Taxing Times: Billionaires, Inequality and Education

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Abstract

In this book, Gabriel Zucman argues that there is severe tax injustice: the billionaire super-rich do not pay their fair share of tax. They pay relatively little personal income tax; most of their money is hoarded away in holding companies, which, in mystical capitalist theory, belongs to nobody' and therefore remains untaxed. Zucman wants this unfair situation remedied; the super-rich must be brought back into the tax system. His remedy is a wealth tax. Zucman acknowledges that his plans for a wealth tax would not solve all of the state's fiscal problems, but argues also that it would lessen economic inequality. Yet Zucman's arguments for a wealth tax could be seen as just another programme for 'saving' capitalism. Even though the wealth of the super-rich rests on the education and training of millions of workers, which Zucman acknowledges, it is argued here that there is no guarantee that money from a wealth tax would alleviate current education funding crises or social and health needs. Class struggle must seek to ensure that any money resulting from a wealth tax is to be used for addressing social needs, boosting spending on social housing and free transport, and tackling severe problems in education – rather than giving in to retrogressive arguments for increased defence spending. A wealth tax should be incorporated within a programme for improving working-class

lives and laying the foundations for moving away from capitalism and its form of education, and towards socialism.

Keywords: Billionaires, wealth tax, inequality, education funding.

Introduction[1]

Wealth taxes on the ultra-rich have surfaced in the mainstream media increasingly over the last five years or so. In the U.S., Elizabeth Warren floated the idea of a wealth tax on the super-rich in her 2020 Presidential election campaign, and in 2021 she put forward the Ultra-Millionaire Tax Act. This Act aimed to legislate for 'an annual tax on individuals with net worths between $50 million and $1 billion …[and]… individuals worth over $1 billion would pay an annual 3% tax' (Siddiq, 2021). The Bill was co-sponsored by Bernie Sanders and other Democrats. It continues to be a proposed Federal Bill, but has been blocked by the Republicans and some antagonistic Democrats. Last March, Warren reintroduced her wealth tax as the Ultra-millionaire Tax Act 2026, with a view to getting it passed in 2028 (Amure, 2026, p.6). If the ultra-rich attempt to avoid the wealth tax by leaving the country and renouncing their American citizenship then Warren's Bill would impose a 40% 'exit tax' on them (Picchi, 2026, p.1). An exit tax has also been proposed by LSE economists Summers, Advani, and Poux for the UK (2024). As Amure notes, for the U.S: 'Wealth taxes are spreading in the states, New York just passed a tax on luxury second homes' (2026, p.6). Meanwhile, California's wealth tax plan, a state where billionaires were estimated to have had a net worth of $2.1 trillion in 2025 by *Forbes* magazine, has come under severe resistance from the super-rich. The billionaires have collected together $129 million to fight California's wealth tax proposals (Foley, 2026).

Something similar has been proposed in the UK, where a group of Labour MPs want to introduce a wealth tax on home and land owners in London and the south-east of England, while scrapping council tax and taxes on home buying (known as stamp duty) (Wheeler and Vaughan, 2026). Known as a 'proportional property tax', the focus would be on land property values, which would include taxing owners of vacant properties. The result would be that 18 million households would find themselves better off (Ibid.). Also in the UK, Richard Burgon and five other Labour MPs submitted an Early Day Motion to the UK Parliament on 21st July 2025, proposing a wealth tax of 2% on those with individual assets over £10 million (Burgon et al, 2025). It was supported by 53 other MPs, mostly from the Labour Party, but also including some from the Green Party, Plaid Cymru (Welsh Nationalists), the Scottish National Party, the Northern Irish Social & Democratic Labour Party, and several Independents (including Jeremy Corbyn). It was calculated to raise £24 billion annually. Beyond the UK Parliament, the proposed wealth tax was supported by Tax Justice UK and Patriotic Millionaires UK. Richard Burgon has run a well-crafted campaign for a wealth tax on social media, especially Facebook, for the last few years. However, Labour Chancellor Rachel Reeves has poured cold water on the idea of a wealth tax, arguing that wealth taxes such as capital gains tax could fulfill the same function in terms of bringing in money to the UK Treasury. Meanwhile, Gary Stevenson has nurtured a substantial campaign for a wealth tax in the UK, arguing that we must 'tax the rich' in his bestselling book (Stevenson, 2025) and on his YouTube channel, *Garys Economics*.[2]

Gary Stevenson has promoted Gabriel Zucman as the academic most knowledgeable on questions of designing and implementing a wealth tax for the richest capitalist countries.[3] Zucman's book, *We Need to Tax Billionaires*, is the primary focus of this review article. Yet its significance for education, combatting social and economic inequalities and the transition to socialism requires some contextual discussion and analysis. Therefore, we need to situate

Zucman's book within current developments in education and inequality. The following section explores briefly the parlous state of education in the UK, which no doubt has many echoes for education systems worldwide.

Education Under Attack

There is no doubt that education is under attack in many of the world's wealthiest nations. Whilst the situation in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) is not as dire as it is in the United States as described by Peter McLaren, where: 'American higher education stands like a besieged city under occupation… [and with] … its scholars compelled to kneel at the altar of political conformity' (2025, p.2) – the situation, especially financially, is alarming. In the U.S., as McLaren (2026) indicates, these attacks on education are not just financial, leading to budget cuts and course closures, but also *ideological*. The propensity of the humanities and social sciences to generate critical theories, analyses and policy prescriptions has become a hunting ground for pro-capitalist ideologues, and Donald Trump and his hangers-on. University managements take the hint and trim and cut departments accordingly in line with these prejudices and presidential intellectual war-mongering. We should not be complacent in the UK regarding the ideological assault on higher education. What is happening to higher education in the UK is not just about financial retraction. As Harrison and Harvie's study of academics in HEIs demonstrates, some 'crises' appear to be 'manufactured by senior managers' and then used to 'justify ideologically driven restructuring' (2025, p.7). Additionally, job cuts, course closures, disinvestment from research and student fees increases 'are not only financially motivated, but also ideological', argue Harrison and Harvie (2025, p.20). A study of the cuts and redundancies at the University of Leicester by Burrell et al (2024) indicates that the drive to attack critical thinking and to undermine trade union power was as least as significant as cutting costs and restructuring in the university's Business School. Nearly a half of higher education institutions in the UK are faced with deficits for 2025-26 (Office of Students, 2025). A recent report by UCU Queen Mary indicates the extent of budget cuts, redundancies, restructuring programs, closures and mergers in UK higher education in recent years (UCU Queen Mary, 2026).

In the further education (FE) and skills sector, Imran Tahir (2026) points to the fact that FE colleges have faced some of the deepest cuts across the UK education system (p.2). He notes that 'when overall [education] spending increases, FE tends to receive smaller boosts, and when budgets are tightened, it often bears the brunt of the reduction' (Ibid.). This is a persistent historical trend, says Tahir. He adds that between 2010-11 and 2019-20, funding per student fell by 14% in real terms in FE, and by 28% in sixth-form colleges (Ibid.). The relative fallback in teachers' pay in sixth-form colleges led to strikes in 2025. Teachers in sixth-form colleges teaching GCE Advanced Level courses get 22% less pay than teachers teaching to the same educational level in school sixth-forms (see Blakeley, 2025, p.1). Jessica Hill (2026) reports on students being turned away from some FE colleges due to lack of space and funding.

The schools' system in England also faces significant budget concerns. This is especially so for buildings and maintenance following the cancellation of the Building Schools for the Future programme by the Conservative Government in 2010, which was replaced by the Priority School Building Programme (PSBP) in 2011 with a significantly reduced budget. Furthermore, thousands of children are learning in illegal or unregistered buildings. There are more than '20 suspected illegal schools in London, Leicester and Manchester alone' (Corker, 2026). There have been persistent teacher shortages in recent years, and some newly-qualified teachers are leaving schools in England to take up posts with better pay and conditions in other countries (Henry, 2023). Meanwhile, the crisis in Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) education funding rumbles on. In 2024, a report by Gareth Davies, Comptroller and Auditor

General for the National Audit Office for the Department of Education found that there had been a 140% increase in the number of children with an education, health and care plan (ECHP) between 2015 and January 2024; that regarding children waiting for an EHCP, 50% had been waiting for longer than the statutory 20 weeks; there would be a £4.6 billion deficit in the dedicated school grant for SEND pupils by the end of 2025-26; and that there was a £3.4 billion gap between the Department for Education's forecast for children with high-needs and the current level of funding (taking inflation into account) up to 2027-28 (Davies, 2024, p.4). *The Guardian* has received hundreds of letters from teachers and parents of children with and without SEND, indicating that 'mainstream schools had no hope of providing adequate support for the growing number of children with increasingly complex special needs' (Otte, 2024, p.1). The situation for SEND children had not improved significantly after nearly two years of a Labour Party government. Sally Weale reported that two-fifths of schools in England had 'been forced to cut back on support for children with special educational needs due to a financial crisis' (2026, p.1). 70% of schools have cut down on teaching assistants in the past year and 49% have reduced support staff – people crucial to the task of supporting SEND pupils (Ibid.). Whether the Labour government's *Education for All Bill* (currently going through the UK Parliament) addresses all these issues for SEND pupils, remains to be seen.

Overall spending on education by the UK Department for Education is expected to fall over the next three years according to a report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) (Sibieta, Snape and Tahir, 2025, p.2). The UK Labour government set out plans for education spending to increase by around '1.2% per year in real terms between 2025-26 and 2028-29' (Ibid.). Yet:

> …after accounting for the likely cost of existing commitments on defence, health and childcare, IFS analysis suggests that 'unprotected' spending will fall by about 1% per year in real terms between 2025-26 and 2028-29, or by about 3% in total. This currently includes most spending by the Department for Education (DfE), excluding the early years and childcare' (Ibid.).

Thus, prospects for increased spending for education in the schools' system does not appear to be very bright – especially given the current media, defence lobby, military spokespeople and 'experts', and Labour Defence Ministry calls to increase defence spending substantially.
But where is the money to boost education funding to come from, and at a time when other calls on UK government funds – e.g. defence, social care, council housing – are being made? Where can the incoming Prime Minister in the UK, Andy Burnham, find extra money to address acute social and educational problems the country faces? One possible new source of finance for education and other social needs is money stashed away by the super-rich, the billionaires. This is the key point made by Gabriel Zucman in his new book, *We Need to Tax Billionaires*. These ultra-wealthy folk should be made to pay more towards alleviating social need and shortcomings in education. To these ends, we need a wealth tax. The focus on the super-rich sneaking their money into tax havens such as the British Virgin Islands or Switzerland was explored by Zucman in an earlier book (2015). But this is only half the picture. In many countries, such as the UK and France, the ultra-wealthy funnel money into holding companies which are free of tax. All this happens in plain sight.

On the Money

Zucman's book is based on researching the world's wealthiest people for over 15 years. Government statistics shed no light on the wealth of the super-rich. There are 'rich lists', as in the *Sunday Times*, but these say nothing about how much tax the super-rich pay. Zucman stresses that his research efforts regarding untaxed income of the planet's wealthiest is part of a collective endeavour. In the early 2020s, an international research project on tax data for the super-rich emerged. Research on a number of countries uncovered data on the effective tax rates of the wealthiest segment of global capitalism. Forming partnerships with tax administrators resulted in gaining access to tax returns of the super-rich and their companies.

The average person in the countries surveyed pays a lot of tax. Focusing on France, Zucman found that all income groups pay a lot of tax; the tax to national income ratio is 51%, taking all taxes into consideration. The French working-class (the bottom 50% of income distribution) pay 45% of their income in taxes on average. The Middle class (those between the median and the wealthiest 10%) pay 50% of their income in tax. The richest 10% pay just over 50% of their income in tax. Thus, the tax system in France is slightly progressive. In Europe, the average person pays between 40-50% in tax. All groups contribute reasonably towards the services provided by the state, except one: the super-rich.

For the French ultra-rich, the ratio of tax to national income is only 25%. The 100 billionaires in France pay half as much tax in relation to their income as compared with the average French person. This is because income tax virtually vanishes at the highest level of the income distribution system. Corporation taxes cut into the income of the wealthiest but these are set at a lower rate than income taxes. Corporation tax is the only substantial tax the wealthiest pay. In France, billionaires contribute only 0.3% of tax revenue. Therefore, the argument that the government would receive less tax revenue if billionaires left France has little force: they pay little tax anyway! Tax revenue would decline by a paltry 0.03% (p.3). Zucman adds that the picture on the tax shortfall for France's super-rich is similar to that in other wealthy nations. The main point is that the ultra-rich pay so little income tax: around 2% of their income. They pay themselves relatively meagre sums from their investments. In one tax year, Amazon's Jeff Bezos paid himself so little actual income that he claimed and received a tax credit for his children (p.24)!

In Europe, the principal scam is setting up holding companies 'to siphon off taxable individual income' (p.26). Dividends received from companies the super-rich own or invest in are lodged in holding companies. As a holding company is basically owned by no-one then nobody is receiving an income to be taxed! Therefore:

> By pulling on the threads of the complex webs of holding companies owned by [the] elite, [tax researchers] were able to obtain a complete picture of the income that ends up in the coffers of the country's largest fortunes and of what fraction of that income goes to the government (Zucman, 2026, p.17).

European billionaires move their money, 'mainly in the form of dividends, to their holding companies', and 'because no actual living, breathing person is receiving an income, no personal tax is paid' (p.26). In addition, hardly any corporate tax is paid, and 'other than the corporation taxes paid by the companies they own, billionaires do not pay taxes in any significant way' (Zucman, 2026, p.20).

Furthermore, standard shareholders pay 30% tax on dividends; billionaires pay 1.25%! Zucman argues that the tax system in France and other wealthy nations violates 'the principle that all citizens are equal before the law' (p.27). As far as the super-rich are concerned, ability to pay has nothing to do with it.

The Great Under-taxed

The argument that the richest 10% pay most of the tax collected is false. The data used only concerns income tax, which in France accounts for less than 10% of all tax revenue. But the billionaires operate outside the tax system. The assertion that money the wealthiest have in holding companies is not really theirs is invalid. Just because 'they cannot use this money as they wish, there's no reason to consider that it truly belongs to them' (p.34). Money chanelled into holding companies is not tied up eternally: sums can be extracted for investments, buying real estate or for personal consumption. The argument that the super-rich might not be paying much tax now, but will later – when they die, in death duties, or when they take money out of their holding companies – is also false, argues Zucman. This is because:

> There is no reason to believe that billionaires will need to withdraw large amounts of money from their holding companies at any time, ever. Because the amounts of money received by the holding companies are considerably larger than billionaires' consumption needs, the money just sits there indefinitely (Zucman, 2026, p.36).

Finally, Zucman points to a particularly egregious argument put forward by presumably Right-oriented commentators: that although the super-rich don't pay much tax, neither do they call much on the state in terms of welfare. The lower classes benefit from the welfare state, so things kind of balance themselves out, is the gist of this argument. Zucman views this argument as a red herring. It simply tries to thwart government attempts to redistribute income. The argument runs counter to tax justice. Regarding tax, most billionaire super-rich seek to opt out of society, as 'in every country for which data is available, income tax vanishes at the top of the pyramid' (Zucman, 2026, p.40). For the super-rich, their income tax burden 'equates to just 2 per cent of their annual income and 0.1 per cent of their total wealth. A pittance' (pp.22-23).

The super-rich must be fully integrated into the tax system, argues Zucman. His solution is a wealth tax worth a minimum of 2% of wealth for ultra-high net worth individuals (p.46). These are people worth $100 million plus. Zucman justifies the 2% tax rate and the £100 million payment level effectively. He goes systematically through the possible technical objections to such a tax. He also analyses why many previous attempts at a wealth tax have failed, and how to rectify their faults. A key point here is that there have been loopholes in previous wealth tax reforms. For example, a wealth tax was introduced in France in 1981. It applied to 'taxpayers with €1.2 million or more in net wealth (358,000 taxpayers)' (Zucman, 2026, p.52), but:

> …large shareholders, which represent virtually all the wealth of billionaires, were exempt under this tax. And it was perfectly legal. Any stake of more than 25 per cent in a company, whether listed [on the French stock exchange] or not, was considered a

> 'professional asset' a term that you would be hard-pressed to find in any economics textbook. Lawmakers simply invented it' (pp.52-53).

This ridiculous state of affairs end in 2017, when the French wealth tax was abolished. Zucman also has answers to the question of billionaires' refusal to pay a wealth tax, and to relocate to a tax haven. On this point, Zucman advocates the U.S. approach: that citizens pay their taxes *wherever* they happen to live or wherever they locate their hoard of money. He seems to have all the angles covered!

The Machine Does Not Stop

Zucman is no Marxist. He provides a critical account of tax inequality and a way to address it – the wealth tax – but he appears to have no interest in hitching his economic agenda in general and his wealth tax proposal in particular to a struggle for socialism and the termination of the rule of capital. For Zucman, the machine does not stop. On the basis of his wealth tax proposals, which of course will anger the ultra-rich and their ideological hangers-on, there could have been a programme articulated for a movement towards dismantling the social relations of production and generating production minus the value-form of labour. Zucman stops well short of this option. He provides a picture of a redistributionist capitalism that leaves the *generation of inequalities intact*.[4] The class relation, value production, profit and private ownership of the means of production, remain. The billionaires remain too. It's just that the proceeds of this social apparatus are redistributed. It seems more like a programme for saving capitalism, rather than dissolving it and liberating labour from capital's economic compulsion to produce value and profit.[5]

If capital's social relations are left intact then this has implications for education in capitalism. The transformation of labour-power (the capacity to labour) into labour in the capitalist labour process continues.[6] Labour-power continues to be bought as a commodity by capital's human representatives, and the attributes of labour-power (the skills, work and social attitudes and physical qualities etc. incorporated within labourers) are commanded and put to use in the labour process by these representatives of capital for the purposes of value production and profit (Rikowski, 1990, 2000b and 2024). For Marx: 'The whole system of capitalist production is based on the fact that the workman sells his labour-power as a commodity' (1867, pp.405-406). Thus, labour-power is fundamental to the existence of capital and its society for Marx. As Marx notes, 'education produces labour-power' (Marx, 1863, p. 210). It follows then that in capitalist society education is intimately involved in the social production of labour-power (Rikowski, 2024, pp.10-12). While Zucman recognizes the role played by education in contemporary society in terms of producing workers that labour for the billionaires in a vast variety of employments, he does not recognise that labourers own and embody the single commodity – labour-power – on which the whole capitalist system (including the wealth of the billionaires) rests. Additionally, he argues that the billionaires do not appreciate or give thanks to the thousands and millions of workers that labour to make their fortunes. It is as if the Devil is being castigated for not recognizing the efforts and labour that go into sins committed for the maintenance of his power!

While Zucman might want billionaires to recognise the importance of education, and to take due responsibility for its funding, with better rewards for the education and work of labourers in contemporary education and other areas of society, he glosses over the fact that his redistributionist capitalism nevertheless retains alienated labour on which the billionaires' fortunes are made prior to monetary redistribution by the capitalist state. Furthermore, although Zucman's wealth tax could reduce economic inequality within the framework of capitalism, capitalist education is significant in terms of reinforcing *educational* inequalities and the class divide. Regarding the latter, capitalist education through its variegated curricula, high stakes testing, the division of education based on money (e.g. private schools), and much else – stabilises and reproduces the class divide. Here, the class divide is seen as the division between those who sell their labour-power to work for a wage; and those who own the means of production, either directly or own shares and investments in companies. Tragically, education plays a role in splitting the working class into *strata*. At the level of the labour market, these strata congeal into the many 'classes', feeding the notion of social 'class' beloved by opinion pollsters, media commentators and bourgeoise sociologists. To view these points more closely we turn to the work of Dave Hill.

Zucman's wealth tax, on its own, would leave capital's social class system intact, but with some redistribution of income once billionaires have been effectively incorporated into the income tax system. As Hill explains, this class system is not simply a matter of 'gradations', with 'people being graded according to social status, life-style, [or] consumption patterns' (2022b, p.60). Class is a social relation: between capital and labour, yielding the two great classes of society; capitalists (as owners of the means of production), and the working-class who are forced to sell their labour-powers for a wage. There is *dependency* on both sides: on the one hand, capitalists rely of their being workers that generate value greater than the value of wages they receive, thereby producing *surplus-value* (with violence, coercion, surveillance and state capitalist laws, legislation and economic policies always working to ensure labourers are 'motivated' to present themselves to capitalists as labourers); on the other hand, workers rely on capitalists to employ them for the wages that they need for their social reproduction. The capitalist state lays the groundwork and the regulatory forms and institutions for these dependencies in various ways.[7] A central policy of capitalist states developed to ensure that workers arrive at labour processes ready to create value for capitalists is *austerity*. As

Hill indicates, austerity has ‘been a political choice, a political tool’ (2022b, p.59). Clara Mattei demonstrates in her work on austerity policies across the wealthiest capitalist countries (2026), and focusing on Italy and Britain (2024), that austerity is a ‘structural component’ of the capitalist economic system (2026, p.86). It is not an optional extra; it is the norm. Austerity is not just a response to downturns in the capitalist economy, or some specific concoction of neoliberal capitalism from the mid-1970s onwards. The so-called Golden Age of Capitalism from around 1947 to 1973-4, was an exception to the capitalist rule. Austerity is a central component of the functioning of capitalist society as it solidifies the existence of wage labour. Its supportive policies, designed and sponsored by the capitalist state, force workers to engage with the capitalist labour market and labour process. On the other hand, it bolsters the domination of capital and the private ownership of the means of production by making ‘necessary’ cuts in welfare, education and other institutions involved in the social production and reproduction of labour-power in order to relieve the burdens on capital in times of economic downturn, or to sponsor capitalist expansion. In these ways, austerity is crafted to solidify and maintain the capital relation, the class divide.

As Hill explains, the two great classes of society – capital (capitalists, owners of means of production) and labour (the working- class, who sell their labour-powers for wages) – can be sliced and diced in various ways. Thus, the capitalist class can be divided into ‘fractions’ of capital (landed, financial etc. capitalists), and the working-class can be split into layers or *strata* in processes of social commentary, mainstream social analysis or prediction (e.g. opinion polls). Yet whatever *horizontal* differentiation of the working-class is highlighted, Hill emphasises there is a ‘common identity of interest between these strata’ (2022b, p.62).[8] This horizontal differentiation of the working-class is accompanied by a *vertical* differentiation (Hill, 2022b):

> The working class is also segmented vertically, by 'race' and by gender, with particular ethnic groups, and women in general, particular religious groups, and particular sexual groups such as LGBT and transexuals, disabled and oppressed, [that are] allocated inferior provision such as schooling, [and are] attacked, raped, murdered – and exploited in the labour market, to a greater degree than their / our while, male brothers' (p.62).

The vertical segmentation of the working-class further weakens the capacity of the class to prevail in struggles against capital and its human representatives. In practical terms, this segmentation can result in different segments either struggling against each other (e.g. so-called 'gender wars'), or one segment claiming strategic importance over others (e.g. the 'which group is the most oppressed' scenario), or one segment asserting its dominance in the fight to change society while simultaneously downgrading social class, or a general outlook that seeks to fuse the segments in various ways in order to assert a hierarchy of oppressions (e.g. intersectionality). And there are many other possibilities for splitting the working-class along vertically segmented lines. All this is can be accompanied by the demonisation, castigation and blame-mongering regarding white males. What should be kept in mind, Hill reminds us, is that, 'It is very useful for capitalists in their ongoing attempts to prevent working class unity, to emphasise and prioritise these aspects of subjectivity – of self – in contradistinction to that of social class' (2025, p.51). While support for the myriad struggles against the multitudinous forms of oppression resulting from vertical segmentation of the working-class is essential, and the *practical* strategies and tactics must be worked out empirically for specific instances, these struggles should not be at the expense of working for the dissolution of the class relation, or for class unity.

Poverty is one outcome of austerity. Working-class real income is squeezed and the capitalist state's support for welfare is curbed. Thus, Hill posits capitalism as inherently hitched to *immiseration* of the working class (2013a and 2013b); abundance is denied as working-class noses must be kept to the grindstones of capital accumulation and capital's regime of inequality and austerity. He notes that 'Hundreds of millions of impoverished children live without access to basic health care or schooling. Around 5.6 million children under the age of five die each year because there is no clinic to safeguard their births' (2022b, pp.66-67). Furthermore, 'A mere 1% of the billionaires' net worth each year would amount to around $91 billion, a sum that could ensure access to health care and education for the poorest children across the globe' (2022b, p.67), an anger-inducing observation in line with Zucman's outlook. For Hill, immiseration capitalism is with us in the UK, a relatively wealthy country by world standards. He notes that in the UK, 'there is now 'in-work poverty' and the need for foodbanks and clothing banks, and there has been an increase in homelessness and the desperation by millions over how to 'get by'' (2025, p.58), while in the USA, 'the suppression of wages has been at the very centre of widening social inequality' (2025, p.59). In the UK in 2025, 4.5 million children were living in poverty – a record figure (Butler, 2025, p.1). A wealth tax would seem one way of addressing these issues.

Yet some question its value and emphasise the limitations of Zucman's wealth tax proposals. For example, although Micheal Roberts notes that 'Zucman shows that just 2000 households have 16% of the world's total personal wealth and that share is accelerating' (2026, p.4), and that the billionaires' tax evasion tactics are 'one of the linchpins of rising inequality and growing government debt worldwide' (p.5), this amounts only to a redistribution of wealth. For:

> The point really is this: why does such inequality arise? Why are there billionaires in the first place? It is not due mainly to tax evasion or low taxes; it is to do with the structure of capitalist economies. The underlying inequality is the concentration of corporate assets in just a small number of companies globally (Roberts, 2026, p.6).

Furthermore, argues Roberts:

> It is not just a question of properly taxing the billionaires as Zucman proposes, but instead to establish public ownership of the dominant large companies globally. That would end the world of billionaires and allow government to plan investment and production for social needs, not the profits of billionaire shareholders (2026, p.7).

While public ownership of the world's largest companies might sound utopian, 'expecting to get governments to impose a 2% wealth tax, which might seem a modest proposal, is just as utopian under the present system', argues Roberts (Ibid.). Talal Hangari argues along similar lines, noting that some Left folk view wealth taxes as a 'panacea for social ills' (2026, p.2). Nevertheless, Hangari hopes that a wealth tax can become reality. His main points are that a wealth tax would not raise much money (in the UK, around £10-15 billion), and a tax of 2% would 'not prevent the fortunes of the richest from increasing' (p.3). Zucman might concede these points but add that his wealth tax is not just about raising money, but about lessening inequality. For Hangari, this is not enough and 'traditional socialist expropriation ought to be our chief demand' and wealth taxes alone 'leaves the power and wealth of the capitalist class intact' (Ibid.). The arguments of Roberts and Hangari bring up the old debates about reformism and revolution, reforms or expropriation of the means of production, and workers' control or state control of the means of production. Hill argues that 'Marxists work for and willingly embrace reforms' (2019, p.112); that is, reforms that better the lives of working-class people, obviously not 'reforms' that are basically cuts and retrenchment in state services that benefit workers. These days, in the UK, governments talk about 'reforms' but they invariably mean cutting back on welfare, health and educational services! Reforms that improve working-class lives are to be welcomed. As Hill argues with Deb Kelsh:

> We support reforms and revisionist political and economic advances that seek to improve the lives of workers, for example, anti-capitalist as well as reformist campaigns and movements such as campaigns for tenants' rights, gender equality, race equality, and campaigns against the SATS [Standard Assessment Tests] or the privatization of schools. But, it is crucial to note, we do so *from a critical position* (Kelsh and Hill, 2006, in Hill 2013a, p.169 – original emphasis).

On this basis, Zucman's wealth tax proposals are to be supported. A successful campaign for a 2% wealth tax could give workers more confidence to go further; either to ask for a higher percentage, or to campaign for what Hangari calls ‘traditional socialist expropriation’ (2026, p.3). Of course, even if a campaign for a wealth tax turned out to be successful, further related class struggles would be essential for ensuring that the billions raised are spent on social and educational services, or to improve transport and housing for workers. At present, UK Right-wing forces (urged on by Trump’s moaning about European nations not contributing enough to NATO) and defence lobbyists, are seeking substantial rises in defence spending, often arguing that some of this extra cash should be raised from welfare cuts. Thus, it would be a human tragedy if extra money raised by a wealth tax was spent on defence! Furthermore, there must be a continual political effort to defend the wealth tax should it ever be brought in. No doubt, in the UK, the Conservative Party and Reform UK would ditch the wealth tax as soon as they could.

A wealth tax should be seen as just one of many developments making for what Marx and Engels called the ‘*real* movement which abolishes the present state of things’ (1846, p.57 – original emphasis). Thus, a Zucman-style wealth tax could be a modest contribution towards abolishing the present state of things, depending on what the proceeds was spent on, as noted above. In the same way, Mike Neary’s proposal for the establishment of universities run by workers’ co-operatives can be seen as part of this ‘real movement’ (see Neary, 2020). Dave Hill’s proposals on who should run education also echo this perspective:

> Revolutionary Marxist educators (and others, of course) believe that schools, colleges and universities should be run democratically, with education workers and students, as well as elected representatives of local communities … Commodification and marketization in education must end (2022a, p.78).

Money flowing from Zucman’s wealth *could* facilitate the changes advocated by Mike Neary and Dave Hill. Only effective class struggle ensures that these proposals become reality.

Conclusion: No Avoiding Tax, No Avoiding Responsibility

Zucman argues that although money received from a wealth tax would be significant it would not be sufficient to rectify multiple problems faced by governments. Yet a wealth tax would clearly aid a government's fiscal situation. Another argument for a wealth tax, as we have seen, is that it would take the rough edges off social and economic inequalities. It would make for a fairer society. The ultra-rich would be made to accept their responsibilities to society. Regarding education, it is not just a question of more money for hard-pressed educational institutions, but recognition of the importance of education for society. The ultra-rich must be forced to face their responsibilities to education, even within the framework of capitalist society.

In a discussion between Zucman and Aaron Bastani (2026) on Novara Media, Zucman argued that wealth of the super-rich depends partly on the education they received, but also on the education of all the workers they employ in the various companies they have shares in. Zucman goes further: he argues that the billionaires' wealth rests also on the education and training of generations of people and their teachers and mentors, and also upon the state provision of universities, colleges and schools. However, it is not just a case of forcing billionaires to recognise their responsibility to education; the capitalist system of education itself needs radical change, as advanced by Marxist educators such as Dave Hill and Mike Neary.

Zucman notes that most people (apart from the super-rich) in the wealthiest capitalist nations already pay a substantial amount of their income in tax. Nevertheless:

> OECD figures suggest that the UK has among the highest levels of income inequality in Europe (as measured by the Gini coefficient), although income inequality is slightly lower than in the United States (Francis-Devine, 2026, p.5).

Therefore, in the UK and the USA, there is an argument that income tax inequality needs addressing as well as bringing in a wealth tax.

Zucman's book is cheap, relatively short, and clearly written. Its arguments and evidence are important, especially when contextualised within an outlook aimed at generating the 'real movement' that is communism. Hopefully, it will be read widely and its conclusions acted upon as a precursor to something more radical.

Notes

1. This review article is a substantially extended and revised version of an article recently published in *Post-16 Educator* (Rikowski, 2026). It situates Gabriel Zucman's ideas regarding the necessity for a wealth tax on billionaires within a broader framework than in the Rikowski (2026) article. It contextualises Zucman's important book on arguments for a wealth tax, and his plans for implementation of such a tax on the super-rich to a greater degree, given the significantly extra space allotted to the article produced here in the *Journal for Critical Education Studies*.
2. *Garys Economics* can be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/@garyseconomics. Stevenson's channel has 1.62 million subscribers and 391 videos.
3. Stevenson invited Zucman onto his channel on 24 May 2026: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jRnYfigc3I&t=177s. For Gary Stevenson, 'Gabriel Zucman is the most important economist in the world today. And the one billionaires fear most', as he says on his YouTube channel.
4. Participation in the capitalist labour process and labour market generates social inequalities, with severe implications for notion of social justice in capitalist society and inequalities in labour-power production and education (see Rikowski, 2000a).
5. See Bonefeld (2023) for a critical analysis of how capital compels us to labour for its reproduction and expansion.
6. Marx views labour-power as: 'the aggregate of these mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description' (Marx, 1867, p.164). Of course, what is to be included within these 'mental capabilities' can be debated, and on this question see Rikowski (2000b).
7. Education plays a key role in ensuring the dependency of labourers on capital, as Dave Hill and myself have explained in our work over many years. The ideologies of 'employability' and 'human capital', and the reduction of education to labour-power development, are just a few of the

ploys representatives of capital utilise for forging the class relation and the dependency of labour on capital.

8. Hill and Maisuria (2022, p.625-628) provide an important historical account of how the British state has constructed and reconstructed income strata as 'classes' (which occludes those who have massive funds at their disposal, yet pay little income tax). These procedures are essentially based on social *status* rather than class, argue Hill and Maisuria, with Max Weber being the theoretical progenitor of these changing and unstable classifications.

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