoretical framework that recognizes that in each ethnographic case policies should be analysed rigorously in relation to the dominant political views. Second, a balanced relationship between citizenship and governance is dependent upon the recognized legitimacy of obligations and responsibility on both sides of the spectrum (Tocqueville 2000 [1945]).
Ethnographic evidence points to observable responsibilities in encouraging, or promoting, unfair directions to such a drive. Examples abound, and several are explored in this book. Among them, it is indicative of the deep roots of discrimination of the unprivileged in our society that sport—as one of the most popular human activities—may, on the one hand, both play a key subversive role by helping self-improvement and be evidence of the inequality separating the urban sportsman from his audience (Armstrong and Bell) and, on the other hand, may help to fuel ethno-political violence, antagonism, racism and gender inequalities (Maidano).

Obviously, money is important. But anthropological research has amply shown that there is much more to life than money or ‘solipsism’ (Nietzsche 1966), even in situations of economic precariousness and unemployment (Pardo 1996; Rosbrook-Thompson and Armstrong, Spyridakis and Feronas, Atalay, Çinar in this book). It may be a moot point but a point that needs nonetheless to be made that in the ways people define their motives, make choices and interact with others there is a deep-rooted significance to the strong continuous interaction between tangible, material aspects of their lives (including, though not limited to, money and possessions) and non-material aspects (contacts, knowledge, values and so on), between the symbolism of personal identity and the ethics of management of existence that informs our lives, daily and ontologically (Pardo 1996: 11 ff.). Treated quite unsympathetically by Marxist orthodoxy and the ‘maximization of profit’ line of thought, the rationality underlying this complex interaction marks our sense of the relationship between action and results in all spheres of our lives, in many cases with an emphasis on the role of our significant others (living and dead) in our individual entitlement to feeling worthy, therefore fulfilled non-materially as well as materially. Bringing to bear our earlier point on the changing relationship between objective conditions of restriction and inequality and actors’ ability to negotiate these conditions, this both radically contradicts suggestions of amoral individualism and implies no contradiction with the individual’s commitment to personal betterment.

Relations of power and political authority impact directly on the individual’s independence and their capacity to combat inequality. Equally obviously, the ugly reality remains in most social settings that the multifaceted gap between the wealthy and the rest within and among countries bespeak a degree of indifference—or vested interests—that pervert the profoundly human in our societies. Sadly, one hundred years after
Pareto’s (1971 [1906]) comparative analysis of the uneven distribution of income, the 80/20 rule of what has become known as the Pareto Principle still applies today.⁹ According to the UN Development Programme, the richest 20% of the world’s population continues to control 80% of the world’s income (UNDP 1992). More recently, Stiglitz (2014) has pointed out how extreme concentration of wealth and high-end income may reduce economic stability and also hinder growth. It may also generate ‘high-end’ inequality, which may in turn lead to a ‘plutocratic capture’ of the political system by the super-rich. As it is shown by several ethnographies in this volume, a high-end inequality may produce not only loss of financial capital but also loss of social capital, thus inducing a sense of social insecurity and humiliation. Money and access to money (Atalay, Spyridakis and Feronas, Rosbrook-Thompson and Armstrong, Pardo in this book) are only part of the problem. While the idea of ‘redistribution’ is both dangerously misleading and a blatantly counterintuitive case of what passes for commitment to the common good, that of pursuing socio-economic, legal and political fairness is but a starting base in any real effort to engage effectively with the scourge of inequality in our world.

As Prato has observed (2011: 142), ‘States are not abstract entities. The efficiency of the regulatory power of a state is measured through the actions of its government’. Meeting her analysis of post-Communist Albania, democratic governments across the world seem to be ‘failing in “pooling” resources and “redistributing” them on the basis of equality of opportunities and citizens rights’ (Prato 2011: 148). Furthermore, while ‘redistribution’ remains a fundamental aspect of modern economy—or, as Polanyi (1944) would say, one of the ways in which economy is integrated in society—the relationship between democratic government and citizens should be conceived as one of ‘reciprocity, in the sense that citizens’ loyalty and respect of the rules cannot be separated from the belief that the state will protect their rights and efficiently respond to their needs’ (Prato 2011: 149). Instead, governments appear to be failing precisely the most vulnerable.

Facilitated by biased political ideology, geopolitical interests—either impalpable or overtly pursued—have driven urbanization without (or

⁹This principle is based on Pareto’s (1971 [1906]) comparative analysis of wealth distribution which showed that 20% of the population owned 80% of property. This result prompted his theorization of competitive market equilibrium, stating that competitive markets produce an efficient outcome.
with weak) growth, thus enhancing urban inequalities. Growing informal work, homelessness, intolerance, conflict, suicide, crime and the indignities brought about by the treatment of people as second-class citizens are, we shall see, disastrous consequences of the mismanagement of urban policy (Pardo, Aly, Spyridakis and Feronas, Çınar, Rosbrook-Thompson and Armstrong). We study the progressive spatial segregation of the privileged from the ordinary rest (Rosbrook-Thompson and Armstrong, Abraham, Shokeid), finding that it is the (more than economically) unprivileged who have the lowest life expectancy (Varelaki), the least comfortable homes, and so on, whereas their wealthier, well-connected fellow urbanites live longer lives in much better homes (Aly, Çınar, Rosbrook-Thompson and Armstrong). And it is the children of the former who have the least access to resources and options for self-improvement (Armstrong and Bell in this book), while being the most exposed to street crime and disease. We see how residents experience bureaucratic red tape, inefficiency, below-standard education, poor infrastructure, public services and disruptive tears in the urban fabric (Pardo, Atalay, Prato, Nugent and Suhail, Abraham).

We are alerted to the disparities engendered by unequal access to technology. For example, as discussed in fine detail by Nugent and Suhail and considered by Abraham, the ‘smart cities’ project may have been pursued world-wide as viable, desirable and inevitable, but smart cities are in fact not so smart, for ‘smart urbanism’ both ‘normalizes crisis’ and ends up excluding in the name of inclusion. Nugent and Suhail remind us that as governance joins corporate interest ‘disadvantaged populations find themselves subjected to alarmingly anti-democratic, discriminatory practices that deny the underserved any meaningful form of citizenship and in effect seek to purge them from urban life’. Their work tallies significantly with Abraham’s, showing how under smart regimes technology consistently helps to ease in top-down, exclusionary and repressive visions and regimes of implementation, a theme addressed by Spyridakis and Feronas, Varelaki, and Atalay.

We are alerted to the impact of migration from poorer countries and from rural areas to cities (Shokeid, Aly, Pardo), which in some cases adds to existing problems, creating new tensions and feeding intolerance among traditionally tolerant and welcoming indigenous people. Perhaps worse, as many foreign newcomers become non-citizens, they experience exploitation, modern forms of slavery and little or no sign of the improvement in their lives that they dreamed of on leaving their countries
of origin. Large internal and international migration flows in conjunc-
tion with weak policy, double standards in the treatment of individuals
and groups and inefficient or slanted governance have given rise to new
challenges to urban life. Urban sustainability and a fair, responsible and
efficient governance are the obvious casualties.

Direct knowledge on the listed distortions of associated urban life,
and more, may help to ‘cure’ the normalization of inequality and the
consequent desensitization to it. The latter is an ever-present, lurking
risk, as is the painful reality that a drive towards greater equality is
not the inexorable and irresistible force that Tocqueville believed to be
a distinguishing mark of democratic society. Fortified by our empirical
understanding of what it is that drives inequality in the societies that we
study, it is our duty as scholars to point out that while it may indeed be
naïve to demand equality in our society and utopian to expect it actualised
in our lifetime, it is more than reasonable to expect democratic politics to
work on ‘equalising conditions’, as Tocqueville would put it.

Pointing to the ‘factual inequality’ inherent in democracy (Stankiewicz
1980: 247–248), the turning of rights into privileges that can be obtained
by belonging to the right group or through corruption (Pardo 1996:
Chapter 6; Pardo 2019) drives across the world a ‘society of privilege’
that works on the principle of inequality as an ineradicable but manage-
able ‘evil’. Stankiewicz has argued this point as radically as convincingly
(1980: 9–17). Having observed the inability of democratic theory to
define equality and the limits to freedom, he provocatively states:

Since the definition of democracy’s norms seems arbitrary, let us cut the
Gordian Knot and let the operating system which calls itself “democracy”
define all its terms. “Equality”, “freedom” and “authority” are what the
system says they are, and the result is “democracy” if the members have
been socialized to call it that. (Stankiewicz 1980: 96)

**Useful Suggestions**

The methodological complexity that we have outlined meets in many
ways the complexity and variations of inequality. It brings out the empir-
ical significance of the dynamics encapsulated by the dialectic between
value and interest, the official and the actual and the distinction between
equality and levelling in the relationship among people, and between
them and those who man the system. The strength of our attempt to build
a correct formulation of the terms of this problem in each specific ethno-
graphic setting rests at once on the strength of the ethnographic evidence 
and on an analysis comforted by a necessary degree of detachment.

Much of this book brings out the gravity of ordinary people’s loss 
of trust in the democratic process. We encounter several examples of 
the kind of ‘obscure’ decision-making which, as Prato notes, meet the 
economist Carlo Cipolla’s (2019 [1976]) insights on human stupidity. 
We find at the grassroots unaligned values, action and choices that implicit-
ly or explicitly challenge the dominant rhetoric of power. We see how, 
dismissed as evidence of an ingrained marginality, they are claimed to 
justify the distrust and mistreatment of their bearers and, ultimately, their 
progressive entrapment into political and socio-economic inequality. We 
gain sociologically significant insights from the ways in which people 
experience and speak about inequalities and the damage they cause, and 
how they envisage change. We learn important lessons from cross-cultural 
indications that as significant political change is denied in the presence 
of inequality ordinary people’s popular revulsion becomes increasingly 
anti-political, and rejection of the legitimacy of rulers and of their rule 
inevitably follows. Bluntly, the foregoing brings to a head the need to 
deal with fundamental omissions in moral and political responsibility and 
assess the precise identity of the dividing line between the legitimate and 
the illegitimate.

We concede that there are no simple or definitive answers to the 
questions raised by our investigations and that the total eradication of 
inequality in all its forms is a noble, desirable but at best very difficult 
goal. However, the essays that follow also suggest in many ways that once 
the aspects of the system that encourage or generate inequalities are iden-
tified, our analysis would do well to engage in an equally dispassionate 
examination of what aspects could instead generate real changes that may 
help to prevent them. Useful insights would seem to emerge, here, that 
if translated into legal and administrative policies could contribute to a 
theory of the state that, based on a reformulation of the principles of the 
individual’s participation in the system, would run counter to inequality 
and the production of inequality.

Current events powerfully indicate that, however imperfect, democracy 
cannot afford to keep dodging this imperative. History teaches us that to 
do so, would raise the risk of very dangerous developments.
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