

‘The rich should be obliged to give to the poor because they don’t deserve what they have’

In a time where the richest 1% own 50% of all the wealth in the world, the question of whether the rich should be obliged to give to the poor remains a hotly debated topic. The prospect of such a commitment only serves to raise further questions- would the reason for this really be that the rich don’t deserve their wealth? Moreover, how would the rich be made to give?

If we are to investigate the rich’s entitlement to their wealth, the amount and value of the work they put in to achieve it is arguably the best indicator. According to a study of 10,000 millionaires, Princeton University discovered that only 21% received any inheritance at all. Initially this would seem to suggest that the majority of the elite’s wealth is a result of their hard work and determination. While this is certainly true, this idea fails to acknowledge the essential contribution made by the workers beneath these successful businessmen and women. Although Steve Jobs may have worked tirelessly to make Apple into the immensely successful business it is today, this would have been impossible without the workers in countries such as China who work 12 hour days - for as little as £5.20 an hour - to produce Apple products. When considered from this perspective it becomes clear that, while the majority of the rich do deserve their success, their enormous wealth is a disproportionate representation of the work they put in. Moreover, there are instances where the rich are entirely undeserving. The most poignant example of this is in countries where the sale of natural resources is monopolised by the wealthy elite. For countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, this means that the rest of the population must face extreme poverty and violence. Consequently, the money given to the poor by the rich should be a fairer representation of the essential work they contribute and the wealthy should only take what they have rightfully earned in the first place.

But what if the rich are more deserving because of their intelligence and initiative? Anyone can work hard, but surely it takes a true visionary to create a company such as Microsoft? This may certainly be the case in some instances, but it fails to consider the influence of differences in opportunities. In third world countries where the main concern is securing enough food and water to survive, undertaking a business venture is simply not an option. Consequently, we must also consider the importance of being born into a country that allows such ambitions to be realised. As for the developed world, there is also a disparity between opportunities for different social and socio-economic groups. For instance, only 11.7% of billionaires are women - far from a proportionate representation of the population. Here the issue is not that the rich are undeserving of the privileges that allow them to attain their wealth, but rather that they are simply not more deserving than those who don’t. If this is so, then who is responsible for resolving this inequality? The answer to this is the rich- not because they are individually responsible, but because they are in a position that enables them to do so.

So how should this obligation be imposed? In theory it seems that imposing higher taxes on the rich is the best way to create greater economic equality, however, the reality is that this will inevitably lead to greater tax evasion. While the law is effective at preventing most crimes, the ease of avoiding national tax laws means that it is highly ineffective. Although this could be circumvented by the creation of international tax laws, the conflicting interests of different nations means that this has so far proved impossible.

If the law is not the answer, then what is? In order to answer this, we must investigate why the rich want money. Given that the wealthy often use their money to purchase status symbols such as expensive estates and luxury holidays, it seems that the answer to this question is overwhelmingly a desire for respect. Therefore, the best way in which to oblige the rich to give to the poor is to create a culture in which charity and compassion, as opposed to wealth, are the most respected assets a person can have.

Now that we have discussed how and why the rich should be obliged to give to the poor, we must also consider how they should do so. For their own workers, this simply means paying them a fairer salary, but for the poor in general the solution is not so simple. Although money could help supply essential goods, this is only a short-term answer to poverty. Furthermore, the level of government corruption in third world countries means that it is possible this money wouldn't even reach those who are most in need. Consequently, the best way to ensure that the donations of the rich lead to the creation of a fairer and wealthier society is through direct investment in institutions. This is because the creation of institutions such as schools and hospitals will enable the poor to realise their full potential and become self-sufficient, thus ensuring continued economic growth.

In conclusion, in terms of the rich's entitlement to their wealth, what can be said is that they owe their workers a salary that reflects their financial contribution and only deserve what they have achieved through their own hard work and initiative. Despite this, the main source of their obligation is not the fact that they don't deserve what they have, but that their position means they are able to help the poor, meaning it is the moral thing to do so. Consequently, the most effective way to ensure this contribution is through the creation of a compassionate and charitable culture in which those with wealth invest in institutions that will allow the poor to have the same opportunities as themselves.

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