

INEQUALITY: A REAL RISK TO OUR PLANET

Oxford geographer Danny Dorling tells **Russell Warfield** why consumption, not population, spurs climate change

Danny Dorling doesn't think that we can address climate change without reducing inequality. At first, he seems a little surprised that I want to talk about it. "I don't often get asked that," he admits, "but you've asked the right question."

Environmentalists are usually more interested in Dorling – who is the Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography at the University of Oxford – for his work on demography and human numbers, as the debates around over-consumption and overpopulation continue to rage across sustainability circles.

His provocative book *Population 10 Billion* argued that the root causes of our various crises don't flow from the sheer numbers of people alive. They flow from the inequalities that exist between them. Published around the same time as Stephen Emmott's contrary *Ten Billion* (which bluntly argued that the outlook for humanity is bleak), Dorling's work runs refreshingly counter to the misanthropy that often hangs over this debate.

"We could easily have a population of 1 billion on the planet and burn it up," he tells me. "We could also potentially have 12, 13, 14 billion – I hope not, but we could – and have a very sustainable human population. But you can't with high levels of inequality."

His thinking around demography and population growth is even optimistic enough to accommodate the idea of some positive outcomes for Nature. As higher-density urban living becomes more necessary and can possibly be

made more attractive, he argues, vast areas of land might be given back over to genuine wilderness. It's typical of his resistance to fatalism.

Population is not Dorling's primary concern. He's worried about inequality – and it's the primary subject of many of his most influential works, from *Injustice* to *Inequality and the 1%*. Not only does he see rampant inequality across economies and societies as unjust, but he also suggests that it's a primary driver of the climate crisis.

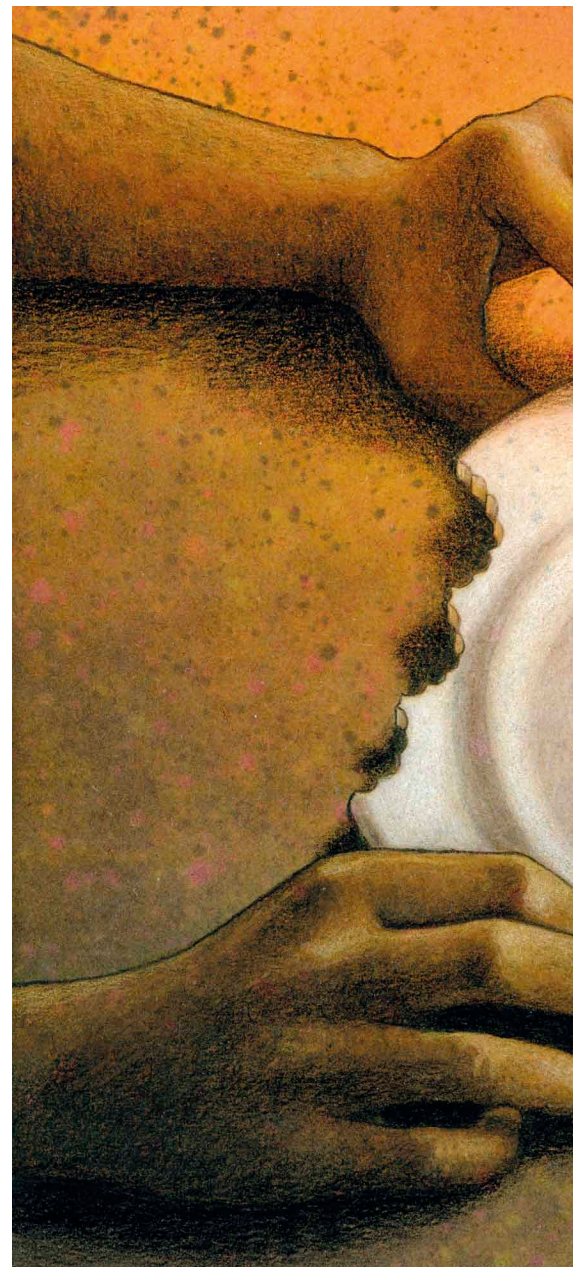
"It annoys me that people obsess around population numbers, and nobody does the really obvious thing and ask, who is trying to get people to buy all these things we don't need" he says, exasperated.

At this point, it's worth bearing in mind some facts it can be easy to forget in the UK, such as that 90% of people have never been on an aeroplane. Or that the richest 1% of people have 50% of all wealth, while the poorest 50% of people have access to only 1% of all wealth.

With the majority of consumption and carbon emissions driven by a tiny global elite, it becomes harder to believe that the population growth of people living in extreme poverty is our biggest environmental challenge. This seems especially true when almost all countries are now barely even hitting replacement level.

Population is stabilising. Inequality is the real problem.

"If we don't reduce the inequalities in the world and in our individual societies,"



Dorling warns, "we are not going to slow down the rate of burning and the rate of pollution. You don't have to worry about the exactitude of whether 2 degrees (Celsius), or 4 degrees is bad. Unless we reduce inequality we're going way up to 6 degrees and beyond. And it's so obvious that we don't want to go there."

For Dorling, the wider inequality gets, the more we drive consumption. This results in corporations that end up needing to sell two mobile phones per person instead of one, to sustain a business model that demands relentless expansion: growth without endpoint or purpose. This has repercussions throughout society.

"What happens in a very unequal

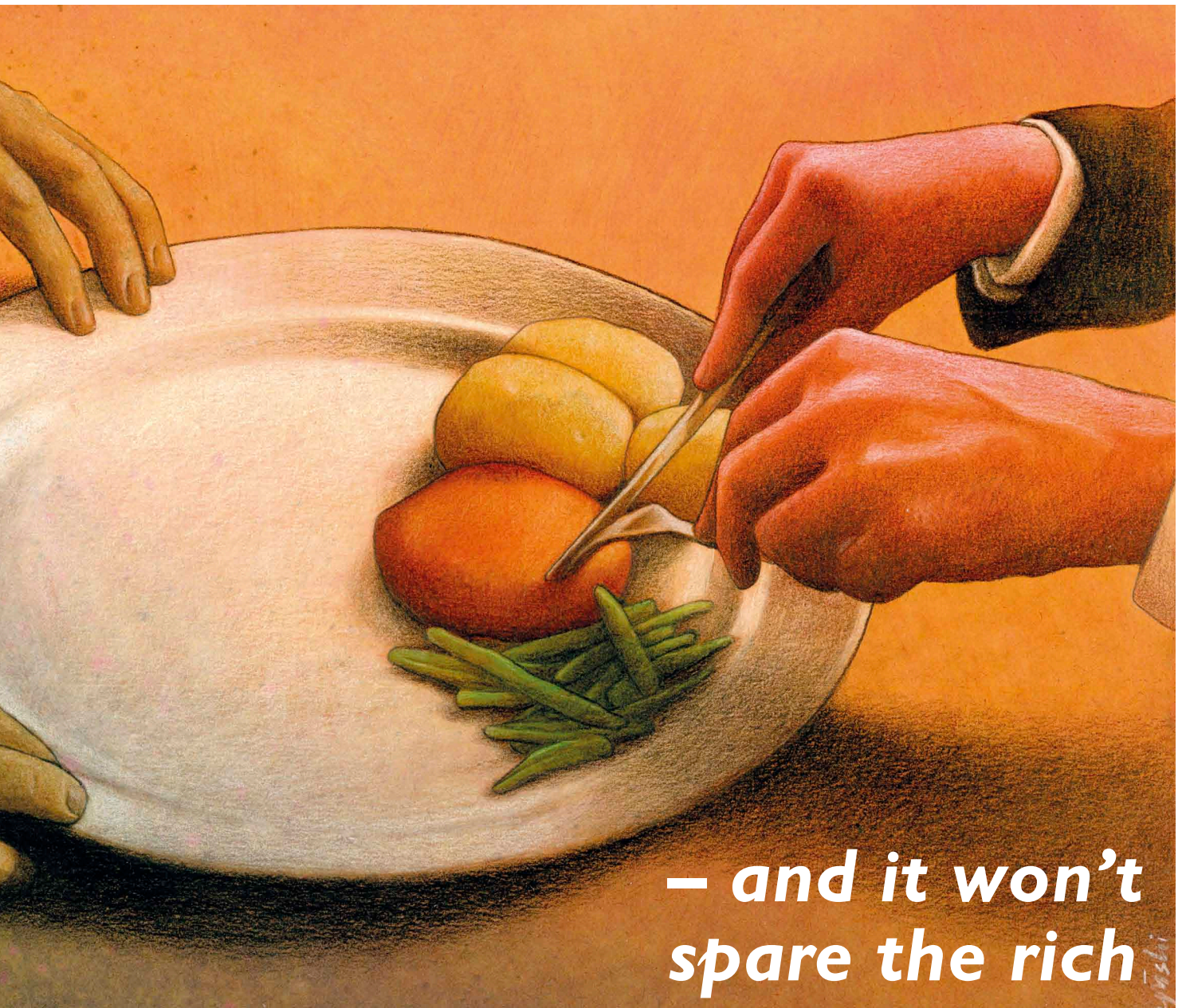


Illustration by Pawel Kuczynski www.pawelkuczynski.com

world is that people start to get expectations to do things and behave in ways that don't actually even make them happy," he explains. "And it's perfectly natural to think: if someone else can do this, why shouldn't I? It looks nice to drive a car, so why should I use the train or a bus?"

He adds: "These unequal societies produce an enormous amount of energy at the top of those societies to make money. Just to make the richest even richer."

This link between inequality and climate change seems clear, but it strikes me that they are related in a second way. Not only does any solution to the climate crisis demand greater socioeconomic equality: we might also be living through our last chance to do it.

Disasters like the displacement of billions and chronic food shortages don't feel to me like the ideal backdrops to more egalitarian politics. Happily, Dorling is more optimistic.

"I can't see why climate change should increase or decrease inequality on its own," he admits, to my surprise. "We think that the places it will affect most will be the global South because people are living precariously there. However, they're also more resilient in not requiring such a sophisticated infrastructure as we do. If the North Atlantic Oscillation ends because we suddenly have melting of sea ice, and the Gulf Stream stops – unlikely, but possible – we'll have to think about how

to evacuate the UK. That's a possible sudden event that would dramatically affect this extremely rich country. We'd have to find countries willing to take us as refugees. Would France or Germany take us?" he asks with an ironic smile.

I take his point that some of the worst effects of climate change could – at a stretch – hit prosperous areas earlier than developing countries. But surely such existential threats will cause existing inequalities to lock into place, the gulf between 1% and the 99% widening to an unthinkable degree as the privileged do all they can to preserve a workable way of life?

"That's the *Blade Runner* future," Dorling replies. "The reason it might

THE SIGNS OF INEQUALITY

Inequality is one of the most pressing social justice issues of our time. We now live in a world where the 62 richest people have as much wealth as half of the rest of the world combined, *Russell Warfield writes*.

If you want to see examples of this injustice, the UK is the perfect place to start. Under the austerity and neoliberalism of our current economic policies, we now see the top 10% richest households holding over 70% of all wealth.

The result is that we see inequality across nearly all areas of life in the UK.

Income and poverty

“The UK has the highest rate of economic inequality in Europe,” Danny Dorling says. “The best-off 10% use of 28% of all income. In no other large European country do they take as much. In the more equitable countries of Europe the poor are paid enough in wages or their benefits are sufficient that they do not need to resort to food banks.”

The recent return of the food bank is arguably the most striking example of modern inequality in Britain. In 2009, the Trussell Trust – one of the UK’s foremost networks of food banks – gave just over 25,000 people three-day emergency food parcels. In 2015, they helped over a million people.

Race and gender

Campaign groups like Sisters Uncut highlight how current economic policies don’t just drive inequality – they often hit the most vulnerable groups in society the hardest.

“Only around a quarter of the best-off 1% in the UK are women,” Dorling explains. “On the other hand, the majority of the poor are women, and women have been most affected by the cuts and austerity.”

“The picture by ethnicity is more complex,” he continues. “Disproportionate numbers of people in the poorest quarter of British society are not white, but there are disproportionate numbers of ethnic minorities in the best-off 10%, too.”

Housing

Since British governments started selling off public housing to private landlords without building new council houses, we’ve seen the emergence of what has come to be known as “Generation Rent”.

“The housing crisis in the UK is fundamentally a crisis of not distributing housing well,” Dorling argues. “An increasing proportion of our homes are under-used and empty because of growing inequalities. We had more bedrooms per person in the UK in 2011 than in 2001. There is not a lack of supply, but people do become too concentrated where the wealthiest now live.”

Education

Education to university level used to be provided without the burden of debt. Today, tuition fees have risen to £9,000, with maintenance grants being totally scrapped.

This means that the poorest in society can graduate with the most debt – up to £53,000 for most undergraduate courses.

Dorling observes that the UK, “and especially England (but also Edinburgh), has an education system that is more segregated than is found elsewhere in the affluent world. Such segregation is only affordable because economic inequalities are so high. The private school system is the peak of the segregation, but it continues throughout the state system.”

not happen is that it can only work for a fraction of the 1% – the very richest of the richest. And they’d have to be unprecedentedly devious and well-coordinated to make that happen.”

Dorling is suspicious of any attempts to see projections of the future as inevitable, especially when humans seem to have an innate capacity to assume the worst. But he’s not a deluded optimist. He fully recognises the gravity of the threat, especially in an increasingly globalised and therefore fragile world.

“What we’re trying now is on a single planetary scale, so we can’t afford to fail in a way that we could with past attempts to settle into separate villages,” he explains. “It is scary.” And most frightening of all? “There are people who still think we can carry on expanding – that we can just go out into space, and that capitalism can continue. It’s so ridiculous.”

It might be ridiculous, but some genuinely think it’s more plausible to desert a wrecked planet on spaceships than it is to reorganise economies. In a capitalist discourse of such hubris, Dorling’s call for equality is a comfortingly measured voice, especially when we’re faced with the existential threat of climate change.

“I think we’re likely to survive this one,” he assures me, but it’s not permission for complacency. His optimism is balanced by a deeper pessimism.

“The worry”, he says, “is that there will be something else. Something we haven’t thought of yet.”

Nobody worried about totalitarianism before it happened, he suggests by way of example. And nobody worried about nuclear war during totalitarianism. Who can say – or even speculate – what humanity will have to confront in the decades to come?

For better or worse, the future remains unwritten, and nothing is inevitable. Danny Dorling’s glass is neither half full nor half empty. It hasn’t been poured yet. In the meantime, we’d do well to concentrate on reducing inequality if we want to best prepare for whatever might be coming next. **R**

Danny Dorling’s latest book, *A Better Politics*, is available in a free digital edition at www.dannydorling.org/books/betterpolitics/



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