
BOOK REVIEWS

The great leveler: violence and the history of inequality from the stone age to the twenty-first century, by Walter Scheidel, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2018, 528 pp., £14.99 (paperback), £27.00 (hardcover), ISBN9780691183251

The book attempts to fill the gap of exploring inequality in a long-term perspective, ambitiously trying to trace its origins from prehistoric times. It achieves its goal mostly through applying economic history through an interdisciplinary approach. The author of the book Walter Scheidel, a historian himself, provides a unique prospective on inequality through concentrating on cycles of *compression* and *leveling*. He defines the two concepts as narrowing the gap between the rich and poor, and minimizing the GINI coefficient respectively. The main focus of the book is the distribution of material resources within societies, rather than in-between different countries. The main question of the book is simple: why has inequality fallen at different points of history and what were the mechanisms of *leveling*.

Right from the start of the book, Scheidel identifies *The Four Horsemen of leveling*: mass mobilization warfare (i), transformative revolution (ii), famine and state failure (iii) as well as lethal pandemics (iv) as the only historically proven cases when long-term inequality statistically decreased. The core of his argument is that in order to level out equality an event needs to be violent, thus belonging to one of the above-mentioned *horsemen*. He continues that peaceful *leveling* used to be an extremely rare phenomenon, as inequality in the distribution of (disposable) income cannot rise forever. By asking a question of what would have happened if violent shocks were not there, Scheidel points to the feasibility of gradual peaceful *leveling* under conditions of modernity or another century of peace. Assuming that concentration of capital in the twentieth century was not massively dislocated, any further *leveling* would not be reversed by *disequalizing* forces. Scheidel also points to Thomas Piketty's weakness in the oversimplification of the effects of the war on inequality through generalization of the experience of France as the case study example, and application of it to a wider group of countries.

Scheidel perceives the two World Wars as the greatest levelers in history, because they penetrated society as a whole, through mobilization of people and resources on a scale *feasible only in modern nation-states*. In addition, specific policy measures, which have been adopted in post-conflict areas, as well as beyond them (which have not been directly affected by destruction and physical casualties – Sweden, Switzerland, Mauritius, USA and other examples), are at the core of his argument. It goes beyond managing inflation in times of war and

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raising taxes for military efforts, as he digs deeper into policy decisions in the aftermath of the wars.

After dedicating almost half of the book to the first horseman, the second part of the book starts from Communism. Here, the distinction between the first and second horsemen is less clear. All in all, Scheidel concludes that communist revolutionary regimes successfully forced down inequality through expropriation, redistribution, collectivization and price-setting. He also takes into account the variety in terms of violence involved in these processes. Here, it blurs the lines with the previous chapters which clearly state that civil wars are not universal equalizers. However, if Communist revolutions and purges are powerful enough to restructure society from within, how different are they from civil wars (which are not considered levelers by Scheidel)?

Walter Scheidel spends the least amount of time on the analysis of the third horseman, due to limitations of empirical examples. In Scheidel's opinion, as in the revolutions, system collapse, to be considered a leveler, had to be violent. It needs to be so in order to penetrate society from within and reach the rich, as they have vastly more to lose than the poor. This is particularly important when everybody's assets and livelihoods are at risk in times of state failure or systems collapse. Describing the unique example of Somalia, Scheidel proves that violent unravelling of predatory states of the pre-modern era does not necessarily increase inequality by leaving a country in shackles. The opposite happened in Somalia, where, in the long run, it benefited from the flight of rich private rent-seekers due to state failure. In addition, the cessation of systematic policies of discrimination against the rural majority in favor of urban businesses happened in Somalia as well. According to the author, getting rid of the government, and having a state in-limbo, actually helped improve equality, and if not for the corruption or poor quality of public services, Somalia would have an equal society today.

If asked to summarize Scheidel's main argument on the effect of the fourth horseman, it would be the following: epidemics reduce inequality because they drastically cut the supply of low-skill labor, which in turn increases their real wages. In the short run, it brings them closer to the propertied classes, who eventually develop strategies for protecting their estates in times of demographic shock. It is also important to note that, not epidemics themselves, but institutional arrangements of the time, were capable of blunting the shocks, by manipulating the labor market. Based on the assessment by Scheidel, it actually worked only in certain time periods. In the aftermath of the Black Death, epidemics took away up to 20% of population of Europe and also improved equality everywhere except for Italy, where the rich were able to mobilize and protect their mechanisms of inheritance of wealth. The strength of Scheidel's argumentation is that he is very careful with comments on the availability of data, as well as historic trends, and is conservative in his estimations. This can be seen in his masterful comparison of plague to famine, which hints at the same equalizing effect, but might also be challenging to prove empirically, due to the lack of reliable data.

What about now? Unfortunately, the last part of the book where Scheidel relates historical instances of *leveling* and *compression* to modern times, is the weakest part of the book. While Scheidel generally considers globalization as a

potent *disequalizing* force, he does not give his opinion without basing it on long-term historical evidence. In his view, although elites tend to benefit disproportionately in both developed and developing countries, intensified competition, financial liberalization and the removal of obstacles to the flow of capital may encourage fiscal reforms and economic deregulation.

The author is a well-established historian and a successful expert in the economic history of ancient times. The book covers the topic well, delivers on its main promises listed at the beginning and points to the possibilities of further research. However, it misses reflection and concrete examples from the twenty-first century, as promised in the title.

All in all, the book is well-balanced, original and very insightful. As it is not overly technical, it is suitable for students of social sciences working on the intersection of history and economics. Moreover, the book has extensive explanations of main definitions as well as user-friendly graphs and does not over-rely on references to seminal books. This book brings value to the advancement of the field, while giving a unique interdisciplinary perspective on one of the main issues facing our societies today.

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When things don't fall apart: global financial governance and developmental finance in an age of productive incoherence, by Ilene Grabel, Cambridge (MA) and London, The MIT Press, 2017, 400 pp., \$28 (paperback), ISBN: 9780262037259

Grabel's recently published book, *When Things Don't Fall Apart*, deciphers in a new context a neglected sociological tune: the problem of lack of change and the dismissal thereof.

What is this new context? Temporarily, so to say, it is the post-crisis era of the global economic crisis of 2007–2008. While, more ideologically and politically, it is the context of great expectations and projections of change in the form of a radical revolution that would bring a new *-ism* instead of the highly contested system of neo-liberalism.

What is Grabel's argument? Basically, she takes issue with the interpretations that claim and lament the lack of meaningful change subsequent to the crisis – the