

Friday 28 May 2010

A 'theory of everything' that explains nothing

The author of *The Spirit Level Delusion* explains why Britain's chattering classes were so wrong to embrace *The Spirit Level* and its argument that all of society's problems are caused by inequality.

Christopher Snowden

If the age of innocence is dead, how do we explain the phenomenal success of *The Spirit Level*? Perhaps it's the recession. 'In these gloomy times', wrote Peter Wilby in the *New Statesman*, 'this work should cheer you up no end'. But why should we Brits find it such a tonic? *The Spirit Level*, which has the self-explanatory subtitle 'Why more equal societies almost always do better', spends 300 pages telling us how ghastly Britain is compared to the workers' paradises of Scandinavia and the egalitarian nirvana of Japan.

If we rule out the 'feel good factor' as a reason for its success, perhaps it's the halo of science that hangs over the book, written by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett and published in 2009. According to former Labour Party deputy leader turned newspaper columnist, Roy Hattersley, the book 'demonstrates the scientific truth of the assertion that social democrats have made for a hundred years'. But while the book's authors are social epidemiologists, even the casual reader can see that the science amounts to little more than a handful of crude scatter-graphs. If, as is sometimes said, epidemiology is a poor cousin of science, the ecological study (attempting to draw conclusions using aggregate data from entire nations) is the poor cousin of epidemiology. A randomised double-blind trial this is not.

Or maybe it's the appeal of what the *Guardian* described as 'the theory of everything'. In a world of infinite complexities, *The Spirit Level* offers us reassuring simplicity. According to Wilkinson and Pickett, almost everything can be explained by a single factor. Infant mortality, murder, health, obesity, mental illness, trust, drug use and even recycling all have a common cause: inequality. Not - it must stressed - poverty or deprivation, but the psychological damage of living in a country with a wide gap between rich and poor. Pick any social problem, say the authors, and it will be worse in unequal hell-holes like Australia and America.

This would be Nobel Prize-winning stuff if it were true, but remarkably few of *The Spirit Level's* claims stand up to serious scrutiny. Its authors say, for example, that 'more equal' countries have lower rates of obesity, teen births, homicide and infant mortality. But all of these assertions largely rest on the 'more equal' Japanese doing better than the 'less equal' Americans. Maybe inequality really is the root cause of these differences, but we must at least entertain the possibility that Asian countries are culturally, historically and physiologically different from Anglo-Saxon nations.

To find out, we would need to look at some other Asian societies. The twin elephants in the room are Singapore and Hong Kong, both of which perform superbly under almost every criteria despite having the most extreme gulf between rich and poor. If, as Wilkinson and Pickett insist, there is a cause-and-effect at work, there should also be a dose-response relationship—the least equal countries should do worst. In fact, these two bastions of unabashed capitalism do conspicuously well. Or rather they would do, if Wilkinson and Pickett showed us the data. Singapore is mentioned only occasionally in *The Spirit Level*, and Hong Kong not at all.

Also notable by their absence are places like Slovenia, South Korea and the Czech Republic, all of which enjoy Nordic levels of income equality without reaching Nordic levels of wellbeing. Not that

Scandinavia is quite the Valhalla portrayed in *The Spirit Level*. Much is made of a survey showing Scandinavians to be a trusting bunch, but to say that they 'do better' requires the reader to turn a blind eye to the high rates of divorce, crime, alcoholism, mental illness and suicide that are also characteristic of these countries.

Turning a blind eye is something Wilkinson and Pickett have to do rather often. Like any monotheistic belief system, inconvenient facts which challenge the faith must be ignored. Consequently, they dwell on the tendency of 'less equal' countries to have larger prison populations without ever mentioning the more pertinent (and not coincidental) fact that these countries also happen to have lower crime rates. They tell us that citizens of egalitarian nations are more philanthropic because their governments put more money aside for foreign aid, without mentioning that these people also give significantly less money to charity. They tell us that infant mortality, homicide, heart disease and teen births are caused by inequality, and yet these problems have become much less common in the very countries where inequality has increased most sharply.

Vast differences between whole nations are glossed over as if they have no bearing on how these countries perform. Issues such as America's murder rate and Japanese longevity have long been the subject of rational discussion by experts in the field and there are sound and logical reasons for both, just as there are cultural and biological reasons why rates of infant death and teen birth vary between countries. In *The Spirit Level*, the complexities of entire academic fields are reduced to rudimentary - and frequently misleading - scatter-graphs.

What Lynsey Hanley in the *Guardian* describes as an 'inarguable battery of evidence' has breathed new life into a hypothesis that has been tried, tested and rejected many times before. The 'theory of everything' is really just a rebranded version of the relative-income hypothesis, which has never enjoyed a great deal of credibility with economists. International surveys show that more equal countries are no happier than other nations and when *The Economist* published its Quality of Life index in 2005, the relative income theory was explicitly rejected: 'There is no evidence for an explanation sometimes proffered for the apparent paradox of increasing incomes and stagnant life-satisfaction scores: the idea that an increase in someone's income causes envy and reduces the welfare and satisfaction of others. In our estimates, the level of income inequality had no impact on levels of life satisfaction.'

Central to the whole theory is the notion that inequality leads to poor health and shorter lifespans, but this too has been serially debunked. It is a subject close to Richard Wilkinson's heart, as it was he who first floated the idea in the *British Medical Journal* in 1992. A flurry of research followed, but 10 years later an editorial in the same journal concluded: 'Now that good data on income inequality have become available for 16 Western industrialised countries, the association between income inequality and life expectancy has disappeared.'

Heedless of criticism, the inequality/life expectancy theory reappears in *The Spirit Level* to support Wilkinson and Pickett's dubious assertion that 'unequal societies are almost always unhealthy societies'. This rather depends on which societies you look at. The graph Wilkinson and Pickett use to make their case (see figure 1) uses data from 2002 and, as usual, excludes a number of important countries. If we use more recent life expectancy figures and show all the rich countries, the association with inequality disappears, replaced with a modest trend in the other direction (figure 2).

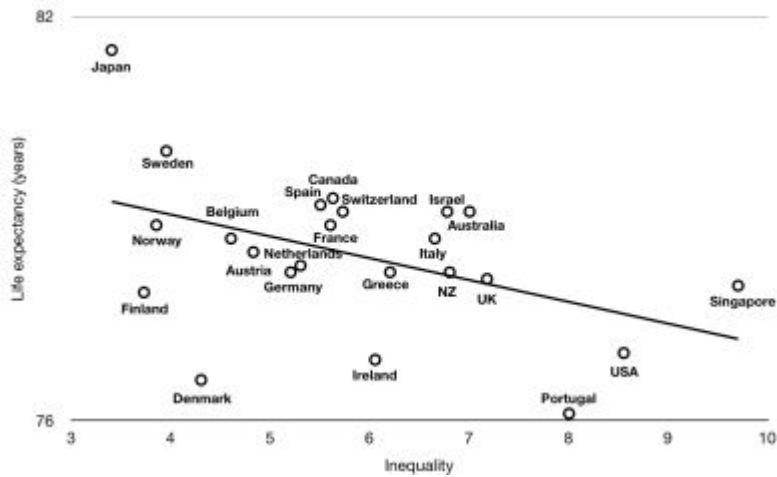


Fig 1: inequality and life expectancy graph, *The Spirit Level*

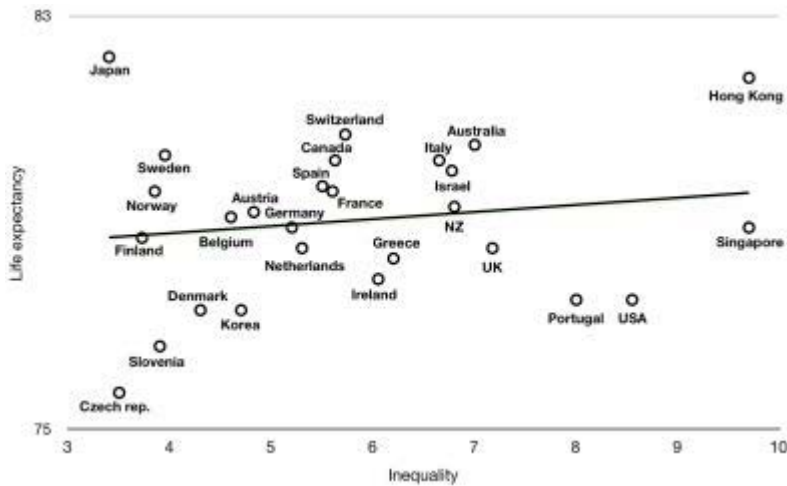


Fig 2: inequality and life expectancy graph, UN (2006)

Much the same is true of the other graphs upon which Wilkinson and Pickett rely. As any statistician knows, if you torture the data it will confess to anything, but – as I show in my new book *The Spirit Level Delusion* – the facts simply do not support the idea that people in ‘less equal’ countries have shorter lives, worse mental health, longer working hours, less respect for women, wider waist-bands or substandard educations. Nor are people in more egalitarian nations any happier or any less likely to be raped or murdered.

The only real difference between ‘less equal’ and ‘more equal’ countries is the size of the government and the amount it takes in tax, rising from less than 15 per cent of gross domestic product in Singapore to almost 50 per cent in Denmark. The fact that Singapore outperforms Denmark under almost every measure of what makes a country ‘do better’ only serves to underline the folly of *The Spirit Level* and, by association, the futility of its political agenda.

That this agenda takes the form of zero-growth economics and eco-authoritarianism perhaps explains why journalists at the *New Statesman* and the *Guardian* have been so willing to suspend disbelief when confronted with such an improbable explanation for the problems of all mankind. It seems not to have struck them as odd that two left-wing epidemiologists were able suddenly to

unearth a 'theory of everything' which had eluded the world's finest minds for generations. To *The Spirit Level's* legion of admirers, this uncanny turn of events is only proof of Wilkinson and Pickett's unique genius. A more prosaic explanation is that the grand unifying theory had not been unearthed because it was never there.

***The Spirit Level Delusion: Fact-Checking the Left's New Theory of Everything*, by Chris Snowdon, is published by Democracy Institute/Little Dice (Buy this book from [Amazon\(UK\)](#).)**

reprinted from: http://www.spiked-online.com/site/reviewofbooks_article/8934/