

Transformationen der (Un)gleichheit - RECET-Festival der Geschichts- und Sozialwissenschaften

Veranstalter: Research Center for the History of Transformation (RECET)

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The Research Center for the History of Transformations (RECET) hosted its second History and Sciences Festival. Focussing on social, economic and political discourses around „Transformations of (In)Equality“, the event offered a variety of lectures, debates and panel discussions. High-level experts from the historical and social sciences, politics, civil society, arts and culture explored the multifaceted and transformative nature of the term. Open to the public on the campus of the University of Vienna the festival offered three days of rich scientific and cultural programs. Founded in 2020, the RECET Institute explores the post-1989 transformations in Central and Eastern Europe in a comparative and global perspective.

What is the mission of RECET? With this initial question, the director of RECET PHILIPP THER (Vienna), opened the Festival. He answered by saying that threats to democracy are always connected to inequality. In the context of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, RECET contributes to the reduction of inequality by hosting scientists who suffer from threats to freedom and democracy in their home countries, and by organizing debates such as this festival. JANNIS PANAGIOTIDIS (Vienna) added that hosting such a public festival and deliberately offering lectures in both German and English ensures accessibility, and thus supports equality.

The first roundtable discussed how concepts of equality and inequality have transformed in technologies, human bodies, literary canons and economic systems, especially in East Central Europe and beyond. MAGDALENA BARAN-SZOLTYŚ (Vienna) argued that shifting narratives in Polish litera-

ture have led to blind spots. She criticized the lack of literature about and therefore for ordinary people – workers, elderly people, conservatives, the religious and so on. THUC LINH NGUYEN VU (Vienna) compared processes of undoing inequality – decolonisation – between state transformations in Poland and Vietnam, while ANNA CALORI (Vienna) focused on workers' fears and expectations of market reforms and the global inequality between industrial and developing countries. SHENG PENG (Vienna) spoke about the winners and losers of state economic transformations and the normative dimension of equality in China.

The keynote address by GUY STANDING (London) highlighted the impact of the neoliberal economic revolution of the 1970s and 1980s on today's social inequalities. Drawing on his books, Standing argued that the resulting neoliberal labour markets and social policies have created a system in which income increasingly favours property owners and disfavors those engaged in labour, which he calls globalised rentier capitalism. This has been accompanied by the emergence of a new mass class – the precariat. As a solution to growing global inequalities, Standing proposes an unconditional basic income financed by dividends and funds generated from the exploitation of the commons. While his enthusiastic statements certainly inspired the vision of a more equal society, the question of how to effectively mobilise the fragmented groups that make up the precariat remained largely unaddressed.

On the second day, GENIA KOSTKA (Berlin) explored the impact of China's growing adoption of information and communication technologies on social inequalities. Drawing on an extensive database of surveys and interviews on local digital initiatives, Kostka highlighted the potential for citizen participation, transparency, online education and women's empowerment to narrow socio-economic gaps. However, she also displayed the downsides of the digital transformation, such as the exclusion of older people from public life, concerns about facial recognition, privacy and increased government control. In doing so, she dispelled common myths about China's social credit system, clar-

ifying that it has only been piloted in various regions and has not yet been implemented centrally. Kostka concluded that while digital technologies can contribute to greater equality, they also have the potential to perpetuate the social exclusion of certain groups and to facilitate the misuse of data.

The challenges of social and political transformations due to climate change and the role of climate activism were discussed in the second panel. EVA HORN (Vienna) argued that the transformation leads to ethical questions of priority. The human community should understand the historical reasons when and why we started to exploit resources and redefine our place in the world by taking responsibility. MELINDA MARTINUS (Singapore) went on to argue that adaptation to climate change is climate activism. In Indonesia, a country that is already heavily affected by climate change, the government is offering climate social assistance to individuals. This can serve as a role model for European governments. AGNES ZAUNER (Vienna) added that Austria, as a rich country of the global North, has a great responsibility. She argued that climate activism should outline a positive future and show what is already possible – solutions, laws, ideas. SINA KAMALA KAUFMANN (Berlin) described climate activism as a tool to create cracks in the certainty we build around us. The role of protest is practising to act under high pressure, to show existential risks and how to react to them. All panellists argued for the urge to rethink history and to study the link between the environment and its use.

The second day concluded with a panel discussion on the implications of rising inequalities for social cohesion in Europe, with a particular focus on the role of the welfare state. DOROTHEE BOHLE (Vienna) defined social inequality as a basic condition of capitalism and argued that the aim of the welfare state in European countries today is not to redistribute wealth but rather to cover the risks of poverty. PHILIPP THER (Vienna) pointed to the strong urban-rural divide in the post-socialist countries and the strong regional character of inequality. He also highlighted the difficulty of democratically legitimising action against inequalities and argued

that redistribution is more effective at the national level than at the supranational level. ROBERT MISIK (Vienna) shifted the focus to the „traditional working class“ and its sense of class belonging, which could only arise from the social differentiation in an unequal society. In his view, increasing inequality among „ordinary people“ leads to processes of alienation and insecurity. Finally, the participants agreed that today’s welfare state is no longer redistributive and pointed out the challenges of creating new structures of redistribution in order to not further endanger future social cohesion.

The final day began with a roundtable discussion on (in)equalities in the Austrian education system. MARTIN GUMIELA (Vienna) gathered insights on the central question of how to prevent the unequal distribution of opportunities and the reproduction of existing socio-economic conditions through education. KARL HEINZ GRUBER (Vienna) argued for a shift from the concept of equality to that of fairness. An education system should prioritise fairness over strict equality and promote a non-selective and supportive approach in schools to meet the diverse needs and abilities of students. MICHAEL WILD (Vienna) emphasized the crucial role of educational support in the early years of schooling to create a more equitable starting point for all. AMY LITTLETON (Vienna) highlighted the challenges faced by first-generation students at Austrian universities, including financial instability, the need to work while studying, and the psychological burden of insecurity and alienation. JULIA HEINEMANN (Vienna) addressed the issue of equality in the academic environment, stressing the importance of different and unequally distributed resources in academia. Ultimately, all participants agreed on the importance of mitigating exclusionary factors such as language, class and gender and their intersectionality, through a system characterised by fairness and additional support from pre-school to university level.

The penultimate round table focused on emerging forms of precarity and inequality in the labour market in the form of the gig economy. CHRISTIAN BERGER (Vienna) explained the notion of the gig economy, which

originates from the working practices of musicians and refers to workers who perform individual gigs without a fixed wage relationship with the employer. However, Berger showed that this arrangement shifts the entrepreneurial risks to the workers and argued for greater transparency and regulation of these employment relationships. ADELE SIEGL (Vienna) drew attention to the challenges of establishing a collective organisation among food delivery workers in Vienna. She highlighted the significant turnover and fragmentation among individual workers which hampers collective efforts. JOHANNA NEUHAUSER (Vienna) explained that migrant workers are over-represented in the gig economy because the low-wage sector generates a greater demand that is generally not taken over by Austrian workers. The discussion revealed a concerning disparity between gig workers and traditional workers, with the former experiencing a lack of individual and collective rights, resulting in multiple precariousness. The panel concluded that the fragmented nature of the workforce poses major challenges for regulation, especially given the continued rapid growth of the gig economy sector in the coming years.

The festival closed with a reading and insights into three representations of socio-economic (in)equalities in literature. MARKUS MEYER (Vienna) read an extract from „A Woman's Freedom“ by Edouard Louis, which tells the story of a woman's struggle to escape poverty and male violence. DOROTA MASLOWSKA (Warsaw) read two of her short stories about everyday life in Warsaw, illustrating the inequalities experienced in post-socialist societies. BARBI MARKOVIC (Vienna/Belgrade) read an extract from her novel „Superheldinnen“ (Superheroines), which depicts the struggles and obstacles faced by three female migrants from the former Yugoslavia as they try to ascend the social ladder in Vienna. During the discussion, the two authors reflected on how addressing inequalities in their work is not a deliberate choice but rather an organic outcome. They argued that, as Maslowska put it, it becomes difficult to remain silent about such issues when they impact every aspect of one's social life.

In conclusion, the festival shed light on the multifaceted nature of inequalities and their impact on different aspects of society. The panels and discussions highlighted the link between the neoliberal turn and the rise of social and economic disparities, which emerged in the Western world since the 1970s and have taken hold in post-socialist countries in the 1990s. Inequalities are also evident in other areas of society, such as the educational system and labour markets. The contributors emphasised the intersectional nature of inequality, highlighting how different forms of discrimination – such as origin, class and gender – can intersect in the effects of marginalisation. Looking ahead, it is clear that the climate crisis will and already has a significant impact on social inequalities at the global level. Although the potential of digital transformations has been mentioned, China's case shows that this can also go in a different direction. In addition, possible solutions to the further development of inequality were explored, such as more inclusive social approaches and an expanded state or supranational interventionism based on economic regulation, as well as the implementation of an unconditional basic income. The future challenge for history and the social sciences, together with other disciplines and stakeholders, will be to develop new concepts of how to mobilise society, create a framework of social cohesion, and ultimately rethink the relationship between humans and nature and its exploitation.

Conference overview:

Philipp Ther (Vienna) / Jannis Panagiotidis (Vienna): Opening remarks

Roundtable I

Magdalena Baran-Szoltys (Vienna) / Anna Calori (Vienna) / Thuc Linh Nguyen Vu (Vienna) / Sheng Peng (Vienna): Transformation and (In)Equality.

Moderation: Frank Bösch (Potsdam)

Guy Standing (London): Inequalities of Rentier Capitalism: The Commons as the Future. Moderation: Rosamund Johnston (Vienna)

Genia Kostka (Berlin): Digital Technologies in China: Towards a More Just and Equal Society? Moderation: Claudia Kraft (Vienna)

Roundtable II

Eva Horn (Vienna) / Sina Kamala Kaufmann (Berlin) / Melinda Martinus (Singapore) / Agnes Zauner (Vienna): (In)Equality and the Climate Emergency. Transforming Activism, Politics, and Visions of the Future.

Moderation: Lukas Becht (Vienna)

Dorothee Bohle (Vienna) / Robert Misik (Vienna) / Philipp Ther (Vienna): Transformation, Ungleichheit, Umverteilung: Welche Zukunft für den gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt? Moderation: Jannis Panagiotidis (Vienna)

Roundtable III

Karl Heinz Gruber (Vienna) / Julia Heine-
mann (Vienna) / Amy Littleton (Vienna)
/ Michael Wild (Vienna): Ungleich-
heit.Macht.(Hoch)Schule: (Un)Gleichheit
im Bildungssystem.

Moderation: Martin Gumiela (Vienna)

Roundtable IV

Christian Berger (Vienna), Johanna
Neuhauser (Vienna), Adele Siegl (Vienna):
Ungleichheit und Prekarität in der Gig-
Economy.

Moderation: Goran Musić (Vienna)

Dorota Maslowska (Warsaw), Barbi
Markovic (Vienna), Markus Meyer (Vi-
enna): Un/Gleichheit Be/Schreiben: Über
Armut und Reichtum.

Moderation: Magdalena Baran-Szoltys
(Vienna)

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