

Wayne Rooney and the Inequality Issue

Anthony Harrop examines why there are very large differences in wealth within a society. It appears that long periods of peace allow special interest groups to accumulate wealth for themselves, whereas wars tend to level wealth. Is there an alternative solution to war? The Bible persistently associates corruption and injustice with wealth accumulation, but perhaps scandal has a role to play.

Is Wayne Rooney's £300,000 a week (£15million pa) either reasonable or just, or is it a prime example of capitalism red in tooth and claw? And if we accept 30-year-old Rooney's 27,000% more than the average British wage (<http://www.whatfootballersearch.com/player/wayne-rooney/>) why do we think it strange that 50 year-old bankers hanker after the same compensation?

Global sport is the worst current example of inequality and – too often – corruption. FIFA, the IAAF, the IOC and some aspects of the gentleman's game cricket compound ambition, status, inefficiency and corruption, whether state-sponsored or private. Sport has become a mirror that we hold up to ourselves, testing our willingness to overlook vast inequality merely because it's a

spectator activity. If we condone the wage inequality of the high-flyers in global sport, why not of those at the summit of global business?

The twin issues of inequality and corruption have been major themes of academic research. Thomas Piketty's blockbuster *Capitalism in the 21st Century* published in 2013 has done for wealth inequality what Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006)

Wayne Rooney's £6m home in Prestbury, Cheshire



Photo: Paul Cousins/
Barcroft Media



‘Whistle-blowers and scandal offer a tentative modern solution’

‘Vatileaks’: Pope Francis examining documents about financial irregularities relating to his family synod, October 2015

did for scientific materialism – scholarly work which reached a mass audience. Piketty’s thesis is that inequality is a feature of capitalism that can be reversed only through state intervention: unless capitalism is reformed, democracy itself is threatened. Inequality is a strong biblical theme, usually combined with corruption, an example being Amos 5:12 “For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins— you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.”

Piketty and his collaborator Emmanuel Saez studied wealth inequality in the capitalist economies of Europe and North America. They conclude that the top 10% of income earners have transferred so much earned income into unearned wealth that they now control over 50% of the total wealth in these economies.

The American economist and social scientist Mancur Lloyd Olson (1932–1998) suggested that societies that enjoy long periods of peace encourage the creation of cliques whose self-interest overrides the common good. Wars, by contrast, especially those of the 20th century which demanded total mobilisation of civilian as much as military, level the playing field, destroying these special interest groups by reducing all citizens to a common economic level. Piketty and Saez agree that wars – particularly the Second World War – made everyone more equal because fortunes were taxed to the bone to fund the war effort.

Olson and Piketty are thus of one mind: the seven decades of peace in the western world since 1945 have enabled the growth of numerous special interest groups and the individuals who profit from them. The top 10% have transferred income into wealth, but the top 1% has garnered enormous rents.

The two global wars of the 20th century, followed by the integration of the communist systems of Russia and China into the global economic network, transformed local into global. Those at the apex of any global human activity – sport, music, fashion, art, just as much as finance and business – demonstrate many examples of Rooney’s 27,000%.

Is it possible to level the playing field without resorting to war or prohibiting globalisation? Whistle-blowers and scandal offer a tentative modern solution, effective because a thousand years of Christianity have tempered the public conscience. Whether Julian Assange and Edward Snowden are heroes or traitors, their unveiling of western governments’ covert activities has encouraged whistle-blowers in all areas. The ‘scandal’ of Google’s £130 million tax payment to the UK government, and of Apple’s tax avoidance collusion with the Irish

government, ignites an EU-wide – and probably global – re-assessment of transfer-pricing and lowest-cost tax jurisdictions. Piketty advocates a global wealth tax – not perhaps feasible if Arab sheikhs and Chinese billionaires are protected by their undemocratic regimes. However, the terrorist threat has had the advantage of bringing governments together to pool knowledge and co-ordinate action. Could this be the forerunner of global government co-operation to harmonise global tax and agree a global wealth tax?

The Bible has a vast array of prophetic ministry attacking economic injustice, in particular inequality founded on political control.

Isaiah collates the terms ‘justice and righteousness’ no fewer than 19 times, from Isaiah 1.21 to 59.14. Isaiah 10.1-2 may summarise his verdict:

Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.

References:

For Wayne Rooney, see (<http://www.whatfootballersearch.com/player/wayne-rooney/>), and for his charities <http://www.officialwaynerooney.com/>.

The Wikipedia article on Thomas Piketty gives a good background to his stellar career – PhD at 22, assistant professor at MIT before he was 25, founder of the Paris School of Economics etc. In a delightful exercise of humility, he refused the Legion d’Honneur medal in 2015, saying that it was not the government’s role to decide who was honourable!

Mancur Olson’s major work is ‘The Rise and Decline of Nations’ (1982) which studied sectional interests such as trade unions that bargain for the financial interests of their members, often against the interests of the wider community. The term ‘sectional interest’ is of long duration: it was applied to “The West India Interest” in the 1830s, when the British Government bought out slaveholders in the Caribbean by paying them 40% of the total British government revenue in 1834 - £16-17 billion today.

Transparency International e.V. “Transparency International – What we do”. transparency.org. TI defines corruption as ‘the abuse of entrusted power for private gain which eventually hurts everyone who depends on the integrity of people in a position of authority’. See TI’s Global Corruption Barometer for country rankings.

Amos, the ‘shepherd and caretaker of sycamore-fig trees’ (Amos 7.14), is the standard-bearer against economic and political injustice:

They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. (Amos 2.6-7)

‘The Bible has a vast array of prophetic ministry attacking economic injustice’

The juxtaposition of Luke 20.47 and Luke 21.1-4 seems to indicate a close connection between ‘the teachers of the law’ who “devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers” and the poor widow who put in two very small copper coins into the temple treasury.


“She out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.” The contrast between the marginal utility of the copper coins to the widow and of their largesse to the rich speaks for itself.

Still more devastating is the condemnation of the merchant traders in Revelation 18.11-20. ‘Babylon’, symbol of empires built on global trade, faces doom “in one hour”:

Woe! Woe to you, great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin.

The list of traded goods occupies three verses and itemises 28 different categories, ending ominously – “fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and human beings sold as slaves”(Revelation 18.13).

From Deuteronomy to Amos, from the Gospels to Revelation, the prophetic tradition in both Old and New Testaments encourages us as Christians in today’s global community to support three levels of action. On the individual level, the courageous whistle-blower; at corporate level, those institutions such as Transparency International that open up national and corporate secrets; and at national and international political levels, all efforts that are made to hold to account the special interest groups and the profit-taking individuals at the top.

At all levels, generosity to the poor is to be encouraged. On this point, Wayne Rooney is a good example. He is the NSPCC’s first ever Ambassador for Childhood, and his charitable donations are well-documented. 



Anthony Harrop spent four decades working with the Bible Society movement, based mostly in Asia. His career in sales, marketing and publishing includes an MBA from MIT. Now retired and living in Reading, he continues to be active in local church ministry, with a global interest in missions as a consultant and Board trustee. He is an editor of this journal.