

## **ETHICS AND ECONOMICS**

**Unjust Deserts: How the Rich Are Taking  
Our Common Inheritance**  
**Gar Alperovitz and Lew Daly**  
New York: The New Press, 2008 (220 pages)

*Unjust Deserts* tackles the implications of inherited social and especially intellectual capital for distributive justice. The authors' view is that individuals deserve relatively little of the income or wealth they accumulate because the society in which they live makes possible the lion's share of their gain. As knowledge accumulates, today's "self-made man" is really only taking advantage of the collective efforts of those who have preceded him. As often as not, he is just lucky enough to be the first one to arrive at his wealth-generating innovation.

The authors remind us of an important truth: The labor and capital inputs of any member of the present generation only work to generate income and wealth because of those who have gone before. We all stand on the shoulders of the countless millions who have preceded us. Theirs is "the gift of the past." Furthermore, the authors claim, "since society at large makes major contributions to economic achievement, it too has 'earned' and deserves a share of what has been created." Indeed, society has a "primary moral claim to that (very large) portion of wealth that the inherited knowledge it has contributed now creates."

In order to give society its share, the authors propose a variety of measures having to do with taxation of estates, redistributions of equity shares and capital stakes in the economy, and new educational subsidies to ensure equal access to socially acquired knowledge.

The weaknesses of the book are several. They all stem from one nodal point: Alperovitz and Daly repeatedly deem things to be problems that are instead simply the ordinary and inevitable incidents of human life and social flourishing. Put simply, the authors are trying to fix what is not broken.

The book is premised on the claim that there has been growing inequality of wealth and income in the United States since the 1920s. The authors see this as unequivocally problematic, but the premise is shaky. When it comes to distributive claims, there are innumerable difficulties of measurement and complex arguments over the relative importance of income, wealth, and individual versus family units. It is certainly the case that the past century has witnessed a catastrophic breakdown of the American family, and this atomization has been shown to impact income and wealth distributions. Furthermore, these distributions are not static in America: lower income households routinely rise through the income distribution profile. Most important, even if we stipulate growing inequality, it is clear that in absolute terms the material conditions of Americans have improved dramatically over the past century. The rich are not getting richer while the poor get poorer. Both are getting richer, albeit at different rates. In terms of consumption, comfort, convenience, and life expectancy, all levels of society have become dramatically better off, as inequality has purportedly grown.

The authors also downplay the importance of individual initiative in carving out unique pieces of the commons, in terms of the importance of this initiative in making possible a workable and predictable rights-based legal framework. The thrust of their argument denies Madison's claim in *Federalist 10*: "The diversity in the faculties of men" is the origin of the legitimate rights of property. By what other mechanism can we justly assign title and entitlement?

The authors also posit "society" as if it is a coherent, timeless body that is in a position to make the same kind of coherent moral claim as rights-bearing individuals. They fail to consider that if past society is responsible for present profits, it is that past society—not current society or its members—that is really entitled to make a moral claim on us.

A more sober account might recognize the fact that there are so many patrimonies and so little time to figure out how to distribute them all. It is the nature of human life that we are always paying it forward. That we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before can also be said of every human venture imaginable—philosophical, religious, creative, artistic—not just wealth accumulation. These ventures in turn become the patrimony that is passed down to future generations. The book that I write today might contain ideas that make a scholar of tomorrow wealthy beyond my imaginings—or, in my wildest dreams, make my country a better place. Indeed, the satisfaction I derive from writing my hypothetical book—even discounted by what I take to be the very tiny possibility that it will have the effects I dream of—far outweighs any monetary gain I am likely to reap in my lifetime.

Real human happiness, we can only pray, and progress, we can only expect, will not flow from ensuring that wealth and income are distributed along lines ordained by egalitarian social theorists. Does it make sense to dedicate ourselves to the quixotic effort to repay

debts to the past with redistributions of capital, rather than with historical awareness and gratitude? Happiness is surely more likely to come from living our lives with a steady eye on the promise of the future.

As we consider the kernels of truth in the authors' argument, we should remind ourselves that Abraham Lincoln, in his Lyceum Address, expressed what Alperovitz and Daly know, but Lincoln knew better:

We, when mounting the stage of existence, found ourselves the legal inheritors of these fundamental blessings. We toiled not in the acquirement or establishment of them—they are a legacy bequeathed us.... 'tis ours only, to transmit these ... unprofaned ... to the latest generation that fate shall permit the world to know. This task of gratitude to our fathers, justice to ourselves, duty to posterity, and love for our species in general, all imperatively require us faithfully to perform.

—Bradley C. S. Watson (e-mail: [bwatson@stvincent.edu](mailto:bwatson@stvincent.edu))  
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## **Blubberland: The Dangers of Happiness**

**Elizabeth Farrelly**

Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008 (219 pages)

## **The Dismal Science: How Thinking Like an Economist Undermines Community**

**Stephen Marglin**

Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008 (376 pages)

The first of these volumes is, quite frankly, a rambling mess. The one good point Farrelly makes about our failure to find satisfaction in the consumption of economic goods is washed out by a sort of self-loathing and disdain for Western Civilization that renders the book wholly unintelligible. In our postmodern age, some might find this incoherent emoting attractive and race out to purchase a copy. However, for those interested in maintaining their rationality, I suggest that you save your money.

The tone of the book is set at the beginning as the author informs the reader that it is intended as an overall critique of modern life and an attack on modern conveniences. She bemoans the fact that she enjoys them and cannot find it within herself to set these comforts aside. She assumes from the outset that this way of life is destroying the planet. In her view, this is simply a matter of fact that cannot be disputed, though no real evidence for this assumption is offered. From this starting point, the book meanders from topic-to-topic, chapter-to-chapter in a kind of wandering manner that makes the reader wonder whether there is any final destination.