

Commentaries on *The Spirit Level from the perspective of Community Socialist Psychologists.**

These are three of the panel commentaries on the Spirit Level given at the European Community Psychology Congress in York, England, September, 2011 following a talk by one of the book's authors, Richard Wilkinson. These are comradely critical analyses of an important book that provides a reference point and resource for those of us working for a more just society.

Jim Orford – Birmingham, UK, offers a critique of the “psychology” in the Spirit Level.

Raquel Guzzo – Campinas, Brazil, offers a perspective from the global South.

Mark Burton – Manchester, UK, offers a critique of the political change strategies proposed in the book's final chapter.

* Wilkinson, R and Pickett, K (2010) **The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone** . Penguin.

The Social Psychology of Inequality: Commentary on the keynote address by Richard Wilkinson

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Like the other commentators I'm delighted to have been asked by the conference organisers to comment on Richard Wilkinson's presentation. I have followed and admired his work on social inequality for a number of years and I know how important it is. Anyone who has read his book with Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level*, will know that it is full of psychological ideas. In fact it is almost too full of psychology, spanning ideas at the individual level (such as shame, anxiety, cortisol), the interpersonal level (trust, control at work, confidence as parents) and the social structural level (spending on education, support for unions). Thinking about how community psychology might contribute to understanding inequality, I have concluded that one of the contributions we might make is to help Richard firm up on theory, to make a choice amongst the many theoretical possibilities.

My own inclination is towards a theory, not of how inequality gets 'under the skin' or into the brain, but rather how it operates in relations between people, specifically in the relations between classes of people. One thing about all the graphs in *The Spirit Level*, which show the relationship between income inequality in a country or state and the magnitude of some health or social problem, is that the latter are the very same outcomes which, within a country or state, show a relationship with socio-economic status. So these are the same kinds of problems which are more concentrated amongst the poor and which then show up in relationships, across countries and states, with income inequality. This surely gives us an important clue. An answer, I believe, lies in the idea of relative poverty, a concept that has been around in British sociology and social policy for some years ever since Peter Townsend brought it to our attention. Strangely, it is not a concept which Wilkinson and Pickett make much of. In the wealthy countries of the world, where the relationship between income inequality and social and health problems holds true, poverty in any absolute sense has largely ceased to be the problem. The

problem now is relative poverty. Free-market economists talk as if creating wealth and lifting people out of absolute poverty is all that matters. What many other people believe, and what Wilkinson and Pickett's work demonstrates, is that the distribution of wealth is just as important. In those wealthy countries where created wealth is most poorly distributed, citizens pay the price because, whilst absolute poverty has been reduced on the one hand, relative poverty is being created on the other.

The question then becomes, why is relative poverty bad for us? There are, I believe, two main, related reasons. The first is the struggle to keep up with what is required to lead a full life in a wealthy society. Material and career expectations and aspirations are higher than in poorer societies and higher than they were for earlier generations in richer societies. Examples are obvious: going to university is no longer a privilege for the few as it once was, but is now almost the norm; access to broadband connection in the home is almost a requirement for advancement; in most parts of our cities, appearing shabbily dressed, which once might have attracted little attention, is now a source of shame and embarrassment. None of that would matter if the wealth that had been created was equally distributed. The more unequally it is shared, the greater the struggle that the relatively poor experience in order to keep up or to cope with the fact that they are unable to keep up. Although the poorest are most affected, this affects almost everyone to some degree because we are all conscious that there are standards being set by those who are more wealthy than we are.

The second reason why relative poverty is bad psychologically lies, I suggest, in what inequality does to prevailing attitudes. The more income and wealth are distributed unequally, the more power is concentrated towards the upper end of the socio-economic distribution and the more divided classes within a society become. This has been noted by a number of British journalists in recent years, notably Polly Toynbee who uses the analogy of a caravan of families with their camels and possessions crossing the desert. They remain safe and secure so long as they remain closely together, but if they allow themselves to become too

disconnected their security is threatened. A very unequal society is one in which those in different income and wealth classes have become more separated from each other, less and less likely to mix and less and less likely to understand and sympathise with each other. The relatively well-off and powerful, whose views and opinions are more likely to hold sway, are more likely to see their less well off fellow citizens as 'other', more likely to blame them for their relatively impoverished circumstances, more likely to favour harsh treatment of those who do not conform, and, perhaps most important of all, less inclined to support policies which act to redistribute wealth and more likely to support those which concentrate wealth still further. As Daniel Dorling puts it in his recent book, *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists*, p. 270, 'Under high levels of inequality great untruths become presented as truths ...'

Why do people put up with inequality and the struggle to keep up and the class divisions and unsympathetic attitudes which it brings in its train? In many ways this is a modern version of the familiar problem of why the oppressed have put up with their oppression over the centuries. But in modern wealthy countries and states we are dealing with the more subtle but perhaps equally socially corrosive situation of relative poverty in the midst of riches. A number of social psychological theories which have come to prominence in recent years are relevant here. One is Social Justification Theory (SJT) which has it that it is psychologically uncomfortable to believe that there is something seriously wrong with the system of which one is part and upon which one is dependent. We are motivated, according to SJT, to reduce or avoid the anxiety we would experience if we thought that the system was unfair. That is particularly the case when the system is under threat, or is claimed to be, or when the position of those of higher power can be seen to be justified in some way, for example if they are thought to deserve their position, or are said to benefit us all by virtue of their position. Equally relevant, and better known, and mentioned by Wilkinson and Pickett in their book, is Social Dominance Theory (SDT) which maintains that social hierarchies are ubiquitous and maintained by hierarchy-enhancing myths such as the idea that redistribution of wealth restricts individual freedom, reduces incentives, stifles choice, discourages competition and encourages

dependency. Particularly powerful is the hijacking of ideas with positive connotations such as freedom and choice.

Finally, I want to raise a doubt I have about the philosophical basis upon which Richard Wilkinson is mounting his very persuasive case against inequality. His argument, pursued throughout *The Spirit Level*, is a utilitarian or consequentialist one: inequality is bad because it has harmful consequences, for example for people's health. But, in community psychology, social justice, in the form of distributive justice, is a fundamental value, a 'public good' in its own right. It does not need empirical support; it is valued for its own sake. I suspect that Richard Wilkinson is with us on that. Having some familiarity with what he writes, I would be very surprised if he were not a believer in equality whatever the empirical findings. However his graphs turned out, I suspect he would be a supporter of equality. In fact, could it be said that, having staked the case for equality on the epidemiological evidence, he is inviting empirical challenge. If others can show that the evidence is not as strong as he makes out – and there are those who have attempted to do just that – does the case for equality fall? I think not.

References:

Dorling, D. 2011. *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

Wilkinson, R. & Pickett, K. 2010. *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, London: Penguin.

**“Spirit Level – Why equality is better for everyone” – comments from a
Brazilian perspective.**

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Without any doubt, from my point of view and with plenty of evidence, social equality is better for everyone because we are human beings and there are no differences (cultural, historical and individual) to justify living life without equal rights to food, education, housing, work, health, respect and love.

We are able to think, feel and act to transform nature. We create social rules for coexistence, we find cures for diseases, we make foods and manufacture all kinds of things, and everything we need to live under different objective conditions.

The debate around the idea that “equality is best for all” can be further analysed from different perspectives on reality. Richard Wilkinson, in this book, presented the situation of some countries due to economic and social indicators calculated by elements of the current situation affecting living conditions in the countries highlighted. But since the main function of conjunctural analysis is to provide a realistic, systematic and articulated reading of a specific situation, different elements represented in this process produce different results from the analysis and different proposals for action. For this reason, discussion of Wilkinson’s ideas is important to deepen our understanding, especially in the direction of action – if we live in an unequal world and there is evidence that equality would be best for the survival of everyone, what should be the right direction to take? What constitutes the main element of equality: equal in which sense?

The discussion proposed by the author immediately raises a question about the elements presented in the analysis: wealth and poverty, in addition to the

economic sense are bearers of other subjective senses which are not captured in a quantitative analysis.

What does it really mean to be rich or poor? What does it really mean to be being happy? Feeling happy facing an objective life condition has a broad spectrum of elements within each type of culture and society. The criteria for establishing levels of wealth and poverty are objective – more possessions, more money, more property can be considered criteria for defining rich people or poor people as those who have more or less. However associating happiness and life dignity with having more or less money makes this debate vulnerable because we are discussing the welfare state for everyone and that is what, with no doubt, does not exist and is not possible in the capitalistic society. That means, within arbitrated variable universal policies, we must find facts and conditions that qualify the lives of all human beings in the planet, regardless of when or where they live and had lived here.

Another point of this debate is related to the questions of the value of the things on which a decent life depends: food, housing, education and every necessary thing we need to live. Necessary things, needed things, are not those whose need was created by capitalistic ideology. The prices or values from commodities and wages or salary gained from people's work are totally related – the more money, the more purchasing power. And the more you buy the more immediate life quality – this is the formula for high developed and capitalistic society. This relation, however, is not mechanical and absolute. There is much less association between getting rich and having a job. Capitalism does not provide benefits for all, and much less through working; people can become rich insofar as the rich countries have established a rich standard of life. These are myths fostered by capitalistic ideology to maintain the system. The contradictions between wealth accumulation and the distribution of wealth are impossible to solve within this system.

The thesis defended by Wilkinson, that living standards should be equalized in such a way to improve the life quality for everyone, must consider that psychosocial factors need to be presented in this formula.

In order to reflect the totality we should include in this analysis the dimensions from individual spirit to public or collective spirit. For Paulo Freire (1970/2006)¹,

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the man's striving for his own humanity requires the changing of structures which dehumanize both oppressor and oppressed and we need to learn from the oppressed perspective. In other words in an enormous range of inequality, the standards of having a good life must consider the perspective of oppressed and poor people.

Which structures must be changed in order to make possible a dignity of life? From all the information presented in Spirit Level, the economic structure is the most important factor. There is a big difference between a reform and a radical change of this structure. A psychology of oppression analyses the economic, historical and the construction of our society, including subjective elements that impact the inequality in life. Should the Spirit Level include the sense of dignity based on life experiences of colonized and oppressed people, the figures should be quite different.

For improving income distribution we need to change the economic system and the higher expectations of modern society. This is the big contradiction of this system – to deal with the inequality presented in the whole world we need to go to the roots, and that means reaching into the subjectivity of sociability that has been created to maintain this system. In that sense, deprivation is relative, low social state is not really the result of inferiority if we see from the opposite side. Health is not only the result of economic status, social hierarchy, or high income. Money is not the main power of life. We need to keep in movement towards a better direction and capitalism has already and historically proved that it is not the right way to live.

¹ Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of oppressed*. London: Continuum. 30th Edition (translated by Myra B. Ramos)

How to cure inequality: a commentary² on “The Spirit Level”

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The 'Spirit Level'³ is a major event and a vital tool in the pursuit of social justice – a concept that has also to include climate justice, something to which the book is alert. While I am going to make some critical comments it is important to keep in focus the book's importance and value in the struggle for a better world.

- 1) To start, it is worth noting that the book's focus is on equality of consumption (as the 'independent variable'), not equality of influence and power, of social resources, or of control and ownership of production. These are harder things to measure but represent the deep processes underneath the income differentials.
- 2) So the book's analysis of the generation of equality vs inequality is limited. It pays little attention to the role of the working class movement in producing concessions that led to equality gains. This occurred in two ways. Firstly by direct influence in workplace bargaining and fiscal policy through Trade Unions and Social Democratic parties in government, and secondly due to the competition faced by Capitalist states from the socialist countries.

Both these factors lost effectiveness from the 1970s onwards as the capitalist class found new solutions to the problems of declining profits, and implemented the neoliberal policies that led to the rise in inequality, especially in the Anglophone countries, but also elsewhere from 1979 onwards. It is also necessary to take into account the composition of Capital and industry within the nation state and the extent of subsidy from super-exploitation of resources and labour in the global South.

So what I am saying is that the Spirit Level insufficiently sees inequality to be a direct consequence of capitalism, made worse when Capital is freed

2 Invited panelist response presented at European Congress of Community Psychology, York, UK, September, 2011.

3 Wilkinson, R and Pickett, K (2010) **The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone** . Penguin.

from its mitigating counterbalances (the neoliberal project). *You can't take the politics out of the question.*

3. It follows that the political prescriptions in the book are inadequate. Now this is the most difficult thing to produce. Without the intervention of Wilkinson and Pickett there would be no basis for critique and thereby construction of a better strategy. But the change section (Chapter 16, "Building the Future") is reminiscent of the variants of socialism criticised by Engels in "Socialism Utopian and Scientific", an inadequate praxis that has its echo in much of the green movement today – for example in the critique of economic growth from the New Economics Foundation⁴. It relies on:
 - a) a rational appeal – present the evidence to society and reason will prevail.
 - b) The equalising effects of new technology
 - c) a localist approach to change – largely based on cooperatives and mutual entities.
4. There is also a rather worrisome 'progressivism', the idea that history is on the side of equality. I dispute this: there is nothing inevitable in this world dominated by a stricken capitalist system that lashes out at social models that threaten its hegemony.

In summary, the politics of *The Spirit Level* lacks a subject. Who is going to make these changes? Where is the leadership? What will be the mobilisation? And how will alternative social and economic forms become institutionalised? The lack of an adequate theory of the generation of inequality and the relationship between subject and transformation means an inadequate theory and practice of change.

I do think, however, that there are two ways in which the book can be used as a tool in the struggle.

1. It has a practical role in building a counter-hegemonic consensus – a new "common sense" that does challenge the inevitability of inequality, and

⁴ See my article "Sustainability: Utopian and Scientific"
<http://greendealmanchester.wordpress.com/sustainability-utopian-and-scientific/>

ideological binding for an effective social movement. The book's moderate language has its usefulness in bringing in those who would initially be scared off by, for example, a Marxist analysis.

2. The empiricist style *is* also helpful in re-establishing a narrative of social and economic justice. But haven't we been here before? The Black report on Health Inequalities appeared in 1980. Although suppressed by the Thatcher regime it did surface and was independently published. It failed to lead to a broad social movement and the killing continued⁵.

Finally I want to look at the question of cooperatives and mutuals as a vehicle for change because Chapter 16 emphasises this as a possible solution.

On the debit side, their share of the economy remains small. The interest of the present (and previous) UK government in them is as a smokescreen for dismantling collective welfare provision and allowing its penetration by Capital, so creating new profit centres: privatise your own health service. And evidence⁶ suggests that a society organised on cooperative lines does not naturally lead to equality since cooperatives end up competing. This is the lesson of Yugoslavia and Hungary (and to some extent the Soviet Union⁷). Funnily enough Thatcher's experiment in market socialism, the NHS internal market, has similar consequences⁸.

For co-ops to deliver greater equality there has to be a reconciliation between workers having a stake in their enterprise (on one hand) and the steering of the economy by a government controlled by popular participation (on the other). The current renovation of the Cuban model⁹ is a promising example to study over the next five years as these issues are grappled with on a national scale (and we can be sure that most coverage in the dominant media will be inaccurate and misleading).

But that's the prescription – of what should be. How can cooperatives and mutuals be linked with the capture of State power? This is where the notion of prefigurative *action*, prefigurative *research* and prefigurative *struggle are essential elements of praxis* – but it requires a coordinating nucleus if strategic

5 See <http://www.sochealth.co.uk/Black/interpreting.htm>

6 Devine, P (1988) *Democracy and Democratic Planning* Cambridge: Polity Press

7 Yaffe, H. (2009) *Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

8 <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/cmipo/publications/papers/2005/wp133.pdf>

9 <http://cubasocialistrenewal.blogspot.com/>

action is to be sustained and adequate to the transformational task. While the debate does (as Wilkinson and Pickett argue) have to be taken out of the left ghetto, real change to social and economic arrangements requires a political strategy - and the forces that represent the interests of unbridled Capital do have to be combated: persuasion has its limits.