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Reviews

Book Review

Injustice: Why social inequality persists

By Danny Dorling

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Britain is one of the most unequal countries in the world. There is a greater disparity between the top 20 per cent and the bottom 20 per cent than our immediate neighbours in France, Germany, Italy and Scandinavia¹. Just 1 per cent of the population owns 23 per cent of the marketable assets in the UK and the top 10 per cent owns about half the assets and receive almost a third of the total income². In this book, Danny Dorling, Professor of Human Geography at the University of Sheffield, argues that this is not natural but is caused by deliberate social, economic and political choices. He shows that although inequality was consistently reduced in the UK between the 1920s and the early 1980s, it has since that time grown significantly and been maintained. He goes on to explore the assumptions, values and ideology that sustain and legitimise this situation and discusses the wider social effects.

In his seminal work that shaped the creation of the welfare state, William Beveridge argued that there were five social evils that needed to be slain by the post-War New Jerusalem³. These were the lack of: education (ignorance), money (want), work (idleness), comfort (squalor) and the lack of health (disease). By focussing on

these, the 'welfare state' reduced inequality systematically and sustainably. However, the rise of the New Right in the UK and USA in the 1980s saw an erosion of the welfare state and the emergence of a more individualised and marketised society. Dorling argues that with the amelioration of these five social evils and the consequent reduction of inequality they have been replaced by five tenets of contemporary injustice: elitism is efficient; exclusion is necessary; prejudice is natural; greed is good, and; despair is inevitable. Although these beliefs and values are not openly articulated, Dorling argues that they underpin contemporary economic, social and political thought.

The first of these new tenets is elitism. Education has been improved and expanded, with illiteracy virtually eliminated and higher education more accessible. However, in place of ignorance, Dorling argues that elitism has grown as reflected in the belief that some people by birth, ability or application deserve to hold power and prestige. He challenges these ideas by exposing that the attainment of qualifications and access to the most prestigious institutions is still skewed by birth and parental wealth. The idea that these individuals are somehow super-human legitimises these inequalities.

The second tenet sees exclusion as a necessary consequence of the individualised, competitive environment that promotes 'winners' and 'losers'. Those who win can buy themselves out of accountability and scrutiny, whilst those who lose are in precarious roles and are left without

the protection of unions, good contractual conditions and pay. This bifurcation of the top and the bottom, it is argued, arises from the market philosophy that has come to dominate. Third, Dorling describes how those who are on the margins are the subject of scorn, and that this prejudice is seen as natural. He describes how those living in poverty are represented as feckless, dangerous and a drain on the state. He goes as far as to suggest that they are seen as sub-human and describes how certain groups — migrants, excluded youths or those in poor estates — are demonised as being inherently inferior. He illustrates how seeing groups in this way compromises their human rights and legitimises oppressive measures being taken against them.

Fourth, Dorling argues that greed is perceived as good and that the excess wealth of the rich and famous is presented as the ultimate achievement. However, Dorling describes how competitive individualism and the desire to retain perceived status is a source of stress and insecurity for many people and has contributed to Western over-borrowing which led to the financial collapse of 2008. Fifth, Dorling argues that although physical health provision has improved, the contemporary world is characterised by growing levels of mental health problems including anxiety and depression. He argues that this is not inevitable but instead that individualism, competitiveness and inequality have left people feeling a profound sense of malaise and despair.

By tackling these themes, Dorling's book complements an illustrious body of work. By

1. Wilkinson, R. & Pickett, K. (2009) *The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone* London: Penguin.
2. Rudge, T. & Wright, S. (eds) (2008) *Understanding inequality, poverty and wealth* Bristol: Policy Press.
3. Beveridge, W. (1942) *Social insurance and allied services* London: HMSO.

exposing the unarticulated but fundamental assumptions that underpin and legitimise inequality, this carries out a similar role to Stanley Cohen's great work on the ways that human rights abuses are justified and denied⁴. In illuminating the psychological scars and social effects arising from contemporary society, this work also is linked to that of Richard Sennett unpicking the harmful consequences of 'New Capitalism' for modern workers⁵. In addition, by attempting to muck-rake and agitate for greater equality, this book can be seen as a companion piece to Richard Wilkinson and Katherine Pickett's *The Spirit Level*⁶. In common with these works, Dorling offers a provocative and often uncomfortable critique of what many of us take for granted.

In discussing how this can be challenged, Dorling argues that change must start with individuals. He suggests that his book is a means through which readers can start to question their own way of thinking and behaving. For those working in prisons, this book will also raise some challenging questions about the use of criminal justice and imprisonment. When one considers that prison has disproportionately high numbers of Black people and is almost exclusively concerned with the socially excluded⁷, is this because they are inherently more criminal or is this the result of how 'crime' is defined and how the criminal justice system operates? Are the wealthy and powerful virtually excluded from prisons because they are law-abiding or is it because the harms they cause are not defined as 'crime' or they are able to resist and evade accountability⁸? In the reflective reader, this book raises uncomfortable questions about

whether, in common with other social institutions, imprisonment is a means through which inequality is maintained and entrenched.

This book holds a mirror to contemporary society and reflects back a stark and honest image. At times it feels like having the blinkers lifted to see how things are and appreciate that they don't have to be that way. Any work that can open up new ways of looking at the world comes highly recommended and this book does that in spades.

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Book Review

People with Intellectual Disabilities: towards a good life?

By Kelley Johnson and Jan Walmsley with Marie Wolfe
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Johnson, Walmsley and Wolfe's collaboration ambitiously aims to 'challenge the values, the expectations and the ideas of those who exercise power over the lives of people with intellectual disabilities or other marginalised groups' (p 10). This book is presented as a journey of exploration which tells the 20th century history of approaches to intellectual disability in terms of a series of problematisations, critiques and reformulations of policy towards intellectually disabled people and, having done so, it mounts a fresh critique of existing policy.

The account of the emergence of institutional care in the early 20th century, the transition to community care in the second half of the 20th century, and more recently the development of market-based personalised services for intellectually disabled service-users is clear but not particularly original. Integrated into this history, however, is an insightful account of the way in which, since the 1980s campaigners and policy makers have been focused on providing for the intellectually disabled an 'ordinary life' or a 'life like any other.'

A life that is merely ordinary is not, Johnson and Walmsley note, one that many of us choose to make the object of our own endeavours. But existing policy has, they claim, focused on establishing for disabled and intellectually disabled people rights to the ordinary goods citizens are deemed to enjoy — most notably, in the contemporary context, individual autonomy and access to employment. And, they argue, an emphasis on the goal of an ordinary life for intellectually disabled people has led to a focus — sometimes an obsessive, unrealistic and unresourced focus — on work as the ultimate badge of citizenship, work as the ultimate gateway to social inclusion.

But, Johnson and Walmsley argue, instead of thinking in terms of providing an ordinary life for intellectually disabled people, we would do better a focus on creating the conditions for a 'good life'. With a good life at centre stage, they say, policy will be more inclined to recognise and confront gaps such as that between the rhetoric of living an independent life in the community and the isolation often experienced by intellectually

4. Cohen, S. (2001) *States of denial: knowing about atrocities and suffering* Cambridge: polity Press.

5. For example Sennett, R. (2006) *the culture of the new capitalism* New Haven: Yale University Press.

6. Wilkinson & Pickett. (2008) see n.1.

7. Social Exclusion Unit (2002) *Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners* London: Social Exclusion Unit.

8. For example see Hillyard, P. et al (2005) *Criminal Obsessions: Why harm matters more than crime* London: Crime & Society Foundation.

disabled people. Similarly, a focus on a good life for the intellectually disabled would encourage reflective questions about the nature of the work that they are encouraged to do, and indeed the question of what constitutes a good life for those unable to work. A focus on a good life, as opposed to an ordinary life would go beyond providing the basic conditions for 'normal' living, whilst drawing attention to the unique journey each individual must make as they imagine and pursue a good life for themselves. As well as providing basic goods such as decent housing and access to work, this perspective would draw more attention and resources to the cultivation of capacities that are required to exploit and enjoy those goods. Drawing on the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, the authors highlight the need to equip intellectually disabled people with such things as a sense of affiliation, imagination, and a rich internal life.

The authors, it should be noted, are not prescriptive about the content of a good life, arguing that each individual needs to imagine and pursue it for themselves. However, based on a brief review of the concept in Western philosophy, they suggest that it is likely to consist of some combination of pleasure, virtue, duty, happiness, the use of reason, freedom and constraint. Johnson and Walmsley admit they are no experts in the field, however the

coverage of this topic is disappointingly thin given its centrality in their argument.

The most compelling insight provided by this book is the way in which an 'ordinary life' as a focus of policy has, in recent years, led to insufficiently ambitious interventions and policy which have been organised around concepts and ideals that have dominated wider political thinking about the relationship between government and citizens. Individual choice, individual budget holding and access to the workplace have all been posited as solutions to the problems faced by intellectually disabled people, with insufficient attention paid to the ways in which individuals with intellectual disability may or may not be able to meaningfully exercise choice, manage their own care and support, or find meaningful work.

However, although a few examples are used to sketch out ways in which carers can address some of the difficulties that arise, from a practical perspective the main flaw in the book is that it gives way to calls for more investment in training and resources for carers whilst offering no proposals for creating the political will needed to realise these things. Having said that the core argument — for a focus on a good life, as opposed to an ordinary life for intellectually disabled people — is one which can be applied readily and productively

by all those who work with intellectually disabled people.

Reflecting on the book in an operational prison context, I am encouraged when I recognise occasions when staff have intuitively applied Johnson and Walmsley's arguments for some prisoners with intellectual disability. However it is, perhaps, relatively easy to provide individualised support for a minority of individuals with the most evident special needs. More broadly, and in the light of the Johnson and Walmsley's claim that their arguments can be applied to all those exercising power over marginalised groups, it is fitting to ask the challenging question of whether policy regarding the wider prison population devotes attention to 'ordinary' goods such as housing and employment, at the expense of resourcing offenders to imagine and to live a 'good life' in prison and subsequently in the community. There are, undoubtedly, many examples of prison based programmes that go this extra stage. Nonetheless there remain many occasions when we might do well not just to ask if prisoners have their basic, 'ordinary' needs met but to ask the more ambitious question of what could be done to facilitate each individual's journey towards a good life.

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