

Dorling, D. (2010) Mean machine: Structural inequality makes social inequality seem natural, *New Internationalist*, 433, 20-21.

## **Mean machine:**

### **Structural inequality makes social inequality seem natural**

Don't be so hard on rich people who appear stupid. All of us are made less able, less imaginative and less mentally effective in more unequal, affluent societies. And it is only in *very* unequal affluent societies that the rich can be very rich. George Bush attended both Yale and Harvard Universities. Tony Blair, British Tory leader David Cameron and a small army of former prime ministers (and even more wanna-be-prime-ministers) studied in just a few elite Oxford Colleges.

All these men were made what they became largely by their circumstances, by growing up with structural inequalities so great that they could not easily understand the lives, motivations and unlimited potential of others because their own lives were so different, literally cloistered from late teenage years onwards.

George Irvin in his 2008 book, *Super Rich: The Rise of inequality in Britain and the United States*, suggests: 'Perhaps the most serious problem created by growing inequality is that it facilitates the reproduction of the politics and ideology of inequality.' Jane Kelsey in her 1997 study: *The New Zealand Experiment* showed how an entire nation could be made to think more callously through the introduction of greater inequality.

The level, content and clarity of public debate in more unequal, affluent nations falls far below that which most citizens of OECD countries enjoy. The outpouring of anger in the US over President Obama's watered down 'socialised medicine' proposals are testament to that. Almost anyone who lives outside of the US understands this and yet in that country 'Tea Party politics' passes for rational debate. Ask Canadians about why they would not live in the United States but make sure you have plenty of time to listen.

In more unequal European countries, such as Britain and Portugal, claims are made about people that would simply not be countenanced elsewhere in Europe. Elsewhere most people are far more trusting of their neighbours and do not look down on others so often as feckless and worthless. Nor do they consider that a few are worth their multi-million euro/dollar/pound salaries because they are somehow wonderfully gifted and need to be encouraged to get out of bed by such vast sums – because no-one else could substitute.

Living in a country where huge income and wealth inequalities are accepted as normal dulls everyone's capacities, from top to bottom. The well-known social critic, Noam Chomsky, was once asked how he responded at talks given to American audiences when he was asked, 'What should I do?' He replied he was only asked this by American audiences: 'I'm never asked this in the Third World... they don't ask you, "What should I do?" They tell you what they're doing... enormous privilege and freedom carries with it a sense of impotence, which is a strange but striking phenomenon...'

Evidence is slowly amassing that the impotence of US citizens is not a result of their apparent privileges or freedoms, but of the huge inequalities they live with. Equally affluent but far more equitable Norway, with a population at least 66 times smaller than the United States, shows what a people can do when not so encumbered by inequality. Norwegians each generate 5.55 times more international assistance than US citizens and they spend it far more effectively.

In Japan, through a translator I can have conversations with young people from the poorest fifth of society about income distribution and inequality that would simply not be possible in England. In England I would have to try not to use the word ‘distribution’ and I would have to cope in my conversation with the near certainty that the people I was talking to would have no accurate idea what average wages were or what the best-off fifth of households received in income a year, what their wealth was, or even what a ‘fifth’ was – even with what a fraction means as a concept.

Sadly it is because the poorest young people in unequal rich countries are so badly schooled – that the richest don’t even realize that their education was not great. They assume that they, the richest fifth, have received a ‘good’ education and often say they are ‘privileged’. The richest fifth in Britain and the US also have almost no idea of how unequal income and wealth distribution have become, but they are often taught to bluff an understanding of the word ‘distribution’, or the mathematics of fractions.

So how does a nation made stupid by rising inequality get out of its hole? People have to think their way out. They did this before when inequalities fell in the United States and United Kingdom, consistently from 1918 to 1978. They can do this again with the help of lessons from abroad. And they can do it by waking up one day and thinking: 'I'm never going to be rich, but there is no need for me to be ignorant. I can start to teach myself about what's going on.'

**Danny Dorling** is Professor of Human Geography at the University of Sheffield. His latest book is *Injustice: why social inequality persists*.

### **Tops in inequality**

Of all the 25 richest countries in the world (excluding very small states), Singapore, the US, Portugal, the UK and Israel are the top five most unequal when the annual income of the best-off tenth of the population is compared with the poorest tenth. For example, the top 10% in the US makes 15.9 times more than the bottom 10%. See footnote 37, p323 of Dorling's book, *Injustice: why social inequality persists*.

17.7 Singapore	15.9 US	15 Portugal	13.8 UK
13.4 Israel	12.5 Australia	12.5 New Zealand	11.6 Italy
10.3 Spain	10.2 Greece	9.4 Canada	9.4 Ireland
9.2 Netherlands	9.1 France	9 Switzerland	8.2 Belgium
8.1 Denmark	7.8 N Korea	7.3 Slovenia	6.9 Austria
6.9 Germany	6.2 Sweden	6.1 Norway	5.6 Finland
4.5 Japan			