

# introduction: the killing fields of inequality

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## **Book reviewed:**

### **The Killing Fields of Inequality,**

Göran Therborn (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 180 pp., ISBN: 978-0745662596

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## **Abstract**

Göran Therborn's recent book *The Killing Fields of Inequality* is an opportunity for political scientists to reconnect with a thematic that has for long been the pre-occupation of sociologists: inequality. The killing fields to which Therborn refers in the title of his book are inequalities of wealth, health, education, dignity, and so on. These inequalities are killing fields because they result in millions of premature deaths every year, not just in the Third World, but also in North America and Europe. And even when people survive inequality, their lives are limited by the inequalities they face. In *The Killing Fields*, Therborn examines the different 'fields' of inequality, examining the different ways in which inequality works, for instance through what he terms 'distanciation', and he identifies the critical battlefields on which the struggle against inequality has to take place. In their reviews of Therborn's book, Walden Bello, Joohee Lee and Shujiro Yazawa take a critical look at the different aspects of Therborn's argument, including the role of the middle classes, the concept of distanciation and Therborn's use of Amartya Sen's capability approach.

**Keywords** capability approach; distanciation; inequality; middle classes; sociology

**I**nequality kills, and it kills in many different ways. Inequalities of wealth, health, education, dignity, and so on and so forth – these are the killing fields to which Göran Therborn refers in the title of his book *The Killing Fields of Inequality*. These inequalities are killing fields because they result in millions of

premature deaths every year, not just in the Third World, but also in North America and Europe, Japan and elsewhere. And even when people survive inequality, their lives are limited by the inequalities they face. In *The Killing Fields*, Therborn – one of the great sociologists and political scientists of our time – examines the

different 'fields' of inequality, examining the different ways in which inequality works, for instance through what he terms 'distanciation', and he identifies the critical battlefields on which the struggle against inequality has to take place. In their reviews of Therborn's book, Walden Bello, Joohee Lee and Shujiro Yazawa take a critical look at the different

aspects of Therborn's argument, including the role of the middle classes, the concept of distanciation and Therborn's use of Amartya Sen's capability approach. Therborn's work is a welcome opportunity for political science to reconnect with a thematic that has for long been the pre-occupation of sociologists: inequality.

# inequality, democracy and the middle class

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Let me say first of all that I am very grateful to have been invited to take part in this Review Symposium on the latest book of one of the giants of our profession, Göran Therborn.

The *Killing Fields of Inequality* begins with a salutary reminder to our profession about how long it has taken sociology to arrive at an engaged investigation of inequality and its social ramifications. Indeed, while inequality became a central concern in other fields in the last quarter of the twentieth century owing to the influence of the political philosopher John Rawls and the economist Amartya Sen, the study of inequality in sociology remained sanitized and pigeonholed for the longest time in a sub-discipline labeled social stratification and social mobility. Not only was inequality shorn of its explosive political and ethical

connotations in the name of objectivity by a field eager to establish its scientific credentials, but the conceptual framework in which academic investigation was carried out was that of functionalism, which dominated American sociology for much of the twentieth century. In this paradigm, the question posed was from a conservative standpoint that could only elicit conservative answers: What role does inequality play in system maintenance?

The book's main message is that no matter how you look at it, whether in terms of wealth, education, status or hierarchy, those on the lower end of the scale have a lower average life span than those at the top. Chronic diseases also arrive substantially earlier. This is not simply a case of malnutrition and bad diets, but psychological stresses associated with job