



A palaeontologist looks at ancient climate change and projects what could be in store for a planet without ice caps



A warning about the scope for political chaos and military conflict in the near future as a result of runaway climate change



Glorious aerial footage of our world tempered by some sobering facts in perhaps the most beautiful horror film ever made

Book of the month

More equal than others

The dogged persistence of social injustice and inequality provokes two important questions: why does it still exist in affluent, resource-rich Western societies, and how can we eradicate it? Daniel Dorling argues that attitudes of mind are largely to blame for the social dislocation and disparities that blight a nation such as Britain and there are five dragons he would like to slay. First, we continue to insist that elitism is efficient: arguing, for instance, that only the smartest kids should enjoy a full, extended education. Second, such elitism (in its many varieties) breeds exclusion. If we rank and rate people, then some of them will inevitably be pushed to the margins. Next, the existence of these marginalised people encourages prejudice: we embrace the opportunity to look down on some of our fellow citizens (as often as not, those who are trapped in poverty). Fourth, the whole sorry situation is exacerbated by the nostrum that greed is good (that grasping capitalistic endeavour will somehow benefit the commonweal). And, finally, we end up shrugging our shoulders and accepting that despair is inevitable for those who find themselves adrift. We live in an era when anti-depressive prescription drugs are handed out like candy and in which the incidence of childhood depression (that most baleful of modern epidemics) soars higher with every passing year.

It all adds up to quite the social quagmire. Dorling deploys an impressive arsenal of evidence, and he explores how these five crimes sustain, cause and bleed into each other. He wants to pin down the social mechanisms that shore up inequality and injustice and, as overarching theses go, this one has great appeal.

It's also defined by great passion (the righteous anger is always just below the surface). Dorling's best point is that these days, no-one would dream of explicitly justifying social inequality, but this doesn't stop its covert (sometimes unwitting) advocates and beneficiaries furthering the cause in subtle ways. There are coded ways of arguing for social differentiation, and many innocent-sounding sentences (uttered by politicians, academics and journalists) that bolster disreputable cultural assumptions.

The only remaining question (and it's a crucial one) is whether Dorling's analysis is accurate. In many particulars, it's robust. He's absolutely right about the current vogue for demonising the poor (the single mum from Essex has become a comedy staple: usually peddled by privileged comedians who live in London's leafier suburbs).

He's also wise to suggest that those who find themselves on the higher rungs of the social ladder do everything in their power to sustain their rank and that of their offspring. I join Dorling in his quest to rid Britain of lazy, insulting talk about the modern 'delinquents', to give every child access to the best education available, and to stamp on social inequality at every opportunity.

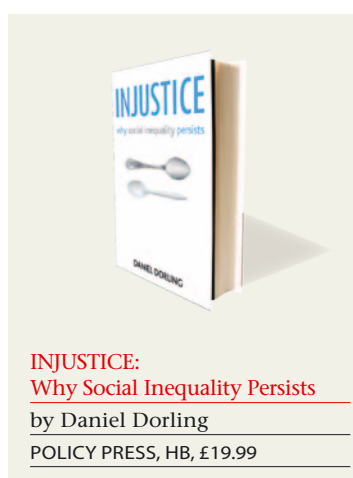
I have one major reservation, however. Dorling snarls a little too angrily at the idea that elitism can be efficient: he seems to see this as the root of all consequent evils. This is a risky manoeuvre, although I suppose it comes down to how a term such as elitism is defined.

Truth be told, all men and women are not born equal. Some are much cleverer than others, some are unusually beautiful, a few lucky people can run 100 metres in under

ten seconds. We all know this to be true, and we all have a sense of our place in countless different hierarchies: I, for instance, consider myself to be suitably smart, quite ugly, and useless at all sports apart from table tennis. I therefore play to my strengths and I hope society benefits as a result.

To suggest that a specific economic, ethnic, regional or gendered group is inherently better at a particular activity would, of course, be loathsome, but we still have to admit that certain people (across the board) are better suited to certain tasks than others. The trick is to accept this and create a society that celebrates individual abilities but also sees the provision of needs (for everyone) as its most urgent priority. That is the best, most honest route to social justice and it replaces utopian pipe-dreams with a blunt acceptance of the uneven texture of humanity.

Dorling's book is witty, well researched, well intentioned and brimful of facts that everyone should know. It also conjures up lovely dreams that will never be realised. JONATHAN WRIGHT



INJUSTICE:
Why Social Inequality Persists

by Daniel Dorling

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