

The New Class Society: The Productive vs the Unproductive

By Dr. Rainer Zitelmann | September 26, 2026 12:01 AM



AP Photo/Ellis Rua

Around the world, we are seeing a rise not only in right-wing populism but also in left-wing populism. The central slogan of left-wing populists is the fight for greater justice. The demand for justice has one great advantage: nobody disagrees. Who is against justice? And who would demand that things become more unjust?

Yet it usually remains entirely unclear what justice is supposed to mean. Let me start with what I consider unjust. This morning, millions of people got up to create value. The baker was in his bakery at four in the morning baking bread. The entrepreneur was thinking about how to develop a better product, win customers, and create jobs. The plumber drove to a customer to repair a broken heating system. And others got up and started thinking about how they could make life more difficult for productive people. Left-wing politicians think about which new tax they can use to stir up resentment against the rich. The equal opportunities officer searches job advertisements for a word that might violate some regulation. The NGO activist develops the next

campaign for new bans, regulations, and restrictions on entrepreneurs, landlords, or motorists. One group produces, repairs, invents, and invests. The other taxes, regulates, controls, and prohibits.

Fifty years ago, the sociologist Helmut Schelsky defined productive work as the production of material goods that sustain and improve life, including material services that make life easier and more secure. “The defining feature of this structurally ‘divided society,’” Schelsky wrote, “is that one group of the population performs this productive work and has to live from it, while the other social group exploits this productive work in order to pursue its own interests at the expense of the other.”

One group, the productive group, produces goods and services that other people voluntarily buy. But it has to hand over an increasing share of what it earns to the unproductive, who themselves create no value. This group lives from compulsory levies, above all taxes. Universities are producing an increasing number of people who have no skills for which there is demand in the market – in other words, skills for which consumers would voluntarily pay. As the number of unproductive people increases, taxes and public debt must rise, because these are the only sources that finance the unproductive. That is also why they constantly demand higher taxes and more public debt.

The problem is that in many countries the number of productive people has been declining for years, while the number of unproductive people has been rising. Take Germany as an example: The number of public-sector employees increased from 4.65 million in 2014 to 5.38 million in 2024 – an increase of almost 16 percent. By 2025, the figure had already reached around 5.5 million, meaning that approximately one in eight employed people now works directly for the state. If employees of institutions and companies organized under private law but predominantly owned by the public sector are included, the number was as high as approximately 6.94 million in 2024.

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The problem is that not many politicians and commentators address the exploitation of the productive by an ever-growing number of unproductive people as a central issue. Instead, in common usage, “justice” is equated with “equality.” The longing for equality is old. The authors of early utopian novels were almost obsessed with the idea of equality. In almost all utopian visions, private property is abolished and every distinction between rich and poor eliminated. Hardly anyone who complains about “social injustice” today would advocate such radical egalitarianism. Almost everyone accepts that there should be differences in income, but many immediately add that these differences should not be “too large.” But what is too large, and what is acceptable?

Even the expression “distribution of society’s wealth” is misleading. There is no wealth that is produced by society; rather, the wealth in a society is the sum of what individual people produce and exchange. The economist Thomas Sowell argues that if there really were some pre-existing total amount of income or wealth

that simply appeared, like manna from heaven, then the moral question would naturally arise as to what share each member of society should receive. But wealth, he emphasizes, is produced; it does not simply exist.

The Nobel Prize-winning economist Angus Deaton argues that progress always goes hand in hand with inequality. Throughout history, the fruits of progress have rarely been distributed equally. A better world necessarily creates differences, and escaping premature death results in inequality, Deaton argues.

The hope that increasing equality will reduce dissatisfaction with “social injustice” is, in my view, poorly founded. For example, equality between men and women has increased enormously in most Western countries over recent decades, yet dissatisfaction with the inequalities that remain has increased at the same time.

Rainer Zitelmann is the author of the books "The Power of Capitalism" <https://the-power-of-capitalism.com/> and "How Nations Escape Poverty" <https://nations-escape-poverty.com/>

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