In the bad old days, medieval German lords figured out how to pocket some quick coin by charging a toll on the primitive paths meandering across their lands. The money wasn’t used to improve the roads or better the lives of the peasants or clean the rivers their pigs pooped in. No, they used it to heighten the piles in their treasury. Even back then, you just couldn’t have enough pewter candlesticks. These were the first robber barons. Literally. Rich people whose sole pursuit was to survive to become richer people. A criminal aristocracy. A term that history has proved redundant.

Fast forward to the Gilded Age, where an 1870 issue of The Atlantic reported “the old robber barons of the Middle Ages who plundered sword in hand and lance in rest were more honest than this new aristocracy of swindling millionaires.” Swindling Millionaires. Good name for a band.

In 1910, theflushest 1 percent of the country held 18 percent of the national income. By 2010, that was up to 20 percent. And as far as wealth goes, and it goes pretty far, the richest 400 American families control more money than the poorest 165 million of their fellow citizens put together. If all 165 million knelt end to end, those 400 families would have footrests from any compass point.

Six members of the Walton Family have accrued as much money as the bottom 41 percent of all Americans. Now, how hard would it be for them to cover the health care of Walmart employees? They’d still be worth as much as the bottom 34 percent. How many pewter candlesticks does one family need? You’d think they could get them wholesale.

The eleventh-richest man in the world, Sheldon Adelson, focuses on politicians whose views on Israel most closely mirror his. That’s it. In 2012, he gave $90 million to various GOP Presidential candidates. In the next election cycle, he is reportedly ready to triple that number, recently holding auditions in Las Vegas for his own personal American Idol. Once again: not Clay Aiken.

The most Darth-like of the new robber barons are the Koch (rhymes with rock) brothers David and Charles, each richer than Adelson. These self-made inheritors of a vast oil empire are responsible for jumpstarting the Tea Party and ALEC, and are now handpicking candidates all over the country, pouring in vast amounts of money to get them and their skewed legacy elected. Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker is one of the first-generation Kochbots.

At least the Waltons, Kochs, and Adelson got an earful from the Pope, who denounced income inequality and trickle down economics. “This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power,” the Pope declared. When the Pope starts cracking wise, you know some serious stuff is about to hit the fan. Although condoms are still off the table.

Even Alan Greenspan recently said: “I consider income inequality the most dangerous part of what’s going on in the United States.” Alan Greenspan. He and Pope Francis: together again for the very first time. Stranger bedfellows have not been spotted since David Bowie and Bing Crosby lunched between rehearsals at a Culver City hot dog stand.

In decision after decision, the U.S. Supreme Court continues to equate money with free speech. This would be great if it meant the more we spoke, the more we’re worth. But, alas, no. That’s not the deal. Pretty much the opposite, come to think of it.

Any politician who espouses lowering taxes on the rich and blunting the powers of the poor gets backed—with unlimited sums. Of course the poor have free speech too, but we might as well be whispering downstage at a Metallica concert.