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**Walter Scheidel. *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century***  
**The Princeton Economic History of the Western World, Joel Makyr, Series Editor. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017**

Reviewed by Leland Conley Barrows

Inspired by the work of Thomas Piketty, particularly his *Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), and Albrecht Dürer's 1497-1498 woodcut, "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," Dr. Walter Scheidel, Professor of Classics and History at Stanford University, argues in his massive 521-page volume that for most of human history reductions in socio-economic equality, supposedly a positive good, have resulted from more-or-less violent compressions entailing destruction and death. The implication is that in "normal" times, societies are characterized by inequality even though it is not perceived as a positive good.

Scheidel groups the causes of compressions into four categories which he identifies as four horsemen: "mass mobilization warfare, transformative revolution, state failure, and lethal pandemics" (p. 6). He analyzes the causes, the course, and consequences of selected compressions having occurred throughout the world relatively recently and as far back as the Stone Age in an effort to determine the degree to which inequality in given societies and in segments of societies was reduced, how much destruction and suffering came about owing to reductions in inequality, and how long before socio/economic differentiation — inequality — re-emerged and by what means.

Scheidel is conscious of data limitations that complicate the formulation of correct generalizations and conclusions regarding events, particularly those occurring prior to the mid-nineteenth century, but exploits every bit of evidence that he can find including, in the case of prehistoric periods and non-literate societies, the relative level of decoration of individual tombs, house sizes, and the sizes of human remains to determine diet and food availability as measures of wealth and inequality. He explains that if he stresses Europe it is because its societies have produced the most comprehensive source materials. In his "Introduction: The Challenges of Inequality," he cautions his readers that "global history is simply impossible unless [one is] prepared to stretch. This book is an attempt to do just that." (p. 17). In short, Scheidel has added a deep historical and pre-historical perspective to the work on inequality of Thomas Piketty and others.

In order to measure and quantify inequality versus equality, Scheidel relies on "Gini coefficients and percentage shares of total income or wealth" (p. 11) of given societies and polities. He stresses "distribution of material resources *within* societies" rather than "inequality *between* countries" (p.10).

He states that he is “primarily interested in answering the question of why inequality fell, in identifying the mechanisms of leveling.” His barely stated paradox is that equality, the greater good, at least by today’s standards, has all too frequently been paid for by extreme suffering, destruction, and death. These parameters established, Professor Scheidel leads his reader on a tour of inequality throughout World History that he has illustrated and quantified by 46 figures and 8 tables, the whole backed by a comprehensive bibliography numbering 978 entries.

Part I of the text, “A Brief History of Inequality.” is organized more or less chronologically. Parts II-V, that reflect the categorizations of Scheidel’s Four Horsemen are presented topically. The same is true for Part VI on “Alternatives” (to the Four Horsemen) including a few counterfactual suggestions as to how equality might have been or could be achieved peacefully, as well as for Part VII, “Inequality Redux and the Future of Leveling.” Scheidel concludes his book with a short Appendix, an analytical essay on “The Limits of Inequality” that, among other things, suggests that in terms of disposable income, the USA is “at least twice as unequal” as Sweden (p. 456).

Part I, “A Brief History of Inequality,” begins by explaining how food gathering societies, initially very egalitarian, became hierarchical and unequal as the development of settled agriculture that generated surpluses, particularly of grain, led to the elaboration of conceptions of exclusively owned property, of hierarchy, and eventually, of despotic and conquering leadership. “All the basic ingredients for structural inequality... were in place” by 6000-4000 BC (p.40). As examples of “Empires of Inequality,” Scheidel sketches brief portraits of ancient China and Rome, both of them having experienced short periods of equalization in times of crisis or imperial mobilization. Scheidel brings this part of his book to a conclusion with a rapid survey of rising and falling inequality in selected societies of pre-19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, the Ottoman Empire, Tang China, and during the “Long Nineteenth Century” in Europe.

Part II on war, Part III on revolution, and Part V on plague are each structured around one or two major events that had uniquely cataclysmic effects and can serve as templates for evaluating other similar events, many of them far back in history. Part IV on societal collapse does not have a specific template. World Wars I and II, often referred to as the Second Thirty Years War, and their aftereffects serve as the template for “War;” the communist revolutions in Russia and China, uniquely cataclysmic events, serve as the template for “Revolution” and “Models of Violent Leveling” (p. 17). The Black Death, 1320-1353, with periodic reoccurrences over the next century situated at the transition from the late Medieval Period in Europe to the early Modern Period serves as the template for “Plague.”

World Wars I and II led to uniquely large-scale physical destruction of resources of all kinds, loss of life, and direct and indirect costs of war mobilization and production, taxation, and caps on personal income and corporate profits. Many of the economic and social measures taken survived the Second World War and became the renewed foundations of welfare states. The losers, particularly Japan, were subjected to greater leveling by the US occupation authorities.

The Russian and Chinese communist revolutions gave rise to the unprecedented liquidation of whole segments of populations, to massive social restructuring, and to the governmental seizure of the Russian (Soviet) and Chinese economies thus drastically reducing inequality at an enormous human cost. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reforms in China following the death of Mao Zedong, inequality returned making both societies very unequal. None of the other revolutions surveyed had similar compressive effects in terms of intensity or duration.

As for societal collapse, the only contemporary example that Scheidel cites is that of Somalia; however, he suggests that at its worst, despite the anarchy that reigned in this country, the situation of the average Somalian was better in collapse than under the predatory dictatorship of Mohamed Siad Barre. Scheidel provides no clear template for “Collapse”; however, looking back to the collapse of polities further back in history including the Tang Dynasty in China, the Western Roman Empire, classical Mayan civilization and others, he acknowledges that although elites suffered the most from compressions, equality in the surviving segments of societies probably increased.

The template for Part V, Plague, is the catastrophic outbreak of the Black Death (Bubonic Plague) in the late Medieval/Early Modern period that wiped out a third to a half of the European population of the time. It perforce reduced inequality among the survivors and led to increased earnings for some. The Black Death had enormous leveling effects throughout Europe, parts of the Near East, and North Africa, but eventually recovery began and inequality made a comeback. The 1918-1921 worldwide flu pandemic did not have such a catastrophic effect even though it killed 50 to 100 million people (p. 441), a vastly smaller proportion of total populations than in the case of the Black Death of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century.

In Parts VI and VII, Scheidel considers ways that equality could be promoted and obtained without recourse to the four horsemen. These ways include economic development and increased education. He concludes that in both cases elites would profit the most. Thus inequality would increase. He proposes certain futurist solutions that smack of science fiction.

Scheidel’s organization of much of his book around the Four Horsemen is clever; however, his categorizations of his horsemen deviate somewhat from the categorizations of the Four Horsemen of *Revelation*.

The latter are more all-encompassing than Scheidel's. In particular, the Fourth Horseman of *Revelation* personifies death that to a great extent characterizes them all.

Scheidel suggests that by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century his four horsemen had dismounted, probably never to ride again, at least not as destructively as in the past. But the world is left with inequality that will probably continue to rise. It is reaching very high levels in the United States. Is there some humane and non-destructive way to curb inequality? Perhaps the only answer to this question is suggested by a passage in the New Testament, St. Mark 4:25: "For he that hath, to him shall be given; and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath."