

## Introduction

so make the advances. If greater equality has been, and continues to be, the underlying solution to so much that troubles people, then it is worth concentrating for once on what you gain from it, not on what you suffer as a result of inequality. This *No-Nonsense Guide* explains what is good about having more equality, and offers a few thoughts on how greater equality is won.

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<sup>1</sup> For those that do, see Utopian Studies Society: [utopianstudieseurope.org](http://utopianstudieseurope.org) and Ruth Levitas's 2005 Inaugural Lecture 'The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society: or why sociologists and others should take Utopia seriously'. Available here: [bris.ac.uk/spais/files/inaugural.pdf](http://bris.ac.uk/spais/files/inaugural.pdf)

## 1 Why equality matters

**In a world that often lionizes wealth, it is worth remembering that no-one can be rich unless others are poor. In the world's more equal countries, more infants survive and people are generally healthier and happier. Equality pays dividends at every stage of human life, from babyhood to old age.**

*'There's ultimately a very small number of people that are phenomenally bright but also have the skills to run a company, the social skills to run a company at that level. It's just the nature of the world ... If this person has those skills, then he deserves the money.'*

Male, 37, private sector, earning more than £100,000 (\$160,000) a year<sup>1</sup>

Equality matters because, when you have less of it, you have to put up with obnoxious behavior, insulting suggestions and stupid ideas such as the one above, that it is the 'nature of the world' that 'a very small number of people' are 'phenomenally bright'.

Equality matters because human beings are creatures that thrive in societies where we are treated more as equals than as being greatly unequal in mental ability, sociability or any other kind of ability. We work best, behave best, play best and think best when we are not laboring under the assumption that some of us are much better, more deserving and so much more able than others. We perform the worst, are most atrocious in our conduct, are least relaxed and most unimaginative in outlook, when we live under the weight of great inequalities – and especially under the illusion that these are somehow warranted.

Inequalities harm the rich as well as the poor. The rich are not necessarily especially hard working, well behaved, happy or creative. Some are obsessed with making money and can be driven by that. Most behave

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much better when they are more like the rest of us. They can have appalling social skills while believing that they are ‘phenomenally bright’. Many don’t understand that it is questionable why the poor should work hard for a pittance, obey the law, or any other conventions, when the poor are members of a group being treated so unfairly.

How can people have the time and energy to contribute to our overall understanding and enjoyment of life when they are thinking of the world under delusions either of superiority or of inferiority? Inequality matters because it brings out the worst in us all. An actor called Mae West spent a lifetime accidentally explaining this. She became famous, which is why we are starting with her.

In times of great inequality, we are fooled into thinking of celebrity as greatness. This is why Hollywood celebrities were so lauded in the 1920s and why they are again today, especially in those countries where inequalities had, before, grown greatest, such as around Hollywood itself in the 1920s, and in most of the United States again now.

### The Zen of Mae West

All too often, when greater equality is advocated, the words of Mae West – a woman born plain Mary Jane – are quoted as if her particular wisdom were of special value because of her celebrity. Mary Jane chose the name Mae to use on stage. It was popular at the time. These are her famous words that are so often still repeated in one form or another when discussing the merits of greater equality: *‘I’ve been rich and I’ve been poor. Believe me, rich is better.’*

Greater equality would mean a few people not being quite so rich, and for many of them, that means (relatively speaking, in their perception) being poor. Because of this, some suggest that it is better not to have too much equality. The suggestion is that it is far

better to be rich if you can, and to get out of poverty by aiming to be rich too. This is seen as preferable to the idea that everyone would benefit from being a little more equal. The dozen words in the quotation above play on the notion that the poor will always be with us, so the only sensible aim in life is to avoid being among them. Mae suggests that the best way to avoid poverty is to become rich.

Mae West was born in 1892 and died in 1980. She lived through a fortunate time. She got to see a great deal of poverty eliminated and inequalities greatly decline through most of her adult years. But she appeared not to appreciate it that much. She was born in Brooklyn, New York, in the United States of America. She became a movie star. Her upbringing was not particularly poor and she didn’t experience much poverty later in life. In fact, her family had been wealthy enough to purchase a series of five crypts in 1930 in a prestigious New York cemetery, one of which she would eventually be buried in. It is certainly true that Mae had been rich, but there is less evidence of her experiencing much poverty.

Offered a choice between poverty and riches, most people would choose the latter. Another of Mae’s famous quotations reads: *‘When choosing between two evils, I always like to try the one I’ve never tried before.’* She was being funny and she was not necessarily comparing riches and poverty, but inequality and evil are not that funny. Poverty and riches are both evils. It is not possible to be rich without others being poor and few people would advocate increasing poverty.

Being rich is having more than others. Getting richer is getting even more than others; by definition, getting richer is at others’ expense. But there is no need to choose between evils. You can choose to be more equal, you can choose for there to be both less riches and less poverty, you can choose the right thing, you can choose that you want to be more like

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others in what your money allows you to do, in how much you have.

But isn't it possible for all of us to become richer, or at least for a great many people to gain wealth? Isn't that what occurred between plain Mary Jane's Brooklyn childhood and Mae West's Los Angeles death? Didn't the standard of living of almost all Americans rise greatly? It did, but that is not the same as all Americans becoming rich. Mae confused a better living standard with greater riches. It is a common mistake to make. In fact, living standards for all rise significantly *only* when the continuing growth in the riches of a few very wealthy people has been curtailed.

Being rich means having much wealth. Wealth means having an abundance of possessions and, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it: an abundance 'especially of money'. Money is a medium of exchange; it is used to buy things: commodities, land, labor. 'Abundance' is: '*a very great quantity, especially more than enough*'. Being rich is about having more than others and more than you need. That might be better than being poor, but if you have more than you *need* – of the means of exchange (money) – others have to have less than they need. If they did not have less than they needed you would not be rich.

You can have more than you need of love, of learning, of friendship, of warmth. People will rarely accuse you of being too gentle a person, too nice, too trustworthy or truthful. You can simultaneously have enough personal material possessions to keep you in comfort. But you cannot have more of the means of exchange than you need without also automatically having the right to call on the time, labor and property of others. That is what an abundance of riches gives you – the ability to curtail the freedoms of others, to be able to make choices which curtail their choices.

What, then, is enough? I once commented about how many shoes a friend of mine had in his family's

hallway. He replied (a few months later, he'd been thinking about it) that he thought his family had fewer shoes than many in the UK, and that he had survived a year in India on a pair of flip-flops and a pair of trainers which was enough, but not enough when appearances mattered. What is 'enough' in affluent societies is most often decided in comparison with what others have and expect, and it tends to be more, the greater inequality there is.

If you were rich you might not worry about others having less than they need, fewer possessions than are essential for their respectability, or worry about others having less choice, less freedom than you. You might think it necessary. After all, how could you purchase the labor of others (to do the work you might not want to do) if they did not have less than they needed?

What use would your riches be if others did not need wages to be your servants? Would you just buy more and more possessions and then dust them yourself? Some people never see others as like themselves. Mae herself said '*I never loved another person the way I loved myself*'. Mae had no children. She may never have loved another person much, but she may also not have loved herself that much – despite being so rich.

Living standards are not about having more than enough. Going back to the dictionary and looking up definitions often helps us see straight. A standard is a measure of *quality* often recognized as a *model for imitation*. A living is a means of maintenance, a livelihood. Living standards are those means of maintaining ourselves which are of a certain quality and which can and should be replicated widely (a model for imitation).

Living standards are about having *enough*. But the problem is that what is enough depends on how much more those above you have. If they have closets full of shoes, then your five pairs per family member may appear meager (boots, trainers, smart shoes,

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deck shoes, flip flops<sup>2</sup>). Well, maybe it's time to give Mae some credit for some of what she said. After all, she said a lot of things and they cannot all have been bunkum. According to Mae, once is enough: *'You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough.'*

Having enough is having what is right in the circumstances you find you are living in. What was enough in 1890s Brooklyn would have been far too little to exist on in 1980s Los Angeles. Even though most of the worse-off people in 1980s Los Angeles, where Mae died, were each on average unbelievably more prosperous than were the residents of that (still being built) Brooklyn borough in New York almost a century earlier. But that did not mean that the living standards of the poor in Los Angeles were high – because humans are social animals. Living standards have always been measured in contemporary comparison to others, since only by comparison can we assess quality.

By the 1980s it had become common to own a car in Los Angeles. It was one of the first cities in the world where car ownership became a norm. To be poor in Los Angeles then was not to own a car. Just over 80 years earlier, when Mary Jane was a child in Brooklyn, only the very richest people owned a car; no factory lines to mass produce cars existed. You didn't *need* a car in 1900s Brooklyn, no matter who you were. By the 1980s, and across that continent, it became almost impossible to be part of society without a car. In the United States today many homeless people sleep in their cars.

### Winning greater equality for babies

Babies are great levelers because they are all more or less the same – and also the same as they were 10,000 years ago. So let's begin with babies.

One way to see why greater equality matters to people is to look across a human lifetime. As Mae said,

you've got to live it right, you'll only have one. At each age you can consider whether people in general are better-off when their living conditions are more equal, or whether living in a family that has great riches might be better for an individual than being more average. It is also worth considering if there are any ages at which living in poverty is more or less harmful than at other ages.

One way in which campaigners for greater equality succeed is by striving to reduce poverty. Demanding that child poverty be abolished is a particularly good tactic because few people argue that any child deserves to be poor. Sadly, however, there are people who try to divide the poor into those who they suggest are deserving of some aid and those who are supposedly undeserving. These same people often then suggest that nobody should have a child if they cannot afford to. They rarely ask why (in some very rich countries today) many people feel they cannot afford to become parents.

The first age of life (following William Shakespeare's famous 'seven ages' speech from *As You Like It*) is infancy – from birth until school. Greater equality has some very clear benefits to infants. In affluent societies with more equitable income distributions, fewer babies are born undernourished. They also suffer less from diseases caused by the alcohol or drugs taken by their mothers while they were in the womb. This is because use of alcohol and drugs is less prevalent amongst adults in more equitable societies.<sup>3</sup>

In poorer societies, infants are more likely to die within their first year of life than in richer societies, but in more equitable poor societies those risks are also reduced. In the year 2009, worldwide, 42 babies died for every 1,000 born. However, in Cuba infant mortality rates were 10 times less at 4 per 1,000, even less than in the hugely wealthier United States of America (7 per 1,000). In very unequal and poor

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India, the rate was 50 deaths per 1,000 born and in more equitable and a little less poor China it was 17 per 1,000. For every grieving parent in China each day there were three in India.<sup>4</sup> Where would you rather have a child if you were an average citizen? Remember there is also childhood mortality and illness to consider, not just surviving the first year.

You could say it is better to give birth in a rich country than in any poor country today, and in terms of child survival this usually is true.<sup>5</sup> However, again you must choose carefully. The rates of infant deaths per 1,000 live births in Iceland and Japan, which currently stand at 2, are less than a third of those in the US.<sup>6</sup> Iceland and Japan are the most equitable of affluent countries and these infant mortality rates suggest that two-thirds of all the infants who die every year in the US are dying because of the great levels of inequalities tolerated in that country and the social ills associated with those inequalities.

Iceland and Japan have suffered great economic hardship in recent years, yet their more equitable societies are better placed to absorb the effects of this – the average family in these two countries is far better off, by many ways of measuring quality of life, than the average family in the more unequal affluent nations. However, in most countries, quality of life is now much better than it was in the recent past. This is also down to equality and especially to the greater equalities that were won almost everywhere not too long ago; in the United States, as well as in very different Iceland, as well as half a world away in India.

Just over a century ago Britain was the richest country in the world. Nevertheless, the infant mortality rates suffered by the newborn children of the very richest people in Britain stood at around 100 per 1,000 babies born. These were the people with high enough incomes to be able to pay servants to cook and clean for them. Now, only nine of the very poorest

countries of the world still suffer rates as high as that. In many ways it is better to be born poor now than to have been born rich a century ago, but this is only because so much progress has been made.

No affluent group anywhere in the world now suffers anything comparable to the rates of infant death that the children of the British aristocracy suffered a century ago. In Britain early on, and in many less affluent countries a little later, rates of infectious diseases (those diseases which still kill most infants globally) had been brought down enormously by immunization and better sanitation. It was the introduction of better sanitation for all in Britain, most importantly the introduction of sewers, which did most to protect the children of the rich (as well as the poor). It was greater equality. Sewers make us all more equal. They are a public good.

Usually it is the struggle of poorer groups that results in greater equality being won. People go on strike to have poverty wages raised. They very occasionally, but with great effect, overturn despotic rulers in revolutions. When revolutions are orchestrated by any group other than the élite, as occurred in France, the United States, Russia, China and Cuba, the results are always greater equality. Often much bloodshed and new forms of tyranny follow and inequalities can rise again, though rarely to their previous heights. The new forms of tyranny often result from increasing internal security in response to outside threats. It is perhaps only in the United States that inequalities today are higher than they were before its revolution (often called its war of independence).

Greater equality is occasionally demanded by the rich. For the rich, the benefits are less obvious and because the rich hold so much power they tend usually to act as a brake upon greater equalities being won. Yet in Britain at the start of the 20th century it became obvious to many rich people that greater equality

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was in their interest, too – the rich were among those agitating for the great public works that were undertaken to improve social goods such as sanitation. A few of the rich also argued for pensions for all, for unemployment benefit and for child allowances. Some of the rich today are still not as blinkered as most of them unfortunately remain.

### Of sewers and cathedrals

If you look around the world today, into the megacities especially, you can see great public works being undertaken almost everywhere. Because sewers run underground they are not as visible as are the great mosques, palaces, temples and cathedrals of the world and yet, in the last few decades, we have built underground more cubic meters of sewer and storm drain worldwide than all the volume of the world's majestic public buildings ever constructed above ground. And whereas only a select few are allowed in each palace, the sewers are for everyone's waste.

Our eyes are more often drawn to new slums, and not to where former slums are turning into poor but permanent neighborhoods. Rulers sanction the building of sewers, of these cathedrals below ground, because they are as much in their personal interest as in their subjects' interest; but rulers are quicker to do this where the gap between them and those they rule is narrower.

Often huge numbers of poor people are unfairly evicted from areas which are being gentrified. Slum clearance is rarely a fair form of progress. The poor frequently turn out not to have legal rights, which is another source of great inequality. But in aggregate the global infant mortality rate continues to fall. By April 2011 it was reported, for 2009, to be 42 children per 1,000 born. It was twice that in 1975.

The absolute fall in the number of grieving parents has been even greater than the fall in the worldwide infant mortality rate. Between the years 1970-74 and

2005-09 world population increased by 67 per cent, but the number of children the average woman in the world was giving birth to (in her lifetime) fell from 4.45 to 2.52 babies, or by 43 per cent. Combining the falls in fertility and rise in population, this is some 28 per cent fewer babies being born.<sup>7</sup> So, in absolute terms, there are much less than half the number of grieving parents in the world now than there were in the early 1970s, even though world population is now much larger. That is real progress.

There is one exception to the general rule that, among affluent countries, infant mortality rates are lowest in those nations that are more equitable. That exception is Singapore which, according to the UN, has a very low rate of two babies dying per thousand born alive in 2009. How then does Singapore manage to maintain very high income inequalities – the highest amongst the 26 richest nations of the world<sup>8</sup> – but also have one of the lowest infant mortality rates?

Some of the poorest people in Singapore are the maids, who are servants for one in five of all middle-class households. The maids act as personal cleaners, shoppers and child-carers. Most of the maids are guest-workers from abroad. They have no right to remain in Singapore. In more economically unequal countries the poor tend to have fewer legal rights. Every six months they must take a pregnancy test and, if they are found to be pregnant, they are deported.

Migrant workers make up about a quarter of the population of Singapore and are mainly at the bottom of the income range, where you'd expect infant mortality to be highest. This section of the population is effectively removed from the picture by deportation and the threat of it. Poorer women trying very hard not to become pregnant is one way in which infant mortality can be reduced. The babies who would have a greater chance of dying are never actually born.

The reason infant mortality rates in Singapore are

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lower than in almost all European countries is not the good public health levels, which are similar to the better standards in Europe, but the deportation threat for ‘guest-workers’, which is not widely replicated in Europe.

It is obvious that your mother losing her job and being sent somewhere with worse medical facilities to have her baby in is clearly detrimental to the unborn children of many of the poor in Singapore. But does the deportation of maids who become pregnant also harm the infant children of the rich in Singapore, those they are often paid to care for? Is Singapore a model that rich people around the world could try to emulate if they did not care about the servants? Can the rich in future shield themselves from the lives of the poor by evicting poor people when their presence no longer suits?

In some ways the nation-state of Singapore is a country that acts like a very large Victorian British country house. In these country houses, servants were expelled if found pregnant. Aristocrats didn’t want servants’ children cluttering up the place and servants could not afford to pay others to care for their children. So naturally, if a maid became pregnant she had to leave. There was, of course, nothing natural about this (which is why, in Britain today, the idea of working ‘in service’ is still so resented).

However, just because gross inequalities within a country like Britain became (for a long time) untenable does not mean such inequalities cannot be maintained across state borders. Many maids in Singapore do have children but return to work, leaving their child with its grandmother or another relative. The money they send home ensures the survival of both. But is this a sensible way of living for the rich as well as the poor?

Where inequalities are great and poverty is widespread, the short-term incentive grows ever greater for the rich to segregate and cut themselves off in great

country estates or smaller gated estates. In India, most of the rich work hard to insulate themselves from the poor – they want not to see them, often not even to acknowledge their existence. Wine bars in Mumbai skyscrapers are so high up that people on the streets below appear smaller than ants. But those ants will be the sisters, fathers and children of the servants of the rich.

From the spread of infectious diseases that feed on poverty, to the fear of armed insurrection one day occurring, maintaining high levels of inequality within a country for decades is both very damaging to wider public health and well-being, and very hard to achieve politically.

One way to begin to answer the question as to whether the perpetuation of inequalities in a place like Singapore is sensible is to ask if it also harms the rich. Think whether you would be better off being brought up by a servant with no lifetime commitment to you, or by your parents. Think whether you would rather sort out your own food to eat, or always have it presented to you. It is rumored that the heir to the throne in Britain has a servant who dresses him each day. But wouldn’t you rather pull up your own trousers? Once you become reliant on servants for parts of your life, it is easy to become less capable of doing those things yourself.

Being brought up by a woman who is all the time thinking of the child she has had to leave behind is not something to be envied. The Victorian English rich were not a joyous bunch. They were an historical aberration. The citadel of Singapore, sitting at the crossroads of world cargo-ship trade, has boomed in recent years only because so many trinkets are now made in China and transported so far by sea using so much oil. Some 900 years ago, the city of Merv on the silk route was claimed to be the largest in the world. Its ancient ruins are a world heritage site and

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yet you almost certainly have not heard of it.<sup>9</sup> It came and it went.

### The worst effects of inequality for children

Equality matters hugely to children. Most children are brought up almost entirely within a loving family until they are old enough to go to school, and after that still spend more of their waking hours in their family. Families tend to be models of equality and co-operation.<sup>10</sup> They are usually far from perfect, and some are very brutal. Nevertheless, it is increasingly common that financial resources are shared equitably within a family, that parents try to treat all their children as equals, and that children are brought up to consider their parents as people they will treat as equals in future, not as their betters or elders.

Most families are made up of a man and a woman and, unlike many of their parents and most of their grandparents, these men and women increasingly try to treat each other as equals and are expected by others to do so. In a variety of religions all over the world, and almost always when bound together in secular ceremonies, far fewer women than in the past promise to ‘obey’ their husbands when they marry.<sup>11</sup> Unprecedented numbers of couples feel no compulsion to go through formal marriage ceremonies at all, but almost all couples understand the need to be loving parents.

A few children are not brought up in loving families. In the past, in what are now affluent countries, many infants had to be abandoned by their parents because they could not afford to care for them and also feed themselves. If left as babies to be discovered, these were called foundlings, and orphanages were built to care for them as one of the earliest signs of greater equality being won. Before then, such babies were left to die, or smothered shortly after birth.

Many children in the poorest and least equitable

countries in the world still have to be abandoned because of destitution. In some (rare) cases, infanticide (more often of baby girls than boys) is still practiced because of extreme poverty. Even in the most unequal rich countries, some children are still given up by their parents because they find they cannot care for them. Most are given up for adoption, but there are still a couple of ‘foundling’ children registered every year in countries like the UK.<sup>12</sup>

Far more teenagers become parents in the most unequal of affluent countries, and it is these teenagers who are most likely to give up their children. Children are also more likely to live with just one of their parents in more unequal countries – marriages tend to break up more often given the economic and social strains of living in a more unequal society.<sup>13</sup>

At the extreme of global society, in affluent but unequal countries, the children of the very rich can often have very little contact with their parents. This is usually not because their parents are callous; almost all parents want to spend time with their children and get to know them. All children want more time with loving parents and carers.

The reasons why very affluent adults often spend too little time with their offspring include social convention, where the servants are there to ‘see to’ the children, and family traditions of sending sons or daughters to boarding school. Other affluent parents often feel they need to work long hours to maintain their privileged position in an unequal society.

It was social conventions that led to those English servant-keeping classes a century ago suggesting that children should be seen and not heard. Conventionally, children would be brought down by nanny and presented in a row for the adults to inspect before they (the adults) started their evening meal.

The children of the rich ate with nanny in the nursery. Their real parent was the nanny but, sadly,



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the nannies were often changed. This was akin to losing your parents over and over again.<sup>14</sup> Although this was clearly nothing like as harmful as actually being orphaned, very little attention is paid to how much the children of the very rich suffered in the past from the conventions that went with extreme affluence. Hardly anyone today talks of the emotional problems of contemporary rich children. It might be good if we did.

Children brought up in institutions, child prisons, boarding schools, care homes and the like rarely talk of the experiences they had with much happiness.<sup>15</sup> They are often very bitter about the choices the adults in their early lives made over their care. These experiences also appear to extend even to institutions established to bring up children in a spirit of greater equality – kibbutzim and communes.

Sometimes children brought up outside of families become convinced that some aspects of their treatment hardened them, or better prepared them for a harsh world. But what they usually say is that the institutions are much better now than then. This might be true – but as I've grown older I've noticed the next generation of incumbents say much the same thing.

In more equitable countries, far fewer children, both rich and poor, are separated from their parents due to long work hours, to being sent away from home to study, to being taken into care or to being imprisoned. In some of the most equitable Scandinavian countries I have been told that the government minister responsible for imprisonment knows personally the handful of children who are incarcerated. They are so few that she or he can remember their names.

In an equitable society, all children are different, but in some ways they are more similar than in unequal nations. Hardly any are hungry, for instance. The consumption of toys and other goods in more equitable nations tends to be lower. Less has to be transported

from China. Far less money is spent on advertising in such countries and less of that advertising is aimed at making children feel inferior and encouraging them to pester their parents. Such advertising directed at children is more likely to be banned.<sup>16</sup>

Where children grow up in similar economic circumstances to other children around them, they have less need to show off. Children are more likely to play together if they do not live in gated compounds in cities without sidewalks (such compounds are common now in more unequal affluent places). They are more likely to have child-centered childhoods, whereas affluent children in affluent countries now spend far more time with adults, often being coached to compete educationally in out-of-hours teaching sessions or sitting in the car talking to mother (not mum or ma) while being driven to some apparently socially appropriate activity, rather than playing freely with the local kids.

Everyone knows, or should know, that the poor do much worse in more unequal societies – they are simply poorer. What far too few people know is that the children of the rich also fare worse under such conditions – not just from the anxiety and depression they are more likely to suffer,<sup>17</sup> but also from the growing sense that they have been denied a normal childhood with lots of play.

### The benefits of equality in childhood

Children are very sensitive to inequality. It has been suggested by a great many researchers that human beings are essentially programmed to be incredibly aware of slights and unfairness.<sup>18</sup> The whine of 'that's not fair' is dreaded by parents because it requires a far more complicated and considered response than is needed to react appropriately to: 'I want it – give me'. At home, within the household, there are often pecking orders. Older siblings will usually dominate younger

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siblings, but they might also be required to care for them and assist them. Men often dominate women; in many places such domination is now less frequent as greater equality between the sexes is being won. Gender and age hierarchies still exist, but much less almost everywhere than was the case just a generation ago.

Families in which greater inequality and unfairness are tolerated tend not to be very happy. At one extreme of domestic inequality, a child grows up watching one parent abuse another. In more equitable societies, all forms of domestic abuse (physical, sexual, emotional and economic) are far less common, including the fairly easily counted rate of child murder.

Some historians claim that, until recently, childhood in much of the world was a very short-lived and often quite brutal experience; they claim that it has only been in very recent times and only under conditions of much greater equality that child labor has not been required and that children have been both seen and heard within families. But this was apparently the case a long time ago too. The offspring of hunter-gatherers do not become net providers until the age of 20.<sup>19</sup> We evolved to have a long childhood of learning and playing.

All over the world it has become widely unacceptable to hit children; their views have to be taken into account and their happiness cherished. Bullying, which was common in the very recent past, and even encouraged so as to ‘harden up’ children, has suddenly become recognized as something to be ashamed of. Corporal punishment is now outlawed in many countries. It was still common 30 years ago.

It is when children go to school that they often discover stark inequalities for the first time. In more equitable countries, children are more likely to attend their nearest school. This reduces the amount of time and money children and their parents need to waste commuting to school (and reduces traffic congestion).

Going to school locally also means that their school friends can easily live next door or nearby, which reduces the strange new fashion in unequal countries for affluent children to be transported in cars to ‘play-dates’ arranged by their parents. In more equitable countries, 20-mile-per-hour or 30-kilometer-per-hour speed limits are more common on residential roads and parents are happier to let their children cross such roads alone, freeing up the time of women in particular. Local speed limits are now just beginning to be seen as an issue associated with improving gender equality.

In countries where people live more similar lives to each other, children tend to be less closely monitored and controlled. Often, formal schooling starts later in life, when a child is aged six rather than four. Examination and ranking of children tends to be less frequent in more equitable societies where there is less apparent need to begin to sort children into different roles early on. And children are usually safer. Child mortality rates are lower where economic equality is higher.

In more equal societies and during more equitable times, children get to mix with a wider variety of other children and so tend to gain a better grasp of their society as a whole.<sup>20</sup> In more unequal societies, places within private schools are reserved only for the few who can afford to pay very high fees. These schools help segregate the children of the rich from other children.

One of the worse effects of private schooling is that it can imbue an unhealthy sense of superiority among those affluent children who have been deprived of the opportunity to mix with others. Often they receive high examination marks, which is hardly surprising, as that is mostly what their parents have paid for. It is easy to confuse jumping well through these hoops (like well-trained puppies) with proof of superior intelligence. They think of their private schools as a better education, but if it teaches them to look down on other people, it cannot be.

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When a greater proportion of children are educated together, rather than segregated by either their parents' wealth or their supposed ability, by parents' faith or by child's sex (or both), all the children on aggregate have a better experience of education and emerge as more knowledgeable, caring and imaginative. Boys and girls, if separated into different schools on the basis of gender, have knowledge of roughly half the population denied them. Reducing segregation is beneficial to all; even the crudest of examination results reveal this, but I'll just give you one anecdote.

I used to live in Bristol, one of England's more affluent larger cities. Bristol at the time suffered very little unemployment, its housing was expensive and incomes tended to be higher than average, and yet from Bristol proportionately fewer children found their way to study at university than from the large city I now live in, which is Sheffield. Sheffield has for decades suffered higher unemployment than Bristol, its housing is much cheaper and a great deal of it was built by local government; incomes are on average much lower, and it is also a divided city by wealth. So why do more children from Sheffield get to university than from Bristol?

The simple answer is that Sheffield has very few private schools, whereas Bristol has many. The children from Bristol whose parents pay for them to attend private school often get higher exam results, and most of them go to university. But the overall effect of taking these children out of the general state system is to reduce the funding for that system (which is per child) and to convince many children that they need to go to a non-state school to have a chance to get to university.

In contrast, in Sheffield, children from similar backgrounds to Bristol's privately educated children are in state schools and so for all children in those schools the sense that they are worthy of further education is

raised. For the city as a whole, it is cheaper and more effective not to segregate children. Sheffield may not be segregated by much of a state/private education divide but it is still divided geographically into areas with state secondary education that tends to lead on to university, and areas where it doesn't. Nevertheless, more children proportionately get to university from the poorer city. If Bristol had as much state education it would be fair to assume that even more children from there would go (given that it is a richer city overall).

So why do parents waste their money on private education? One reason is that they have the money to waste. In more equitable societies, there are fewer rich parents who can afford to pay for their children not to have to sit near others at school. However, another reason is that no-one is employed to explain the downsides. Not just the aggregate downsides, which they may well not care about, or the fact that their child might do just as well, if not better, in the state system (which no-one is paid to tell them about), but also that they might be reducing their offspring's future options. Growing up with a narrow social group dents the aspirations of the rich as much as of the poor.

For poor children in an unequal affluent society, being funneled into a school for the poor means becoming part of a group within which the idea of staying on in education at older ages is not common and where a limited range of occupations are suggested to you (once you realize that footballer and pop star are unlikely).

Only three per cent of the richest one-thousandth of Americans are highly paid media and sports celebrities. That is, 3 in every 100,000 people in the United States. Far more US estate agents are rich than pop and sport stars combined. But even estate agents (realtors) make up only 4.7 per cent of the richest one-thousandth. Over 90 per cent are executives, managers, financiers and lawyers.

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*‘After executives, managers and financial professionals, the next largest groups in the top 0.1 per cent of earners were lawyers with 6.2 per cent and real estate professionals at 4.7 per cent. Media and sports figures, who are often assumed to represent a large portion of very high-income earners, collectively made up only 3 per cent.’<sup>21</sup>*

For rich children funneled into exclusive, affluent education, the only future option often now presented is going on to further study in one of a handful of select universities and then a career in one of a very small number of well-paid occupations. You have less choice: be an executive, a manager, a financier or a lawyer. These options leave you with less choice over many things but, perhaps most importantly, they give you less choice over whom you may come to love.

## Why greater equality matters for lovers

The third human age, according to William Shakespeare, is that of the lover, the years of young adulthood.<sup>22</sup> It is at this age that humans become most acutely sensitive as to how they are perceived by others. Some surveys find that in these years physical looks and issues of attractiveness temporarily outrank riches in how social status can be perceived. Suddenly the income and wealth of your parents is much less important than how bad your acne is and whether your overall appearance happens to match what is currently considered to be attractive.

People are mammals and almost all mammals organize themselves into groups with a little inequality inherent in the group, as well as a great deal of cooperative equality. For instance, mammals often hunt as a pack but have a pecking order. Older teenagers and younger adults are not that unlike our nearest animal cousins, great apes, in some of their grouping and ranking behavior concerning friends and acquaintances. In fact, we are all not that different

from other apes, but we are often more constrained in our behaviors at both older and younger ages than we are as teenagers and young adults.

Equality matters for lovers because, in times and places of greater equality, artificial taboos on whom you might love are less frequently imposed. There are no untouchable castes in more equal societies. Under greater equality there is no significant class distinction. Women are also not looked down upon as creatures unable to make their own decisions as to whom to love or even over what they read about love.

‘Would you wish your wife or servants to read *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*?’ is the question most well known worldwide for exposing the pomposity of a section of British society. It was asked by the prosecuting attorney in 1960 of a jury in the obscenity trial of DH Lawrence’s book about a lady who falls in love with one of her many servants, a gamekeeper. The book’s plot was only plausible because it was written in a time and place of great inequality (1920s England).

At times of great equality, furtive glances up and down the social spectrum at others you might fancy but must not touch are no longer taboo. Many more taboos have been broken as much greater equality has been won for people who are gay or lesbian or belong to other sexual minorities, each once considered a stigmatized or even sinful group to belong to.

All kinds of human love can be expressed more openly when rules need no longer be imposed to ensure that people who are not supposed to mix do not do so. Racial color bars to mixed marriages were only ever introduced when one racial group was made much poorer than another due to financial inequalities.

The recent rise in inequalities, as measured by income and wealth in many countries, has often had only a very small dampening effect on the more general progress towards equality in love in recent years. But, as children and young adults become more segregated

## Why equality matters

by income and wealth, then opportunities to mix reduce and wealth inequalities are further exacerbated.

As wealth becomes concentrated in rich families through marriage (including now same-sex unions), you have to ignore a huge number of potential life partners in order to choose someone primarily because they come from a similar income bracket to you.

### Why greater equality matters as we age

Material inequalities may have a great effect on children but they are often most keenly felt in adulthood. Shakespeare's life-stage at which people were said to be fighting for recognition, the age of the soldier, can be equated to the 'mostly out of education but not yet mid-life years' of 25-39. At the start of these years there is often great optimism. At the end it becomes more apparent where the battle has got you and how much you had to fight along the way to get there.

Many young adults, especially in more unequal countries, harbor fantasies of achieving great success. The word 'aspiration' is usually reserved for this and is often presented as if it were a good thing. But unrealistic aspirations are most likely to be held and then dashed where there is less equality, less room at the top, and where aspirations are often far greater because the rich have so much that the target for apparent success has to be set very high.

Growing up in a more equal society at more equal times, you tend to wish for things that are realistic and which also are less likely to harm others around you (if you attain them). You wish to have happiness and good health in your family, more than you wish to own and drive a series of fast 'sports' cars. You might aspire to a career which is seen as useful, rather than to earn as much money as possible.

More laudable and achievable aspirations are more common under greater equality. Egalitarians exhort the ordinary, the regular, the sustainable, the average,

which can be for the (excellent and outstanding) good of all, without any of the corrosive effects of any individual having to pretend to be either excellent or outstanding. Adults also find it easier to be better parents where being a good parent is valued over being a rich parent and where fewer parents have to endure poverty.

Moving rapidly on, the fifth of Shakespeare's ages is the age of the justice, nowadays around the years 40 to 59. It is between these ages that income inequalities tend to be greatest. By age 40 in an affluent nation, your career – or lack of it – is established and your children – if you have any – are mostly born. In some of the poorest and most unequal countries of the world, it is at this point that you enter old age. If your body has been beaten down by the insults of poverty, then it is in your forties and fifties that the ramifications of the times and places you have grown up in and lived through begin most obviously to hit home. You also have a little more time to contemplate them and where you are heading next. You are supposed, by now, to be wise. One reason Shakespeare called this the age of justice is that this is the age at which a few people are usually first appointed to judge others.

In more equal countries, far fewer adults have to be actual justices of the peace because far fewer crimes are committed. Rates of imprisonment are incredibly low in almost all of the most equitable of nations, such as the Nordic countries and Japan. Imprisonment is expensive, which is why it did not become commonplace in the world until some people in some countries grew very affluent.<sup>23</sup> In the most equal countries you can be 10 or 20 times less likely to end up in prison as an adult partly because you are much less likely to resort to crime.

The fifth human age is also that at which we are supposed to be better at judging what is fair, but people tend to make better judges if they have been brought up and socialized in conditions of greater equality. In

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the country I live in and know best, England, judges are more likely than any other single profession to be drawn from the very richest strata of society. They thus have minimal experience of the lives of the people upon whom they sit in judgment and are often considered out of touch with normality.

The sixth age of life is the stage that most people in the world still don't get to complete, but it is just the first part of retirement in more affluent countries. These are the years of the 'lean and slippered pantaloon', around 60 to 74 among the affluent. In William Shakespeare's time 'pantaloon' meant an old fool. And from those Elizabethan years all the way through to the time of Queen Elizabeth II's youth, ageing was to be greatly feared and was often accompanied by hunger. There were only pensions for a tiny chosen few.

Greater equality brought the idea of retirement, of pensions by right, of minimal living standards. It is what made old age enjoyable. Predictably, in more equitable affluent countries you get to retire earlier – at 60 in Japan and 62 in France. In the most unequal of rich countries that age is currently rising, to 67 in the UK (68 soon) and in the US a huge number of elderly people have inadequate pensions to live on and have to work until they die. They have no retirement age despite the riches of their nation.

For William Shakespeare the final age was 'Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything'. Sans is French (and archaic English) for without. It won't surprise you to know that the number of teeth you keep, your chances of having your cataracts fixed or your glaucoma spotted, and even your likelihood of still being able to enjoy the taste of things, to keep your senses about you and to be active and appreciated, are all much greater if you live in a society where resources are not being hoarded for themselves by a few.

It is when you come to think about how you would like to end your days, whether you would want the

younger person caring for you in your final year to resent you or respect you, that the exceptional foolishness of advocating courses of action which lead to greater inequality becomes apparent. Your money might buy you human servants and expensive medicines, but not respect nor love, or necessarily real dignity. At the grossest extreme, private health companies will have a vested interest in keeping your physical body alive as long as possible, but they will undeniably make a greater profit if you are sedated while they do it.

The final chapter of this short guide concerns how we should go about gaining greater equality but it is worth realizing that this is far from some impossible mission. It is also worth thinking, as you consider how the very richest die, often pumped full of expensive drugs, just how wide the benefits of greater equality reach.

It may surprise you, but we have been becoming more equal for quite some time – most of us, most people in the world. Gaining greater equality is not some fantasy; it has been the real-life experience of most of our parents, grandparents and their parents. That is, if you look within the countries which are home to most people, and if you take the long view and are not mesmerized by what has happened most recently.

The past is one good guide to how greater equality can be gained. Experiences of countries that are more equal are another guide. In addition, new ideas and aspirations for greater equality are constantly being created and these too are guides. Old ideals have to be defended, along with what some have already gained: pensions, social benefits, free education, healthcare, housing; a very long list in affluent countries. In poorer countries the list is often a little shorter, but it has tended to be lengthening, at least until very recently.

Greater equality matters because under it more people are treated as being fully human.

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**1** On current attitudes to inequality and equality in London, probably the most unequal among the rich cities of the Global North, see: T Lanning and K Lawton, *Getting What We Deserve? Attitude to pay, reward and desert*, IPPR, London, 2011. The quotation is from p28. **2** Also called 'Thongs' or 'Jandals', depending on where you live. **3** All of the evidence on this is neatly summarized in Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's book *The Spirit Level: Why equality is better for everyone*, Penguin, London, 2009. See [equalitytrust.org.uk](http://equalitytrust.org.uk) **4** By quintile-group-comparisons the Chinese are more equitable than the Indians, but still suffer from high rates of income inequality which, among the countries of the Global North, are only to be found in the US. **5** Giving birth is not always safer in richer countries. Compare, for example, the infant survival rates of Cuba and the US. In Cuba, income inequalities as measured between decile groups are almost five times lower than in the US. **6** UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 2011*. **7** We can work out that fewer babies in absolute terms are born now than in the 1970s by calculating the drop as:  $28\% = 100 \text{ minus } (100 \times 1.67 \times 0.43)$ . We also know that half as many of those babies now die in their first year of life. So the number of parents who grieve the loss of a baby is now less than half the number it was in the 1970s. **8** See the table of the 26 largest rich nations sorted by income inequality in Chapter 5. Here I include affluent countries with a population of at least two million. Singapore may mostly be a small island, but it is home to over four million people. **9** Google it – that way you can learn as much or as little as you like. For those who have internet access, it is a wonderful leveler of knowledge. For those who don't, a new hurdle has been erected. **10** They might also be contested spaces dominated by the inequalities of patriarchy, but compared to the ruthlessness of many modern labor markets they are a playground (which is also a 'contested space of domination'). **11** There is a good argument to be made that: 'Fatherhood is a human social invention and patriarchy, the rule of the father, is a fundamental condition of history and of our ideas of power, authority, and of civilization itself'. See: S Kraemer, 'The origins of fatherhood: An Ancient Family Process,' *Family Process* 30(4), 1991, 377-392. **12** The latest numbers will be in: Office for National Statistics, *Birth Statistics 2009*, Vol 38, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2011 (see section on foundlings/abandoned children). There were 4 in 2004, 3 in 2006 (called 'abandoned children' by then). **13** See reference 3 above for pointers to much of the scientific evidence. **14** On attachment theories, see: C Reeves, 2007, [beyondthecouch.org/1207/reeves.htm](http://beyondthecouch.org/1207/reeves.htm) **15** O James, *The Selfish Capitalist: origins of Affluenza*, Vermilion, London, 2008. **16** O James, *Affluenza: how to be successful and stay sane*, Vermilion, London, 2007. **17** See Fig 21, D Dorling, *Injustice: why social inequality persists*, Policy Press, Bristol, 2011. **18** T Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 2002. **19** M Ridley, *The Rational Optimist*, Fourth Estate, London, 2011. **20** RH Frank, *Falling Behind: How Rising Inequality Harms the Middle Class*, University of California Press, 2007. **21** On only 3% of the richest 0.1% being entertainers and sports stars, see: Peter Whoriskey, 'With executive pay, rich pull away from rest of America,' *Washington Post*, 19 Jun 2011. [nln.tl/r80dBJ](http://nln.tl/r80dBJ) **22** On the seven ages and measuring inequality by age see Bethan Thomas & Danny Dorling, *Identity in Britain: a cradle-to-grave atlas*, Policy Press, Bristol, 2007. Online examples can be found here: [nln.tl/rnKheo](http://nln.tl/rnKheo) **23** To be fair, like most things, the reasons for the rise in imprisonment are a little bit more complex. For a very complicated but great guide see: L Throness, *A Protestant Purgatory: Theological origins of the penitentiary act, 1779*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2008.

## 2 What is equality?

**Statistics show the extreme inequality between continents and nations. But equality is well worth pursuing. Not only are humans happier and healthier when they are more equal, but more equal societies offer greater social mobility – as well as reducing population growth.**

*'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.'*

Universal Declaration of Human Rights,  
1948, article 1.

The basic thrust of this *No-Nonsense Guide* is that human beings are happier and healthier the more equal they are, and that this is borne out by looking at statistics from all over the world today – as well as by surveying the whole of human history. My view comes from lots of other people's views – I didn't think these things up by myself.

Equality means being afforded the same rights, dignity and freedoms as other people. These include rights to access resources, the dignity of being seen as able and the freedom to choose what to make of your life on an equal footing with others. Believing that we are all quite equal in what we could do is very far from suggesting that we would all do much the same were we more equal.<sup>1</sup>

Although leftwing and green politicians tend to advocate greater equality more vocally and rightwing and fascist ones might join parties to oppose it, equality is not the preserve of any political label. Great inequality has been sustained or increased under systems labeled as socialist and communist. Some free-market systems have seen equalities grow and the playing field become more level. More anarchistic systems with smaller or non-existent states can be