



# ENLARGING POLITICAL IMAGINATION: IDEAL TYPES OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS AND A PLURALISTIC DISTRIBUTIVE APPROACH

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## Introduction

In the current public debate, one of the main questions concerning distributive justice has increasingly become whether or not the *gap* in economic resources between the super-rich and the rest of society is acceptable. Many empirical studies have shown that the gap between the super-rich and the lower, and even middle classes, has grown enormously in the last 30 years, with negative effects in terms not only of fairness but also efficiency of the economic system,<sup>1</sup> putting liberal democracies at risk at the same time.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly, many of these studies, belonging to different scientific fields, have forcefully and convincingly argued that excessive economic inequality gives leverage to the best-off, which can be easily converted into political power. Political power, in turn, reinforces

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<sup>1</sup> See: Bowles (2012), Stiglitz (2012; 2015), Piketty (2014), Atkinson (2015), and Alvaredo et al. (2018).

<sup>2</sup> See: Graetz and Shapiro (2005), Bartels (2008), Winters and Page (2009), Winters (2011), Gilens (2012), Gilens and Page (2017), Mccarty et al. (2016), and Cagé (2020).

their socio-economic position and increases the distance from those who are situated at the bottom of the distribution. The process is what Edmundson calls “the fact of domination” (Edmundson, 2017, p. 60). Others call it the essential feature of a “civil” oligarchic system (Winters, 2011). While, for Rawls (2001), this phenomenon is a clear violation of the fair value of political liberties.<sup>3</sup> I prefer to call this process material domination; that is, a person or a group of citizens is materially dominated when the distribution of material resources (wealth and income) in society assigns to other, more affluent individuals a significantly bigger share of economic and political influence on legislation and, in particular, on the shaping of the basic structure of society.<sup>4</sup> The notion of material domination is able to highlight that the source of this form of domination is material inequality, even if individuals enjoy equal political rights.

170

Thus, my normative starting point is that no democratic theory of justice can afford the luxury of allowing social mechanisms that lead a class of citizens to *dominate* others. Otherwise, we would conceive of citizens as passive recipients of goods, rather than as active subjects of justice.<sup>5</sup> This means that we cannot keep the question of distribution separate from the question of political and socioeconomic

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<sup>3</sup> About the fair value of political liberty, see: Rawls (1971, p. 201-205; p. 222-234; p. 278), and Rawls (2005, p. 5-6; p. 324-331).

<sup>4</sup> See: Ali and Caranti (2021), Ali (2022).

<sup>5</sup> Some (non-relational) distributivist conceptions of justice run this risk insofar as they concern people’s absolute levels, and only with the bottom of distribution; for instance, Frankfurt’s sufficientarianism (2015), Parfit’s prioritarianism (2000), or Dworkin’s luck-egalitarianism (2000). However, even within these broad families, there are relevant exceptions; for example, in the case of Axelsen and Nielsen’s sufficientarian account (2015) and in the luck-egalitarianism account; see Cohen, G. A. (1989); Otsuka (2002). I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

power and inclusion.<sup>6</sup> From this normative point of view, the economic gap between the best-off and worst-off should be a chief concern. Indeed, given the competitive and relational nature of economic and political powers, the significance of power that ensues from having wealth depends not simply on how much one has in absolute terms but on the comparative difference between what some have and what others do not. We might infer that the worst-off in a (democratic) society could and should reject “social” arrangements that leave them so distant in terms of economic resources from the best-off that they risk material domination. However, and despite this, in the current debate things are not that simple. Indeed, although scholars could agree on the premise that economic inequality has a relevant effect on undermining the value of political liberties, they might radically differ on the solution to be adopted.

First of all, some scholars do not believe that the only solution to avoid material domination is to cap economic inequality. Not surprisingly, in the current debate, even within an egalitarian camp,<sup>7</sup> some scholars rely on some version of the so-called “insulation strategy” – a set of methods to cap private contributions to candidates and parties, severely curtail television and radio advertising, guarantee public slots in the media devoted to representing the views of all different candidates, and so on – as a sufficient remedy for the influence of money on politics. If this worked, then we could afford to remain ignorant of the acceptable limits on economic inequality, no matter how large it would be, and the mechanisms above would defuse potentially degenerative effects of

171

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<sup>6</sup> There are many conceptions of social justice which share this view. See, for example: Rawls (1971, 2001), Young (1990), Anderson (1999, 2010), Forst (2014), Scheffler (2015), Scanlon (2018), and Schemmel (2021).

<sup>7</sup> The most exemplary case is Anderson’s account (1999, 2010). Indeed, Anderson (2008) rarely mentions the necessity to limit economic inequalities; on the contrary, she seems to opt, at least as the best option, for some forms of the insulation strategy. For more details on this point, see Schemmel (2021, p. 233-42).

economic inequality. For these scholars, as von Platz perfectly expresses such view, “whether the political process can be adequately insulated is an empirical question, not a matter that can be settled a priori, and to establish that it is impossible to insulate requires showing that no feasible insulation scheme would work” (von Platz, 2020, p. 24-25). It means that we cannot normatively prescribe a certain limitation of economic inequality unless we say a definite word against the effectiveness of the insulation strategy.

Secondly, even those scholars who believe that the only effective strategy is to prevent excessive economic concentration and inequality, they disagree whether we should endorse a noncommittal or committed view in choosing the ideal social system capable of avoiding material domination, such as a property-owning democracy, liberal democratic socialism, or another ideal social system. For example, Rawls (2001) opts for a noncommittal view, while other Rawlsian scholars, such as Edmundson (2017) and Thomas (2017), sustain, on the contrary, a committed view, albeit they then disagree about the type of ideal social system we should pursue.

172

This paper focuses on both of these relevant disagreements and divergences in the current debate, arguing that, first, the so-called “insulation strategy” is an insufficient remedy for the influence of money on politics (broadly understood), and second, that we have strong reasons to avoid a committal view in choosing an ideal type of social system. Moreover, this paper suggests associating the noncommittal view of an ideal social system with what I call a “pluralistic distributive approach,” the main idea of which is to focus on a set of distributive proposals concerning the most crucial areas of socioeconomic structures in liberal democracies.

Hence, the paper proceeds as follows. In its first section, I will borrow (and expand) Christiano’s theoretical analysis of how money translates into political influence. Then, in the second section, I will argue that the reliance

on the insulation strategy is misplaced. The insulation strategy, albeit not entirely useless, is impotent against those mechanisms through which money indirectly influences the political system and, above all, public opinion. This means that the only remedy against material domination is the containment of economic inequality within a certain range or proportion.<sup>8</sup> In the third section, I will defend a noncommittal view, such as that in Rawls' theory of justice, on the question of which ideal social system is the most effective to prevent excessive wealth and property concentration. There are some fundamental reasons and advantages to avoid a committed view. Being committed to a single specific ideal per-distributive social system restricts our options and political imagination about our choice of social system. Moreover, I argue that the best way to proceed is to associate the discussion about the ideal types of social systems with a "pluralistic distributive approach" which might be able to pursue a more productive step-by-step strategy to better understand how to achieve a certain ideal system or, more realistically, some version of it. The point is that, depending on the non-ideal society that we hope to transform toward a certain ideal social system, the actual non-ideal institutional structures and the socioeconomic, cultural, and political circumstances of that society might make it more feasible and affordable to opt for one ideal system rather than another and much more likely for a combination of several different ideal systems. The innovative nature of the pluralistic distributive approach is to bridge the gap between ideal models and their concrete implementations to different and non-ideal circumstances. Finally, I will show how we can read Piketty's participatory socialism (2020) from the point of view of a pluralistic distributive approach.

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<sup>8</sup> See: Ali (2022).

## How Money Influences Politics

In this section I will provide, first of all, a theoretical analysis of how money translates into political leverage. To discuss this issue, I will borrow the four mechanisms described by Thomas Christiano (2012) to identify how money influences politics. Secondly, I will try to explain why the insulation strategy is an insufficient and ineffective remedy to counter these mechanisms.

Christiano (2012) distinguishes four basic mechanisms through which economic power is converted into political influence: (1) *money for votes*, (2) *money as a gatekeeper*, (3) *money as means for influencing public and legislative opinion*, and (4) *money as independent political power*.<sup>9</sup>

The first mechanism concerns the way rich people fund politicians' electoral campaigns in exchange for policies which benefit them. This mechanism is the most direct manner in which money influences politics. This mechanism presents a clear *quid pro quo*; donors ask politicians for something in return for their financial support (Christiano, 2012, p. 244).

The distinctive characteristic of the second mechanism – money as a gatekeeper – is that money is converted into political influence and power to set the agenda for collective decision-making (no direct *quid pro quo* mechanism). The distortion of the deliberative process in agenda-setting occurs because “the interests and points of view of the affluent segments of society will be better represented in political campaigns than those of the less well-off” (Christiano, 2012, p. 246).

In the case of the third mechanism, money is used to influence public opinion. Addressees are not politicians or candidates but citizens. Money can influence politics by

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<sup>9</sup> A similar analysis is provided by Bohman and Rehg (1997), Elster (1998), Shapiro (2003), Przeworski (1990, 2003), and Winters and Page (2009).

highlighting and boosting (through advertising, for example) a selection of specific messages. Moreover, rich people can also influence public and legislative opinion by financing the activities of lobbyists, *think tanks*, and intellectual activity in general (Christiano, 2012, p. 250).<sup>10</sup> Some famous examples are those of Charles and David Koch, the brothers who spend millions on ultraconservative *think tanks* (Mayer, 2016), or George Soros, who usually finances left-wing parties and candidates. However, the third mechanism is more complex than Christiano's evaluation and must be understood as functioning far beyond the obvious channels of material influence which can buy direct political messaging. Indeed, the way wealthy people can influence public opinion, and more precisely, citizens' political and social values, preferences, desires, and normative judgments is more pervasive than we can imagine at first sight. In this sense, the process of collective decision-making and public opinion can be indirectly influenced. Indeed, a certain political hegemony can also be reached by not only investing money through political foundations but also via cultural and philanthropic non-profit foundations and activities. These foundations are not only tools for obtaining extensive tax relief (Saez and Zucman, 2019) but can also function as a way to shape (at least partially) some spheres of social life according to an investor or donor's own ideas and interests. As Rob Reich (2018) has demonstrated, philanthropic and charitable initiatives are also instruments to pursue personalistic projects. The scope and ways in which all these non-political *prima facie* activities are organized and performed (even the most eccentric ones, such as Elon Musk's project

175

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<sup>10</sup> On this specific phenomenon, see West and Loomis (1998), Jacobs and Shapiro (2000), and Graetz and Shapiro (2005). Nowadays, an effective tool is used by social media platforms, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, which targets voters with personalized political advertisements. See the famous scandal of *Cambridge Analytica*, a company owned by the hedge fund billionaire Robert Mercer (Cadwalladr, 2017).

to colonize Mars) are not “neutral”; rather, they inevitably embody a specific set of cultural, political, social, and normative values (or, in broader terms, a particular worldview) that influences citizens and the public opinion. The case of the *Chan Zuckerberg Initiative* is very significant here because it has the explicit scope of seeking to influence public policy debates by its philanthropic initiatives and thus purports to embody a new model of philanthropy which demands more control over where the money is spent.<sup>11</sup> Another way to influence public opinion is by funding the scientific dissemination of research in sensitive public fields, such as climate change or health.<sup>12</sup> We do not need to assume (and I do not) that all these activities are morally or politically problematic or to establish a good way to carry them out. Here, the point is to simply take into account that they can significantly influence public opinion and the political agenda, and the impact of these activities is clearly proportional to the amount of money that every citizen can legitimately decide to invest in them.

176

Finally, through the fourth mechanism, money does not operate directly on the process of collective decision-making but as an independent constraint (Christiano, 2010; 2012). Imagine a government does something to pursue a democratically chosen aim, e.g., to impose a costly environmental regulation, and big corporations subvert this aim by maneuvering the economic forces they control. They can, for example, decrease (or threaten to decrease) investments in that

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<sup>11</sup> A limited liability company, founded by Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan, which should receive (at least according to what they announced) 99 percent of their Facebook shares (during their lives). Although it is not a non-profit foundation, this unusual corporate structure allows enjoyment of major tax breaks regarding profits and inheritance duties while leaving Zuckerberg and his wife in ultimate control of the organization (Goel and Wingfield, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> In some cases, these scientific disseminations have the not-so-hidden aim of discrediting or spreading doubts about established scientific data rather than contributing to the scientific debate itself. See Oreskes and Conway (2010), Farrell (2016), and Cagé (2020).

country, thereby increasing unemployment and popular discontent toward the government itself (Christiano, 2012, p. 250). At the same time, firm investments, disinvestments or production reallocations can be used not only as a sort of countervailing power against a specific law that may affect their profits but also as an advanced means to obtain favorable regulations, such as reducing taxation over profits, loosen labor laws, offering special subsidies, etc. These maneuvers amount to an independent exercise of political power which can influence political actions and behaviors of the involved and affected citizens, politicians, and local and national governments.

Even if these mechanisms do not capture all the ways in which money translates into political influence, they are sufficient to give us an idea of how material domination unfolds. Now, given the pervasiveness of these mechanisms, the further question becomes “What could be done to counter them?”

177

### **The Insufficiency of the Insulation Strategy**

The ‘insulation strategy’ is the most common strategy that is taken to be a sufficient remedy for the influence of money on politics. It can be summarized by the lemma: “keeping money out of politics” (Thomas, 2017, p. XIX). The insulation strategy aims, indeed, to insulate the political democratic process from the power of money by a set of regulations, restrictions, and institutional devices. From an ideal point of view, if this strategy works, we could disregard the question of economic inequality, no matter how large, and yet remain quite confident that citizens are not exposed to the risk of material domination. Indeed, as I said, some influential scholars rely on the insulation strategy to reject a normative prescription against large economic inequalities or, at best, to downgrade the question to an empirical stand. Therefore, it is important to say something about the effectiveness of this strategy. In the literature, there have been several attempts to

reject the insulation strategy (see, for instance, Thomas, 2017; Robeyns, 2017; Edmundson, 2017; and Schemmel, 2021). They can be understood in three ways. The first is empirical; namely, the insulation strategy is something very difficult, or quite impossible, to be fully implemented, and for this reason it would not be empirically effective. The second way is an “exogenous” normative rejection. It means that, although in principle, the insulation strategy can be fully implemented and effective to defuse the mechanisms mentioned in the previous section, social justice is about a spectrum of issues that go beyond guaranteeing the fair value of political liberties (or avoiding domination) and, therefore, economic inequalities should be reduced for other moral and political reasons, such as avoiding the unfairness of an economic system or humiliating differences in social status.<sup>13</sup> In this case, the insulation strategy is considered insufficient but for exogenous normative reasons regarding the objective of protecting political equality and the value of political liberties. The third way is, on the other hand, an endogenous normative rejection. In this case, the insulation strategy is also seen as insufficient but for ‘internal’ reasons, in the sense that this strategy, even if perfectly implemented, is not fully and adequately able to protect citizens from the risk of material domination. In this section, I will argue about this third way to consider insulation strategy as insufficient.<sup>14</sup> Here, my main contribution is that even the most ambitious and comprehensive proposal for an insulation strategy in the current debate – provided by Julia Cagé in *The Price of Democracy. How Money Shapes Politics and What to Do about It* (2020) – is ineffective in dealing with the mechanisms through which money indirectly influences the political system and public opinion. Let me present this point.

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<sup>13</sup> For a plurality of reasons against economic inequalities, see O’Neill (2008), and Scanlon (2018).

<sup>14</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

Cagé (2020) proposes radical institutional reforms based on three main pillars: (1) strict limits on private funding and electoral spending; (2) a public voucher system (Democratic Equality Vouchers); and (3) a Mixed Assembly in which a fraction of seats in a parliamentary assembly is representative of social-occupational groups. However, even her radical proposal is a clear example of how the insulation strategy is an insufficient remedy to material domination. But, beforehand, let me briefly present Cagé's proposal.<sup>15</sup>

Cagé's empirical investigation is extended to current and past experiences in the United States and European countries of developing legislation to cap private donations and to develop public systems to fund campaigns and parties. She demonstrates that these attempts have been incoherent and ineffective. Its most perverse aspect is that the current public system to fund electoral campaigns and parties in many liberal democracies (France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Canada, and Brazil) has a regressive character. Indeed, since, in these countries, donations and membership fees to political parties bring an entitlement to tax relief, least advantaged citizens literally pay, by way of the state, for the political preferences of the very rich (Cagé, 2020, p. 77-80, 104-108). Given this broad picture, Cagé proposes a radical transformation of the current model based on an annual ceiling of EUR 200 for individual private donations; a ban on corporate donations, strict limits on electoral spending, and the introduction of a system for the public funding of political movements based on Democratic Equality Vouchers (DEVs), which would give each voter an equal amount (seven euros in a French setting) to spend in support of political movements (Cagé, 2020, p. 335-336).

Additionally, along with severely curtailing television and radio advertising, Cagé (2016) proposes to extend her

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<sup>15</sup> I provide an extensive discussion in Ali (2022).

previous proposal, applied to media companies, to include political foundations. In the case of a media company, she suggests a new model of media business based on a ‘nonprofit media organization’ (NMO) which combines features of both foundations and joint-stock companies. The main innovation would be that profit-taking is not allowed and capital invested in media is irrevocable (like a donation for a foundation). Moreover, the decision-making power of outside investors is also limited in exchange for investors receiving certain tax breaks (Cagé, 2016, p. 83). The proposal aims to reformulate the model of media-capitalized ownership toward so-called co-management to cap the voting rights of the biggest shareholders and, conversely, to increase the weight of voting rights of small shareholders (journalists and employees but also readers through crowdfunding).<sup>16</sup> In other words, beyond a certain threshold of participation, voting rights would cease to be proportional to owned shares. It can be considered an attempt to “isolate” large ownership from decision-making processes within media companies and political foundations.

However, according to Cagé, this is not enough to realize the idea of democracy as “one person, one vote” if we do not also solve the problem of representation in the current liberal democracies, in which some social classes are almost entirely excluded from the ranks of those elected in the parliament, with the result that their preferences are ignored by elected politicians. Hence, Cagé’s solution is to reserve a significant proportion of national assembly seats (a third or even a half) for

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<sup>16</sup> For example, she suggests that company investments above 10 percent may obtain voting rights corresponding to one third of the amount invested. Meanwhile, those that contribute less than 10 percent (but above 1 percent) would receive a proportionate boost in their voting rights so that the total is always 100 percent (Cagé, 2016, p. 100; 2020, p. 169-70).

[...] members elected by proportional representation on lists that are genuinely *representative* of the social-occupational reality of the population. In France, for example, this could mean that at least 50 percent of the lists would have to be made up of blue-collar workers, employees, and workers in new forms of insecure employment. (Cagé, 2020, p. 366)

Now, given the pervasiveness of four of Cristiano's mechanisms, is Cagé's proposal able to counter them? Unfortunately, while the regulations and institutional mechanisms Cagé proposes are not pointless, I believe that they are seriously insufficient and, above all, fully impotent against those mechanisms through which money indirectly influences the political system and, most importantly, public opinion. Although she also sustains policies of wealth taxation (Cagé, 2020, p. 173), I argue that only a radical limitation of economic inequality can avoid material domination, as I will now explain.

181

The main reason for this argument is that Cagé's proposal seems to be effective only against the first two of Cristiano's mechanisms. Indeed, a very low ceiling of private donations to political parties and movements, as well as the ban on corporate donations and strict limits placed on electoral spending, might avoid economic power being converted into political influence by mechanisms such as: (1) money for votes and (2) money as a gatekeeper.

However, the problem with these restrictions is that they are difficult to implement because they often enter into conflict with freedom of expression. Not accidentally, supreme courts are inclined to accept contribution or expenditure limits with the aim of limiting the first mechanism (money for votes) but they are less inclined to counter the second

mechanism.<sup>17</sup> When money supports candidates or parties without a *quid pro quo*, it is hard not to construe any contribution and expenditure as a non-problematic exercise of freedom of expression. Someone (for example, Cohen, 2001) might sustain that a trade-off between political equality and freedom of expression is acceptable because money as a gatekeeper would take place only during electoral campaigns. However, there are good reasons to remain skeptical. Contributions to politics do not *only* happen before elections. For this reason, Cagé proposes permanent limits on private donations and expenditures. She argues (Cagé, 2020, p. 344) that supreme court decisions make a mistake by equating money with political discourse, and the ceiling introduced in a consolidated liberal democracy such as France seems to support her argument. But, although it is not unreasonable to imagine certain limits or more stringent regulations for very large private political donations – for example, those coming from Super PACs – a yearly ceiling of EUR 200 per head may be too rigorous. However, even if we accepted Cagé’s proposal for strict limits on private political donations and expenditures, is her premise able to deal with the other two mechanisms? Unfortunately, the answer is no.

Regarding the third mechanism, we have seen that it concerns the formation of public opinion and hegemonic steering, things that usually happen not only by means that can be considered “political,” such as activities of lobbyists and *think tanks*, but also through intellectual activity in general, such as cultural, scientific, and philanthropic channels. In these fields of social life, the implementation of certain ‘isolation’ policies (if feasible), as suggested by Cagé, would

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<sup>17</sup> For the case of the Supreme Court of The United States, see *Buckley v. Valeo* decision 424 US 1 (1976) and *McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission*, 572 US 185 (2014). About the debate on these decisions, see Rosenkranz (2000), Anderson (2000), Kuhner (2014), Post (2014), and Hasen (2016). European courts also shared the content of the Supreme Court’s decisions, see 1998 judgment of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in the *Bowman v. United Kingdom* case.

have an unbearable cost on freedom of expression and individual liberties. For example, her proposal of co-management to work should be extended to all modes of intellectual activity. However, I have serious doubts about it.

First of all, I am not sure that Cagé's proposal of co-management will be able to reduce the decision-making power of investors in any drastic way for the simple reason that it works both indirectly and more pervasively. She herself acknowledges this when she mentions how "outside investors" who have no seat on the board can nonetheless still have influence on editorial lines. To mention only two such cases: (1) prominent French advertiser Bernard Arnault deprived *Le Monde* of publicity revenue for being unhappy with *Le Monde's* publication of the case *Paradise Papers* (Cagé, 2020, p. 166, 399 note 41) and (2) Meredith Corporation, which provoked skepticism about their capacity to avoid undue influence on the editorial line of *Time magazine* coming from the Koch brothers' investment fund (*Koch Equity Development*) who gave financial support to buy *Time magazine* without holding seats on the board of the company (Cagé, 2020, p. 166).

Secondly, and most importantly, by extending this co-management model to political foundations and other intellectual activities, I do not see how we might avoid the problem of unequal influence on public opinion that the rich enjoy through these activities and, at the same time, to maintain the attractiveness of these tools for those who are willing to invest their money. Indeed, these activities are not only perceived as ways to obtain economic profit or tax breaks but are also explicit means to pursue personal and legitimate forms of life, including the aim to influence and orient public opinion and political agendas (a legitimate purpose in a liberal democracy). A foundation (political or otherwise) is created for a specific aim and with a particular worldview (which is usually binding by its statute) and if we impose Cagé's NMO model, two simple things might occur.

In the first scenario, if the disproportional mechanism of countervailing power is particularly strong, original founders might lose control of the foundation (to the extent that new large investors would not have the leverage to gain control) in favor of a more “democratic” management among many small investors. In the second scenario, on the contrary, the disproportional voting rights acquired by small investors may not affect the dominant control of large investors for three main reasons: a) the management is in any case bound to the statutory mission of the foundation; b) it is very unlikely that small donors would yield a massive investment in a foundation or association in which they do not share similar cultural and political orientations; and most importantly, c) the balance of power within the foundation would be far more “democratic” if and only if wealth concentration and economic distribution in society are not extremely unequal. Otherwise, we would not find this collection of small investors and donors who are compensating for the power of large investors – where the eventual countervailing power can favor the rich over the super-rich while the middle and lower classes would be excluded from this possibility.

184

In the first case, it is obvious that the tool will lose its attractiveness, and the super-rich might follow the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative strategy to maintain ultimate control of the organization (even at the cost of losing more generous tax benefits) or find other legal instruments; while in the second case, Cagé’s NMO model may simply be a further gift to the richest in terms of tax deductions.

However, and in any case, all these regulations and Cagé’s NMO model remain fully ineffective in dealing with Christiano’s fourth mechanism. First, the set of strict limits on private funding and electoral spending are ineffective because, as we have seen, wealthy individuals and corporations are able to undermine and subvert public policies while giving the impression of remaining fully within the exercise of

their prerogatives and liberties, with no need to “buy” consent directly among legislators or citizens. Second, Cagé’s NMO model is unfit because we cannot convert all productive activities in a non-profit business (and in particular a financial investment) into a “gift”; that is, into an irrevocable donation to the firm. Thus, the main weapon for increasing and decreasing investments, as well as making decisions on production reallocations, remains in the hands of large investors. It does not mean that we cannot pursue some forms of co-management (at least, in major corporations), as in the famous examples of German and Swedish systems for sharing voting rights within firms (Piketty, 2020). However, this tool is thought to pursue two different aims: workplace democracy and long-term redistributive effects.<sup>18</sup> Of course, in the case in which forms of co-management are highly effective means of achieving a significant dispersion of wealth and property, we could enjoy a positive corollary effect of a depletion of political influence of the best-off; albeit as a result of economic inequality reduction rather than of regulations and barriers instated to control the power of money.

Am I perhaps ignoring the effectiveness that Cagé’s proposal for a mixed assembly could have in defusing Christiano’s third and fourth mechanisms? But no, that is not the case. Indeed, if the best-off are able to profoundly influence public opinion and the political agenda through the third mechanism, the idea of creating a proportional representation of all social occupations in parliament would not change this picture at all. Even the representatives of the most disadvantaged social groups, now better and fairly represented, would participate in the decision-making

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<sup>18</sup> Recently, Piketty (2020, p. 1094) proposes to extend Cagé’s proposal of a vote rights ceiling to profit-making sectors to reinforce the weight of workers’ decision-making within firms above a certain size (>100 employees). However, the exact aim seems to be that of pursuing workplace democracy and long-term distributive effects for a reduction of economic inequality.

process taking place within a certain political and cultural hegemony in which unfavorable policies for the rich do not even appear in the public debate. A mixed assembly is even more ineffective against Christiano's fourth mechanism because, in this case, money does not operate directly within the process of collective decision-making.

To summarize, in no way do I think that Cagé's several proposals are useless. On the contrary, her Democratic Equality Vouchers proposal is an ingenious model of public funding capable of overcoming many flaws of the actual one, and it can serve as a valid model even in the best scenario of a society, in which economic inequalities are not wide enough to upset political equality. Moreover, in contemporary societies that present extreme levels of wealth inequality (while we do everything possible to reduce it), I believe that we ought to find a way to implement some limits on electoral spending, place a ban on corporate donations and a cap on very large private political donations in respect to the tenets of a constitutional democracy. Nonetheless, I hope to have offered some decisive arguments to show how even the most ambitious of insulation strategies is not only insufficient but also fully ineffective in dealing with mechanisms through which money indirectly influences the political system. Even if barriers meant to insulate the political dimension from external influences worked effectively (a big 'if' indeed), economic inequality and its corresponding economic power would still continue to offer wealthy people a significantly bigger share of political influence (broadly understood) than the one left to the worst-off.

186

### **How liberal democracy can prevent material domination: a pluralistic distributive approach**

Once we have ascertained the insufficiency of the insulation strategy, the only credible solution to avoid material domination is to implement a structural distributive scheme

to prevent huge wealth and income concentration and inequality. However, the idea of shaping the political, economic, and social institutions in such a way that prevents excessive material inequalities could be taken as an argument in favor of one or another predistributive social systems. Indeed, the contemporary debate focuses largely on this question, and, as a consequence, the lists of ideal types of social systems have significantly increased in number, more than Rawls' closed list of options.<sup>19</sup> In this case, a relevant divergence consists of defending a noncommittal or a committed view about the choice of the ideal type of social system.

The origin of this debate can be traced to *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Rawls, 2001), in which Rawls expressly introduced a specific normative question concerning what he called our "choice of a social system." This choice specifically concerns comparing a set of ideal types of social systems and deciding which of these satisfy the requirements of the two principles of justice. Rawls takes into account a closed list of options composed of (1) *laissez-faire capitalism*; (2) *welfare-state capitalism*; (3) *state socialism with a command economy*; (4) *property-owning democracy*; and finally, (5) *liberal (democratic) socialism* (Rawls, 2001, p. 136). According to Rawls, the first three kinds of regimes, (1) to (3), violate the two principles of justice in at least one way. *Laissez-faire* and *welfare-state capitalism* allow very large inequalities in the ownership of real property (productive assets and natural resources) and thus tolerate that few wealthy people control the economy and, with it, much of political life (Rawls, 2001, p. 137-138); while *state socialism with a command economy* disrespects legitimate differences among individuals. As Piketty (2014,

187

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<sup>19</sup> For example, property-owning democracy (O'Neill and Williamson, 2012; Thomas, 2017), liberal market socialism (Schweickar, 1993; Ellerman, 2016), pluralist commonwealth (Alperovitz, 2005), participatory economics (Hahnel, 2005), liberal democratic socialism (Edmundson, 2017), market democracy (Tomasi, 2012), social democracy (von Platz, 2020), participatory socialism (Piketty, 2020), and workplace democracy (Neuhäuser, 2021).

p. 531-532; 2020, p. 666-668) observes, the point is that private property and the free-market economy do not have the sole problematic effect of exposing the risk of domination of capital but also play an indispensable role in coordinating the actions of millions of individuals. Given the complexity of our modern society and the need for high levels of coordination, it is impossible for everyone, even for a central political authority, to collect and manage all information in the social order in terms of individual preferences and needs. Thus, famously, Rawls' choice falls on only two of these – liberal market socialism and property-owning democracy. As Thomas rightly observes, Rawls' methodology for the choice of a social system has two fundamental features:

[...] first, he vindicates no single option, rather the disjunctive choice between liberal market socialism and a property-owning democracy. Second, while nearly all the options on Rawls' closed list can claim to have some basis in historical fact, one of his chosen options [a property-owning democracy] does not. (Thomas, 2020, p. 109)

188

Thus, Rawls endorses a noncommittal view, leaving room for political imagination about the choice of social system. In this section, contrary to the direction the debate has taken in some cases, I convincingly sustain that Rawls' noncommittal view is correct. Then, I suggest coupling the noncommittal view about the ideal types of social systems with what I call a “pluralistic distributive approach.” Allow me to offer a defense of both positions.

Some scholars have considered Rawls' noncommittal view to be unsatisfactory. They detect an important ambiguity about the threat that, according to Rawls, excessive economic inequalities pose to the protection of the value of political liberties and the ultimate manner in which this threat should be defused. As summarized by Thomas,

[...] while Rawls is explicit about the threat, he is less explicit about whether he has retained his confidence in an insulation strategy to contain it. Nor, if he takes the very choice of a social system to be the ultimate, successful, pre-emptive strategy of capital dispersal offering the strongest protection against the fact of domination, did he revise the architectonic of his system to reflect that fact. (Thomas, 2020, p. 114-5)

For this reason, and to exclude this ambiguity, some suggest revising Rawls' methodology to assume a committal view about the ideal (predistributive) social system which is the most effective to prevent wealth and property concentration. For example, Thomas (2017, 2020) defends that only a property-owning democracy should be considered compatible with Rawls' principle of reciprocity; while, on the contrary, Edmundson (2017, 2021) advocates liberal democratic socialism; or, recently, Neuhäuser (2021) defends the workplace democracy as an alternative to both. By contrast, I argue that this evident shortfall in Rawls' theory of justice should be resolved at the level of the principles of justice. Elsewhere, I have suggested reformulating the difference principle and making it sensitive to the *gap* in economic inequality.<sup>20</sup> However, I believe that a committed view reduces our options and political imagination about our choice of social system. Here I would like to focus on three main reasons why we should maintain a noncommittal view.

189

First of all, it does not seem to be plausible and reasonable that all liberal democratic societies should pursue the same ideal type of social system. The democratic autonomy of political societies should be ensured as much as possible. Second, assuming that there is only one social system at our disposal involves the risk of endorsing the idea that

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<sup>20</sup> I recently proposed an alternative distributive principle called "the principle of proportionality," which *explicitly* prescribes that economic inequality must not exceed a certain range or *proportion*; see Ali and Caranti (2021), Ali (2022).

we should realize the ideal social system exactly the way it was ideally conceived. By contrast, depending on the non-ideal society that we hope to transform toward a certain ideal social system, the actual non-ideal institutional structures and socioeconomic, cultural, and political circumstances of that society might make it more feasible and affordable to opt for one ideal system over another and much more likely for a combination of several different ideal systems. Only thus can we safeguard and boost political imagination. Third, a committed view inevitably increases the risk of marking a sharp distinction between different types of social systems; as occurs, for instance, between Thomas's account of a property-owning democracy and Edmundson's proposal of democratic socialism. It is true that each type of social system is characterized by a specific redistribution device – for example, a system of widespread and decentralized private property and wealth or a system of public ownership of the means of production – but upon careful scrutiny, an ideal social system very often embodies a mix of institutional devices, mechanisms, and social policies (both redistributive and redistributive). A paradigmatic case of this sort is that of Meade's original version of a property-owning democracy which combines a mix between private and public forms of capital redistribution without a total replacement of the traditional welfare system (see O'Neill and Williamson, 2012). Moreover, from this perspective, we can also realize that a strict opposition between redistribution and redistribution might be misguided and that both strategies are complementary rather than substitutive.

These three main reasons, on the one hand, make me opt for maintaining a non-committal view about the choice of the ideal social system and, on the other hand, also highlight the need for greater attention to a plurality of distributive means rather than focusing exclusively on which ideal social system would be the most effective to

prevent wealth and property concentration. Thus, it is crucial to combine long- and short-to-medium-term perspectives (O’Neill, 2017). A long-term perspective concerns the search for ideal social systems in which we have political and socioeconomic institutions that systematically prevent political and economic domination. Instead, a short-to-medium-term perspective is a less ideal approach and one that requires a discussion of a set of distributive proposals seeking to contain and reduce, at present, inequality of income and wealth. Both perspectives are important and complementary; we need the ideal perspective to guide our political actions and institutional reforms. In a certain sense, we need a sort of bridge to connect these two perspectives. For this purpose, I suggest coupling the noncommittal view about the ideal types of social systems with what I call a “pluralistic distributive approach.”<sup>21</sup>

Hence, the main purpose of a pluralistic distributive approach is to first pursue a more productive step-by-step strategy to better understand how to achieve a certain ideal system or, more realistically, some version of it. *Second*, to avoid reproducing a very common misleading opposition between predistribution (or *ex-ante* distribution) and redistribution strategies (or *ex-post* distribution).<sup>22</sup> Redistribution involves the classical measures of progressive taxation and social protection:

191

[...] the more common egalitarian strategy that accepts the given distribution of wealth and seeks to override market outcomes through tax and transfer policies designed to attenuate the consequences of concentrated ownership.  
(Bowles, 2012, p. 18)

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<sup>21</sup> I would like to thank anonymous referees for urging me to clarify this point.

<sup>22</sup> On this point, see more in O’Neill (2020).

In contrast, predistribution implies restructuring the economy as a whole via wealth and capital ownership dispersion to produce a way for markets to implement more egalitarian outcomes. However, this contraposition is misleading. For example, the main reason to raise the upper tax rate (for those belonging to the top 1%) is not to primarily collect revenue (a redistributive policy) but to regulate the labor market, reducing the bargaining power and incentives of top executives to negotiate higher pays (with a clearly predistributive effect. See Piketty, 2014, p. 510; 2016, p. 104). *Third*, to focus on a plurality of distributive proposals combining redistribution with predistribution of both public and private forms of capital (e.g., sovereign wealth funds and a universal capital endowment); forms of workplace democracy (including stakeholding mechanisms, control ownership, and access to the dividends of social ownership); progressive tax schemes, and new forms of welfare state and social security (based on novelty instruments such as universal basic income).

192

I only have sufficient space here to provide a sketch of the pluralistic distributive approach, the main idea of which is to focus on a set of distributive proposals concerning five broad areas: (1) *wealth distribution and shared capital*; (2) *social security*; (3) *progressive taxation*; (4) the *countervailing power of economic decision-making*, and (5) *transnational financial regulations*.<sup>23</sup> These can be considered as the most crucial areas of contemporary capitalistic socioeconomic structures.

First, wealth is the most prominent source of economic inequality and the most important resource of economic and political power, made clear when we investigate the phenomenon of power asymmetry between those who save vast sums of wealth and those who save very little, as well as between those who borrow vast sums and those who borrow

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<sup>23</sup> For a similar pluralistic view, see Wright (2010, 2019), Atkinson (2015), O'Neill (2021).

little (Bowles, 2012). On the one hand, we can observe that the rate of return on capital is much lower for small savers. On the other hand, wealth inequality also reveals its asymmetrical power in the credit-market structure. Indeed, those who are not sufficiently wealthy are disadvantaged in the credit market simply because they are precluded from engaging in efficient contracts. A proposal for the first phenomenon, according to Atkinson (2015, p. 168), might be that “the government should offer via national savings bonds a guaranteed positive real rate of interest on savings, with a maximum holding per person.” But this is only a partial solution because we should attack the main mechanisms by which the wealthy are able to preserve their position at the top of the distribution: inheritance. Thus, the answer lies in knowing whether wealth and capital should be distributed and shared by means of a universal basic income (Van Parijs, 1995; Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017), capital endowment or a “minimal” inheritance for all (Ackerman and Alstott, 1999; Piketty, 2020), or sovereign wealth funds (two examples of this sort of public institution might be the *Alaska Permanent Fund* or the *Norwegian Statens Pensjonsfond Utland*).

193

Second, basic income could also be a proposal for addressing systemic unemployment, social exclusion, and poverty and thus, also an instrument of social security. It is necessary to argue about the nature of basic income, whether it should be universal and unconditional (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017) or whether it should include some kind of conditionality, such as the requirement to provide some forms of social contribution or participation (Atkinson, 2015). The answer to this likely depends on the kind of function and level of distributive ambition that basic income should (and could) perform. Moreover, we should not discard a combination of unconditional and conditional distributive tools. For example, Atkinson combines his conditional “Participation Income” with an unconditional “Child Benefit” which should

be paid for all children (regardless of the family's income) at a substantial but taxable rate as “an effective way of ensuring that all families receive some recognition of their family responsibilities but that more is given per child to those on lower incomes” (Atkinson, 2015, p. 214).<sup>24</sup> Alternatively, or additionally, we might opt for reformulating some forms of social assistance of the classic welfare state.

Third, income and wealth taxation still remains the main distributive tool to reduce economic inequality. The tax system is usually understood as a simply redistributive means but this is misleading. The tax system is not simply a tool to collect revenues but is also a means to regulate capitalism in a way in which the free market might implement a more egalitarian outcome (Piketty, 2016). For example, the main reason to raise the top tax rate (for those who belong to the top 1%) is not to primarily collect revenue but to regulate the labor market, reducing the incentives of top executives negotiating higher pays. Indeed, as Piketty observes:

[...] in the 1950s and 1960s, with very high marginal tax rates (around 80%), top executives had little reason to fight for a very large pay (millions of dollars), and also other interested parties were less inclined to accept it, because 80% (at least) of the increase would in any way go directly to the government. (Piketty, 2014, p. 510)

This is a clear example that progressive taxation is also a predistributive means rather than a simple redistribution policy. However, it is critical that the progressive tax structure should be designed in a way to avoid economic disincentives.

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<sup>24</sup> Although Van Parijs (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017, p. 161-162) sees a certain similarity between the basic income and the *Bolsa Família Program* (see Pinzani and Rêgo, 2013), the latter is a means to test a program and it is less generous than basic income would be. Moreover, *Bolsa Família* shares some characteristics with the Child Benefit proposed by Atkinson. Also, in this case, *Bolsa Família* is a program addressed to only very poor families.

For example, given that taxation on income from labor and on income from capital or wealth have different economic effects in terms of efficiency, we should tax wealth, inheritance, and property more severely than income from labor.<sup>25</sup> Hence, we might impose a step-by-step progressive taxation to increase the average tax rate on the top 1%, wherein marginal tax rates have to rise lower down on the income scale (Atkinson, 2015). Moreover, we should impose a progressive inheritance taxation of all bequests and gifts *inter vivos*, which could have the same step-by-step structure.

Fourth, it also cannot disregard the power exercised by different actors by virtue of their socioeconomic positions and their roles in economic decision-making. The issue of the countervailing power in the dimension of economic decision-making has important distributive effects in reducing inequality. In particular, an important dimension of countervailing power concerns the governance of firms and relationships in the workplace, which Anderson (2017) calls a “private government.” Anderson calls attention to the way in which authority and power is exercised over workers, who, in many cases, are exposed to a high degree of arbitrariness and unaccountability. For instance, the precarious working conditions that Amazon is able to impose, even in fully developed liberal-democratic countries (Anderson, 2017, p. 128-129). Moreover, if we want to seriously take into account the issue of bargaining power in the process of decision-making, all decisions about production cannot be left only to private initiatives. Unfortunately, in public debate, there is a sort of dichotomy which presents only two possible alternatives, free market or a planned economy, as if some sort of middle ground could not exist between them. The actual reality is very different, but it is distorted by the myth of the

195

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<sup>25</sup> For more details about optimal tax rates on inheritance, income labor, and top income labor, see, respectively, Piketty and Saez (2013a, 2013b), and Saez and Zucman (2019).

genius entrepreneur who takes all risks by themselves and creates a revolutionary product which is able to innovate and change the entire society forever; an exemplary case is the figure of Steve Jobs and his Apple creations. Opposite to that, as Mazzucato (2013) brilliantly shows in her comprehensive work, state investments in research and development are a necessary first condition to generating private innovation later. Her investigation on the historical development of Apple shows that what many successful entrepreneurs have done – including Steve Jobs – is to integrate state-funded technological developments into breakthrough products. Therefore, the main question is not about government intervention itself but what kind and whose economic interests are protected or favored by the government when it decides, or not, to intervene. Nowadays it seems to be a matter of fact that governments in liberal democracies decide to intervene, or not, to guarantee and favor the economic interests of the top 1% of society.

196

Finally, it is well-known that the actual process of globalization has restricted the set of distributive policies that are politically available in democratic nation states. Although the kinds of constraints imposed by globalization should not be overestimated and liberal democracies still have enough room to implement distributive policies (see Piketty, 2020, p. 1107-1108), it is strictly necessary to improve transnational coordination and accountability and severely regulate the financial global market, even by introducing some form of “global” or “transnational” taxation.

All these five broad areas of “distribution” are linked to the question of government intervention into the market economy. Each concrete proposal within these areas has strong consequences for how we conceive of social cooperation and job participation, individual responsibility and liberty, freedom of private initiative, and property rights. Hence, it requires an accurate normative evaluation of

each single proposal and how it relates to the others; a comprehensive work which I have to postpone to another time.

Last but not least, I would like to offer an example of how we can understand a certain ideal social system from the point of view of a pluralistic distributive approach. In other words, we can disassemble a certain ideal social system into its main elements and analyze them separately. Piketty's participatory socialism (2020) is certainly the most recent proposal to be characterized by a similar pluralistic approach.<sup>26</sup> Even a very limited description of his participatory socialism makes evident its pluralistic distributive imprinting.

First of all, concerning the structural dispersion of capital, Piketty suggests that an annual progressive property tax could represent the main tool for ensuring the real circulation of capital. The advantage of an annual property tax over more conventional forms of property taxes – for example, inheritance taxes – is that “[...] it can adapt much more quickly to changes in wealth and in the ability of each taxpayer to pay. There is no need to wait for Mark Zuckerberg or Jeff Bezos to turn 90 years old and pass their wealth to their heirs in order to collect taxes” (Piketty, 2020, p. 978). Secondly, and in addition to these measures, Piketty sketches two other forms of progressive taxation: an inheritance tax and an income tax. This triptych of progressive taxation – on property, inheritance, and income – mainly aims to finance and put in place a system of capital endowments (see Ackerman and Alstott, 1999) which should be paid to all young adults (say, at the age of 25), with the result of disseminating ownership at the bottom while limiting its concentration at the top (Piketty, 2020, p. 983). The idea is to design a progressive tax structure that does not disincentivize work, innovation, and productivity

197

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<sup>26</sup> O'Neill (2021) also seems to understand Piketty's participatory socialism as a sort of pluralistic distributive approach. Of course, the same reading may be made for other ideal types of social systems. Here, I do not have the space to take into account proposals other than Piketty's.

while, at the same time, avoiding wealth and income accumulation on the top levels; a sort of step-by-step progressive taxation system that reaches the marginal tax rates of 80% or 90% only for the positions at the very top (Piketty, 2020, p. 985). Third, another fundamental pillar of Piketty's participatory socialism is workplace democracy. His proposal of workplace democracy starts from historical events in Germany and Scandinavia and tries to reinforce the weight of workers' decision-making within larger companies by, for instance, limiting the voices of the biggest shareholders, whose voting rights should be lowered to a third of their contributions in capital (Piketty, 2020, p. 974). Finally, Piketty's participatory socialism encompasses other important elements. For instance, a progressive tax on carbon emissions as a partial response to global warming, a fairer educational system, and a form of social federalism on a global level which should allow for a rewriting of the treaties that regulate financial and commercial exchanges in a way that helps nation states to recover their power to collect taxes and impose distributive policies.

198

Piketty's proposal combines a plurality of distributive policies, tools, and mechanisms that easily, and not surprisingly, overlap with the five broad areas I associated with a pluralistic distributive approach. I think this may be the right path to pursue; albeit it still requires a great normative and empirical effort to be carried out.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that an excessive economic inequality between the most and least advantaged is incompatible with a democratic commitment to the fair value of political liberties or, in other words, it exposes the least advantaged to the *risk* of material domination. First, I argued that the insulation strategy is an insufficient remedy to material domination, even in the case of its perfect implementation. The only adequate remedy against material domination

is the containment of wealth and income inequalities within a certain range or proportion. Secondly, I argued that we should avoid a committal view about our choice of ideal type of social system. Otherwise, we run the risk of restricting our political imagination and political autonomy. On the contrary, I suggested to associate the normative investigation about the ideal types of social systems with a pluralistic distributive approach to bridge the gap between ideal models and their concrete implementations to different and non-ideal circumstances and thus enlarge our political possibilities and imagination. Finally, I suggested a pluralistic reading of Piketty's participatory socialism.

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199

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## ENLARGING POLITICAL IMAGINATION: IDEAL TYPES OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS AND A PLURALISTIC DISTRIBUTIVE APPROACH

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**Abstract:** The background position of this paper is that an excessive economic inequality between the most and the least advantaged citizens in a liberal democracy has a relevant effect on exposing the latter to the risk of material domination. In this respect, this paper argues that even the most sophisticated and ambitious version of the so-called “insulation strategy” recently proposed by Julia Cagé is an insufficient remedy for the influence of money on politics. Moreover, it sustains that we have strong reasons to maintain a noncommittal view about the choice of ideal types of social systems. Being committed in principle to only one specific ideal social system restricts our political imagination and democratic autonomy of political societies. By contrast, this paper suggests coupling the noncommittal view with a “pluralistic distributive approach”, the main purpose of which is to focus on a set of distributive proposals concerning the most crucial areas of socioeconomic structures in liberal democracies.

**Keywords:** Pluralistic Distributive Approach; Ideal Social System; Insulation Strategy; Julia Cagé; Thomas Piketty; Material Domination.

### *AMPLIANDO O IMAGINÁRIO POLÍTICO: TIPOS IDEAIS DE SISTEMA SOCIAL E UMA ABORDAGEM DISTRIBUTIVA PLURALISTA*

**Resumo:** *A posição sustentada no artigo é que uma desigualdade econômica excessiva entre os cidadãos mais e menos favorecidos numa democracia liberal carrega o risco relevante de expor os menos favorecidos ao risco da dominação material. A este respeito, o artigo argumenta que mesmo a mais sofisticada e ambiciosa versão da chamada “estratégia isolacionista”, que foi proposta atualmente por*

*Julia Cagé, é um remédio insuficiente para lidar com o modo como o dinheiro influencia a política. Em segundo lugar, sustenta-se que há fortes razões para manter uma visão não-comprometida com a escolha do sistema social ideal. Estar comprometido em princípio com apenas um sistema social ideal específico restringiria nossa imaginação política e a autonomia democrática das sociedades políticas. Em contraste, o artigo sugere complementar uma visão não-comprometida com uma “abordagem distributiva pluralista”, cujo objetivo principal é focar num amplo conjunto de propostas distributivas para as estruturas socioeconômicas mais cruciais nas democracias liberais.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Abordagem distributiva pluralista; sistemas sociais ideias; estratégia isolacionista; Thomas Piketty; Julia Cagé; Dominação material.*

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