FAIR PLAY

A Daniel Dorling reader on social justice
To my brothers,
Anthony and Tristan Dorling
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When I agreed to write the foreword to this book it seemed obvious how I should go about it. I would approach it with rigorous journalistic detachment, as if what it has to say has no direct impact on me or on my life. After thinking about it, though, I reached the conclusion that this would be dishonest. There is no way for me to read this book – or any others by the author for that matter – without it resonating on a personal level.

You see, I was born into that stratum of society many of the more privileged among us would refer to – without a hint of irony – as the “underclass”. Therefore, the lack of a level playing field that this book deconstructs is much more than an abstraction to me.

In the early 1980s, during the brutal years of Thatcherism, my father became unemployed. He would never work again. On many occasions my siblings and I were painfully aware of what it felt like to have no money for basic provisions. We were aware too of the fact that receiving free school meals placed us in a particular category of people somewhere towards the bottom of an already deprived community. And we were also conscious of the humiliation of borrowing money from the “tick man” who visited weekly to collect what he’d lent us at extortionate rates of interest. All so we would have some presents at Christmas.

We had no washing machine. We were often envious of our friends whose fathers had jobs and we were certainly envious of the middle class people we never got to meet because they lived in “better” areas and didn’t send their kids to the same schools as us.

There is more to being “poor” or “disadvantaged” than statistics alone can ever tell us. That is why Fair play, with its emphasis on marrying abstract ideas about social exclusion to the experience of it, and on laying bare the cultural manifestations of elitism that underpin contemporary Britain, matters.
Can’t you see that the poorest people in society only think they are poor? Compare them with the genuinely impoverished of decades past and really, they are pretty well off. So the argument of some people goes. Those who propagate this kind of reasoning tend to bolster their contentions with facts such as the number of so-called poor people who own mobile phones, or a television or any other kind of electronic luxury you might care to mention like – say – a washing machine. Within this perspective resides the attitude that the modern poor and marginalised should stop their whingeing, get off their pizza-gorging backsides and accrue multiple low-paying jobs, and grin and bear their fates in the face of abject exploitation. So the argument goes.

There are better people than I capable of demolishing this kind of logic and one of them is Danny Dorling. In book after book he manages to obliterate the specious arguments and entrenched prejudices that sustain elitism – and its apologists. Yet again, here is a book from Dorling that consummately dismantles what we think we know about poverty, social exclusion, mobility (or the lack of it) education and hierarchy, wellbeing, wealth inequalities and all their myriad corollaries.

Across a series of discrete chapters – mainly carefully edited extracts from previously published work in magazines, newspapers and elsewhere – you the reader are treated to the unravelling of the ideologies that sustain a society where the gap between rich and poor widens under the so-called “progressive” government that was New Labour. You are also guided through the (indisputably important) whys, hows and consequences of unrelenting momentous social changes and political hubris that have seen a country that, for all its problems in 1978, was more equal then than it is now.

Our politicians may talk the talk on social equality and “poverty of opportunity” as some like to refer to it, but they merely tinker. Under New Labour there were some encouraging developments of which the minimum wage, a calculable focus on child poverty, improved maternity rights, and progressive projects such as Sure Start are just a few. But to their great shame, their “progressive” era also shepherded in the conditions that cultivated a jump in wealth inequalities between the very top and very bottom of our society. If you were born poor under the New Labour government you can bet you are probably staying poor. In a decade’s time, who knows what your prospects will be thanks to the coalition government in power when this book is published.

*Fair play* is about chronicling what Dorling terms “the tenacity of unfairness”. It is about confronting that most stubborn of social norms: the idea that the poor are the architects of their own misfortune. For those of you reading this book that have known what it is like to live in poverty in modern Britain (despite its status as an extraordinarily wealthy country in global terms) the charts and numbers and analysis on offer will be much more than analytical aids or abstract rationale. The analysis will be a valuable
and comprehensible framework within which you can place your own experience.

It is no coincidence that often the most vigorous defenders of the view that the poor should (as Norman Tebbit once put it so acidly) “get on their bikes” hail from low-income backgrounds. These are often the people who have clambered their way out of the social cesspit they were born into and who can’t for a moment contemplate why, for every one of them, there are thousands left behind: excluded, hopeless, shunned and ignored. I did it so why not the rest?

There are multiple studies – many of them referenced in this book – that document the social attitudes, structures and political forces, that have brought Britain to a place where it ranks high among wealthy nations on income and health inequalities and where there is scant evidence to suggest that this will change any time soon. As Dorling says, “The prejudice that preserves poverty remains stronger in Britain than in most of the rest of the rich world. [...] Labour introduced and continued to extol a populist and punitive approach [to poverty], labelling benefit claimants as potentially feckless. [...] Permitting rising inequality and stoking prejudices against the poor sets a precedent for the next government which heavily outweighs the many gains made.”

It takes sound reasoning and robust evidence to shed light on the reality of inequality, social injustice and any notions of ‘fairness’ we might have as a society. However, it also takes a singular ability to unpick and demystify the complex social forces and contradictory messages that swirl about us each and every day. This is exactly what Fair play does.

As America’s second president, John Adams so eloquently put it, “Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.”

Mary O’Hara
Journalist and Alistair Cooke Fulbright Scholar
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Thanks to Alison Shaw at The Policy Press for persevering with the idea of an edited collection and helping to ensure it was not too large a collection. Laura Vickers at Policy put in hours way beyond what was agreed in chasing up copyright clearances for reprinting all these papers and especially to help secure permission to include the images used throughout the book including many not used in the original publications. Jo Morton and Laura Greaves edited the text and ensured that the work from so many sources was tidied up, allowing it to be reproduced throughout this whole book to a similar quality. Dave Worth typeset all the text and illustrations. The images shown here are from the collections of iStockphoto and Super-Stock images.

Vassiliki (Vicky) Yiagopoulos, was very kind in searching out the images used at the start of each section and chapter. Paul Coles redrew all the graphs, tables and maps shown here without ever asking when the apparently limitless stream of requests would end (although he did raise an eyebrow at times!). Bronwen Dorling read an early draft and convinced me not to be as mean to the world’s elite economists in print as I was in that first draft (what you are just about to read is me being kind to them). David Dorling did the same and suggested which parts of my previously published papers were so boring that you should be spared reading them and thus helped in the extracting of sections. Finally, although they are not always reproduced below to save on space and your time, many of the papers reprinted here had their own acknowledgment sections to anonymous referees, journal editors, to colleagues who had helped me earlier with work and so on and on. It is quite shocking to step back and list everyone you owe favours to. I am very grateful for all the help.

For any human creation – from a humble book to a complicated television, to generating fair play in a school playground – many of us might think we know how it works, but a single person could hardly ever put a good book together from beginning to end, let alone make a television on their own, or bring up and organise many schools classes of children so they play well in the open air. Books, like machines, like playgrounds, like villages, towns, cities, countries and international organisations reveal what it is that human beings are really good at – working together. We are just very bad at acknowledging that. Especially in our more selfish and individualistic of cultures. To say “when I wrote my book” is to help prolong the myths that we can do much at all on our own. We are almost all of us guilty of suggesting that we contribute a great deal more than our fair share, and guilty of complaining about the apparent deficiencies of others. Almost everyone who does contribute more than their fair share will never get to read a book like this. So, we need to start learning better how to play fair.
Britain must close the great pay divide

Observer newspaper (2010) 28 November

…UK wage inequality is approaching levels not seen since the end of the first world war. A cap on bosses’ pay is vital if Britain is to become a fairer place…

Do you know how well you are rewarded and how you compare with your colleagues? Here’s a simple way to work it out. First, calculate how much you are paid an hour, without subtracting tax and national insurance.

At £5.93 an hour, the minimum wage for those aged 21 and over, you are almost perfectly representative of the poorest fifth of employees. Moving up the income ladder, if you receive just over £7 an hour, you are in the next bracket, the “modest” fifth. At £10 an hour, you are now, more or less, the median worker – while £14 an hour takes you into the more “affluent” fifth of employees.

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1 Editorial note: The statistics with which this chapter begins were the most up-to-date concerning the median incomes of each quintile group of earners in Britain at the time of writing.
At close to £21 an hour, which translates to an annual salary of just over £40,000, you are bang in the middle of the best rewarded fifth of all employees. You earn getting on to twice the national average. In short, you are, in relative terms, rich.

But here’s the thing. If you are in that top income bracket, you may not feel rich. In fact, although you are heading towards double the median income, you might well feel part of the “squeezed middle”.

This vague term – deliberately vague, perhaps, when used by Ed Miliband, determined as he is to reach out to as many potential voters as possible – seems, at times, to capture all of us who are neither poor nor rich.

However, the exact details of what we are paid – in particular the gap between the best and worst paid, which is wider in Britain than in much of the developed world – is an urgent political topic. Earlier this year, Will Hutton, executive vice-chairman of the Work Foundation and an Observer columnist, was appointed by the government to head a review into creating fairer public sector pay – and to determine to what extent a multiple between top and bottom public sector pay, say 20 to 1, could help shape norms of private sector pay. This week, Hutton will rehearse his first thoughts in the review’s interim report.2

Vince Cable, the business secretary, has also launched a review of British business which includes an analysis of executive pay. In addition, the think-tank Compass, in collaboration with the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, has set up its own “high pay commission” after failing to convince the coalition that it should set up one of its own.

A recent poll by Compass and the Joseph Rowntree trust showed that only 1% of people think that top executives should be paid as much as they are. Another striking figure revealed that 64% believe that a chief executive should take home an annual salary of less than £500,000. This contrasts sharply with the actual pay figures. Research by Income Data Services found that the average FTSE 100 chief executive was paid £4.9m, a figure that had risen more than 50% in a year. This equates to 200 times the average wage.

The previous year – between June 2008 and 2009 – the earnings of the FTSE 100 chief executives had fallen 1%, in the wake of the financial crash. Examining this year’s figures, it seems that restraint at the top was short-lived, and it’s back to business as usual.

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2 The interim report can be downloaded from the Treasury’s website. It was placed there on 1 December 2010 and is titled “Hutton Review of Fair Pay in the Public Sector”. See: www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/indreview_willhutton_fairpay.htm Hutton bases his review on Rawls flawed “ ‘difference principle’, the notion that inequality is permissible only to the extent that those at the bottom can be said to benefit from arrangements which allow others to be very much richer.” (page 13 of the interim review). It is flawed because growing inequality itself is now known to disbenefit society, especially the poor. See page 87 of this book and section entitled “Rawls was wrong: inequality harms us all”.

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This week, it is widely expected that Hutton will support the concept of a pay multiple. It will be hard, given the terms of his review, not to imagine that he will also advocate the principle being extended to the private sector.

Why do pay differentials matter? Plenty of recent research – best detailed in Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett’s book – *The spirit level* – suggests that a wide range of statistical indicators, from mental health to social mobility, are better in more equal societies. These societies tend to have narrower income distributions.

One consequence of wide pay differentials is a more atomised society. We do not mix as much as we used to in the 1950s. Now we tend to stick much more with our “own”; we read the newspapers written for people like us, we buy food sold for people like us, our children go to schools for children like them.

Across much of western Europe the income inequality ratio is lower than in Britain. It is lower in Australia, New Zealand and Canada too. Japan’s ratio is half Britain’s.

What’s more, in Britain high-paid work is concentrated in particular families. So while in a prosperous home you might find two high incomes, in a poorer home one low income might be supplemented by a convoluted mix of benefits – a pattern found far less often abroad.

For much of the 20th century, the income gap in Britain narrowed steadily as we gradually became a more equal society. In 1918 the richest 1% of earners was rewarded with 19% of all income, receiving about 19 times more than the average earner. By 1935 the top 1%’s share of income had fallen to 14%; by 1950, 12%; by 1960, 9%; by 1970, 7%; and by 1980, 6% (and only 4% after taxes).

This was all achieved without stipulating a ratio from top to bottom – but it was much lower than 20:1. And, in fact this process towards a more equal society seemed inexorable, an almost natural consequence of an advanced democracy. During these years – the three decades or so after the end of the Second World War – this trend was part of the political consensus.

However, in the late 1970s a few of us got greedy; the rest of us failed to stop the greedy, and they spread their ideas around (if not their money). By 1983 the income share of the best-off percentile was back up to 7%; by 1992 it was 10%; by 1997, 12%; by 2001, 13%; by 2005, 16%.

Today, with the return of big City bonuses, I very much suspect it will be back up to 18%. We should have a national day of mourning when we return to a level of inequality last experienced at about the time of armistice day in November 1918.

New Labour did not do as much as it might, perhaps, in checking the trend. In 1997 the hourly pay rates for each fifth of earners were all lower than they are now, but so were the gaps between our earnings. And income cannot, of course, be divorced from other factors. The cost of housing rose
even faster than average earnings, for instance, and it can be argued that the poorest ended up with even less choice over where they lived at the end of New Labour’s time in office.

Though Alistair Darling’s final budget could be deemed progressive, with the introduction of a new top rate of tax for those earning more than £150,000, during New Labour’s reign, as a whole, the income ratio of the richest to the poorest earners rose from to 3.6 to 3.9. Hence the poor became relatively poorer despite receiving on average an extra £2 an hour for their labour.

In Tory chancellor George Osborne’s first budget, the effects of the unevenly distributed £6bn of local authority cuts and the punitive £81bn cuts of the comprehensive spending review were all designed to be regressive. I say designed because you don’t introduce a regressive policy by accident. So the gap will have grown again since narrowing slightly at the start of this year.

In the 1970s, the earnings ratio between the richest and poorest fifth of UK earners used to be nearly 3 to 1. It approaches 4 to 1 today. In recent decades, the greater part of the increase in inequality occurred during Margaret Thatcher’s premiership, but Tony Blair added a little extra dollop of unfairness on top, and Gordon Brown – his own sliver.

When we consider families as a whole, and not just the family’s central breadwinner, the inequality ratio is found to be even greater. The richest fifth of families by income in 1997 each received 6.9 times the income of the poorest fifth in 1997. By the time of the election the Liberal Democrats were loudly complaining that the ratio had risen to 7.2 to 1. In other words, from 1997 to 2009, we moved a quarter of the way to becoming as unequal in income distribution as people experience in the United States.

Will Hutton’s predicted proposal of suggesting a maximum full-time pay ratio of 20:1 may help this situation, but we need to take the principle seriously and apply it to the private as well as to the public sector with whatever necessary adjustments need to be made. Otherwise high-earning public sector employees will simply carry on comparing their salaries with those earned by private-sector employees.

On the minimum wage, someone working 38 hours a week now earns £11,700 a year. Twenty times that is an annual salary of £234,000 (or £118 an hour). Ask the British people their views, and you find that the

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3 Editorial note: This is the ratio for the median income of the best-off and worse-off fifths, which amounts to just over half the rise in inequality that can be measured between the mean levels of household incomes by quintile (which rose from 6.9 to 7.2). This ratio for individuals is lower because it is the ratio of median, not mean incomes, and because inequalities between households tend to be greater than between individuals. Well paid individuals are often married to other well paid individuals. This exacerbates social inequalities overall.
overwhelming majority consider this more than ample. It is approaching twice what the prime minister is paid, for instance.

However, there are a handful of public-sector workers receiving more than £100 an hour. I predict a rapid adoption of the £7.85-an-hour London living wage in their organisations to raise the permissible take-home pay at the top to £310,000 a year (or £157 an hour).

I may be a cynic, but I would prefer that approach to not seeing wages rise at the bottom. However, I think almost everyone would be better off if wage rises at the bottom were coupled with wage reductions at the top.

Hutton’s proposals could begin to change how we think. It is assumed that constraint at the top results in a contraction of the whole income distribution – one reason is that top earners, so research suggests, do not like those just beneath them in earning power getting too close to them. Couple that with wider adoption of the living wage and you have more rises at the bottom, stagnation in the middle, and maybe even a few cuts at the peaks.

This, though, can only happen if the effects are spread across all occupations, not just the public sector. Why should an excellent brain surgeon receive “only” 0.5% of a top banker’s income? At the peak of excess a top banking boss can receive £40m a year in remuneration. 0.5% of that income is a salary of £200,000 a year, which is just about in the possible range of top surgeons’ salaries. You can have 200 excellent brain surgeons, and quite a few more average ones, all for the cost of a single man in a suit running a large bank in Britain.

If the chief executive’s pay fell, the surgeon could soon be earning a far higher proportion of that top banker’s income without anyone having to spend a penny. And all the rest of us would be richer, as we would not be being charged so much by our banks to allow them to pay those exorbitant salaries and bonuses.

The good news is we can change – and any public sector reform should be accompanied by private sector change. I would suggest that, just as many parts of the public sector have begun not to work with private sector companies that do not pay the living wage, a new clause is simply added to those ethical contracts. This clause would demand that for any new public sector work where the private sector is contracted in, no one should be paid more than 20 times that living wage. And why? Because helping to support such profligacy is a waste of public money.¹

¹ Editorial note: As it happened, in his final report to government Will Hutton did not even recommend a 20 to 1 inequality limit for pay differentials in the public sector. Maybe he and those advising him could see where it might lead and how they might personally lose out? The lists of those whose advice he sought are given in appendices in both reviews, but not the incomes of a single advisor.
Raising equality in access to higher education

Original article (2011)

1 In summer 2010 I was invited to write this paper for probable publication within a forthcoming special issue of the National Institute Economic Review which is published quarterly by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research in London. I had received that invitation to write the paper based on a conference presentation and was told at the time that “This is an influential journal which targets policy-makers in the UK and other European countries as well as an academic audience and aims to do so in a timely and topical manner. The articles are assured of quick turnarounds by referees so that issues of immediate policy interest can be addressed.” I submitted the paper in November. The turnaround was quick. In December the editor of the special issue suggested many changes, all of which I accepted (I have reinserted a few of the more interesting deletions in the footnotes which follow so you can see what was excluded). The paper was accepted subject to final review. In January the paper was rejected for publication because a single anonymous referee did not agree with its tone, including my suggestion that the raising of state retirement age was being “forced through”. Apparently I was being “very loaded and inaccurate”. I offered to make changes but to no avail. I’ve included the paper here so you can decide for yourself. I am grateful to the editor of the special issue, Geoff Mason, for all the changes he has made to the copy you can read here and to professors Andy Green and Lorna Unwin who originally asked me to write it. The footnotes to this paper are illustrative of some of the more interesting asides that are often removed from academic papers. The original title of the previously unpublished article ended “... and the prospects for the future.”
Abstract

The Higher Education Funding Council Report of January 2010 on who is getting into universities in Britain revealed that, after years of effort, children from poorer areas were finally going in growing numbers to university. Many more university places have been provided in the last few years and, for the first time ever recorded, the majority of those most recent additional places have been taken up by children living in the poorer half of British neighbourhoods.

This change may well be seen in future years as the greatest positive social achievement of the 1997–2010 government. This was achieved not at the expense of upper- and middle-class children, who have also seen their chances improve. It occurred because of the way the education system as a whole has expanded and, most importantly, as a result of massive increases in funding per child in state secondary schools in recent years.

This improvement might well have been reversed in autumn 2010 as unprecedented numbers of applicants were turned away from universities, and it will almost certainly be reversed in future following the Comprehensive Spending Review of October 2010. However, even before the cuts to come, access to good schools, universities and jobs remained far more socially determined by class and place of birth in Britain, than in almost any other affluent nation. Now the young adult job market is rapidly changing as work becomes both more scarce and changes in its nature. The secrets to young people’s futures are not in their genes but are largely captured by their postcodes and dates of birth: just a dozen letters and numbers in total.

Key words: higher education • secondary education • social class • geographical inequality • United Kingdom • England

Introduction

“The danger that has settled in upon us since the shock administered by the events of the last year is that the clamouring throng who find the gates of higher education barred against them may turn against the social order by which they feel themselves condemned” (Young, 1958, p 13).

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2 Editorial note: As you can see, the article was at the point of having had its key words assigned and diagrams reformatted into the house style of the journal which had invited me to write it before its last minute rejection.
Over half a century ago Michael Young warned us of what might happen were a government to attempt to make savings by curtailing access to higher education. He was writing about a fictitious 2034 economic catastrophe. He could have been writing about today.

This paper argues that the way in which we currently allocate university places will, in a few decades time, come to appear as perverse and haphazard as was entry to elementary education prior to the 1880s, and as secondary education places were allocated prior to the 1960s. Perverse here means harmful to almost all, from the poorest to the richest. What is needed is to reconsider what is a good education, a good university and a good job. That need is especially urgent as a result of the spending cuts announced in October 2010 being greater for the higher education teaching budget than for almost any other sector of government spending.

Michael Young was writing in a period of austerity in the 1950s. The early 1950s was the last time that the National Health Service financial settlement was as low in constant price terms as that announced on October 20th 2010 (Emmerson, 2010). It was also the last time that for a couple of years the proportion of adults being admitted to universities in Britain fell (Timmins, 2001). We have to turn back to the early 1950s to know what austerity feels like and to get a sense of the grievances it can cause if it is coupled with rising inequalities, with not being “all in it together”. This was the essence of Michael Young’s 1958 book.

From the 1870s onwards the school leaving age has steadily risen, firstly in leaps and bounds during the more progressive early years of the last

**Figure 1:** School-leaving age (years) and university entry (%), Britain, 1876–2013

Note: Leaving age is the stepped line whose scale is shown on the left hand axis. The proportion attending universities is the smooth line, shown as the percentage of 30 year olds who have attended university (scale shown on the right hand axis). Source: Dorling (2010).
century and then more slowly, until very recently (see the stepped line in Figure 1). In contrast, the proportion of young people gaining access to university education has followed an S shaped curve, rising most quickly in the progressive 1960s, and then in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but slowing down more recently, and possibly being about to fall significantly depending on the decisions made over the coming year (see the smooth line in Figure 1).

**University access in 2005**

Figure 1 shows that around 43% of 30 year olds had attended university at some point by the year 2005. Of those, around two thirds had attended by the time they were aged 19. However, students from different parts of the country tend to have very different chances of attending university and, if they do attend, very different chances as to which university they will gain admittance to.

To study these inequalities Britain can be divided up into 1282 ‘tracts’, each with roughly equal numbers of people living in them. The proportion of young adults from each tract attending university has been calculated with the assistance of Mark Corver from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (where the “access” data is held). All the tracts have been divided into ten groups of equal population size, ranging from those where young people were most likely to enter university (51% attending by age 19), to those where they were least likely (13% attending). Each tract represents about half a parliamentary constituency. Table 1 shows the results.

**Table 1: Access to higher education by neighbourhood of residence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decile</th>
<th>Chance of going (%)</th>
<th>All (%)</th>
<th>Elite (%)</th>
<th>Least popular (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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3 Editorial note: See Chapter 17, page 139, for an earlier paper Mark and I wrote on these issues.
Table 1 shows, for each geographically defined decile group of children, from least advantaged by neighbourhood (decile 1) to most (decile 10), what proportion of all university students in 2005 came from each set of areas as a proportion of all young people who could have gone. It also shows those same numbers, but scaled to 100 to show from where an ‘average’ university admits its students, what proportion of students studying in elite universities came from such areas, and what proportion of students studying in the least popular universities came from such areas.

The elite universities are the tenth of institutions which tend to draw from the most well-to-do areas. They equate roughly to what have been called, the most selective universities: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Imperial College, London School of Economics, Nottingham, Oxford, St. Andrews, University College London, Warwick and York (Sutton Trust, 2007). The ‘least popular’ universities are those institutions which are least competitive in entry and which include much of the higher education that is taught in further education establishments, and the ‘worse performing’ of what are often referred to as ‘recruiting’ universities.

As Table 1 makes clear, the majority of students attending ‘recruiting’ universities (usually former polytechnics) have been drawn in recent years from the areas in which young people are least likely to attend university. In contrast, young people are most likely to attend elite (‘selecting’) universities if they have grown up in the most affluent of neighbourhoods.

The table shows that by 2005 there were four students from the best-off tenth of neighbourhoods studying in an elite institution for every one then studying in a least popular university (20/5 = 4). Conversely, there was only one student from the least advantaged tenth of areas attending an elite university, for every six who attend one of the least popular universities. Only 4% of young people attending university were from the least advantaged tenth of large neighbourhoods, Only 0.66% of young people from those least advantaged areas attended an elite university in 2005.

There is great current concern that, with funding cuts, the potential closing of some ‘recruiting’ higher education institutions may have a massively disproportionate impact on young people from poorer neighbourhoods and be highly socially regressive in effect. Any changes to university funding which deter even more young people from the least advantaged areas from seeking access to an elite university could see that tiny 0.66% figure fall. Rather than just 1 in 150 young people from the worst-off tenth of large neighbourhoods attending an elite university in Britain, that fraction could revert back to the numbers more common in the 1930s. Michael Young wrote about just that situation in his book in 1958, noting that students from
poorer areas often had to work much harder than upper class youngsters in order to get to university.\(^4\)

Figure 2 shows that disparities in higher education participation are greatest at each end of the distribution. The proportion of young people in the worst-off decile of areas who attended university was five percentage points lower than in the second-lowest decile, while the participation rate in the highest decile was some nine percentage points above that in the next highest decile. This is the pattern of inequality of access by area in 2005.

\textbf{Figure 2: Inequality in university access, 2005 by area}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{inequality.png}
\caption{Inequality in university access, 2005 by area}
\end{figure}

\textit{Source:} Table 1 above

\(^4\) Or, as he put it, for every hard working student from a poorer area, how many more extremely lazy youngsters from the upper classes then ‘studied’ at university, Michael Young was basing his assertions on reports produced in the 1930s that showed this to be the case. [Added editorial note: In particular see Chapter 10 by David V. Glass and J. L. Gray entitled ‘Opportunity and the older universities: a study of the Oxford and Cambridge scholarship system’, within J. Hogben (1938) \textit{Political arithmetic: A symposium of population studies}, London: George Allen and Unwin. Reprinted by Routledge in 2010. On page 439 of that volume details are given concerning how the majority (52.7\%) of ‘scholarships’ and ‘exhibitions’, designed supposedly to widen participation slightly — even in those times — were being awarded to pupils from “Public and Private Schools” (note also that the word “Public” here is the bizarre title given to the most private of private schools, those whose head is invited to a particular annual conference): “The conclusion to be drawn from this last table is that the bulk of State scholarships, in relation to school populations, is going to boys from wealthier families or from families of higher social status than was intended by the authors of the scheme” (page 442).]
The geography of variation in access reveals far more than the aspatial statistics above can do. Figure 3 shades each of the census tracts in England and Wales (south of Middlesbrough) by which combination of higher education institutions the young adults from that place were most likely to attend if they went to university in 2005. The map is a population cartogram in which every parliamentary constituency is represented by a hexagon. Each hexagon is cut in half as the large neighbourhoods we have statistics for are half constituencies. A key to the regions is provided and Sheffield Hallam constituency is labelled as an example of a locality youngsters grow up in with significantly greater chances of attending university than in any of the other Sheffield constituencies that surround it.  

Figure 3 shows that only in one half of one constituency in North London (Hampstead to be precise) are young people who attend university most likely to attend an elite university. The half constituency is shaded dark red.

Figure 3: Which type of university people aged 18–19 are most likely to attend by area of residence at age 15


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5 In 2010 Sheffield Hallam was the seat of the Deputy Prime Minister, within the ‘six constituency area’ that is Sheffield city.

6 This part of Hampstead is a neighbourhood where, if a youngster tells you they have been offered a place at university, you should not be surprised to hear that it is one of those institutions whose names are best known.
(see the colour plate of Figure 3) to indicate that of those who are not in that majority (attending an elite university), the majority of the rest go on to attend an ‘over average’ university which is usually a Russell Group or other red brick establishment.

The light red half hexagons in Figure 3 are the next most educationally fortunate set of neighbourhoods where attendance at university is most likely to be in one of those ‘over average’ establishments, and if not that then in an even higher ‘elite’ place (a place you tend to go ‘up’ to). Both Oxford and Cambridge have a quarter of their cities coloured light red, and these are the most expensive quarters to live in. The more affluent half of Sheffield Hallam constituency is the only large neighbourhood in a city like Sheffield where this is the most likely set of destinations of those who go to university (and more go to university from here than from anywhere else in Sheffield).

In the other half of the Hallam constituency, coloured lightest grey, and across almost all of the North of England, much of East Anglia and also a large part of London, the most likely university a young person will attend, if they go to university, will be a former polytechnic. In contrast, west of London, and south of Oxfordshire, the map is coloured darker pink and there is a great block of areas where, if university access is obtained, it is usually to an older institution, often based in the North of England, such as in Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle or Sheffield. Thus southern accents tend to predominate in northern campuses and student areas during term time.

The lightest pink colour in the key indicates those half-constituencies where attendance at an ‘over-average’ institution is most likely, but if not that, then the most likely destination of those going to university is an ‘under-average’ institution in terms of popularity, many of which are post-1992 universities.

The light grey, of which there is a particularly distinctive spatial block in Birmingham, represents those areas where young adults are most likely to go to an under-averagely popular institution and, if not that, to an even less popular ‘least-favoured’ one. The two dark grey shades on the map are areas where, for the few that do gain access, it is most often to the institutions which are least favoured. These neighbourhoods are found in places between Birmingham and Stoke, and in the North East of England just above North Yorkshire. Interestingly, it is here that we have the only examples of ‘split’ neighbourhoods. For example in some parts of South Wales most who go to university go to a local ‘least favoured’ institution, but the majority of the rest attend an over-averagely popular institution.

**Changes since 2005**

In all the changes that occurred in government, to government funding and then to government spending plans over the course of the year 2010,
it is easy to forget that in terms of educational statistics the year began with the revelation that the geographical and social gaps just described had recently narrowed and narrowed greatly. In January 2010 the Higher Education Council for England published its report on trends in access to universities over time (HEFCE, 2010). The report found that when quintiles are considered, the worst-off fifth had a 15% chance of university participation in 2005. That rose to 19% by 2010. This was a huge increase for young people (aged 18 and 19) in the worst-off fifth of areas in terms of their chances of attending university, representing an extra one in twenty five going in just five years.

The quintiles being considered here are groups of wards sorted by participation rate and so the range of outcomes are slightly wider than those reported for the deciles above (calculated by larger census tract), despite the population being split into five groups rather than ten. However, the sources of data are nearly identical.

The narrowing in life chances by area which has occurred since 2005 does not look dramatic if shown on a graph giving all rates over time for each quintile group as in Figure 4 below. But note here that, even though the absolute gap between quintile groups one and five fell between 2005 and 2010, it had risen between 1995 and 2005.7

Figure 4: Young people’s chances of attending university by ward quintile

![Figure 4: Young people’s chances of attending university by ward quintile](image)

Source: HEFCE (2010) Figure 2, page 5, including projections (p) and estimates (e), methodology explained in full in the original source

7 The small drop in access for the best-off quintile is thought to be partly due to slightly more pupils from the most elite of public schools aiming for Harvard or the Sorbonne in recent years (Corver, 2010), and also a little lack of imagination over having suitable ‘insurance offers’ amongst some of these children who are then shocked when they don’t necessarily secure a place in the university of their dreams (see the story of Florence on page 181).
The improvement in just 15% of young adults in the worst-off areas participating in university in 2005 rising to an estimated proportion of 19% by 2010, based on early application data and other sources, is the fastest improvement ever recorded in absolute terms, an extra child in 25, one extra child per class, 5 children going rather than 4 from every class in every school in a poorer area of the country in just 5 years.\(^8\)

The HEFCE report made various attempts to explain why participation had risen so quickly in the worst-off fifth of areas and one predictor stood out as being far more important than any other. The numbers and grades of GCSE’s being achieved by these young people around age 16 was improving at exactly the rate required, several years earlier, to result in the improvement to university participation later observed in their lives (Figure 5).\(^9\)

**Figure 5: Actual (1994–2010) and GCSE-predicted participation rate (2004–2010) in the poorest areas of England**

![Figure 5: Actual (1994–2010) and GCSE-predicted participation rate (2004–2010) in the poorest areas of England](image)

*Source: HEFCE (2010) Figure, 5 page 8, including projections (p) and estimates (e), methodology explained in full in the original source. The line which becomes dotted is the measured participation rate. It is dotted when projected or estimated.*

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\(^8\) Note also that all the complaints about letting more children from poorer areas have a chance are about letting at most an extra one in 25 children have university access from these areas. This achievement could hardly be described as the workers taking over the parapets of power. It is not as if they are being allowed in for any reason other than that they are finally being allowed to get the grades that give a young person a chance at access to university.

\(^9\) At this point the editor suggested that I insert the following sentence and I agreed as a compromise although I have never read Chowdry et al’s paper and was not entirely happy with the implications of including this: “This confirms previous findings by Chowdry et al (2008) that poor attainment in secondary schools is the biggest single barrier to young people from poorer neighbourhoods attending university”. If you are interested in the study that I was asked to add a reference to (although I had not read it), see: Chowdry, H., Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Goodman, A. and Vignoles, A. (2008) *Widening participation in higher education: Analysis using linked administrative data*, Report R69, Institute for Fiscal Studies: London, UK.
And what caused the rise in GCSE passes amongst this cohort of children studied by HEFCE? In fact, it seems to be largely explained by rises in average funding for secondary school pupils over the period which (with the appropriate lag) in turn almost perfectly predicts the GCSE rises and hence the later upturn in admissions to higher education from the poorest areas of England (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Actual (1994-2010) and spending-predicted participation rate (1999–2010) in the poorest areas of England**

Source: HEFCE (2010) Figure, 25 page 35, including projections (p) and estimates (e), methodology explained in full in the original source [Participation rate is the line which becomes dotted].

The implications appear to be that: spend more per child and they will gain better GCSE results, they will then, at least in this period, go on to attend university in greater numbers in almost direct proportion to that spending. It should hardly be surprising that this is the case. The same mechanism operates to ensure that higher numbers of children attending private schools, especially expensive private schools, obtain many GCSE’s and then A levels and go to universities in large numbers. Their parents would not pay if this were not the case.

There were two other factors that helped university admission rates from poorer areas to increase, one of which was mentioned in the HEFCE report, the other which was not (at least not explicitly). Educational Maintenance Allowances were mentioned explicitly (paragraph 32, page 8), the introduction of which enabled many young people from poorer areas to be able to afford to stay on at school. These allowances are to be phased out following the Spending Review of October 2010.

The other factor is government funding of university places which is the ultimate determinant of what young people’s chances are. If the places are
not funded, they cannot be won. The spending review of October 2010 resulted in cuts of up to 75% in government funding of teaching within higher education being announced, with unknown compensation from higher fees being introduced.

The situation in 2010

Some critics of rising university participation appear to believe that young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds and areas would often be better suited to ‘learn a trade’ rather than be the fifth child out of a class of twenty five to go to university (Dorling, 2010). It has to be put as bluntly as that because it is very obvious that this sentiment is held as strongly as that.

In recent months some newspaper stories have implied that upper class and upper-middle class families were losing out to the children of working class parents for whom exceptions were being made to ease them into universities to which they apparently did not belong. For example, The Times newspaper on April 10th reported on Florence MacKenzie, who they described as “upset and angry”. Their report continued:

‘Universities would have fought over Florence MacKenzie, 18, in previous years. On course to achieve A and A* grades in her A levels, she has straight A*s in her nine GCSEs, plays hockey for her school, and is Grade 8 at piano and violin. She and her parents were baffled when she was rejected by three of her five chosen universities. Florence, from Banbury, is happy with her place studying English at University College London, but was turned down by Edinburgh, St Andrews and Durham. All are popular universities, hugely oversubscribed for her chosen subject, allowing them to be extremely picky. Edinburgh allocated 70 per cent of places on a points system that favoured teenagers from poor schools, those whose parents did not go to university, or those from Scotland or northern England. Florence goes to an independent girls’ school in Warwick so did not qualify. It set a hurdle of 11 GCSEs at A* to qualify for the remaining 30 per cent of places, but many schools (including Florence’s) do not set this many. She said: “I was very keen on Edinburgh and upset when rejected by them – angry as well after I found out the reasons why. I don’t think it’s a fair way of doing it, they should interview like other universities.” As many as 25 candidates are pursuing each place on popular courses at leading universities.’ (Woolcock, 2010)\(^\text{10}\)

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\(^{10}\)Anyone familiar with university applications will note the totemic “grade 8” at various musical instruments (a function of parental financial support), the place in the school sports team (mainly a function of how small the school is and how many teams it has) and the A*s (largely a function of the kind of school you attend).
But what are the job prospects for those youngsters not lucky enough to manage to gain access to a university place? The latest ONS figures from the Labour Force Survey show that, when scaled up to the population as a whole, there were some 156,000 fewer young adults and older children working in 2009 as compared to 2008, despite the age cohort still expanding slightly due to more births to this group some 16 to 24 years earlier.

Table 2 shows that the largest falls in employment amongst young adults (and 16 and 17 year olds) were in Sales jobs\textsuperscript{11}. Next, general office assistant and clerk jobs fell by almost 20,000 nationally amongst this age range. All this was almost entirely due to 24 year olds turning 25 and almost no new younger adults and older children being hired. The next largest falls were in warehousing and box-shifting: “Other goods handling & storage occupations”.

Retail, that sector that employs a tenth of the population of Britain was slowing down rapidly and the workforce in it which was, in effect, being shed – simply by not recruiting - was the young. For example it was the young who were the bulk of the people who could no longer work at Woolworths when those stores closed on 800 high streets in December 2008 and January 2009.\textsuperscript{12}

Work opportunities for youngsters also fell in painting and decorating and joinery and building in general as fewer people moved home, while in sales it was “Telephone salespersons and call centre agents & operators” who were not being taken on. In a number of other occupations, such as “marketing associate professionals”, “retail cashiers/check-out operators”, “conveyor belt assemblers (of electrical products)”, young people were simply not being taken on in large numbers anymore and so employment rates within young age groups fell rapidly.

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{11} Fewer young people were being paid to stand in shops asking if you wanted “help with anything”. This is, in itself not a bad outcome, but even those jobs are much more worthwhile and much less boring for many young adults when compared with the alternative of sitting at home and watching television.

\textsuperscript{12} With the loss of 27,000 jobs around Christmas 2008. See: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7811187.stm
\end{footnote}
Although Table 2 shows that employment fell in sixteen categories of work for young adults and older children between 2008 and 2009 by over 5000 jobs in each category (at most by over 30,000 jobs in one), it did rise by over 5000 jobs in six areas of employment. The smallest rise was in teaching, as government was still spending on increasing employment in the public sector at this time to try to ward off the worst effects of the recession. That rise in spending per child shown in Figure 6 above was still resulting in more jobs for new young secondary school teachers in 2009 as compared to 2008 (see Table 3 below).

All the rest of the few recent new jobs have been in the entertainment sectors, mainly because of increases in overseas tourism to Britain as the pound fell and also, perhaps, as government liberalised both the domestic betting and online betting industries. Note also that leisure and theme park attendant positions saw a rise in youth employment equating to 5,700 posts nationally. Receptionists, restaurant and catering managers and – above all else – waiters and waitresses saw increased employment opportunities, especially in London, but these job gains were massively outweighed by

Table 2: Jobs in which youth employment fell the most, 2008–09
Change in jobs (numbers) – and job title

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change in jobs (numbers)</th>
<th>Job title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-33,762</td>
<td>Sales and retail assistants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-19,722</td>
<td>General office assistants or clerks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-13,264</td>
<td>Other goods handling and storage occupations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-12,747</td>
<td>Customer care occupations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-8,247</td>
<td>Painters and decorators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-7,961</td>
<td>Labourers, build and woodwork trades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-7,714</td>
<td>Telephone salespersons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-6,976</td>
<td>Marketing associate professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-6,506</td>
<td>Carpenters and joiners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-6,126</td>
<td>Personnel and industrial relations officers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-6,107</td>
<td>Bricklayers, masons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-5,989</td>
<td>Retail cashiers/check-out operators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-5,969</td>
<td>Assemblers (electrical products)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-5,169</td>
<td>Civil Service admin officers and assistants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-5,099</td>
<td>Fishing and agriculture related occupations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-5,073</td>
<td>Call centre agents and operators</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: ONS, Labour Force Survey for 16-24 years olds, change 2008-2009 kindly supplied by the Prince’s Trust. [showing exact number estimates but only accurate to nearest 1000]*
the overall loss in posts available to the young (shown in Table 2), and the absence of long-term career paths in many of the poorly-paid service jobs where young people did find employment.

**Table 3: Jobs in which youth employment rose most, 2008–09**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change in jobs (numbers) - and job title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5,193 Secondary education teaching professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,731 Leisure and theme park attendants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,733 Receptionists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,800 Restaurant and catering managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7,083 Accounts wages clerks, bookkeepers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8,164 Waiters, waitresses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: ONS, Labour Force Survey for 16-24 years olds, change 2008-2009 kindly supplied by the Prince’s Trust. [showing exact number estimates, but only accurate to the nearest 1000]*

In aggregate these extra jobs totalled only 37,700. Overall some 222,000 fewer people aged 16–24 were employed in jobs for which figures were available for both years, and this was when places in higher education were still expanding.

**Conclusion**

Unprecedented numbers of young people are set to leave British universities and schools in autumn 2011. Unprecedented numbers will apply and fail to gain a place in higher education this coming academic year. Political leaders and policy-makers need to be asked if it makes sense to have millions of unemployed and poorly trained youngsters, while at the same time forcing through an increase in the retirement age. It is worth recalling that, during the Great Depression in the 1930s, when it would have been very hard to imagine the world of near full employment, we actually planned for and created that in Britain by the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

Why not now try to imagine a better future, with many more young people going to university, people able to retire at an age they can enjoy, and near full employment for all who want it in between? What is needed is hope, imagination and faith in the ability of other people, especially the young. Many higher education analysts and policy makers harbour the views that the present system is a meritocracy, and that meritocracy is desirable. Michael Young’s masterpiece of 1958 is worth returning to in order to understand the disadvantages of limiting entry to higher education.
This figure was removed by the editor as unsuitable for publication before the paper was rejected entirely. It has been a long time since it was asked what the economy could do for us, rather than what we could do for the economy. It has been a very long time since we were in as dire straits as we are in now. It is worth looking back at what we did the last time. It is worth worrying why some economists are so keen to censor such consideration. I did ask if it would be possible to know who the anonymous member of the editorial board of the journal was who said this piece could not be published, but they chose to remain in the shadows.

Looking back at Figure 7 and at the conclusion above, I am still forced to ask, apart from including women as well as men, brown faces as well as white, and not having everyone wearing a cap, how else would you redraw the cartoon shown above for today?

Figure 7: They way we used to think\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure7.png}
\caption{My plan for 2,000,000 workless}
\end{figure}

\textit{You go home and rest dad. Leave this job to me.}

\textit{You go back to school. I’ll look after this job.}

Source: Ernest Bevin 1933

\textsuperscript{13} This figure was removed by the editor as unsuitable for publication before the paper was rejected entirely. It has been a long time since it was asked what the economy could do for us, rather than what we could do for the economy. It has been a very long time since we were in as dire straits as we are in now. It is worth looking back at what we did the last time. It is worth worrying why some economists are so keen to censor such consideration. I did ask if it would be possible to know who the anonymous member of the editorial board of the journal was who said this piece could not be published, but they chose to remain in the shadows.
References
SECTION V
Elitism and geneticism

The first short chapter in this section was written at the end of a debate among male academic geographers concerning geography’s exclusion from the celebration of the 150-year anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the origins of species*. A great deal of geographical work had been required to write that book, not least many expeditions, the most significant of which may not have been undertaken by Charles himself. However, geographers – like many other academics – have often forgotten that Charles Darwin was simply a cog in much greater wheels of thinking. It was that thinking that resulted in the discoveries later attributed uniquely to him.

We often now fail to remember that not all the Victorian discoveries about our origins and about how we are currently biologically ordained (our supposed genetic propensities to harbour greatness) are necessarily still seen as valid. We also tend to forget that unsung women and other men, such as Alfred Wallace (who wrote about the geography of animals), also played a hugely important part in inching our knowledge forward. In Alfred’s case he was simply not rich enough, and perhaps not vain enough, to be able to afford to take the bulk of the credit, as is implied below (page 190).

From their very inception, genetic theories as applied to theories of natural selection concerning crude evolutionary ideas of the ‘descent of man’ have tended to result in unfortunate outcomes because writers confuse the very long-term processes that result in the creation of species with the short-term implications of random variation within species. The long *Fabian essay* which follows the Darwin editorial elaborates on this and includes a summary of some new arguments now being made. These arguments suggest that we are almost all now born as near equal in intellectual potential as makes no material difference.
Sadly, very few of the elite have heard of the recent discoveries concerning how inherently equal in capacity we might well be, and they tend not to believe in those findings and arguments when they do hear them. The penultimate chapter in this section is a *Soundings* article which tells of the contemporary repercussions of so many people still seeing other human beings within the society they live in as being of different 'stock'. This, as the final chapter in this section (from *New Statesman*) highlights, culminates in the super-rich being able to justify their soaraway wealth as supposedly being just reward for almost belonging to a separate species from the rest of humanity. How can great inequalities in wealth and opportunity otherwise be justified? And how else is it possible for those, with most, to be able to tolerate the suffering of billions in poverty? A final table and graph has been added to the end of that chapter showing the simple consequences of inequalities either continuing to soar to new heights, or reducing rapidly. Neither is likely, although either (or anything in between) is conceivably possible.
If we men with our fascination for the big man are going to remember Darwin, we should not forget that his thinking was also an example of a very particular evolution (Castree, 2009). Darwin came to and modified an idea already formed by others (Summerfield, 2010). Part of what was special about him, why he is now remembered, was because of how wealthy a man he was before he began to think his thoughts (Finnegan, 2010). The kernel of his big idea had already been described to him by a poorer man: Alfred Wallace (Davies, 2008). This part of the story only entered into public debate over Darwin’s legacy late in that supposed anniversary year of 2009, and only after a few fellows of the Royal Geographical Society started a campaign named after his ship, the Beagle (Driver, 2010). The allegations are worth repeating:

“In 1855, Wallace’s first paper on evolution prompted Charles Lyell to warn Darwin that Wallace seemed close to solving the ‘species problem’ and to urge him to publish his own theory. Three years later, while studying the fauna of the Malayan
archipelago, Wallace completed his theory and sent it to Darwin from the island of Ternate on 9 March 1858. Sent to England on the same boat was a letter to Frederick Bates, who received it on 3 June. It seems that Darwin wrote to Joseph Hooker on 8 June, saying he had found the ‘missing keystone’ that enabled the completion of his evolution theory, while on 18 June, he wrote that he had just received a letter from Wallace proposing a theory of evolution identical to his own - a very suspicious chronology! Although it initially became known as the Darwin-Wallace theory, Darwin took the glory and Wallace was largely forgotten. Lacking Darwin’s establishment connections, Wallace was shabbily treated” (Venables et al, 2009).

In responding to Darwin’s anniversary it has already been noted by geographers that: “With the thinnest veneer of qualification, environmental determinism is back in vogue” (Kearns, 2010). So too again in vogue is eugenics, in this case with the veneer of appearing in crypto-form. ‘Crypto’ meaning the name ‘eugenics’ is no longer openly used, although the concepts are, again, now more and more frequently mentioned (Connelly, 2008). In the most unequal of affluent countries, such as the United States and United Kingdom, it appears to be becoming acceptable again to talk of there being genetically inherited differences in the mental abilities of different groups of people (Dorling, 2010a). Geographers could be doing more to counter this current regressive trend, given their advantage of being well placed to remember the dismal imperialist past of their own discipline.

The idea that different people are made of different mental ‘material’ was most commonly espoused in the era of 1920s and 1930s when those who advocated the inheritability of intelligence wrote that it “... is seen with especial clearness in these numerous cases – like the Cecils, or the Darwins – where intellectual ability runs in families” (Wells et al, 1931, p 823). That the offspring of such families do not now dominate intellectual life provides an extra spoonful of evidence to add to the great pile built up since the 1930s that now discredits eugenics and other such:

“foolish analogies between biology and society [whereby the world’s richest man] ... Rockefeller was acclaimed the highest form of human being that evolution had produced, a use denounced even by William Graham Sumner, the great ‘Social Darwinist’” (Flynn, 2007, pp 147–8).

Today again a few ‘great men’ are very rich and inequalities in income, health, voting, and wealth are as wide as they were at their 1920s heights (Dorling, 2010b). Our fascination has been rekindled for myths of chaps
with maps sailing across oceans in vacuums of scientific imaginative purity discovering truths just waiting to be uncovered. The big men with beards are again being venerated. We too easily forget the strangeness of the Victorian English arrogance that fuelled beliefs in the supposedly great insights of these few. The danger Hannah Arendt highlighted in the 1960s is re-emerging: an “absence of thinking ... the refusal to read, to think critically or deeply, the rejection of all but one or one kind of book” (Goldberg, 2009, p 373). We even usually now forget to mention the full title of Darwin’s work: *The origin of species by means of natural selection*, or *The preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life* (Dorling, 2010c). And because we forget, we labour in danger of failing to notice the return (in a new form) of old evil ideas about ability and evolution.

The Charles Darwin who paced up and down the path at Down House, who collected beetles in the hills of Barmouth (where he later struggled over revisions of his text) has long ceased to exist. His name is now as much an empty vessel to be filled with the arguments of others as was his mind in the 1850s. We now keep him alive as a monster, not as he was but as how we choose him to be, and only if we choose him to be. His bushy visage adorns the reverse of the £10 note because his mythical might is valued slightly below that of Adam Smith (whose bug-eyed face is etched on every new £20 note in circulation).

**Figure 1: Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913)**

Author of *The geographical distribution of animals* (1876) and many other fine works. Social activist, land reformer, early opposer of social Darwinism and eugenics, supporter of women’s suffrage and opponent of militarism. Recipient of the Royal Geographical Society’s Founder’s Medal in 1892. Oh – and early proposer of a theory of evolution due to natural selection...
Other people we choose to forget (Kundera, 1999). The circumstances might be none of our making, but our choice concerning which version of those circumstances we are to remember will alter all our futures. Venerate Darwin as anything more than he was and you help to condemn many others to be dismissed as inadequate in a world being nastily reconstructed anew to pit the ‘favoured few’ against the ‘unfavoured masses’. And who were the Cecils?

Exactly!

References
Dorling, D. (2010c) ‘The return to elitism in education’, *Soundings spring*, issue 44, March. [see Chapter 26 of this volume]
…The science is clear: intelligence isn’t inherited. So it’s not just wrong for politicians to talk about potential, it’s bad for equality…

John Hills’s National Equality Panel report of January 2010 revealed that our social divisions are even wider than we thought. In London today the best-off tenth of citizens have recourse to 273 times more wealth each than do the worst-off tenth. Never before has so much been held by so few; and such great inequalities in wealth can dull our thinking by creating a pernicious assumption that people are inherently different.

If most people in affluent nations believed that all human beings were alike – were of the same kind, the same species – then it would be much harder to justify the exclusion of so many people from so many social norms. It is only because the majority of people in many affluent societies have come to be taught that a few are especially able, and others particularly undeserving, that current inequalities can be maintained. It seems inequalities are not being reduced partly because enough people have come – falsely – to understand inequalities to be natural, and a few to even think inequalities are beneficial.

The code word used to talk of inequality as natural is to talk of children having differing ‘potentials’. This belief in inherited intelligence – geneticism – is dangerous and remains uncritically challenged at the heart of much
policy making in Britain. But recent evidence can help dispel the myth that children from different social backgrounds are born with differing potential.

It was only in the course of the last century that theories of inherent differences amongst the whole population became widespread. Before then it was largely believed that the gods ordained only the chosen few to be inherently different and therefore favoured – the monarchs and the priests. Back then mass deprivation was a fact of life, as there simply could not be enough produced to enable the vast majority to live anything other than a life of frequent want.

It was only when more widespread inequalities in income and wealth began to grow under nineteenth century industrialisation that theories attempting to justify these new inequalities as natural were widely propagated. Out of evolutionary theory came the idea that there were a few great families which passed on superior abilities to their offspring and, in contrast, a residuum of inferior but similarly interbreeding humans who were much greater in number. Often these people, the residuum, came to rely on various poor laws for their survival and were labelled paupers. Between these two extremes were the mass of humanity in the newly industrialising countries, these were people labelled as capable of hard working but incapable of great thinking.

These early geneticist beliefs gave rise to eugenics. Eugenics had become almost a religion by the 1920s; one that famously gripped many prominent Fabians at the time. It was an article of faith to believe that some were more able than others and that those differences were strongly influenced by some form of inherited acumen. However, after the horror of the genocide of the Second World War, where men of all classes fought and died together, and after the later realisation of the importance of generation and environment to achievement, eugenics was shunned. Contemporary work on epigenetics – the study of heritable changes in gene expression that do not involve changes to the DNA sequence – explicitly steers away from saying genetic makeup determines the social destiny of humans along an ability continuum. But, in contrast to modern scientific understanding, geneticism is the current version of the belief that not only do people differ in their inherent abilities, but that our consequent ‘ability’ (and other psychological differences) are to a large part inherited from our parents.

There are sceptics, but the overwhelming weight of progressive scientific opinion now suggests that, if there is any inherited influence on acumen, the effects are tiny. Recently I have brought together the evidence and have been convinced that there is no general, even slight, inherited inequality.1 Sadly, many political commentators are unaware that the debate as to whether inherited acumen is minuscule or non-existent has moved on. For instance

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even the *Guardian* newspaper recently published an article which suggested that “common sense tells us that inherited inequality is in part the result of economic injustice and in part the results of disparities of intelligence.”

As Professors of Psychiatry and Psychology at the University of Minnesota (and international authorities on genetics and twin-studies) Irving Gottesman and Daniel Hanson, pointed out five years ago: “questions of nature versus nurture are meaningless.” They explain that depending on the circumstances into which we are born and given how malleable and unformed our brains are at birth, none of us are destined regardless of circumstance to be either great thinkers or great imbeciles.

Intelligence is not like wealth. Wealth is mostly passed on rather than amassed. Wealth is inherited. Intelligence, in contrast, is held in common. James Flynn’s work has shown how successive generations of children appear to out-perform their parents when their apparent intelligence is measured. Unlike monetary wealth, what matters most when it comes to appearing to be clever is the generation you are born into, then where and to whom you are born.

The similar outcomes of identical twins are often held up as evidence of genetic influence on IQ. If identical twins are separated at birth and then adopted by different families, they will appear to perform in a way that is correlated. This is, however, unconvincing as proof of inherited intelligence. Firstly, as Flynn explains, they perform similarly because they are of the same generation. Secondly, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that teachers and other key individuals treat children slightly differently according to their appearance, leading to differential attainment. And, of course, the one thing we know about identical twins is that they tend to look very much like each other.

Studies of how Afro-Caribbean children did badly in school in the 1960s when taught by white teachers in London, or of what happens when you suddenly decide in an experiment to treat all the blue eyed children in a classroom with disrespect, show how much it matters how children are learning. The correlations between the measured test performances of identical twins separated at birth are slight; slight enough to easily be explained, not by genes, but by how different sets of teachers are treating them in similar ways because of their similar physical appearance.

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3 For one of the most insightful discussions, which does not discount the genetic possibilities, but which says they are so tiny that by implicit implication appearance could be as important, see the open access copy of the summary of James Flynn’s December 2006 lecture which was given at Trinity College Cambridge: www.psychometrics.sps.cam.ac.uk/page/109/beyond-the-flynn-effect.htm (accessed 9/7/2009), the full length version of the argument is: Flynn, J. R. (2007) *What is intelligence? Beyond the Flynn effect*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
good looking, white children receive (on average) more praise in societies where the bias is toward height, certain perceptions of beauty and being white – and get correspondingly better results.

The current scientific consensus is that intelligence – the capacity to acquire and apply knowledge – is not an individual attribute that people come with, but rather it is built through learning. No single individual has the capacity to read more than a miniscule fraction of the books in a modern library, and no single individual has the capacity to acquire and apply much more than a tiny fraction of what we have collectively come to understand. We act and behave as if there are a few great men with encyclopaedic minds able to comprehend the cosmos; we assume that most of us are of lower intelligence and we presume that many humans are of much lower ability than us. In truth the great men are just as fallible as the lower orders; there are no discernable innate differences in people’s capacity to learn, other than those caused by failing to develop basic cognitive functions. Take, for example, Margaret Thatcher’s ‘tall poppies’ speech:

“I would say, let our children grow tall and some taller than others if they have the ability in them to do so. Because we must build a society in which each citizen can develop his full potential, both for his own benefit and for the community as a whole, a society in which originality, skill, energy and thrift are rewarded, in which we encourage rather than restrict the variety and richness of human nature.”

The ‘full potential’ idea presumes some great variety in potential. That variety is not found when looked for – except by those who wish to find it. There is variety in outcome, but not in opportunity, if unhindered. Human intellectual ability is rather like our ability to have opposable thumbs or binocular vision or to sing: we evolved to have it. There are cases where children are born with potential fixed low – but these are the results of just a few conditions, such as oxygen depletion at birth, chromosomes causing Downs Syndrome, malnutrition problems and severe lack of attention. It is much more an either/or, for those unlikely to do like others regardless of subsequent circumstance, than the commonly perceived continuum of intelligence. Our problem today is that 100 years of intelligence testing strengthens the idea of there being a curve of ability potential.

Britons spend proportionately more money than any country other than Chile on private education – more even than the USA (below higher education level). Half of all ‘A’ grades at A-level go to the 7 per cent of children privately educated. It’s very sad for the English – but a great natural experiment for the world to show that you can simply take a set of children and throw money at them and they will appear to do well at tests. That does
not mean there is a continuum and these children are near the top end of it – what it does mean is that you could take 7 per cent of almost any set of children and put them in an environment that means they appear to learn more than the other 93 per cent. If there were a continuum to ability potential then the private schools – and especially the top public schools – would have found it far harder than they did to monopolise the A grades.

Learning for all is far from easy, which is why some educators confuse a high correlation between test results of parents and their offspring with evidence of inherited biological limits. Human beings cannot be divided into groups with similar inherent abilities and motivations; there is no biological distinction between those destined to be paupers and those set to rule them.

In academia today, perhaps unsurprisingly, those whose arguments more often suggest possible hereditability are disproportionately found in the most elite institutions, and especially among many of those who advise some of the most powerful governments of the world. Eugenicism has risen again, but now goes by a different name and appears in a new form and is now hiding behind a vastly more complex biological cloak. For example, it was recently stated in a textbook supposed to be concerned with ‘fairness’ and including amongst its editors people near the very heart of government, that “there is a significant correlation between the measured intelligence of parents and their children … Equality of opportunity does not aim to defeat biology, but to ensure equal chances for those with similar ability and motivation.”

This quote was written by a professor based in the city of Oxford. It is disproportionately from places such as Oxford University that possible excuses for exclusion are more often preached. To give another example from the same institution: “children of different class backgrounds tend to do better or worse in school – on account, one may suppose, of a complex interplay of socio-cultural and genetic factors.” Outside of Oxford, researchers are so much more careful with their words when it comes to suggesting such things. Why?

There are many advantages – but also disadvantages – to working in a place like the University of Oxford when it comes to studying human societies. It is there and in similar places – like Harvard and Heidelberg – that misconceptions about the nature of society and of other humans can so easily form. This is due, Pierre Bourdieu has claimed, to the staggering and strange social, geographical and economic separation of the supposed

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crème de la crème of society into such enclaves. During the time these Oxford academics were writing, the British Prime Minister had clearly come to believe in a kind of geneticism, as revealed in his speeches.

Tony Blair disguised his geneticist beliefs by talking of them as the “God-given potential” of children, but it is clear from both the policies he promoted, his ‘scientific Christianity’, and the way he talked about what he thought of his own children’s special potential, that his God dealt out potential through genes.

A strand of eugenics thinking hung on in the way many left-wing policy-makers in Britain treat and describe inequality and the poor. We need to exorcise these past ghosts before we can get out of some of the ruts in our current collective thinking. We need to understand that the modern forms of crypto-eugenic belief – geneticism – lead to an implicit acceptance of social segregation, to enclaves, escapism, excuses for huge wealth gaps and an argument being made which promotes inequality as good.

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8 Editorial note: In Britain most recently it has been the Australian writer Peter Saunders (not to be confused with the Australian academic of the same name) who has been at the forefront of such arguments, including making the argument that we need to create more servile simple jobs for people he labels as stupid. Whenever someone comes along with such arguments look for their track record and for where they have been dismissed before. Usefully on his website Peter provides examples of how best to deal with him:

“In recent days, some politicians and commentators in New Zealand have attacked me for suggesting that, on average, people in higher occupational classes are brighter than people in lower class positions. I have been labelled ‘extreme right wing’ and a ‘nut job’ for pointing out the link between social class and intelligence. …The problem is that one-sixth of the population has an IQ under 85. At this level, people struggle with tasks like reading and understanding official documents, or working out a budget. These are the people who used to do the unskilled jobs that have now disappeared, and many of them are now long-term welfare dependent.”

However, given that most people who are unemployed are young, for Peter’s argument to work we must have very recently become more stupid. I think we can become more stupid, but this is more the case when it comes to arguments such as Peter’s which are themselves good evidence that progress is not inevitable and of how poor argument can be promoted. The quote is from his website: www.petersaunders.org.uk/social_class__intelligence.html (accessed in February 2011).
The return to elitism in education


...A society’s attitudes to innate intelligence are closely correlated with its levels of inequality...

As inequality becomes ever more deeply entrenched into contemporary everyday life, there has been a creeping return to the idea of innate ability. At the same time, priorities in education have become increasingly determined by a utilitarian concern for the needs of the economy, rather than for developing the thinking of each child. One place where the effects of these interconnected trends can be seen is in the OECD’s reports on learning skills (for it is now part of the business of the OECD – an organisation of economists – to tell countries how well educated their children are). Its comparative report on learning skills among 15-year-olds is therefore a good starting point for a reflection on the connections between elitism, neoliberal ideas of competitiveness and concepts of innate ability.¹

The Netherlands is the country which best approximates to the OECD economists’ favoured 1:1:2:2:1 distribution of children according to categories of ability (which are, respectively: limited, barely adequate, simple, effective and developed – corresponding to the OECD’s international testing levels of 1 to 5 – see Figure 1). It may surprise you to learn that the Netherlands – with 51 per cent of its children classified as ‘simple’ or worse – fares particularly well on comparisons of this kind. Only half a dozen

countries, out of more than fifty surveyed, did significantly better when last compared (in 2006): an even larger percentage of children were awarded the damning labels of ‘limited’, ‘barely adequate’ and ‘simple’ in both the United Kingdom and the United States.

According to the OECD, in Finland and New Zealand the top level ‘genius strand’ is reached by 4 per cent; in the United Kingdom and Australia it is 3 per cent; in Germany and the Netherlands 2 per cent; in the United States and Sweden 1 per cent; and in Portugal and Italy nearer to 0 per cent. These are the children who, according to the educational economists, show real promise. These are the children who have been trained in techniques such that they answer exam questions in the ways that the examiners – operating in the light of OECD economic beliefs – would most like them to be answered. The way this small group of children behave, they could one day even become educational economists themselves.

As it turns out, however, the proportions of such children are so low in these comparisons because the international tests are set in a way that seeks to arrange the distribution of results around a ‘bell curve’, whose smoothly tapering tails are cut off precisely to produce results that label 1.3 per cent as geniuses and 5.2 per cent as know-nothings.

The OECD report does not actually include any statistics shown as bell curves, perhaps because its authors know that such representations would arouse suspicion. But if you read the report’s technical manual (released three years after the survey), you will find hidden after 144 pages of equations and procedures the statement that, in calibrating the results (adjusting the scores before release): ‘those releasing this data … assumed that students have been sampled from a multivariate normal distribution’. Given this assumption, almost regardless of how the students had ‘performed’, the statistical curves produced would have been bell shaped. The data was made to fit the curve. It is not hard to devise a set of questions and a marking scheme that results in those you test appearing to be distributed along a bell curve. But to do this you must first have it in your mind to construct the world as being like this. It is not revealed as such by observation.

Editorial note: The 2009 PISA results were released after the original article (which this chapter was based on) was written: OECD (2010), PISA 2009 at a Glance, OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264095298-en. They suggested that amongst a larger pool of countries the Netherlands remained towards the top. That country ranked 11th out of 65 countries surveyed and was significantly above the OECD average in the Mathematical proficiency of its children (Ibid, Figure 1.5, page 21); 11 out of 65 in Science (Ibid, Figure 1.8, page 27) and 10th out of 65 in Reading (Ibid, Figure 1.2, page 15). The UK ranked 28th, 16th and 25th respectively. The PISA results remain a useful source of information on educational outcomes, just as early experiments on making humans smoke remain a useful source of information on health outcomes. That does not mean that either kind of study is necessarily something we should wish to see repeated.


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It goes without saying, of course, that there is very little room within a bell curve to be at the top.

The knowledge base that the OECD refers to is a particular kind of knowledge that comes from a particular way of valuing people, of seeing the world, a way that came to dominate the thinking of those appointed to high office in the rich world at the start of the twenty-first century. For example, the OECD uses the results of its international comparative exercises for the purpose of making claims that ‘having a larger number of schools that compete for students was associated with better results’. Indeed, many of the people who work for organisations such as the OECD feel they have a duty to suggest that competition between countries, schools and pupils is good, and a duty to encourage it as much as they can. They appear to be appointed largely on the basis that they share this belief, and that – in the case of the education section – they can produce tables showing how many children are doing badly, how few are doing well, and, by inference, how much better prepared the large majority need to be to achieve such things as ‘Science Competencies for Tomorrow’s World’. Their imagined tomorrow’s
world is a utopia where all will benefit from increased competition, from being labelled by their apparent competencies. This is a place where it is imagined that the good of the many is most enhanced by promoting the ability of the few.

Another way of understanding the cultural embeddedness of concepts of intelligence and intelligence testing is to observe that ever since we have been trying to measure ‘intelligence’ we have found its levels to have been rising dramatically. This is true across almost all countries in which we have tried to measure it.\(^4\) The average child in 1900 measured by today’s standards would appear to be an imbecile, mentally retarded, a ‘virtual automaton’. Our intelligence when measured is so much greater than that of our parents that you would think they might have wondered at the extraordinary subtlety of their children’s conversations. All that actually happened, of course, was that in affluent countries over the course of the last century most people became better fed, and were better educated in the kinds of scientific thinking which score highly under intelligence tests.

**IQism: the underlying rationale for the growth of elitism**

The merits of thinking of intelligence as something of which each individual has an allotted quotient (i.e. the concept of IQ), through having its origin in earlier theories of innate ability, was pushed forward fastest in Britain in the 1950s, when almost all eleven year olds were subjected to testing to determine which kind of secondary school they would be sent to. In the later 1960s and 1970s this brutal sorting of children into camps was challenged, and the comprehensive system was widely introduced. But today the beliefs which lead to this discrimination against the many have once more become the mainstream beliefs of those who make recommendations over how an affluent economy should be run.

The assumption underpinning the concept of IQ is that intellectual ability is limited physically, like height. (Most people who were initially told of the idea were also told that their IQ was high; while the people who propagated the idea thought that their own IQs were even higher.) But thinking is as much like height as singing is like weight. You can think on your own, but you best learn to think with others. Education does not unfold from within but is almost all ‘induction from without’.\(^5\) There are no real ‘know-nothings’. We are all occasionally stupid, especially when we have not had

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enough sleep, or feel anxious and ‘don’t think’. We are similarly all capable
of singing or not singing, singing better or worse, singing in groups or alone.
What is seen as good singing is remarkably culturally specific, varying
greatly by time and place. Work hard at your singing in a particular time and
place and people will say you sing well if you sing as you are supposed to.
It is possible to rank singing, to grade it, and to believe that some singing is
truly awful while some is exquisite, but the truth of this is as much in the
culture and ear of the listener as it is from the vocal cords of the performer.
Someone has almost certainly been silly enough to propose that human
beings have singing limits which are distributed along a bell-shaped curve.
After all is said, we are all capable of being stupid. But the bell-curve-of-
singing idea did not catch on. We are not as vain about how good we are at
yodelling in the shower as we are about being told we are especially clever.
The misconception of the existence of ‘gifted’ people grew out of beliefs
that talents were bestowed by the gods, who each originally had their own
special gifts (of speed, art, or drinking, say). The misconception was useful
for explaining away the odd serf who could not be suppressed in ancient
times, or the few poor boys who rose in rank a century ago. But then ideas
about intelligence changed, and such a distribution of “a few with talent”
was abandoned in favour of a distribution reshaped as bell-curved: the bell
curve as a general description of the population became popular as more
people were required to fulfil social functions that had not existed in such
abundance before: engine operator, teacher, tester. This led to the creation
of tests that could produce a bell-curved set of statistics.
If you apply an IQ test to a population that the test was not designed
specifically for, most people will either do very badly or very well; they will
not perform in a way that produces a bell-curve distribution. Tests have to
be designed and calibrated to result in such an outcome. In a more equal
society, the aim would be to move the rising bars of the curve to those
found rightwards, and attempts were made in this direction during the 1970s.
However, in the neoliberal era we have returned to a more restricted view
of the distribution of talents.
Although in the affluent west we are now almost all fed well enough not
to have our cognitive capabilities limited physically through the effects of
malnutrition (on the brain), and more and more children are better nurtured
and cared for as infants, and although we are now rich enough to afford
for almost all to be allowed to learn in ways our parents and grandparents
were mostly not allowed, we still hold back from giving all children that
encouragement and, instead, tell most from a very early age that they are not
up to the level of ‘the best in the class’. And never can be – by definition.
Within our families all our children are special, but outside those cocoons
they are quickly ranked, told that to sing they need to enter talent shows
that only a tiny proportion can win, told that to learn they need to work harder than the rest and – more importantly – need to be ‘gifted’.

Children need to be ‘gifted’, it is now commonly said, to attain the level of a well developed ‘level 5’ child (see Figure 1). They need to be ‘especially gifted’ to be that seventh of a seventh that reach ‘level 6’, and it is harder still to win a rung on the places endlessly stacked above that scale. Most are told that even if they work hard they can at best only expect to rise one or two levels, to hope to be simple rather than no-knowing; or to have effective knowledge, to be a useful cog in a machine, rather than just be a simpleton (if you do particularly well). Aspiring to reach more than one grade above your lot in life is seen as fanciful.

Arguing that there is not a mass of largely limited children out there is portrayed as misguided fancy by the elitists. Most of the elitists say this quietly, but occasionally a few say what they think in public, and I have collected some of these musings in the book from which this article is drawn. Such public outbursts are not the isolated musings of a few discredited former schools’ inspectors or other mavericks. They reveal what is generally believed by the kinds of people that run the governments that appoint such people to be schools’ inspectors. It is just that elitist politicians tend to have more sense than to tell their electorate that they believe most of them to be so limited in ability.

You might think that what the OECD educationalists are doing is trying to move societies from extreme inequality in education, to a world of much greater equality. However, the distribution of ‘ability’ is not progressively changing shape from left-skewed to right-skewed. As the figures show, in countries such as the Netherlands, Finland, Japan and Canada, the system teaches more children what they need to know to reach the higher levels. In those countries it is less common to present a story of children having innate differences. But in other countries, such as the United Kingdom, Portugal, Mexico and the United States, where more are allowed to learn very little, children are more often talked about as coming from ‘different stock’. The position of each country on the scale of how elitist their education systems are also varies over time. In fact, ways in which different groups are treated differently within countries at different times can be monitored by looking at changes in IQ test results. This evidence clearly demonstrates that the tests measure how well children have been taught to pass them. That is

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why the generation you are born into matters so much in determining IQ. Intelligence tests have nothing to do with anything innate.  

**The return to elitism**

In the United States the ‘IQ gap’ between black and white Americans fell between the 1940s and the 1970s, but by the start of the twenty-first century inequality had risen back to 1940s levels. The move away from, and then back to, elitism occurred in tandem with changes in the social position and relative deprivation of black versus white Americans. From the 1940s to the 1970s black Americans won progressively higher status; they won the right to be integrated more into what had become normal economic expectations; and wages equalised a little between black and white. Then, from the 1970s to 2009 the wage gap grew; segregation increased again; and civil rights victories were rolled back by the mass incarceration of young black men. Measured levels of ability decreased in relative terms at around the same rate.

Treating a few people as especially able inevitably entails treating others as especially unable. And if you treat people like dirt you can watch them become more stupid before your eyes – or at least through their answers to your multiple choice questions in public examinations, and in their restricted options in life thereafter. From the 1970s onwards poor Americans, and especially poor black Americans, were progressively treated more and more like dirt. To a lesser extent similar trends occurred in many other parts of the affluent world, in all the rich countries where income inequalities grew. And they grew most where IQism became most accepted.

IQism can be a self-fulfilling prophesy. If you believe that only a few children are especially able, then you concentrate your resources on them and subsequently they will tend to appear to do well. They will certainly pass your tests, as the tests are designed to pass a certain number, and the children you selected will have been chosen and then taught to pass the tests. Young people respond well to praise to learn, and get smarter when they learn as a result. The young respond badly to disrespect; it reduces their motivation to learn: they perform badly in tests when they are taught with

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8 There is not space here to go into all the research on IQ and genetics. But see, for example, footnote 3 on page 195 above on J.R. Flynn’s insightful discussion on identical twins, which argues that it is possible to take his logic one step further and propose that similar appearance could be key to explaining away apparently innate ability. Teachers and other adults tend to treat and teach children differently according partly to their physical appearance. For the tiny differences that would need to be explained by this see: *What is intelligence? Beyond the Flynn effect*, Cambridge University Press, 2007. See also his open access lecture [www.psychometrics.sps.cam.ac.uk/page/109/beyond-the-flynn-effect.htm](http://www.psychometrics.sps.cam.ac.uk/page/109/beyond-the-flynn-effect.htm).

little respect. Telling children they rank lowly in a class is a way of telling them that they have not earned respect.

Children are not particularly discerning about what they are taught. They will try to do well at IQ tests if you train them to try to do well at IQ tests. Almost all people want to fit in, to be praised, not to rank towards the bottom, not to be seen as a liability. Indeed it was recognition of these effects that helped drive educationists’ campaigns for an end to the 11-plus system in the 1970s.

Unfortunately, greater equality of opportunity is almost always seen as a threat to the relatively privileged. And, although the start of the 1970s was a great time to be ordinary in affluent countries, and not a bad time to be poor, it was a disconcerting time if you were affluent. Inflation was high; if you were well off enough to have savings, those savings were being eroded. You began to realise that your children were not going to be as cushioned as you were by so much relative wealth, by going to different schools from most children. When politicians said that they were going to eradicate the evil of ignorance by educating all in Britain, or that they were going to have a ‘Great Society’ in America, they did not mention that this would reduce the apparent advantages that your children had. Equal rights for black children, a level playing field for poor children – these were seen as threats in a race in which only a few can win. And as the economy deteriorated in the late 1970s, this fear of equality grew, and so did the backlash against the progressive changes of the 1960s and 1970s.

It is not hard for most people to know that they are not very special. Even affluent people, if not delusional, know in their heart of hearts that they are not very special; most know that they were members of what some call the ‘lucky sperm club’, born to the right parents, or just lucky – or perhaps both lucky and a little ruthless. It is only those with the strongest of narcissistic tendencies who think they became affluent because they were more able. Those who couple such tendencies with eugenicist beliefs think their children are likely to inherit their supposed acumen. The rest – the vast majority of the rich, who are not so stupid – had a choice when greater equality appeared on the horizon. They could throw in their lot with the masses, send their children to the local school, see their comparative wealth evaporate with inflation and join the party, or they could try to defend their corner, pay for their children to be segregated from others, and look for ways to maintain their advantages, in particular by voting into power politicians who shared their concerns. They managed to convince enough voters that politicians of the centre left – who were responsible for this levelling of the playing field – had been a shambles. They did this in both the United States and United Kingdom. In Britain in 1979, and in the United States in 1980, the right won office.
As segregation of children in different state secondary schools in Britain was being (to a large extent) abolished, a boom began in the private sector, in newly segregated ‘independent’ schooling. At the same time changes were gradually introduced into the state sector that allowed increasing levels of competition within an allegedly comprehensive system. By 2007 the English school system had become a market system, in which schools competed for money and children. The expansion of private schools was accompanied by the introduction of 57 varieties of state school. Privately educated children (7 per cent of the total) took one quarter of all advanced level examinations and gained over half the places in ‘top’ universities.\(^\text{10}\) The better funded of the 57 varieties of state school accounted for most of the rest of elite places (supplemented by those who had some other advantage at home). Elitist systems claim to be meritocracies, but in such systems almost no-one gets to the top without substantially benefiting from the unequal distribution of educational opportunities.

To believe that your children are in the top fifth requires first to believe that there is a top fifth. At any one time you can subject a group of children to testing and a fifth can be singled out as doing best. That fifth will be slightly more likely than their peers to rank in the top fifth in any other related test, but that does not mean that there is an actual top fifth that is waiting to be identified. The higher the correlations between different tests, the more the same children come to be selected as being in that top fifth under different test regimes. The more this happens, the more they will have been coached to perform well, and the more likely they are to live in a society that takes the idea of such testing seriously – a society, from government to classroom, that implicitly accepts the idea of inherent differences in ability, in intelligence quotas (or quotients), even when not explicitly admitting that they do. It is the smallest of steps from that position to accept that what you think is inherent is inherited.

From putting prize winners on pedestals to putting whole populations in prisons, how we treat each other reveals how we see each other. This IQism has become the current dominant unquestioned underlying belief of most educational policy-makers in the more unequal of affluent nations.\(^\text{11}\)

People who have taught the children of the affluent classes at the universities they go to have seen the result of this growth in elitism. These children have been educationally force-fed enough facts to obtain strings of A grades, but they are no more geniuses than anyone else. There is a tragedy in making young people pretend to have super-human mental abilities which neither they nor anyone else possess. To justify their situation they have to

swallow and repeat the lie being told more and more often; that only a few are especially able and that those few are disproportionately found amongst the higher social classes.

In the more unequal affluent countries, such as Britain and the United States, it has become a little more common in recent years for the elite to suggest amongst themselves that children born to working class or black parents simply have less natural ability than those born to higher class or white parents.\(^{12}\) The people who say such things are merely a little more bold in uttering the claims made commonly, if discreetly, by the class they are in or have joined. They often go on to quietly suggest that children of different class backgrounds tend to do better or worse in school on account of some ‘complex interplay of sociocultural and genetic factors’.\(^ {13}\) It may sound more nuanced to include words such as ‘complex’, and ‘sociocultural’ in your educational parlance, but once ‘genetic factors’ are brought into the equation all nuance is lost. ‘Genetic factors’ can be used to defend arguments that any category of less privileged people – women, black people, working class people – is (it is often claimed) inherently less able. Slip ‘genetic factors’ into your argument and you cross a line.

Sadly, it is belief in mumbo jumbo like the IQ gene that results in teachers being asked around the rich world to identify children who may become especially ‘gifted and talented’, with all the consequences that that implies. At times these assumptions are made explicit, such as in the official proposals to change English Education Law in 2005 in which it was claimed that: ‘we must make sure that every pupil – gifted and talented, struggling or just average – reaches the limits of their capability’.\(^ {14}\) In England the idea that different children have different limits has for so long been part of the social landscape that, despite the best efforts and advice, it still underlies key thinking.

Yet we all become more able through learning. We learn collectively. And it is through learning together that we will eventually come to understand.

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\(^{12}\) In Britain in 1997, the then head of the nation’s Economic and Social Research Council and his colleagues suggested that there was the possibility: ‘… that children born to working-class parents simply have less natural ability than those born to higher-class parents’. Documented in White, S. (2007) Equality, Cambridge: Polity Press, p 66.
