

Top wealth and its historical origins. An analysis of Germany's largest privately held fortunes 2019

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Abstract

Rising wealth inequality is a topic in recent policy discussion, in social stratification research and in the broader social sciences. Despite the general interest in wealth concentration, we know only very little about the largest privately held fortunes. To help filling this gap for Germany, which ranks fourth among the countries with the most billionaires (Forbes billionaire list 2022), we analyze the historical origins of Germany's 1032 largest fortunes in 2019. First, we examine the structure of origin of these fortunes by using the founding dates of the fortune-generating businesses. Second, we identify the share of *entrenched fortunes* – fortunes which date back to the beginning of the twentieth century – and ask to what extent this group differs in terms of regional and socio-structural characteristics from the rest of the fortunes. Third, we examine in an exploratory way if the entrenched fortunes are connected to fortunes of younger origins through family lines. Our analyses are based on a journalistic rich list published by the *manager magazin* in 2019 which we link both with a rich list from the beginning of the twentieth century to identify entrenched fortunes and with *Wikidata* to scrape genealogical data. We find that about eight percent of today's fortunes (82 out of 1032) can be traced back to fortunes held by the same families already at the beginning of the twentieth century. Regression analyses show that entrenched fortunes rank on average higher on the rich list than the remaining fortunes. Descriptive network analyses indicate that some of today's largest fortunes (both entrenched and fortunes of younger origin) are intertwined through marital lines hinting at social closure at the top. Our findings indicate that the accumulation and perpetuation of fortunes over many generations is an important feature of top wealth in Germany.

Keywords: wealth, super rich, family, network analysis, inheritance, social closure