

lution within a broader philosophical and cultural perspective – an approach that is essential for navigating the complexities of our digital future.

Alessandro Albanese Ginammi
Università per Stranieri di Perugia

David Lay Williams, *The Greatest of All Plagues: How Economic Inequality Shaped Political Thought from Plato to Marx*, Princeton University Press, 2024.

Economic inequality is a prominent feature of modernity. Advances in science and technology have allowed humans to gain longer lifespans and a better quality of life, but they have also helped to concentrate extreme wealth in the hands of a tiny few.¹ In the United States, for example, 2/3 of the nation's wealth is now held by the top 5% of households.² Yet very few serious efforts have been made to address this issue, in part because we cannot agree that it is even a problem in the first place. Indeed, in the U.S. the 119th Congress just passed a budget bill that strips health insurance from ten million of the poorest Americans in order to help fund a tax cut for millionaires – a policy explicitly designed to make economic inequality even worse.³

Is economic inequality a problem that needs to be addressed? And if so, *why*? What are the consequences of living in an increasingly economically stratified world? In *The Greatest of All Plagues*, David Williams takes up these and other questions, mining some of the greatest thinkers of the western philosophical canon for insights into the perils of economic inequality. As it turns out, economic inequality is not just a product of modernity but has been a consistent concern for political thinkers for thousands of years, from Plato and Aristotle all the way to Carl Marx and David Engels. Yet, as Williams rightfully points out, academics too often overlook these passages on economic inequality when teaching the philosophical canon. *Greatest of All Plagues* is a necessary corrective to this, offering a thoroughly researched and highly readable treatise on a timely topic of utmost importance capable of attracting the interest of scholars from a wide range of academic disciplines.

¹ <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/issues/economic-justice/income-and-wealth-inequality/>.

² <https://inequality.org/facts/wealth-inequality/>.

³ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/1/text>.

Greatest of All Plagues explores the writings of an ideologically diverse range of thinkers, moving chronologically from Plato to Jesus, then Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill, before concluding with Marx. Some of Williams' choices are obvious. No one should be surprised to find that Marx is genuinely concerned with the growing power of the capitalist bourgeois during industrialization (291-302), or that the gospels include stark warnings about the spiritual and moral dangers of excessive wealth (71-74). Others though are a bit more surprising. The fact that both Plato and Hobbes, two thinkers who tend to be characterised as "elitist" and anti-democratic, thought that extreme wealth would distort one's soul (37-40; 114-122) and lead to violent revolution (28-30; 122-124) might surprise some. Similarly, Smith and Mill, two libertarian thinkers and strong advocates of free markets, also included dire warnings about the dangers of allowing people to use those markets to amass vast fortunes and concentrate wealth in the hands of a tiny few.

In addition to detailing their thoughts on economic inequality, Williams also takes pains to situate each of these thinkers in their proper economic, social, and historical context. There are some remarkable similarities here in that each of these scholars was writing during a time of economic transition and upheaval (101-109; 137-140; 205-209). Peasant revolts, general strikes, and efforts to abolish debt were all common occurrences during the lives of these thinkers, and no doubt influenced them. Many were also writing during a time of economic transition away from an agrarian society, towards a more industrialized economy. Industrialization was hailed as a technological breakthrough designed to ameliorate the conditions of humankind by providing access to new consumer products, improved infrastructure, health care, and communication. But this "progress" was extremely disruptive for many workers, leading some to wonder if they were not better off under Feudalism. Williams points out, for example, that feudal serfs probably had a better quality of life, including more leisure time, and proper nutrition than the average industrial factory worker (101; 156-157).

The scholarly contributions of *Greatest of All Plagues* are myriad. But what is more important is that Williams draws our attention to why inequality is such a problem. There is consensus among these thinkers that highly stratified societies are less cohesive and thus more vulnerable to creating factions. They tend to suffer from political in-fighting and often descend into revolution or civil war. Many of these thinkers also discuss the moral dangers of "pleonexia" or extreme greed (74-77; 282-291). This goes beyond the mere accumulation of basic comforts, to an almost compulsive desire to gain assets far beyond one's needs, even

at the expense of others. Such extreme greed distorts the morality of the wealthy, causing them to become arrogant and feel that they deserve their wealth. This leads them to treat the poor, who they are encouraged to see as lazy and undeserving, with further disdain (145-147; 291-302). Conversely, in modern industrial societies the poor are expected to take ownership of their poverty, often internalizing their own sense of inferiority as a result (147-159).

The Greatest of All Plagues shows that economic inequality has been a consistent concern for political thinkers from a wide range of different ideological backgrounds and time periods. In this way it offers a necessary corrective to an academic literature that has too often given short shrift to economic concerns, even as issues of “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI) have gained more prominence in higher education. The fact that so many businesses and universities have created DEI programs designed to ameliorate inequality, without including socio-economic status as a relevant factor speaks volumes.⁴ Academics themselves, who it should be noted are typically not from working class backgrounds, have too often served the neoliberal state, by ignoring or even outright denying, the problems of economic inequality. This helps create a permission system for the very types of policies that have contributed to our worsening economic situation. Williams’ book is a welcome contribution, and a necessary read for anyone concerned with how worsening economic inequality is impacting the democratic world order.

Joseph Mello
DePaul University

⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mayarichard-craven/2024/02/23/why-dei-needs-to-include-socioeconomic-diversity/>