

Dorling, D. (2024) Review of 'Wealth, Poverty and Enduring Inequality' by Sarah Kerr, 'Let's talk about wealth, baby', Jacobin, 27 October, <https://jacobin.com/2024/10/wealtherty-sarah-kerr-review-inequality>

# Let's Talk About Wealth, Baby

BY [DANNY DORLING](#)

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A new book examines the self-sustaining dynamic of extreme wealth and its political influence. Is it time to switch our focus from the problem of poverty to the problem posed by the rich?

Review of *Wealth, Poverty and Enduring Inequality: Let's Talk Wealtherty* by Sarah Kerr (Policy Press, 2024)

Introducing a new word into the English language is no easy task. A colleague of mine claims that a medical paper he coauthored years ago was the original source for the phrase “vanilla sex,” originally referring to sex unlikely to result in much calorie-reducing physical exercise.

While the definition of vanilla sex remains somewhat vague, “wealtherty,” by contrast, was clearly and thoroughly defined in the [2021 article](#) that was the prelude to Sarah Kerr’s 2024 book, *Wealth, Poverty and Enduring Inequality: Let’s Talk Wealtherty*:

I am proposing a pivot to a new articulation of the problem: wealtherty. Wealtherty is the state or condition of prosperity in abundance of possessions or riches, plus concomitant political power and influence, and resultant risks to the democratic process. This articulation assumes that the social (of social policy) is made up of richer and poorer people. It assumes that there is such a thing as morally and politically unjustifiable surplus wealth and that this wealth bleeds into socially damaging political influence. It assumes that the existence of surplus wealth in conditions of urgent unmet needs is intolerable. It assumes a set of restricted capabilities (such as media and political influence) that are usually only accessible to those with money and influence, and which, in their operation, can cause harm to others. Finally, transposing theories of privilege from race, wealtherty exists when this dynamic is self-sustaining and has made itself invisible – a form of wealth privilege, which makes it unlikely that beneficiaries of the system will be motivated to enact change.

In a few years, like vanilla sex, wealtherty might also find itself in common use — but that will depend on whether others begin to adopt the word. I think it might have been better had the book simply been titled *The Rich: Wealth, Poverty and Enduring Inequality*. But I could be wrong.

There are, of course, [many books](#) whose [titles](#) play on the phrase “the rich.” I own a few of them myself. The one I have enjoyed the most, George Kirstein’s *The Rich: Are They Different?*, was first published in 1968. I enjoyed it both because so much of what it says remains true today and because it shows that society’s critics managed to dislike the greed and duplicity of the wealthy at a time when their riches were at a historical low. By “low,” I mean the lowest in all of recorded world history.

One of the main differences between the wealthy of half a century ago and today is the shamelessness with which the wealthy now [boast about their filthy lucre](#). Conversely, Kirstein’s book noted that in the 1960s in the United States, “the rich dislike being set apart from the rest of society; they do not talk about their wealth, indeed they often deny possessing it; they are quite aware that their problems and concerns are laughable to the vast majority of their fellows.”

One of Sarah Kerr’s achievements in *Wealth, Poverty and Enduring Inequality* (*Wealtherty*, for short) is to illustrate that today’s rich are less self-aware — less conscious, more socially oblivious — than their equivalents were in the 1960s.

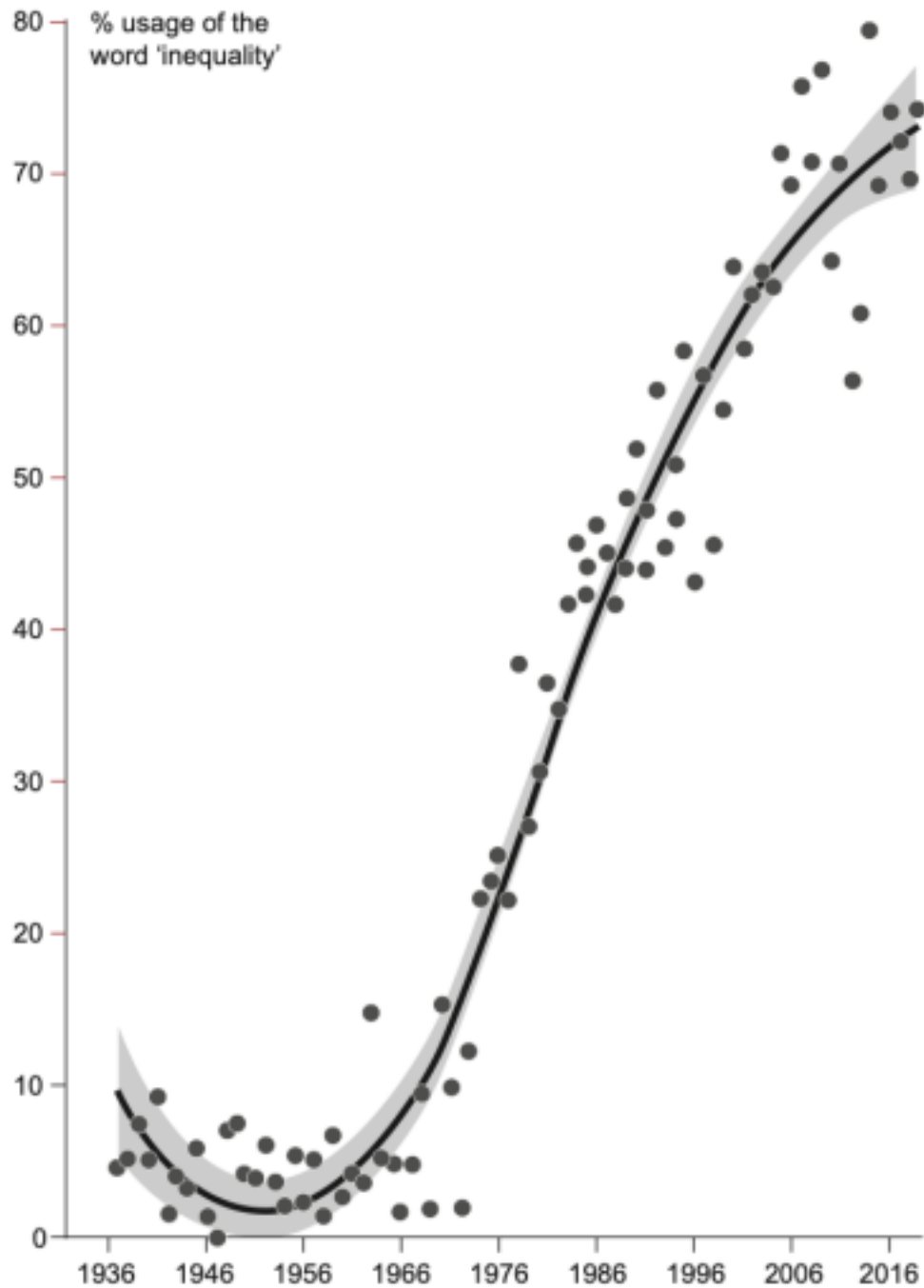
# The Wealth Problem

It's rare for an academic book to deliver on its promises, but this one largely does. Kerr defines her terms as clearly and concisely as possible and is quick to explain that the book "is normative (wants to change things) as much as sociological (interested in how and why things exist like they do) and there's little point wanting to change things, but then only talking to people who already know what you're talking about."

But why the subtitle, *Let's Talk Wealtherty*? The book's central argument is that poverty is no longer a helpful concept — it has outlived its usefulness. Our problem now is not the poor; it is the rich. Instead of looking down, we need to look up. We need to focus on the lived experience of the rich who cause harm and listen to what they have to say about why they do it. If we truly care about inequality and about poverty, we should have our eyes firmly focused on the rich — we should focus on the carriers of the disease, not the symptoms. As the graph I have provided here shows, drawn from a study originally reported only in grey literature, sociologists now understand that inequality matters. Kerr's claim is that the sociologists, and all of us, have not been paying enough attention to the rich.

## Frequency of mentions of inequality, American Sociological Review, 1936-2019

**Inequality in Sociology:** the % of articles using the word 'inequality' in the American Sociological Review, 1936-2019



Source: Turgut Keskintürk, Figure 1: Inequality in American Sociological Review, Sociology's Inequality Problem, Blog, 10 October 2023, <https://tkeskinturk.github.io/blog/inequality/>

Kerr opens with R. H. Tawney's 1931 statement on the "problem of riches" — "what thoughtful rich people call the problem of poverty, thoughtful poor people call with equal justice the problem of riches." Tawney's observation highlights the social and economic power structures that define how we think about wealth, which is a concept echoed in older activist academic statements that now seem obvious but were revolutionary in their time. For example, Karl Marx's 1852 remark about the events of November 9, 1799 — "*Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past*" — underscores how the structures of wealth and power are inherited from previous generations, constraining individual and collective action.

Whatever one thinks of the old Rhineland, his omission from Kerr's text is glaring, given Marx's centrality to discussions of wealth distribution. Most commentators make at least one nod in his direction. Yet there is only one brief reference to Marxist historians, dated 1975, and one mention of a book that touches on Marx, gender, and feminism.

# When Sociology Meets Fine Print

After a rollercoaster start, *Wealtherty* settles down into the very densest of literature reviews. Kerr makes sweeping claims about the need for a fundamental shift in the focus of British sociology, so it makes sense that she wants to demonstrate the thoroughness of her research. But only a few future PhD students will find the exhaustive list of sources useful — there are some thirty-nine sources cited on page fifteen alone. This isn't meant as criticism, just an observation: the small print is in your face, which may reassure some readers but put off others. Similarly, and in contrast with the dearth of Marx citations, the literature review features a heavy dose of Michel Foucault, with nine of his works cited throughout.

If we truly care about inequality and about poverty, we would have our eyes firmly focused on the rich.

While transparency about one's approach, understanding, and sources may be commendable, much of this earlier material might have been better suited to an appendix for the more curious readers to turn to if they wished. Some will likely give up by page twenty-two, after wading through dense paragraphs with lines such as, "Without wishing to overtheorize the Tōhaku image, the trees on the left might be considered to visualize

Savage’s understanding of duration.” These asides can be frustrating because there is much that is of great value in the book. A careful editor could have rearranged or trimmed some sections and suggested maintaining the engaging tone of the book’s beginning throughout.



The UK usually ranks as the most economically unequal country in Europe by income distribution. (Henry Nicholls / AFP via Getty Images)

Language matters, as *Wealtherty* explains at length. At times, though, especially in the sections on the history of wealth and poverty studies, I couldn’t help but feel the intended audience was almost entirely academic. However, by the time we get to part two, we dive into the story of recent British politics and the rise of think tanks designed to spread harmful ideas to provide cover for their rich masters — an excellent and engrossing account. But it did leave me wondering: Why did these groups find such success in Britain, compared to other European countries?



*Wealtherty* rarely steps beyond the small island of Britain, which is useful in some ways. It's satisfying to have concise biographies of some of the most hideous characters in all of recent British history collected together in one place. However, what's missing is an explanation of why these people were taken seriously in the first place. While their vicious, antisocial conduct is made clear, the book doesn't quite explain what made them that way and what made their ideas socially acceptable. For details on who these people are, you'll have to read the book yourself — it's worth it for the brilliant photographs, the diagrams, and portraits of the rich, which vividly capture their power over, and poorly disguised contempt for, others. This book provides brilliant insights into the current state of Britain — a very sad story.

## The Different Faces of Inequality

*Wealtherty* contains some international comparisons. One of the book's graphs shows curves from the 2018 *World Inequality Report*, which depict similar inequality trends in the United Kingdom and United States as in Spain, Japan, France, and Germany. But the way the wealthy use their power — and are permitted to be powerful — varies country to country. In some places, such as some parts of the UK, landowners might control

vast wealth, but others have rights to access and use their land for things such as hiking, requiring landlords to ensure safety and upkeep. This creates a different balance of power, even if the wealthy appear equally rich in monetary terms.

While the United States is now one of the most unequal countries in the rich world, it was far more equitable in terms of income and wealth in the 1960s.

Public wealth may have fallen in all the countries included in the *World Inequality Report* Kerr cites, but public spending has risen across the board — though less so in the United Kingdom and United States. More could have been made of these international comparisons, rather than simply suggesting that Britain's story is mirrored elsewhere. Interestingly, the latest *World Inequality Report* (2024) shows a sharp and sudden drop in the UK's top incomes derived from wealth holdings, a trend not seen elsewhere. We don't yet know why this is happening — or how accurate these findings are — but hopefully this book will be updated in a future second edition to address this very recent change.

Jumping to the conclusion, the book calls for defining extreme wealth as a social problem and debunking the myth that inequality can ever be benign. However, some of the proposed solutions, including reserving spots at elite universities for the

“top one or two pupils from every school” assumes that such top students exist in all schools and that maintaining a hierarchy among universities is a good idea.

On this score, *Wealtherty* itself could use some debunking. Schools don't contain inherent “top” students — only those elevated by the prevailing norms of the day.

Kerr's *Sociological Review* article, which this review opened with, concludes by calling for the rejection of “poverty as the articulation of our social problem *tout court* and move on.” The phrase “tout court” means with no addition, with no qualification — simply and completely. This may feel harsh, considering how hard British academics fought in the 1980s to reclaim the word “poverty” after it was effectively banned by Mrs Thatcher's government. Then again, her government would have loathed this book's focus on the rich — and it is a very much needed survey of their depredations.

As George Kirstein's 1968 book on the rich I mentioned earlier made clear, the rich are different from us because “they have *enough* money.” No individual needs more than what the

richest tenth of people had in the United States in 1968. While the United States is now one of the most unequal countries in the rich world, it was far more equitable in terms of income and wealth in the 1960s (though not in terms of race or gender). The UK, too, was much more equal then. Today it ranks as the most economically unequal country in Europe by income distribution, occasionally competing with Bulgaria for the top slot.

*Wealtherty* is especially timely in light of this shift. It was written as the UK took a radical turn, with its leading political party adopting some of the most extreme positions of any party in a wealthy or middle-income country on the planet. The book effectively shows that this political leap wasn't accidental but a direct result of the pernicious influence of a small group of the extremely rich and their enablers.

### **CONTRIBUTORS**

Danny Dorling is professor of human geography at the University of Oxford. His latest book is *Seven Children: Inequality and Britain's Next Generation*, to be published in the UK and the United States in the fall of 2024 by Hurst and Oxford University Press.

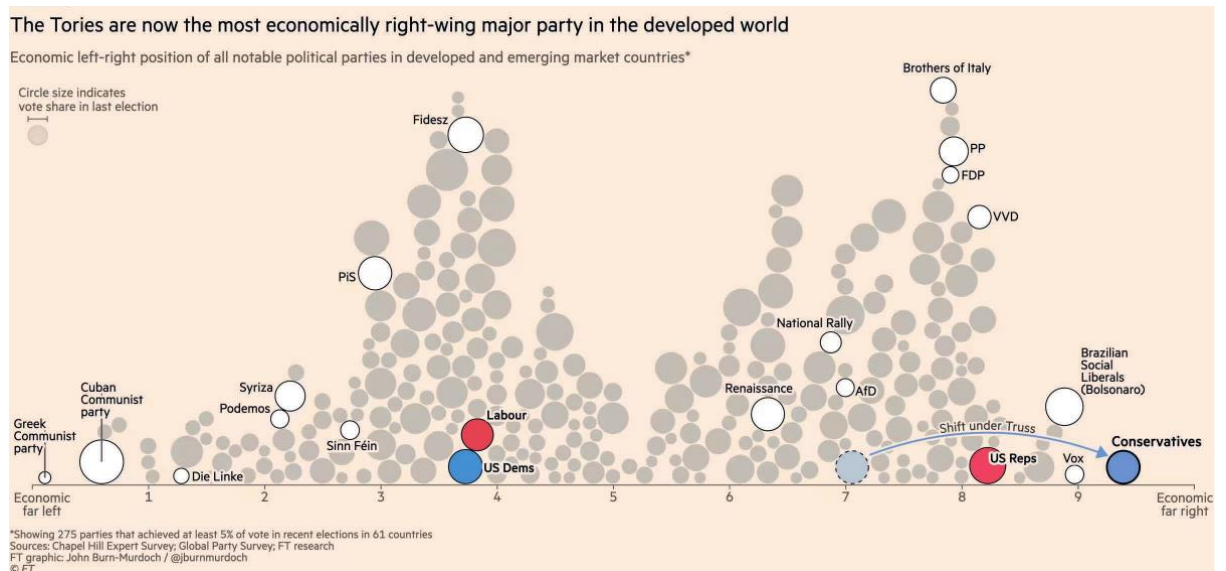
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Wealth, Poverty and Enduring Inequality: Let's Talk Wealtherty, By Sarah Kerr, a review. Published by Policy Press (Bristol University Press), 27 September 2024, 256pp 978-144737056, £27.99 paperback (or EPUB – no discount), £80 hardback.

### Afterword

Incidentally, if you are in any doubt as to how extreme the UK has become in recent years as an international outlier, due to the power of those with wealth, consider what the Financial Times explains in its images of global economics and politics.



Note: Figure includes all the rich and mainstream world states.

Source: John Burn-Murdoch (2022) 'The Tories have become unmoored from the British people', *Financial Times*, 30 September. John Burn-Murdoch's graph: <https://twitter.com/dannydorling/status/1575836071832604673?s=20>

Wealtherty was written at the point when the light blue circle above jumped to the most extreme of all the political parties of any rich or medium income country on the planet – and demonstrates that it did so because of the pernicious influence of a few the extremely rich, and their lackies.