

Why Social Inequality Harms Us All

Review by James Sewry,

July 1, 2015 /

Danny Dorling

Injustice: Why Social Inequality Still Persists

473pp – £9.99

ISBN: 9781447320753

Bristol: Policy Press, 2015

In 2014, Oxfam revealed that the richest 85 people on the planet own as much wealth as the poorest 50 percent of the world's population. Earlier this year, the same organisation declared that the wealth of the richest one percent will soon overtake that of the other 99 percent unless economic inequality is tackled. Inequality, we are frequently told, will be one of the biggest, if not the biggest, problem facing the world community over the next few decades. And it is not difficult to see why. Evidence consistently shows that inequality significantly hinders economic growth, leads to the creation of more poverty, and actively damages the physical and mental wellbeing of ordinary people. It is linked to more crime, social segregation, and selfishness. Perhaps surprisingly, inequality affects not only the poor, who bear the brunt of other people's greed, but also the rich. In affluent countries with a large dispossessed underclass, the rich are much more suspicious of others, worried about the security of their possessions, fearful of theft and personal attack, and report themselves as consistently less happy than those who accumulated their wealth in more equal societies.

Interest in social and economic inequality has grown significantly in recent years, almost in proportion to the scale of the problem. Danny Dorling's reissue of *Injustice*, a fully revised edition of the work first published in 2010, is the latest contribution to a fast growing field of academic study: Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level* (2009), Joseph Stiglitz's *The Price of Inequality* (2012) and Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013) are the environment into which Dorling's work is released. Collectively, these works provide a powerful and damning critique of the modern capitalism. As the Tories, overjoyed by their unexpected majority following the 2015 General Election, start the final leg of its 'long-term economic plan' by bringing forward £2.5 billion of public spending cuts this year, it seems that the publication of Dorling's work could not have been better timed. The Conservative Party under David Cameron, 'stuffed full' of 'multi-millionaire ministers', is just one section of society that Dorling vehemently criticises in his passionately argued and very persuasive book. But Cameron is not alone: Dorling also targets, among others, Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair (New Labour was 'Thatcherism continued') and orthodox economists. Broadly, the book argues that injustice is propped up by five myths, or 'ideologies of inequality', that we as a society have come to hold. Namely, these are that 'elitism is efficient', 'exclusion is necessary', 'prejudice is natural', 'greed is good', and 'despair is inevitable'. By showing the flaws in justifications for these myths, Dorling hopes to demonstrate that, by changing our beliefs and by choosing to act differently, injustice can be actively countered and governments encouraged to create an economy that benefits all.

Dorling can hardly be criticised for his ambition and his attempt to accurately diagnose the source and scale of the problem. He postulates that it is within our own minds more than anywhere else that injustice perpetuates, but does not see his central task as providing ready-made solutions. He notes that our views about injustice are changing all the time as we respond to circumstances around us. Accordingly, it is unwise to suggest solutions that would become redundant as our views about injustice develop. For him, half the battle (in fact, most of the battle) is won by changing opinions from which individuals proceed in their actions. He recognises that failure to form solutions to such a large and complex social problem can hardly be laid at the door of individual members of society.

Dorling makes striking assumptions upon which the rest of his argument depends. The most startling, perhaps, is his faith that beliefs really can effect change. He argues that injustice persists not because of any one single economic factor, but because, consciously or unconsciously, the belief-systems of the masses support it. Clearly Dorling has read his Marx. He quotes from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, and borrows Marxian terms such as ‘immiseration’. Yet Dorling’s hypothesis – that our beliefs lead to change – could not be a more vigorous denial of the materialist conception of history. Dorling completely disregards any notion that personal abilities are in any way inherited. Supermen do not exist. People succeed not because they possess an innate special talent, but rather because their social environment makes success more or less likely. It is just that successful people have come, erroneously, to believe that their achievements were the result of hard work, or some special ability they had at birth. Once atop the social hierarchy, they are invariably tempted to look down upon those who they deem as ‘inferior’, even when such inferiority is due simply to socio-economic background. In Dorling’s worldview, a criminal’s mistake is not their crime, but ‘having been born at the wrong time, to the wrong family, in the wrong place, in the wrong country’. Given that much of Dorling’s criticism of society is based on these assumptions, it is unfortunate the book doesn’t give more detailed and assiduous justifications for them. As it is, one is left to wonder.

We may also wonder how much of Dorling position as Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography at the University of Oxford has shaped his views on education. He criticises both those who attend university for ‘the brand’ rather than a desire to engage in learning, and the universities themselves for providing a sheltered environment in which students can continue to believe that they are especially able. He clearly resents the pre-eminence of examinations endemic in modern education systems, which he believes leads to children being coached simply to pass tests rather than to discover the necessary tools for life-long learning. This criticism is hardly novel, but it is nonetheless worrying that compulsory education in this country, culminating in A-levels, no longer prepares students adequately for university and later life. While teaching sixth-form students to produce scripts for success at A-level seems reasonable, it is interesting that university students are often reminded that one of the main reasons for failure in their university examinations is reverting to writing

‘A-level style’ essays. Dorling also bemoans the increasing income inequality within universities themselves. He cites the fact that, by 2014, the combined salary of eight senior staff at the University of Chicago totalled \$7.6 million. He could also have mentioned the £424,000 salary of Andrew Hamilton, the Vice-Chancellor of the university at which he teaches, a matter which became the subject of a student campaign earlier this year.

Dorling’s book perhaps engenders the most concern in the discussion of the fifth myth that bolsters inequality, that ‘despair is inevitable’. In more unequal countries, there are higher rates of anxiety, mental illness and depression, and this problem is increasingly affecting adolescents and children. As a society we have rightly overcome the taboo associated with mental illness, but have not expended sufficient energy on research to determine the causes. In North America, rates of teenage depression have more than doubled since 1984, with one in six teenage girls suffering from some kind of mental ill health. Of course, not all mental illnesses have their origins in the ills of society, but the growth of inequality plays its part, bolstered by anxiety around competition and the need to succeed.

Dorling is at his best when writing more philosophically about the harm caused by inequality rather than a digest of statistics, and though his main objective is to diagnose rather than to solve, it would have been better if some of his postulated innovations, such as universal tertiary education, were developed more fully. Yet these are relatively minor concerns for a work that seeks to elucidate our current predicament and how we got there. And if the majority of Dorling’s work is fundamentally depressing, then a significant part of it also full of hopefulness and optimism. There are signs of change. Individuals are increasingly willing to speak out against injustice and to uncover those who seek to perpetuate it in promotion of their self-interest. Collective action, the like of which was seen recently when the tenants of the New Era housing estate took to the streets in protest against a rent increase or eviction, can work. Dorling also puts his faith in young people, who are these days more likely to have had a university education than previously, and are less and less likely to tolerate inequality and more inclined to question the myths that sustain it. The central message of the work is fundamentally liberating. If it is our beliefs that do most to sustain inequality, then each individual, in their own small way, has the

capacity to effect radical change. The choice is open to us all to think and act differently. The transformation that is required to build a more egalitarian and sustainable society does not occur because of the actions of one person, nor of a political movement, but instead through the combined adjustments of many millions across the globe. As Dorling's work illustrates so well, the current trend of deepening inequality is not only harmful, but also fundamentally unsustainable. The book provides a rallying point for a different vision of society, one in which elitism is replaced by equality, exclusion and prejudice by acceptance, greed by selflessness, and despair by confidence. It is only in such an environment that individual fulfilment, regardless of position in the social order, and so desperately craved but so rarely realised in capitalist society, is available to all. What, then, are we waiting for?

James Sewry, Christ Church