

The moral contours of our new Gilded Age

By [Heath W. Carter](#)

April 24, 2013

When Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio announced his papal name, he stoked hopes for a season of reform in the spirit of [St. Francis](#). In the weeks since, the Argentinian pontiff, who was shaped in part by his [experiences in Buenos Aires' villas miserias](#), has not disappointed.

Pope Francis has garnered headlines with his simplicity—[riding the bus](#), [cancelling his own newspaper subscription](#) and [opting for the Vatican guesthouse over the more opulent papal apartments](#)—as well as with [his calls for a “Church for the poor.”](#) On Holy Thursday he raised countless eyebrows by [washing the feet of female prisoners](#) at a Roman juvenile detention center. The surprise these actions met reflects, among other things, this: that when it comes to the matter of the haves and have nots, Christians these days tend not to rock the boat.

In the United States, contemporary Christianities rarely challenge the economic status quo. On the contrary, they typically celebrate the ever more elusive and yet no less alluring “American Dream.” Christians are as enamored with upward mobility—and all the iPads, designer countertops, and luxury sedans that come with it—as the next person.

Meanwhile, we abide and even endorse an unbiblical distinction between “fiscal” and “moral” issues. It is little wonder that, at the Lutheran university where I teach, students assume that corporations—as much “persons” as you or I according to the Supreme Court—are, by their very nature, exempt from the Golden Rule. “Nature” is the key word here, for in the minds of many our free enterprise system, championed by Democrats and Republicans alike, seems as natural as the earth and sky.

This desensitization to the (im)moral contours of our economic life is especially alarming since we live in an age of historic inequality. The [global dimensions of this problem](#) are staggering, but even setting those aside, consider a few illustrations from the domestic scene, courtesy of Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz’s

latest book:

- In 2010, the ratio of CEO annual compensation to that of the typical worker was 243 to 1. (In 1965, that same ratio was 24 to 1.)
- The wealthiest 1 percent of Americans today own 225 times the wealth of the average American. (In 1962, they owned 125 times as much.)
- The wealth of the six heirs to the Wal-Mart fortune is \$69.7 billion, roughly equivalent to the wealth of the entire bottom 30 percent of Americans.

Statistics like these have Stiglitz and others hailing these times as a new Gilded Age. If that sounds grim, take heart at least in this: our plight is not unprecedented.

In fact, today's Christians might find in the first Gilded Age stories worth salvaging. While leading ministers such as Dwight Moody and Henry Ward Beecher enjoyed cozy relationships with capital, this period nevertheless witnessed a vigorous exchange between believers regarding the shape of a moral economy.

Galvanizing the debate were myriad ordinary Christians who sought to reform both the emerging industrial order and those churches that unquestioningly accommodated it. These included thousands of trade unionists, who battled both intransigent bosses and scab ministers. Workers were quick to remind their religious betters that Jesus, a carpenter after all, had insisted that "the laborer deserves to be paid" (Luke 10:7).

Consider what transpired during [Chicago's 1894 Pullman Strike](#). When the local Catholic paper proved lukewarm in its support, dozens of strikers stopped their subscriptions. Meanwhile, across the south suburbs working-class parishioners pilloried ministers hostile to their cause. One Presbyterian church lost nearly a quarter of its members when its pastor denounced the strike. Nearly every one of the workers who left soon re-affiliated with a neighboring congregation—their problem was not with Christianity but with those churches that seemed no longer to practice it.

You've probably never heard their names, but the collective witness of these everyday believers produced momentous change: the early-20th-century churches finally acknowledged that the gospel entailed not only saving souls but also redeeming social and economic life. Now, ensconced in another Gilded Age, we stand in need of a similar groundswell. If we can shake off the sense that the existing maldistribution of resources is just second nature, it may yet come.

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