

17

DANNY DORLING ON INEQUALITY



Danny Dorling joined the School of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford in September 2013 to take up the Halford Mackinder Professorship in Geography. He was previously a Professor of Geography at the University of Sheffield. He has also worked in Newcastle, Bristol, Leeds and New Zealand. He went to university in Newcastle upon Tyne, and to school in Oxford.

David Edmonds:

When in 2004 steel tycoon Lakshmi Mittal paid a cool £57million for a property in London's Kensington Palace Gardens, it was – at the time – the most expensive home in Britain. Mittal has since bought additional properties for much more: and in any case, the price looks a bargain compared to his yacht. The gap between rich and poor has grown dramatically over the past few decades: not just in terms of wealth, but on other indicators too – there's been a growing gap in life-expectancy, for example. Danny Dorling is a social scientist, a human geographer. He's analysed trends in inequality and presented the data in novel and compelling ways. He claims inequality is bad for everyone: not just for the poor, but even, bizarrely, for Mr. Mittal and the rest of the super-rich.

Nigel Warburton:

The topic we're focusing on is inequality. Give us a quick sketch of the degree of current inequality in the rich world.

Danny Dorling:

Currently inequality in the rich world is at a high, it's been rising for several decades and if you measure it in terms of differences in life expectancy, or in terms of income and wealth differences, it's the highest it's been since around the 1920s, maybe even earlier.

- NW:** *So the disparity between rich and poor is massive and higher than it's been for years?*
- DD:** Yes. Of course (most) people are much better off than they were 80 or 90 years ago. But the gaps between groups of people have become as wide again as they were back then, and that is staggering, it's one of the defining features of our times.
- NW:** *Why do you think it's happened?*
- DD:** To put it very crudely, a lot of us took our eyes off the ball and didn't fight enough to keep it down. There were some groups who thought inequality wasn't necessarily a bad thing in a time of riches because, the argument went, a few people getting richer would help drag everybody else up. But there are wider forces that make society more unequal unless you do something about it.
- NW:** *What sort of forces are you talking about?*
- DD:** If you leave a group of people alone there will tend to be variation between them, which grows enormously if not controlled. Some people will like making money much more than others and if you let them do it, they'll make yet more money: they're driven by money. If you don't curtail their wish to make money, they'll become richer and richer and you then get imbalances of power. If you simply leave particular social situations to run their course, you tend to get growing inequalities in income, and then even bigger inequalities in wealth. Then, with a lag, you see rising inequalities of people's wider life chances in some of the most important things such as education and health.
- NW:** *So you've touched on it there, but why should we care that there are these inequalities? If people reach a threshold level of income, why would it matter if there are some very rich people?*
- DD:** Well, you can carry on for quite a long time with high and growing inequality and it might not appear to matter terribly much, particularly if the economy as a whole is growing. If the entire country is becoming richer and rich people are becoming much, much richer, but poor people are still getting a little bit more than the generation before them, it's possible to

keep things going. There are great ecological and sustainability problems with this approach: your overall consumption levels are enormous. But one reason that inequalities have become so high again is that it's not that uncomfortable becoming more unequal if you're all becoming a bit richer. What's really uncomfortable is when you have economic decline coupled with high and rising inequalities; and what's almost impossible to live with is when you have economic decline, most people getting poorer, the poor getting very poor, and a few people still getting richer.

NW: *And it's uncomfortable because people are just envious of the rich?*

DD: The argument about envy fits with the scenario in which economies are growing and everybody is becoming a bit better off while the rich are gaining even more than the poor. What happens when you have economic decline is the switch from envy to disgust. It's not just people saying during austerity 'I wish I could be the one rich person.' Instead, people say, 'In a time of austerity, what are they doing taking 50% pay rises?'

NW: *Well, one common argument is that the people who get those huge pay rises earn them. There's something they do, by their own merit, which justifies the pay differential.*

DD: This is an argument that you could try to sell when you have economic growth. The very rich could say you're all having growth because of us. But it is an argument which becomes unsustainable when entire countries are becoming poorer for the very rich to say 'we're doing something that's so valuable that you need to give us a 50% pay rise this year.' You really have to believe that without them everything would fall apart.

NW: *Well, take sport: there are people who can run a marathon in around two hours and that's quite phenomenal. There are huge individual differences in sporting skill and aptitude. What makes you so sure that there aren't huge individual differences in terms of people's capacity to generate income, and to do things which are worthwhile for society?*

DD: I don't think that differences in ability to run between human beings are that great. Human beings are remarkably

similar animals. If you look at leg length and height and what we are capable of, we're not talking about different species that can do different things. The extent to which people can walk and run very much depends on the environment in which they are brought up to walk and run in. And of course you can always take an individual and train them up to behave in a particular way. You can do the same with a dog. That doesn't mean that any one dog's a particularly special dog; it means somebody's trained that dog to behave in that particular way. What's remarkable about human beings is how similar we are. We almost all have binocular vision; we almost all have two opposable thumbs; we all have a brain of a particular size, it doesn't vary that much – in fact you don't want a really big one because that's actually associated with a form of mental illness. But we're very bad at recognising how similar we are; and for peculiar reasons we're very good at looking at the slight differences and then trying to make out that they're terribly important.

NW: *You seem to be saying that inequality is bad. Is it bad because it leads to certain other ills, or is it intrinsically bad?*

DD: There are always differences between people and there are always variations, but where inequalities are not based on something which is real, they can have very sad implications. One of my favourite examples is singing. There's a lovely history of human beings singing, people have written about Neanderthals singing! And if you look at the distribution of singing, how many people are used to singing, it's very high in parts of Africa and it's now pretty low in parts of Europe. But we have this idea that only a few people can be great singers – you have to win *X-Factor* and then you get to make records. And what ends up happening is that most people stop singing and you put a few people on pedestals and say what wonderful singers they are. It's not just singing, it's storytelling; it's all kinds of human abilities. You get a 'winner takes all' society, where most people feel that their achievements aren't good enough and a few people are told that they're so good that they begin to believe they're super-human.

NW: *In the singing example you're saying that potentially almost anybody has the ability to sing at a quite good level, and only social*

factors stop them from doing that. Now, are you saying that economic inequality is one of the obstacles to various kinds of achievement, or rather that quite apart from its consequences, gross economic inequality is just wrong, it's a bad thing?

DD: It's quite hard to tell whether economic inequality is just a bad thing in and of itself, or whether it's inefficient. There are so many overlapping reasons why high levels of inequality cause harm in all kinds of ways that it's very hard to disentangle. It's a bit like saying 'Is there a good way of smoking tobacco?' The key thing about tobacco is – although I happen to quite like tobacco – it's bad for you. Tobacco is just not good, and inequality is simply not good. I'm not saying we should all be completely equal (or never smoke), but great levels of inequality tend to bring harm in all kinds of ways. They harm our creativity, they harm our economy, they harm our health. And they mean that we delude ourselves at the top of society as well as at the bottom.

NW: *And yet, if you take the example of Renaissance Florence, it was great social inequality that allowed the wonderful artists that were commissioned by the Medici or whoever to flourish.*

DD: No. No. No. No. No! It was the Medicis accepting the illegitimate son of a peasant woman, Leonardo da Vinci, and allowing him to sit not just at the end of the table but next to the Lord. It was the equality of the Medici times (at least around their table) that led to that. They had an attitude which was unusual, and was breaking against the old hierarchies of inequality. The sons and daughters of millionaires and billionaires don't become our only great artists. Art and creativity are in everybody. What happens to particularly draw it out of individuals at particular times varies. But if you look at indicators such as where are the highest proportions of scientific papers written per person, it's Finland and Sweden. If you look at where the most patents per person are, that's Japan. We have a myth in very unequal countries like the United States and the UK that we're particularly entrepreneurial.

NW: *So are you saying that there are no benefits from economic inequality?*

- DD:** I find it hard to find them. There are disbenefits from ridiculous levels of imposed equality. I think it's hard to find an example of a place in the rich world which has become too equal for things to work.
- NW:** *Obviously uniformity in wealth is not a sustainable position because people would start to spend the money in the way they want to spend it, some will gamble and some won't, some will want to save, others won't. But is there anything we can do, generally, to reduce the massive levels of inequality that we now find ourselves with?*
- DD:** Well, the massive levels of inequality and wealth are currently reducing, at least for most people. Even in the UK, for 99% of the population income inequality levels are lower than they were before the crash of 2008. It has only been the best-off 1% who have seen their incomes rise. Wealth inequalities rise more stubbornly. The general economic crisis of the rich countries at the moment means a reduction in international inequalities in wealth. If you want a slightly more equal world, part of what's going on is not necessarily bad. So in answer to your question 'Can you reduce inequality?', it's actually happening. Whether it carries on and is sustainable is unclear. The soft-landing for humanity is that the richest countries of the world become that little bit less rich but more equal, which is how you can tolerate being less rich, whilst poorer countries become better off, but don't have a super elite who become very rich. This is the (ideal) point where people have enough, but you have very few who have too little, and even fewer who have too much. Social scientists concentrate on what is worse rather than what is good. For example there are reported to be more bankers in Barclays Bank in the UK earning over one million euros a year than there are people in the whole of Japan earning as much. We are right to be shocked by Barclays but we should also celebrate the relatively high equality of Japan and look for what it is about Japanese society which makes much lower salary inequality possible.
- NW:** *But you're talking about the vagaries of the market, and historically the way that people try to reduce massive economic inequality is through political change, including the imposition of rules to prevent the rich from getting massively richer.*

DD: Markets have always had rules. Markets are very old. We've made a mistake in the last four centuries of calling the new ways in which we live 'the market', as if there weren't markets before then. Equality makes traditional markets more equal, more efficient. The classic example is prisoners of war. When you're given your Red Cross box, prisoners swap things that they don't like: one prisoner might not like chocolate and swaps it for something that somebody else doesn't like. Markets are incredibly efficient when everybody's on the same level. Markets become really inefficient when you have a few people who have lots of money and many people who don't. People with lots of money might just buy some food because they feel like hoarding it, not because they need it. They might buy a nice-looking book, not because they want to read it but because they can and it doesn't cost very much. So inequality makes market economies inefficient.

NW: *Now, you describe yourself as a human geographer, and that's a form of social science. There is one, perhaps naive, view of a scientist that they go out and describe the way the world is. But it seems to me you're doing much more than that.*

DD: I'm doing a little more than that. I tend to get criticized in human geography for being somebody who describes far more than almost anybody else describes, because I draw maps and pictures and look at numbers – lots of numbers, hence lots of descriptions. The way I grandly put it is this: imagine that you were a medic and you were interested in lung cancer in the early 1950s and you thought it was very complicated and there were all these possible things that could be causing lung cancer, and many theories. But you did a very simple descriptive study with doctors and smoking and you found an incredible correlation – the more that doctors seemed to smoke, the more they got lung cancer. Now, the group of social scientists who are interested in inequality in the last few years have suddenly started getting these graphs which suggest it's much more important than even they thought it was. Just like medical researchers in the 1950s, they are unsure of what is causing the correlation, but they have a series of very plausible suggestions. It's hard to remain completely neutral in that situation, but it helps to try to work out what situation you think you're in.

- NW:** *Well it's one thing to hypothesise about correlations and the likelihood of them being causal relations, and it seems to be another one to say, 'Look this is something wrong and we ought to be changing it'. That seems a different enterprise: you're a moralist at that point.*
- DD:** It isn't that hard to think carefully about my philosophical position on this, because everything lines up so neatly. There isn't an affluent country in the world with high levels of inequality where other things work well. I would be a moralist, I think, if I was just against inequality, even if it had positive outcomes.
- NW:** *Well, if you were one of the very rich elite, there would be clear positive outcomes from large inequalities of wealth. You would be the person who gains at the expense of other people.*
- DD:** I might gain money. I might be able to extend my lifespan with the help of a private doctor. But I might also fear being kidnapped, I might begin to realize that people despise me, I might begin to wonder whether my partner really liked me or was just with me for the money, I might wonder what was the point of all this. I might start to distrust the servants, I might wonder if I had an honest relationship with my children or whether they lied to me (because they were relying on future inheritances and gifts). And if you look at very rich people and how some of them are giving away large amounts of their money, I think they're coming to similar conclusions about the ambiguity of great wealth.
- NW:** *But there are values inherent in the way you've described things. It's not as if you're giving a neutral account of economic inequality is it?*
- DD:** I've never seen a position where somebody has an entirely neutral view. There will be biases and values that I hold that I'm somewhat aware of. There'll be other ones that I hold that I won't be aware of at all, and it's really interesting when somebody points this out to you. But here we have a situation where everybody is losing out. The classic example is the children of the very rich, brought up by a nanny, so they don't get to see their parents and the nanny's own children who are brought up by the nanny's mother, because

the nanny can't look after them. You have this chain of sadness and one of my strongest biases is that I hate chained stupidity: somebody exploiting somebody else is bad, but it's even worse when you've got everybody losing out.

NW: *When you're suggesting that greater equality would lead to better outcomes, that's a generalisation based on some kind of past evidence. Is that like a scientific law?*

DD: It's a scientific law when it comes to income and money. Money is a means to exchange. It gives you permission to do something else. So in terms of money I think you can make a claim of a scientific law. What the poor need above all else is a bit more money. When people say the poor don't need money, they haven't got the idea of poverty. And you can't all be rich: that's a scientific law. You could only all be rich if aliens came from another planet and became our slaves.

When it comes to things like improvements in education it's more complicated. For instance, I'd suggest that children on average do better in cities which are a bit more equal. The city I used to live in, Sheffield, sends more children to university than another city I used to live in, Bristol, a much more unequal city. But those are correlations. And you can try to work out what, if any, is the causal reason. Or is it just chance? And the same pattern can be found with health. You have a correlation and then you look for reasons to explain it. And one of the things about health is that a very rich person might be able to extend their life a tiny amount by paying for huge amounts of drugs, but the same amount of money can have a huge effect on thousands of babies who don't die of malaria. But you have then to prove the benefit of saving thousands of lives rather than extending one by a few years, especially if you are trying not to moralize. People tend to have fewer children when infant mortality drops. There are then fewer mouths to feed, more people grow up more healthily, more can become carers, be trained, become doctors themselves and improve overall population health. It is not that hard to show cases where the children of rich benefitted when the rich took less. Life expectancy for all social groups is now highest in those rich nations which became most equal and sustained those high levels of equality the longest.

- NW:** *These kind of thoughts must be relevant to social policy and how governments implement various programmes. Do you think social science generally has something important to offer politics?*
- DD:** Social science always has important things to offer politics, but often there are long lags. What social science does is help to define the underlying ethos that is taught about how society operates, and that eventually influences politicians. But it may be from what they read at school. I think social scientists worry too much about trying to have an immediate policy impact, and don't take as much comfort as they should about the very long term beneficial effects they can have if they're careful about what they do. And the greatest effects are the ones you don't notice, when the underlying belief systems of society alter.

FURTHER READING

- Jamie Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (Oxford University Press, 2010)
Andrew Sayer, *Why we can't afford the rich* (Policy Press, 2014)
Danny Dorling, *Inequality and the 1%* (Verso, 2014)