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More Lessons to Learn: Thomas Piketty's *Capital and Ideology* and Alternative Archives of Social Experience

<https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-2021-0007>

Abstract: Thomas Piketty's *Capital and Ideology* has been written with the intention to offer lessons from the historical trajectory of economic redistribution in societies the world over. Thereby, the book suggests learning from the political-economic history of 'social-democratic' policies and societal arrangements. While the data presented speak to the plausibility of looking at social democracy, as understood by Piketty, as an archive for learning about the effects of redistribution mechanisms, I argue that the book, or future interventions might profit from integrating alternative archives. On the one hand, its current line of argumentation tends to underestimate the significance of power relations in the international political economy that continued after formal decolonization, and thus form the flip side of social democracy's success in Europe and North America. On the other hand, the role of the polity might be imagined in a different and more empowering way, not just—as in Piketty—as an elite-liberal democratic governance institution; for instance, it would be interesting to explore the archive of the French *solidaristes* movement more deeply than Piketty does, as well as much more recent interventions in economic anthropology that deal with 'economic citizenship' in the Global South.

Keywords: financialization, international political economy, social justice, collective learning processes, migration, transnationalism, redistribution

1 Introduction

Thomas Piketty has written a book that is truly dedicated to the idea of economic enlightenment. He formulates lessons to be learned from the ways in which ideological currents have become assembled with positions in the political economic structure of contemporary societies (mostly, formal democracies), which them-

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selves rest on a minute correlation between changes in the distribution of income and wealth and the transformation of ideological landscapes in a globally comparative perspective and over several decades. Most of all, the book is a powerful plea for the role of redistribution in society. All societies know social inequalities, and all know justifications for them that Piketty terms ideologies. Yet under conditions of extreme inequalities, the danger arises that people turn to exclusivist and ultimately violent ideologies, such as xenophobia and nativism. Piketty's general argument is that much of the inequality-related miseries of contemporary societies stem from an "exacerbated proprietarianism" (Piketty 2020, 122), due to which private property is inalienable and produces economic entitlements that tend to accumulate over generations, thus producing social polarization. He suggests replacing this fundamentalist notion of property rights with a notion of 'temporary property,' which he argues can be applied through an increase of measures of progressive taxation, not only with respect to income but also to wealth and its intergenerational transfer. This is convincing not least because it avoids fundamental, yet at times unrealistic critiques of private property as such, but instead extends the notion of property to that of ownership, like in the co-management of commercial firms by the workforce introduced in some societies, which the book discusses as an example of effective limits to private proprietarianism.

In order to combat the expectable argument that taxation chokes off economic growth, the book proposes a set of economic as well as sociological reasons and evidence as to why an increased level of redistribution (taxation) in a society can be seen as a prerequisite not only for more social justice and general welfare, but also for economic productivity, rationality, and growth (Piketty 2020, 458 *et passim*). This is achieved through a rigorous comparative research agenda which, on the basis of an impressive and at the same time carefully contextualized set of mostly quantitative data, assembles crucial and highly indicative cases of different redistributive regimes within quite diverse political and economic macro-orders, and which provides stimulating comparisons beyond the horizon of the northern and western hemispheres. The only desirability here would have been an engagement with the former Yugoslavia, which not only had developed a distinct model for workers' participation in and ownership of production units, but also is one of the rare cases in Europe where former imperial or colonial ties did not play a significant role in the country's macroeconomic arrangement (Majstorović, forthcoming).

Not least, the book provides an interesting explanation for the transformation of social democratic political parties, once the vanguard of redistributive policies and, in particular, schemes of progressive taxation, that since the 1980s started receiving support from a highly educated stratum of society, while support among increasingly alienated workers waned; and, in general, a productive contribution to a more global comparison of the distribution of political forces within democratic

orders. It also raises demands and makes concrete suggestions to transform and upgrade the European Union by a European Assembly with fiscal authority which, through dual membership of MPs in national and the supranational parliaments, would more intimately tie national and European politics, notably in the areas of taxation and redistribution.

Meant as a public intervention like its predecessor (Piketty 2015), it is understandable that the book is mainly interested in setting an agenda for political debate by suggesting lessons to be learned from the cases discussed and the results arrived at. It is with these lessons and the way they are laid out by Piketty from his case discussions that my following comments will be concerned. Set out to fight ideological messages that crucially misrepresent economic history—most fundamentally, the ideological message that private property is a quasi-sacral good in modern economies and must not be touched lest the demons of collectivism, economic inefficiency, and overall deterioration of living standards are let loose—the book mobilizes alternative narratives concerning recent economic history. In particular, it turns its attention to the period between the end of the Second World War and the 1980s, with a particular focus on the western and northern hemispheres, for it is in that period that, from Piketty's viewpoint, a particularly precious lesson can be learned: namely, that there are institutional alternatives to the sacralization of private property. While the following elaborations are neither meant to take a position of fundamental and substantial disagreement over this particular argument, nor to disagree with the overall political diagnosis, I will argue that the conceptual architecture of the study privileges some experiences and developments to be learned from at the expense of potential others. In the end, my aim is not an outright refutation of any of the particular lessons of the book, but rather to point to additional—contextual, complementary, sometimes maybe also alternative—registers and archives of historical data and social experience that Piketty's analysis might seek alliances with.

In order to prepare this critique, I will first turn to Piketty's notions of ideology and justification, and suggest an interpretation of his work as an attempt to not only analyze the relation between inequality and ideology, but to build and strengthen a particular sort of ideology, one that would be different both from the prevalent orthodox preoccupation with property purism and from its nativist and exclusivist critiques (*section 2*). This opens his work for an 'ideology-critical' examination, and in this spirit I will point out a few points that might be criticized in an attempt to make Piketty's ideological suggestion still stronger, relating it to aspects of contemporary inequality and ideology that his book does not cover. In particular, I will discuss three points: first, the crucial question of the embeddedness of societies and their regimes of inequality in the international political economy (*section 3*); second, the inter- and transnational production of the ideologies of neoliberal

proprietaryism (and their potential antidotes) that cannot be fully understood and explained by a match between ideology and the necessity to justify inequality on the level of the nation-state (*section 4*); and third, the lessons one might draw from historical and contemporary experiences that move beyond a view of formal political institutions as the single lever of a more egalitarian politics (*section 5*). The last *section* (6) concludes.

2 Ideology, Orders of Justification, and Historical Learning

As the comments that follow in the next sections focus on the book's ambition to suggest learning from the political-economic and socioeconomic history of the 20th century, I first wish to reconstruct that ambition in the context of the relationship between social inequality and ideology analysis that Piketty proposes. According to Piketty, social inequality, while belonging to the universals of human history, is never just accepted: "Every human society needs to justify its inequalities, and every justification contains its share of truth and exaggeration, boldness and cowardice, idealism and self-interest." (Piketty 2020, 2) For a sociologist, it is evident that Piketty's notion of justification refers to Laurent Thévenot, Luc Boltanski, and Ève Chiapello's 'sociology of critical capacities.' Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) had argued that social conflicts operate and are modulated through the mobilization of different forms of criticism, which in turn refer to different orders of justification as their ultimate normative points of reference. Thus, for instance, a type of social stratification that operates on the normative understanding of hereditary claims can be criticized from the perspective of another order of justification that highlights individual achievement as the only legitimate source of social status. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) transposed this conflict theory to an analysis of capitalism as requiring an additional amount of legitimation which, given the highly challenging demands that it imposes on the conduct of life, it cannot produce out of itself. They crucially claimed that post-1970s Western neoliberal capitalism relies on the incorporation of a type of justification that had been initially directed against it, namely, 'artistic' criticism of the 1960s with its preoccupation with self-actualization, authenticity, and subjectivity, which neoliberal ideology appropriated, recasting it as an erosion of boundaries between work life and personal life, self-responsibilization, and an individualization of workplace security as employability (an argument that raises the question of how certain criticisms of capitalism might find themselves complicit with it in retrospect, cf. Langenohl 2007). Piketty in turn transposes this argument—that justification is especially

needed when criticism is mounted—to his historical scenes of investigation, arguing that justifications, or ideologies, play an important role especially in those situations when the socially detrimental consequences of economic accumulation processes become the target of public resentment (Piketty 2020, 28). According to his analysis, this is the case, for instance, in the present, when growing population segments in democratic societies seem to adhere to a ‘nativist’ ideology that blames foreigners, groups with a migration trajectory, or historically disadvantaged and discriminated groups for what they perceive as a dwindling of economic and social resources (*id.*, ch. 16).

Thus, the interrelation between justifications/ideologies and social inequality is more complicated than the generic argument—each structure of social inequality corresponds to a certain type of justification—announces, because the practice of criticism intervenes. Piketty argues, along with the sociology of critical capacity, that orders of justification (or ideologies) inform criticism, or at least determine the effectiveness of those criticisms. For instance, as long as the proprietarian order of justification/ideology of the long 19th century was predominant, it was difficult to mount effective criticisms against the rampant inequalities resulting from them. It took a period of 30 years of societal upheavals and organized mass atrocities and genocide between 1914 and 1945 until such criticisms, for another roughly 30 years, consolidated into an *effective* ideology, according to which the rights of private property must be limited. At the same time, Piketty contends that ideologies roughly correspond to people’s perceptions concerning their own standing in the social hierarchy and the prospects of their social aspirations; people, as it were, ‘choose’ their ideologies / orders of justification in a rational way, typically at the ballot box. Thus, one of his major historical arguments concerns the alienation of parts of the population in Western democracies from the social-democratic parties that they once supported, which, according to Piketty, has to do with their realization that those parties, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, became dominated by groups that stemmed from the working classes but used the expanded resources of higher education for social upward mobility, changing the party profiles accordingly to privilege their interests, as epitomized in the ‘third way’ strategies of nominally social-democratic parties since the 1990s. Consequently, “the less advantaged classes feel abandoned by the parties of the center-left”. (Piketty 2020, 754)

Against this conceptual and historical background, Piketty’s book becomes visible as an intervention aimed at the construction of a new order of justification, or ideology. He proposes to study the history of social inequality and political developments (mainly seen as the popular rise and fall of political movements epitomized in parties and coalitions) from a normative viewpoint that challenges the rampages of fundamentalist proprietarianism through the conception of temporary ownership. The historical narrative is thus meant to vouch for the normative

viability of the order of justification Piketty is suggesting—in particular, the historical facticity of temporary ownership, taking the form of progressive taxation, that gained traction after the end of the First World War and was turned into official government policy on a very broad scale after 1945. Learning from history in Piketty's terms means precisely this: the rearticulation and stabilization of a specific ideology that might be capable of effectively outmaneuvering competing ideologies, such as proprietarianism or social nativism, whereby the optimism that this battle can be won is found in the historical and systematic contributions of the social sciences (2020, 11).

If this assessment of the book's rationale is correct, two consequences follow. First, in its quality as an ideology, Piketty's argument ought to, within the logic of its own notion of ideology, be interrogated regarding the ways that it justifies inequalities. Within the confines of this article, I will not embark on that task, and restrict myself to noting that this reflection does not principally undermine the book's general cause. Thomas Piketty is clearly not heralding a utopia of entirely removed social inequality, even as he is optimistic that progress is possible (Piketty 2020, 16-20); and his political suggestions—for instance, concerning the establishment of a European Assembly—are characterized by a clear sense of political realism (see below). Yet second, as an ideology, Piketty's call for temporary ownership, staged as the result of a learning process redeemed through academic research into political-economic and socio-economic history, is contiguous and on par with competing ideologies and thus, accordingly, with *alternative* learning processes that draw quite different lessons from the past—even as they, like neoliberalism or social nativism, crudely misrepresent it from an academic point of view. The political acumen of Piketty's analysis thus resides in the suggestion not just to learn from the global history of political economies and social inequalities, but to learn *the right way*, thus confronting competing orders of justification on their own turf as ideologies—a valiant move that boosts the monograph's intellectual and political vigor.

While I agree that this kind of analysis is necessary, first of all in order to expose the contemporary preoccupation with property purism *as* an ideological lesson that ought to be unlearned, Piketty's argumentation also invites questions regarding *still* alternative learning processes and historical lessons that, as it seems to me, are not covered by the book. While Piketty equips the lessons he derives from his historical accounts with a normative significance as alternatives to the dominant, but historically erroneous, neoliberal history lesson, he exposes this gesture to the question of its own selectivity, and maybe blind spots. In the following, I will thus discuss three aspects of contemporary social inequality that do not, or hardly, factor into Piketty's analysis, yet that have the potential to contextualize and interrogate some of the premises on which Piketty's lessons are built: first, the

entanglement of societal inequality on the level of nation-states with the international political economy; second, the international and transnational history of political-economic ideologies; and third, alternative archives of historical learning that conceptually relocate the (nation-)state, which figures as the ultimate seat of political effectiveness in Piketty's analysis and political suggestions, within a wider, transnational, and transversal web of social relationships, institutions, and alliances.

3 The Embeddedness of Social Inequality in the International Political Economy

Let me first turn to Piketty's account of the success story of social democracy after 1918 and especially between the end of the Second World War and the 1980s. The book argues that fundamentalist proprietarianism was challenged in the early and mid-20th century on a very general level, which, however, led to a broad and world-wide political trend toward social-democratic policies only after the Second World War. The international scope of Piketty's case analysis is principally able to cover this very broad spectrum of developments, and deduces some interesting lessons from societies beyond the western and northern hemispheres—most notably, from India. Yet, Piketty's (2020, chs. 11, 14-16) diagnosis of the successes of social democratic policies is most detailed and paradigmatic with respect to the correlation between an historically high level of progressive taxation and economic dynamism in North America and Western Europe. I contend that this analysis has an open flank because it does not account for some of the more delicate historical entanglements of Northern and Western democracies in the mentioned period, which in turn, have to do with issues of the international political economy.

Historically, it is not fully plausible to celebrate the period between 1950 and 1980 in the US and Europe as the success of a model based on redistribution while not accounting for the continuing exploitation of the former colonies and the Global South in the international political economy. The period of political decolonization was not marked by a radical change in the ways that the countries of the northern and western hemisphere imposed their political economic interests on their former colonies and other societies of the Global South. This continuity did not go unnoticed to critical contemporaries of many political inclinations and in diverse political-economic settings. For instance, in South America, the theory of *dependencia* reflected a growing concern on the left with the ideological character of 'development aid,' a concern which was already voiced as early as 1950 (and which Piketty notes; cf. Amin 1976). In postwar Europe, it was, of all people and

political currents, Ludwig Erhard who against the background of his ordoliberal creed critiqued plans to create a European economic union and single market (and not just a customs union) that would invariably bring with itself an exclusion of countries outside of it from equal access to European markets, especially those that could not hope to be offered tariffs and customs unions in the way that the U.K. and North American societies were (Schönwald 1999). Moreover, the period of the 1950s to the 1970s in Europe was characterized by a huge increase in immigration into the industrial core countries that lacked the necessary workforce. In the case of former imperial centers like Britain, France, Belgium, or the Netherlands, this workforce stemmed from (former) colonies (Thomas 2018), while the case of (West) Germany stood out as the most prominent instance of a ‘guest worker system’ according to which laborers from poorer countries in Europe’s south came to work in the German agrarian and industrial sector, decisively reconstituting the political-economic weight of Germany while long being denied equal pay, let alone regular residence status for themselves and their families (cf. the contributions in Oltmer et al. 2012). In both instances of migration during the *trente glorieuses*, immigrants were not offered an equitable social, political, or economic status; instead, as research has pointed out, these migration and so-called ‘integration’ schemes have created vulnerable populations that often find themselves attacked by the ‘nativist’ forces that Piketty criticizes (cf. Mecheril/Thomas-Olalde 2019). These examples testify to the significance of highly unequal terms of trade and employment in the international political economy and of the creation of sustainably substandard and vulnerable economic and social positionalities of migrant populations that the ‘social-democratic’ politics of the western and northern hemispheres rested upon. These historical circumstances put a question mark behind any presumption that the social-democratic container models of redistribution of the 1950s to 1980s can be without ado referred to as examples to learn from when creating a federalist socialism on a grander scale up to a truly planetary dimension.

Furthermore, in my opinion, the book might in greater detail account for changes and tendencies in the contemporary international political economy as constitutive preconditions for the important role of financial revenues in the dynamics of social inequality. This might have to do with, as the author explains, the circumstance that statistically reliable data on the distribution of incomes over different sources is hard to generate (obviously for political reasons), especially for financial revenues (Piketty 2020, 656-661). To be sure, he does hold the international political economy of the turn of the 20th century to be responsible for the portfolio structure of incomes and also for staggering degrees of inequalities in Europe (280-283), and also thematizes inequalities of the present regarding the financial revenues that massively differ for large and small investors respectively (703). However, financialization is a heterogeneous, but very powerful, tendency

that decisively shapes social inequality, as due to changes in the international political economy, more and more subjects and households are drawn into it (Krippner 2005; Lapavistas 2009). It is a process that covers a much larger ground than financial deregulation (Piketty 2020, 436), extending over the massive changes in the ways economic revenue, and thus income, is *created* in the first place. This consideration must include, among other things, changes in corporate governance along the lines of shareholder value, which puts a premium not on production and cost-benefit optimization but on the maximization of market value (Castells 1996; Davis 2009); and government strategies, notably in the US, the UK, and the EU, to safeguard the economic value of financial assets, as became evident in the ways that the subprime crisis and its European aftermath were tackled (Langley 2015). What compounds this problem is the fact that the financialization of income streams is not a phenomenon of the upper one or even ten percent, but has permeated through society, be it in the form of increasingly aggressive marketing of security-based pension schemes, the forced financialization of the home as families have to treat it as an investment, or the financial securitization of everyday payments (Martin 2002; Harrington 2008; Langley 2008; Bryan/Rafferty 2017; Schraten 2020). These analyses serve as another piece of evidence that the international political economy is important in order to understand changes in the composition and architecture of income and wealth distributions.

Finally, and related to this problem, the interrelation between financialized income streams in the societies of the Global North/West (and, it seems, increasingly China, see Dal Maso 2020) and extractivist policies concerning natural resources and labor in the Global South (and to a lesser extent, in southeastern Europe) is another matter of the international political economy that ought to factor into the interpretation of the book's findings. While Piketty is right in critiquing the hardening social-structural polarization that results from a distributive privileging of high incomes and wealth stocks, which are increasingly generated through, and consist of, financial assets, he does not look into the international political economic preconditions put in place that enable this enrichment in the first place. I will just mention some of the more significant examples for these: governments of the Global South accepting a structurally subordinated position of their countries in the international political economy in order to secure a relatively stable influx of income for primary commodities as part of the "commodities consensus" and neo-extractivism (Svampa 2019, 12-15); dramatic inadequacies of local wage levels in places like South and Central America and the Western Balkans that drive whole population segments into low-paid jobs in North America and the European Union (as household or care workers, notably, Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010, Majstorović forthcoming), who thus subsidize the latter's social security systems with their underpaid labor, often without conformity to legal standards

(cf. Bucher 2018); or the miserable pay of IT workers in India and Bangladesh who provide Northern and Western companies (including, by the way, academic publishing houses) with outsourced services pertaining to crucial functions such as data processing and security (cf. Parikka 2016). Even if incomes generated from these exploitative relationships were differently taxed, this would not be enough to sustainably change them, as there would presumably still be enough financial gain generated. Moreover, and more importantly, it is not only high incomes, or incomes at all, that directly profit from these exploitative arrangements, but entire service sectors, catering to many more population segments than just the upper deciles or percentiles, as the example of cheap care work provided by non EU-citizens in the EU shows from which a broad stratum of the population profit.

Taken together, these three points lead me to a more general critique of Piketty's analysis: issues of the international political economy tend to be sidestepped through focusing on the domestic distribution of income, wealth, and life chances. The non-domestic dimension of domestic economic distribution is analytically reduced either to international relations between societies (as in the discussion of the prerequisites of a European Parliamentary Union, which rests on an outspokenly realist consideration of power alliances among nation-states in Europe, Piketty 2020, 913-918) or to wealth transfers between national economies under conditions of deregulated markets (639-645). Thereby, the fact that the fundamentals of economic distribution and allocation are highly internationalized remains unaccounted for. There is an increasing size of labor segments in many western and northern societies which are 'irregular'—undocumented household and care workers, workers with only temporal residence permits whose share in the benefits of social security services, let alone pension schemes, is mostly questionable at best (Mezzadra/Neilson 2013). And yet they all contribute substantially to the political economy, even if not so much to the direct generation of incomes (although companies brokering these services should be mentioned here as direct beneficiaries of these precarious working conditions and legal statuses), but rather to the functioning of basic social security infrastructures. Thus, situating the analysis of regimes of inequality within the much broader relations of the international political economy suggests that the latter's structures and relationships, far beyond the impact on domestic regimes of inequality, effectively ground the very modalities of economic and societal reproduction of Northern and Western societies on an international, transversal form of inequality. We are thus not only talking about inequality *in* and *of* societies, but about societies *founded on* inequality.

4 Ideological Trajectories Beyond the Nation-State

The little attention that Piketty pays to issues of international political economy corresponds to the fact that the book presupposes the form of the sovereign state as a default analytical optic on the political economy and on potentialities of political interventions. This is, of course, an effect of the book's emphasis on taxation, which is the paradigmatic capacity of sovereign polities; and it brings with itself a historical emphasis on the major period of sovereign statehood, the 19th and 20th centuries (Piketty 2020, 369, 462). Even where the sovereign state is questioned as an effective seat of political intervention into mechanisms of redistribution (as in the suggestion for a deepening of European political integration), Piketty's proposal suggests gearing up the nation state with more effective supranational institutions (which is why for him the history of culturally heterogeneous and strongly federalist nation-states like India or the U.S. actually instills the hope that Europe will be capable of a similar process of political unification, 894-897). What is absent is a note of the fact that even a (so far, counterfactual) polity with fully sovereign and effective terms of societal redistribution would need to equally address its dependency on unequal and exploitative relations in the international political economy, as has just been discussed.

Yet, international and transnational processes also play a role in the very formation of ideologies—actually they have been found to have had a decisive influence on changing the parameters of the justification of inequality in the 20th century. Ideological developments cannot be reduced to the justification of social inequality in a given (nation-state) society and polity. Instead, their analysis must also encompass transnational currents and movements—notably, in the case of neoliberalism, but also in that of socialism. Neoliberal thought was crucially developed in the period of progressive taxation between the 1940s and the 1980s (Mirowski/Plehwe 2015). The ideological and political changes that materialized since the 1970s were thought through, elaborated on, and ideologically prepared long before Thatcher and Reagan came to office; and notably, they represented an alternative 'learning' from the failures of laissez-faire liberalism of the long 19th century, contrary to the lessons of Keynesianism. Thus, analytically, Piketty's book tends to overestimate the match between ideology and political-economic structures in a given period, and accounts little for the historical development, rationalization, and refinement of ideologies that form in sequential, and international, responses to each other, and as challenges to one another. As a consequence, it does not account for the—understandably uncanny—possibility that 'learning' is a process for which no political suggestion can claim a normative prerogative.

As has been demonstrated by a number of recent studies, neoliberal thought itself was the result of an intellectual learning process, and also came up with popular pedagogies (think of Milton Friedman's TV show) that helped to spread the word (see the contributions in Mirowski/Plehwe 2015). Thus, if Piketty wants us to learn from the successes and failures of social democracy in the 20th century, it might help to also become aware of the successes of neoliberalism ('know your enemy') that were themselves the fruits of learning processes—and which impacted so powerfully, not least, the agendas of nominally social democratic parties since the end of the 20th century.

A point that is really surprising about the book is the absence of any attempt to deal with the complicated intellectual and conceptual history of socialism since the 19th century, up to a point where socialism becomes reduced to any political program aimed at resisting the property fundamentalism of the 19th century, sidestepping its *politically* emancipatory program. Socialism was about the population's inclusion into the democratic process, not just in terms of voting rights and workplace democracy but in terms of nothing less than a 'new human being,' epitomized in countless projects as diverse as institutions for popular education, avant-garde performance art, revolutionary approaches to housing and the built environment, and, not least, internationalism. This program was meant to trigger an imagination of a better, and another, society, and to learn from that vision. Piketty implicitly refers to this legacy, when he states repeatedly that his suggestions are first of all meant to trigger a broad discourse about alternative ways to distribute the goods of society, and "that human societies have yet to exhaust their capacity to imagine new ideological and institutional solutions." (Piketty 2020, 1034) The point is, however, that the imagination of these solutions is a politically complex and arduous work of crafting an 'hegemony' (Laclau/Mouffe 2001). It involves all sorts of actors, stakeholders, and social groups—not just political parties or office holders—that, in the case of socialism, have typically struggled about what kind of political aims, agendas, and alliances are to be *understood* as socialist. In other words, the diverse trajectories of 'socialism' ought to inform and add nuance to the analysis, instead of simply defining the meaning of socialism as a single and unequivocal response to social inequality. This crucially includes an analysis of the *social* instances and institutions that might lend legitimacy, credibility, and effectiveness to any socialist *political* program—a point that I will return to in the next section.

Against the background of this principally indefinable and historically contingent array of social forces and institutions that informs and drives forward ideological struggles, it stands out that in Piketty's imagination of socialism, 'learning' chiefly refers to a set of modules that package, in the idiom of socio-economics, the historical trajectories of nation-states and their political histories and political

economies (see, for instance, 570-573). Even as Piketty notes that it is not least from “missed opportunities [that] we can learn a lot that may be useful in the future” (399), all in all the book follows an understanding of learning from socio-economic facts, not from projects that were begun but maybe not completed; from political, social, and economic thought debated but maybe not refined into political agendas; or from paths taken that might have been proven successful were it not for the contingencies of history, like the sudden end of state socialism, which equipped neoliberal thought with a powerful weapon to sidestep any nuanced arguments concerning socialism while effacing its own glaring contradictions and historical misrepresentations (to be sure I fully support Piketty’s notion that “[j]ust because Soviet Communism was a disaster does not mean that we should stop thinking about property and how it might be transcended,” 513). The point here is not to per se presume any ethical quality of that what did not come to pass, but to open up the analysis to the social forces and institutions that fed into these aborted or abandoned projects, and to inquire as to how it was that they did not materialize in any other way—a mode of analysis that might actually inform our views on present-day struggles for more equity that are still unfolding, unresolved, and jeopardized.

Thus, Piketty’s analysis circumvents a discussion of non-state centered, more transversal, and complicated alliances and arrays of power outside the realm of political institutions and institutionalized processes, like elections and their results. Thus, although the book does cite some interesting cases of how social groups can learn to see themselves in social-structurally similar or adjacent positions (like the low caste und Muslims in India) and hence vote for the same parties or ideological camps, it does not delve deeper into the ways of how such similarities of social-structural positioning could actually be translated into common causes and solidarities that might even withstand ideological pressures. For Piketty, the articulation of ideologies remains the matter of political elites, or even more narrowly, *national* political elites. No political experience outside the spectrum of the party system and its inherent power instrumentalism can thus factor into his conceptualization of ideology. Of course, this risks excluding non-elected political institutions—like courts, the European Commission, expert bodies, international organizations, transnational epistemic communities, and not least, social science—as carriers and emitters of ideological statements (s. Rosanvallon 2011). This becomes a problem in particular when the book sidesteps ideological articulations outside of the discursive space of political institutions, effectively accepting a version of political participation reduced to voicing inclinations or disinclinations towards pre-set ideological alternatives on the occasion of general elections—a normative predisposition that is highly debatable given the multiplex challenges to a vision of democracy as reduced to liberal parliamentarism.

5 Alternative Archives of Political-economic Learning

In Piketty's book, transnational and transversal phenomena are largely neglected with respect to the possibility and facticity that they might strongly impact ideological currents. This is not only a question of potential solidarities among disprivileged groups, which have found the attention notably of decolonial approaches in sociology, anthropology, and political theory (Bhambra/Narayan 2017; Mezzadra/Neilson 2013; Majstorović forthcoming), but also one of transnational flows of economic resources, like for instance remittances which make up the bulk of the GDP of some countries in the Global South, as pointed out by the sociology of transmigration (Glick Schiller/Basch/Blanc 1994). Given these transnational social, cultural, and economic entanglements, it is questionable whether the national analytical lens can be equally applied to all countries in the sample; even more so, as the denial of national form and cohesion has been explicitly addressed in world systems or *dependencia* approaches (as the author himself mentions). What this situation calls for is an attention to alternative archives of political-economic learning that transcend the realm of (nation-)state policies.

The point about the following remarks, as they address such alternative archives of political-economic learning beyond the (nation-)state as the still-predominant form of polity, is not so much to confront Piketty's suggestions with radical thought that would outright deny the polity to serve any beneficial function for achieving a better society, as in some currents of anarchist-inspired thought (cf. Day 2005). To be sure, I am convinced that radical thought must have its place in the task to rethink current regimes of economic exploitation, socio-cultural marginalization, and environmental externalization of the consequences of our societies' default modes of operation—for instance, because it challenges a reduction of popular politics to party and regime support. Yet, for the purposes of the present paper it will be more straightforward to mention some additional files in the archive of political learning that put the state, or the polity, at center stage, yet are better equipped to account for the dimension of the international political economy. These additional archives might help us better understand the different dimensions of the state's capacity in their entanglements with non-state institutions. I thus plea for reconsidering state functions: including, but also moving beyond, taxation (because not all tax revenues go into the project of maintaining social peace); and including, but also moving beyond, the amelioration of social-structural polarities, which might be brought about by benefits that not necessarily include a dimension of entitlement or full membership in the political-economic collectivity; and including, but also moving beyond, the

consideration of creating a more just society, bearing in mind that ‘society’ is a term which might provoke an overly inward-looking and exclusionary stance.

First, I would like to address the French *solidaristes* as a movement (which Piketty [2020, 562] mentions only briefly in a footnote) for recalibrating the international political economy. Growing out of Émile Durkheim’s understanding of social cohesion as enacted through norms, and transposing this understanding to the interrelation between states, their societies, and among themselves, the *solidaristes* put states to the task of catering to the needs of *all* populations across the lines of state borders. They thus thought redistribution in more transversal and internationalist, as opposed to income- and wealth-related, ways. Their primary case of application was the international constellation after the end of the First World War, when they argued that all states that were party to the war were responsible to support all populations that had suffered from the war irrespective of their citizenship and nation-state affiliation (Mallard 2011). To my mind, this is a relevant intellectual archive for Piketty’s vision of a planetary socialist federalism for several reasons: first, because the *solidaristes* saw a direct conditionality between states refraining from a ‘sovereign’ behavior on the international scene and their role in collaborating in order to secure the safety and welfare of populations across national borders; and second, because they highlighted (at least Marcel Mauss did, cf. Mallard 2011) that the beginning of a successful sequence of international collaboration might include the requirement for any state to waive ‘sovereign’ rights. This latter requirement, which Mauss envisaged as an international political economic correlate to the social institution of gift exchange (cf. Mauss 1954), clarifies a crucial hurdle that must be taken if any kind of international socialist federalism is to come into reach.

Mauss’s views are probably more urgent than ever, given the role of states and supranational polities, such as the EU, as sites of an intensified international scramble for scarce resources, as well as actors that strive to protect their wealth from ‘outsiders’ by means of erecting and guarding all sorts of territorial and non-territorial borders. The EU is actually a sadly apt case in point here. Its internal market integration corresponds to a shielding off of this political-economic space from the outside, notably vis-à-vis societies of the Global South that, as a rule, do not enjoy the advantages of the free trade agreements that the EU maintains with many countries of the Global North. These economic barriers create one-sided advantages for the EU, at least in the shorter term. As has been argued by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013), the EU’s external border (like most other political borders of Northern societies) institutionalizes a legal continuum of mobility rights, work permits, and residence statuses that channel a legally disabled workforce into the EU whose labor power can then be exploited (see also Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010 and Narayan 2017). This bordering mechanism exacerbates a similar mechanism

within the EU where recent member states serve as reservoirs of low-paid labor, notably in the realm of medical treatment and care, and which helps the affluent countries to keep their social security costs comparatively low while draining off much-needed personnel from the Eastern and Southern countries (cf. Favell 2008). And of course, it is the idiom of ‘market exchange,’ on which European integration is so thoroughly founded (von der Groeben 1982), which—even as Piketty (2020, 709) is right to note that the EU is not “a coherent and invincible ordoliberal or neo-proprietarian conspiracy”—decisively helps legitimizing any cross-country inequalities through invoking the long-term balancing effects of competition and growth.

An internationalized view on the agency of states and polities makes one more cautious regarding any learning from European or Northern history, including social democracy. Faced with the long-lasting effects of hardly fully achieved decolonization as they combine with neo-colonial economic value creation (as in neo-extractivism, for instance, cf. Svampa 2019), some researchers have given up on the idea that Europe might harbor any historical experiences that others, or indeed Europe itself, could learn from (de Sousa Santos 2017). On this side of such fatalism, while still upholding the urge informing it that the archives of learning must be rearranged, I would simply argue that the political constitution of societies vis-à-vis one another is still largely mediated by state institutions as well as supranational and international organizations. Here I second Piketty in his overall skepticism regarding ‘radical’ critiques of the state as such. At the same time, however, I contend that state and political institutions and organizations have a responsibility to radically expand their learning archives and practices.

One respective avenue, which I would like to elaborate on a bit here, concerns the notion of membership in the political economy, as this membership can be reconceptualized with the state having a role to play in it when considering Southern experiences—namely, and first of all, the role of a rather *miniscule* state institution, overridden by (international) political economic relations, such as colonial extraction, that cannot by any means be presupposed as being fully effective (cf. Comaroff/Comaroff 2012 for this argument, and further Ferguson 2015). The point that these studies make is that the state’s actions cannot be analytically convincingly separated from the formation and types of social bonds and institutions that organize redistribution independent of the state’s schemes, because it was historically non-state social relations and institutions (for instance, such as colonialism) that characterize the past of those societies. Therefore, Southern experiences invite reflecting on the state as a kind of, if important, epiphenomenon of society and its redistributive processes, not as a central redistributive institution. To these relationships belong entitlements based on kinship or other forms of social relationships that are not directly administered by the state, yet intervene

into the efficacy of its measures, and are conversely impacted by state schemes of redistribution. Political economic membership thus comprises state schemes, but also other forms of social relationships and institutions of redistribution. These considerations have been focused in particular by the ‘human economy’ approach (Hart 2007; Schraten 2020), which views economic activity as a specific, if variable, modality of social relationships. This view might be considered as a principled extension of Piketty’s invocation of the relationship optic that reserves it for the (undoubtedly important) area of property (Piketty 2020, 990). Applied to Northern societies (for instance, the era of successful social democracy that Piketty highlights), the question would be how the state became involved in the formation of social constituencies, relationships, and institutions that cannot be reduced to voter segments, groups of equal education, or relative economic privilege, but which crucially encompass forms of social organization—trade unions, solidarity networks, advocacy groups, social movements, etc.—whose logic by far exceeds that of statistical segments as these do not reflect the social relationalities of economic membership.

Thus, and politically close to Piketty’s agenda, the notion of ‘economic citizenship’ might be used in order to connect questions of “property as a social relation” (*id.*, 990) more thoroughly and transversally to social relationships and institutions from local constituencies all the way up to asymmetries in the international political economy. According to Greta Krippner (2017) and James Ferguson (2015, see for a discussion Langenohl 2021), ‘economic citizenship’ refers to claims and entitlements to economic participation (not only salaried work but also receiving payments, having access to credit, etc.) that are built on concrete memberships and participation in social networks, relationships, and associations. In Krippner’s (2017) example, tenants of an urban neighborhood in a U.S. city threatened with a general decrease of their residence-related credit eligibility have put pressure on local banks, urging them to make loans available to them despite the worsened overall credit rating of the neighborhood. In this case, economic participation stems from social membership in solidarity networks, not directly from any legal title that could be granted by the state. With respect to Ferguson’s (2015) study, countries in the Global South (he focuses on South Africa) have been experimenting with making small amounts of money available to members of generally disprivileged social categories (such as single mothers) without individual eligibility checks. While this procedure saves a lot of administrative resources and red tape, the point about Ferguson’s argument is that the state actually is adopting a *social* redistribution mechanism, according to which entitlements to receive payments are based on certain positions within social relationships (often, but not always, kinship relationships), not on individual deservedness.

From this point of view, the state can be addressed as one relationship scale among others on which economic entitlements and claims are negotiated—for instance, through the connection between various citizenship titles and their effects on taxation and eligibility from transfer payments so highlighted by Piketty—while also bringing into view other scales that (at least in the present) are not directly mediated by the national citizenship titles, such as (informal) claims to payments in given social relationships (Ferguson 2015), membership in transnational households that exceed the governance reach of any one state (Schiller/Basch/Blanc 1994), or the reliability of (local as well as transnational) social networks that decisively impact career advancement and life chances (see, for the EU, Büttner et al. 2015). Especially, if it is true, as Piketty notes, that “it is impossible to wait for the entire world to agree before moving ahead” toward a more just distribution of resources and life chances (Piketty 2020, 1032), it would be worthwhile to picture social relationships and institutions other than those directly mediated through state taxation, where redistribution, however rudimentary and imperfect, is already taking place.

6 Conclusion: The State and its Learning Responsibilities

Piketty argues that ideologies can be conceived of as orders of justification of social inequality. These ideologies are not the inevitable consequence of a certain class position, but vary with political constellations. The polity thus plays a major role in forming those constellations, for instance, through allowing for more or for less inequality. To this agenda I have added the argument that the polity should be addressed as a site and an institutional agent of learning processes that must transgress any polity’s preoccupation with domestic politics. More concretely, the polity (still mostly the state) must be held responsible for learning processes that interconnect international political economic inequalities with those within its immediate political-legal reach. Moreover, this can happen only if accounting for the polity as a social actor and an actor in society, not just as a set of ideally liberal-democratic institutions, because it is only then that the polity might be able to learn from social practices and institutions that tackle inequalities other than through taxation and centralized means of redistribution.

What does ‘learning’ actually entail? Apart from a cognitivist perspective, according to which learning describes the process of adapting expectations and action orientations according to information and data about the world learning has a decisively moral underpinning. This is not to say that learning can refer

to any unproblematic or preexisting body of moral statements and principles of justice, accountability, and responsibility—rather, these statements and principles are themselves in flux, constantly re-negotiated, and strongly disputed. Instead, the moral dimension of learning can be conceived of as a reformulation and rearticulation of normative statements and decisions that account for the principal recognition of the legitimacy of claims made by all those social (and some would argue, more than merely social, if understood as human) constituencies that will be affected by the consequences of those statements and decisions (cf. Miller 1988).

Seen in this light, purely cognitivist learning is prone to trigger non-recognition because each piece of data and information is irrevocably incomplete, more or less one-sided, and exclusive of other aspects that other constituencies might regard as valuable or even vital. While Piketty addresses states and polities mainly with the task to problematize social inequalities within their legal constituencies, his suggestions ought to be contextualized by those moral dimensions of learning that would address the state and other political institutions with the urge to also take into account the bids of those constituencies outside their immediate legal reach, but still affected by the consequences of their decisions. Thus, Piketty is right to criticize a one-dimensional notion of globalization as leading to a strategic underestimation of the state and its capacity to steer political-economic processes within its legal confines; but I would add that globalization talk has also eroded any sense that states and polities have responsibilities that transgress their narrowly defined political-legal reach.

As Piketty has entered the competition and struggle between different ideologies and justifications of inequality with his book, the analytical as well as political question is how his arguments can be made to resonate with the concerns of trans-state and transnational social constituencies, including those impacted and co-constituted by the international political economy. In my view, such an alliance is the precondition for any effective critique of proprietarianism. I share the book's indignation at the fact that states, still the most powerful political actors in the world (it is them that directly control armies), do not engage more in progressive taxation—Leviathans without a clue, as it seems. All the more, they might learn from the relational, often micrological, mechanisms and strategies of redistribution that have been found in social relationships, be it with, alongside, or against states.

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