

# The Zero-Sum Mindset Will Get You Nowhere

By [Rainer Zitelmann](#) December 22, 2025

Hugo Aitken

Patricia Andrews Fearon and Friedrich M. Götz from Stanford University and the University of Cambridge have published an important article entitled “[The Zero-Sum Mindset](#)”, in which they present the results of nine studies spanning six countries with 10,000 participants. They define a zero-sum mindset as a mental conception of success in which another person’s success automatically comes at your expense, and your failure is their success.

Such situations do exist in life – a tennis match is one example: if you want to win, the other person must lose. However, there are numerous other situations where both sides win, such as in the voluntary exchange of goods, i.e. trade. Fearon and Götz show that people with a “zero-sum mindset” fundamentally interpret situations as zero-sum games, even if they are not in reality. This has serious implications because zero-sum thinkers base their behavior on this assumption. Protectionist policies, such as those pursued by Donald Trump, are one example of this.

Anti-capitalists believe economics is a zero-sum game. Bertolt Brecht classically formulated this thinking in his poem “Alfabet”, in which two men – one rich, one poor – come face to face:

“Said the poor man with a twitch,

‘Were I not poor, you wouldn’t be rich.’”

This is the how anti-capitalists envision economic life. They argue that rich countries must share some of their wealth with poor countries, and rich people must share with the impoverished. From their viewpoint, the fact that there are still so many poor people is solely due to selfishness and a lack of goodwill among the rich. Historically, in earlier societies, wealth was often based on robbery – some people enriched themselves at the expense of others. In contrast, the market system operates on a different principle: those who effectively meet the needs of a large number of consumers become rich. That is the fundamental logic of the market.

The (mis)conception of a zero-sum economy is debunked by analyzing the development of the number of rich and poor people over recent decades. Prior to the advent of capitalism, the majority of the global population lived in extreme poverty – in 1820, the rate was 90 percent. Today, it has fallen to around 10 percent (a number that would be even lower – 6,5% - if the World Bank had not recently adjusted its calculation method).

Most notably, since the decline of socialist planned economies in China and other nations, poverty has fallen at a rate unprecedented in human history. In 1981, the global poverty rate was as high as 42.7 percent, but by 2000 it had fallen to 27.8 percent, and by 2025 it was 10 percent. At the same time, the number of billionaires has continued to increase.

China is one example: Between 1958 and 1962, 45 million Chinese starved to death during Mao's "Great Leap Forward," the biggest socialist experiment in history. A few years after Mao's death, in 1981, 88 percent of the Chinese population were still living in extreme poverty. Thanks to the market economy reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, the proportion of extremely poor people in China has now fallen below 1 percent. At the same time, the number of billionaires has risen from zero to over 500 – only the United States has more. Zero-sum thinkers cannot explain how the number of rich people can rise so quickly at the same time as the number of poor people falls so rapidly.

The idea of trade as a zero-sum game is also wrong. Adam Smith recognized that trade is not a zero-sum game because specialization and the division of labor enhance overall production. David Ricardo further developed this insight by formulating the principle of comparative advantage, demonstrating that even a less efficient country can benefit from trade if it specializes in producing goods that it can produce relatively more cheaply.

It is clear that the zero-sum mindset underpins envy and resentment toward rich people. After all, anyone who believes that an increase in the wealth of the rich automatically results in a deterioration of the circumstances of the non-rich, will perceive the fight against poverty as synonymous with a fight against the rich or in favor of "redistribution."

The link between envy and zero-sum thinking was confirmed by a survey conducted by Ipsos MORI on my behalf across 13 countries. Respondents were asked a series of questions to assess their attitudes towards wealth and the wealthy. These included several questions that serve as indicators of social envy. According to the [study](#), social envy was most prevalent in France, followed by Germany. In contrast, countries such as Poland, Japan, and Vietnam exhibited significantly less envy.

One of the survey items presented respondents with a statement encapsulating the zero-sum mindset in a single sentence: "The more the rich have, the less there is for the poor." Based on this and several other questions, the study was able to distinguish between "enviers" and "non-enviers." Notably, in all 13 countries, enviers far more frequently agreed with the above zero-sum statement than non-enviers. This correlation is easy to explain: if someone believes that the rich have only acquired their wealth at the expense of others, envy is an almost inevitable outcome.

*Rainer Zitelmann is a German historian, sociologist and multiple bestselling author, whose books include "How Nations Escape Poverty", "The Power of Capitalism" and "Hitler's National Socialism." He published 29 books that have been translated into more than 30 languages. In recent years, he has written articles and been the subject of interviews in leading media such as Wall Street Journal, Forbes, Newsweek, The Daily Telegraph, The Times, Le Monde, Corriere della Sera, Israel Hayom, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, and numerous media in Latin America and Asia.*

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