

Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists

27 May 2010 – Times Higher

Greed still good; despair inevitable

This analysis of elitism is not new, says Fiona Taylor, but neither are the claims made in elitism's favour

Hot on the heels of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* - a brilliant multi-disciplinary indictment of the dire consequences of inequality for us all - comes another new publication taking a similarly eclectic approach to the study of inequality. In *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists*, Daniel Dorling agrees that inequality is bad for both rich and poor. But his key question is this: why do we, and the powers that be, allow this injustice to continue and worsen?

Dorling locates the cause of what he categorises as the "new injustices" of the late 20th century in sets of beliefs that have "old origins" but "new faces". These beliefs, he contends, can be boiled down to five key precepts: "elitism is efficient, exclusion is necessary, prejudice is natural, greed is good, and despair is inevitable". He charges that many of those who run things in the most unequal rich nations hold these beliefs - covertly, if not openly - or become converts once they join the ranks of the powerful.

Elitist thinking first accelerated in intensity in the 1950s, he says, when in countries such as Britain, the state enthusiastically sponsored "the division of children into types", and funded their education differently. The chapter on elitism then goes on, and on, becoming shrill in places - Dorling's polemic against the Nobel prize and prizewinners seems almost personal in tone - but it raises undeniably important issues.

The author's key concern is that in spite of official slogans about equality of opportunity, and scientific evidence to the contrary, "IQism", and the belief that the limits to a child's potential ability can be predicted from genetic (or class or ethnicity-based) inheritance, remains rife.

According to Dorling, the smug belief that "the fittest" are deserving and the rest deserve what they get lies at the heart of two more beliefs. The first is the view that the exclusion of the bottom 20 per cent of income-earners from what society considers to be the basics of life is both right and necessary to protect the living standards of the rest. The second is the belief that disrespect and suspicion directed against immigrants, refugees and the poor is justified, as they are genetically inferior, untrustworthy, trying to take our jobs, not trying hard enough, or all of the above.

Dorling argues that in the early 1970s, when reduced access to cheap resources and falling profit margins culminated in a stagflation that threatened all classes, a collective decision was made by the relatively powerful in the West that the greatest sacrifice should be made by poorer people and nations. There was no conspiracy; rather, conservative think-tanks trotted out justifications for inequality that amounted to the idea that "greed is good", and a majority of voters in the most unequal nations bought it. It is no accident, he adds, that around the same time, Margaret Thatcher and others actively fuelled prejudice in the form of fear of immigration and contempt for the poor.

Like many others, Dorling points out that the post-1970s period has also seen accelerating rates of anxiety, depression and conduct disorders among children and adolescents in the most unequal rich countries, and particularly among girls. And like many others, he suggests that the sources of these "diseases of despair" are increasingly cut-throat competition in school and the workforce, and an advertising industry that exploits the emotional vulnerability of young and old alike.

In the face of all this, suggests the author, all we are offered is sticking plasters. The medical profession mass-prescribes anti-depressants that render some of us compliant but make few of us happy. Governments keen to cover up the symptoms subsidise cognitive behavioural therapy, as if it is the millions out there who are not coping who are in need of repair, rather than the systemic dysfunction at the root of it all.

Dorling admits that *Injustice* represents the "bringing together of others' posies with a few of my own thoughts to add to the call for greater levels of social justice". There is nothing wrong with that. Still, his labelling of the injustices he elaborates on as "new" is contentious. Furthermore, his key arguments have been presented elsewhere with less tiresome repetition and high-pitched moralising of a kind that can irritate even the converted.

Nevertheless, Dorling has a unique ability to use statistics to frame history in a particularly punchy socio-economic perspective. In spite of its flaws, specialist and general readers alike are likely to find much of the book a fascinating read that sticks in the memory. Lately, while teaching, I have often found piquant little pieces of *Injustice* popping, impromptu, into my head and out of my mouth - with all due credit given to the author, of course. From a teacher with a wealth of ammunition about inequality to fire at bleary-eyed students, that says a lot.

Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists

-

By Daniel Dorling

Policy, 400pp, £19.99

ISBN 9781847424266

Published 21 April 2010

Reviewer :

Fiona Taylor teaches in the political economy department, University of Sydney. Her doctoral research focused on the relationship between poverty and human-capital formation.