

# A New Rationalization for Riches

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Cheerleaders for concentrated wealth have a new reason to cheer. They have chanced upon a fresh rationalization for inequality.

This new rationalization comes from an unlikely source, a sober and thoughtful just-published book from a distinguished historian and classicist, Stanford's Walter Scheidel.

In the 14th century, the horror of bubonic plague left over a quarter of Europe's population dead—and the continent's distribution of wealth markedly more equal.

In *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century*, Scheidel builds upon his considerable academic expertise on the ancient world and explores how and when societies have actually become less unequal. In the process, he has brought forth a book that could hardly be more profoundly depressing.

Scheidel's basic thesis: Down through history, only “massive and violent disruptions of the established order” have generated “big equalizing moments.”

“It is almost universally true,” he advises, “that violence has been necessary to ensure the redistribution of wealth at any point in time.”

**The violence that** Scheidel details has taken various forms over the millennia, from war and plagues to revolutions and utter collapses of civil authority. All this violence has exacted a heavy price on humanity, in everything from lives to liberty.

Even worse, the greater levels of equality this violence has ushered in, *The Great Leveler* relates, has never been sustainable. In instance after instance, inequality has always returned, often at even fiercer levels than before.

The good news? Scheidel essentially has none. On the one hand, “nobody in his or her right mind” welcomes violence. On the other, Scheidel sees no easy peaceful, incremental route to more meaningfully equitable distributions of income and wealth.

“Business as usual may not be enough,” Scheidel cautions. “We have to think harder about how to bring change in today's world.”

**By change**, Scheidel means greater equity, an outcome most people in the world today would likely consider worth pursuing. But not all people. In our contemporary unequal world, we have among us a number of folks who see nothing particularly wrong with grand concentrations of private wealth and power. These folks now seem to see Scheidel as an ideological godsend.

Scheidel hasn't invited this bubbly appreciation from the right. *The Great Leveler* offers up no impassioned defense for maldistributions of income and wealth. Quite the opposite. Scheidel invites us to think deeply about inequality and come up with something "innovative and original" enough to "create lasting change." The conservatives now celebrating Scheidel's book don't want us thinking at all about "lasting change." They want us to simply accept our current maldistributions as inevitable and irreversible.

Only "bloody suffering," as the Cato Institute's Ryan Bourne puts it, ever produces more equality, and that equality "comes at too high a cost." So let's simply instead "accept the historical facts" that Scheidel gives us, he counsels, and abandon "equality as a central ambition."

**For fans of grand fortune** like Bourne, the notion "that more equality generally is necessarily better" amounts to a silly "value judgment" that "should surely be put to bed by the long sweep of history."

**The right sees in Scheidel's history a reason to abandon 'equality as a central ambition.'**

We need not, in other words, make any moves that challenge our top-heavy world economic order. We don't need, Bourne believes, "much higher minimum wages" or "unionization" or "punitive income tax rates" on our wealthiest. Just keep government at bay and let the market work its magic.

And if we do, the Cato Institute analyst assures us, "our modern, dynamic world" economy will surely bring us "opportunities to continue to alleviate poverty." A rising tide will lift all boats. So what if the income gap widens. That widening, "absent violence," will always be with us

**George Will**, America's prime gatekeeper to conservative orthodoxy, fully shares Bourne's gratitude for *The Great Leveler's* take on inequality's history. His write-up on the book, published earlier this month in the conservative *National Review*, carries a headline that neatly sums up how the right is reading Scheidel: "The most potent 'solutions' for inequality are unpleasant."

The quote marks around "solutions" subtly carry their own message: We don't need to "solve" inequality because inequality poses no problem that should give a civilized society pause.

Will goes on to not so subtly amplify that same message in the text of his contemplation over what Scheidel has wrought. Inequality surely rates as a *fact*, Will contends, but inequality only rates as "a problem when, and to the extent that, a critical mass of people decide that it is."

**This claim from Will** will not go down well with the legions of social scientists who've spent recent decades researching and revealing the many social ills that inequality creates and nurtures. Wide divides between the rich and everyone else, these researchers have shown, are ripping safety nets and degrading our environment, subverting democratic norms and eroding our economy.

**Social scientists have researched and revealed the many problems that inequality creates.**

Maldistributions of income and wealth, epidemiologists inform us, are even limiting how long we live. And what about violence? Some 40 studies link inequality and homicides, the ultimate in violent acts. The wider a society's inequality, the higher the murder rate.

Yes, inequality does rate as a problem, a reality that you don't have to be a social scientist to recognize. Every great religious tradition in the world frowns on maldistributions of wealth. We put ourselves and our societies at risk, our greatest thinkers have always recognized, if we let these maldistributions fester.

**But do we have** no choice in the matter? Is inequality, as the most dispiriting reading of Scheidel would imply, our inevitable natural order?

In fact, we certainly do have choices. Scheidel may know the historical literature on social cataclysms. But he has less familiarity with the debates over antidotes to inequality that have coursed — and continue to course — through movements for social change.

Activists today are exploring encouraging pathways to a New Economy that sustains both our planet and greater equality. The work of veteran activist scholar Gar Alperovitz stands as just one heartening example.

Walter Scheidel asks us to “think harder about how to bring change in today's world.” In truth, we already are.