

# **Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists** **(updated edition)**

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**The original edition of *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists* stands out as a masterpiece, not only in the production of razor-sharp arguments, but also in its collation of extensive supporting evidence. This updated edition is perhaps even more important today.**

**Daniel Dorling, *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists* (2nd edition, Policy Press), xvii, 403pp.**

The key reason why this version of *Injustice* is so exciting, as well as useful, is that the original was written before the Con-Dem government came to power, and began to implement their assault on working people in this country. The book was, and continues to be, a brilliant critique of capitalism in its current phase, something that is particularly crucial at the moment. As Dorling says, 'this book should serve as a reminder that the UK was in a great mess before the coalition came to power' (p.321), but he does not shy away from evaluating how much further the cuts have exacerbated injustice after the coalition came to power. It is important to remember that Dorling's book was always an analysis of capitalism as a neo-liberal system, and how this western-based programme has affected people and economies around the world. Secondly it was also an analysis of the impact of Thatcherism here in the UK, which, Dorling points out, continued to be carried through by New Labour policies. The already grim consequences of this are of course being made a whole lot worse by current Tory policy.

The Forward to the new edition of *Injustice* has been written by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, perhaps the ideal duo of authors to introduce this book. Wilkinson and Pickett are the authors of *The Spirit Level* (Allen Lane 2009), in many ways the perfect companion to Dorling's book. In their Forward they evaluate the achievements, strengths and, to an extent, the weaknesses of the book, and of Daniel Dorling's approach. One key theme, which I am glad they not only noticed but focused on, runs throughout the whole work. This is Dorling's evaluation of the prejudices of the rich, and their arguments for the justification of injustice; effectively analysing present-day ruling-class ideas as commonly understood, and underlining their hegemony or dominance in society.

Whether deliberate or not, there is a clear absence of the language of the left, both in Dorling's and Wilkinson and Pickett's work. Perhaps this is to avoid unwanted associations and gain as wide an audience as possible, or simply to make the book more accessible. However, the lack of the use of concepts such as, 'imperialism' or 'ruling class' is unfortunate, and limits the argument in some respects. Nonetheless, given the strength of the evidence presented here, this problem is, in the grand scheme of things, of lesser importance.

As Wilkinson and Pickett note correctly, Dorling provides an excellent breakdown of the ideas that propagate injustice, which he categorises as; 'elitism is efficient', 'exclusion is necessary', 'prejudice is natural', 'greed is good' and 'despair is inevitable'. This, of course, harks back to post-war minister Ernest Bevin's five great evils. These ideas are deconstructed with great precision, and their weaknesses are fully exposed. As the Forward says, 'he has in fact shown that the bricks of society are held in place, not with proper mortar containing cement, but with wet sand' (p.xv). Though at times, the huge bulk of evidence which Dorling presents can lead to a tough read, it is nonetheless brilliant. Events, conditions and processes are not seen as abstract or in isolation from one another, they are considered with a keen sense of the significance of history. For example, hierarchies are not seen as having been always present but as being preceded 'by a long period of remarkably egalitarian pre-historical development' (p.xvi).

One of the most interesting parts of this edition is the new Afterword, an opportunity for the author to respond to criticisms. Dorling explores the implications of the Con-Dem government taking power for the arguments made in the book in the preceding New Labour era. Although it would have been great if this discussion had been awarded more space, it is nonetheless addressed well in the space of just a few paragraphs. The continuity of neo-liberal ideology is laid out, as Dorling writes that 'this was a coalition which included a large majority who appeared to prefer to see the injustices outlined in this book maintained' (p.321).

Dorling's response to the sharply divided reactions of reviewers is brilliant, and the same scrutiny is applied to these as had been applied to ideas critiqued beforehand. Dorling is humble about the positive reviews, but does not hesitate to explain why some people have received the book in different ways. The contrast between positive and critical responses does not indicate any kind of inconsistency, he points out, but should be expected from each reviewers' position, political environment and social influences, such as the 'distinct readerships of the publication they write for' (p.323). One notable criticism concerns his writing style, which seems a petty thing to write him off for, considering the sheer range of serious work brought together in this work. He brushes off this attack by making the point that 'it sounds angry if you write about injustices and inequalities as they are' (p.323). This considered, I would still regard his writing style as calm, measured and as objective as is practicable.

Dorling explores how government policies have been perpetuating and deepening injustice since the last election. This discussion adds a dimension that was somewhat lacking in the original text, and is therefore all the more welcome here. This is the sense of hope that there can be successful resistance to the unjust ideas and policies Dorling has critiqued. Some of the struggles which are cited include the student movement, and how the Browne report maintains injustice, as well as the particular issue of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), and the importance this small amount of money has for working class and poorer children. Perhaps the inclusion of references to these movements is the result of Dorling's growing optimism, something which has affected many of us involved in recent protests.

Next, the ideas behind Con-Dem rhetoric are taken on, in particular the assumption that 'there is no alternative' (p.326). Even in the short space of the single paragraph he allocates to engaging with these arguments, Dorling is able to demolish them thoroughly. Whilst making links to imperialism, as well as the cost of Trident, the necessity of austerity is completely ruled out of court. The scale of the cuts programme is underlined as Dorling says 'even

Thatcher in her darkest hour was not as cruel' (p.327). In contrast, an eloquent argument for taxing the rich is put forward and supported by the example of how land-value tax works in the US, and therefore should be a possibility here also. There are unfortunately still some weak points in this otherwise impressive Afterword. One is the inconsistency of Dorling's critique in calling the Labour budget of 2010 progressive, which gives too much allowance towards New Labour politicians, who are so sharply critiqued earlier in the book.

The very last heading is entitled 'what to do', but disappointingly reveals very little in the way of practical ideas of how to fight back. This is exemplified by the very last line of the book: 'what matters most is how we think' (p.320). On this matter, Dorling contradicts himself. At times, he is very clear in arguing that ideas are based on social, political and economic influences, although at others he seems to privilege the power of ideas themselves. It could be argued that Dorling's analysis is almost Marxist in places, and he is very sharp on the oppressive nature of capitalism, the importance of ruling ideas and how they are maintained. However, his approach is weakened by the lack of a developed sense of the possibility of change, and of the revolutionary possibility that people might take their destinies into their own hands.

Nevertheless, for anyone who believes in combating injustice, this book is a brilliant read, and very important. Not only does it reinforce the need to resist, but it is an accessible tool for equipping yourself with powerful arguments, and provides an excellent general understanding of injustice in the world today.