

Max Rashbrooke

*Too Much Money: How Wealth Disparities Are
Unbalancing Aotearoa New Zealand*

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Wealth, Money, Power, and Class in Aotearoa New Zealand

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The interface between journalism and scholarship is a useful area of intellectual endeavour (as reading Karl Marx's work reminds us). The journalist writes for the literate public—a lay readership that is interested (among other things) in having the fruits of scholarship rendered into accessible everyday language. The scholar engaged in philosophy or social science thinks and digs more deeply in quest of 'truth'—or, at least, in pursuit of deep insights not immediately obvious to readers of the daily news—but often writes in technical language for a specialist audience. Digesting already-created research results and translating them into popular discourse is the happy task of a journalist working in a country and a topic area where plenty of scholars have done the spadework. Far tougher is the challenge facing a journalist asking important questions to which scholars and statisticians have not yet produced clear and comprehensive answers, as is the case with the dimensions of wealth inequality in Aotearoa New Zealand and the relationship of wealth inequality to processes of class formation and persistence. As Max Rashbrooke ruefully points out in *Too Much Money*, 'class-based analysis has been

unfashionable for so long that it is hard to say anything definitive'.¹ Where many journalists would settle for reporting that the relevant information is not available, some years ago Rashbrooke opted to do the work himself and stepped over the boundary into scholarship. Now, having undertaken and published (with specialist co-authors) his own ground-breaking research into Aotearoa New Zealand wealth statistics,² he has stepped back to write a book for the general public about the dimensions, structure, and implications of wealth inequality in this country.

The solid core of *Too Much Money* lies in the third chapter's authoritative review of the statistics on wealth composition and distribution in Aotearoa New Zealand measured in terms of money values in the markets for various sorts of assets. Although the chapter includes some summary statistics on the Māori/Pākehā and gender dimensions of inequality, and although there is a concise summary of the historical dispossession of Māori land, readers looking for those two dimensions to be more fully developed upon will be disappointed. Rashbrooke firmly holds to his focus on wealth *per se*, and hence implicitly on rich, mostly white, men and their families. There is obviously much more to be said in this space; but that task is left to others—or, perhaps, to another book. As Rashbrooke emphasises, 'there is nothing to be gained by arguing that socio-economic status shapes people's lives more powerfully than, say, gender or race', and he acknowledges that 'class-based approaches . . . [have] tended to marginalise other kinds of inequality, notably those of ethnicity and gender. This mistake must be avoided'.³ This book, though, is firmly focused on the relatively neglected

1 Max Rashbrooke, *Too Much Money: How Wealth Disparities Are Unbalancing Aotearoa New Zealand* (Wellington: BWB, 2021), 182.

2 Max Rashbrooke, *Wealth and New Zealand* (Wellington: BWB, 2015); Geoff Bertram, Max Rashbrooke, and Wilma Molano, 'Wealth Disparities in New Zealand: Final Report', IGPS Working Paper 17/02, Wellington, 2017; Max Rashbrooke, Geoff Bertram, and Albert Chin, 'Wealth Inequality in New Zealand: An Analysis of the 2014-15 and 2017-18 Net Worth Modules in the Household Economic Survey', IGPS Working Paper 21/10, Wellington, 2021; Tim Hazledine and Max Rashbrooke 'The New Zealand Rich List Twenty Years On', *New Zealand Economic Papers* 52, no. 3 (2018): 289-303.

3 *Too Much Money*, 82-84, 40-42, 5, 185-186.

issue of class and socio-economic status *per se*.

Flanking the empirical, statistical core of chapter 3 are discursive chapters that try to put intellectual flesh onto the statistical bones; at the end of the book, Rashbrooke outlines policy conclusions drafted in terms calculated to have some chance of resonating with the prevailing tone of policy discourse among the New Zealand public. In common with Rashbrooke's parallel work on democratic governance and policymaking, *Too Much Money* holds out the vision of a social-democratic state governing in the interests of the New Zealand public and freed from the iron-cage restrictions imposed by the capture of the New Zealand state by the wealthy and their well-organised vested interests.⁴ Rashbrooke's belief in achieving a less-unequal capitalism by democratic means channels Thomas Piketty's prescription that 'if democracy is someday to regain control of capitalism, it must start by recognizing that the concrete institutions in which democracy and capitalism are embodied need to be reinvented again and again'.⁵

As with the ethnic and gender dimensions of inequality, the crucial issue of how to achieve an actual political transition from here to there is set aside in *Too Much Money*; effectively, it is assumed to follow from normal, democratic electoral processes once the issues have been fully understood by the voting public. Rashbrooke is content to paint an aspirational picture of what a restored social democracy could look like: 'imagine a world in which opportunities are more widely spread, social divisions are diminished, and the distribution of wealth is not as top-heavy as it is now'.⁶ And at the end of chapter 8, discussed below, he turns to some of the policy specifics that a genuinely progressive elected government could adopt.

To establish the economic feasibility of such a better state of affairs, Rashbrooke follows Piketty's lead into 20th-century history, tracing the U-shaped trajectory of income and wealth distributions. He uses this as

4 Max Rashbrooke, *Government for the Public Good: The Surprising Science of Collective Action* (Wellington: BWB Books, 2018).

5 Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2014), 570.

6 *Too Much Money*, 6.

evidence that, even if one accepts that the inherent dynamics of market capitalism (Piketty's $r > g$) persistently *tend to* drive the economy towards a concentration of wealth and power at the top, a combination of historical events and deliberate reformist policy can suffice—and has in the past sufficed—to radically equalise wealth and life chances, as occurred in New Zealand's settler society from the 1930s to the 1980s.⁷ While New Zealand's adoption of extremist neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s eliminated many pillars of the welfare state and opened the floodgates to inequality, the contemporary experience of the Scandinavian countries is cited by Rashbrooke as evidence of the ongoing viability of welfare-state institutions in supporting the wellbeing and life chances of most citizens, even in the face of rising wealth disparities.

In the remainder of this review, I shall focus on just three elements in a book that contains much else by way of detailed data and wider discussion. First is the vexed question of class analysis, with which Rashbrooke grapples bravely but inconclusively in chapters 2 and 7. Second is the transformation process by which wealth *per se*, measured in money-value terms, is or is not convertible into privileged access to the elements of day-to-day wellbeing: income, consumption, political and market power (or, at least, agency), and status/self-esteem. Third is the concrete policy programme at the end of the book.

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Two sentences set the scene for the discussion of class. On page 3 we read that 'we cannot understand privation unless we understand affluence'; in the same vein, on page 104, 'we cannot understand poverty without understanding wealth'. The tight connection between these rests on two processes: the division of the national economy's annual total income

7 *Too Much Money*, 43, 40, 42, 51, 54, 109, 110; see also, Geoff Bertram, 'The New Zealand Economy, 1900-2000', in G. Byrnes, ed., *The New Oxford History of New Zealand* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2009), 537-572; 'A Comparative World-Systems Analysis of Settler Colonies in the Hispanic and Anglo Realms', *Journal of New Zealand Studies* 11 (2011): 11-34.

between profits and wages; and the upward escalator (what Rashbrooke calls the ‘conveyor belt of advantage’) that causes the economy’s existing total stock of assets to accumulate in the hands of the wealthiest rentiers, courtesy of compound interest and capital gains. Insofar as the labour share of the national product is allowed to be driven down and the upward escalator is left to run unchecked, these market processes will tend to transfer control of the economy’s scarce resources from the poor to the rich, producing the increased wealth inequality documented by Rashbrooke.

But in what sense does this redistribution and concentration of money-valued wealth correspond to the formation and reproduction of a class or set of classes? Having set out the forms in which that wealth exists and is held and having asked who exactly are the wealthy and how did they become wealthy (chapters 2 and 3), the remaining move is to show how a specific group within the population consolidates and entrenches its economic position while at the same time constructing a collective consciousness (becoming ‘a class for itself’) and exercising collective agency to advance its position and interests vis-à-vis other classes. The ‘conveyor belt of advantage’ can carry individuals into the ranks of the wealthy and can continually dump additional wealth into the laps of the already wealthy, but this process alone does not create a class in the full sense of the term.

Rashbrooke recognises this as a crucial but difficult issue. ‘The processes of the past shape the social positions of today. . . . [Class] helps identify the power relations sitting just below the visible fabric of society’. He devotes two full chapters to thinking about the ways in which New Zealand is not a classless society. His starting point is the greater freedom of choice and action that wealthier individuals have, and he frames this in the terms of Amartya Sen’s philosophy: wealth is ‘an essential part of making freedoms substantive’. From here, individual possessors of wealth are collectively categorised as a ‘class’ on the basis of their shared material prosperity, from which emerges a shared sense of group identity along with cultural and social mechanisms of exclusivity. Only after he has already provisionally classified the wealthy as a class does Rashbrooke turn to what the literature

on class has to say.⁸ Marx's model of antagonistic classes based on their relationship to the means of production gets a single paragraph; Weber, with his essentially meritocratic view of material rewards to individual worth (human capital) gets two; and Bourdieu's ideas about the role of class consciousness and its articulation (social capital) gets a full page, reinforced by Jane Austen.

While acknowledging the individualistic bias of the New Zealand Treasury's wellbeing framework, Rashbrooke picks up and develops the idea that individuals' endowments or acquisition of several key 'capitals'—productive/financial, human, social, and cultural—are the basis on which class distinctions arise and persist; this provides him with his framework for trying to nail down the structure of Aotearoa New Zealand's 'low-key class system'. There is an attractive simplicity to a two-way split: a rich elite versus the masses—the model popularised by Piketty, with the top 1 percent forming the ruling class. Thus, Rashbrooke toys with specifying class simply in terms of the hierarchy of wealth: 'Class, at its simplest, is a way to think about socio-economic hierarchies that are powerful – and enduring'. This last characteristic leads him to explore the limitations on upward mobility for individuals and the (rather neat) idea of the wealthy as 'an increasingly powerful upper stratum who could be described as opportunity hoarders'.⁹

But as Rashbrooke works his way through the issue in chapter 7, the difficulty of identifying the precise contours of class in Aotearoa New Zealand on the basis of socioeconomic-status hierarchies becomes increasingly apparent. Already, in chapter 1, he signals an appropriate caution about his analytical goal: 'making a positive statement about the nature of class in modern-day New Zealand would be a Herculean task, one well out of scope here. The aim is simply to challenge the commonplace idea of a classless New Zealand, and to suggest that class is worth thinking about more deeply'. The 'working classes', comprising half the population, fail straightforward tests of class identity. An upper class in the strict

8 *Too Much Money*, 24, 15, 22-27.

9 *Too Much Money*, 170.

sense is not to be found. Rashbrooke settles for ‘an upper-middle class – or, perhaps, multiple upper-middle classes’, forming a divided elite in which the professionals of the Kelburn Left stand opposite the financiers, executives, and developers of the Remuera Right.¹⁰ But there remain, he concedes, ‘more questions than answers’.

Where might one go from here? I find it useful to look back to the heyday of class analysis, to the 19th-century classical economics of Ricardo and Marx, when ‘wealth’ was not synonymous with a single dominant class but with two or more, and ‘capital’, understood as the produced means of industrial production, was the particular property of just one of them. In Ricardo’s model, two distinct classes—landlords and capitalists—were wealthy and powerful, with the third class—workers in town and country—surviving at a subsistence level.¹¹ The power of the wealthy in Ricardo’s market economy came in two different forms, was exercised in two different ways, and produced, in his theoretical model, a straightforward long-run dynamic tendency. The long run belonged to the owners of land (read: rentiers) because the growth of population, production, and consumption in a finite country (a modern reader may substitute in ‘finite planet’) must ultimately, Ricardo thought, push up rents, squeezing capitalists’ profits. Thus, while rentiers and capitalists could share a growing surplus between them in the short run, in the long run their interests would be in conflict as the composition of the surplus shifted in favour of rent. Putting Ricardo into modern context, his prognosis for capitalism was that it would have a finite historical trajectory, ending when all the net economic surplus was appropriated as rent. Capitalism, in other words, would naturally decay back to a modernised form of feudalism. Whereas, in Ricardo’s day, rent was associated with rural land, in the modern FIRE (finance, insurance, and real estate) economy, the dominant rentier groups are the owners of urban real estate, the creditors/holders of debt instruments (including,

10 *Too Much Money*, 26, 180-181, 178-179.

11 David Ricardo, *An Essay on the Influence of a Low Price of Corn on the Profits of Stock; Shewing the Inexpediency of Restrictions on Importation: With Remarks on Mr Malthus* (London: John Murray, 1815).

obviously, the banks), and the owners of big-tech platforms (from Google and Amazon through to electricity-distribution networks).

In his theoretical work, Marx largely set aside the role of land in his model of the capitalist economy, to focus instead on the confrontation between capitalists and workers. But when writing about the complexities of the real world, his analysis identified a similar fundamental division within the ruling classes. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx wrote of ‘the *two great interests* into which the *bourgeoisie* is split – landed property and capital’ and described the way in which these two had developed their own identity, culture, and forms of political representation:

Under the Bourbons, *big landed property* had governed, with its priests and lackeys; under the Orleans high finance, large scale industry, large scale trade, that is, *capital*, with its retinue of lawyers, professors and smooth-tongued orators. . . . What kept the two factions apart . . . was their material conditions of existence, two different kinds of property, it was the old contrast between town and country, the rivalry between capital and landed property. . . . Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life.¹²

That divide between capitalists and rentiers identified by the classical economists never completely vanished but was overshadowed in the 20th century by the combination of technological progress and welfare-state redistribution. It was dramatically revived in the late-20th century with the rise of the FIRE economy, a development that Jane Kelsey has documented for the New Zealand case.¹³ Once again, rentier interests are on the advance, with the emerging system variously described as ‘rentier capitalism’, or

12 Karl Marx, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Selected Works* vol. 1 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House 1962), 273, 272.

13 Jane Kelsey, *The FIRE economy: New Zealand’s Reckoning* (Wellington: BWB, 2015).

‘techno feudalism’.¹⁴ Class structure is being shaped accordingly. So is the scope for tax policy, an area that Rashbrooke skirts uneasily around in his final chapter on policy proposals, echoing only quietly (because they are ‘currently not very popular in New Zealand’) Piketty’s full-blooded call for wealth taxes.¹⁵

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At the beginning of the book, Rashbrooke both acknowledges the difference between wealth and income, and makes a clear distinction between the real assets that make up economic wealth, and the money values assigned by markets to individually held paper claims over those real assets (company shares, debt instruments, real-estate titles, and so on). In the main body of the book, these fundamental distinctions are largely set aside, with wealth treated as synonymous with the current market valuation of legal claims over the economy’s real assets.¹⁶ Only near the end of *Too Much Money* does Rashbrooke come back to the issue of limits on the transformation of wealth—measured in money-value terms—into real consumption values. Memorably, having pointed out that Scandinavian economies have levels of *wealth* inequality similar to the UK, he argues that those countries exhibit a combination of low income inequality and well-funded public services, which ‘provides the vast majority with the means for a good life and prevents the elite from converting their greater wealth into starkly better life outcomes’.¹⁷ In other words, progressive income taxes that partially break

14 Brett Christophers, *Rentier Capitalism: Who Owns the Economy and Who Pays for It?* (London: Verso, 2020); Yanis Varoufakis, ‘Techno Feudalism is Taking Over’, *Project Syndicate*, 28 June 2021.

15 *Too Much Money*, 213. The neoliberal tax-cutting chorus relies heavily on the alleged disincentive effect of taxes on productive entrepreneurship; but, famously, rents—and wealth based on them—can be taxed with minimal loss of economic efficiency.

16 Although not entirely: on page 70, Rashbrooke points out the radical difference between owning a house and having cash in hand.

17 *Too Much Money*, 200, 211, 201.

the link between wealth and money income, combined with non-market collective provision of essential services such as health and education (which are thereby immunised from capture by the superior purchasing power of the rich), can limit or prevent the conversion of balance-sheet wealth into exclusive command over society's supply of goods, services, culture—and, ultimately, power.¹⁸

But the precise forms in which wealth exists and is held matter when one asks, to what extent does the formal ownership of a particular 'asset' provide the owner with the ability to take command of other assets, or to appropriate a share in the flow of currently supplied goods and services that make up the social product? One essential link is money. For the owner of an asset to immediately exercise an amount of real purchasing power equal to the asset's nominal valuation, the asset must be able to be swapped for actual money (that is, it must be relatively liquid). In Table 3.6, Rashbrooke records the total wealth of the New Zealand population in 2017/18, totalling \$1,368 billion, nearly five times Gross Domestic Product.¹⁹ Of this total, only \$105 billion was held in cash and \$34 billion in 'financial assets'. 'Broad money' across the entire economy, as defined by the Reserve Bank of New Zealand, was just under \$300 billion.²⁰ The money-denominated number for total wealth, therefore, was not convertible directly into current purchasing power over GDP.

Assets have their money values assigned to them on the basis of the expected future flows of purchasing power and capital gains that will accrue to their owners over time. If expectations change, or the economy's capacity to service the expected income flows is reduced, asset values will change accordingly. Most importantly for the stability of a market economy, an attempt by all wealth-holders at once to convert their paper assets into current purchasing power in the home economy could not realise more in

18 Similarly, there is a case to be made that policy restraints on monopoly power can be powerfully equalising.

19 *Too Much Money*, 74–75.

20 Reserve Bank of New Zealand, Table HC50, <https://www.rbnz.govt.nz/-/media/ReserveBank/Files/Statistics/tables/c50/hc50-long-run.xlsx?revision=3c89f080-ca13-4650-8501-6a8d4f2ab856>

total than the existing stock of money and could not secure more than the total available stock of real goods and services; as Keynes pointed out, while an individual holder of an asset can liquidate it at its current value, a general attempt by wealth-holders to liquidate their holdings simply drives down the money values of assets. Another way of putting this is that the money value of nominal assets can hold up only insofar as there are individuals willing to hold them in anticipation of future reward.

This means that there is an inherent fragility in wealth statistics constructed from current market valuations. Assets vary in their riskiness and degree of liquidity (ease of conversion into money), and the uneven distribution of riskiness and liquidity is therefore an important dimension with which Rashbrooke's analysis deals only tangentially. The most equally distributed form of wealth is housing—in particular, owner-occupied housing—which accounts for \$490 billion, 34 percent of the total wealth detailed in Table 3.6, with three-quarters of it held by the bottom 90 percent, mostly by the middle groups in the socioeconomic ranking. A crash in house prices would therefore increase wealth inequality, even after allowing for trusts and other housing held by the top 10 percent. Shares in companies, in contrast, are 85 percent held by the top 10 percent, so a share-market crash could be, taken in isolation, potentially equalising (obviously, this is not a policy recommendation). But more fundamentally, in Table 3.6 the bottom half of the population appear to have mortgage indebtedness equal to the total value of the housing assets that they own, indicating extreme vulnerability to a downturn in the market for this most illiquid asset.

This brings me to a notorious weakness in Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, a weakness that is only partially overcome in Rashbrooke's book: the measurement of wealth as a homogeneous whole, rather than as an assemblage of various fractions, each of which has its own particular relation to the means of production, accompanied by elements of social and cultural distinctiveness. Piketty works with the identity

National capital = farmland + housing + other domestic capital + net foreign capital

and aggregates these different sorts of assets, using money values, into a single quantity of ‘capital’ for each country, which he subsequently treats as identical to the k term in neoclassical production function analysis.²¹ Yet Piketty’s descriptive statistics on the composition of this ‘national capital’ in Britain, Canada, France, Germany, and the US clearly show that landed property (mainly agricultural land at 1900, predominantly urban real estate—‘housing’—today) has consistently made up half or more of the total wealth that he labels ‘capital’.²² Piketty’s ‘capital’, in other words, is not the same thing as the reproducible means of production in industrial capitalism, which is what economists have generally called ‘capital’. The point was made forcefully in Yanis Varoufakis’s penetrating review of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*:

To understand what capital means in the context of either classical or neoclassical economics, students must leave outside the seminar room’s door their preconception that capital means ‘money’ or assets expressed in money terms. Instead, they need to embrace the idea of capital as scarce goods that have been produced so as to be enlisted in the production of other goods; ‘produced means of production’ as we keep repeating hoping that repetition will help free our students’ thinking from their urge to conflate a firm’s or nation’s (a) capital and (b) the total value of its marketable assets.

Professor Piketty . . . is himself defining capital as the sum of the net worth of all assets (excluding human skills and labour power) that can be sold and bought courtesy of well-defined property rights over them, measured in terms of their net market price (minus, that is, of any debt liabilities). From this prism, aggregate capital (of a person, a company or a nation) is the sum of the market prices of not only robotic assembly lines and tractors but also of assets like shares, stamp collections, paintings by

21 Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 119.

22 See charts in Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 116, 117, 141, 151, 157.

Van Gogh, the equity that people have in their house (i.e. its price minus any outstanding loan on it).²³

Clearly there is a strong case for distilling at least three different categories of assets from the amorphous national wealth aggregate whose distribution is being analysed by Rashbrooke. The first category would be the means of production—the economist’s ‘capital’. The second would be assets that yield real services to their owners, but in non-monetary terms: primarily, owner-occupied housing, but also cars and household equipment and furniture. The third category would be other assets such as cash and collectibles. Each of these categories has its own story to be told about distribution and its own role in the formation and reproduction of class. To some extent, then, Rashbrooke’s class analysis has been clouded by his use of the overarching concept of ‘wealth’ in general, as distinct from the *particular forms* of wealth.

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On the other hand, when he turns to the practical issue of how the wealthy can or cannot convert their nominal wealth into actual current advantages, Rashbrooke moves onto more fruitful ground under the heading of ‘blocked exchanges’.²⁴ The concept comes from the philosopher Michael Walzer, whom Rashbrooke (rather frustratingly) cites only at second hand rather than engaging directly with Walzer’s key work.²⁵ Walzer’s central observation was that ‘good fences make just societies’. The role of those fences is to limit the things that money can buy—in other words, to restrict the ability of the wealthy to convert their wealth into command over spheres of human life that are better kept insulated from the potentially corrupting effects of money. Obvious

23 Yanis Varoufakis, ‘Egalitarianism’s Latest Foe: A Critical Review of Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*’, *Real World Economics Review* 69 (2014): 19.

24 *Too Much Money*, 207.

25 Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

examples, long familiar from writers including Adam Smith, are justice and government policy in general; as one would expect, Rashbrooke firmly advocates for the strong restriction of private funding for political parties.²⁶ But on a broader canvas, as Rashbrooke's discussion makes clear, the welfare state as an institution can be thought of as an extensive set of blocked-exchange fences that place key aspects of human wellbeing out of reach of the market and hence of exclusive appropriation by the rich. Such is the case with health and education services, insofar as these are collectively supplied to the population at large with no distinctions of wealth. Rashbrooke wonders about popular access to classical music and whether opera (cultural capital) is a 'socially-desirable art form', but evidently concludes that blocked exchange does not extend that far.

Turning to policy specifics, Rashbrooke offers a five-part agenda: a state-subsidised wealth endowment for children; some form of partial equity participation by government in private entrepreneurial ventures; an increase in the wage share; radically improved provision of social housing; and some kind of wealth tax. Behind those specifics lies a three-pronged social-democratic policy package: a basic income support level; non-market collective provision of essential goods and services; and direct institutional limits on the ability of the rich to convert their stocks of wealth into flows of personal consumption, political influence, social control, and cultural dominance. All of these, Rashbrooke acknowledges, are ways to ameliorate the consequences of wealth inequality without eliminating the basic fact of that inequality.

Here the book embodies a tension that is all too familiar in progressive policy discourse between the pragmatic case for advocacy of limited policies for which electoral majorities can be assembled and the more radical case for fundamental challenges to the structure of capitalism itself. Chapter 4, titled 'Is Inequality Justified?', comes up with a clear judgment that, although perfect equality is not defensible, current levels of inequality cannot be justified and that—readers of this journal will not be surprised to learn—'inequality is political'. Contemplating the prospect of an automated

26 *Too Much Money*, 214.

future in which wage work becomes harder to secure, Rashbrooke toys with a move to collective ownership of the means of production: ‘If the robots are owned by a tiny handful of businesspeople, the profits will flow their way and inequality will indeed increase. If the robots are owned collectively – by workers’ cooperatives, for instance – or subject to a hefty wealth tax that is widely distributed, inequality might actually decrease’.²⁷ But the concluding chapter’s policy package stops well short of that vision.

Summing up, this book delivers a masterly overview of the available statistical information about the size of Aotearoa New Zealand wealth holdings and their degree of concentration. A second step is to ask who are the wealthy and how did they become wealthy; here the book’s offerings are more fragmentary, though still helpful. A third step, tracing the underlying dynamics of wealth accumulation and class formation, barely gets beyond Piketty’s argument that so long as r exceeds g , wealth will naturally tend to accumulate through time until some steady state is reached. But Rashbrooke’s social-democratic message is clear: government policy has mitigated the effects of wealth inequality in the past and could do so again by reversing the disequalising neoliberal policies of the 1980s and 1990s and blocking the channels of systemic capture by the rich. Whether Rashbrooke’s manifesto can persuade a large enough constituency to bring about change through the channels of liberal democracy remains to be seen.

²⁷ *Too Much Money*, 110.