

## Can We Trust Neoliberalism?

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Kevin Vallier's *Trust in a Polarized Age* focuses on ways to build social trust, a crucial task for the U.S. and the world. The considerable merits of Vallier's book notwithstanding, I disagree with many of Vallier's policy prescriptions. Vallier endorses a version of *neoliberalism*: a social system focused on economic growth, with strong private property rights, mostly unregulated markets, a good amount of economic inequality, a small welfare state, and little concern for the climate crisis. I shall argue that Vallier's neoliberalism arises from at least three mistaken commitments: his conception of agency rights, the priority he gives to economic growth, and his rejection of egalitarianism.

Much of Vallier's book concerns empirical claims about *social trust*. Roughly, social trust occurs when people believe that shared moral rules are being followed, rules allowing all people to pursue their plans and projects (p. 50).<sup>1</sup> Despite Vallier's arguments that neoliberal policies will restore social trust, I remain unconvinced.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, however, I shall set that topic aside. Instead, I shall assess the philosophical foundations of Vallier's neoliberalism.

### 1. AGENCY RIGHTS

For Vallier, *agency rights* are central to his defense of neoliberalism; he believes they justify robust private property rights, rights drastically restricting the state's power to enact regulations and redistribute economic resources. He hopes that enforcing these strong private property rights will restore social trust.

"Agency rights," according to Vallier, "protect the formation of coherent agent psychologies and the minimal capacity of persons to extend their projects, plans, and values into the external world" (p. 45). Vallier distinguishes between *negative* and *positive* agency rights. Negative agency rights protect us from types of interference. They "include freedom of thought and protections from various types of mental or physical harm. . . . the right to life and bodily integrity, freedom of speech, and the formation of intimate relations with others. . ." (Ibid.). In contrast, positive agency rights "are rights to meaningful access to the resources required for an agent to freely develop and exercise her agency"; they include rights to "food, healthcare, housing, clothing, and education" (p. 46).

Private property rights, on this view, are negative agency rights (p. 45), justified on the ground that they protect other agency rights: "Private property provides persons with the resources they need to satisfy their urgent wants and needs and to pursue their projects, plans, and principles" (p. 126).

Crucially, Vallier believes that negative rights—such as property rights—take priority over positive rights—such as rights to healthcare, housing, and education: “societies should protect [positive] rights in ways that do not curtail the negative rights of agency” (p. 46). This view, however, is misguided. Vallier appeals to the value of agency to derive both negative and positive rights. Yet positive rights are no less important than negative rights to the protection of agency. A lack of needed medical care vitiates my agency as surely as assault does. If I am desperately ill and yet lack effective access to care, my capacity to live my values and carry out my plans is severely diminished. As a result, a social system that prioritizes negative rights over positive rights does not take my agency very seriously (Nussbaum 2011, pp. 2-8).

Moreover, negative rights are often not worth very much without positive rights. My right to free speech is profoundly threatened by malnourishment. When my right to proper nutrition is not upheld, my hunger and weakness will vitiate my ability to think and speak freely. I may not be able to think about much more than how hungry I am (Shue 1996, pp. 24-25). With respect to free speech and other negative rights, I doubt that we merely value non-interference; we value actually exercising free speech, movement, freedom of worship, and the like. Positive rights, therefore, are at least as morally important as negative rights (Nussbaum 2011, pp. 20-22, 65-66).

It might seem that negative rights take priority over positive rights, because negative rights are less demanding than positive rights. At first glance, negative rights merely ask individuals not to interfere with other individuals, while positive rights require the state to levy taxes and set up social programs. But this view is a mistake.

While we can make a conceptual distinction between rights to non-interference and rights to goods, services, and regulations, this distinction has little practical significance. This is because rights do not enforce themselves. If I am to enjoy non-interference in the real world, then social institutions—such as the police, the judiciary, and the military—must exist and effectively enforce my rights to non-interference. Without such institutions to deter and punish rights violations, other people may violate my agency rights with impunity. I do not really possess the freedom of speech if others may assault me whenever I exercise it. Thus, the actual enjoyment of *both* negative and positive agency rights requires the creation and maintenance of extensive social institutions (Nussbaum 2011, pp. 65-67; Shue 1996, pp. 36-40).

Vallier could counter that the social institutions required to uphold positive rights are much more costly than those required to uphold negative rights. Upholding positive rights, for example, requires constructing a costly welfare state, while upholding negative rights is generally less costly. On this view, less costly rights should take priority over more costly rights. Negative rights should, therefore, take priority over positive rights.<sup>3</sup>

I doubt, however, that less costly rights should take priority over more costly rights. All wealthy societies can afford to uphold both negative and positive rights. Some rights are indeed more costly to uphold than others. But for wealthy countries, these costs are manageable. Of course, desperately poor societies cannot afford to uphold positive rights while also upholding negative rights, but this is why wealthy countries have strong obligations to provide financial aid to poor countries.

Because I deny the priority of negative rights, I also deny Vallier’s claim that society should protect positive rights by employing non-coercive institutions, such as charities and churches, instead of coercive institutions, such as the state (p. 46). Positive rights are no less important than negative rights, and the state may employ coercion to protect negative rights—by, for example, levying taxes to pay for a police force and then employing the police force to prevent and punish rights violations. If the state may use coercion to protect negative rights, then it may use coercion to protect positive rights. The state may, for example, coercively tax the wealthy to pay for social programs or coercively regulate industry to protect the environment.

Contrary to Vallier, I doubt, too, that private charities can adequately uphold positive rights to healthcare, housing, childcare, and education. As the only affluent nation without universal healthcare, the U.S. has tens of millions of people who lack health insurance, and tens of millions more with inadequate insurance. No law prevents private charities from providing uninsured Americans with good-quality health in-

surance, but this does not happen, because private charities simply do not have the resources to do so. The same holds true for housing, education, and childcare.

History tells the same story. Prior to the New Deal, private charities and fraternal organizations attempted to protect Americans from extreme poverty. They sometimes provided sick pay and minimal health insurance to some working men (not all men and virtually no women). The benefits were paltry and inadequate. Although private charities and fraternal organizations left large numbers of people behind, they were most successful in large, dense cities. People in less populous areas had to do without. Another problem is that private charity collapses precisely when it is needed the most. During an economic depression, charitable donations decrease as people become more financially insecure. The welfare state solves these problems. By heavily taxing the wealthy, it can gather the resources needed to uphold positive rights. By being national in scope, it covers everyone across the country. And because of the state's capacity for deficit financing, it can increase aid during a depression, when it is most needed. Thus, only the state, drawing upon the resources of the entire nation, can adequately uphold positive rights (Konczal 2014).

Vallier also claims that positive rights are “sensitive to the deserts or merits of the recipients” (p. 46), meaning that some people are too lazy or reckless to deserve state-provided healthcare or housing. I see things differently. Negative rights are not merely extended to the deserving, as it would be plainly unacceptable for the police to protect only hardworking, upstanding citizens. With positive rights being just as important as negative rights, we similarly owe healthcare, housing, clothing, education, childcare, and proper nutrition to the deserving and undeserving alike.

So far, I have argued that negative agency rights do not take priority over positive ones, the state, not private charity, should uphold positive rights, and positive rights should be provided unconditionally.

I do agree with Vallier, however, that the value of agency justifies some private property rights, but I do not think private property rights are nearly as strong as Vallier holds. In my view, property rights do not create a weighty presumption against state regulation or redistributive taxation. Because negative and positive rights are equally important to protecting agency, private property rights, as negative rights, do not take priority over positive rights to healthcare, housing, education, and the like. Instead, negative and positive rights, I think, should fit together into one coherent scheme. This means that healthcare, housing, and education rights limit private property rights. On this view, the state does not infringe property rights when it levies taxes for health, education, and housing programs. Private property rights do not apply in these cases.<sup>4</sup>

Further, Vallier argues that private property rights include a right to own *productive property*, such as farms and factories. To support this claim, Vallier gives the following example: a person “can convert her personal property in her home into productive property, as does a person who decides to run a massage parlor out of her house” (p. 129). She combines her personal property with one of her agency rights—freedom of occupation—to create productive property.

While it is reasonable to allow someone to run a massage parlor out of her home, it does not follow that massive holdings of personal and productive property are justified. Unlike a small, one-person business, massive holdings of productive property engender immense power over the lives of other people. Suppose I am a factory owner living under a system of strong property rights. Because the factory is *my* factory, I alone determine its working conditions. I can hire or fire people, set their work and break schedules, decide how safe they should be at work, and create obnoxious, demeaning, and arbitrary rules for them to follow (Anderson 2017, pp. xix, 37-40). This power requires justification, and the massage parlor example does not give it.

To be sure, I do need some private property—for instance, food, clothing, and money—to exercise my agency. If I enjoy hiking, then I likely need to own hiking boots and a warm coat.<sup>5</sup> The problem for Vallier, however, is that these examples do not justify large concentrations of wealth and power. There is an important difference between owning a pair of shoes and owning an entire shoe factory. The latter involves possessing a vast amount of power over others, yet I do not require this power to protect my agency. Protecting my agency requires that I have nutritious food, not that I own vast tracts of farmland. Vallier has shown

that protecting agency requires some private property; he has failed to show that rights to personal and productive property are strong enough to justify undemocratic workplaces and large concentrations of wealth and power.<sup>6</sup>

In this section, I have argued that negative and positive agency rights are equally morally important, the state should use coercion to unconditionally uphold positive rights, and rights to personal and productive property are too weak to justify large concentrations of wealth and power. These claims are important because Vallier thinks that strong property rights preclude a comprehensive welfare state (p. 153) and the large-scale redistribution of wealth (p. 183). I have argued, however, that the value of agency justifies limited private property rights, rights fully consistent with the public provision of positive rights.

## 2. ECONOMIC GROWTH

Vallier places great value on economic growth, using it to argue for strong private property rights (pp. 130-132), while also using it to argue against egalitarianism (pp. 188-196) and most state regulations (pp. 158-159). Vallier believes that economic growth has mostly beneficial social consequences (p. 131). And regulations and egalitarianism, according to Vallier, dampen economic growth, thereby limiting these beneficial consequences. Strong property rights, in contrast, spur growth. For the sake of everyone's well-being, then, Vallier advises us to reject egalitarianism and most regulations, implementing strong property rights instead. I shall argue, however, that economic growth is much less important than Vallier thinks it is. It neither justifies strong property rights nor precludes egalitarianism and most regulations.

The core problem is that, though Vallier acknowledges that wealth is different from human well-being (p. 131), he quickly loses sight of this point, extensively using wealth as a proxy for well-being. Vallier is right that as a society becomes richer, its members can gain opportunities and live healthier and happier lives. But this is by no means guaranteed.

Without redistributive taxation and high-quality public services, the benefits of economic growth are often shared extremely unequally (Nussbaum 2011, p. 49). The U.S. is the wealthiest country in human history, yet millions of its citizens lack access to affordable healthcare, housing, education, childcare, and nutritious food, subjecting them to an incredible degree of economic insecurity and avoidable suffering. Despite the U.S.'s large GDP, its citizens live shorter, unhealthier, more stressed lives than the citizens of other rich countries (Hacker and Pierson 2016, pp. 23-43).

Moreover, consider China. It has combined high economic growth rates with authoritarianism, its citizens lacking basic freedoms, such as free speech and freedom of religion. Meanwhile, toxic air suffocates Chinese cities (Nussbaum 2011, pp. 47, 50).

Although a high GDP tells us that a country *could* have a high quality of life, it fails to show that a country *does* have a high quality of life. Other measures—life expectancy, obesity rates, protection of human rights, deaths from preventable illness, homelessness, air quality—are needed to ascertain a country's quality of life (Nussbaum 2011, pp. 49-50).

What is more, poor countries without high economic growth can have relatively high living standards (Sen 2000, pp. 45-49). Despite suffering under an unjust economic blockade, Cuba has longer life expectancy, lower child mortality, and a better doctor-to-patient ratio than the U.S., and, unlike Americans, all Cubans enjoy access to excellent health and education systems as basic rights (Pineo 2019, pp. 16, 29, 33-44; Kronenberg 2015). Cuba achieved all this while having lower carbon emissions than comparable countries (Hickel 2020, p. 6).<sup>7</sup> Kerala, a state in southern India, has also achieved an impressive standard of living despite low economic growth (Sen 2000, pp. 21-24, 45-49).

Economic growth can also be morally objectionable. Many countries have used sweatshop labor to produce economic growth, but long working hours in unsafe and strenuous conditions violate the rights of workers—since these working conditions threaten and damage agency. Similarly, fossil fuel companies can produce economic growth, but this kind of economic growth brings the entire planet closer to climate catastrophe.

Vallier does concede that we should care about broad-based economic growth, “growth that benefits everyone” (p. 132), not merely economic growth itself. Yet broad-based economic growth is not enough. For example, broad-based growth derived from worker exploitation and large greenhouse gases emissions is highly objectionable. What is more, broad-based growth can be highly unequal. Because Vallier does not specify broad-based growth, it is consistent with the least advantaged benefiting minimally while the most advantaged benefit enormously—this has roughly been the situation in the U.S. for the last four decades. This contributes to extreme economic inequality, which, as I argue in the next section, is morally objectionable.

My points about economic growth are important, because Vallier primarily appeals to economic growth to argue that few state regulations are justified. He thinks that most regulations dampen economic growth (p. 159). But if economic growth is not nearly as important as Vallier thinks, then many more regulations are likely justified. After all, the primary justification for most regulations is that they protect people’s lives, health, and agency. For example, the state requires businesses to have unlocked fire exits so that, in the case of a fire, workers can escape the flames rather than burn to death, as happened in the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.<sup>8</sup> The state mandates building codes to prevent factories from collapsing, as happened in Bangladesh in 2013, killing at least 1,132 workers, while injuring more than 2,500.<sup>9</sup> By regulating automobile production, the state saves thousands of people each year from dying in driving accidents (Lardner 2011, pp. 15-16).

Vallier sees a policy’s effect on economic growth as a neutral way to assess the policy, believing that a policy must be justified as “an improvement according to each person’s reflective perspective.” “Otherwise,” Vallier warns, “only those who think that a proposed policy realizes moral values that override economic well-being will have sufficient reason to endorse it if it comes at an economic cost” (p. 158). But for the reasons I cited above, this focus on economic growth is a mistake. Additionally, health and safety are values that every reasonable person should endorse. Of course, many libertarians may not think health and safety concerns override economic growth, but surely that is one of the reasons libertarianism is implausible. It is difficult to have much liberty if your workplace injures you, your food poisons you, and faulty wiring causes your home to burn down.

To be sure, at one point Vallier acknowledges that “. . . some regulations required to protect people from workplace harms, like health and safety regulations, should be publicly justifiable” (p. 154).<sup>10</sup> But the rest of Vallier’s discussion makes clear that he thinks very few state regulations are actually justified. For example, he approvingly cites the economist Ronald Coase, who speculates that virtually no regulations are worth the economic cost (p. 159). Vallier even believes that a private court system, instead of state regulation, can adequately protect workers, consumers, and the environment (pp. 154-155).<sup>11</sup>

Vallier also casts doubt on our capacity to reasonably predict how regulations will affect economic growth (pp. 160-161). But, again, this worry arises from a mistaken focus on economic growth. The effectiveness, moreover, of many regulations to save lives and protect health is clear. In the U.S., regulations have ended child labor, increased access to public places for disabled Americans, improved workplace and housing safety, banned harmful chemicals such as DDT, and reduced cigarette smoking rates (Lardner 2011). When regulations are well-designed, the results are impressive.

Even if there are reasonable doubts about the effects of proposed regulations, many regulations will still be justified, because the state should, in some areas of public policy, err on the side of more regulation, not less. After all, unsafe workplaces and unsafe consumer products can cause serious injury and death, a significant threat to agency. What is more, the future of human civilization is threatened by the climate crisis. Everyone’s agency will be greatly reduced by failing to keep the increase in global temperature below 1.5 degrees Celsius. In this case, doing too little is far more dangerous than doing too much. Limiting economic growth is a small price to pay to protect people’s agency and ensure the planet remains habitable.

To be clear, I am not arguing that economic growth is entirely unimportant. Nor am I arguing that the absence of economic growth is desirable. Some growth, consistent with net-zero carbon emissions and protecting workers, consumers, and the environment, is a good idea. I am merely arguing that economic



growth should not be a main priority. Consequently, concerns over economic growth fail to provide strong reasons against regulations and egalitarianism.

### 3. ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Vallier opposes egalitarianism (roughly, the view that we should greatly reduce economic inequality).<sup>12</sup> Instead, he supports some aid to the poor (pp. 167-171) and reforming zoning laws and intellectual property rights (pp. 176-177). He also entertains the possibility of supporting some union rights (p. 197) and some limits on inheritance (p. 129). These policies would somewhat reduce economic inequality, but huge concentrations of wealth and power would likely remain. For example, the vast wealth already generated by strong intellectual property rights would remain concentrated, and weak union rights and weak limits on inheritance are not enough to combat the massive inequalities entrenched in the American economy. Additionally, Vallier's proposals fail to reduce the wealth and power of the financial and fossil fuel sectors.

Contrary to Vallier, I believe that there are at least two compelling reasons for promoting a high degree of economic equality. The first is that equality protects democracy, the second that equality promotes desirable social outcomes.

Why does equality protect democracy? Consider that extreme economic inequality undermines democracy, because the wealthy are able to buy a disproportionate share of political influence. The wealthy hire lobbyists to shape legislation in their clients' interests, and the wealthy give large campaign contributions to candidates, which allows them to lobby candidates directly. The wealthy can then threaten to withhold future contributions if politicians are tempted to contravene their interests. Large campaign contributions also give an advantage to primary candidates who seek to protect the interests of the wealthy. The wealthy create think tanks, advertising campaigns, and astroturf political organizations to promote their favored policies and mislead the public. Ownership over the media also plays a role in framing the national debate. These activities distort the political process, tilting it in favor of the wealthy and against ordinary Americans (Mayer 2016). If, in a democracy, people are supposed to have roughly the same influence over the political process, then extreme economic inequality greatly damages democracy.

This problem calls for strict rules on lobbying and campaign contributions, along with public financing of elections. While these measures are part of the solution, they are not enough. The wealthy would still have inordinate influence through think tanks, advertising, astroturf organizations, and control over the media. To truly protect democracy, we need to greatly reduce economic inequality. By doing so, there will be less money available for subverting democracy.

Vallier, of course, rejects the claim that greater economic equality protects democracy. Instead, he speculates that economic inequality is not the main cause of *political inequality* (that is, the affluent having more influence over the political process than everyone else). For example, he suggests that rent-seeking is the main driver of political inequality. "If it is relatively easy for people to gain special government favors," then rent-seeking may be the primary cause of both political inequality and economic inequality (p. 177).

This suggestion, however, is implausible. Securing government favors requires resources: large campaign contributions, hired lobbyists, and producing propaganda. Although rent-seeking no doubt helps to create economic inequality, it is mostly a symptom of economic inequality, because it takes wealth to engage in rent-seeking. So, rent-seeking is unlikely to be the primary cause of political inequality.

Similarly, Vallier suggests that the affluent may be more savvy about the political process, creating political inequality, not through their wealth, but their knowledge and social traits (p. 178). Although I strongly support a better civics education in the U.S., I doubt that political inequality primarily results from some being shrewder and better informed than others. Again, lobbying, access to candidates (by means of large campaign contributions), and promoting misinformation (through think tanks and astroturf organizations) are the main mechanisms of political inequality, and these methods require a great deal of wealth. Ordinary Americans, no matter how well-informed, cannot afford to hire a phalanx of lobbyists, as the wealthy can.

Next Vallier speculates that high social status, not economic inequality, causes political inequality. On this view, high status individuals use their status to influence the political system (p. 178).

But social status is intimately connected with economic inequality. Great wealth, in our culture, tends to be equated with superior ability, while poverty is often seen as a personal failing (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010, p. 40). The wealthy are seen as intelligent and hardworking, the poor as slow and shiftless. In this way, economic inequality creates inequalities in social status. Thus, the claim that social status causes political inequality largely amounts to saying that economic inequality does so.

Finally, Vallier speculates that economic inequality may not cause political inequality, because economic inequality may merely cause greater polarization, and our institutions do not function well in circumstances of polarization—they become gridlocked. The problem, then, is our institutions, not inequality. Perhaps we could redesign our political institutions to function better when there is polarization, while leaving extreme economic inequality in place (pp. 178-179).

But this suggestion suffers from the same problem we saw above. Namely, political institutions cannot be effectively insulated from extreme economic inequality. There are simply too many ways—think tanks, advertising campaigns, astroturf organizations, and media ownership—for the wealthy to gain greater influence.

Contrary to Vallier, extreme economic inequality is the *best explanation* for the wealthy's disproportionate influence over politics. Consider the U.S.'s inaction on the climate crisis. The science of climate change has been settled for over 30 years; unless the U.S.—and the rest of the world—drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the future of human civilization is threatened. Yet the U.S. has failed to meaningfully reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, it has expanded its own fossil fuel production. The best explanation for this disturbing situation is that the fossil fuel industry, by means of lobbying, campaign contributions, and propaganda, has effectively prevented political action (Mayer 2016, pp. 146-156).

Exorbitant U.S. healthcare costs provide another example. Virtually every other rich country employs some form of price regulation to keep healthcare costs reasonable. The U.S. chooses not to (Kane 2012). The best explanation for this choice is the political power of the pharmaceutical industry, hospital companies, medical manufacturers, and the American Medical Association (Reuters 2021). It is beyond reasonable doubt that extreme economic inequality undermines democracy.

The second good reason for egalitarianism is that greater economic equality produces desirable social outcomes. As Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have argued, more equal societies have longer life expectancy, less obesity, better health outcomes, lower rates of teenage pregnancy, less crime and violence, better education outcomes, better mental health, and lower levels of drug abuse. Indeed, more equal societies have greater social trust (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010, pp. 15-30).

Vallier claims that we lack a good reason to think equality *causes* these desirable outcomes (pp. 61, 183). Wilkinson and Pickett, however, present a highly plausible causal story. We tend to see wealth as a marker of greater personal ability. Those at the top of society are seen as superior to those below them, giving the wealthy a higher social status. Greater inequality intensifies the differences in social status. So, some people are not merely seen as a little better than others; they are seen as much better than others. This matters because thinking of yourself as socially inferior—or knowing that you are seen as such—is one of the greatest drivers of stress. As is well-documented, stress has terrible consequences for a person's health and behavior. With their greater inequality of social status, extremely unequal societies are extremely stressed societies (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010, pp. 33-44).

This causal story is strengthened by the following. Higher poverty rates, all on their own, cannot explain the worse social outcomes in extremely unequal countries, such as the U.S. This is because, in highly unequal societies, *every* social group—including the wealthy—is worse off. The upper and middle classes in the U.S., tend to have worse health and shorter lives than the upper and middle classes in more equal societies. Greater inequality, it turns out, increases stress throughout society, resulting in worse health outcomes for all social classes (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010, pp. 75-76, 175-182).

Vallier's rejection of egalitarianism also assumes that strong property rights are in place, providing a presumption against reducing inequality, a presumption overridden by only very weighty considerations (p. 183). But, as I argued above, property rights are not nearly as strong as Vallier thinks they are. That redistributive taxation will eliminate "many valuable choices from rich persons" is not a compelling reason to preserve plutocracy (p. 179).

Likewise, Vallier's rejection of egalitarianism assumes that economic growth is very important (pp. 188-196). If egalitarianism engenders market inefficiency and state corruption, then, according to Vallier, these are powerful reason to reject egalitarianism. Yet, as we saw above, economic growth should not be a top priority, thereby draining these worries of their force. It is also not inevitable that egalitarianism leads to severe economic problems. For example, Norway, with relatively low inequality and a large state sector, is not plagued with rampant corruption and enormous inefficiencies. The Norwegian state even owns most of the country's wealth, yet Norway is one of least corrupt countries in the world (OECD; Bruenig 2018; Transparency International 2020).

In short, to strengthen democracy and our society, we should drastically reduce economic inequality.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To restore social trust, Vallier proposes doubling down on neoliberalism. Yet neoliberalism rests on implausible foundations. Neoliberalism prioritizes negative rights—such as property rights—over positive rights to healthcare, housing, education, childcare, and proper nutrition. Neoliberalism prioritizes economic growth, even though growth is a poor indicator of improvements in well-being, and some growth is morally objectionable. Neoliberalism protects extreme economic inequality, despite its corrosive effects on democracy and society.

My criticisms suggest an egalitarian alternative: a social system without large differences in wealth, power, and opportunities, with a strong set of positive rights, robust labor unions, extensive state regulation to protect workers, consumers, and the environment, and a massive effort to prevent climate catastrophe.

Although I disagree with large parts of *Trust in a Polarized Age*, it is an intelligent and sophisticated contribution to contemporary political thought. I very much share Vallier's commitment to restoring social trust.

#### NOTES

- 1 All in-text page numbers refer to Vallier 2020.
- 2 After all, neoliberalism has dominated U.S. economic policy for the last four decades, a period corresponding with a sharp decline in social trust. Will doubling down on neoliberalism really restore social trust?
- 3 I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.
- 4 For a similar point, see Stilz 2014, pp. 427-428.
- 5 It is worth noting here that public ownership can also protect agency. Public transit helps me move around efficiently and inexpensively, public education helps me to develop my agency at low cost, and public housing can keep me housed, despite the, often massive, failures of the private housing market.
- 6 For a similar point, see Stilz 2014, p. 429.
- 7 Of course, Cuba's achievements neither excuse nor justify its undemocratic government and the government's human rights violations.
- 8 1911 Triangle Factory Fire. Cornell University's ILR School. <https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/index.html>.
- 9 The Rana Plaza Accident and Its Aftermath. International Labor Organization. [https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/geip/WCMS\\_614394/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/geip/WCMS_614394/lang--en/index.htm).
- 10 I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.



- 11 Pursuing justice through a court system, however, is very difficult for workers, consumers, and communities with limited means. A legion of expensive corporate lawyers can often mitigate the damage a company is found liable for. This limits compensation to amounts that are often too small to dissuade large corporations from inflicting harm. The time and expense to bring court cases can be prohibitive, and compensation is little remedy for workers and consumers who die from corporate malfeasance. Worse still, private courts are often overly sympathetic to business interests, since businesses are their main customers. Fortunately, state regulation can effectively *prevent* harm from occurring by inspecting workplaces and consumer products. This is far superior than merely compensating people after the harm occurs. Thus, a private court system would likely not protect the vulnerable and the environment.
- 12 I am sympathetic to Anderson's *relational* egalitarianism. See her 2012.

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