

Tony Atkinson: The birth and development of modern inequality studies

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Anthony ('Tony') Atkinson occupies a unique place among economists. During the past half-century, in defiance of prevailing trends, he placed the question of inequality at the centre of his work while demonstrating that economics is first and foremost a social and moral science.

Tony published his first book in 1969. Between 1969 and 2016, he wrote over 40 books and more than 350 scholarly articles. They have brought about a transformation in the broader field of international studies of inequality, poverty and the distribution of income and wealth. Since the 1970s, he has also written major theoretical papers, devoted in particular to the theory of optimal taxation. Atkinson was always interested in practical issues of public policy and social justice, and understood that marrying theoretical analysis with a careful look at the actual data was the most powerful way to make progress.

Atkinson's most important and profound work has to do with the historical and empirical analysis of inequality, carried out within a theoretical frame, deployed with impeccable mastery and utilised with caution and moderation. With his distinctive approach, at once historical, empirical, and theoretical; with his extreme rigour and his unquestioned probity; with his ethical reconciliation of his roles as researcher in the social sciences and citizen of, respectively, the United Kingdom, Europe, and the world, Atkinson was for decades a model for generations of students and young researchers.

Together with Simon Kuznets, Atkinson single-handedly originated a new discipline within the social sciences and political economy: the study of historical trends in the distribution of income and wealth. Of course, the question of distribution and long-term trends already lay at the heart of 19th-century political economy, particularly the work of Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, and Karl Marx. But these writers could draw only upon limited data, and were frequently obliged to restrict themselves to purely theoretical speculation.

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It was not until the second half of the 20th century and the research of Kuznets and Atkinson that analyses of distribution of income and wealth could actually be based on historical sources. In his Kuznets (1953) masterwork, *Shares of Upper Income Groups in Income and Savings*, Kuznets combined the first systematic records of American national income and property (records that he himself had helped to create) and the data produced by the federal income tax (established in 1913, in the aftermath of a prolonged political battle), to establish the very first historical account of year-by-year income distribution.

In 1978, in *The Distribution of Personal Wealth in Britain*, a fundamental book (Atkinson AB and Harrison, 1978), Atkinson outstripped and overtook Kuznets: he made systematic use of British probate records from the 1910s to the 1970s to analyse in magisterial fashion the extent to which different economic, social, and political forces can help us understand the developments observed in the distribution of wealth, a distribution that was particularly under scrutiny during this period of exceptional turbulence. As compared to Kuznets' book, which was mostly concerned with the construction of the statistical database, Atkinson's book goes a step further, in the sense that it better articulates the data collection with the historical and theoretical analysis.

All subsequent work on historic trends in income and wealth inequality to a certain extent follow in the wake of Kuznets' and Atkinson's groundbreaking studies. In particular, the *World Wealth and Income Database* (WID.world) can be viewed as a mere continuation of the Atkinson-Kuznets agenda.

At a more personal level, I was very fortunate to meet Tony when I was a young student at the London School of Economics in the fall of 1991. His many advices, always delivered with infinite care and kindness, had a decisive impact on my trajectory. Soon after I published *Les hauts revenus en France au 20e siècle*, in 2001, I had the chance to benefit from his enthusiastic support. Tony was the first reader of my historical work on inequality in France and immediately took up the British case (where historical income data had not yet been exploited) as well as a number of other countries. Together, we edited two thick volumes that came out in 2007 and 2010, covering 20 countries in all. These works are the origin of the database WID.world, and also of my 2014 book *Capital in the 21st century*, which could not have existed without the support of Tony.

Leaving aside his historic and pioneering writings, Atkinson was for decades one of the leading international specialists doing comparative investigations on the measurement of inequality and poverty in contemporary society. He was also the tireless architect of projects for international cooperation on these subjects.

In his most recent book, published in 2015, *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* – wholly focused on a plan of action – Atkinson provided us with the broad outlines of a new radical reformism based on his many decades of research analysing inequality and public policy. Witty, elegant, profound, this book brings us the finest blend of what political economy and British progressivism have to offer.

Atkinson was a generous and rigorous scholar, a unique source of inspiration for all of us. He was also the kindest of mentors. Although he had been fighting a long illness in the last years of his life, he remained extremely active until the very end, continuing work on several big projects, and exchanging with his colleagues and friends even in his last weeks. Atkinson died as inequality became probably the most pressing issue our societies are facing. His life was about creating the tools to measure, understand and

tackle inequality. His work will live as we continue confronting the problem of inequality. We will miss him deeply.

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Author biography

Thomas Piketty holds a doctorate from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) and the London School of Economics, for a dissertation on the theory of the redistribution of wealth. After teaching at MIT in 1993 -95 and undertaking research from 1995 -2000 at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, he was appointed professor of economics at the EHESS (2000) and became the founding director of the Paris School of Economics (2007). The author of major historical and theoretical work on the interplay between economic development and the distribution of income and wealth, he initiated the recent literature on the long run evolution of top income shares in national income (available in the *World Wealth and Income Database*). His work, challenging Kuznets' optimistic view of the relationship between development and inequality, focuses on the role of political, social and fiscal institutions in the historical evolution of income and wealth distribution. In 2014 the English publication of his *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* became a best-seller for its analysis of the implications for inequality of the relative rate of growth of inherited wealth and earned income.