his legacy would be perceived but the implications of this shift went well beyond his individual case and this sad truth weighs heavily on White's general analysis. He knows that Stalin effectively ended Soviet scholarship in 1917 (279). However, he presents the polemic between Pokrovskii and Trotsky concerning the special features of Russia's historical development in an appendix, such that the material seems somewhat peripheral to the main narrative. The absence of a more critical engagement here feels like a missed opportunity. There are other instances where a more sustained commentary would have been valuable.

White's book will undoubtedly serve as a valuable reference for anyone studying Pokrovskii or the history of historiography in Soviet Russia. Given the many questions raised by his analysis, one hopes that he will build on this foundation in the not too distant future.

David Lay Williams, *The Greatest of All Plagues: How Economic Inequality Shaped Political Thought from Plato to Marx*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 2024; 424 pp., 1 b/w illus.; 9780691171975, £30.00 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Paul Seabright, *University of Toulouse, France*

This book consists of seven chapters setting out the views of various 'great thinkers' on the role of economic inequality in society and the case for reducing or eliminating it. Six are about individuals – Plato, Hobbes, Rousseau, Smith, Mill, and Marx – and one is about 'The New Testament', which means the views of Jesus, St. James and St. Paul. The purpose of the chapters appears to be threefold. First, and most consistently with the book's subtitle, we are told how economic conditions in their own societies (and particularly the inequality visible around them) influenced the views of these thinkers. This part is interestingly and informatively carried out, though briefly so, taking up just a few pages in each case. We learn about conditions in fifth-century Athens, first-century Palestine, seventeenth-century England and so on, and how the early life circumstances of the thinkers may have shaped their world views.

Secondly, we are given an exegesis of the views of each thinker, what they really thought about inequality and how important a social evil they considered it to be. In several cases the author claims that the thinker was more hostile to inequality than is generally believed. This exegesis is undertaken comprehensively and (mostly) convincingly. This is true in particular for thinkers such as Rousseau (where the author is an established expert) and Smith (where a scholarly consensus ascribes more importance to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* than does the popular view of Smith based purely on *The Wealth of Nations*).

However, this exegetical programme is very strange when applied to the New Testament. The views of Jesus are reported here as if the four Gospels were verbatim transcripts of his opinions, rather than historical documents written by different authors many years after the events recorded and with widely divergent agendas. The views of St. Paul are reported as if all the epistles were written by him, which most biblical scholars believe

not to be so. I am baffled as to what the author is trying to do here. If he were trying to trace the impact of 'the biblical character of Jesus' on subsequent thinking about inequality I could understand such a historically uncritical approach to the sources, but that does not seem to be his purpose, and it is not his purpose in the other chapters.

There is, however, a third purpose at work in all the chapters, which is that of advocacy. The author wants to convince his readers that inequality is a social evil that deserves our urgent attention, and to recruit these thinkers on his side. This explains why he most urgently wants to do so for thinkers such as Plato and Smith, who are believed by many to have been defenders of inequality. The author's main target is not those who want to promote inequality *per se*, but rather those modern writers who believe inequality only matters to the extent that it leads to poverty, and who are willing to tolerate inequality if it helps to alleviate poverty. Such writers are called, inelegantly, *sufficientarians.* They include such well-known names as Deirdre McCloskey and Steven Pinker.

What is wrong, then, with sufficientarianism? The most successful part of this advocacy consists of drawing out a consistent concern across all the author's thinkers with the dangers of what the ancient Greeks called *pleonexia*. This is usually translated as 'greed', but it has much stronger connotations of obsessional desire for wealth. Lay Williams plausibly argues that all the thinkers he considers were concerned with the effects of inequality not just on the poor but also on the rich. It led them to be *pleonectic* – obsessionally greedy and in other ways morally insensitive or cruel. These thinkers also believed that inequalities of wealth led the rich to exercise political and social power that was detrimental to society in other ways than through the infliction of material poverty. It undermined fraternity and solidarity, for example (though it is not always clear what they meant by these terms).

Showing that these thinkers were concerned with *pleonexia* is fine as far as it goes. It does not show that *pleonexia* in modern societies is a really important concern – it might be, but arguing that it is would require far richer evidence than can be found here. This does not stop the author from giving a sketchy (and at times disdainful) summary of the arguments of the sufficientarians, nor from claiming to have refuted their views via a meagre handful of modern studies. I find the advocacy role of these chapters the least successful part of the book's arguments. If sufficientarianism is to be refuted, it will need less superficial treatment than is to be found in these pages.