

# Equality is Better for Everyone

Denis Gildea reviews

## *The Spirit Level*

by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett

Penguin revised pbk edition (London 2010). 346 pages. £9.99.

Five years ago Richard Layard published *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (reviewed in *Sofia* 73, September 2005), which showed clearly that our pursuit of wealth beyond a modest level did not make us happy. He also researched what kind of things increased or diminished the happiness of individuals, mainly by asking them in polls. But even after our faith in the infallibility of market forces, and the objective of maximising profits, incomes and consumption was badly shaken in October 2008, we have still not transferred our objective to The Greatest Happiness.

Now, in a similar direction, we have a really solid work based on masses of published statistics, leading to the conclusion, in one sentence: 'The evidence shows that reducing inequality of incomes is the best way of improving the quality of the social environment, and so the real quality of life for all of us, including the better-off.'

The authors collected data for health and social problems in 23 rich countries, and related them to the degree of inequality in each country, measured as the top fifth of incomes divided by the bottom fifth. The points covered were:

- Level of Trust
- Mental Illness, including addiction to drink and drugs
- Life expectancy and infant mortality
- Obesity
- Children's educational performance
- Teenage births
- Homicides
- Imprisonment rates
- Social mobility

The middle part of this book contains the statistical research. If you find seeing so many graphs a bit daunting, don't be put off. They are all basically the same graph, with different figures, and they yield some fascinating comparisons. But you can skip them and just read the text. The main thing that stands out is that USA is the worst for inequality and pretty well all the problems, and is followed next by UK and Portugal. The winners are usually Scandinavia and Japan. It confirms my previous impression that UK was not too bad for inequality before about 1980. This

is the most solid reading, but since the method is repeated, you can go a bit faster or do some skipping if you want to.

Part 3, 'A Better Society', is diverse and fascinating, relating this new measure to some other ideas and ideals we may already have, and eventually coming to what we can do about it. It deals with the point that correlation is not the same as causality. It

compares us to the apes and to stone-age men, who were better than we are at equality and sharing, and goes into the psychology. Social status stratification and competition are the opposite of friendship and giving. Corporate power and the developing world are dealt with. Co-ownership with participation is recommended as an alternative to the stock exchange system. The quickest move to equality took place in the 1940s, with rationing and an enthusiastic people working together. The idealism continued for some thirty years, and included the formation of the European Community and the development of some conscience about the Third World, until around 1980, when we had the big reversal to the sanctity of market forces, and maximising profit, income and status. The measure of the success of government economic policy is Economic Growth, but the rich countries must abandon this for reasons of sustainability and climate change. Moving towards equality is very nearly a panacea for all our common problems. The book finds many signs that show some progress.

Writing during the election campaign, I note that the word 'fairness' is creeping in, but there is not yet any mention of Equality, and no party seems to want to tax the rich with a properly progressive income tax, as we had in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. I am filled with enthusiasm about this book, and hope many of us will read it, and then visit [www.equalitytrust.org.uk](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk) and give the movement some support.

One point that fascinated me was what the authors meant by the main title *The Spirit Level*. I looked in the index, and could not find spirit, or spirituality, or morality, or faith (though plenty about trust); and only two mentions of happiness. Who better than members of SOF to make some connections?

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