Book Review: Williams, David Lay. *The Greatest of All Plagues: How Economic Inequality Shaped Political Thought from Plato to Marx*. Princeton University Press, 2024. xv + 405 pages. Paperback, $24.95.

Spanning centuries, *The Greatest of All Plagues: How Economic Inequality Shaped Political Thought from Plato to Marx* is a broad study of how philosophers have wrestled with the public issue of economic inequality. Between Plato and Marx come Jesus, Hobbes, Rousseau, Smith, and Mill, each with an up-to-date literature review and each succinctly placed in their historical context, Williams' book is an intriguing read. Whether readers of this book are seeking to explore inequality or major thinkers, they will find it accessible and engaging. I was particularly intrigued by the discussion surrounding Adam Smith and William's views on his work, *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith's concerns about inequality surface not only in what he sees as a damaged relationship between the many impoverished workers and the few wealthy owners, but also in the primary role assumed by any civil government in a capitalist system: to protect the property of the rich against violent encroachment by the poor. Like Jesus in ancient times, Smith deplored the sinful greed of the wealthy; he also sympathized with impoverished workers and noted that the same division of labor concept he celebrated for boosting productivity and prosperity left laborers exhausted, unhealthy, and mentally dull. Smith advocated such government intervention as progressive taxation, but was not hopeful that such policies would succeed given the political power wielded by the wealthy. He wished that great inequality was not the inevitable outcome of industrial society, but ultimately accepted that it was and believed that the industrial-age poor at least benefited from cheaper goods and improved standards of living overall.

Williams ultimately finds that Smith is less concerned about inequality than all the others. Jean-Jacques Rousseau devoted an entire book to the subject, describing the physical and psychological miseries of the poor, miseries inflicted by the rich, who use laws and government to maintain their superior status. He also claims that the wealthy pit the poor against one another to divert their attention. For Rousseau, the impoverished multitudes' dependence on the wealthy means they lose their freedom; without free will among voters, democratic processes are corrupted and injustice reigns. John Stuart Mill also objects to economic inequality as anathemic to liberty, resulting in a government in which the wealthy rule on their own behalf. For both Rousseau and Mill, the possibility of political equality dies with economic inequality, as could not be more obvious in the United States today—compare the act of voting available to all with the act of donating a grand sum for a gilt White House ballroom.

Each chapter of *The Greatest of All Plagues* is devoted to one philosopher. Williams review the recent literature for each. These are no doubt useful, but I preferred the passages placing each thinker in his historical context. The description of Jesus's Galilee, for example, helps to explain why his teaching emphasized the morally ruinous nature of wealth and asserted that a person can be either rich or saved, but not both. His birthplace of Nazareth was a poor agrarian village of mud-hut housing, beset by drought and famine, whose desperate farmers often fell prey to lenders intending to seize their land and even enslave them. Wealth was concentrated in nearby cities where an affluent class lived in lavish homes and governed the Jewish world on behalf of distant emperors. Glaring economic inequality in Jesus's time resulted in intense unrest among the peasantry, often violently quelled, and the rise of a class of Robin-Hood-style bandits who looted the homes of the wealthy and gave to the poor. Thus, Jesus's care for and elevation of the poor and his scorn for the wealthy, exemplified throughout the Gospels, placed him in conflict with the Romans and their collaborators, who crucified him between two bandits.

Williams finds that this long history of erudite concern over the adverse moral, social, and political effects of inequality is most useful for attacking a modern school of thought called sufficientarianism. It holds that inequality per se is unproblematic so long as poverty is addressed. Propounded by economists and celebrated by billionaires, sufficientarian reasoning reduces the complicated problem of inequality to a number: the amount of money required to meet the basic needs of society's indigent. In other words, the cost of extreme wealth, for the wealthy, is only whatever portion they will be required to provide for the mere subsistence of the lowest class. Egalitarians can indeed celebrate Williams' analyses of past thinkers for how they counter such arguments.

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