

Review of Danny Dorling, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Equality*. Oxford, UK: New Internationalist, 2012. 176 pp, incl index, notes and tables.

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This is a smart, readable, quite wonderful book, but it may be more than that. It may pioneer a new form of progressive thought and action.

“[W]ithout an idea of where it is you want to get to,” writes Danny Dorling, Professor of Human Geography at the University of Sheffield, England, “constantly opposing where you are heading can become exhausting” (10). Exhibit A can be much left reporting, with its litany of capitalist and conservative outrages and calls for resistance; exhibit B could be academic writing, with its seeming mission to show the oppression behind everything. And no branch of the left has relied more on apocalyptic rhetoric than the environmental movement. Over the last 20 years the left has had little to counter the vision of wealth, personal autonomy, and traditional values offered by conservative proponents of the “free market.” As a left academic I may be biased here, but to my mind, more than anything, we on the left need new thinking. Dorling does not, in the 176 pages of this no-nonsense guide, offer a new, fully-worked out progressive philosophy, but he does provide something perhaps more valuable at this moment: a place to stand.

In a manner reminiscent of the wildly successful strategy of market apostles, Dorling works like this. Start with a simple, obviously true (to me, anyway, and I’m sure to many) idea: that we are all roughly equal in abilities and potentials. Don’t stop to carefully defend this proposition, point-by-point. Instead, rush ahead to show the better world that results from taking this idea seriously. The book is a series of boldly made, thrilling statements of truth marked by Dorling’s absolute refusal to cede any ground to those who

might question his basic idea of equality. Some of these are clear and categorical: “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” (13). Others require a bit of explanation: sewers “make us all more equal,” because they provide better public health to both rich and poor. The odd one is a bit strange or perhaps just needs more explanation, like his claim that more equal societies have lower speed limits in residential areas (really?). Along the way, Dorling discusses the virtues of small, local schools, cites the beneficial effects of equality on teen pregnancy and the emancipation of women, and expresses his (quite genuine) sympathy for privileged children of pop singers, who must struggle to understand our essential equality.

At this point, it might be customary to offer a summary and critique of the book. So here it is. The book is something of a mash-up; it’s not the most coherently structured thing you will ever read (though it’s always clear). But it’s a beautiful mashup. Dorling sticks throughout to defending his basic, powerful definition of equality, using anecdotes, examples and many (carefully explained) numbers, especially on wealth and income inequality. He is not interested here in parsing different ideas of equality (for instance, in pitting equality of opportunity against equality of outcome). Nor is he concerned with the issue raised by an economist I know: whether equality should properly be a goal of public policy. For Dorling, the question is wrong. Equality is a fact, and public policy that does not take this fact into account will produce bad outcomes. Which is not to say that equality will be achieved at the cost of innovation or the careers of the more blessed: better ideas happen where “people are far freer to think and rest, where sham competition to identify talent is less encouraged, where there is no great corralling of children into classrooms of

those of supposedly greater and lesser ability..." (126).

Does this instance on the truth and centrality of basic human equality form the basis of a new way of left thinking? Not exactly. Dorling counsels us to reject an idealized socialism, and I suspect he would agree with the British historian Tony Judt that socialism, simply, turns too many people off, that we can't expunge from it the memory of the gulags (Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*). Yet if the left rejects socialism, it rejects its history, and a large and diverse body of thinking with much to teach us. Queen's historian Ian McKay suggests instead that we recognize we are connected to a long and illustrious left history in Canada, but we are not *those people* or *that history*. We are, in his words, a new formation (McKay, *Rebels, Reds and Radicals*). McKay, writing in 2005, saw today's formation of the left as concerned with global justice, local control, and environmentally sustainable economies. The emerging focus on equality, to which Dorling has made such a valuable contribution, may yet be a new turn of the wheel. Certainly it is less about building an alternative, about resisting or edging around global capitalism, than it is a frontal assault on the foundations of a global order built on inequality, and a vision of something that can take its place.

A few final words for the readers of this magazine specifically. Canada comes off poorly here; check your love of our superior safety net at the door. Instead, we are shown, with the US and UK, to be a nation that has given up on the equalities we achieved in the 50s, 60s and 70s, descending to levels of inequality not seen since the 1920s. In this we are alone with our English-speaking brethren amongst wealthy nations. Many continental European nations – and especially but not exclusively Norway, Sweden and Finland – made the political choice to maintain funding for such as schools and childcare and reject the argument that the "free market" required funding to be slashed, with the result that these

countries continue to combine affluence with far greater equality than we manage. And what of the environment, you might ask? It comes up, as when Dorling argues that it was the shift to burning ancient, compressed plants (coal), rather than recently living plants, that empowered the spasm of inequality we call the industrial revolution. But its place is best expressed by paraphrasing Wendell Berry: the land and the people are the same. Treat the land badly, and you will treat the people badly also.