

# **Wealth Inequality in the Long Run: What We Know and Do Not Know**

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*A*  
BRIEF  
HISTORY  
*of*  
EQUALITY  
THOMAS  
PIKETTY

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Capital and Ideology and Capital in the Twenty-First Century*

WORLD  
**INEQUALITY**  
REPORT  
**2022**



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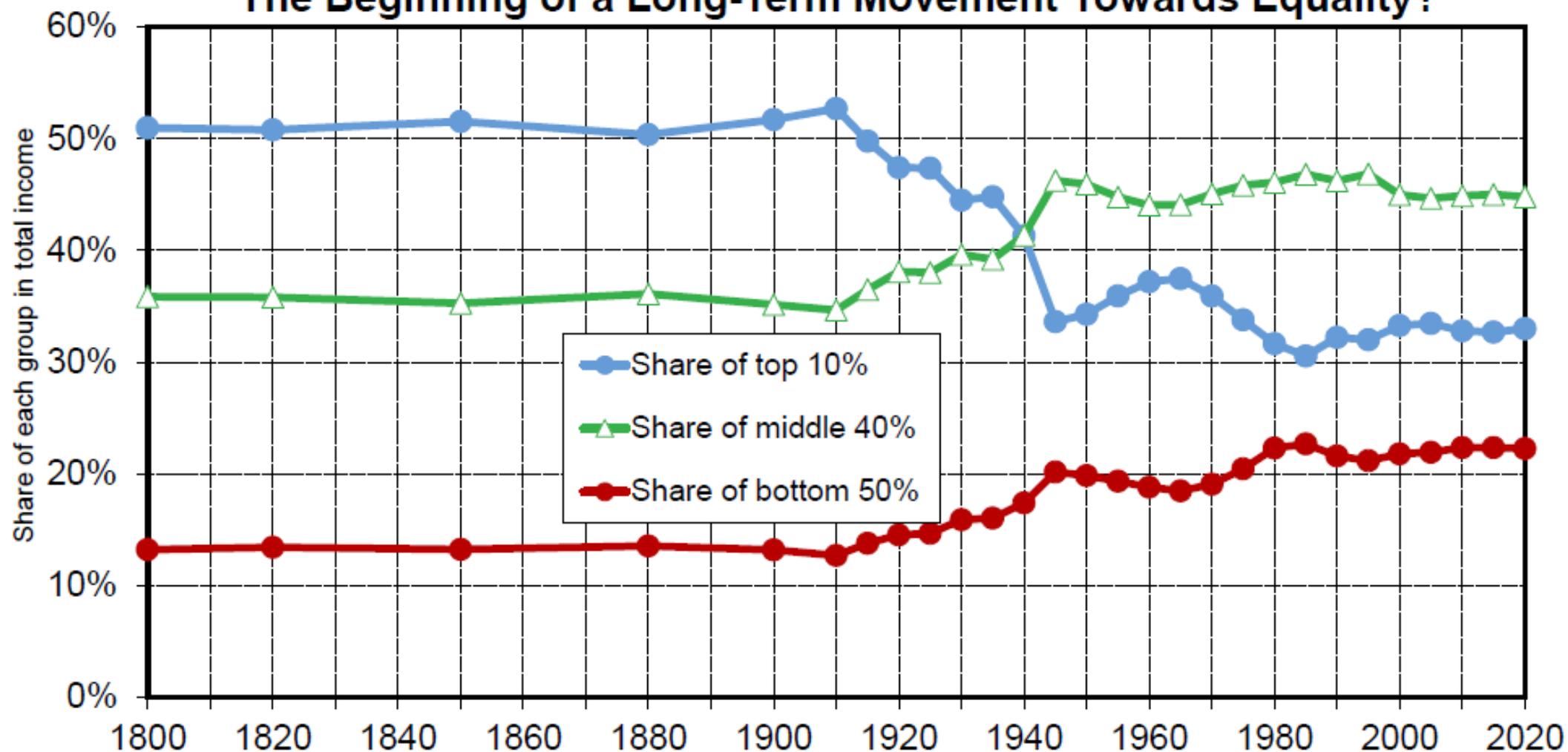
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# **Wealth Inequality in the Long Run: What We Know and Do Not Know**

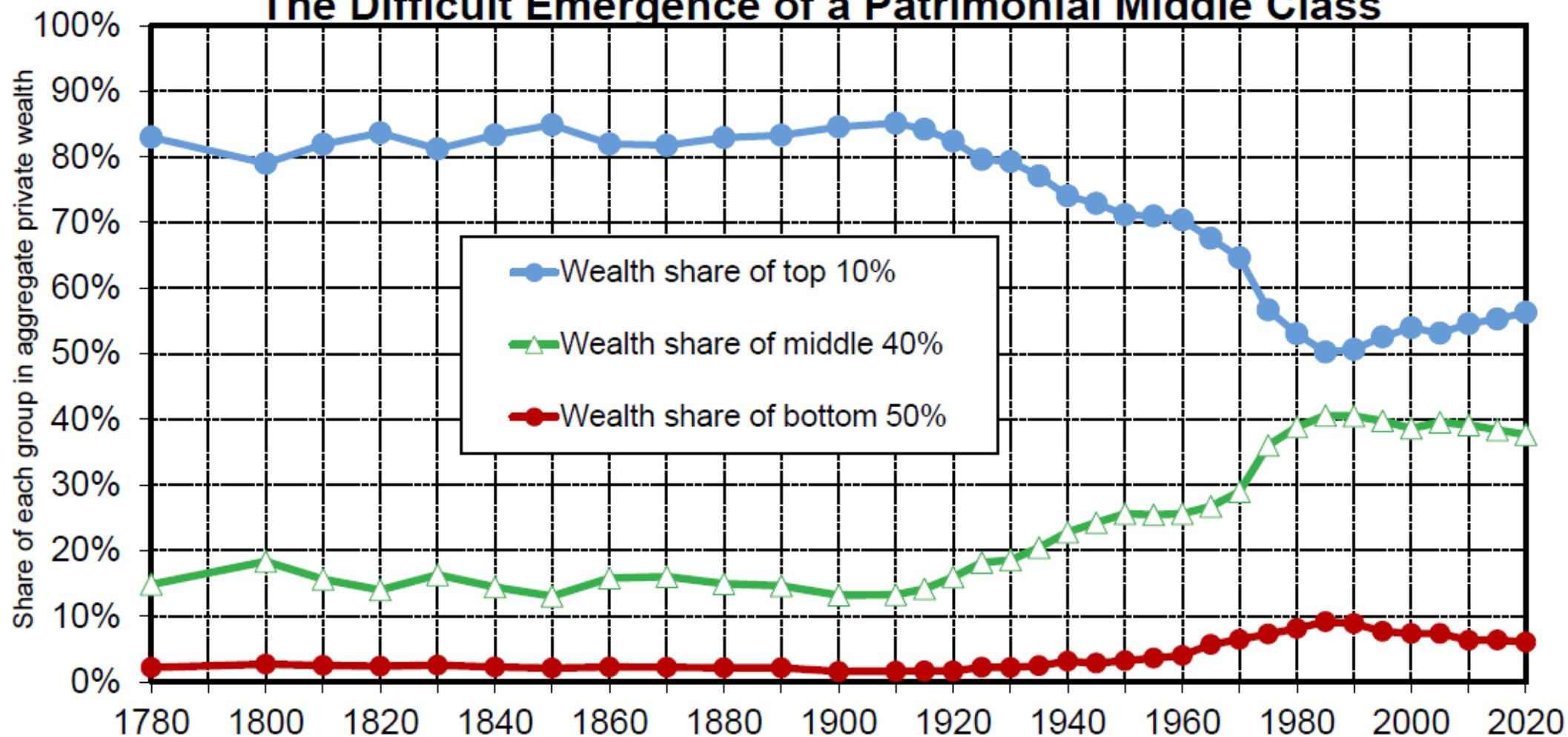
- 1. Large reduction of income inequality in the West over 1800-2020 period (especially between 1910 & 1990):** very successful rise of social-democratic societies (welfare state & progressive income taxation)
- 2. We also see a long-run reduction of wealth inequality over the same period, but it has been much more limited** (very small bottom 50% share): need for progressive wealth taxation & minimum inheritance?
- 3. Did wealth inequality rise significantly over 1500-1800 period, or was it more or less stable at very high levels?** Maybe we do not fully know yet

## Income Distribution in France, 1800-2020: The Beginning of a Long-Term Movement Towards Equality?



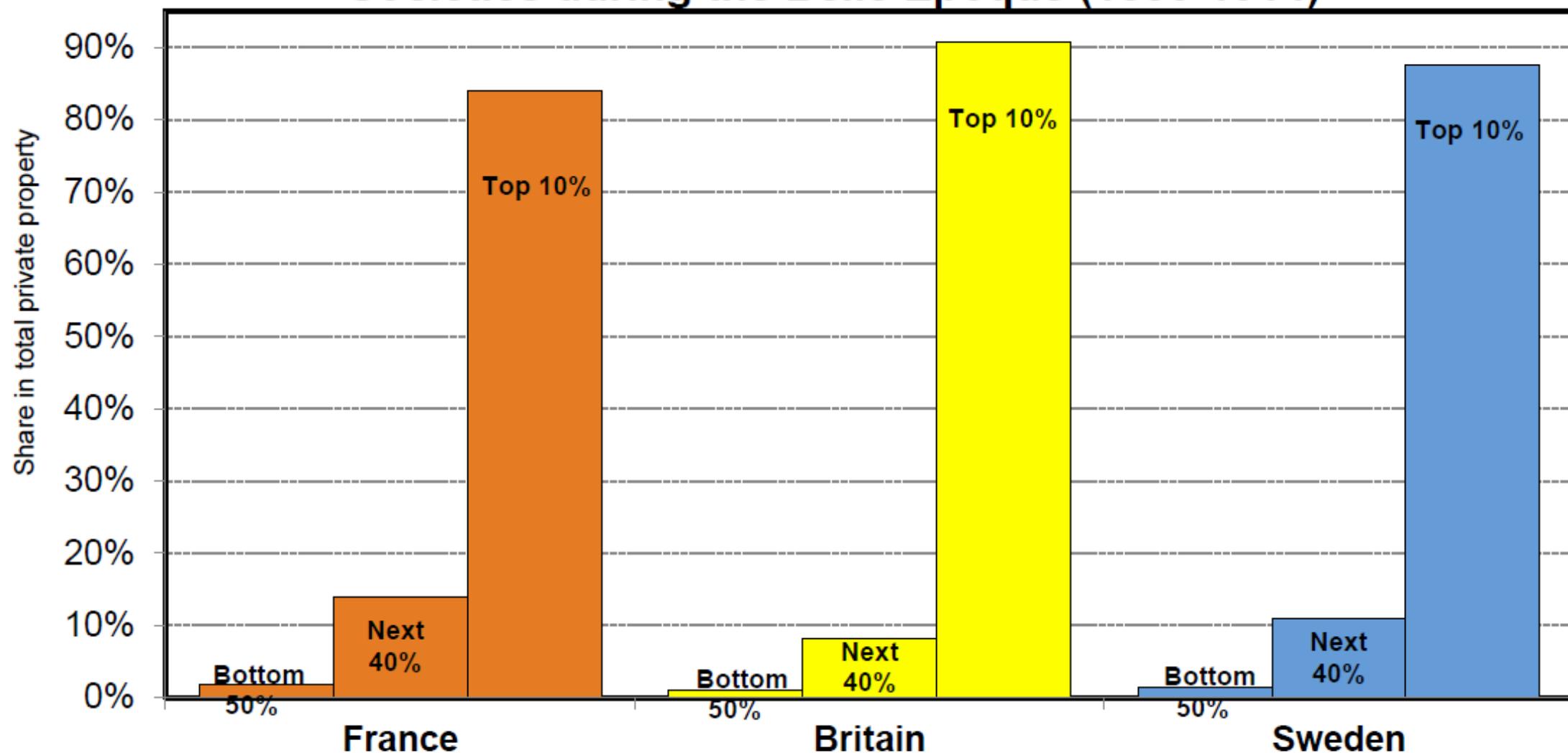
**Interpretation.** The share of the top 10% highest incomes in total income (including capital income - rent, dividends, interest, profits - & labour income - wages, self-employment income, pensions, unemployment benefits) was about 50% in France from the 1780s to the 1910s. The fall in the concentration of income started after World War 1 and occurred to the benefit of the "lower classes" (the bottom 50% lowest incomes) and the "middle classes" (the next 40%), at the expense of the "upper classes" (the top 10%). **Sources and series:** see [piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality](http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality) (figure 7)

## Wealth Distribution in France, 1780-2020: The Difficult Emergence of a Patrimonial Middle Class



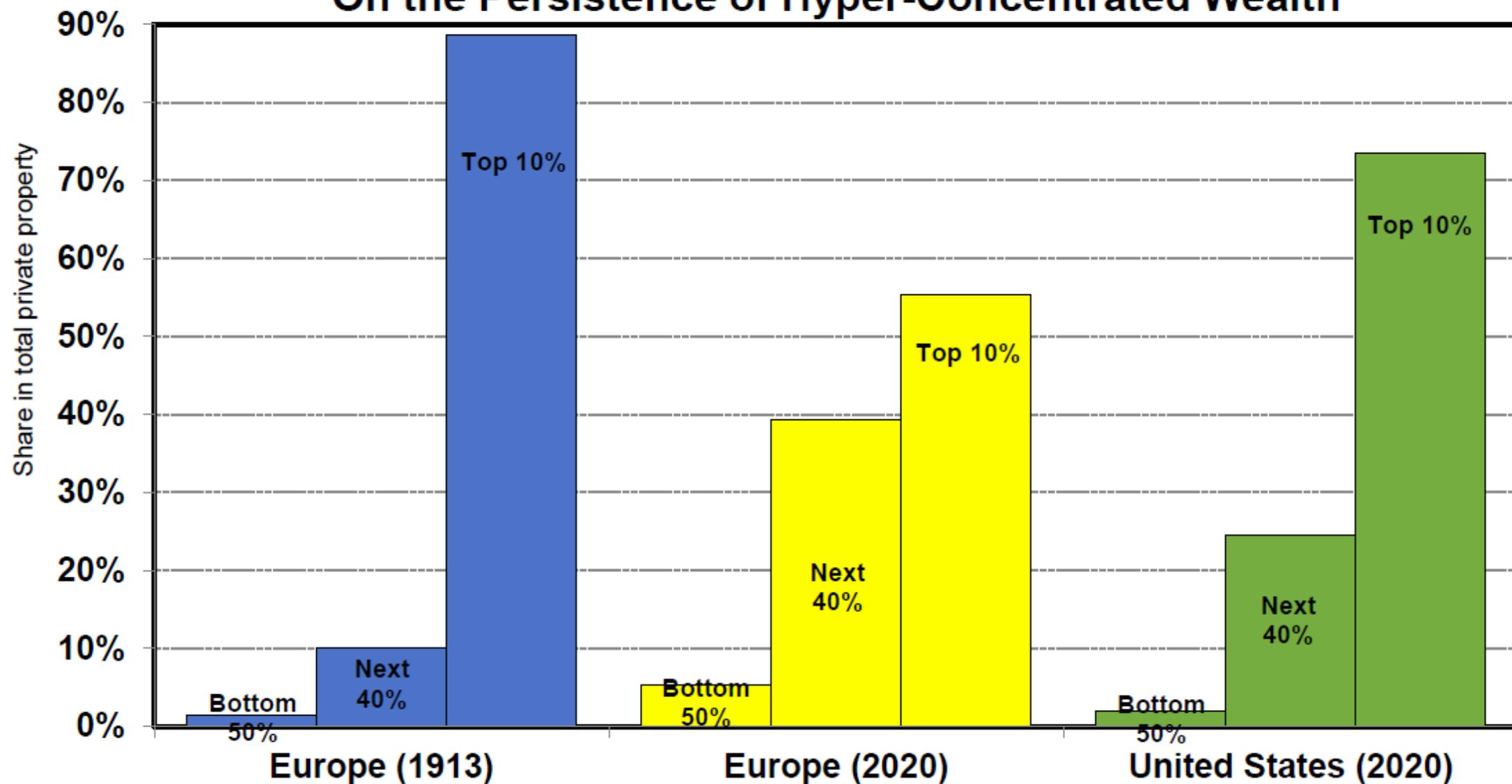
**Interpretation.** The share of top 10% wealth holders in aggregate private wealth (real estate, business and financial assets, net of debt) was around 80%-90% in France between 1780 and 1910. The decline in wealth concentration begins with World War I and stops in the 1980s. It benefited mostly to the "patrimonial middle class" (the middle 40%), which is defined here as the intermediate group between the top 10% and the bottom 50% of the wealth distribution. **Sources and series:** see [piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality](http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality) (figure 6)

## Extreme Patrimonial Inequality: Europe's Proprietarian Societies during the Belle Epoque (1880-1914)



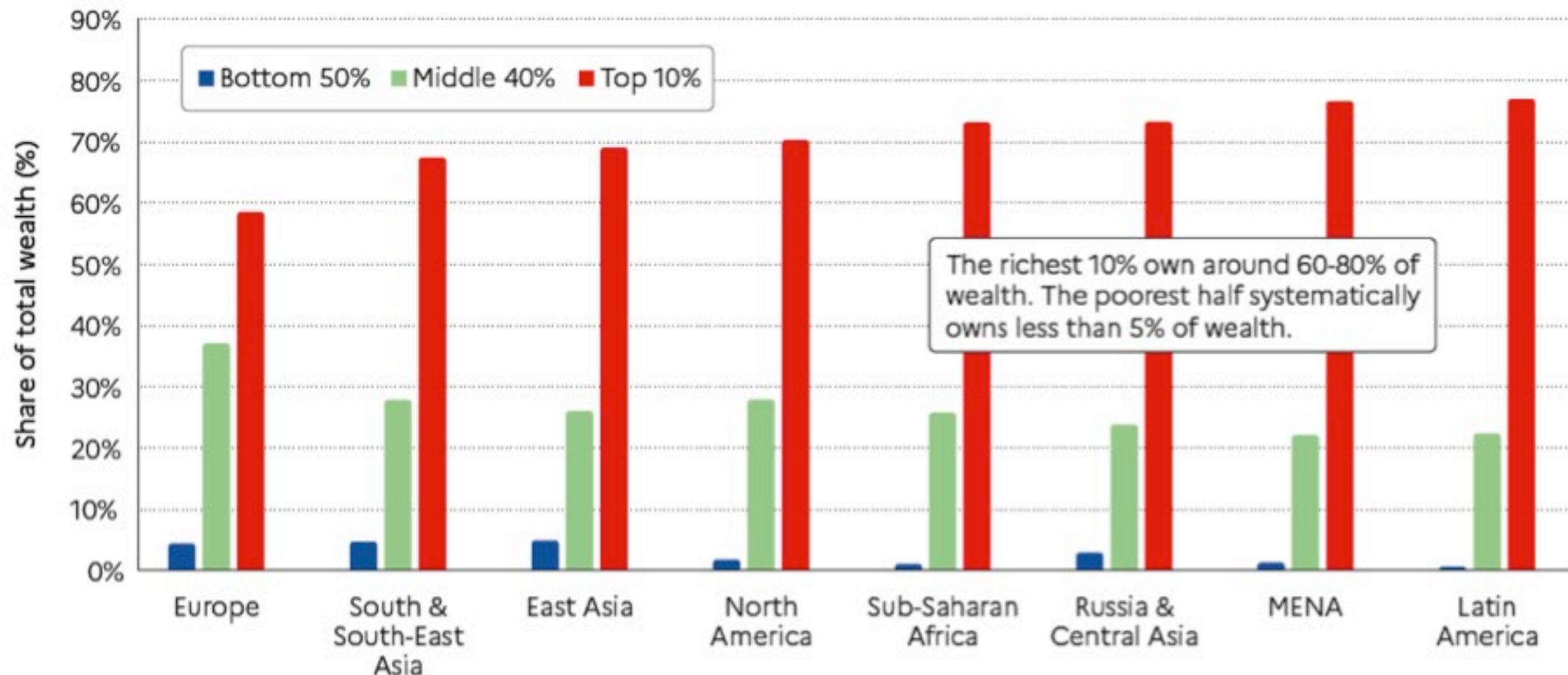
**Interpretation.** The share the richest 10% in total private property (all assets combined: real estate, business and financial assets, net of debt) was on average 84% in France between 1880 and 1914 (vs. 14% for the next 40% and 2% for the bottom 50%), 91% in Britain (vs 8% and 1%) and 88% in Sweden (vs 11% and 1%). **Sources and series:** see [piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality](http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality) (figure 17)

## On the Persistence of Hyper-Concentrated Wealth



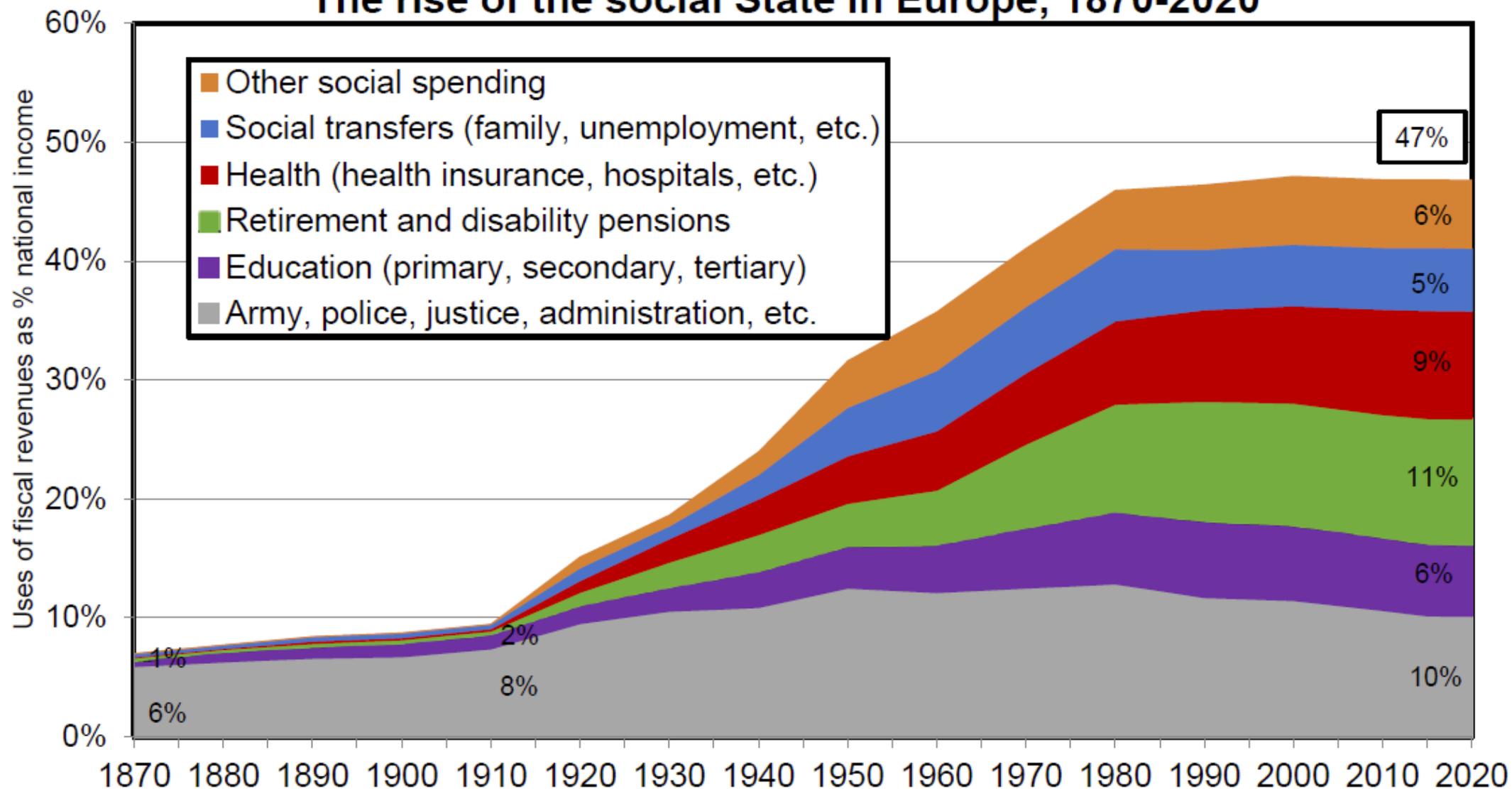
**Reading.** The share of the richest 10% in total private property was 89% in Europe (average of Britain, France and Sweden) in 1913 (compared with 1% for the bottom 50%), 55% in Europe in 2020 (compared to 5% for the bottom 50%) and 74% in the United States in 2020 (compared to 2% for the bottom 50%). **Sources and series:** see [piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality](http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality) (figure 27)

**Figure 4** The extreme concentration of capital: wealth inequality across the world, 2021



**Interpretation:** The Top 10% in Latin America captures 77% of total household wealth, versus 22% for the Middle 40% and 1% for the Bottom 50%. In Europe, the Top 10% owns 58% of total wealth, versus 38% for the Middle 40% and 4% for the Bottom 50%. **Sources and series:** [wir2022.wid.world/methodology](http://wir2022.wid.world/methodology).

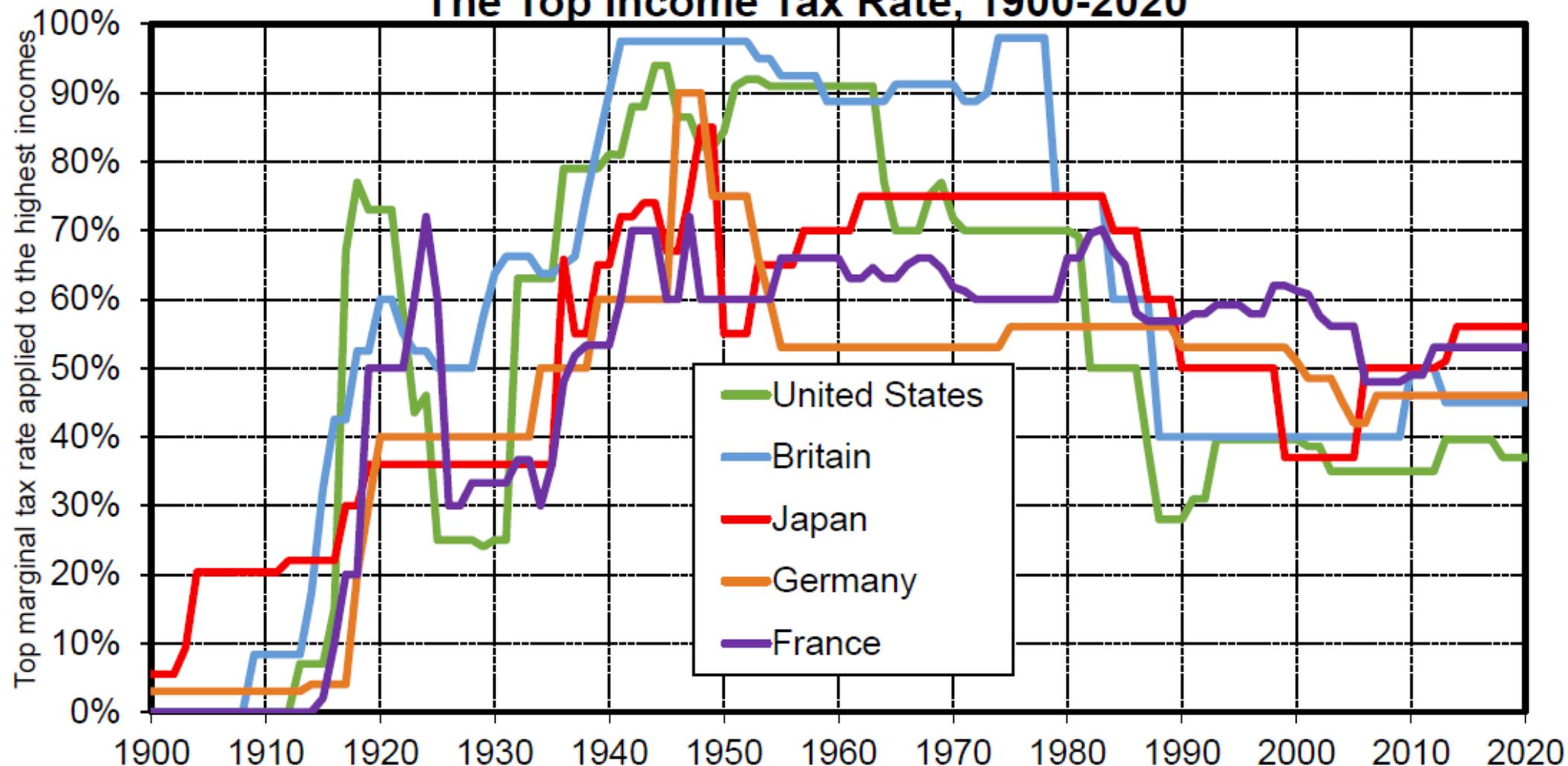
## The rise of the social State in Europe, 1870-2020



**Interpretation.** In 2020, fiscal revenues represented 47% of national income on average in Western Europe et were used as follows: 10% of national income for regalian expenditure (army, police, justice, general administration, basic infrastructure: roads, etc.); 6% for education; 11% for pensions; 9% for health; 5% for social transfers (other than pensions); 6% for other social spending (housing, etc.). Before 1914, regalian expenditure absorbed almost all fiscal revenues.

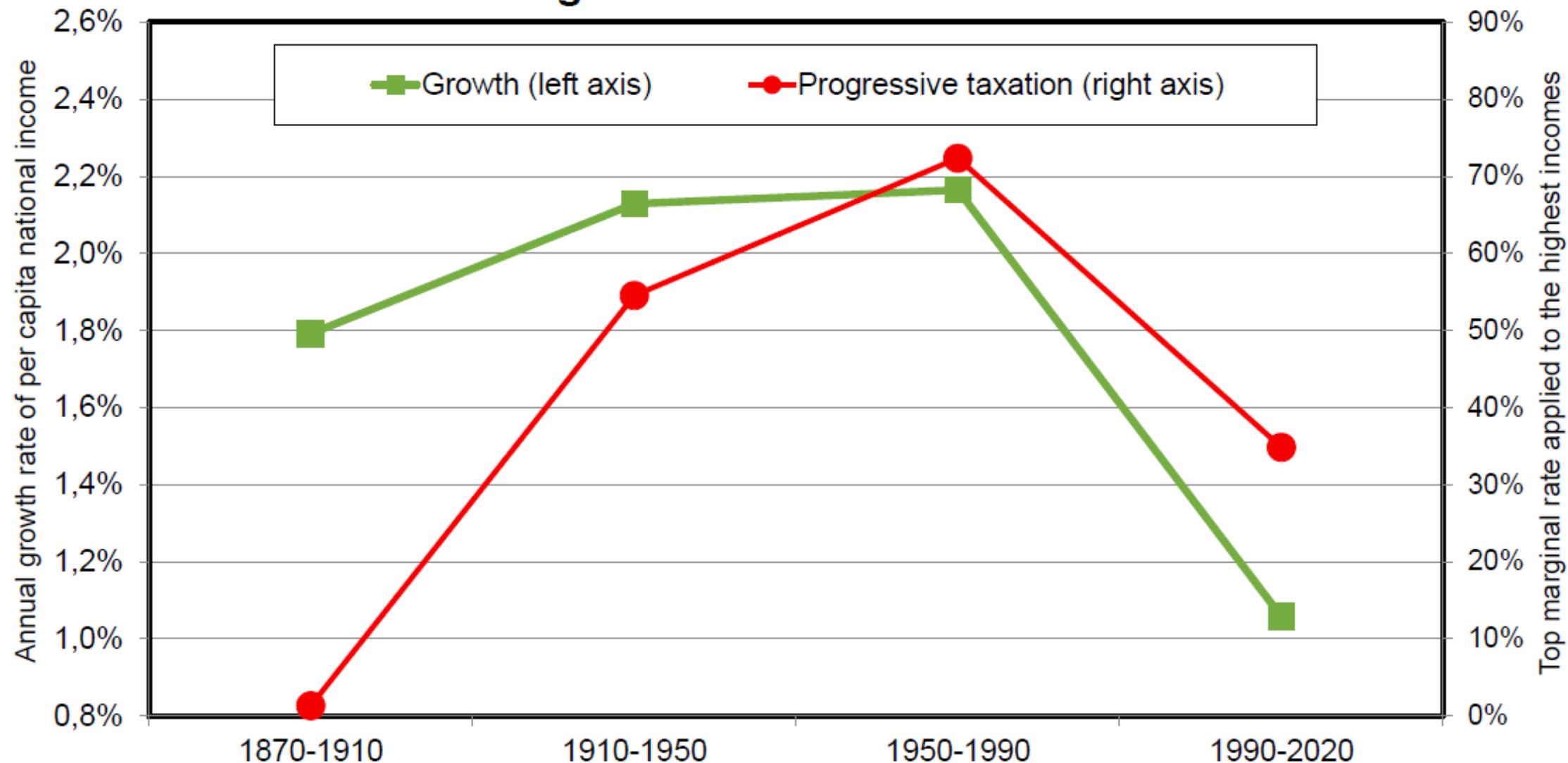
**Note.** The evolution depicted here is the average of Germany, France, Britain and Sweden. **Sources and séries:** see [piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality](http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality) (figure 19)

## The Invention of Progressive Taxation: The Top Income Tax Rate, 1900-2020



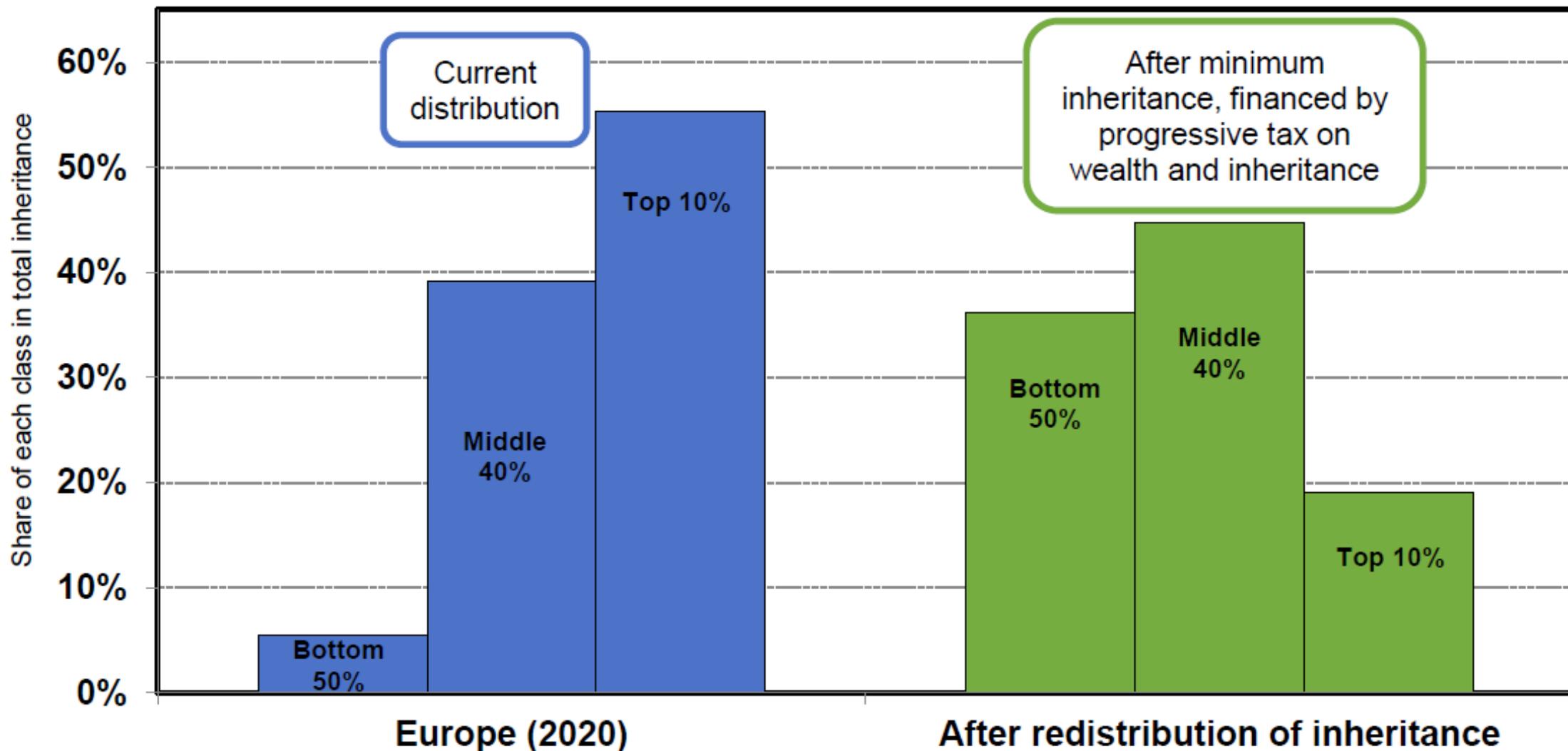
**Interpretation.** The marginal income tax rate applied to the highest incomes was on average 23% in the U.S. from 1900 to 1932, 81% from 1932 to 1980 and 39% from 1980 to 2018. Over these same periods, the top rate was equal to 30%, 89% and 46% in Britain, 26%, 68% and 53% in Japan, 18%, 58% and 50% in Germany, and 23%, 60% and 57% in France. Progressive taxation peaked in mid-century, especially in the U.S. and in Britain. **Sources and series:** see [piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality](http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality) (figure 20)

## Growth and Progressive Taxation in the U.S. 1870-2020



**Interpretation.** in the U.S., the growth rate of per capita national income dropped from 2,2% per year between 1950 and 1990 to 1,1% between 1990 and 2020, while the top marginal tax rate applied to the highest incomes dropped from 72% to 35% over the same period. The promised resurgence of growth following the cut in top tax rates did not occur. **Sources and series:** see [piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality](http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality) (figure 23)

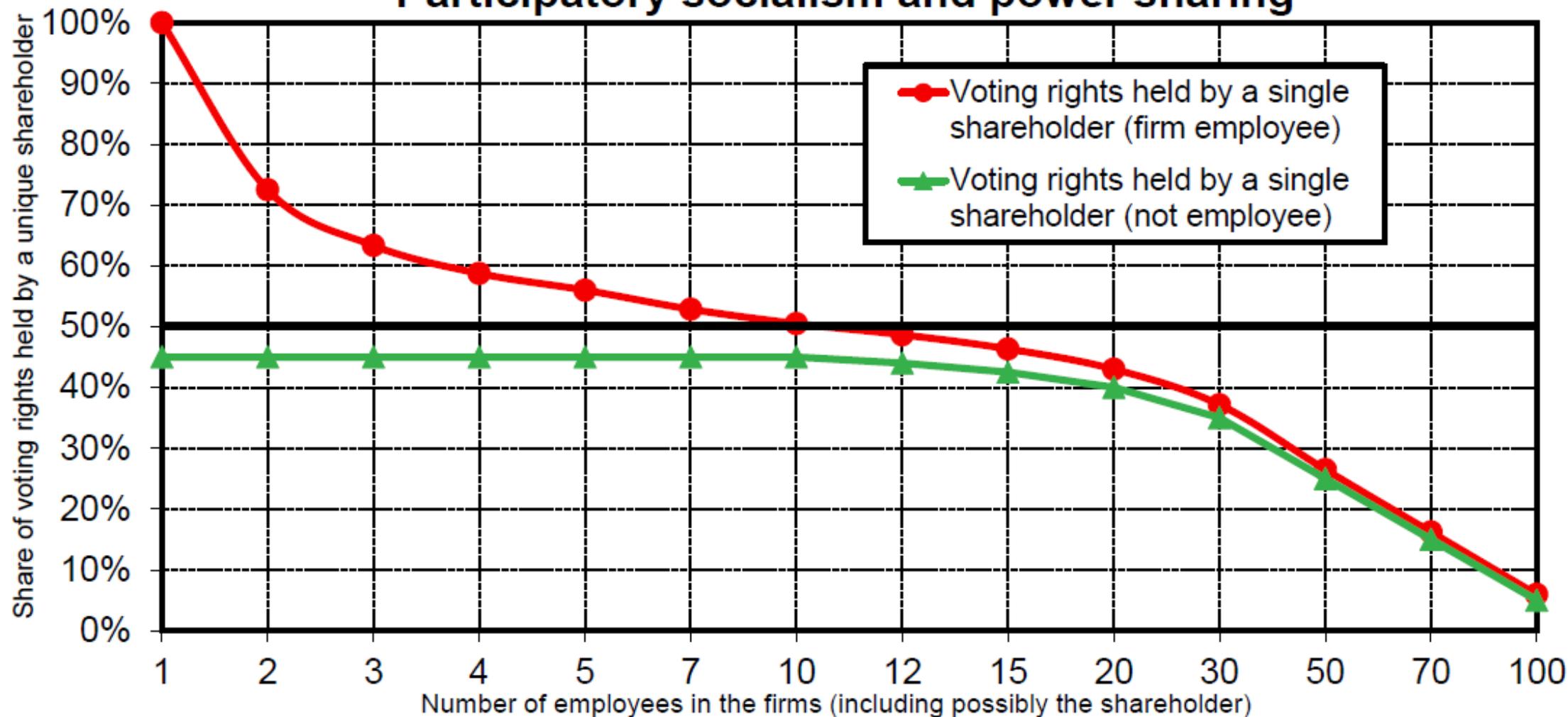
# The Redistribution of Inheritance



**Interpretation.** The share of the poorest 50% in total inheritance is 6% in Europe in 2020, vs 39% for the next 40% and 55% for the richest 10%. After implementation of inheritance for all (minimum inheritance equal to 60% of average wealth, allocated at 25-year-old), financed by a progressive tax on wealth and inheritance, this share would be equal to 36% (vs 45% and 19%).

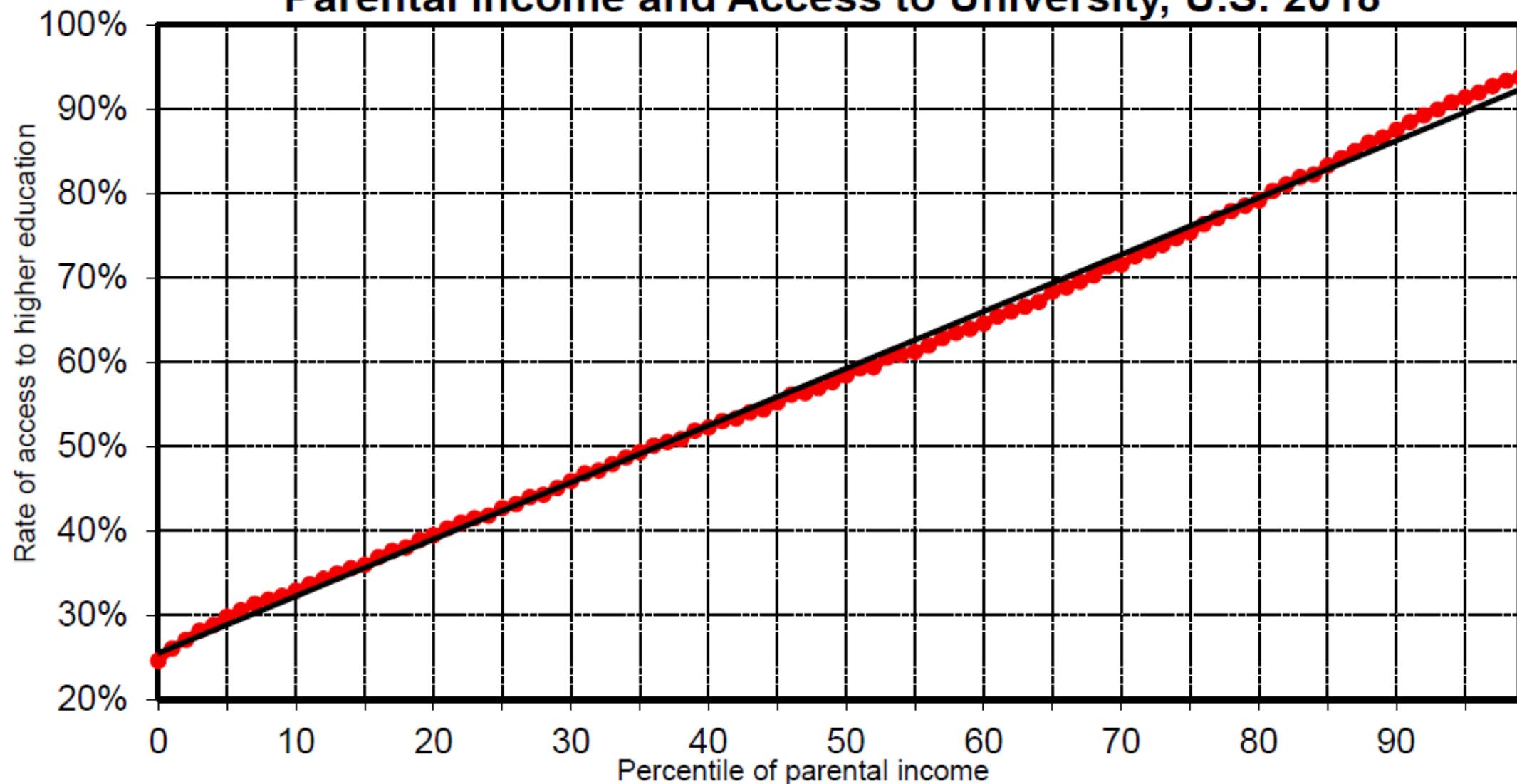
**Note:** Europe: average Britain-France-Sweden. **Sources and series:** see [piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality](http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality) (figure 30)

## Participatory socialism and power sharing



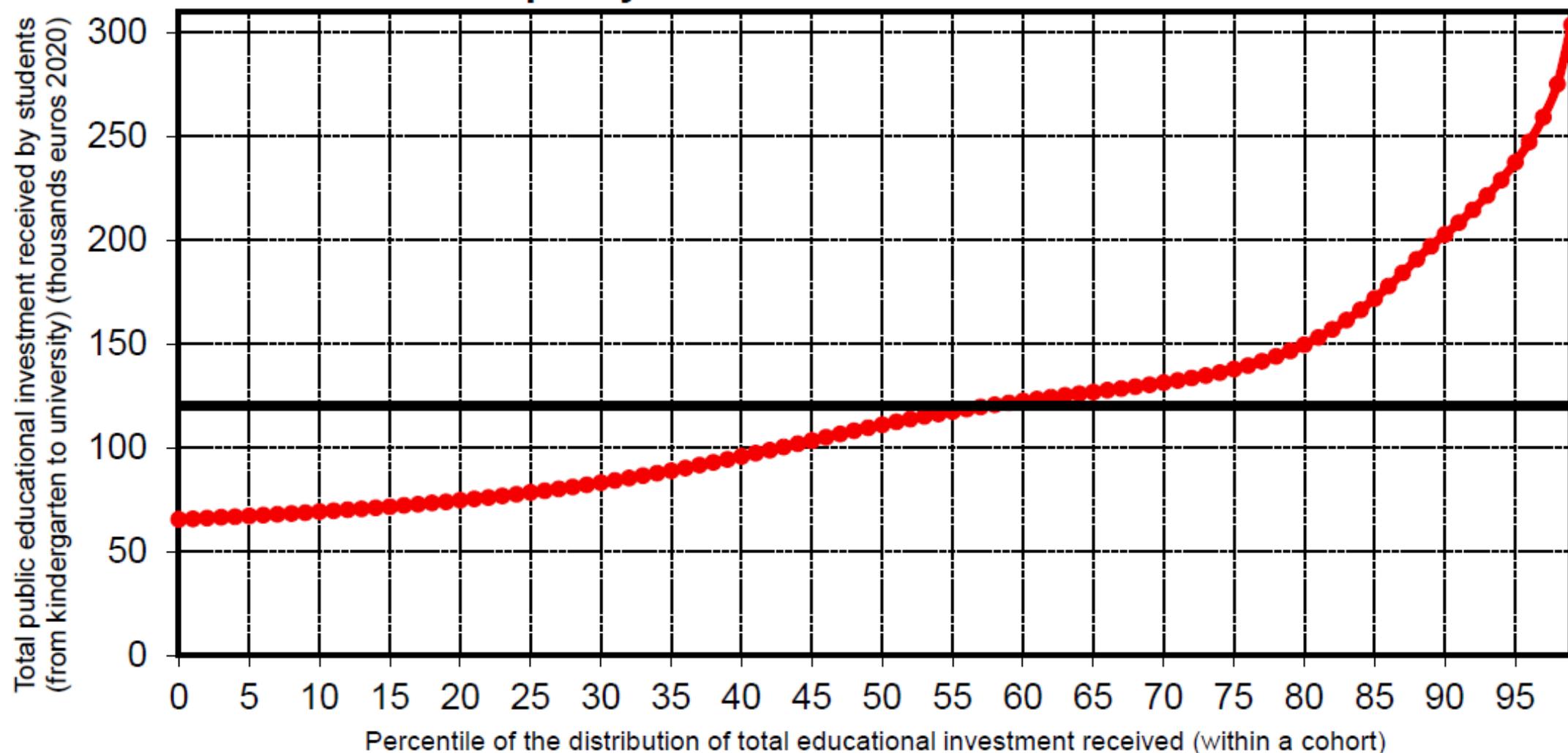
**Reading.** In the system of participatory socialism, a single shareholder holding 100% of the firm's capital stock holds 73% of voting rights if the firm has 2 employees (including himself), 51% if the firm has 10 employees (including himself), and loses the majority beyond 10 employees (including himself). A single shareholder who is not a firm employee holds 45% of the voting rights if the firm has less than 10 employees; this share then declines linearly and reaches 5% with 100 employees. **Note:** The parameters used here are the following: (i) employees (whether or not they are also shareholders) hold 50% of voting rights; (ii) within the 50% of voting rights going to shareholders, no single shareholder can hold more than 90% of them (i.e. 45% of voting rights) in a firm with less than 10 employees; this fraction declines linearly to 10% (i.e. 5% of voting rights) in firms with more than 90 employees (shareholder voting rights that are not allocated are reallocated to employees). **Sources and series:** see [piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality](http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality) (figure 18)

## Parental Income and Access to University, U.S. 2018



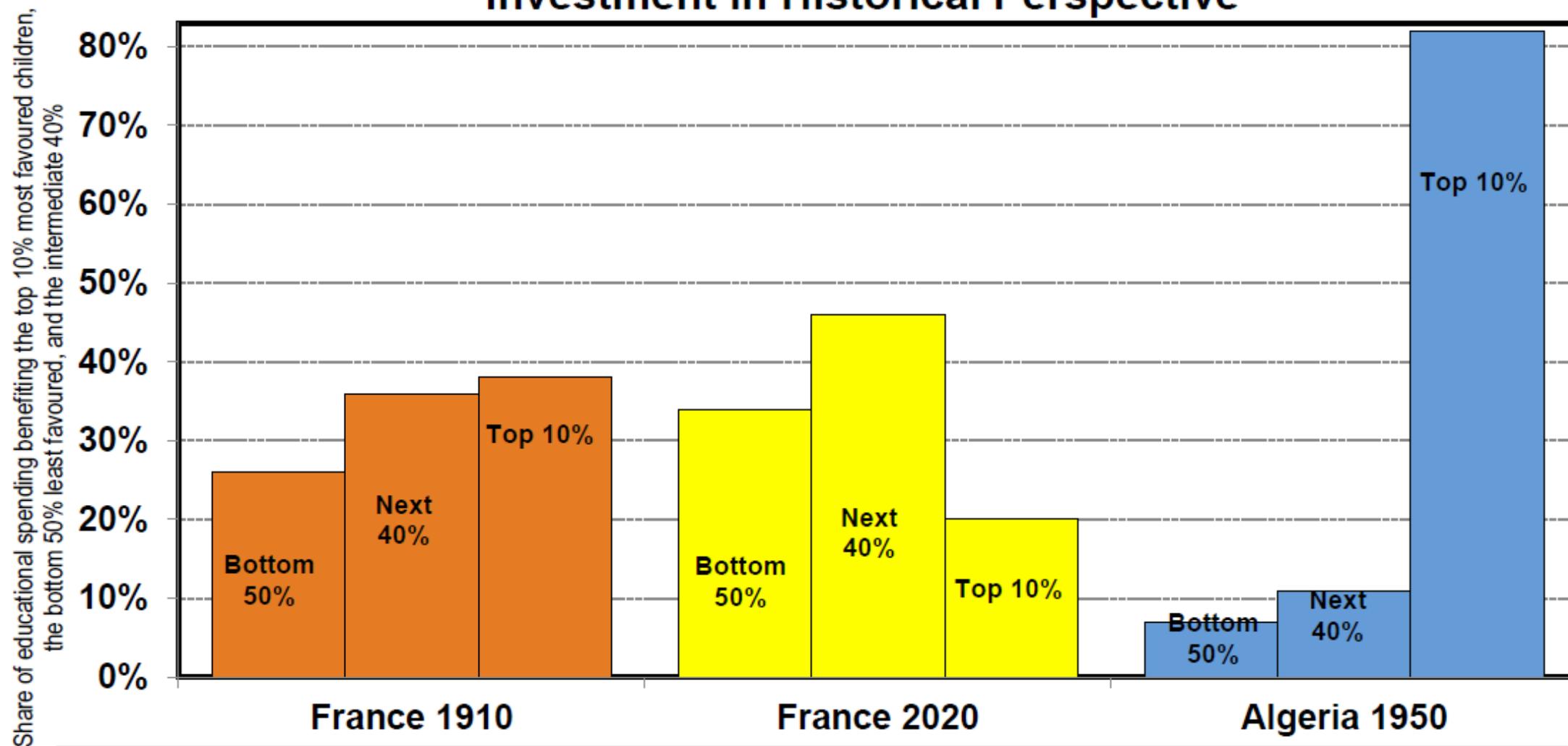
**Interpretation.** In 2018, the rate of access to higher education (percentage of individuals aged 19-21 enrolled in a university, college or any other institution of higher education) was barely 30% among the bottom 10% poorest children in the United States, and over 90% among the top 10% richest children. **Sources and series:** see [piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality](http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality) (figure 31).

## The Inequality of Educational Investment: France 2020



**Interpretation.** Total public educational investment received during their studies (from kindergarten to university) by the students of the cohort reaching 20-year-old in 2020 will be about 120 k€ (i.e. approximately 15 years of studies for an average cost of 8000€ per year). Within this generation, the 10% of students receiving the smallest educational investment receive about 65-70 k€, while the 10% receiving the most receive between 200 k€ and 300 k€. **Note:** average costs per year of study in the French educational system in 2015-2020 rank from 5-6 k€ in kindergarten-primary to 8-10 k€ in secondary, 9-10 k€ in universities and 15-16 k€ in preparatory classes to *grandes écoles* (elite tracks). **Sources and series:** see [piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality](http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality) (figure 32)

## Colonies for the Colonizers: The Inequality of Educational Investment in Historical Perspective



**Interpretation.** In Algeria in 1950, the 10% the most favoured (the settlers) benefited from 82% of total educational spending. By comparison, the share of total educational spending benefiting the top 10% of the population which benefited from the highest educational investment (i.e. those children which did the longest and most expensive studies) was 38% in France in 1930 and 20% in 2020 (which is still twice as much as their population share). **Sources and series:** voir piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality (figure 14).

**3. Did wealth inequality rise significantly over 1500-1800 period, or was it more or less stable at very high levels?** Maybe we do not fully know yet

Lots of good reasons why wealth inequality might have risen over 1500-1800 (or even over 1500-1914): rise of centralized state controlled by the wealthy elite, new possibilities for capital accumulation in large territories and colonial empires, etc. (see work by Alfani & others)

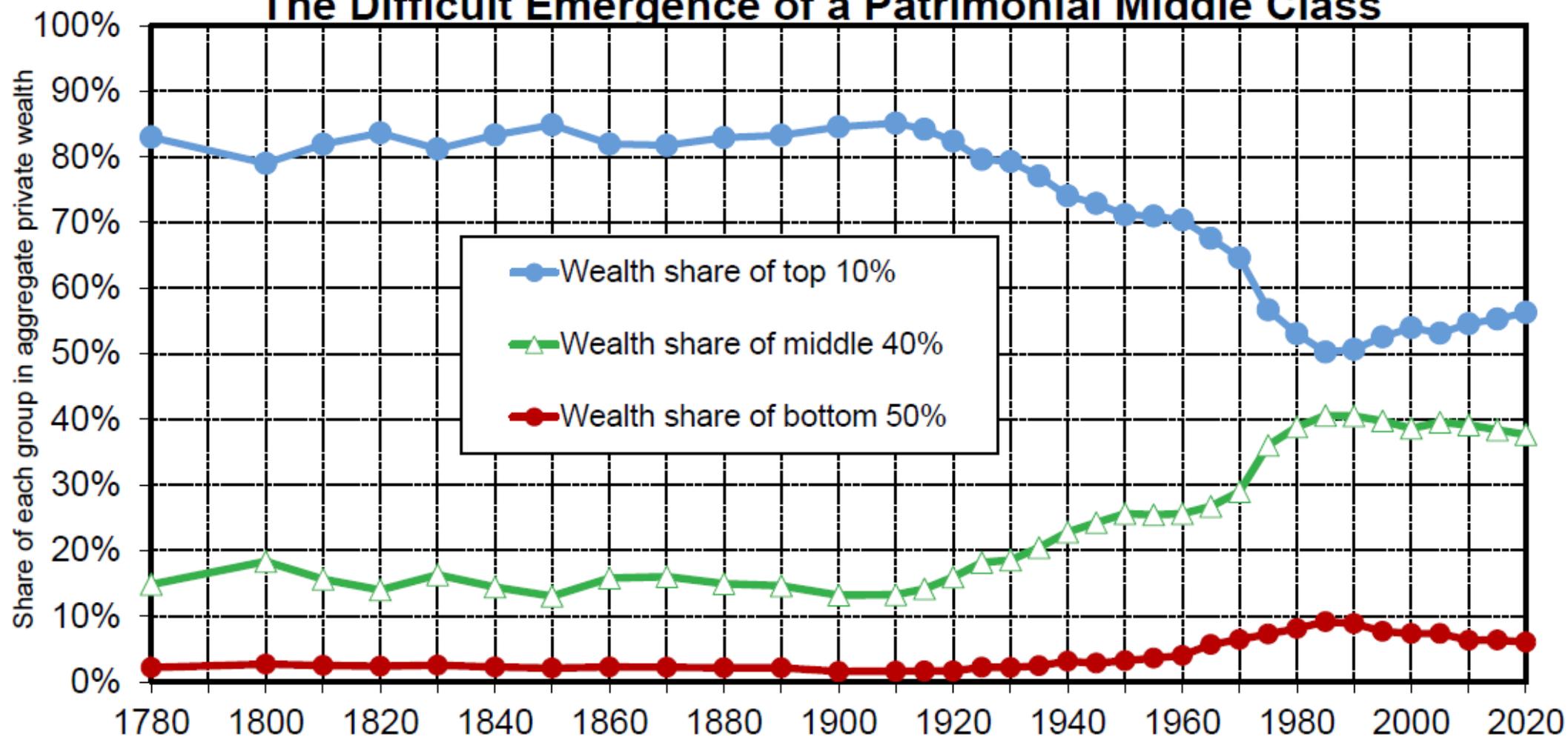
But reduction of status-based nobility privileges in 18c-19c, slow rise of social mobility & educational opportunities could have led to inequality ↓

→ Maybe the two forces balance each other & lead to pretty stable wealth inequality at very high levels (≈ France 1780-1914)

But reduction of status-based nobility privileges in 18c-19c, slow rise of social mobility & educational opportunities could also have led to a slow decline in wealth concentration over time

→ Maybe the two forces balance each other & lead to pretty stable wealth inequality at very high levels ( $\approx$  France 1780-1914)

## Wealth Distribution in France, 1780-2020: The Difficult Emergence of a Patrimonial Middle Class



**Interpretation.** The share of top 10% wealth holders in aggregate private wealth (real estate, business and financial assets, net of debt) was around 80%-90% in France between 1780 and 1910. The decline in wealth concentration begins with World War I and stops in the 1980s. It benefited mostly to the "patrimonial middle class" (the middle 40%), which is defined here as the intermediate group between the top 10% and the bottom 50% of the wealth distribution. **Sources and series:** see [piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality](http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/equality) (figure 6)

Methodological issues: property registers & probate records only record those with property; we need very good census data to make sure that we properly register the existence of propertyless individuals

In 19c France, inheritance tax is supposed to be universal, but half of the decedents are missing. It is critical to have excellent census and Etat-civil data to correct for this

In 16c-18c, maybe we miss large parts of the urban poor or rural poor

In case bottom 50% wealth shares in 1500-1800 were really higher than today, who are these urban and rural poor with property, what do they own and what do they do?