



Inequality and the 1%

Danny Dorling

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As the results of the disastrous Thatcher-Reagan neoliberal revolution become ever more evident, the intellectual state apparatuses of the 1% launch themselves into ever more absurd defences of the 'wealth creators' and argue that 'there is no alternative.' Since these voices dominate the mainstream media, it is particularly important that we have recourse to the works of public intellectuals such as Danny Dorling. Newly installed at the University of Oxford, Dorling continues his extraordinarily prolific career with a close evaluation of the impact of the growing systematic and structural inequality brought about by neoliberalism. The central question is summarized in the title of the first chapter, 'Can We Afford the Superrich?' In answering this question (spoiler alert, it is 'no'), Dorling considers not just the impact of having a small number of extremely rich people, their desire to Hoover up the choicest assets of the world (e.g. central London mansions) and their negative impact on democratic governance, he also considers the impact on the rest of us. As we know from the forensic work of Pickett and Wilkinson (2010), inequality is strongly correlated with a wide range of negative societal outcomes, from early deaths to obesity to teenage pregnancies. The central concept is easy enough to envisage: when people live in communities in which people have more or less the same as they have, then even if they are comparatively poor it is a situation that they can manage. By contrast, when people live in a community where there are others (even a small number) who have much more than they do, then they suffer stress and esteem issues that lead to those negative outcomes mentioned above. Under conditions of neoliberalism, even those societies which appear to be built on solid foundations of ample social capital rapidly turn into

nightmarish caricatures of themselves (e.g. Chang, 2012). Is this a sustainable situation?

Dorling's approach is rooted in careful analysis of primary and secondary data. His focus is on the wealth of the 1% and, specifically, that much smaller proportion within that group with wealth that is increasing ever more rapidly – that is, the 0.01%. Often, people supportive of the current system reach for the long-held and always disreputable trope of the 'underserving poor,' which in previous times saw those in difficult circumstances held in poorhouses until such time as they could somehow miraculously find the means to support themselves and their families. "Among the top 0.01% are people who fervently believe that inequality is good, that the poor deserve nothing more than to be poor because they do not have it in them to be any better, and that the rich are worth their riches. Most of the top 1 per cent appear not quite as deranged and driven but they are a hard group to survey, let alone tax, so it is time we took a closer look at life at the top and its effects on us all (p.25)." It is worth pointing out here that the focus on the book is primarily on the UK, which is well-known to be the second-most unequal society in the western world, behind only the USA, which can only maintain its system by the creation (and privatization) of a prison industry on a scale vaster than the Soviet Union's gulags. However, the UK does have one mitigating advantage, which is that it is at least arguably a post-religious society (cf. Sparrow, 2014). In countries where religion maintains its grip on the throat of society, especially those religions which confound the accident of birth with virtue, the ability to bring about progressive change is constrained even further.

That the possession of extreme wealth is unrelated to personal abilities is demonstrated by the paucity of creative or entrepreneurial talent among the 1% and the preponderance of bankers. That there is no relationship between long-term corporate performance and the excessive pay of leading executives has become well-established. Many are simply the offspring of individuals who made their money under dubious circumstances, like Donald Trump, David Cameron and the majority of the British aristocracy. They use at least part of their wealth on making sure their children are not susceptible to the vagaries of social mobility through the sponsorship of private health schemes and, in particular, private education:

"Theories of the inherent inferiority of the poor circulate among the elite. Often those theories are bolstered by an upbringing full of hints that privileged children are superior and born to lead. Consider how the world must seem through the eyes of a young scion of a wealthy family. As a boy, you attended a school in a suit and tie, maybe even a frock coat. You are aware that your 'education' cost an 'awful lot' – a fortune if you boarded. You might not know just how expensive it was by most people's standards. How can you make sense of your situation other

than by believing that you are somehow special, and that all this extra attention was in some way warranted? Your school might even help you firm up that belief by making you take an exam that only the truly gifted (they say) could pass (p.98).”

Dorling writes well and, as the acknowledgements indicate, has editors and readers to assist with any infelicities that might have infiltrated the text. He also writes with some passion, especially when dealing with the human costs of the crisis of austerity inflicted upon the British people by the Conservative-led coalition and the egregious George Osborne. This book was first published prior to the Conservative general election victory that gave that party a majority in its own right and an afterword deals with the impact of that unexpected outcome: “Lives are being destroyed, people shamed, and moral crimes verging on atrocities being committed. Many thousands of elderly women have died prematurely, many times the number [infamous mass murderer and medical doctor] Harold Shipman killed and each of them suffering a more painful fate than his lethal injections (p.187).” Dorling has the facts and the close analysis to support his claims (see, for example, Dorling, 2014). Britain is not part of the Eurozone and so its government has no requirement to inflict the misery of austerity on its poor; it is doing so by choice.

Inevitably, the question must be raised of what is to be done? Dorling hints once or twice that the political situation across the western world is becoming similar to those that have brought about revolutionary struggles in the past. He does not call for revolution but, choosing the path of Adam rather than Satan at the end of *Paradise Lost*, prefers the slow, difficult approach of kindness to all:

“What is needed is understanding and generosity, hope and perseverance, but above all kindness. Kindness is patient, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud, it is not self-seeking. Every kind action is worthwhile. The greedy waste their own lives through their greed. They are not worthy of envy (p.193).”

References

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