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The Geography of Injustice (Part 2)

by **Danny Dorling, Tom Mills**

[Danny Dorling](#) is a Professor of Human Geography at the University of Sheffield. He has spent his academic life mapping the social, political and medical geographies of Britain, concentrating on inequality and differences in life chances. He is the author of *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists* and more recently of *So You Think You Know About Britain?*, in which he examines a set of social and geographical issues in Britain from the north-south divide to immigration and emigration. In the second of a two part interview with Tom Mills he discusses the relationship between racism and social inequality and the importance of ideas in changing society. Part 1 can be found [here](#).

In recent years we have seen a rise in racism in Britain, particularly anti-immigrant attitudes and Islamophobia. With the cuts we can only expect this to increase further. What do we actually know about social trends like immigration, integration and segregation and how does that compare to the political debates on these issues?

Let's take the rise in racism first. There's quite a lot of evidence which suggests that in many ways racist attitudes are falling, particularly amongst the young. Think of the horror with which people often react to the implication that they are a racist. There's a lot of good news there and similarly homophobia has declined. So there is this increased progressiveness and we should not forget that. When I was a child you used to get two or three Bangladeshis or Pakistanis usually stabbed every year by the National Front. That doesn't happen anymore and there was a lot of expectation that after the 7/7 bombings that it would happen but nobody was killed by the far right – racist killing which although very infrequent is normal still in parts of mainland Europe. There are some things which are very good about Britain, actually unusually good. How crap our fascist party is right now particularly is something we should be quietly celebrating.

At the same time immigration has become the number one election issue. If you are honest about it the polls from 2001 and 2005 show that. It would still have been in 2010 except that somebody managed to crash the economy so badly that 'the economy' managed to beat immigration as the prime issue that voters were worried about.

My take on it is that life is getting worse for people in general as inequalities widen. It becomes harder and harder to buy a house or rent a house. It becomes harder and harder to send your children to the school that you went to. It becomes harder to find a job, harder to move around. All this is because of inequalities and I could go through each major social issue and show you how if you increase inequality it gets worse. But it is a difficult argument to make and to understand and hardly anyone is making this argument.

My favourite person who is making the argument is Robert Frank who is an economist in the US. He writes with Ben Bernanke, so this isn't a mad argument. The *Spirit Level* has the same argument. Robert Frank has written a book about problems facing the middle class in America, how it costs you so much more to buy a house than it used to, but you need to buy the average house because you don't want your children to go to the bottom-end school. So this inequality argument is being made, but it's a very specialist argument. Alternatively you can't get your children into a good school (you think!) because the immigrants are going to the school. You can't get a house because the immigrants have got all the houses and you can't get a job because the immigrants have got the jobs. So you can (wrongly) blame the immigrants for everything. Name any social problem and I'll make up a fiction and tell you why the immigrants caused it.

Inequality is making people's lives worse and there is a sense that it didn't used to be like this; that it was a bit better. And it was. In the 1960s and 1970s you could pick what job you wanted and if you didn't like it you could resign or you could tell your boss to fuck off (if you're from a different class) and you could go and get another job next week. That's freedom. People have a sense of what they've lost. Or they might just be conscious that they can't buy a house like their mum or dad bought. Home ownership is actually falling in Britain. So the percentage of people who can afford a home has declined, but at the same time we've actually got more houses than we've ever had before. It's not lack of houses and it's certainly not immigrants using up all the houses. It's because if you have increasing wealth inequalities a few people can own lots of houses and rent some of them out and have a holiday house and other people can't. It's an inefficient use of our housing stock.

I'm not advocating communism and some immediate introduction of pure equality. It's just obvious that if you start off unequal and you become more unequal it becomes harder to share things out. Also the differences between schools tend to increase, particularly if you publish league tables which don't help reduce school difference. Suddenly you no longer want your children to go to a particular school because that ends up being a sink school. And of course where do the immigrants go? They go to the sink school. Well then people start to think that it must be a sink school because of the immigrants (whereas in fact we know that the children of immigrants on average work harder and do better). So for any problem you can blame immigration and if you are more in favour of inequality, which some people

on the right are, then you will need a quick fix to explain the social problems that it creates. So you start to talk about the problems of multiculturalism and immigration and the worse you do in the polls the more you talk about it.

You've also suggested that in some ways inequality creates racism. Talk about this idea.

I think this is the cleverest thing that Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett did in *The Spirit Level*, which is to say that it is very hard to maintain racial and ethnic groups in a country which has quite equal incomes. What people sometimes say is that Iceland and Japan have higher equality because people there are of the same race. But if you go to Japan or Iceland, actually people do look quite different from each other. You could construct racial groups. If I was allowed to conduct an evil experiment and make one part of the country rich and another part poor then you would begin to get ethnic groups forming. In any society which has big inequalities you get racial differences. In Singapore you get Chinese and Malay, in America you have black and white. In more equal societies you get less racial differences.

The other thing is that big inequalities create spaces at the bottom because you have a high demand for people to work on very low wages and through immigration people come in at the bottom and they look different to the people at the top. The point of having a lot of money is to spend it and the main thing rich people spend their money on is other people's labour – on people to make their beds, clean their rooms and make their breakfast. In more equal countries less of that goes on because you don't have the rich who can afford it. So there are fewer jobs at the bottom. America sucks in immigrants because of its inequality and the UK sucks in immigrants partly because we are a more unequal country so we have huge demand for poorly paid workers to service the affluent.

In your book 'Injustice' you connect social inequality with a particular set of ideas – that elitism is efficient, exclusion is necessary, prejudice is natural, greed is good and despair is inevitable. Do these ideas justify social inequality or cause it?

I am an egalitarian and I honestly believe that people are remarkably equal in potential ability and that people who are supposed to be very clever are not necessarily that clever. What I did for *Injustice* was to take a whole lot of other peoples' ideas and put them in a box and then took some of my own prejudices and the things I hear and mixed it all up. For example you hear a lot about children having different potential ability in education. It's normal in Britain to believe that some people are born to be clever and some people aren't. This helps people at the top to keep going. Take Tony Blair, he was once asked why he wouldn't send his children to a normal state school. They said that Harold Wilson sent his children to a normal state school and one became a professor and one became a headmaster or headmistress. Tony Blair's reaction was, 'Oh well, that's not good enough for my children.' The

implication is that Tony Blair thinks his children are especially gifted, that they have something special about them. They were very young at the time so I suspect that he was thinking that he is especially different, especially able, especially clever. How else could he have ended up running the Labour Party and then becoming Prime Minister? There must be something special about you and this may pass on to your children (or so this fiction goes).

So, if you are at the top of society, you might have worked hard and all the rest of it, but you also come to believe that you're partly there because you were born with lucky genes and with luck you'll pass on those lucky genes to your children and so they will also do OK in this very nasty and unequal world. What's more there are lots of people at the bottom and you come to believe that maybe their children didn't have whatever the lucky gene is (it used to be called the IQ gene but few are silly enough to claim that today). You believe in your own superiority and you can be nice to the poor and give to charity and do other things, but hopefully your children won't mix with theirs and certainly not marry them because you don't want to mix those genes. It's not just Tony Blair though. It's lots of MPs. It's many of the people who end up running universities. It's a common way of thinking.

In a sense then you need to believe these things in order to function in an unequal system. What you are trying to do is point out that these ideas are wrong. How much can you achieve simply by demystifying these ideas?

How much can you do? R. H. Tawney did it. He was a professor in the 1930s and he told his brother-in-law William Beveridge that he was getting it all wrong about eugenics and genes. It was a personal story, they were mates, and William Beveridge stopped using the language of upper and lower people and ended up helping to design the welfare state. He wasn't a very nice man still, but it certainly changed him. It's been done before. This was an awful country in the 1920s. The aristocracy believed things which... well... they often liked Hitler! We were lucky that the people who argued against this won out against the people who believed in eugenics and fascism. The pictures of the concentration camps at the end of the war helped seal it for a little bit, seal as unacceptable the idea that people are genetically inferior, because it ends up with the idea that you must destroy them. Now it's kind of crept back again. We had a period from the 1940s to the 1970s of increasing belief that we were all the same. It ended up with comprehensive schools – with 80% of children going to their nearest school. That had never happened before. It was the first time ever that people all went to the same school and were all taught together. These achievements were the result of some people winning and some people losing the arguments about our inherent nature.

If we are all inherently different then you want to be sorting us out at the age of five for the good of everybody (some private schools have entrance exam for children of those ages!). But if we're not that inherently different and you do that kind of thing then you end up terribly disadvantaging people at the bottom for no reason. And equally bad, if not worse, you end up with a whole set of grammar school kids who believe that they are somehow superior to the people beneath them. People spend the rest of their lives believing this. Anyway, that's just one of the ideas I look at in the book – educational disadvantage.

Another one is prejudice, the idea that some people are just worth less than others. We had unemployment in the 1930s because we didn't have enough money to employ the middle-aged men who were sacked, but there was practically no youth unemployment in the 1930s. Very few people know this but young people were employed because they were cheap. Mass unemployment exists now because we don't think certain people are worth employing. I wish I had explained this better in the book but if you took our total salary and wage bill in Britain and worked out how much we are paying ourselves and just made it a bit more equal and gave everyone a job – all the million people under 25 without one – I suspect you could save quite a lot of money and also have full employment. If the people you paid £200,000 you paid £150,000 and the people you paid £150,000 you paid £110,000 and people on £110,000 you paid £90,000 or £80,000. But keeping everyone in their order, that's the key thing...

Maintaining everyone's social status but redistributing the income?

As the immediate policy I would suggest – yes. If you want a policy to make things better, this is one thing you can do. The argument for the maximum 20 times salary in the public sector is that you constrain the salary at the top. It's a great incentive for the boss to pay the living wage as well by the way, because if you pay the living wage rather than the minimum wage then you can pay yourself £300,000 a year rather than £250,000. But if you don't allow top salaries in the public sector to carry on like they have been then that will take all the salaries down. If you have to cut, just push down from the top and each person should get a little less of a reduction as you go down. It's a social policy that actually saves you an enormous amount of money.

My only caveat to it is that I'd want to do what Ken Livingstone did as London Mayor and Boris Johnson continued, which was that any private company that the Greater London Council gives money has to pay the living wage. You could do exactly the same with the 20 to one ratio so that any public company which does any work for taxpayers cannot pay anybody over 20 times more than anybody else. Then suddenly PricewaterhouseCoopers and Arthur Andersen can't do any work for government. The private sector could still do what they like and have complete freedom, but the minute it wants to take tax payers' money it has to change. This can be sold as saving tax payers' money because such wage differentials are obviously inefficient. They may pretend to be economically efficient but someone is just taking the money and running and we can see it in the salary.

But there are hundreds of policies you could introduce. I think people need to realise that we need the policies before we can argue over which policies are introduced and currently we don't accept the need for any policies on income and wealth inequalities.

Finally, then, what can people do to raise awareness of these problems and to move towards policy solutions?

What action can people take? Anything. There is a sort of power to being egalitarian as well as a great disadvantage. The great disadvantage to being egalitarian is that you think, 'What the hell can I do? I'm not that special.' Whereas the right have this belief in superhuman individuals and they might think, 'I am special. I will go and do this.' The advantage though is that there is less pressure and it almost

doesn't matter what you do, as long as you do something. It can be something quite small like a letter to an MP or a newspaper. It can just be a conversation in the pub. It can be saying something when you might have held your tongue. Tiny is fine. Much more radical is good as well, going on marches, agitation, sits-ins on firms that don't pay enough tax, or whatever – that's all good. But what people don't appreciate is the multiplying value of tiny behaviour changes. We often make the mistake of thinking that it was the Second World War which changed things but in fact it was the 1920s and '30s. There was a change in peoples' beliefs so that you could have the Education Act that brought in secondary education for all in 1944. There were plans for the NHS in the 1930s. So I think it's about changing beliefs and not accepting it when someone tells you that there are inferior people, or that an underclass exists, or that the real problem is the poor. I honestly think you need to try and bring people with you and not underestimate the ability even of the Conservative Party to quietly change and to quietly, albeit reluctantly, learn.

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Danny Dorling's latest book is [So You Think You Know About Britain?](#).

You can listen to an extensive archive of his talks and lectures [here](#).