

UNSUSTAINABLE INEQUALITIES:

Social Justice and the Environment

Lucas Chancel

Translated by Malcolm DeBevoise

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020. vi, 175 pp.
cloth, ISBN: 9780674984653

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In the English translation of his 2017 book, *Unsustainable Inequalities*, French economist Lucas Chancel takes on the subject of inequality and seeks to understand it in the context of environmental sustainability. Exploring the relationship between sustainability and socioeconomic inequality, he brings attention to the policies developed at global climate summits over the last thirty years to understand how these goals, agreements, and policies might work to reduce inequality while still adequately protecting the environment. The author notes that there has always been a sense of tension between reducing socioeconomic inequality and protecting the environment and this tension has revealed itself in the way policies are created and acted upon. He uses this work to show that this tension need not be—that there are ways to achieve both pursuits simultaneously without detriment to the other. Drawing on some of his own previous work and data collected for the World Inequality Database (WID.world), Chancel paints a clear portrait of how unequal access to resources, exposure to risk, and responsibility for pollution ultimately cost us more in the long run. With ample data presented from several case studies, he clearly and effectively demonstrates that reducing these inequalities through data-driven policy making can help us achieve true sustainability and equity by placing environmental resiliency and socioeconomic equality at the forefront of our global policy strategies.

Throughout the book, he explains why the need to reduce inequality is inextricably linked with the need to protect the environment. He successfully argues that these two pursuits are not mutually exclusive—in fact, we cannot pursue one and ignore the other without serious long-term consequences. He lays out his argument carefully in the course of the work; first, looking at the relationship between economic inequality and unsustainability—namely, what trends and policies drive these inequalities and what does this mean for the environment? He then tackles the vast intricacies of environmental and social inequality at the global scale to understand how these drive unsustainable practices and he teases out the historical precedents which laid the foundation for these inequalities to fester quietly until they would eventually explode in the face of a global pandemic. Finally, he lays out the policy implications of reducing inequality

and expanding environmental protection and shows how this might usher in a paradigm shift in how we address climate change for both people and the environment. Most importantly, however, he demonstrates a degree of optimism throughout, showing the reader that though the data are grim, all is not lost. We have a unique opportunity to begin the process of reversing the environmental, social, and economic ills of previous decades in order to forge a clearer, more resilient path for ourselves and future generations. Written clearly and concisely, this is an accessible book for those with or without a background in economic analysis and will prove to be highly relevant in the months and years ahead as existing socioeconomic and environmental inequalities are further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Part One, Chancel begins with describing how economic inequality is inherently bound up with unsustainable environmental practices. In describing the trends and drivers of economic inequality he identifies the principle causes and shows that while no one cause has overriding importance, each one represents a series of very specific and purposeful policy choices meant to maintain the status quo. A running theme throughout the work is that economic inequality has merged into political debates because of the threat it poses to global capitalism. The burgeoning political influence of those with increasingly vast amounts of private wealth subsequently drives the creation of policies which reinforce unsustainable practices and increase economic inequality. Bolstered by a good deal of country data detailing wealth and income disparities over the past several decades, the author shows us that these are not new problems and are, instead, the result of years of power-driven policy making. More importantly however, Chancel reminds the reader that because the driving forces behind unsustainability and inequality are policy *choices*, with the right political and moral will, these can be offset or overturned with more sustainable and more equitable policies.

In Part Two, the author sheds light on the ways pervasive social and environmental inequalities dampen our ability to fully realize the potential of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly. He argues that unequal access to resources, exposure to risk, and responsibility for pollution have created a situation where those living in poverty increasingly become more vulnerable to shocks—he refers to a “vicious circle” where these economic, social, and environmental inequalities are mutually reinforced. The author cites the need for the implementation of better social and environmental public policies which specifically work to interrupt these vicious cycles. He uses Part Three to provide an overview of potential policy strategies which, when successfully implemented, have the power to begin the process of reversing these inequitable and unsustainable policies. He argues that reducing disparities in exposure and risk at all scales is inseparable from the need to protect the environment and he draws a clear line for the reader between the evolution of these inequalities and how current policies and strategic frameworks continually work to exacerbate these problems.

Overall, this work is highly comprehensive and covers a great deal of ground without burying the reader in mounds of complicated datasets, which is so often the case when we delve into large amounts of country-level wealth and income statistics. It is interesting, however, that the author did not spend more time underscoring the effects of systemic and institutionalized racism while discussing the trends and drivers of socioeconomic inequality. He briefly touches

upon the effects of education inequality on Black student test scores in the United States and he mentions that Black Americans are far more likely to be exposed to lead and ambient air pollution than white Americans but he does not dig deeper into the historic zoning policies which worked to create these outcomes. The spatial remnants of redlining still have very real implications for people of color today. A deeper discussion of the evolution of systemic racism would have strengthened his argument that the trends and drivers of inequality are deeply ingrained in our policy making processes and represent decisions made by those in power to remain in power. Disaggregating the data by race would reveal an entirely new story, possibly one even more dire than what is told here but still crucial if we are to take the author's advice and tackle these wicked problems with better data and smarter policy choices. The decision to not include disaggregated data certainly does not lessen the importance of the work at hand, rather it provides fertile ground for future work that is focused on reducing inequality with even sharper data for stronger policy recommendations. Chancel finds a great deal of success in this work with his ability to get to the essence of social and environmental policies created at various scales and demonstrates how even small adjustments could make a true difference to the very real individuals who suffer the inequalities we tend to discuss so broadly. Ultimately, we must remember that when we talk about "inequality" as a concept, this is, in fact, the lived reality for billions of people worldwide and the consequences of inaction are and will continue to be catastrophic. The author carries this understanding throughout the book, letting the reader know that the reality we currently face can be changed for the better when we are armed with sharp data and the right amount of political and moral willpower.