

The income gap between rich and poor: stealth colonialism

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Settled and shaped by the 1 %

While there is some global improvement in poverty reduction, better healthcare, and other measures, the income gap between rich and poor is increasing, with its negative relationship to educational opportunities, healthcare, longevity, happiness, and social cohesiveness. Besides socio-economic harm, personal and collective agency are diminished, and the norms of distributive justice are violated. Practical theologians should understand and highlight the scope of the problem and its consequences. This paper discusses the justice, agency, biblical wisdom, cultural context, and empathy which are an important foundation for the construction by others of economic and political efforts to narrow the income gap. Where the “1 %” invade, occupy, and control the political, economic, and cultural space of all, a kind of colonialism (“stealth colonialism”) is present.

Introduction

It should be noted that wealth, capital, and income are different. Wealth is overall economic worth, including one’s house, for example. Capital is more like at-hand, usable economic resources, for example, money in a bank account. Income is the money that comes into a household. Disposable income is the money that comes into a household minus taxes. Income can come from an investment of wealth.

After a brief look at the world economic situation, we focus on the income gap between rich and poor, its economic, social, and particular consequences, and relevant practical theological principles. While there has been some material improvement in the situations of many people in the lower quadrant of economic prosperity, poverty remains, the income gap grows, and its negative effects remain. The quiet invasion, occupation, and control of more and more of the political, economic, and cultural space thrives. This gross assault on distributive justice is indeed “stealth colonialism.”

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I. There is physical improvement in life situations of many people on the planet: the case for optimism

Steven Pinker argues “more or less” that things are better than ever with regard to happiness, which he says is related to absolute income, not comparative income (Pinker 2018, 270). Income is increasing in 45 out of 52 countries studied. Happiness is also related to social support, generosity, and less perception of corruption (Pinker 2018, 271). Pinker argues that recent years have brought measurable improvement in longevity, health, abundance, safety, peace, equal rights, freedom, literacy, knowledge, and opportunity for leisure-time enjoyment (Pinker 2018, 51). Hans Rosling (Rosling 2018, 52–53) notes that





the percentage of the world's population living in extreme poverty (less than \$2 per day adjusted for inflation and prices) has dropped from 85 % in 1800 to 50 % in 1966 to 9 % in 2017. Latin America went from 14 % living in extreme poverty in 1997 to 4 % in 2017. Rosling (Rosling 2018, 248) argues that educational programs should present this generally optimistic view of the state of the world, things getting better for the majority of people in the world.

II. Serious problems are associated with income inequality: the rich-poor gap

What do the income gap between rich and poor and its financial consequences look like? In the U.S. three people have more wealth than the lower half of the population. In the world at large, 63 people have more wealth than the 4 billion in the lower half. Anand Giridharadas (Giridharadas 2018, 4) notes that the average pre-tax income of the top 10th of Americans has doubled since 1980, that of the top 1 % has more than tripled, and that of the top 0.001 % has risen more than sevenfold even as the average pre-tax income of the bottom half of Americans has stayed almost precisely the same. Much wealth is income producing. Thomas Piketty (Piketty 2015, 20) notes that wage inequality began increasing in the U.S. and U.K. in the 1970s and stopped decreasing everywhere else in the 1980s. Piketty (Piketty 2015, 15) offers a picture of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) country ratios of income inequality by comparing the top decile with the bottom decile. Comparisons include Sweden 2.7; Germany 3.0; U.K. 3.8; U.S. 5.9. Anthony Atkinson (Atkinson 2015, 79) is convinced that a general fall in inequality in Latin America can be attributed to a reduction in skilled worker wage premiums and progressive government transfers to the poor, since other factors go in various directions depending on the country.

The "sufficiency" substitute

Samuel Moyn (Moyn 2018, 3) is concerned that in this age of a focus on human rights, the goal has become greater sufficiency rather than greater equality. Sufficiency does not equal equality. The "distributive commitment" of the welfare state has been uncoupled. The material rights of all, by virtue of being human, generally set aside. "Sufficiency con-

cerns how far an individual is from having nothing and how well she is doing in relation to some minimum of provision of the good things in life. Equality concerns how far individuals are from one another and the portion of those good things they get" (Moyn 2018, 3). At least some equality in the distribution of goods in life is necessary; otherwise it might turn out that two societies emerge — different ways of life, the wealthy covering over their economic inferiors with the moral that as long as basic needs are met, it does not matter how much the rich are above the rest. Moyn supports Barbara Ward's still unrealized call for a global distributive equality (Moyn 2018, 155).

The opportunity versus outcome issue

Atkinson (Atkinson 2015, 3) called the 1980s the "Turn to Inequality." He supports the position of Wilkinson and Pickett (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010) that we should be concerned about inequality of outcome, rather than equality of opportunity. Atkinson himself is focused on achieved economic resources, making the distribution of market incomes less unequal (Atkinson 2015, 13–14, 21). What is claimed is that where opportunities do not lead to improved outcomes, they are not usually in fact opportunities.

III. Specific consequences of the income gap

We briefly look at studies concerned with the negative relationship of income inequality to family, education, healthcare, longevity, happiness, and social cohesion.

Family

Miles Corak (Corak 2013) found that income inequality is strongly related to family background, more than to "hard work." Income inequality is negatively related to quality of education, access to high level employment, and "upward mobility." Remediation of the results of the gap must include focus on inequality of outcomes. Bourguignon, Ferreira, and Menendez (Bourguignon, Ferreira, and Menendez 2003) also found that observed outcome income inequality strongly related to family background. However, after the family background is controlled for, they note that inequality remains high in Brazil.



Education

Sabrina Tavernise (Tavernise 2012) points out that children from affluent families do better in school. In rate of college completion – the best predictor of workforce success -- the imbalance between rich and poor children has grown by 50 % since the 1980s. She notes that Kornrich and Furstenberg found that in 1972, rich families spent five times more on their children than low- income families but by 2007 the ratio was 9:1, even though low-income family spending had increased by 20 %. Tavernise highlights Meredith Philips' finding that by the start of school high-income family children have spent 400 more literacy hours and 1200 more out-of-the-home cultural activity hours than children from low-income families.

Fifty people were recently arrested in a bribery scheme to gain admission to prestigious U.S. universities by claiming fictitious talent in minor sports. But Ron Lieber (Lieber 2019) has pointed out another admissions edge at many prestigious private colleges and universities, which are accessible to families in the upper middle class. One has a better chance of admission if one does not need financial aid and can pay the full amount (as much as \$300,000) for four years of tuition, room and board.

Sean Reardon (Reardon 2013) has found a relationship between income and academic treatment, "the income achievement gap," which has grown significantly in the last three decades and is attributable to social trends affecting both income and educational preparation of children entering school. Already large when children enter school, it does not grow significantly afterwards.

Steven Durlauf (Durlauf 1992) developed a model that predicted children's income from parents' neighborhood choice, which is affected by income and leads to economically homogeneous neighborhoods, similar levels of educational opportunity, and fewer successful role models in poorer neighborhoods.

Alan Krueger developed the concept of the Great Gatsby Curve: high economic inequality corresponds with low economic mobility on a generation-to-generation basis. When the "rich- everyone else disparity" is wide, people's ability to improve their financial health depends even more heavily on their parents' economic status. B. Mazumder (Mazumder 2015) claims that the immobility described by the Great Gatsby Curve may be related to in-

equality in skills. In another area, but typical of the income gap, Krueger also found that most of the gain in pop music income went to a few top recording artists.

Health and longevity

In studies of the U.S., U.K., and Brazil, Lynch, Smith, Kaplan, and House (Lynch et al, 2000) noted that income inequality is generally associated with differences in health. They found the best explanation of this is to say that the political and economic processes that generate income inequality influence both individual and public resources such as schooling, healthcare, welfare, and working conditions.

In a review of research, Brian Keeley (Keeley 2015, 77) of the OECD saw a consensus that there is a correlation between income inequality and health and social problems. While there is not complete agreement, there is evidence that income inequality causes health and social problems independently of other factors. Karachi, Kennedy, Lochner, and Prothrow-Stith (Karachi et al, 1997) found that income inequality led to increased mortality, due to less access to social capital (for example, trust in others and opportunities for civic engagement). In a study in Brazil, Pabayo, Chiavegatto, Filho, Lebrão, and Kawachi (Pabayo et al, 2013) noted that persons living in districts with higher income inequality were at significantly increased risk of mortality compared with those in low- inequality districts.

Happiness

Sherman and Stone (Sherman and Stone 2010) present the general picture that the income gap between the very rich and everyone else more than tripled between 1980 and 2010. Rousseau (Rousseau 2009) found that since 1995, U.S. income gains have accrued to the richest 20 % of households and income inequality has significantly increased. The happiness gap has also widened substantially, happiness having stagnated for the rich and fallen for the poor. Happiness is "a commodity of the rich," he says (Rousseau 2009, 14).

Okulicz-Kozaryn and Mazelis (Okulicz-Kozaryn and Mazelis 2016) in their research found that the income gap and the happiness gap have been increasing over the past several decades in the U.S. The happiness gap has widened by about 40 % since the 1970s for the poor and by about 50 % between the middle class and the rich.



Schneider (Schneider 2016) contends that studies of the relationship between income inequality and subjective well-being (life satisfaction and happiness) remain inconclusive. But A. E. Clark, S. Flèche, and C. Senik (Clark, Flèche and Senik 2016) offer a conclusion from six studies that countries with income growth saw reduced numbers in both the “very unhappy” and “perfectly happy” categories of self-rating, leading to falling happiness inequality in countries experiencing income growth but not in those which did not experience such income growth. Similar to 70 years ago, two-thirds of U. S. inhabitants cannot say that they are very happy (Pinker 2018, 325). Overall, there appears to be evidence that the income gap is related to unhappiness.

Social cohesion

Joseph Stiglitz (Stiglitz 2013) fears that the social consequences of the gap lead to a divided society. He argues that the real solution to the inequality crisis lies in focusing on community rather than self-interest, otherwise we will have an even greater divide in society. Stiglitz (Stiglitz 2013, 39–40) sees much of the problem of income inequality in what is called “rent seeking,” which is acquiring income not as a reward for creating wealth but by grabbing a larger share of the wealth which is produced. It occurs in many ways: making markets less transparent and competitive; taking advantage of asymmetries of information; taking advantage of the poor and uninformed; predatory lending; abusive credit card policies; laws allowing corporations to take advantage of others; gaining access to favorable terms in regard to another country’s natural resources; non-competitive procurement; politics influencing governments to make policies that work for one’s self-interest rather than for the good of society; and eroding the power of labor unions. All of this is taking money from the rest of society and re-distributing it to the top.

IV. Practical theological perspectives

Practical theology does not offer specific economic or political programs for ameliorating the income gap, nor does this paper. However, it does provide ethically, theologically, biblically, and social scientifically derived principles, perspectives, and values which may undergird pragmatic solutions to the injustice of the income gap. Here we focus on distrib-

utive justice, agency, biblical guidance, empathy, and cultural context.

Distributive justice

Justice is the foundation of a democratic society. Commutative justice regulates exchanges between persons and between institutions and requires the restitution of stolen goods to the owner or other restitution for injustice committed (CCC 1997, 2411). Distributive justice regulates what the community owes to its citizens in proportion to their contributions and needs (CCC 1997, 2412). Distributive justice expects that since all are created in the image and likeness of God all should share in an adequate amount of the world’s goods. After one has an adequate (varied) amount for one’s own life the rest of one’s goods may need to be used for the welfare of others. As Pope Leo XIII advocated in *Rerum Novarum* (Leo XIII, 1891, 36), “Once the demands of necessity and propriety have been met, the rest that one owns belongs to the poor.”

John Rawls’ (Rawls 1999, 53) highly influential theory of distributive justice – justice as fairness – rests on two principles. The first is that “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others.” The second and perhaps more important for distributive justice is that “social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all.” Underserved inequalities, e.g. birth, endowment, social position, call for social redress – his “difference principle” (Rawls 1999, 86). This Kantian perspective is geared toward equality of opportunity, rather than equality of outcome.

Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI 2009, 35) highlights the relational dimension of distributive justice, which is important for the market economy “not only because it belongs within a broader social and political context, but also because of the wider network of relations within which it operates. Markets need social cohesion, mutual trust, and internal forms of solidarity to function well, not merely equivalence in value in exchanges. The poor should not be seen as a burden but rather as a resource, not simply an economic balance and opportunity for development (Benedict XVI 2009, 35). They are disadvantaged when economic action is detached from political action. Locating resources, financing, production, con-

sumption and all the other phases in the economic cycle inevitably have moral implications and consequences (Benedict XVI 2009, 37, 39). When economic action is detached from political action, imbalance is the result. Globalization requires political logic and action as well as a social order that conforms to the moral order (Benedict XVI 2009, 67). In an interconnected world, distributive justice and some forms of redistribution must play their roles.

Agency

Agency is the manifestation or exercise of the capacity to act (Cf. Schlosser 2015). Such action is of interest to us insofar as it is intentional, caused by our mental states and events. Precluding the questions of free will and determinism, as well as of habit, automaticity, deliberateness and consciousness, we can look at agency as the capacity to act. Certainly, the scope of our agency will depend on the means we have to affect our situation or environment. It is not unreasonable to say that our conscious intentions are causal. Besides individual events, we frequently join with others toward common purposes or goals or need satisfactions. Agency also refers to the capacity of groups to have resources to achieve results and then actually achieving them. Cartels, “legal” monopolies, oligarchies, and enormous accumulations of wealth by a few people all squeeze or eliminate the agency of the many.

Contributing to the understanding of agency is social theorist Margaret Archer (Archer 2000, 2–10), a proponent of a critical realist theory of the relationship between society and people — structure and agency — which does not conflate the two. The notion of agency as distinct from structure is critical if we are to “make things happen” and avoid passivity (simply having things happen to us). The circumstances of our birth are not of our own choosing; we are assigned to positions on society’s distribution of resources, which means that we become members of collectivities which share the same life chances, “involuntarily either privileged or not privileged (Archer 2000, 11).” But we need to be primary agents, at times linked with others, to transform our circumstances and reconfigure society’s distribution of resources. We need the capacity to “write our own scripts” – agency. If all encompassing determinism or internal psychic forces are presumed to control us, agency is a thing of the past.

There is a connection between distributive justice and agency, in that some of the world’s goods

would be used to facilitate agency. If the goods of the world need to be shared, then the capacity for agency similarly should be shared among the people of the world. The gap in agency becomes severe and a violation of distributive justice when a few have disproportionate agency with regard to the rest.

David Hollenbach (Hollenbach 2002, 198) notes the connection between distributive justice and agency: “...if the institutional arrangements prevailing in society prevent some persons from sharing the social goods to the level required by their dignity as members of the human community, requirements of distributive justice are violated.” Living in a society requires interacting with others economically, culturally, and politically. One uses one’s freedom and agency to build the common good. Without social solidarity, one cannot make one’s own contribution. Being treated passively dehumanizes and results in marginalization. Hollenbach notes the many forms of the resulting marginalization: denial of the vote, limits of free speech, repression by tyrannical governments, unemployment, poor educational opportunities for all, de facto closing the gates to social mobility, school resources based on geography, the circumstances causing generational urban poverty and ghettoization (Hollenbach 2002, 199 ff.).

Biblical wisdom

Narratives from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (the Old and New Testaments) develop an ambience pointing toward equality within the people, a culture of thriving through equality and weakness through division. A literal reading of the Hebrew Scripture presents a strong theme of justice, a constant emphasis on peoplehood, and a negative view of extravagance. The biblical creation story is analyzed to propose the notion of all human beings made in and sharing the likeness and image of God (*imago Dei*). Exodus describes the Hebrews’ enslavement plight in Egypt as unjust, immoral, and calling for liberation. Of course, the Israelites are liberated from slavery and each one is fed manna and quail in the desert. The whole people do enter the Promised Land.

Walter Brueggemann (Brueggemann 2012) draws from the wisdom of the Hebrew Scriptures to develop his contrast of the dominant imagination and the prophetic imagination. Beginning from the later greedy, idolatrous, enslaving Solomon, Brueggemann (Brueggemann 2012, 42) describes the



dominant “royal” imagination and consciousness as a mindset of complacency, self-sufficiency, anxiety, restlessness and autonomy. It is involved with contractual and utilitarian arrangements, caution, manipulation, self-interest, fearfulness, a lack of truth, a “zero sum game,” and a commitment to keeping the status quo (Brueggemann 2012, 32). Prophetic imagination is centered on the surprising, uncontainable YHWH (God). It rejects self-invention, competitive productivity and self-sufficiency (Brueggemann 2012, 12).

Prophetic imagination is a new way of seeing, a new consciousness, faithful to the tradition, modeled on the prophets, calling for widespread conversion. Such a prophetic imaginative consciousness is consistent with concern to reduce the income gap between rich and poor, the few and the many, the fragmentation of the community.

The New Testament contains the promise of salvation open to all. The five thousand are fed. Jesus’ parables of Lazarus and Dives, the widow’s mite, and the Pharisee and the publican can be seen as appreciations of equality. The man who would build more barns to store his surplus grain dies too soon to enjoy it. The early Christian community shared its resources in common, giving to each according to their need (Acts 3:31–4:10, 1989, NRSV). The rich sold goods for the benefit of the community. Two who sold but did not donate the promised receipts were struck dead.

Deacons were appointed to assure that both Hebrew-speaking and Greek-speaking widows were cared for. Our biblical examples all touch on distributive justice, agency, culture, and empathy. An argument for income equality can be made.

Empathy

D. Goleman (Goleman 2011) has described three types of empathy. Cognitive empathy is being able to “stand in the shoes of another” and know what they think and feel. Emotional empathy is feeling what the other person feels. Compassionate empathy (empathic concern) is knowing and feeling what the other person knows and feels but also being moved to assist them as needed. An example is Jesus being moved with compassion and then healing a person in need. Some part of this may be “wired” into us, but the willingness to act for the good of the other is virtue, vital for human flourishing. In the current pandemic crisis, without a vaccine, the disease is controlled only by population cooperation by

using suitable distancing, masks, handwashing, heroic health professionals, and contact tracing. These are the recommendations of scientists. Without this community effort and enlightened leadership, the death rate rises – possibly into the millions. Of course, persons with fewer resources and lower income have more crowded living spaces, greater vulnerability from higher rates of diabetes and high blood pressure, economic pressure to work in more dangerous environments (e.g. meat packing plants), and a greater vulnerability to contracting COVID-19. The income gap fosters this in that most deaths are among patients in minimum standard nursing homes, African Americans and Latinx persons, as well as health care personnel. If persons apparently less likely to contract the virus do not assist in anti-spread behavior, then in fact those at the top of the gap will be safer and those at the bottom will be in even greater danger. Empathy is a critical motivation. “I want my freedom to do as I please” does not live well alongside empathy.

Cultural context

This paper is not about devising political and economic strategies for narrowing the income equality gap. But those who do construct them must not ignore the “cultural context.” The presence or absence of distributive justice (social justice), the right of groups and individuals to their own agency, religious insight, and the development of empathy (often through exposure) are significant threads in the fabric of the cultural context. The recently oft used maxim, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast,” should be kept in view. Perspectives like neo-liberal economics and thought, “rugged individualism,” “mind your own business,” “you are poor because you are lazy,” and “religion belongs in church” have strong, but certainly not universal, cultural influence.

Practical theology connects specific situations with aspects of the theological tradition. Distributive justice and agency relate to theological ethics. The Bible is the Judeo-Christian community’s book and guide in theory and practice. The cultural context is an integral dimension of practical theology’s connection making. Compassionate empathy combines with a sense of justice to guide the practice of ethical life. All of these provide dimensions of a foundation for the political and economic strategies others will develop to shape a lessening of the income gap. Individuals flourish and society flourishes when the gap narrows. This does not preclude



some people being rich, not does it eradicate all poverty. It puts many more of us together, with all of the benefits of social cohesion, health care, longevity, educational access, and perhaps a better modicum of happiness.

V. Conclusions

This paper is not about promoting a utopia but rather the survival of cohesive society. There have, indeed, been improvements in the standard of living for some people, but the ethical stance which is distributive justice seems minimally operative. The income gap widens. When it comes to the things that matter, “agency” is quite limited for most of those with whom we share this planet. When people do not have effective control of their own lives, they are, in essence, driven out of their own “land.” When a few invade and settle in the space of others, this is colonialism. If I occupy your land, even to try to improve your life (or your chance for salvation through my religion), then I have power and claim prescience and am in fact a colonizer. If you are effectively removed from the economic influence, political power, and the shaping of culture, you have been removed from the territory you have the right to inhabit. The same fortunes that philanthropically help to promote improvement in certain basics exercise a quiet but wide-ranging control. In the whole “stealth colonialism” case, those at the top end of the income and resources spectrum control the life circumstances and agency of many more than just the bottom half. They have pushed out or dominated the rest economically, politically, and culturally, even if they could claim to have the best of intentions. All this has the quality of “stealth” because the disconnections to distributive justice, agency, and human flourishing are barely visible and are often hidden behind simple poverty-based analyses.

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