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Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett:
The Spirit Level: Why Equality Is Better for Everyone

London 2010: Penguin, 368 pp.

In the short time since it was first published, this book has provoked considerable debate. Written in a highly readable format, with pithy illustrations and a wealth of simple but very informative graphs, the book has gained a wide readership that includes politicians of every hue. The authors wanted to reach a broad audience, and have certainly succeeded in doing so.

The book addresses in a systematic and powerful manner the very foundation of developed market societies—social inequality. It does this from within an epidemiological framework, rather than one that centres on 'the individual'. It starts from the apparent paradox that differences in life expectancy among the wealthy market economies are not related, as might be expected, to the average incomes of those societies, but rather to how equal or unequal the societies are. This was the subject of Richard Wilkinson's well-publicised earlier research. What this book does is to bring together official data and the results of a multitude of research studies on the basis

of which the authors are able to compare countries—and states within the US—according to level of inequality and prevalence of a range of social problems in addition to health. What is remarkable is that they are able to bring evidence to bear which shows that the level of social inequality within a rich country or a US state is linked to a startlingly wide range of social problems: more unequal societies not only are less healthy, they have more mental illness, more homicides, more teenage pregnancies, more obesity, higher rates of imprisonment, less social mobility, and lower levels of social trust.

For example, at opposite ends of the inequality spectrum are the US and Japan, who also display radically different approaches to imprisonment. In the US, prison populations have been increasing since the 1970s, but only 12% of the huge increase was due to a rise in crime, most is accounted for by longer sentences—in 2005 there were 360 people in California serving life sentences for shoplifting crimes. The rate of imprisonment is 14 times lower in Japan. The judicial system there operates with relative flexibility, defendants tend to show humility and remorse, and custodial sentences may be suspended even for relatively serious crimes. The repressive approach is not more effective—more punitive systems also seem to have higher re-offending rates. In another example, both homicide and teenage pregnancy and birth rates rose in the US until the early 1990s, then fell until 2005/6—data show this was mirrored by changes in social inequality. Inequality increased until it reached a peak in the early 1990s, with a decline in inequality from then until the year 2000. In yet another example evidence is cited suggesting that educational performance is not simply an individual or family affair: research into literacy scores in relation to parental level of education in the USA, the UK, Belgium, and Finland, found that even if parents are well-educated, the country a

person lives in makes some difference to educational performance. The difference is much greater further down the social scale; average levels of performance are linked to the slope of the socio-economic gradients. Obesity is another social issue whose prevalence is linked to social inequality. More adults are obese in countries that are more unequal, as well as in more unequal US states, with a stronger relation between obesity and inequality in the case of women than in the case of men. Finally, more homicides occur in countries that are more unequal. The US, the most unequal country, has a murder rate of 64 per million, more than four times higher than the UK, and more than 12 times higher than Japan.

How is it, the authors ask, that despite such unprecedented levels of wealth having been generated in these countries, so much suffering and unhappiness has also been produced? And it is not just the people at the poorer end of the scale that pay the price. For example, in unequal societies, people at the top end of the scale are less healthy than people in the same income category in more equal societies. At any level of education or personal income, someone's quality of life will be higher if he or she has the same level of education or income but lives in a more equal society. How does this happen? Here Wilkinson and Pickett point to the evidence that emphasises the negative effect on health of stress, and to the fact that stress reactions are magnified by 'social-evaluative threat'—a threat of loss of social esteem. They link this to the way living in a market democracy, social status tends to be read as defining a person's worth—if you don't want to feel small or disregarded and experience shame, it helps to avoid low social status. The evolutionary importance of shame and humiliation, they say, offers a plausible explanation of why more unequal societies have more violence. In unequal societies the stakes are raised, because

inequality increases the importance of social status, in turn increasing people's social evaluation anxieties. We tend to use signs of wealth and living standards as markers of people's different status, they suggest, and this leads to social divisions, lack of empathy and trust. The argument is corroborated by evidence which shows how countries where income differences are greater have lower levels of trust. Of the large cities in the US, New Orleans is one of the most unequal, and this, the authors say, contributed to the mistrust and confrontations that were witnessed there after Hurricane Katrina.

The book has had its critics, some on issues relating to interpretation, others more ideologically fuelled. The pattern that has been created is compelling, even if at some points the argumentation may seem a bit sweeping, as in a passage on the consequences of absent fathers. Overall, there is no doubt that the book packs a powerful punch. With its highly accessible format, the many public talks that have been held to discuss its contents, and in the founding of the Equality Trust (www.equalitytrust.org.uk), the authors clearly hope that what they have written will contribute to activism that will bring about social change. In this, they reveal a basic optimism with respect to what public opinion can achieve. Yet the terms on which the recent financial crisis has settled with a bonus culture surviving and the worst-off bearing the costs—or the relentless progression towards the privatisation of the National Health Service now being pushed forward in Britain in the face of rational argument and public opposition, not to mention the extent to which academic standards can be corrupted to that end, can make such optimism seem an achievement in itself.

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