

READING GUIDE

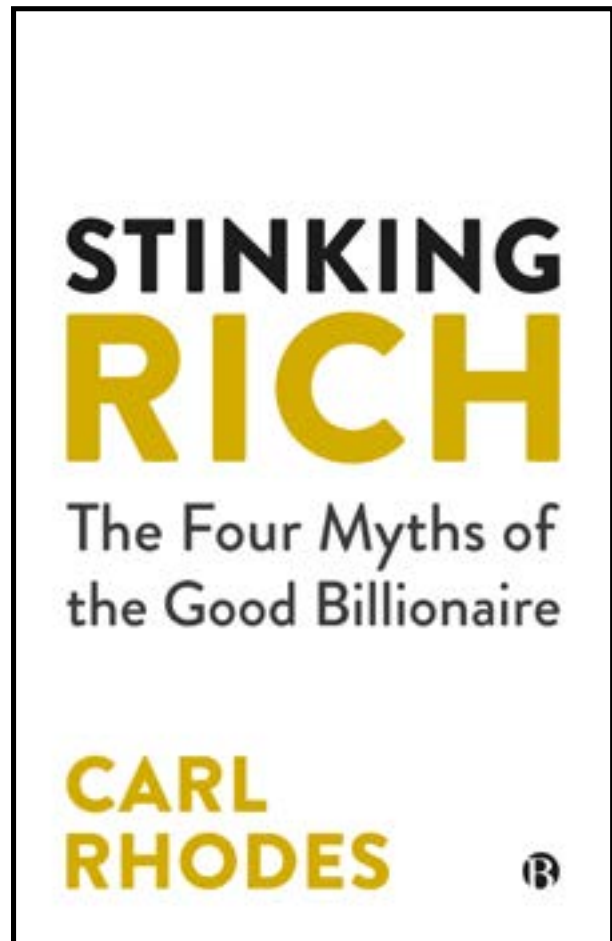
STINKING RICH: THE FOUR MYTHS OF THE GOOD BILLIONAIRE

Welcome to the reading guide for *Stinking Rich: The Four Myths of the Good Billionaire*. The guide is a resource for individuals and reading groups who want to read and think through the issues and topics raised in the book. Following an introduction to the book, the guide contains summaries, lists of case studies, keywords and discussion questions for each chapter.

There are more billionaires globally than ever before, and their ranks are growing fast. From Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos to Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates, the vast wealth billionaires have accumulated represents the scourge of inequality spreading worldwide. Only half of the problem. What is different about today's billionaires is that the titanic power they wield is not just an affront to the hope of economic equality and shared prosperity; it is a threat to democracy, progress and justice. But how do they get away with it?

This book seeks to explain how vast and widening economic injustice on a global scale is obscured by the moralisation of the ultra-rich at a time when their political power is expanding globally. It explores how four mythical archetypes of the 'good' billionaire justify the curse of widening inequality by presenting its most conspicuous beneficiaries as righteous and deserving. By undermining the one-sided falsehood of these archetypes, the intention is to advocate for revitalising the democratic values of equality and shared prosperity.

Social and political power billionaires



possess cannot be explained by their wealth alone, even though that is a significant part of it. Coupled with the financial resources billionaires command are a set of inter-connected myths that portray billionaires as a 'force for good'; myths that shield them, at least partially, from being held to account for the inequality they represent in such an excessive, if not vulgar, form. In being portrayed as mythically righteous, resistance and change to an almost morbidly unequal global economy is held back.

If equality is the political goal, the myths that perpetuate economic injustice need to be exposed, explored and undermined. That is the contribution this book hopes to make. It does so by identifying and describing four mythical archetypes of the good billionaire, using them to delve into how inequality has been accepted through the moralisation of the ultra-rich. These four myths are:

- the 'heroic billionaire' asserts they are gallant protagonists of the American Dream gone global.
- the 'generous billionaire' pretends that their philanthropic efforts and personal good deeds should be lauded for generosity and benevolence.
- the 'meritorious billionaire' insists that extreme wealth is a worthy reward for individual hard work and talent.
- the 'vigilante billionaire' claims to be able to solve the world's biggest problems where bureaucrats and politicians have failed.

Each of these myths enables billionaire wealth and power to set us back to old-style feudalism and plutocracy.

In addition to offering a trenchant critique, the book testifies to the growing international political will to take concrete actions to support economic justice and democratic equality.

The obscene inequality of wealth and power that billionaires represent has certainly not gone unnoticed. The criticisms articulated in this book mirror calls for change that have been issued loud and clear worldwide. We saw it in activist movements such as Occupy Wall Street in 2011. It is around today in the 'tax the rich' movement. It is also in the resurgent socialism of

Bernie Sanders in the United States and Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom. The book attests to the need for a new political imagination that can reinvigorate the democratic promise of shared prosperity at a global level. On the one hand, as the world tumbles into climate disaster, economic inequality, and political populism, the ultra-wealthy need to be held accountable for their power by society. More radically, a new political vision is needed for a future where the wealth created by human activity is shared by the many rather than hoarded by the few.



About the Author

Carl Rhodes is Professor of Organisation Studies and Dean of the Business School at the University of Technology Sydney. He studies the ethical and democratic dimensions of business, the economy and work. He is the author of the bestselling *Woke Capitalism* (Bristol University Press, 2021) and a frequent commentator for the press in publications such as *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Fast Company*, *Business Insider* and *The Conversation*. International in scope, Carl's work has been translated into Chinese, Dutch, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Spanish and Turkish.

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CHAPTER 1

THE RIGHTEOUS RICH

Introduction

This chapter introduces the four myths of the good billionaire and how they culturally value the ultra-rich for using their wealth and power as a 'force for good.' In contrast, the chapter shows that when it comes to billionaires' excursions into social and political activities, extreme wealth is a means to acquire and wield power to reshape the world to their own liking and do it all in the name of generosity and morality. The myths of the good billionaire shun the democratic ideals of shared responsibility and rule by the general will of the people, replacing them with a plutocratic image of (at best) benevolent responsibility and rule by the rich. The chapter introduces the idea that the titanic power that billionaires wield is not just an affront to the hope of economic equality and shared prosperity; it is a threat to democracy, progress and justice. The problem the world is facing is much more significant than the billionaires themselves. They are a symptom of a global culture that accepts the gross inequality of which they are at the apex and the attendant injustice that comes with it.

Examples and Case Studies

- Billionaire Bill Gates' approach to business and philanthropy.
- The moral justification of political power through the ages

Questions for discussion

- What is political morality? Why is it important to understanding how billionaires operate in today's society?
- In what ways are today's billionaires similar to the feudal lords of the past? In what ways are they different?
- What are the four myths of the good billionaire? How do they relate to each other?
- What are the implications for democracy when billionaires use their wealth to address social, political and environmental problems?
- Why would billionaires wish to be seen by others as morally righteous?

Key Words

- Billionaire morality
- Democracy
- Mythical archetypes
- Plutocracy
- Political morality

CHAPTER 2

MONEY AND POWER

Introduction

This chapter explores the increasingly extreme extent of billionaire wealth worldwide as it relates to expanding economic inequality. The chapter charts how the emergence of the new billionaires is a symptom of an unbalanced economic system that resulted directly from global economic policy reform starting in the 1980s. As national economies the world over embraced economic deregulation, corporate tax cuts and the virtual end of trade protectionism, a newly globalised world economy emerged, intoxicated by the promise of economic freedom. The result was not the promised economic growth and shared prosperity but widening economic inequality and the sequestering of extreme wealth at the top. With wealth comes power, and today, the collective political might of billionaires represents a wanton disregard for the social promise of democracy. Billionaires are leading us to a new form of feudalism where the extremely wealthy become the world's rulers as members of a newly emerged global aristocracy.

Examples and Case Studies

- The 2021 race for the richest person in the world.
- Trickle-down economics from the 1980s to today.
- BlackRock asset management firm's CEO Larry Fink's case for stakeholder capitalism.
- US Senator Bernie Sanders' proposal to tax billionaires.
- Co-CEO of software company Atlassian Mike Cannon-Brookes' climate activism.

Key Words

- Global inequality
- Neofeudalism
- Neoliberalism
- Stakeholder capitalism
- Trickle-down economics

Questions for discussion

- What is trickle-down economics? What political purpose does it serve?
- What is stakeholder capitalism, and why are people who support it accused of being 'woke'?
- What does Mike Cannon-Brookes' attempt to address climate change in Australia tell us about the relationship between liberal democracy and billionaire political activism?
- Should sovereign nations rely on the commercial and political interests of globally mobile billionaires to address their most severe problems?

CHAPTER 3

THE MYTH OF THE HEROIC BILLIONAIRE

Introduction

This chapter explores the myth of the heroic billionaire. This myth casts billionaires as the heroic protagonists of the American Dream gone global. Billionaires are heroes with the right stuff to achieve greatness that is unavailable to others. Despite its appeal, this myth belies a cruel version of survival of the fittest social Darwinism where the rich are exalted, and the poor are cast asunder as losers in life's game. The original American Dream was of a new world emancipated from its feudal past, where everyone, irrespective of class, creed, or colour, could thrive. The new global American Dream is a cruel mutation of its original version where success is possible, but only for the select few who can approach the dizzy financial heights of being a billionaire. The dream turns into a nightmare when the billionaire is the anti-hero of a 'winner-take-all' story that justifies and glorifies inequality by canonising the ultra-rich.

Examples and Case Studies

- The Undercover Billionaire television show (2019).
- Professor of Public Policy and former US labour secretary Robert Reich questioning Elon Musk's status as a 'self-made man'.
- US President Donald J. Trump and Martin Luther King's different versions of the American Dream.
- British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990)'s idea of 'popular capitalism' and its influence on the new American Dream.

Key Words

- American Dream
- Heroic billionaires
- Popular capitalism
- Self-made man
- Social Darwinism

Questions for discussion

- How has the idea of the American dream changed since the early 20th century? How is this reflected in countries outside of the United States?
- 18th-century economist Adam Smith is often seen as a defender of free-market capitalism, but what were his views of economic inequality? What was he referring to when he used the term the 'vile maxim'?
- In what ways can contemporary economic inequality be traced back through neoliberal reforms to the global economy witnessed since the 1980s?
- The new American Dream of individual success for the heroic few at the expense of widening inequality is central to the moral justification of billionaire wealth and power. Discuss.

CHAPTER 4

THE MYTH OF THE GENEROUS BILLIONAIRE

Introduction

This chapter explores the myth of the generous billionaire, where the ultra-rich appear to be giving away large sums of money to good causes they support. Looking beyond the myth, we find a much more dangerous phenomenon where billionaires are using their wealth to engineer a transfer of political power from public into private hands, all at the expense of democracy. This is not to say that handouts from billionaires do not benefit their recipients; they can do so. Nevertheless, despite how much they give away, collectively and often individually, billionaires' wealth keeps growing, as does the number of billionaires worldwide. The myth of the generous billionaire obscures the fact that the more they give away, the worse the economic inequality that they are a part of is getting. The practical outcome of billionaire philanthropy is that it preserves the political and economic system that continues to benefit those at the top of a widening economic divide.

Examples and Case Studies

- Billionaires and the 'new Gilded Age'.
- Bill Gates' and Warren Buffet's Giving Pledges.
- Yvon Chouinard, founder and owner of Patagonia Inc., transferring the company's stock to a not-for-profit organization dedicated to combatting climate change in 2022.
- Australia's richest woman Gina Rinehart's withdrawal of the proposed partnership with the Australian women's national netball team.

Questions for discussion

- What is the new Gilded Age we are witnessing today? How is it similar to the first Gilded Age of the late 19th century? How is it different?
- Why did people say that Yvon Chouinard 'gave away his company' for the planet? What does this say about the role of extremely wealthy businesspeople in today's society?
- Why did Hancock Prospecting withdraw from its proposed partnership with Netball Australia in 2022? What does this say about how billionaire philanthropy operates?
- What is a 'gift economy'? How does it shed light on how billionaire philanthropy works?
- What is 'philanthrocapitalism', and what does it reveal about the logic of billionaire philanthropic generosity?

Key Words

- Generosity
- Generous billionaires
- New Gilded Age
- Philanthrocapitalism
- Philanthropy

CHAPTER 5

THE MYTH OF THE MERITORIOUS BILLIONAIRE

Introduction

This chapter explores the myth of the meritorious billionaire. Central to the moral defence of billionaire wealth is the claim that their riches are a deserved reward for hard work and talent. While meritocracy is an ideal means to justify billionaire inequality, the argument that extreme wealth is meritoriously earned suffers two different problems. The first problem is that the meritocratic credentials of billionaires are deeply questionable. The second is that even if we did assume that billionaires deserved their wealth on merit, meritocracy is an inherently unfair system that undermines democracy. A meritocratic society is one where economic inequalities are based on the employment of the talents and abilities that a person was born with and developed. But isn't being born with talent no more a matter of luck than being born into a land-owning aristocratic family? Even worse, should people with these talents for money-making be allowed to use their wealth to exercise power? Meritocracy, at least as a political ideal, represents an unfair 'winner-takes-all system' that provides a false moral justification for inequality.

Examples and Case Studies

- Celebrity and billionaire Kylie Jenner's rise to wealth and the idea of the self-made billionaire.
- The 'year of the nepo baby' in 2022 and what it says about public awareness of how financial success is related to merit.
- The Panama Papers scandal in 2016 revelation of the secret tax avoidance of the world's wealthy.
- The rise of meritocracy politics in the 1990s in Prime Minister Tony Blair's Britain and President Bill Clinton's United States.

Questions for discussion

- Is it reasonable for Kylie Jenner, who at age 21 was the youngest ever billionaire in 2019, to claim that her riches were self-made? What factors other than her own actions might be responsible for her wealth?
- What does the 'Year of the Nepo Baby' tell us about the public awareness of economic injustice and meritocracy?
- What is 'insider syndrome'? How does it relate to how the class system perpetuates economic inequalities?
- How did meritocracy become a guiding political principle that cemented the centrality of individual competition as a central value of twenty-first-century liberal-democratic culture on a global level?

Key Words

- Democracy
- Meritorious billionaire
- Meritocracy
- Nepo babies

CHAPTER 6

THE MYTH OF THE VIGILANTE BILLIONAIRE

Introduction

This chapter explores the myth of the vigilante billionaire. The classic vigilantes – the likes of the Lone Ranger, Batman, or Dirty Harry – are seen as heroes for taking the law into their own hands when public institutions fail to achieve justice. Vigilantes are cultural figures whose personal values rule supreme as they single-handedly solve problems where others have failed. The vigilante is also an archetype associated with billionaires. Whether it be the climate crisis, global health or world poverty, billionaires are positioned as bypassing governments in trying to solve the world’s biggest problems using their vast wealth, business acumen and entrepreneurial spirit to succeed where politicians have failed. Like vigilantes, they forsake bureaucratic interference to get things done. They also act alone and with no public accountability. But this is real life, not the movies. The myth of the vigilante billionaire justifies social and political interventions by billionaires. In so doing, it presages new global plutocracy where the rich rule the world on their terms.

Examples and Case Studies

- David Beasley, Director of the United Nations’ World Food Programme (UNWFP), and Elon Musk’s Twitterstorm over whether billionaires can help solve the problem of world hunger.
- The World Economic Forum and its annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland and the development of stakeholder capitalism.
- The emergence of new forms of 21st-century masculinity in the form of the ‘Davos man.’

Questions for discussion

- What is ‘Muskism’, and how does it relate to the myth of the vigilante billionaire?
- To what extent are we living in an age of plutocracy where billionaires use economic power to gain political power and claim social leadership? What are the implications of this for democracy?
- How has the success of the World Economic Forum’s annual meeting in Davos influenced the growth in political power of billionaires and wealthy corporations?
- How is the myth of the vigilante billionaire related to dominant forms of 21st-century masculinity?

Key Words

- Masculinity
- Sovereignty
- Stakeholder capitalism
- State of exception
- Vigilantism
- World Economic Forum

CHAPTER 7

REASONS FOR HOPE

Introduction

This chapter concludes the book by assessing how contemporary political movements are mounting a collective struggle against the vast inequalities that billionaires represent. Together, these movements represent a 'politics of hope' for a fairer and more equal world. The chapter argues that the promise of progress lies in fostering a shared political conviction and building consensus across differences. We are seeing people working together for new democratic possibilities where the world's wealth is put to work for the benefit of all of humanity rather than being stockpiled by the elite few. So long as power continues to accrue to an increasingly large billionaire class, the world is on the road away from democracy, returning to the plutocracy and feudalism that deserves to be kept in the past. Being fooled by the myths of the good billionaire is fuel in the engine of this terrible journey.

Examples and Case Studies

- The 2011 Occupy Wall Street Movement and its legacy today.
- The 'Tax the Rich' movement and contemporary political resistance to the expansion of the billionaire class.

Key Words

- Economic justice
- Occupy movement
- Solidarity
- Tax the Rich
- Utopia

Questions for discussion

- How did the Occupy Wall Street movement influence contemporary political views concerning economic inequality?
- Have billionaires created today's economic inequality, or are they just a symptom of the system that created it? What does this say about the ways that inequality can be addressed politically?
- How can awareness of the myths of the good billionaire contribute to addressing economic inequality?
- Is growing economic inequality inevitable, or is there any hope for any real alternatives?