

The Great Leveler

by Bill Herbst

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Wealth inequality has reached staggering proportions in America. The massive concentration of wealth in the top 0.1% of the population — one-tenth of one percent — is more extreme than at any previous time in American history, more than during the era of the Robber Baron Industrialists during the latter 19th century, and more even than at the peak of the stock market mania in the late 1920s before the Crash of 1929. Economic disparity and the accompanying differences in social power between the very few at the top and the multitudes below are so vast as to be nearly inconceivable. The three richest individuals — Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and Jeff Bezos — have amassed more wealth than the bottom half of the populace.

Stanford historian Walter Scheidel's book, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century*, published in early 2017, is a comprehensive account of the entire history of human inequality, wherein he makes the case for what he considers the four major "correctives" that cause restarts of society on more equal footing in forced redistributions of wealth and power.

The book is long, dense, and a work of scholarship — not what one would consider a light or easy read. Scheidel's points are offered and argued with reasonableness and attention to detail, and Scheidel strictly avoids any dramatic oversimplifications. That said, the author manages to pull off the neat trick (essential for book sales) of making his main tenets fit a lowest-common-denominator format. Readers and reviewers of all stripes will have no trouble identifying (for later argument) Scheidel's "Four Horseman" Great Levelers of Inequality:

- 1. mass mobilization warfare*
- 2. transformative social revolutions*
- 3. state failure or collapse*
- 4. catastrophic pandemics.*

Scheidel starts in prehistory and traces the development of both equality and inequality throughout homo sapiens' approximately 200,000 year run. Unlike our simian cousins, where hierarchy is a natural result of strength and dominance, human beings began with little inequality. Subsistence-based hunter-forager

communities, where only limited horticulture existed, were primarily equal. With the domestication of animals for labor and the onset of agriculture (mainly through cultivation of wild grasses into staple grain crops) that changed. Growing crops resulted in surpluses of food, and grains were ideal for storage. As we stopped roving and settled in regions conducive to agriculture, ownership of land resulted. Farmers who used livestock for labor could grow more crops and acquire more land. That gave them a distinct advantage over their neighbors.

In Scheidel's academic narrative, the other conspicuous factor that promoted social inequality was the transmission of wealth through family inheritance from one generation to another, by handing down land, financial holdings, and the means of production — a practice that continues to this day. When that began, distinctions of class privilege set in, and societies developed more rigid hierarchies of authority and power through family dynasties.

In terms of civilization, inequality is the norm, with relative equality a rare and usually temporary exception. Those of us born in mid-20th-century America, especially if we were white and middle-class or above, may have been fooled into believing that equality was our birthright and that our country was virtuous in pursuit of the rule of law and justice for all. Half a century of "progress" has effectively removed those illusions.

The Marxist concept of revolutionary class struggle — meaning the supposedly inevitable rise of the proletariat to overthrow the capitalist bourgeoisie — that so profoundly influenced the social zeitgeist of the late-19th and 20th centuries has proven inadequate. Not that class struggle doesn't exist — it does — but, as a single overriding factor in the course and outcome of history, class struggle fails to provide a dependable blueprint. Inequality may be intensified by our choices of economic, social, and political systems — market-based capitalism leads inevitably to unequal distribution of wealth — but the roots of social inequality are deeply embedded in the dark side of human nature.

Religion is a powerful human motivator that provides rationales for both equality and inequality, depending on which particular sermon one embraces. On the one hand, we may indeed be "*our brother's keeper*" and responsible for the well-being of those less fortunate. On the other hand, "*God helps those who help themselves*," implying that the rich are favored.

That second belief may have deeper roots than some people assume. The idea that the rich *deserve* their wealth, that they are, in the Mind and Heart of God, somehow *innately* superior, may seem counter-intuitive or even distinctly un-Christian, but that meme is actually very widespread.

What's curious is not only that many of the wealthy believe themselves to be "the chosen people." That's to be expected. The surprise is that poorer people

are just as likely to believe that the rich deserve everything they've got, and that the wealthy are somehow "better" or more spiritually favored than those who fail to amass riches, choose not to pursue them, or otherwise end up with less material bounty. Stated in blunt terms, such a belief holds that God loves the rich but despises the poor. The rich are "good," while the poor are "defective." That may seem bizarre, but it remains a potent factor and a real impediment to the implementation of political policies that might achieve at least a somewhat more equitable distribution of wealth in society. This may be the modern variant of the Divine Right of Kings that justified and cemented the power of royalty in many previous cultures, and predominated especially during the feudalism of the Middle Ages, to which we seem to be returning as fast as possible.

The last quarter of Scheidel's book is about our current situation and the possibilities for some amelioration of runaway inequality. Scheidel's basic thesis is that the only consistent factors that have achieved this historically have been major catastrophes, all violent, each of which caused mass human suffering — wars, revolutions, state collapses, and pandemics. Even then, the "leveling" was only temporary. Given our social and economic systems and, apparently, human nature, inequality always returns., surging back with a vengeance.

The biggest surprise for me in Scheidel's narrative was the absence of any discussion of disruptive climate change or nuclear war. For a book published in 2017, that seems odd. Both of those human-created problems hang over our heads like Swords of Damocles. If either catastrophe occurs full-blown, inequality might be diminished, but that impact would pale compared to the imperiling of our very future as a species, perhaps sealing our fate.

Maybe that's why Scheidel didn't include climate change and thermonuclear war, since — as catastrophes go — those two are pretty much ultimate game-enders. Beliefs vary about whether any humans could survive either or both of those cataclysms (and the numbers of people that would remain), but, even in the most optimistic scenarios, civilization would be devastated and not recover for a long, long time, if ever.

Some researchers assert that the auto-feedback loops of progressively disruptive climate change have already passed the tipping point, that the melting of the polar ice caps and death of the oceans are now inevitable, and thus that no remedial efforts will prevent the biosphere from becoming uninhabitable for humans. In their view, it's a question of "when," not "if."

In addition, the global proliferation of nuclear weapons has continued for more than 70 years. We have already come close to nuclear Armageddon on too many occasions, avoiding it by the slimmest of margins. Given the increasing instability of states that possess nuclear weapons (and seem determined not only to keep them, but to add to their arsenals), the possibility of our collective luck running out looms large.

As an American who grew up in the mid-20th century, my formal education included the mainstream perspective that civilization was a positive, long-term project that offered great bounty. History was presented as “progress” in the refinement of humanity, perhaps not continual, but moving over time toward better things and better people. Over my lifetime, however, those views have not held up to scrutiny. I am no longer a fan of civilization, and my regard for humanity has taken quite a hit. Having lived through half of one century — the 20th — that was marked by profound suffering through wars, revolutions, pogroms, famines, pestilence, and other disasters — I worry that the 21st century could make the 20th look like a walk in the park.

While I may have become something of an old curmudgeon, I do not wish for human suffering (or non-human suffering, for that matter). With seven billion people living on the planet, however, and given the mess we’ve made of things, the possibility of mass suffering for any of a number of reasons seems all too real to me. Reduction of the human population might be in the cards, but I don’t cheerlead for die-off.

Wealth inequality may turn out to be the least of our worries. Nonetheless, it is a contributing factor to human misery.

Scheidel’s outlook on our chances over the foreseeable future (meaning the next two or three decades) to achieve greater wealth equality by peaceful means — such as social, political, and economic changes in policy — is grim, to say the least. The admonition with which Scheidel ends his book is chilling:

“All of us who prize greater economic equality would do well to remember that with the rarest of exceptions, it was only ever brought forth in sorrow. Be careful what you wish for.”

Is Professor Scheidel correct? I don’t know, but I fear it’s not looking good for us at this point.