“Is the ‘Common Good’ Good Enough?

The Case for More Egalitarian Remedies in Pursuing the Common Good”

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“Everyone knows that the Fathers of the Church laid down the duty of the rich toward the poor in no uncertain terms. As St. Ambrose put it: "You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his. You have been appropriating things that are meant to be for the common use of everyone. The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich."

Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, Article 23, March 26, 1967

Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*[[1]](#endnote-1) has finally focused the attentions of today’s publics as well as policy-makers on the fact that economic inequality in the global North is growing, and that this is not a good thing. Thus, the inequality word is out and about once more, and even the occasional politician is listening. It is thus an ideal moment for institutions such as the Catholic Church to examine whether its social goals in light of vast economic inequality are far-reaching and comprehensive enough to successfully contribute to the “common good.”

 The concept of the common good occupies an important place in Catholic Church social teaching. It means that the Catholic Church, the institution and its members, should treat the human concerns of every one as the concerns of all. Its ethic is communitarian: each person and the institutions of which s/he is a member must act responsibly toward those who lack the means for a fulfilling life. David Hollenbach (infra) notes that the concept of the common good, as defined by Pope John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* (1961) consists of “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment.” As Hollenbach points out, John XXIII’s summative definition enjoins the Catholic community to take into account the needs of both groups and individuals, thus exceeding the requirements of the more utilitarian injunction of “the greatest good for the greatest number,” that could lead in practice to the neglect of individual needs at the expense of majority needs.

This essay shows how the concept of the common good and its implementation can be enhanced by the inclusion of more explicitly egalitarian remedies. My discussion consists of three parts. First, I show how economic inequality, even though once more being considered as socially harmful, risks being naturalized today. Second, I argue that the revival of concerns about economic inequality recalls a period at the end of the sixties and the early seventies when recognition of inequality world-wide generated calls for the redistribution of income and wealth, including from inside the Catholic Church. Third, I compare the common good with proposals that arise from within the Catholic Church community for greater economic equality. I show that greater economic equality can be compatible with a program based upon the enhancement of the common good.

**Economic Inequality Returns to Center Stage**

Suffice it to say, massive economic inequalities and their detrimental consequences have become a part of the common sense of everyday life in the world today, and as such, risk becoming natural facts about the world itself. Consider some instances for the United States. When geographical alleys of high poverty and catastrophically low life expectancy are charted across the middle of America from the Appalachians to the deep South, no one cries out in disbelief, even if the life expectancy gap is **35 years** between rich and poor regions.[[2]](#endnote-2) Nor does anyone exhibit surprise that the U.S. poor and working class, including African-Americans and Latinos, have higher high-school drop-out rates and dramatically lower college attendance and completion rates than the middle and upper classes, despite the modest efforts of the federal government as well as colleges and universities to mitigate the wealth and income disadvantages for the deserving with scholarships and loans.[[3]](#endnote-3) Perhaps the only “aha” response recorded is when people are confronted with the fact that 45% of U.S. children live in poor and low-income households.[[4]](#endnote-4)

For the most part, economic inequality and its harms are taken for granted. From “culture of poverty” conservatives such as Charles Murray that pathologize the poor to liberal poverty interventionists like economist Richard Freeman that argue for more opportunity, few policy analysts would disagree with the late Nobel economist James Tobin that one must face “the unpleasant reality that one generation’s inequality of outcomes is the next generation’s inequality of opportunity.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

From the vantage of the Global North, the plight of poor countries put most charitably arises from the pathologies of under-development. As Paul Farmer, first with reference to Haitians during the AIDS crisis,[[6]](#endnote-6) and now once more with the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, noted, many in the Global North have preferred to treat these epidemics as the result of traditional beliefs and practices of the world’s poor rather than objective deficiencies in their health care systems. Regarding Ebola, Farmer writes:

“Ebola is more a symptom of a weak healthcare system than anything else. But until this diagnosis is agreed on, there’s plenty of room for other, more exotic explanations. The palaver (as Liberians say) includes a lot of talk about the ‘cultural beliefs and behaviors’ said to propagate the outbreak. The list usually includes activities that are not really ‘behaviors,’ such as hunting and eating bush meat, (and) taking part in strange funerary practices of ‘secret societies’ … Despite anthropologists’ fondness of recounting such practices, these rights are not suspected of having played a major role in outbreaks of Ebola in Congo, Uganda and Sudan over the last forty years. …. What is to be done? The only formula we’ve come up with is the following: you can’t stop Ebola without staff, stuff, space and systems.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

A profound ambivalence exists, thus, between believing that economic inequality is a natural fact, or that economic inequality is a social fact, that is, manufactured in the course of everyday social life. In the first case, human fulfillment falls victim to chance. In the second case, an abiding pessimism effaces reason, and human fulfillment again falls, this time to a reluctance to pull up inequality by its social roots. If one considers significant economic inequality a gross social liability either for society as a whole or for the economically disadvantaged, then this is a time of peril. But is may also be a moment of opportunity for supporting the achievement of a “fully human” life, as Popes John XXIII and Paul VI termed it, for all.

One then can take heart that Piketty and his extraordinary book have come along. His findings of deep and enduring economic inequality in the Global North (and as his data allowed, in the Global South as well) are consonant with other less well-known recent findings. For instance, Oxfam reports that the top 1% of world households owns half the world’s wealth. Just 85 people have the wealth equivalent to half the world’s population. Seventy percent of the world’s population lives in states where economic inequality has increased over the past 30 years. Twenty-four out of 26 countries where complete data are available have experienced a growth in the income share of the top 1% between 1980 and 2012. The GINI index, currently the most widely used index for income inequality, has climbed in 58 states since 1988; their number in addition to the Global North (including Scandinavia) includes Indonesia, China, India, Pakistan, and Nigeria. Governance played a part, as in most of these states marginal tax rates have declined since 1975.[[8]](#endnote-8)

 Piketty’s effort has also helped pushed back the “growing global middle class” hypothesis that has emerged since the 2008 world recession.[[9]](#endnote-9) He has enabled various publics to understand that the economic growth of China and India was helping the Indian and Chinese rich get richer, in many cases astronomically richer, even as it was only marginally lifting the poor.[[10]](#endnote-10) Many observers are now also gaining an audience as they draw attention to the fragility and fears for the survivability of the small progress that heretofore poor masses, lately re-branded as the new global middle class, have made in the last decade.[[11]](#endnote-11)

 Yet the commonplace notion that the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer, persists, and is taken for granted in our time. In an otherwise engaging and picturesque piece in the weekend leisure section of a recent *Financial Times* on tramping about rural Albania, writer Andrew Eames allows casually that:

“Albania’s long period of communist isolation has given way to a catch-up capitalism, producing massive inequality between town and country. In practical terms that means that an Albanian’s choice of transport seems to be either a Mercedes or a donkey.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

An observation such as this before might have fit nicely into the casual accounts of travels in Europe’s many colonies the Second World War. The writer talks with a shepherd coming off a mountain who had lost a sheep to wolves. He stops to admire a frescoed 13th Century Byzantine Church with a sagging roof and nests of bats. The stark modernism of a Sufi shrine puts him off. Perhaps owing to Italian occupation, the food is good. And so it goes: inequality, albeit “massive” and driven by “catch-up capitalism,” is one fact among many of today’s world. There is no alarm bell sounded. After all, it is a travel piece.[[13]](#endnote-13)

 Gross global economic inequality, as well as inequality in the United States, have brought forth campaigns to correct the problem three times since the start of the Second World War, periods in which one can trace a progressive religious response as well. The first corresponds with the U.S. effort to construct a peaceful and more prosperous post-World War II world. The second, largely associated with the social and political upheavals of the sixties, marks a moment when peoples around the world demanded freedom from colonial and neo-colonial oppression, an end to wars, and a new age of social justice. The third, our present day, is but half-born, even as now many voices world-wide insist that vast economic inequality among and within all nations is snuffing out human well being just as quickly as metrics of “economic development” inch upward on the graph of human progress.

It should be noted, however, that even during the eighties, a time of economic crisis and political upheaval in the state socialist East and the Global South, as well as stern conservative political reaction in the Global North, religious and lay progressives spoke out against what came to be called “the structural violence” of the world capitalist economy and the states that suborned its predations.[[14]](#endnote-14)

**A Partial Genealogy of Inequality Concern**

On February 1, 1941, Franklin Roosevelt proposed that “freedom from want,” the goal of providing “a healthy peacetime life” for all the world’s citizens, should take its place alongside freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and freedom from fear, as one of the four great desiderata of a world delivered from the tyranny of war. For Roosevelt, these goals, so close indeed to those he held sacred for the United States, could change the world for the better too.[[15]](#endnote-15) He sought to implement his “global new deal” via the establishment of institutions that later became the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. [[16]](#endnote-16) In the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the world’s nations made known their intent to make “freedom from want” a fundamental human right in the face of the greatest modern humanitarian and economic crisis the world had yet known.[[17]](#endnote-17) President Harry Truman supported a World Bank mission to promote economic growth in poor countries, and as the Cold War accelerated, viewed development as a bulwark against the rise of revolutionary socialism in the Global South.[[18]](#endnote-18)

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) gave voice to peoples around the world that sought to redeem dignity and virtue after the savage and deadliest war in human history. Not only governments but also religious groups, many of which had become deeply involved in war relief, expanded their charters to include reducing poverty and privation as common conditions for the vast majority of the world’s population. The Church World Service, an umbrella organizations of 17 different Protestant denominations was formed in 1946 to work with Lutheran and Catholic welfare organizations to relieve not only those suffering from the effects of war, but to take on feeding the hungry throughout the world.[[19]](#endnote-19) The 1948 Anglican Communion’s *Lambeth Conference Principles* includes practically *verbatim* the UN *Declaration*’s preamble.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Though Pope John XXIII consulted unofficially with UN *Declaration* drafters while Papal Nuncio to France,[[21]](#endnote-21) his 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris* formally endorsed it in the following terms:

“We think the document should be considered a step in the right direction, an approach toward the establishment of a juridical and political ordering of the world community. It is a solemn recognition of the personal dignity of every human being; an assertion of everyone's right to be free to seek out the truth, to follow moral principles, discharge the duties imposed by justice, and lead a fully human life.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

With this pronouncement, the Catholic Church joined forces with other religious and lay voices advocating the establishment world-wide of fundamental human rights, especially “the right to …. a fully human life,” a turn of phrase that encapsulates the next great phase of reformist energies that breaks out in the sixties. The demands for social justice whether by parties of the left (liberal and social democratic forces in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union), anti-colonial oppositions, trade unions, civil rights, pacifist, and anti-war movements, or by the beginning of the seventies, liberation theology practitioners and base communities, were carried forward.

At the instigation of Pope John XXIII and spurred on by his successor Paul VI, Vatican Council II expressed its solidarity with the world’s poor. In *Gaudium et* Spes (1967), Pope Paul made it clear that inequality itself radically limited human flourishing for the majority of the world’s population:

“At the very time when the development of economic life could mitigate social inequalities (provided that it be guided and coordinated in a reasonable and human way), it is often made to embitter them; or, in some places, it even results in a decline of the social status of the underprivileged and in contempt for the poor. While an immense number of people still lack the absolute necessities of life, some, even in less advanced areas, live in luxury or squander wealth. Extravagance and wretchedness exist side by side. While a few enjoy very great power of choice, the majority are deprived of almost all possibility of acting on their own initiative and responsibility, and often subsist in living and working conditions unworthy of the human person.” [[23]](#endnote-23)

Paul argued directly that economic inequalities must be eliminated if humankind is to flourish:

“To satisfy the demands of justice and equity, strenuous efforts must be made, without disregarding the rights of persons or the natural qualities of each country, to remove as quickly as possible the immense economic inequalities, which now exist and in many cases are growing and which are connected with individual and social discrimination.” [[24]](#endnote-24)

Militant struggle on many fronts achieved some gains, and logged some losses, but the greater damper upon the fires of reform proved to be the deep world economic crisis of the mid-seventies that extinguished flames conservatives of all sorts could not. For the Global North, the 30-year “golden age” of economic expansion was over, and the Global South’s hopes for their own golden age snuffed out by debt, stagnation, and for many decline.[[25]](#endnote-25) The growing inequality gap between the Global North rich and the Global South poor was noted and protested by the Brandt Commission (1980) and the Brundtland Commission (1987). The first of these argued for the redistribution of the North’s riches to help solve the South’s pervasive poverty;[[26]](#endnote-26) the second called for “sustainable development,” a concept that included a decent living for everyone on the planet.[[27]](#endnote-27) Both caused a flurry of concern upon release, and were then ignored and forgotten.

In the United States, increasing income inequality was spotted (and ignored) almost the instant it became a trend. Inequality in the US had been growing since the 70s and chronically world-wide since the renewed waves of globalization begun in the 70s, this time fed by Northern finance and neoliberal policy regimes that helped the rich get richer in every society, swept into the deepening waters of the world economy. In fact, a few minutes with the *New York Times Archive* is enough to document how major stories were filed from 1972 onwards detailing the rise in U.S. income inequality.[[28]](#endnote-28) Most disturbing is a January 3, 1982 “conversation” among Daniel Bell, Robert Nozick, and James Tobin entitled “If Inequality Is Inevitable, What Can Be Done about It?” that save for Tobins’ temporizing is like a modern version of the *trahison des clercs*. Certainly audiences ranging from the readers of the *New York Times* to intellectuals and technocrats were aware of these facts well before the outbreak of the “Occupy” movements world-wide in 2011, as the data had been available almost simultaneously with the renewed growth in income inequality itself.

However, the relentless ideological fusillades of neoliberalism released by the Reagan and Thatcher regimes in the eighties pushed the story of growing economic inequality off the front pages. When the issue of inequality surfaced in public spaces, their administrations alternately took the hard line that inequality was the cost of economic growth and rewarding entrepreneurial success, or more softly suggested that a “rising tide” of economic growth “would lift all boats.” It was a time of “trickle down” economic reason and an assault on welfare states, the latter signifying a war on the poor.[[29]](#endnote-29)

The United States Catholic Church, as did other religious denominations upon which the burdens of the poor were thrust, spoke out against the new neoliberal direction of the national political economy. *Economic Justice for All*, the U.S. bishops’ 1986 pastoral letter, talked back to the new prevailing orthodoxy, arguing that the economy “… must be at the service of *all people, especially the poor*.” According to Charles Curran, the bishops insisted on primacy of human dignity in the conduct of all social institutions and affirmed the right of all to a minimally decent human existence.[[30]](#endnote-30)

The bishops placed strong emphasis on the concept of the common good and cited Vatican II as their authority:

“Vatican II described the common good as "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment." These conditions include the rights to fulfillment of material needs, a guarantee of fundamental freedoms, and the protection of relationships that are essential to participation in the life of society. These rights are bestowed on human beings by God and grounded in the nature and dignity of human persons. They are not created by society. Indeed society has a duty to secure and protect them.”[[31]](#endnote-31)

They enunciated six principles that should guide the U.S. Catholic Church, including the protection of human dignity, the provision of community, economic participation, special consideration for the poor and vulnerable, and the recognition and protection of basic human rights for all.[[32]](#endnote-32)

 The bishops promised solidarity, but not equality. “Basic justice,” they argued,

“also calls for the establishment of a floor of material well-being on which all can stand. This is a duty of the whole of society and it creates particular obligations for those with greater resources. This duty calls into question extreme inequalities of income and consumption when so many lack basic necessities. Catholic social teaching does not maintain that a flat, arithmetical equality of income and wealth is a demand of justice, but it does challenge economic arrangements that leave large numbers of people impoverished. Further, it sees extreme inequality as a threat to the solidarity of the human community, for great disparities lead to deep social divisions and conflict.”[[33]](#endnote-33)

Poverty, in other words, is the enemy; inequality becomes a problem when it endangers solidarity. This would seem consistent with the ultimate modesty of Church goals, as another section of *Populorum Progressio* suggests. Despite his forthright attacks on inequality in other sections of the document, Pope Paul nonetheless accepts, albeit via metaphor, the notion that justice is served sufficiently if the rich and the poor can find themselves the same table:

But these efforts, as well as public and private allocations of gifts, loans and investments, are not enough. It is not just a question of eliminating hunger and reducing poverty. It is not just a question of fighting wretched conditions, though this is an urgent and necessary task. It involves building a human community where men can live truly human lives, free from discrimination on account of race, religion or nationality, free from servitude to other men or to natural forces which they cannot yet control satisfactorily. It involves building a human community where liberty is not an idle word, where the needy Lazarus can sit down with the rich man at the same banquet table.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Thus, like *Populorum* Progressio, the bishops’ *Economic Justice for All*, was reforming rather than radical, Curran believes, even if the bishops were roundly attacked by Catholic intellectuals such as Michael Novak, part of the neoconservative choir that sang the praises of capitalism as the harbinger of future human happiness. For Curran’s purposes, though, the real problem with the document lay in its avoidance of the role of economic and social power that secured an American society so ashamedly unequal:

“The pastoral letter belongs to a genre of teaching that obviously appeals to the reason and goodwill of others. Such an approach challenges the elite and the leaders to put into practice the principles proposed in the teaching. The letter pays little or no attention to the role of power. Power can never be absolutized, but is an important aspect in changing social structure. … In practice, the U.S. Catholic Church has recognized the role of power in bringing about structural change but not in the theoretical exposition of the pastoral.”[[35]](#endnote-35)

Curran also faults the pastoral letter for failing to recognize groups such as the Catholic Worker movement whom he describes as “prophetic shock minorities” that focused precisely on redistributing power from rich to poor.[[36]](#endnote-36) He also argues that the pastoral letters on economic justice and nuclear war of the eighties seen in retrospect were the last attempts by U.S. bishops to develop church teaching in building an ecumenical community for progressive social change.[[37]](#endnote-37)

 From the eighties forward, however, a more egalitarian reading of modern Catholic social teaching of the common good emerged. Drew Christiansen, in actuality writing before the U.S. bishops letter on economic justice, argued that there is a warrant for “relative equality” to be found in the Catholic tradition. While reflecting on many of the same sources that have given rise for a call to the common good and holding fast to the greater good of solidarity and thus a communitarian view of the world, he stresses the task of social justice over the duties of solidarity and charity in achieving greater equality. Thus the function of relative equality (as a subset of solidaristic equality) consists of three functions: “(1) (re)distribution of resources on egalitarian lines, (2) for the realization of full human life by all, (3) in a spirit which reduces differences and increases the life shared in common.”[[38]](#endnote-38)

 The differences between Christiansen’s “relative equality” and the “common good” are not sharp, but they are significant. Though accepting that “relative equality” implies “that there can be legitimate differences but that these must always be regulated to common sharing in a full human life,” Christiansen returns to the primary need to continuously (re)distribute the economic product.[[39]](#endnote-39) In another context, Christiansen also highlights Pope John XXIII’s explicit call for the elimination of the invidious distinctions of class as enemies of the common good. He contrasts John’s belief with that of his forebears:

“From the time of Leo XIII to Pius XI, while Catholic social teaching defended the interests of workers and the poor, it also assumed that different standards of living were appropriate to people in different roles wither because of social status (Leo) or social function (Pius). While John was no leveler demanding flat equality, he nonetheless deemed inequities of class incompatible with the common good.”[[40]](#endnote-40)

Christiansen concludes from the foregoing that inequality is thus incompatible

with Church teaching:

“The control and elimination of inequality stands, by almost any analysis, as a strong standard of egalitarian justice. The bias against privilege entails a preference for a more egalitarian society.”[[41]](#endnote-41)

Christiansen’s argument that egalitarian remedies belong in a robust program for the common good appear once more in a 2014 *Theological Studies* article by Kate Ward and Kenneth Himes entitled “’Growing Apart’: The Rise of Inequality.” They argue that equality should not be confused with poverty reduction:

“…Catholic theologians would do well not to treat inequality and poverty as if they were one and the same, but to pay careful attention to the difference between the two. One major moral feature of inequality is the distance it creates between richest and poorest. Inequality is not simply a matter of the suffering of the poor, although we can never forget that, but a matter of the existence or failure of a community of mutual concern.”[[42]](#endnote-42)

Despite this remonstrance, Ward and Himes do not take up what remedies would generate what Christiansen had termed 20 years ago “relative equality.” They advocate complete early childhood education and health services for children from the ages of 0 to 5. They note with favor the US bishops’ 2013 Labor Day message that called inequality a “Catholic concern,” and their advocacy of ending wage theft, increasing the minimum wage, and indexing the minimum wage to inflation.[[43]](#endnote-43)

 That said, it is a thin list. Early childhood development programs, especially when matched with medical services for youngsters, the improvement in children’s subsequent academic progress and their social adjustment is statistically significant, but very incremental and very partial. As noted above, lower high school and college completion as well as college attendance are directly related to lower family income and to minority race/ethnic status. Though pre-kindergarten attendance had grown from 55% of children ages 3-6 in 2007 to 61% of the same group in 2012, it still means that a sizeable portion of youngsters will grow up without the benefits of early childhood education. Again, income is a culprit: In 2012, 46 percent of three- to six-year-olds in poor families, and 52 percent in low-income families, were in such programs, compared with 72 percent of children in families with higher incomes. Significantly fewer Latino youngsters were enrolled than children from white and other minority/ethnic groups.[[44]](#endnote-44)

 Let us take up the question of the impact of raising the minimum wage and indexing it to inflation as recommended by the U.S. bishops in 2013 and reported by Ward and Himes. The federal minimum wage in 2014 was $7.25 an hour; the 19 million full-time minimum wage workers thus receive an annual income of $14,500 a year. President Obama has been waging a campaign to increase the minimum wage to $10.10 an hour: should it become law, the full-time minimum wage worker would obtain an annual income of $20,200, which is less than $1000 more than the U.S. poverty definition for a household of three and still $3550 below the poverty threshold for a household of four.[[45]](#endnote-45) U.S. inflation ran an average of 2.2% per year between 2004 and 2014, and even after compounding the rate over the decade, the resulting increase for the current minimum wage worker, had cost of living increases been attached to the minimum wage in 2004, would have amounted to $3100. This would have improved the position of single minimum wage earners and those in a two-person household, but it would not be have been sufficient to lift households any larger than 2 over the poverty threshold.[[46]](#endnote-46)

 Unfortunately the same can be said of the Earned Income Tax Credit, a program begun in 1975 with the support of both parties that adds income back to the working poor by refunding a portion of their withholding tax monies upon filing their annual tax returns. Again, a worthy cause, nominally, but in reality the unemployed have no recourse to the program. In addition, the amounts reimbursed are slight: from a person or couple making minimum wages, the figure for 2013 is $487. The program begins to pay off when combined with the dependent children allowance. Once could have made up to $37,870 as a single bread-winner with one child or as a couple have made up to $43,000 with one child and receive a refund of $3,250. With a bit more income and 2 children, the refund goes up to $5,720; and with 3 children, the reimbursement rises to $6,044.[[47]](#endnote-47)

 EITC is the federal government’s largest welfare program for the poor and working poor. Over 27 million received over $65 billion in EITC for the 2013 tax year, as against $35 billion in Fiscal Year 2012 (latest data available) expended for the Transitional Assistance for Needy Family program, formerly AFDC, for 4 million recipients. In no state, however, did EITC reimbursements exceed an average of $3,000 per tax filer.[[48]](#endnote-48)

 I have reviewed these U.S. “welfare” programs in dollars-and-cents details to bring home to American readers just how impecunious and paltry the income support for the poor and working class in the United States is. No programs of this sort could even pretend “to close the gap” between the classes; instead they testify to why indeed almost half of the nation’s children live in poor and low income households, as noted above. These are the “signs of the times.” These empirical illustrations indicate why a resolve to raise the banner for the common good in the United States should now include measures to reduce significantly income and wealth inequality. Based upon the findings of dramatic income and wealth inequality world-wide, a universal campaign for the common good should find ways to reduce wealth and income equality among and within nations.

 Regarding the United States, one of the many virtues of Thomas Picketty’s *Capital in the 21st Century* is that he highlights that the vast discrepancies in wealth and income that had accrued in the United States from the end of the 19th Century to the Great Depression were significantly reduced via their progressive taxation under New Deal, Fair Deal, and even the early years of the Eisenhower administration.[[49]](#endnote-49) The progressive taxation of the rich would not only provide for the economic redistribution necessary for improving the common good, but it could diminish the political hold the rich have over U.S. democracy.

Wealth and power, both political and social, are highly correlated. To put it plainly, they go together like ham and eggs. To take up the U.S. case again, as Benjamin Paige as his associates found, the wealthiest 1% are the most politically active of all income segments: they are much more conservative than the electorate at large, and are typically in active contact with the political establishment. The authors infer that their influence may explain why U.S. laws and regulatory oversight follow the policy initiatives of the rich rather than the opinions of the majority which are typically at variance with U.S. policy directions and public practices.[[50]](#endnote-50) It is a matter of public record that the rich in the United States exercise their “free speech rights” by donating hundreds of millions of dollars every year to political candidates and positions they prefer, in addition to supporting foundations and think tanks that generate policy options favorable to their status. If unchecked, political regimes form that ensure the reproduction of the ruling class by supporting further expropriation of income, capital, and resources of a society. State power also protects class privilege and destroys resistance and/or controls dissent.[[51]](#endnote-51)

 To redistribute, then, is to make repairs on U.S. democracy and perhaps to begin constructing a new commonwealth. Redistribution to the Global South is more complicated by the questions of state sovereignty for the nations involved. Yet, the Ebola crisis has shown once again how poorly distributed basic medical resources are distributed worldwide. It is a multi-dimensional problem: poor nations, and even those like China, India, and Andean Latin America treated as “middle income” countries lack the basic components of the taken-for-granted modern medical system, including trained staff, clinical facilities, medical centers and hospitals, as well as the necessary linkages to international markets for medical technology and pharmaceuticals. There is no wont of highly detailed plans to remedy the situation. A United Nations commission headed by economist Jeffrey Sachs fifteen years ago presented a plan that on its face might have, if implemented, significantly aided African nations in combating both the AIDS and Ebola epidemics.[[52]](#endnote-52)

 Redistributing medical resources is not like building roads and dams: it requires transferring expertise and technologies of clinical research and care as well as the bricks and mortar of modern medical facilities. It involves institution-building, not simply monetary transfers. For the Global North, it would require a re-direction of its resources away from seeking new sources of profit and skimming surplus from the nouveaux riches of the rapidly developing world. The rush of top U.S. universities to the Arabian peninsula and the design and staffing of high end medical research facilities there as well as in China suggests a need for reflection not only of state priorities but those of non-profit “foundations,” once the objects of domestic charity now being “re-engineered” for global profit. Redistribution from North to South, thus, requires institutional reform at home in which sentiments and bonds of solidarity are necessary for success.[[53]](#endnote-53)

 The assumption of global responsibility for the common good by all requires new forms of taxation, once again as much for redistribution as for resources. Any sovereign that imposes a tax on wealth and income that the others do not will find that a proportion of those of means, persons either real or fictive, will do what they can to avoid paying. Witness, for instance, how many Fortune 500 U.S. companies are relocating their corporate headquarters to low-tax countries, creating the so-called “inversion” problem.[[54]](#endnote-54) Piketty, highly cognizant of the problem, argues that a global tax on capital flows will discourage opportunism and indirectly foster the international solidarity necessary to chip away at yawning wealth and inequality differences among nations.[[55]](#endnote-55)

 I close this paper with a desire to do more that would redeem the great promise of social science to help improve the human condition, mindful that our findings as social scientists can find a sympathetic strain of Catholic social teaching where they might prove useful. Given “the signs of the times,” egalitarian remedies are essential to the Church mission of assuring the common good. Still, there may be some among its readers who feel like pushing back their chairs and saying: “so true, but equality is so utopian. It has no chance of coming to pass in our lifetimes.” So true, but will shrinking human needs to today’s policy imperatives accomplish what must be done? I am reminded of the economist John Roemer’s closing words after reporting that to provide real equal educational opportunity for African-American students that would be typical of that provided their white age-mates, it would cost ten times as much to provide for African-American students as was being provided to typical white students. Noting that politicians and policy people would probably reject his findings out of hand, demanding more “reasonable” numbers to make reform more realistic, he responded:

“Let us not mix ethics and political pragmatism, but rather remain clear on the distinction between what is right and that compromises are necessary, because our societies have not yet fully embraced what is right.”[[56]](#endnote-56)

Economic equality brings along with it many challenges and complications, not the least of which is the contemplation of changing the current world order. In these times, more than ever, it demands a hearing.

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