

Books: Rainer Zitelmann's 'The Origins of Wealth and Poverty'

By [Shawn Miller](#) March 15, 2025

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Travel logs give their readers the desire to travel, or they give those who do not want to travel a vicarious experience that will enrich them, helping them escape from their isolated, boring life. Some travel logs, such as *Traveling Around the Equator*, are interesting not only because they tell us about different places, but also because they give us a glimpse at the traveler. When I read *T A E*, I got to know Mark Twain better than by reading his novels about fictional characters. *The Origins of Wealth and Poverty* is similar to *T A E*. It is a travel log about different places around the world, and it helps us get to know an interesting person, the author Rainer Zitelmann.

While a travel log written by an interesting person might be enough, *The Origins of Wealth and Poverty* is more, as the following quote from the forward explains:

“Both personal conversations and observations on the one hand and empirical research on the other are important. I was often able to understand the results of the polls better once I had traveled to a country and talked to the people there. Conversely, I was able to better classify my impressions from the conversations when I used the data collected in the surveys.”

Walking along the path to wisdom requires both feet. Nobody can experience everything, so everyone should learn as much as possible from others, by reading their books and listening to what they say. There is great danger, however, when people who read books and listen to others lack real experiences. Some people lie, and others make honest mistakes. Without real experiences, a person cannot know if what s/he reads or hears is true.

Karl Marx was a case in point: he studied much but had some terrible ideas. He was a bad husband and father, and his followers caused tens of millions of deaths. If he had lived more and read less, the world might be better than it is. If he had ever worked in a factory or on a farm, instead of just thinking about it, and if he had loved his family enough to provide for them instead of mooching off his in-laws and then allowing his children to suffer from malnourishment because he neglected them, then he might have realized that communism cannot work with real men and women. Zitelmann writes of a follower of Marx, Enver Hoxha, who ruled Albania from 1946 until his death in 1985. “Hoxha spent time completely immersed in his ideologies,” (p. 37). He isolated himself from everyone, including the people he ruled, and boasted of how great Albanian socialism was. “It seems absurd that the leader of a state should isolate himself and produce book after book about the superiority of socialism – in the poorest country in Europe,” (ibid.).

While *The Origins of Wealth and Poverty* is largely about economics, and has plenty of objective facts and figures, it is not an academic book. A man in London who had read one of Zitelmann's other books told him that he writes like he is talking, which Zitelmann did not deny, “I write the way people speak. . . . I don't think written language should be too different from the spoken word,” (p. 173). Some people do think that written language should differ from the spoken word; reading a book is not the same as having a conversation. In a conversation, one might say the same thing more than once, but redundancy in a book is wasteful. If a reader wants the same thing again, s/he can go back and reread it, so repetition is not necessary. Zitelmann, however, does not apologize for writing as he does. It is an easy read; one need not be an economist to understand.

The book is divided into thirty sections, each of which recounts Zitelmann's visit to some place, his impressions of that place, and his conversations with people he met there. Thirty times we hear the same message: free market capitalism causes prosperity and happiness, while socialism causes poverty and misery, yet many folks prefer socialism. *The Origins of Wealth and Poverty* is not an academic treatise with convincing argumentation, but it does give strong evidence to support its thesis.

Rainer Zitelmann has excelled in both scholarship and life experiences. He has two doctoral degrees. There is no doubt that he is capable of writing academic works, but he chose to do something else. He did not live his whole life in school. He built up and then sold a successful business. Now, with the wealth he earned in business, he travels the world as a philosopher seeking wisdom. Neither of his degrees is in philosophy, but he is a philosopher. The word *philo sophia*, means lover of wisdom. Zitelmann loves wisdom, and traveled the world seeking it. He also spent his own money on research. He is a capitalist, but does not value money above all else. If anyone thinks that all capitalists are greedy materialists, then s/he should read this book about a capitalist who spent his own money to gain knowledge because he values knowledge more than money.

Libertarians who cherish economic freedom will read this book and have their beliefs confirmed. Socialists who adore big government are unlikely to read it. Perhaps some who are between libertarian and socialist will read this book and move a little in the right direction. If that happens, then it is worthwhile. Even if only libertarians read it, this book is still worthwhile, because it will make libertarians feel good, which is not bad.

Finally, throughout this book Zitelmann mentions numerous other books, some of which he wrote, others that he read as research to write *The Origins of Poverty and Wealth*. This can be a valuable guide to further reading about libertarianism, economics, and recent history.

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