

Beyond property or beyond Piketty?

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Abstract

Capital and Ideology represents a significant further statement from Thomas Piketty. The arguments made by the “New Piketty” are largely compatible with those of his previous *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, but reflect broadening of scope and deepening of causal analysis, most markedly through the adoption of a world historical perspective. The result is a fuller offering for understanding inequality’s pattern in the world, why it exists and how we can best respond to it. The book presents a wide range of arguments, which do not on first glance appear unified. This review essay distills these into six propositions, describes and evaluates each in turn, and identifies some threads that link them. In the process, it provides a critical assessment of *Capital and Ideology*.

KEYWORDS

economics, inequality, political economy, property, world system

1 | INTRODUCTION

Thomas Piketty’s *Capital and Ideology* possesses a sweeping ambition.¹ It is a perhaps unparalleled effort by an economist of his generation trained within the mainstream² to bridge the divide with the other social sciences and offer an interpretation of the contemporary world. Although his subject remains nominally that of inequality, the focus for which he has come to be celebrated as a leading thinker in the world, Piketty ranges far and wide. Even those who approach the book with skepticism will recognize his ambition as breathtaking. In today’s balkanized and disciplinary academic life, it is extraordinary to find a researcher referring to the range of literature and ideas, crisscrossing academic domains, that is invoked in this massive tome. It is still more surprising that the author is an economist. I recall a senior economist in a prestigious university informing me a number of years ago “I do not like to read,” an attitude which would hardly have been met with opprobrium. In sharp contrast to this attitude,

Piketty is clearly an economist who does like to read, and indeed with the creditable effort he has made to do so, has proven himself far more than an economist. His aims extend not merely to generating a unified explanation of contemporary inequality, drawing inductively upon a wide range of historical examples and social scientific arguments, but also to deriving the most promising directions for transformative action.

In *Capital and Ideology*, much more than in his widely discussed earlier volume, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Piketty commits himself to the idea that understanding of our problems can best come from the comparative study of society and history, over the greatest possible sweep, and not from unanchored or loosely anchored theorizing. In this way, he strikes, whether or not consciously, at the underlying basis of the separatism of the discipline of economics in our time. Whereas *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* could reasonably be said to have developed an entire argument around three data points, or if you prefer, six—relating to wealth stocks and tax rates in Europe, and especially France, in the pre-World War I “Belle Epoque,” between the end of the first world war and the early 1970s, and thereafter—no such accusation can be made of the new Piketty. Those who have long been convinced of the value of a “world historical” analysis that takes in the range of examples from the comparative study of society and history will experience gratification and even excitement at seeing this turn, made credible by the substantial investment made by Piketty to assimilate a vast range of evidence. They will also be frustrated that Piketty appears to remain unaware of perspectives and literature which could inform him in his task and to be grossly dismissive of traditions of thought that have made major contributions to the style of social understanding that he now embraces.³ While embracing the revival of grand theory in the social sciences which this volume marks, they will find no reason to discard the view that it must be more than an individual project if it is to provide fuller fruits.

Thomas Piketty has taken a royal road, but has he arrived an equally royal destination? I now turn to this question.

2 | PROPOSITIONAL STRUCTURE OF CAPITAL AND IDEOLOGY

Capital and Ideology is more than a thousand pages long. Its claims, often delivered in a declamatory fashion, are numerous. Moreover, it draws on empirical cases from various countries, parts of the world, and moments in history. The resulting discussions are individually substantial. Whereas some of its specific arguments are close to the surface, others are beneath it, bedeviling the reader's efforts to make sense of the whole.

It is possible, at the risk of oversimplification but in the interest of clarity, to identify six propositions which together compose the argument of the book. These are:

1. *Ternary Societies*: Inequality has been present in most societies in history, but in most of these societies took a specific form: “Ternary,” or tripartite, consisting of clerics, warriors, and workers, with the first two categories, although a numerical minority, possessing a dominant position. Political privileges of rulership (“regalian powers”), symbolic and social privileges, and economic privileges were together concentrated in the hands of the two dominant estates.
2. *Proprietarianism*: The central social and economic formation in modern times, in contrast, is that of “Proprietarian” society, only briefly arrested due to mid-twentieth century efforts to tame it, and more recently resurgent, since the 1970s, in the form of “Neo-Propertarianism.” It is unitary rather than ternary in the sense that it forms the single, and also central, societal basis of privileges and domination: economic, social, and political. Whereas complex societal rules governed who gained membership in each of the orders making up ternary society, membership in the dominant group in a proprietarian society is, in principle, although not in practice, accessible to all, since ownership is an abstract rather than concrete idea.
3. *Ideology*: All societies which possess inequality have an ambient “Ideology” which justifies and thereby supports that inequality. “Ideology” is understood to refer to the collection of these justificatory ideas. Although ideology

is essential for the stabilization of a system, it can be contested. In this way, changing the ambient ideas can bring about a different trajectory in history, especially at “switch points” at which the arrangements that prevail are otherwise underdetermined.

4. *European World Domination*: European colonialism, imperialism, and the slave trade projected the proprietarian ideology on a world scale, and reflected an intensive as well as extensive form of proprietarianism, effectively viewing colonized people and their lands as an extended form of property available to be exploited in various ways, which Europeans did with considerable benefit to themselves. The ongoing effects of this historical experience are also of considerable importance to understanding the pattern of contemporary inequalities.
5. *Knowledge is Power*: As the brief interval in which it was arrested in the mid-20th century shows, proprietarianism is not destiny. It can be tamed through specific measures, but to advance these requires above all public understanding, including in particular of informative data on the extent and nature of inequalities and the mechanisms of their production, so as to undermine the ideology that supports proprietarianism and so as to inform policies to combat inequality. In recent years, the trend around the world has been toward the weakening of class-based politics and the ascendancy of “identity cleavages.” This can be overcome by “groups of different origins and identities” recognizing that “what unites them outweighs what divides them” (p. 959). There is no deterministic explanation of politics, so “social and political mobilization” and knowledge matter.
6. *Participatory Socialism*: The most promising measures to address contemporary inequalities are those which limit the privileges of property, for example, through extension of the range of taxes to cover a wider variety of assets, sizable increases in the level of tax rates applying to top wealth and income holders, making certain property privileges effectively “temporary” rather than permanent, limiting the governance rights that go with property claims by demanding that these rights be shared with workers, and pursuing approaches to regional and global development which combat inequality across as well as within countries. A coalition can potentially be constructed, consisting of all but the ultra-rich, in favor of such “internationalist” and “egalitarian” policies, but this requires political realignments, and actors who champion such a programme, which can be dubbed one of “participatory socialism.”

It is clear that, once made explicit, and taken together, Piketty's propositions form a grand theory in that they form an ensemble that is no less in intended scope than any of the great prior efforts in political economy and social theory. It must therefore be evaluated in the same light.

We evaluate each of the propositions in turn.

3 | EVALUATING THE PROPOSITIONS

3.1 | Origins of inequality

It is unclear whether the concept of ternary society can be credited as a discovery. Piketty himself quotes accounts from specific societies of the past which refer to them as divided into three estates, with warriors and clerics each possessing superior, if contesting, roles. But the source of the difficulty is a deeper one.

First, it is a very long-established idea in anthropological, sociological and historical analysis that premodern societies involve interconnected economic, social, and political functions. The economy in such societies is “embedded” (Childe, 1942; Engels, 1884 [1972]; Godelier, 1972); Polanyi, 1944 [2001]; Tribe, 1978). The idea of ownership as an entirely abstract function, distributable in any one of many different ways, is simply infeasible. Although property existed in many such societies, they could not, by their very nature, be “proprietarian.” Moreover, in almost all if not all such societies, there were ideational (symbolic, cultural, or religious) functions, rulership (political) functions, and economic functions, although these were not always allocated to specifically constituted groups (estates, castes, or classes). Indeed, “primitive” and “small-scale” societies possessing little

or no internal division of labor or differentiation have often been characterized by these functions having been performed all together, although perhaps in a shifting fashion, by the entire community or large sections of it, for example, through the performance of rituals and other collective practices.⁴ In contrast, not only less unitary but also premodern societies, possessing a division of labor, however elementary, devolved these specific functions to particular groups, giving rise to semi-permanent or permanent clerical, warrior, and other functions. The dividing line between these two kinds of social order is classically seen as arising as a result of the development of settled agriculture and the associated economic surplus and division of labor that it made possible. For example, in the Marxian tradition, the distinction between “primitive communism” and “class society” turns on this development. More recently, in 20th century anthropology and archaeology, both in its Marxian and non-Marxian strands, “primitive” and “small-scale” societies were thought not to have a pronounced internal division of labor and correspondingly deep economic, political, and status hierarchies.⁵ The fundamental origins of social and economic inequality were located in the epochal transition from such primitive and small-scale societies to settled agriculture, which made possible the emergence and appropriation of a surplus, and made necessary its legitimation. This is a widely shared idea but Piketty makes no reference to it, confining his discussion of historical inequality to his own concept of “ternary” societies. More generally, the longstanding literature offering accounts of the origins of inequality that are “materialist” in some degree⁶ insofar as they link economic and social differentiation to features of ecology and technology, seems to be substantially neglected by Piketty. As a result, the concept of ternary society appears both idiosyncratic and freestanding.

Second, since any society generating surplus possesses the possibility of its unequal distribution, it also possesses the possibility of becoming a class-differentiated society. How and why it is that such societies invariably did become class-differentiated is an important question. What is clear, regardless of the answer, is that a legitimation function was necessary in such a society, and indeed integral to the maintenance of inequality, as Piketty rightly (although hardly uniquely) notices. A clerical function was therefore a seemingly unavoidable consequence of class differentiation. That it often possessed a well-remunerated role within the dominance hierarchy is hardly surprising in light of its importance. A warrior function was also not a surprising development insofar as it enabled both the possession of privileges internally and the maintenance or indeed extension of those privileges externally. These two elements of ternary society are therefore a straightforward and even difficult to avoid consequence of the development of a surplus-generating class-differentiated society. The elements of a regime of property are also an attendant consequence of class differentiation, and are known to have existed in the earliest such societies (see, e.g., Graeber, 2012). Whether the generation of differentiation of estates to parallel distinct social functions must end with three elements or whether it can and frequently does extend beyond it is a different question. For instance, although Piketty tends to downplay the existence of trade in history, suggesting at more than one point that societies existed largely in indifference and ignorance of one another until modern times, the extensive evidence of international trade from earliest history contrarily suggests its importance, and indeed the role of merchants, which is borne out in the archeological record. Whether the most “fundamental” form of society is ternary, quaternary, or something else is it matter or discussion, if there is any fundamental form. What is important for the present purpose is that the ubiquity of ternary societies is not a surprising point, if by that we mean societies that *admit* of the possibility of being described as ternary (e.g., in the case of Hinduism’s fourfold Varna order, much discussed by Piketty, this requires collapsing merchants and agriculturalists into a single category in order to permit “ternary” re-description, and ignoring those who fall outside of that order altogether). The fundamental binary division between those with a privileged relationship to the control and use of surplus and others can always give way to further differentiation, and it is not obvious that this process must end - either for analytical or sociological reasons - with two categories giving way to three, nor how to draw the most parsimonious resulting scheme.⁷ We must therefore ask to what extent the “finding” is indeed one.

Third, the purpose of Piketty’s description of premodern societies as ubiquitously possessing a ternary structure remains obscure. One might have thought that it would help to illuminate how and why contemporary proprietary societies came to have a specific form, or to help to explain variations among them, for example, because of

different directions taken in the transition from ternary to proprietary society. It does not appear, however, that this is a role of the extensive discussion of ternary societies. Indeed, it seems that Piketty's object is to establish a universal stagist history, in which ternary societies precede proprietary society. The analytical insight which is offered by the historical excavation, in explaining either the origins of, or variation in, the contemporary world, is therefore limited. It is difficult to understand what this stagist universal history offers over others, such as the already mentioned Marxian tradition, in which premodern class societies are swept in to world capitalism; the world systems tradition which offers a similar but more methodologically capacious account; or the sociological tradition associated with Max Weber and others, in which premodern societies' unrationalized symbolic order gives way to the rationalized order of modernity. The observation that the unjustified privileges of the past are visible lineaments in the present is a mere restatement of the idea that behind every fortune is a great crime. Moreover, Piketty's perspective is hardly unique in offering an account in which, echoing Anna Karenina, all modern societies are alike (i.e., disembedded) but each premodern society is embedded in its own way.

3.2 | Proprietarianism and property

Until now, Capitalism has been most often advanced as the central explanatory concept in the social sciences to capture the specificity of the world-straddling economic system which has emerged into its current central position, although when and how exactly is debated, during the last centuries. Piketty proposes to substitute for this the concept of Proprietarianism. Specifically, he conceives of proprietarianism, defined as "a political ideology based on the absolute defense of private property" (p. 971) as being the more basic concept and of capitalism as being a secondary concept, representing a higher stage of proprietarianism ("The extension of proprietarianism to the age of large-scale industry, international finance, and more recently to the digital economy" (p. 971). He sees capitalism as "a historical movement that seeks constantly to expand the limits of private property and asset accumulation beyond traditional forms of ownership and existing state boundaries" (p. 154). Although capitalism is "closely related" to proprietarianism, it is distinct from it, and its definition turns on its empirical characteristics as an extension and an expansion, whereas proprietarianism is given a more basic, conceptually free-standing, definition. The benefit that derives from differentiating the concepts is, according to Piketty, that proprietarianism has a career that is both temporally and logically prior to capitalism, and contains the original seed of the modern world system insofar as it emerged "as a way of transcending the logic of trifunctionalism in the context of new possibilities offered by the formation of a centralized state with a new capacity to discharge regalian functions and protect property rights in general" (p. 154). Nevertheless, Piketty says that proprietarianism is subject to a "logic of accumulation" which causes it to "extend the frontiers and forms of property to the maximum possible extent" and if unchecked to cause a "hardening" that leads to a more brutal economic process and to more conflictual class relations.

Although this picture is coherent, it is far from obvious that it is compelling. It provides an alternative nomenclature, but may deprive us of insight concerning the "engines" of the historical economic process. The vast existing literature on capitalism, both in mainstream and radical social science traditions, classically presented a picture of the modern economic system ("capitalism") developing in historically in phases, beginning with a commercial revolution in which expanding bounds of commerce led to the development of towns, the enrichment of new groups, and the demand for new forms of property law and legal relations between a widening circle of nominally free and equal persons to govern economic transactions, all prior to industrialism, and including international dimensions, for example, Hont and Ignatieff (1983), Marx (1867), Smith (1776 [2000]), and Weber (1927). Central to this picture is the idea that pressure was put on pre-existing customary social relations by these transformations (p. 102) leading ultimately to demands for a more open, rational, and contractual civic order, the collapse of vestiges of feudalism, and to the "bourgeois revolutions" successfully effected in certain countries, such as France and the United States. Similarly, the idea that capitalist economic relations became more abstract yet intensive over time can also be found widely (Edwards, 1979; Rubin, 1928 [1990]).

From this point of view, it is far from obvious that proprietarianism explains something that existing understandings of the historical development of capitalism do not. Piketty's view of capitalism as "high proprietarianism" would seem to be possible to map on to standard views of capitalism as developing in phases. But does it have comparable explanatory resources? For instance, whereas it can be plausibly argued that "the formation of a centralized state" was linked to, and even necessitated by, the development of commercial economic relations on a growing scale, which required a state adjudicator and regulator (See, e.g. Bagchi, 2005; Gellner, 1983; Jha, 2006; Polanyi, 1994 [2001]), it appears that Piketty takes this development as *background* to proprietarianism—which is presumed to have arisen out of its own prior, unexplained, logic.⁸ The role of the state in creating property as well as the role of property in creating the state both require attention, as recognized by analysts from Engels to Polanyi and Tilly. Piketty abstractly recognizes coercion, enforced by the state, to be an important part of the "inequality regime" (pp. 59–60) but does not appear to weave it into his historical account, nor into his examination of the contemporary constraints to a transformative project.⁹ From this perspective, Piketty's account appears incomplete if not ad hoc.

It is not clear what problem the introduction of the concept of proprietarianism solves. Piketty does not expressly address conceptual arguments in the literature on capitalism that attach explanatory significance to other proclaimed systemic or structural feature, such as, for instance, the centrality of wage labor or the control of investible funds by "capitalists." But neither does he address the claims of those critics who deny the existence of such uniform structural features across modern market systems and therefore hold that capitalism as a concept lacks validity (Unger, 1987). Where such critics point to the past, present, and future indeterminacy of the form of property rights, which can be and have been unpacked and repacked in diverse ways, to solve functional problems of the modern economy (Horwitz, 1977; Unger, 1996), Piketty argues contrarily that proprietarianism (pp. 102–109) brought about the elimination of these variations, replacing them with a unitary conception - in effect the absolutist Blackstonian property right. The first part of this thesis—the contention that traditional property rights' systems overlapping and complex claims were unified and simplified in the transition to modern property rights systems—is not difficult to sustain, but the second part—the conception of proprietarianism as a regime of property rights *absolutism*—does not explain the presence of qualifications of "absolute" private property rights in capitalist systems, as for example in the practice of eminent domain.

Piketty's view of "Capitalism" as the highest form of proprietarianism does not offer any account either of capitalism's structural features nor of its "inner" dynamics. It fails to recognize aspects that may be crucial to understanding the dynamics of wealth and inequality creation in modern economic systems, such as routinized technological innovation (Piketty does not mention this aspect of Marx's thought nor the related ideas of Joseph Schumpeter and other liberal thinkers). Piketty's perspective does not also offer such an explanation indirectly, by way of a corresponding account of "underlying" proprietarianism. Property is an abstract legal idea without a beating heart. The discovery of the elevation to universality of property protection ideology may be likened to the discovery that people universally wear clothes, without noting that it is because they have pride or that they fear the shame of nakedness. As such, it is a description but not an explanation. All in all, it is difficult to understand what is original in the concept of proprietarianism that is also good.

3.3 | Ideology and property

Piketty understands ideology as a justificatory apparatus, "a set of a priori plausible ideas and discourses describing how society should be structured" (p. 3), in particular in relation to its "political and property regimes" (p. 4). From this perspective, no social order can exist without an ideology. Piketty states that he understands "ideology" in a "positive and constructive" (p. 3) sense, in other words as not containing any intrinsic normative evaluation. It is clear that, from this definition, a justificatory apparatus (an "ideology") *can* be in alignment with warranted justifications (such as those he presents in relation to his own ideas about justice [pp. 967–971]). This would

presumably be a “good” ideology. To refer to a set of ideas as an ideology is not, therefore, to resolve what attitude we ought to take to it. He appears, though, to use the concept pejoratively in relation to proprietarian ideology, seeing it as a justificatory apparatus which is in fact unjustifiable. By referring to the “quasi-sacralization of private property,” Piketty indicates that proprietarian ideology involves more than false ideas: a magical conception of the role of private property. But he does not explore how that sacralization emerges, nor does he explain its relation to Marx’s seemingly similar concept of the “fetishism of commodities.”

Piketty views the influential ideology of an age as playing a role in stabilizing a social order, and in particular in sustaining its inequalities, but also views any ideology as inherently contested and contestable. (Piketty views Marxist ideas of ideology as involving a society’s ideological “superstructure” deriving from its “economic forces and relations of production” as being “almost mechanical” (p. 7) but neglects the elements of this tradition which are less deterministic (e.g., the ideas of Gramsci). He also does not offer any theory of his own as to the mechanisms through which an ideology comes to be propagated or to become dominant. Piketty insists on the independent power of ideas to shape reality, but this is not a distinguishing feature of his view. Indeed, if they did not have that power there would be little point in discussing their role. In what ways, and through what means, does reality shape ideas and do ideas shape reality? If it is especially at historical “switch points” that ideas matter, then what brings such moments about? Piketty does not discuss what conditions give rise to a “switch point,” either conceptually or through investigation of empirical cases, although he often makes recourse to this suggestive metaphor as a way of underlining that he favors a non-deterministic approach to history¹⁰. More generally, Piketty appears to offer a theory of the effects of ideology but not a theory of ideology itself (which would require describing the dynamics of production, circulation and legitimation of justificatory ideas). In this respect, Piketty’s invocation of the concept of ideology is instrumental, and thin.¹¹ We shall return to these matters when we deal with Piketty’s views concerning the role of social science and public understanding in (re-)shaping social reality, in Section 3.5.

3.4 | Proprietarianism on a world scale

Piketty must be credited with an attempt to develop a theory that pertains to and draws upon the experience of the whole world. Despite its ambitious geographical and historical reach, it remains selective in its cases and references, still veering toward the familiar. Nevertheless, it must be one of the least parochial exercises of grand ambition in contemporary social science. Indeed, it self-consciously attempts to “De-Westernize our Gaze” while acknowledging its limits in the realization of this task (pp. 1037–1039), and recognizing that in this respect the current book contrasts with earlier exercises by the same author. The chapters on slave and colonial societies show a familiarity with a wide range of relevant literature from diverse disciplines, although with a bias toward contemporary and metropolitan sources. Although there is other literature that could have been drawn upon and, perhaps inevitably, a variety of small errors, the result is an impressive *tour d’horizon* of colonial exploitation, in its informal and formal aspects. Piketty notes that although colonial regimes were at pains to maintain a shell of contractual legitimacy, so as to accord with the ideology of proprietarianism, the underlying fact of unequal power relations, and indeed the ubiquitous threat of application of force, was central to their modes of exploitation. Examples of superficial legality backed up by force and self-interest provided by Piketty include the “reparations” imposed by France on Haiti after the latter’s abolition of slavery, war indemnities imposed by the Spanish on Morocco (p. 282), forced labor in the Belgian and French colonies (pp. 291–295) and the contractions and indemnities extracted from China during the opium wars (p. 376). Because of his concern with the ideology of property writ large, Piketty captures here an important aspect of colonial discourse. Although well known, this aspect of colonial hypocrisy may not have been treated as an outgrowth of a larger ideology by other scholars.

In examining the making of the modern world through the lens of the effects of Western world domination, Piketty examines a wide range of mechanisms, all familiar to students of the economic and political history of colonialism. He argues that these have shaped the world in lasting ways. Examples range from the neglect of the schooling

of the colonized in favor of the colonizer (Algeria) and the outright seizure of land and labor (French colonies, South and East Africa, etc.) to the appropriation of foreign exchange revenues from the colonies to cover the deficits of the imperial centers (India and Indochina). The list is not exhaustive (for instance, Piketty could have given more attention to the impact on industrial development of tariffs, taxes and regulations disadvantaging local industry and favouring metropolitan industrial products) but it is extensive enough to underline the likelihood that slavery, colonialism and imperialism had sizable economic consequences, that in large measure these did not result from legitimate trade, and that their effects may still be with us. He suggests that “only a small part” of foreign financial assets accumulated by Britain and France in the 19th century were attributable to trade, with the rest arising from theft and fiddling (“quasi-military forms of tribute..., uncompensated appropriations, ... unusually high returns on certain investments,” p. 284). In effect, where Proudhon saw property as theft, Piketty, as did Marx, sees theft as a basis of property.

In this, Piketty shows himself a partisan, diverging from much of mainstream economic history writing, which has downplayed the importance of colonialism as a retarding factor in the development of the non-West and as a propelling factor in that of the West (see e.g. Landes, 1998). Piketty comes down on the other side. The larger effect of his discussion is to underline that the cumulative consequence of these diverse mechanisms was to shape the unequal world in which we live today. It is not clear that Piketty's proprietary perspective fundamentally shapes how we understand this epochal historical episode. Nor is it clear whether Piketty, traversing this well-trodden but essential terrain, is making such a claim. But the obverse certainly holds: that this epochal historical episode shapes the application of Piketty's proprietary perspective on a world scale.

Although Piketty gives some attention late in the book to the contemporary economic relations between the rich countries and the rest, and in particular to new political structures that could help to advance an egalitarian program simultaneously within and across countries, he pays little attention to whether “neocolonial” economic and political frames, embodied in rules and institutions and in many cases a direct outgrowth of colonial relationships, may also help to shape contemporary international inequalities. To take one of many possible examples, although Piketty gives much attention to the adverse consequences of capital flight and the ability to hide wealth in offshore banking centers, he does not pay corresponding attention to the manner in which the resulting flows benefit a few global financial centers, or in which they shore up the value of currencies which already enjoy a superior position in the global “hierarchy of money” (Mehrling, 2012), nor the manner in which the need to build up reserves in hard currencies to maintain confidence generates an ongoing cost for poorer countries. One cannot talk about everything at once, but then again, Piketty appears to have exactly that ambition.

Finally, one is left with the nagging feeling that despite Piketty's stated and laudable commitment to de-Westernizing his gaze, he fails to do so in crucial respects. His policy proposals foreground European examples and proposals for Europe. This seems increasingly out of keeping with the needs of speaking to a global audience, in a world in which Europe's relative importance has been rapidly diminishing. Moreover, the effects of the emergence of race and culture as optics with which to view and organize the modern world, as a direct effect of European hegemony (often through subordination of indigenous hierarchical and exploitative structures) seems to receive little or no attention. It seems difficult to understand the internal struggles within metropolitan countries today (whether France, the UK or the US) as Piketty is intent to do (see, e.g., his discussion of the dynamics of “social nativism”) or even to understand their external dimensions, without recognizing these hierarchies as having an existence that is now independent of “proprietaryism.” Although Piketty gives attention to racial discrimination as a factor in the emergence and maintenance of inequalities, it is not clear that he has taken the full measure of race and culture as organizing principles on a world scale (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991).

3.5 | Proprietarianism, public understanding, and politics

Although Piketty acknowledges that “facts” about society are only known through the activities of social institutions, and in this respect are “constructs” (p. 9) rather than wholly objective reports, he nevertheless writes of

engaging in “unbiased examination of the available sources” (p. 9). Piketty has faith, in particular in the ability of “collective learning” (p. 10) based on “objective” examination to offer a window on the “evolution of ideology and of political and ideological regimes around the world” as well as concerning the nature of the “ideal social, economic and political organization” (p. 10). Piketty’s recognition of obfuscatory role of ideology does not sit easily alongside his robust, perhaps even naïve, belief in the prospects for a rational understanding of data and facts in order to overcome it. Even those who are in sympathy with this ambition, and believe too in the prospects for rational understanding to uplift humanity, may raise questions as to what is Piketty’s theory in this regard. He appears not to have an account of the *mechanisms* through which a governing ideology emerges and why it survives: how it is produced, reproduced, legitimated, and comes to have an ambient role. Why does an ideology that offers unjustified justifications (his view of the proprietarian “ideology”) stand firm in the face of counter-arguments? After all, neither the diagnosis of empirical inequalities under neoliberalism nor the ethical case for egalitarianism was born with Piketty. If, like Althusser, Piketty sees self-justifying ideology as mysteriously but definitively “secreted” by a given order, then why does he have so much hope in the ability of data and reasoning to puncture it, and of collective learning to take place without becoming recurrently caught in ideological obfuscation? It is difficult to understand when and why argument matters, or not, for Piketty.

There are certainly enough examples of arguments and facts being discarded because inconvenient. The case of economics is an especially apposite example of social science acting as obfuscatory justificatory apparatus and not merely to unveil the truth. It has long been recognized that the dominant tendencies in economics have, aside from whatever “scientific” validity they may have, gained sway in part because of their role in providing useful justifications. In particular, the rise of “marginalist” economics in the 19th century and, subsequently, of neoclassical economics, has owed a great deal to their role in “naturalizing” the rewards due to different factors of production, in particular for the “services” delivered by capital, and drawing attention away from the element of conflict involved in the distribution of reward (Dobb, 1973). This disciplinary deflection of attention is not merely a historical curiosity. It is in fact the proximate explanation of why inequality had to be re-discovered in recent years, including through the work of Piketty himself. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the then limited discussion on inequality in mainstream economics focused almost invariably on “marginalist” explanations for growing inequalities, such as “skill-biased technical change”, with a focus largely on inequality in wages among different classes of workers, giving rather less importance to the effect of inequality between workers and capital owners (Reddy, 2020).

The role of structural factors such as financialization and globalization in changing the relations between capital and labor, and influencing the bargains struck in national economies and firms, thereby causing the share of national income captured by workers, especially the unskilled, systematically to fall, was little studied. Many scholars, often outside the mainstream and on its margins drew attention to these facts, but were largely ignored.¹² Moreover, inheritance and wealth taxes were very little discussed in the post-second world war literatures on taxation, public finance, and inequality.¹³ The difference between placing inequality in center stage versus treating it as a side issue appears to lie in shifts in the influence of an ideology within “science” rather than in the internal dynamics of science itself. The rise of Piketty to the status of a global phenomenon, while accounted for in part by his capabilities and contributions, appears from this perspective to be adventitious. The possibility of contesting an ideology, according to Piketty’s own framework, emerges at specific “switch points” in history due to the underlying movement of “tectonic plates”. In this case the yawning societal gaps brought to attention by the global financial crisis of 2008 provided the opening for attention to overlooked dimensions of inequality.

The importance that Piketty attaches to “collective learning” in bringing about the progress of social science can seem both grandiose and simplistic, neglecting the fact that economics and other social sciences have experienced episodes of forgetting as well as learning (perhaps precisely because of the ideological “force field” in which they are practiced). One can recognize the predicament of the social sciences, as entangled in ideology by virtue of their social grounding and functions, without denying the possibilities for improved understanding—for example, through better data and methods of analysis. Not only does this not commit one to “indiscriminate relativism” (p. 10) but permits the development of an anti-relativist position that departs from naïve empiricism, recognizing that

the data, informative as it is, does not speak of its own accord. Rather, data are enabled to speak as a result of the particular concerns and questions that we bring to bear, which are shaped in turn by the ambient social “scientific” milieu. Who has a loudspeaker within the social sciences, and what is said using it, is in turn shaped by the larger historical conditions. This is one reason that social science and public concerns often evolve in a similar direction together, as the recent concern with inequality itself illustrates.

For example, it seems implausible to suggest that social science “led” public attention to the privileges of the one percent or vice versa. Instead, deepening societal fault lines caused a growing concern with plutocratic privilege which in turn found expression through this formula. Social “science” can shore up a dominant ideology, as much of economics did during the “neoproprietary” era (what many others call the neoliberal era), or to undermine it, as there are indications of today. The role of access to high positions in government, the favor of funding bodies, media attention, and other factors in enabling elite consent *within* the social sciences requires fuller attention. Correspondingly, the role of ambient presuppositions as well as material and career interests in determining the *reception* of social science research by gate-keepers in politics, the media, and elsewhere also needs attention. The determined inattention during the neoliberal or “neoproprietary” period to growing inequalities, especially between labor and capital owners, and to the link between these inequalities and policies of tax reduction, deregulation, and globalization—by social scientists, politicians, and the media—itsself requires an analytical understanding. Piketty hints at such an understanding, for instance, by noting the support of the more educated in a number of countries for pro-globalization policies that benefitted social elites, or by underlining the importance of measures to reduce the influence of money in politics and over the media. More generally, comprehending the power of ideology requires insight as to how and why it leads people *not* to act, although they may understand the devastating consequences of inaction. Amartya Sen pointed out, famously, that the power of property rights ideology is such that famine victims have gone to their deaths rather than engage in acts that violate property rights (Sen, 1981). The concept of sacralization of property rights seems apposite here, but deserves much fuller exploration. Famine victims apart, it finds an academic counterpart in economic theories, prolifically propagated during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, to the effect that protection of property rights is the elixir of economic growth.¹⁴

An adequate examination of how ideology sustains inequalities, as well as of the possibilities for contestation, must study the secretion glands and not just the secretions. It is of course uncomfortable that some of the secretion glands are very close to home, and in particular have powerfully shaped the propensities of the mainstream of economics, the existence of Piketty notwithstanding.

What of politics? Based on extensive analysis of post-election surveys around the world, Piketty sees a common difficulty around the world in the form of obscurantist identitarian traps. Piketty hopes that ultimately class interests can unify, overcoming these. He sees signs for hope in the existence of mobilizations that he characterizes as class-based, which have been partially successful in recent years, in particular in Brazil (the Workers’ Party) and in India (he refers to caste- and “social justice”-based parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party [BSP] and Samajwadi Party [SP], but notably pays little attention to the communist parties). In fact, these characterizations are questionable. In Brazil, the Workers’ Party was influential for a period because it built a broad coalition encompassing the middle classes. Although the Workers’ Party employed burgeoning tax revenues (in particular during the Lula administrations) to fund social programs benefitting the poor, this approach also provided a fillip to consumer demand which fueled high growth, and was therefore generally welcomed (before the global downturn affecting Brazil and corruption scandals engulfing the Rousseff’s government). In these respects, the case of the Workers’ Party was not wholly different from that of other nominally left-wing “Reformed” parties such as New Labour in Britain. In India, the parties that Piketty cites are limited to regional caste (i.e., identity) rather than class-based formations, and have not been able to enter into larger national class-based coalitions.¹⁵ The communist parties have meanwhile suffered serial setbacks, notably the loss of the one-time bastion of West Bengal. Although there may well be hope for the class-based movements Piketty champions, it is not clear that these are the examples which provide that hope.

Piketty views “populism” as an empty concept with little explanatory force, but he does not adequately confront the effectiveness of identitarian political movements. The role of identity politics based parties in forestalling or turning back class-based mobilizations against plutocratic power is presumably one of the reasons for their rise in the present age of inequality. Piketty decries and hopes to overcome identity politics, but has no account of why it exists here and now.

As shall be noted below, Piketty sees a desirable political program as promoting the interests of the least advantaged, but durably successful political movements are likely to appeal, in contrast, to the interest of a “vast majority”¹⁶ including in particular the middle classes.¹⁷ The power of a formula such as “We are the 99%” is that it captures this idea, overcoming the political limitations of narrow class-based mobilizations while still being defined by their class element. The sharply increased inequalities in many countries¹⁸ would seem to provide suitable conditions precisely for such broad-based class based movements, but they are notably missing. A sustainable political economy underpinning an egalitarian program must, presumably, carry with it a sufficient majority. What social coalition would underpin such a program and under what conditions? Piketty offers little insight on the membership of a coalition that could promote such policies, or how it may be mobilized.

Piketty suggests that changes to “political, institutional and electoral regimes” (p. 957), both national and international, would help (e.g., reducing the “race to the bottom among countries engaged in tax competition with one another”) and that we should focus on “new thinking about the property regime: fiscal, social and educational systems; and the organization of borders” (p. 965). It seems compelling to suggest that new ideas are needed to overcome the malaise of contemporary politics (not just better public understanding of the data). But creating and sustaining winning coalitions requires more than this: a link between these ideas and the interests of all, almost all, or at the very least, enough.

A related difficult issue that Piketty appears not to face concerns what is necessary to wean the middle classes, and not merely the poor, away from the idea that property should be “sacralized.” After all, property plays a central role in “common sense” all over the world, and people express fervent aspirations to possess it and to pass it on to their children, including many who do not have it. The idea that property should be overcome is far from the sensibility of the voters that Piketty hopes to carry along. At a bare minimum, it would seem important to recognize that such an agenda demands a “long march.” In any case, Piketty’s own commitments seem misnamed. His policy proposals, as opposed to his stated commitments, make him appear less concerned with overcoming property than with limiting and distributing it, putting him in line with Proudhonian socialists (such as Cui, 2003). Piketty often seems to have made a peace with small property, mainly expressing opposition to concentrated property holdings. He does not seem to have an elaborated account of where the dividing line should be and why. Whether or not Piketty’s view that “there should be more for the little guy” is incoherent, it is certainly incomplete. Piketty’s diagnosis of proprietarianism as the ill, and his advocacy of cooperatives and of share governance rights in firms,¹⁹ suggest that there is a connection between his analysis and his prescription. He favors a social and not merely a distributed element to property ownership, requiring some reinvention of the idea of property itself, or at least its de-privatization. But this link is never made explicit, and the direction remains primarily suggestive.

3.6 | A limited Utopia

It is commendable that Piketty wishes to make his thought an aid to life, guiding us in the collective pursuit of a better, more equal, world. He accepts the injunction to unite imagination with analysis, so as to make of social enquiry a prospect of the possible and not merely a diagnosis of the extant (Unger, 1987).

Although such a prospect is something less than a deduction it nevertheless must adhere to certain disciplines. Consider, for example, the role of normative reasoning in such reflection on the possible. We may take it as a given that some normative commitments are necessary in order to create a “should” or an “ought” and thus to orient reflection and action. But how comprehensive must such commitments be? On one view, it is necessary to anchor

reflections on desirable social futures in a specific normative conception, because these define the objectives and the constraints, and provide a basis for giving detailed content to a compatible practical vision. On another view, it is enough to identify a general direction for action, supportable by a *range* of normative conceptions (Sen, 2009).

Piketty's approach, however, is not discernibly of either kind, leading to confusion as to what is the relation between his proclaimed normative commitments and his favored practical prescriptions. Piketty commits himself to two specific ideals (pp. 967–968). Unfortunately, these are not only imperfectly specified, but they are also (a) mutually incompatible, and (b) do not obviously give rise to the specific policy prescriptions he promotes, although they are separately compatible with them.

One must be explicit to bring to light the problem. Piketty offers in the same paragraph the following two distinct descriptions of a just society, which he refers to as being parts of a single “imperfect definition” viz. (1) “one that allows all of its members access to the widest possible range of fundamental goods,” where “Fundamental goods include education, health, the right to vote and more generally to participate as fully as possible in the various forms of social, cultural, economic, civic, and political life,” and (2) one that “organizes socioeconomic relations, property rights, and the distribution of income and wealth in such a way as to allow its least advantaged members to enjoy the highest possible life conditions.” The difficulties are obvious. Put aside the minor questions, such as whether the “widest” range of goods refers to having as many distinct goods as possible or having each good to the largest extent possible—and how, insofar as these two desiderata conflict, they should be traded off. There are potential conflicts of more serious kinds, in particular between the two descriptions. Improving the life conditions of the least advantaged may well come at a cost to other members of society (perhaps even only slightly more advantaged members) in terms of their access to the same or other fundamental goods. This problem can make it very difficult to gain democratic political endorsement of such a principle, as noted later in this essay, even when the same good is involved for different persons. The problem of conflicts between distinct goods, for instance, between provisioning adequately for some and allowing freedoms for others, is not simply dismissible, whether as a matter of economics,²⁰ politics, or ethics.

Piketty appears, if the degree to which he elaborates on it is any indication, rather more serious about his second provision, favoring society's least advantaged members, than the first, favoring the provision of the “widest” range of goods to all. (Strangely, he only allows “some truth” to the idea that the “principles of justice” he sets forth are “similar to those formulated by John Rawls,” whose name is practically synonymous with the maximin idea as a demand of justice.) Let us therefore focus on that provision.

There is a further and rather more serious problem. Advancing the interest of the least advantaged is a Paretian (and prioritarian) concern and not an egalitarian one in that widening relative inequalities can be justified to any degree as long as these are argued to have been necessary to improve the condition of the least advantaged. For example, the vast increase in relative inequalities in China in recent decades (p. 618) appears plausible to justify from this standpoint, since it has been accompanied by steep and indeed otherwise historically unprecedented decreases in absolute poverty (Minoiu & Reddy, 2008). This is evidently not the perspective from which Piketty, known for his concern with relative inequality rather than absolute deprivations (indeed the former concept is central to this volume, as it was to his last, but the latter concept barely figures) is concerned. His policy prescriptions are similarly resolutely concerned with the reduction of *relative* inequalities (e.g., in wealth and income, educational expenditure and outcomes, etc.). It is therefore extremely difficult to see Piketty's stated normative commitments and his empirical research and policy arguments as forming a coherent or even a consistent whole.

Regrettably, much as many economists may think so, normative reasoning is not entirely an amateur sport. Neither is it dispensable. Without a plausible normative anchoring, the argument as a whole, since it is nothing if not prescriptive, is not only incomplete but also rudderless.²¹

Let us now move to the specific policy prescriptions that Piketty offers. These prescriptions are broadly of two kinds. First, Piketty recommends implementing elevated, steeply progressive and broadened, taxation on property and wealth, including inheritance taxes, and on income. The proceeds of these taxes are to be employed in a progressive manner, benefiting the less advantaged through educational expenditures, a universal capital

endowment distributing wealth to all citizens, and a minimum guaranteed income (which Piketty calls a basic income, although it is conditional). Second, Piketty recommends the development of “new forms of social ownership,” most especially in the form of distributing decision-making rights within firms to workers and other stakeholders, and not merely to shareholders. These innovations are to be considered not merely on a national level but also through implementation through a transnational democratic system “aiming at achieving social, fiscal and environmental justice”. (I do not attend here to various subsidiary proposals, such as those for a progressive tax on carbon use, greater fiscal powers to supra-national federative organizations such as the EU, international coordination to staunch illicit capital flight and determine the ultimate beneficiary owners of assets, and affirmative action measures.) To enable a more supportive political economy for such policies, Piketty recommends innovations in political financing, in particular through “democratic equality vouchers” which would enable all citizens to make political contributions, and perhaps charitable contributions.

The first direction Piketty embraces is in line with his earlier work, underlining the idea of linking progressive wealth taxes to specific egalitarian initiatives, such as a universal capital endowment, and undertaking some accounting exercises to identify the scale of such taxes need to finance these. Piketty's emphasis on progressive taxation, especially of wealth, is by now easy to predict. The second direction, underlining the value of extending greater governance rights to workers, appears to be a newer one for him, although it has been espoused by a very long line of progressive economists and social scientists (not only James Meade, whom Piketty mentions, but also such figures as Jacques Dreze, Joseph Stiglitz, Jaroslav Vanek, and others). Although much can be said about these prescriptions, we confine ourselves to three related points here, concerning their selectivity, their adequacy, and their feasibility.

First, selectivity—Piketty appears to be unaware of, or at least says nothing about, a range of progressive proposals which have long been discussed. Although sensibly critical of left-wing political parties' excessive focus in the past on achieving the “transcendence” of capitalism through state-owned enterprises, his own conception of how that goal, which he states that he shares, is to be achieved, is underdeveloped. For example, proposals that appear to be hardly or not at all discussed include such ideas as socialized but distributed public shareholding of corporations (Roemer, 1994), a profit-sharing economy (Weitzman, 1984), legal and financial measures to support consumer and workplace cooperatives and social venture capital funds (Unger, 1998). More accustomed proposals, such as limitations on protection for “intellectual property,” environmental social and governance mandates applying to firms, requirements that financial institutions employ social as well as economic criteria in lending and changes to labor law that facilitate unionization, are also hardly discussed. Many such proposals also attenuate the content of private property, by making it more “temporary,” provisional, qualified, or disaggregated, exactly in keeping with the direction Piketty himself embraces.

Piketty gives little attention too to the policy context within which increases in inequality have taken place in recent years: financialization, deregulation, and globalization. Although he pays some heed to the need to weaken the constraints within which governments find themselves trapped through suitable international agreements (especially on his favored subject of information sharing to limit the hiding of wealth), the larger case for an alternative form of globalization, empowering rather than constraining progressive governments (see e.g. Barry & Reddy, 2010) is not developed. Neither is the role of measures to strengthen the relationship between finance and the real economy in sustaining or restoring livelihoods for the vast majority. Analyses of the present situation provide the background for exercises in institutional imagination. But both could have been attended to more by Piketty.

Second, adequacy: does Piketty conceive of his proposals as a comprehensive, perhaps even total, program for achieving his stated normative ends, or only as a first step? Is it a plausible way of attaining those ends? The elements of his proposal are familiar. Some appear already to have been realized in some measure. Consider for example progressive wealth, income, and inheritance taxes. On Piketty's own account, these were partially realized in the 20th century, with the effect of moderating inequalities but not abolishing them, let alone of overcoming the structural patterns of existing capitalism. Indeed, some capitalists have prominently advocated the same measures as Piketty, including a universal capital endowment, in order to create a shared stake in the “system” and

better to save capitalism.²² Or consider the role of the “Germano-Nordic” system of providing rights to workers to participate in governance of firms in some countries. Important as this has been in generating a more productive and equitable economy, its effects have not been decisive in arresting increases in inequality experienced in these countries in the last four decades nor even in protecting the job security of workers in such firms. The elements of the political economy which moderate inequalities to a degree may be entirely different ones (such as the size distribution of firms, most famously embodied by the German *Mittelstand*).

The increased expenditure on education resources which Piketty espouses has been central to the agenda of progressive “neoliberal” parties such as New Labour. Piketty’s emphasis on the need to shift educational expenditures from those who receive a disproportionate share of them (e.g., in tertiary institutions) is not different from the guidance for education sector reform long provided by the World Bank and other institutions, in particular during the 1980s and 1990s. Piketty may anticipate going further in terms of the scale of increase in educational expenditures for those who receive lesser resources presently, as for example has Roemer (1998). Nevertheless, if “I would do *more* of it” is the answer, it is not one that Piketty has laid out explicitly. Such measures may be ameliorative, and if taken to an adequate degree, even transformative, but one can be forgiven for not seeing in this advice a qualitative break.

It is worth noting too that Piketty’s policies appear economicist, focusing on better distributing monetary resources and control rights over productive enterprises, whereas access to the “widest possible range of fundamental goods” may instead benefit from provisioning of high quality social and public goods, such as education, health, access to nature, and so forth. This makes for a rather different prescription.²³ Indeed, it may also change the understanding of the role of taxation. Even a seemingly regressive tax system can finance public expenditures which improve lives for the vast majority, and thereby more than make up for this deficiency through the progressivity of its expenditures (Steinmo, 1993; Unger, 1998).

Third, feasibility: in relation to his tax and expenditure (e.g., wealth tax and citizen income) proposals, Piketty undertakes some accounting exercises to show the level of tax effort that may be needed to finance programs on the scale that he favors. He also notes that the prior existence of higher tax rates, in a period of high growth in productivity and in incomes, suggests that high and progressive taxes need not come at a cost to prosperity. Piketty does not, however, give much attention to countering in any detail the arguments advanced by those opposed to taxation. Consider, for instance, the idea that a high inheritance tax would adversely affect work effort and savings by harming the bequest motive, thereby diminishing output, employment, and growth. Or consider the idea that economic growth can be “profit-led” as well as “wage-led,” and that which is the case may determine whether redistributive tax and transfer policies are beneficial or harmful to output and employment. Consider too the famous result in the literature on “optimal taxation” that the highest marginal income tax rate should be zero in order not to choke off effort. Such arguments are prominent and prevalent, and made frequently by economists, among others. If it is thought that they are dismissible, then the counterarguments ought to be presented. Of course economic arguments can be given on Piketty’s side too (e.g., that wealth taxes are much less likely to cause adverse incentives than are income taxes, because wealth is largely the consequence of previous effort, to the extent it is a consequence of effort at all).

As a general matter, Piketty appears to neglect the connections between growth and redistributive policies. This perspective can be contrasted to one in which growth and equitable distribution are viewed not only as shaped by common factors but moreover as shaping each other (whether positively or negatively).²⁴ Where *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* relied heavily on sometimes recondite economic arguments, *Capital and Ideology* pays little attention to such economic arguments at all, even well-known ones which play an important role in public discussion. Even if one welcomes Piketty’s self-emancipation from the often narrow discourse of mainstream economics, one might also wish that he not abandon it before defending his flanks.

Despite Piketty’s ambition to construct a theory from world-spanning evidence that in turn has globally relevant prescriptive implications, he can appear especially inattentive to the concerns of peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, for which reliance on foreign capital and technology and even managerial skills forms a

constraint which must be delicately and strategically handled. A frontal assault on the property regime in such a context seems hard to envision, and of doubtful immediate relevance, much as changes in the international system may create circumstances that are more accommodating for such policies.²⁵

Another concern about the feasibility of Piketty's tax proposals is that they will be resisted, either through capital flight or through politics. He recognizes the former concern and calls for a tighter regime of international coordination to diminish competitive lowering of tax rates, and to make hiding wealth harder. He does not, in contrast, give much attention to the latter concern, the prospect (indeed, the reality) that the wealthy make determined efforts to avoid taxation, which may make it not a sound political tactic to make this the first point in one's political agenda. Similarly, Piketty's advocacy of policies that promote substantive and not merely procedural equality, including affirmative action (p. 360) is not accompanied by a recognition of the potency of racial, caste, and ethnic politics, let alone a political strategy for their rebuttal. Piketty's view of history and politics is non-deterministic,²⁶ but incorporating politics as well as economics into such a view requires recognizing not merely that our economic policies can have effects, but that they can expect to generate political reactions, including resistance. Piketty's non-determinism can seem at times to verge on a view, suggested by the very title *Capital and Ideology*, in which superstructural or ideational constraints are the main ones, so that we can will ourselves into a different reality by dropping the scales created by existing lenses.²⁷

A much larger issue concerns the distinction between policies focusing on reducing inequality in market incomes and ones focusing on improving post tax-and-transfer inequality incomes. The former require ex ante policies which change the terms, both premarket and in-market, on which people engage with the market, as opposed to ex post policies, effecting changes in final receipts through post-market transaction state actions. The case for ex ante policies (sometimes also understood under the heading of "predistribution") is both economic and political. By empowering people to be more productive contributors to the social product such policies make it difficult to think of egalitarian policies as shifting resources from makers to takers. They therefore also conduce to social dignity. They moreover create a more durable basis for equality by diminishing the incentive and the capability of the wealthy to resist egalitarian policies. Although Piketty nods to the idea of predistribution, the policies he proposes do not turn much in this direction. The idea of generalizing the Germano-Nordic corporate governance model involves changing in-market terms of engagement, but is not specifically conceived of as being desirable for this reason, nor is it therefore proposed to be accompanied by other such policies. A more convincing egalitarian program would more firmly and comprehensively root the pursuit of equality in the production system itself. In addition to having the consequentialist benefits noted, such an approach would also give more substance to the idea of a "participatory" egalitarianism.

4 | CONCLUSIONS

In *Capital and Ideology*, Thomas Piketty has undertaken an impressive effort, which ranges far and wide. It shows a remarkable aspiration, not wholly explicit, to integrative social science—drawing upon a variety of disciplines and domains, learning from history and cases, abjuring fetishistic model building, attempting to overcome Eurocentric parochialism, and viewing academic investigation as an aid to human emancipation.

Although Piketty's effort to develop a historically informed and globally relevant perspective is admirable, it does not succeed in achieving a fully convincing unification. It is limited by its eclecticism and neglect of traditions of social science relevant to such a project. Piketty's central concept of (neo-)proprietaryism is thin. It does not provide an account of systemic dynamics. As a result, some grand themes, such as European world domination, have an accidental quality. "Classical" themes that could be relevant to understanding the systemic dynamics of inequality, such as the sources of technological and organizational innovation and their relations to capital and wealth accumulation, are given little attention. The bridge from description to explanation or to prescription is often unclear. Piketty's normative framework is incomplete where it is not incoherent. His policy prescriptions

appear to be individually selective and jointly insufficient. They smack too of voluntarism—lacking an account of the political conditions and actions that can help to advance a desired program.

The “New Piketty” asks many of the right questions. It is not always evident that he offers the right answers. But this can be forgiven. Piketty's book points to a return of grand theory in the social sciences, strengthened by current empirical research.²⁸ Such a turn can point the way to new insights and proposals. The vista before us offers the prospect of making the social sciences great again—not for their own glorification but because a better world depends on it.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For their invaluable suggestions, I thank John Harriss, Matjaz Nahtigal, Ajit Sinha, and Donald Robotham.
- ² These qualifications are necessary since Piketty is hardly the first economist or social scientist to have had a concern with grand themes and capacious arguments or to have drawn on comparative experiences over space and time to inform them.
- ³ The former include perspectives from world systems and dependency theory, and the latter include Marxian analyses.
- ⁴ Of course, even the most “basic” social structures can feature profound internal differentiation of status and roles, in particular in relation to gender and age, raising the question of whether they are more basic than, or are “primitive” counterparts of, class. The rediscovery of these forms of differentiation, greatly emphasized in the earlier British structural functionalist anthropological tradition, has been an important theme in French Marxist anthropology and sociology. See, for example, Bourdieu (2001), Godelier (1986), Meillassoux (1981), and Terray (1972).
- ⁵ The distinction made by Goody (1976) between the relative equality of “hoe cultures” engaged in simple reproduction and the profound class and gender divisions of surplus-accumulating “plough cultures” provides one example.
- ⁶ Such explanations of the origins of inequality, in various intellectual traditions, are associated, for instance, with Gordon Childe, Friedrich Engels, Jared Diamond, Jack Goody, David Graeber, Marvin Harris, and D.D. Kosambi.
- ⁷ Wright, 1996, provides one example of a multi-fold class division for contemporary societies.
- ⁸ “[Proprietarian ideology] emerged in societies that were still largely preindustrial as a way of transcending the logic of trifunctionalism in a context of new possibilities offered by the formation of a centralized state with a new capacity to discharge regalian functions and protect property rights in general” (p. 154).
- ⁹ Piketty here echoes, without referring to, Gramsci's famous formula relating hegemony to force and consent.
- ¹⁰ The word “bifurcations” is used in the French text. Although neither term necessitates the role of agency in making for one trajectory rather than another, it is presumably what makes the difference, with “ideology” acting as an obstacle to certain applications of agency.
- ¹¹ Piketty appears to be unaware of the long history of social scientific debates on ideology. Major figures in that debate (Althusser, Aron, Foucault, Godelier, Gramsci, Lukacs, or Mannheim, to name a few) appear not to be cited, and others (e.g., Bourdieu) are cited without their ideas on the subject being addressed. The concept of ideology as invoked in the book is neither located in relation to its predecessors nor fully elaborated.
- ¹² We can think of the work of Andrew Glyn, Giovanni Andrea Cornia, James Crotty, Gerald Epstein, Jomo KS, Richard Kozul-Wright, William Lazonick, Robert Rowthorn, Ajit Singh, John Weeks, Richard Wolff, and many others.
- ¹³ The “Italian School” of the late 19th and early 20th century had a notable interest in the role of inheritance and wealth taxes in combatting inequality. See the references in Dalton (1920) and also Gabbuti (2020).
- ¹⁴ We can think here of work along these lines by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, Paul Collier, Hernando de Soto, Douglass North, and others, not to mention a wide variety of reports from international development institutions on “institutions,” “governance,” and development, such as the World Bank in the 1990s and the first decade of this century.
- ¹⁵ Piketty's lack of knowledge of India, even in the area of his express competence, sometimes shows, for example in his crediting the SP and BSP with calling for the “creation of India's first federal wealth tax” (pp. 950–951), when in fact a pre-existing central government wealth tax had been recently abolished, in 2016.
- ¹⁶ This is a concept that has been introduced by my colleague, Anwar Shaikh. See Shaikh and Ragab (2007).

- ¹⁷ It is well established that middle class support was crucial to the historical success of social democratic movements in Nordic countries.
- ¹⁸ Somewhat more than half of countries have experienced increases in inequality over the last four decades, as measured by the Gini coefficient, according to data from the Global Consumption and Income Project.
- ¹⁹ Piketty's discussion of the former is very brief in comparison with the latter. This is a bit surprising in light of the large existing literature on the economic theory and empirical social science literature on the conditions under which cooperatives are likely to be successful, or not—which he does not appear to cite. The possibility that a certain dominant context—defined by the ecology of firms as well as by existing rules—may be hostile to such experiments, an idea which figures powerfully in that literature, is also hardly mentioned.
- ²⁰ The case of health care is a case in point. Requiring that all opt-in may be a condition for financial sustainability of a health care program, because of the problem of “adverse selection”.
- ²¹ Piketty uses a number of normatively imbued terms without definition, and which moreover do not appear to be directly linked to his stated normative framework. One example is “exploitation” (e.g., p. 239). Another example is the suggestion by Piketty that a “just wage” ought to be an objective of policy (pp. 1000–1004). It is unclear whether Piketty is aware of how deeply contested these terms have been.
- ²² See e.g. “Bill Ackman on saving capitalism: Every child in the U.S. could be given enough money at birth to become millionaires by retirement”, MarketWatch, 31st August, 2020: <https://www.marketwatch.com/amp/story/bill-ackman-on-saving-capitalism-every-child-in-the-u-s-could-be-given-enough-money-at-birth-to-become-millionaires-by-retirement-11598893294>.
- ²³ A thoughtful literature critical of basic income and related proposals has cropped up along these lines.
- ²⁴ It has been contended that inequality can be antithetical to growth by a number of economists in recent years. See, for instance, Stiglitz (2012) for some relevant arguments.
- ²⁵ Expropriations in many countries have, because of such dependence, later been reversed at great cost, to underline the commitment to the property regime, for good or for ill. Recently, see, for example, “Zimbabwe to return land seized from foreign farmers”, [bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53988788), 1st September, 2020: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53988788>.
- ²⁶ This is perhaps one reason that an accounting view (famously involving r and g) formed the heart of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*: although dynamics leading to greater inequality were argued to be present, these were also understood as being possible to overcome with suitable policies, in particular taxes on the wealthy.
- ²⁷ Piketty seems, here and elsewhere, to echo the French social science tradition's concern with “mentalités” although without that tradition's at times sophisticated engagement with the relation between the mental and material (as, e.g., in Godelier, 1986).
- ²⁸ In this way, the prospective Return of Grand Theory is rather different in nature from that referred to by Skinner (1985).

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