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# Ideologies and Utopia: A Ricoeurian Reading of Thomas Piketty

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**Abstract:** In his most recent books, Piketty offers a global history of inequality in its economic, social, political, and intellectual dimensions, arguing that history is moved by the struggle of ideologies. To take part in this battle of ideas, he conceives a new ideal model of society, ‘participative socialism’, as an egalitarian alternative to the dominant neoproprietary ideology and to the dangerous resurgence of nationalism and populism. This paper provides a new interpretation of Piketty’s view of history and of his participatory socialism in light of Paul Ricoeur’s study of the dialectics of ideology and utopia. First, I present Ricoeur’s singular analysis of ideology and utopia, which he sees as two inseparable facets of social imagination. Then I show how Ricoeur’s concepts can be fruitfully applied to Piketty’s conception of history and to his conception of a new form of socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, drawing lessons from history and forming a ‘good’ or ‘realist’ utopia. Finally, I demonstrate that this interpretation of Piketty’s socialism can help to better understand some of the criticisms he has received.

**Keywords:** Piketty, ideology, utopia, realism, Ricoeur, participatory socialism

**JEL Classification:** B5; P1; P3

## I. INTRODUCTION

Soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, some were quick to proclaim ‘the end of history’ (Fukuyama 1989, 1992), and along with it, the death of socialism (Hodgson 2019, Introduction) and of utopian thinking (Hodgson 1999, xv). For many, and especially for the proponents of neoliberalism, there would be no alternative to liberal democracy and market-based capitalism. Concomitantly, socialism and communism were seen as ideologies of the past and relegated to the dustbin of history. However, the combination of the economic crises

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(the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid crisis), social and political crises (rising inequalities, the crisis of the social state, the rise of populism), health crisis (Covid-19), and the ever more pressing environmental crisis urge us, on the contrary, to rethink our model of society. More precisely, it pushes us to rethink its ideological representations in the social imaginary, and thus, to imagine new alternatives, or ‘utopias’. The definition and meaning of ‘utopia’ have long been hotly debated questions (see Levitas [1990] 2010). I will follow Levitas in defining utopia in a broad sense, reconciling its various definitions in terms of forms, contents, and functions, as the expression of “the desire for a better way of being and living” ([1990] 2010, 8).

While the nineteenth century has been seen as the golden age of political utopia, the twenty-first century might be a new age of utopia, when it is more necessary than ever. The time is ripe for utopia as the question of the purpose of society or social life arises because of the limits of our way of living. But the word ‘utopia’ still often connotes an inaccessible, unfeasible, and therefore useless ideal. It is used to discredit any radical project of reform or any alternative project of society. Yet, utopian thinking is experiencing a certain return to favour (Wright 2010; Macherey 2011; Chrostowska and Ingram 2016; Bregman 2017), which owes as much to the material circumstances that were aforementioned as to contributions in the world of ideas by philosophers who have tried to rehabilitate the notion of utopia, such as Abensour (Cervera-Marzal and Poirier 2018), Ricoeur (Roman 2021a), or Levitas ([1990] 2010), among others (Chrostowska and Ingram 2016). Utopian desire, or the hope for a better way of living, has never completely disappeared, probably because it is a significant part of human culture. Yet, it is being reborn today. Some critical social scientists are working to rethink the boundaries of the possible (Gueguen and Jeanpierre 2022), and to reinvest the utopian space (Levitas [1990] 2010, chapter 7), long neglected, through a new Marxist, anarchist, or radical democratic perspectives (Chrostowska and Ingram 2016), reinventing liberalism (Gamel 2021), communism (Badiou 2009, Friot [1989] 2012; Friot and Bernard 2020; Lordon 2021; Friot and Lordon 2021), and socialism (Cohen 2009; Wright 2010; Honneth 2017; Hodgson 2019), or imagining an ‘ecological City’ by building on a multiple heritage (Audier 2020).

Piketty follows this trend in his recent books (Piketty 2020, 2022a), I argue, provided we first carefully define what kind of utopia he envisions. Although he never explicitly presents his ideal model of society, i.e.,

‘participatory socialism’ (Piketty 2020), as a utopia in *Capital and Ideology* (henceforth *C&I*) or later, in *A Brief History of Equality*, I think that there are good reasons to interpret it as such, and in a positive and constructive manner. With *C&I*, Piketty clearly intended to overcome what he sees as the main limitations of his preceding book (Piketty 2020, Preface), the now famous *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. He does this by providing (i) a more ‘global’ history of inequality, and (ii) an analysis of the ideologies that served to legitimize inequality throughout human history. Additionally, in *C&I*, Piketty no longer simply offers a few normative policy proposals for reducing inequality, such as a global wealth tax, that he interestingly presented as an “ideal” and a “useful utopia” (2014, 515). He now formulates explicitly some underlying principles of social justice that are embodied in a model of society, a new form of socialism called participatory socialism seen as one possible model for reforming society and surpassing capitalism. Fighting explicitly against fatalism and disenchantment, Piketty fuels the utopian spirit, showing that another world is not only possible but necessary, calling for new alternatives.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a new interpretation of Piketty’s vision of history as the struggle of ideologies and of his project to rethink socialism for tackling the issues of the twenty-first century. First, it aims to enrich its philosophical foundations and its normative framework, on which he has been criticized. In doing so, this article reinterprets philosophically Piketty’s vision of history in *C&I* and studies his ideal model of society, participatory socialism, through the prism of Ricoeur’s innovative but little-known analysis of the dialectics of ideology and utopia.<sup>1</sup> It thus provides a new interpretation of Piketty’s participatory socialism as a ‘realist’ utopia and as a ‘good’ utopia in the sense of Ricoeur, i.e., as a practical and political utopia, or as an alternative and ideal model of society that relies on both history and on real, existing institutions (and also, presumably, on unexploited possibilities of the present to formulate a society that is desirable and, at least in part, achievable and realizable). Second, and relatedly, I will show too that this perspective on Piketty can help to better understand some of the criticisms he has received, and that it finds some echo in current debates in normative political theory on political feasibility, utopianism, and realism.

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<sup>1</sup> This crossed reading of Piketty and Ricoeur is not motivated by a willingness to unveil an unknown influence of the latter on the former, nor even by the observation of references to Ricoeur in Piketty’s works, since I did not find any. Of course, it does not mean that Piketty did not read Ricoeur’s works.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 deals with Ricoeur's singular analysis of the dialectics of ideology and utopia, which he sees as two inseparable facets of social imagination. His views on the links between ideology and utopia underlines the main characteristics of his approach, and its distinction between good and bad utopias. Sections 3 and 4 try to apply Ricoeur's reflections on ideology and utopia to Piketty's thought to enrich its normative framework, first, in view of the latter's conception of history as a struggle of ideologies, and second, with respect to the alternative socio-economic system he describes in his latest works, participatory socialism. As to the first point, I question whether Piketty defends an idealist, teleological, and dialectic view of history (section 3). In section 4, I discuss the multiple origins, the foundations, and the nature of Piketty's socialism and its utopian character through the lens of Ricoeur. I claim that the categories of 'utopianism' and 'realism', which are harshly debated today in political theory, helps in understanding the reception of Piketty's project. I conclude by summarizing the results of this 'Ricoeurian' interpretation of Piketty, adding further thoughts on how his works may help economists to (re)consider economics as a critical, engaged, and emancipatory social science, cultivating the utopian spirit.

## **II. RICOEUR AND THE DIALECTICS OF IDEOLOGY AND UTOPIA**

Ricoeur's singular analysis of ideology and utopia is part of his wider and long-lasting reflections on imagination (Amalric 2021, 37-38). For Ricoeur, ideology and utopia are two conflicting though complementary "idealities" (Roman 2021c, 134). Inspired by Mannheim, Ricoeur thinks about ideology and utopia together. But what characterizes his approach is to think of them as two inseparable facets of our "social imagination" (Ricoeur 1986a, 1), or more precisely, as transhistorical structures of social imagination working at, respectively, the conservation and the transformation of social order. Ricoeur builds upon an innovative three-levels analysis for ideology and utopia, these levels echoing and responding to each other, and he underlines a double polarity both within ideology and utopia and between them.

### ***III. The Two Inseparable Facets of Social Imagination***

These two idealities at the heart of our social imagination establish our collective identity. In order to exist, every society needs a representation of its own identity. On the political level, "the social imaginary is reflected in the conflicting tension between ideology and utopia" (Roman 2021a,

23). No representation of social order is possible without ideology *and* utopia. For Ricoeur, ideology needs utopia, and vice versa, though it is often difficult to think of them together because each of these two poles is often presented “in a polemical and sometimes pejorative sense that prevents us from understanding the social function of the collective imagination” (1984, 53). There is a “crossed game” and “mutual exchanges” between ideology and utopia (Ricoeur 1986b, 260; 1984, 1963). We always need utopia in its fundamental functions of contestation and projection into a radical ‘elsewhere’ to cure the rigidity and petrification of ideologies. But we also need ideology to cure utopia from the “madness” it may fall into and to provide a historical community with a narrative identity (Ricoeur 1984, 63–64; 1986a, 310). In the end, there is always an unsurpassable tension between ideology and utopia that are dialectically linked, so much so that it might be difficult sometimes to decide whether a mode of thinking is ideological or utopian (Ricoeur 1986b, 261). According to Ricoeur, “we are always caught in this oscillation between ideology and utopia,” and thus, we have no choice but to “let ourselves be drawn into the circle and then try to make it a spiral” (1986a, 310).

Both ideologies and utopias are necessary for our collective narratives and identity. Ricoeur provided a rehabilitation and redefinition of utopia at a time when it was decried. Accordingly, utopia is neither reduced to a mere literary style, nor to a critical function of reality. Following Mannheim,<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur gives priority to ‘practical’ and political utopias over literary utopias, favoring Saint-Simon and Fourier over More and Campanella, because the former aim at the contestation and concrete transformation of our historical and social reality. Utopia has a projective and practical function. That is why Ricoeur sees the foundation of utopia in Müntzer and in the works of the first socialists rather than in More. There is in human beings an original desire for utopia which is an original desire of the right and the good, prompting the variations of utopian imagination and underlying the protests and transgressions of practical utopia (Amalric 2021, 52–53). In Abensour’s words, man is a “utopian animal” who always craves for emancipation (2013, 17–18, 20, 31, 60). For Ricoeur, it is impossible to imagine a society without utopia because it would be a society without purpose (1986a, 283). Utopia is an escape from, and the ‘weapon of criticism’ of, social order. It helps us to understand the contingency of existing order (299–300), to take a fresh look at our reality,

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<sup>2</sup> For more details on Mannheim’s views on utopia and its limits, see Levitas ([1990] 2010, chapter 3).

“in which nothing can be taken for granted anymore”, and to open the field of possibilities beyond reality (Ricoeur 1986b, 257–258). Utopias are imaginative variations about power and authority, and they are indispensable to achieving a vibrant democracy driven by the immanent tension between the power that is exercised and the possibility of challenging it (Roman 2021b, 21). Utopian pluralism and the conflict of utopias (and ideologies) are necessary conditions of the democratic project (Amalric 2021, 55).

### ***II.II. Commonalities and Differences between Ideology and Utopia***

For Ricoeur, what ideology and utopia have in common, and what makes it possible to think of them together, is their necessary “non-conformity” (“noncongruence”) with social and historical reality, as Mannheim had noticed (Ricoeur 1986a, 3). But ideology exercises a resistance to change and aims at preserving the past order, while utopia is oriented toward the future and brings about change, breaking through “the thickness of reality” (309).<sup>3</sup> Ideology is mainly linked to dominant groups, whereas utopia is supported by emerging groups. Utopia can be seen as a kind of transformative and developing ideology. Ricoeur stresses, in an original way, that the polarity between ideology and utopia illustrates the two sides of social imagination (310). Ideology corresponds to the conservation or reproductive function of imagination, our memory of things through “paintings”, “portraits”, and “pictures” (Mongin 2021, 61). Utopia, by contrast, represents “fiction”, the constructive or productive function of imagination (Ricoeur 1986a, 310; Mongin 2021, 61). It reconfigures reality through the figuration of a nowhere, a u-topia.

There is, in fact, a double polarity between ideology and utopia, both among them and within each of them (Ricoeur 1986b, 254). Ideology and utopia have both a positive and constructive role, and a negative and destructive side, or sound and pathological forms (Ricoeur 1984, 54). Inspired by Geertz, Ricoeur emphasizes that the positive side of ideology is to preserve collective identity and social order—its integrative function—which is pre-existent to any distortion. But against Geertz, he claims that we still need to criticize ideologies, and this is precisely the role of utopia (Amalric 2021, 42). Its positive side is to explore the possible, or its subversive, critical function. On the negative side, ideology is conservative and distorts reality, often to the advantage of the dominant groups,

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<sup>3</sup> For Hodgson, too, “the word ‘utopia’ fosters a likelihood of change, and points to an unfulfilled future that differs from the present” (1999, 4).

whereas utopia can appear as mere fantasy, as ‘an escape from reality’ or as the chimerical dream of an unreachable ideal.

Ricoeur goes further than Mannheim<sup>4</sup> into the analysis of the dialectics of ideology and utopia by identifying, through a specific method which he calls a “regressive method” (Ricoeur 1986a, 311), three parallel levels of depth for each, from the most superficial level to the most profound. The motivation for this method is to investigate beyond the apparent meanings of ideology and utopia, i.e., their “pathological” meaning, to reach their more essential and positive meanings (Amalric 2021, 46). It thus innovatively combines, rather than separates, different meanings of these concepts and formulates a hierarchy among them.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it allows Ricoeur to highlight a dynamic correlation between ideology and utopia.

Let’s start with ideology. There are, Ricoeur claims, three uses of the concept, all of them equally legitimate, corresponding to three levels of depth. On the first, most superficial level, remaining at the surface of the phenomenon, we find ideology as distortion and dissimulation. This is Marx’s early view of ideology as presented in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and in *The German Ideology*, in which ideology is supposed to offer an inverted view of reality as opposed to praxis (Ricoeur 1984, 54-56). On the second, deeper level, ideology is the legitimation or justification of domination (56-57). It is close to Marx’s notion that the ideas of ruling classes become the dominant ideas by being presented as universal ideas. Domination always wants to justify itself, Ricoeur notes, and ideology is necessary to the process of legitimation of power and authority. Inspired by Weber and Arendt, Ricoeur claims that there is always “a gap to close, a kind of surplus-value of belief that every authority needs to extort from its subordinates” (57). On the third, deepest and most fundamental level, ideology should be seen as “integration into social memory” (58-60). In Ricoeur’s words: “Any group is held together by the stable and lasting image it creates of itself. This stable and lasting image expresses the deepest level of the ideological phenomenon” (59). For him, this illusion is not the most important phenomenon, it is only a corruption of the process of legitimation which is rooted in the integrative function of ideology.

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<sup>4</sup> For more details on Ricoeur’s analysis and critique of Mannheim on ideology and utopia, see Ricoeur 1986a, chapters 10 and 16.

<sup>5</sup> On the multiple meanings given to ideology in political theory, see Geuss (1981) and Freeden (2003).



Ricoeur then offers a parallel analysis of utopia. The three levels of ideology and utopia complement one another. While under its three forms ideology reinforces, redoubles, and preserves a social group and order, providing an interpretation of real life, utopia is meant to project the imagination out of reality in an elsewhere which is also a nowhere, in a spatial and temporal exteriority (60). There are three parallel levels of utopia that Ricoeur studies in a reverse order, from the bottom up because, he argues, it's easier to show how utopia, in its fundamental sense, is the necessary complement of ideology in its fundamental sense. On the third, deepest and most fundamental level, utopia is the proposal for an alternative society: "If ideology preserves and maintains reality, utopia essentially questions it" (60). All areas of life in society are concerned, be it family, modes of appropriation and consumption, or political and religious life. Utopia cannot be defined by its content, but rather by its main function, which is always to imagine an alternative society, against the integrative function of ideology. On the second level, utopia represents a questioning of power, responding to the parallel middle level of ideology, which aims at legitimizing authority (61–63). Utopias are seen by Ricoeur as 'imaginative variations' of power and human emancipation. At last, with the third, most superficial level of utopia, we reach its pathological form, which is the opposite of that of ideology: "Where ideology reinforces real life, praxis, utopia makes the real itself vanish in favour of perfectionist, ultimately unattainable schemes" (62). It is the negative side of utopia, when the 'crazy' all-or-nothing logic replaces the logic of action. Thus, for Ricoeur it's important to come back to the positive, liberating function of utopia, "concealed by its own caricatures" (63). Utopia imagines the no-where and opens the scope of possibilities.

### ***II.III. Good and Bad Utopias***

But what are the criteria for distinguishing 'good' from 'bad' utopias? Ricoeur explores this issue, too, and provides his own answer that I will use later to assess Piketty's proposal of an alternative socio-economic system, his participatory socialism. Inspired by Bloch's concept of "concrete utopia" (1986, 157), Ricoeur distinguishes good from bad utopias, or utopia from *utopianism* in the following manner: good utopias are 'practical', political utopias actualizing latent potentialities from the past and present and aiming at effectively transforming social order, while bad ones are an escape from reality, or the chimerical dreams of a perfect though unrealizable society, often based on an unrealistic view of human nature and

without regard for history. The “utopian mentality” is dangerous when it leads to “the absence of any reflection of a practical and political nature on the support that utopia can find in the existing reality, in its institutions,” and when it is unable to “designate the first step that should be taken in the direction of its realization from the existing reality” (Ricoeur 1984, 62).

Utopia must be a space of exploration of other possible worlds, societies, institutions, relying on the lessons of history. Following Bloch, Ricoeur decides to re-historicize utopias, seen as “unfulfilled promises of the past,” or “variations on the possible, which history keeps in mind” (Pieron 2021, 115). As Roman rightly noted, for Ricoeur utopia is “the production of a new form determined by an already-there, by an a posteriori appropriation of not yet actualized possibilities which gives them a new meaning” (Roman 2021a, 18), and which counterbalances the “nowhere” of utopia, otherwise condemned to be a mere reverie (Foessel 2021, 93). The end of the good utopia is to find a proper balance between what Ricoeur calls the “desirable absolute” and the “achievable optimum,” or between the “expectation horizon” and the “experience space” (Roman 2021a, 10). A good utopia reconciles the ‘ethics of conviction’, which is defined by Ricoeur as the ‘excellence of the preferable’, with the ‘ethics of responsibility’ defined by what is realizable in a specific historical context (Ricoeur 1986b), while a bad utopia is impracticable. Utopia defines an ideal, but if it wants to serve as a regulating horizon and motivate action, it must be based upon experience and be practical and feasible, at least in part. It has more to do with finding the best compromise than with the posture of radical conflict (Roman 2021a, 13–14). But Ricoeur does not explain to us how to identify these latent possibilities of the past and present. That’s where Piketty’s work, and critical social science in general, might play an important role. The careful study of social experimentations throughout history, of their successes and failures, offers a wide range of experiments of human inventiveness from which we can draw some lessons to better understand which kind of institutions are possible and necessary to revive what Piketty sees as a long-term movement towards equality.

### III. PIKETTY’S VIEW OF HISTORY: A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

Ricoeur’s analysis of the dialectics of ideology and utopia can be fruitfully applied to Piketty’s most recent works (Piketty 2020, 2022a), and more specifically, to his views on ideologies, which Piketty considers to be the

driving forces of history. His interest in history is of crucial importance in his works. He regards his work as history and social science, as a continuation of the new economic and social history promoted by, among others, the French *Annales School* of history (Piketty 2022a, 5). What interests us most here, however, is Piketty's views on ideologies, which take center stage in his big narrative upon the global history of inequality. He presents history as the "struggle of ideologies" (Piketty 2020, 1035-1036) and a quest for justice and equality, with different "inequality regimes" succeeding over time (2-3). Piketty's history of inequality is not merely descriptive (see by contrast Scheidel 2017). This section will thus study Piketty's view of history from a philosophical perspective. Even though Piketty does not try to offer a new philosophy of history, it is interesting to identify the main features of his history of inequality and to question its idealist, teleological, and dialectical dimension.

### ***III.1. An Idealistic View of History?***

I explore first the traditional opposition between the idealist and the materialist views of history, which Piketty uses to clarify his position and, more generally, to distance himself from what he sees (somewhat distortingly) as the Marxist view of history. Contrary to most of his fellow economists, Piketty claims that inequality is mostly due to political and ideological causes, setting the degree of acceptability of society towards the level (and forms) of inequality, rather than to economic or technological causes (2020, 7). He starts from the idea that every society needs to make sense of and justify its inequalities to perpetuate itself (1). In doing so, it develops different and competing discourses and narratives, or ideologies, with a dominant ideology structuring the existing "inequality regime", based upon a "political regime" and a "property regime" (4).

In "a self-conscious inversion of Marx" (Dennison 2021, 162), Piketty argues that: "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of the struggle of ideologies and the quest for justice" (2020, 1035). Ideas and ideologies "count in history," and have their own autonomy (1035, 7-10). For Piketty, the political and ideological superstructure is not (fully) determined by the economic infrastructure: "Given an economy and a set of productive forces in a certain state of development [...] a range of possible ideological, political, and inequality regimes always exists" (8). These clear albeit provocative statements very much sound like an idealist view of history (Brisset and Walraevens 2020; Motadel and Drayton 2021). But Piketty's position is more nuanced than it seems at first sight, especially

in his latest book, *A Brief History of Equality*, maybe in response to some of the criticisms he faced for *C&I*. Moreover, even in the latter book, there are Marxist overtones in his view of history and ideology, which is not without creating some tensions (Dennison 2021; Morgan 2021). Piketty does not deny that power relationships and social struggles play an important (though limited) role in history, especially in the transition from one inequality regime to another (Piketty 2022a, 13–15). What he fights against, I think, is an overly mechanistic and deterministic view of history that very few would endorse today. For Piketty, the study of history teaches us that similar levels of material and productive forces can always lead to different outcomes and paths, depending on the prevailing ideological balance of power. History exhibits different ‘trajectories’ and astonishing ‘bifurcations’ (or ‘switch points’) (Piketty 2020), as in Sweden in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of social democracy. Eventually, Piketty seems to adopt a kind of reasonable mixed view between idealism and materialism (Piketty 2022a, Introduction), giving credit to both, though he appears more on the side of the former than of the latter with his constant emphasis on the role and independence of ideas in history.

Now, what is his definition and view of the notion of ideology, so central to his history of inequality? It is defined “in a positive and constructive way”, but somewhat vaguely, as “more or less coherent discourses” and “a set of a priori plausible ideas” on “how society should be structured”, having economic, political, and social dimensions (Piketty 2020, 3, 9). Or again, as “an attempt to respond to a broad set of questions concerning the desirable or ideal organization of society,” expressing an idea of social justice (3, 9).

The conceptual limits of Piketty’s notion of ideology have been repeatedly underlined (Brisset and Walraevens 2020; Motadel and Drayton 2021; Reddy 2021; Zevin 2021). Here it seems that Ricoeur’s analysis of ideology can be helpful to complete and enrich Piketty’s view by providing stronger philosophical foundations to it. For the latter, ideologies are essentially discourses and narratives serving to justify inequalities “more or less truthfully” (Piketty 2020, 3; 1035), and defining two things: political borders (the “political regime”) and property (the “property regime”). In other words, ideologies define who has rights and who owns what, both of which suggest “the exclusion of others” (Witztum 2021, 3). Thus, Piketty’s view of ideology seems closer to Ricoeur’s second level of ideology, i.e., as a legitimation of existing power and inequality or domination. Sometimes Piketty’s analysis of ideology might also be reminiscent of Marx’s

early view of ideology as distortion and dissimulation, especially in his important critique of the fallacy and illusion of meritocracy in neoproprietarism, which he sees as today's dominant ideology (Piketty 2020, 1–2, 709–713). More generally, there are Marxist overtones in Piketty's overall presentation of proprietarian societies being born out of and held by an ideology supported by the elites, the rich and powerful to confer legitimacy on their rights to property, which is then adopted by society (Denison 2021). What reading Ricoeur fundamentally adds to Piketty's mostly descriptive and neutral view of ideology is the idea that there are different meanings and levels of ideology which combine, and further, that ideologies have—first and foremost—a structural and constructive though conservative power, creating and supporting a certain view of collective identity and memory. They help to maintain the stability of social order and identity or, in Piketty's words, of the inequality regimes, and mainly serve the interests of dominant groups. That's why it is difficult to replace them. Piketty's view has sometimes strikingly 'Ricoeurian' overtones, for example, when he emphasizes that “every ideology attempts [...] to impose meaning on a complex social reality” because “human beings will inevitably attempt to make sense of the societies they live in, no matter how unequal or unjust they may be” (2020, 16). Ricoeur also importantly adds that ideologies are inextricably linked with the imagination of alternative views of society and social justice, or utopias.

### ***III.II. A Teleological View of History?***

There is also in Piketty's view of history an apparent teleological dimension. In several passages in *C&I* and maybe even more in *A Brief History of Equality*, Piketty seems to assign to modern history a specific end or *telos*, namely equality. History, he tells us, is a relentless quest for justice and equality (Piketty 2020, 1035–1037). The conclusion he draws from his historical analysis of inequality regimes is that “what made economic development and human progress possible was the struggle for equality and education and not the sanctification of property, stability, or inequality” (3). There is “a historic trend toward ever greater equality” (33). The title of Piketty's latest book (Piketty 2022a), as well as the title and first lines of its first chapter, “The Movement toward Equality,” are quite explicit: “there has been a long-term movement over the course of history toward more social, economic, and political equality” (1).

Thus, at least since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there is for Piketty a real, long-term though unachieved tendency toward equality, an advance toward the

equalization of conditions that is reminiscent of Tocqueville, and a faith in the progress of society. But it does not mean that for him history is predetermined and linear. Quite the contrary: His works on highest incomes and subsequent inequalities have long highlighted the rise of inequality since the 1980s, leading to a rejection of the famous inverted-U Kuznets curve (Piketty 2014). There is now a form of consensus in the economic and political sphere on the ‘revival of inequality.’ But in Piketty’s narrative, it leads to “reversing the historic trend toward ever greater equality” (Piketty 2020, 33). It is seen as an exception to the rule, to the general levelling trend in modern history, and as a consequence of the failures of social democracy and of the fall of communism, which led to the rise and dominance of neoproprietary ideology. The history of equality is not “a linear one” and is “punctuated by multiple phases of regression and identitarian introversion” (Piketty 2022a, 1). At every moment of history, multiple “trajectories” are always possible (Piketty 2020, 1037). There is a fundamental contingency of history.

Piketty’s highlighting of a trend of history toward equality is meant to be a descriptive point of view, a statement based upon a careful analysis of scientific data on inequality by social scientists, rather than a philosophical or normative analysis of the predetermined *telos* of human history. But he switches more clearly to a normative stance when he imagines the future and argues that the historical quest for equality and justice can and will continue (Piketty 2022a, viii), at least if we enter the battle of ideas and support a new ideology of equality with its attendant socio-economic system—participatory socialism—though its implementation would not be the ‘end of history’. Piketty’s idealism and his claimed optimism join here.

### ***III.III. A Stadial and Dialectical View of History?***

Piketty’s narrative about human progress toward equality is based upon the observation and distinction of different and successive inequality regimes, supported by a specific ideology and institutional framework: from the trifunctional societies of the premodern era, to the ownership societies with first proprietary societies and then communist societies and social democracies, to today’s hypercapitalist societies founded on the neoproprietary ideology. This typology of inequality regimes might at first sight look like a stadial theory of history, in the spirit of the great narratives about the progress of society in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But these ‘stages’ of modern history and distinct inequality regimes are not meant

to be a natural course through which every society should necessarily pass. Rather, they help us to identify the numerous forms that social regulation has taken over time and space, the infinite inventiveness of human societies to justify and regulate their inequalities through different institutional schemes. For Piketty, there is a big fund of “historical experimentation” (Piketty 2020, 10, 41, 116, 119, 495) from which we can draw some lessons to imagine new forms of ideology and inequality regimes because we face an open future with multiple possibilities for regulating inequality.<sup>6</sup> Piketty’s history looks at the past, but always with an eye on the future.

Finally, Piketty’s view of history seems to have a dialectical aspect. Each inequality regime has its own limits and contradictions, or internal sources of instability, which tend to exacerbate themselves leading to a crisis and to the need for of a new narrative about inequality—a new inequality regime with institutions implementing a different political and property regime. The rise of social democracy is seen as a reaction to the increasing concentration of incomes and wealth in proprietary societies which became more and more difficult to justify in proprietary societies, and to the threat of communist societies. Likewise, today’s continued increase of inequality under neoproprietarianism and its growing inability to justify them by the meritocratic narrative—not to mention its inability to answer to climate crisis—all combine to fuel peoples’ dissatisfaction, which translates into the rise of social nativism, populism, and nationalism, and calls for an egalitarian alternative (Piketty 2020, 1-3, 821, 825).

#### IV. PIKETTY’S UTOPIA: PARTICIPATORY SOCIALISM

Piketty does not simply describe the characteristics and limits of the different regimes of inequality which existed throughout human history; he also wants to actively participate in the struggle of ideologies by imagining a new egalitarian ideology, or a utopia, in Ricoeur’s sense, which would continue what he sees as the long-run march of modernity toward equality. Some passages of the conclusion of *C&I* sound quite Ricoeurian in spirit, for example, when he writes that “human societies have yet to exhaust their capacity to imagine new ideological and institutional solutions” (1034). Or when he claims that not only do we have to “carefully scrutinize today’s inequality regimes and the way they are justified.

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<sup>6</sup> As remarked by Morgan (2021), it means that there are no laws of capitalism for Piketty, what seems to be in contrast with his position in *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* in which he argued for two fundamental ‘laws of capitalism’.

Above all, we need to understand what institutional arrangements and what types of socioeconomic organization can truly contribute to human and social emancipation” (1035). Imagining a new form of egalitarian inequality regime is the topic of the last chapter of *C&I* in which he provides, for the first time, well-defined normative foundations for his repeated policy proposals to reduce inequality. We find here the elements of a theory of social justice, or an economic theory of justice (Brisset and Walraevens 2021), defining an ideal socio-economic model—his theory of participatory socialism. For Ricoeur, “to develop a critique of ideology is thus always to oppose a utopian imagination to an ideological imagination: it is to bet on an imagination of the new against a dominant imagination already there and already operating” (Amalric 2021, 44). This is what Piketty does, I argue, with his critique of the dominant neoproprietarian ideology, of its sacralization of markets, private property and billionaire entrepreneurs, and of its meritocratic discourse, which only serve to naturalize inequality (Piketty 2020, 709–716). He does it too with his imagination of an alternative, participatory socialism, based upon the lessons of history.

#### ***IV.1. The Multiple Origins of Piketty’s Participatory Socialism***

In order to elaborate his theory of social justice, Piketty draws on multiple sources (Piketty 2020, 970, fn. 3), among which one can identify the French “solidarism” of Fouillée, Bourgeois, and Durkheim with their ideas of “social debt” (562). This movement first appeared in France at the end of the nineteenth century and played a fundamental role in the emergence of its social state. It considered property to be essentially social, the product of a collective and intergenerational effort and cooperation, which should therefore (in part) be returned to society. Solidarism can be seen as a form of ‘liberal socialism’.

Another important source of influence on Piketty’s thought of social justice is Rawls’s theory of justice (Brisset and Walraevens 2020; Morgan 2021, section 5), which had a major influence on 20<sup>th</sup> century social science; though Piketty seems to underestimate this filiation (Brisset and Walraevens 2020). In particular, he appropriates Rawls’s difference principle, arguing that the just society “organizes socioeconomic relations, property rights, and the distribution of income and wealth in such a way as to allow its least advantaged members to enjoy the highest possible life conditions” (Piketty 2020, 968). Further, by advocating for a broader distribution of property through an increased progressivity of the



taxation of incomes and wealth and a capital endowment, and by defending a more democratic corporate governance, Piketty's socio-economic model recalls the egalitarian version of "property-owning democracy" supported long ago by James Meade ([1964] 1993, 41-60), by Rawls himself, who refers to Meade and who considered property-owning democracy to be compatible with his own principles of justice (Rawls 1971), and more recently by Atkinson (2015) (see also Morgan 2021), praised by Piketty (2017).

Lastly, Piketty aligns with democratic socialism, which he sees as having reached a limited, unachieved equality (Piketty 2020, chapter 11). He wants his participative socialism to be seen as the next step toward equality, and thus, as a form of radical social democracy, extending what Piketty sees as its successes: progressive taxation and the social state (1036).

#### ***IV.II. The Characteristics of Piketty's Participatory Socialism***

Piketty defines a just society as "one that allows all of its members access to the widest possible range of fundamental goods" (Piketty 2020, 967). So, his theory of justice is based on a metric of 'fundamental goods' rather than utility, capabilities, or primary goods; and the rule of distribution on which it rests is to maximize these fundamental goods and ensure equal access to them for all (Brisset and Walraevens 2020). Piketty's egalitarian theory of justice is founded on the equalization of resources. His concept of fundamental goods is not precisely defined, but he offers a preliminary list, open to debate and likely to change with the evolution of deliberation and new pressing problems for society, including education, health care, the right to vote, "and more generally to participate as fully as possible in the various forms of social, cultural, economic, civic, and political life" (Piketty 2020, 967-968). Piketty's fundamental goods have an air of universal human rights, most of them being part of the United Nations 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As I already indicated, Piketty also endorses Rawls's difference principle and its intent to maximize the situation and opportunities of the least well-off (968), and so he makes a plea for deliberative and participatory democracy, and social federalism. He sees the quest for justice as a collective learning process, based upon extended public deliberation over time and space, with strong cosmopolitan overtones (970).

That said, for Piketty, "it is wise to be wary of abstract and general principles of social justice" because what matters most are the "concrete

policies and institutions” reducing inequality and injustice (969). His participatory socialism is based on the idea of combining private, “temporary,” and “social” property (493). It pleads for a wide de-concentration and constant circulation of private property made possible by a progressive taxation of carbon emissions, of incomes, of wealth, and of its transfers with very high top marginal tax rates for each, allowing for the payment of a substantial capital endowment to everyone, which would guarantee more equality of opportunity, as well as through measures for promoting economic democracy or the power of workers inside firms, inspired by Swedish and German congestion.

Piketty’s project also contains a whole set of measures to ensure a truly equal participation of all in political life. He advocates a fair democracy, one which is not reduced to electoral processes but rather based on democratic and egalitarian deliberation founded on the development of non-profit media companies, on some control of the media, on stricter rules on party and campaign financing, and on the granting of “democratic equality vouchers” (1016), an idea he takes up from Julia Cagé, and which aims to establish a more egalitarian and participatory democracy in order to reduce the influence of private financing on political processes. On the international level, Piketty promotes the creation of transnational assemblies and of co-development treaties to fix crucial issues about borders, fiscality, international trade and investments, and climate change, focusing on global public goods. Piketty’s alternative project of society is meant to redistribute power in society and to provide maximum equal access to fundamental goods, allowing for the greatest participation of everyone to economic, social, and political life.

#### ***IV.III. Piketty, Socialism, and Utopia***

Even though Piketty often claims to be a socialist, he neither defines socialism in his books, nor does he discuss the “complicated intellectual and conceptual history of socialism since the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (Langenohl 2021, 132; see also Zevin 2021, 78). Yet, it is interesting to try to identify the type of socialism that he defends because it helps to better understand some of the criticisms he has received. Certainly, he rejects both the authoritarian state socialism with central planification of the communist era (Piketty 2021; 2022a, 167) and today’s post-communist Chinese model, which he considers “an authoritarian mixed economy” or “a perfect digital dictatorship” (Piketty 2020, 606–611; 2022a, 230–237). What he offers instead is a “participative socialism” (Piketty 2020, chapter

17), or a decentralized, self-managed, democratic, ecological, and multicultural socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Piketty 2022a, chapters 7 and 10). Though this new socialist model is turned towards the future, it has some roots in the past, and especially in solidarism and social democratic thought. We can also establish a filiation with the decentralized and self-managed socialism of the first socialists, as he himself acknowledged (Piketty 2021). Frobert (2019, 2021) has recently distinguished between two views of justice and equality, and thus, two kinds of socialism among the first, so-called ‘utopian’ socialists. Associated with Saint Simon and his followers, the first one relies on the equity criterion and aims for equality of opportunity, while the second one promotes a more radical view of economic equality, beyond mere equal opportunities, and can be found in the works of Blanc, Pecqueur, Raspail, and Sand. Frobert calls these strands of socialism, respectively, “below socialism” (“socialisme de l’en-deçà”) and “beyond socialism” (“socialisme de l’au-delà”) (2021, 7). Piketty belongs to the latter, I argue; but does it mean that he should be seen as a ‘(neo)utopian’ socialist? And if so, in what sense?

The answers to these questions will depend on the meaning we give to the word ‘utopian,’ especially in its association with socialism, which has a long and complex history. As noted by Levitas, “The Marxist tradition has for the most part been strongly antipathetic to utopianism, which it has understood as the construction of blueprints of a future society that are incapable of realization”, though ironically this charge has also been levelled against Marxism by its opponents ([1990] 2010, 41).<sup>7</sup>

Marx and Engels presented a caricatural and dismissive view of what they called in *The Communist Manifesto* the utopian socialism of the first socialists, as opposed to their scientific socialism. But the real bone of contention between them and the utopian socialists “is not about the merit of goals or of images of the future but about the process of transformation, and particularly about the belief that propaganda alone would result in the realization of socialism” (Levitas [1990] 2010, 41). The main problem is their idealistic, as opposed to a materialistic, concept of social change. Likewise, the common meaning of the word is still pejorative today, representing utopia as an escape from reality, as an unrealizable project of society. Piketty’s project is not utopian in the latter sense. But it is, if we place Piketty in the filiation of the radical egalitarianism of the utopian socialists of ‘beyond socialism’, promoting an important

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<sup>7</sup> There are a few important exceptions within the Marxist tradition, like Bloch and Marcuse. See Levitas [1990] 2010, chapters 4 and 6.

redistribution of property and wealth and limited levels of inequality. All the more so knowing that in ‘beyond socialism’ the theoretical principles of socialism, considered to be synonymous with the science of society, must be embodied in practical proposals and social reforms (Frobert 2019, 199, 206).

More importantly, Piketty’s participatory socialism is a utopia in Ricoeur’s positive sense of the word.<sup>8</sup> The latter wrote that “there are two kinds of utopia: those which are escapes and those which are programs and want to be realized” (Ricoeur 1986a, 289). Piketty’s participatory socialism clearly belongs to the latter. Utopia is meant here to be a possible future, rather than an impossible dream. Even though it is not fully implemented or implementable, his project of society is meant to be a useful, practical, and evolving guide for action, for reforming society towards more equality and justice. Participatory socialism is for Piketty a project to overcome capitalism, an alternative narrative about inequality and a new egalitarian ‘horizon’ having two related characteristics which make it a good, practical utopia in Ricoeur’s sense: (i) it is based on a more realistic view of human nature than communism, while being by contrast more “optimistic” on this front than neoproprietarianism, and (ii) “it is firmly rooted in the lessons of global history” (Piketty 2020, 3, 1037).

On the first point, Piketty argues that a fully public or state property, denying any private property, is unrealistic, untenable, and undesirable because it makes no room for the legitimate differences and necessarily non-identical aspirations of human beings (591–594). He privileges a social, “temporary” and “shared” vision of property, as a kind of middle way between the sacralization of private property and respect for individual aspirations in proprietarianism, and their denial in Soviet ideology (592). Thus, Piketty seems to offer an ideal model of society based on a realistic view of human nature, or to use Rawls’s words, a “realistic utopia,” taking people as they are, not as we want them to be (Rawls 1999, 4, 5-6, 11-12). Piketty does not base his participatory socialism on the presence or development in each of us of noble, disinterested feelings of benevolence, solidarity, or fraternity, as one can find recently in Cohen (2009) or Honneth (2017).

On the second point, Piketty draws lessons from his analysis of the history of inequality regimes, rejecting ‘historical experimentation’ that did not work like state socialism, while keeping and extending what for

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<sup>8</sup> Reddy calls Piketty’s participative socialism a “limited utopia,” but he does not explain what he means by it (2021, 18).

him did work: the benefits of social democracy, namely progressive taxation and the social state, or Ricoeur's latent potentialities of history. In line with the latter, who thought that good utopias are always historically determined, because they are a reaction to one or several other ideologies of a given period and inherit from the history of utopias, Piketty tries to reinvent and revive socialism after the fall of communism in order to find egalitarian solutions to the issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to continue the long-run progress of human societies towards justice and equality.

#### ***IV.IV. Utopianism, Realism, and the Overcoming of Capitalism***

Interestingly, my presentation of Piketty's project of society as a 'Ricoeurian' and 'realistic' utopia situates his work at the heart of currently heated debates in political theory and philosophy on the relative merits of ideal and non-ideal theory and on the possibility and/or necessity of combining them (Valentini 2012). In these debates, the seeming opposition between ideal and non-ideal theory might take the form of a distinction between idealistic or utopian theory and realistic theory. Then the discussion focuses on whether considerations of feasibility should constrain normative political theorizing, and if so, what kinds of (realistic) feasibility constraints should be considered as relevant (Valentini 2012; Gilibert and Lawford-Smith 2012). The compatibility of utopianism with realism is widely debated and some authors think that it is possible to fruitfully combine them (Raekstad 2016, 2020a), as Piketty seems to try to do. This is the case of Gilibert and Lawford-Smith who offer a model combining evaluations of desirability and feasibility, reconciling ideal and non-ideal theory, or utopianism and realism. In a general sense, "some state of affairs is feasible if there is a way we can bring it about", now or later (Gilibert and Lawford-Smith 2012, 809). They distinguish "soft" constraints (economic, social, political, or religious constraints) and "hard" constraints (biological) (813-814). Then, they describe a three-step approach on the way evaluations of desirability and feasibility should be combined. Step 1 must focus on the formulation and definition of the main principles, and here only hard constraints should be considered (819-820). Step 2 should deal with proposals of institutions implementing the principles of step 1. Here questions of stability and soft constraints must be considered (820). Finally, step 3 must deal with strategies of political reforms leading to the realization of the institutional framework defined in step 2, or aspects of accessibility (820).

This theoretical framework can help to better understand some of the criticisms that have been levelled at Piketty's project of society. In particular, some commentators have raised doubt about the capacity of his participatory socialism, if it was implemented, to truly 'overcome' capitalism, as Piketty claims (Bihl and Husson 2020; Brisset and Walraevens 2020; Witztum 2021; Zevin 2021; Lordon 2021).<sup>9</sup> It is rather seen as a reformist project, not going much beyond social democracy or egalitarian forms of property-owning democracy because it would tend mainly to redistribute private property more equally. In a sense, it would not be transformative, radical, or utopian enough for those wishing to transcend capitalism.

Of course, statements about the post-capitalist character of Piketty's project of society might depend, at least in part, on the definition of capitalism we adopt. Piketty provides a definition which is embodied in his own framework of the reasoned history of inequality regimes. Capitalism is seen as an advanced, historically situated form of proprietorship, emerging "in the era of heavy industry and international financial investment, that is, primarily in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries," and culminating in today's "globalized digital hypercapitalism" (Piketty 2020, 154). It is defined as "a historical movement that seeks constantly to expand the limits of private property and asset accumulation beyond traditional forms of ownership and existing state boundaries" (154). Hence Piketty's insistence on his concept of 'temporary' property, or a permanent and more widespread circulation of private property that would be allowed by his redistributive measures. More generally, capitalism can be defined as a socio-economic system having some or all of the following features: (i) the bulk of the means of production is privately owned and controlled, (ii) markets are the main mechanism allocating inputs and outputs of production, (iii) there is a class division between capital owners and workers, and (iv) production is oriented toward capital accumulation and profit rather than to the satisfaction of human needs (Gilabert and O'Neill 2019). Socialism, as an alternative to capitalism, would involve, by contrast, removing at least one if not all of these features, and especially the first one (see Roemer's market socialism in Roemer 1994, or Rawls's liberal socialism in Rawls 1971, §42). It has traditionally been defined upon the public or social property and control of the means of production. Socialism is about extending social empowerment and democratic control over the economy (Gilabert and O'Neill 2019; Wright 2010). Now, with the definition I have given of capitalism, a

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDY3aczWOd0>

fairer and equal distribution of social wealth is not enough for transcending capitalism. It doesn't seem to deeply question features (ii) and (iv), and it would merely weaken features (i) and (iii).

In Piketty's defense, however, we can think that guaranteeing maximum equal access to fundamental goods to everyone might require that a (quite) significant part of social wealth and of the means of production be publicly owned or under social control. Moreover, his participatory socialism is meant to be an open model subject to change with the evolution of public debate and new data, in line with his view of justice as a deliberative and never-ending process animated by the democratic public sphere. Precisely, in his latest book, *A Brief History of Equality*, Piketty provides further thoughts and policy proposals for implementing his participatory socialism, among which one finds some motivations for the development of commons and cooperatives, and positive comments on Bernard Friot's communist proposal of a life wage (169). He also endorses the support of a system of job guarantee (Tcherneva 2020), the strengthening of minimum income schemes, and the development of the non-profit sector (chapter 7). Finally, he pleads more explicitly for the de-commodification of society and for the collective redefinition of needs. All these elements seem more in agreement with his stated intention to transcend private property and to overcome capitalism, giving more substance to the post-capitalist, socialist character of his project.

Another type of criticism levelled at Piketty's social project concerns what can be seen as its alleged insufficient 'realism,' in the sense that he does not tackle enough with the conditions of its feasibility and accessibility in today's world (Bihr and Husson 2020; Zevin 2021; Reddy 2021). His project is thus deficient on step 3 of the process of combination of utopianism with realism sketched above, i.e., on the process leading to a socialist society, a key issue in debates about socialism. This is how we can interpret Bihr and Husson's view of Piketty's participatory socialism as an 'utopian socialism' (Bihr and Husson 2020, chapter 6; see also Motadel and Drayton 2021, 36). The word 'utopian' is used by them in its pejorative, Marxist sense, to mean that Piketty's project is too idealistic, or in other words, too confident about the power of ideas to change the world, and hence, not attentive enough to the real conditions of political change or to obstacles that his project would face in the material world from those who believe in, benefit from, and defend neoproprietarian ideology. Specifically, Piketty does not really explain why or how a new majoritarian political coalition would or could form, endorsing his socialist

project and trying to implement it when in power (Zevin 2021, 76). Yet, I do think that his project on political and economic differences should be seen as one step in that direction (Piketty 2020, chapters 14 and 15; Gethin et al. 2021). It is meant to inform us better about the historical dynamics of electoral cleavages and its recent changes, and thus could be used to draw some lessons from history for reconstructing a majoritarian, socialist, or egalitarian coalition.

## V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I tried to show why and how Ricoeur's rehabilitation of utopian thinking, and his innovative analysis of the dialectics of ideology and utopia might help both to shed new light on and give stronger philosophical foundations to Piketty's view of history as the struggle of ideologies and to his alternative project of participatory socialism, which I interpreted as a 'good' utopia in Ricoeur's sense. Both Ricoeur and Piketty plead for taking into account the feasibility of utopias. We must not oppose utopianism with realism, but rather try to find a proper balance between them to awaken the utopian desire and mobilize people for action. Piketty's project allies the critical and transformative functions of utopia. It is not meant to be the final word on ideal society, but only an alternative or a 'possible world', which should be discussed and compared with others in the endless public debate about social justice. Presenting Piketty's project in this way as a 'Ricoeurian' and 'realistic' utopia helps, I think, to better understand some of the criticisms levelled against him. Additionally, these discussions find an echo in current debates in normative political theory over the benefits of ideal and non-ideal theory and of their possible reconciliation, combining utopianism with realism by defining feasibility constraints that political theories should respect.

Good utopias can make useful contributions to social science and be fundamental guides for public policies. Piketty's latest books, I argue, are a prime example of this. But they show that the reverse is also true, in the sense that social science can help to extend the frontiers of the possible and to imagine new utopias. His works dispel an unorthodox view of economics as a historical, social, political, and moral science. The historical study of inequality and of their discursive and institutional structures of justification, or inequality regimes, combining intellectual and quantitative history, allows to highlight the political and ideological foundations of inequality. More than that, it offers important lessons for building a new egalitarian socio-economic model or utopia. He repeatedly underlines



the role of statistics for fighting injustice and promoting equality (see Piketty 2022b). The development and widespread diffusion of economic data on inequalities are seen by Piketty as a means to improve democracy through citizens' enlightenment and their appropriation of economic knowledge (Piketty 2020, 1039-1041; 2022a, 244; Piketty, Saez and Zucman 2022, 2), providing the necessary epistemic conditions of a successful deliberative and participatory democracy and of an open and inclusive public debate about social justice. As rightly noted by Langenohl, "Thomas Piketty has written a book [C&I] that is truly dedicated to the idea of economic enlightenment" (2021, 121), relying on and calling for other researchers to follow his steps in developing and using economic data to foster human emancipation. For Piketty, "more just and egalitarian societies are always possible", but if "progress exists [...] it is a struggle, and it depends above all on rational analysis of historical changes and all their consequences, positive as well as negative" (2020, 20). Under Piketty's pen, economics becomes a critical, engaged, and emancipatory social science. At the end of his books, Piketty quite naturally pleads for a decompartmentalization of knowledge and for an interdisciplinary perspective on economics as a normative and moral science (Piketty 2014, 2020).

To conclude, in line with Ricoeur's recommendation, Piketty's project of participatory socialism seems to reconcile the 'ethics of conviction', or his socialist sympathies and his ideal of radical equality, with the 'ethics of responsibility' and the 'logic of action' by defining concrete, implementable, and realistic though ambitious proposals to advance social justice and equality, trying to find a proper balance between idealism and realism. Piketty's participatory socialism unites the critical and transformative functions of utopia. Through his work in history and social science, he seems able to identify some latent, unfulfilled possibilities of the past and present which are necessary for building 'good', practical utopias as Ricoeur recommends it.

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