THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHICAL ECONOMICS:
REFLECTIONS ON ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ISSUES
Volume XVIII Annual issue 2025
ISSN: 1844-8208
ISSN (print): 1843-2298

Paper format: 16.5x23.5 cm

Review of David Lay Williams, *The Greatest of All Plagues: How Economic Inequality Shaped Political Thought from Plato to Marx*, Princeton, USA, Princeton University Press, 2024, xv + 403 pp., ISBN Digital (PDF) 9780691255514

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EDITURA ASE

Review of David Lay Williams, *The Greatest of All Plagues: How Economic Inequality Shaped Political Thought from Plato to Marx*, Princeton, USA, Princeton University Press, 2024, xv + 403 pp., ISBN Digital (PDF) 9780691255514

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The Greatest of All Plagues focuses on the intellectual legacy within the Western canon concerning the philosophical and economic concept of *inequality*. The book's title is a reference to Plato's *Laws*, where the Athenian character in the dialogue states that inequality in the *polis*, which ultimately creates the conditions for civil war, is the 'greatest of all plagues' (p. 11). Drawing on this Platonic reference, David Lay Williams [1] aims to construct an intellectual history of the concept of *inequality* using some of the most influential and widely studied authors in the European intellectual tradition.

Within the pages of this book, one finds a close analysis of a historical and hermeneutical nature, where the author examines the context of each philosopher's society while attempting to connect their economic and social reality with their wider philosophical system or general thought. The focus of this book is interdisciplinary, combining perspectives from history, economics, sociology, political science, and philosophy. Its contents are well researched and offer valuable insight into this philosophical and economic issue. Williams argues that his foundational premise lies in the claim that economists have a great deal to learn from the doctrines of well-established philosophers (p. 321); however, this volume is not exclusively for philosophers or economists, as its potential value extends to scholars across disciplines as well as to a broader readership.

Năfureanu Dan (2025), Review of David Lay Williams, *The Greatest of All Plagues: How Economic Inequality Shaped Political Thought from Plato to Marx*, Princeton, USA, Princeton University Press, 2024, xv + 403 pp., ISBN Digital (PDF) 9780691255514, *The Journal of Philosophical Economics: Reflections on Economic and Social Issues*, XVIII (Annual issue), 380-388

Recent historical crises – the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing war waged by Russia against Ukraine, and numerous human rights violations around the world – are accompanied by a trend of income inequality and a lack of social mobility (pp. 1-2). For example, in 1965, the average CEO in the United States of America earned 21.1 times more than the average employee at the same company. In 1978, the difference was 31.4 times more; in 1989, 61.4 times; in 2021, it was 351.1 times (p. 10). For the author, economists and people in power exhibit a narrow perspective, focusing on trends of efficiency for corporate capitalism while dismissing the issue of *inequality* (pp. 320-321). The book ends with the passage '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). The claim is that the ever-growing gap between the richest and the poorest in the world, the ongoing *cost of living crisis*, higher rents and mortgages, alongside lower or stagnant incomes, higher inflation, riskier speculative bubbles like the AI bubble, austerity and chauvinistic nationalist policies and rhetoric pose grave risks for the democratic order.

The author takes the reader on a journey through the philosophical ideas and real-life historical socio-economic conditions of the following figures: Plato, Jesus Christ, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx. These include six major philosophers – three of whom made foundational contributions to economic thought – and one central religious figure, all of whom have been highly influential in shaping Western political thought and institutions. In short, the aim of the book is neither to create a comprehensive compendium or encyclopaedia of political and economic thinking related to *inequality*, nor does it aim to be inclusive and mindful of all possible worldwide traditions. The author in question assumes these shortcomings and embraces them (p. 3), trying to paint a picture within the Western canon, selecting a few famous and relevant thinkers who will help inspire those economists, politicians and billionaires, whose ignorance or ill intent could spell danger for democracy in Europe and North America, from within those lesser known arguments, overlooked passages and misunderstood works of Western thought.

In the following sections of this review there will be a short and condensed look at the main ideas found within the works and teachings of the seven central figures quoted by Williams, a summary of possible critiques one could target at the authors' work and a conclusion that will try to answer the question of 'what is to be done?' using the knowledge and arguments of *The Greatest of All Plagues*. The section concerned with the body of this book will be reductionist and not exhaustive due to the nature of this review article, but it will try to paint a general picture on how each character tackled the issues of *pleonexia* and *economic inequality*.

Pleonexia, economic inequality and the Western canon of philosophy

As stated previously, the aim of the book is *economic inequality*, but as Williams demonstrates, this cannot be understood without acknowledging how and why *inequality* appears (p. 4). The word repeatedly invoked and analysed in each chapter is the Greek term *πλεονεξία* (*pleonexia*), which roughly translates to 'greed'. Taking a finer look at etymology and culture, it is clear that this term does not solely refer to plain greed, but to a form of insatiable and ruthless greed, one that viscerally desires far more than one's fair share, sometimes by means of exploiting, stealing, or taking what is another's (p. 74). It is a reprehensible urge, egotistical and a clear form of avarice that dehumanizes the individual. *Pleonexia* matters because the author is not concerned with a 'natural' form of inequality – *i.e.* the fact that people are inherently different and have a range of abilities and needs – but an *inequality* that is economic and social in nature, a product of the way people create social contracts, laws, systems of governance and commerce – it is a form of artificial *inequality*, which stems from class-based systems and dynamics that may be influenced by *pleonexia*.

Economies and societies based on classes are an ancient practice found throughout the world, not just in European societies. The question of who should be rich, powerful and privileged and who should be poor, ridiculed and on the margins is a man-made phenomenon. The thinkers included in this book argue that the ratio at which societies become unequal is the fault of a greedy elite and

of bad governance. For most philosophers treated in this book, economic inequality is a *zero-sum game* (p. 97), where people are poor because of the *pleonexia* exerted by corrupt and powerful individuals. This may have worked for societies within the ancient world, feudal systems or for emergent forms of mercantilism during the beginning of colonialism. Later authors such as Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx would critique this position (pp. 199 and 289), revealing the inherent flaws of a *zero-sum* argument and expanding on the new dangers of social inequality made possible by industrialism and capitalism.

Plato's political ideas found in *The Republic* and *The Laws* mark an ideal and deeply philosophical look at how a city-state should be run and a concrete historical and political analysis of the Hellenic world, with its problems and benefits, depending on the dialogue in question. Plato discusses democracy and autocracy, Athens and Sparta (p. 26), the way that a city-state mimics the three parts of the soul (*epithumetikon*, *thymos* and *logos*) and how moral virtues in accordance with these structures should dictate political organization (p. 27), but what is under review in Williams' book is how Plato warns against the dangers of extreme wealth. It is the greed and unethical nature of the elites that stir dismay and revolt into a population, creating the potential for a civil war (p. 37). His solutions, like banning gold and silver-based currency (p. 32), equal distribution of land, prohibiting the wealthiest person from owning more than four times that of the poorest individual (p. 42), and his critique of the unstable nature of democracy, have their sources in real Athenian and Hellenic struggles with poverty and political crisis. Similarly, Jesus' critiques of the rich are famously found in passages like those regarding *the eye of the needle*, *the slave with two masters*, *the clearing of the temple*, *the Sermon on the Mount* or his crucifixion alongside two thieves [2]. Roman Judea was a place of severe poverty and great economic injustice (pp. 58-60), with privileged classes relishing in extravagant wealth while peasants and artisans were living on the verge of starvation. Jesus' teachings also echo two old Mosaic laws found in Hebrew law and theology, those of the Sabbath and Jubilee (p. 61). The seventh day when everybody should rest and the seventh year where all debts are forgiven are not the only radical ideas within this old Jewish practice. The laws also mention that in this seventh year all slaves have to be freed and all people have to access the

fruits of their labour. These are forms of great wealth redistribution, especially considering that nowadays the richest people are able to access grand fortunes from inheritance. Thus, the distrust for *pleonexia*, the old Hebrew foundation and his radical teaching of *loving thy neighbor as thyself* serve as a ground of directly addressing economic inequality (p. 79). The author is also trying to critique certain forms of contemporary American Evangelist theology, 'the prosperity gospel', which seem to be at odds with the core values of Christianity and are also very popular among the American political elites (p. 56).

In Hobbes' case, his discussion of *pleonexia* and *economic inequality* stems from his experience under the English Civil War. The Leviathan, that which helps maintain the *commonwealth*, protecting its subjects from war, the state of nature, at the cost of the individual sovereignty of the populace, is at odds with political and economic elites that think against the common good and in favour of personal gain, elites which Hobbes critiques as bending the rules on different occasions in order to undermine the Leviathan. *Pleonexia* seems to be at the centre of the cause for the English Civil War, one of the main roots of this struggle being the nature of *taxes* (pp. 108-112 and 121), something Hobbes seems to be in favour of (heavy taxation of the rich) (p. 128).

Rousseau's role in the historical debate on *inequality* is well known, being one of the first Western philosophers to treat this issue with dignity and profundity. The transition from feudal systems to a mercantile society that predates industrial capitalism is marked by wealth accumulation, unequal classes and the dismantling of fixed social hierarchies (pp. 138-142). Rousseau identifies the economic and psychological impact poverty has on people and realizes that monetary constraints tend to create social ones. *Amour de soi-même* and *pitié*, the two natural inclinations Rousseau considers virtuous, are mistaken for *amour-propre* and *pleonexia* during his era (pp. 142-143 and 145-146). Wealth is a *zero-sum game* for him and big economic inequalities cannot maintain a healthy democracy (p. 148). The general will is supposed to be unrestrained and borne out of free will, not out of legal backing for the interests of a few rich individuals, but Rousseau's political reality seems to mirror the second scenario (p. 151). In a world of capitalist wealth accumulation and during the Industrial Revolution, the question of *pleonexia* and economic inequality changes.

Adam Smith, a proponent of wealth accumulation and commerce as a means for peace and stability, has some sharp critiques targeted against capitalism. Firstly, he identifies that the division of labour has negative effects on the general well-being, happiness and intellect of the workers, citing that more 'primitive' societies – a term now recognized as problematic – do not produce as much or have as much wealth as 'advanced' ones, but their general population seems brighter and happier (p. 183). Smith was concerned with poverty as a sign of societal failure and with the psychological damage that the poor live with constantly (p. 188).

John Stuart Mill, a figure known for his Utilitarianism, is here read from the perspective of his socialist tendencies. His *utility principle* and *harm principle* are interpreted as normative tools for mitigating inequality (p. 210). Contrary to Bentham's reduction of human motivation to pleasure and pain, Mill defends a richer moral psychology (p. 211). He rejects corporations in favour of worker cooperatives (pp. 244-246), he distrusts law as a guardian for the interests of the privileged (p. 225), and he observes that corporate competition does not breed innovation but merely cuts costs and engineers lower quality products (p. 215). These are critiques targeted directly towards economic inequality and *pleonexia*, two social states powerfully represented by the reality of his Industrial era Victorian England.

Finally, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' critiques on capitalism are well studied and understood. The class distinction between the proletariat and the capitalist, the class antagonism and war, the need for a revolution and the overthrowing of the bourgeoisie world are things generally associated with Marxism. But Williams offers a more nuanced look at this doctrine, showing how Marx was not convinced by the concept of *equality* under the guise of bourgeois law. For the German economist and philosopher, liberal and capitalist *equality* was only a juridical form and a means of commodity exchange (p. 257); the class dependencies – the proletariat dependent on capitalists for wages so they do not starve and capitalists dependent on the proletariat for their labour in order to extract profit – are the real form of bondage in industrial capitalism where *inequality* reigns. 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' is too, according to Williams, an acknowledgement that *pure equality* is not to be desired in Marxism (p. 257). The dialectical solution is the abolition of

societies based on 'the absence of compulsion' (p. 260), and in Marxist terms that means 'communism', while embracing the differences between people that are not to be exploited for class war, but should be embraced to create a better- and well-rounded society. This radical voice of abolition and revolution stems from the same reality Mill described (p. 310) – an English society where children work 16 hours a day, where people die prematurely because of their unsafe working conditions and where the nuclear family has to spend their waking hours working to avoid starvation (p. 281).

In sum, the seven figures examined by Williams had to tackle the issue of *economic inequality* and *pleonexia* because their political reality imposed itself on their philosophical ideas. Without sustained engagement with these concepts, political philosophy and philosophical economics risk failing in their normative task of articulating a just and democratic social order.

Limitations of philosophy and economics: possible critiques

Before arguing in favour of this book's conclusions, this section offers several critiques, some of which are acknowledged by the author himself. As stated at the beginning of the review, Williams accepts that this selection of seven figures is somewhat arbitrary and is guided by what people in the West tend to consider as canonical thinkers in the fields of philosophy, economics, and political science (p. 3). Perspectives from other cultures are largely omitted. The perspectives of marginalized people are also absent, and it would have been valuable to examine how the Western intellectual tradition has, at times, reinforced structures of domination and shaped lived experiences through oppression. Insights from postcolonial and gender studies, for example, could have provided a more systematic critique of the seven central figures discussed in the book. Importantly, these limitations are explicitly acknowledged by Williams, who encourages further research on *inequality* and *pleonexia* from diverse cultural and disciplinary perspectives.

Another important limitation identified by Williams concerned the adequacy of the solutions provided by the seven figures treated in his book. Some of these proposals are either morally indefensible by contemporary standards or

incompatible with present-day global capitalism (p. 7). Plato defended slavery; Hobbes supported absolute monarchy; Rousseau expressed deep suspicion toward currency and commerce, suggesting that their abolition might foster greater equality; Marx and Engels advocated in favour of violent revolution. While such prescriptions are widely rejected today, they do not negate the broader analytical insights contained within these thinkers' works. Their valuable resources remain available because the persistence of *pleonexia* and *economic inequality* across centuries suggests that these traditions retain interpretative significance, having to deal with some problems as old as society itself.

A third possible critique is that philosophy alone is not sufficient to dismantle gross economic inequality. If economists, politicians and billionaires are narrow-minded and contribute to the erosion of democratic governance through austerity, corporate neoliberalism or nationalism, philosophy is not the only resource in creating a better society. Other empirical social sciences like anthropology, psychology and sociology should supplement philosophical ideas with data and facts, while the arts remain powerful instruments for understanding the lived experiences and needs of diverse communities, through music, theatre, cinematography, literature and other forms.

Conclusions

David Lay Williams aims to critique the political and economic sentiments of people like Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and Steven Pinker, whose failure to acknowledge the social consequences of inherent inequality – and whose focus on profit maximization – may contribute to the erosion of contemporary democratic institutions. In a world marked by nationalism, the cost-of-living crisis, widening wealth disparities, ecological catastrophe, wars and unregulated technology and free-market forces – particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic – the works of Plato, Christianity, Hobbes, Rousseau, Smith, Mill and Marx provide valuable insights into how societies might be organized more justly and what forms of *inequality* and *pleonexia* ought to be resisted. Hayek and Friedman deemed egalitarianism a 'disease' and a twentieth-century dogma of liberals and communists, thereby dismissing the extensive Western intellectual tradition addressing *inequality* (p. 6). Williams

emphasizes the power of a critique articulated by 'a classical republican, the founding figure of Christianity, an early modern republican, a classical liberal, a utilitarian, and a communist, as well as Hobbes, who seems to defy labels' (p. 6). As he further notes, 'this growth in inequality has corresponded to a growth in authoritarian populist movements, social distrust, and political instability' (p. 2). In light of contemporary political and social challenges, *the greatest of all plagues* appears closer than ever. Society's persistent neglect of *economic inequality* and *pleonexia* poses real dangers. Part of the antidote seems to lie within the pages of this otherwise impressive and well-researched book that offers timely and urgent guidance for understanding and addressing these structural injustices.

Endnotes

[1] David Lay Williams is a professor at DePaul University in Chicago and a member of Stone Centre for Research on Wealth Inequality and Mobility. His work engages with concepts and themes from political science and broader social sciences.

[2] These famous passages from *The Bible* are found in the following Gospels: Matthew 6:24, 19:16, 21:12-13, 27; Mark 4:1-9, 10:17-31, 11:15-17, 15; Luke 8:4-8, 18:18-30, 23; John 19.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that this research has no conflict of interest.

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