

Book Review

David Lay Williams: *The Greatest of All Plagues: How Economy Inequality Shaped Political Thought from Plato to Marx*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024. Pp. xv, 403.)

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The greatest plague referred to in the title of David Lay Williams's new book on economic inequality comes from a reference to civil war in Plato's *Laws*, when the Athenian Stranger suggests that addressing the former is necessary to avoiding the latter. The quotation and the book are apt, given that economic inequality has steeply risen and political divisions have some people openly musing about the possibility of a second American civil war.

Williams's book addresses scholars and commentators, such as the psychologist Steven Pinker and the economist Deirdre McCloskey, who are unconcerned by widening wealth gaps between the rich and the rest. Williams calls such figures "sufficientarians" characterized by concern only for absolute wealth and access to resources rather than their distribution among citizenries. For sufficientarians, it does not really matter that the rich have an increasing share of all wealth if the poor have ever-greater access to technology, health care, and political participation.

Countering these claims, Williams marshals seven figures from the history of political thought who, he argues, worried deeply about the detrimental effects of economic inequality: Plato, Jesus (along with Saints James and Paul from the New Testament), Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Karl Marx. Selected for their influence and shared concerns yet diverse diagnoses and prescriptions, these thinkers reflect a Western tradition that finds great danger in economic inequality. In chapters devoted to each, Williams brings out the contextual conditions of inequality in which they wrote, the worrisome effects of inequality upon the rich, poor, and society generally, and their proposed solutions.

Plato's *kallipolis* of the *Republic* is a notoriously unequal political place, with the few ruling over the many. But Williams draws our attention back to the radical economic equality that coexists with political inequality in the *Republic* and then focuses on the *Laws*, outlining how the Athenian Stranger proposes moderate restrictions on commerce, money lending, and inheritance that would limit inequality without provoking too much resistance from the wealthy. In the New Testament, Jesus and St James inveigh against the political and moral damage done by inequality, and for the revival of Hebraic laws of regular debt forgiveness and the moral renewal of forswearing

mammon in favor of God. Though St Paul's epistles are less hostile to the wealthy, Williams insists that Paul also condemns greed and the wealth disparities that inevitably accompany it.

Hobbes is little known for his egalitarianism. But Williams convincingly shows Hobbes too feared the corrosive effects of economic inequality and counseled measures to avoid it. Williams's analysis complements but also challenges the traditional emphasis on Hobbes's concern for political instability and the English Civil War. The chapter on Rousseau places him within his milieu of Geneva and brings out his view of the connections between economic inequality and the General Will, as well as his radical proposals (abolishing currency and commerce) and less radical ones (strong luxury taxes) to combat the difficulties he associates with these connections.

Smith is included as a sort of proto-sufficientarian who ultimately believed in the rising tide of market economies to address the greatest ills of poverty. But for Williams, unlike Smith's contemporary heirs, Smith is more circumspect about the risks of greater wealth and accepts there are true trade-offs in the accompanying inequality that can outweigh the benefits of greater gross prosperity. Mill appears as a sort of synthesis of the first five. Convinced of the great economic ills in Victorian England, Mill echoes the New Testament's openness to serious wealth redistribution, Rousseau's hope that this might occur through progressive taxation, yet also Smith's sense that the market economy need not be entirely jettisoned. In his final chapter, Williams brings out a radical republican Marx who disparages "bourgeois equality" but seeks a politics in which the proletariat attain genuine economic equality in the non-domination that is possible only when capitalism is transcended.

The Greatest of All Plagues is an immensely learned book, covering seven vast corpuses deeply and incisively. Unsurprisingly, given Williams's expertise, the chapters on Rousseau and Hobbes especially offer distinct contributions to the literature and the others—to varying degrees—bring out overlooked aspects of canonical texts. The writing is commendably clear: non-specialists and even non-academics should have no trouble following the book.

I will mention just a few areas of friendly concern. First, despite Williams's occasional efforts to connect chapters to previous ones, the book cannot help but appear like seven separate essays on a single topic, united by a thesis that: "these great thinkers all cared deeply about economic inequality." The chapters on Mill and Marx are both quite long, and I wonder whether the space may have been better used on a more substantive conclusion (it is only nine pages) putting the figures more deeply in dialogue and considering which of their ideas most effectively counters sufficientarian claims today. In his conclusion, Williams observes that one can ignore the deleterious effects of inequality, but the Western tradition "emphatically counsels otherwise." Those such as Pinker and McCloskey who "claim to revere this tradition ... should heed its warnings," Williams insists (317). We are left feeling as though Williams's final indictment of sufficientarians is that they are bad

readers. Does this mean that he has nothing to say to those who do not revere the Western tradition? Friedrich Nietzsche (who plays no role in the book) hovers ominously here, calling out that the Western tradition has indeed long feared *inequality*—and wrongly so!

Finally, I note two issues—one that a scholar might raise, the other a believer—with Williams's chapter on the New Testament. He is forthright that he treats it as a "great book" and is not doing theology (71), helpfully contextualizing it in the era's economic life of Galilee and Jerusalem. But it feels strange for an intellectual historian to simply treat Jesus' words in the Gospels as a transcription of his teachings and not filtered through the disciples. Even credulous biblical scholarship today generally affirms that the Jesus of the scriptures is the Jesus of the early church, and Williams does not consider what it means for how we read Jesus' teachings on inequality that they come to us through the leaders of the nascent church decades after his death.

Conversely, we must wonder whether we can treat the Gospels as historical texts without sterilizing their significance to those who see them as the revealed word of God—Williams does the former and aspires to avoid the latter. True, Christians believe they are called to care about economic inequality and the poor because of what Jesus said. But for Christians these teachings only make sense given the broader life of Jesus in the incarnation, passion, and resurrection: Jesus's birth in a modest stable to penniless parents, his torturous death at the hands of the rich and important, and his ultimate transcendence of that powerless demise in his ascendance to eternal life. Williams approvingly cites Jürgen Habermas' acknowledgment that secular arguments may not be sufficient today, calling it "foolish to ignore the remarkable tradition of religious texts on questions so vital to contemporary debates" (98). He may be right about that foolishness, but I am skeptical this can be done by treating religious texts as if they were simply making arguments. The revival of special attention to the poor in Christianity, including in the liberation theology of Gustavo Gutierrez and others, recognizes that the moral questions of the poor and inequality are as much about experience as argument. They insist that those of us with much become more human by refusing to evade the eyes of those with little. For them, we may be *free to ignore the effects of inequality*, but the costs far are greater than misinterpretation of the canon. In the end, I suspect Williams agrees.

—Samuel Piccolo 

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