

Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists

Book Review by Iain Ferguson, May 2010 – Socialist Review

Daniel Dorling, Policy Press, £19.99

A veteran Tory MP recently suggested that people who travel standard class in trains "are a totally different type of people". Not surprisingly, he was quickly slapped down by David Cameron since that kind of elitism doesn't exactly fit the image of the new, reformed Tory party. Nevertheless, the belief that certain groups of people are inherently superior to others is one of several that have helped to create and sustain the highest levels of income inequality in Britain since the Second World War. In this book Daniel Dorling challenges five of the core beliefs which, he argues, today underlie most injustice in the world.

Firstly, there is the notion that "elitism is efficient". Underpinning that belief is the spurious science of "IQism", based on the idea that there is a fixed quotient of intelligence (IQ) in society, with only a small percentage of "gifted" children at the top end. Prior to the 1970s that belief condemned the majority of working class children to an inferior education in secondary modern schools with the lucky few, along with most middle class children, creamed off into grammar schools.

Like many other reactionary ideas, IQism was challenged by the great social struggles of the late 1960s and for a while all political parties supported comprehensive education. The rise of neoliberalism since the early 1980s, however, and the introduction of competition into every area of education through tests and league tables have meant the return of these old elitist ideas, albeit in a slightly different form.

Secondly, there is the belief that "exclusion is necessary". Dorling estimates that a sixth of all households in Britain are now excluded from the activities that "normal" society takes for granted, such as an annual holiday, because they are so heavily in debt.

Thirdly, there is the idea that "prejudice is natural", with rising inequality giving rise to new forms of racism based on genetic theories as well as wider forms of prejudice towards the poor more generally.

Fourthly, there is the notion that "greed is good", that we should all aspire to the levels of extreme affluence enjoyed by those at the top of society, a belief that feeds the current cult of "celebrity".

Finally, there is the idea that "despair is inevitable", with rising levels of mental ill health being the price we have to pay for a society based on competition, with the promise that we can all become rich or celebrities.

Dorling has a rather rosy view of what life was like in the period before the onset of neoliberalism. In my view it is also too uncritical of societies such as Japan which may be more equal than Britain but are no less based on exploitation. Nevertheless, like the recent work of writers such as Richard Wilkinson, Kate Pickett and Oliver James, he provides valuable ammunition for attacking the ideas of our rulers and his book deserves a wide readership.