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All in the mind? Why social inequalities persist

Danny Dorling suggests that as old 'social evils' have largely been overcome in affluent nations, in one of the most unequal of those countries – Britain – they have transformed into five new tenets of injustice. A continued belief in those tenets both maintains and helps to exacerbate social inequality

My maternal grandfather was born in 1916, in an era so different from today that women were not permitted to vote. Last year I asked him about the 1929 crash and what life was like for a teenager growing up in Yorkshire in the 1930s. I talked to him about jobs and he said, “You’d know if it were as bad again because – almost no matter what your qualifications – you’d be grateful to take any job.”

For many people in Britain today, especially young adults not living with children, their current experiences and my grandfather’s recollections are not so far apart. However, in other ways social evils today have changed almost beyond recognition. Yet there are some uncanny echoes with prejudices of the past in how we now think and in how we stall at progress.

In 1942, when my grandfather was 26 years old, William Beveridge labelled the great social evils as ignorance, want, idleness, squalor and disease. I would claim that now those five evils have been fought and largely vanquished, to be replaced by five *new* evils: elitism, exclusion, prejudice, greed and despair. These result today in one in seven children being labelled the equivalent of ‘delinquent’ and a sixth of households being excluded from modern social norms. These norms include being able to afford a holiday once a year: poverty surveys now find that a sixth of households say they cannot afford to take a holiday and are living on low income.

One in five adults now routinely report, when asked about their circumstances, that they are finding it ‘difficult or very difficult’ to get by. This was the proportion reported

before the economic crash. Similarly, a quarter report not having the essentials, such as a car if you have young children, even though (if resources were just a little better shared out) there is enough for all. A third now live in families where someone is suffering from mental ill health. The fraction that ends this series of statistics concerns people's ability to choose alternative ways of living and how limited those choices are: half are sufficiently disenfranchised that they choose not to vote at most elections¹.

In the United States almost half of all those old enough to vote either choose not to or are barred from doing so. Local elections have been held in Britain in recent years where, at the extreme, less than a tenth of the electorate chose to vote.

The greatest indictment of unequal affluent societies is for their people to be, in effect, disenfranchised, to think they can make no difference, to feel that they are powerless in the face of an apparent conspiracy of the rich or what might simply be called 'circumstance'. Apathy has increased as we all become distracted by trying to make a living, lulled into a false sense of comfort through consuming to maintain modern lives. In the space of under 100 years we have gone from successfully fighting for the right for women to vote, to around half the population in the most unequal of affluent countries not exercising that right.

No conspiracy of the rich

There has not been any great, well-orchestrated conspiracy of the rich to support the endurance of inequality, just a few schools of free-market thought, a few think tanks preaching stories about how efficient free market mechanisms are, how we must allow the few 'tall poppies' to grow and suggesting that a minority of 'wealth creators' exist and it is they who somehow 'create' wealth.

That there is no great conspiracy was first realised in the aftermath of the First World War, when it became clear that no one '... planned for this sort of an abattoir, for a mutual massacre four years long' (Bauman 2008: 6). The men they called the 'donkeys', the generals, planned for a short, sharp, war.

Today, those who think they run the economy, from Thatcher to Brown, all believed that growth accompanied by trickle-down economics, variously aided, would reduce inequality. There is no orchestrated conspiracy to prolong injustice. If there were, injustice would be easier to identify and defeat.

¹ See Dorling (2010) for the statistics, the sources they are drawn from and the arguments made behind these claims, as well as a much fuller version of this argument. See also http://sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/publications/2010/Dorling_2010_SocialInjusticeStatistics.ppt and the downloadable spreadsheets at <http://www.policypress.co.uk/> (search for 'injustice').

In June 2009 the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published the results of its major consultation 'What are today's social evils?'. This produced lists that included greed, consumerism and individualism as new evils and talked about erosion of trust and growth of fear (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2009), but the consultation did not delve into the factors that might underlie these changes.

I think it is more clear today than (even one year ago) that unjust thoughts and ideologies of inequality have seeped into everyday thinking from the practices that make the most profit. Once only a few argued that hunger should be used as a weapon against the poor. Now many grumble when inconvenienced by a strike, label those requiring state benefits 'scroungers', but hope to inherit money or to win fame.

The evolution of injustice

It is not just that greed and individualism have risen: the nature of injustice appears to have evolved from the former five giant evils to five quite different looking modern evils. I would suggest we call these: elitism, exclusion, prejudice, greed and despair. They all reflect the way that today too many people favour arguments that actually bolster contemporary injustices in rich nations because they do not recognise the transformed injustice for what it is. But humans are far from being simply the pliant recipients of the seeds of social change they sow. Hardly any foresaw what they would reap as side effects of affluence, and great numbers are now working optimistically in concert to try to counteract those effects.

My contention is that in their modern form social evils suggest that elitism is efficient, exclusion is necessary, prejudice is natural, greed is good and despair is inevitable. These tenets are most strongly adhered to by those on the right, but many weaker forms underlie much thinking in the centre and left, among parts of the green movement and are found within other otherwise progressive forces. It is belief in these new tenets that leads those in power to talk of people only being able to achieve up to their 'potential' (resulting in elitism).

Unjust beliefs that others are different, have different needs and deserts, can result in relative benefit payment levels being kept low. As compared to median wages, benefit levels of people not living with children have been lower under Gordon Brown than even under Thatcher (resulting in growing social exclusion for poor childless adults). A quiet tolerance of racist ideas of inherited difference has re-emerged (a new prejudice). There is a desperate continued clinging to the coat tails of greedy bankers, despite all we have seen during the financial crisis (resulting from greed, the new squalor). And a generally unquestioning acceptance of rising levels of mental illness, where the symptoms rather than the causes are addressed ('despair' rather than 'disease').

There is widespread and growing opposition to these five key unjust principles and the over-arching belief that so many should now be 'losers'. Most advocating injustice are now very careful with their words. However, it appears to me from reading a sample of 3

their words that the majority of those in power in almost all rich countries do still believe in most of these tenets. This is despite the fact that since late 2008 majorities among half a billion people in some of the richest countries in the world have successfully voted for more radical governments than have been seen in a generation. Elections in the US, Japan, Greece and Iceland have put politicians in power who were recently thought unelectable by a majority. It would be foolish to believe that further progressive lurches are not possible.

However, in Britain it would take change at the top of each of the main three political parties to make any of them progressive enough to begin to reverse the 31 year legacy of Thatcherism. What was full-blooded in the early 1980s is now muted in 2010, but, I argue, is still Thatcherism. What other word best encapsulates the public sector cuts currently being planned by all three main parties and the refrain being sung on concert that 'there is no alternative'? Why not make pay cuts across the board, even progressive pay cuts, in place of layoffs? Such things happened in the early 1930s to teachers, other public servants, and even to the police in Britain. They are happening in Ireland and Greece and have occurred in recent years in Japan. Britain probably has to become poorer. It is far less harmful to combine becoming poorer with becoming more equal than to distribute most of the pain of falling GDP onto those with the least and the rest of the burden on those living average lifestyles.

The central argument I am trying to make here is that unjust hegemonic beliefs are still held by enough of us for them to underlie injustice and to cloud our thinking so that what are seen as reasonable suggestions in other places or at other times are often not even made in Britain today. To ask what we do after we dispel enough of these beliefs to overcome injustice is rather like asking how to run plantations after abolishing slavery, or society after giving women the vote, or factories without child labour. The answers have tended to be: not very differently than before in most ways, but vitally different in others.

Dispelling the untruths that underlie the injustices we currently live with will not suddenly usher in utopia. A world in which far more people genuinely disapprove of elitism will still have elitism and something else will surely arise in place of what we currently assume is normal, as that 'normality' starts to look like crude, old-fashioned snobbery, as has happened so often before. Almost no one in an affluent country today bows and scrapes or otherwise tugs their forelock in the presence of their 'betters'.

What I have come to understand from others is that it is *in our minds* that injustice continues most strongly, in what we think is permissible, in how we think we exist, in whether we think we can use others in ways we would not wish to be used ourselves.

Rawls was wrong: inequality harms us all

All five faces of social inequality that currently contribute to injustice are clearly and closely linked. Elitism suggests that educational divisions are natural. Educational divisions are reflected in both children being excluded from life choices for being seen as not having enough qualifications, and in those able to exclude themselves, often by opting into private education. Elitism is the incubation chamber within which prejudice is fostered. Elitism provides a defence for greed. It increases anxiety and despair as endless examinations are undergone, as people are ranked, ordered and sorted. It perpetuates an enforced and inefficient hierarchy in our societies.

Just as elitism is integral to all the other forms of injustice, so is exclusion. The exclusion that rises with elitism makes the poor appear different, exacerbates inequalities between ethnic groups and, literally, causes racial differences. Rising greed could not be satisfied without the exclusion of so many, and so many would not be excluded now were it not for greed. But the consequences affect even those who appear most successfully greedy. The most excluded might be most likely to experience despair, but even the wealthy in rich countries are now more prone to such symptoms, as are their children (Dorling 2009). Growing incidence of depression and anxiety has become symptomatic of living in our more unequal affluent societies.

The prejudice that rises with exclusion allows the most greedy to try to justify their greed and makes others near the top think they deserve a lot more than most. The ostracism that such prejudice engenders further raises depression and anxiety in those made to look different. As elitism incubates exclusion, exclusion exacerbates prejudice, prejudice fosters greed, and greed – because wealth is simultaneously no ultimate reward and makes many without wealth feel more worthless – causes despair. In turn, despair prevents us from effectively tackling injustice.

Removing one symptom of the disease of inequality is no cure, but recognising inequality as the disease behind injustice, and seeing how all the forms of injustice that it creates, and that continuously recreate it, are intertwined is the first step that is so often advocated in the search for finding a solution (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). The status quo is not improved ‘by introducing an inequality that renders one or more persons better off and no one [apparently] worse off’ (Arneson 2009: 25).² The awarding of more elite qualifications to an already well titled minority reduces the social standing of the majority. Allowing those with more to have yet more raises social norms and reduces more people on the margins of those norms to poverty through

² The insertion of the word ‘apparently’ is all that is needed to begin the process of dismantling the logic of this well-known argument attributed originally to John Rawls.

exclusion. To imagine that others are, apparently, no worse off due to inequality requires a prejudicial view of others, to see them as ‘not like you’. This argument legitimises greed.

There is a danger that if Britain keeps its benefits so low (Job Seeker’s Allowance is just £9 a day) and allows unemployment to rise rather than reducing wages at the top, the country may start to look more like a backwater of social progress. Where social security is concerned, rights are already being rapidly curtailed: starting later in 2010, ‘clients’ will be compelled to undertake ‘meaningful activity’ after spending 12 months on Jobseeker’s Allowance. However, in other areas the outlook is more positive. For instance, a move away from elitism can be observed. The Government’s *Children’s Plan* (published in 2007 before the economic crash made change so obviously imperative) suggested that schools in England should aim for children to understand others, value diversity, apply and defend human rights and for staff to be skilled in ensuring participation for all: ‘[there should be] no barriers to access and participation in learning and to wider activities, and no variation between *outcomes* for different groups. [... Children should] have real and positive relationships with people from different backgrounds, and feel part of a community, at a local, national and international level’ (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2007: 73-4)³.

Less bound by elitism, the Welsh government’s advice to schools in 2006 was that they should encourage more play, as learning is about play and imagination. In Wales it is now officially recognised that children can be stretched rather than being seen as having a fixed potential; the Welsh government says that if children play just within their capabilities, they feel their capabilities extend as a result.

In Scotland the educational curriculum is similarly being redesigned, for learning to ensure the development of ‘... wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity’ (Shuayb and O’Donnell 2008: 22). All this for Britain is very new, and for England much of it is yet to come; but it may be a tipping point in the long-term trend of what people are willing to tolerate for their children’s futures.

³ It is my hope that the DSCF officials were deliberately rejecting the prejudicial beliefs that underlie arguments for ‘equality of opportunity’ – an ‘equality’ that assumes inherent inequality – by emphasising instead the word ‘outcomes’.

Conclusion – those to whom evil is done

In the British Government's Budget of spring 2009 taxes were raised so the rich would, if they earned over a certain limit, again pay half their surplus gains as tax. The House of Lords proposed an amendment that all companies should, by law, publish the ratio of the wages of their highest paid director or executive to the wages of the lowest paid tenth of their workforce⁴. And the new Equality Bill was introduced to Parliament, with Equalities Minister Harriet Harman stating that it was now the British government's understanding that inequality hurt everyone.

At the start of this century wage inequalities were 'higher than at any point since the Second World War and probably since representative statistics were first collected at the end of the nineteenth century...' (Machin 2003: 191). People in Britain thought little of this before the economic crash; they were told it did not matter; 'growth' would improve everyone's life. Big inequalities were viewed as natural. Key members of the Government said they were 'seriously relaxed'⁵ about the situation; inequality was not an issue for them. Religious leaders concerned themselves with the plight of the poor, not the size of the equality gap. The British had forgotten that for most of their recent history they had not lived like this.

Despair grew, greed spiralled, prejudice seeped in, more were excluded. The elite preached that there was no alternative, that their experts were so very able, that the 'little people' were safe in their hands, and that greed really was good⁶. Even when the economic crash came they said recovery would follow quickly and things would soon be back to normal. Many are still saying that as I write these words in March 2010. There is a general strike in Greece today. There have been small runs on the pound and even the Euro! In Ireland the unfair distribution of the struggle has resulted in more public protests. In Iceland over a quarter of the population petitioned to not pay the newly created national debt (to the UK and the Netherlands). Outside Sheffield Town Hall hundreds of people have just rallied against 1000 job cuts announced by the local council.

⁴ The Companies and Remuneration Bill had its third reading in the House of Lords on 13 July 2009 and then went for consideration to the Commons. Many of the Lords were more opposed to high rates of inequality than was the party who once represented the interests of the poorest of labouring commoners. There was little expectation that the Commons would accept the Bill and make it law. When Britain was last bankrupt, in 1945, the only secure and cheap way to provide security for all, including many of the affluent, and a health service for all, was to introduce a welfare state and National Health Service. Being less rich creates more possibilities.

⁵ They did add 'as long as they pay their taxes', but avoidance or evasion was allowed to continue to the equivalent of many multiples of benefit fraud.

⁶ 'It may not be pretty but, on the whole, greed is good.' (Peston 2008: 336)

In some ways we have been here before. In 1929 the stock market rallied several times, followed by massive unemployment in the US, and real falls in prices in Britain, which occurred again in 2009. The Government cut wages across the public sector by 10 per cent in the 1930s. Although we began to become more equal in wealth during that decade, inequalities in health peaked as those dying young fell disproportionately among the poorest. In many other newly rich countries, especially Germany, it was far worse. In his poem *September 1, 1939* W.H. Auden wrote:

‘I and the public know/ What all schoolchildren learn / Those to whom
evil is done / Do evil in return.’

The most unequal of rich countries were those most willing to go to war overseas 64 years on from 1939. More equitable nations are more likely to find it easier to refuse to join any supposed ‘coalition of the willing’, or make only paltry contributions to it. When injustice is promoted at home to maintain inequality, it also becomes easier to contemplate perpetrating wrongs abroad. In the richer countries social wounds caused by inequality have been plastered over by building more prisons, hiring more police and prescribing more drugs. But by 2007 it was becoming more widely recognised that rich countries could not simply allocate money to ease the symptoms of extreme inequality. There was much agreement that: ‘Extreme social inequality is associated with higher levels of mental ill health, drugs use, crime and family breakdown. Even high levels of public service investment, alone, cannot cope with the strain that places on our social fabric’ (O’Grady 2007: 62-3).

Inequality cannot keep on growing. But it will not end without the millions of tiny acts required in order that we no longer tolerate the greed, prejudice, exclusion and elitism that foster inequality and despair. Above all else these acts will require teaching and understanding, not forgetting once again what it is to be human: ‘The human condition is fundamentally social – every aspect of human function and behaviour is rooted in social life. The modern preoccupation with individuality – individual expression, individual achievement and individual freedom – is really just a fantasy, a form of self-delusion...’ (Burns 2007: 182). We need to realise that, and accept that none of us – including and especially our political leaders – is superhuman, but also that none is without significance. Everything it takes to defeat injustice lies in the mind. So what matters most is how we think.

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