

**Review of Thomas Piketty’s *A Brief History of Equality*.  
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Piketty’s history of equality expands the vision of his critique of inequality in previous work, most famously in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014), but also, *The Economics of Inequality* (2015). The impetus for the new book is to re-cast the arguments of his famous book—focused almost entirely on lessons learned from nineteenth and twentieth century economic history—into a longer historical narrative with more attention on the changes that are and could be happening, and who or what causes them (chapters 3–9). Not surprisingly, social class analysis is at the heart of his account, and the call for democratic socialist alternatives is more refined. While the narrative is briefer in the new book than it was before, the timeframe he considers is much longer, and the policy proposals are aimed at issues arising from inequality in a variety of different cultural settings.

Readers familiar with the “hockey stick of economic history” (Our World in Data 2017)—the long pre-1800 history of societies with small elites living well while most of the population lived just above subsistence level, followed by a rapid increase over the past two hundred years in almost every metric of economic progress—will recognize in Piketty’s history a dependence on the same story turned toward a different prediction about the future. Until about 1800, well over 90% of humanity lived in desperate poverty. Life expectancy remained at about 30 years of age, almost no one was well-educated, and opportunities were limited to a radius of about 30 miles. The 1800s changed all that; or at least, changed the economic prospects for the average European or North American tremendously. Productivity and resource growth at astonishing rates enabled population growth both within the native population and via immigration. Europe’s population doubled between the French Revolution and Lenin’s arrival at the Finland Station. North American population growth exceeded that: from a population of close to ten million at the end of the American Revolution, the US population grew to over 100 million by the

First World War (the consequence of high birth rates with moderate early mortality until the Civil War, aided thereafter by declining death rates).

For Piketty, it is the history of the next 100 years (that is, 1920 to 2023) that has been a mixed blessing. Pre-1900 capitalism had produced wealth unimaginable to the vast majority of humans who lived before 1800, and spread its benefits widely across the current human population. Just not widely and deeply enough, Piketty thinks. Since the mid-twentieth century, inequality has grown despite economic growth and the growth of welfare states, and still trends upward, making the elites wealthier and, therefore, more resistant to reforms on either side of the government's budget. The poor are better off than at any previous point in human history, but the redistributive policies that aided the rise and increase of the upper and middle classes have not extended as many benefits farther down the income tables. The poor have therefore fallen behind, and the gap between them and the middle class has grown. For Piketty, what is worse is the erosion of the welfare state provisions that has occurred in the 21st century, which is extending the distance between the middle classes and the upper class.

We are facing a crisis point, Piketty believes. Either we begin a long retreat to the social inequalities of the early 1800s, with a status-based elite trumping a land-based one, or we move forward by accepting the primacy of political, economic, and social equality. The final chapter lays out Piketty's views of how societies around the world could become more democratic, ecological, and multicultural; what he calls:

A democratic and federal socialism, decentralized and participatory, ecological and multicultural, based on the extension of the welfare state and progressive taxation, the battle against discrimination, educational equality, the carbon card, the gradual decommodification of the economy, guaranteed employment and an inheritance for all, the drastic reduction of monetary inequalities, and finally, an electoral and media system that cannot be controlled by money. These are only a few of the options. (237)

Rather than retell his narrative, which has been retold via academic presentations and media stories for the past several years, I intend to proceed directly to a criticism of Piketty's argument built upon the work of Vincent and Elinor Ostrom.

The Ostromian response is one that Piketty goes out of his way to avoid. Elinor Ostrom is only mentioned in one footnote, and in that note he focuses solely on her notion of property as a “bundle of rights” (footnote 4, 34). Piketty includes the reference to her work simply as a means to lay the groundwork for his understanding of property, which includes real property, tangible occupation-related assets, and financial assets, minus debt (figure 4, 31). But Elinor’s construction of the means by which we may achieve long-surviving commons is problematic for Piketty’s top-down approach. Much of the human capital involved in commons’ management is embedded locally in a community whose aims will probably neither align with national nor international agencies, and their knowledge is simply better than any national (not to mention international) agency regarding the multiple factors that enable success in their own commons. Contra Piketty, then, Ostrom believes the local community’s discussion and decision-making should take precedent over any national or international decision-making, a focus made clear by her emphasis on the fallibility of humans and the necessity of humility regarding our knowledge and capabilities. She also recognized that governmental units will probably have goals at odds with what a community’s aims might be, setting up a conflict between jurisdictions (Ostrom 1990). In response, Piketty appears to argue that collating studies of commons around the world would enable principles of successful operation to emerge. But here Vincent Ostrom’s work further undercuts Piketty’s argument, by undermining his optimism about positive change coming from public officials. Vincent argued that the “omnicompetent public officials, omniscient legislators, and the perfection of a uniform and universal system of laws”—things Piketty assumes will guide us in the future—run contrary to human nature and assume “impossible conditions” (Fotos 2015, 68). The Ostroms’ work, therefore, suggests that Piketty’s (243) recipe for a universalistic sovereignty “contain[s] much bad medicine” (V. Ostrom 2008, 4).

A common theme in the work of both Elinor and Vince Ostrom is that experiments which run against the established patterns of life in a community are unlikely to succeed, and may well diminish a community’s long-term capacity to sustain itself. Elinor’s commons’ governance depends upon the historical development of patterns of interaction that are well-known within the community. Indeed, the history of every successful commons can identify key points where issues were settled by assent of its members, followed by adjustments that account for new issues or

threats arising within the community, the physical environment, or from higher-level governance structures. And there are plenty of stories regarding well-functioning commons (or efforts to restore a commons) that were undermined by a mandate from municipal, state, or national programs that claimed to know the ‘right way’ to do things, and then failed. What is often lost along with the commons is its community-minded orientation.

Thus, the Ostroms’ work ran directly counter to Piketty’s orientation. For him, moving governance upward is the logical thing to do because it enables a global cadre of economic experts to use generalized knowledge to address what look like issues common to many societies, so that common solutions can be created. The imposition of those common solutions would be aided, Piketty argues, by some common governance structures that would address similar issues in similar ways across the world. The question that concerns me is whether Piketty’s world is one that I would want to live in.

While reading *A Brief History of Equality*, I was also preparing to teach a course on Philosophy, Politics and Economics at my university (Arizona State). In the process of selecting materials for the students to read, I came across a Kurt Vonnegut short story that I had read long ago, and which I had thought outrageous (and a bit silly) at the time. The story is *Harrison Bergeron* (1961) which tells the tale of a man living in a society which is dedicated to making all people equal. In order to do so, the society’s ‘Handicapper General’ forces citizens to wear ‘handicaps’ that would diminish their strengths and enhance their weaknesses. Piketty’s objective seems to be analogous: to achieve equality across societies by enhancing or handicapping aspects of each society’s governance structure until no country is significantly different from any other.

The questions I would ask regarding Piketty’s proposals in his *Brief History of Equality* are similar to those suggested by Vonnegut’s story: What constitutes equality? Who decides? And, to what lengths are we prepared to go in forfeiture of freedom to achieve equality?

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