

Reflections on Plato and Global Capitalism

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Abstract

Global capitalism poses an ethical challenge similar in nature to the challenge of political materialism that Plato addressed in his assessment of the impact of the Sophist tradition of thought on the youth of Athens, in their search for the Good life. For Plato, a Good life is incompatible with a materialist conception of human happiness (in ethics) and justice (in politics); it presupposes an understanding of the significance of physical as well as spiritual dimensions of human life, in a social-political context. This article argues that Plato's theory of economics offers an important point of departure for a critical engagement with the anti-humanist politics of global capitalism.

Keywords: Plato; global capitalism; political materialism; the market; humanism; justice

Introduction

Globalisation is a complex economic phenomenon that is grounded ideologically in the foundational principles and value-system of the neoliberal school of thought. It functions primarily under the sway of major international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Its primary objective is to free capital (the market, the economy) from all forms of political interference in order to create a new world order that prioritises the commercial principle of supply and demand as dictated by the specific interests and imperatives of the "free" market.

Following the collapse of the former Soviet Union, and the subsequent disintegration of its former satellite states in Eastern Europe during the mid-1990s, capitalism has widely been hailed as the only rational and realistic alternative to a socialist political economy (Fukuyama 1992). From this perspective, the proponents of global capitalism have unapologetically declared their public support for a materialist global dispensation; one



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that is characterised by the relentless pursuit of profit, wealth, material prosperity and security.

Global capitalism is predicated on a fundamental assumption of Euro-American cultural superiority. According to the proponents of global capitalism, the human desire for happiness—and the related self-interested pursuit of material prosperity and security—can best be achieved within a democratic state that supports and promotes the principle of free trade.

The seductive powers and attractiveness of Euro-American capitalism have in recent years been flaunted unashamedly by their major international television entertainment industries, in tandem with their major international news broadcasting companies, resulting almost inevitably in the globalised exportation of the “American dream” as the greatest gift that the “free world” can bestow on the rest of the world. Peter Gray describes the utopian universalism at the core of global capitalism, and its associated political project of global democratisation, as follows:

[Democratic capitalism] will soon be accepted throughout the world. A free global market will become a reality. The manifold economic cultures and systems that the world has always contained will be redundant. They will be merged into a single universal free market. (Gray 1998, 2)

The myth of human inferiority—and the associated radical questioning of the humanity of the conquered subject—has historically been a major ideological mechanism for the rationalisation and justification of unethical political power and the domination of a conquered people. The colonial project of European capitalist expansionism of the past five hundred years, for example, was inseparably linked to unethical, racist assumptions and discourses. These sought to validate not only the questionable idea of genetic, mental and moral inferiority of their conquered subjects, but also to cast doubt on the idea that their conquered subjects could legitimately be regarded as fellow-human beings.

These racist assumptions have been re-appropriated in recent times to justify the expansionist project of Euro-American global capitalism. The doctrine of global capitalism has thus been presented in rationalistic economic discourses, aimed at convincing the world of the inevitability, unavailability and irreversibility of an economic system that is finally “free from the threat of dictatorship of the proletariat ... [and free for] the dictatorship of the world market” (Martin and Schumann 1997, 9). In this scenario, the millions of people who have been adversely affected by the structurally created poverty of global capitalism are increasingly falling outside and beyond the moral radar of bourgeois human consciousness. The millions of unfortunate people across the globe who have fallen prey to the anti-humanist economics of global capitalism are generally regarded as unfortunate victims of the unavoidable collateral damage that necessarily accompanies progressive economic change (Martin and

Schumann 1997, 1–5). For its proponents, the real significance of global capitalism is that it has finally succeeded in securing the primacy of economics over politics.

Although global capitalism is a recent historical phenomenon, it has its epistemic roots in the political philosophy of Plato. In the *Republic*, Plato presents a utopian construction of political life, based on the principle of justice, and grounded metaphysically in a theory of the Good. While Plato self-consciously conceived and duly formulated his political vision of the state as a utopian project (*Republic* 592a–c), he never doubted its practical epistemic significance for the actual construction of the state as a historical phenomenon. His political philosophy has provided a normative framework, not only for the historical development of the modern European nation-state, but also for its exclusionary practices and discriminatory policies in relation to the “barbarians” of the world.

In contemporary economic discourses of modernity, the “barbarians are often referred to as economic migrants, refugees, foreigners, and the homeless.” For most citizens of the modern democratic state, the poverty suffered by millions of victims of global economic injustice is not seen as the tragic consequence of an inhuman economic system, but rather as something self-inflicted, as something that can be avoided through hard work, discipline and a good education. In response to the threat of poverty, the academic institutions of modernity are required to provide a “relevant” education, capable of delivering the much-needed skills and expertise that will, hopefully, enable a future of material prosperity for our youth, in keeping with the promises and principles of neoliberal capitalism.

The capitalist-inspired curricula of our academic institutions are substantively designed to play a similar role to that of the Sophists in ancient Greece. The youth of ancient Greece, in particular, were enthused by the idea that a Sophist education would enhance the future possibility of a Good life, public success, personal happiness and material security. While Plato correctly recognised the dangers potentially associated with the possession of wealth as the cornerstone of a Good life, his model of state-sanctioned exclusion of women, children and slaves, has placed the question of humanity (its selective privileging, on the one hand, and its systematic denial, on the other hand) at the centre of the historical struggle for justice.

Timocracy: The Power of Money

Plato’s political philosophy represents an important critique of a materialist political economy in the form of a timocracy, in which wealth, especially in the form of property, is generally considered to be an indispensable condition for the possibility of a successful political career and the associated reputational benefits of public honour and prestige. This position was widely supported during Plato’s time, especially by the youth with ambitions of prominent positions of leadership in government. Plato was particularly critical of the potentially individualist, divisive nature of a politics that overvalues the significance of money. As a result, he sought to develop a critical

response that would invalidate the foundational principles of political materialism. He was especially wary of the potential for corruption—as well as the narcissistic arrogance, cynicism and indifference—that the possession of excessive wealth potentially encourages. Mogobe Ramose’s comments on the nature of the ethical-political challenge that Plato was faced with at the time, are worth noting:

[One] of the major problems of Athens was the fact that money had the power to undermine, displace and even destroy long established and respected ethical values. ... This was the age of timocracy; the period of money-based rule. ... Timocracy had no special regard for the value of a human being as a human being. Its primary and overriding aim was to continue to accumulate wealth without end. Even human life was subordinated to the achievement of this aim. (Ramose 2014, 69)

For the youth of ancient Greece, the promise of a Good life came in the form of a Sophist education, whose pedagogical vision of individual success in the political sphere posed a serious threat to Plato’s philosophical vision, in which the greater Good of society was of primary concern. Plato’s critique of democracy emanated essentially from the potential abuse associated with the democratic right to free expression; propounding that it merely served as an excuse for the expression of a self-centred individualism and political ambition. He was of the view that the power of money, especially in the hands of the youth, is inimical to a spirit of civic responsibility and self-discipline; political virtues that he deemed essential to a political community, motivated by a vision of the greater Good. Plato’s critique of the democratic form of government proceeded from the assumption that it lends itself intrinsically to political corruption insofar as it is not morally resilient enough to resist the threat of materialism. Democracy, on Plato’s account, if not properly regulated, is inclined to yield to “the insatiate greed for that which it set before itself as the good, the attainment of the greatest possible wealth” (*Republic* 555b). He writes:

[Since democratic] rulers owe their offices to their wealth, they are not willing to prohibit by law the prodigals who arise among the youth from spending and wasting their substance [money]. Their object is, by lending money on the property of such men, and buying it in, they become still richer and more esteemed ... this honouring of wealth is incompatible with a sober and temperate citizenship. (*Republic* 555c)

The Sophist pedagogical vision sought to find expression in a democratic political ethos, in which the individual enjoyed the right to challenge not only the normative basis of political power, but also the legitimacy of any political leader or party within the state. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that one of the charges levelled against Socrates by his accusers was that he corrupted the youth through his “teachings” by inculcating in their minds a method of radical questioning that was potentially capable of subverting traditional Greek moral and religious values; it also encouraged the youth to question the legitimacy of all political authority, thereby creating a subversive political climate, characterised by the permanent threat of anarchy (*Socrates’ Defense (Apology)* 24b–26c).

While the political virtues associated with democratic freedom seemed obvious to most citizens insofar as they represented (in principle) the possibility and potential for political change in the face of tyranny and corruption, for the more politically astute, however, democracy (in practice) proved itself potentially capable of undermining its own democratic foundations. As was the practice then—and still is today—the abuse of political power was often overlooked when political standing is associated with something that the community values highly; for example, family or political affiliation, personal wealth, a reputation born of heroic achievements and acts of self-sacrifice. From this perspective, wealth and political power constitute two sides of the same political coin. The perpetuation of the *status quo* thus requires a “political education” with the specific aim of implanting in the “masses” the belief that money and political power have nothing in common. Beyond the threat of political violence, incarceration and death, the legitimation of political leadership and authority ultimately depends on the state’s educational policies, whose substance and intent will ensure the ideological indoctrination of the political subject (Freire 2000). If the citizen can be convinced, for example, that all political power comes with a mandate given by God, and that the political leader rules by divine right, then the state requires, for legitimation purposes, an education system (in the broadest possible sense) that is ideologically capable of negating the subversive nature of the Marxist claim regarding religion: “it is the opium of the people” (Marx 1978, 54).

For Plato, the task of convincing the political community of the legitimacy of the ruler’s *right* to rule was an important challenge. He was particularly disturbed by the idea that justice (or, “doing the right thing”) could be abused as a rhetorical-ideological instrument, aimed at the passive submission of the political community to the interests of the ruling class. In the *Republic*, he critiques this view of justice, which he associates with the teachings of the Sophists, whose essence is captured by Thrasymachus, who articulated it as follows:

[“Right”] is the same thing in all states, namely the interest of the established ruling class; and this ruling class is the “strongest” element in each state, and so if we argue correctly we see that “right” is always the same, the interest of the stronger party. (*Republic* 339)

Plato’s response to the Sophist challenge regarding the link between economic interests and justice was to present a counter-claim that seeks to demonstrate that justice—as a political idea, if properly understood—always transcends the narrow interests of a privileged few; its validity ought to arise from its normative potential to unify the entire politically community. Plato thus argues that the relevant normative context for determining the universal significance of justice in the state is the Good. He writes: “Good ... is the end of all endeavour, the object on which every heart is set” (*Republic* 505–506). Justice cannot, therefore, be legitimately defined, in Plato’s view, from the exclusive-exclusionary perspective of the rich and powerful.

In his political philosophy, Plato offers a vision of an ideal state that is grounded (ethically) in an anti-materialist value-system. In support of this vision, he critically appropriated the ancient doctrines of religious leaders, priests and priestesses of the past, the “men and women who understand the truths of religion” (*Meno* 81a–b). From this perspective, he identified human spirituality as the normative-transcendent condition for the possibility of justice and the Good in the state. His appropriation of ancient “religious truths” was undertaken with a view to validating what he considered to be a pre-rational understanding of the spiritual dimensions of human existence, which he recognised as the key to formulating the relevant ethical foundations of political life. Plato was particularly inspired by Socrates’ epistemic inquiry into the ontological nature of traditional Greek ethical ideas and virtues. He was determined to offer a positive response to the pre-rational nature of Socrates’ philosophy of (self-confessed) ignorance.

Using the Socratic epistemic position as his point of departure, Plato argued that all knowledge is grounded in an intuitive (pre-)understanding (a prior knowledge) of the Good, as the condition of its possibility. This claim arose from his reflections on the significance of a paradox at the heart of Socrates’ position, in relation to which the latter publicly confessed to a dependence on the promptings of a *daemon*; a divine spirit, “an inner voice,” which he interpreted as “a sign from the gods” (*Socrates’ Defense (Apology)* 31c–d; *Republic* 496c), on the one hand, while insisting, on the other hand, on the rationalistic nature of his ethical inquiries. Plato concluded from this paradox that Socrates was ethically motivated by a pre-rational understanding of the Good, the universal significance of which he had failed fully to understand, hence Socrates’ stubborn insistence on his own ignorance (*Socrates’ Defense (Apology)* 21d).

In response to the Socratic position of epistemic ignorance, Plato developed an epistemology, characterised by an intense struggle between memory (recollection) on the one hand, and the threat of amnesia on the other hand (*Meno* 81a–86b). According to Plato, the pre-understanding of the Good, as represented in Socrates’ philosophical position, serves to “remind” us that the various truth-claims that arise in the process of philosophical enquiry and debate are limited, provisional and hypothetical in nature. They lack the universality of the Forms knowledge that ontologically “precede” and transcend the limits of human understanding. All human knowledge is, at best, recollected knowledge, and the epistemic process of recollection is a never-ending struggle for the recollection of true knowledge; knowledge that we have “forgotten.” In Plato’s epistemology, recovering the “truths” of the past constitutes the first step in the process of overcoming human ignorance, on the path towards human wisdom. For him, the spiritual “memories” within human consciousness are of fundamental importance; they require rational investigation and understanding. Lest we dismiss this aspect of Plato’s epistemology prematurely as the irrational product of mystical thinking, we would do well to remind ourselves that Karl Marx defended a similar stance when defining the nature of his own political philosophy:

A reform of [human]consciousness not through dogmas, but through analyzing the mystical consciousness, the consciousness which is unclear to itself, whether it appears in religious or political form. Then it will transpire that the world has long been dreaming of something that it can acquire if only it becomes conscious of it. It will transpire that it is not a matter of drawing a great diving line between past and future, but of carrying out the thoughts of the past. (Marx 1978, 15)

Plato's idea of the Good, as the originary source of ethical-political life in the community, is deeply rooted in a human consciousness of moral truths of the past, which, if properly understood, could provide the ethical orientation required not only to overcome the ideology of political materialism, but also to construct (albeit in utopian form) a truly just political community. His response to the socio-economic inequalities—structurally generated by a state grounded in a value-system of political materialism—is to construct a state whose economic infrastructure is linked inseparably to the “natural” capabilities and skills of its citizens. The purpose of this approach is to create an economy that can respond positively to what Harold J Laski, many years later, referred to as the “irreducible minimum of human wants”—“Hunger, drink, sex and the need for shelter and clothing” (Laski 1967, 23). Plato's state is based on an economic infrastructure in which the human right to life is respected as its fundamental concern and primary responsibility. He traces the origins of political life to an ontological condition of human neediness. Given this view, the survival of every individual presupposes the ability to function effectively in a communally based, intersubjective network of ethical relations, aimed at social interdependence, cooperation and mutual support. Plato writes:

The origins of the city ... is to be found in the fact that we do not severally [individually] suffice for our own needs, but each of us lacks many things ... we being in need of many things, gather many into one place of abode as associates and helpers, and to this dwelling together we give the name city or state. ... Its real creator ... will be our needs. ... Now the first and chief of our needs is the provision of food for existence and life. (*Republic* 369 b–d)

From here Plato proceeds to consider the creation of three classes of citizens. The formation of each class is structured around the distinctive skills and capabilities that its members “naturally” possess. The self-identity of each group is tied closely to the nature of its collective contribution to the Good of the community as a whole. Beyond the specialised contributions of the economic class, Plato introduces a military class, highly trained in the discipline of state protection. The third class comprises the “philosopher-kings” whose wisdom and insight into the nature of the Good provide them with the normative authority to declare that a just political community requires that each group does what they do best. As Plato famously declared, justice consists in “doing [minding] one's own business” (*Republic* 433b) in order to enhance the quality of life of the community as a whole.

While we may not always agree with Plato, either on the details of his ideal state or the hierarchical nature of its internal structural divisions of labour, his theory of justice clearly offers, at the very least, one important, fundamental insight: if the political community as a whole is to flourish (and find happiness), then politics, conceptualised as the distinctive sphere of human interdependence, reciprocal cooperation and solidarity, must always take priority over economics. In the final analysis, Plato's turn to the "religious truths" of the ancient priests and priestesses points in the direction of a normative pre-understanding of human rationality which—if transformed into a political rationality grounded in ethical relations of human interdependence, reciprocity and mutuality—possesses the normative potential to overcome the threat of political materialism. His formulation of a humanist economic project represents an effective challenge to the instrumental form of rationality, implicit in the self-centred pursuit of power through the accumulation of wealth, insofar as taught by the Sophists.

The Tyranny of Economic Freedom

The challenge of political materialism that Plato faced in ancient Greece is, in many respects, similar to the challenge that global capitalism presents today. While historically far removed from the city-state of ancient Athens, the modern state, nevertheless, finds itself embroiled in a battle for political supremacy in the face of a politics of unrestrained, deregulated economic freedom. For Plato, the answer to the material and social inequalities generated by political materialism was to reflect on the possibility of a state, whose economic foundations are rooted in an anti-materialist, humanist value-system, whence he proceeded to redefine the concept of justice in the state. In the Platonic state, justice is predicated on a fundamental understanding that underscores human ontological neediness and interdependence as its point of departure. From the position of human ontological neediness, he presents an economic theory in which the economy is ethically motivated to serve the interests of the entire political community; this is its primary objective. To this end, the citizens are functionally empowered—through the development of their natural abilities—to contribute to the greater Good of society. In the Platonic state, the greater Good of society is thus valued more highly than anything else.

In the political context of the modern sovereign-secular state, the highest Good is associated primarily with the foundational idea of individual moral autonomy, which provides the normative basis for the possibility of a liberal state, founded on the distinctive ideals of equality, personal freedom and respect for the rights of the individual. The politics of liberalism borrows from Plato the idea that the state is a projection of the individual writ large (*Republic* 368d). In the context of political liberalism, state sovereignty is conceptualised as a projection of individual autonomy and personhood, assumed to be rooted within the inner recesses of modern subjectivity in general, and modern ethical-political consciousness in particular. From this perspective, freedom—whether conceived of in political terms of state supremacy on the one hand, or in personal-subjective terms of individual autonomy on the other

hand—is characterised essentially by the notion of non-interference “from outside.” As Francis Fukuyama puts it, “Political liberalism can be defined simply as a rule of law that recognises certain individual rights or freedoms from government control” (Fukuyama 1992, 42).

When the foundational principle of liberal freedom is applied within the broader economic context of capitalist modernity, we realise that we are clearly dealing with a different understanding of the economy to the one presented by Plato in his economic theory. According to Plato, the economic life is a communally-integrated sphere of activities that are motivated primarily by certain humanist considerations, the most important of which is the Good of the community. In the modern sovereign-secular state, by contrast, the normative point of departure is the pursuit and attainment of personal (individual) autonomy. When pursued in a socio-economic context of the capitalist value-system, the idea of personal autonomy translates invariably into a self-interested, opportunistic mentality, in keeping with the dictates of free-market liberal thinking.

Despite the fact that the modern sovereign-secular state has been conceptualised formally as a democratic state, subject only to the supreme authority of a constitution, the politics of modernity (or capitalism, to be more precise) has posed a constant threat to the more “traditional” (humanist) ideals of solidarity, social security and mutual respect in our communities. In the modern secular-liberal state, characterised by the pursuit of economic survival, material prosperity as well as social security, the individual is invariably torn between the self-interested pursuit of wealth and material prosperity in the marketplace on the one hand, and the ever-weakening pull of a Christian-liberal conscience on the other hand, which requires a certain degree of concern and compassion for others. In the liberal context, the traditional conflict between materialism and spiritualism, a self-centred materialist economics and the Good of the community, finds its ultimate expression within the privatised sphere of the individual’s conscience, as the only legitimate voice of authority in the modern state.

While the distinctive nature of the modern state resides in its constitutionality, which serves as a normative safeguard against the tyrannical abuse of political power, the real tyranny that threatens the life of the social-political sphere of human interaction and human solidarity has come in the form of liberal economic freedom that effectively challenges all barriers of social cohesion and human solidarity within the state, as well as beyond the political parameters of state sovereignty. In its efforts to secure and protect the economic imperatives of neoliberal capitalist expansionism, many governments around the world have neglected or, in certain instances, abandoned their responsibility to protect the vulnerable, especially the poor, in society. In the state of capitalist modernity, the victims of poverty—and the resultant phenomena of social marginalisation and exclusion—are often viewed through an economic prism that pathologises and criminalises economic non-participation and non-productivity in the free-market system. Given this misguided approach, poverty—especially in countries

formerly colonised by European imperial powers—is hardly ever viewed as a systemic-structural legacy of historically created conditions of racial (white supremacist) capitalism. The historical amnesia surrounding these conditions has habituated us, instead, into a mindset of victim-blaming, in which the plight of the poor is attributed to some innate moral-racial defectiveness, a generalised condition of cognitive inferiority and a laziness to work. The liberal rationalisation of poverty has increased the social distance between the haves and the have-nots insofar as the social and health problems of the poor living within predominantly black, working-class communities are problems that defy the foundational rationality of free-market liberalism that celebrates individual autonomy and exceptionalism at the expense of the “masses.” As a result, the poor “masses” have been excluded systemically and distanced ethically from the benefits of global capitalism. The neoliberal economic climate is characterised by the perennial threat of structural unemployment, while the unemployable (the poorest of the poor) are forced to fend for themselves on the peripheries of modern city-life, in a hostile bourgeois social environment in which poverty has become the face of crime.

The historical transition to state sovereignty in the form of a constitutional democracy has been widely hailed as progressive development, despite its intrinsic vulnerability to the corrosive powers of free-market capitalism. In spite of this vulnerability, however, the modern sovereign-secular state of political liberalism is self-conceptualised as “the sole source of law and legitimate force within its own territory, and as the sole appropriate object of its citizens’ allegiances” (Skinner 1978, ix–x). The principle of the state as the sole source of law assumes a different significance, however, when viewed from the perspective of the other foundational principle of capitalism: the possession of (private) property. In the political consciousness of European modernity, private property represents the material condition for the possibility of justice. John Locke argues, for example, as follows:

The origin of justice explains that of property. ... No one can doubt, that the convention for the distinction of property, and for the stability of possession, is of all circumstances the most necessary to the establishment of human society, and that after the agreement for the fixing and observing of this rule, there remains little or nothing to be done towards setting a perfect harmony and concord. (Locke n.d. T III, II, par, 10–11, pp. 542–543)

The economic privileging of private property and wealth in a secularised-capitalist state gave rise to the brutal colonial practice of land dispossession with impunity, which was based on the problematic rationale that the lands of conquered people were unoccupied at that time, that is, devoid of human presence. It was also claimed, furthermore, that the dispossessed lands were devoid of any recognisable signs of human economic activity. On the colonialist logic, the “empty” lands were there for the taking. The colonialist rationale for land dispossession, rationalised by the doctrine of *terra nullius* (“empty” land), was an extension of the Lockean claim that property is duly constituted by a productive interactive process that involves labour and land; the mixing of these two elements constitutes the normative grounds for the entitlement and sole ownership

of property (Lorenzo 2015, 62–67). In the eyes of the colonial settler, when the lands of conquered people are transformed into property, all talk of historical justice is rendered irrelevant.

The erasure of the colonial history behind the rationalisation of property has, in later years, given rise to the free flow of capital internationally, a major consequence of which has been the deification of money. From this perspective, money is no longer viewed merely as a means to an end—as Aristotle once declared in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b, 5–10—but as an end in itself. This shift in the understanding of the significance of money has given rise to an economic theology, characterised by the deification of money—and the power that it brings. In terms of this economic theology, money assumes divine status; it is the new (universally) recognised god. Endowed with divine-like powers of omnipotence comparable to that of gods of the more traditional religious faiths, it is believed to be more than capable of (re-)creating the world in its own (capitalist) image.

Ramose (1999, 131) has characterised neoliberal capitalism as a form of economic fundamentalism that threatens to undermine the ethical foundations of the more “traditional” self-understandings of human-being-in-the-world, that are anchored in the idea of a human-embodied spirituality. He argues:

The invention of money was predicated on the intention that it was a means to an end. Indeed, money continues to be the means to realize multiple ends. However, economic globalization has arguably reversed this logic. Its commandment is that money shall be an end in itself. Profitability, or the insatiable urge to make more money at whatever cost, is the apotheosis of money as an end in itself. Money has become the “god” towards which everything must move and before whom everyone must submit. In this sense, we wish to borrow and endorse the insight that: the invention of money is the original sin of economics. (Ramose 1999, 131)

While the dominance of the free market is often celebrated today by its proponents as a progressive economic process, we tend to forget its lowly origins in nineteenth-century Victorian England. John Gray (1998) points out that capitalism was originally conceptualised as a social experiment, conducted in strictly localised conditions. The purpose of the social experiment was to test the viability of an economics that is defined by an ethos of *laissez-faire* thinking, aimed at radically transforming the traditional social market by freeing it from all traditional forms of political regulation and social constraint. According to Gray:

The free market created a new type of economy in which prices of all goods, including labour, changed without regard to their effects on society. In the past, economic life had been constrained by the need to maintain social cohesion. It was conducted in social markets—markets that were embedded in society and subject to many kinds of regulation and restraint. The goal of the experiment ... was to demolish these social

markets and replace them by deregulated markets that operated independently of social needs. (Gray 1998, 1)

In his vision of an ideal state, Plato conducted his own “social experiment” in which he tried to validate a fundamental idea that the purpose of the economy is to create and sustain a material infrastructure that is capable of supporting and sustaining the physical imperatives of human life within the political community as a whole. Plato’s “social experiment” regarding the (humanist) ethical significance of the economy offers us a valuable lesson that has largely gone unheeded within the political modernity of global capitalism. Global capitalism has, in fact, effected a complete reversal of the foundational humanist principles of the Platonic political economy that basically stresses the idea that the right to life is a precondition for the establishment of a political community that is characterised by justice. For Plato, economic and political life should not be separated; they should co-exist peacefully if the political community is to flourish. This lesson from Plato is an indictment on the gospel of global capitalism that will have us accept that “all civilisations from now on [are] going to be led by commerce ... [and that the] other constituent parts of human activity—from politics to social policy to culture—[are] going to be perceived principally through the prism of economics” (Saul 2005, 17–18).

Historically, the social market has always been an important mechanism for social interaction. As a social institution, it has featured prominently in just about every human civilisation in the world. Its social significance in terms of human enrichment has always exceeded its basic economic function. In his response to the levelling of the social market to its economic function, Amartya Sen does well to remind us of the social significance of the marketplace for all human communities; he draws our attention specifically to the fact that marketplace activities include so much more than the mere buying and selling of goods. It includes the freedom to exchange words and gifts as essential components of human life. He writes:

The freedom to exchange words, or goods, or gifts does not need defensive justification in terms of their favorable but distant effects; they are part of the way human beings in society live and interact with each other (unless stopped by regulation or fiat). The contribution of the market mechanism to economic growth is, of course, important, but this comes only after the direct significance of the freedom to interchange—words, goods, gifts—has been acknowledged. (Sen 1999, 6)

Today, the social marketplace still has an important role to play in the socialisation of individual and community life. Rooted in the human right to life, it poses a moral challenge to the individualist economic imperatives of free-market global capitalism. Unlike the free market of neoliberal capitalism, it seeks to nurture and sustain a humanist economics in which the human right to life reigns supreme.

Conclusion

The economic structure of Plato's state is anchored in the idea of a humanist exchange of goods and services, aimed at promoting a political community in which human life flourishes. The submission of the political community to the political authority of leaders, however, whose legitimacy derives from their privileged life and insight into the Good, compromises the ethical integrity of Plato's political project. The problematic epistemic and ethical restriction of political wisdom to the experiential horizons of the "philosopher-king" implies that the "other" wisdoms—emanating from "other" reflections on the concrete lives, historical experiences and historical memories of ordinary people, along with their "religious truths"—lack epistemic credibility. We are presented, instead, with a mystifying metaphysics of political life, which can only be fathomed by the exceptionally gifted philosophical minds, resulting in a political elitism that makes a mockery of justice as a historically informed ethical idea.

The politics of global capitalism has, in similar fashion, created an elitist class of experts, technocrats and managers, blessed with a privileged insight into the nature of global capitalism and the divine power of money. From this elevated position, they dispense their wisdom in complete disregard for the immense suffering that their economic theology continues to inflict on the lives of millions of people across the world. Given this perspective, it could be argued that the poor will always be among us—and that the cry for historical justice will always go unheeded.

When historical experience and historical memory are dismissed as irrelevant for determining the nature of justice, we run the risk of being misled by social experiments whose utopian-elitist nature often translates into political nightmares for most human beings. In this regard, Michael Ignatieff's critique of political utopias, such as Plato's, is worth noting:

Political utopias are a form of nostalgia for an imagined past projected on to the future as a wish. ... It is the vision of the classical *polis*—the city-state of ancient Greece ... which beckons me backwards, as it were, into the future. No matter that Greek democracy was built upon the institution of slavery. ... Utopias never have to make their excuses to history, like all dreams they have a timeless immunity to disappointment in real life. The *polis* would continue to beckon us forward out of the past even if no actual *polis* had ever existed. (Ignatieff 1984, 107)

Global capitalism could in a similar fashion be conceptualised as an economic utopia that beckons us backwards (a-historically) into the future; a future dominated exclusively by the "law of the jungle"—the economic jungle of capitalism and modernity.

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