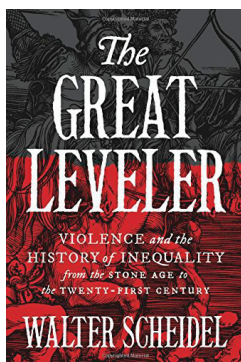


The Great Leveler. Violence and the History of Inequality From the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century

By Walter Scheidel

Princeton University Press. Princeton and Oxford. ISBN 978-0-691-16502-8. 2017, 504.



Inequality has been one of the most serious "problems" that engages the mind of so many people in different fields of science. Economists, sociologists, philosophers, journalists, political scientists and

politicians have been taken part in a heated debate on the issue, whether out of scientific motives or in the pursuit of personal, partisan or "public" interest. In such complex cases of excessive multilateral interest, it is necessary that historians be given a chance to express their opinion. The author of this review is a historian – a researcher in the field of social and economic history, demography and comparative history. We should therefore be happy with this commitment to undertaking an in-depth study of inequality. History and historians enjoy an advantage over the other spheres of human knowledge and researchers therein - economy, sociology, philosophy - considering that their main task is to present the reality in the past – whether we like it or not. So let's take a closer look at one strictly scientific, anti-utopian book that shows us the reality about inequality.

Walter Scheidel's *The Great Leveler. Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century*¹ is devoted namely to this issue. My first impression is that the book has an unusual structure: an introduction and seven parts which in turn are divided into sixteen chapters. It becomes evident that this unusual, albeit appropriate structure, was determined by the author's interesting approach. The text is not structured by chronology. A problem-thematic approach has been adopted instead. In addition, this study offers 54 tables and figures.

The big question raised at the very beginning of the exposition is: "*Has inequality always been with us?*" In his attempt to provide an answer to this question, the author argues that inequality has always been there, though it has taken various forms throughout the years such as improving hunting fields or increasing the female mammals for the dominant male. Hence there are almost no cases in world history in which the goods are equally allocated. The presence of a hierarchy that is inherent for our close relatives – for example the African great apes (gorillas or chimpanzees), brings about inequality. Thus, exploring the initial stages of the emergence of human society, the author concedes that inequality is a typical characteristic of the human race rather than an exception.

What is quite interesting for the Bulgarian readership is the examination of the Gini coefficient measuring the gold content in the more than 200 graves discovered near Port Varna, where the villagers apparently

possessed various golden objects and jewellery. This is what archaeologists refer to as the "culture of Varna" as one of the earliest cultures where people are engaged in gold processing and have a well-established social hierarchy. More than 6,000 years ago, these people were not quite equal. Some were buried with much more gold than others. Therefore, they did not enjoy equality in terms of wealth distribution. The book offers numerous facts from the history of other early cultures as evidence in support of this assumption. So inequality was inherent to the humans long before the first forms of state organization emerged. It is evident that, even after the "state" appeared on the historical scene, inequality did not disappear but was only transformed. As the author argues, "*unequal access to income and wealth preceded the formation of the state and contributed to its development. Yet once established, governmental institutions in turn exacerbated existing inequalities and created new ones*" (p. 43).

Inequality was also quite typical of the first bigger state structures (empires). Chapter 2 makes an overview of inequality in the Roman Empire, Early China, Mamluk Egypt, among other ancient empires. As the author argues, the main focus of the study is on Europe, though it also presents data from some Ottoman cities in Anatolia. Thus, the book also presents the Ottoman Empire, making mention of the research carried out on inequality by Turkish historians. There has been such research for Balkans cities, though it has not been included in the study.

Nevertheless, the text is clearly "Eurocentric", which is probably due to the much denser statistical information available for Western Europe. Particularly revealing is Figure 3.1. *Inequality trends in Europe in the long run* (p. 87). It exposes the trend of growing inequality in Europe over long periods of time, interrupted by shorter periods of "flattening" (or less inequality). Please do not rush to be happy! These periods were not a result of any solution and fairer distribution of goods. The European continent did not experience any

utopian and idyllic moments. There was no "heaven on earth". Instead they were historic events stemming from political, revolutionary or other cataclysms such as the plague, for example. The author highlights some of these events: the fall of the Roman Empire and the subsequent plague, the great plague epidemic – Black Death and so on. The same results are evident from the figures headlined *Inequality Trends in Latin America in the Long Run* (p. 104) and *Inequality Trends in the United States in the Long Run* (p.110). In the first case, the rise in inequality in Latin America was interrupted by the declining population following the Spanish conquest (the impact of population loss) and the Wars of Independence. In the second case (United States) leveling factors are emerging such as the War of Independence and the far more devastating Second World War.

In my opinion, the latter is the greatest contribution of the book. It definitely has a chastening effect on us. Indeed, as the author points out, the major cataclysms in human history can be identified as the great levelers. In the following chapters, he begins to present "the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse". The Second World War and the revolution in Russia – which led to the communist regime – were singled out as the main reasons for the collapse. The author himself writes: "*Two of the four horsemen of violent leveling – mass mobilization warfare and transformative revolution – had been unleashed with devastating consequences. For the first time since the Black Death, and on a scale perhaps unrivaled since the fall of the western Roman empire, access to material resources came to be distributed much more equally – and, uniquely, across large parts of the globe*" (p. 112).

As was already said, the text has a "problem-thematic structure". Hence the events and processes in world history are presented in terms of their relevance to the subject of the book, not with regard to a year or period. Presumably, the revolution in Russia turned out to have a more serious effect on inequality than the revolution in France. Accordingly, the former comes first in the text. Quite expectedly,

the French Revolution did not have such a dramatic impact on inequality in France. Excuse my reiteration, but the approach adopted in the book is at once appropriate and original.

It should be assumed that the total war was a total leveler, while the transformative one, like communist revolution, was the second one. But which are the others? They are explained and analyzed within the separate chapters of the study: The great demises of the empires and systemic collapses such as the collapse of the Tang dynasty elite in China, the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire and of the pre-Columbian Americas. The great pandemics, especially The Black death, when the Europe lost nearly half of its population, are also recalled. As the author writes, *"the Black Death of the 14th century was not the first plague pandemic of the Old World. Back 800 years earlier, the same disease had already struck and ravaged Europe and the Middle East in much the same way during a pandemic known as the Justinianic Plague, which lasted from 541 to about 750 CE"* (p. 319). These disasters led to equalization in the distribution of incomes and wealth.

The author points out some less apocalyptic reasons for reducing inequality. Sometimes well-intentioned human activity can have an effect in this direction. It presents some reform actions, especially some more successful land reforms, debt reliefs and emancipations.

Overall, history teaches us to be realistically-minded. Obviously, inequality is deeply rooted in human society at all times and on all continents. A "perfect world" in which everything is distributed equally and there is no inequality in practice has never existed. It should be noted that history shows both moments of growth and prosperity and those of rampant inequalities in the distribution of income and wealth. There is economic logic in such regularity. The wealth was concentrated in the hands of a small number of people who, in turn, were able to increase it. Whether this is fair or not – I do not know. History should not teach us what is fair and what is not – I will repeat, this is a science of the real life and facts in the past. The book,

however, raises the question of whether full equality in income and wealth distribution is fair? I think that definitely it is not.

After many historical examples, the author focuses on modernity. At present, there is also a large disproportion in the distribution of incomes and wealth. On the question as to how far inequality can go, the author replies: "In theory, one person can own everything there is to own, with everyone else owning nothing but surviving on labor or transfers." In theory, a society of almost complete equality is also possible (in theory "yes", but practically "not"). The other big question is: "what does the future hold?" Obviously, we cannot expect any "paradise on earth", where we are all granted public goods on equal terms. History teaches us that we should be skeptical. The author is even more moderate and reminds: *"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"* (p. 444).

All those who dream of equality in the distribution of goods will find the book to expose the harsh truth. History shows us that it was not so typical, and is unlikely to happen in the future. In any case, the research stimulates us to think. Why should people decide to start distributing the goods on equal terms only in times of great turmoil? Do periods of economic growth precipitate periods of serious inequality? Should moments of decline and poverty necessarily be accompanied by greater equality in the distribution of wealth and goods? Do human aspirations to be equal include being equally poor? Many questions remain unanswered. It will be hard to find any solutions to these issues. Yet the book does not have such a goal. However, this piece of research is a major contribution to systematizing and analyzing data and facts about the history of inequality. It tells us that things are not always what we want them to be, and equality in wealth among the people will probably remain an unattainable dream.

Reviewed by Hristiyan Atanasov