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## CLASHING NARRATIVES ABOUT ECONOMIC INEQUALITY IN THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIOLOGICAL TEXTBOOKS

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## Clashing narratives about economic inequality in the economic and sociological textbooks

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**Abstract:** Students of introductory economics courses pointed out that economic inequality is the most significant challenge in the 21st century (Bowles & Carlin, 2020). However, there is limited research on how this issue is portrayed in introductory textbooks. Our study aims to investigate the presentation of economic inequality in economics textbooks compared to sociological ones. We conduct a mixed-method study to examine differences in how introductory economics and sociology textbooks portray economic inequality. By focusing on the comparison between economic and sociological textbooks, we aim to highlight the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to studying economic inequalities, as advocated by economist Thomas Piketty (Korom, 2019). Comparing textbooks across disciplines is essential for informing curriculum development, encouraging interdisciplinary learning, and enhancing the relevance of education to real-world issues. This comparison provides insights that help integrate diverse perspectives on economic inequality into educational practices in both disciplines. Our analysis includes twelve introductory economics textbooks and three introductory sociological textbooks. We find significant differences: top-selling economics textbooks focus on statistical measurements of inequality and the trade-off between equality and efficiency, while sociological textbooks consider economic inequality from historical, cultural, and philosophical perspectives.

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**Keywords:** income inequality, wealth inequality, textbook analysis, narrative economics, qualitative research

**JEL codes:** A23, D63

## 1. Introduction

Over the decades, economic inequality was not a popular subject among economists; it was a controversial and unappealing topic for research (Griswold & Theine, 2020). For instance, Milanovic (2007), a leading economist on economic inequality, recalls being discouraged by older colleagues from tackling the topic early in his career. This discouraging attitude was also reflected in economic education. Hill and Myatt (2010b) noted that mainstream economic textbooks confined the discussion of economic inequality to the trade-off between equality and efficiency.

The marginal treatment of inequality in mainstream economics is not accidental. It reflects broader, long-standing tendencies within the discipline that can be understood as crises of rationality, meaning, and data abundance. In practice, this means that introductory textbooks often narrow their conceptual scope, shy away from interpretive discussion, and lean heavily on technical measurement. Akerlof (2020) has described such situations as “sins of omission” where important phenomena are left unexplored because they are impossible to examine in a purely quantitative way. We argue that the way narrative is presented overlooks the historical and social context necessary to fully understand economic inequality, thereby reducing its depth and relevance in economic textbooks.

Textbooks, however, do more than transmit information: they create collective ways of thinking (Bäuerle, 2021). In this sense, the *Principles of Economics* genre functions almost like a “Bible” of economics, shaping how generations of students imagine the economy. The authority of textbooks is reinforced by a style of presentation that combines simplified diagrams, formal models, and a rhetoric of scientific neutrality. As McCloskey (1985) argued in her work on the rhetoric of economics, what persuades in economics often comes less from the evidence itself and more from how arguments are framed, narrated, and visually displayed. In the classroom, charts and trade-off curves often gain a quasi-sacred status, directing attention toward efficiency and away from questions of distribution. We focus our research on introductory textbooks. Siegfried and Latta (1998) estimated that roughly forty per cent of undergraduates in the United States enroll in at least one economics course. These courses attract future economists and students from diverse academic disciplines (Maesse et al., 2022), mainly relying on standard textbooks. Klamer (1990), Mankiw (2016), and Bowles and Carlin (2020) have noted that these introductory courses have the potential to shape the political beliefs and opinions of future voters, as many students will

likely never attend any other economics course. Therefore, the absence of specific topics in introductory economics courses can result in misunderstandings and contribute to the spread of inaccurate knowledge or even fake news (Giroux, 2018).

These considerations motivate the central question of this study. We ask whether introductory economics textbooks adequately address topics of pressing public concern and, if not, how these omissions might shape students' understanding of the economy. Piketty's 2014 publication sparked significant public interest in economic inequality. It became one of the best-selling non-fiction books, marking a turning point in economists' perception of the topic. Additionally, for most students in introductory economics courses, rising inequality is the most pressing economic issue (Bowles & Carlin, 2020). Given that over a decade has passed since Piketty's publication, we examine whether introductory economic textbooks now reflect students' and the public's interest in economic inequality and how this crucial topic is portrayed.

Researchers have examined what economic textbooks teach about income and wealth inequality (Colander, 2017a; Hill & Myatt, 2010a). However, these were not interdisciplinary studies that compared the economic approach to teaching these issues with those presented by other social or humanistic sciences. This is partly due to the lack of interdisciplinary research on the subject (Piketty, 2020). To give this study an interdisciplinary character, we decided to expand on the comparative research initiated by Korom (2019), which analyzed economic and sociological textbooks together. Why did we adopt introductory sociological textbooks as a benchmark? First, economics and sociology differ significantly in presenting social problems qualitatively and quantitatively. These differences shape the way inequality is presented in textbooks. We hypothesize that significant variations exist in: (1) the concentration and frequency of the topic across chapters, with economic inequality appearing more often in sociological textbooks; (2) the main themes and contexts in which economic inequalities are discussed, where sociology tends to integrate these issues with various other topics, whereas economics treats them as a distinct subject; and (3) the contextual and interpretive approaches to economic inequality. Economic textbooks focus on statistically measuring inequality and the trade-off between equality and efficiency. In contrast, sociological textbooks offer a more nuanced understanding of the causes, consequences, and historical context of economic inequality.

Our study is exploratory in nature. Testing obvious hypotheses seems unnecessary, as their validity can be confirmed through experience, simply by reading and comparing any economic and sociological textbook. However, the question remains: *how significant are these differences, and how do the narratives about inequality in these textbooks diverge?*

This study aims to assess the magnitude and nature of differences in how economics and sociology textbooks present inequality. To achieve this, we employ two interdisciplinary approaches. First, we use a quantitative method typical of economics—statistical text analysis techniques. This enables us to quantify differences through measures such as term frequency analysis, readability index scores, and topic modeling (Bowles & Carlin, 2020). We also construct a language corpus and provide online analysis tools, allowing readers to conduct their own comparative studies. These tools enable the systematic and quantitative evaluation of economics and sociology textbooks beyond the topic of inequality.

Second, drawing on sociological practice, we apply qualitative analysis that enables us to interpret the context, meaning, and narratives that may have been overlooked if the study was limited to quantitative methods alone (Shin, 2014).

## **2. Textbooks and Their Potential Role in Shaping People's Beliefs**

The word “textbook”, according to Patiniotis (2006), is defined as “a book containing a systematic presentation of the principles of a subject or a collection of writings dealing with a specific subject”, so in its nature it is standardized. The main task of a scientific textbook is to popularize principles of a discipline and communicate necessary academic jargon (Kuhn, 1970). Textbooks have the potential to be a representation of scientific consensus in a given discipline (Pritchard, 1993). They also spread and make scientific knowledge more accessible to a broader audience (Richardson, 2004). Textbooks themselves may be perceived as not so influential when students read them. Introductory courses in sociology and economics, which rely heavily on textbooks, have the potential to shape the political beliefs and opinions of future voters, since many students will never take more than the introductory course, as shown by studies in economics by Klamer (1990), Mankiw (2016), and Bowles and Carlin (2020), and in sociology by Keith and Ender (2005) and Wagenaar (2004). Most instructors of introductory courses in economics and sociology base their curriculum on textbooks (in economics: Chingos & Whitehurst, 2012;

in sociology: Best & Schweingruber, 2003). Therefore, examining those textbooks provides a good approximation of the course content and what students have learned from taking the course. Moreover, sociologists and economists examine introductory textbooks to determine what the core of the disciplines is (Coyle, 2010; Lynch & Bogen, 1997), as those introductory textbooks in both disciplines appear to have the power to affect mainstream thinking (Keith & Ender, 2005).

Nowadays, economics and sociology both rely heavily on textbooks in introductory courses, making them ideal material for analyzing the development of disciplinary doctrines. While the two fields assign similar definitions and roles to introductory textbooks, their characteristics and trajectories differ. In both disciplines, textbooks gained prominence after World War II, but their origins and subsequent evolution followed distinct paths.

#### *Sins of economics and sociological textbooks*

According to Kuhn (1970), teaching should not rely only on textbooks but also include complementary materials and readings to increase students' awareness of the diversity within the field. Those complementary materials should help present multiple, equally valid theories and scientific explanations and encourage students to evaluate them independently. This strategy was employed in teaching economics prior to the widespread use of Samuelson's textbook (1948). Samuelson's *Economics: An Introductory Analysis* (1948) revolutionized the teaching of economics and helped popularize the use of textbooks within the discipline (Lawson, 2015). Even Samuelson claimed that the subsequent editions of this textbook are valuable research material for examining the evolution of the economic discipline (Skousen, 1997). What is more, he believed that textbooks may shape political beliefs as "*I Don't Care Who Writes a Nation's Laws . . . If I Can Write Its Economic Textbooks.*" (Samuelson, 1990) According to (Klamer, 1990), Samuelson's textbook established the standard on the economic textbook market after WWII, and it was the first economic textbook for millions of students globally. Today, the vast majority of introductory economic courses are based on an economic textbook that is a descendant of Samuelson's prominent text (Bowles & Carlin, 2020).

Inspired by the article (Akerlof, 2020) and previous textbook research, we list the "*sins of omission*" of introductory economic textbooks. First on the list of "*sins of omission*" is avoiding controversies. The inspiration for Samuelson's textbook was Feynman's textbook in physics, not other social sciences. This helped create the image of economics as the most scientific of all the

social sciences (Denis, 2009). However, it also fostered an environment that avoids controversial topics, treats introductory economics textbooks as religious dogma, and shows little empirical evidence contradicting those dogmatic statements (Becker, 2007). According to Denis (2009), undergraduate programs in economics focus on the acquisition of mathematical skills instead of presenting scientific controversies, in order to be perceived as more scientific.

Second, the impartial style in which Samuelson's textbook is written is, on the one hand, advantageous but also helps to hide inconvenient controversies. According to Colander and Landreth (1996), Samuelson's textbook was written in a legal style, which made it challenging to attack him on political grounds. Lawson (2015) claims that there were other positions on the market, but Samuelson's textbook was not too scientific in its form, which seems to be far from any ideology or political orientation. These characteristics transitioned to other textbooks today. Klammer (1990) points out that economic textbooks seem to be similar in their tendency to hide controversies and remain apolitical on the surface. To this day, the majority of analyses include Samuelson's textbook (1948) to examine the similarity with other, more modern positions (Bowles & Carlin, 2020). The main conclusion of Klammer (1990) and Bowles & Carlin (2020) is that introductory textbooks do not include many changes and are similar to each other in the studied domain.

Third, economic textbooks do not provide an explanation of the discipline's development over time. According to Klammer (1990), they do not present this evolution to conceal the imperfections in theory and research. A few, such as Becker (2007) and Coyle (2012), advise that students should learn that economics has more unresolved and unanswered questions than answered ones.

The 2008 financial crisis sparked the call for change in economics textbooks. The failure to predict a crisis, despite the use of advanced statistical models awakened the need for alterations. However, Madsen (2013) analyzed how and whether authors of introductory economics textbooks have reacted to the 2007 financial crisis in their books. His main conclusion is that the response was moderate, and they summarized the financial crisis in a few added lines. Colander (2017) stated that there has been no change in mainstream economics, as most economists believe that the failure in the predicting the financial crisis was not caused by inadequate theories but by faulty economic engineering. Moreover, many economists, such as Mankiw (2020), an author

of the popular economics textbook, believe that we should incorporate even more mathematics and statistics into teaching economics.

Another proposal for reforming economics education was to respond to many years of research on faulty textbooks and to include a more interdisciplinary perspective. Coyle (2012) is one of the researchers who proposed a deep reform of teaching economics following the 2007 financial crisis, and she claims that if we want useful economists for society, we need to change the way we teach future economists. She is a supporter of teaching economics in a more pluralistic manner, incorporating economic history, the history of economic thought, and sociology, so that students can see the evolution of the discipline and raise awareness about past and present controversies.

In the case of sociology, on the other hand, the popularity of textbooks in introductory-level courses began before the Second World War (Hobbs, 1951, pp. 179-80). As sociology gained popularity after 1945, the bachelor courses in sociology required more accessible introductory materials – textbooks (Manza et al., 2010). In contrast to economics, there was no constant and clear leader over decades, like (Samuelson, 1948). In the sociological textbook market, every decade is characterized by different market leaders (Manza et al., 2010). Also, Herrick (1980, p. 618) found that catching up to the market leader in the sociological textbooks market was extremely rapid from 1950s to the 1970s. Therefore, even though there was no leader, all available textbooks were similar in content over time. Furthermore, similar to introductory economics textbooks, introductory textbooks in sociology are written in a noncontroversial tone (Ferree & Hall, 1996).

Like economics, textbooks are lagging in the inclusion of mainstream research (Lynch & Bogen, 1997). Moreover, scholars have found gaps between the introductory sociology textbooks and the state-of-the-art scientific articles (Hamilton & Form, 2003). Furthermore, textbooks also include journalistic articles from media outlets rather than sociological research (Carroll, 2017). One explanation for this is that authors of sociological textbooks do not teach and do not conduct research; they just write textbooks (Manza et al., 2010).

There is limited literature on the content of economic textbooks focusing on income and wealth inequality. Colander (2017) argues that mainstream economics has neglected income distribution and growing inequality, explaining income distribution through marginal productivity.

He states, “If income distribution is not to our liking, we need policies to redistribute income. Unfortunately, those policies are politically and administratively almost impossible to institute, so we are left in a policy bind” (Colander, 2017, p. 2). Despite expectations for increased focus on inequality after financial crises, as suggested by Rajan (2011), such interest has not been reflected in textbooks. Klamer (1990) notes that the distinction between positive and normative economics appeared after Nordhaus joined Samuelson. Klamer (1990) explains that Samuelson viewed economics as a science focused on description and prediction, while redistributive justice issues were seen as outside its scope. This emphasis on the scientific nature of economics, akin to physics, led to the omission of topics related to economic inequality.

In contrast to economic textbooks, the topic of inequality has been included in sociological textbooks since the 1960s and 1970s (Manza et al., 2010). Furthermore, there have been some analyses about how the poverty and inequality topics are portrayed in sociological textbooks (Ferree & Hall, 1996; Pritchard, 1993).

### **3. Quantitative Analysis**

We employ a mixed-method analysis. Advocates of mixed methods, such as Rheindorf & Rheindorf (2019), argue that combining qualitative and quantitative approaches provides a more comprehensive understanding by capturing both attention and narrative. Frequency analysis alone cannot capture how economic inequality is framed; numbers reveal attention but not meaning. First, we employ quantitative methods to examine the extent of attention devoted to economic inequality through frequency analysis and topic modeling, identifying potential themes for subsequent qualitative analysis. Following the pluralist methodological stance developed earlier, we integrate narrative analysis into this design: textbooks are treated not just as data points but as structured economic narratives whose framing cannot be reduced to counts. Then, we conduct a qualitative study to extract the precise meanings and contexts presented about economic inequality.

Our study is exploratory. Rather than testing formal hypotheses, we seek to address a set of research questions that help organize and systematize our analysis. Specifically, we ask whether introductory sociology textbooks address income and wealth inequality more comprehensively and critically than introductory economics textbooks. To examine this, we investigate:

**RQ1: (Frequency of Terms):** Is the frequency of terms concerning economic inequality across chapters, measured by term frequency–inverse document frequency, lower in “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” than in “*Sociological Textbooks*”?

**RQ2: (Distribution of Content):** Are terms related to economic inequality more evenly distributed across multiple chapters and less concentrated in a single chapter in “*Sociological Textbooks*” compared to “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*”?

**RQ3: (Context of Discussion):** Do the main themes and contexts in which economic inequalities appear, as identified through topic modeling, differ between “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” and “*Sociological textbooks*”?

**RQ4: (Interpretive Depth):** Are the contextual and interpretive aspects of economic inequality more diverse and nuanced in “*Sociological textbooks*” compared to “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*”?

In economics, there has been a recent rise in narrative studies, initiated by Shiller (2020), who defines narration as a sequence of events. Shiller (2020) measures the spread of narration using Google N-grams, which track attention rather than narration itself. We are mindful that frequency counts identify salience but do not necessarily indicate interpretive depth—hence our reliance on qualitative analysis to complement quantitative indicators. Simple frequency counts only capture the popularity of a term, not its true meaning. Quantitative analysis, such as word frequency, helps identify how popular a topic is across documents but can miss the nuanced sense of the text, which qualitative methods can reveal (Shin, 2014).

Most previous research has used quantitative techniques, primarily counting the total occurrence of key terms, the frequency of terms in total, or the number of pages with key terms (Green, 2012; Madsen, 2013; Stevenson & Zlotnick, 2018). In the past, there were some attempts to examine the content of textbooks using text-mining techniques (Bowles & Carlin, 2020). However, there was no research in which a broad spectrum of text mining techniques would be applied. Our study addresses this gap but does so with an awareness that such quantitative tools, while powerful for mapping attention, do not replace the interpretive task of understanding how inequality is framed.

## Data Description

The details about our sample are summarized in Table 1 in Appendix 1. Our sample includes 10 mainstream textbooks, two innovative economic textbooks, and three sociological textbooks. Consequently, we categorize our corpora into four types: (1) “*Mainstream Economic Textbooks*”, (2) “*CORE Textbook*”, (3) “*Anti-Textbook*”, and (4) “*Sociological Textbooks*”. Due to the similarity in content and word distribution among “*Mainstream Economic Textbooks*” (as evidenced by Zipf’s law analysis in Appendix 2), we combine them into a single corpus. A similar approach was taken for the “*Sociological Textbooks*”, resulting in their combination into one corpus as well. The preparation of the corpus involved cleaning of the text data, which included removing the preface, glossary, index, web-based chapters, and other online materials. Furthermore, we deleted stop words that could deteriorate the results and performed lemmatization.

## 4. Quantitative Analysis

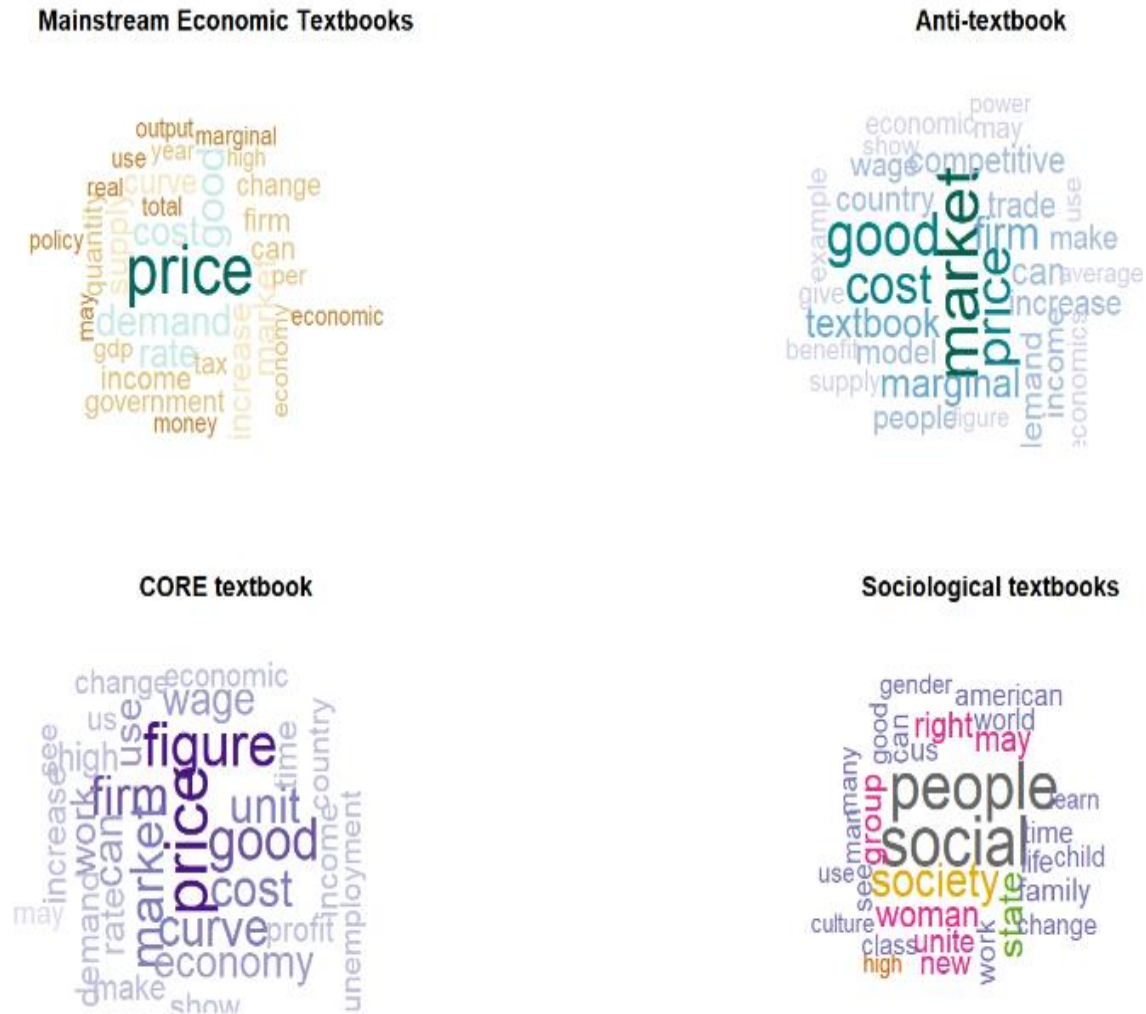
To provide an overview of the textbooks analyzed, we present a word cloud of the most frequent unigrams for each type of created corpora—“*Mainstream Economic Textbooks*”, “*Anti-Textbook*”, “*CORE Textbook*”, and “*Sociological Textbooks*”.

Figure 1 presents four-word clouds from different types of textbooks. The “*Mainstream Economic Textbooks*”, “*Anti-Textbook*”, and “*CORE Textbook*” all prominently feature terms such as “*price*”, “*market*”, “*cost*”, and “*goods*” reflecting the centrality of markets and pricing across economics education, regardless of perspective.

However, they diverge in emphasis: “*Mainstream Economic Textbooks*” highlight “*demand*”, “*government*”, and “*policy*”, signaling a traditional focus on economic mechanisms and policy frameworks. “*Anti-textbook*” stress “*competitive*”, “*power*”, and “*trade*”, pointing to a more critical approach to conventional models. Figure 2 shows that “*CORE Textbook*” emphasize “*figure*”, “*curve*” and “*unit*”, indicating an effort to integrate quantitative and graphical tools with economic instruction. By contrast, the “*Sociological Textbooks*” word cloud is dominated by “*people*”, “*social*”, and “*society*” alongside terms such as “*woman*”, “*gender*”, and “*family*”. This suggests that sociology frames

inequality within broader social contexts—identity, culture, and institutions rather than abstract market mechanisms.

**Figure 1.** Word clouds on created corpora

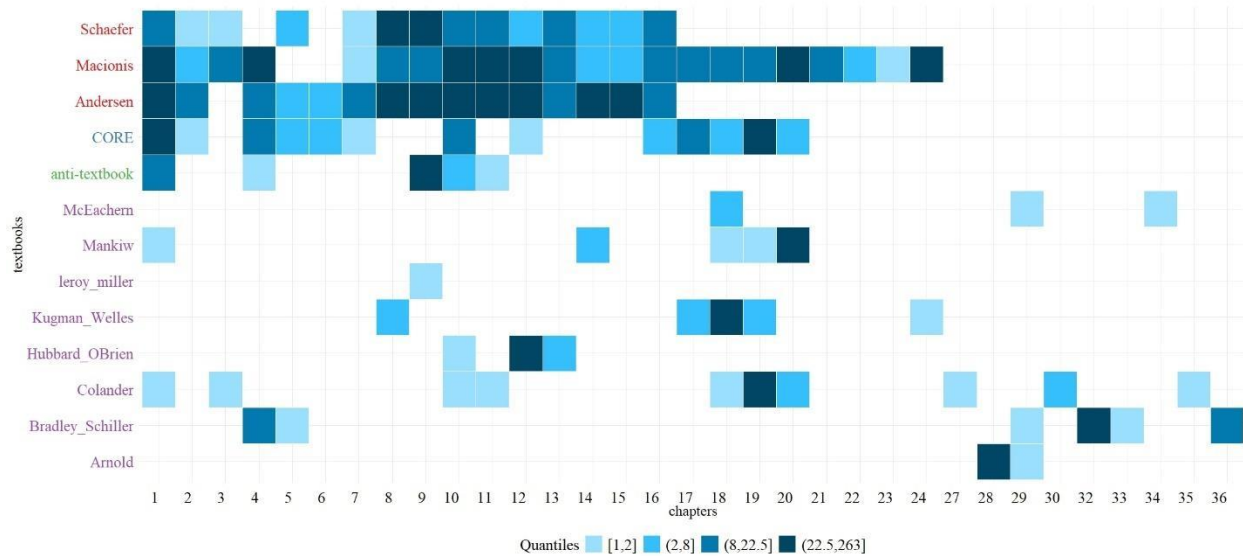


These differences justify our comparative analysis: while economics textbooks present inequality primarily through technical concepts of markets and efficiency, “*Sociological Textbooks*” foreground social relations and lived experiences. Understanding this divergence is crucial, since introductory textbooks shape how students and future citizens perceive inequality and the economy itself.

Figure 2 visualizes the frequency of income inequality across different chapters of various textbooks. The horizontal axis represents chapter numbers ranging from 1 to 36, while the vertical

axis lists the different textbooks. Each tile in the heatmap is colored based on the term frequency of inequality in that specific chapter.

**Figure 2.** Heatmap with frequency of income inequality bigrams in created corpora



Note: Red (“Sociological Textbooks”), Blue (“CORE Textbook”), Green (“Anti-Textbook”), Violet (“Mainstream Economics Textbooks”)

Figure 2 shows the distribution of inequality-related terms across chapters in different textbooks. “*Sociological Textbooks*” display an even distribution of these terms across multiple chapters. At the same time “*Mainstream Economic Textbooks*” show a more uneven pattern, with inequality terms concentrated sporadically in one or two sections. The innovative textbooks, such as “*CORE Textbook*” and the “*Anti-Textbook*”, reveal distinct patterns: the “*CORE Textbook*” exhibits relatively high frequencies of inequality terms and maintains a more even distribution across chapters, while the “*Anti-Textbook*” displays a different, though less balanced spread. This visual representation provides a clear comparative overview, showing how different disciplinary traditions frame and prioritize the topic of income inequality.

Figure 3 illustrates the relative frequency of specific words related to “inequality” across different corpora. We selected 50 words prior to and 50 words after each occurrence of the term “inequality” and calculated their frequency. The words are listed on the vertical axis, representing the top 10 most frequently found terms near the word “inequality” in each corpus. The “*CORE Textbook*” and “*Sociological Textbooks*” have higher frequencies for terms related to social

factors, while “Mainstream Economics textbooks” and “Anti-Textbook” focus on concepts of measuring inequality and statistics (Figure 3). The only word that appears in all four corpora is “income”. In the “Anti-Textbook”, words like “growth”, “economics”, “health”, “trade”, and “equity” appear most frequently in the context of inequality. In the “CORE Textbook”, the words “economic”, “countries”, “wealth”, and “income” frequently appear near the term inequality. In the “Mainstream Economics Textbooks” category, the words “states”, “Gini”, and “distribution” appear most frequently in the context of inequality. In the “Sociology Textbooks”, the words “poverty”, “women”, “gender”, and “class” show very high frequencies, suggesting a strong focus on social aspects related to inequality.

**Figure 3.** Frequency of words nearby inequality



Note: Figure 3 compares the frequencies of specific words across four different corpora: “Anti-textbook”, “CORE Textbook”, “Mainstream Economics Textbooks”, and “Sociological Textbooks”. These words are likely those found in proximity to the term “inequality”.

Figure 4 illustrates the results of LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation) topic modeling, comparing probabilities of words related to “inequality” across four corpora: “Anti-textbook”, “CORE Textbook”, “Mainstream Economics Textbooks”, and “Sociological Textbooks”. On the vertical axis, various topics identified by the LDA model are listed, each represented by a string

of words closely associated with the topic. The horizontal axis represents the relative frequency of these topics within each category, ranging from 0 to 1.

**Figure 4.** Topic proportions across documents using LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation)

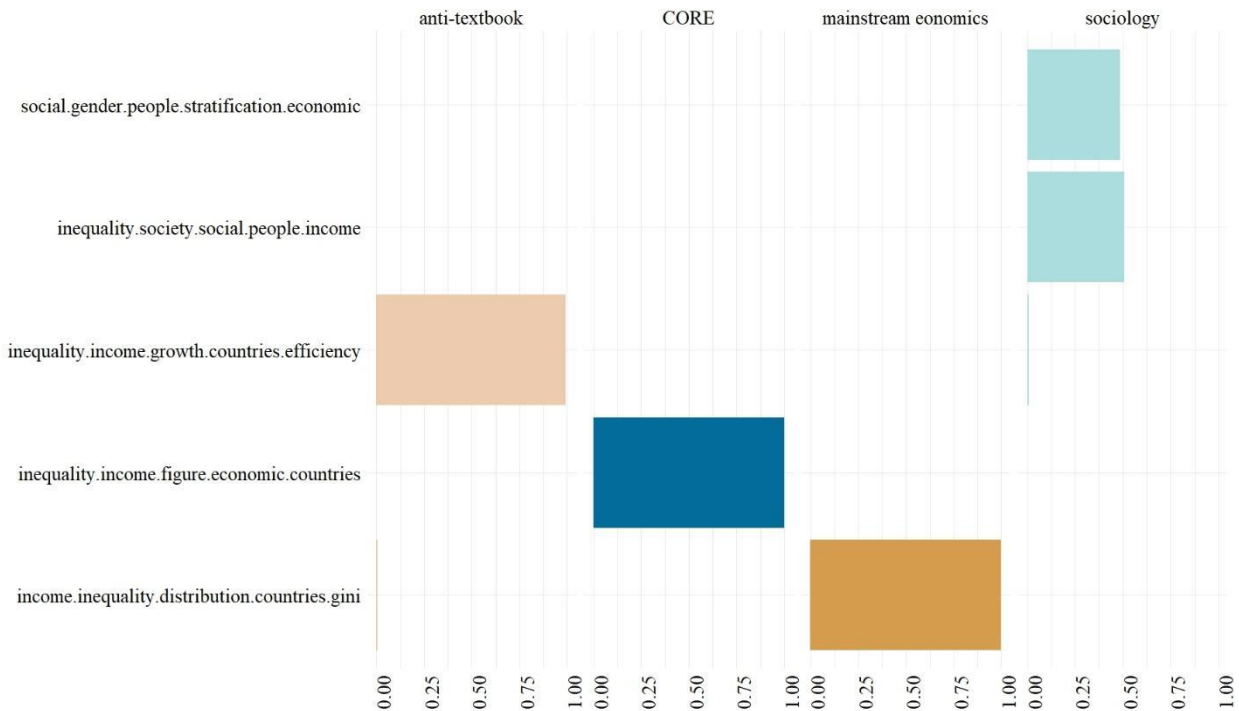


Figure 4 highlights the differences in discussing the topic of inequality across corpora. The “*Anti-textbook*” emphasizes topics involving growth and efficiency. “*CORE Textbook*” focuses on economic figures and countries. “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” discusses distribution and the Gini coefficient. “*Sociology*” centers on social structures and stratification in discussing the topic of inequality. This visualization characterizes the distinct themes in each corpus when discussing inequality.

“*Sociological Textbooks*” exhibit a comprehensive and evenly distributed mentions of inequality-related terms, reflecting a holistic and interdisciplinary approach that integrates social dimensions such as gender, class, and societal impacts, aligning with RQ1 and RQ2. Furthermore, even in those chapters about economic inequality, the phrases such as inequality and redistribution are less frequent in economics textbooks than in sociological and modern economics textbooks. Why is that? The topic of economic inequality is presented differently in three selected text sources (Figures 3 and 4). The “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” mainly cover the measurement of

inequality, the efficiency-equality trade-off, poverty, and taxation, leaving almost no space for the causes and consequences of economic inequality.

Most of the textbooks were written after the publication of Piketty (2014), but none of the chosen “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” refer to his work. Only “*CORE Textbook*” and “*Anti-Textbook*” include, after each chapter, a reference list that seems reasonable and is expected from academic texts; however, it is not the case for “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*”. This heavy reliance on economics textbooks and the lack of reference to scientific articles has been emphasized by Siegfried & Latta (1998) and Reimann (2004). Klein (2006) emphasized that the trivialization and oversimplification of economics have been on the rise. What is more, the chapter on income inequality is presented as one of the last ones and is rarely included in course syllabuses. This observation is in line with George (1990) and Hill & Myatt (2010), who pointed out that economics textbooks tend to favor the importance of the private sector over the government. Therefore, the topic of economic inequality, which is interconnected with redistribution, is either omitted or placed at the end in “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*”.

## 5. Qualitative Analysis from Numbers to Narratives

The quantitative tools can identify patterns of attention but cannot, on their own, reveal meaning. The qualitative stage directly addresses this limitation. The “quantification without meaning” problem becomes particularly clear here, as our word clouds, heatmaps, and topic models point us to where inequality is mentioned, but not to how it is framed or interpreted. In line with the pluralist methodological stance outlined earlier, this section treats the quantitative results as signposts rather than conclusions, using them to guide a closer reading of textbook narratives.

Based on Figure 4, we derive four themes for our thematic analysis. Figures 3 and 4 summarize leading themes (using topic modeling) for qualitative analysis and demonstrate the distinct thematic patterns in how sociology and economics approach the topic of inequality, which aligns with the topic modeling presented in the previous section. “*Mainstream Economic Textbooks*” focus more narrowly on specific economic indicators, as Figure 4 shows that inequality is usually related to the percent, “*Gini*”, “*distribution*”, suggesting a quantitative approach to teaching inequality. We decided to seek a term connected to this called “*Theme 1: Measurement of inequality*”. As one of the three common words between mainstream economics

and sociology is “theory” (Figure 3), we decided to introduce “Theme 2: Theory of economic inequality”. In Figures 3 and 4, one of the key terms revealed was related to efficiency for “Anti-Textbook”, so we decided to examine “Theme 3: Equality efficiency trade-off”. As this is one of the most prominent concepts in economics, we find this trope not only in “Anti-Textbook” but also in other positions after thorough qualitative coding of selected texts.

Looking at Figures 3 and 4, we see the importance of the term distribution for “Mainstream Economics Textbooks” and the term people in “Sociological Textbooks”, which may indicate a potential theme as “Theme 4: Solutions to economic inequality”.

Finally, we identified the theme “Theme 5: What is missing in mainstream economic textbooks?” since Figures 3 and 4 show the widest divergence in terms between “Mainstream Economics Textbooks” and “Sociological Textbooks”. Table 1 summarizes our observations and conclusions on the potential themes.

**Table 1.** Leading themes identified from text mining analysis of textbooks on economic inequality

Theme	Figure	Observation from the Figures
Theme 1: Measurement of Inequality	Figure 4	“Mainstream Economics Textbooks” focus more narrowly on specific economic indicators, such as percent, Gini, and distribution, suggesting a quantitative approach to teaching inequality.
Theme 2: Theory of Economic Inequality	Figure 3	One of the three common words between mainstream economics and sociology is “theory”, indicating a shared focus on theoretical frameworks.
Theme 3: Equality Efficiency Trade-off	Figures 3 & 4	The term “efficiency” is prominent in “Anti-Textbook”, reflecting the concept of the equality-efficiency trade-off, which is a significant concept in economics.
Theme 4: Solutions to Economic Inequality	Figures 3 & 4	The term “distribution” is a key term in “Mainstream Economics Textbooks”, while “people” is significant in “Sociological Textbooks”, indicating different approaches to solving inequality.
Theme 5: What is Missing in Mainstream Economic Textbooks?	Figures 3 & 4	There is a wide divergence in terms between “Mainstream Economics Textbooks” and “Sociological Textbooks”, highlighting gaps in the economic perspective on inequality.

Theme 1: Measurement of inequality. All “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” include a subsection on the measurement of economic inequality and discuss in depth the advantages and disadvantages of the Lorenz curve and Gini coefficient. Furthermore, they focus on describing imperfections in income data, which may suggest to the reader that any conclusions drawn from such data should be treated with caution. Moreover, several textbooks argue that economic inequality is not as high once redistribution is considered. For example (Mankiw, 2008, p. 453):

*“Because in-kind transfers, the economic life cycle, transitory income, and economic mobility are so important for understanding variation in income, it is difficult to gauge the degree of inequality in our society using data on the distribution of income in a single year. When these other factors are taken into account, they tend to suggest that economic well-being is more equally distributed than is annual income.”*

Additionally, the majority of economic textbooks suggest that including consumption in the derivation also diminishes income inequality. For example, Mankiw (2008, p. 440) summarizes that if one compares the inequality in consumption, the gap between the rich and the poor is not as big as in income.

*“As a result, consumption per person in the richest fifth of households is only 2.1 times as much as consumption per person in the poorest fifth. These data show that inequality in material standards of living is much smaller than inequality in annual income.”*

In contrast, “*Sociological Textbooks*” do not focus on measurement and data imperfections of economic inequality, as in general they lack the explanation of empirical research (Medley-Rath, 2022). The overemphasis in the “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” on measurement challenges is not surprising, as economists prefer to discuss statistical imperfections (Akerlof, 2020). Furthermore, the main criticism toward Piketty’s publication (2014) focuses on data and statistical imperfections (Homburg, 2015; King, 2017); this concern is also reflected in “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*”.

Theme 2: Theory of economic inequality. “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” define the economy as a science of choice under scarcity (Green, 2012). Furthermore, Bowles & Carlin (2020) have shown that textbooks such (Mankiw, 2008) and (Krugman & Wells, 2013) have more content on microeconomics than macroeconomics, which could suggest that individuals’ choices,

preferences, and characteristics are dominant topics in those aforementioned textbooks. Moreover, the dominance of microeconomics over macroeconomics is also present in economic research over the last three decades (Angrist & Pischke, 2017). The overemphasis in “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” on analyzing individual choices is reflected in the explanation of economic inequality. The “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” strongly emphasize that the main reason for economic inequality is differences in individual characteristics, preferences, and productivity. For instance, Arnold (2019, p. 707) summarizes the individual factors influencing economic inequality:

*“Income inequality exists because individuals differ in their innate abilities and attributes, their choices regarding work and leisure, their education and other training, their attitudes about risk taking, the luck they experience, and the amount of wage discrimination directed against them.”*

Only a few of the selected positions mention randomness and luck among the factors for economic inequality. Those “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*”, which do mention them, state that bad luck is temporary and has no long-term effect on individual income, in contrast to other factors such as skills or number of working hours.

*“Although luck can and does influence incomes, it is not likely to have (on average) a great or long-run effect. (...) In the long run, such factors as innate ability and attributes, education, and personal decisions (e.g., how much work versus how much leisure) are more likely to have a greater, more sustained effect on income than luck does.”* (Arnold, 2019, p.703)

However, according to Piketty (2014), it is challenging to distinguish between what is beyond individuals’ control and whether success is a result of effort or luck. What is more, the support for redistribution depends on subjective belief and preferences about the reasons for economic success (Alesina & Glaeser, 2006; Esarey et al., 2012). Additionally, one of the “*Mainstream Economic Textbooks*” argues that there is intergenerational mobility in the USA, and the majority of millionaires have their fortunes through hard work, rather than inheriting them or they having good luck.

*“One result of this great economic mobility is that the U.S. economy is filled with self-made millionaires (as well as with heirs who squandered the fortunes they inherited). According to one study, about four of five millionaires made their money on their own,*

*often by starting and building a business or by climbing the corporate ladder. Only one in five millionaires inherited their fortunes.” (Mankiw, 2008, p. 441)*

In contrast to “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*”, “*Sociological Textbooks*” define economics as the study of production and product exchange. For instance, Schaefer (2017, p. 4) summarizes:

*“Economists explore the ways in which people produce and exchange goods and services, along with money and other resources.”*

Again, the way economics is defined influences the explanation for economic inequality. In “*Sociological Textbooks*”, the leading theory used to explain economic and social inequality is that of Karl Marx. To explain the economic inequality, “*Sociological Textbooks*” do not start with statistical measures but with a theory, formed by Karl Marx.

*“Why Is There Inequality? Stratification occurs in all societies. Why? This question originates in classical sociology in the works of Karl Marx and Max Weber; theorists whose work continues to inform the analysis of class inequality today”.* (Andersen, 2014, p.187)

Even if it is a well-known fact that sociology is more left-wing oriented than economics (Gross & Simmons, 2014), it is not that “*Sociological Textbooks*” praise the work of Karl Marx; instead they show how the research about his theory has been reinterpreted over time. In contrast, the “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” do not even mention Karl Marx’s work, and most of them do not even once mention the term Marxism or Karl Marx throughout the whole text. Missing the reference to Karl Marx, economists also miss the explanation of class struggles. They present the story of economic inequality only from a macroeconomic perspective, ignoring the fact that the inequality is created at the micro level between two distinctive agents. For example, sociological and modern economic textbooks mention the struggles between landlords and tenants or employees and employers. Is the lack of Karl Marx in introductory economics textbooks a result of fear of controversial topics, or aiming at being perceived as rational and objective as possible? Or do the authors of those introductory economic textbooks think the work of Karl Marx is so well-known that it does not need to be discussed? Maybe the authors think we should forget about Karl Marx’s work, as it has been so often misinterpreted in the past? Or do economists have a completely different methodological approach to teaching economic phenomena? Many

researchers have noted that economists strive to be like physicists, as they believe in the power of mathematical formulas and models (Klein, 2006; Akerlof, 2020). However, while comparing “*Sociological Textbooks*”, and “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*”, it is striking that economics has forgotten, or one can say has been ignoring, the historical context of economic inequality. The ignorance about time path dependence and historical events in neoclassical models has been studied by Robinson (1974). In “*Sociological Textbooks*”, emphasis is placed on the historical, geographical, and cultural circumstances that shape individuals’ entry points into economic life and the development of nations, thereby reinforcing patterns of economic inequality. For instance, “*Sociological Textbooks*” refer to the caste system in India as an example of traditional norms that still influence today’s economy.

Theme 3: Equality-efficiency trade-off. When explaining what economic inequality is, “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” often refer to the concept of the efficiency-equality trade-off. This notion is so crucial to introductory economic textbooks that they sacrifice the lion’s share of the chapter on economic inequality for this topic. The efficiency-equality trade-off seems so central, as it is yet another convenient excuse not to discuss the solution to economic inequality. The “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” leave the impression that there is nothing worse than impairing market efficiency. Although they are not direct in that statement, the “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” advocate that the level of economic inequality should not be decided by economists but by other social sciences. But why are economists so afraid to answer normative questions?

*“Exactly how far policy makers should go in promoting equity over efficiency is a difficult question that goes to the heart of the political process. As such, it is not a question that economists can answer. What is important for economists, however, is always to seek to use the economy’s resources as efficiently as possible in the pursuit of society’s goals, whatever those goals may be”.* (Krugman & Wells, 2013, p. 16)

But is it that surprising that even economists are trying to distance themselves from one of the most controversial topics for modern society? The “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” define economics as a science of choice and decision making, not fairness. Furthermore, our findings echo Hill and Myatt’s (2010) conclusion that the widely assumed equality–efficiency trade-off lacks empirical support.

The lack of clear answers in “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” about the optimal level of economic inequality results from the fact that economists do not have any objective index that would evaluate how much economic inequality is too much. McEachern (2012, p. 401) states that:

*“One problem with assessing income distributions is that there is no objective standard for evaluating them. The usual assumption is that a more equal distribution of income is more desirable, but is equal distribution most preferred? If not, then how uneven should it be?”*

In contrast, in “*CORE Textbook*” and “*Sociological Textbooks*”, the debates about inequality are almost nonexistent. Instead, they focus on the consequences of rising inequality. Avoiding discussion in “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” about the consequences seems like the authors running away from responsibility or avoiding challenging and controversial topics.

Theme 4: Solutions to economic inequality. The “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” sacrifice much space for discussing redistributive policies; however, they do not refer to any empirical research concerning the mentioned solutions. Although they discuss the redistribution through the tax system, their primary concern remains that it distorts the reservation wage and undermines the incentive to work. For instance, in (Hubbard & O’Brien, 2019, p. 389), we found the following:

*“Many economists are skeptical about the ability of tax and social security policy proposals to reduce income inequality to a great extent. They argue that a market system relies on individuals being willing to work hard and take risks with the promise of high incomes if they are successful. Taking some of that income from them in the name of reducing income inequality reduces the incentives to work hard and take risks. Ultimately, whether policies to reduce income inequality should be pursued is a normative question. Economics alone cannot decide the issue.”*

In contrast, in “*Sociological Textbooks*“, they mainly focus on the deliberations about who should pay high and low taxes. In “*Sociological Textbooks*”, they refer to one of the most recent movements (Occupy Wall Street) to discuss the controversy about the tax evasion of the rich. For example, Schaefer (2017, p. 176) states that the rich pay less in taxes.

*“The affluent actually paid less in taxes than the average citizen, given the many loopholes—offshore bank accounts, and so on—available to them. In Congress, the suggestion that the rich should pay the same effective tax rate as other citizens was met with an angry charge of class warfare.”*

The fact that some countries with high redistribution provide their citizens with higher standards of living is omitted in the *“Mainstream Economics Textbooks”* without impairing efficiency. For example, Hill & Myatt (2010, p. 210) refer to the example of Denmark:

*“Taxes amount to half of Denmark’s total production. (...) Denmark has comparatively low levels of economic inequality, has almost eliminated child poverty and is among the world’s most prosperous countries and its people among the happiest. How can a place like Denmark exist if there is a serious trade-off between efficiency and equity?”*

According to Myrdal (1973), investment in welfare can increase future productivity and prevent the negative consequences of rising economic inequality, which happened in Scandinavian countries. Moreover, according to Piketty (2014), during the post-war period, many developed economies had a rapid GDP growth and low unemployment, despite high tax rates on the wealthy, which contradicts the prediction from the equality-efficiency trade-off.

The *“Mainstream Economics Textbooks”* seem to overlook other channels for combating economic inequality, such as education. For example, Goldin & Katz (2009) emphasize the importance of education and advise that the USA should invest in it to combat income inequality. The significance of education in the era of fast-growing technological progress is also advocated by Acemoglu & Autor (2012) and Frank et al. (2019). In contrast, *“Sociological Textbooks”* and *“CORE Textbook”* (CORE, 2017, p. 982) textbooks discuss how education can contribute to fighting economic inequality.

*“Other countries (South Korea and Taiwan, for example) are more like Japan, experiencing limited levels of inequality without a major role of taxes and transfers because endowments are more equally distributed. After the Second World War, all three redistributed the property of large landowners among landless or land poor farmers and have also invested heavily in providing high-quality education to citizens.”*

Why do “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” focus on providing only one solution to economic inequality? Perhaps it is the one that seems the easiest to criticize, as it distorts incentives and the free market. Moreover, redistribution seems like the only truly economical solution.

Theme 5: What is missing in mainstream economic textbooks? The “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” tell a story about economic inequality from the perspective of an American household. When they present some comparisons to other countries, it is limited to a few lines without an in-depth explanation of the differences. However, “*CORE Textbook*” and “*Sociological Textbooks*” present the global perspective on economic inequity. Two out of three “*Sociological Textbooks*” have even a separate chapter on global economic inequality. Next thing that is unfortunately missing in all economics positions but is presented in “*Sociological Textbooks*”, is the interrelation between economic inequality and other forms of social inequality like power, status, and gender.

This is in line with the results of Korom (2019), who compared sociological and economic academic articles. His main results confirm that economists focus on studying economic inequality using statistical models, in contrast to sociologists who examine wealth inequalities between racial, cultural, and gender groups. This interrelation and other types of social inequalities are crucial when explaining economic inequalities between countries. For example, none of the “*Mainstream Economic Textbooks*” provides a discussion about the influence of colonialism, slavery, or communism on economic performance and therefore on economic inequalities between countries. This lack of discussion is also a lack of clarity about who is responsible for those historical events. What was not surprising to us was that none of the selected positions discussed the transitions to capitalism in Eastern Europe and their influence on country-level inequalities within the European Union.

### **LENS application (Learning Economics and Sociological Narratives)**

To facilitate analysis for other researchers and enable exploration of the broad spectrum of topics and textual aspects of textbooks, we created a Shiny application called LENS (Learning Economics and Sociological Narratives). This web application can be accessed at [https://letycjaewa.shinyapps.io/lens\\_app\\_ver\\_4/](https://letycjaewa.shinyapps.io/lens_app_ver_4/). In the LENS application, users can examine textbook corpora without the need for programming. The app allows users to conduct more detailed analyses and compare each textbook individually. The selection of textbooks was guided by a review of previous studies analyzing introductory textbooks, ensuring that we included

the most popular ones and made our results comparable to those of other studies. This application will be further developed by adding new textbooks (or new editions) to the language corpus and incorporating additional text-mining tools. The analytical results presented in this chapter represent only a selection of findings obtained using this tool.

## 6. Conclusions

At the outset of this article, we were aware of the disparities between economic and sociological textbooks in their approaches to addressing economic inequality. However, through comprehensive analysis, we fully grasped the extent of this divergence in both scope and depth. While new economic textbooks (e.g., “*CORE Textbook*”, “*Anti-Textbook*”) have introduced fresh perspectives, economic inequality remains a peripheral topic in most older ones. In contrast, “*Sociological Textbooks*” tend to place these issues at the center of their discourse. Our findings align with previous studies that highlighted the underrepresentation of economic inequality in “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” (Korom, 2019; Bowles & Carlin, 2020; Akerlof, 2020). Economics textbooks typically present a more technical and quantitative approach to analyzing income inequality, focusing on market mechanisms and public policies. On the other hand, “*Sociological Textbooks*” offer a more contextual and qualitative analysis, considering a wide range of social and institutional factors that contribute to economic inequality. These two perspectives are complementary and together offer a more comprehensive understanding of income inequality. However, these perspectives have not converged within economic and “*Sociological Textbooks*”.

Our mixed-method design confirmed the concern that “counting is not understanding”. Quantitative analysis identified *where* inequality appeared in textbooks, but only qualitative reading revealed *how* it was framed—whether as a structural challenge, an individual responsibility, or an abstract measurement problem. This is the “quantification without meaning” problem: frequency counts can signal salience but cannot, on their own, expose interpretive depth. Our findings summarize the disciplinary tendencies we expected to observe: narrative exclusion, methodological imperialism, atomistic bias, and the absence of reflexivity. The evidence from textbook analysis confirms that these are not abstract critiques, but rather visible features of how mainstream economics education presents inequality.

The slow reaction to the need for changes in economics education reveals a specific pattern in how economics responds to emerging crises or economic issues. Following a crisis, there is often a surge in calls for reforms among economists, but these calls gradually diminish as obstacles arise, memories fade, and economics teaching reverts to the status quo. Does this pattern of forgetting also apply to issues of inequality and poverty? It is difficult to imagine that Piketty's work could be entirely ignored or forgotten, much like the issue of inequality itself. However, history offers examples of similar occurrences. Consider this quote from Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (1879), which remains strikingly relevant and poignantly reflects the problem of social stratification:

*“I mean that the tendency of what we call material progress is in no way to improve the condition of the lowest class in the essentials of healthy, happy human life. Nay, more, that it is still further to depress the condition of the lowest class... It is as though an immense wedge were being forced, not underneath society but through society. Those who are above the point of separation are elevated, but those who are below are crushed down”.* (George, 1879, pp. 9)

What is intriguing is that this was one of the most widely read economic books of the late 19th century. However, does anyone refer to this book today? The answer is no, mainly because George identified land ownership and the high rents of landowners as the main factors driving social stratification. In contrast, Piketty identifies financial capital as the modern equivalent of the factors. What will happen when financial capital, like land in the 19th century, ceases to determine the wealth of nations? Will someone, a hundred years from now, write a similar book rediscovering the problem of inequality?

This article also introduces a tool for monitoring changes in textbooks. The corpus and analytical tools created for this research will be made available and supplemented with new editions of economics and sociology textbooks. This will enable ongoing tracking of how approaches to these topics evolve. The history of Henry George teaches us that it is not a bestselling book that changes perceptions of inequality. Such changes may only occur when these issues are fully integrated into introductory economics textbooks.

This research also contributes a practical resource for resisting this forgetting: our corpus and the LENS (Learning Economics and Sociological Narratives) application. This tool enables

ongoing monitoring of how inequality appears in economics and sociology textbooks and how its framing evolves. It allows future researchers, educators, and reformers to detect whether inequality shifts from the periphery to the conceptual core of economics education—or whether it remains marginalized.

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## Appendixes

### Appendix 1

**Table 1.** Sample of textbooks

Reference	Short reference	Number of Pages	Number of Chapters
Mankiw, G. (2008) Principles of Macroeconomics, 5th ed., Nelson Education, ISBN: 978-0-324-58998-6	(Mankiw, 2008)	500	12
Bade, R., and M. Parkin. (2016). Foundations of economics, 8th ed., Pearson, ISBN 9780134486819	(Bade & Parkin, 2016)	901	38
Blanchard, O. (2021). Macroeconomics, 8th ed., Pearson, ISBN 9780134897899	(Blanchard, 2021)	519	12
Hubbard, R. G., and A. P. O'Brien. (2019). Essentials of Economics, 4th ed., Pearson, ISBN: 9781488616983	(Hubbard & O'Brien, 2019)	708	12
McEachern, W. A. (2012). Economics: A contemporary introduction. 9th ed., ISBN: 978-0-538-45374-5	(McEachern, 2012)	777	36
Miller, R. L. (2012). Economics today. 16th ed., Pearson, ISBN 13: 978-0-13-255451-0	(Miller, 2012)	744	36
Arnold, R. A. (2019). Principles of economics. 13th ed., Cengage, ISBN: 978-1-337-61738-3	(Arnold, 2019)	839	36
Case, K. E., R. C. Fair, and S. Oster. (2012). Principles of economics. 10th ed., Pearson, ISBN: 978-0-13-255291-2	(Case et al., 2012)	735	36

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Short reference</b>	<b>Number of Pages</b>	<b>Number of Chapters</b>
Colander, D. (2017). Economics. 10th ed., McGraw-Hill Education, ISBN 978-1-259-19315-6	(Colander, 2017)	846	38
Krugman, P., and R. Wells. (2013). Economics. 4th ed, Worth Publishers, ISBN-13: 978-1-4641-4384-7	(Krugman & Wells, 2013)	1024	34
Schiller, B. R. (2010). The economy today. 12th ed., McGraw-Hill Education, ISBN 978-0-07-337589-2	(Schiller, 2010)	794	36
Hill, R., Myatt, T. (2010). The Economics Anti-textbook: A critical thinkers guide to microeconomics. 1st ed., ISBN: 978 1 84277 938 5	(Hill & Myatt, 2010c)	263	12
CORE Team. (2017). The Economy. Oxford: Oxford University Press.	(CORE, 2017)	1064	34
Andersen, M. L., Taylor, H. F., & Logio, K. A. (2014). Sociology: the essentials. 9th ed., Cengage Learning, ISBN:978-1-305-50308-3	(Andersen, 2014)	417	16
Macionis, J. (2010). Sociology. 13th ed., Pearson, ISBN: 978-0-205-18109-4	(Macionis, 2010)	647	24
Schaefer, R. T. (2017). Sociology: A brief introduction. 12th ed., McGraw-Hill. ISBN 978-1-259-42558-5	(Schaefer, 2017)	410	16

## Appendix 2

**Figure 1.** Zipf law for all types of textbooks

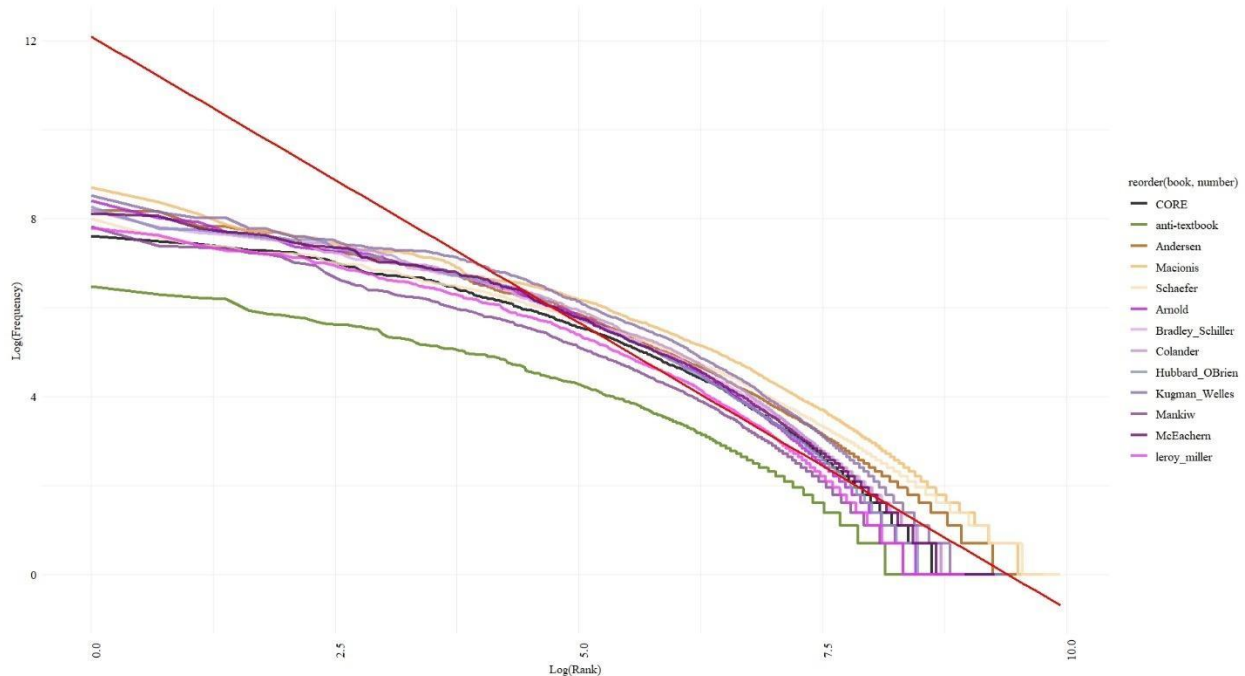


Figure 1. shows rank–frequency distributions for individual textbooks, with each line representing a single book and the red diagonal indicating the theoretical Zipf’s law benchmark. Across the mid-range of word ranks, most textbooks align reasonably well with the Zipf line, suggesting that their vocabularies broadly follow the expected statistical pattern. At the high-frequency end, the curves flatten relative to the benchmark, indicating that very common words are used more often than predicted. At the low-frequency end, the curves drop away more sharply, reflecting the finite vocabulary of each book and producing a staircase pattern from words that occur only a few times. While all books display the general Zipfian form, differences can be seen in the steepness and curvature of the lines, with some textbooks showing heavier reliance on frequent words and others containing a larger share of rarer terms. These differences highlight variation in lexical richness and distribution across the sampled textbooks.

**Figure 2.** Zipf law for CORE, Ant-Textbook and Sociological Textbooks and Mainstream Economic Textbooks

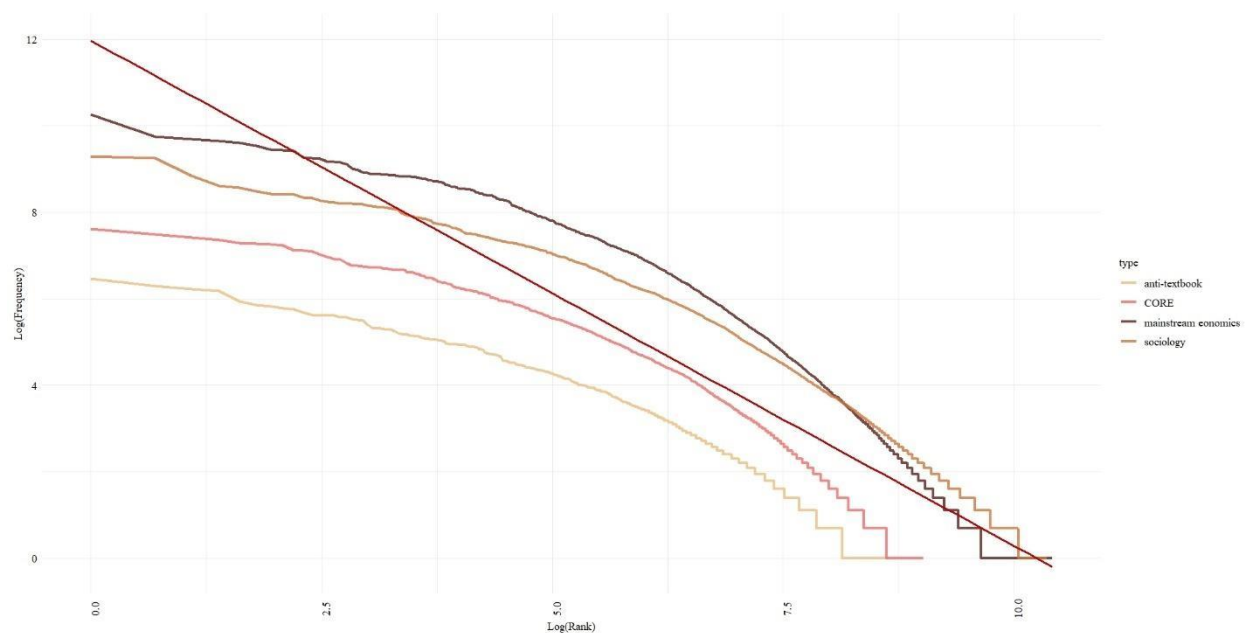


Figure 2 shows that all four textbook categories— “*Anti-Textbook*”, “*CORE Textbook*”, “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*”, and “*Sociological Textbooks*”—broadly follow the expected Zipfian pattern, with word frequency decreasing as rank increases. In the high-frequency range, all categories display flatter curves than the Zipf benchmark, meaning that very common words (such as *the* or *and*) are used more often than predicted. In the mid-rank range, the curves come closest to the theoretical line, especially for “*Mainstream Economics Textbooks*” and “*Sociological Textbooks*“, while “*CORE Textbook*” and “*Anti-Textbook*” diverge slightly earlier. At the low-frequency end, all categories drop more steeply than the Zipf reference, reflecting the limited vocabulary size of each corpus, with the staircase pattern marking words that occur only a few times. Differences between categories are also evident: sociology relies more heavily on a small set of very frequent words, mainstream economics includes a wider spread of rare words, and “*CORE Textbook*” and “*Anti-Textbook*” lie in between, showing smoother distributions. Overall, while Zipf’s law provides a good approximation across all categories, the patterns reveal distinct vocabulary characteristics for each type of textbook.



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