The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone

Introduction

The Spirit Level\(^1\) has a very simple and compelling argument, that society is better off when inequality is low. However simple it may seem to some, it is a monumental task to prove. This book is almost accidental in nature, two epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett were originally looking at longevity and income when their early findings led them to discover that inequality was the main culprit and not wealth or a lack of it. The idea being that we have reached an economic plateau, where more economic growth does not lead to improved material conditions. Wilkinson and Pickett argue that social relations are built on material foundations; therefore inequality has many negative effects on the fabric of society.

Wilkinson and Pickett’s research is extremely complete. It draws upon the most reliable sources available today, such as the World Bank, UN and OECD. On top of their research being well sourced, their choices for its selection or omission are made clear. As well any interpretation is clearly labelled as such. The repetition of their simple thesis is relentless, that equal societies do better. In order to organize and prove their overarching argument, the authors lay out an effective structure to tackle to issue. The book is broken down into three main arguments.

- Material success and social failure
- The costs of inequality
- How to create a better society

Material Success and Social Failure

The first part of the book presents the main thesis, which is broken down into three sub sections.

- Material living threshold, conditions can only improve so much.
- The amount of inequality and social failure = direct relationship
- Human beings sensitive to inequality

Using many reliable sources the team effectively demonstrates that economic growth in rich countries and increases in average incomes have ceased to contribute too increased wellbeing. Basically they argue we are rich enough. The common wisdom is that health and social problems are strongly associated with income, which is true but not in terms of absolute wealth. The evidence leads the authors to argue that it is inequality which demonstrates the strongest correlation, and not where you stand on the income ladder. The relationship between life expectancy and gross national income (at various stages of economic development) demonstrates that rich nations do not benefit from an increase, while poor ones do. The authors suggest a threshold is attained, which makes sense. One you have enough of something,

you don’t appreciate it as much. Material living standards can only increase so much. An interesting statistic provided is that 70% of poor Americans have air conditioning.

Does the amount of inequality make a difference? According to the team it does. It acts as a throttle where the more inequality that you have the more social wellbeing will be sacrificed. Using statistics from reliable sources a correlation is clearly demonstrated using simple graphs. The main conclusion is that health and social problems are related to inequality and that average income is not as important of a factor. The fallacy is that social problems are created by poor material conditions, implying that rich societies do better, which is not the case. Wealth will not protect you from social problems. The author’s argue that social distinctions often rely on material differences. Inequality is therefore socially divisive. Ultimately when inequality is greater, social distances are greater and social stratification more important.

In summary of their main argument, Wilkinson and Pickett argue that humans are innately sensitive towards inequality. Our psychological wellbeing hinges on social cohesion. Advertising around the world acknowledges our desire for material wealth and social status. They play on social comparisons in order to sell us a product we probably don’t need. The desire for community, social cohesion and solidarity are nothing new and are very important to human wellbeing. The French revolution was characterised by Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Divisive class prejudice is the number one enemy in the fabric of society.

The Costs of Inequality

The second portion of The Spirit Level is broken down into 8 sub sections and goes into painstaking detail to uncover the correlation between inequality and social issues.

- **Social relations**: Community life is extremely important. The author’s make reference to De Toqueville’s reflections on American cohesion and equality. However hurricane Katrina shows a different story, was there really equality of conditions? They argue a strong relationship between inequality and trust, friends are often near equals. Equality is a precursor for greater trust in society.

- **Mental health/drug use**: Social status has an effect on mental well being. Illegal drugs are used more in unequal societies. Prescription medication is much more prescribed in unequal nations. Rates of depression and anxiety are skyrocketing.

- **Physical health/life expectancy**: A strong relationship between inequality and different health outcomes exist. Possible explanation is that the biology of chronic stress is a plausible pathway which helps us understand why unequal societies are almost always unhealthy societies.

- **Obesity**: It does affect everyone along the social ladder and factors such as poor nutritional knowledge do play a role. There are social reasons for choosing specific foods ex: eating for status. The authors point out that it wasn’t so long ago that plus sized women were admired, sign of wealth and status. Today, well that is not so much the case. At the end of the day calorie intake is not the whole story, Wilkinson and Pickett argue that stress and social factors play an equally important role.

- **Education**: Most important factor of educational attainment is family background. Dropout rates in unequal U.S States are much higher. Learning opportunities are diminished in unequal societies.
• **Teenage pregnancy:** Inequality equals a rise in teenage pregnancy. Comparison of U.S and UN statistics shows that low income is not enough. Inequality is a precursor for higher teenage pregnancy rates.

• **Violence:** Homicides are more common in unequal countries. They are also more common in unequal states. The association between inequality and violence is strong and consistent. Most importantly the data suggests that with a drop in inequality violence will follow.

• **Imprisonment/Punishment:** Strong correlation between inequality and prison population. Public policy plays a role, notion of class control, where honest “middle class” people must be protected from dangerous criminal underclass. This diverts attention away from the real problem, inequalities in wealth and income.

• **Social mobility:** While we often praise our equal opportunity society the evidence suggests otherwise. There is a strong correlation between low social mobility and inequality. Wilkinson and Pickett take it one step further, arguing that bigger incomes seem to solidify the social structure and decrease the chances of upward mobility. Where there are greater inequalities of outcome, equal opportunity is a significantly more distant prospect.

**A Better Society**

Wilkinson and Pickett spare no detail in proving that the relationship between inequality and social issues cannot just be dismissed. They argue that even with enormous variations from one society to another the levels of problems associated with low social status can’t be explained without accepting that the common denominator is inequality. In order for the playing field to be levelled the lower class must feel more valued than at the present. Political and social will must mobilize in order to end the characteristic problems found within this undervalued group. Low spending on education, low benefits and the other traits of the poor class result in systemic social failure for everyone. Wellbeing must take a front seat to economic growth indexes. Depression and anxiety rates must be taken into account. Status and hierarchy should be replaced with community. Even small decreases in inequality provide exponential results, with the authors calling on politics to develop a strategy which recognizes that we create the society.

**Conclusion**

*The Spirit Level* is a meticulously long and well argued piece. Wilkinson and Pickett provide a wealth of knowledge which easily proves a correlation between inequality and social welfare, which cannot be dismissed. While the structure of the book is simple it tends to drown the reader with information. However there is no real alternative in going about arguing that inequality has been a negative foundation of our economic and domestic policy. It is a mammoth task which requires the skill and knowledge of two professional scientists. Wilkinson and Pickett make it very difficult for anyone to disagree that equal societies do better.