DEMOCRACY AROUND THE WORLD

Inequality and democracy: an introduction to the debate

David Murillo



A homeless man reads a book sitting next to the headquarters of a real estate agent. Photo by Jordi Borràs

What do we mean by inequality, what are its causes, and how is it related to democracy? These questions are so fundamental and far-reaching that demand an exploration of the intersection between economic processes, social phenomena and impacts on the political sphere. This topic is inextricably steeped in ideology, but it also seeks to shed light on issues such as the differing political itineraries of social or economic policies, the so-called decline of the middle class, the reasons behind the rise of populism, and why we are now talking about the decay of liberal democracy.

What inequality are we talking about?

While trying to get a closer look at this intersection inevitably involves choosing a specific perspective, the latest data can point us in the right direction. What do we mean by inequality? In terms of wealth, we should start by referring to two types of inequality. The

first is the one that exists between countries. An inequality that points to a contraction, above all, of the east-west axis which closes a two-hundred-year-old historical cycle of western economic predominance. The metric here is wealth generated, or GDP, insofar as it reflects the geopolitical leverage of different countries. An indicator that calls for us to question the reasons of the reputational crisis of a democracy that, until recently, was one associated with growth and political stability, in the West at least. At the other extreme, among the primary beneficiaries, we find non-democratic regimes and, above all, China [1], the power that has been most successful in reducing this global inequality by lifting a significant part of its population out of poverty [2].

Another way to approach the phenomenon of inequality, and perhaps the most common, is to observe what happens within countries and how the difference in the population's disposable income evolves. By this standard, occasional deviations notwithstanding, the overall pattern points to increasing inequality as a cross-cutting phenomenon worldwide. Thus, it is a structural phenomenon only interrupted in the West by the so-called *glorious thirties*: the post-war period dominated by powerful redistributive policies, the threat of communism and a trade union and labour activism that saw income inequalities reduce.

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At this point, we should underline the fact that the debate on the relationship between inequality and democracy is primarily a Western problem linked to other equally Western phenomena: a growing scepticism about globalisation and the mounting fear of China's ascendency. In the case of Europe, this debate is inevitably linked to more recent phenomena such as the European Union's response to the latest financial and migration crises and the consequent imposition of austerity measures with no public debate. Actions that require us to reflect on their consequences for the illiberal tendencies of countries like Poland and Hungary or the growth of so-called populisms in countries like France, Italy, Greece and the Netherlands.

Causes of inequality: who is responsible for fixing it?

An initial specific way to study the relationship between democracy and inequality is to look at the level of responsibility attributed to the different social and political agents. This implies asking ourselves: who should correct it? By what means? And, for that matter, how responsible should democratic governments be for correcting it? This discussion calls us to reflect on the scope of the solution on which citizens will place their expectations and the ability, or not, of governments to respond. Three readings of inequality open up here. The individual, which emphasises the individual's role (responsibility) in responding to the

income differentials in a society. An interpretation that basically pushes states to promote training policies, educational improvement and the introduction of different labour or tax incentives to improve the competitiveness of the citizen-worker.

The second reading, of a growing ascendancy, which regards inequality as the result of macroeconomic imbalances that place some countries above others. China above the US, from Trump's perspective; or Germany ahead of Greece, in terms of the European left. An approach that forces us to confront debates such as the social impact of transnational trade agreements; the *real* fiscal capacity of states beyond their *theoretical* political sovereignty; trade deficits (or current account deficits) or the country's (in)ability to make competitive currency devaluations, for example

Finally, the third systemic reading would point to capitalism's structural tendency to generate inequality via market concentration [3]. A structural inequality that pushes the financialisation of large corporations and the establishment of financial corporate performance indicators; that forces companies to embrace technological change in order to compete and, ultimately, to enter a race to the bottom in terms of working conditions, which becomes a hugely important factor in the expansion of inequality [4]. Having arrived at this point, we can underline a preliminary take-away for our analysis on the relationship between inequality and democracy: the higher our level of analysis, the less the political system will be able to respond to the problem of inequality by itself, and the closer we come to throwing in the towel. In short, the real capacity of democracy to deal with citizens' problems fundamentally correlates with its stability.

The erosion of labour power: why is it so important?

Our last point brings us to the following question: how to assess a political system? From an efficiency perspective, it should produce results. From a procedural perspective, the decision-making system must be seen as legitimate by the population. However, the two are not independent variables. For citizens to express support to a political system, they must feel they benefit from it. Procedural legitimacy is not enough. However, polls reveal that support to democracy is increasingly questioned. It also seems clear that, in the context of growing poverty, inequalities bluntly expose the uneven capacity of the different social classes to confront a crisis. A fact intertwined with the economic and social cushion with which we have endowed ourselves as a society via the welfare state.

Leaving the current crisis aside for a moment, the debate between democracy and inequality tends to focus on two phenomena: the overall impact of technological change and the disruption brought about by globalisation [5]. These two transformations limit the ability of states to act politically and have a huge influence on citizens' expectations upon governments. Thus, focusing on data from Spain, although it can be extrapolated to the vast majority of industrialised countries, inequality linked to the two transformations mentioned above can be felt in the decline in labour income (wages) compared to capital (investments and shares); in the historical increase of tax deductions for the more affluent social strata (with the aim of generating economic activity) and in the reduction of corporate taxation vis

a vis VAT and income tax (once again to the detriment of society's most vulnerable groups).

This marginalisation of the labour factor of production in favour of the capital factor translates to wage stagnation; the appropriation of productivity increases by the capital factor, and the growing disappearance of jobs due to digitisation, automation, and the outsourcing of globalised supply chains. These factors have also converged on the mounting precariousness of the working conditions of workers [6]. The end result translates into the stagnation of social mobility and conflicts with one of the promises implicit in any democracy: that labour and workers' training can act as a driving force for correcting the inequalities of origin dictated by a person's birth into one family or another. The decay of labour is also found at the heart of the decline of managerial models where democracy can be practiced in the workplace: for example, through workers control of a significant number of the shares of the company. Finally, this trend is in line with the historical and not uncontroversial analysis of French economist Thomas Piketty and his r> g hypothesis, where 'r' is the after-tax return on capital and 'g' is the economic growth rate [7]. Economic growth, therefore, can be seen as happening at the expense of the labour factor.

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This erosion of the labour force is accompanied by the erosion of the collective mechanisms that could curb this inequality, an invisible but very real wage for the lowest segments of our societies: the decline in investment in public education, health, pensions or social services. A trend which was ultimately produced by the neoliberal assault in the first instance, and then, for countries like ours, by the application of austerity policies in response to the financial crisis. Once again, the result has been the squeezing of the middle classes and the increasingly significant role of family wealth in the individual destiny of ordinary citizens [8]. We must iterate, though, that this ideological struggle reverberates, conditions and finally limits the political sphere, the level most legitimately placed for implementing structural changes. As a consequence, the more the current system shows signs of impotence in dealing with these issues, the more it will be accompanied by the rise of non-institutional *contentious* politics (protests, demonstrations, revolutions) and the support for ideologies that veer away from liberal democracy [9].

Inequality and political preferences: how does this dissonance manifest?

The institutional response to the 2008 crisis offers recent examples of the conflicting relationship between political preferences, state action, and rising inequalities. Thus, in Spain, the 2011 constitutional reform managed to put public debt creditors ahead of pensioners in the order of payment for the first time ever, and impose balancing the state budget as a constitutional mandate. In the same vein, on the other side of the Mediterranean, the financial bailouts handed to Greece after the Eurocrisis effectively saw citizens' working conditions and pensions held to ransom over the repayment of debt to the banks (mainly German and French) that lent money to the Greek government and now, as if by magic, emerged unscathed from their failed investment decision [10]. It is a sad state of affairs in the country that gave us democracy. The question is always the same: who should be assisted and with what money? The issue becomes even more interesting if we want to understand why we are talking about a crisis of liberal democracy: by what mechanisms are certain agents more capable than others to bring the action of the executive power (or legislative or judiciary) in line with their interests?

If, in the case of financial bailouts, we were bound to remember the ideological burden that guided the austerity policies and the ulterior increase in inequalities under the auspices of the Troika (European Central Bank, European Commission and the IMF) with the creditor countries and Germany in the wings [11], we do not always have to look that far. Here, in Catalonia, the leading collection of contemporary art collects dust in the warehouses of a financial institution that prefers to have the pieces kept under lock and key to accumulate value rather than make them available to citizens. Meanwhile, the Museum of Modern Art of Barcelona languishes, deprived of a public budget. What would public opinion say, not about the ownership of the property, but about public access to it? In the end, the question is a much broader one: who has access to the political agenda, by what means, and what do they get in return [12]?

Several studies have shown the structural and recurring mismatch between citizens' political preferences and political decision-making spheres. In the USA, for example, there is a sustained dissonance between political (in) action and citizen aspirations around relevant issues like regressive taxation, which we have already identified as a cause of the growing inequality [13]. Why, then, the majority public will is not translated into policies that move in the same direction? Why this disconnect?

The shrinkage of the political decision-making space: how does it operate?

The ability of economic elites to capture the political sphere is one of the central issues when discussing the relationship between democracy and inequality. We need to view this capture as the expected outcome that results from deploying a set of corporate tools to increase profits by acting on a country's institutions, thus, ultimately, effectively operating

outside the realm of markets. Again, a review of recent history can help us understand the relevance of corporate political activism to the issue at hand. Let us ask ourselves some questions that, while often reiterated, not that often have been answered: what companies were bailed out during the 2008 crisis? Through what *political* processes were the costs of the previous crisis transferred to society? Anticipating the great debate to come: what companies will be bailed out from the ravages of the current COVID-19 pandemic? How will the political agenda be articulated, and what agents will take part in the deliberation?

Corporate influence on politics and public opinion is typically articulated within the institutional relations departments of large firms; through the support provided to particular political parties or non-profit organisations; via lobbies and by means of the creation of the right type of knowledge that defends their interests. What this obviously unequal struggle does is shifting the power differences common in the markets, now to the political realm. This type of activism becomes particularly effective when there is no public information about political decision-making procedures or there is widespread ignorance about the area to be regulated.

> The ability of economic elites to capture the political sphere is a central issue. Inequality is not only an a posteriori result of the political process but also, and above all, a cause that 'a priori' restricts the political sphere of action resulting in the expansion of already existing inequality

Lobbies usually develop their political agenda by generating attention for certain proposals, raising public awareness to certain issues, creating a sense of shared urgency and cooperating with or capturing agents or platforms that hold valuable information about the specific field in which they operate [14]. These measures are deployed in addition to other methods of direct (acquisition) or indirect (advertising) control that some companies, and always the largest, exercise over the media. This reduction in the scope of political debate to favour one of the many agents in our societies must be seen as a sheer exercise of *power* in the most sociological sense: the capacity to make an agent's political agenda a reality while pushing other agents in the same direction. Inequality is, therefore, not only an *a posteriori* result of the political process but also, and above all, a cause that *a priori* restricts the political sphere of action which ultimately results in the expansion of already existing inequality.

Political pluralism in crisis: where does the criticism come from?

Thus, the disproportionate power of these agents has a precise impact on political mechanisms that is found at the heart of a weakening of democracy. At this point, if we are

to understand why we are talking about a crisis of liberal democracy, it is important to highlight the discrepancies between *ideal* democracy and *effective* democracy. On this topic, the classical pluralist approach argues that power in a society is relatively dispersed (which is not in the hands of specific agents); that the disparity of competing political interests determines political compromise where everyone wins a little (i.e., alliances of interests are thus likely); that the balance of power is permanently reconfigured to follow the changing interests of the agents (the same coalition of interests does not always win); that the state acts as a neutral arbiter for these different interests (political neutrality of state institutions is therefore assumed); that interest groups must seek the support of the majority of voters; and that the separation of powers prevents any abuse of the various powers of the state [15].

However, the controversy that repeatedly accompanies the sentences handed down by the higher judiciary bodies in democracies like ours (or that of the United States) should lead us to consider whether the concentration of power, economic in this case, has a tangible impact on the division of powers and the proper functioning of the democracy, particularly in relation to the ideal framework described above by political pluralism. Perhaps, therefore, we must restrict our definition of what a democracy is and how it can be transformed in the face of inequality. A minimal, non-systemic, liberal and individual-based definition would understand democracy as the effective ability of citizens to determine the political agenda of governments *lato sensu*. Do we really have that? Sociologist Colin Crouch, for example, describes the progressive diminution of the space for political debate under the very real influence of the inequalities discussed earlier as *post-democracy* [16]. In contrast to pluralism, then, recent years have seen a resurgence of critique coming from the field of elite theory. An approach that departs precisely in the recognition of the inequal distribution of power in a society and explores how that inequality materialises in the political sphere.

It is important to highlight how the naïveté of the pluralist approach has come under fire from all sides of the ideological spectrum, not just the left. In the United States, conservative political scientist Francis Fukuyama has underlined the role of economic elites in perpetuating inequality by the recurrence of applying political pressure to the legislative power. Similarly, libertarian economist and former Republican party adviser Randall Holcombe exposed the decline of competition as the result of the control that economic elites exert over American political institutions. Anne Case and Nobel Laureate in Economics Angus Deaton have repeatedly explained how the American pharmaceutical industry’s excess power is responsible for the destruction of the health of North-American citizens and the decline in life expectancy among the more impoverished segments of society. A fact which explains, by the way, a significant part of the Trump vote in 2016. Obviously, the most vehement attack on the idealised view of democracy has come from the ideological left. Thus, Chantal Mouffe sees the crisis of democracy and the rise of populism as an inevitable result of the major imbalance between corporate interests and those of the rest social agents [17].

We should remind ourselves of an important fact: economic elites (corporate or individual) do not depend on the provision of public services, but on the macroeconomic regulators or

public institutions to be now seen mostly as customers. According to Fukuyama [18], the erosion of public services is precisely the result of the political machinery having been captured by the economic powers. A significant repercussion can be felt: citizen support for public services and, as a consequence, the quality of the said services are reduced. Meanwhile, the resources earmarked for monitoring and auditing these underperforming services are increased so that, gradually, they become entangled in a bureaucratic web that ends up benefitting the private sector. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy: the spread of suspicion around public services accentuates their decline. The inequality of power, once again, widens the income gap. Importantly, the state-provided social safety-net is simply not an option that can be cast aside by the lower-income segments of society. Public services, we must insist, are an integral part of citizens' indirect salary. Ultimately, their erosion will also corrode the social contract on which the legitimacy of our political system is based.

The narrative of inequality: what has changed in the public debate?

The most recent debate around inequality and democracy inevitably falls back on classic debates that expose the relationship between inequality and economic models. Thus, we know that a rise in inequality in a society increases the volume of private resources filtered into the speculative economy, while those filtered into the real economy and consumption decrease. Mounting inequality also fuels doubts about the collective benefit of the various globalising waves we find behind each new international trade agreement. Treaties, by the way, that are increasingly questioned and transversally resisted [19]. In any case, cracks are undeniably appearing in the social, political and even academic consensus around mottos such as trickle-down economics, which justifies short-term raising inequality from economic growth by pointing to its redistributive effect in the medium term [20]. Unfortunately, this has simply not happened.

Let us not forget that the German export miracle occurred on the social basis of the 2010 Agenda sponsored by left-wing parties at the turn of the century which ultimately created mini-jobs that reinforced the country's growing inequality. Likewise, until the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump's economic miracle was sustained by an unemployment indicator that favoured the creation of precarious jobs, the progressive indebtedness of citizens struggling to maintain inherited consumption patterns, and the mirage effect of an inflated stock market due to the massive influx of global speculative capital. All this in a country where one per cent of Americans have shares worth $ 14 trillion while the poorest 50% barely reach $ 0.16 trillion [21]. An economic model that saw the price of Amazon shares rocket during the pandemic, while the company itself lead the ranking of companies employing low-paid workers forced to supplement their wages with public aid [22].

However, there has been a tangible shift in the discourse on how to correct inequality over these last years. The International Monetary Fund has been calling for corrections in fiscal progressiveness, increases in health investment, education and even the creation of a universal basic income for years. Similarly, the OECD has put addressing tax evasion, the downward tax race and the unfair competition of tax havens firmly on its political agenda.

All are measures that seek to reverse inequality and patch up the social contract that underpins the legitimacy of public institutions.

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Systemic criticism, however, reminds us that these measures do not correct the *structural* dynamics of an economic model that generates growing and also increasingly synchronised financial crises; that considers the destruction of the *creative* productive fabric to be the inevitable collateral damage of technological change, and that concentrates the wealth of many into the hands of a few. And we can be fairly certain that the initial analyses of the pandemic's impact on individuals according to their social class and country of origin will only add more fuel to the fire in this already heated debate [23].

Inequality and democracy: what to do?

The stability of our political system hinges on its ability to prevent our democracies from serving the interests of a minority. This, therefore, implies that its stability calls for the strengthening of distributive policies; implementing measures to curb the political activism of large corporations and balancing each other's capacity to place our problems at the centre of the political agenda. An about-turn that calls for other interventions along the lines set out above: genuine progressive tax reform (the *google tax* or a minimum tax on transnational corporations, for example); fighting tax evasion from weighty taxpayers; limiting the scope for speculation with special attention paid to housing [24] and protecting labour wages, particularly there where digital platforms are concerned.

However, the magnitude of the challenge would require even more drastic actions in the economic field. A set of initiatives that necessarily would involve incorporating workers onto the boards of large companies, strengthening the trade union movement where it is most challenged (again, the digital platforms) and eradicating sovereignty transfer mechanisms, for example, in trade agreements that currently allow corporations to bypass the jurisdictional scope of the nation-state [25]. In other words, a strong democracy cannot exist if this democracy does not extend its presence to the economic sphere and reduces the extractive tendencies (in terms of people and natural resources) of our current inequality-expanding economic model.

All in all, the logical conclusion of the debate that has brought us thus far, is that inequality in a democracy should be regarded as an unintended consequence of inefficient political action. Therefore, we should accept that it is a choice that can be reversed, should that be the majority will of a society [26]. Ultimately, democracy and equality are intrinsically linked: one cannot function without the other. After all, the only alternative to equality is

authoritarianism.

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1 — See Milanovic, B. (2019). *Capitalism, alone: The future of the system that rules the world*. Harvard University Press; Mounk, Y., & Foa, R. S. (2018). The end of the democratic century: Autocracy's global ascendance. *Foreign Affairs*, 97(3), 29–36.
2 — Well illustrated in Deaton, A. (2013). *The great escape: health, wealth, and the origins of inequality*. Princeton University Press.
3 — The quality of statistical data in the US allows us to observe how oligopolistic tendencies have reduced competition in practically all sectors and industries (see David Leonhardt's atricle at *The New York Times,* "The Monopolization of America"*,* available online). Spain is no exception, with the concentration of the banking system being an increasingly obvious example.
4 — Discussions around the existence of structural patterns of exploitation, which are inevitably linked to the extension of fiscal optimisation mechanisms, or economic power's drive to control the political agenda, could be introduced here. These points will be addressed later.
5 — Stiglitz, J. (2019). *People, power, and profits: Progressive capitalism for an age of discontent*. Norton, pp.86-87.
6 — Oxfam's recent report on inequalities puts this shift into figures, now amplified by COVID. For generic data on inequality and technological change, see Frey (2020). *The technology trap: Capital, labor, and power in the age of automation*. Princeton University Press.
7 — Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Harvard University Press.
8 — On the decline of the middle classes pre-1990s, see the article "La clase media española pierde peso y cae a niveles previos a los años 90", from *La Vanguardia*, available online. The 54% of fortunes in Spain are inherited: see the working paper "The Origins of the Superrich: The Billionaire Characteristics Database" (2016) from the Peterson Institute for International Economics. Available online.
9 — Mounk & Foa, *op.cit.*
10 — It is estimated that 95% of the 216 billion euros received by Greece between 2009 and 2015 went to rescue creditors. See "Most of Greek bailout money went to banks: study" at DW.COM. Available online.
11 — Extremely well explained in Beck, U. (2013). *German Europe*. Polity Press.
12 — Alternatively, following Bobbio, how is the balance between the two components of liberal democracy distributed: the *liberal* component that pivots on the concept of property, and its *democratic* element which articulates itself on the basis of popular will? See Bobbio, N. (2005). *Liberalism and democracy*. Verso, pp.1-3.

13 — Or action on climate change. See Gilens, M., & Page, B. I. (2014). Testing theories of American politics: Elites, interest groups, and average citizens. *Perspectives on Politics*, 12(3), 564–581.

14 — For an interesting approach to their methods of action, see Scott, J. C. (2018). *Lobbying and society: A political sociology of interest groups*. John Wiley & Sons. I have written a review in Murillo, D. (2020). Review of John C. Scott. Lobbying and Society: A Political Sociology of Interest Groups, Cambridge UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2018. *International Sociology*, 35 (5), 530-533.

15 — The work of reference here would be the classic by Dahl, R. A. (1961). *Who governs? Democracy and power in an American city*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

16 — Crouch, C. (2004). *Post-democracy*. Cambridge: Polity.

17 — Fukuyama, F. (2014). America in Decay: The Sources of Political Dysfunction. *Foreign Affairs*, 93; Holcombe, R. G. (2015). Political capitalisme. *Cato Journal*, 35(1), 41–66; Case, A., & Deaton, A. (2020). *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. Princeton University Press; Mouffe, C. (2018). *For a left populism*. Verso Books. The reference for the increase in votes for Trump can be found in the article “Trump succeeds where health is failing” from *The Economist*. Available online.

18 — Fukuyama, *op.cit.*

19 — The increasingly negative perception of globalisation in industrialised countries was highlighted during the 2016 American election campaign when citizen disapproval of the Trans-Pacific Alliance (TPP) led both candidates to reject it. This debate is reliably covered by Rodrik, D. (2011). *The globalization paradox: democracy and the future of the world economy*. W.W. Norton & Co.

20 — *The sun always rises in the East* would be the Chinese version of the same idea. This quote, attributed to Deng Xiaoping in the 1970s, would attempt to justify the inequality produced by the country’s economic development. It was believed that the concentration of wealth in the eastern coastal provinces could be called upon to nurture, over time, the poorest western provinces. The reality has been quite different.

21 — See *The Triumph of Injustice* by Emmanuel Saez & Gabriel Zucman (available online). TaxJusticeNow.org.

22 — On workers struggling to make ends meet, see the article “Amazon’s warehouse workers struggle to make ends meet” at *Bloomberg News*. Available online.

23 — On this point, we would need to address issues such as the impact of COVID on the real wages received in the different social classes; the unequal opportunities to work remotely among citizens; and, inevitably, the availability of vaccines depending on the country of residence. While in Italy workers have seen their incomes fall by 4%, the same statistic is 56% in Peru. Unemployment has risen by 4% and 37% respectively. See data in the January 2021 International Labour Organisation (ILO) report. Not to mention the two hundred million people who have fallen into poverty as a result of the pandemic, definitively expanding inequalities (see a global analysis in the January 2021 Oxfam report). Finally, we should draw attention to the fact that, with rapidly growing poverty rates, the Spanish state is already on its way to imitating the patterns of inequality seen in countries like the United States, Great Britain and South Korea.

24 — Among the working classes, 60% of an individual's salary is spent on daily living costs such as food, supplies and housing, compared to 36% for those with higher incomes. See "La clase media española pierde peso y cae a niveles previos a los años 90", *La Vanguardia,* November 24, 2020. Available online.

25 — A much more controversial debate is the one that argues a universal basic income should be a matter of political priority, an initiative curiously defended from all sorts of ideologies and approaches. Here we should point out that the ultimate logic is always to shift the unwanted costs of the economic model into the public sphere without correcting the imbalances detailed above. These and other proposals are discussed, for example, in the works of Fray and Milanovic cited along this text.

26 — This is the central theory of Piketty, T. (2019). *Capital and Ideology*. Harvard University Press.



David Murillo

David Murillo is full time Lecturer at the Department of Society, Politics and Sustainability from ESADE's Business School-Ramon Llull University in Barcelona. He currently conducts research at the ESADE's Institute for Social Innovation in areas like globalization, social innovation, business ethics and critical management studies. He holds a PhD in Sociology by the University of Barcelona (UB), a Bachelor's degree in Humanities by the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) and a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration by the University of Barcelona. His research explores the intersection between economic globalization, social change and political impact. He authored the book *From Walmart to Al Qaeda. An interdisciplinary approach to globalization* (Routledge, 2017) and several academic papers published in journals such as *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*; *Globalizations, International Politics*; *International Sociology*; *International Review of Sociology*; *Organization*; *Business Ethics: A European Review*; *Journal of Business Ethics* or *Business Research Quarterly*.