

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

November 15, 2016

Not a few of us have been thinking about cataclysm lately, and not just because we're looking at Revelation on these two Wednesday evenings. And when thinking about God's judgment and the Wrapping Up of All Things, it's pretty easy to point fingers and think that the chief offenders live somewhere other than our own address.

As we wonder about such things, it may be instructive to review what John's prophecy had to say about ancient Rome (using the pseudonym "Babylon").¹ I invite you to read what follows from that letter, listening for any echoes that may still resonate in today's world, and I'll say more after that . . .



Revelation 18:1-24 (NIV2011)

¹ *After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. ² With a mighty voice he shouted:*

“ ‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!’ She has become a dwelling for demons and a haunt for every impure spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable animal. ³ For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.”

⁴ *Then I heard another voice from heaven say:*

*“ ‘**Come out of her, my people,**’ so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues; ⁵ for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes. ⁶ Give back to her as she has given; pay her back double for what she has done. Pour her a double portion from her own cup. ⁷ Give her as much torment and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself. In her heart she boasts, ‘I sit enthroned as queen. I am not a widow; I will never mourn.’ ⁸ Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her: death, mourning and famine. She will be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.*

⁹ *“When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. ¹⁰ Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry: “Woe! Woe to you, great city, you mighty city of Babylon! In one hour your doom has come!”*

¹¹ *“The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes anymore— ¹² cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; ¹³ cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and human beings sold as slaves.*

¹ “When the stars begin to fall” comes from Isaiah 34:4; Matthew 24:29; and Mark 13:25.

¹⁴ “They will say, ‘The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your luxury and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.’ ¹⁵ The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn ¹⁶ and cry out:

“ ‘Woe! Woe to you, great city, dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls! ¹⁷ In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!’

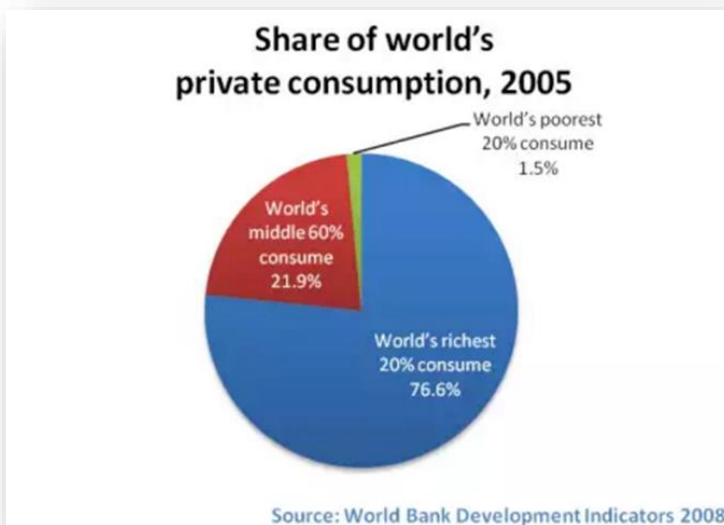
“Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. ¹⁸ When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, ‘Was there ever a city like this great city?’ ¹⁹ They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out:

“ ‘Woe! Woe to you, great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin!’ ²⁰ “Rejoice over her, you heavens! Rejoice, you people of God! Rejoice, apostles and prophets! For God has judged her with the judgment she imposed on you.”

²¹ Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said:

“With such violence the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again. ²² The music of harpists and musicians, pipers and trumpeters, will never be heard in you again. No worker of any trade will ever be found in you again. The sound of a millstone will never be heard in you again. ²³ The light of a lamp will never shine in you again. The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again. Your merchants were the world’s important people. By your magic spell all the nations were led astray. ²⁴ In her was found the blood of prophets and of God’s holy people, of all who have been slaughtered on the earth.”

I don’t know about you, but it’s hard for me to read that without thinking about our own country. Mitchell Reddish noted fifteen years ago that America, along with other Western nations, enjoys a standard of living far greater than that of most the world’s population. We spend more, consume more, waste more, and exploit more.²



Because our economies are so massive and powerful, we in the first world dominate the world market. Multinational corporations (the new “merchants” who are the magnates of the earth), driven by the desire for more and more profits, seek cheaper ways to produce more

² Mitchell Reddish, “Revelation,” *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon: 2001), pp. 350-354.

goods and more successful ways of marketing them to consumers. Factories are built in third-world countries where cheap labor (often slave labor) is available, usually without the health and safety standards that must be met in more developed nations.

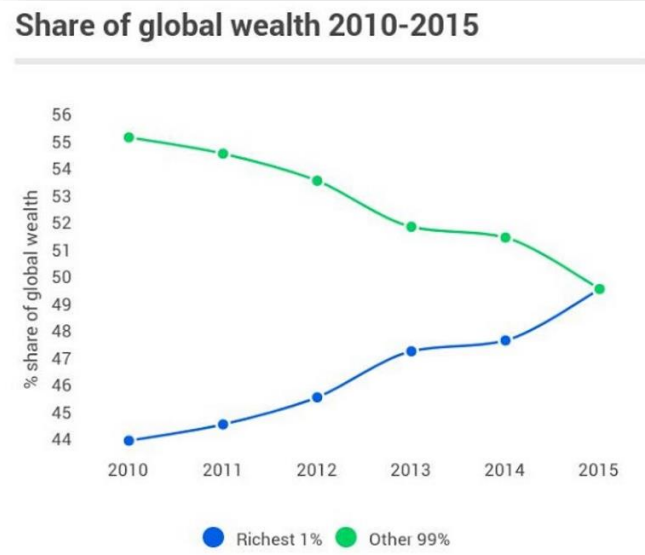
The natural environment is exploited and dangerously abused in order to reap more profits. Too often, the controlling criterion in world economic matters is not what is best for all the people of the world, and certainly not what is best for the poor and disenfranchised, but what is best for the few who already possess and control the most. So the rich get richer while the poor not only get poorer, but starve to death as well.

Fifteen years ago, Reddish noted that “People in the industrial world account for only 21% of the global population, and that share is decreasing, given the faster rate of population growth in the developing world. But industrial countries consume about 86% of the globe’s aluminum, 81% of its paper, 80% of its iron and steel, 75% of its energy, and 61% of its meat. So they [we] are responsible for the vast majority of the hazardous wastes created by the mining and smelting of aluminum and iron ores, the clear-cutting of forests done for the sake of paper production, the air pollution and buildup of greenhouse gases caused by fossil fuel burning, and the severe soil erosion found on grazing lands.”³

Economics and politics are often inextricably intertwined. The U.S. government has been guilty of supporting political factions and regimes in other countries on the basis of whether those parties were in the best economic interests of the United States, despite records of serious civil and human rights abuses. In such instances, the United States, along with “Babylon,” must bear the guilt of innocent blood that is spilled.

We who by the standards of most of the world’s population are fabulously wealthy, we who are citizens of the most powerful nation on earth, we whose higher standard of living has contributed to a lower standard of living for people in our own country as well as throughout the world, we who live in a society that is marked by violence and bloodshed and that promotes and exports that violence throughout the world, should see our own reflection in the great prostitute of Babylon.

We may prefer to see ourselves and our nation as the “city set on a hill,” the savior and protector of the world. In the eyes of many oppressed people in the world, however, we may look more like an intoxicated prostitute on whom is found



³ In 1991, the richest 20% of the world’s people earned 61 times more income than the poorest 20%, according to the United Nations. Not only is this gap wide, it has been growing. Thirty years ago, the richest 20% received “only” 30 times more than the poorest 20%—half the gap of today. In this same thirty years, the poorest 20% saw their share of global income drop from 2.3% to 1.4% while that of the richest 20% increased from 70% to 85%.

Here in the U.S., the average income for the top 20% of U.S. households grew from \$73,754 in 1968 to \$105,945 in 1994, an inflation-adjusted increase of 44%. During this same period, the bottom 20% of households saw their income grow from \$7,202 to \$7,762, an increase of 7%.

the blood of countless victims. If we hear the message of Revelation clearly, we are forced at times to admit, to paraphrase the comic strip character Pogo, “We have met the beast, and he is us.”

The pages that follow present several charts that will make these disparities visual. John’s word to the believers in ancient Rome was that they “**Come out of the city so you will not share in her sins**” (Revelation 18:4).

- ☞ We “come out of the city” when we do not allow consumerism and greed to control our lives.
- ☞ We “come out of the city” when we contribute our time, talent and treasure to God’s causes.
- ☞ We “come out of the city” when we refuse to accept coercion and violence as means of achieving our goals, either as individuals or as a nation.
- ☞ We “come out of the city” when we choose to be involved in businesses that meet genuine, worthwhile needs, not just things that “make money.”
- ☞ We “come out of the city” when we adopt a simpler lifestyle that does not consume a disproportionate share of the earth’s resources.
- ☞ In addition to “coming out of the city” by living by a different set of values, our task is also to change “the city,” attempting to make it a place more in keeping with the standards of God.

And finally, if you were to describe your own life as “a city,” what would you say? What kinds of cargoes are coming into it? What activities occur within its walls? What would be a good name for it? How similar to or different from Babylon/Rome would it be? What needs to change?

Dave

The global wealth pyramid

Source: James Davies, Rodrigo Lúberas and Anthony Shorrocks, Credit Suisse Global Wealth Databook 2013

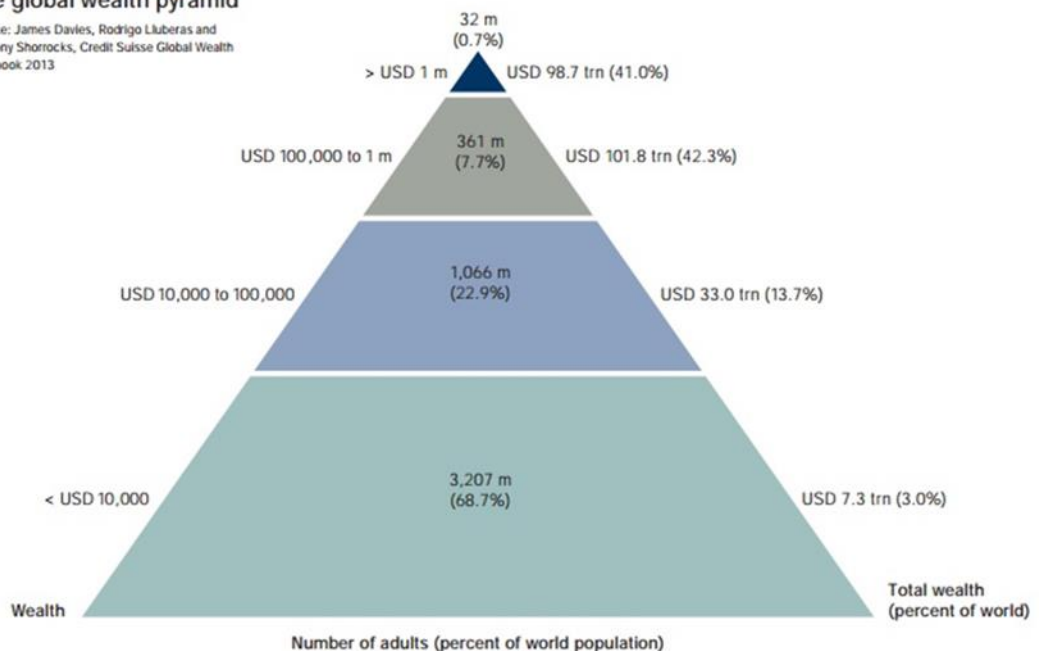
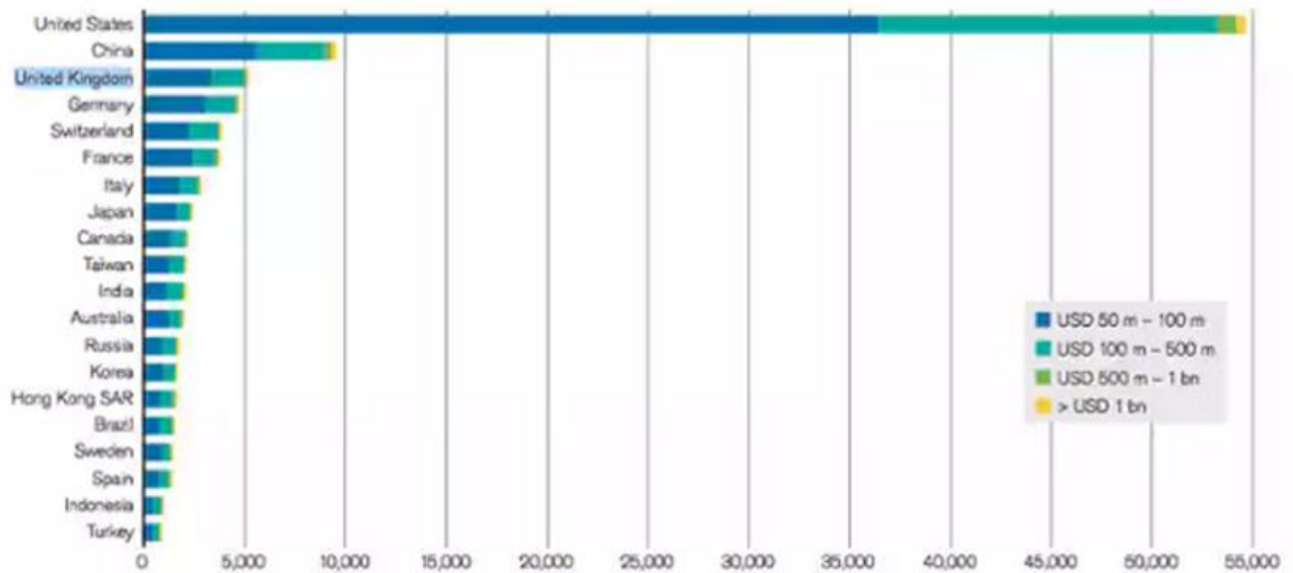


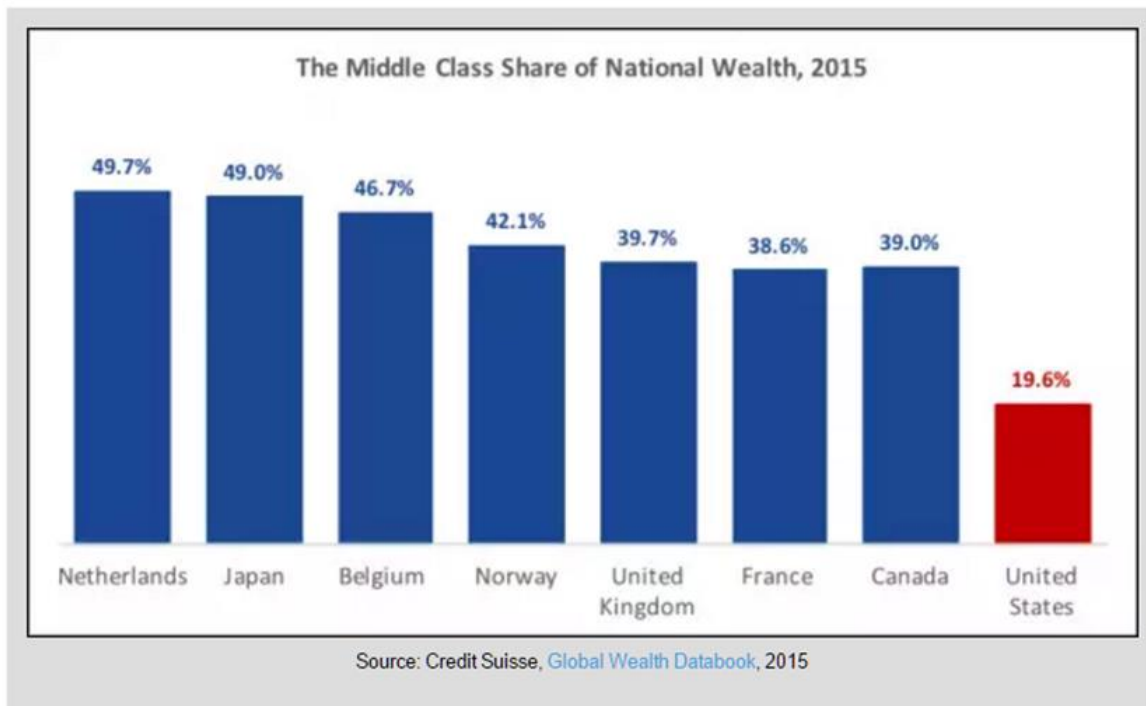
Figure 5
Ultra high net worth individuals, 2015: Top 20 countries



Source: James Davies, Rodrigo Lluberas and Anthony Shorrocks, Credit Suisse Global Wealth Databook 2015

Photograph: Credit Suisse

May explain our election . . .

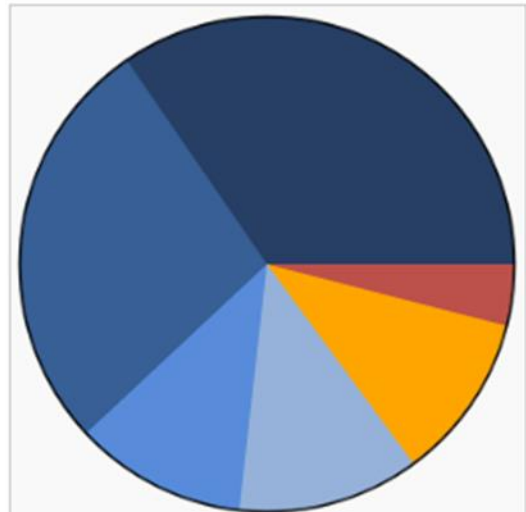


Source: Credit Suisse, Global Wealth Databook, 2015

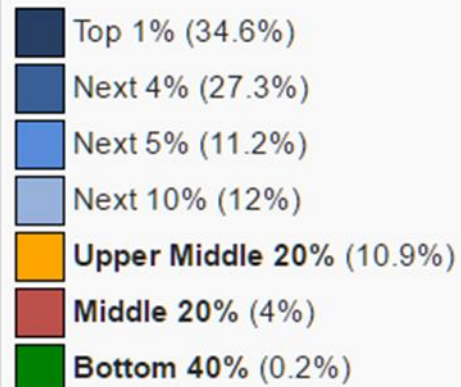
The middle class in the United States has less than half the wealth share of middle classes in much of the rest of the developed world.

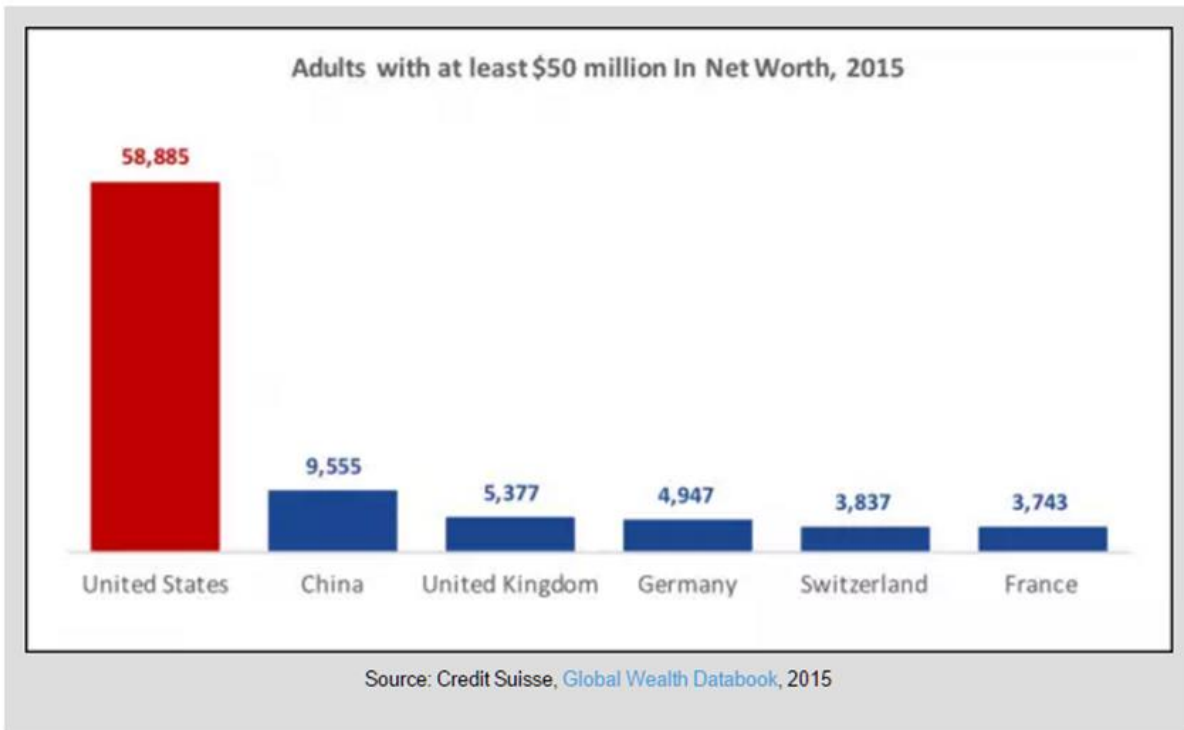
Here are the top 10 countries, with their percentages of total global personal wealth.

1. United States — 41.6%
2. China — 10.5%
3. Japan — 8.9%
4. U.K. — 5.6%
5. Germany — 3.9%
6. France — 3.5%
7. Canada — 3.0%
8. Italy — 2.9%
9. Australia — 2.0%
10. South Korea — 1.6%

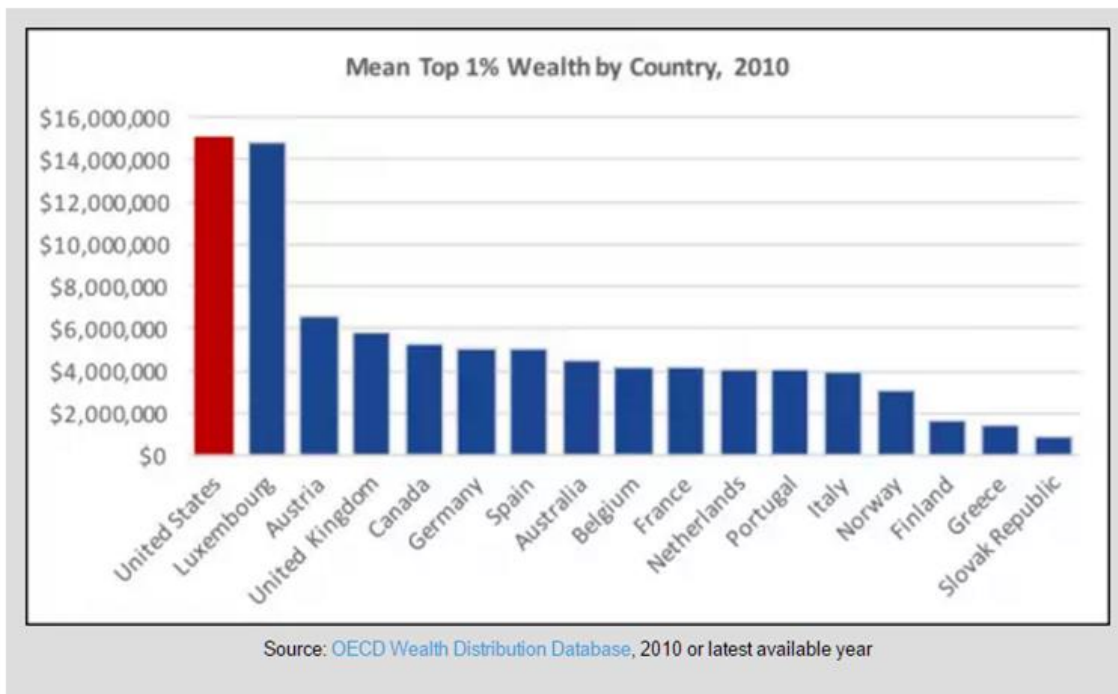


Distribution of net worth in the United States (2007).^[22] The net wealth of many people in the lowest 20% is negative because of debt.^[22] By 2014, the wealth gap deepened.

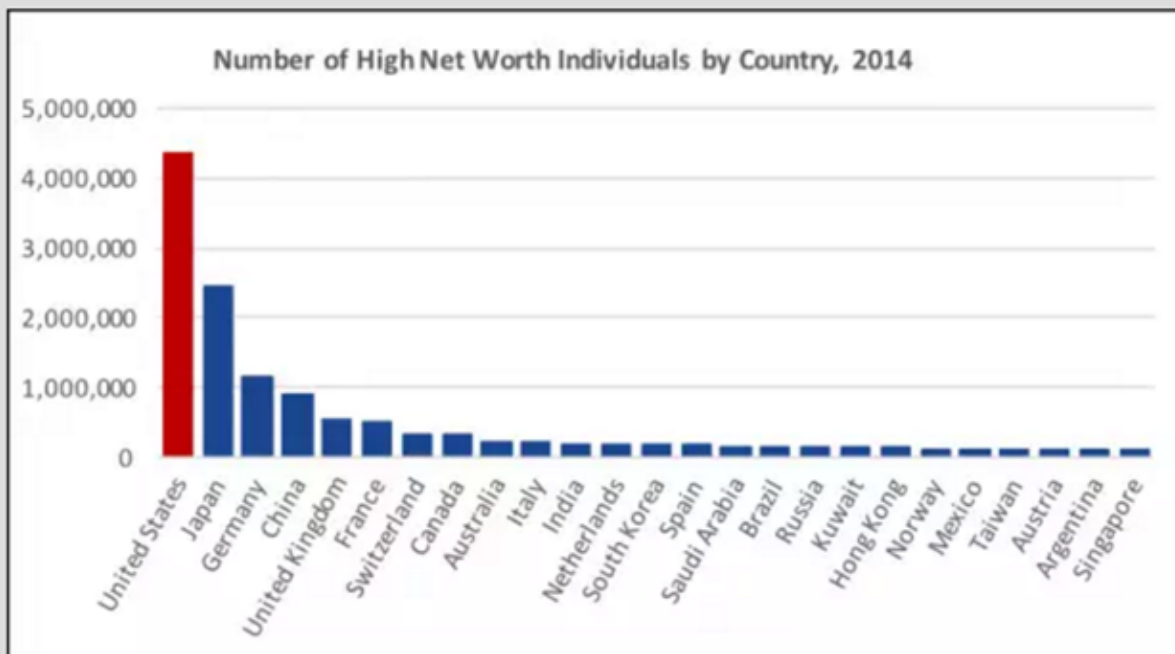




The United States has become home to more than twice as many adults with at least \$50 million in assets as the next five nations with the most super rich combined.

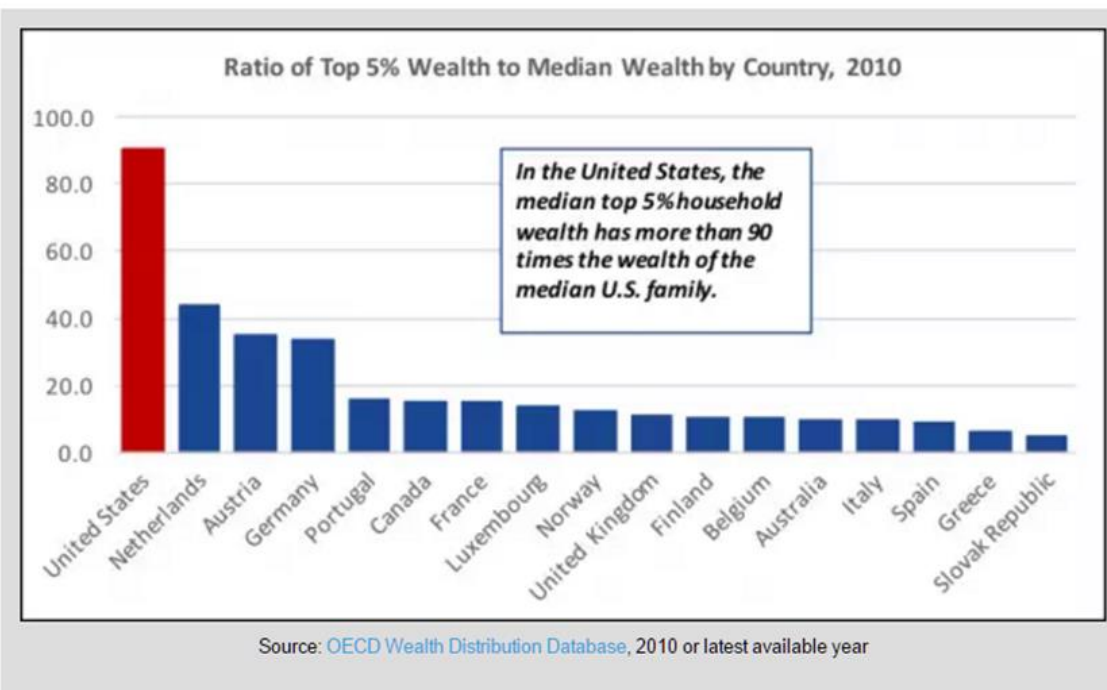


The top 1 percent in the United States hold an average \$15 million in wealth, a total only comparable to the prosperous microstate of Luxembourg. No other nation's top 1 percent own even half of the wealth the top 1 percent's in the United States and Luxembourg hold.



Source: Capgemini and RBC Wealth Management, [World Wealth Report, 2015](#)

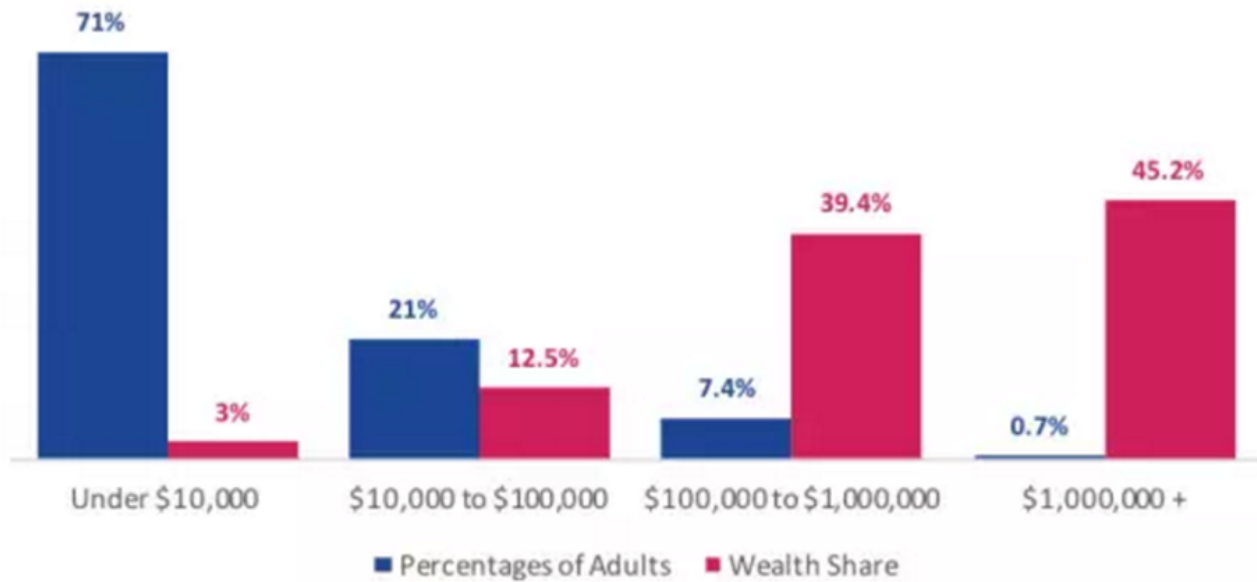
The United States dominates the global population of high net worth individuals, with over 4.3 million individuals owning at least \$1 million in financial assets (not including their primary residence or consumer goods).



Source: [OECD Wealth Distribution Database](#), 2010 or latest available year

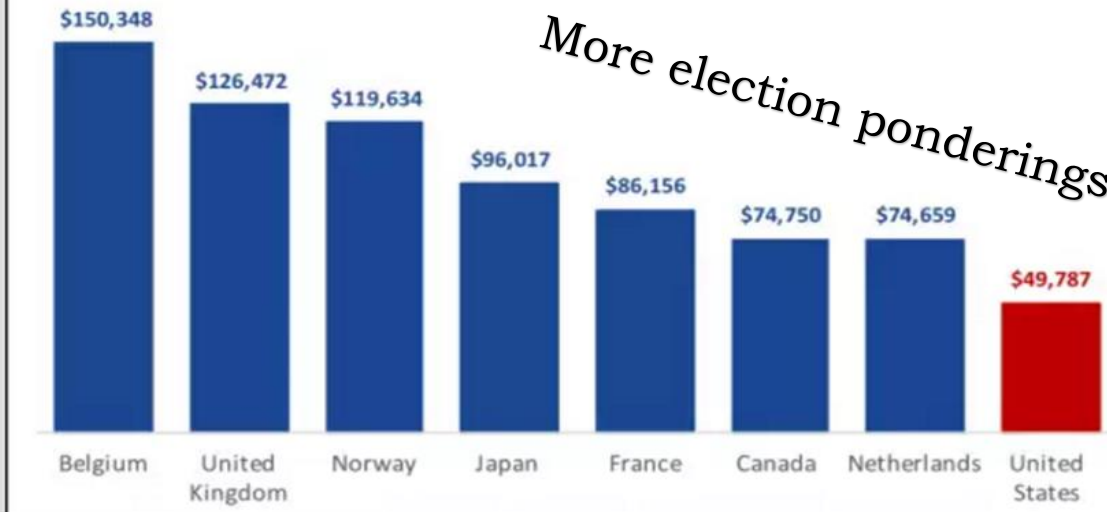
Wealth disparity in the United States is running twice as wide — and more — as wealth gaps in the rest of the industrial world.

Global Adult Population and Share of Total Wealth by Wealth Group, 2015



Source: Credit Suisse Research Institute, [Global Wealth Report 2015](#), October 2015

Median Wealth Per Adult, 2015



Source: Credit Suisse, [Global Wealth Databook](#), 2015

The United States has more wealth than any other nation. But America's top-heavy distribution of wealth leaves typical American adults with far less wealth than their counterparts in other industrial nations.