

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

CAN GREATER EQUALITY MAKE SOCIETIES STRONGER? DELVING INTO THE SPIRIT LEVEL FOR AN EXPOSÉ

by
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A Review of: **The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger** by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (Bloomsbury Press, 3rd Ed. – 2011)

“We write for the 99%” reads the slogan for the Occupied Wall Street Journal. (<http://occupiedwallstjournal.com/>) As one of several key slogans of the Occupy Wall Street movement, it highlights the scope, ambition, and potential strength of the social movement towards more equal societies. This movement has spurred synergistic endeavors not only among American citizens but also among citizens all over the world who are organizing up against the 1% of people believed to be put in charge of making the rules and ultimately widening the gap in the social equality scale by dint of their power. This surely makes one sit back and wonder why we, as citizens, have ended up having to take collaborative ingenuities vis-à-vis such historic movements like the Occupy Wall Street movement.

For sure, it would make Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett wonder! And wonder they did. In fact, they wondered ahead of most of us as their pre-Wall-Street-movement, eye-opening book (2011) attests. They have checked the inequality pulse and addressed two key questions: why did we get here and what lies ahead?

Though they are British citizens, Mr. Wilkinson and Pickett have demonstrated a strong familiarity with anything American in their presentation of the income and wealth inequality trends in relation to various health and social problems affected the 50 states of America and a host of other rich countries. The core implication of their findings is that inequality is a large problem in places where growing social failings can be observed, including in societies enjoying remarkable material success.

The book is divided into three main parts.

- In the first part, the authors consider material success and social failures and emphasize the need for an improvement in the psychological and social well-being of societies. In their view, in broken societies, values don't count for much, but rather, as the authors put it, what counts is “*where you come in the social pecking order*” (*Chapter 1 The End of an Era, page 13, paragraph 2, line 9*). Unequal societies can be observed to suffer almost all of the health and social problems typically present at the bottom of the social ladder. To support their argument, the authors assessed these problems in each country and U.S. states considered using a Health and Social Problems Index which they established by combining all the health and social problems data for each of these places.

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The authors documented a rise in anxiety levels in the U.S. between 1952 and 2003, which, they argue, can be attributed to the importance we give to the way other people see and think of us and to our drive to preserve our self-esteem amidst our social insecurities. One plausible explanation for the increasing trend in anxiety level over the last fifty years, they report, is the breaking up of established communities (where one's identity is normally rooted) presently swallowed up into the obscurity of mass society.

- In the second part of the book, the authors are even more thought-provoking as they invite us to consider the costs of inequality. In terms of community life and social relations, the authors contend that in unequal societies, there is also a break down in the quality of social relations given the existence of a social divider mainly as a result of how we mark status differences as a reflection of different living standards. The end result is that our social relations suffer as inequality inevitably affects trust, leading people to care less about one other, have less mutual relationships, and fall into a cycle of everyone-for-onese.

Also, in increasingly more unequal societies, the status of women becomes lost. There, more people can be observed to suffer from mental illnesses. This is especially true of adult women, yet almost non-existent with men. In terms of physical health and life expectancy, there is a also strong association between several health outcomes and inequality in both the USA and developed countries where poor people, who have to work harder and longer hours, do not have access to good food and medicine. Other factors impacting our physical health identified by the authors include happiness, optimism - as opposed to pessimism, and hostility and aggressiveness towards others.

A nexus between wider income gaps and obesity can also be strongly observed in developed countries, this relationship being more prominent for women than for men. This relationship between income inequality and obesity can be attributed to two key factors: calorie intake and physical activity. The authors also point to some social factors as influences of obesity.

Educational performance and income inequality are also examined; the findings? Unsurprisingly, parents with high incomes, a well grounded education, an adequate study area, and much material comfort in their homes tend to have children who perform better at school. The authors also contend that countries with greater welfare provisions tend to have higher reading scores and low social inequalities in reading literacy, all of which being further linked to the quality of the family life and parental relationships.

Teenage birth rates are also found to be strongly associated with relative deprivation and inequality. In communities with a high divorce rate and where low levels of trust and low social unity prevail, high unemployment, poverty, and high crime rates are the hallmarks. Moreover, there tends to be a higher teenage birth rate. The strong relationship between inequality and violence (or higher homicide rates) is also highlighted, this relationship being most prominent in comparison to the other affects of inequality, especially where gun ownership is allowed. Characteristics of unequal societies that exacerbate the link between violence and inequality include how much family life matters, how important schools and neighborhoods are, and the value placed on status competition.

Another interesting observation is how much higher rates of imprisonment can be observed in more unequal countries where lower-class people, having less income and education, are likely to end up in jail. It may be that in such societies, social distances between people are wider. There is a lack of trust and a fear of criminal behavior. Perhaps policy makers are also more readily prepared to send their citizens to prison and exhibit tougher disciplinary behaviors toward crime. Moving further, the authors demonstrate the strong relationship that exists between income inequality and inter-generational social mobility, pointing out that in the USA, starting in the 1990s, a rapid decline in social mobility combined with a sharp increase in the income gap has been observed.

- In the third part of the book, the authors shed light on certain key factors that need to be considered if we are to achieve a society where equality is conscientiously embraced so as to build stronger societal cohesion. It is clear that in the sample groups the authors had studied, strong relationships can be observed between income inequality and the Health and Social Problems Index. However, one social problem that the authors have identified as being more prevalent in more equal societies is suicide. As they stated, this could be because of an inverse relationship between suicide and homicide in more equal countries: *"anger sometimes goes in and sometimes goes out"* (Chapter 13 *Dysfunctional Societies*, Page 175, Paragraph 3, Line 8). The authors also consider other factors possibly accounting for the prevalence of health and social problems in unequal societies such as ethnicity, being a single parent, and some historical factors. But how societies arrived at their current predicament does not matter as much as the level at which they are at in terms of their levels of inequality. So is greater equality attainable?

The authors first point to our social inheritance. Greater equality gives rise to more sociable human beings. Striving for a more humane society is more practical than the unequal ones we live in where social structures only promote relationships based on inequality, inferiority, and social isolation, all of which great contributors to social pain.

Another path offered is that of sustainability. Rather than nurturing a mindset that will keep us from shifting away from materialism, individualism, and self-interested consumerism and thus from achieving a more sustainable economic system, we must first acknowledge that such manifestations are not inherent in human nature and societies and vary among rich democracies.

According to the authors, it is only by tapering the income gap within rich countries that we can promote more responsiveness on their part towards the needs of poorer countries. Furthermore, achieving a transformation of societies toward equality is possible without having to move either away from peaceful means or tamper with inconsequential policy options. What is needed is a road map that promotes society's own growth as well as its growth together with other institutions which it eventually might substitute or relegate. We must recognize that there are numerous routes that can be taken to arrive at the same destination.

The authors have identified two paths - interchangeable ones - and articulated consistent strategies, namely, using taxes and benefits to restructure big income gaps and, second, aiming for greater equality in gross incomes, thereby avoiding tax and benefit restructuring. This in turn could promote greater equality. As the authors point out, ultimately it all depends on the extent of the political will exerted to bridge the income gap. Some of the approaches suggested include dealing with huge pay rates at the top and establishing democratic employee-ownership schemes where governments provide tax concessions to promote employee share-ownership. Technological change within modern economies can also provide some key inferences for equality. Such changes have been observed to diminish variable costs, not just in technology *per se* but in other areas relating to it as well, such as biotechnology, electronically printed components, and genetic engineering. Emerging technologies like those holding the promise of more efficient solar power, reduction in the price of medicines, and the availability of greater and new economical materials can also promote more equality.

One of the key messages running throughout the book is that unrelenting efforts and a steadfast commitment towards policy changes dedicated to this end with a clear road map are needed to create more equal, and thus stronger, societies. As there will be an increasing dependence of modern societies on factors such as creativeness, adaptability, inventiveness, being well-informed, and flexible communities, as well as a society's munificent responsiveness towards each other and to requirements, generating political will is the top priority. It entails establishing an attainable and inspiring vision of healthier societies.

The much needed building blocks toward healthier and more equal societies offered by the authors clearly resonate well in today's world, not the least among the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Indeed, one doesn't need to look any further than the established social movements taking shape all around the world to gauge the relevance of *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*. The authors will be encouraged to see that the impulse to bring about changes is gathering momentum.