

# Senator Cardin Must Help End The Blockade Of Cuba



04-22-2024 ~ Cuba is going hungry. The costs of food and other basic necessities are [skyrocketing](#). Rolling [blackouts](#) periodically plunge the island into darkness. Parents struggle to find [milk](#) for their children.

For the first time in history, the government has [asked](#) the UN for food aid.

The people of Cuba are facing their [worst humanitarian crisis](#) in decades. But Maryland Senator Ben Cardin has the power to help. We, as faith leaders concerned for our siblings in Cuba, urge him to act.

When President Obama took office, he recognized that U.S.-Cuba policy needed a change. For over half a century, the powerful United States has imposed a strict embargo (considered by many to be a [blockade](#)) on the small island nation. The main consequence of this policy has been the suffering of everyday Cubans. A [fettered economy](#), [deteriorating infrastructure](#), lack of access to [food](#) and [medicine](#)—the costs of the blockade are borne by the entire Cuban people.

President Obama began a process of easing these harsh restrictions and thawing relations between our two nations. The people of Cuba were [overjoyed](#); for once, their future looked bright.

Then came President Trump. In short order, Trump undid virtually all of the progress that Obama had made. In his last week in office, Trump even [added](#) Cuba to the State Sponsors of Terrorism list, a designation that top Democrat and Republican officials [have called](#) “bogus” and “a fiction,” and that effectively cuts investment-starved Cuba off from the international financial system.

When Biden became president, hopes of a return to the Obama approach were rekindled. After all, Biden had been Vice President at a time when easing restrictions yielded immediate benefits for Cuban civilians while [winning](#) the [support](#) of U.S. voters. But instead, Biden has kept almost all of the Trump policies in place, and the Cuban people are now paying the price.

The combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and Trump's sanctions has ignited such a crisis that [over 4 percent](#) of the Cuban population has left the country in search of a better life in the United States in the past two years alone.

U.S.-Cuba policy is stuck in the Trump era. But as Senator Cardin prepares to retire, he has a chance to chart a new path.

Last year, Cardin assumed the powerful position of Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, taking over from the hardline pro-blockade New Jersey Senator Bob Menendez, who had to [step down](#) after being indicted on bribery-related charges.

That's why we recently joined over thirty Maryland-based organizations, and dozens of community leaders, in sending a letter urging Senator Cardin to help end the blockade. As Senator Menendez used his position to block any measure of relief for the Cuban people, Senator Cardin can promote reform, supporting and advancing legislative efforts such as those that would repeal the [Torricelli](#) and [Helms-Burton](#) acts, and could wield his role to pressure Biden to take unilateral action, such as [removing](#) Cuba from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list.

Uniting churches, immigrant rights organizations, University of Maryland academics, Young Democrat clubs, and over a dozen ordained ministers and rabbis, we wrote: "As you are soon to depart from Congress, your actions in the coming year may define how you are remembered. It is our hope that your legacy will be as someone who is willing to transcend the inertia of the status quo and do what is right; for the people of Cuba, the United States, and the world."

This is not a fringe demand. As our letter notes, [poll](#) after [poll](#) after [poll](#) show that most Democrats and Republicans alike support an end to the blockade. That's to say nothing of the rest of the world; last year, the United Nations General Assembly [voted](#) to condemn the blockade by a vote 187 to 2. It was the 31st time the resolution has passed nearly unanimously.

Whatever we may make of the Cuban government, and whatever share of the responsibility it holds for the state of the Cuban economy, nothing justifies the United States intentionally starving the Cuban people. Our faiths demand that we stand up to such injustice, and build a world that respects the inherent dignity of all people.

Senator Cardin has a window of opportunity to help right a historic wrong, ease the suffering of millions, and define his legacy as a true forward-thinking leader. But that window is closing fast. It's time for him to act.

*By Rev. Deborah McEachran and Rev. Dr. Eliezer Valentín-Castañón*

*Author Bios:*

*Rev. Deborah McEachran is Pastor of the Hunting Ridge Presbyterian Church in Baltimore.*

*Rev. Dr. Eliezer Valentín-Castañón is the Frederick District Superintendent of the United Methodist Church's Baltimore-Washington Conference.*

*Source: Independent Media Institute*

*Credit Line: This article was produced by [Economy for All](#), a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

---

# **South Korea's Election Outcome: Opposition Party Triumphs, President Yoon Faces Diplomatic And Domestic Challenges**



*04-20-2024 ~ Opposition party wins in South Korea's election, posing challenges for President Yoon's governance and foreign relations, notably with China. Despite this, Yoon's alignment with the U.S. and Japan is likely to continue, amid domestic concerns like inflation and medical strikes.*

The liberal opposition party of South Korea has secured a [sweeping majority](#) in

the nation's general election, maintaining control of parliament. The Democratic Party (DP), led by Lee Jae-myung, attained 175 out of 300 seats in the National Assembly. This election is widely interpreted as a midterm assessment of President Yoon Suk Yeol, who still has three years remaining in his term. Following the results, the leader of his party, Han Dong-hoon, has stepped down, and Prime Minister Han Duck-soo has tendered his resignation.

Mr. Yoon and his People Power Party (PPP) have suffered a significant setback, grappling to advance their agenda within a legislature controlled by the DP. With the DP's victory, it now has the leverage to expedite and advance legislative initiatives through parliament. The DP and PPP strategically utilize satellite parties to optimize their votes within South Korea's electoral framework, wherein certain seats are allocated to smaller parties whose representation doesn't proportionally match their overall support.

Satellite parties are smaller political entities that align themselves with larger, more established political parties. They often share similar ideologies or goals and cooperate strategically during elections to maximize their collective vote share.

Following his narrow defeat to Mr. Yoon in the 2022 presidential election, Lee Jae-myung is gearing up for another presidential bid. This election marks nearly two years since conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol secured victory in the 2022 presidential race by a razor-thin margin of 0.73 percent, the narrowest in South Korean history, prevailing over Lee.

At the national level, South Korea holds two major types of elections: presidential elections, where citizens directly elect the president for a single five-year term, and National Assembly elections, which determine the composition of the legislative body consisting of 300 members. These members serve a four-year term. Among them, 254 are elected through single-seat constituencies, while the remaining 46 members are selected through a proportional representation system. In the proportional representation system, voters vote for political parties rather than individual candidates, and the proportion of votes each party receives determines their seat allocation in the National Assembly.

In the 2024 South Korean general election, three main political parties competed for seats in the National Assembly. With 175 seats won, the Democratic Party became the largest party. The ruling People Power Party (PPP) secured 108 seats,

while the Rebuilding Korea Party (RKP), led by former justice minister Cho Kuk, won 12 seats. Notably, the RKP obtained its seats solely through proportional representation, without fielding candidates for district positions. The overall voter turnout was 67 percent, marking the highest turnout in 32 years. Approximately 44 million people were eligible to vote in the National Assembly election, held on April 10, 2024.

### *Key Issues*

The rising cost of living and inflation emerged as key concerns for voters, particularly the escalating prices of essential goods like vegetables. During the election campaign, President Yoon Suk-yeol's visit to a supermarket brought attention to the issue, focusing on the price of green onions. Upon observing a bunch of green onions priced at 875 won (\$0.65), he [commented](#), "I've been to many markets, and this seems like a reasonable price." However, [media reports](#) state that green onions typically now sell for three or four times that amount and local media reported that the store had discounted the vegetable ahead of Yoon's visit.

In March 2024, South Korea's annual inflation rate was at [3.1 percent](#). The primary contributors to this inflationary trend were the increased prices of fresh food and energy. In March, the prices of agricultural products surged by over 20 percent compared to the same month last year.

Another main concern in the election was the doctors' strike. All medical interns and residents, actively practicing doctors, are rallying against Yoon's proposition to boost the annual medical school admission quota by two-thirds to mitigate the doctor shortage. They contend that universities are ill-prepared to handle such a substantial surge in student intake, which could jeopardize forthcoming medical services.

Despite South Korea's rapidly aging population and its low doctor-to-population ratio compared to other developed nations, attempts to increase medical school capacities have consistently encountered staunch resistance from incumbent doctors and medical students, resulting in significant political obstacles.

At first, Yoon's proposal received public backing. However, increasing pressure for compromise arose as a result of the ongoing doctor strikes, causing numerous surgeries to be canceled and disrupting patient care.

## *Implications*

The victory of the main opposition party indicates the continuation of strained relations between President Yoon and the legislative body. Since taking office, President Yoon has encountered consistent opposition to his domestic policies from the National Assembly, which is largely controlled by the opposition, holding approximately 60 percent of the seats. As of January 2024, only 29.2 percent of the bills presented to the National Assembly have been passed into law, a significant decrease from the 61.4 percent passage rate seen under the previous administration.

For months, President Yoon has struggled with low approval ratings, impeding his efforts to fulfill his promises of tax cuts, deregulation, and increased support for families in the world's fastest-aging society.

The Yoon administration's foreign policy has been characterized by a persistent alignment with the United States and Japan while distancing South Korea from China. Since assuming office, Yoon has been actively disrupting the relatively balanced diplomatic relations maintained by previous administrations and significantly straining China-South Korea relations.

Yoon's alignment with the United States has also adversely affected the interests of the South Korean people. For instance, in the economic realm, South Korea has prioritized compliance with U.S. semiconductor export controls on China. Previously, South Korea had enjoyed close cooperation with China, resulting in a significant trade surplus. However, since joining the U.S.-proposed "Chip 4" alliance, South Korea has suffered considerable losses, while facing warnings from the U.S. against filling the void in the Chinese market. Yoon's foreign policy has strained relations between China and South Korea, exacerbating trade and economic issues and eroding public support for Yoon.

When confronted with Japan's discharge of nuclear-contaminated wastewater into the ocean, Yoon staged a symbolic act of eating seafood but failed to take substantive action in response to widespread public protests.

Nonetheless, it's anticipated that South Korea's foreign policy stance, including its trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan, will remain relatively unchanged. The election outcomes are unlikely to exert significant influence on international affairs, and the president retains considerable autonomy to pursue

his agenda. Yoon is expected to maintain a more assertive stance towards North Korea. His approach to North Korea sharply contrasts with that of the previous progressive administration, emphasizing negotiations and engagement.

*By Pranjali Pandey*

*Author Bio:* This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

Pranjali Pandey, a journalist and editor located in Delhi, has edited seven books covering a range of issues available at [LeftWord](#). You can explore his journalistic contributions on [NewsClick.in](#).

*Source:* Globetrotter

---

# Perceptions Of Social Dominance And How To Change Them



04-19-2024 - It's surprising that human infants [as young as 10 months](#) may be able to identify social rank. Research suggests that infants learn to distinguish who around them is dominant, using relative body size as a cue.

Experiments by University of Oslo psychologist Lotte Thomsen indicate that [infants may use the cue of body size to predict that a larger-sized object will prevail](#) over a smaller-sized object in a controlled visual representation. And, a Yale University research team found that [infants as young as three months seem to be able to recognize that voice pitch correlates with body size](#), with smaller organisms producing a higher pitch sound.

*How Do We Know What Infants Think?*

Researching and evaluating infant perceptions is complex. Experiments assessing infant reactions involve familiarizing them with an animated visual object, such as a colored block, and then varying its relationship with another similar block.

When the expected relationship is reversed, in what's called a "violation of expectation," researchers measure how long the infant gazes at the anomalous image, as compared to the length of its gaze on an expected image. The longer gaze at the unexpected image is interpreted as meaning that the infant recognizes something is not right.

For example, to assess the perception of dominance, [Thomsen and an international team of researchers](#) showed infants animations depicting a small and a large block moving toward each other, where one or the other would bow and give way to avoid a collision. In a series of experiments, they found that the infants gazed longer when the larger object yielded to the smaller one, suggesting that this was not what the infant expected.

This line of research suggests that by one year of age, infants may be able to recognize that size is related to strength and dominance, that the bigger size will prevail in a conflict situation, and that this holds for other conflict situations. These experiments conclude that knowledge of cues about perceiving social hierarchy develops very early in the human organism, and continues to develop through childhood and adolescence.

### *Other Species Do It Too*

Studies comparing the hierarchical structure of human societies to those of other species suggest that "[there may be no fundamental discontinuities between social structure in humans and animals.](#)" Social hierarchy in animal groups is nearly ubiquitous: Non-human primates, insects, birds, and fish do it.

Social groups of non-human species form hierarchies to help protect the group from predators, reduce aggression within the group, find and allocate resources, and ensure that those at the top of the hierarchy can reproduce successfully—all of which is thought to contribute to the well-being of the group as a whole.

Social grooming is important in holding primate groups together by encouraging bonding. Studies show that primate [grooming triggers the brain to release endorphins, which promote a sense of well-being and relaxation](#) and at the same time create a sense of mutual trust. Grooming among primates can also be used

as [a form of conflict resolution and reconciliation](#). It's suggested that the time-consuming grooming necessity limits the upper limit of primate group size to about 50.

Humans replicate the grooming effect of stimulating endorphins, Oxford University psychologist R. I. M. Dunbar suggests in a 2020 article, by creating a "form of [grooming-at-a-distance](#)," which includes laughter, singing, dancing, storytelling, and communal eating and drinking. With humans as with primates, the endorphin-releasing practices allow the group members to know each other and predict the future behavior of group members.

### *Neural Connections*

The neural connections to status and status perception are an ongoing area of research in both primates and humans. Temple University psychology researchers suggest that there is an "[evolved origin for attaining high status and recognizing status in others](#)" in both non-human primates and human adults.

Using MRI imaging, scientists looking at the brain areas related to the perception of social status and dominance have identified regions of the brain and neurotransmitters that are activated when humans or primates are involved in perception of dominance in a relationship. Research results vary by experimental setup, but the [studies have consistently identified the same specific brain areas, including the amygdala, the hippocampus, and the prefrontal cortex](#), as being part of the neural network involved.

Future research, perhaps aided by improved imaging and detecting techniques, is needed to create a more precise picture of how the brains of humans and primates are involved in social status perception, the researchers conclude. What is known is that the perception of dominance is learned in human infants and continues to develop in complexity as the individual ages and gains more social experience.

### *Good or Bad Hierarchy?*

If hierarchical organization is actually innate and even necessary for human institutions, the question is then how to make use of this reality.

Hierarchies can be characterized as benevolent or autocratic, based on whether they primarily benefit the general good, those at the bottom and middle, or the few at the top. Looking at human history, the hierarchical societies that come to

mind are “bad” in the minds of most people. Think of dictators like Stalin or Hitler, or more modern ones.

But, as [one research team argues](#), “Equality is a mirage.” To function well, a large-scale society needs a system of organization that involves hierarchies, according to political theorists at the University of Hong Kong, Wang Pei and Canadian Daniel A. Bell. They point to the failure of China’s Cultural Revolution, as an example of failed “equality.” Instead, they propose:

“The choice is not between a society with no hierarchies and one with hierarchies, but rather between a society with unjust hierarchies that perpetuate unjust power structures and one with just hierarchies that serve morally desirable purposes.”

The question becomes not a choice between equality or hierarchy, but how to shape a hierarchical society into one that promotes more equality.

### *The Consequences of Inequality*

Equality is now a hot topic in society, whether talking about gender, religion, race, income, or education. Generally, the arc of political development is bending toward more equality, and away from traditional inequalities such as relegating women to a lower rank.

The question of equality isn’t an abstract one. Perception of lower social status has consequences for mental and physical health and well-being, as well as life expectancy, for humans and animals. As a [2019 anthropological study of rhesus macaques reports](#), “[S]ocial adversity gets under the skin over long time spans.” Writing in the Proceedings of the American Academy of Sciences, an international team of researchers concluded that social adversity affects the immune system in female macaques, with some variation, such as type of pathogen, length of exposure, and degree of social adversity.

Scores of studies document the adverse effects of the *perception* of low socioeconomic status in human beings. For example, a [meta-analysis of 44 studies of teenagers 12-19](#), conducted by researchers at Concordia University in Montreal, found that lower self-perceptions of status correlate with worse health. Interestingly, the study suggests that objective indicators such as wealth were not as relevant to health as subjective perceptions of status.

[One very specific study published in Health Psychology in 2008](#) looked at the

objective socioeconomic status and subjective perception of status and how each was affected by the common cold virus. The researchers involved 193 healthy U.S. adults, who were first ranked objectively and subjectively on social status indicators. After six weeks, the study volunteers were screened for any cold symptoms and if they had none, they were exposed to one of two varieties of a common cold virus. Over the next few days, the volunteers were monitored for cold symptoms.

The surprising bottom line: Subjectively perceived lower social status correlated with greater susceptibility to catching a cold. Objective lower social status did not have this association.

### *Toward Better Health and Happiness*

As [University of Toronto psychologist Marc A. Fournier explains](#), “Income inequality casts a pall over the quality of societal relations, such that everyone living in a more stratified society is less likely to trust others or become involved in community life.” Further, those who subjectively rank themselves with lower social status, as many different studies show, are more likely to have lower levels of happiness.

The remedies for creating more happiness, and consequently better health, are not mysterious, just an ongoing challenge. Income redistribution is one sure measure, for example, through progressive taxation. [A few studies covering several countries](#) over a few decades have documented that this decreases income inequality and increases happiness.

Other measures also seem self-evident. Are there opportunities in society for advancing one’s status? How can public education systems foster such opportunities? How does the education system prepare young individuals to have more mastery over their lives? How do social institutions create more opportunities for positive community relationships?

Perceptions of dominance and social rank seem to begin very early in life, and later self-perceptions of lower rank, whether or not accurate, affect health and happiness. The open questions are how innate such perceptions are, and how society’s approach to equality can help change these perceptions for the better.

*By Marjorie Hecht*

*Author Bio:*

Marjorie Hecht is a longtime magazine editor and writer with a specialty in science topics. She is a freelance writer and community activist living on Cape Cod. You can read more of Hecht's work [on the Observatory](#).

*Source:* Human Bridges

*Credit Line:* This article was produced by [Human Bridges](#).

---

# **Nobody “Earns” A Billion Dollars. We Need A Wealth Tax**



*James K. Boyce - Photo by Matthew Cavanaugh*

04-19-2024. *Economist James K. Boyce analyzes new data on US disparities and frames environmental degradation as a class issue.*

U.S. billionaires have [seen their wealth nearly double](#) since the Trump tax cuts took effect in 2017. In the meantime, the planet is getting hotter and the [richest 1 percent of humanity accounts for more carbon emissions than the poorest 66 percent](#). Indeed, the interconnection between climate change and economic inequality has emerged as a central theme in serious economic analyses and a focal point of climate activism.

In the exclusive interview for *Truthout* that follows, progressive political economist James K. Boyce — who has just received the inaugural [Global Inequality Research Award](#) from Sciences Po and the World Inequality Lab for his groundbreaking work in the field of economic and environmental inequalities — explains the main causes behind the broad trend of rising inequality in the U.S. and globally, and how it is linked to environmental degradation.

However, as Boyce makes clear, environmental degradation does not impact everyone equally. Environmental degradation is a class issue as it disproportionately affects the poor, and it is the rich that benefit from environmentally harmful activities. Nonetheless, in spite of the challenges facing us in addressing climate change and inequality, there are economic instruments available to us that, if implemented, will create more equal societies and secure at the same time a sustainable future. This is especially critical as fossil fuel industry bosses are pulling out all stops to convince the world that it should [“abandon the fantasy”](#) of transitioning away from dirty energy.

[Boyce](#) is professor emeritus of economics and a senior fellow at the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He is the author, among many other works, of [Economics for People and the Planet: Inequality in the Era of Climate Change](#).

*C.J. Polychroniou: I'd like to start by asking you to comment on the latest report by the nonprofit [Americans for Tax Fairness](#) showing that the combined wealth of U.S. billionaires has nearly doubled since 2017, hitting a record of \$5.8 trillion. In light of this report, why does a wealth tax make sense in the effort to reduce inequality?*

*James K. Boyce:* The first thing to say is that nobody “earns” a billion dollars. It’s simply not possible to make that much money by working for it, no matter how hard you work or how smart you are. So we have to ask, where does this enormous wealth come from?

In 2023 there were 735 billionaires in the U.S. (“[a mere 735](#),” as *Forbes* put it). If their wealth rose by \$2.9 trillion in the past six years, that means they each pocketed on average \$39 billion — more than \$6.5 billion apiece per year.

To which one might respond: *WTF??! How did they do this?*

There are three ways a person can accumulate enormous wealth. Winning the lottery is not one of them — the lottery is peanuts compared to the sums we're talking about here. One way is by outright plunder: taking money and resources from other people, either by naked expropriation (like seizing control of lands and minerals) or monopolization (hence the U.S. term "[robber barons](#)") or [grand corruption](#). The second is by [inheritance](#). If kids could choose their parents, we might say, 'Well done, junior, you deserve to be rich because you made such a smart choice.' But kids don't choose their parents: the inheritors of great fortunes do nothing to deserve them. The third way is through the income spun off by wealth itself — profits, dividends, interest, rents, capital gains — what economists call "returns to capital" as opposed to returns to labor. The real problem is not that wealth grows over time. It's that so few people have so much of it, while so many people have so little.

The toxic concentration of wealth in the U.S. and many other countries is not only an economic problem. It is a political problem, too. Disproportionate wealth translates into disproportionate political power, and this corrodes democracy. As inequality widens, the ultra-rich become more able and willing to elevate their own self-interest above the public interest. One obvious way they do so is by cutting their own taxes while increasing taxes (and cutting benefits) for everyone else.

[Wealth taxes](#) could be a powerful tool to address rampant inequality. The idea here is to tax not just income (the annual flows of money a person receives) but also accumulated wealth held as financial assets, real estate, and so on, above the threshold level that demarcates the ultra-rich. In practice, only a handful of countries have wealth taxes, and the U.S. is not one of them. Moreover, where wealth taxes do exist, their rates are typically modest — less than 2 percent, less than the average return to capital. This slows the rise of inequality but does not arrest it. Considerably higher rates would be needed to have a significant impact.

In addition to the wealth tax, there are other policies to combat toxic inequality. We need well-designed and well-enforced laws against plunder, including plunder in its latest guise: corporate smash-and-grab operations once called leveraged buyouts, that now go by the more innocuous-sounding name of "[private equity](#)." We need laws against organized criminality that masquerades as legitimate business. We also need hefty inheritance taxes on outsized estates of more than, say, \$10 million. And we need to remedy the perverse situation today in which

billionaires pay lower rates of income tax than people who work for a living (Exhibit A is our [tax-dodger-in-chief](#)). Among other things, it is bizarre that unearned capital gains are taxed at a [lower rate](#) than hard-earned income.

*Economic inequality has been shown to be extremely toxic to individuals and society. In the U.S. the [top 1 percent own more wealth than the entire middle class](#). What are the main causes of inequality in today's world, and why does the U.S. have such a high level of inequality?*

The snowball effect is a big part of the problem. In the upper tier of the economic spectrum, wealth generates income, and income in turn generates more wealth. The rich make money even when they sleep. Their economic advantages are compounded by their political influence over the government. At the opposite end of the economic spectrum, the poor make money only when they work. Even then, they often don't make much. Unless some kind of countervailing force is present, inequality tends to widen over time — an accumulation of advantages and disadvantages.

If the economy were a self-contained perpetual-motion machine, economics would be a dismal science indeed. But it is not. Every economy operates within the broader sphere of society and politics, making it possible not only to hold inequality in check but also to reverse it. Examples of countervailing forces include public education and trade union organization as well as progressive taxation.

Countervailing forces are not just a hypothetical possibility; they are a core feature of the way that societies work. From the 1940s until the 1970s, for example, inequality declined in the United States, an era sometimes called the "Great Compression." This did not happen by accident, nor as a result of unfettered market forces. It was the result of political mobilization and public policies. But just as there is no iron law of history that inequality will increase inexorably, there is no law that it will be curtailed. Everything depends on the balance of power.

Many factors have contributed to the widening inequality seen in the U.S. since the 1970s. A concerted offensive mounted by the rich — foreshadowed by the infamous [Powell memo](#) written for the Chamber of Commerce in 1971 by soon-to-be Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell — was an important piece of the story. So,

too, was the Vietnam War, which not only polarized the nation but also squandered money as well as lives, precipitating the nation's growing dependence on capital inflows from abroad. This in turn led to chronic trade deficits and a hollowed-out manufacturing sector. These changes were accompanied by the ideological ascendancy of free-market fundamentalism. We are still living with the consequences today.

*There is a school of thought in economics which insists that economic inequality isn't really a problem and that, in fact, it is a healthy thing. Is inequality some sort of a delusion? Is the battle against economic inequality based on biases and misconceptions?*

Inequality is no illusion — it is all too real. The school of thought to which you refer contends that inequality, however disagreeable, promotes efficiency, higher savings and investment, and faster growth, with benefits that “trickle down” to the middle class and even the poor. And because, in this view, you can never have too much of a good thing, the more inequality the better.

This theory never had much empirical support, but in the economics profession it was elevated to a dogma, particularly in the Reagan-Thatcher years, and it still plays a prominent role in propaganda on behalf of the rich. To its credit, the economics profession has largely changed its thinking in the past couple of decades. Today extreme inequality is widely considered to be a curse rather than a blessing, above all because it empowers the rich to pursue relentlessly their own self-interest at the expense of the public interest. This shift in thinking was propelled in part by the experience of East Asia, where thorough land reforms after World War II brought about a large-scale redistribution of wealth and power, and this set the stage for the region's rapid and relatively inclusive economic growth. In part, the shift also reflected the sluggish economic performance and persistent poverty in countries like the U.S. where inequality was rising. It turns out that economists are not entirely impervious to the evidence that is before their eyes.

*Research has shown that inequality also harms the environment, and there are studies showing that global warming itself has also worsened global economic inequality. Can you discuss the inequality-environment nexus, since this has been the focus of much of your own work?*

Environmental harms do not impact everyone equally. And the benefits from actions that pollute the air and water, deplete natural resources, and destabilize the climate are not shared equally, either. The distribution of power — both political power and purchasing power — shapes who gets what, who reaps net benefits and who bears net costs.

Environmental costs are borne disproportionately by those who lack sufficient political power to resist having them imposed on their communities, and who lack sufficient purchasing power to move elsewhere or to insulate themselves from the damage by buying air conditioners, bottled water, insurance, and so on. Environmental destruction is not like rain that falls equally on everyone's house. The harms are not randomly distributed. Instead, we find disparities that mirror economic and political inequalities. In fact, they reinforce them by sapping the health, wealth and productive capacities of the victims.

Meanwhile, the benefits from environmentally harmful activities accrue disproportionately to the rich. There are two reasons for this. First, they receive an outsized share of corporate profits for the firms responsible for pollution, natural resource depletion and climate change. Second, they consume an outsized share of the goods and services whose prices are lowered by the exclusion of environmental costs.

Given the disjuncture between who benefits and who bears the harms, societies with wider inequalities of wealth and power tend to experience [more environmental degradation](#), for the simple reason that those on top are better able to pursue their self-interest at the expense of everyone else.

*Does this mean that environmental degradation is a class issue?*

Absolutely. This is not to say that it's only about class, especially if "class" is construed narrowly to refer to wealth or income or occupation alone. It is also about the other correlates of power. It's about race, ethnicity and gender. It is about regional and international disparities, as seen when the Global North propels pollution and resource depletion in the Global South. And it is about future generations who are not here to defend themselves: it is a moral issue, too.

*How can we jointly tackle climate change and inequality in a world where money and power set the policy agenda?*

I do not need to tell you or your readers that this is a difficult task. But that does not mean it is hopeless.

Along with historic challenges, the current historical juncture creates new opportunities to attack some of the key foundations of oligarchic rule. Both climate change and inequality expose the blatant disconnect between the priorities of ruling elites and the interests of ordinary people, and this fuels demands for change. The question is whether the resulting opening will lead to a more democratic distribution of wealth and power or instead to the rise of authoritarian leaders who promise heaven but deliver hell on Earth.

An example of the upside potential is the opportunity to transform the biosphere's limited capacity to absorb carbon emissions from an open-access resource into universal property. Open access refers to a complete absence of property rights. At first glance, this may seem attractive to critics who equate property with theft. But as climate change shows, open access simply opens the door to another kind of theft: the exploitation and abuse of resources by the rich and powerful at the expense of everyone else.

[Universal property](#) would resolve this problem not by the conventional routes of privatization or state ownership, but instead by turning planet Earth's limited carbon-absorption capacity into inalienable property that belongs equally to all. In practical terms, this could be done by putting a hard cap on the use of fossil fuels that phases them out over time, auctioning the permits to bring the allowed amounts of fossil carbon into the economy, and returning the revenue from these auctions directly to the public in the form of equal per-person payments. This idea — sometimes called “cap-and-dividend” — is not a utopian fantasy. It has been incorporated in the U.S. in the [Healthy Climate and Family Security Act](#) introduced by Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-Maryland) and Congressman Donald Beyer (D-Virginia). If and when it once again becomes possible to pass serious climate legislation in Washington, it could become a reality.

Other natural resources, like minerals and timber, could be turned into universal property, too — treated as gifts of nature that belong equally to all, with their use generating cash dividends for every member of society. The realm of universal property could also include assets we have created as a society. For example, financial transaction taxes could be another source of dividends, reflecting the value of the legal and institutional architecture that underpins banking systems.

The basic principle governing universal property is that the users pay according to their use of the resource and the income is paid equally to all as co-owners.

In other important ways, as well, tackling climate change can reduce inequality. The shift to clean and renewable energy will undercut the wealth and power of the fossil fuel industry, itself a key locus of inequality. This is why oil and gas barons deride phasing out fossil fuels as a [“fantasy,”](#) even as studies of the “mortality cost of carbon” warn that their greenhouse gas emissions ultimately could cause [millions of deaths](#) worldwide.

Curbing fossil fuels also reduces emissions of nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxides, fine particulates, and other hazardous air pollutants that [kill and sicken millions](#) and disproportionately harm low-income people and disadvantaged communities. Employment creation sparked by the clean energy transition can generate millions of new jobs, improving the incomes and bargaining position of labor. Universal property would add a powerful element to this mix by contribution to a more equitable distribution of assets.

None of this is impossible. But none of it is inevitable, either. The only way to curb climate change and reduce inequality is for people to organize to make it happen. That may seem like a tall task, but it is precisely how in past generations we won slavery abolition, public education, women’s suffrage, civil rights legislation and democracy itself. We are not the first generation to face historic challenges, and we can take heart from the victories of those who came before us.

*Copyright © Truthout. May not be reprinted without [permission](#).*

*C.J. Polychroniou* is a political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism’s politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout’s* Public Intellectual Project. He has published scores of books and over 1,000 articles which have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of different languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German,

Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).

---

# Property And Debt In Ancient Rome



*Roman Empire - Source: en.m.wikipedia.org*

04-16-2024 ~ *The Roman concept of property is essentially creditor-oriented. As Rome's power grew, practices quickly became predatory.*

Traditional societies usually had restrictions to prevent self-support land from being alienated outside of the family or clan. By holding that the essence of private property is its ability to be sold or forfeited irreversibly, Roman law removed the archaic checks to foreclosure that prevented property from being concentrated in the hands of the few. This Roman concept of property is essentially creditor-oriented, and quickly became predatory.

Roman land tenure was based increasingly on the appropriation of conquered territory, which was declared public land, the *ager publicus populi*. The normal practice was to settle war veterans on it, but the wealthiest and most aggressive families grabbed such land for themselves in violation of early law.

### *Patricians Versus the Poor*

The die was cast in 486 BC. After Rome defeated the neighboring Hernici, a Latin tribe, and took two-thirds of their land, the consul Spurius Cassius proposed Rome's first agrarian law. It called for giving half the conquered territory back to the Latins and half to needy Romans, who were also to receive public land that patricians had occupied. But the patricians accused Cassius of "building up a power dangerous to liberty" by seeking popular support and "endangering the security" of their land appropriation. After his annual term was over he was charged with treason and killed. His house was burned to the ground to eradicate memory of his land proposal.

The fight over whether patricians or the needy poor would be the main recipients of public land dragged on for twelve years. In 474 the commoners' tribune, Gnaeus Genucius, sought to bring the previous year's consuls to trial for delaying the redistribution proposed by Cassius. He was blocked by that year's two consuls, Lucius Furius and Gaius Manlius, who said that decrees of the Senate were not permanent law, "but measures designed to meet temporary needs and having validity for one year only." The Senate could renege on any decree that had been passed.

A century later, in 384, M. Manlius Capitolinus, a former consul (in 392) was murdered for defending debtors by trying to use tribute from the Gauls and to sell public land to redeem their debts, and for accusing senators of embezzlement and

urging them to use their takings to redeem debtors. It took a generation of turmoil and poverty for Rome to resolve matters. In 367 the Licinio-Sextian law limited personal landholdings to 500 *iugera* (125 hectares, under half a square mile). Indebted landholders were permitted to deduct interest payments from the principal and pay off the balance over three years instead of all at once.

### *Latifundia*

Most wealth throughout history has been obtained from the public domain, and that is how Rome's latifundia were created. The most fateful early land grab occurred after Carthage was defeated in 204 BC. Two years earlier, when Rome's life and death struggle with Hannibal had depleted its treasury, the Senate had asked families to voluntarily contribute their jewelry or other precious belongings to help the war effort. Their gold and silver was melted down in the temple of Juno Moneta to strike the coins used to hire mercenaries.

Upon the return to peace the aristocrats depicted these contributions as having been loans, and convinced the Senate to pay their claims in three installments. The first was paid in 204, and a second in 202. As the third and final installment was coming due in 200, the former contributors pointed out that Rome needed to keep its money to continue fighting abroad but had much public land available. In lieu of cash payment they asked the Senate to offer them land within fifty miles of Rome, and to tax it at only a nominal rate. A precedent for such privatization had been set in 205 when Rome sold valuable land in the Campania to provide Scipio with money to invade Africa.

The recipients were promised that "when the people should become able to pay, if anyone chose to have his money rather than the land, he might restore the land to the state." Nobody did, of course. "The private creditors accepted the terms with joy; and that land was called *Trientabulum* because it was given in lieu of the third part of their money."

Most of the Central Italian lowlands ended up as latifundia cultivated by slaves captured in the wars against Carthage and Macedonia and imported *en masse* after 198. This turned the region into predominantly a country of underpopulated slave-plantations as formerly free peoples were driven off the land into overpopulated industrial towns. In 194 and again in 177 the Senate organized a program of colonization that sent about 100,000 peasants, women and children from central Italy to more than twenty colonies, mainly in the far south and north

of Italy.

### *The Gracchi and the Land Commission*

In 133, Tiberius Gracchus advocated distributing *ager publicus* to the poor, pointing out that this would “increase the number of property holders liable to serve in the army.” He was killed by angry senators who wanted the public land for themselves. Nonetheless, a land commission was established in Italy in 128, “and apparently succeeded in distributing land to several thousand citizens” in a few colonies, but not any land taken from Rome’s own wealthy elite. The commission was abolished around 119 after Tiberius’s brother Gaius Gracchus was killed.

### *Civil War and Landless Soldiers*

Appian describes the ensuing century of civil war as being fought over the land and debt crisis:

“For the rich, getting possession of the greater part of the undistributed lands, and being emboldened by the lapse of time to believe that they would never be dispossessed, absorbing any adjacent strips and their poor neighbors’ allotments, partly by purchase under persuasion and partly by force, came to cultivate vast tracts instead of single estates, using slaves as laborers and herdsmen, lest free laborers should be drawn from agriculture into the army. At the same time the ownership of slaves brought them great gain from the multitude of their progeny, who increased because they were exempt from military service. Thus certain powerful men became extremely rich and the race of slaves multiplied throughout the country, while the Italian people dwindled in number and strength, being oppressed by penury, taxes and military service.”

Dispossession of free labor from the land transformed the character of Rome’s army. Starting with Marius, landless soldiers became *soldati*, living on their pay and seeking the highest booty, loyal to the generals in charge of paying them. Command of an army brought economic and political power. When Sulla brought his troops back to Italy from Asia Minor in 82 and proclaimed himself Dictator, he tore down the walls of towns that had opposed him, and kept them in check by resettling 23 legions (some 80,000 to 100,000 men) in colonies on land confiscated from local populations in Italy.

Sulla drew up proscription lists of enemies who could be killed with impunity, with their estates seized as booty. Their names were publicly posted throughout

Italy in June 81, headed by the consuls for the years 83 and 82, and about 1,600 *equites* (wealthy publican investors). Thousands of names followed. Anyone on these lists could be killed at will, with the executioner receiving a portion of the dead man's estate. The remainder was sold at public auctions, the proceeds being used to rebuild the depleted treasury. Most land was sold cheaply, giving opportunists a motive to kill not only those named by Sulla, but also their personal enemies, to acquire their estates. A major buyer of confiscated real estate was Crassus, who became one of the richest Romans through Sulla's proscriptions.

By giving his war veterans homesteads and funds from the proscriptions, Sulla won their support as a virtual army in reserve, along with their backing for his new oligarchic constitution. But they were not farmers, and ran into debt, in danger of losing their land. For his more aristocratic supporters, Sulla distributed the estates of his opponents from the Italian upper classes, especially in Campania, Etruria and Umbria.

Caesar likewise promised to settle his army on land of their own. They followed him to Rome and enabled him to become Dictator in 49. After he was killed in 44, Brutus and Cassius vied with Octavian (later Augustus), each promising their armies land and booty. As Appian summarized: "The chiefs depended on the soldiers for the continuance of their government, while, for the possession of what they had received, the soldiers depend on the permanence of the government of those who had given it. Believing that they could not keep a firm hold unless the givers had a strong government, they fought for them, from necessity, with goodwill." After defeating the armies of Brutus, Cassius and Mark Antony, Octavian gave his indigent soldiers "land, the cities, the money, and the houses, and as the object of denunciation on the part of the despoiled, and as one who bore this contumely for the army's sake."

### *Empire of Debt*

The concentration of land ownership intensified under the Empire. By the time Christianity became the Roman state religion, North Africa had become the main source of Roman wealth, based on "the massive landholdings of the emperor and of the nobility of Rome." Its overseers kept the region's inhabitants "underdeveloped by Roman standards. Their villages were denied any form of corporate existence and were frequently named after the estates on which the villagers worked, held to the land by various forms of bonded labor."

A Christian from Gaul named Salvian described the poverty and insecurity confronting most of the population ca. 440:

“Faced by the weight of taxes, poor farmers found that they did not have the means to emigrate to the barbarians. Instead, they did what little they could do: they handed themselves over to the rich as clients in return for protection. The rich took over title to their lands under the pretext of saving the farmers from the land tax. The patron registered the farmer’s land on the tax rolls under his (the patron’s) own name. Within a few years, the poor farmers found themselves without land, although they were still hounded for personal taxes. Such patronage by the great, so Salvian claimed, turned free men into slaves as surely as the magic of Circe had turned humans into pigs.”

### *The Church as a Corporate Power*

Church estates became islands in this sea of poverty. As deathbed confessions and donations of property to the Church became increasingly popular among wealthy Christians, the Church came to accept existing creditor and debtor relationships, land ownership, hereditary wealth and the political status quo. What mattered to the Church was how the ruling elites used their wealth; how they obtained it was not important as long as it was destined for the Church, whose priests were the paradigmatic “poor” deserving of aid and charity.

The Church sought to absorb local oligarchies into its leadership, along with their wealth. Testamentary disposition undercut local fiscal balance. Land given to the Church was tax-exempt, obliging communities to raise taxes on their secular property in order to maintain their flow of public revenue. (Many heirs found themselves disinherited by such bequests, leading to a flourishing legal practice of contesting deathbed wills.) The Church became the major corporate body, a sector alongside the state. Its critique of personal wealth focused on personal egotism and self-indulgence, nothing like the socialist idea of public ownership of land, monopolies, and banking. In fact, the Crusades led the Church to sponsor Christendom’s major secular bankers to finance its wars against the Holy Roman Emperors, Moslems, and Byzantine Sicily.

*By Michael Hudson*

*Author Bio:* Michael Hudson is an American economist, a professor of economics at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, and a researcher at the Levy

Economics Institute at Bard College. He is a former Wall Street analyst, political consultant, commentator, and journalist. You can read more of Hudson's economic history [on the Observatory](#).

Source: Human Bridges

Credit Line: This article was produced by [Human Bridges](#).

---

# Where Did Vladimir Putin's Dream Of A 'Russian World' Come From?



Source: Independent Media Institute

04-15-2024 ~ Russian President Vladimir Putin justified the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by asserting the existence of a singular "Russian world" that needs protection and reunification. He set aside the secular socialist ideological rationales that the Soviet Union used to justify its expansion favoring the Tsarist Russia, rooted in religion and culture. But the history of political orders in the northern European forest zone, which stretches back 1,200 years, is not one of a unified Russian world.

Instead, there were a series of competing orders with rival power centers in Kyiv, Vilnius, and Moscow as well as powerful nomadic steppe polities like those of the Khazar Khaganate, the Mongol Golden Horde, and the Crimean Khanate to the south. Only at the end of the 18th century would they all be forcibly annexed into a single state by Tsarist Russia's Romanov dynasty. That unified state continued under its Soviet Union successor until it dissolved into 12 independent countries in 1991.

Ukraine and Lithuania in particular had been the centers of their own imperial polities with histories older than Russia itself and were instrumental in creating the Russian culture Putin is now so keen on defending. They achieved this in ways that did not require the protection of an autocrat.

### *Empires in The Forest Zone*

The forest zone spanning the Dniester River in the west and the Volga River in the east historically constituted a vast (more than 2 million square kilometers) but sparsely populated region. It would become the home of three long-lived empires: Kievan Rus' (862-1242), the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1251-1795), and the Grand Duchy (later Tsardom) of Muscovy (1283-1721). The surplus wealth that supported these empires came from international transit trade and the export of high-value furs, wax, honey, and slaves, often supplemented by raiding. After expanding beyond its forest zone home, Tsarist Russia declared itself the Russian Empire in 1721 during the reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725), but it took the rest of the century for it to gain control over its neighbors to the south and west, which was achieved during the reign of Catherine the Great (1762-1796).

States of any kind, let alone empires, were absent from the northern forest zone before the 9th century because it was then inhabited only by small and dispersed communities with little urbanization or political centralization. Engaged in subsistence farming, foraging, hunting, and animal husbandry, these communities interacted only with others like themselves or with foreign traders using its rivers to pass through the region. Dense forests and extensive marshlands presented serious obstacles to potential invaders, which were already few because the region had no precious metals to plunder or towns to occupy. This changed when the forest zone was drawn into the high-value commercial network that exchanged a flood of silver coins for furs and slaves, which were traded through a series of intermediaries. The demand for these goods and the silver to pay for

them lay in the lands of the distant Islamic Caliphate and the Byzantine Empire, but it was the nomadic Khazar Khaganate (650-850), rulers of the entire steppe zone to the south, who dominated the trade routes. The Khazars exploited that position by projecting their power north into the forest zone where they imposed tribute payments in furs or silver on the communities residing there, creating a class of wealthy local leaders living in towns who were responsible for collecting the payments. They also established trading emporiums on the Volga River that attracted foreign merchants who paid a 10 percent transit tax on the goods they took in or out of the Khazar territory.

### *Kievan Rus'*

The flow of silver resulting from the fur trade attracted the attention of Scandinavian maritime merchant/warrior groups known as the Varangians or Rus', whose shallow draft boats were easily portaged from one watershed to another. Initially seeking only local trading opportunities, they established their political authority in the north but soon expanded southward through the Dnieper and Volga river systems to reach the Black and Caspian seas where they engaged in raiding and trading. The Varangians replaced the Khazars as the dominant power in the forest region in the 860s. By the 880s, they had moved their center south to Kyiv where they established an empire, Kievan Rus', which encompassed 2 million square kilometers by the early 11th century. It was an empire that lasted almost four centuries and ended only after the Mongols conquered the entire region and destroyed Kyiv in 1240.

Although Kievan Rus' is seen as the foundation of later Russian culture, it did not assume its classic form until a century and a half after it was established when Vladimir the Great (r. 980-1015), a pagan polytheist, converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity in 988 and made it the state religion after marrying a Byzantine princess. He was also responsible for turning Kyiv into a true city with a population of around 40,000 people, erecting Byzantine-style churches there and supporting trade. It was a multiethnic state that developed its own common culture by drawing on a variety of sources. Eastern Orthodox Christianity brought with it a tradition of literacy and the Cyrillic alphabet, a hierarchical clerical establishment, and a Byzantine tradition of governance where state authority was based on laws and institutions. Rus' rulers also respected the authority of existing Slavic political institutions at the local level that included decision-making councils in towns and regions (*veche*), Indigenous local rulers (*kniaz*), and a class

of aristocratic military commanders (*voevoda*). Although only the direct descendants of the Rus' founder Rurik could hold the top position of the grand prince and other high ranks, this ruling lineage intermarried with its Slavic subjects (Vladimir's mother was one of the offsprings of this kind of intermarriage), and eventually adopted their language.

Perhaps most significantly, Kievan grand princes did not wield absolute power. After the empire reached its zenith under Vladimir and his son Yaroslav the Wise (r. 1016-1054), constant wars of succession among the Rurikid elite weakened the central government to such an extent that by the mid-12th century it had devolved into a looser federation of autonomous regional polities (with Kyiv, Novgorod, and Suzdalia being the most prominent) whose leaders agreed among themselves on who would become the grand prince. The government survived because it was a jellyfish-like state that absorbed enough resources to sustain itself without requiring either a strong imperial center or autocratic leadership, and where no single part was critical to the survival of the whole.

Lacking a brain, jellyfish depend on a distributed neural network composed of integrated nodes that together create a highly responsive nervous system. As a result, jellyfish can survive the loss of body parts and regenerate them quickly. Similarly, Kiev and its grand prince was only the biggest node in a system of nodes rather than an exclusive one. And because jellyfish regeneration is designed to restore damaged symmetry rather than simply replace the lost parts, a jellyfish cut in half becomes two new jellyfish as each half regenerates what is missing. Following this pattern as well, two rival empires eventually emerged in the lands of the old Kievan Rus' after the Mongol occupation finally ended: the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the west and the Grand Duchy of Muscovy in the east.

### *The Mongol Yoke*

The Mongol invasion of central Europe ended in 1242 when they withdrew their troops, never to return, but the Mongol Golden Horde retained control of the Kievan Rus' territories. To administer the forest zone region, the steppe nomads turned to the very Rurikid elite they had come close to annihilating a few years earlier.

However fraught and unequal the relationship between the Golden Horde and its Russian clients might have been, it produced a durable governmental structure

that lasted almost two and half centuries. The Mongol administration was far more intrusive and state-centered than that of the Kievan Rus'. The Horde's demands for tax revenue and troops were high and achieved through a wide-ranging set of sophisticated administrative structures, tax systems, and censuses. As much as they may have resented the Mongols, the Rurikid rulers they appointed became richer and more sophisticated state builders in their own territories. Their endemic succession disputes were now resolved by the Horde's Great Khan rather than on the battlefield. Although the Horde's pagan leaders eventually converted to Islam, they maintained the Mongol Empire's longstanding policy of religious tolerance. This included tax exemptions for all clerics and property owned by religious groups, a policy that won the Golden Horde support from the Orthodox Christian Church.

### *Dueling Duchies*

The Horde displayed a stronger interest in controlling its eastern Russian principalities (Tver, Vladimir, Muscovy, and Suzdal) in the Volga River watershed rather than its western ones (Kyiv, and Smolensk) in the Dnieper River watershed. This was because the east was now more populous (1,350,000 people) than the west (800,000 people) and more easily controlled from the Horde's capital of Sarai on the lower Volga. As Mongol interest in the western forest zone receded, the Lithuanians moved in to reorganize it. With their capital in Vilnius, the Lithuanians had avoided the initial Mongol onslaught and began expanding south into the Dnieper region during the early 14th century to create the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), the largest empire in all of medieval Europe.

What was so striking about the emergence of the GDL and the territories it occupied was how closely the Lithuanians followed the pattern of the Rus' as foreigners moving into a power vacuum produced by the decline of a steppe nomadic power and how they superimposed themselves on an existing political system too fractured to unite from within. The economy improved as the region became more stable within an imperial "Pax Lituanica" that provided security for merchants moving their goods along the strategic international trade networks. The minority pagan and Catholic Lithuanians disturbed the existing order as little as possible. They allowed the Russian nobility to retain both, their privileges and the Eastern Orthodox faith. They created a cohesive upper class that transcended simplistic definitions of ethnic boundaries. Like the Kievan Rus', the GDL was a jellyfish polity that lacked a true metropole. It integrated many different nodes of

production and authority into a single political system, expanding and contracting without changing the structure of the polity. The GDL became the dominant power in the forest zone for a short period after Tamerlane destroyed the Golden Horde's capital of Sarai in 1395.

The Grand Duchy of Muscovy arose to challenge the GDL after Ivan III, also known as Ivan the Great, (r. 1462-1505) united the northeastern Russian principalities and declared his independence from the nomad Great Horde in 1476. His grandson, Ivan IV or Ivan the Terrible, (r. 1547-1584) proclaimed Russia a tsardom and coronated himself as its first tsar. It was a bid for a new imperial status that sought parity with the Horde—descendants of Genghis Khan who had formerly ruled Russia—the Ottoman sultan, and Europe's Holy Roman Emperor. Within Russia, the tsar's position uneasily combined the paternalism of a Byzantine emperor responsible for the protection of the Eastern Orthodox faith and its believers with the raw power of a Mongol Khan who ruled an absolutist and secular state. In a series of wars during the 1550s, Ivan the Terrible conquered the steppe regions of Kazan and Astrakhan along the Volga down to the Caspian Sea and took control of a number of Baltic ports. As a direct dynastic successor of its founder Rurik, Ivan then insisted that the Poles and Lithuanians return the lands of the Kievan Rus' to him.

It was not to be. Ivan's destructive domestic policies during the next 10 years weakened Russia and his enemies invaded it. Moscow was burned to the ground during a cavalry raid led by the Crimean Khan in 1571. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's newly elected king, the Hungarian Stephen Báthory, went to war with Ivan in 1578 to reclaim the GDL's disputed territory. Báthory forced Russia to abandon the Baltic ports and cede Pskov to the Poles in a 1582 peace agreement signed a few years before Ivan's death. After Ivan's son Tsar Dmitri died without an heir in 1598 (ending the Rurikid dynasty that had lasted for more than 700 years), Russia entered its Time of Troubles turmoil where its very existence as a sovereign state was threatened. That period of anarchy ended only with the emergence of a new Romanov dynasty of tsars in 1613 who helped restore political stability and went on to rule Russia for the next 300 years. However, it would take another century for Russia to again move north to the Baltic Sea under Peter the Great, and then west and south into Ukraine and Crimea under Catherine the Great. Their success made the Russian Empire the world's largest by area. It collapsed in 1917 during World War I, but most of its

old territories remained part of the new USSR.

### *The Legacy of Empire*

Russia emerged as the Soviet Union's most powerful successor state after it collapsed in 1991 (Map 7). Although shorn of about 5.5 million square kilometers of former Soviet territory, Russia remained the world's largest country with 17.1 million square kilometers. Its status as a peer polity with the U.S., the EU, and China rested on its possession of the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal and robust spending on conventional military forces that amounted to around 3 or 4 percent of its GDP from 2010 to 2020. But in other respects, Russia was not in their league. In 2020, the Russian economy comprised only 1.79 percent of the world's total GDP, more than an order of magnitude smaller than the U.S. (24.8 percent), China, (18.2 percent), or the EU (17 percent). Indeed, its GDP was smaller than South Korea's, a country that is less than 100,000 square kilometers in size, whose top exports were advanced electronics, machinery, and motor vehicles. Russia's main exports were oil, natural gas, coal, timber, minerals, and metals. While the Soviet Union's population was larger than that of the U.S. when it dissolved, Russia's population of 146 million in 2020 was less than half that of the United States and was shrinking rather than growing.

Its neighbors, Ukraine and the Baltic states returned to their roots, too. With political structures that rejected autocracy and saw their future tied to Europe, Ukraine and the Baltic states restored modes of governance and alliances that were the norm before their incorporation into Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. Those of their people who defined themselves as culturally Russian saw no need to be political subjects of Russia to maintain their language and traditions that had long thrived without the need for an autocrat to watch over them.

Putin's post-Soviet Russia is a nuclear-armed Muscovy with frontiers that would have been familiar to Ivan the Terrible. Its mere survival was an impressive feat—most other places would have experienced a cascade of further breakups as seen in the case of the former Yugoslavia—but Russia retained its resilient jellyfish structure. It could reconstitute itself from whatever damaged parts survived, albeit on a smaller scale. Russia moved forward rather than dying, although it failed to realize the Baltics and Ukraine could do the same without it. Despite 70 years as part of a centralized Soviet command economy, Russia remained a network of economic and political nodes where no single part was critical to the survival of the whole. Departing from the Soviet Union's closed

economy that aimed at self-sufficiency in all economic sectors, Russia returned to a Muscovite (and even Rus') pattern of exporting its natural resources to the world economy to sustain itself. It was these exports that financed the high military spending required to maintain itself as a peer player with other world powers and pay for the welfare services that were now expected by its citizens.

Despite Putin's intent to restore Russia's status as a world imperial power, his was a far less cosmopolitan polity than either Tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union and is apparently happy to be so. Russia now defined itself in nationalist terms that stressed deep historical ties to a Russian cultural past and ignored the existence of the other empires that had ruled the region except to claim they were Russian when convenient.

Putin raised the status of the Orthodox Church and portrayed himself as the defender of its traditional Russian cultural values—the absolutist Tsar-equivalent protecting a Holy Russia from the evils of the outside world. Putin justified his invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as an act of domestic house cleaning by defining the Ukrainians as a variety of wayward Russians—sheep who had strayed and were now being brought back into the fold, not people who had their own independent states and empires when Russia was still being ruled by the Mongols.

And that Mongol legacy runs deep. The many photographs of a bare-chested Putin engaging in horseback riding, hunting, and plunging into icy waters channeled the Great Khan tradition of the steppe whose rulers felt it was necessary to demonstrate their physical vitality because state power was invested in a living person rather than a governing institution. Similarly, Putin made the continued possession of great wealth dependent on personal loyalty to him—creating a patrimonial system resembling that of the Tsars and their boyars rather than a modern capitalist economy.

Many talented Russians are choosing to make their mark abroad under these circumstances, forfeiting Russia's opportunity to remain on the technological cutting edge that China and the United States had seen as the economic battleground of the future. But Russia has not felt the need to compete in these areas to remain relevant so long as it can wield military power backed by nuclear weapons.

What could undermine Russia's ability to act as a peer polity now and in the

future are two related things that have resulted from its invasion of Ukraine. In the short term, isolation from the world economy in response to its invasion of Ukraine threatens to choke off the export of raw materials that make up the bulk of its revenue. In the longer term, the instability Russia has created in the oil and gas market hastens the emergence of carbon-free wind, geothermal, solar, and nuclear energy technologies that will leave its oil and gas resources stranded without buyers. Empires that depended on regular flows of outside revenue to finance themselves, whatever way they obtained them, rarely survived once those external revenue sources disappeared.

Vladimir Putin sees himself as another Peter the Great, but the better analogy is to Ivan the Terrible. Ivan's absolute autocratic power, refusal to take advice, and paranoia combined with persecutions at home and wars abroad produced a powerful state that was on the verge of collapse by the end of his reign. Russian history proclaimed three rulers "the Great," but Putin is less likely to join their ranks and, instead, is more likely to become the country's second "the Terrible."

*By Thomas J. Barfield*



*Thomas J. Barfield -  
Boston University*

*Author Bio:* Thomas J. Barfield is [professor of anthropology at Boston University](#). His new book, [Shadow Empires](#), explores how distinctly different types of empires arose and sustained themselves as the dominant polities of Eurasia and North Africa for 2,500 years before disappearing in the 20th century. He is a renowned historian of Central Eurasia and the author of [The Central Asian Arabs of Afghanistan](#), [The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China, 221 BC to AD 1757](#), [Afghanistan: An Atlas of Indigenous Domestic Architecture](#), and

[\*Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History\*](#) (revised and expanded second edition 2022, Princeton University Press).

Source: Human Bridges

*Credit Line: This article is distributed by [Human Bridges](#), first published in the [Sentinel Post](#).*