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**GROWING APART: THE IMPLICATIONS
OF ECONOMIC INEQUALITY**

**An Interdisciplinary Conference Sponsored by the
Jesuit Institute at Boston College**

8-9 April 2016

Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA

<http://www.bc.edu/centers/jesinst/inequality.html>

The Jesuit Institute at Boston College sponsored an interdisciplinary conference called “Growing Apart: The Implications of Economic Inequality,” on 8-9 April 2016. The conference followed a yearlong seminar on economic inequality for Boston College scholars in the fields of economics, education, law, philosophy, political science, social work, and theology.

Context: Economic inequality — inequality of wealth and of income — is a serious problem within and between countries around the globe. The NGO Oxfam International recently reported that sixty-two individuals own the same amount of wealth as the poorest half of the world’s population. As a deliberate matter of policy, rapid economic growth in many nations, including the U.S., is largely accruing to people who are already rich, leaving the poorer majority behind. Economic inequality is a pervasive problem that touches on many areas of life in society, affecting families’ income and wealth, to be sure, but also suppressing political voice, affecting health outcomes and lifespan, increasing wealth segregation within society and much more. Pope Francis captured this reality with his famous statement “Inequality kills.”

Objectives: “Growing Apart: The Implications of Economic Inequality” aimed to raise awareness within and beyond the Catholic community about the urgent problem of economic inequality. We felt it imperative to address the pervasive, multifaceted problem of inequality in an interdisciplinary way, bringing together scholars from as many different epistemological perspectives as possible. We

also wanted to promote the voices of junior scholars by issuing specific calls for papers for graduate and undergraduate students. The conference drew scholars ranging from undergraduate students to full professors. This write-up details only a sample of the papers presented.

Planning Committee: Kenneth R. Himes, OFM and Kate Ward of the Boston College Theology Department and Ms. Toni Ross, Associate Director of the Jesuit Institute at Boston College, took the lead in planning. Boston College faculty Tiziana Dearing (School of Social Work), Frank Garcia (Law School), Micah Lott (Philosophy), Joseph Quinn (Economics), Vincent Rougeau (Law School), Kay Schlozman (Political Science), Sandra Waddock (Carroll School of Management), and Mary Walsh (Lynch School of Education) participated in planning and evaluated submitted proposals. The Jesuit Institute at Boston College provided generous funding for the conference.

Participants and Procedure: 30 people gave presentations at the conference. Presenters included undergraduate and graduate students and faculty and represented more than 15 different universities and five countries. Plenary speakers were Elizabeth Warren, U.S. Senator from Massachusetts; Victor Tan Chen, assistant professor of sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia, USA; and Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI, of Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, India. Besides the 3 plenaries, the conference included nine concurrent sessions featuring 27 papers. Conference plenaries and panels were open to all and were well attended by Boston College faculty and students and members of the general public, with more than 400 people attending Senator Warren's speech. The conference concluded with a lunch and debrief for conference presenters to share their experience of the conference, what they had learned, and how they hoped to act on economic inequality in the future.

8 April 2016

The conference began with concurrent sessions of papers. In a panel reflecting the approaches of various disciplines to framing and addressing inequality, Micah Lott drew on the work of philosopher Elizabeth Anderson to reflect on how inequality limits freedom. Kate Ward argued that inequality affects the pursuit of virtues such as justice, humility and solidarity by limiting the practices available to persons. Joe Quinn presented an economic argument for the earned

income tax credit as an effective tactic against inequality that does not harm economic growth. Jeffrey Sternberg (Northeastern University) explored the limited ability of knowledge-producers embedded within powerful institutions to challenge inequality in a global economy.

In a panel entitled "Inequality, Sustainability and Ideology," Sandra Waddock argued that contemporary business practices foster environmental waste, threatening sustainability and the dignity of the poor. She said that business leaders should redefine assessment of progress and performance and incorporate assessment of human and environmental costs into the costs of doing business. These measures will promote the dignity of humans and ecology as a whole. Rachel Madsen (Brandeis University) showed that environmental sociology raises questions about inequality in the development of sustainability initiatives in urban areas. And Rosalia Greco (Boston College) presented her economic research showing that political polarization, which increases as inequality rises, reduces the expected effect of inequality on income redistribution.

Senator Elizabeth Warren assessed growing inequality in the U.S. in her keynote speech, arguing that while "the rich are doing great," the "American Dream" — that hard work translates into a more comfortable life — is receding from view for many. She noted that corporate profits have improved since the global recession of 2008, while wages for workers have remained stagnant. She encouraged the crowd to take political action to reverse inequality, urging, "We have seen David beat Goliath before." She took questions from the audience on topics ranging from the importance of government investment in transportation infrastructure, to the role of regulatory agencies, whose heads are appointed by the President in the U.S., in combating inequality.

In a panel entitled "Inequality in Global Perspective," James O'Sullivan (Boston College) looked at how the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals have attempted to address global inequality, both within and between countries and in a variety of overlapping arenas, from economic inequality to gender equality. Using the joint ethical analysis of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and rights-based approaches to development, O'Sullivan argued that both goal-setting initiatives fall short of adequately addressing the issue of inequality. Frank Garcia reflected on how international economic law (IEL) can be used to address global inequality. Similar to the tactics used to address inequality within nations, IEL should promote education,

mobility, basic fairness, and the rule of law. This imperative challenges current practice for addressing inequality at the domestic level. And Sylvia Cesar of Georgetown University presented quantitative political science research demonstrating that democracies are better able than autocracies to redistribute the gains and losses from trade and ameliorate its effect on income inequality.

One of the richest aspects of the conference was the opportunity for scholars who do theoretical work to learn from scholars whose research has immediately practical applications, and vice versa. A panel entitled "Community, Education and Inequality" showcased the range of methodological approaches on offer. Tiziana Dearing presented on the challenges persistent inequality poses to social work. Social work was rooted in community organizing but more recently has moved toward addressing the concerns of the individual. In order to effectively address inequality's systemic harms, especially its effect on political voice, social work should emphasize fostering relationships within the community and act in the arena of policy and politics. Mary Walsh presented on her work with City Connects, an organization which links primary and secondary schools, researchers from Boston College, students' families and community organizations to provide holistic support for students in impoverished areas. Research shows that the City Connects model improves students' experience across many educational outcomes, improving test scores and reducing absenteeism and dropout rates. It is a powerful tool to oppose the impacts of inequality on K-12 education. Finally, Dustin Crummett (Notre Dame) argued that contrary to economic notions of rational personhood, philosophical views of well-being show that too much wealth can be harmful insofar as it distances the rich from others. Thus, he insisted, egalitarian economic proposals are not harmful to the rich, as is commonly supposed.

Saturday, 9 April 2016

Victor Tan Chen began Saturday's conversations with a plenary speech discussing his research on laid-off autoworkers. He began by noting that the U.S. economy is shifting away from stable long-term employment and to temporary and part-time work, epitomized by adjunct college faculty. As Chen's work with autoworkers reveals, unemployment is not only a financial problem, but imposes emotional burdens that threaten the laid-off worker's mental health, sense of self and relationships. The U.S. likes to think of itself as an egalitarian

meritocracy, Chen points out, which implies that people who are struggling must deserve it. He called for U.S. people to embrace a "morality of grace," saying "Grace helps us recognize our society has enough for all and share even with those who 'don't deserve it.'"

The conference had aimed to attract scholars working on sources outside their traditional disciplinary boundaries and a panel entitled "Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Economics" showed what fascinating questions can emerge from this type of work. Manon Garcia (Tufts University) argued that economic studies of women's behaviour support investment in women as a means to sustainable development, but challenge the classical economic view of *homo economicus*. Traditionally, economics understands humans as self-interested agents, but women tend to invest in children and families, encouraging the flourishing of the entire community. Kyle Nicholas (Notre Dame) examined the techno-libertarian notion of the "sharing economy" presented by companies such as Uber and Airbnb. He proposed that Christian social thought can offer the robust notion of the common good and human dignity lacking in conversations about the "sharing economy" and its purported benefits to workers and societies. John Buchmann (University of Chicago) drew on Adam Smith and David Cloutier to argue that the vice of luxury threatens distributive and commutative justice. Pursuing positional goods — whose purchase increases our status relative to others — can price poorer consumers out of the goods they need to survive.

A contrary view to Buchmann's was put forth by Stephen Leccese (Fordham University) on a panel dealing with wages. Leccese, a historian, detailed the views of 19th century economists, motivated by Marx and worker well-being, who promoted luxury spending to stabilize national economies and improve workers' living standards. Ken Himes presented U.S. theologian John A. Ryan's view of the living or family wage. Ryan's promotion of a living wage is necessary but not sufficient for addressing inequality, because Ryan advocated for a floor of income when a ceiling is also necessary. Joyce Konigsburg (Duquesne University) assembled economic and theological views in support of a living wage. A living wage, she argued, promotes the dignity of workers and their families while allowing for more flexibility relative to particular areas than a universal minimum wage. Economic evidence defends its use as sustainable for workers and businesses.

In his plenary session, Shaji George Kochuthara presented an international, theological response to the conference's reflections on

economic inequality. He noted that in the Indian context, neoliberal development has become so prized that pointing out its flaws can be viewed as anti-national. Yet, “so-called development has not improved the life of the poor; rather, their life is more miserable.” Kochuthara drew on recent works of Pope Francis to argue that “development becomes real development only when it is soaked in solidarity,” and offered several concrete solutions including international debt forgiveness and accountability for multinational corporations.

To close the conference, the presenters met over lunch to reflect on what they had learned and what they hoped to achieve going forward. One message reported by many was concrete reason for hope. We learned that there are many proven, practical ways to address economic inequality. Despite its prevalence and pervasiveness, scholars across the disciplines have practical solutions to inequality that our interdisciplinary conversation can help promote and encourage. Manon Garcia, a scholar from France, pointed out that academics in her country are active as public intellectuals sharing the findings of important research with the public, and challenged U.S. scholars, in particular, to do more in this regard.

Many U.S. people were surprised by Shaji George Kochuthara’s comment that before his invitation to the conference, he was not aware that inequality was a serious problem in such a wealthy country as the U.S. This highlights the need for international solidarity to address an issue that affects human dignity for so many people in wealthy and impoverished countries alike. Finally, many participants shared the realization that combating inequality demands a conversion of moral values. Even to implement a practical solution like the earned income tax credit, political will to justice, manifesting in solidarity, is called for. Many of us felt that fields like moral theology and philosophy, and education, economics and social work, are strongly linked through the need to rely on values in addressing economic inequality.

Results: Many of the papers from the conference will be published in a special issue of the journal *Religions* (MDPI) to be co-edited by Kenneth R. Himes, OFM and Kate Ward. This special issue will be open-access and available online; please contact Kate Ward for more details. Video of the plenary speeches is available online now at the Jesuit Institute website provided above.

Kate Ward (wardkf@bc.edu)