

Spotlight on ...

The Spirit Level

by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett

Lyndsay Grant and
Glen O'Hara

According to Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2009), almost all the problems we associate with life in modern developed societies can be traced to one common cause. This is a big idea, one that should radically change the way we think about politics, economics, fairness and social justice. The common factor they have identified has the power to help forge a society that is healthier, where people trust each other more, where children have higher literacy, where there is less stress, less violence, less drug dependence and less mental illness. While we are spending millions to tackle each of these problems individually, often with questionable results, there is one solution that could tackle them all at the same time. This shared answer is not, as many of our politicians would have it, to speed up and strengthen economic growth, forging policy in the fearful shadow of the markets' reaction as if they were some kind of capricious deity. Instead, it is greater income equality: if we want to do better we need to become more equal.

'A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members' (Mahatma Gandhi). Among developed nations, there is a general consensus that one of the functions of the state is to at the very least provide a 'safety net' that protects the poorest in society from the worst effects of poverty, while also taking steps to ensure that people have the opportunities – largely through education and entrepreneurship – to move out of poverty.

This focus on safety nets and social mobility has traditionally had little to say about the role of the rich. Indeed, both left and right have seen the growth of higher income groups as a way of

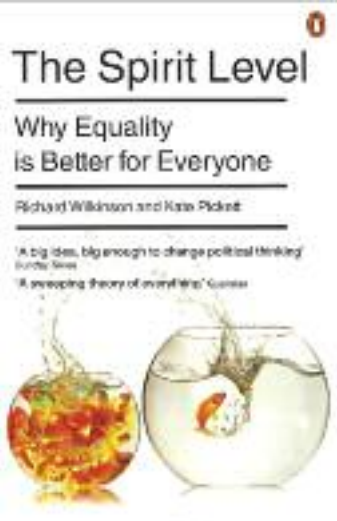
alleviating poverty, which is based on the idea that wealth would 'trickle down' from the richest to the poorest through job and business creation, or through higher tax revenues that can be spent on public goods and redistributive measures. In 1998, Peter Mandelson famously said that Labour was: 'intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich – as long as they pay their taxes'. Economic growth at a national level was seen as benefiting rich and poor alike, as 'a rising tide lifts all boats'. As long as the poor were also getting better off, why should it matter how wealthy the rich were becoming? The message of *The Spirit Level*, however, is that many of the problems we associate with poverty are not just to do with absolute wealth but also with the level of inequality between the richest and poorest people in society. Perhaps even more strikingly, inequality leads not just to worse outcomes for the poor, but for everybody. Greater equality means we all do better.

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The equality gap

Marshalling a formidable wealth of data, Wilkinson and Pickett plot a range of negative outcomes – reduced life expectancy, low educational qualifications, high crime, high proportions of teenage pregnancies, high incidences of mental health problems – against the level of income inequality within countries. In case after case a strong trend emerges: those countries, including the UK and US, with a higher degree of disparity between the highest 20% and lowest 20% incomes fare worse on measure after measure than more socially equal countries such as Japan, Sweden and Norway. So, while the poor in the highly unequal USA may be richer than the poor elsewhere (in terms of purchasing power), they fare significantly worse than their ‘poorer’ peers in more equal countries. In highly unequal countries, the difference in outcomes between the richest and poorest is seen more at every point along the scale; in unequal countries, people who are just a bit poorer than the richest experience many more problems. While these problems are felt most keenly at the bottom end of the scale, they extend the whole of the way up, meaning that countries with greater inequality have more problems as a whole.

From this perspective, it matters intensely just how filthy rich some people are becoming. The gap between the richest and poorest has increased in most developed countries over the last 30 years, and the UK has been no exception, despite the fact that the previous Labour government was, in cash terms, the most redistributive in Western Europe (Muriel *et al.*, 2010).

A ‘common sense’ argument against aiming to promote greater equality is that it is idealistic and unrealistic because some people are just better at

things than others and income inequality reflects this basic human inequality. Many also argue, somewhat paradoxically, that equality is unfair because it holds back the high achievers. But Wilkinson and Pickett’s international comparative analysis shows us is that the high levels of inequality we see in the UK are neither necessary nor inevitable. Achieving greater income equality, according to the thesis of *The Spirit Level*, achieves better outcomes for everyone – both the high achievers and the low. If we want higher levels of educational achievement overall we must address the underlying income inequality that means the poor fare far worse than the rich.

Social hierarchy

If it is the level of disparity between the rich and the poor that causes such a range of woes, how does it do so? The overarching explanation provided is that greater income differentials indicate the importance of social hierarchy within a country. Wilkinson and Pickett draw on research from many different contexts that shows how more rigid distinctions in social status play out on both psychological and social levels in ways that help explain many of the poor outcomes. As Oliver James (2007) argues, in advanced capitalist societies where status is more important, we place a high value on the acquisition of material possessions and looking good in the eyes of others, values that leave us vulnerable to depression, anxiety, drug abuse and mental illness. Where there are big differences between people’s incomes, the markers of social status – whether that be buying new cars or visiting the opera – are more important.

Social class, while most visibly expressed through cultural choices, has its foundations in economic differences between people. The social and cultural ‘capital’ that people are able to draw on further reinforces social class differences: social connections through friends and family give individuals access to opportunities, while children with the cultural knowledge about how to play the ‘rules of the game’ of school will achieve more highly. The entrenchment of social class differences in highly unequal societies also makes connections between people of different social status less likely: in more unequal societies people are more likely to count most of their friends as being of very similar status to themselves.



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Poverty, 'social exclusion' and the economics of happiness

In recent years, efforts to alleviate the problems experienced by those at the 'bottom of the scale' have been framed around a 'social exclusion' agenda. This approach constructs 'the problem' not so much as one of material poverty but of 'poor people, their behaviours, lifestyles, cultures and inadequacies of a multitude of differing kinds' (Mooney, 2007). It emphasises the need for the poor to take 'responsibility' for their own well-being, in particular to raise their aspirations for success, while sidestepping the role that inequalities of wealth, income, power and life chances play in shaping the opportunities and outcomes available to them, and indeed the role and responsibility of the wealthy and powerful. *The Spirit Level* is a timely reminder of the importance of material inequality in the face of a return to 'cultural' explanations of poverty.

The rhetoric of 'social exclusion' sees those individuals who are not able to succeed within the market economy as unfortunate exceptions to the norm. However, disadvantage, poverty and inequality are not exceptions, but integral and necessary parts of a system in which social stratification is used to create growing consumer demand for higher status goods. This continual desire and consumption form the basis of what is sometimes described as the 'hedonic treadmill', meaning that we never quite feel that we have 'enough'. As the metaphor of the treadmill indicates, while we continue to pursue our desires, we are effectively standing still: above an annual income of US\$25,000 per year, further wealth brings sharply diminishing returns in terms of individual happiness. In advanced capitalist societies, as the work of economic historians such as Avner Offer (2006) demonstrates, the treadmill runs ever faster, amplifying and extending inequality. The place of the poor in such systems is not therefore an aberration to the norm, but an essential element of the way the system functions.

As well as attempting to explain and address social exclusion and poverty through cultural and psychological approaches, there has been a recent popularisation of attempts to measure the success of nations in terms of their cultural and psychological wellbeing. The measurement of

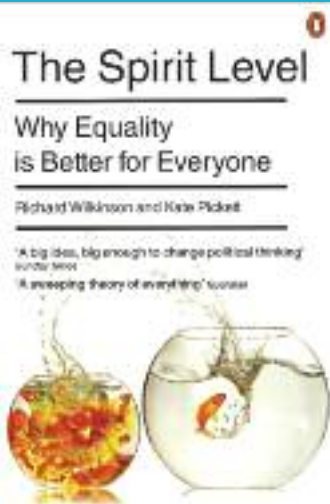
'Gross National Happiness', as pioneered by the King of Bhutan in the early 1970s; the emphasis on 'well-being' in the *Every Child Matters* education framework; and the recommendations of 'happiness tsar' Richard Layard (in 2005) to increase access to mental health therapies all provide a welcome counterbalance to attempts to measure success purely in economic terms. The recognition that simply earning more does not bring greater happiness prompts governments to measure, value and support other aspects of life such as the quality of the local environment and the extent of community involvement. However, *The Spirit Level's* restatement of the importance of material inequality also provides an important caveat to this trend: no amount of accessible green space makes up for the fact that you are far more likely to die young if you are a lot poorer than the richest in your country, and you are less likely to report high levels of happiness regardless of other indicators of well-being. Wilkinson and Pickett's message is that 'economic relations are social relations': in order to achieve better well-being and social relations, we must look to economic relations.

Inequality in a globalised world

While taking an international comparative approach has yielded strong insights for the authors of *The Spirit Level*, the implications of the argument can be extended further, by considering inequality in a more global and regional political economy. Inequality's entrenchment over the last 30 years has been both caused and experienced on a global and a regional level, creating what David Rothkopf (2009) has termed a new 'superclass' of individuals with privileged access to the new chains of production and exchange. These processes are 'regional' in two ways. First, on a supra-national level groupings as the European Union and the North American Free Trade Agreement have done much to reduce the power of local communities, to 'technologise' and thus neuter political and ideological debates. Second, on a sub-national level, inequalities between regions within each state have become ever more marked. In the UK, for example, affluent parts of London and the South East have become ever more divorced from the nation-state which surrounds them.

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Wilkinson and Pickett's analysis focuses on the differences between 'developed' nations. In poorer countries, where people are in need of basic housing, food and education, increasing economic growth does bring returns for the poorest, even if inequality also rises.

The work of the economic geographer Danny Dorling (2008), which is informed by a radical sense of world inequality, is useful in this global perspective. Through the use of cartograms, Dorling shows exactly how inequality works out in practice on a global scale: access to clean water, to raw materials, to education and to any number of other components of a decent life is largely determined by where you live – with the opportunities and outcomes available in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia severely reduced in comparison to richer regions (Dorling *et al.*, 2008). This point is relevant within the framework of *The Spirit Level*, for as Dorling points out, the footloose capital that has migrated to London, is one of the key reasons why London is



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the developed world's most unequal city. This insight would be impossible without a sense of the global, European and local trends that help us begin to address the question: does the relationship between inequality and social 'bads' revealed in *The Spirit Level* follow through at a local, continental or even world level?

Political and economic historical trajectories

Inequality itself can become a self-sustaining system, in which ever-more virulent competitive urges and social divides become increasingly

dominant. Yet, inequality itself should not be the only explanatory variable: we also need to ask how some countries have come to be more unequal than others. For example, quite different welfare models have arisen across developed nations. Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990) has helpfully analysed these as 'three worlds of welfare capitalism': the 'social democratic' model that has prevailed in Scandinavia for many decades in which welfare is a 'right'; the 'conservative', contractual model based around social insurance that still pervades French and German practice; and the liberal and neoliberal conception of safety net 'welfarism' for the very poor that dominates practice in countries such as the UK and USA.

British inequality, as the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm (1968) and others have noted, has very deep roots within the country's long industrial past. As the 'first' industrial nation, Britain experienced a gradual industrial revolution that left many artisanal practices and ideas in place. Skilled workers became increasingly powerful, at the expense of the unskilled, until the 'New Unionism' that emerged at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. It remained very difficult, therefore, to construct a Labour Party that reached across those divides within the working classes. The Labour Party also had the misfortune to be in power, as a minority government, when the Great Depression was at its fiercest, and then again during the austerity of the late 1940s. Many of its remedies and concepts were simply swept away by these crises, leading to long periods of Conservative rule. The situation elsewhere was very different: Scandinavian social democrats, for instance, were able to stitch together coalitions of small farmers, agrarian and industrial workers partly because internecine class rivalry was less strong between those groups than between different groups of British urban workers, and partly because they had the good luck to come to power after the Great Depression had done its worst. The British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was once asked what really governed the country: his reply was 'events'. Such changes over time may provide us with somewhat prosaic clues as to why some countries have achieved greater equality than others.

Achieving equality

The Spirit Level deserves to have its message not just considered but acted upon. It should also be a



cornerstone of any political agenda that seeks to not only minimise the effects of poverty but to achieve greater well-being for everyone. The themes outlined above – of global trends and historical trajectories – may help to approach the question of what remedies might be put in place to halt and reverse this slide towards inequality. While Wilkinson and Pickett advocate that the economy should be increasingly socialised around and through worker participation and co-operatives, we also need to take account of how synoptic global and historical systems evoke and then entrench these inequalities. Global and historical perspectives may prompt us to consider a range of measures including global economic governance that allows redistribution between as well as among nations; national and international political reform; and, above all, much more thorough individual and group involvement in economic as well as social change.

For teachers and students of geography, *The Spirit Level* provokes a number of further questions. Why are some societies more unequal than others? We need to add to the international comparison of nations a temporal analysis that considers the different historical, economic and political trajectories that have given rise to different dominant economic and social relationships within different countries. If we are concerned about

inequality in a context in which we are economically, socially and culturally interconnected in an increasingly globalised world, how do we deal with inequality between as well as within countries on a global and regional scale? And perhaps most importantly of all, if we agree with the thesis of *The Spirit Level* (and it is difficult not to) how do we act on this information? This is a book that should make us not only think differently but it also deserves to reshape the core political debates and aims of our times.

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spirit level definition: 1. a tool that contains a tube of liquid with an air bubble in it, used to show if a surface is level. Learn more. An extension of the spirit level is the bull's eye level: a circular, flat-bottomed device with the liquid under a slightly convex glass face with a circle at the center. From. Wikipedia. "The importance of the Spirit Level is that it provides a vital part of the intellectual manifesto on which the battle for a better society can be fought." - Roy Hattersley, The New Statesman. A fellow progressive friend of mine recommended that I read The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger by Richard Wilkinson, Kate Picket because it dealt with inequality and how it explains most of our societal problems which sounded very interesting. The Spirit Level does contain a powerful political message. It is impossible to read it and not to be impressed by how often greater equality appears to be the answer, whatever happens to be the question. It provides a connection between what otherwise look like disparate social. In half a page [The Spirit Level] tells you more about the pain of inequality than any play or novel could.™ John Carey, Sunday Times (UK). The Spirit Level. 2K likes. A supernatural road trip across the Australian paranormal landscape. See more of The Spirit Level on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of The Spirit Level on Facebook. Log In. Forgot account? The crudest form of the spirit level is the bull's eye level: a circular flat-bottomed device with the liquid under a slightly convex glass face which indicates the center clearly. It serves to level a surface in two perpendicular directions, while the tubular level only does so in the direction of the tube. The most sophisticated spirit levels are guaranteed accurate to five-ten-thousandth of an inch (.0005) per inch and are much easier to read because of their blue colour.