

Interview with Danny Dorling

(Professor of Geography at the University of Oxford; author of several books on social issues -
<http://www.dannydorling.org/>)



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Dario Ruggiero in March
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Today we are with Danny Dorling again. Author of several books and articles on social issues, Danny has recently published two interesting books that investigate with deep details the thematic of 'inequality' (*Injustice: Why Social Inequality Still Persists*) and on the effects of Politics on people happiness (*A Better Politics: How Government Can Make Us Happier*). According to Danny, Inequality, happiness, politics and sustainable economy are four strongly related subjects. Let's see why....

Danny Dorling: Danny is a Professor of Geography at the School of Geography and the Environment of the University of Oxford. He is one on the most important thinkers on social issues. Danny has published with many colleagues more than a dozen books on issues related to social inequalities in Britain and several hundred journal papers. His work concerns issues of housing, health, employment, education and poverty. Among his most important books:

- *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Still Persists*
- *A Better Politics: How Government Can Make Us Happier*
- *Inequality and the 1%;*
- *All That is Solid: The Great Housing Disaster;*
- *Population 10 Billion;*
- *Unequal Health: The scandal of our times.*

The interview was made in March 2016.

Subject: Inequality, happiness, politics and sustainable economy

Highlights

For me the five evils/beliefs (that feed inequality) are that educational elitism is efficient, social exclusion of the poor (and rich) is necessary, prejudice against immigrants and others is natural, greed is good for the economy, and despair is inevitable in our mental health....

....So much carbon pollution is caused by the far worse behaviour of the richest in the most unequal of countries.

Extreme unhappiness in the form of anxiety and depression is more common in more unequal countries in the affluent world.

Changes of state are often associated with greater happiness: starting a relationship, having a baby, securing a home, learning something new, changing your job to one you want, seeing the same occur to others (especially your children or grandchildren).

There is growth that is beneficial and economic growth that is harmful. Growth that produces goods that makes people happy and create very little pollution is often beneficial

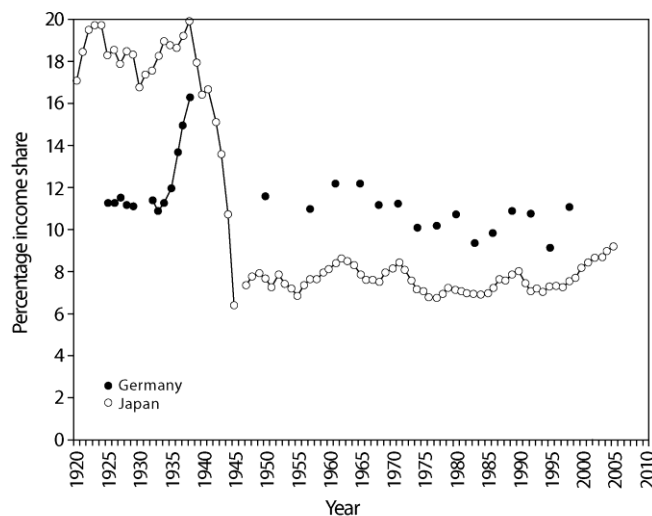
All across the world there are examples of a better politics in different areas. School are better organized in Finland, the workplace is better arranged in Sweden, welfare is being sorted out in the Netherlands, in Germany housing is well regulated, in Japan the elderly are looked after well enough to live to a very old age. Parts of the better politics can be found in many places.

Question 1: Welcome Danny Dorling. Over your career you've been investigating very deeply into the subject of 'Inequality.' Inequality is now considered one of the most important global issues (source: World Economic Forum). *Why is Inequality so dangerous for our future?*

Answer

Thanks for asking me again Dario! Inequality is dangerous for our futures because it was at times of great inequality in the past that great evils were committed. I have copied below a graph of the share of the national income taken by the 1% between 1920 and 2010 in Japan and Germany. In Germany inequality rose very abruptly in the 1930s. The poor became much poorer and the rich held on to their high incomes. However, not enough people recognized growing inequality as an issue of such importance at that time and a few blamed other factors for ills. Myths were spread about the Jews, just as myths as spread about minority groups today. The claim was made that Germany did not have enough space to expand into. But all the time inequality was rising and just living for most people was becoming harder with hyper-inflation destroying the value of the incomes of so many, while those who could charge rent and charge highly for food and other necessities could profit more and more and take a greater and greater share for themselves. The case of Germany in the 1930s is just one of many historical examples of why rising inequality is dangerous.

Income share of the best-off 1%, Germany and Japan



Note: In Japan the estimates exclude incomes from capital gains. In Germany the estimates are excluding capital gains apart from 1925-1938 and are only for the Federal Republic from 1960 to 1991.

Source: The World Top Incomes Database.

Question 2: In your book *'Injustice: Why Social Inequality Still Persists'* you say: 'In the world's richest countries, social inequality is not caused by having too few resources for everyone, instead it is driven by beliefs that perpetuate the inequality.' In particular you mention '*5 evils*.' Could you concisely describe them? Which of them is the most dangerous one?

Answer

For me the five evils are that educational elitism is efficient, social exclusion of the poor (and rich) is necessary, prejudice against immigrants and others is natural, greed is good for the economy,

and despair is inevitable in our mental health and we should tolerate poor health, especially amongst those with less; and even blame them, the victims, for not living as long as we might live due to their behaviour. Because there has been widespread and growing opposition to these five key unjust beliefs most of those who, in effect, advocate injustice, are becoming ever more careful with their words. The most dangerous of these is the belief that it is efficient to be elitist in education and spend a very large amount of money and other resources on a small number of children because we think we can tell from an early age that a few particular children are destined to go on to do great things – and without such resourcing they would not. Believe in that and you can then believe more easily in so many of the other unjustifiable claims.

Question 3: Why is Inequality related to *Climate Change* and *Unhappiness*?

Answer

As Thomas Piketty and his colleague Lucas Chancel demonstrated so brilliant in November 2015: In more unequal countries the best-off 1% pollute so much more than in more equal countries and emit so much more carbon, such that entire countries then pollute much more per capita overall. If everyone behaved like people behave in the USA we would need four planets. If they behaved like they do in Japan we need two – still one to many but far better than needing four (see: <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/ChancelPiketty2015.pdf>). The key point is that so much carbon pollution is caused by the far worse behaviour of the richest in the most unequal of countries as compared to the richest in the most equal that drives this.

On happiness there are similarly recent findings from academics and national statistical agencies. We really are only just finding out about all this. And many of those findings are reported in the second book you mention (“A Better Politics”), because they had not been published when the first edition of “Injustice” was written. When I was updating “Injustice” just before 2015 (when the second edition was published) I was not aware of just how much new evidence linking happiness to inequality there was.

Question 4: Let’s move on to your second book: ‘*A Better Politics: How Government Can Make Us Happier.*’ Why do we need a better politics? In what are today’s politicians failing? Do you think most people are unhappy today?

Answer

There’s a copy of the book here – it’s free to download, no need to register – just take a copy: <http://www.dannydorling.org/books/betterpolitics/> - now does that make you happy? *Most people are just a little over averagely happy!* That may sound odd, but when you ask people how happy they are, slightly more say they are more happy than usual than say they are less happy than usual. We are an ‘optimistic species.’ However, *we also overestimate how happy certain things will make us*, such as wealth, even not much more than average wealth. Research published by the Office for National Statistics in the UK in September 2015 suggested that for outright homeowners and those with a mortgage, high property and private pension wealth do not make the better-off happier. Small amounts of savings do increase happiness. Extreme unhappiness in the form of

anxiety and depression is more common in more unequal countries in the affluent world, where it is also so much harder to have small saving for so many with such little income.

Question 5: In your book you present the results of a survey, you and your colleague Dimitris Ballas conducted on the '*secret of happiness*:' what makes us happier. What emerged from the study?

Answer

It seems obvious when you look at the results, but it is not what people initially say might make them happy when you ask them. Changes of state are often associated with greater happiness: starting a relationship, having a baby, securing a home, learning something new, changing your job to one you want, seeing the same occur to others (especially your children or grandchildren). And so whatever makes some of these things less difficult and also reduces what makes us unhappy is likely to be beneficial.

Question 6: According to your findings, '*living in better organized countries makes us happier*.' Why? Can you mention some examples?

Answer

Here's a quote which also nicely explains why we cannot simply become happier by ensuring that we are a winner – the ability to do what makes us individually happier is so influenced by what happens around us that in the modelling of these things by the new wave of economics nation state statistics emerge as very important:

'The differences in your feeling of well-being living in a Scandinavian country (where welfare programs are large) versus the US are going to be larger than the individual factors in your life. The political differences trump all the individual things you're supposed to do to make yourself happier – to have fulfilling personal relationships, to have a job, to have more income. The political factors swamp all those individual factors. Countries with high levels of gross domestic product consumed by government have higher levels of personal satisfaction.' M. Hiltzik (*quoting Radcliff*). 2013. '*How much are we willing to pay for the pursuit of happiness*', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 November (<http://lat.ms/1Klm2aQ>).

Question 7: You argue that the classical economic model based on GDP growth is no longer functional to make our society happy. However, some rich countries, like Italy, needs to face the problem of public accounts (high public debts). How do you think such countries *can address both the problem of happiness and growth*?

Answer

There is growth that is beneficial and economic growth that is harmful. Growth that produces goods that makes people happy and create very little pollution is often beneficial. Digitally transmitted music is a good example. Other growth that might look good on the balance sheet is actually harmful. An obvious example is manufacturing unmanned drones to sell to Middle

Eastern (or any other) states for a profit and which they then use to terrorize civilians in a neighboring state, or for internal oppression.

As for debt – you must always remember that the reason you pay interest on debt is that the person lending you the money is being paid for the risk you might default. If a debt cannot be repaid without harmful economic growth – then it should not be repaid. Perhaps you can explain to your creditors that you won't be paying them back as much as they might have been expecting? Someone will do that as some point. Why do you think the amount you have to pay in interest is higher than other countries pay? It is because the risk is higher. The world has as much debt as the rich have wealth.

Question 8: Many rich countries are facing the problem of *unemployment*. Isn't the productivity-based policy promoted by modern countries in contrast with the goal of higher occupation? How do you think the problem of occupation, wage welfare and more in general economic equality should be managed in rich countries?

Answer

It is entirely possible to be both productive and have near full employment. In the book I explain that in 2015 the lowest unemployment rate in the affluent world was 3.5% in Norway, followed by 4.0% in Japan and 4.2% in Switzerland – the official figure for the UK was 7.2%, the real UK figure is higher still, and for Italy it is higher again. The UK and Italy are both less productive and have higher unemployment than those countries. But those countries are also often producing more useful growth than in the UK. The UK has a far larger arms industry and a far more risky finance industry – which creates harm around it – which takes risks with other peoples' futures.

Question 9: It seems that in the past, a growing generalized wealth could make us happy. Now seems that humans are more in search of *immaterial needs*. Do you think *Happiness policies* should change and adapt over time? Is there something can be done in order to build a stable happy society?

Answer

Yes, we are changing rapidly in what we need and want. Many of our basic material needs are met and as our societies evolve so quickly into something so very different to what our grandparents or their grandparents experienced, so too do our desires change. And it will be different for our grandchildren too.

Question 10: So, finally, what is a better politics based on?

Answer

You mean where can it be found today? All across the world there are examples of a better politics in different areas. School are better organized in Finland, the workplace is better arranged in Sweden, welfare is being sorted out in the Netherlands, in Germany housing is well regulated, in Japan the elderly are looked after well enough to live to a very old age. Parts of the better politics

can be found in many places. All of it is found nowhere, and never will be. Or as Oscar Wilde put it so long ago:

“A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.”

There will always be a better politics than the one we have. Just because that is the case is not reason not to set sail now.