IS THE VERTICAL SOCIETY COMPATIBLE WITH JUSTICE? ELLIOTT #2128

Yesterday (6Jan87) a just retired business exec excitedly laid out to me his plan for step-style training, as entrepreneurs, of minority ex-offenders. Sort of, I might say, like turning a sock inside out so that (1) bottom will be top and (2) inside (prison, "oppression") will be outside (economic freedom). A small (as involving, necessarily, only a few) project, but--within the Am. economic system--truly radical. Elitist (as the entrepreneur of any size in Am. is among the elite), not egalitarian. And, though radical, not revolutionary (as is the Magnificat, which has the rich "sent empty away," as my friend will not be, as he's risking only his time on the project, not his shirt). But, from another angle, roughly egalitarian, as the people he trains will, if they hang in there, become equal with him in the sense of entering the entrepreneurial class, where he abides by virtue of his cushy retirement arrangements.... The question behind his decision for this enterprise (the words being mine, not his) was not "How can I as a Christian engage in appropriate revolutionary action using my private and public powers?" but rather "How can I as a Christian use my private powers to fight for justice with some of the last-least-lost in our Am. society?" To use a derogatory term, he's determined to be a do-gooder person-to-person; to use complimentary language, he's determined to invest his private powers (his "resources" --his commitment, knowledge, skills, $, network), intelligently-compassionately, to make a visible up-difference in the lives of some "last" God can use him to help become "first" (again, not "first" in the sense of having at the cost of others' not having, being "sent empty away"; but "first" in the sense of first-class, free to determine one's own ecopolitical destiny--which is the democratic-egalitarian vision).

1. All those stated-&-suggested distinctions I made in telling the story above are relevant to this Thinksheet's question. "And more," as Mad. Av. says. Street rhetoric is undernuanced for handling the realities & the range of options therewithin; school rhetoric may be overnuanced. I'm trying to be somewhere in between, let's say (as is the style of NY Theol. Seminary) one foot on the street & one in the school.

2. In the crude histo-distribution below, only "A" meets the specs of the ideological egalitarian, and it's "(A)" because I think it impossible to achieve & pernicious to try to achieve. Yet much of what I hear & read seems to posit this not only as a possibility but also as the goal for ecopolitical action.

(A)	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
people	God	God	God	God	God	(God)	(God)
	people	reps	lords	barons	sovereign	government	government
		people	serfs	middle class	barons	owner-managers	owners
			slaves	peasants	middle class	middle class	managers
				slaves	peasants	workers	workers
					slaves	unemployed	unemployed
							unemployable

"B" is the theocratic ideal, appearing first in premonarchic Israel and (I believe) continuing as a necessary dynamic in ecopolitical theorizing-praying-working. But note that in terms of this Thinksheet's title, "B" (unlike "(A)") is not a horizontal society; rather, as ideal & model, it is, of all vertical societies, the one most compatible with justice. In this sense, the answer to the title is this: Only the vertical society (and only this vertical society) is entirely compatible with justice. At Bible's end, this ideal becomes real; not any longer is (as in "C") there any need for God's reps, for all are (in Marney's booktitle) "priests to each other" in a templeless world that has become itself the temple.

3. Instead of running through the whole ecopolitical history of the West (convergently also of the world), "B" through "H," I want to lift up two facts about our present Am. situation ("H"), in addition to the fact that in these past two stages we've become increasingly nontheistic in our ecopolitics (thus, "God" in "G" & "H" is "(God)"):

OVER

(1) An increasing separation of owners and managers even though ownership, in a contramovement, is becoming more widely distributed on the corporate pyramid. More and more of the managers are employees, but also more and more of the workers participate in ownership (though this trend is not as advanced among us as it is in Europe). It can even be said that those below the workers in this vertical society have, as voters, some say in the ecopolitical structuring and that, through various eco-programs of government, they participate in the fruits of economic processes. (As to "below," ask those who have "fallen out of the work force" where they are, how it feels to be where they are; and, below them, ask those who for various reasons are virtually "unemployable" how they feel vis-a-vis the merely unemployed....On the eco-ladder, how can anybody under anybody else be helped to feel "as good as anybody else"? or is it possible? or should we be about some other question?)

(2) The category "unemployable" appears only at the latest stage ("H") --the 3rd-industrial or post-industrial. "The theory of surplus labor," for two centuries an abstraction for economists to squabble about, is now --for all of us to face--the fact that increasing numbers have no economic value except as consumers. For the health of society & the dignity of human beings, "work" thus must be redefined. (I first dealt with this in my 1965 TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF LEISURE.) Recent Catholic, Methodist, and other statements on justice in Am. seem to me to give insufficient weight to this reality (as well as to market, esp. world-market, realities).... Too, we Christians, along with others, might use creative imagination & economics & politics to fight against "progress," as did & do the Amish, & Ghandi with his spinningwheel (Marg. Bourke-White's great photo), & the Yankees who pushed the spinningwheel for one of the same reasons as did Ghandi (viz, to resist British imperialism; see the very old Yankee wheel, made before the invention of the treddle, in our Craigville home: our Founding Foreparents were determined to be economically, not just politically, free of England!). An ally in this struggle is the ecology movement ("less is more," "appropriate-size technology"): "development" (in the post-WWII sense, the straight-line extension of West. technology) is dooming the biosphere, fouling the only nest we can hope to have, depleting the only wealth available to us. What, more than that, could be properly termed a theological issue? (I'd like to list a number of going projects in Christian life-simplification, individual & group. I feel called to none of them, but I thank God for their witness. Thank God for all ears attuned to nature's cry against us--even Hagar's, here:)

4. The ecological-ecopolitical task seems tough enough for Christian theology, but even tougher is the shaping of a theopolitic that accepts the inevitability of verticality in society & constructs a view of "justice" that yet does not yield prophetic-critical consciousness. What now, eg, could this mean for "South Africa"?