



**HOW
WEALTH
RULES
THE WORLD**

SAVING OUR COMMUNITIES AND FREEDOMS
FROM THE DICTATORSHIP *of* PROPERTY

BEN G. PRICE

FOREWORD BY DAVID KORTEN, AUTHOR OF *WHEN CORPORATIONS RULE THE WORLD*

Praise for *How Wealth Rules the World*

“*How Wealth Rules the World* should be prerequisite reading for all serious social science academicians and especially social change activists. It convincingly exposes how property became and remains the single most sacred and legally protected right in our culture and increasingly globally, which has routinely blocked peoples’ right to protect the health, safety, and environment of their communities. Price challenges people of conscience dedicated to human rights and protecting the planet in our life-threatening times to rethink their goals and reassess their strategies directed toward authentic life-affirming systemic change.”

—**Greg Coleridge, Outreach Director, Move to Amend**

“Powerfully and unflinchingly, Ben Price is telling the truth: the truth about the founding of our nation, our legal system, the mess we’re in—and what we can do to change it. Well said, every word, and all true. It is staggering to realize that the architecture of this country was (and still is) designed to deliver injustice and inequality in perpetuity unless we work for real change. I appreciated the in-depth historical and contemporary look at this issue. It’s a bit overwhelming to realize the depth of revolution required if we are ever to see real democracy here in the United States, but Price guides us through the challenges to the opportunities with depth, intensity, and dedication to getting to the vision that so many of us hold for people-powered democracy. An important read.”

—**Rivera Sun, author of *The Dandelion Insurrection***

“Ben Price’s important new book, *How Wealth Rules the World*, is a revelatory page-turner, an urgent and timely guide to both explain the subversion of democracy by the rich and to provide a way out of the meat grinder that is shredding and destroying families, communities, countries, and our planet’s very biosphere, its ability to sustain nature and civilizations.

“The counterrevolution of business and property over we the people, our rights and communities, has grown ever stronger for hundreds of years as American courts and politicians serving the elite have subverted our branches of government. Read *How Wealth Rules the World*, share it, discuss it, and organize around it as if your family’s and friends’ lives depended on it—because they do.”

—**John Stauber, author of bestsellers including *Toxic Sludge Is Good for You*; *Trust Us, We’re Experts*; and *Weapons of Mass Deception***

“Unlike good ice cream, the truth can be hard to swallow. But you won’t get a brain-freeze from reading this book. Dig into *Ben Price’s How Wealth Rules the World*. I promise; it’ll be good for you. He’s scooped the political historians by serving up unexpected revelations chock-full of common sense.”

—**Jerry Greenfield, cofounder of Ben & Jerry’s**

“*How Wealth Rules the World* is an immensely important revelatory work that lifts the blanket off this still insufficiently discussed but absolutely most important issue. Ben Price offers a step-by-step explanation of the extent to which the wealthiest 1 percent of the population have managed to usurp control and undermine the once democratic processes in the United States, distorting them to serve only the goals of the richest people on the planet. This information is mandatory for anyone interested in pursuing positive change, and Ben Price has done a magnificent, step-by-step presentation of the roots and details of the problem. Right now, this is probably the most important subject we all need to address. Thank you to Ben Price for moving the details forward.”

—**Jerry Mander, author of *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* and *The Capitalism Papers***

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How Wealth Rules the World

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*I dedicate this book to the people of every community
struggling for control of their own destinies, and to my
colleagues at the Community Environmental Legal Defense
Fund, for their selfless commitment to making the future
better and their devotion to correcting the errors of the past.*

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Contents

Foreword	vii
<i>David C. Korten</i>	
Preface	xiii
Introduction One Right to Rule Them All: The Dark Side of Property	1
1. Property Is Not an Unalienable Right	23
2. The Ongoing Counterrevolution	47
3. Of Laws and Men	64
4. The Emancipation of Property from Democracy	89
5. The Municipal Colonies of America	103
6. The New Three-Fifths Clause	121
7. The Pretense of Representation	138
8. Creditors and Cannibals	149
9. Property's International Empire	163
Conclusion Community Rights Challenge the Dictatorship of Property	175
Notes	193
Acknowledgments	203
Index	207
About the Author	243

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Foreword

We the people of the United States are not the middle-class democracy of, by, and for the people many of us grew up believing our nation to be. Our current awakening to this truth is a first step toward achieving our aspiration of real democracy and a society that truly works for all.

To take the next step, we must understand why achieving the aspiration has so long eluded us. This makes Ben Price's book, *How Wealth Rules the World*, a distinctive and essential read for our time.

I was among those who grew up believing that the United States modeled the middle-class democracy to which most of the world's people aspire. With that belief as my guide, I devoted some thirty years of my early professional life to sharing the supposed lessons of US success with the world's less fortunate. This included twenty-one years living and working as a development professional in Ethiopia, Central America, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

Over these years, I began to see results very different from what I had gone abroad to serve. I observed "development" forcing people off the lands and waters from which they met their daily needs. A tiny number of people were lifted to new levels of opulence and a few to new levels of material comfort. Most, however, were reduced to a daily struggle to survive even

more brutal than the hardships they might previously have endured.

The real shock came when I realized that many in so-called advanced countries, including the United States, were experiencing a similar downward spiral. Eventually, I returned home to share what I had learned while abroad about the truth behind America's global mission. I documented that story in my book *When Corporations Rule the World*.

In *How Wealth Rules the World*, Price adds another layer of analysis to reveal a yet deeper truth and its roots in US history. He reveals how the inspiring and visionary words of the US Declaration of Independence mask the reality that the United States was born of the European conquest of the Western hemisphere, the theft of lands from the hemisphere's indigenous people, and the conversion of those lands into prosperous plantations by indentured servants fleeing extreme poverty in Europe and by slaves brutally abducted from Africa.

The rules of the new nation were written by members of a landed aristocracy resting on a foundation of stolen lands worked by their enslaved and indentured servants. Exactly whose rights and freedoms might we have expected these founder's preferred rules to guarantee?

It would come as no surprise that, as Price reminds us, the original US Constitution limited political power to white male property owners *and* that the first human rights victory of the citizens of the new nation came when white males without property won the right to vote. Nonwhite males followed only much later. Women, of course, came later still.

So, do we in the United States finally have democracy? Hardly. We are no longer ruled by a landed gentry, but rule remains in the hands of a propertied aristocracy. It isn't just some innocent fluke of history.

As Price elaborates, the legal code of the rights of property was inserted into the Constitution written by and for the owners of stolen property and the enslaved who worked it. It is not much of a stretch to suggest that the original Constitution was written to enshrine a US dictatorship of the propertied class.

I'm especially intrigued by the distinction Price makes between *personal* property that an individual has earned through his or her labor and *privileged* property that secures the rights of a propertied elite.

I often note that I believe private property is such a good thing that everyone should have some. By this I mean that all people should have a secure right to the property on which they depend for their basic livelihood. The land, tools, skills, and/or business from which the person makes a living for herself and her family. The place of lodging he calls home. These are the things in which every person should have an ownership stake as an individual or as a family or cooperative member.

Privileged property, as Price describes it, is property used by one person to extract unearned profits and/or to enjoy luxuries far beyond his personal need by controlling and limiting or prohibiting access by others to a means of living. It is a very important distinction between the right to make a living and the right to make a killing.

As Price describes, using a clever legal sleight of hand, the founders who drafted the Constitution made property into a rights-bearing canteen to be drunk from only by the holders of privileged property. They thereby assured that a propertied aristocracy of men like themselves would hold the powers of self-governance securely in their own exclusive hands.

As subsequent human rights victories led to constitutional amendments that weakened the rights of the propertied, a

judiciary schooled in rights-of-property legal doctrine regularly stepped in to assume for itself the Constitutional power to issue decisions that restored and strengthened the founders' "original intention."

Consequently, the real power in our system resides not with We the People, or even with the institutions that make the rules. It resides with a court system that has taken unto itself the power to *interpret* the rules. This all comes together to secure the power of the US Supreme Court—as ultimate representative of the interests of the owners of privileged property—to be the ultimate decider among the three branches of the US government.

I have long suspected that the founders might well have anticipated that a Supreme Court staffed by graduates of elite law schools—in their day exclusively white males born of wealthy families—would be the ultimate arbiter of the rules. I have also long wondered about the twisted legal logic of the Supreme Court justices who granted the rights of personhood to corporations owned by private shareholders. Isn't an owned person a slave?

The system of rule by property in the name of democracy that the US founders put in place is one of history's greatest and most successful deceptions. Libertarian think tanks, neo-liberal economists, and lawyers in service to the propertied class have more recently taken the deception global through the World Trade Organization and international trade and investment agreements.

I am struck by the truth of Price's extraordinary and perceptive observation that the US Constitution, which defined economic relations between thirteen formerly independent colonies with its clauses on contracts and interstate commerce, was effectively the first North American trade agreement securing the interests of big business and wealth concentration.

The division between the super-rich and everyone else continues to grow on a now global scale to create the greatest wealth gap in human history. As of 2018, the six richest people in the world owned more wealth than the poorest half of humanity. The combined wealth of the three richest US citizens exceeded that of the poorest half of the US population.¹

If democracy was the founders' intention, they failed terribly. If it was to secure elite privilege and an ever-growing gap between rich and poor, they succeeded beyond anything they could possibly have imagined.

What the US founders may have intended, however, is currently irrelevant. We the People—*all people*—have the right and the imperative to create the democracy of the people, by the people, and for the people that we have never had. *How Wealth Rules the World* unlocks the code that stripped us of our rights and that we must now strip from the laws and legal institutions by which we govern ourselves.

David C. Korten, author, *When Corporations Rule the World* and *Change the Story, Change the Future: A Living Economy for a Living Earth*

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Preface

A concerted assault on local democracy is under way. In towns, counties, villages, and cities across the United States and around the globe, municipalities are forbidden the authority to secure and protect residents' rights through local law.

Every day, people are faced with assaults against their rights on the job. They are left helpless to preserve their local economies against giant retail chains, subsidies paid with their tax dollars to attract community-busting monopolies, exemptions from local laws and taxes for industries that bring poverty-level wages and toxic by-products for local disposal. They are stripped of self-governing tools to defend the air they breathe against the installation of refineries and fossil fuel pipelines. They are scoffed at for wanting to protect their families and neighbors against police violence. They can't protect the land they get their food from and the air their children breathe against aerial pesticide spraying by agribusiness juggernauts. And it's illegal for them to safeguard the water their children drink against polluting manufacturers and extractors when state law forbids ("preempts") protective local laws.

The plan of this book is to unmask the artifice of democratic representation that American law—and the laws of many erstwhile democratic nations—mocks in practice. It will expose the way the legal system has been engineered to guarantee that wealth and empire prevail over people and their

common birthright. It has been written for anyone who wonders “what went wrong” in a nation thought to have pioneered a system of democratic representation with rules that apply equally to everyone.

Community activists, labor leaders, working people, environmentalists, progressives tired of losing, and conservatives tired of believing in but not seeing reverence for foundational ideals will be interested in knowing how things got so screwed up.

Readers seeking a deeper understanding of why so many social and political challenges seem insurmountable and those who wonder why the legal system, economic policies, and international trade agreements seem to serve some purpose other than the public welfare will find in this book a new framework for productive thought.

Those involved with Move to Amend, Public Citizen, and similar organizations focused on ending the legal advantages with which courts have empowered corporations will find here an expanded and more nuanced view of the problem. Others whose critique of capitalism demands more than superficial reform will be interested to learn the hidden ways the wealthy are favored by a system of law that protects capitalism from democracy and sacrifices human and civil rights to ensure its success.

The information that people under siege need is not warm and fuzzy. It's stark and real. It may at times seem depressing, disempowering, and, frankly, not filled with hope. I can only say that, although these are common reactions to being exposed to our dire situation, that's not where the story ends. Extraordinary people have taken up the struggle for true freedom. They have begun to take seriously their unalienable right to protect themselves, their communities, and their natural environment against toxic uses of private wealth. *Unalienable*,

as used in these pages, means intrinsic; impossible to be separated from; not able to be forfeited, sold, traded, or even voluntarily surrendered.

Understanding the truth of our predicament always seemed more important to my colleagues and me than being sensitive to the desire to find easy answers and quick fixes. Our impatience with Band-Aid solutions to systemic oppression is driven not by callousness but by urgency. Our critique of traditional progressive organizing is a judgment not of character but of strategy.

The underlying framework for what's revealed in these pages is partially outlined in the curriculum we've developed and continue to revise in what we call Democracy School. It's an intensive seminar that the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELDF) has presented to many hundreds of communities around the country since 2003. I'm a Democracy School lecturer, a contributor to the curriculum, and the current national organizing director for CELDF.

My community organizing work over the past fifteen years has been as important in developing the ideas presented here as the legal and historic research. At CELDF we've gone beyond theory and history. I was CELDF's first community rights organizer. Fifteen years later, with a team of organizers in multiple states, we've helped hundreds of communities draft local laws that challenge legal privileges for wealth that violate the rights of people and the natural world.

Along the way we learned how the system is *fixed*. It works exactly as intended. It prevents democracy from inconveniencing the rich. When I use the term *democracy*, I mean that the people affected by governing decisions are the ones who make and enforce the law, directly or through representatives bound to the will of the governed and limited only by a strict respect for the unalienable rights of all beings.

Rich people hiding behind the legal immunities afforded by incorporation appeal to domestic courts and international trade tribunals to protect their interests against democracy. Laws, administrative agencies, and a plethora of ineffective regulations are programmed to favor and maximize advantages for the privileged. Around the world, legal traditions rooted deep in the hierarchical imperialism of a globe-spanning empire yield predictably undemocratic results. In nations that have emulated the US Constitution and system of law, and in others that once were colonies of the British Empire, as was the United States, the dictatorship of property is mistaken as the indispensable foundation of civilization.

The story of how property gained through conquest and confiscation is legally immunized from democratic governance has been kept quiet for far too long. Today's beneficiaries of the colonial tradition of genocide, slavery, and ecocide have a responsibility to educate themselves to the facts and abandon the heroic legends that mask the truth.

Victims of empire around the world don't need to learn the visceral lessons that privileged white descendants of imperial colonizers need to learn. But before the progeny of settlers can understand the misery and injustice brought on by their forebearers, a lot of false history needs to be unlearned, including how, after American independence, counterrevolutionary schemers erected a system of government that perpetuates the violently won gains of wealthy white men.

This is your invitation to know what those who game the system know and to pick up where the American revolutionaries left off. Come join the community rights movement. It's time we liberate ourselves from our delusions and from the dictatorial power that law conveys to a propertied aristocracy.

One Right to Rule Them All

THE DARK SIDE OF PROPERTY

When plunder becomes a way of life for a group of men living together in society, they create for themselves in the course of time, a legal system that authorizes it and a moral code that glorifies it.

—Frederic Bastiat

Owning Up to the Real Problem: Wealth Obliterates Self-Government

Let's get it out in the open: The United States of America and nations that emulate its governing principles are governed by a dictatorship of property. Is it plutocracy? Sure, but it goes deeper than that.

The US Constitution, as it was written and later interpreted by the Supreme Court, hijacked democratic rights that American revolutionaries thought they had won. The Federalists developed a whole system of law that serves the interests of wealth. Elements of that system include the following:

- ❖ State constitutions untethered from their revolutionary moorings
- ❖ International trade agreements that supersede local, state, and federal laws