

Dorling, D., 2010, Are the times changing back? There are painful similarities between life lived in London now and the unjust inequalities of Victorian times, *New London Review*, July, 2, 16-17. (This text is as submitted, not the first two figures, which are on the internet (website addresses given here, could not be included due to copyright on the printed version))

Are the times changing back?

There are painful similarities between life lived in London now and the unjust inequalities of Victorian times

Danny Dorling

London viewed from the South

Tourists visiting Covent Garden are often drawn to Christopher Roger's stall at Jubilee market. Among much else which is eye catching he sells panoramic views of London drawn from a vantage point located somewhere in the sky just south of the river. Hovering over Lambeth and looking North, London's iconic buildings are spread out: from parliament in the west to the Gherkin in the East, from the globe theatre in the foreground to Hampstead hill in the distance, all the opulence of the Capital is on display.

Images such as this sell, but they cut out most of London, and of the country beyond. The south and east of London is cropped from the frame. The great buildings of state, of finance, the churches and towers, block out views of the people and their homes, of commuters, of maisonettes, of children and of markets. In images such as Roger's "London Looking North" the land south of the river appears laid out to service the heart of the Capital. Bridges, roads and rail cross the Thames like so many tangled arteries bringing sustenance to the city and square mile.

London Looking North by Christopher Rogers, 2004



Source: <http://www.jigsawpuzzlesworld.com/jigsawpuzzle.php?refnum=G830>

London is a city of contrasts, not the smooth working concert it can appear from the air. From high enough up you can no longer see the people and the whole appears like a machine. Delve down into the lives of Londoners and it becomes clear that all is not flowing so smoothly. Using their own words Peter Hall tells a thousand tales of Londoners in his collection on “London Voices, London Lives: Tales from a Working Capital”. With thousands of numbers (rather than own accounts) John Hills and his enquiry achieved the same, earlier this year. It was the Hills Enquiry which released the statistics which show that London is one of the most divided of rich cities on the face of the planet.

Nationally across England the richest tenth of adults have recourse to 96 times the wealth of the poorest tenth. In London that ratio is now 273 times. A tenth of Londoners *each* have wealth estimated, on average, to exceed £933,563, in contrast to the assets of the richest from the bottom tenth of Londoners, which equate to, at most, £3,420. A small part of that inequality is due to older Londoners usually being a little wealthier, but even if you just compare the citizens of the Capital of the same ages, 55 to 64 year olds say, the poorest of the best-off tenth in their middle age in London (now with £1,653,191 on average) are still, on average, *126 times richer each* than is the richest of the poorest tenth who have recourse to only (at best) assets of £13,113 in their old age. No wonder Londoners are so split politically.

These rich and poor people in London are of the same age when counted in calendar years, each aged around 60, but the rich each have more than twice as long left to live than the poor so great are inequalities in life expectancy in London. The rich will get to vote in half a dozen more general elections on average, the poor in just a couple more if lucky. A large part of the wealth of the richest tenth of Londoners by age 60 is tied up in pension rights and housing equity, but that is real wealth. It means that they will live into old age in comfort and can retire away from the capital should they wish, selling their home to finance the move. Equity and pensions are real wealth.

In many ways Londoners are again living lives again as unequal as they last did when Dickens published *Hard Times* in 1854, just as cholera was breaking out around Broad Street. The major difference today is the sewer system which makes everybody much better off materially. However psychologically gross inequality still harms us all. Murder rates have return again to levels last reordered in Victorian times (when it was legal to carry arms). Violent crime might have fallen a fraction in recent years but our fear and mistrust of one another is again palpable. Panoramic views of London were as popular in Victorian times as they are today. J.H. Banks drew his famous areal view in 1845 from somewhere just above Southwark. The main visual differences between then and now are the smokestacks and great sailing ships of the past, now replaced by skyscrapers.

The greatest social difference between now and the Victorian era is that the super-rich are today so much more opulent. Of the richest 1000 people in Britain, most live in or near London. In the year to 2010 the Sunday Times reported their individual wealth to have each risen, on average, faster than ever recorded before, by £77million a piece, totalling some £335.5billion shared out amongst just 1000 individuals. Most of the poor no longer go hungry, but they exist as far beneath the sight and understanding of the wealthy as they ever did.

A panoramic view of London. Drawn and engraved by J.H.Banks, 1845



Source: British Library. See: <http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/images/maps/large14281.html>

It is not just in terms of murder rates, wealth inequalities or panoramic picture popularity, that the view of London from the South again appears so similar to that shown so long ago. Just as Charles Dickens advocated change through his writing and other Londoners mapped poverty and agitated for change so successfully in the century that followed him, so too today there is growing agitation. There are again a huge number books on inequality, surveys of poverty, and newspaper columns written in anger.

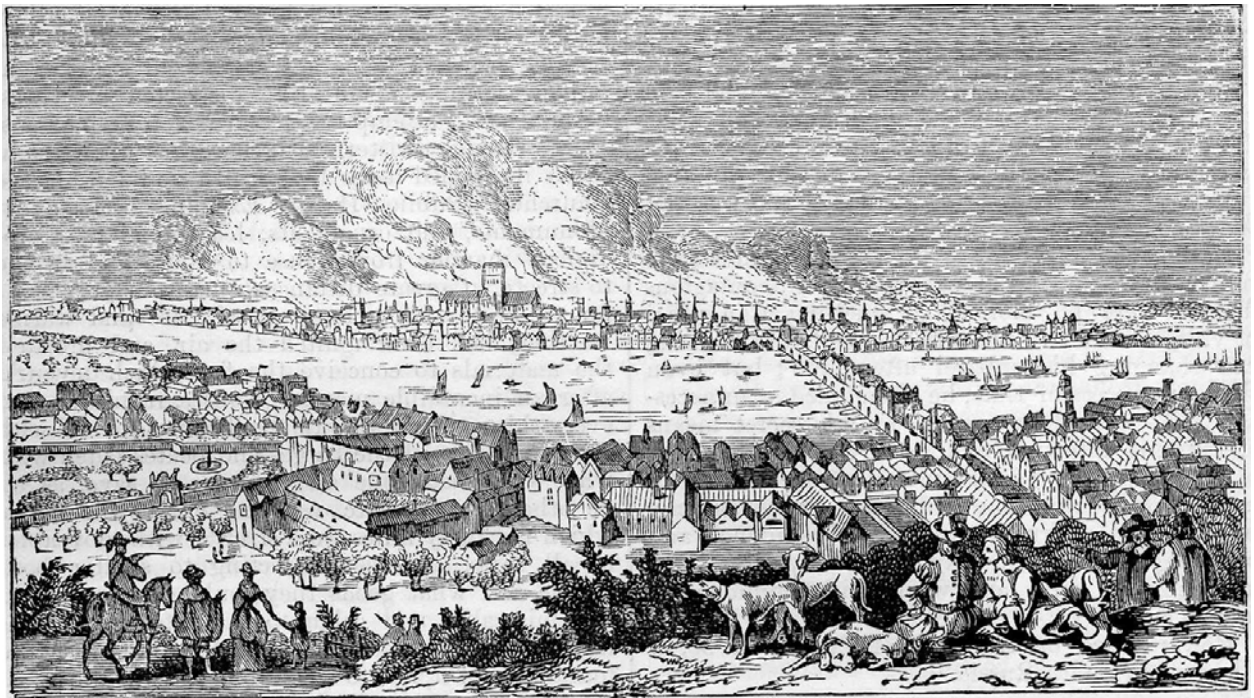
In 2010 the London Sustainable Development Commission commissioned Professors Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett to write on the modern day “Impact of income inequalities on sustainable development in London”. Their report was published in March. They produced an overall index of health and social problems for all London boroughs. At the head of that index were Southwark and Lambeth. What Richard and Kate then went on to do was to show how these problems might be reduced if income inequalities in London were reduced to the levels normal in an affluent country, levels experienced by countries such as France and Canada which do allow 1000 people to individually hold \$335.5bn of the national wealth).

The Report also calculated what the effects of a fairer society would be on a borough such as Lambeth. It found that rates of mental illness in Lambeth should be expected to more than halve if London were to become *only as unequal as the average rich city*

in the world. Obesity rates should be expected to reduce by more than a third; teenage pregnancies by more than two thirds (to only be a third of their current rate). These are huge improvements to life in south London. You may well doubt they are possible, if so why not read their report?. It is available for free to read here: <http://www.londonsdc.org.uk/lscd/research.aspx>

The Report was commissioned by a body whose chair was appointed by Boris Johnson – you are living in remarkable times; wealth and health inequalities are spiralling out of control and even Boris knows it and is concerned. Go back just another century and a half or so from 1854 and the view from South London was even more remarkable. In 1666 people sat on hillsides on the south and watched as the smoke from the Great fire drifted off to the West. How we currently live never remains the same for that long. Change is sometimes rapid, but often harder to see when it is gradual. For almost four decades the lives of Londoners have been becoming more divided. That trend could be changing direction again today. Where would you look to finance a national structural deficit of £70bn or more if you were looking from south of the river? What would your eyes alight on?

The Great Fire of London viewed from South of the River, contemporary to 1666



http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:GreatFireOfLondon1666_VictorianEngravingAfterVisscher300dpi.jpg