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The Political Origins of Inequality: Why a More Equal World Is Better for Us All

By Simon Reid-Henry



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The Political Origins of Inequality: Why a More Equal World Is Better for Us All By Simon Reid-Henry

Inequality is the defining issue of our time. But it is not just a problem for the rich world. It is the global 1% that now owns fully half the world's wealth—the true measure of our age of inequality. In this historical tour de force, Simon Reid-Henry rewrites the usual story of globalization and development as a story of the management of inequality. Reaching back to the eighteenth century and around the globe, *The Political Origins of Inequality* foregrounds the political turning points and decisions behind the making of today's uneven societies. As it weaves together insights from the Victorian city to the Cold War, from US economic policy to Europe's present migration crisis, a true picture emerges of the structure of inequality itself.

The problem of inequality, Reid-Henry argues, is a problem that manifests between places as well as over time. This is one reason why it cannot be resolved by the usual arguments of left versus right, bound as they are to the national scale alone. Most of all, however, it is why the level of inequality that confronts us today is indicative of a more general crisis in political thought. Modern political discourse has no place for public reason or the common good. Equality is yesterday's dream. Yet the fact that we now accept such a world—a world that values security over freedom, special treatment over universal opportunity, and efficiency over fairness—is ultimately because we have stopped even trying in recent decades to build the political architecture the world actually requires.

Our politics has fallen out of step with the world, then, and at the every moment it is needed more than ever. Yet it is within our power to address this. Doing so involves identifying and then meeting our political responsibilities to others, not just offering them the selective charity of the rich. It means looking beyond issues of economics and outside our national borders. But above all it demands of us that we reinvent the language of equality for a modern, global world: and then institute this. The world is not falling apart. Different worlds, we all can see, are colliding together. It is our capacity to act in concert that is falling apart. It is this that needs restoring most of all.



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- Sales Rank: #531587 in Books
- Published on: 2015-12-23
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 1.00" w x 6.00" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 208 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

"The Political Origins of Inequality makes the bold claim that popular thinking on global development is profoundly and fundamentally flawed because many of the economists who have written many of the best sellers have often been shortsighted. This is an important book about big issues, dismissive of facile solutions, it should change the terms of the debate on why the gaps between us are so wide and what we could do about them."

(Danny Dorling, author of *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Still Persists*)

"An important reminder that the historical origins of today's crushing burden of global and national inequality are political, and so too must be the solutions."

(Duncan Green, head of research, Oxfam GB)

"Reid-Henry has mapped the terrain of our current political landscape with frightening accuracy. From this cartography, he points the way forward: we need a politics that prioritises social prosperity over economic growth. We need to reinvent the social democratic project 'at home and abroad'—including a global institutional system to mediate effectively between existing public and international law. We must do the hard work of 'joining up the dots...of a far too patchy, far too easily manipulated institutional framework that governs the lives of the rich and poor around the world but does not govern them alike.'"

(*Times Higher Education, Book of the Week* 2016-04-25)

"Back around the time of World War I, observes Reid-Henry, the richest 20 percent of the world's population earned 11 times the income of the poorest 20 percent. Some four score years later, the world's most affluent fifth was grabbing 74 times as much. This exploding divide . . . didn't have to happen. Political decisions, not natural disasters or economic iron laws, are driving inequality ever wider, and Reid-Henry guides us through these decisions with grace and grit."

(*Too Much* 2016-04-25)

About the Author

Simon Reid-Henry is associate professor in the Department of Geography at Queen Mary University of London and a senior researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo. He is the author of *The Cuban Cure: Reason and Resistance in Global Science*, also published by the University of Chicago Press.

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