

Lynne, Gary D. Review of: Williams, David Lay. *The Greatest of All Plagues: How Economic Inequality Shaped Political Thought from Plato to Marx*. 2024. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition.

Introduction

CHAPTER ONE Plato “THE GREATEST OF ALL PLAGUES”

Explaining the source of Big Lies: “...great wealth and luxury frustrate the virtues (ethics)... (Plato asserted) ‘It is impossible that those who become very rich also become good.’” Big lies are Unethical. Williams, David Lay. 2024. *The Greatest of All Plagues ... Economic Inequality*. Princeton University Press, p. 40.

Conclusions

Plato was not into supporting places that did not want anything to do with equality. He was invited by two different cities, areas to legislate. “As Rousseau would summarize these historical accounts, Plato refused to legislate for both because he ‘knew that these two peoples were rich and could not tolerate equality (SC, 2.8, 74).’ (p. 53)”

“Whereas equality breeds friendship, inequality breeds faction, civil strife, and civil war (p. 53)... every republic requires a ‘sturdy foundation’ on which legislators can build. ... ‘If this foundation is rotten, political activity would always encounter difficulties in the city’ ... the sturdiest foundation ...is a people unburdened by extreme inequality and an insatiable lust for wealth (p. 53).”

“Aristotle’s acceptance of Plato’s critique of inequality helped cement this criticism in Western political thought, which would then inform not only Christianity but also early modern thinkers such as Thomas More, Jean Bodin, Montesquieu, and especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Plato may not have been a political reformer ... but his work as a teacher and scholar assured an enduring egalitarian legacy (p. 54).”

CHAPTER TWO The New Testament “THE EYE OF A NEEDLE”

Conclusions

Jesus, James, and Paul all share core commitments ... to the dignity and special status of the poor ... the importance of almsgiving ... inveigh against greed ... celebrate neighborly love ... (said) values offer a consistency and coherence across the New Testament and speak to anyone reading these texts in search of insight and wisdom into the problem of inequality (pp .95-96).”

“... early Eastern Church ... emphasized the lessons of Jesus and James regarding the dangers of wealth, greed, and inequality ... (citing a Saint Basil) possession of great wealth is evidence of greed or pleonexia. The fabulously rich cling to their wealth as if it were their most prized possession—more than their limbs, much less their souls (p. 96).”

“Similar views emerged in the West... Pelagian work... accumulation and possession of wealth were understood to be evil in the context of a zero-sum economy where every addition to a wealthy man’s fortune came at the expense of the suffering poor (p.97).”

“... much of what one finds in the New Testament regarding wealth, greed, and inequality parallels Plato’s explorations ... employ the same Greek word of pleonexia ... havoc on society at large. Jesus, James, and Plato share the assumption that the very possession of wealth itself is an indication of the presence of greed and its ignoble effects on the soul ... all three are determined that the solution to problems both of society and the soul require fairly radical measures, up to and including threats of divine punishment for acquiring too much wealth (p 97).”

But, Christianity has had more enduring effects than framing by Plato: Athens to include Plato was about reason. Christianity about God. “There are more than two billion Christians worldwide, eager in their own way to embrace the principles found in those texts. And as Strauss suggests, for many of them, those texts speak to them with indisputable authority—it is, for them, the word of God. For various reasons, Jesus and James’s condemnations of wealth and inequality are commonly downplayed at the expense of other teachings—by priests and pastors, by public interpreters, or by individuals at home with their Bibles. But it is also undeniable that those very same Bibles in the hands of billions of people draw stark and dramatic attention to these same problems (p. 98).”

Rounds out the Chapter with the following:

“The celebrated philosopher Jürgen Habermas, among others, has argued that the Enlightenment project has effectively stalled out and that ‘pure reason’ is unlikely to motivate vast majorities of citizens to action on their important moral and civic responsibilities. This is in some ways the great shortcoming of a school of thought associated with thinkers like Immanuel Kant—that all one needs to do is to articulate reasoned arguments in a free society and then can witness the

inevitable public enlightenment (p. 98).” Well, yes, it is about finding sufficient reason, but perhaps not only from science.

Williams (2024, p. 98) continues: “Yet far too often the carefully reasoned arguments of philosophers are ignored because relatively few find themselves motivated by mere arguments. In this ‘postsecular’ context, Habermas argues, it may be helpful to acknowledge and commandeer the motivational forces of religion insofar as they have the unique capacity to inspire the fulfillment of moral and civic duties. ... if one acknowledges the inevitability of religious appeals in the public sphere, as Habermas suggests we might, it would seem foolish to ignore the remarkable tradition of religious texts on questions so vital to contemporary debates.” So, yes, it is about serious inquiry using both science & humanities, the latter to include consideration of religion.

CHAPTER THREE Thomas Hobbes “TOO MUCH ABUNDANCE”

After Hobbes: “It is only when individuals fear the Leviathan that peace—the object of all individuals in the state of nature—becomes possible. Because once they fear the sovereign power, that sovereign can then legislate and enforce laws. And law facilitates peace (p. 111).”

Conclusions

“In his Second Treatise on Government, the philosopher John Locke objected to Hobbes’s absolute monarchs since ‘absolute monarchs are but men.’ In other words, if humanity is as selfish and violent as Hobbes depicts it in the state of nature, how would it make any sense to then grant all the political power to a single one among them? This objection, among other observations, has been at the foundation of the doctrines of separation of power and checks and balances, both of which Hobbes opposes (p. 133).”

“... is important to recall, for Hobbes, that much of what worries him about concentrated wealth and inequality is the threat it poses to sovereign power. Those with enormous fortunes, such as the emerging merchants of the seventeenth century, represented legitimate competitors for sovereign authority in Britain. The sovereign’s wealth, by contrast, does not represent a threat in this respect (p. 133-134).”

“... greatest threat posed by sovereign wealth is likely wealth’s effects on one’s character—the fostering of a sense of impunity. This could theoretically detach the sovereign from its obligation to heed the laws of nature (p. 134).” (like DJT!)

“Inequality is not simply a problem for those committed to the ancient virtues and their associated religious systems ... is also a problem for peace and a threat to modern sovereignty ... not merely a problem because it blocks the path to a virtuous life or to the love of God. Poverty is not just a problem because it can make people hungry. Wealth is a problem because it inspires the wealthy to seize power for themselves. Poverty is a problem because it inspires insurrection. Inequality is not just a moral problem. It is, for Hobbes, fundamentally political, demanding

political interventions ... lowered ambitions of Hobbes's philosophy did not render inequality irrelevant—they merely offered new reasons to worry about it (p. 134).”

CHAPTER FOUR Jean-Jacques Rousseau “THE EVER-WIDENING INEQUALITY OF FORTUNES”

Conclusions

“Rousseau’s approach to understanding inequality is an important landmark in the Western tradition ... spoke of the problems of poverty and wealth concentration ... gives the simultaneous presence of these conditions a name: inequality ... (and) not only how inequality comes about, but also how it is legitimated through the social contract and its subsequent institutions (p. 168).”

“... what distinguishes Rousseau from Hobbes and his other predecessors is his acknowledgment of how the principle of legitimacy can be abused to secure inequalities and govern on the elite’s behalf. The lesson of the *Discourse on Inequality* is that most of the social contract tradition has rationalized such inequalities ... wealthy have been able to establish a system that guarantees their advantages by tricking the poor and dispossessed into consenting to a social contract that legitimizes their oppression (p.169).”

“Rousseau’s understanding of the faux social contract that has secured illegitimate inequalities animates his successors (p. 169)... For Adam Smith, ‘laws and government may [thus] be considered ... in every case as a combination of the rich to oppress the poor, and preserve to themselves the inequality of the goods which would otherwise be soon destroyed by the attacks of the poor, who if not hindered by the government would soon reduce the others to an equality with themselves by open violence (LJ, 208).’ John Stuart Mill laments that the poor have been persuaded by the rich that their poverty is a ‘necessary evil,’ and consent to their condition has been ‘partly extorted from their fears’ (Socialism, 227). For Friedrich Engels, the ‘legal system has been devised to protect those who own property from those who do not’ (AD, 317). These subsequent thinkers have drawn from Rousseau’s logic of the faux contract, sometimes with express acknowledgment. His approach to understanding inequality, thus, significantly raises the stakes. Inequality is more dangerous because it is more deeply entrenched, not only in the laws and institutions of Western societies but in the notion that popular consent legitimates it (p. 170).”

Rousseau saw a zero-sum economy, so the rich were rich by taking from the poor. “Adam Smith changed that view ... reasoning, that someone can grow rich without it coming at others’ expense. In colloquial terms, this is sometimes known as ‘growing the pie—if the pie is larger, then everyone gets a larger slice, and it explains why it is that although Smith will affirm Rousseau’s criticisms of inequality, he does less to mitigate it ... (yet even though) the market

has produced enough material wealth for everyone to live a good life, the priority then becomes to ensure that wealth benefits everyone (p. 170).”

CHAPTER FIVE Adam Smith “A COMBINATION OF THE RICH TO OPPRESS THE POOR”

“...Smith, Mill, and Marx. In the hands of these latter thinkers, economics became a science. But these intellectuals still share much in common with their predecessors—something that distinguishes them from many contemporary economists today. They are moral and political philosophers. Economics in their hands was not a ‘pure science’ to be fenced off from moral and political philosophy—it was, rather, one branch of it (p. 171).” Yes: Need serious and systematic inquiry using science & humanities, not just science.

Conclusions

“Voltaire once quipped that Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality* was an effort to restore such a world: ‘never has so much wit been used to seek to make us into animals; when one reads your work, one is seized with the desire to walk on all fours.’ We could return to an earlier, more equal, stage of history but at what cost? We could make people more equal. But at the cost of depriving people of food, clothing, housing, medical, and other technological advances, is this really desirable? On this model of thinking, one can acknowledge that the inequality associated with capitalism is problematic and still prefer it to living with the material uncertainties experienced by early generations (p. 200).”

“ Smith’s decision to prioritize economic growth ... Stimulating the economy would create greater social wealth, the benefits of which would redound to the whole community, not just the rich. Everyone would benefit from scientific, technological, and material advances. ... economist Deirdre McCloskey has called this ‘the Great Enrichment’ --- ‘Poor people in the United States and other developed countries live better than 18th-century European monarchs. Today, supermarkets and other stores are stocked with an ever-growing variety of goods, lifespans have been extended by decades, and (in the past 40 years alone) billions of people have been lifted from poverty. These are just some of the amazing achievements that have come about as the result of the Great Enrichment, a flowering of opportunity and economic growth unparalleled in human history’ (p. 200).”

“... thinkers like Steven Pinker, who has argued that even though inequality may be growing, this development is trivial in comparison to the gains made by unleashing the forces of capitalism and liberalism (p. 200) ... So, inequality no longer a problem? Perhaps. ... Both McCloskey and Pinker appear convinced that these gains can be sustained indefinitely by following the same policy of ignoring inequality and promoting economic growth through free markets (p. 200).”

“... unlike Smith, who emphasized the real moral, social, and political difficulties associated with inequality, McCloskey and Pinker instead dismiss inequality altogether. Inequality, if anything, is for them a blessing. Whereas, even though Smith prioritizes economic growth and poverty relief, no one can accuse him of embracing inequality as a blessing. It is, at best, a mixed blessing—a trade he makes with full awareness of its limitations and inconveniences (p. 201).”

Looking forward to the final two authors, chapters in the Williams book: “For Mill and Marx, Smith’s markets had already achieved all the good they possibly could. It was now time to exchange the benefits of growth for those of greater equality (p. 201).”

CHAPTER SIX John Stuart Mill “THE WIDENING BREACH”

Conclusions

“it is only in the backward countries of the world that increased production is still an important object: in those most advanced, what is economically needed is a better distribution” (Principles, 755). (p 253).”

So, continued growth is not the solution in the developed world, with the supposed trickle-down and everybody’s boat is lifted notion.

“Mill anticipates that progress toward greater equality advances utility ‘in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being’ (Liberty, 14). Given that ‘a person ‘who cares for other people, for his country, or for mankind, is a happier man than one who does not’ (Considerations, 137), selfishness and inequality tend to conspire against human happiness (p. 254).” So, using DIT, shared other-interest plays an ever larger role in the develop economies.

Was not familiar with this notion about Mill: “... it is possible that communism might work ‘at some future time’ when humanity is ready (Socialism, 270). What would this take? Mill answers, it ‘requires a high standard of both moral and intellectual education in all the members of the community’ (Socialism, 271). By ‘moral’ he means that people need to learn to do their work honestly and energetically (p. 254).”

Mill did not like the notion of redistribution... rather focusing on such things as: “The steep inheritance tax involves taking the money only from deceased citizens rather than from living ones. The reformed enclosure laws include compensation for landowners. Worker cooperatives raise their own capital and seek to supplant traditional bourgeois-funded industries only by providing a superior business model, not by seizing bourgeois assets (p. 255).” Sounds like New Deal Order stuff.

CHAPTER SEVEN Karl Marx “THE SOCIAL GULF”

Conclusions

“There is an important lesson to be learned from Marx about inequality. The problems stemming from radical inequality cannot be resolved with modest or cosmetic gestures. For him, inequality comes from economic systems designed to create widely separated winners and losers. The only solution is to abandon the system and replace it with one prioritizing greater equality (p. 310).”

“Public displays of charity are very much in vogue today. ... Yet Marx would urge a more skeptical lens. The point of grandiose charity, for him, is more fundamentally about forestalling systemic change and protecting the lion’s share of bourgeois assets. ... Rarely, if ever, have even outsized charitable gestures by billionaires required donors to make lifestyle sacrifices. When the poor or their advocates complain about inequality and concentrated wealth, the rich are often quick to retort with a long list of charitable deeds (p. 310-311).” Yes. Ex-post charity does not work. Point is, the self-sacrifice must be ongoing every day, as in finding path 0Z in a pre-distribution sense, not redistribution after the fact. Like, Taylor Swift sharing \$190M with the traveling staff, like \$100000 payments to truck drivers, all pre-distribution. Swift was operating on path 0Z for every one of the Eras concerts in 2024.

“The concern for Marx, Giridharadas, and Reich is that charity is deployed as a means of maintaining underlying structural inequalities that made charity necessary in the first place (p. 311).”

“As Mill insisted, when it comes to inequality, ‘justice is the one needful thing rather than kindness (Labour, 383)’ (p. 311).” Yes. Justice puts the system on path 0Z in the pre-distribution sense, not ex-post.

Conclusion THE LESSONS OF CANONICAL WISDOM ON INEQUALITY

Referring to Steven Pinker (and indirectly, Deirdre McCloskey): “Given his celebration of inequality, it is perhaps unsurprising that Bill Gates, one of the wealthiest men in the world, championed Pinker’s book as his ‘new favorite book of all time.’ As the most prominent work in recent decades to confirm to the rich that inequality is more a social blessing than a burden, Pinker’s arguments surely soothe billionaires much better than James’s disconcerting warning, ‘You rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you (James 5:1).’ That aside, over the course of a long book dedicated to lionizing the wisdom of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers, Pinker fails to acknowledge even in passing that several of the most celebrated intellectuals of that period, including Hobbes, Rousseau, and Smith, registered serious objections to inequality (p. 313).”

“The arguments against inequality found in historical texts are hardly peripheral; they emphatically deserve to be as prominent a feature of these thinkers’ thought as any other part of their work (p. 313).”

And, Williams also does not like the sufficientarianism idea either... as in the ethic that works to ensure poor having enough to survive, keep them alive, in effect like slaves of old.

“Economist Deirdre McCloskey is equally clear: ‘It doesn’t matter ethically whether the poor have the same number of diamond watches and Porsche automobiles as do the owners of hedge funds. It does, however, matter ethically whether they have the same opportunities to vote or to learn to read or to have a roof over their heads.’ ...

On the voting pointed to by McCloskey: “ institutions. Such oversights are common in the sufficientarian literature that dismisses inequality as ‘ethically irrelevant.’ But these considerations are not overlooked by Rousseau or Mill who, for example, understand the myriad ways in which inequality subverts democratic institutions (p. 314).”

“For McCloskey, one reason that earlier generations mistakenly cautioned against inequality is because they embraced a zero-sum economic framework in which one person’s financial gain is another’s loss. To be sure, this assumption was dominant before Adam Smith all the way up through Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who once asked someone with aspirations to become rich, ‘How is it possible to become wealthy without contributing to impoverishing someone else?’ (WFT, 9). Mandeville began challenging this orthodoxy in the early eighteenth century (pp. 314-315).”

“McCloskey thus follows established precedent in emphasizing that by virtue of the market economy, to be sure, ‘the rich got richer’ while ‘the poor [got] richer, much richer.’ This ‘Great Enrichment’ ... has buried zero-sum conceptions of economics in favor of one that is ‘distinctly positive-sum’ or ‘win-win.’ (Williams is citing the 2016 McCloskey book) (p. 315).”

Also, Williams points to the perversion of the rich... “... psychologist Dacher Keltner, who has found that the wealthy tend to act in ‘self-gratifying and often greedy ways,’ becoming increasingly ‘rude and offensive’ and delighting in stories that ‘divide and demean.’ (p. 316).”

“They are also more likely to avoid paying their taxes and to invent elaborate justifications for doing so. In fact, according to Keltner, justifying bad behavior is among the favorite pastimes among the ill-behaved rich—they show ‘no shortage of imagination when it comes to explaining away [their own] injustices.’ When shown graphs depicting widening inequality gaps in the American economy, ‘those from upper-class backgrounds were more likely to attribute the income gap to talent, genius, effort, and hard work.’ The rich, that is, have persuaded themselves that they have deserved their fortunes. This sense of entitlement, on Keltner’s account, emboldens further presumptuous behavior (p. 316).”

“There is an additional problem burdening many sufficientarians—the assumption that the problems of poverty and inequality can be reduced to the dollar amount required to satisfy the basic needs of the poor. Elizabeth Popp Berman refers to this approach as ‘thinking like an economist,’—where social problems are reduced to simplistic mathematical elements without consideration of their intricate moral complexities. As Berman notes, as recently as the early

1970s, lawmakers were receptive to antipollution policies that shamed polluters. But by the 1980s, 'environmental policy turned away from a moral framework that stigmatized polluters and toward the position that pollution was simply an externality to be priced '(p. 317).' Yes. The Ethic is ignored, the Ethic left out, the shared other-interest with the poor is ignored.

"Perhaps the peak of this kind of thinking is summarized by Margaret Thatcher's adviser Keith Joseph: 'If we are to reduce poverty in this country and to raise our standard of living, we need more inequality than we have now.' (p. 317)." Ouch.

"But we should recall how Mill distanced himself from Bentham, not only from his godfather's myopic insistence that every person has always been and will forever be egoistic but also from his mathematical reductionism. This criticism is to be found more between the lines of Mill's Utilitarianism than in his express arguments. Unlike his explicit rejections of Bentham's trenchant egoism, Mill rebukes Bentham in this respect by refusing to reduce his moral philosophy to mathematical formulas. Yes, Mill wants the greatest happiness. But there is no suggestion on his part that we can actually quantify that (pp. 317-318)."

"But my immediate point is this: simple numbers like GDP and economic growth rate do not effectively replace considerations of unity and solidarity. We cannot achieve these ends simply by deriving some fixed number of how much money to throw at the poor (p. 318)." Well, yes, there is an ethic at play, a shared other-interest.

"There are no simple formulas delineating the right degree of inequality (p. 318)." Perhaps not, but there is an Optimal Inequality developed with what reasoned people can go along with, evolved behind Rawlsian Veil of Ignorance and at the station of the Smithian Impartial Spectator --- The Ethic --- at play.

"Perhaps the single most common theme uniting thinkers in this book regarding the problem of inequality is the degree to which inequality divides political communities (p. 319). ... For Plato's Athenian Stranger, for example, economic inequality 'breed[s] both civil war and faction' (Laws, 744d). For Jesus, 'every kingdom divided against itself is laid to waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand' (Matthew 12:22). For Hobbes, inequality is a source of faction, and 'factions are the source of sedition and civil war' (Citizen, 10.12). For Rousseau, inequality inflames the 'citizens' hatred of one another' (PE, 20). Smith describes how in unequal societies, the 'disproportion betwixt them [rich and poor] ... is so great that he [the wealthy man] will hardly look at him [the poor] as being of the same kind' (LJ, 184). Mill observes that unequal societies commonly pit the classes against one another in 'concealed enmity ... [and] soured animosity' (Labour, 379). And for Marx, the inequalities required by capitalism stimulate 'antagonisms' between the classes culminating in class war. This reveals a persistent theme that colors inequality today: that radical inequality, everything else being equal, fosters hostility (p. 319)."

"What the history of political thought reveals, and what is lacking in influential segments of the inequality debate today, is the understanding that inequality is intrinsically connected to all of these matters. There is no magic GDP figure, no target economic growth rate, or even a Gini coefficient number that can replace the task of carefully thinking through how inequality affects

human nature, moral psychology, moral philosophy, and political institutions. There are no shortcuts to a more perfect union (p. 320).” Yes, it is about common ground, about a shared other-interest that works for everyone, in a constant consideration of just what is Optimal Inequality, one that enhances the performance of an economic & social system.

“The Nobel laureate economist Angus Deaton has echoed almost precisely this sentiment: ‘economics has been very narrow in its focus compared with its origins.... If you read Adam Smith, or Karl Marx, ... or John Stuart Mill ... there’s a very broad set of issues including philosophy, some psychology, serious contemplation of the human condition in all its strengths and weaknesses and in all its dimensions—whereas a lot of economics over the last 20 or 30 years has become obsessed with efficiency.’ (Note: and ignored the reality that efficiency depends upon the ethic, many dimensions of it, including the ethic of compensation). He laments that economics has simply ignored these larger questions that rightly concerned earlier generations of economists and philosophers—a disposition that compelled them to take inequality seriously (pp. 320-321).”

Last paragraph in the book: “A degree of economic equality is admittedly far from sufficient to ensure thriving political communities. But if we can learn anything from giants on whose shoulders we stand, it is almost certainly a component of it. Political thought cannot be entirely extricated from questions of equality and inequality. These matters inevitably shape our social world. We ignore them only at our peril (p. 321).”

References

Williams, David Lay. 2024. *The Greatest of All Plagues: How Economic Inequality Shaped Political Thought from Plato to Marx*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.