

Graphic detail

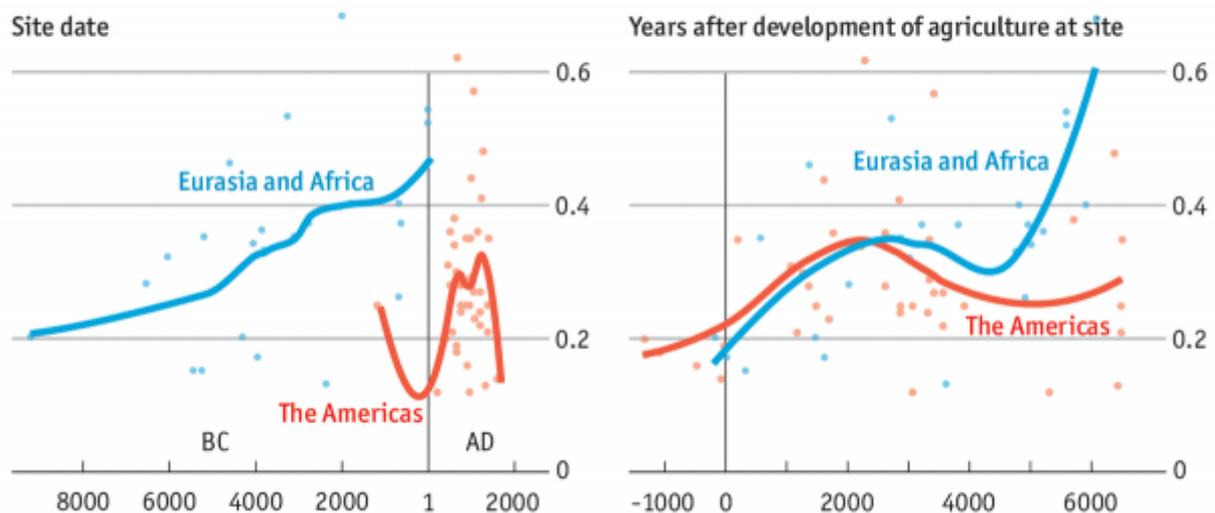
Daily chart

Wealth inequality has been increasing for millennia

Neolithic societies were far more egalitarian

Nice digs

Gini coefficient of house sizes at archaeological sites
1=perfect inequality, 0=perfect equality



Source: "Greater post-Neolithic wealth disparities in Eurasia than in North America and Mesoamerica" by Timothy A. Kohler *et al*

Economist.com

Graphic detail

Nov 22nd 2017 | by THE DATA TEAM

THE one-percenters are now gobbling up more of the pie in America—that much is well known. This trend, though disconcerting, is not unique to the modern era. A new study by Timothy Kohler of Washington State University and 17 others finds that inequality may well have been rising for several thousand years, at least in some parts of the world. The scholars examined 63 archaeological sites and estimated the levels of wealth inequality in the societies whose remains were dug up, by studying the distributions of house sizes.

As a measure they used the Gini coefficient (a perfectly equal society would have a Gini coefficient of zero). It rose from about 0.2 around 8000BC in Jerf el-Ahmar, on the Euphrates in modern-day Syria, to 0.5 in around 79AD in Pompeii. Data on burial goods, though sparse, suggest similar trends.

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The researchers suggest agriculture is to blame. The nomadic lifestyle is not conducive to wealth accumulation. Only when humans switched to farming did people truly begin to acquire material riches. Inequality rose steadily after the shift into settled agriculture, but tailed off in the Americas after around 2,500 years. In the old world, however, wealth inequality

continued climbing for several millennia. That may be because Eurasia was richer in large mammals that could be domesticated. Horses and oxen greatly improved farm productivity—but livestock were mainly owned by the rich (who could also rent them out). The agricultural revolution was good for humanity but awful for egalitarians.

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