



# Upward classism: Prejudice and stereotyping against the wealthy

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## Abstract

While there are many studies of prejudice towards disadvantaged minorities, there has been little research into stereotypes of rich people. The author commissioned the first international comparative study to investigate popular attitudes towards rich people. He analyses findings from the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and France, and calculates a ‘Social Envy Coefficient’ for these four countries. Envy appears most pronounced in France, followed by Germany. By contrast, envy is significantly lower in the United States and Great Britain, although there are interesting variations by age. In addition, the study subjects a sample of popular international feature films and articles in German newspapers to detailed media content analysis. This analysis finds that rich individuals are predominantly portrayed as cold-hearted, profit-hungry and morally suspect.

## KEYWORDS

prejudice, social envy, the rich

## JEL CLASSIFICATION

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In many countries the rich are increasingly being singled out as the enemy. And what was already an ongoing trend has been further exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, as demonstrated by widespread conspiracy theories blaming the super-rich, including Bill Gates and the Rothschilds, for the Covid-19 catastrophe (Zitelmann, 2020b).

One comment piece in the British tabloid, the *Sun*, ran under the headline: ‘The arrogant super-rich have no right to spend their way out of the coronavirus crisis – we’re all in this together.’ In the article (McKinstry, 2020), the paper went on:

*As the coronavirus pandemic sweeps across the world, some celebrities, millionaires, and members of the business class seem to believe that their wealth can be used as a form of vaccination while the rest of us face the deadly risk of infection.*

The tabloid went on to recall World War II, during which anger was also directed against the rich:

*During the Second World War, when the Blitz spirit was at its peak, there was fierce hostility to rich individuals who tried to cheat on rationing regulations or avoid national service. The same contempt should now be shown to those who try to dodge the rules that promote fairness.*

Another British newspaper, the *Guardian*, made the following observations:

*The world’s richest people are chartering private jets to set off for holiday homes or specially prepared bunkers in countries that, so far, appear to have avoided the worst of the Covid-19 outbreak. Many are understood to be taking personal doctors or nurses on their flights to treat them and their families in the event that they become infected. (Neate, 2020)*

Mirroring the typical pattern by which prejudices against other minorities emerge, isolated examples of misconduct are singled out and extrapolated to create a generalised stereotype of the behaviour of ‘the rich’.

Verbal attacks on the rich also played an important role in the Democratic Party’s primary elections in 2020 in the United States. Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and others competed to outdo one another with their ‘rich-bashing’ rhetoric. Even Michael Bloomberg, himself one of the richest men in the world, was forced to call for higher taxes on the rich. In Britain, leading left-wing politicians such as Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell identified the rich as the enemy, while in Germany the new leadership of the Social Democrats under Norbert Walter-Borjans and Saskia Esken also stoked up hostile feelings towards what have been branded the ‘one per cent’.

In intellectual circles, the French economist Thomas Piketty attracted enthusiastic backing for his calls for a substantial global wealth tax on the super-rich. Apparently, the super-rich – like other minorities – make suitable scapegoats for a host of negative developments in society.

## 2 | CLASSISM, ENVY, AND THE RICH

But so far there has been hardly any research into prejudices against the rich. And yet studies have shown that prejudices and stereotypes based on social class are more pronounced than those based on ethnicity and/or gender (Spencer & Castano, 2007, p. 421). There has been less research into class-based stereotyping than into stereotyping based on gender, ethnicity, or



other characteristics, and what research has been carried out has overwhelmingly focused on attitudes about the lower class. One reason for this is that most scholars belong to the middle class and have therefore perhaps perpetuated such prejudices unconsciously themselves.

A majority of 'classism' researchers have a narrow perspective, focusing predominantly on 'downward classism', that is, on prejudices related to the working class and the poor, whereas 'upward classism', or prejudices concerning the rich, has been almost completely neglected. The works of many classism researchers are also characterised by ideologically driven advocacy for the poor and the working class, combined with considerable resentment directed at the rich and at the capitalist system as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Explicitly or implicitly, these researchers assume that poor people bear no responsibility for their poverty and the rich have not earned their wealth. To these researchers, media reports about the personal failures of poor people – or the deserved success of rich people – are an expression of classism. From their point of view, people in capitalist societies are never actually responsible for their own fate; rather, they are either the innocent victims (the poor and the working class) or the undeserving profiteers (the rich).

One of the most fruitful approaches in prejudice research is the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), which postulates that emotional impressions of other social groups (i.e. out-groups) form along two dimensions. The first dimension is warmth: strangers or out-groups can be stereotyped as warm and friendly or as cold and unfriendly. The second dimension is competence.

There are four potential combinations for perceiving out-groups:

1. warm and competent;
2. warm and incompetent;
3. cold and competent;
4. cold and incompetent.

In all interpersonal and intergroup encounters, we are predisposed first to assess a stranger's or out-group's intentions to either harm us or help us. What goals are these groups or individuals pursuing? Is the stranger or the out-group friendly or unfriendly towards our in-group? This is the dimension of warmth. The second assessment is of competence: to what extent is the stranger or out-group capable of acting on their perceived (good or bad) intentions? Negative perceptions and prejudices towards out-groups are essentially based on two different assessments: either the out-group is seen as lacking competence, such as we find in negative stereotypes about housewives, disabled people, or senior citizens, or the out-group is seen as lacking warmth, such as we find in negative stereotypes about Asians, Jewish people, or female professionals (Fiske et al., 2002, p. 895).

In several studies, individuals have been asked to score social out-groups on a scale of 1 to 5 for the dimensions of warmth and competence. The highest levels of competence are attributed to rich people, who are also rated low in warmth. High-competence and low-warmth groups, including rich people, Jews, and Asians, are met with mixed feelings of admiration and envy. When out-groups are regarded as highly competent, this view can heighten negative feelings and attitudes against them (Fiske et al., 2002, p. 899).

Research conducted using the stereotype content model shows that rich people and businesspeople are dehumanised, likened to cold automata and robots (Harris, Cikara, & Fiske, 2008, p. 137) and envied. Under stable social conditions, the threats faced by envied groups and the damage for society as a whole are limited compared with the risks faced in unstable situations. However, history demonstrates repeatedly that at times of social unrest,

envied groups come under sustained, dangerous, and sometimes deadly attack. A vicious circle results: the more suffering is inflicted on envied groups, the more envious people gloat (Harris et al., 2008, p.143). The specific form of 'mechanistic dehumanisation'<sup>2</sup> – which construes groups such as the rich as unemotional and heartless and hence associates them with cold, soulless machines – is a prerequisite for persecuting or even killing members of such groups, especially in exceptional situations such as crises or wars. Although these automata may be rational and competent, they lack human values and emotions, which means they are unworthy of pity.

Social comparison research has demonstrated that we constantly compare ourselves with other people, consciously or unconsciously, in order to obtain indispensable data for self-evaluation.<sup>3</sup> By the same token, when we evaluate ourselves, we also compare ourselves with other people. This comparison happens automatically. Envy is aroused when person A compares himself or herself with person B, and person B has qualities, possessions, or status that person A would like to have but currently lacks. The fact that people are often unaware that they are making these comparisons is one of the reasons why envy is so often unconscious.

People have different strategies for dealing with envy: they can seek to reduce the gap between themselves and the person they envy. If they are unsuccessful, they may emphasise their advantages in traits or characteristics that are unrelated to the domain they are comparing themselves in. For example, the envier could say, "I might not be as rich as X, but I'm better educated, or a nicer person". Enviars can also downplay the importance of the domains in which they are inferior and emphasise the domains in which they compare favourably (Alicke & Zell, 2008, p. 87).

When social groups perceive other groups as economically more successful, their members can develop compensation strategies to maintain their self-esteem. It is only natural that members of higher social strata can more easily accept the criteria for societal rankings – for example, economic success or education – because they themselves are at the top of the hierarchy. Members of higher social classes have a greater tendency to differentiate themselves from other groups on socioeconomic and cultural grounds, whereas members of lower social classes have a greater tendency to rely on moral criteria. This emphasis on moral criteria serves as an alternative yardstick for workers and the lower-middle classes, allowing them to place themselves above those who are superior to them in the socioeconomic and cultural dimensions (Sachweh, 2009, pp. 165–6).

In order to maintain self-esteem, it is not enough for some individuals to point out that they also have something to offer, or to highlight those aspects in which they think they are doing particularly well. This strategy can only work when other social groups – in this case, the upper class – are accused of having corresponding failings or deficiencies in the aspects that the individual has declared relevant. The 'non-rich' pursue a number of compensation strategies, calling into question whether economic success is a key factor in determining people's levels of contentment and satisfaction and prioritising other values, such as interpersonal relationships, morality, and family life.<sup>4</sup> But that is not all. In striving to feel superior to the rich, people generally need to believe that they are just as good (or perhaps even better) in all of the areas they deem relevant. The stereotypes that the rich are cold, have unrewarding family lives and generally unsatisfactory interpersonal relationships, and are selfish and have poor morals serve to promote one's own sense of superiority and to compensate for feelings of inferiority.

The common feature of the domains in which members of 'socially disadvantaged' classes claim to be superior to the rich is that they are largely based on subjective interpretation. Using objective measures, it is easy to demonstrate who has more money or is better educated. The same cannot be said for who has the most fulfilling interpersonal relationships or the most



satisfying family life. Such determinations rely far more on subjective interpretation of, for example, the quality of someone's marriage, which is almost impossible for an outsider to judge.

When out-groups – such as the rich – are credited with intelligence, diligence, or other high competence traits but not with moral traits, this has far-reaching consequences. We know from the field of perception research that people base their assessments of other people and social groups on moral traits, whereas competence traits play a distinctly secondary role. Researchers have demonstrated that morality and competence are the two key factors in determining our perceptions of out-groups: some three-quarters of our perceptions are determined by these two components (Wojciszke, Bazińska, & Jaworski, 1998, p. 1251). If people tend to judge the rich as competent but morally questionable, then the moral judgment has much higher weight, and the attribution of competence leads not to a more balanced overall assessment but to an overall negative assessment.

The socio-psychological concept of the 'hidden injuries of class', as first developed by Sennett and Cobb (1972), has been confirmed, but could possibly be taken further. The authors' attention was focused on deficits in the self-esteem of economically less successful blue-collar workers in a society that measures value in terms of individual achievement and financial success. But what about members of the educated middle class, against whom – as has been shown – the prejudices of workers are partially directed? What effect does it have on *their* self-esteem if, despite their higher education, they are all too often the economic losers in a capitalist system in which a less educated entrepreneur can become far richer than someone with a higher level of education? Put yourself in the shoes of someone who has been told time and again that higher education is the key to success – and has then been frustrated as other people climb higher and higher up the economic ladder despite their lack of education. Wouldn't this frustration likely lead to feelings of inferiority and resentment against economically more successful people, just like the 'hidden injuries' of the working class as they compare themselves with the middle and upper classes?<sup>5</sup>

Envy research has shown that enviers rarely admit their envy. "Nowadays we are generally reticent and inhibited when it comes to the imputation of envious motives", observed the sociologist Helmut Schoeck (1966, p. 29). Envy is the most commonly denied, repressed, and masked of all emotions. Anyone who admits to themselves and others that they are envious is also admitting that they feel inferior. This is precisely why it is so difficult to acknowledge and accept one's own envy.

Envy arises when you admit to yourself that another person has something that you want. This automatically leads to the questions: Why don't I have what they have? Why have they succeeded in achieving what I have not been able to achieve myself? This is a key factor in understanding why people so strongly deny their own feelings of envy and explains why most people are unwilling to admit that they are enviers.<sup>6</sup> One reason for concealing their envy is that when someone publicly admits to being motivated by envy, any action they take to remove the cause of their envy would be deemed socially illegitimate. When envy become recognisable as such, or is openly communicated, then the envious person automatically disqualifies the intention of satisfying it or eliminating it.

In a culture of inequality, envy and resentment are kept in check because they relate exclusively to the social differences within an in-group.

*In a culture of equality, however, where everything is apparently promised to everyone (as an ideal), but certain career and life paths are only open to a few (as a*

*reality), the scope for envy, malevolence and resentment is opened wide. Unlimited equality as an (empty) promise liberates poisonous feelings. (Müller, 2004, p. 889)*

It is therefore an illusion to believe that more 'social justice' will reduce or even eliminate envy.

This leads to a particular problem. Research has highlighted the link between envy and the belief that life is a zero-sum game, in which the advantage of one inevitably means the disadvantage of the other. A zero-sum game is a game in which the payoffs to the players sum to zero. One player's gain is automatically another's loss. Non-zero-sum games, in contrast, are games in which the sum of payoffs to the players is not constant. In such games, both parties can win or lose, or one party can win without the other losing, and so on. Psychologists have demonstrated that people can believe they are playing a zero-sum game even if that belief is objectively incorrect.

It is obvious that zero-sum beliefs are a crucial basis for envy and resentment against rich people. Logically, if someone believes that any increase in the wealth of the rich is automatically linked to losses for the non-rich, they will perceive the fight against poverty as synonymous with the fight against the rich or in favour of redistribution. When the rich are vilified as the cause of poverty, they fulfil a scapegoat function, especially at times of social crisis. 'Scapegoating' is the term used to describe a strategy by which members of out-groups are held responsible for the problems faced by an in-group. As demonstrated throughout history, when people are unable to explain negative events, they tend to blame specific out-groups for their problems.

Gordon Allport emphasised the importance of scapegoating in his seminal work *The Nature of Prejudice*. Allport (1979, p. 343) believed that scapegoating was the most common explanation for the most extreme forms of prejudice. Allport's scapegoat theory rests exclusively on his 'frustration-aggression' hypothesis. Frustrations arising from the fact that many people in a competitive society are not as successful as they or others expect are particularly important. Allport argues that this dissatisfaction could lead to frustration, which could then be displaced on to out-groups, such as immigrants, for example.

Many arguments have been put forward to counter Allport's scapegoat theory. For example, it has been argued that Allport's theory never satisfactorily explained why specific out-groups were selected as scapegoats, and that – contrary to Allport's original claims – scapegoats did not necessarily have to be defenceless minorities but could also be powerful out-groups. When simple explanations prove inadequate, people try to explain complex events by blaming specific out-groups. Glick (2005) argues that only groups perceived as having the power and intent to cause negative events will be scapegoated. However, these groups are *not* defenceless minorities. Typically, this is the root of conspiracy theories, in which the scapegoated groups are portrayed as omnipotent.

### 3 | THE EMPIRICAL STUDY: A SURVEY OF FOUR COUNTRIES

Although there is some discussion in the literature of stereotypes and prejudices relating to the rich, this research largely lacks any empirical underpinning. Although pollsters (especially in the United States) have occasionally conducted surveys to determine the population's attitudes towards rich people, there have been no international comparative studies. So the author commissioned the first international comparative survey on popular attitudes towards rich



people. The main findings are discussed here; a fuller account appears in the author's *The Rich in Public Opinion* (Zitelmann, 2020a, chs 10–14).

In May and June 2018, the Allensbach Institute and Ipsos MORI conducted representative surveys with identical questions in the United States, Great Britain, Germany and France. In each of these countries, interviews were conducted with a representative sample of at least 1,000 people. In Germany, France and Great Britain, the survey took the form of face-to-face interviews and in the United States it was carried out online.

As social envy cannot be measured via direct questions ('How envious are you?'), the survey's participants were presented with three statements, which were designed to serve as indicators of social envy:

1. I think it would be fair to increase taxes substantially for millionaires, even if I would not benefit from it personally.
2. I would favour drastically reducing [high-earning] managers salaries and redistributing the money more evenly amongst their employees, even if that would mean that they would only get a few more pounds (dollars/euros) per month.
3. When I hear about a millionaire who made a risky business decision and lost a lot of money because of it, I think it serves him right.

Responses are shown in Table 1.

For the purpose of this study, interviewees who did not agree with any of these three statements were classified as 'non-enviers', and those agreeing with one of the statements were classified as 'ambivalents'. The term 'envier' refers to interviewees who agreed with two or three of the statements, a subgroup that also encompasses 'hardcore enviers', who agreed with all three statements. As Figure 1 shows, in Germany 33 per cent of respondents are social enviers, in France 34 per cent, in the United States 20 per cent, and in Great Britain 18 per cent. Of course, there will also be social enviers among the group of 'non-enviers', just as there will be non-enviers in the 'social envier' group. But it is far more likely that a respondent who disagreed with all three statements is a non-envier than someone who agreed with all three statements. And, as the same questions were asked in all four countries, there is a solid basis for comparison.

The comparisons are based on the Social Envy Coefficient (SEC) developed for this study, which indicates the ratio of enviers to non-enviers in any given country. A value of 1 would mean that the number of social enviers and non-enviers is equal. Where the value is less than 1, this indicates that there are more non-enviers; conversely, where the value is greater than 1, there are more social enviers. The SEC is determined by comparing social enviers (= agreed with 2 or 3 statements) with non-enviers (= agreed with no statements). As Figure 2 shows, social envy is highest in France (1.26), followed by Germany (0.97). It is significantly lower in the United States (0.42) and Great Britain (0.37).

The precision of these categories is demonstrated by the clear differences between social enviers and non-enviers in their positions on dozens of other statements. When social enviers were asked about the personality traits they associated with rich people, they highlighted self-centredness, ruthlessness, materialism, arrogance, greed, cold-heartedness and superficiality. Only two of the 25 personality traits most frequently mentioned by social enviers are positive, while 23 are negative. In contrast, non-enviers most frequently described rich people as industrious, intelligent, bold, materialist, imaginative and visionary.

**TABLE 1** Attitudes to the rich

*I think it would be fair to increase taxes substantially for millionaires, even if I would not benefit from it personally.*

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Difference (% points)
Germany	65	23	42
United States	47	28	19
France	63	20	41
Great Britain	50	22	28

*I would favor drastically reducing managers' salaries and redistributing the money more evenly among their employees, even if that would mean that [the employees] would get only a few more dollars per month.*

	Agree (%)
Germany	46
United States	31
France	54
Great Britain	29

*When I hear about a millionaire who made a risky business decision and lost a lot of money because of it, I think it serves him right.*

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Difference (% points)
Germany	40	37	+ 3 approval
United States	28	29	+ 1 rejection
France	33	41	+ 8 rejection
Great Britain	22	38	+ 16 rejection

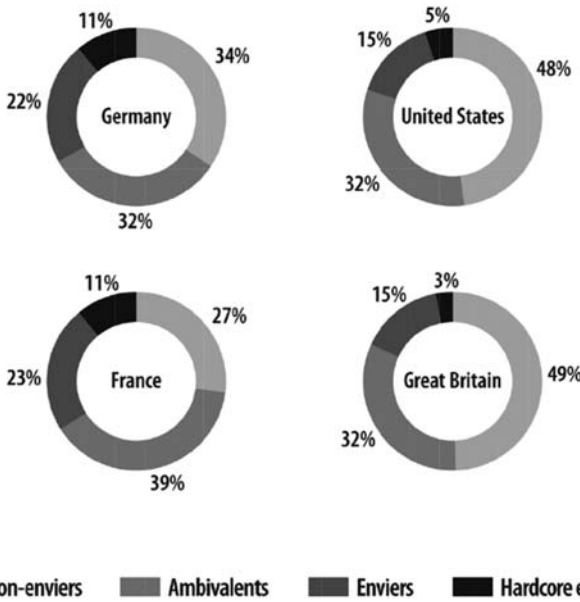
Sources: Allensbach Institute survey 11085; Ipsos MORI J18-031911-01-02. See Zitelmann (2020a, pp. 260-1).

One of the survey's questions was designed to find out how susceptible people in the four countries are to scapegoating. The interviewees were presented with the following statement: 'Those who are very rich and want more and more power are to blame for many of the major problems in the world, such as financial or humanitarian issues.' In Germany, 50 per cent of interviewees agreed with this statement, which was roughly twice as many as in Great Britain and the United States (21 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively). This suggests that it would be easier to exploit pre-existing hostility towards rich people in Germany at times of severe economic upheaval, and that German politicians would be more likely to target rich people than would be the case in Great Britain or the United States. In France, 33 per cent of interviewees agreed with the same statement.

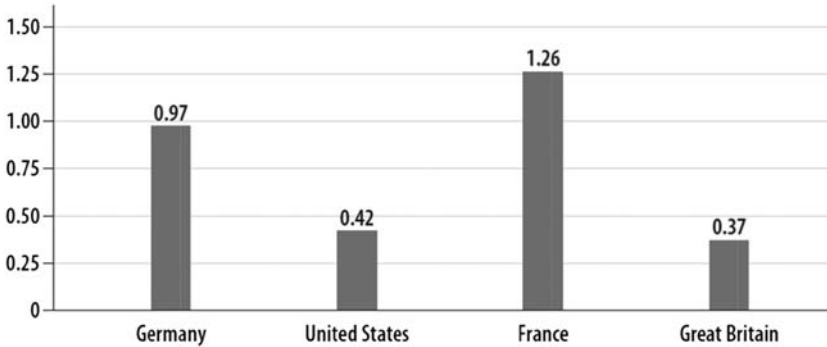
Social envious are extremely susceptible to scapegoating, which just goes to prove how well the Social Envy Coefficient distinguishes between envious and non-envious. As Figure 3 shows, in Germany, 62 per cent of envious tended to scapegoat other groups, compared with just 36 per cent of non-envious. In the United States, France and Great Britain, responses to the scapegoating statement confirmed an even larger gap between social envious (57, 46, and 44 per cent) and non-envious (12, 17, and 10 per cent).

Those who subscribe to scapegoating are also more inclined to zero-sum beliefs. When asked to respond to the following statement, 'The more the rich have, the less there is for the





**FIGURE 1** Breakdown of interviewees by position on the Social Envy Scale  
 Note: All data in percentage of respondents. Percentages do not add up to 100 in all cases because of rounding.  
 Sources: Allensbach Institute survey 11085; Ipsos MORI J18-031911-01-02. See Zitelmann (2020a, p. 262).

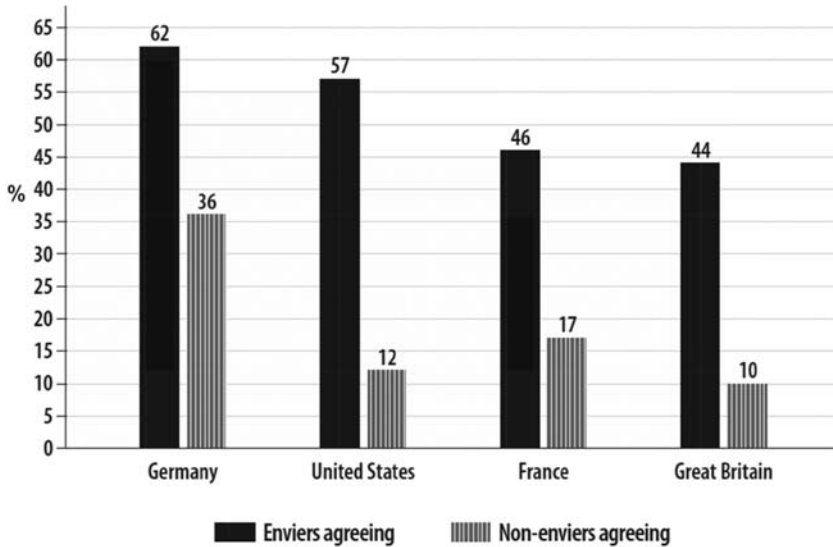


**FIGURE 2** Social Envy Coefficients  
 Note: A coefficient greater than 1.0 indicates that enviers (levels 2 or 3 on the Social Envy Scale) outnumber non-enviers (level 0 on the Social Envy Scale). A coefficient of less than 1.0 indicates that non-enviers outnumber enviers.  
 Sources: Allensbach Institute survey 11085; Ipsos MORI J18-031911-01-02. See Zitelmann (2020a, p. 263).

poor', a majority of scapegoaters in all four countries agreed, namely in Germany (60 per cent), France (69 per cent), Great Britain (57 per cent) and the United States (65 per cent) – compared with just 35, 41, 30, and 24 per cent of those who were not susceptible to scapegoating.

Another key finding of this study is that younger Americans are much more sceptical of the rich than older Americans – whereas in European countries, the opposite is true. These generational differences were revealed by many of the survey's questions, including one that asked whether rich people are regarded as role models. In Germany, as in France, this question elicited a far more positive response from younger people than from older people, whereas in the United States it was the other way around. The fact that younger Americans view the rich far more critically than older Americans is also evident from the personality traits they assign

*Those who are very rich and want more and more power are to blame for many of the major problems in the world, e.g., financial or humanitarian issues.*



**FIGURE 3** Tendency to scapegoat the rich

Note: All data are in percentage of respondents. Percentages do not add up to 100 in all cases because of rounding.

Sources: Allensbach Institute survey 11085; Ipsos MORI J18-031911-01-02. See Zitelmann (2020a, p. 265).

to rich people. Although four of the five personality traits most frequently mentioned by younger Americans in relation to rich people were negative (materialistic, arrogant, greedy, and self-centred), four out of the five traits mentioned by older Americans were positive (industrious, intelligent, imaginative, and bold and daring).

In Great Britain, France and Germany, many more older people than younger people were strongly in favour of drastically cutting back very high manager salaries and redistributing them to employees, even if this would mean that each employee would only get a few extra euros/pounds/dollars per month. The United States is the only country in which younger interviewees were far more likely to embrace this idea than were older interviewees.

A substantial majority of older interviewees in the United States rejected zero-sum thinking, in stark contrast to their younger fellow-Americans, who overwhelmingly favoured it. In Germany, age was not a factor in zero-sum thinking, whereas in France, older interviewees were far more inclined to think in terms of a zero-sum game than were their younger compatriots.

In each of the countries surveyed, a significantly higher proportion of younger people than of older people said that it was important for them personally to be rich or to become rich. The reason is perhaps obvious: at a young age, with a long life ahead of you, you are more likely still to entertain the dream of becoming rich some day. The survey's responses clearly show that this hope diminishes with age. After all, anyone who is not rich by the time they turn 60 should have realised that it is unlikely to happen to them now. Also, in all countries, more men than women said that it was important for them to be rich.

Formal education is also a key factor that influences opinions about the rich. As a rule, less-educated interviewees were more critical of rich people than were better-educated interviewees.



In general, poorer-educated people in all four countries more frequently agreed with the statement that ‘rich people are good at earning money, but are not usually decent people’ than did better-educated interviewees. In France and the United States, the proportion of less-educated interviewees who agreed that the rich are not decent people was greater than the proportion who disagreed. The exact opposite was true of better-educated people in both countries. In Great Britain, better-educated interviewees also rejected the statement that the rich were not decent people far more strongly than did the less educated.

In previous surveys on attitudes towards rich people, the rich have usually been treated as a homogeneous group. In fact, however, the population’s attitudes on rich people vary depending on how those people acquired their wealth. In the four countries, the interviewees were asked, ‘Which, if any, of the following groups of people do you personally believe deserve to be rich?’. In all four countries, entrepreneurs and self-employed people were the highest-ranked groups, followed by creative people (such as musicians and artists), top athletes, and lottery winners. Financial investors, whom Americans and Britons also rank highly, came in second to last in Germany and were also far behind in France.

Can the rich at least improve their image by donating to charity? Rich people who believe they can should note that, in all four countries, they will be accused of self-interest, rather than altruism – for example, of seeking to reduce their tax burdens or improve their reputations.

One of the positive stereotypes of rich people is that they are particularly industrious. Although this view is to some degree confirmed by empirical studies, the fact that rich people are especially industrious does not explain the gap between their incomes and wealth and those of the rest of society. According to the survey, a majority of interviewees in all four countries claimed not to know personally a single millionaire, which means they either based their stereotypes on what they saw in the media or they projected their own experience on to the rich: life teaches average employees that they will earn more if they work harder. Therefore, based on their experience, they believe that the amount of money someone earns – or should earn – depends on how long and hard someone works. People who harbour positive views of rich people may thus assume that their wealth is the product of exceptionally hard work, whereas those who are more critical of rich people – as the survey results demonstrate – far less frequently described the rich as being especially industrious and criticised the imbalance between the actual hours they work and their incomes.

Respondents’ attitudes towards rich people were strongly influenced by their assumptions regarding the key factors determining an individual’s income. This effect can be seen in the opinions expressed by the interviewees about managers’ salaries. The level of a manager’s salary is not determined by the number of hours he or she works, but by supply and demand in the market for top-tier managerial talent. However, most people (particularly low earners) didn’t recognise this connection, as our survey data indicate.

In all four countries, respondents were presented with the following two statements about managers who earn at least 100 times more than the average employee: Statement A: ‘I think it is inappropriate for managers to earn so much more as they do not work so much longer and harder than their employees.’ Statement B: ‘Companies can only hire and retain the best managers if they pay salaries of this kind, otherwise these managers will go to another company that pays more or they will work for themselves.’ Statement A implies that salaries are ultimately determined, or should be determined, by how hard and long someone works, and that very high salaries – that is, those not in direct proportion to extra effort – are ‘unfair’. Statement B, on the other hand, assumes that supply and demand in the market for top-tier managers is the main

determinant of a manager's salary. Agreement with Statement A prevailed in all four countries, which implies that most respondents felt that working harder and longer should play a decisive role in determining an individual's salary.

Low-income interviewees, in particular, favoured the 'hard and long work' statement far more than the 'supply and demand' statement. Interviewees in lower-income groups, who have direct experience of increasing their incomes by working harder and longer (more overtime = more wages), were therefore much more likely to agree with Statement A than were higher-income interviewees, who understood that earnings are determined not only by working harder and longer, but also by supply and demand for scarce skills. Therefore, higher earners were much more likely than were lower earners to endorse Statement B.

In Germany and Great Britain, the survey also examined the correlation between social envy and electoral behaviour or political affiliation. In Germany, although the share of centre-right Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) voters in the total population was 36 per cent at the time of the survey, it was only 20 per cent among hard-core social envious, compared with 43 per cent among non-envious. The opposite is true for supporters of Germany's left-wing party, Die Linke. Ten per cent of the total population said they would vote for this party. However, among hard-core social envious, the figure was 24 per cent. Among non-envious, by contrast, the proportion of left-wing voters was only 4 per cent. Supporters of the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) tended in the same direction, but less so: among the total population, 10 per cent said they would vote for AfD, compared with 17 per cent of hard-core envious.

In Great Britain, similar differences exist between left-wing and conservative voters. Almost half (48 per cent) of Labour voters subscribed to the zero-sum theory that 'the more the rich have, the less there is for the poor'. By contrast, only 17 per cent of Conservative voters adhered to this theory. Similarly, 53 per cent of Labour voters supported very high taxes on the rich, compared with only 21 per cent of Conservative voters. And twice as many Labour voters as Conservative voters said they would be in favour of a significant increase in taxes for millionaires, even if they would not benefit personally. Labour voters were far more likely (33 per cent) than Conservative voters (13 per cent) to believe that the super-rich are to blame for many of the world's major problems. One in four Labour voters, but only one in ten Conservative voters, believed that many rich people only obtained their wealth at the expense of others.

A majority of interviewees in all four countries were not personally acquainted with a millionaire. When people who did have a millionaire in their social circle were asked for their opinions of the millionaire they knew, their answers were markedly different from the answers given by the general population. Among the German population as a whole, 62 per cent thought that rich people are self-centred, 56 per cent said they are materialistic ('think only of money'), 50 per cent thought the rich are ruthless, and 49 per cent thought they are greedy. Only then do positive qualities such as industriousness, boldness and intelligence get mentioned. For interviewees who personally know one or more millionaires, the opposite was true. Those who personally knew millionaires rated them very positively: 71 per cent considered them both industrious and intelligent, 58 per cent regarded them as imaginative, 47 per cent as optimistic, and 45 per cent as visionary. Across the German population as a whole, only 3 per cent thought rich people are honest, compared with 42 per cent of those who knew at least one millionaire personally. And although more than 60 per cent of Germans considered the rich to be selfish, only 20 per cent said this about the millionaire they knew personally.<sup>7</sup>



As most people do not know a millionaire personally, media images of rich people are likely to play a key role in shaping perceptions.

#### 4 | MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF THE RICH

Media analysts and a media agency examined depictions of rich individuals in German media.<sup>8</sup> Although the study was limited to Germany, most of the subjects covered by the German media in articles about the rich are also frequently covered by media in the United States, Britain and France. The analysis was based on a sample of 582 articles on executive pay and bankers' bonuses, studies published by Oxfam, the German government's poverty and wealth reports, the Panama and Paradise Papers, the Giving Pledge initiative, and discussions surrounding Thomas Piketty's (2014) book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. The researchers analysed national and regional daily newspapers and weekly magazines.

A majority of the articles painted a negative picture of the rich. The surveyed media devoted extensive coverage to executive pay and severance payments. The predominant tenor of the coverage was that executive pay and severance payments were far too high and that this represented a serious problem. The articles frequently featured negative and highly emotive terms such as 'greed', 'gambling', 'excess', 'filling their pockets' and 'obscene'. Half of the articles analysed contained sweeping generalisations, such as referring to a prevailing and 'increasing insatiability on the executive floors' or describing managers generally as 'criminals'.

Bankers' bonuses are another frequent topic of media coverage. In 85 per cent of the articles reviewed, bonuses were depicted in a generally negative light. Newspaper articles talked about 'greed', while bankers were described as 'fat cats'; large bonuses for bankers were described as 'excessive' and as manifestations of 'excess' and 'self-service' by which bankers 'fill their pockets'. There are a few more differentiated voices; however, the simple (but objectively highly questionable) explanation continues to be by far the most dominant narrative: that 'greedy bankers' with their 'noses in the trough' caused the global financial crisis.

Oxfam publishes its global wealth reports every year in January, to coincide with the annual meeting of the world's economic elite at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Unsurprisingly, Oxfam's reports attract considerable media attention. The quality of the reports, however, is in inverse proportion to the attention they generate. The spectrum of media coverage of the reports ranges from uncritical regurgitation of the reports' central claims to sharp criticism of the methods used in the reports. There are, of course, a number of more nuanced articles, but even those frequently appear under banner headlines featuring key claims lifted directly from Oxfam's reports. Thus, even the small number of more differentiated articles also tend to be closely aligned to Oxfam's interests. Despite the serious shortcomings of Oxfam's reports, their findings receive prominent media coverage year after year. Even after word spread that Oxfam's studies were not based on credible data and methods, the reports were not retracted or corrected, as is common practice among journalists.

There are not many real-world contexts in which the rich and the super-rich are the subject of positive reporting. Nevertheless, one such context was the Giving Pledge campaign, which was launched in June 2010 by two billionaires, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, and aims to encourage wealthy people to contribute a majority of their wealth to philanthropic causes. In media coverage of the campaign, 37 donor motives were mentioned, including 13 positive and altruistic motives, 16 negative and selfish motives, and 6 neutral motives. Overall, the Giving Pledge campaign was depicted in a positive light. Although reports on the Giving Pledge were

naturally kinder to the rich than were articles on other issues, they were also coloured by strong levels of animosity. In some articles, praise for the donations was relativised by criticism of individual donors. In addition, donations were described as undemocratic, because individual billionaires, not the state, decide which causes to support. Again and again, media coverage claimed that the fundraising campaign was also motivated by a desire to 'polish the tarnished image of capitalism'. Although the reports about the Giving Pledge campaign were naturally more sympathetic in their depictions of the wealthy than articles on other topics, these articles also reinforced strong misgivings in the way the rich are portrayed.

The same is true to an even greater extent in other media coverage which, from the point of view of their subject matter alone, suggests an overtly critical framing of rich people, such as coverage of the Panama and Paradise Papers. In April 2016, an international research team of 400 journalists published excerpts from what they called the 'Panama Papers'. These papers contained information on letterbox companies (also known as shell, mailbox and offshore companies) registered in Panama. It is striking that the articles placed the rich and the super-rich under general suspicion, putting them on public trial. By juxtaposing so many individual examples, the articles created the impression that almost all of the rich use tax dodges. Only in very rare cases did the Panama Papers' journalists refrain from sweeping generalisations when they reported about the rich and the super-rich. Eighty-six per cent of the articles created the impression that simply being named in the papers was indicative of suspicious behaviour. In 92 per cent of the articles, the term 'offshore company' had a negative valence, or at least was not presented in a neutral but in a decidedly negative context.

Tax-planning structures are not in and of themselves morally or legally objectionable. In fact, they are a legitimate right of every taxpayer. In the public debate, however, legal tax arrangements are often conflated with illegal tax evasion. In 90 per cent of the articles on the Panama Papers, tax structures were presented as illegitimate, often because journalists used terms such as 'tax cheating' instead of the neutral term 'tax planning'. Readers were not informed of the distinctions between legal and illegal activities. Frequent mentions of dubious individuals (Mafiosi, money launderers, dictators) created the impression that a majority of owners of letterbox companies are money launderers or tax evaders.

When the international team of journalists continued its revelations in November 2017 with the Paradise Papers, many media outlets reported on the second wave of revelations in a similar vein. In 91 per cent of the 76 articles analysed, the term 'offshore company' had a negative valence, and 78 per cent of the articles created the impression that the activities dealt with in the Paradise Papers are shady or downright illegal. Incidentally, the analysis reveals that 83 per cent of the articles completely failed to explain what offshore companies are and what purposes they serve. However, by emphasising certain owners of offshore companies, such as drug dealers and corrupt politicians, the media created a general air of suspicion, especially because 78 per cent of the articles failed to caution readers not to automatically assume that the individuals mentioned in the leak had done anything wrong. Only five out of 272 articles – just under two per cent – specifically highlighted the danger of drawing such erroneous conclusions. As was the case with media coverage of the Panama Papers, articles on the Paradise Papers also referred sweepingly to 'the rich' and 'the super-rich', thereby creating the impression that this group of individuals regularly engages in illegal activities.

When the Panama and Paradise Papers were published, only 6 per cent of the 272 articles highlighted the privacy issues surrounding the publication of the leaks. The media campaigners apparently believed that the end (their good cause, namely exposing the machinations of the rich and super-rich) justified the means – a principle that does not apply in formal criminal

proceedings, where there are clear restrictions on the methods that can be used to convict a suspect. In this context, protesting that a rich person hasn't actually broken the law is not enough to lift the shadow of suspicion. On the contrary, pointing out that a rich person has done nothing illegal is taken as evidence that the capitalist system itself is morally bankrupt and that we live in a world in which the rich write the laws to benefit themselves.

In addition to daily newspapers, magazines and the internet, views about rich people are also heavily influenced by television series and movies, and a sample of these were analysed. Criteria were developed to classify the portrayal of rich characters in popular movies. The first stage of the analysis identified the 20 top-grossing films worldwide in each of the years from 1990 to 2017 – a total of 560 movies.

From this list, 43 movies featured rich characters in key roles. These movies were analysed in detail by a team of researchers. A codebook was used to record the characteristics assigned to the rich: sympathetic, unappealing, competent, incompetent, warm-hearted, cold-hearted, selfish, greedy, arrogant, imaginative, reckless, superficial, daring, visionary, moral, immoral and/or manipulative. The codebook was used to record the traits and qualities attributed to rich characters both at their first appearance and at the end of the movie. In addition, the analysis determined whether the rich character had a counterpart, that is, a contrasting character who served as a foil.

For the purpose of the study, it was first important to determine the proportions of characters with negative or positive moral traits (M traits) in each of the 43 films. The analysis applied the same distinction used by perception research, which differentiates between moral traits and competence traits (C traits). The characters who were depicted as callous, selfish, greedy, or ruthless and who exhibited immoral or unethical behaviour had negative M traits. Positive M traits were associated with characters presented as warm-hearted or honest and who demonstrated morally and ethically positive behaviour.

After determining whether the rich characters in the movies had positive or negative M traits, the same classification was made for simple, non-rich characters in the movies, who often served as counterparts to the rich characters. Finally, in a second analytical step, the researchers determined whether the rich characters and the supporting characters were presented as competent, ambitious, capable, intelligent, or purposeful or as incompetent, less capable, or less intelligent.

In the first acts of the analysed films, 31 out of 43 rich characters were depicted as exhibiting morally questionable tendencies, although they were also portrayed as being competent and intelligent. On the one hand, the rich were shown as arrogant, unsympathetic, callous, immoral and selfish while, on the other hand, they were also portrayed as being competent, imaginative, daring and visionary. These representations correspond with the Stereotype Content Model, which claims that the rich are predominantly perceived as cold but competent. Only nine rich characters were portrayed in a positive light at the start of the movies.

By the end of the analysed movies, portrayals of rich people had shifted slightly: nine of the rich protagonists had seen the error of their ways during the course of the movie. Thus, the number of rich people with positive characters was higher by the time the closing credits rolled than it was as the curtains opened – although it was still significantly lower than the number of rich people portrayed in a negative light, and also significantly lower than the number of non-rich counterparts portrayed positively. At the start of the movies, 24 of the 40 counterparts had positive characters (by the end of the movies, this had risen to 30), and they were also portrayed as being competent. Only six non-rich characters were portrayed in a negative light at the beginning; at the end there was only one.

The observation that portrayals of rich people tended to be negative rather than positive was confirmed by the analysis of recurring frames, that is, the frames of interpretation used to portray rich people in the movies reviewed. Rich people were depicted as being prepared to climb over corpses in pursuit of their economic goals, as having nothing but profit on their minds. Everything they did was driven by their desire to satisfy their greed – but they also cheated others and used their wealth to exert and manipulate power and influence. Still, some of the movies also showed that rich people could redeem themselves and regain their humanity, shedding the negative traits that are so often presented as being synonymous with wealth.

Even though this media analysis revealed that rich people are presented more negatively than positively, it would be remiss to search for the cause of prejudices towards the rich in media coverage alone. Social envy has deeper psychological roots. The media have the power to amplify envy and channel it at specific targets, but in doing so, the media are largely reflecting feelings and prejudices that already exist.

In societies that promise equality, people develop psychological strategies to cope with the fact that they are nowhere near as economically successful as others. In addition, throughout world history, minorities have frequently served as scapegoats for grievous events that could not be otherwise explained. The media satisfy people's inherent need for simple, linear explanations (for example, the claim that greedy bankers caused the financial crisis), a need that transcends the media. When movies portray rich people in an overwhelmingly negative light, it is not necessarily because the scriptwriters want to manipulate their audiences, but rather because the scriptwriters are tapping into widespread stereotypes and satisfying deeper psychological needs.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

Of course, research alone cannot eliminate prejudices and stereotypes, as these are inherent features of human perception. Prejudices not only harm the rich, they damage society as a whole. If people do not understand the real causes of crises and negative events, choosing instead to believe simple explanations and to blame the rich as scapegoats, this error gets in the way of finding real solutions to very real problems. When economic policy is driven by social envy, it can lead to significant declines in prosperity and social trust and prevent sorely needed political and economic reforms. In exceptional situations, such as serious economic crises or wars, extreme prejudice can lead to the persecution or even the physical annihilation of the rich – thereby eradicating social systems based on economic freedom and giving rise to repressive systems that actually increase poverty.

To date, the rich have attached little importance to actively confronting the prejudices directed against them. Despite having the financial resources to do so, they have so far not sponsored scientific research into prejudices against the rich. Therefore, the rich bear a fair share of the blame when negative prejudices against them become entrenched.

It will never be possible to eliminate unfounded prejudices and stereotypes, whether they are directed at the rich or at other minorities. However, experience shows that enlightenment can be the wellspring from which change flows. In many respects, we are more enlightened nowadays than were our predecessors in the early modern period. For example, we no longer believe that witches are responsible for natural disasters. Over the past few decades, many minorities have learned that the only way to overcome prejudice is to take an active stand. As a



result, attitudes toward some minorities – such as gays and lesbians – have changed greatly. However, such change has only been achieved because those minorities have taken up the fight against prejudice. In this process, scholars working in the field of prejudice and stereotypes have a valuable contribution to make.

*The Rich in Public Opinion* is intended to make a significant first contribution to the exploration of stereotypes and prejudices against the rich. In doing so, the study applies the methods and findings of academic prejudice research to a minority that has previously been largely neglected by researchers. The surveys in United States, Great Britain, Germany and France reveal that the strength of social envy directed at the rich varies between these four countries – in France and Germany, it is significantly more pronounced than it is in Great Britain and the United States. Among younger Americans, however, resentment of the rich is very common, as well as being far stronger than is the case in the countries surveyed in Europe.

One of the study's key findings is that those groups in society that are most prone to social envy are also most likely to scapegoat the super-rich when crises emerge. Primarily, resentment against the rich is based on a zero-sum mindset, which asserts that the rich are only rich because the poor are poor. Prejudices against the rich are further reinforced by the portrayal of wealthy figures in the media and feature films, as demonstrated by the study's media content analysis and analysis of Hollywood films, which finds that the rich are portrayed as competent but cold and morally reprehensible.

It is hoped that many more investigations into this hitherto neglected but highly relevant issue will follow. After all, the true nature of a society is reflected in its words and deeds towards its minorities. And this undoubtedly includes not only disadvantaged social groups, but also the rich.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Kemper and Weinbach (2016); Lott (2012); Kendall (2011); Jensen (2012).

<sup>2</sup>For more detail see Haslam (2006).

<sup>3</sup>For more detail see Alicke and Zell (2008).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, the works of Gorman (2000, 2017), Lamont (1999), and Sachweh (2009).

<sup>5</sup>This is one reason why intellectuals tend to harbour such negative attitudes towards capitalism. For more information see Zitelmann (2018, ch. 10).

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Foster (1972, pp. 184–5).

<sup>7</sup>This relates to a supplementary question asked by the Allensbacher Institute in Germany that was not asked by Ipsos MORI in the other three countries.

<sup>8</sup>For more detail see Zitelmann (2019, chs 15–18). The analysis was conducted on the basis of a specially developed codebook, which allowed a detailed analysis of the articles' content and frames to determine precisely how the rich are depicted in the media.

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**How to cite this article:** Zitelmann R. Upward classism: Prejudice and stereotyping against the wealthy. *Economic Affairs*. 2020;40:162–179. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecaf.12407>