

**Book Review**

## **The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better.**

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett.  
Allen lane, London, 2009.

Epidemiologists Wilkinson and Pickett address the issue of inequality with a purely empirical question: among the wealthier countries of the world, do those that are more equal tend to perform better on measures of the well-being of their populations? The authors describe their approach as "evidence-based politics", by analogy with evidence-based medicine.

Firstly, they establish that, among the wealthier countries of the world (roughly, those with average annual incomes of more than 18000 dollars), greater wealth is not associated with greater well-being, although among the less wealthy countries it is.

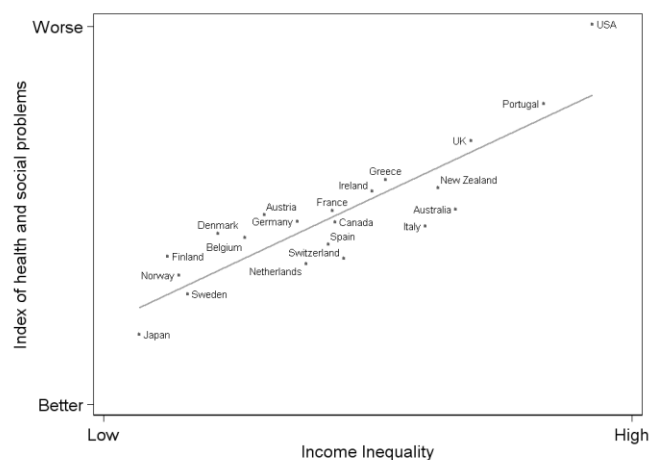
For their main study, they took the 50 wealthiest countries of the world and first excluded all those with populations of less than three million or on which there were no data on income inequality. This left 23 countries in all, including the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Greece, Israel, Singapore and most of the countries of western Europe and Scandinavia. They compared each country's level of inequality with its performance on various indicators of social well-being such as life expectancy, homicide rates, teenage pregnancies, infant mortality and educational attainment, in order to test the hypothesis that greater inequality is associated with poorer performance. On measure after measure, they show that more equal countries do better, less equal countries do worse. They repeated the

study, using a similar method, on the 50 states within the USA and obtained similar results.

This book is written for a lay audience and we are spared most of the statistical technicalities. The measure of inequality used in the main study was the gap between the richest 20% and the poorest 20% of the population. We are told of other standard measures (I like the idea of the Robin Hood Index, which is the proportion of a country's wealth which would have to be taken from the rich and given to the poor in order to achieve perfect equality!) but the authors claim that they make little difference to the outcome. The standard presentation used is a scatter plot, in which the score of each country on some measure, like obesity rate, is plotted over its score on inequality.

A plot showing a summary of the results on ten of the measures, scored as an 'Index of health and social problems', is reproduced here as Figure 1.

Figure 1. A scatter plot of 'Health and social problems' over inequality, for 21 of the 23 wealthy countries (Israel and Singapore are excluded for lack of data on some measures). From *The Spirit Level*, p20 (Figure 2.2).



The vertical axis is the index value and the horizontal axis is inequality. The solid line is the line of best fit through the scatter of points.

It is obvious that there is a strong correlation: the more unequal a country is, the worse it tends to score on the index. Since this is a summary, the correlation emerges particularly strongly. However, on all such graphs for the individual measures (there are some 50 of them in the book), the existence of a similar correlation is obvious at a glance.

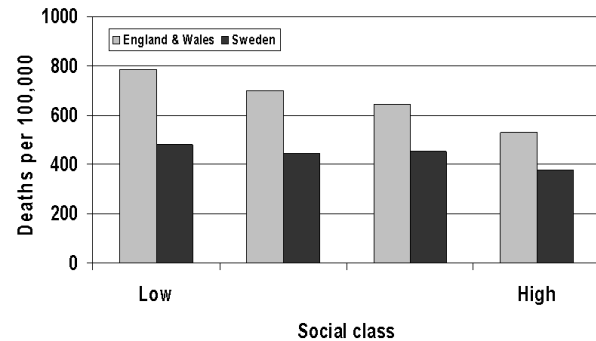
The UK is the fourth most unequal of the 23 countries, after Singapore (the most unequal but for which there are no data on some measures), the USA and Portugal. On most measures it performs accordingly, that is, rather badly. Japan is the most equal, followed by Finland, Norway and Sweden and these countries all perform predictably and consistently well.

It seems plausible that low status is bad for your health and morale and that in a strongly stratified society it is even worse. There is an interesting exploration of the connection between violence, in particular, and low status, with a view to explaining the higher crime rates of more unequal societies. However, generally the issue is more complicated than merely explaining the negative effects of lower status, since inequality has its effect on all social classes. A steeper inequality gradient is associated with poorer performance, even for the upper echelons of society. For example, the bar chart reproduced here as Figure 2 shows that there are higher death rates among men of working age in England and Wales than in Sweden and this holds true within every social class.

The relationship between equality and well-being is not just one of association but one of causality. This is conclusively demonstrated over several closely-argued pages (pp187-193) in which it is shown that if all the different pieces of correlation evidence are taken in

combination they are sufficient to establish the existence of a causal relationship.

Figure 2. Death rates of working-age men in England and Wales as compared with those in Sweden. From *The Spirit Level*, p183 (Figure 13.3).



Why are humans susceptible in this way to the equality level of the society in which they live? Except with respect to the discussion of violence, mentioned above, the title of the book over-reaches in promising an answer to this question. I should have thought that the best approach to it would be to undertake fine-grained investigations of the background to some of the existing statistical findings. For example, what is the chain of causation which increases the likelihood of death among working-age males of high status in England and Wales as compared with Sweden? Does the steeper inequality gradient in England and Wales produce in those of high status some kind of toxic physiological effect, due to a greater fear and loathing of those beneath them, for example? Or might it be that dedication and skill levels are higher in carers and the caring professions in more equal societies, resulting in better quality care for the sick? It would have been interesting to read such hypotheses (doubtless more well-informed than these examples) for testing in a proposed programme of future research and it would have been in the spirit of the evidence-based politics the authors

espouse.

Instead, they switch to a broad focus, much of it with a view to convincing us that human nature includes the potential for egalitarian styles of social interaction. To this end, they cherry-pick evidence from anthropology, evolution psychology, experimental psychology and biology. We learn the results of some experimental economic game-playing and that Stone Age societies were egalitarian. The centre-piece of this part of the book is a discussion of the contrasting social interaction styles of chimpanzees and bonobos. Chimpanzees are the villains of the piece, using large quantities of violence to maintain their highly stratified social structures; bonobos, on the other hand, are egalitarians, who use food-sharing and large quantities of sex. It is unclear what this is supposed to prove. At one point there is a reference to a claim that we share some relevant piece of DNA with bonobos rather than chimpanzees. This would be good news but actually their argument turns out to be that we have inherited from our primate ancestry the potential for both status driven and egalitarian modes of interaction, the implication being that we should cultivate our bonobo side at the expense of our chimp side. It is all quite entertaining but I have to say it reminded me more of *Gulliver's Travels* than a theory to be taken at face value.

This criticism is trivial enough, when weighed in the balance against the enormous significance of the rest of the book. The evidence in it implies that greater progressive taxation or a narrowing of income ranges would be both necessary and sufficient to improve the UK's performance on health, education and a range of social issues. This is doubtless anathema to the political right but their only legitimate recourse is (as with climate change

theory or evolution by natural selection) to engage in a debate on the science. Bring it on!

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