Social inequalities, injustices and crises have always been significant themes for historical and sociological research. Since the beginning of the financial crisis of 2007 they have also featured in public and scientific debates. Despite the increased recent attention, some of the central questions remain unanswered: under what conditions do social inequalities become an issue of scientific consideration, public attention, protest or political intervention? Are we facing a ‘new social question,’ or can recent developments be better understood if they are regarded as ‘crisis as usual’?

Of particular importance for the issue of social inequality was the ‘social question’ in the 19th century. In the wake of industrialization, the ‘social question’ involved social injustices such as poverty in emerging national welfare states. Today, sociological perspectives on inequalities and conflicts are different in that they span the gamut of social categories such as class, gender, ethnicity, legal status/citizenship and religion. However, historians point out that not all of these aspects are new. The consensus appears to be that the ‘old social question’ and contemporary social problems are due to normative evaluations of the illegitimacy of social inequalities. Within this framework, the Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology organized its 6th Annual Seminar on 4–6 June 2014 with the title “A New ‘Social Question’ or ‘Crisis as Usual’? Historical and Sociological Perspectives on Inequalities” to encourage transdisciplinary discussions on the topic. It brought together 150 scholars of varied disciplines.

Opening the conference with an argument against the popular use of the notion of “crisis”, Loïc Wacquant from the University of California Berkeley laid the groundwork for subsequent contributions. Beginning by establishing the etymology of the term as a moment of judgment and a transitional phase between established and emerging orders, he went on to present the case of the contemporary urban precariat as a self-perpetuating phenomenon and a new social question. Social inequality in Western Europe and the United States can be linked to the transformation of the concept of the ghetto from a vehicle of social organization to a stigmatizing zone of decreasing life opportunities. Wacquant argued that the emerging marginalized urban areas in Western Europe cannot be seen as ghettos, but rather “anti-ghettos” that suffer from multiple forms of destabilization.

The first day of the conference was also honored to serve as host to a photographic exhibition from a project by Hermine Oberück and Gertraud Strohm-Katzer. Oberück and Strohm-Katzer spent a number of years creating portraits of 70 individuals with immigrant backgrounds through photography and interviews. The authors of the project elaborated on the similarities and differences of issues expressed by their participants, the difficulty of integrating into German society and offered reflections on their own roles as culturally comparative researchers.

The second day of the conference delved into empirical studies from diverse perspectives and analytical discussions on the overall question of social inequalities and/or crisis. In the first keynote lecture of the day, Thomas Faist from Bielefeld University set the tone for a critical engagement with to the terminology of social questions and its power for understanding life chances. He claimed that there is indeed
a transnational social question, a truncated and displaced one, in relation to migration and spatial mobility in the contemporary European context. The dynamism of movement and counter-movement of economic liberalism and political populism produces not only very selective immigration policies but also fuels political conflict around migration, which is tied to manifold issues such as taxes, wages, crime and social justice.

The first part of the second day dealt with what is arguably one of the most traditional forms of crisis: revolutions. Contributions offered glimpses into the revolutions in Ukraine and Algeria by means of case studies and elaborated on new forms of digitalized activism. In addressing the issue of values and inequality in the current Ukrainian revolution and subsequent war, Svitlana Khutka showed that there is no revolutionary change in Ukraine because its two main requirements, shifts in personal values and change in the structure of the elite, are not fulfilled. She hypothesized that the transition experience decreases the correlation of civic political involvement and post-materialist values, especially evident in transition countries where higher level of declared protest activity readiness is higher and is better explained by economic and structural than political individual differences and values.

In the second contribution, Thomas Serres from Université Jean Monnet-Saint-Étienne provided the example of a quotidian situation of crisis in Algeria and argued that the fear of potential disorder suggested by a revolution is being used to ensure the status quo. This can be explained through the logic of “the dialectic of order and crisis,” where uncertainty provides possibilities for both radical change and perpetuation of the system. Revolution and reaction remain locked in an uncertain embrace. Rainald Manthe from Bielefeld University proposed the concept of global microstructures for studying the digitalized interaction of transnational social movements. He reckoned an interaction perspective allows for the analysis of two types of interactions in social movements - meetings and protests - under one analytical framework. This sheds light on their specific dynamics, similarities and differences. Manthe suggested taking into account both the face-to-face-interactions transpiring at demonstrations and meetings and computer-mediated communication, especially in social media like Facebook, blogs or Twitter.

Taking a historical perspective in the context of France, Sarah Haßdenteufel from Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main addressed the conference question as to how far the concept of exclusion reflects the transformation of social problems from the 1960s and how it acquired political attention in the 1980s. The emergence of the concept of social exclusion exemplifies how concepts describe, capture and address social inequalities. Haßdenteufel’s contribution shifted the focus of the conference from the tangibility of concrete case studies of crisis back to questions of terminology, preparing the stage for the subsequent keynote speech by Angelika Poferl from Fulda University of Applied Sciences.

Poferl’s speech approached the topic of human rights and their connections to questions of social inequality from a perspective based on a sociology of knowledge and a social constructivist approach. Her claims were two-fold: first, the development of a language of human rights makes it possible to de-legitimize social inequality and to create pressure to justify given situations and conditions; and second, the frame of reference of human rights foregrounds the experience of human vulnerability of human dependency.

The next part engaged with issues of social inequality and social justice by highlighting the positions of disparate actors, such as migrants, marginalized minorities, citizens as researchers and women. In the first contribution, Anna-Lisa Müller from Universität Bremen argued that the transformation of contemporary societies - and thereby also structures of social inequalities - have a spatial dimension. Through the example
of international migration she queried the social, political, economic and spatial dimensions of transmigrants and their interrelations with notions of inequality against the backdrop of equality.

Against the backdrop of increasing religious diversity in the last decades in the U.S., Aletta Diefenbach from Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main asked how far Islam pushes for egalitarian ideas and how organized American Muslims express critique towards the socio-economic situation in New York city. She proposed that there is no causal link between religiosity and social inequality. Sorin Gog from the University of Helsinki elucidated how processes of Europeanization, especially the transition from socialism to capitalism, produce hegemonies of transnational capital and welfare. These devaluate national forms of capital and institutions, producing new social exclusions, wide-spread peripheralization of poverty and ghettoization. Presented was the case of the Roma or Gypsies in Eastern Europe, which suggests that new EU member states have undergone an unequal and unbalanced process of integration leading to increased inequality.

Vando Borghi from Università di Bologna focused on the concept of Informational Basis of Judgment in Justice, or “the capability approach”. This he argues to be a valuable tool in collating and exploring possible exchanges among scientific strategies for accentuating the role of citizens’ qualitative experience and knowledge so as to pursue a deeper cognitive justice. He pointed out that the relations among social justice, information and processes of knowledge-making are critical terrains for understanding the social and institutional contexts of the free expression of the human right to research and information, and further to the pursuit of individually valued and freely defined life projects. This right is a collective responsibility, shared both by researchers and citizens.

The day culminated with a keynote speech from Sylvia Walby of Lancaster University, who aimed to narrate the crisis using the United Kingdom as the focus, to put democracy back on the sociological agenda in relationship to finance and to analyze gender as a multi-level system in relation to governance of finance. Walby argued that the financial crisis is a change path and can be described in two ways: as a cascading crisis and a gendered crisis. The cascade of the crisis from one institutional domain to another has led to a critical turning point in which the trajectory of the gender regime shifts away from a slow increase of gendered social democracy into rupture and a neoliberal trajectory of the gender regime. In contrast to class, it is rather the tipping point of the gender regime in the UK, which gives evidence to the intensification of an already existing neoliberal trajectory.

Delivering the first presentation and keynote lecture of the third day of the conference, Elmar Rieger from the University of Bamberg problematized the contemporary state of sociology as a social science. He evoked a comparison between the late Antiquity and the Hellenistic Period and the late 19th century and contemporary society by comparing the most prominent social theories of these respective eras as reflections of the societies they were produced in. Arguing that sociology no longer deals with a theory of the society, but rather topics that converge on questions of social policy, he contrasted its usefulness to tackling contemporary forms of inequality.

Following Rieger’s keynote lecture, the participants of the conference dealt with the connections between social class and the crisis. Topics ranged from the German labor unions’ policies and actions during the 1970’s oil crisis to questions of class and recognition in Hungary and further to the academic disinterest showed for class terminology among German researchers. All three contributions stressed the importance of class considerations in addressing the current situation. Sebastian Voigt of Institut für Zeitgesichte München-
Berlin began by arguing that a comparison between labor unions’ policy decisions during the Oil Crisis of the 1970’s aids in contextualizing the central issues of the late 2008s and the 2010s. One of these issues was elaborated upon in Ákos Huszár’s contribution, which problematized the issue of class in Hungary from the perspectives of social esteem and self-esteem. Huszár, who came from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, found large differences between ideas of the self and ideas of social standing and proposed analyzing the results further in a temporal and international context to gauge the relative society-wide significance of these discrepancies.

Expanding upon Huszár’s concerns, Carina Altreiter from the University of Vienna argued that, while social class as a term has fallen out of sociological vogue, it remains an important influence on current research. She exemplified the phenomenon in relation to the 1998 concept of „labor-power entrepreneur“ (Arbeitskraftunternehmer). Because the labor-power entrepreneur has not currently been discussed in the context of a class-informed habitus, Altreiter argued that certain trends in the 21st century workforce are being overemphasized at the behest of others, thereby skewing analysis.

Next the topic of the conference turned to the varied discourses of the crisis and their consequences on social inequality. The papers delivered all presented evidence of the adverse effects of unchecked privileged discourses, regardless of whether these rely on economic, sociological or political logic. Blagovesta Nikolova from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences presented a paper on the trapping consequences of social inequality discourses. She argued that addressing social inequalities on the basis of economic aspects ties these inexorably to monetary evaluations. Attempts to eradicate inequality suffer from the uncritical adoption of monetized language, which tends to isolate and externalize the problem.

Tomasz Warczok argued that social scientific discourse enforces the Post-Soviet inequality of the social structure of Poland. This discourse serves to assign a brand of maladjustment and backwardness on the working class, whose struggle against these classifications further legitimates them and establishes an unequal societal status-quo. Lastly, Manish Tiwari from the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi presented a case study of the Dalit political party BSP in Uttar Pradesh. Tiwari showed how caste identity has been used as a political rhetoric, sometimes with adverse effects, and argued that regardless of its seeming strengths current rhetoric based on caste identity in India suffers from empty populism.

The conference attendees were also fortunate to have the chance to hear a contribution by Svitlana Khutka on the state of the Euro-Maidan and the Ukraine during the elections. She quoted research data and polls showing the popularity of various alternatives to pacify the situation in Ukraine. Presented were views from both the Ukrainian and the Russian side, illustrating the often diverging interpretations of the crisis.

The last part of the conference was devoted to economic perspectives on the crisis. Here the discussion turned to the political uses of crisis thinking, to the factors contributing to the crisis and to its origins in Greece. Ben Merriman from the University of Chicago presented the case of contemporary American conservatism and the Tea Party as a political movement of often overestimated influence. Viewing the phenomenon as largely misunderstood, Merriman pointed, firstly, to evidence suggesting that the Tea Party is temporary and politically opportunistic congealing of conservative interests. Secondly, he demonstrated a lack of scholarly attention to the diffusion and adoption of new conservative policies. Together, he argued, these factors have led to a systemic overestimation of Tea Party and related political movements.
Following Merriman, Luigi Droste of the University of Münster presented the case of linking the dynamics of real estate markets with those of financial crises from the 19th century until present day. Tracing the history of multiple real estate bubbles leading to crises in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, he argued that shared characteristics between the two markets serve to aid the understanding of economic crises, practices of speculation, household debt and social inequalities. Droste exhorted future research to treat economic crises as more than credit “booms” and “busts”. Finally, the contribution by Panagiotis Manolakos from the Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences in Athens argued that the Greek experience of the late 2000s financial crisis should be seen in the context of both failed national political transformations, 1996-2009, and the architecture of the euro as a currency. Manolakos elucidated the developments leading up to the eruption of the crisis of the Eurozone and the reasons that exacerbated the Greek situation in ways that transformed it into a national crisis within a global crisis.

Wrapping up the discussion on economics and the conference as a whole, the keynote lecture of Hartmut Kaelble, who spoke on the topic of economic history and the development of social equality and inequality in Europe between the 1950s and 1970s. During this time the income levels and the forms of social inequality tied to them reduced all over Europe, in the United States and Japan, leading to the development of the Kuznets-curve. The conclusions Kaelble drew pointed to little evidence of the reduction of overall social inequalities as a consequence of the narrowed income gap and argued that while the period cannot be seen as entirely historically unique, neither can it be used directly as a policy guideline without misrepresenting the current social climate.

It is challenging to draw conclusions from the rich discussions and diverse talks but with no doubt, they have generated historical and sociological reflections with regard to rethinking theoretical and methodological questions about contested and sometimes even obfuscating terms such as social inequalities and crisis. The 22 contributions illustrated the importance of discussing certain historical periods as a way to reflect on current social, political and economic conditions. Several overlooked yet significant concepts such as space, transnationality, finance, human rights and social justice have been advanced in order to understand life chances in contemporary societies.

Conference overview

Welcome & Introduction: Prof. Dr. Thomas Welskopp, BGHS Director

Keynote Speech: Lifting the Veil of Crisis: Structure and Transformation in Urban Marginality. Prof. Loïc Wacquant, PhD, Berkeley/Paris

Different From What You Expected Once Again – Experience From an Exhibition Project with Immigrated People. Hermine Oberück and Gertraud Strohm-Katzer, Bielefeld.

Introduction, Day 2

Chairs: Karolina Barglowski & Christian Ulbricht

Keynote Speech: On the Transnational Social Question in Europe: Social Inequalities in Mobility/Migration. Prof. Thomas Faist, PhD, Bielefeld.

How Values and Inequality Impact Protest Behavior in Ukraine and Post-Socialist Societies. Svitlana Khutka, Kiev.

Managing Crisis, Avoiding Revolution: On Southern Protests and Perpetuation of Order in Algeria. Thomas Serres, Saint Étienne.

Bringing Interaction Back In: Transnational Social Movements as Global Microstructures. Rainald Manthe, Bielefeld.
A "New Social Exclusion" or "Social Inequalities as Usual"? The Political Debate on Social Exclusion in France 1960-1990. Sarah Haßdenteufel, Frankfurt am Main.


Muslim Imaginaries on Economic Inequality in New York City. Aletta Diefenbach, Frankfurt am Main.


Keynote Speech: Gender and the Crisis: Is This "Gendered Austerity as Usual" of "a Turning Point in the Trajectory of the Gender Regime"? Prof. Sylvia Walby, Lancaster.

Introduction, Day 3
Chairs: Henrik Dosdall, Paul-Matthias Tyrell, Dorothee Wilm


Structural Transformations and New Challenges. The Reaction of Western German Labor Unions to the Multifaceted Crisis of the 1970s. Sebastian Voigt, Munich.

Class and Recognition. Ákos Huszár, Budapest.


Social Inequalities in the Discursive Trap of "Poverty" and "Distance". Blagovesta Nikolova, Sofia.


Symbolic Domination and Social Sciences. (Re)production of (Semi)Peripheral Inequalities through Sociological Discourse. Tomasz Warczok, Warsaw.

Caste Inequality as Political Rhetoric: A Case of BSP in Uttar Pradesh India. Manish Tiwari, New Delhi.


Real Estate Markets and Financial Crises. Luigi Droste, Münster.
