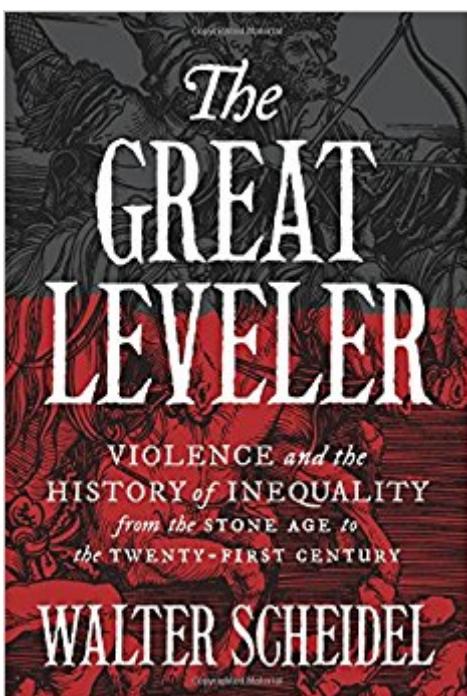


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# The Great Leveler: Violence And The History Of Inequality From The Stone Age To The Twenty-First Century (The Princeton Economic History Of The Western World)



## Synopsis

How only violence and catastrophes have consistently reduced inequality throughout world historyAre mass violence and catastrophes the only forces that can seriously decrease economic inequality? To judge by thousands of years of history, the answer is yes. Tracing the global history of inequality from the Stone Age to today, Walter Scheidel shows that inequality never dies peacefully. Inequality declines when carnage and disaster strike and increases when peace and stability return. The Great Leveler is the first book to chart the crucial role of violent shocks in reducing inequality over the full sweep of human history around the world.Ever since humans began to farm, herd livestock, and pass on their assets to future generations, economic inequality has been a defining feature of civilization. Over thousands of years, only violent events have significantly lessened inequality. The "Four Horsemen" of levelingâ •mass-mobilization warfare, transformative revolutions, state collapse, and catastrophic plaguesâ •have repeatedly destroyed the fortunes of the rich. Scheidel identifies and examines these processes, from the crises of the earliest civilizations to the cataclysmic world wars and communist revolutions of the twentieth century. Today, the violence that reduced inequality in the past seems to have diminished, and that is a good thing. But it casts serious doubt on the prospects for a more equal future.An essential contribution to the debate about inequality, The Great Leveler provides important new insights about why inequality is so persistentâ •and why it is unlikely to decline anytime soon.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Mr. Scheidel's depressing view is bound to upset [those] who quite naturally might prefer to live in a world in which events might move political and social systems to figure out a more equitable way to distribute the fruits of growth without the plague, the guillotine or state collapse."--Eduardo Porter, *New York Times*"Sweeping and provocative."--*New Yorker*"An astonishing tour de force."--Gregory Clark, *Wall Street Journal*"In [Scheidelâ™s] magisterial sociopolitical history *The Great Leveler*, inequality is shown as preferable to the alternative: society levelled by vast upheavals."--Aaron Reeves, *Nature*"Complex societies naturally generate inequality. It has been so, argues Stanford University professor Scheidel, ever since the discovery of agriculture. Might policy ameliorate, or even reverse, the tendency towards inequality? No. In Scheidelâ™s account the lessons of history are clear: only war, revolution, state collapse or catastrophic plague--or a combination of such disasters--destroy the wealth of the rich. I wish the argument were wrong, but suspect it is not. . . . Very powerful."--Martin Wolf, *Financial Times*"As a supplier of momentary relief, the Great Depression seems an unlikely candidate. . . . Yes, it brought widespread suffering and dreadful misery. But it did not bring death to millions, and in that it stands out. If that counts as relief, you can begin to imagine the scale of the woe that comes before and after. [Scheidel] puts the discussion of increased inequality found in the recent work of Thomas Piketty, Anthony Atkinson, Branko Milanovic and others into a broad historical context and examines the circumstances under which it can be reduced."--*The Economist*"Reducing inequality by peaceful means looks harder than ever, giving Mr. Scheidelâ™s arguments even greater resonance."--*Buttonwood, Economist*"A scholarly and ambitious book."--Paul Mason, *The Guardian*"A thoroughly unsunny . . . but fascinating look at the engines of our discontent."--*Kirkus*"A new history of wealth inequality from primitive times to the present that is provoking wide debate."--David Talbot, *San Francisco Chronicle*"Tight labor markets shrink income inequality by causing employers to bid up the price of scarce labor, so policymakers fretting about income inequality could give an epidemic disease a try. This might be a bit extreme but if increased equality is the goal, Stanford's Walter Scheidel should be heard. His scholarship encompasses many things (classics, history, human biology) and if current events are insufficiently depressing for you, try his just-published book *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century*. Judge this book by its cover, which features Albrecht Durer's woodcut 'The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.'"--George Will, *Washington Post*"A new comprehensive and compelling account of the history of inequality by Walter Scheidel suggests that the only means of substantially levelling economic outcomes have been mass mobilisation war, violent revolution, pandemics (think bubonic plagues) and state failure."--Ryan Bourne, *City AM*"One of the most important books on geostrategic trends to have

been published in some years. . . . A dark masterpiece, and everyone who thinks about global trends should read it."--Ian Morris, *Stratfor*"[Scheidel] draws on mountains of data to examine the social, economic and political forces that have been responsible for the growth of material inequality--and those that have reduced wealth. . . . Fascinating."--Glenn Altschuler, *Huffington Post*"The current tome that has policy circles all abuzz."--Dave Neese, *The Trentonian*"In his remarkable new book, *The Great Leveler*, historian Walter Scheidel shows that . . . reducing inequality has always been a miserable business. . . . Magisterial."--Ian Morris, *BBC History Magazine*"A readable and quirky history of economic inequality from the great apes to the modern day. . . . It is well worth the read. It is, in a word, gripping."--Victoria Bateman, *Times Higher Education*"*The Great Leveler* is a fascinating and informative book, and likely to become a classic--as a warning about our fate if we accept inequality as a law of nature. But now we know better."--Crawford Kilian, *The Tyee*"A perceptive, if grim, explanation for the ever-widening socio-economic gap in America, for the growing practice of paying corporate leaders 300 or 400 times whatâ™s paid workers on the shop floor, and for the reasoning behind appointing a Cabinet filled with billionaires. who have little in common with average citizens."--Bill Mares, *Vermont Public Radio*"*The Great Leveler* is a fantastic piece of social science."--Mark Koyama, *Public Choice*"This book will be widely read and spur a wave of critical scholarship."--Choice"Try *The Great Leveler*, by Walter Scheidel. In this well-reviewed nonfiction book, the author argues that only catastrophes like pandemics and great, violent upheavals like world wars can ever address economic inequality. Hey, youâ™re depressed anyway. Might as well be educated as to why."--Randi Kreiss, *Long Island Herald* (Summer Reading)"Scheidelâ™s excellent survey has the merit of drawing evidence from the smallest scrap--height in burial sites, records of wages or rations, differences in house sizes over time, for example."--Ben Collyer, *New Scientist*"I am greatly impressed by his ingenuity in constructing his data-sets. . . . A very brave attempt to say very important things backed up by enormous empirical research. . . . This is a fascinating, brave and important book. I recommend that you should read it."--Michael Mann, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*"Mr Scheidelâ™s evidence is so persuasive that readers will find themselves cheering on the Black Death as a boost to median wages."--Janan Ganesh, *Financial Times*"A convincing--if depressing--portrait of wealth equalization over time and across space."--Anthony Comegna, *Libertarianism.org*

"If you think you've heard it all about economic inequality, think again. Walter Scheidel's analysis of what really reduces inequality is provocative, but he makes the case with reason, evidence, and style."--Steven Pinker, author of *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has*

Declined"Brilliant, erudite, and chock-full of historical detail, The Great Leveler has a powerful message and asks a big question for the twenty-first century: Can we find a cure for inequality that isn't worse than the disease?"--Branko Milanovic, author of *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*"This is the best book on the history of income inequality. And the central message is that most significant reductions in inequality come through violence and destruction. Have a nice day!"--Tyler Cowen, author of *The Complacent Class: The Self-Defeating Quest for the American Dream*"This brilliant and thoroughly researched book solves a major paradox in the study of historical inequality. If we accept Thomas Piketty's rule that returns on capital are greater than the rate of economic growth, the 10,000 years of evolution since the Neolithic period should have resulted in all wealth becoming concentrated in the hands of a single individual or family. The Great Leveler explains why that didn't happen. A major breakthrough in our understanding of the historical dynamics of income and wealth inequality."--Peter Turchin, author of *Ultrasociety: How 10,000 Years of War Made Humans the Greatest Cooperators on Earth*"Inequality and violence are fundamental features of human society. No one before Walter Scheidel has shown us just how closely they have been intertwined. This is a masterful new assessment of an age-old problem."--David Stasavage, coauthor of *Taxing the Rich: A History of Fiscal Fairness in the United States and Europe*"The Great Leveler makes a convincing case."--Robert J. Gordon, author of *The Rise and Fall of American Growth*"This superb, and superbly written, book justifies its profound but pessimistic conclusion that in world history inequality has declined significantly only as a result of violent changes caused by wars, state breakdown, or pandemics. It should have a huge impact on world historians and generate interesting and important debates about growing inequality in today's world."--David Christian, author of *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*"Walter Scheidel offers a fascinating and powerful analysis of how worldwide income and wealth inequality have evolved from the Neolithic revolution to today. No other book on inequality has the temporal breadth or reach of Scheidel's book. And his interpretation is strikingly new."--Philip T. Hoffman, author of *Why Did Europe Conquer the World?*

Walter Scheidel tackles a very ambitious project here. He attempts nothing less than a one volume account of economic inequality throughout all of human history. In my opinion he succeeds brilliantly. This is a book of impressive scholarship. It is rare that someone is motivated to study this topic without an obvious political and policy agenda. Even after finishing the book I still could not tell you what Professor Scheidel's political views are. The book is descriptive not prescriptive. The thesis of the book is that, throughout all of human history, only violent cataclysms

and plagues have produced significant and long standing reductions in economic inequality. Peace and prosperity always tend to lead to increasing inequality over the long term. With the benefit of hindsight, this is less surprising than it first appears. The overwhelming majority of humans have always lived with little or no economic savings or financial net worth. That is the constant. Peace and prosperity necessarily change the net worth and income of the richest more than the poorest because the economic situation of the poorest just can't get a lot worse. The effect of compounding earnings is very powerful and not intuitively well understood by most people. This effect is even more dramatic when it spans several generations in a family. Increasing (or at least high and stable) inequality has been the default tendency throughout all of human history. Scheidel cites what he calls the Four Horsemen of economic leveling: mass mobilization warfare, transformative revolution, state collapse and plagues as the only forces that have consistently led to major economic leveling. It is important to note that only mass mobilization warfare has this effect. Ordinary warfare tends to shift fortunes between victor and vanquished without overall leveling. The period of the 20th Century that included the two World Wars and the communist revolutions represented one of the great economic levelings in all of human history. Those of us who grew up just after those events consequently have a somewhat distorted view of what is a typical historical level of economic inequality. Before reading this book I felt that there was something abnormal about the increasing degree of economic inequality we see around us. After reading it I feel like I knew all along this was inevitable. It is a rare book that can change your perspective like that. Scheidel is not arguing that economic inequality is good. He is well aware of the role of plunder and cronyism in contributing to it. He realizes that economic inequality is problematic for a number of reasons including the possibility that it may contain the seeds of the next cataclysm. He is just giving the history here not making any argument about the appropriate policy response. It's not that the cataclysms that produce leveling don't also hurt the poor. They always do. It's just that the rich have a lot more to lose when a lot of people lose everything. Scheidel closes with this: "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." To put it another way, and to put it in the words of Woody Allen, after the next great leveling we may well look back on the previous period of inequality and think "We were happy then but we didn't know it."

Walter Scheidel, author of *The Great Leveler*, provides a scientifically rigorous, excruciatingly detailed and politically agnostic survey of wealth inequality from pre-history to the present. The

focus is on factors that reduce, or level, that inequality and the core message is disheartening. Given the far-reaching scope, in both time and geography, finding reliable and comparable data related to wealth requires making some assumptions — actually, a LOT of assumptions. But he's very straightforward about that, explaining each at length including, for example, how burial practices might indicate wealth, how measures of wheat could be stand in for wages and — at least in the modern world — how reported income may not accurately reflect hidden assets. He relies heavily on one metric especially, the Gini coefficient, which attempts to capture wealth inequality in a closed system (say, a country) in which zero represents full wealth and resource equality for all members (everyone has as much as everyone else) and 1 equaling maximum inequality, in which one person possesses all the wealth. It's a thorough and far-reaching study leading to a disheartening and inescapable conclusion: wealth and resource inequality (which is maximized by the compounding advantages of wealth, access to political influence and the narrowing effects of inheritance) has always been part of the human experience. In his view, only four things have ever leveled inequality in any significant way — mass mobilization warfare (WWI and WWII, for example), pandemics (the Plague), transformative revolutions (as in, the communist variety) and state collapse. He walks readers through many, many explorations of each of the four examples, studying before and after wealth and resource distribution from countries around the globe and throughout recorded history (and even a bit before). The research brings to life a troubling trend — a gulf of wealth inequality that continually increases, putting the capital and resources into the hands of a small (and shrinking) wealthy elite while extracting them from basically everyone else (especially the working- and lower-classes). Then one of the four levelers unwinds and the rich — who have the most to lose — slip down the social scale and working poor (who suddenly have a resource that's in demand — their labor) are able to charge more and live more cheaply, and so move up the scale. Then it all starts over again. His research skills are incredible, so perhaps it's no surprise the writing is solid but never lofty or in the slightest bit lyrical, but still is a punch in the gut. For example: “in eleven of the twenty-one countries with published top incomes shares, the portion of all income obtained by the 1 percent rose between 50 percent and more than 100 percent between 1980 and 2010. In 2012, inequality in the United States even set several records: in that year, top 1 percent income shares (both with and without capital gains) and the share of private wealth owned by the richest 0.01 percent of households for the first time exceeded the high water mark of 1929.” In other words, congratulations America, the chasm of inequality is now greater than during the era of the robber barons. The question the book raises, and one he frames specifically, is “given

that inequality in the U.S. is at near historic levels (or beyond) "are there any leveling events that could close the gap, even briefly, and are there in ways we could use policy to reduce inequality. The answers, it seems, are no (short of a far-reaching nuclear conflagration, which he deems unlikely), and also no, given the lack of political will needed to redistribute wealth away from the controlling elite (even though there are scads of ways " dozens of which he lists " to at least nibble around the edges without actually leveling). It's an important work that is, at times, mind-numbingly boring and at times pants-wettingly frightening, and almost always disheartening. I found myself almost rooting for a return of the plague, if only to knock the elites temporarily out of their golden towers and close the wealth gap just a tiny bit to the good old days of 1935.

This well-written book is interesting in its own right, but probably its greatest value is as an introduction for readers too meek to dive directly into Piketty's Capital in the 21st Century

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