BUSINESS & SOCIETY

Special Issue of Business & Society

Call for Papers

Economic Inequality, Business and Society

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Growing levels of economic inequality in society has become a serious concern for both developed and developing countries. Stakeholders cutting across the ideological spectrums have expressed concern about the current high levels of economic inequality in much of the developed world. Research in a number of disciplines, ranging from sociology to economics, has shown that economic inequality leads to lower human development (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) and is associated with many social ills, including lower trust, fewer opportunities for social mobility and lower investment in developing skills (please see Neckerman and Torche, 2007 for a comprehensive review). To arrest the growing inequalities and alleviate their effect on societies, economists and policy researchers have emphasized the role of the state in placing limits on income and redistributing income through taxation (Piketty, 2014; Alvaredo, Atkinson, Piketty & Saez, 2013).

As creators of wealth and its distribution to various stakeholders, business organizations have an undeniable role to play in current high levels of economic inequality. Yet, organizational researchers have been relatively silent on the role of the firm in economic inequality. For example, management research has studied firm actions relating to compensation, training, vertical integration, outsourcing, and offshoring – all of which have an effect on economic inequality, but have rarely viewed these actions through the lens of their distributional and social welfare consequences. Research in human resource management and organizational behavior has been concerned about wage dispersion and its consequences within the firm, but rarely examines its broader social consequences beyond the firm (Greenberg, 2010; Pfeffer, 2010). Similarly, the corporate social responsibility literature has, at best, offered only marginal treatments of income distribution (Utting, 2007). Issues related to living wages, fair trade, and the base of the pyramid have occasionally been explored, but questions about the broader corporate role in fostering inequality remain unanswered (Utting, 2007).

On the other hand, economic inequality can affect firms by influencing their strategic decisions such as where to invest or business practices such as human resource policies. When firms expand to geographic markets with different levels of economic inequality, they will face challenges as to whether and how to adapt their business strategies and practices. Ultimately, these decisions will affect firm performance. Taken together, bringing the firm into research on economic inequality is necessary in order to understand the broad range of its social, public health, and environmental consequences (Wilkinson, 2006; Bourguignon, 2000; Coondoo and Dinda, 2008), as well as to understand how such consequences affect firms (Bapuji & Riaz, 2012; Davis & Cobb, 2010).

A vibrant body of organizational research has examined the relationship between business and society by emphasizing a stakeholder approach to conducting business, base of the pyramid strategies to improve the lives of the poor, and social entrepreneurship to enhance the wellbeing in society. In addition, organizational research on socio-economic status as well as gender and racial inequality, have generated much needed insights into the relationship between business and society. These lines of inquiry have also not studied economic inequality.

This special issue is based on the premise that a better understanding of the relationship between business and society is possible by examining it within the context of rising economic inequality. Numerous ways exist to explore how firms contribute to societal economic inequality, but a few potential avenues are: the effect of offshoring on incomes, movement of capital across the world, the role of unions in wage-setting (Lommerud, Meland, & Straume, 2009), the role of technology and structure (Barley, 1990; Gupta, Chen, & Chiang, 1997), as well as the contribution of corporate governance and executive compensation (Bebchuk and Fried, 2004) in maintaining and increasing income inequality. An equal number of ways exist to explore how societal economic inequality might result in negative externalities to firms in the form of an erosion of institutions of governance that support business, a decline of a healthy labor pool that is physically able and mentally capable, and a decrease in social capital that facilitates knowledge sharing and innovation.

We are interested in a broad range of questions focused on linking business, society, and economic inequality. The questions listed below are merely meant as pointers to further illustrate the vision of the special issue editors. These are neither exhaustive nor comprehensive, and thus any related investigations of the topic will be equally welcome.

- What is the relationship between inequality, business, and society? What organizational and other theories are helpful to understand this relationship?
- What are the normative foundations of an evaluation of inequality? Is inequality fundamentally unjust? Are there acceptable levels of inequality? What criteria can be used in assessing such acceptability?

- How is economic inequality related to other forms inequality (gender, racial, and other social inequalities)?
- Who are the stakeholders related to inequality? How are they affected and what can they do to address the effects?
- What role did business play in creating, sustaining, or ameliorating economic inequality in a historical perspective? Do business research and practice have a moral imperative to address current growing inequalities?
- How does business affect economic inequality in different forms of capitalist organization (i.e. the Anglo-Saxon model, the Rhenish model, the Japanese/Korean model, etc.)?
- How does income inequality differ between developed and developing countries and what is the role of business in those contexts?
- What role do multinational enterprises play in creating economic inequality within the countries they operate and around the globe?
- How does economic inequality affect the strategies, structures, and performance of MNEs?
- How does economic organization, particularly offshoring (manufacturing, financial services, dispersion of business activities around the globe) affect income inequality?
- How does income inequality affect business – market structures, consumption patterns, business strategy, relevant institutions, role of business in society, entrepreneurship, etc.
- Can BOP approaches be used to address growing levels of inequality? Do BOP approaches need revisiting based on the level of inequality in a society?
- How does inequality affect social innovation? Can the latter be used to manage the former?
- Can the state play an effective role in curbing inequality? What are the potential firm-level consequences of state-led interventions in the service of reducing inequality?

Organizational research devoted to examining the firm-inequality relationship is at a very nascent stage and needs to draw on established research in other disciplines, as well as develop new theories by making broad connections between previously unexamined phenomena. Similarly, empirical examinations might have to make use of publicly available data and established methods, as well as creatively generate new data and methods to study this complex phenomenon. Therefore, we invite conceptual and empirical papers that offer substantial potential to result in high quality publications.

SUBMISSION PROCESS AND DEADLINES

Interested authors are encouraged to submit a 6-page proposal (excluding references and exhibits) to Hari Bapuji (inequalitysi.2014@gmail.com) through email by November 30, 2014. The guest editors will provide developmental feedback and invite authors of suitable proposals to submit a full paper to the special issue. In addition, potential authors may contact any of the guest editors to discuss initial ideas for papers. While interested authors are encouraged to make use of the guidance of the guest editors before submitting full papers, full papers may be submitted (and will be equally welcomed) even without prior consultation with guest editors.

The deadline for submission of all full papers (including papers that received feedback on their proposals) will be June 30, 2015. Authors should submit their manuscripts through ScholarOne

Manuscripts at http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/bas. Manuscripts should be prepared following the Business and Society author guidelines:
http://www.sagepub.com/journals/Journal200878/manuscriptSubmission.

All articles will be subjected to double-blind peer review and editorial process in accordance with the policies of Business & Society.

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