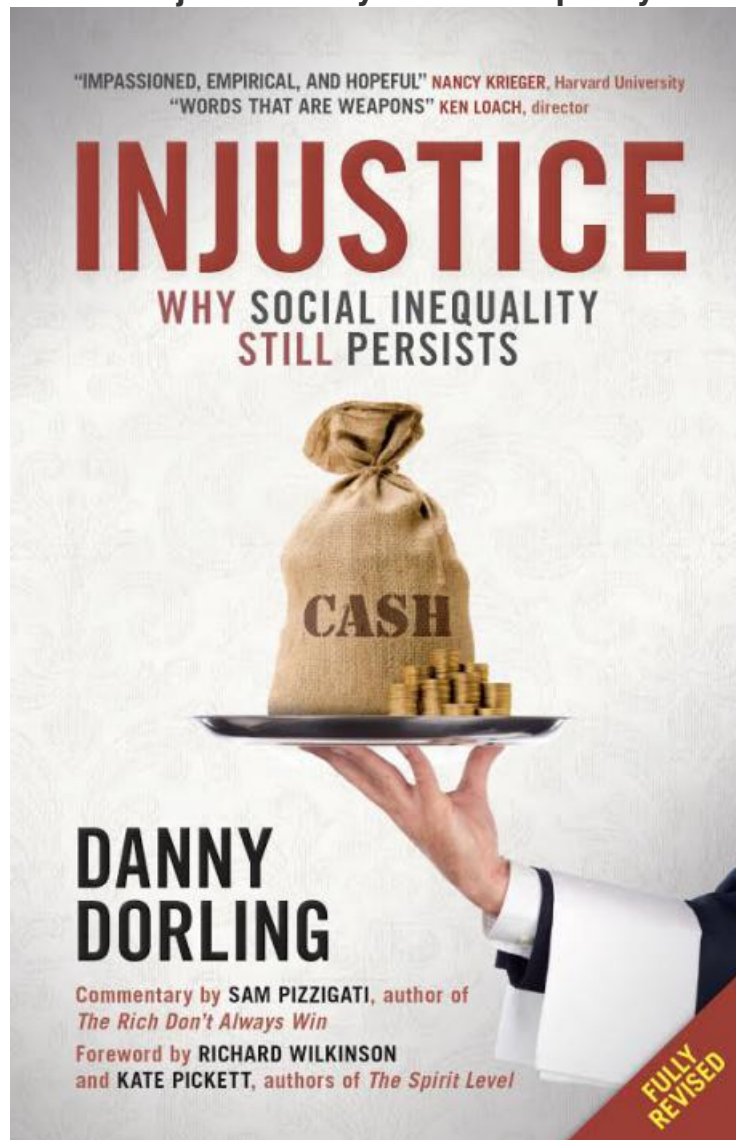


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Now is the time when we most need hope

DANNY DORLING 29 May 2015

An extract from "Injustice: why social inequality still persists".



People on both the left and the right construct their stories, testaments and beliefs as to the way to behave. On the right, what is key is survival of the fittest (the most selfish?) and apparent market efficiency (blindness?), not being held back by the weakest (the feckless?), not believing that humans are capable of organizing themselves (leave it to the 'price mechanism'?).

On the left there is too much faith in the ability of all of us to see sense and to rationally organize ourselves, too much faith that the majority will succumb to good argument when they hear it. There is too much harking back to defend previous success, defending council housing estates, comprehensive school uniformity, or clinical authority over patient inclusion. The left needs to regain the imagination it once had – it needs a metamorphosis.

The left still underestimates the extent to which the minds of many in power have been closeted by upbringing, and the huge disadvantage caused by each generation having to learn the world anew (1). But there are a few certainties. One certainty we can be quite sure of is that the near future really will be very different, because, for at least the last five human generations, the near future has changed radically with each one (2).

Don't despair that there won't be change. Don't assume it will be for the better, nor necessarily for the worse; it may simply just be different. The very least we can do is describe clearly the crux of our present predicament; namely, that much that is currently wrong is widely seen as either inevitable or justifiable – despite not even being sustainable.

As 2014 drew to a close, a protest took place in Mayfair at the London headquarters of the landlord Westbrook Partners. Some 60 tenants of the New Era housing estate took to the streets outside Westbrook's plush offices to complain that they would soon be evicted because the rents were to be raised. One mother brought her two children, Angel, then aged 10 and Alfie, aged 11.(3) The public mood had changed. There was no way that this eviction was going to be permitted. Within 20 days a deal had been done, and the tenants could stay. The news was announced on 19 December and spread around the world.(4)

You can no longer evict children at Christmas, not in front of the cameras, not if the world is watching, and not when people have stopped being so afraid to act. In Britain, the vast majority think it is obvious that the NHS, state education and benefits matched to needs are good things; that ignorance, want, idleness, squalor and disease are bad things needing to be tackled, not accepted as inevitable. However, there is still a small, but rich and powerful, minority who are appalled at the amount of taxpayers' money that goes into the NHS and push for more privatisation in the name of efficiency, the end result of such false efficiency often meaning that they can make a personal profit out of the NHS. They also think that as little as possible should be spent on

welfare, state education and social services. They aim to shrink the state, and some of them will go to extraordinary lengths to avoid paying taxes at all.

It is obvious that elitism, exclusion, prejudice, greed, despair and the inequality that binds them all are harmful and need to be tackled. We need to beware the small, but rich and powerful minority who feel that they personally benefit from inequality, and who preposterously try to claim that in the end everyone else benefits, or who say that rising inequality is inevitable because of market forces and globalisation, or that the 'riff-raff' do not deserve any more whereas they are so very deserving.

We only have to look around the world to see that many other affluent countries are not behaving like Britain and the US are behaving today. Injustice is not inevitable. What is important is not getting to some arbitrary goal, but the direction in which we are travelling. The current levels of inequality in the US and the UK would have been unimaginable a few decades ago.

We do not know by how much it will be possible to reduce inequality, but we will easily know if we are heading in the right direction, which will be when the share of the richest 1 per cent falls.

When I started to work on this new edition [of *'Injustice'*], I was expecting to just update the facts and figures with more recent statistics. What I found in the numbers surprised me. Following the 2008 economic crash, the US Federal Reserve Board was floundering over financial statistics that it had been updating quarterly since 1980, and in retrospect they had to revise their recent statistics substantially. What had been published was fiction. The UK government preferred to avoid producing statistics where possible, even proposing to stop the national census that had been undertaken every 10 years since 1801 (other than in wartime). Statistics from non-government sources showed that the poorest were getting poorer and the richest much richer.

In the US and across Europe, we moved from an atmosphere of 'the bankers should suffer for this' to 'we are all in this together'. We then began to realize that the richest, including the bankers and financial institutions that had created the crash, were actually not in it with us, but were making a bonanza for themselves, and the bottom 99 per cent were paying for it. The poorest were suffering the most gratuitous hardship, gratuitous because the cuts to their standards of living hardly dented the deficit but destroyed so many lives. There was an element of

sadism in the new UK government policies. Many of the unemployed accepted zero hours contracts, low wage (below living wage) employment or registered as self-employed, despite little prospect of financial benefit but so as to avoid the ritual humiliations of the 'job' centres.

While inequalities have increased within most nations in the last five years, there was some evidence of increasing equality between nations, but between individuals worldwide there was still rapidly increasing inequality. Those in power were being more careful over how they chose their words, but their actions showed no change in their attitudes to the very rich and how many they thought were undeserving.

The elite are reluctant to do anything about that which is morally wrong, but still technically legal, while they are happy to pillory 'benefit cheats'. The UK MPs' expenses scandal,⁽⁵⁾ first publicized by The Telegraph newspaper in May 2009, revealed just how upright and honourable many of our political leaders actually were. The wealth of those in government and of their friends revealed their probable allegiances: 'All great political action consists of and begins with, speaking out about that which is. All political petty-mindedness consists of being silent and covering up that which is.'⁽⁶⁾ To that we should add: 'To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing.'⁽⁷⁾ Now is the time when we most need hope.

Notes:

1) Dorling, D. (2010) 'Mean machine: structural inequality makes social inequality seem natural', *New Internationalist*, no 433, pp 20-1 (www.sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/publications/2010/Dorling_2010_New_Internationalist_2010.pdf).

2) It is worth remembering in conclusion that '... with the roughly 300,000 generations that humans spent as hunter-gatherers and the 500 generations they spent as agrarians, the 9 generations passed in the industrial era and the 1 generation so far spent in the emerging post-industrial era ... a drop in the bucket of time. As organisms, we cannot possibly have adapted to the environment in which we now find ourselves' (Massey, D.S., 2002, 'A brief history of human society: the origin and role of emotion in social life: 2001 Presidential Address', *American Sociological Review*, vol 67, no 1, p 15). Note that 300,000 is probably an over-estimate, as it gives modern hunter-gatherers a six-million-year history. Humans, in our current state as evolved social animals with sophisticated language, have possibly only experienced around 3,000 generations. We really are all still learning and trying to understand exactly where fate has placed us. My parents grew up

without computers, my grandparents without television, my great-grandparents without radio, and not all of their parents were able to read. Only very recently have we, the majority of humanity, been given access to enough information to be able to discover so much for ourselves. No wonder we are confused, do not agree, and often continue to preach the unjust thinking of the tiny minority who used to hold such a monopoly on knowledge.

3) Booth, R. (2014) 'New Era estate protest: "We are asking for the moral thing – leave our homes"', *The Guardian*, 1 December (www.theguardian.com/society/2014/dec/01/new-era-housing-estate-protest-mayfair).

4) Staff reporter (2014) 'Londoners toast victory over "greedy" US rent-hikers, stave off eviction', *Aljazeera News America*, 19 December (<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/12/19/new-era-housing.html>).

5) Martin, I. (2014) 'MPs' expenses: a scandal that will not die', *The Telegraph*, 13 April (www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/mps-expenses/10761548/MPs-expenses-A-scandal-that-will-not-die.html).

6) Ferdinand Lassalle, 1862, who was paraphrased by Rosa Luxemburg in 1906 as: 'The most revolutionary thing one can do is always to proclaim loudly what is happening' (<http://permalink.gmane.org/gmane.politics.marxism.marxmail/175220>).

7) Williams, R.H. (1989) *Resources of hope*, London: Verso, p 118. Raymond Henry Williams was a Welsh socialist academic, and this book was published posthumously.

'Injustice; Why inequality still persists' by Danny Dorling (ISBN 9781447320753), is priced £9.99 and available [from Policy Press](#)'.