

Commentary¹ on “The Spirit Level”

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The 'Spirit Level'² is a major event and a vital tool in the pursuit of social justice – a concept that has also to include climate justice, something to which the book is alert. While I am going to make some critical comments it is important to keep in focus the book's importance and value in the struggle for a better world.

- 1) To start, it is worth noting that the book's focus is on equality of consumption (as the 'independent variable'), not equality of influence and power, of social resources, or of control and ownership of production. These are harder things to measure but represent the deep processes underneath the income differentials.
- 2) So the book's analysis of the generation of equality vs inequality is limited. It pays little attention to the role of the working class movement in producing concessions that led to equality gains. This occurred in two ways. Firstly by direct influence in workplace bargaining and fiscal policy through Trade Unions and Social Democratic parties in government, and secondly due to the competition faced by Capitalist states from the socialist countries.

Both these factors lost effectiveness from the 1970s onwards as the capitalist class found new solutions to the problems of declining profits, and implemented the neoliberal policies that led to the rise in inequality, especially in the Anglophone countries, but also elsewhere from 1979 onwards. It is also necessary to take into account the composition of Capital and industry within the nation state and the extent of subsidy from super-exploitation of resources and labour in the global South.

So what I am saying is that the Spirit Level insufficiently sees inequality to be a direct consequence of capitalism, made worse when Capital is freed

1 Invited panelist response presented at European Congress of Community Psychology, York, UK, September, 2011.

2 Wilkinson, R and Pickett, K (2010) **The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone** . Penguin.

from its mitigating counterbalances (the neoliberal project). *You can't take the politics out of the question.*

3. It follows that the political prescriptions in the book are inadequate. Now this is the most difficult thing to produce. Without the intervention of Wilkinson and Pickett there would be no basis for critique and thereby construction of a better strategy. But the change section (Chapter 16, "Building the Future") is reminiscent of the variants of socialism criticised by Engels in "Socialism Utopian and Scientific", an inadequate praxis that has its echo in much of the green movement today – for example in the critique of economic growth from the New Economics Foundation³. It relies on:
 - a) a rational appeal – present the evidence to society and reason will prevail.
 - b) The equalising effects of new technology
 - c) a localist approach to change – largely based on cooperatives and mutual entities.
4. There is also a rather worrisome 'progressivism', the idea that history is on the side of equality. I dispute this: there is nothing inevitable in this world dominated by a stricken capitalist system that lashes out at social models that threaten its hegemony.

In summary, the politics of *The Spirit Level* lacks a subject. Who is going to make these changes? Where is the leadership? What will be the mobilisation? And how will alternative social and economic forms become institutionalised? The lack of an adequate theory of the generation of inequality and the relationship between subject and transformation means an inadequate theory and practice of change.

I do think, however, that there are two ways in which the book can be used as a tool in the struggle.

1. It has a practical role in building a counter-hegemonic consensus – a new "common sense" that does challenge the inevitability of inequality, and ideological binding for an effective social movement. The book's

³ See my article "Sustainability: Utopian and Scientific"
<http://greendealmanchester.wordpress.com/sustainability-utopian-and-scientific/>

moderate language has its usefulness in bringing in those who would initially be scared off by, for example, a Marxist analysis.

2. The empiricist style *is* also helpful in re-establishing a narrative of social and economic justice. But haven't we been here before? The Black report on Health Inequalities appeared in 1980. Although suppressed by the Thatcher regime it did surface and was independently published. It failed to lead to a broad social movement and the killing continued⁴.

Finally I want to look at the question of cooperatives and mutuals as a vehicle for change because Chapter 16 emphasises this as a possible solution.

On the debit side, their share of the economy remains small. The interest of the present (and previous) UK government in them is as a smokescreen for dismantling collective welfare provision and allowing its penetration by Capital, so creating new profit centres: privatise your own health service. And evidence⁵ suggests that a society organised on cooperative lines does not naturally lead to equality since cooperatives end up competing. This is the lesson of Yugoslavia and Hungary (and to some extent the Soviet Union⁶). Funnily enough Thatcher's experiment in market socialism: the NHS internal market has similar consequences⁷.

For co-ops to deliver greater equality there has to be a reconciliation between workers having a stake in their enterprise (on one hand) and the steering of the economy by a government controlled by popular participation (on the other). The current renovation of the Cuban model⁸ is a promising example to study over the next five years as these issues are grappled with on a national scale (and we can be sure that most coverage in the dominant media will be inaccurate and misleading).

But that's the prescription – of what should be. How can cooperatives and mutuals be linked with the capture of State power? This is where the notion of prefigurative *action*, prefigurative *research* and prefigurative *struggle* are

4 See <http://www.sohealth.co.uk/Black/interpreting.htm>

5 Devine, P (1988) Democracy and Democratic Planning Cambridge: Polity Press

6 Yaffe, H. (2009) Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution. London: Palgrave Macmillan

7 <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/cmpo/publications/papers/2005/wp133.pdf>

8 <http://cubasocialistrenewal.blogspot.com/>

essential elements of praxis – but it requires a coordinating nucleus if strategic action is to be sustained and adequate to the transformational task. While the debate does (as Wilkinson and Pickett argue) have to be taken out of the left ghetto, real change to social and economic arrangements requires a political strategy – and the forces that represent the interests of unbridled Capital do have to be combated: persuasion has its limits.