2015

Thomas Piketty and Inequality: Legal Causes and Tax Solutions

Paul L. Caron

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.law.emory.edu/elj-online

Recommended Citation

Paul L. Caron, Thomas Piketty and Inequality: Legal Causes and Tax Solutions, 64 Emory L. J. Online 2073 (2015).
Available at: https://scholarlycommons.law.emory.edu/elj-online/27

This Response or Comment is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Emory Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Emory Law Journal Online by an authorized administrator of Emory Law Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact law-scholarly-commons@emory.edu.
THOMAS PIKETTY AND INEQUALITY: LEGAL CAUSES AND TAX SOLUTIONS

Paul L. Caron*

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Piketty’s best seller,1 Capital in the Twenty-First Century,2 has acted as an accelerant fueling the fiery public debate over increasing inequality in America and around the world. Piketty makes the provocative empirical claim that the rate of return to private capital inevitably exceeds the rate of economic growth (r > g) and thus leads to growing concentrations of wealth among the richest members of society. Piketty also makes the normative case decrying high-end wealth concentration and prescribes a global wealth tax to alleviate this inequality.

Since publication of an English edition in March 2014,3 Capital in the Twenty-First Century has spawned heated debates in newspapers, magazines, and blogs, which soon will continue in academic journals and law reviews.4

* Professor of Law, Pepperdine University School of Law.
3 The book was first published in French in August 2013. THOMAS PIKETTY, LE CAPITAL AU XXIÈME SIÈCLE (2013).
Shi-Ling Hsu is one of the first out of the gate with *The Rise and Rise of the One Percent: Considering Legal Causes of Wealth Inequality*.\(^5\)

Hsu acknowledges some of the critics of Piketty’s empirical claims\(^6\) and casually dismisses the critics,\(^7\) but does not focus on the details and validity of their claims.\(^8\) Neither does Hsu directly engage Piketty’s normative and prescriptive argument.\(^9\) Instead, Hsu focuses on the interesting question of how law and legal institutions foster inflated returns on capital (Piketty’s \(r\)). He writes that “[a]lmost always, an economic effect can be traced to some conscious policy decision, which in turn can be traced to a legal rule or institution. As between legal and economic explanations for inequality, it is almost surely a greater question of law than economics.”\(^10\) Hsu also makes the important point that lawmakers often conflate Piketty’s \(r\) (private capital returns) with \(g\) (public economic growth), resulting in laws that boost the


\(^6\) Hsu, supra note 5, at 2045 n.7.

\(^7\) Id. at 2047 n.16.


\(^10\) Hsu, supra note 5, at 2049.
former with little discernible impact on the latter.\textsuperscript{11} Piketty tosses out a few “snippets” of laws that contribute to concentrations of wealth,\textsuperscript{12} while the bulk of Hsu’s argument is devoted to explaining how four areas of American law contribute to “the legal enrichment of the one percent”\textsuperscript{13}: financial regulation,\textsuperscript{14} oil and gas subsidies,\textsuperscript{15} transition relief,\textsuperscript{16} and electric utility regulation.\textsuperscript{17} Hsu eschews discussion of how law and legal institutions contribute to economic growth (Piketty’s \textit{g}) because it “is a morass of economic and legal policy, and the source of too much partisan bickering.”\textsuperscript{18} Hsu concludes with a plea for greater federal funding of education to fuel greater economic growth and bridge the deepening inequality chasm in America.\textsuperscript{19}

Hsu’s essay is a significant contribution to what is certain to be an energetic debate over the implications of Piketty’s work. Indeed, Frank Pasquale praises Piketty for “adopt[ing] a methodology capacious enough to welcome the contributions of legal academics and a broad range of social scientists to the study (and remediation) of inequality.”\textsuperscript{20} The need to examine the impact of legal rules and institutions on both private capital returns and public economic growth will be an enduring contribution to future scholarship on the extent, consequences, and reduction of income and wealth inequality. I offer here two modest reactions to Hsu’s essay\textsuperscript{21}: (1) recent inequality research has shifted the focus of high-end wealth concentration from the Top 1% to the Top 0.1% (and even the Top 0.01%),\textsuperscript{22} with important implications for the

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Group & No. of Families & Wealth Threshold & Avg. Wealth & Wealth Share \\
\hline
Top 1\% & 1,607,000 & $3,960,000 & $13,840,000 & 41.8\% \\
Top 0.1\% & 160,700 & $20,600,000 & $72,800,000 & 22.0\% \\
Top 0.01\% & 16,070 & $111,000,000 & $371,000,000 & 11.2\% \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Thresholds and Average Wealth in Top Wealth Groups, 2012}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Id.} at 2047–48. Jim Repetti and I recently summarized the empirical evidence that inequality has a long-term adverse impact on economic growth. Caron & Repetti, \textit{supra} note 9, at 1264–74.
\textsuperscript{12} Hsu, \textit{supra} note 5, at 2047.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Id.} at 2048–64.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Id.} at 2051–56.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Id.} at 2056–58.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Id.} at 2058–61.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Id.} at 2062–64.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Id.} at 2051.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Id.} at 2068–71.
\textsuperscript{21} Like Hsu, \textit{supra} note 5, at 2051, I focus on the United States.
\textsuperscript{22} In 2012, the number of families, wealth thresholds, average wealth, and wealth shares of these wealth groups in the United States were as follows:
work of both Piketty and Hsu, including (2) the inquiry into whether policymakers should intervene before the fact to reshape the distribution of the benefits and burdens of economic activity (Hsu’s approach) or instead redistribute wealth after the fact (Piketty’s approach).

I. HIGH-END WEALTH CONCENTRATION: THE 1% V. THE 0.1% (AND THE 0.01%)

Hsu’s essay, like Piketty’s book, views inequality through the prism of the Top 1%. (Indeed, Hsu titles his essay The Rise and Rise of the One Percent.) However, very recent work by Piketty’s frequent collaborators argues that the rise of wealth inequality in America over the past thirty-five years is due almost entirely to the rise in the share of wealth captured by the Top 0.1%. Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman estimated the distribution of household wealth in the United States since 1913 and found that the wealth share of the Top 0.1% rose from 7% in 1979 to 22% in 2012—a level almost as high as in 1929:

![Graph showing wealth share of Top 0.1% in the United States, 1913-2012](http://www.nber.org/papers/w20625.pdf)


Saez & Zucman, supra note 22, at 49 fig.1.
This 22% wealth share of the Top 0.1% in 2012 matched the wealth share of the bottom 90%. 

Saez and Zucman decomposed the Top 1% into four groups: Top 1% to 0.5%, Top 0.5% to 0.1%, Top 0.1% to 0.01%, and Top 0.01%.

---


26 Saez & Zucman, supra note 22, at 49 fig.1.
Matt O’Brien used the Saez and Zucman data to illustrate the enormous share of the wealth gains since 1980 captured by the Top 0.01% (+8.6%), followed by declining shares of the gains enjoyed by the next two groups (Top 0.1% to 0.01% (+5.4%) and Top 1% to 0.1% (+3.5%)), with the final two groups suffering losses in their wealth shares (Top 10% to 1% (-7.4%) and Bottom 90% (-10.4%)):

27 Matt O’Brien, The Bottom 90 Percent Are Poorer Today Than They Were in 1987, WASH. POST WONKBLOG (Oct. 22, 2014), http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2014/10/22/the-bottom-90-percent-are-poorer-today-than-they-were-in-1987/. For a global perspective, a recent report notes that the world population of ultra-high net worth (UHNW) individuals—defined as those with at least $30 million of wealth—hit a record 211,275 in 2014, comprising 0.004% of the world’s population and controlling 12.8% of the world’s wealth:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30+ Million</td>
<td>0.004%</td>
<td>211,275</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–29 Million</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
<td>682,775</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–9.9 Million</td>
<td>0.02%</td>
<td>835,950</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–4.9 Million</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>14,930,000</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,000–999,000</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>366,340,000</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
<td>105.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000–99,000</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>1,265,000,000</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 10,000</td>
<td>66.3%</td>
<td>3,248,000,000</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>4,806,000,000</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>232.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, other recent data document increasing concentrations of income at the very high end. For example, the Internal Revenue Service’s Statistics of Income Division last month released information on the 400 individual income tax returns with the highest adjusted gross incomes for 2002–2010. The data reveal increasing amounts of income for these 400 individuals, as illustrated in this chart by David Cay Johnston:

II. RESHAPING AND REDISTRIBUTING WEALTH

Rather than relying on Piketty’s proposed global wealth tax to redistribute excessive wealth already captured by those at the top, Hsu proposes that we more closely examine the distributional impact of proposed legal rules to curb the accumulation of such wealth in the first place. Although Hsu does not flesh out this proposal, Presidents Clinton (in Executive Order 12,866) and Obama (in Executive Order 13,563) planted the seeds for such an approach by directing federal agencies in choosing among alternative regulatory approaches to select those approaches that “maximize net benefits (including potential economic, environmental, public health and safety, and other

30 Hsu, supra note 5, at 2071–72.
advantages; distributive impacts; and equity). However, federal agencies thus far have not engaged in much distributional analysis of proposed regulatory action.

In any event, refocusing high-end wealth concentration in the United States from the Top 1% (1.6 million families) to the Top 0.1% (160,000 families) and the Top 0.01% (16,000 families) suggests that Piketty’s redistributive approach may be a more desirable and achievable policy response to growing inequality. But Piketty’s proposed global wealth tax may not be the optimum redistribution vehicle.

Piketty outlines various possible wealth tax rate schedules, including the following “basic” and more “comprehensive” schedules (converted from Euros to U.S. Dollars):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Piketty “Basic” Wealth Tax</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Net Worth (Dollars)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6,500,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

35 Jim Repetti and I recently argued that the tax system should be used to reduce inequality. Caron & Repetti, supra note 9, at 1274–76.
36 Piketty, supra note 2, at 515–39.
37 Jim Repetti and I recently argued that the estate tax is a particularly apt tax vehicle for reducing inequality in light of the role of inherited assets among the very rich and the adverse economic effects of that inherited wealth. Caron & Repetti, supra note 9, at 1276–80. In earlier work, we showed that the estate tax plays a significant role in breaking up concentrations of wealth, with fewer adverse effects on taxpayer behavior than the income tax. Paul L. Caron & James R. Repetti, The Estate Tax Non-Gap: Why Repeal a “Voluntary” Tax, 20 STAN. L. & POL’Y REV. 153 (2009). In later work, we proposed five estate tax reforms that would generate needed revenue, reduce inequality, and contribute to economic growth. Paul L. Caron & James R. Repetti, Revitalizing the Estate Tax: 5 Easy Pieces, 142 TAX NOTES 1231 (2014).
39 See Schuyler, supra note 38, at 6.
Piketty recognizes that his global wealth tax is a “utopian idea,” and others have criticized the political, practical, and potential adverse economic consequences of such a tax. Piketty muses about the desirability of a “much more steeply progressive tax on the largest fortunes (for example, a rate of 5 or 10 percent on assets above [$1.25 billion]),” which would be more targeted at the source of most of the rise in inequality in the United States. But Joseph Bankman and Daniel Shaviro convincingly argue that Piketty’s wealth tax would be unconstitutional and thus should not be the focus of efforts to remedy inequality through the tax code.

40 Piketty, supra note 2, at 515.
42 Piketty, supra note 2, at 517.
43 Joseph Bankman & Daniel Shaviro, Piketty in America: A Tale of Two Literatures, 68 TAX L. REV. (forthcoming 2015) (manuscript at 46–49), available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2518586. Bankman and Shaviro note that Piketty has acknowledged that his proposed wealth tax “is unconstitutional, but constitutions have been changed throughout history. That shouldn’t be the end of the discussion.” Id. (manuscript at 50) (quoting Economist and Bestselling Author Thomas Piketty Discusses Wealth Inequality with Diverse Experts, NYU LAW (Oct. 8, 2014), http://www.law.nyu.edu/news/thomas-piketty-capital-twenty-first-century-economist) (internal quotation mark omitted). But Bankman and Shaviro rightly conclude that “the constitutional concern affects the merits of focusing current efforts to address rising high-end wealth inequality in the United States on the prospect of enacting a wealth tax.” Id.
In concluding his essay with a plea for greater public investment in education, Hsu recognizes the importance of human capital in boosting public economic growth (Piketty’s $g$), thus highlighting a criticism of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*’s focus on financial capital in computing private capital returns (Piketty’s $r$). Bankman and Shaviro note that “[t]he dominant role of human capital in creating high-end U.S. wealth concentration may greatly complicate redistributive tax policy.” They sketch out various redistributive tax policies to remedy inequality caused in part by differences in human capital of several representative individuals among the Top 0.01%:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human Capital</th>
<th>Representative Figure</th>
<th>Redistributive Taxes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurial; Managerial; Skilled</td>
<td>Larry Ellison</td>
<td>Surtax on Financial Capital, Surtax on Corporate Income, Estate and Gift Tax, Consumption Tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Sector; Managerial; Skilled</td>
<td>Jim Simons</td>
<td>Surtax on Labor Income, Reform of Financial Sector Tax, Estate and Gift Tax, Consumption Tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial</td>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Surtax on Labor Income, Consumption Tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly Skilled</td>
<td>Law Firm Partner</td>
<td>Surtax on Labor Income, Consumption Tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic; Entertainment</td>
<td>Floyd Mayweather</td>
<td>Surtax on Labor Income, Consumption</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the end, Bankman and Shaviro conclude that “it is difficult to translate Piketty’s analysis or prescriptions into a world in which human capital plays a primary role.”

In a recent essay, Joseph Bankman and I argued that tax scholars need to focus more of our work on how policymakers should address the federal

---

44 Hsu, supra note 5, at 2068–71.
46 Bankman & Shaviro, supra note 43 (manuscript at 65).
47 Id. (manuscript at 75 tbl.1).
48 Id. (manuscript at 76).
government’s unprecedented (and growing) fiscal imbalance. Over the past forty years, federal spending has averaged 20.5% of GDP while federal revenues have averaged 17.4% of GDP. This 3.1 percentage point gap between spending and revenues has produced $18 trillion of federal debt held by the public, an increase of seventy percent since President Obama took office. In Piketty terms, $s$ (spending) > $r$ (revenues). We proposed that California’s recent tax increases on the wealthy should provide a template for the nation to bring $r$ more into alignment with $s$.

Piketty’s pioneering work provides added impetus for deploying the tax system in this effort. Increasing the tax burden on the wealthy would both raise revenue to meet the nation’s spending needs and redistribute wealth to alleviate Gatsby-level inequality in America. Hsu’s proposed focus on the distributional impact of laws and legal institutions may prove to be helpful in the long run but a chimera in the short term as the nation’s fiscal and equality challenges demand solutions that only the tax system stands ready to provide. In short, raising taxes on the wealthy would both increase $r$ (revenues) to better match $s$ (spending) and decrease $r$ (private capital returns) to better match $g$ (public economic growth).

CONCLUSION

Thomas Piketty paints a convincingly bleak picture of growing inequality caused by inflated returns to private capital. Shi-Ling Hsu inaugurates an important inquiry into how law and legal institutions contribute to outsized returns to private capital in the first place. But neither provides an achievable solution in the short term to address America’s vexing inequality and fiscal problems. Using the tax system to raise taxes on the wealthy would do both.

---


50 Bankman & Caron, supra note 49, at 408–11.


53 Bankman & Caron, supra note 49, at 411–18.