Pope Francis’s Call for Social Justice in the Global Economy

Bruce Duncan

Pope Francis sparked accusations that he is espousing Marxism in his November 2013 exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, because of his pointed attacks on economic liberalism or neoliberalism, the ideology behind versions of free-market economics. The conservative US radio commentator, Rush Limbaugh, with a following of 20 million listeners on a program valued at $400 million, accused the Pope of sprouting ‘pure Marxism’, and of not knowing what he was talking about.

Pope Francis responded that he was merely articulating church social teaching. ‘The Marxist ideology is wrong. But I have met many Marxists in my life who are good people, so I don’t feel offended.’ He said his critique of ‘trickle down theories’ of economics referred to those that did nothing for the poor.

On 20 September Francis had said that ‘Jesus emphasises so much that the love of money, in fact, is the root of all evil. “You cannot serve both God and money”’. This ‘was not communism! This is pure Gospel’.

Francis is highlighting problems of deep poverty in many countries and vast inequalities in the distribution of wealth. He welcomes the material uplift for millions of people in recent decades, but is strongly critical that millions of others are trapped in grinding poverty. In a time when we have such an abundance of material resources, he is calling for economic initiatives to lift remaining populations out of hunger and extreme poverty.

* Within months of being unexpectedly elected Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis has attracted a wide following, and not just among Catholics. *Time* magazine named him person of the year in 2013, and he receives surprisingly positive media commentary, despite the horrid exposure of clerical sexual abuse in many countries.

The man we see today is very different from the Jorge Bergoglio of his early years. He has been changed by two sets of experiences in particular: his growing pastoral response to masses of people trapped in dire poverty, and the impact on his thinking of repeated economic crises in Argentina and beyond.

---

Like the Brazilian Archbishop Helder Camara and the martyred Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, Bergoglio shifted over time from conservative views about the church’s role in society to a growing conviction that the church needed to champion more vigorously the rights of the poor and oppressed, as the Second Vatican Council asserted. The church needed to throw its moral influence fully behind the struggle for human rights and social justice.

As a man, it has not been an easy road for Bergoglio. He nearly died in 1957 of a lung infection and had part of a lung removed, resulting in a slow and painful convalescence. As provincial of the Jesuits in Argentina, he was dogmatic and authoritarian, and with his conservative resistance to the changes after the Second Vatican Council became a divisive influence among the Jesuits. He later wrote that he made many mistakes during these years.

He regards his earlier mistakes as sins, and constantly asks people to pray for him. When asked if he would accept the role of pope, Bergoglio replied: ‘I am a great sinner, trusting in the mercy and patience of God in suffering, I accept’. 5

This is not the mouthing of pious platitudes by an old man, but arises from a deep experience of God’s mercy in his life, resulting in a deep transformation to distrust his own first judgments, to consult widely, and listen carefully to what others are saying, particularly poor or distressed people.

*  

Born in 1936, Jorge Bergoglio worked for a short time as a janitor and a nightclub bouncer, and studied to be a chemical technician. He liked to dance and played basketball and soccer. He was intending to marry when an intense religious experience led him to join the Jesuits in 1958; he was ordained a priest in 1969. After teaching for some years, as part of a conservative swing and disputes among the Jesuits, at the age of thirty-six he was appointed provincial of the two hundred or so Jesuits in Argentina during 1973–79. He was a strict disciplinarian and opposed many of the changes following the Second Vatican Council.

This period coincided with the presidencies of Juan Perón and Isabel Martínez de Perón, followed in 1976 by the traumatic years of the ‘Dirty War’ under the military junta, when tens of thousands of people were tortured and ‘disappeared’, including some of his friends, along with 150 priests and hundreds of nuns and lay catechists. 6

He later said that he had made many mistakes as leader of the Jesuits in Argentina: ‘I had to learn from my errors along the way, because to tell you the truth, I made hundreds of errors. Errors and sins. It would be wrong for me to say that these days I ask forgiveness for the sins and offences

that I might have committed. Today I ask forgiveness for the sins and offences that I did indeed commit’.7

He was removed as provincial in 1979, and was appointed rector of the theological college until 1985; during this period, in 1980, he made a visit to Ireland for two months. He spent six months in Germany in 1986 preparing his doctoral studies, which he did not finish, and returned to teaching. Disagreements over his role in the school resulted in him being moved north to Cordoba (Argentina) in 1990–91 for normal pastoral work.

In his interview with his Jesuit colleague, Antonio Spadaro, in September 2013, he acknowledged: ‘My authoritarian and quick manner of making decisions led me to have serious problems and to be accused of being ultraconservative. I lived a time of great interior crisis when I was in Cordoba’. He said he had ‘never been a right-winger. It was my authoritarian way of making decisions that created problems’.8

Then to his surprise he was appointed an auxiliary bishop in Buenos Aires in 1992. In 1997 he became coadjutor archbishop (i.e. with right of succession) and archbishop in 1998 in a diocese of over twelve million people. Bergoglio was media-shy and gave few interviews, yet as pope he exudes a confident simplicity and a joy of life and, to the discomfort of his minders, often speaks or acts spontaneously from the heart.9

As a bishop, his frequent visits among the poor in the slums of Buenos Aires made him keenly sensitive to their struggle for existence in such acute poverty, living without adequate sewerage, clean water or electricity. His response was not doctrinal but pastoral, befriending and encouraging people to do the best they can in their situation, in the belief that they are precious in God’s sight. He also became more convinced that individual efforts at social reform were not enough. What was needed was concerted structural change in society, and particularly in economics and processes of globalisation.

Francis has been striking in some of his actions. After his election he greeted the people in St Peter’s Square with a simple ‘good evening’; he prayed with the tens of thousands present and asked them to pray for him, which they did in solemn silence. He avoided the traditional red shoes and much of the papal regalia that Pope Benedict had delighted in. The new pope kept his one pair of black orthopaedic shoes, and preferred his Ford Focus car instead of a chauffeur-driven limousine escorted by a security detail.

His gestures soon assumed significant symbolic meaning. At one of the most sacred days of the church’s liturgy, Holy Thursday, he commemorated Jesus’ Last Supper and his washing of the

disciples’ feet not in St Peter’s or the Basilica of St John Lateran, the official seat of the Bishop of Rome, with great crowds and choirs, but in a Rome juvenile prison. To the consternation of some liturgists and against the rubrics, he washed and kissed the feet not of the usual twelve clerics, but of twelve prisoners, including two young women, and of Muslims as well. Some critics have accused the pope of staging media stunts. What they did not realise is that Bergoglio also performed the Holy Thursday ceremony in prisons back in Buenos Aires.

As archbishop there, he asked people to call him ‘Fr Jorge’, and avoided ceremonial titles and dress. He lived in a small unit, not in the grand episcopal residence, cooked his own meals, travelled by public transport in simple clerical dress, and made a point of visiting the slums of Buenos Aires and making personal contact with the poor. He was not putting on an act as pope, but simply being himself.

It is then not too surprising that, given his concern for the poor and distressed, he readily accepted the suggestion of his ‘good friend’ Cardinal Hummes after his election as pope not to forget the poor, and immediately thought of the name Francis. ‘Then I thought of all the wars, as the votes were still being counted, till the end. Francis is also the man of peace. That is how the name came into my heart: Francis of Assisi’.10

The name Francis is itself deeply symbolic. It recalls the message of St Francis in the thirteenth century encouraging joyful simplicity of life in the presence of God, hospitality to all and care for the poor and strangers.

The memory around St Francis not only challenges the consumer mentality prevalent today, but also connects with concern for preserving the environment. Further, this Franciscan tradition recalls to western Christianity its pre-Reformation origins. Recovering more of that may well open new doors to deeper fellowship and understanding among Christians and other believers, including Jews and Muslims.

Bergoglio did not always agree with some of Pope Benedict’s views. According to the Anglican Archbishop of Argentina, Gregory Venables, Bergoglio told him that the Anglican Ordinariate, a special new Anglican rite for those who become Catholics, ‘was quite unnecessary and that the Church needs us as Anglicans’.11 As for Benedict’s unfortunate speech at Regensburg in 2006 that so upset Muslims, Bergoglio was reported in Newsweek Argentina saying that ‘Pope Benedict’s statement doesn’t reflect my own opinions … These statements will serve to destroy in 20 seconds the careful construction of a relationship with Islam that Pope John Paul II built over the last twenty years’.12

Bergoglio was not expecting to be elected pope. Though he had been runner-up to Cardinal Ratzinger in 2005, he was considered by most commentators as too old, at seventy-six. He had

11. Vallely, Pope Francis, 11.
submitted his resignation, and was giving away his books in preparation for entering a home for retired priests. After Pope Benedict’s unexpected resignation, he did not accept the first-class plane ticket to Rome that the Vatican provided him, but booked a return economy-class seat, as he always did.

Surprised by his election, Pope Francis does not appear daunted by the office, but is simply carrying on as he had been doing as archbishop. This becomes clearer when we consider his earlier history and role among the Latin American bishops.

Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio was one of the most important church figures in Latin America. After the papal election of 2005, back home he was elected president of the bishops’ conference of Argentina, and later became president of the committee guiding the extremely important ten-yearly conference of bishops of Latin America in Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007.

This conference indicates the priorities Bergoglio gives for the church in its mission, including promoting social reform and human rights. Bergoglio played a major role in the deliberations, and was charged with overseeing the writing of the 160-page final document.13 Pope Benedict himself opened the conference. It was to be his last major journey overseas, and quite exhausted him.

Cardinal Ratzinger had been at times a strong critic of inequities under forms of capitalism and of the glaring contrast between the abundance of increasing numbers of people and the dire poverty of many others. Yet his role as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 1981 to 2005 gave him little scope to develop his social thinking. Instead he concentrated on doctrinal issues in the high theology of the Germanic tradition. Immensely scholarly, his writings were often highly abstract and dense for many readers.

The unrelenting public role for Ratzinger as Pope Benedict was extremely demanding for a naturally reserved and bookish man. He did not have the outgoing persona of Pope John Paul II, and his public speeches tended to be dreary as he read his documents in a low voice. He spent much of his time writing new books rather than travelling or in the details of governance.

**Pope Benedict at Aparecida, Brazil**

Indicative of continuity with the thought of Pope Benedict, Bergoglio helped prepare Benedict’s opening address to the Aparecida conference, as well as his other speeches in Latin America. Benedict called for a renewed ethics to guide globalisation, which otherwise brought ‘the risk of vast monopolies and of treating profit as the supreme value’. He criticised political regimes of both the right and the left, and the materialism in both ‘Marxist and capitalist systems’. He called for

---

greater equity since increasing numbers of people were ‘oppressed by immense poverty’, and countries were being despoiled of their natural resources.\textsuperscript{14}

Both capitalism and Marxism promised to point out the path for the creation of just structures, and they declared that these, once established, would function by themselves; they declared that not only would they have no need of any prior individual morality, but that they would promote a communal morality.\textsuperscript{15}

Capitalism and Marxism had both failed in this. Benedict recognised that: ‘This political task is not the immediate competence of the Church. Respect for a healthy secularity—including the pluralism of politicians—is essential’. He urged lay Catholics ‘to be present in the formation of the necessary consensus and in opposition to injustice’. He called on the church to be ‘the advocate of justice and of the poor’.\textsuperscript{16} Benedict then returned to Rome as the bishops continued their conference.

\textit{The Aparecida Conference}

The key themes in Aparecida were:

\begin{itemize}
  \item reaffirming the option for the poor,
  \item solidarity with the marginalised in very personal and practical ways,
  \item a strong critique of neoliberal globalisation,
  \item insistence on greater equity in the distribution of wealth and opportunity,
  \item encouraging a mature laity in their mission of social transformation,
  \item collaborating with all people of good will,
  \item protecting the environment and developing a sustainable future, and
  \item promoting the more active participation of women in church and society.
\end{itemize}

The bishops met in Aparecida before the global financial crisis, but even so they were very critical about injustice in the international economy. They called for a new process of globalisation ‘characterised by solidarity, justice and respect for human rights’, one that did not exploit, oppress or exclude vast numbers of people.\textsuperscript{17}

Led by a tendency that prizes profit and stimulates competition, globalization entails a process of concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few, not only of physical and monetary resources, but especially of information and human resources.

The bishops also appealed to business people to help provide employment and overcome the inequalities ‘that keep large numbers of people in poverty’.\textsuperscript{18} They were particularly critical of financial

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item 15. Pope Benedict, in \textit{Aparecida}, no. 4, p. 10.
  \item 16. Pope Benedict, in \textit{Aparecida}, no. 4, p. 11.
  \item 17. \textit{Aparecida}, no. 64, p. 38.
  \item 18. \textit{Aparecida}, no. 62, p. 37.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
speculation in public bonds, currencies and derivatives, which resulted in no long-term productive investment.\(^{19}\)

Today the natural wealth of Latin America and the Caribbean is being subjected to an irrational exploitation that is leaving ruin and even death in its wake, throughout the region. A great deal [of] responsibility in this entire process must be attributed to the current economic model which prizes unfettered pursuit of riches over the life of individual persons and peoples and rational respect for nature.\(^{20}\)

In writing this document, Bergoglio was reflecting the views of millions of people in developing countries that the economic rules have been made by the richer countries, resulting in inequitable trade and financial policies, and leaving whole populations in distress.

**Bergoglio and Liberation Theology: From Opposition to Support**

As pope, Bergoglio is very favourable to key streams of liberation theology. In his interview with Sergio Rubin and Francesca Ambrogetti in *Pope Francis: His Life in His Own Words*, he said liberation theology ‘has its good points and its bad, its restraints and its excesses’. Cardinal Ratzinger issued two reports in 1984 and 1986 on liberation theology that ‘described it and also noted its limitations (one of which is the appeal to the Marxist interpretation of reality), but also showed its positive aspects’. Bergoglio denied there had been a ‘mass condemnation’ of it.\(^{21}\)

There were missteps. But there were also thousands of pastors, be they priests, religious men or women, young, adult, or old laypeople, who committed themselves to the Church and are the honor of our work, the source of our joy. The danger of an ideological infiltration was disappearing, insofar as what was growing was our awareness of the treasure of our people: popular piety.\(^{22}\)

Bergoglio recognised that church teaching has a political dimension, but he did not see this as politically partisan.

It’s a matter of concerning oneself not with partisan politics, but with the great politics born of the Commandments and the Gospel. Denouncing human rights abuses, situations of exploitation or exclusion, or shortages in education or food, is not being partisan. Catholic social teaching is full of denunciations, yet it is not partisan.\(^{23}\)

Bergoglio had not always been so positive about liberation theology. Paul Vallely wrote that his opposition to liberation theology ‘was very much rooted in the mindset of the Cold War and the fear that atheistic Soviet-style communism would supplant both capitalism and Catholicism in Latin America, with Cuba as its toehold’.\(^{24}\)

According to Vallely, Bergoglio was ‘the hammer of Liberation Theology, that movement which sought to combine the spiritual and material improvement of the poorest’. Though he was always

---

\(^{19}\) *Aparecida*, no. 69, p. 39.

\(^{20}\) *Aparecida*, no. 473, p. 146.

\(^{21}\) Rubin and Ambrogetti, *Pope Francis*, 92.

\(^{22}\) Rubin and Ambrogetti, *Pope Francis*, 93–4.

\(^{23}\) Rubin and Ambrogetti, *Pope Francis*, 94.

\(^{24}\) Vallely, *Pope Francis*, 129.
concerned about the poor, Bergoglio avoided addressing issues about why people were kept poor, until his mid-forties.\textsuperscript{25}

Even in early 1975, at the Thirty-Second General Congregation of the Jesuits under the guidance of their general, Fr Pedro Arrupe, Bergoglio opposed in particular its Decree Four on social justice, which he considered flirting with Marxism. Vallely commented: ‘Bergoglio wanted to alleviate the symptoms of poverty; Arrupe wanted to challenge them’.\textsuperscript{26}

Liberation theology had taken a different shape in Argentina from elsewhere in Latin America, where it was widely influential. The debates about liberation are difficult to interpret, reflecting complex but varying situations in different countries; and contrary positions were reflected also in Vatican agencies themselves as different voices contended for the dominant position.\textsuperscript{27} A full account of these developments has yet to be written.

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1989 and clarifications by liberation theologians about use of Marxist categories in their social analysis, concern about liberation theology in church circles began to wane. Fear of communism abated, but the struggle for economic development continued, often with disappointing results.

**Bergoglio’s Growing Critique of Neoliberal Capitalism**

The economic crisis in Argentina in 2001 appears to have been a turning point for Bergoglio, who emphasised that responses needed to be on a structural level as well as by individual responsibility. Bergoglio was made cardinal in February 2001 and felt an added responsibility to protest against the savage impact of the crisis. The percentage of Argentine people in poverty rose to over fifty per cent during 2001, compared with four per cent in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{28} According to Vallely, 40,000 businesses folded, banks closed, one in four people lost their job, wages were slashed, millions lost their savings, and a quarter of the population was destitute and hungry.\textsuperscript{29}

Bergoglio urged people to avoid violence, but castigated the rich for ‘their rapacity and their share of ill-gotten gain’. The International Monetary Fund meanwhile prescribed privatisation, deregulation and trade liberalisation, resulting in the country going into the biggest debt default in history, owing US$96 billion. Bergoglio was appalled at the injustice of social and economic policies and outcomes.\textsuperscript{30}

Bergoglio attacked the ideology behind economic policies, often termed economic liberalism or neoliberalism. ‘Unjust economic structures’ violated human rights. He regarded as ‘immoral, unjust and

\textsuperscript{25} Vallely, *Pope Francis*, 190.
\textsuperscript{26} Vallely, *Pope Francis*, 55.
\textsuperscript{28} Rubin and Ambrogetti, *Pope Francis*, 128.
\textsuperscript{29} Vallely, *Pope Francis*, 116.
\textsuperscript{30} Vallely, *Pope Francis*, 116.
illegitimate’ the increasing burden in restructuring the national debt, and described homelessness as ‘structural slavery’. He particularly criticised financial speculation that damaged real economies and resulted in cuts in social services. Such ‘unbridled capitalism fragments economic and social life’.

Increasingly Bergoglio focused his social criticism on neoliberalism in capitalism. When someone takes up the manual of the Social Doctrine of the Church, they are astounded by the things it denounces. For example, the condemnation of economic liberalism. Everyone thinks that the Church is against communism, and yet it is as against communism as it is against the wild economic liberalism we see today … No one should be dispossessed and there is no worse dispossession—and I want to emphasise this—than not being able to earn one’s own bread, than being denied the dignity of work.

As the global financial crisis began to wreak havoc in world economies in 2007, Benedict and Vatican representatives deplored the events and the collapse of moral standards in financial markets. Commentators expected a new social encyclical, a major statement from the pope reiterating the church’s critique of failures in the moral foundations underlying neoliberal economics and unjust patterns of globalisation.

The papacy has a long track record criticising both forms of capitalism and communism, and extreme forms of socialism, stemming back to Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 letter On the Condition of the Working Class (Rerum Novarum), followed by Pope Pius XI in 1931 attacking the failed capitalism that resulted in the Great Depression.

This critique of totalitarian regimes and forms of capitalism was developed by Pope John XXIII and by the Second Vatican Council. Pope Paul VI vigorously promoted church social teaching, especially in his 1967 letter, Development of Peoples, which considered key issues in the new processes of globalisation. John Paul II gave powerful leadership in his campaign against Soviet communism, as well as in his telling critique of failings under forms of capitalism that left many in developing countries and elsewhere in severe poverty.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Pope John Paul II in his landmark 1991 encyclical, Centesimus Annus, had warned against a virulent new strain of capitalism that could sweep the world, and he highlighted the need for adequate regulation of capitalism to ensure social outcomes were just and equitable. In January 1998 he attacked:

a certain capitalist neoliberalism that subordinates the human person to blind market forces … From its centers of power, such neoliberalism often places unbearable burdens on less favoured nations … We thus see a small number of countries growing

---

31. Vallely, Pope Francis, 133.
32. Vallely, Pope Francis, 134.
exceedingly rich at the cost of the increasing impoverishment of a great number of other countries.\textsuperscript{35}

In the rapidly unfolding global economic crisis, Pope Benedict’s encyclical was delayed until 2009. It strongly reiterated Catholic social teaching, but it did not have the impact of some earlier documents. At 28,000 words, it was five times longer than \textit{Development of Peoples}. And the early sections, written by Benedict himself it appears, were dense and intimidating to many readers. Nevertheless, Benedict on 29 June 2009 signed \textit{Caritas in Veritate}, which summarised his critique of neoliberal philosophy and economics, and called for renewed efforts to recast the global economy to benefit all people more equitably, especially those in hunger and poverty.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{Pope Francis’s Exhortation, The Joy of the Gospel}

Pope Francis drew from these earlier responses to economic injustice in his apostolic exhortation \textit{Evangelii Gaudium} (\textit{The Joy of the Gospel}) on 24 November 2013, although a fuller critique of globalisation, the environment and economics is reportedly being prepared.

Many leading economists, including Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jeffrey Sachs, have decried the global financial crisis as fundamentally a moral crisis, in which powerful economic interests have sundered much economic policy from its ethical foundations.\textsuperscript{37}

Some of these critics of neoliberalism, especially Stiglitz, have been advising Vatican agencies, including the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and annual conferences coordinated by Harvard Professor Mary Ann Glendon, President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences and former US Ambassador to the Holy See. These groups have been discussing how to renew the value framework in economics, and restore notions of the common good, solidarity with the marginalised and dispossessed, and greater equity in the distribution of goods and ownership.\textsuperscript{38} Presumably they also had an influence on Francis’s letter, \textit{The Joy of the Gospel}.

Written in his friendly, accessible style, this 48,000-word \textit{Joy of the Gospel} is not strictly a social document but a wide-ranging reflection on future directions for the church, and expands on key themes from his earlier writings, particularly from Aparecida in 2007.\textsuperscript{39} Pope Francis begins


\textsuperscript{39}Francis is also calling for a major adjustment in the structures and processes of the church itself, including the papacy and episcopacy, to make the gospel message more transparent and alive. He reiterates his views on expanding lay collaboration and participation at all levels of the church.
challenging richer people not to blunt their consciences, but to hear God’s voice calling them to open
their hearts and minds to the needs of others, especially the poor and excluded.\textsuperscript{40}

The new pope is acutely aware of the extensive suffering caused in Latin American
countries by the long series of economic crises linked closely in recent decades with the processes of
globalisation, as well as the financial crisis from 2007. From Rome he can now observe at first hand
the economic downturn in Europe, with youth unemployment in some countries reaching nearly sixty
per cent.

He protests against ‘an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills’.
‘Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the
powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and
marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape.’\textsuperscript{41}

He attacks fundamental tenets of ‘trickle-down’ neoliberal economic philosophy: ‘some
people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by
a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world.
This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the
goodness of those wielding power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system
…’\textsuperscript{42}

‘We have created new idols. The worship of the ancient golden calf … has returned in a new
and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy
lacking a truly human purpose.’\textsuperscript{43}

‘While the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the
majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few. This imbalance is the result of ideologies
which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation … A new tyranny is
born, invisible and often virtual, which unilaterally and relentlessly imposes its own laws and rules.
Debt and the accumulation of interest also make it difficult for countries to realize the potential of
their own economies … The thirst for power and possessions knows no limits. In this system, which
tends to devour everything which stands in the way of increased profits, whatever is fragile, like the
environment, is defenceless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule.’\textsuperscript{44}

‘We can no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market. Growth in
justice requires more than economic growth’. It requires ‘a better distribution of income’ and creating
jobs, not turning ‘to remedies that are a new poison, such as attempting to increase profits by reducing
the work force and thereby adding to the ranks of the excluded’\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{40}. Pope Francis, \textit{Evangelii Gaudium}, 2–3.
\textsuperscript{41}. Pope Francis, \textit{Evangelii Gaudium}, 53.
\textsuperscript{42}. Pope Francis, \textit{Evangelii Gaudium}, 54.
\textsuperscript{43}. Pope Francis, \textit{Evangelii Gaudium}, 55.
\textsuperscript{44}. Pope Francis, \textit{Evangelii Gaudium}, 56.
\textsuperscript{45}. Pope Francis, \textit{Evangelii Gaudium}, 204.
Responses to The Joy of the Gospel

Conservative critics in the United States responded that the pope is misguided in his economic views, and defended the neoliberal policies espoused by right-wing think tanks. Sam Gregg from the Acton Institute claimed many of the document’s economic views were ‘hard to defend’, and reflected ‘straw-man arguments about the economy that one encounters far too often in some Catholic circles’. He also alleged that ‘many poverty-alleviation methods that involve redistribution (such as foreign aid) are increasingly discredited’.46

Quite the contrary, many leading economists have been appalled at the neoliberal economic beliefs that resulted in the global financial crisis, along with the astonishing corruption, greed, and concentration of corporate power in the very citadel of free-market capitalism. Gregg makes no mention of these factors, which brought the world economy to the brink of collapse, and massively harmed many developing countries, along with the United States itself.

According to the Australian economic commentator, Alan Kohler, the pope’s critique of economics could have been more nuanced,47 which the pope concedes, saying he is not an economist using technical language, but is speaking urgently on behalf of those trapped in poverty and hunger.48

As Kohler points out, over the past forty years the income of the top 1 per cent in the US has risen from 10 times to 29 times that of the average income, and is again rising. The average income of the 99 per cent has barely risen at all. There is something terribly wrong with such an economic system, and some are warning that a global crisis may well happen again.49

The Scottish forerunner of economists, Adam Smith, would not be surprised. Though extolled by the neoconservative free-marketeers as the champion of free markets, Smith repeatedly warned against manipulation of the market by special interests and the politically influential.

The interest of the dealers, however, in any particular branch or trade of manufactures, is always in some respects different from, and even opposite to, that of the publick. To widen the market and narrow the competition, is always the interest of the dealers … The proposal of any new law or regulation of commerce which comes from this order, ought always to be listened to with great precaution, and ought never to be adopted till after having been long and carefully examined … with the most suspicious attention. It comes from an order of men, whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the publick, who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the publick, and who accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it.50

Smith would be especially concerned at the concentrated economic power of banking, finance and the giant corporations when they make the rules to suit themselves as if that automatically

48. La Stampa, Zenit, 16 November 2013.
49. Kohler, ‘Two Great Vested Interests’.
served the public interest. He repeatedly argued that it is the role of good government to marry good business practice and sound social outcomes for the entire community, not just for sectional interest.

Smith supported the right of workers to form unions to protect themselves against exploitation. He opposed slavery, colonialism, the exploitation by the East India Company, and poverty among the ordinary people. He argued that it was ‘but equity’ that workers ‘should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed, and lodged’. 51 In the view of Jerry Muller, Smith wanted to keep commodity prices low and wages high to increase living standards of ordinary people. 52

Smith did not support laissez faire economic policies, and he situated his talk of pursuing one’s self-interest within the context of customary social and moral institutions, including the churches, the family, culture, law and appropriate regulation. 53 It is astonishing that Smith came to be regarded by some as the prophet of neoliberal economics.

Pope Francis is all in favour of capitalism if it means free initiative and competitive free markets, as long as these opportunities are open to everyone and all benefit. What he rejects is the ‘dark side’ of capitalism, with global ‘mercantilism’, rigging of markets, quasi-monopolist power, unjust trade agreements, vast inequalities of wealth and living standards, and despoliation of the environment in pursuit of increased profits. Adam Smith would be applauding Pope Francis on such grounds.

Conclusion

Despite criticism of Pope Francis that he is extreme or Marxist, he is in close continuity with his predecessors. He reiterates that concern for social justice in today’s circumstances, by eliminating the structural causes of poverty, is a central demand of the Gospels. ‘I have tried to make explicit once again the inescapable social dimension of the Gospel message and to encourage all Christians to demonstrate it by their words, attitudes and deeds.’ 54 He quotes Benedict that the church ‘cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice’. 55

Nevertheless, the church has had great difficulty communicating its critique of social injustice under forms of capitalism. Earlier generations balanced criticism of abuses under capitalism with the firm resistance to communism. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Pope John Paul encouraged urgent reforms to capitalism, but the extreme form of capitalism he warned against captured much of the ideological high ground with its neoliberal beliefs. Even some right-wing Catholic commentators

52. Jerry Z. Muller, Adam Smith in His Time and Ours: Designing the Decent Society (New York: Free Press, 1993), 75.
53. Muller, Adam Smith in His Time and Ours, 2.
54. Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, 258.
55. Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, 183.
interpreted Catholic social teaching to favour neoliberalism. This confused many, and unfortunately the church in many places ‘dropped the ball’ at this crucial time, despite efforts by Pope Benedict to maintain the critique of capitalism.

The global financial crisis demonstrated the failure of neoliberalism, and so current rethinking presents an opportunity to revise economic assumptions and practice to conform more closely to the norms of social justice. Pope Francis is attempting consistently to encourage this in his own writing, and by recognising the need for collaboration with specialists and economists. Astonishing as it may seem, many Catholic social thinkers have failed to engage cogently with economics as a discipline and economists as interlocutors.56

Partly this is because they speak different academic languages, and partly because of the neglect of serious conversations about the philosophical foundations of economics. Some leading economists are now attempting to remedy this, and there is an opportunity here for a renewed conversation about affirming a better moral context for globalisation.

Pope Francis has been particularly insistent on restoring equity as a crucial moral dimension in economic planning, reiterating that governments have a duty to ensure that economic policies and development measure their outcomes not just in aggregate figures but by how they improve reasonable life opportunities for everyone, particularly those who are disadvantaged or excluded.

Francis continues that welfare projects alone are not enough, though they are necessary. ‘As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural cause of inequality, no solution will be found ... Inequality is the root of social ills.’57

The pope is not only addressing the Catholic world, but attempting to rally all people of good will against ‘unregulated capitalism’ and for a renewed ethics to restore a more just world. Nor is he launching a partisan class war broadside against business and finance. He recognises they have important roles to play, but he appeals to business leaders and financial experts for their collaboration in this ongoing process of social transformation: ‘Money must serve, not rule!’ ‘I exhort you to generous solidarity and a return of economics and finance to an ethical approach which favours human beings.’58

58. Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, 28.
This is a critical moment in history for the church to make a substantial contribution to rebuilding the moral foundations of economics and of the whole process of globalisation. We are at an historically unprecedented place where decisions today may well determine the fate of coming generations. It is long past time that the Catholic Church put serious resources into this conversation.