

# Equality and the Imagination

Francis McDonagh writes about the growing inequality in Britain where many rely on food banks, in contrast to the vision of an 'eschatological banquet'.

On the day she was elected Leader of the Conservative Party, Theresa May denounced pay inequality in leading companies: 'There is an irrational, unhealthy and growing gap between what these companies pay their workers and what they pay their bosses'. The most recent figures were provided by the High Pay Centre: 'The average pay ratio between FTSE 100 CEOs and the average total pay of their employees in 2015 was 129:1.<sup>21</sup> For 2012, Danny Dorling calculated that 'if the National Minimum Wage had kept pace with FTSE 100 CEO since 1999, it would now stand at £18.89 per hour, instead of £6.19 per hour.'<sup>22</sup>

One of the last acts of George Osborne as Chancellor of the Exchequer was to steal the name 'living wage' from the anti-poverty campaigners of the Living Wage Foundation and rebrand the National Minimum Wage the 'National Living Wage' (NLW). How far this rate deserves that name can be judged by its 2016 rate, £7.20 per hour. The Resolution Foundation welcomed the NLW, but argued in February 2016 that as a whole government policy on wages and benefits would hit the poorest hardest: 'With further cuts to benefits and in-work support being concentrated in the bottom half of the distribution, our estimate is that growth will be higher in the top half of the income distribution than in the bottom. Indeed, we forecast slight reductions in income for the poorest 25 per cent of households between 2015 and 2020. This pattern is likely to entirely reverse the gains made on inequality in the post-crisis period.'<sup>23</sup>

This inequality is not new, but the result of a process of several decades: 'Inequality has been rising rapidly in Britain for the past 30 years. The gap between rich and poor has widened and the share of income going to the top 1% has doubled (from 6% to 14%).'<sup>24</sup> Thomas Piketty, in his book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, argues that the reduction in inequality, and the creation of a welfare state that took place in European countries after the Second World War, was an

exception, and began to be reversed in from the late 1970s onwards. Piketty stresses that the distribution of wealth in society depends on people's ideas of justice: 'The history of the distribution of wealth is always a deeply political one and can't be reduced to purely economic mechanisms... The history of inequalities depends on the images economic, political and social actors have of what is just or not.' As an example of this he notes later: 'The border between what can be possessed by private individuals and what can't be evolves hugely in time and space, as illustrated in an extreme form by the case of slavery.'<sup>25</sup>

Slavery is also a famous test case for Christianity, which, arguably, it failed for many centuries. Our earliest New Testament witness, Paul, offering to return Onesimus, the slave who has become a Christian, to his master Philemon, says nothing about freeing him, only asking Philemon to receive him 'no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother' (Philem v. 16). This is the same attitude as that shown in the well-known passage, Romans 13:1-7, which opens: 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.' Towards the end of this passage Paul says that Christians should pay their taxes, recalling the remark attributed to Jesus: 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's' (Mk 12:17).

It seems clear that the primitive Christian communities were not particularly interested in the prevailing social order, since they believed that 'the present form of this world is passing away' (1 Cor 7:31). Interestingly, in this passage Paul is even more explicit about slavery: 'Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it' (1 Cor 7:21), a message similar to that in Eph 6:5-9.

If we cannot look to the New Testament for a direct critique of social injustice, it is nevertheless



'The Breaking of Bread': 3rd century fresco in the Catacomb of St Priscilla in Rome, probably representing a Eucharist looking forward to the Eschatological Banquet

clear that the New Testament community itself was meant to be a model for a different sort of human relations. At its core was a meal, and in the exemplar given in John's Gospel Jesus, 'Teacher and Lord', washes his disciples' feet (Jn 13:3-15). In contrast to the attitude of the Johannine Jesus, the behaviour of the Christians in Corinth at the Lord's Supper drew fierce criticism from Paul. Their celebration seems to have turned into a party at which the richer members of the community brought their own food and drink, while the poor went hungry. 'Do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?' asks Paul (1 Cor 11:22).

Despite the remark attributed to Jesus about paying the Roman poll-tax, he himself clearly was a critic of the social and economic order in which he lived. What motivated him, however, was not nationalism – though even after the resurrection the disciples still thought it was (cf Acts 1:6) – but 'the kingdom of God', a more radical transformation of the human condition. As well as proclaiming the kingdom Jesus embodied it (cf Lk 17:21: 'The kingdom of God is among you.')

The first two chapters of Mark's gospel are an action-packed summary of what this kingdom means: Jesus cures 'many' sick people, cleanses a

leper and casts out 'many' demons. Then, after calling Levi/Matthew, the tax-collector, i.e. swindler and collaborator with the Roman occupiers, he has a meal in Levi's house along with 'many tax-collectors and sinners' (Mk 2:15). All this provokes the first of many complaints from the religious scholars, summed up in Lk 15:2: 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' That vision of radical equality is captured in the famous verse of Galatians: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28). And in the judgment scene in Matthew the king declares: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these..., you did it to me (Mt 25:40).

In the New Testament the coming of the kingdom of God is a divine intervention, eschatological, that is, in the 'last times'. As this final intervention failed to come, the urgency of the revolutionary transformation it embodies was blunted, especially when the Christian church effectively became another institution of the state after Constantine's conversion. The church allowed itself to be used in military adventures such as the Crusades, and gave its blessing to the colonial enterprise, in which it found itself asking whether the native inhabitants of the Americas



Food bank with volunteer helpers. Photo: [mirror.co.uk](http://www.mirror.co.uk)

were really human. It was left to individuals such as Francis of Assisi in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas in the case of Spanish colonialism, radical minorities such as the Diggers and Levellers in 17<sup>th</sup> century England, or liberation theologians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to challenge ideas of humanity, rank and property.

If Piketty is right, and social and economic policy ‘depends on the images economic, political and social actors have of what is just or not’, education must be crucial, and reintroducing segregation by bringing back grammar schools, as prime minister May proposes, will reinforce the impression that some children are innately better than others and undermine attempts to improve comprehensive schools.

Michael Wilshaw, head of the education regulator Ofsted, makes the point forcefully: ‘If you have grammar schools, you take away the most able children from the all-ability comprehensive set-up. And I speak as an ex-head of a successful inner-city comprehensive school, an academy, in Hackney. I needed those top 20% to lift everyone up. I wouldn’t have been able to do it if those top, those most able youngsters went to the grammar school.’<sup>6</sup>

In successive international surveys, countries such as Finland, with fully comprehensive systems, produce far better results in literacy and numeracy than the highly segregated British system.<sup>7</sup> There are also studies showing that in Britain ‘students from independent schools do less well than students from comprehensive schools’, despite having three times as much

spent on their secondary education than state school students.<sup>8</sup>

A different light on private education was thrown by Sarah Vine, wife of Michael Gove, one-time Education Secretary for England and Wales: ‘The private sector is based on very different principles. Its agenda is a fundamentally selective one, based not only on the ability to pay but on pupil potential. And it is also, let’s face it, about snobbery. Of course the parents of private school children are paying for the best teachers and facilities. But

let’s be honest: they’re also paying for their child to mix with the right kind of kids.’<sup>9</sup>

The ‘right kind’ of kids will grow up to be ‘one of us’, in the sense of Mrs Thatcher’s famous phrase, not so different in attitude from the ‘grumbling’ of the Pharisees that ‘this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them’. The image of the eschatological banquet, at which all are welcome, is part of the treasury of intellectual and imaginative resources, from various traditions, which we need to fight the division of the human family into greater and lesser breeds.

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NOTES

1. <http://highpaycentre.org/pubs/10-pay-rise-thatll-donically>
2. Danny Dorling, *Inequality and the 1%*, London 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2015, p. 23.
3. Resolution Foundation, *Living Standards 2016. The experiences of low to middle income households in downturn and recovery*. <http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/living-standards-2016/>, p.6.
4. Deborah Hargreaves, <http://highpaycentre.org/blog/New-film-the-shocking-rise-of-inequality-in-britain>
5. Thomas Piketty, *Le capital au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 2013, pp 47 and 84. English edition: *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge MA, 2014.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/oct/30/grammars-harm-british-schools-says-ofsted-chief-michael-wilshaw>
7. See Dorling, *Inequality and the 1%*, pp 26-36.
8. Dorling, pp 40-41.
9. Quoted, Dorling, p. 32.

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