



## Book Review

*The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century.* Walter Scheidel. 2018. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 528 pages, ISBN 978-0-6911-8431-9. Paper (\$18.95)

**Reviewed by Corey R. Payne**

*Johns Hopkins University*

[cpayne20@jhu.edu](mailto:cpayne20@jhu.edu)

What causes inequality to rise and decline?<sup>1</sup> Scholars recently have begun to recognize the role that war plays in historical reductions in inequality. Thomas Piketty popularized this analysis, writing that “it was the chaos of war, with its attendant economic and political shocks, that reduced inequality in the twentieth century” (2014: 275). Branko Milanovic described “malign mechanisms” that reduce inequality, such as wars, civil conflict, and epidemics. In the modern and pre-industrial era, he writes, wars reduced inequality by bringing about disruption of trade, “mass mobilization, destruction of property, and progressive taxation” (2016: 56).

Walter Scheidel makes a masterful contribution to this literature. In an exhaustive exploration of the relationship between violence and inequality, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the 21st Century* treks through history with a geographical and temporal scope that only an expert world-historian could achieve. The title anticipates Scheidel’s main thesis, which is that throughout history significant reductions in material inequality have resulted from four different kinds of violent ruptures: mass mobilization warfare, transformative

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revolution, state failure, and lethal pandemics. Absent such violent ruptures, he claims, inequality tends to rise. Across a wide range of times and societies, “stability [has] favored economic inequality” (6). For Scheidel, only such “violent shocks,” which he dubs the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” have wiped clean the slate of social inequality. Scheidel reviews historical examples of each of the Four Horsemen, identifying the mechanisms linking each violent shock to the equalization of wealth and income.

War comes first, with the World Wars taking a central role. In Japan during the Second World War, the total mobilization of the population resulted in massive destruction of elite wealth. The shock of war yielded “government regulation, inflation, and physical destruction,” which “flattened the distribution of income and wealth” (119). In other belligerent locales, similar processes unfolded: Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, India, the United States, Finland, Australia, Denmark, and Norway – to name just a few of the examples Scheidel discusses— each experienced a massive decrease in inequality during the ‘thirty years war’ of 1914 to 1945. Scheidel argues that these mass mobilization wars of the twentieth century are the best examples of a broader process in which violent war causes reductions in inequality. He examines this argument in pre-industrial and civil wars, from the American Civil War and the Napoleonic wars to the Warring States of China and the Roman Wars against Carthage. He finds that “in traditional warfare,” the degree of leveling which occurred was less severe and dependent upon many factors but, nonetheless, leveling tended to be associated with the magnitude of violence (202). The distinction between “mass-mobilization” and “traditional” warfare is crucial to this analysis—not only were industrialized, mass-mobilization wars more expensive, they also required societal consensus and a guise of fair sacrifice across rich and poor alike, resulting in a greater degree of leveling when combined with mass destruction (144-147).

Scheidel’s second Horseman is “transformative revolution.” He again starts from the twentieth century examples for which there is ample data, and works back in time. The communist revolutions of the twentieth century, he argues, relied on large-scale violence in the form of civil war (in Russia and China) and purges (in Russia, China, and Cambodia) to enact “expropriation, redistribution, collectivization, and price-setting” (231). He finds similar processes at work in pre-industrial settings, such as the French Revolution, peasant revolts in Ming China, and uprisings in Roman Gaul. Scheidel finds that these pre-industrial cases were less successful at reducing inequality, regardless of how violent they were. He argues that it was only the twentieth century that produced “revolutionaries who wielded both machine guns and radical programs” (253); the pre-industrial revolts were not violent enough to level inequalities in a lasting way.

State and system failures, the third Horseman, provide the cleanest examples of Scheidel’s argument. Throughout history, the violent destruction of entire political, economic, and social systems has resulted in reductions in inequality. In this section, his examples are largely confined

to the pre-modern era (e.g. Tang China, Western Roman Empire, Egypt's Old Kingdom) where, he acknowledges, it is "less desperately difficult" to come by evidence for the destruction of wealth, as opposed to evidence for other potential explanations (260). In the modern era, he points to only one example – late-twentieth century Somalia – to make his case. In short, Scheidel shows that "even if these [state- and system- failures] left most or all people worse off than before, the rich had farther to fall" (259), thus compressing the degree of inequality.

Scheidel's final Horseman is plague. Focusing on the Black Death, Scheidel uses Malthusian economics to highlight the reduction in inequality in a macabre way: high mortality rates led to labor scarcity, which ultimately resulted in higher real wages (292, 297-304). This was complemented by the fragmentation of property among the wealthy and chaos in the political system. Thus, the mass death of the plague combined the causal mechanisms of several of the other Horsemen to reduce inequality in Europe.

He ends the book by searching for 'peaceful' leveling in history—and largely comes up short. He finds that the best contenders for peaceful reductions in inequality, such as land reform, debt relief, economic crises, the abolition of slavery, the development of democratic institutions, economic growth, and educational advancement, have each been either violent or ineffective. Scheidel concludes that his hypothesis ("in the absence of violent shocks, transitional increases in inequality are unlikely to be reversed") is "consistent with evidence across the long run of history" (374).

This book's immense contribution to the literature on historical inequality is clear. In addition to the historical depth and breadth of this work, the creative and comprehensive compilation of data on inequality measures is impressive. Scheidel utilizes common measures of inequality, such as the Gini coefficient or top earner shares, but also synthesizes other, less common data for periods and locales where these measures are unavailable. These range from wage ratios in thirteenth century Spain and household size in the Iron Age, to wages in grain in late Middle Age England, to consumption baskets in sixteenth century Mexico and daily wheat wages of Egyptian workers from the third century BCE. The imaginative and encompassing comparisons that fill this volume are a must-read for any scholar or student of inequality.

Yet there are several shortcomings in Scheidel's work that call for further analysis. One salient omission in *The Great Leveler* is so-called 'between-country' inequality. As a result, his argument is unable to account for what amounts to a significant portion of global inequality throughout history. What's more, the omission of between-country dynamics (inequality, but also imperialism and underdevelopment) limits his ability to understand the full complexity of several of his cases, for example, state-failure in present-day Somalia, the Haitian revolution, or the Irish Potato Famine. It also leads him to draw dubious conclusions—for example, that Spanish-carried

epidemics reduced inequality within the New World while not considering how the simultaneous colonization of the Americas violently increased ‘between-country’ inequality (317-318). Moreover, other scholarship points to an opposite relationship between broadly defined ‘violence’ and between-country inequality; as Karatasli (2017) has shown, periods of systemic chaos (characterized by intensified social, political, and inter-state conflict) have corresponded with divergences in the between-country distribution of wealth.

These exclusions are forgivable given the limitations of a single book. More problematic for his project, however, is his causal concept of ‘violence.’ In his historical analysis of the Four Horsemen, Scheidel explains how they led to liquidation of the elite through a careful review of the mechanisms linking each shock to its equalizing effect. Yet this careful review of mechanisms falls away in favor of an overarching and simplistic root cause: violence (e.g. 8). This move from concrete mechanisms to broadly defined ‘violence’ is murky at best. In pointing to violence as *the* defining shared characteristic, he not only loses the varied and detailed stories that he attempts to tell, but he also obscures other potential forces linking these horsemen.

Scheidel himself acknowledges the limits and ambiguities of this conceptualization but does not adequately address them. For example, he points out that many violent shocks throughout history do not result in declining inequality (e.g. 176, 184, 247, 345). One central paradox dogging Scheidel’s argument, then, is that not all violent shocks lead to equalization, but (almost) all equalizations come from violent shocks. If violence does not invariably lead to declining inequality, what is it about each of his violent cases that yields this result?

I might suggest that the commonality across Scheidel’s Four Horsemen is not simply that each is a violent shock leading to the destruction of social-political institutions and/or elite wealth, but rather that each *yields increased power to a society’s lower strata*. This is perhaps clearest in the case that Scheidel touts as the best example of his argument: The World Wars. As many scholars have noted, the preparation for and waging of industrialized warfare increased states’ reliance on workers and citizens to serve as soldiers and as providers of war-time materials. This reliance resulted in an increase in worker-citizens’ structural bargaining power vis-à-vis capital and states, which they were able to leverage for increased rights and benefits (e.g. Tilly 1992; Silver 2015). Thus, in these cases, it was not just the destruction of wealth that resulted in lasting equalization; the increase in workers’ structural bargaining power because of the war effort was instrumental. Scheidel acknowledges this at times without ever giving it much credence. He writes that the World Wars “served as a uniquely powerful catalyst for equalizing policy change, providing powerful impetus to franchise extensions, unionization, and the expansion of the welfare state” (7), but attributes this catalytic effect to the violence of the war. He dismisses the centrality of unionization in reducing inequality, writing that the “expansion of unions was largely a function of mass mobilization warfare” and finds no reason to identify this expansion “as an independent

agent of income compression” (165). It seems that Scheidel is trying to point out that union expansion and increased workers’ bargaining power is not *independently sufficient* to explain declining inequality (366). Yet in so doing, he overemphasizes the ‘shock’ of war and obscures the importance of working-class struggle in capitalizing on the ensuing chaos, especially in wealthy countries.

The state and system failure Horseman may be the strongest case for Scheidel’s argument that it was primarily violence that reduced inequalities, though, as he acknowledges, his examples are largely confined to the pre-modern era where evidence for other potential explanatory factors is unlikely to be found (260). Yet, here too, complications arise. Evidence points to local unrest by lower strata in a handful of premodern examples (e.g. 276). In the extreme cases of collapse, he points to a contraction of overall population, yielding labor market tightening (258). In the case of plague, the power of the lower strata increased in a similarly morbid way: high mortality rates and labor scarcity yielded higher marketplace bargaining power.

In Scheidel’s discussion of the transformative revolutions Horseman, the emphasis on violence as *the* key explanatory factor is especially limiting. This emphasis obscures the central principles of these revolutions, especially the Communist ones in the twentieth century: the redistribution of land to the peasantry, the democratic control of enterprises in workers’ councils, and the eradication of class. Scheidel acknowledges that the true cause of leveling in these cases was “expropriation, redistribution, collectivization, and price-setting,” and that the violence of civil war (in Russia and China) or purges (in Russia, China, and Cambodia) were *unnecessary* means to that end (231). However, he concludes that these leveling projects “relied on large-scale violence” (231)—a claim that seems to be undermined by the other examples of revolution that he discusses (Cuba, Central America, and Vietnam) that accomplished the same with little comparable violence. In each of these cases, the importance of the empowerment of the lower strata – workers and small-holding peasants – in the equalization process cannot be overstated. The primary emphasis on violence thus seems misplaced.

In sum, as a theoretical contribution to the literature on inequality, this book has several limitations. Yet as a historical contribution, no scholarship currently comes close to matching its scope and detail. Using innovative data, Scheidel’s comparison of (in)equality in ancient empires and modern nation-states, across vast regional and temporal boundaries, embodies some of the very best of global studies. But one final consideration is worth noting. In emphasizing the momentary violence of equalization, one tends to obscure the *systematic violence of inequality*. Pre-capitalist tributary arrangements, capitalist imperialism, and the systems of slavery and wage labor are organized around near-constant violence. Equalizing ‘shocks’ appear abnormally violent only because many observers are not conditioned to see the normalcy of violence in everyday life.

Scheidel may be correct that “stability favor[s] rising inequality” (6), but stability is by no means non-violent. That the remedies to the violent processes of inequality should themselves also be violent seems both expected and ordinary. Nevertheless, Scheidel’s skilled contribution gives us a lens through which to begin to understand these levelers.

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