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Globalized Labour Markets and Social Inequality in Europe

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Foreword

Gosta Esping-Andersen

That we live in an increasingly globalized society is indisputable in terms of communication, trade and finance. But, aside from making international transactions easier, is globalization having any direct and significant influence on human lives, in general, and on life chances in particular? And if so, exactly how are such effects brought about?

The globalization literature is ripe with claims that reach almost revolutionary dimensions. At the macro level, globalization is said to push nations towards a (lowest) common denominator in terms of all-out deregulation and less social protection. As institutional buffers erode, citizens come to experience an intensification of risks, family and work life becomes increasingly precarious, and societies will become ever more individualized. All told, one prevalent view is that globalization promotes a convergent scenario of less community, weaker solidarities and more inequality.

These are strong claims indeed and, unsurprisingly, many social scientists remain quite sceptical, dismissing such scenarios as speculative 'globaloney'. Scepticism would seem warranted since so much of the globalization literature makes the case primarily on conjecture. It typically offers little in the way of systematic and rigorous empirical scrutiny. Indeed, even a rather superficial review of the empirical literature over the past decades would suggest that such causal globalization claims lack credibility. The welfare state literature identifies reforms and adaptation, which is surely what one would expect. But the overwhelming conclusion is that there is little, if any, regime convergence or common race to the bottom. The dominant trend is one of path-dependent policy-making (Pierson, 2001; Palier, 2010). As this book demonstrates, the same is pretty much the case for the deregulation hypothesis.

As far as people's lives are concerned, there is certainly mounting evidence that inequality and job precariousness are on the rise, but is this really caused by globalization? Even a cursory glance across the advanced nations would invite caution. Wage and income inequality has risen spectacularly in some countries, such as Britain, but not in others, such as the Netherlands (Salverda et al., 2009). As the Netherlands is one of the world's most globally integrated economies, one would have expected exactly the contrary. A minimal criterion for

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whether a scientific argument is solid is that it must confront rival explanations head-on. Among economists there is broad support for the thesis that rising wage inequalities are driven by technological change and how education systems have adapted to this (Goldin and Katz, 2008). Where the demand for skills outpaces supply, those with strong human capital will race ahead of the rest. Alas, much of the globalization literature has been rather cavalier about applying the basic Popperian criteria of scientific validation. The challenge we face is to get the causal mechanisms right.

To get at the true causal relations we need to focus on variation and not just on apparent commonalities. A common characteristic of so many globalization writings is their exclusive attention to (purported) similarities. It is in this respect that the research produced under the GLOBALIFE project and the subsequent TransEurope network, led by Hans-Peter Blossfeld, merits special attention. Focusing explicitly on variation between and within countries it is uniquely positioned to distinguish genuine from apparent convergence.

Getting it right is a huge and challenging undertaking since we need to establish if, how, and to what extent, massive global forces work their way down to the everyday life experiences of Mr and Mrs Jones and their children. The essence of the approach taken by Blossfeld and his colleagues is to identify commonalities and variation across nations, institutions and individual life-course trajectories. Buchholz et al. (2009) provide a very good overview of its analytical logic. Previous publications have focused on younger and older workers, on women's and on men's careers. In this, the most recent study, the same core approach is now applied to questions related to social stratification. Is it true, as so often asserted, that globalization promotes deregulation, tout court? Does this, in turn, promote new but similar patterns of inequality? And, are the effects universal or selective? This book, in other words, addresses fundamental sociological questions.

Bringing it all together with such ambition is clearly beyond the reach of any mortal sociologist. The approach, therefore, is collaborative comparison. A team of first-rate European social scientists compare across nine European countries that, largely in pairs, represent distinct welfare state and labour market regulation models. These cases serve to test two links in the purported causal logic; in the first place, whether national institutions are converging; in the second place, whether life-course inequalities line up similarly cross-nationally or, alternatively, whether they reflect national institutional idiosyncrasies. This is clearly the litmus test.

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From the empirically rich and detailed country studies we obtain systematic confirmation that there is little, if any, international convergence in terms of social institutions. There is precious little to support the notion of an omni-potent globalizing ogre. Rather, the case for the path-dependency perspective is strong. This implies that emerging patterns of labour market stratification differ across countries in ways that, broadly speaking, reflect the core characteristics of national institutions. There are winners and losers, as always, but they line up so differently from one regime type to another that their respective lot in life simply cannot be ascribed to globalization. In Scandinavia, very much thanks to proactive welfare states, inequalities remain comparatively modest; in Continental Europe, especially in the South, the insider–outsider cleavages persist and may even strengthen; where liberalization and deregulation has gone furthest, as in Britain, is where overall inequality has risen the most – mainly because individual skills play a far greater role than collective cushions.

In many respects the two ex-communist countries included, Estonia and Poland, provide the single most telling comparison. Although the two regimes are still in a process of transition, they are institutionally moving in opposite directions – Estonia embracing the liberal model, and Poland favouring a conservative ‘male breadwinner’ bias. The patterns of social stratification are, in these countries, no doubt still in flux and, yet, the data lines up quite well in terms of expected regime effects: Estonia shares many of Britain’s inegalitarian attributes, and Poland harbours the potential for insider–outsider cleavages quite similar to those found in countries like Italy – older workers do well while the young are the losers.

The conclusion is clear: institutional differences create different inequality structures. And the twain appear, broadly speaking, quite impermeable to any identifiable forces inherent in the globalization process. This is, in a double sense, a very important message. First, it is good news for humanity. We are not defenceless victims of anonymous and inevitable forces beyond our control. We can build institutions, communities and solidarities, and these truly matter for how our lives unfold. Secondly, the findings from this book (and its predecessors) suggest that way too many social scientists have been barking up the wrong analytical tree over the past decades.

As C. W. Mills argued almost half a century ago, good social science must be able to connect private troubles and public issues. In and of itself, this is not a very controversial dictum. The question is how the connections are made. This means getting at the social mechanisms that

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guide and shape the life chances of citizens and identifying the reasons why they make some into losers and others into winners.

The single best way to identify whether the connections are also causal is to make experiments. This is clearly not an option for the kind of research that this book represents. Simulations offer an alternative that I, as foreword writer, would like to propose to Blossfeld and his collaborators. As with this, the most recent book, they have spawned a number of very important academic contributions. And there may – hopefully – be more to come. I would very much welcome one that answered questions like: ‘What would Danish life-course inequalities look like if Denmark was saddled with Italy’s system of labour market regulation?’ Or ‘what would Italian women’s career paths look like if Italy imported the Danish public sector?’

In the meantime I would like to thank Hans-Peter Blossfeld and his colleagues because they have, indeed, given us the right kind of good social science.

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Preface

Though there have been animated discussions in academia, politics and the media about the impact of global competition and flexibilization on the work lives of individuals in modern societies, little is known about the topic in a systematic, empirically well-grounded, comparative perspective. There are yet no cross-national analyses on the topic which cover a broad range of countries reflecting different 'welfare arrangements'. Based on a large number of sample countries, Hans-Peter Blossfeld and his research group recently published four different books that analysed the effects of the globalization process on specific transitions within the life course, (1) the transition to adulthood (Blossfeld et al., 2005, 2009), (2) the careers of mid-career men (Blossfeld, Mills and Bernardi, 2006), (3) the life courses of mid-life women (Blossfeld and Hofmeister, 2006) and (4) the late careers and the transition to retirement (Blossfeld, Buchholz and Hofäcker, 2006). However, these research results do not allow the drawing of more general conclusions about the variation in modal flexibility strategies applied by different countries in the globalization process. The examination of the dynamics of the development of social inequalities in different countries as a whole hence remains beyond their scope. This provides the starting point for this edited volume which intends to fill this gap by providing an up-to-date account of globalization's influences on entire individual life-course patterns, employment lives and the development of social inequality in nine different modern societies, and of cross-nationally varying political strategies to mediate this influence.

More specifically, our book raises the following questions: How does globalization affect the careers of individuals in modern European societies? Is there a general trend towards more unstable careers in European societies or can we identify specific groups of employees/people who disproportionately suffer from increasing labour market risks? Who are the winners and who are the losers of the predominant flexibilization strategies applied in the nine different European countries under study? Do uncertainty, inequality and instability increase for all individuals or do traditional inequality patterns – based on educational resources and occupational class – persist? How does flexibilization impact on the employment careers and life courses of people in various employment regimes? Specifically, how do the domestic institutions in different

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nations filter the transformations caused by growing globalization? Does the trend towards more globalized labour markets cause the life courses and employment careers of individuals in European societies to become more alike, i.e. is there a convergence in career patterns? Or does path dependency in institutional development trigger the continuance of cross-national differences?

With its analyses and findings, this book provides essential empirical evidence in the highly controversial debates in sociology on the effects of globalization and flexibilization on single nation states, their welfare systems and their economies as a whole. Some globalization theorists indeed have argued that globalization heralds the end of the nation state (e.g. Ohmae, 1990) and leads to a convergence of institutional regulations. Our research findings do not provide support for such a theory of global convergence, but rather demonstrate that each nation effectively 'filters' and interprets similar globalization pressures in a unique and systematic manner. Furthermore, in contrast to popular theories within sociology (e.g. Beck, 2000; Giddens, 2000) – which argue that we are increasingly entering a 'classless' society where inequality infiltrates all groups in society – we argue that class structures continue to remain important under globalization. The single country studies of this book vividly demonstrate that globalization-induced insecurity is not spreading equally across all social strata, but is far more often channelled to specific disadvantaged groups, such as the low-skilled or least-educated, thereby not reducing but rather reconfirming or amplifying existing inequality structures.

This edited volume originates from a conference jointly organized by the Jean Monnet Chair for European Studies in Social Sciences at the University of Bamberg, funded by the European Commission, and the Research Networking Programme 'TransEurope – Transnationalization and Changing Life Course Inequality in Europe', funded by the European Science Foundation (ESF). During this conference, renowned experts in the social sciences brought together their most recent empirical findings and vividly discussed the consequences of globalization and flexibilization for the life courses of individuals in various different European countries. We are very grateful to both funding organizations for providing generous support for both this conference itself as well as the opportunity to publish its results into the edited volume at hand.

This work would not have been possible without the various contributors that provided the single case studies of globalization and its life-course repercussions as distinguished experts in their respective countries. We thus would like to sincerely thank all authors for their

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