

The **NO-NONSENSE GUIDE** to

EQUALITY

‘Publishers have created lists of short books that discuss the questions that your average [electoral] candidate will only ever touch if armed with a slogan and a soundbite. Together [such books] hint at a resurgence of the grand educational tradition... Closest to the hot headline issues are *The No-Nonsense Guides*. These target those topics that a large army of voters care about, but that politicians evade. Arguments, figures and documents combine to prove that good journalism is far too important to be left to (most) journalists.’

Boyd Tonkin,

The **NO-NONSENSE GUIDE** to

EQUALITY

Danny Dorling

Dedication

To those who desire more.

About the author

Danny Dorling is a Professor of Human Geography at the University of Sheffield. With a group of colleagues, he helped create the website worldmapper.org which shows who has most and least in the world. He has co-written more than two dozen books on issues related to social inequalities as well as several hundred academic papers.

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Foreword

DANNY DORLING's *No-Nonsense Guide to Equality* needs reading twice. In a world where so much that doesn't matter is slickly promoted in day-glo colors to grab unwarranted attention, Danny makes important points thick and fast, with so little build-up that you can easily miss them. He gets to the core of greater equality by asking – as if in passing – ‘What use would your wealth be if others did not need wages to be your servants?’ We often fail to recognize how inextricably wealth and poverty are bound together. The presence of wealthy people creates a sense of relative deprivation and the need for higher wages among the less well-off. As Danny says, ‘what is enough depends on how much more those above you have.’

The social anthropologist Marshal Sahlins said of people in early hunting and gathering societies: ‘[they] have few possessions, but they are not poor.’ He then went on to say: ‘Poverty is not a certain small amount of goods, nor is it just a relation between means and ends; above all it is a relation between people. Poverty is a social status. As such, it is an invention of civilization. It has grown with civilization... as an invidious distinction between classes...’¹

An important issue facing the modern world is the way economic growth serves as a sop for the dissatisfactions and social tensions which result from great inequality. Henry Wallich, a former governor of the US Federal Reserve and professor of economics at Yale University, put it like this: ‘Growth is a substitute for equality of income. So long as there is growth there is hope, and that makes large income differentials tolerable.’² By ‘hope’, Wallich meant that rising material standards over time produced a sense of self-advancement – of moving up – that might serve as a substitute for the sense of self-advancement produced by moving up the social ladder.

However, economic growth is now severely curtailed by the international financial turmoil since the crash of 2008 and, even without that, would need to be reined in to reduce carbon emissions. (We should distinguish here between the growth of resource use, which the rich countries need to avoid, and the technical and social innovation needed to bring us towards sustainability.)

So what if growth can no longer substitute for equality? When growth halted in the Great Depression of the 1930s, there were very rapid reductions in inequality. The motive for policies which contributed to the decline in inequality almost certainly included a desire to reduce what was then the growing support for socialism and communism: the Depression was, after all, regarded by many as the long-heralded collapse of capitalism that socialists had predicted.

Now that the threat of communism has largely passed, there may be less pressure on politicians to reduce inequality as a way of maintaining political support. Nevertheless, the signs are that the public tolerance for astronomical top salaries and bonuses, for tax avoidance among both wealthy individuals and companies, is rapidly disappearing. No-one believes there is anything 'fair' about paying for the mistakes of bankers and hedge-fund executives (especially while they continue to receive grossly inflated incomes) by cutting public services, which are used predominantly by the least well-off and most vulnerable.

If economic growth is less forthcoming, whether because of the long-term effects of the financial crash or as a result of the need to reduce carbon emissions, the pressure for greater equality is likely to increase. There is another important link between environmental issues and greater equality. Consumerism is almost certainly the greatest threat to reducing carbon emissions. The reduction of inequality is a necessary first step to achieving sustainability because

consumerism is driven by status competition which – in turn – is intensified by having less equality.

Lastly, as we showed in our book *The Spirit Level*, greater equality seems to improve the real quality of life for the vast majority of the population.³ It improves the quality of social relations and dramatically reduces the scale of health and social problems in societies. Indeed, the data suggest that, to make further improvements in the real quality of our lives, we need to shift our attention from material standards as driven by consumerism to improving the quality of social relations. What is exciting is that the evidence suggests we can achieve this by reducing the material differences between us.

Looking only at the effects of income differences, in our research we took a very simple view of inequality. What is refreshing about Danny's *No-Nonsense Guide to Equality* is how multi-faceted and rich in insights it is. That makes it an important contribution to creating a wider understanding of inequality.

Richard Wilkinson, Emeritus Professor, University of Nottingham, and *Kate Pickett*, Professor, University of York.

¹ Marshal Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, Tavistock, London, 1974. ² Henry C Wallich, 'Zero Growth', *Newsweek*, 24 Jan 1972. ³ Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: why equality is better for everyone*, Penguin 2009.

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Introduction

WHEN I SAID I was trying to write a guide to equality, what was most interesting about the comments I received was how varied was the advice that was offered. Hardly anyone studies equality.¹ Huge numbers of people are concerned with inequality. Almost all of these people lament the extent to which inequalities have grown, but there appears to be little shared ground over the benefits of a more equal city, country and world.

It is as if so many of us have been moving away from greater equality for so many years that it is now considered fanciful to ask how we might live better. However, without an idea of where it is you want to get to, constantly opposing where you are heading can become exhausting. The most common route to greater equality is simply ensuring that next year is a little less unfair than this year, and doing that repeatedly, sometimes for longer than a human lifetime.

I usually precede 'equality' with the word 'greater' because this guide is more about a direction than a destination. I provide numerous examples of how just moving in that direction increases the well-being and happiness of the vast majority, but subverts the wishes of those who believe you can never have too much, a group who can never be satisfied.

This book is a very personal view of greater equality, its benefits and what are seen as the possible downsides of us all becoming more equal. It takes an optimistic stance because it is very easy to become pessimistic when considering inequalities. The tendency is to concentrate all the time on the current worst excesses of inequality and then to extrapolate from that point.

In medical science there is always a disease that is becoming more common. In affluent countries it was cholera, then tuberculosis, then heart disease, then cancers, now dementia. In poorer countries it was

diarrhea and then AIDS and now malaria (again). Medics are largely concerned with ill-health, not with good health, and to someone who sees ill people every day, illness is all around. But most of us in the world have seen huge improvements in our overall health, largely due to better sanitation, nutrition and public health, but also through medical advances, including vaccination. Most of us have also benefited from periods of rising equality.

The vast majority of people in the world enjoy greater equality in so many more ways than did their great-grandparents. In relation to men, the position of women has improved most markedly. As mortality during childbirth continues to decline, for the first time in human history, women – any day now – are about to make up a majority of humans on the planet. Another example of progress is that few people now live in colonies (as explicitly defined). Fewer people are governed by obvious dictators than ever before.

Only recently have a majority of children worldwide been treated as being equal enough in value to other children to be taught to read and write – and, again, this is the first time in human history this has happened.

At the same time, most people are enjoying less equality in many ways within their country than their parents did. Women make up the large majority of the world's poor. Death in childbirth remains the biggest killer of women. More of us now, worldwide, live at the whims of colonizing corporate organizations, some of whose employees suggest that there is no alternative to concentrating primarily on inhuman profit-taking. For the first time in history, we could easily prevent the majority of the millions of deaths that are suffered by very young children every year, but we choose not to. At least we now have the choice.

The technologies and knowledge that gave us this choice were only developed themselves in places where enough equalities had been won to allow more than the élite to join in the study of medicine and science, and

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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.

Danny Dorling

Sheffield, November 2011

¹ For those that do, see Utopian Studies Society: 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

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 year¹

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