

INTERNATIONAL STUDY TO INVESTIGATE PREJUDICES AGAINST THE RICH

Researchers in the field of prejudice research have, to date, devoted hardly any attention to prejudices and stereotypes against the rich. Thousands of books and scientific papers about prejudices towards black people, homosexual people, Muslims, and other minorities have been published, but so far there has been no major reference work on the subject of prejudices against the rich. Addressing this gap in the research, the study *The Rich in Public Opinion* (<http://therichinpublicopinion.com>) is based on extensive research, including the world's first international survey into popular attitudes toward the rich and super-rich. The public opinion research institute Ipsos MORI conducted interviews with representative samples of at least 1,000 people in each of four different countries: Great Britain, France, Germany, and the United States.

Attitudes in Great Britain and the United States are very similar

Since social envy cannot be measured with direct questions along the lines of "How envious are you?", the study's interviewees were presented with several statements that served as indicators of social envy, like for example: "I think it would be fair to increase taxes substantially for millionaires, even if I would not benefit from it personally." Social enviers are not primarily motivated by the desire to improve their own situation. In contrast, they want the rich to be worse off, to have something taken away from them. This, the study demonstrates, is enough to satisfy the social envier, even if they derive no personal economic benefit as a result.

A total of three distinct groups emerged during the course of the study: Enviars, non-enviars, and ambivalents. It was astonishing to confirm the similarity between attitudes towards the rich in Great Britain and the United States: Enviars represent 18% (GB) and 20% (US) of the respective populations, while 32% of interviewees in both countries are ambivalents and 49% (GB) and 48% (US) are non-enviars. In this respect, the findings for these two countries are almost identical. In France and Germany, on the other hand, there are far more enviars (33% and 34%, respectively), and far fewer non-enviars (34% and 27%, respectively). As one element of the study, a social envy coefficient was developed

to depict the prevalence of social envy in each of the four countries. The result: Social envy is highest in France, with a coefficient of 1.26, followed by Germany at 0.97. Significantly lower levels of social envy were registered in the United States (0.42) and Great Britain (0.37).

The rich as scapegoats

In every crisis, people look for scapegoats. This is as true today, in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, as it ever has been. Some conspiracy theorists have even blamed Bill Gates for unleashing the virus on the world. One of the study's questions was therefore designed to find out how susceptible people in each of the four countries are to scapegoating. The respondents were presented with the following statement: "Those who are very rich and want more and more power are to blame for many of the major problems in the world's financial or humanitarian issues." In Germany, twice as many interviewees (50%) agreed with this statement as did interviewees in Great Britain and the United States (25% and 21%, respectively). In France, 33% of interviewees agreed.

Younger Americans are far more negative towards the rich than are younger Europeans

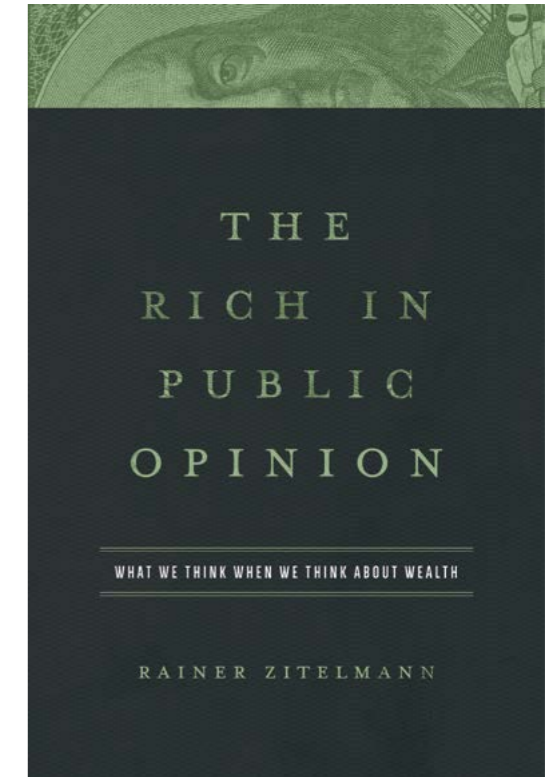
Although the study confirms the populations of the United States and Great Britain are less prone to social envy than the populations of Germany and France, there is one important caveat: Younger Americans are far more skeptical of the rich than are older Americans. Interestingly, the opposite is true in the three European countries. The fact that younger Americans are so much more critical of the rich than their older compatriots is confirmed by a range of survey data, including the personality traits younger and older Americans attribute to the rich. While four of the top five personality traits attributed to the rich by young Americans are negative (materialism, arrogance, greed, self-centeredness), four of the top five traits selected by older Americans are positive (industrious, intelligent, imaginative, bold and daring).

The unknown millionaire is regarded with suspicion

One of the most striking differences in attitudes toward the rich was registered between the population as a whole and the subset of interviewees who know at least one millionaire personally. Across the German

population as a whole, 62% consider the rich to be selfish, 56% describe them as materialistic ("think only about money"), 50% regard rich people as ruthless, and 49% think them greedy. In contrast, the exact opposite is true for German interviewees who know one or more millionaires among their families or personal acquaintances. In fact, interviewees who know at least one millionaire personally are extremely positive in their assessments: 71% describe their closest millionaire acquaintance as industrious and intelligent, 58% imaginative, 47% optimistic, and 45% visionary. Across the German population as a whole, only 3% describe the rich as honest, compared with 42% of those who know a rich person well. And while 60% of Germans label the rich as selfish, only 20% of the interviewees who know a millionaire personally say the same.

by Rainer Zitelmann who is a German historian and sociologist. His latest book, *The Rich in Public Opinion* (<http://therichinpublicopinion.com>), was published in May 2020.



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