Review Essay

The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century. *By Walter Scheidel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. xviii + 504 pp. Figures, tables, appendix, bibliography, index. Cloth, $35.00. ISBN: 978-0-691-16502-8.

Reviewed by Sarah Wilson

This text, looking to identify and problematize the "challenge of inequality" for society today through undertaking a global history of inequality from the Stone Age to the present, is very much one *of* our time, and arguably one *for* our time. It can be aligned persuasively with how an intensifying concern about social and actually human dimensions of key societal institutions—especially economic and political ones—has followed the "first crisis of globalisation" (Gordon Brown, *Beyond the Crash: Overcoming the First Crisis of Globalisation* [2010]) and new discursive spaces have emerged to support analyses that stand apart from traditional economics or primarily economics-oriented approaches.

For Scheidel, the challenge of inequality for twenty-first-century living is manifest. His imperative for understanding causes and consequences of levels of inequality he sees as *dangerous* and actually *growing* is attached to distributions—of income, wealth, and public goods—*within* any given society, rather than *between* different societies. Channeling his assertions through the trope of *resurgent inequality*, the significance Scheidel attaches to forces of globalization as *disequalizing* signals why this analysis is so interesting. Indeed, elsewhere it has been proposed that while globalization has operated to reduce overall inequality between nations, it has been a force for rising inequality within individual nations (Andrew Haldane, "A Leaf Being Turned" [speech to Occupy Economics, Friend's House, London, 2012]). For Scheidel, globalization is able to achieve this disequalization through being "predicated on a relatively peaceful and stable international order" (p. 422).

Scheidel's text is not unique in its concerns (see, for example, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality Is Better for Everyone* [2009]), and many will already identify with what might be termed an *inequality imperative*. Many others are likely to

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be persuaded through engaging with texts such as this one. Indeed, Scheidel argues that understanding and critiquing inequality is important for both developing and developed nations and asserts that inequality appears to be particularly harmful for developed countries, given apparent correlations between inequality and lack of growth.

What makes this particular analysis of inequality particularly engaging is twofold. First are the connections it makes and explores between inequality and civility, proposing that inequality is a product of civility, and of civility's triumph over violent forces. It asserts that civility has significantly curtailed what Scheidel calls the "four horsemen" of leveling, whereby mass mobilization warfare, transformative revolution, state collapse, and catastrophic plagues have historically acted as effective checks for embedded inequality. Second, the analysis explores this hypothesis over a very long time frame as well as across very different cultures.

The cross-cultural approach is perhaps not surprising given Scheidel's interest in identifying core features of inequality and its embeddedness, in terms of causation as well as consequences. However, observing this should not underplay the enormity of this task. Bringing together such diverse cultural examples requires levels of courage possessed by very few (of those very few) who would be capable of undertaking this endeavor. Scheidel's interest in exploring this over time as well as across space is particularly interesting from the reviewer's perspective—and particularly welcome. Applying how the discipline of history is proffering its usefulness for social commentary generally to his *inequality imperative*, Scheidel's approach embodies historian John Tosh's explanations of how a society can understand the significance of its own collective past for its identity and continuing journey. For Tosh this lies in appreciating the importance we as individuals attach to our own pasts, for self-awareness and understanding of how we behave and why, because human beings are creatures of experience rather than instinct (Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* [2015]).

Scheidel's text deftly intertwines approaches taken and the author's underpinning rationale in explaining why we should care about inequality and why we should fear its continuing to flourish into the future. The principal argument makes for very uncomfortable reading as it presents and works through the different faces of the apparent paradox that civility encourages inequality while violence operates to *check* inequality, and that with high and increasing levels of civility, forces of violence are themselves increasingly *checked*. That the decline of these violent forces has helped to embed inequality that is highly detrimental to societies is an intriguing idea, and one the author fully appreciates will challenge the reader through appearing counterintuitive, and disconcerting. Scheidel's use of the case study of Europe and the unique example of

China stands out in this cross-cultural examination of how inequality starts to take hold once *forager egalitarianism* is abandoned in favor of something different—something more civilized. Another highlight—albeit for generating unease—is the analysis of how peaceful land reform has assisted the attainment of inequality.

Following directly from this, the text does capture very effectively the key tropes of a trend toward civilization, commencing initially with the presence of relative stability, or the means by which this can be attained, and then how power structures will emerge to preserve *social order* in order to maintain this, at the heart of which will be a controlling elite. From this position, an emerging discourse of *civilizing forces*—emphasizing benefit, progress and advancement—will assist in obfuscating the disturbing similarities between controlling social order through violence and barbarity and the articulation of expectations and obligations underpinned by purported rationality, where physical repression is replaced by corruption, bullying, and intimidation.

This book could raise eyebrows by drawing so widely from different cultures and could attract comment that breadth has been achieved at the expense of depth. And in connecting Scheidel's aspiration for a global understanding of inequality with the text's acknowledged pursuit of "the global *history* of inequality" (reviewer's emphasis), his approach may not conform to all views on how history should be written (p. 10). This latter point is worth making, perhaps especially for this journal's audience on account of current debates on how management and organizational studies (MOS) and business history do and should engage with history (e.g., Stephanie Decker, "Paradigms Lost: Integrating History and Organization Studies," *Management & Organizational History* [2016]). These debates are emphasizing the perceived importance of engaging explicitly with canons of the discipline of history (e.g., Mike Zundel, Robin Holt, and Andrew Popp, "Using History in the Creation of Organizational Identity," *Management & Organizational History* [2016]). Purists may question the extent to which this has been achieved in this text, but this should not underplay its sheer ambition and its highly effective melding of the present and recent past with more distant pasts. The journey across time—which is also across space—is particularly strongly supported with secondary literature, and current intellectual debate within MOS *is* also emphasizing plurality and the pursuit of historical methodologies (e.g., Stephanie Decker, Matthias Kipping, and R. Daniel Wadwhani, "New Business Histories! Plurality in Business History Research Methods," *Business History* [2015]).

Something that is striking about this book is how through engaging with it a further paradox in the relationship between inequality and

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civility can be revealed, which the text itself could usefully have explored more directly. This is how intellectual critique of the kind offered here by Scheidel is itself premised on overall stability within a society and the supporting power structures designed to preserve order. Civility creates not only the space for intellectual thought, but also a climate of at least threshold tolerance for expression of views, as civility aligns itself with rationality through the words and actions of its overseeing elites. Scheidel argues convincingly that civility embeds and perpetuates inequality, and yet without civility it is unlikely that his work would acquire any traction. Here we may have to acknowledge that civility generally is the *friend* of critique even if we wish to assert that the very structures that facilitate critique of equality are actually responsible for embedding and perpetuating inequality. Indeed, that the forces of civility may thus operate to limit considerably the capacity of critique to effect change is perhaps particularly saliently illustrated in the limited impact of John Rawls's theory of justice—despite high intellectual praise, together with the instinctive attraction of his arguments relating to the distribution of societal "goods," defined as such things that, it can be assumed, everyone would want: namely, rights, liberties, powers, opportunities, income, wealth, and self-respect (Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* [1971]).

The Great Leveler does explore the intellectual paradoxes arising from aligning civility and inequality very extensively together with the causes and implications of creating and embedding inequality, and it does this impressively across time and space. Scheidel also powerfully makes the case that we should be concerned about rising inequality, although less overall is apparent from the text about how to resolve inequality or at least prevent it from continuing to rise, notwithstanding that there is "currently no shortage of proposals on how to reduce inequality" (p. 432). But the latter can be read into the nuances of this text, alongside a powerful and insightful conclusion, and it is perhaps inevitable that challenges will be more readily apparent than solutions in these times of "uncertainty" (Mark Carney, "Uncertainty, the Economy and Policy" [speech at Court Room, Bank of England, 2016]). And in looking to provoke thought and action around what is persuasively identified as an issue of manifest importance for our times, this is a book that can and actually should draw wide appeal.

Sarah Wilson is a senior lecturer in law at York Law School, University of York, U.K. Her key research interests lie in financial law (broadly configured to include financial regulation and financial crime) and business operation and culture. Her monograph The Origins of Modern Financial Crime: Historical Foundations and Current Problems in Britain *(2014) was shortlisted for the 2015 Wadsworth Prize awarded by the Business Archives Council for outstanding contribution to the study of British business history.*

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