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BOOK REVIEW

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Robert F. Clark, *Giving Credit Where Due: A Path to Global Poverty Reduction*, (Boulder, CO: University Press of America, 2006), pp. 209, \$35.00 (paperback) ISBN: 13-978-0-7618-3534-9.

Edward Laws
University of York

At the core of Robert F. Clark's latest book lies a powerful and commonly shared egalitarian intuition. The extreme wealth concentrated in the hands of so few, compared to the impoverished and insecure existence suffered by those hundreds of millions in extreme poverty, is a moral embarrassment. As economic globalisation gains speed, the rights of so many of the world's population seem at risk of becoming more, and not less, precarious, if left without institutional protection from the whims of the global market: "Absent concerted international action, the world's poor will continue to be whipsawed by forces outside the control not only of themselves, but their own governments" (p. 5). What is the solution to radical, global income inequality and its concomitant social and political evils? For Clark, nothing short of a global, refundable tax-credit scheme will be adequate to protect the basic needs and interests of the world's poorest.

Clark outlines and defends his proposal in 13 concise chapters. The use of single-word chapter titles lends the book the air of a manifesto; which is, in fact, how much of the text reads. However, Clark's writing conveys his moral indignation in the face of contemporary global inequality without falling into populist rhetoric or allowing indignation to cloud his analytical precision, his sensitivity towards history, or his understanding of political feasibility. Clark advances a powerful critique of radical global poverty, drawing on the history and ethical foundations of social welfare programs to address the gaps and problems faced by current global anti-poverty strategies.

The idea of a global, refundable tax credit presents a stark and provocative alternative to the current strategies deployed by international donor agencies in

combating extreme poverty. In place of ill-advised, slow-acting, “pro-poor” growth initiatives and generally ineffective community-based programs steered by non-governmental organizations and aid agencies, Clark urges the international community to accept a more direct form of responsibility and to make a more concerted and coordinated intervention against the grossest forms of poverty. The international community is asked to implement a permanent wealth-redistribution scheme and to establish a minimum basic income for all. Clark defends a novel alternative to the dominant theories regarding establishing a global minimum basic income: that each country implements and administers its own refundable tax-credit scheme, with the United Nations taking an active role in providing financial and administrative support and partial reimbursement costs.

The first half of the book comprises insightful and informative historical analyses of poverty and poverty-aid programs, primarily in Europe, the United States and South America. Having first carefully critiqued current global anti-poverty strategies, Clark outlines and defends in Chapter 9 his core proposal in favour of a global tax-credit scheme. His basic idea has a deceptively elegant simplicity: “A refundable tax credit would entitle individuals with incomes below a designated threshold to receive a payment from the government that brings them to the threshold” (p. 123). Clark relies on nation states to voluntarily participate in the credit fund; thereby allaying fears that it would conflict with national sovereignty and self-determination or would evoke the Orwellian nightmare of unified global government. However, Clark envisages the United Nations as playing an active role in constructing and implementing the program: the global tax credit fund would be under its control. By putting a “floor” underneath the world’s poorest, a global tax credit would not, by any means, eradicate global poverty and distributive inequality, but it would help to combat the most extreme and pernicious forms of poverty and inequality.

In the penultimate chapter, Clark strengthens his case by responding to a number of key objections. For example, he convincingly dismantles the dusty, conservative, free-riding objection that a global tax credit would have a negative impact on the work ethic of the world’s poorest. He argues that it would help, instead, to stimulate economic advancement and productivity among the able-bodied while insulating from the worst ravages of the free market economy those unable to carry out or find paid work.

The comparatively moderate character of Clark’s proposal means that his book will find advocates among a diverse range of scholars and policy analysts. Few would quarrel with the basic premise that extreme poverty is a stain on the

moral conscience of wealthy nation states, and that this stain calls for organised institutional response targeted at improving the situation and protecting the rights of the poorest. But this broad humanitarian appeal may also work against the popularity of Clark's position, as the agendas of the followers of the dominant theoretical orientations towards international political morality will be left unsatisfied. For those inspired by Marxist political economics analysis, Clark's scheme will be seen as treating only the symptoms of, not the fundamental economic and structural conditions that give rise to, global distributive inequality. For neo-Rawlsian cosmopolitans like Charles Beitz or Thomas Pogge, Clark's proposals will appear far too modest. If – as neo-Rawlsians maintain – global equality is a necessary condition of global justice, then efforts to bring the poorest up to a mere baseline will be only partial steps in the normatively correct direction. By contrast, if there are any hard-core political realists left working in international relations theory today, they would undoubtedly bark at the suggestion that the international arena is the kind of sphere in which the moral distaste that Clark expresses at global poverty can be unproblematically translated into obligations of states. Nationalist and republican theorists – whose numbers in political studies and political theory show no sign of dwindling – will voice similar doubts about translating moral claims into coherent statements about either national or statist parameters of responsibility and obligation.

In *Giving Credit Where Due*, Clark has put forward a major contribution to the debate on global poverty, and his book will be of interest to political analysts, political theorists, economists and policy makers, as well as individuals interested in the history and normative foundations of social welfare policies. There is, of course, no consensus in the academic or international political community on the extent of the moral obligations wealthy states have towards poorer countries, and still less is there any clear idea of how best to institutionalize whatever obligations may be thought to exist. However, what does seem wholly unobjectionable is the claim that wealthy states cannot simply ignore the plight of the world's poorest nor absolve themselves of any causal or remedial responsibility. The great merit of *Giving Credit Where Due* is that its arguments and analyses will sharpen the terms of the debate on global justice and poverty relief. For that, Clark should be commended.

Edward Laws
Department of Politics
Derwent College
University of York
Heslington, York YO10 5DD
United Kingdom
Email: E1503@york.ac.uk