Thomas Piketty, **Capital and Ideology**, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020, pp. 1104.

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Thomas Piketty's comprehensive sequel to *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) can be summarized as three studies united by the conviction that "ideas and ideologies count in history" (p. 7). The first study is a historical exposé of economic inequality mostly based on economic statistics. The second maps sociopolitical cleavages from WWII to the present using election surveys. The third exhibits Piketty's political imagination for the future as a "thought experiment" (p. 970) that draws on insights from the book's more data-driven parts.

Throughout, the book's perspective is positioned against the traditional Marxist base/superstructure model. Piketty even concludes by reformulating Marx and Engels' famous phrase to: "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of the struggle of ideologies and the quest for justice" (p. 1035). However, there is surprisingly little explicit dialogue with Marx's writings or contemporary Marxism. This makes the figurative statements vis-à-vis Marx/-ism in the introduction and concluding sections rather meaningless.

The book's theoretical perspective is akin to mainstream Economic Sociology. Piketty treats economic inequality as inherently embedded in sociopolitical relations as opposed to being a deterministic or natural condition. The historical perspective is not economistic. Instead, societies are said to evolve from a complex interplay between material and ideological factors, and disruptive events (e.g., WWI) that constitute "switch points" offering multiple possible trajectories of historical development.

The book offers a historical account of economic inequality from a comparative perspective. Long time-series data of wealth and income distribution within countries buttress this analysis. Drawing on this data, Piketty paints a detailed picture of how the structure and level of economic inequality has evolved over time, particularly emphasizing the share of resources possessed by elites at the top end of the distribution. This type of historical overview – Piketty’s trademark – is an impressive and important contribution. The center of gravity in the analysis is certainly Western Europe and the United States, but other parts of the world are also included. I leave it to others to judge how successful the book is in providing a truly global history on the subject.

Piketty also aims to shed light on historical “inequality regime[s]/.../defined as a set of discourses and institutional arrangements intended to justify and structure the economic, social and political inequalities of a given society” (p. 2). My impression regarding this part of the analysis is mixed. The book does provide an instructive institutionalist account of the rise of the modern state, with particular emphasis on the history of taxation. Moreover, the historical contrasts between different ideological paradigms are, for the most part, convincing. However, the book lacks a systematic and detailed account of how struggles of ideology and quests for justice, which are supposed to be a motor of history, play out in concrete cases. In this respect, the book’s vast historical and geographical scope comes at the expense of analytical depth and nuance. Detailed case studies, such as the work by Bengtsson (2020) on Sweden, are necessary to fill the gaps.

The second study maps sociopolitical cleavages from WWII to the present using election surveys. To summarize very briefly: politics from 1950–1980 were relatively one-dimensional, with political parties competing mainly on socioeconomic issues with voters clearly divided by social class. The upper classes voted for conservative parties, whereas the lower classes supported social democratic parties. However, since the 1980s, the political

landscape has become more complex. In many countries, sociocultural issues (identity politics) now supersede socioeconomic issues (class politics) as the focal point of political conflict. Whereas the economically privileged keep supporting conservative parties, the highly educated have increasingly turned to social democratic parties or corresponding center-left parties, while the lower classes increasingly back non-mainstream parties – usually to the right – or abstain from voting altogether. However, since this process started way before immigration became politically salient, Piketty argues that its explanation needs to be traced further back in history.

While the overall narrative is relatively persuasive, the originality of the argument is somewhat overstated, to say the least. After all, sociological class analysis has long pointed to growing voting cleavages within the higher classes as well as increasing non-voting among the lower classes (e.g., Hout et al. 1995). Similarly, the hypothesis that growing non-voting and/or support for the radical right is partly due to the failure of social democratic parties (and other mainstream parties) to pursue an ambitious economic-redistributive agenda that appeals to the lower classes is increasingly common in political science and sociology. However, contrary to others suggesting similar theoretical explanations, Piketty does little to carefully test the hypothesis in detail, for example, by studying the congruence between voting patterns and the content of party manifestos or politicians' socioeconomic profile over time (cf. Evans and Tilley 2017). Overall, the second study contains interesting arguments and observations. The problem is that many of them are not particularly new.

The last study, mainly concentrated in the final chapter, outlines Piketty's own future policy manifesto. Piketty's vision of "participatory socialism" includes proposals concerning progressive taxation; corporate governance and ownership; universal education and capital endowments; and social federalism. On the one hand, it is easy to understand that one's level of appreciation for Piketty's political vision is largely dependent on one's own political

perspective. On the other hand, some of the proposals are of broad public interest, such as the call for improved public registers of wealth and international cooperation in combating tax evasion (see also Saez and Zucman 2019). Ultimately, the book's last part will spark much debate, just as Piketty wants it.

All in all, this book certainly promises more than most academic volumes do. After reading it, however, it remains somewhat unclear to me how ideas and ideology count in the history of economic inequality. That said, the book is otherwise instructive and stimulating, and should be of relevance to anyone interested in economic inequality from a cross-disciplinary perspective.

References

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