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## The Invincible Ignorance of Pope Francis

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Pope Francis is a winsome and admirable figure, so long as you discount his economic animadversions.

The infectiously likable pontiff who has charmed the world with his humility arrived on our shores to a high-spirited welcome. He will preach to the faithful, reach out to the vulnerable, delight onlookers and, if the past is any guide, make wholly ridiculous statements about public policy.

The Catholic Church's traditional discomfort with modernity happens to have some cachet at this moment, especially when it is wrapped in the fashionable causes of income inequality and climate change. In this sense, Pope Francis is (inadvertently) a genius marketeer by taking crackpot attitudes about economic development and getting them a respectful hearing.

He discusses these matters with essentially the same point of view as a stereotypical black turtleneck-clad graduate hanging out at the university cafe and hoping one day to hit the big time and get one of his pieces excoriating global capitalism published at *The Nation*.

The pope's anti-capitalist broadsides have helped make him the adorable mascot of the American left, which enthusiastically defends infanticide, pitilessly scorns traditional sexual morality and heedlessly tramples on the the conscience rights of people with the wrong social views, but holds up the Vicar of Christ as confirmation of the economics of Bernie Sanders and the climate alarmism of Al Gore.

True to form, the pope held forth Wednesday in his brief address on the South Lawn of the White House on the urgency of addressing climate change, an issue that fits seamlessly into his broad-gauge indictment of the economic system that gave us the modern world.

In his interviews and writings, the pope blames capitalism for a host of ills, from income inequality to the degradation of people to the despoliation of the planet. Of course, no human system is perfect, and the pope wouldn't be the pope if he didn't warn against soulless consumerism. Where he loses credibility is in making a material case against capitalism. When it comes to the miracles of widespread prosperity and enhanced well-being wrought by capitalist development, the pope is a denier.

Yes, advanced economies have seen increasing income gaps, but in the context of overall economic growth that has drastically improved conditions for their poor. And globally, inequality has been shrinking, not growing.

As Marian Tupy of the free-market Cato Institute points out, when the world was much poorer 2,000 years ago, it was also much more equal — in its miseries. The industrial revolution and subsequent economic development were, naturally, a boon to the West, and it sprinted far ahead of the rest of the world. As the rest of the world has embraced modern capitalism, it has caught up. The U.S., Tupy notes, once was 11 times richer than Asia; now it's only 4.8 times richer.

It's not true that the world is, as a result, becoming a "pile of filth," in the pope's pungent phrase. Environmental quality has been improving in the rich countries that embraced capitalism first and most thoroughly. No American or western European city — where presumably capitalism would be at its most ravaging — is near the top of the list of urban areas with the worst air pollution. Only Naples, Italy, is in the top 75.

It is true that poor countries become more polluted when they first begin to industrialize — Chinese and Indian cities are high on the list — but they should get eventually cleaner as those countries, too, become rich. Would people living in these cities really be better off if they were still as poor as they once were? Over the past 30 years, the percentage of Indians living in extreme poverty in urban areas has dropped from more than 30 percent to about 13 percent.

The pope should be delighted. And as modern development has spread, people have thrived by the most basic benchmark — they live longer. In 1820, life expectancy at birth in the West was only 36. By 2003 it was 76. The rest of the world started its upswing much later, around 1900, but as it has developed economically, it has rocketed from 26 at the beginning of the 20th century to 63 in 2003.

The pope's capitalism is parody seemingly drawn from the pages of Noam Chomsky. It is a system "where the powerful feed upon the powerless." This kind of exploitation has been the norm through human history, and it will never disappear. But there is less of it in the advanced West, where property rights, the rule of law, open political systems and market competition make it much harder for an entrenched elite to despoil ordinary people.

That the pope doesn't realize this constitutes a serious moral blind spot. Francis arrived here from a country, communist Cuba, built entirely on economic theft and political oppression, and yet he couldn't bring himself to say a peep about it. He turned his back on Cuba's dissidents and tried to spin his way around this abdication in a press availability on his plane over to the U.S.

If the pope doesn't want to consult the data before issuing his stinging rebukes of capitalism, perhaps he should consider everyday lived experience around him.

He has written that "we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase," as if that's a bad thing. Judging by the charming footage of bishops using their iPhones to take pictures of the pope when he arrived for a service at St. Matthew's in Washington, there was not a flip-phone among them. The wonder of the impersonal, profit-driven market economy is that Steve Jobs presumably never thought his device would be a way for the Catholic hierarchy in America to capture a pope's historic visit — and he didn't have to.

So what's the pope's alternative to all of this? In part, it is subsistence agriculture, which is a wonderful thing so long as you aren't the one subsisting on agriculture. There was a time when the American economy would have been much more to the pope's liking, when people on the frontier grew their own food and made their own goods. Their lives were characterized by

ceaseless labor from dawn to dusk, and by routine exposure to harrowing dangers. Childbirth was so risky that, a book on a Central Illinois town in this period notes, “a man often outlived two wives, and sometimes three, or even four.”

Good times.

The pope’s hostility to modernity should be an affront to anyone whose life has been transformed by innovative medicines, who is living to a once unthinkable ripe old age, who is avoiding unforgiving, backbreaking labor for safer, more meaningful work, and who is living relatively free of violence and disease in a world that — despite its myriad evils — would have been considered an impossible nirvana just a few centuries ago.

It is the pope’s role to call us to be ever better, more faithful and mindful of the poor, but not to deny an obvious boon to human progress.