

Dorling, D. and Steen, J. J. (2012) Welcome to the new value match, Velkommen til den nye værdikamp, Information Denmark, 13th March, <http://www.information.dk/295979> (automated translation lighted edited)

Welcome to the new value match

The (Danish) government went to the polls claiming it would promote greater equality. Now it's ambitions are drowning in the economic crisis. But the struggle against inequality is determined not only by dollars and cents. It is just as much about struggling against the norms and attitudes that re used to justify inequality.



We see people like Malou Stella from 'The young mothers' as helpless and perceive their situation as self-selected. This example recently, was used to rubber-stamp acceptance of social inequality,

Photo: Jonas Vandall Ørtvig / Scanpix

It was with grand gestures and visions of a different policy, that the newly elected government in September last year declared war on rising inequality. Government parties even proclaimed that they should be measured on their ability to reduce inequality - in the government platform it was stated confidently:

"Denmark is known as a country where there are relatively few poor, and where there are large social and economic divide ... The Government is committed to reducing inequality. The government will be assessed by its success in reducing poverty and in ensuring genuine equality of opportunity. "

Although the government began well by first eliminating the so-called poverty benefits and decided to carry a predominantly sensible anticipatory pension reform, it nonetheless reduced its ambitions drastically. Here, a half year into its reign, it has already refused to be measured by the evolution of Gini coefficient. It has accepted that inequality may have to rise. The excuse is the economic challenges. As a result recently it has become much harder to regain the showdown with the inequality that was in the government's political project

Poor excuse

But the economic pressures should not be an excuse to abandon a confrontation with inequality. If you want to win the fight, the weapons are not only dollars and cents, betting pools, cash assistance, social economy enterprises and redistribution. It is also about understanding the inequality anatomy and survivability. Doing so, one quickly realizes that the fight must be deployed against a range of values and norms that maintain inequality. The exercise can be

described in a paraphrase of an old Labour slogan: one must be "tough on inequality and tough on the causes of inequality '.

It is our current fate, not naturally given or eternally valid, that we live in an unequal and unjust world. However, there is talk about a modern and temporary construction that is beginning not defend and even promote inequality.

What seemed fair and normal yesterday will often be judged as unfair in the morning. Slavery was a matter of course 250 years ago. Democratic exclusion of women was naturally permitted until they were given the vote in 1915. And the right to beat your own children was only finally abolished in Denmark 1997. Our perception of justice and inequality condition our ability and opportunity to do away with it.

To understand the survivability of inequality, we need to address social inequality's five faces: elitism, exclusion, prejudice, greed and despair. These are the five basic categories that uphold the fundamental inequalities in affluent Western societies.

Effective elite

The basic idea is that elites are more efficient and more valuable than all the others. We cultivate the people who we say have the highest IQ, those who are admitted to the Niels Brock's elite high school, or are entering an international Ivy League university. We salute the following Penkowa'er and the great Nobel laureates. The ideal is to create efficient super-humans who can survive without help from others.

It helps to maintain inequality, for (it is said by those who promote inequality) why should the more valuable not have more benefits than the less cherished?

The way forward is not to deny diversity and individuality. But it is crucial that we recognize that even the elite are dependent on the community.

Required Exclusion

Being excluded from society is today usually defined as economic exclusion from taking holidays, sending children on a school trip or being able to buy Christmas presents. So it is not about extreme poverty, but that some are excluded by the community due to their lack of economic status.

This type of exclusion rubber is stamped regularly throughout our lives and days, so we finally (wrongly) perceive it as both fair and useful. It's the usual argument for the pay gap between managers and shop floor – an excellent example.

While the Danish managers in C20-held companies enjoyed salary increases of 13 per cent in 2011, the wage earners in the industry had to settle for an increase of 1.26 per cent in 2012. The difference is justified by the notion that the employees are not working hard enough. That allows those who make the decision to contrast these two groups are being very different people. This presents exclusion of people from society and promoting inequality as just tools to help get the lazy out of bed.

Prejudice and greed

Prejudice is based on notions of 'them' and 'us'. 'You' is not only reserved for 'the strangers' - is alluded as often to "those who do not deserve."

Thus emerges a new form of racism. The Danish recently amused themselves on teenage mothers in "the young mothers" and those indebted in Luxury Trap. They see them as helpless and perceive their situation as a self-chosen. They live by a Darwinian ideal, where the perception is that all those who suffer deprivation makes for lack of ability. Therefore, our prejudices are somehow fair. Therefore, inequality appears to be acceptable and natural.

Greed is another of the faces of inequality. Greed was really an ideal, with the memorable slogan "greed is good" emanating from the movie 'Wall Street' about the ruthless speculator Gordon Gekko. What should have been a frightening figure in a Hollywood film, was instead an ideal in the real world. Success is measured no longer in diligence and creativity, but only in the size of your bonus. Peter Straarup reaps a lifetime golden handshake of 67 million dollars for his miserable effort in the Danish Bank. This is only one among a very large number of examples.

Inevitable despair

Increased greed and material success has never been a shortcuts to happiness. Elitism and exclusion have a price that often comes in the form of despair. Fear, mistrust, fear, mistrust and a feeling of not living up to the requirements creates despair or mental illness. It is accepted that mental illness already affects 1.5 million Danes, as a condition of modern life. It is all too often apparently solved with psychotropic drugs without us questioning the structures that create the challenge.

Inequality's five faces strikes tend not to strike different people and places at the same time or in the same way, but they are all part of the history of the evolution of the western world. It's a story that does not represent the status quo, but rather characterizes a development that has only been noticed since 1970, and in many ways has been a negative development for many places made more similar as a result.

Until the 1970s, real wages, the rich's share of total income decreased. Since there have been several prisoners, more indebted and still retaining massive difference in the newer areas such as health inequality and culture.

Left value match

There have always existed ideals or values, which include elitism, exclusion, prejudice, greed and despair. And the confrontation with them does not mean that we should strive for the overall similarity or commit a race to the bottom where we are continually striving downwards.

The point is that we must challenge the standards, because they shape our perception of what we 'know' and what we 'should' strive for.

Even in a relatively short time it can actually be done to move the standard of what we think is acceptable. In 1987, a majority of Americans believed that teachers should be fired if they were homosexual, and two thirds believed that women should return to the kitchen. In 2007 only a third believed that teachers should be dismissed, and the clear majority backed the liberation of women.

Over time, economic inequality being promoted as good is a mind-set that is being replaced with other values and beliefs. Just as we no longer perceive slavery

or illiteracy as natural and acceptable, it is possible that the current inequality-creating value with time will become unacceptable. The foundation for solving our current crisis of promoting economic inequality as good is just to acknowledge the problem, not to excuse it as inevitable, or – worse still – as desirable.

The confrontation with the current high levels of inequality experienced in many affluent nations is also about changing the current values in the direction we want the world to move in.

It is time that the Danish left-wing challenged the established ideals and did away with the myths of the lazy unemployed and unworthy drains on public assistance. It's time to put into question the elitist super-humans' credentials and diligent bank managers' supposedly great abilities. These tend to be the kind of performances which only increases inequality.

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