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Our grandchildren will wonder why we are addicted to social inequality

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WHAT would be your list of the most damaging social evils in Britain today and how would you explain their survival?

Many writers and commentators have tried to answer this question over the decades since an answer was first offered by William Beveridge in 1942. In recent years, the general public has also been asked what they think, many more times than they have ever been asked before. The result is that you end up with many long lists of evils.

I thought these lists might be a good place to start when writing a book I have called *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists*, which attempts to explain why inequalities are allowed to rise, even having reached in some cases their highest recorded levels for almost 80 years, notably in terms of our income, health, wealth and also voting inequalities.

What I found was that almost all the entries in almost all the lists could be put into various boxes.

By comparing how the lists changed over time, I have been able to see how the nature of each social evil has changed. What began to emerge, for me at least, was a picture of how each old social evil has transformed into something often very different but equally as damaging in terms of maintaining inequality and hence injustice. So, as the social evils identified by Beveridge at the dawn of the British welfare state (ignorance, want, idleness, squalor and disease) are gradually being eradicated, social injustices are now being recreated, renewed and supported by new sets of unjust beliefs.

Most troubling is the realisation that people, especially powerful people in the most unequal of countries in the rich world – top of this list is the United States and the United Kingdom – don't appear to see their great levels of inequality as particularly problematic, despite the evidence.

Indeed, have some of us also become weaned on to the idea that inequalities are good, as evidence of successful competition, as the unavoidable result of a survival of the fittest?

Are the mental habits that perpetuate inequality much harder to kick in some places and times than others?

Does living in a nation that has become adjusted to high levels of unfairness make inequalities appear more acceptable; inequalities which would not be accepted now elsewhere?

What is also interesting is why the most unequal countries of the rich world don't express any sustained wish to have their levels of social inequality reduced, say to the average levels enjoyed by the rest of the world's richest 25 countries.

In the rest of the rich world, people live longer, consume and pollute less, appear happier when surveyed, experience less crime, trust each other more, stay together more often in families, live longer and healthier lives, invent more things, recycle more, eat less meat, have more stable economies, take fewer drugs and drink less and so on and on. Even the trains run on time more often!

People in the most unequal of affluent countries are not especially stupid, although we do worse at school on average than children of the other 21 rich nations. So, why don't we notice? Why don't we accept that greater equality brought about by curtailing the excesses at the top would help us all?

A good place to start in trying to answer this question and where I started in writing is with the answers people living in these most unequal countries themselves give when they are asked what is most wrong.

All of the new social evils are arguments for maintaining and increasing inequality. They are, I claim, what keep us addicted to inequality.

Some people used to say that smoking was good for the constitution. It helped you develop a "productive cough", cleared out the lungs. There are still people today who say that inequality is good, it rewards merit, encourages competition and fosters growth and consumption – these are in effect the "productive coughs" of 21st century society.

And, just as there were lobbyists paid to argue for tobacco long after most people came to agree it was harmful, so too are there lobbyists today who are paid to argue for injustice and call it "freedom" by those who can see a short-term gain in bolstering inequality.

Had you told someone in 1942 that there would come a day when smoking was banned in all public buildings, they might well not have believed you. If you are told today that within your lifetime you could see social inequalities greatly reduced and the health and well-being of the population greatly increase as a result, would you believe it?

Will our grandchildren ever understand why some people equate inequality with freedom?

- Danny Dorling is professor of human geography at Sheffield University. His latest book *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists* was published yesterday.