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# Learning to be fair: Lessons from the deep past

While Thomas Piketty's bestseller fuelled a major rethink on economics and inequality, creating change is tough – and may depend on reimagining hunter-gatherer societies



Personal reflection:

Inequality as a source of diversity

=> a source of richness and/or at least robustness

Not barely managing: the smallest setback can push you over the edge  
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SLACK-JAWED publishers watched in amazement as *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* by Thomas Piketty sold 2.2 million copies in the two years after its publication in 2014. Unknown outside a small circle of scholars studying old tax returns, Piketty found himself feted by top policy-makers and excited students alike, while pundits claimed a turning point.

The Piketty effect is spawning a shoal of books, all aiming to recast global economics or avert more inequality. These books are complemented by research in social, cognitive and biological sciences, documenting poverty's cost to people and communities.

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Now the instigator of this flurry of activity, Harvard University Press, has entered the fray again. *After Piketty* collects papers by 24 commentators, ranging from those sympathetic to Piketty to the more critical. Piketty himself writes the final chapter.

All the contributors agree that his ideas can be boiled down to two fundamental assertions. First, his tax data confirmed earlier findings that income inequality fell after the world wars, and is now rising alarmingly. Second, and more controversially, he detected an underlying signal in the data: inequality rises as the share of national income derived from capital investment increases and the share going to wages falls.

Behind this signal lies something deeper, Piketty argues: a steadily falling rate of economic growth. Investors demand a fixed rate of return even when growth stutters, and workers pay the price. On current trends, we may soon be rerunning the grim inequities of the late 19th century.

His reviewers detect a central contradiction, however. While Piketty seems at times to argue that a trend to rising inequality is an inevitable economic "law" of peacetime, he advocates policy solutions – in particular, a tax on capital. Nor does he address the causes of lagging growth, which if reversed would

undermine his predictions.

## **“Scheidel believes in four horsemen of equalisation: war, disease, revolution and state collapse”**

So what do the contributors think? Some question whether Piketty counted the right things, others suggest his assumptions don't tally with other data. For example, shouldn't slaves be included on the capital side? Are companies incapable of raising productivity? Still others propose different factors driving inequality – the rise of corporate lobbyists, outsourcing, the use of tax havens, racial and gender inequalities, and the global drive for cheap labour. While lack of debate about production is a weakness, the authors unite in rejecting the idea of a natural law of inequality.



**Is modern inequality fuelled by the global drive for cheap labour?**

Alex Webb / Magnum Photos

A more troubling strand of post-Pikettyism comes in the shape of *The Great Leveler*, which extends the study of inequality back 10,000 years. Historian Walter Scheidel argues that historical efforts to reduce inequality have mostly failed or been reversed. In fact, nearly all periods of peace seem to widen inequality. The only serious historical forces closing the income gap are war, disease, revolution and state collapse: his four horsemen of equalisation.

Scheidel's excellent survey has the merit of drawing evidence from the smallest scrap – height in burial sites, records of wages or rations, differences in house sizes over time, for example.

The causal links are revealing. For example, it was the Black Death, and subsequent labour shortage, that allowed the rise in pay that followed. As populations recovered, wages fell again. More usually, income gaps close from the top down. After war, assets held by the rich become worthless as workshops, homes and roads to market are destroyed. Revolution and civil war are even more poisonous. Worse still, most revolts fail, and mass uprisings reap only merciless revenge. Something unique must happen, says Scheidel, if we are to reduce inequality by peaceful means.

But one of the problems with just looking at income or markers for income is the loss of social context. This means it is probably a mistake to draw sweeping conclusions about the failure of popular struggles in the past. For the participants, gains in legal and social rights were often more important than pay rises. Struggles against slavery, or for religious freedom or workplace organisation, come to mind.

That income data alone can give only the barest glimpse of the lived experience of inequality is clear from sociologist Thomas Shapiro's *Toxic Inequality*. He defines this as the especially harmful intersection of income and racial inequality in the US. For over a decade, he and colleagues at Brandeis University in Massachusetts, and elsewhere across the US, gathered personal stories about inequality from 200 families from different ethnic and income backgrounds in selected US cities. One child in the research group was murdered during the study period, by a stray bullet in a run-down area. Others inherited wealth, bought big houses in safe areas and sent their children to

private schools.

The figures and interviews show black and Hispanic families fare worse both financially and in their life histories. Nevertheless, poor families emerge heroically. Often they are penniless because they have helped relatives, lack work benefits despite their long hours, or have become entangled in a web of arcane welfare legislation.

The most dangerous trap is the lack of anything put by for a rainy day. An emergency can plunge a family into long-term debt for want of a few hundred dollars. Inequalities are real, life-changing, stressful and often sudden in impact. *Toxic Inequality* reads like a dispatch from the front lines: Shapiro insists on exposing inequality's intimate miseries, but he also identifies the most urgent policy changes.

Here we see a glimmer of light: social vigilance is the one proven curb on unfairness. Curiously, Scheidel also recognises the role of social vigilance in a brief reference to hunter-gatherers. Inequalities in forager societies, especially over food supply, are resisted by what anthropologists often call a "fierce egalitarianism". Scheidel himself talks of "active equalisation", "distinctive moral economy", and the rejection of dominance that keeps inequality at bay. He cites the influential anthropologist Christopher Boehm, author of *Moral Origins*, to acknowledge the universality of these beliefs among foragers.

It is puzzling why he doesn't return to this, and temper his conclusions. He recognises that the failure to share is taboo for hunter-gatherers, and that it is countered by pestering, gossip, ridicule and ostracism.

Research elsewhere shows concessions apply for the sick, young and elderly. Personal autonomy and experience are also generally highly respected, and typically, foragers all have equal rights to make group proposals, and aren't coerced into collective decisions as long as others aren't disadvantaged.



**“For hunter-gatherers,  
failure to share is taboo,  
countered by pestering,  
gossip, ridicule, ostracism”**

This social order only collapses under extreme resource shortage. It is possible this powerful moral outlook has been a central feature of human prehistory. There is little in the archaeological record to suggest social hierarchies in everyday life over the hundreds of thousands of years preceding the first attempts at agriculture.

An even deeper trend, where canine teeth get smaller and body sizes more equal between the sexes, points to a human social order that steadily turned its back on the dominance likely with our ape ancestors.

There is little dispute in any of these books that humans ever had much truck with unfairness. So might the struggle for human rights, combined with modern communications and technology, open a peaceful route beyond Scheidel's horsemen?

We already have a globalisation of gossip and ridicule of elites. But if a forager world outlook is any guide, then improving production and sharing more equally needs a society with more participation in decision-making. Is this a new direction for post-Pikettyism?

***After Piketty: The agenda for economics and inequality***

Heather Boushey, J. Bradford DeLong and Marshall Steinbaum

Harvard University Press

***The Great Leveler: Violence and the history of inequality from the Stone Age to the twenty-first century***

Walter Scheidel

Princeton University Press

***Toxic Inequality: How America's wealth gap destroys mobility, deepens the racial divide, and threatens our future***

Thomas Shapiro

Basic Books

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