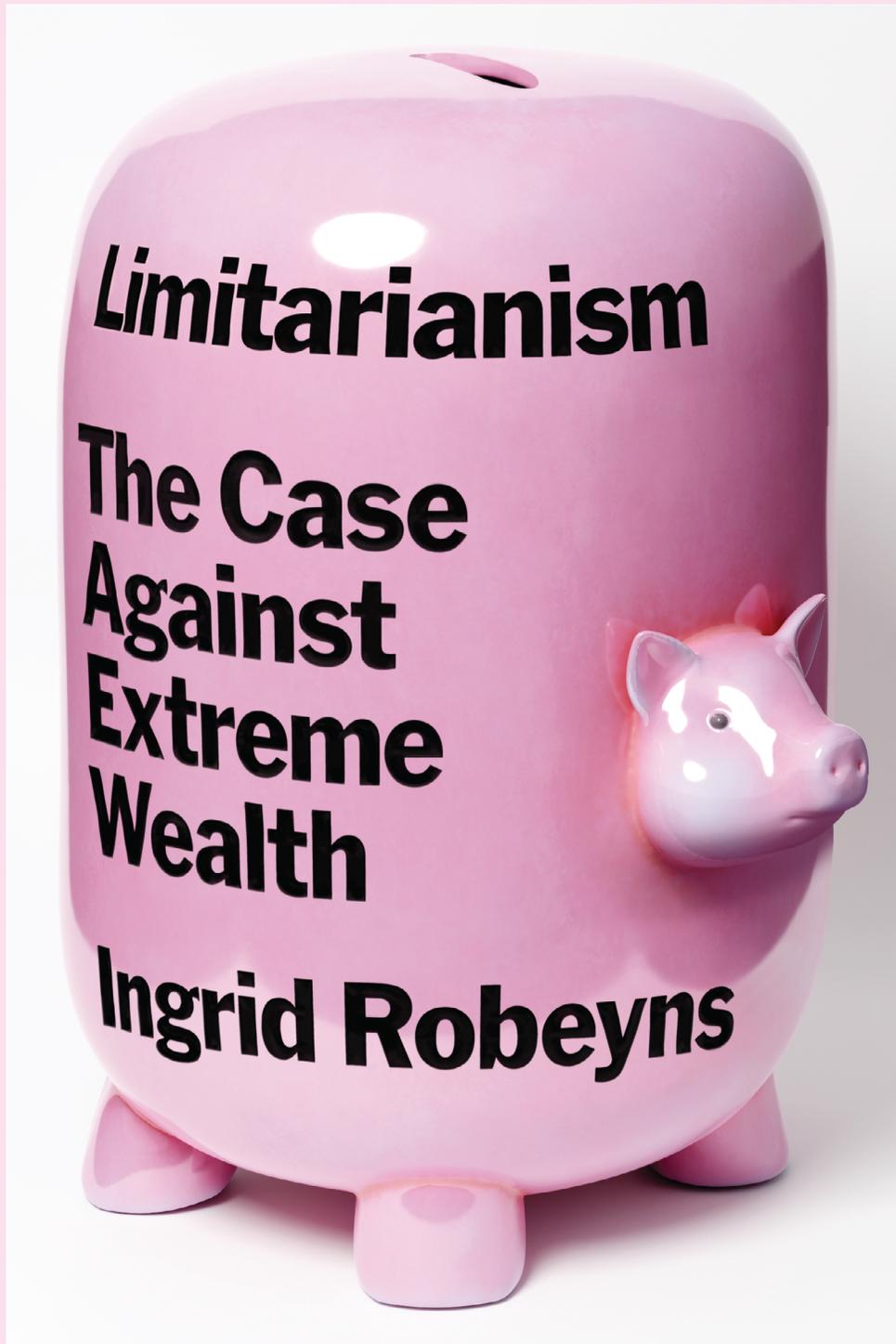


LIMITARIANISM
INGRID ROBEYNS



READING GROUP GUIDE

 ASTRA HOUSE

ABOUT THE BOOK

An original, bold, and convincing argument for a cap on wealth by the philosopher who coined the term “limitarianism.” The first authoritative trade book to unpack the concept of a cap on wealth, where to draw the line, how to collect the excess and what to do with the money. In the process, Robeyns will ignite an urgent debate about wealth, one that calls into question the very forces we live by (capitalism and neoliberalism) and invites us to a radical reimagining of our world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



INGRID ROBEYNS holds master degrees in economics and philosophy, and obtained her PhD for a thesis on gender inequality and the capability approach at Cambridge University. She currently holds the chair in ethics of institutions at Utrecht University. In 2018, she was elected as a member of the Netherlands Royal Academy of Sciences and Arts. In 2021, she was awarded an Emma Goldman Award for her work on inequality studies and feminism by the FLAX foundation in Vienna. She lives in Utrecht, Netherlands.

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

- 1 One of the reasons Robeyns uses to make the case for limitarianism is that excess wealth does not just make the rich richer, it also widens the gap between the rich and poor. What could be the cause of this and what are the consequences of this gap?
- 2 Robeyns is reluctant to set a number for a cap on wealth because, as she explains in Chapter 1, context matters. What are some the key elements each country or community should consider when debating where to set a cap on wealth?
- 3 Robeyns distinguishes the riches line from the ethical limit and the political limit when it comes to determining a cap on wealth. What is the difference between the three concepts?
- 4 Another argument for limitarianism is that so often, excess wealth comes from dirty money. How does Robeyns define dirty money? What are some better uses for wealth obtained in this manner?
- 5 In chapter 4, Robeyns argues that extreme wealth can be a threat to democracy. How does the behavior of individuals like Elon Musk and Rupert Murdoch support this assertion?
- 6 Robeyns claims that no rich person can be said to deserve their wealth. What are the reasons offered for this claim?
- 7 In *Limitarianism*, various statistics are reported on various forms of inequalities. Were any of those statistics a surprise for you? If so, which one surprised you most?
- 8 Some who agree that economic inequality has become too big claim that the solution is for societies to encourage more philanthropic giving. According to Robeyns, philanthropy is not the way to go. Why not?
- 9 In what ways does extreme wealth negatively affect climate change? And how should this consideration factor into our calculation of where to put the cap on wealth?
- 10 Would limitarianism lead to a world with more or fewer opportunities for economic growth and stability for individuals? What are the factors this would depend on?
- 11 What are some of the arguments made against limitarianism? What are the concerns critics have raised around the concept of a cap on wealth? How might one respond to these critiques?

REASONS FOR LIMITARIANISM

Excess wealth keeps the poor in poverty while inequality grows:

Many aspects of our socio-economic system are biased against the poor and favor the rich. In the case of the division of economic gains (whether within a company, a country or internationally) all groups gain something (so technically it is a win-win situation). But the lion's share of the gains go to those who already have most, with only a tiny fraction going to the economically weaker. In the case of fiscal policies, this includes tax deductions and subsidies that disproportionately benefit the rich, or the lower effective tax rates on income from capital in comparison with income from labor (since only the richest have wealth and thus capital).

Excess wealth often comes from dirty money:

Many contemporary fortunes have roots in economic activities that are morally repulsive, such as unpaid labor by people who were enslaved and never received proper compensation. Other fortunes are too large because they were created while shifting the environmental costs onto society at large, or by exploiting laborers. And even those fortunes that while being generated did not violate human rights or basic moral principles, have become excessively large by using tax evasion strategies. And all the super rich have profited from the very favorable fiscal regime for large fortunes, that the wealth defense industry lobbied for.

Excess wealth undermines democracy:

Democracy requires that everyone should have an equal opportunity to influence collective decision making. Yet extreme wealth allows the super rich to spend fortunes on lobbying, or to donate so much to political candidates and parties that they have a direct say in political decisions. Excess wealth also leads to the media being disproportionately in the hands of the very rich, which leads to reporting that is pro-capitalist and uncritical towards the harms that excess wealth causes.

Excess wealth leads to climate change:

The rich and super rich are disproportionately responsible for climate change, since they emit much more greenhouse gasses through their lifestyles and their investments. If the super rich had adhered to the polluter-pays-principle, their wealth would have been smaller. This is also a problem of global injustice, since although the well-off and especially the super rich in affluent countries are largely to blame for climate change, the harms will especially affect those in the Global South who are too poor to defend themselves against climate change.

REASONS FOR LIMITARIANISM

Excess wealth is undeserved:

Our current neoliberal ideology has led us to believe that what we can reap in the market is also what we morally deserve. But this is a mistake. Wealth is the result of various factors that we can in no way claim to be to our credit. First, there is the sheer influence of good or bad luck in our lives: the “natural lottery” ticket that we were given when born; the social class and particular family we were born into; the parents and teachers who influenced us deeply; but also other forms of luck such as when and where we were born. The inheritances that rich people receive are also a form of pure luck, and thus undeserved. Moreover, much economic success has been facilitated by the work done by previous generations, as well as investments in technology and social institutions by the people and governments of the past, funded by taxpayer money.

Excess wealth could do so much good if it were used to meet unmet urgent needs and address collective action problems:

There are many urgent needs that could be met by simply financially empowering the most vulnerable people, as experiments with unconditional cash transfers have shown. Excess wealth could also do much good by providing new investments in infrastructure and public goods that were neglected under decades of neoliberal policies. And excess wealth is needed to tackle some collective action problems, of which climate mitigation and adaptation strategies are the most urgent. There are trillions needed to protect the planet from becoming uninhabitable for large parts of humanity, and we could find those trillions by taxing the wealth of the super rich.

Excess wealth makes all of us worse-off, also the super rich:

The neoliberal era has led to wealth concentration among the richest in society, but also a weakening of welfare state institutions and public goods that have typically led to higher quality of life for all. Moreover, excess wealth is also a danger to the wellbeing of the super rich themselves, as it is hard to provide private insurance against what are risks that affect all. The super rich are also at risk of wealth addiction, since the mental goals of accumulating wealth will keep shifting.

MORE FROM INGRID ROBEYNS

Christine Emba wrote piece on *Limitarianism* in the [Atlantic](#) on April 1, 2024

Ingrid Robeyns was interviewed about *Limitarianism* on WNYC's [The Brian Lehrer Show](#) on February 19, 2024

Ingrid Robeyns wrote a pub day blog post about *Limitarianism* for the [Crooked Timber](#) blog published on January 16, 2024

Ingrid Robeyns wrote a piece for the [Nation](#) on the occasion of the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos, asserting that the WEF is not adequately addressing the issue of wealth inequality and proposing a wealth cap of \$10 million published on January 17, 2024

Ingrid was interviewed alongside Abigail Disney on a segment about billionaires on [CBS Sunday Morning](#) on January 23, 2022

Ingrid Robeyns penned an op-ed for *The Guardian*, [Limitarianism: why we need to put a cap on the super-rich](#) on January 21, 2024

FURTHER READING

Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto by Kohei Saito

The Deficit Myth: Modern Monetary Theory and the Birth of The People's Economy by Stephanie Kelton

Poverty, by America by Matthew Desmond

Bootstrapped: Liberating Ourselves from the American Dream by Alissa Quart

A Brief History of Equality by Thomas Piketty

Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World by Anand Giridharadas

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power by Shoshana Zuboff

Debt: The First 5,000 Years by David Graeber