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DIRECTION FOR THE
DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Ideas in Place of Fear: reducing inequality and fermenting justice

by Danny Dorling

January 2010

Think
PIECES

Number 57

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“When you next look at a congested street, with cars jostling to move a few metres forward, pedestrians dodging in between, cyclists weaving dangerously around them, children walking past at the level of exhaust pipes, no one getting anywhere fast, and all those petrol engines continuously running, this is the both symbolic but also very real collective outcome of individual greed encouraged to grow by the mantra of personal freedom.”

PART OF THIS THINKPIECE IS TAKEN FROM THE INTRODUCTION OF Dorling, D. “Injustice: why social inequality persists”, published by Policy Press in March 2010.

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Ideas and action
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Ideas in Place of Fear: reducing inequality and fermenting justice

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A 'progressive' alliance requires positive aims with a majority of participants working in the same direction, a serious debate about concepts and practical suggestions. Electoral systems don't determine attitudes and cultures, ideas do. Simple steps in the right direction can have huge effects; ideas such as equalising pay-rates for full and part-time workers and giving part-time workers same benefits as full-time. Across the UK a land value tax of 7.3p a (typical) square meter would raise £175bn in 10 years. Multiply the land you or your landlord owns by that amount to see if you could afford it. It would pay off most of the bail-out. Those who owned so much valuable land that they could not afford to pay could sell some. All these ideas were taken from just a few comments made to previous Compass thinkpieces (see acknowledgments). We have between us enough good ideas to put fear in its place, to reduce inequality and so ferment justice. We need to better understand why we don't enact these.

Ideas that propagate injustice

Very few say they agree with injustice, or that inequality is beneficial. In the world's rich countries injustice is caused less and less by having too few resources to share around fairly; it is increasingly maintained by widespread adherence to beliefs that actually propagate it. These beliefs are often presented as natural, innocent and long-standing, but they are mostly modern creations – what appeared fair and normal yesterday will often be seen as unjust tomorrow. Changing what is understood by injustice today means telling some people, usually those in high office, that what they consider to be fair is in fact in many ways unjust.

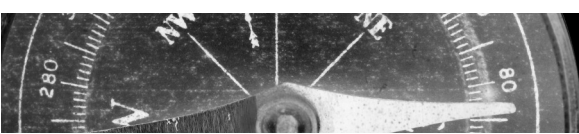
This thinkpiece is drawn from a book which aims to help redefine injustice. This will inevitably anger some people. Those who will find these claims of injustice most troublesome will include some of those in exalted positions, those people who believe others are less able than themselves, those currently consuming most and those benefiting from the despair of others. While no one will claim to be on the side of injustice, without the continued spread of beliefs in support of injustice it would not survive long in its present form. Now, even after economic crash, we have enough resources for all. Much that was previously seen as an unfortunate fact of life today becomes unjust.

I suggest that the five tenets of injustice are that: elitism is efficient, exclusion is necessary, prejudice is natural, greed is good and despair is inevitable. They are the modern day incarnations of the old social evils of ignorance, want, idleness, squalor and disease. These tenets are most strongly adhered to by those on the right, but many weaker, although still greatly damaging forms, underlie much thinking in the centre and left, among parts of the green movement and are found within other otherwise progressive forces. At the same time many of these forces are coming together to appose most aspects of the five tenets. Because of this widespread and growing opposition to the five key unjust beliefs, including the belief that so many should now be 'losers', most advocating injustice are now very careful with their words. Those who believe in these tenets remain the majority in power across almost all rich countries. This is despite a great lurch leftwards occurring across the majority of rich nations (an obvious majority when nations are weighted by voters). As I write, within the last 12 months half a billion people in the richest countries of the world have successfully voted for more radical governments than have been seen in a generation. Elections in the United States, Japan, Greece, and Iceland have put politicians in power who were recently thought unelectable by a majority. It would

be foolish to believe that further progressive lurches are not possible.

Although most of those in power in rich nations today may want to make the conditions of life a little less painful for many people, they do not believe that there is a cure to modern social ills, or even that a few inequalities can be much alleviated. Rather they believe that just a few children are sufficiently able to be fully educated and only a few of those are then able to govern; the rest must be led. They believe that the poor will always be with us no matter how rich we are. There is growing evidence that many in power have come to believe that most others are naturally, perhaps genetically, inferior to them. And many of this small group believes that their friends' and their own greed is helping the rest of humanity as much as humanity can be helped; they are convinced that to argue against such a counsel of despair is foolhardy. It is their beliefs that uphold injustice, and our beliefs if we agree with them.

In recent years there has been a rapid growth in the scientific evidence that shows that the five tenets of injustice are unfounded beliefs. The evidence also shows how people who end up in power come so easily to hold these beliefs, or indeed become converted to them, and how their beliefs provide a false justification for those who benefit most from injustice. It is very hard to seek power, and especially to seek to lead a political party, if you yourself do not believe you are especially able, that by inference many others are not as able as you and people like you and so poverty really will always be with us. A prejudice you may be tempted to convince yourself is natural and warranted. How can the world work without a little greed (you might think) and with all this realism some despair is inevitable, others just don't have your "get up and go". We need to better share out power among our leaders and not put them on pedestals so high that only the psychologically flawed could happily stand on them for any length of time. Look at who have been the longest



serving British political party leaders of the last century. These have been a man and woman, Tony and Margaret, whose respective beliefs in their personal infallibility has been unshakeable. That is not healthy.

The beliefs that uphold injustice

Within affluent countries, especially the more economically unequal of affluent countries an argument can be made that social injustices are now being recreated, renewed and supported by five new sets of beliefs. Although they have old origins, they have taken new faces. These are all beliefs which have been publicly condemned as wrong and which most individuals claim not to support. I argue that the acceptance of these beliefs by just a few, and the reluctance of many others to confront those few, is crucial to maintaining injustice in times and lands of plenty. There are many good arguments against upholding these beliefs. If injustices are to be reduced for all, it is important not just to claim that you do not hold the beliefs, but also to positively reject them. For those who are more conservative, for whom the existence of injustice is actually at the heart of what they believe to be correct, then simply saying you reject the labels of these beliefs (elitism, exclusion, prejudice, greed and despair) will not be sufficient to reduce injustice. If you think these beliefs about each label are correct, then you must also believe that injustice is good.

The beliefs that uphold injustice in its contemporary form have been given many names and categorised in many ways by very many writers, but most of the categorisations can be simplified to five: elitism is efficient, exclusion is necessary, prejudice is natural, greed is good and despair is inevitable. Each belief also creates a distinct set of victims – the delinquents, the debarred, the debtors, the discarded and the depressed. Both the victims and those who uphold these beliefs often find it hard to see possibilities beyond their current situation; they are, in effect, advocates for the continuation of

injustice, arguing that those who suffer will always be with us in large numbers. The largest groups of all are the disenfranchised – all those who come to believe so little can be done.

It is a sign of the duplicity of our times that institutions which often say they are against elitism do most to promote it; that governments which say they aim to reduce social exclusion actually create it; that movements (arguing on migration or for UK separatism or population curbs) which pretend not to be prejudiced often foster hate; that academic disciplines (such as economics and business studies) where the orthodoxy is to advocate greed cannot say so explicitly; and that many experts argue that the best that most others can hope for is a life of which they themselves would despair. They do not say this explicitly, but it is implied in their accusation of those who argue against them of being utopian.

While those with most power promote elitism, exclusion, prejudice, greed and despair, injustice will not be reduced; instead its promotion is described as inevitable and as 'practical' politics. It is only in the most unequal of rich nations that the powerful can explicitly say that they believe there is good in the inequalities sustained by this injustice. Elsewhere in the rich world most who favour injustice are usually more circumspect, but as the examples given in the book these arguments are taken from show, they have been effective in many countries where life chances are now less fair than they were just a few decades ago. However, the supporters of injustice are being opposed and exposed more and more strongly as time passes, and social movements are gathering momentum to challenge their views.

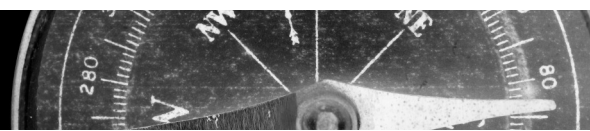
Because belief in the five tenets of injustice is so widespread among people in power, these beliefs are then propagated through what they control. For instance, many of those who fund and manage educational institutions encourage teachers to present these beliefs as truths:

that some children are remarkably especially able and others are destined for servitude. The beliefs are also propagated by governments whose departments for social security increasingly label the poor as wanting, feckless, immoral and criminal, not as 'decent' people. The beliefs are supported by the media, where stories which imply that other people are less deserving than us are common, where great city businessmen and a few businesswomen are lauded as superheroes and where immigrants looking to work for a crumb of the City's bonuses are seen as scroungers. The working class is offered "X-factor" and the middle class "Dragons' Den". Both are fatuous dreams. The beliefs are supported by a politics whose mantra is that without greed there would be no growth, and without growth we would all be doomed. These beliefs are supported by industries, whose spokespeople say we must continue to consume more and more and which now manufacture pharmaceutical treatments to cope with the consequent despair on a mass scale – within rich countries and worldwide, mental distress and despair is the largest growth industry for pharmaceutical companies and frontline medical practitioners. So in various ways academia, government, the media, politics and industry are each key in promoting elitism, exclusion, prejudice, greed and despair.

The five faces of social inequality

The argument being made here is concerned mainly with injustice in affluent countries, but it touches on wider debates. If you had to choose one word to characterise the nature of human society as it is currently arranged worldwide, there is no better word than 'injustice'. Across all walks of life, between continents and over the decades, injustice has been constantly prevalent.

At the pinnacle of the current process of human ranking is the awarding of elite prizes, Nobel Prizes, allocated overwhelmingly to just a few men from a tiny handful of the richest of countries; the history of these prizes can be studied



both to illustrate the growth of elitism and the remarkable scope there is for rapid change. In normal times (1901-2008) just 1 in 20 Nobel Prizes are awarded to women. In 2009, one in three of all the prizes were, including the first ever prize for a woman in economics. The least remarkable and most predictable award in 2009 was that to the American President. There was no gradual built up to this shift away from men, including away from white men in the allocation of prizes which was another facet of the 2009 allocation. The world had changed. There had been an economic crash and long held beliefs of superiority in many walks of life were changing. The origins of the ideas that currently constitute the core beliefs of injustice can be traced back to when we last lived in times as unequal as today, during the last 'gilded age', which began at the end of the American Civil War in 1865 and ended in 1914 in Europe, and in the late 1920s in the United States.

Prizes such as those of Alfred Nobel came about when they did, along with the first intelligence (IQ) tests, because it was only at that point that there were spoils great enough to be shared out in rich countries, and those who had gained most needed to justify their positions in newly created hierarchies. Nobel prizes were first awarded in 1901 in the midst of that first gilded age of great wealth concentration, when it was unimaginable that there would not be some 'natural' elite. Over a century later the educational statistics they produce suggest that some international bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) still continue the tradition of trying to defend elitism as natural, but bodies such as the OECD are now far more coy about their intent than those in the 1890s who first used social statistics to suggest that paupers mainly bred more paupers. That coyness suggests that in recent years some progress against rising elitism has been made because the elitist know now to hide their core beliefs about the distribution of human ability in obscure technical notes, presumably in a failed attempt to avoid criticism. Although

elitist views still underlie the beliefs of many in power, they have also now been institutionalised in the form of bodies such as the OECD. Those destined to be paupers today are labelled children 'limited in their ability' – a staggering seventh of all children born in the richest of countries are labelled thus today. Almost seventy years ago in the UK, William Beveridge named 'ignorance' as one of his five social evils; but as ignorance was overcome across the rich world, widespread elitism took its place, and children who would have appeared of normal ability in the 1940s are called limited today.

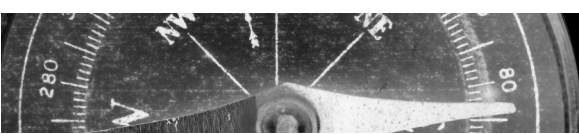
The most terrible result of elitism is that it can be used to justify the exclusion of so many people from normal social activity. It was in the most affluent of countries a century ago that the supposed scientific theories defending inequality began to be drawn up. The modern origins of exclusion can be traced to an academic paper of 1895 when data was first presented that showed the geographical distribution of English and Welsh paupers in a way that was designed to suggest that pauperisation was some kind of natural phenomenon. The timing of this was no coincidence – this was the first time under a market system that such an abundance of wealth had emerged. It then became necessary to try to update feudal justifications for the unequal distribution of that wealth and to explain why so many should have to live with so little.

The new justifications became dominant beliefs between the 1890s and the 1930s, but were then rejected for a generation before gaining ground again as social exclusion rose from the late 1960s onwards, alongside the great growth in personal debt when the old social evil that Beveridge described as 'want' was cut down in size. The cycles through which people fell into exclusion due to having too little were first established as we currently see them in the 1960s. Before then, to be truly rich was to be landed. To be poor was, for many, normal. Today, one in six of all households in rich countries are again excluded from social norms due

to poverty and are poor in at least two ways of counting poverty. What now makes those households poor are the effects of the riches of others.

Elitism and exclusion have further causes and corollaries, and chief among these is prejudice. As elitism and inequality rise, and as more people become socially excluded, or are able to exclude themselves by dint of their wealth, those at the top more often look down on others with ever greater disdain and fear; as evidenced by growing social and spatial segregation in Britain. Those at the bottom are also less likely to trust others and more likely to become fearful in a society that so clearly values them so little. Racism rises in just these kinds of circumstances, and a wider form of racism, a middle class racism, a new social Darwinism, quietly spreads. Over time, inequalities in wealth and health, and the widespread acceptance of bigoted views, all shrank from their height in the 1920s, to reach minima in the early 1970s, before rising up again in that fateful decade of oil shock, inflation and "overseas intervention" (war).

Just as one in seven children have been marked as 'limited' by elitist labels and one in six families as 'poor' by the economic circumstances of exclusion, as a result of new prejudices over how it is acceptable to treat others (which have overtaken the old social evil of idleness in importance and effect), an even higher proportion of one in five households in rich countries were only just managing to get by with great difficulty, even before the financial crash of 2008. Our inability in the most unequal of rich nations to undertake land reform or even tax land value and other wealth provides the material mechanism through which prejudice is transmitted between generations, how it is maintained by inherited wealth and the deep social polarisation that results. Of the 25 richest countries in the world, the UK is the fifth most unequal in terms of income distribution, even more unequal than Israel. That is why social polarisation in Britain is so great. Countries like Japan and Korea became more equal through having



land reform thrust upon them by the United States. Countries like Norway and the Netherlands used taxation to reduce inequality. Two thirds of the world's richest billion people live longer, mentally happier, better educated, better rewarded lives than we in Britain. They do these things in families that stick together more often and where crime is far less of both a reality and a fear. They do this despite mostly being poorer on arithmetic average than are people in UK. We created the NHS, universal secondary education for all, and began the greatest housing program in our history when we were bankrupt following the Second World War. It is not money but the will to change our lives that is missing.

The rise of elitism, exclusion and prejudice were all precursors to the age of greed, ushered in during the 1980s, seen as good, and not questioned seriously until 2008. At least a quarter of households are now disregarded in what is considered access to normal infrastructure, whether it be simply the ability to own and drive a car or to be able to access the internet. In the US not to have a car these days is not to live as a 'normal' human being. In Britain almost half the children of lone parents live in families which have no access to a car. Many people who need a car because they have young children or find it hard to walk or no longer live near shops, have no car. Many of the car journeys made are non-essential and the majority of cars contain only one person, the driver. Some 7% of single person households own two or more cars! If we lived in a more equitable society, we would realise that there are enough cars currently owned for all those who need a car to have one. More equitable affluent societies are also better able to build and maintain public transport, and even the trains run on time far more often. People who are not insulted by their pay or the job they are asked to do are far better at their jobs.

Mass car driving is the simplest example of what happens when greed begins to be valued in its own right. When you next

look at a congested street, with cars jostling to move a few metres forward, pedestrians dodging in between, cyclists weaving dangerously around them, children walking past at the level of exhaust pipes, no one getting anywhere fast, and all those petrol engines continuously running, this is the both symbolic but also very real collective outcome of individual greed encouraged to grow by the mantra of personal freedom.

Unsurprisingly, growing despair is the result for those living in the most elite of affluent societies, where inequalities are allowed and encouraged to rise untrammelled, where more and more are excluded or live partly in fear of being ostracised, where prejudice towards the 'lower orders' begins again to become normal and where greed is commonly referred to implicitly (if not often explicitly) as good.

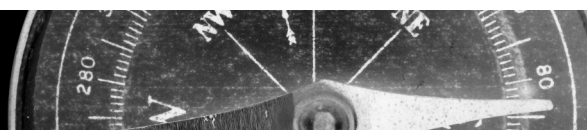
In Britain it was in the 1990s when the fastest rise in recorded despair occurred. This rise was not just in the growing use of prescription medicines to get through the day, but in the growth of feelings that there must be more to life. The Young Foundation's report "Mapping Britain's Needs" showed figures for adults worsening in the 1990s and again more recently. Even children were hit with a feeling of despair, with the fastest increases in adolescent depression being recorded in North America and Britain in the 1990s, a rise found not to be due to changing diagnostic practice. The despair was often very private, with private consumption of medicine, alcohol and other drugs, a private despair at debts or feelings of failure.

In Britain private despair reached such levels that by 2006 it was being reported that a third of families had at least one family member who was suffering from depression or a chronic anxiety disorder. But it was also public, as shown by the publication of so many books criticising modern trends, the rise of the green movement and of new forms of social protest. Across Europe the majority of

best-selling books on subjects such as economics were not business manuals but alternative treatises on the woes of capitalism. By 2004 anti-globalisation books were almost the only books on business or economics that sold well in Europe.

In the 2000s we stumbled into a crisis that no one now denies was of our own making. Given this, how it is possible to be optimistic in the face of rising social injustices and the financial crash? For optimism concentrate on what is now different in the circumstances that are not of our making, on what we now know and on just how many more people are now involved in the arguments about what happens next. Out of the many things that are different, the increase in education is the most important, with a majority of young people in the world being literate, and near majorities in more equitable rich countries now attending university. Compared to the end of the last gilded age it is now much harder to see who or what there is left to exploit, and how much harder it will be to fool so many better informed people this time round.

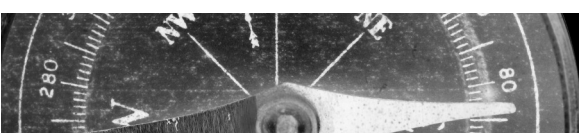
Arguments against injustice used to be rare treatises. A single essay against slavery written in 1785 could be held up high as a shining example of such work two centuries later, but it has largely only been within living memory that we have started to learn that it was not the essays of aristocrats that made differences in the past; it was the fact that their contributions were far more often recorded and preserved. Slaves also made slavery uneconomic by not adapting willingly to slavery; they worked slowly, they revolted, they died young. Similarly, it is only within the last century that the lives of the 'great men' and odd woman of science, politics and business (men who are still so often put on pedestals) have been re-examined and found not to produce biographies of awe. Their fallibilities, failings and most importantly their luck, are all being revealed more frequently. In each case they are remembered for an achievement that was always just about to be made because of



the circumstances or the actions of others around them, now mostly forgotten. The belief that human advancement is achieved by a few great people themselves standing on the shoulders of giants is misplaced. There are no superhuman people, and to say so is unjust.

Acknowledgements

Sources for all the statistics and arguments made here are given in: Dorling, D. "Injustice: why social inequality persists", published by Policy Press in March 2010, apart from reference to the Young Foundation report which was published in December 2009 and the contributions listed below. Everything said here was thought of by someone else first. For instance, I am grateful to those compass watchers who posted comments to Mark Perryman's Thinkpiece of July 2009 "We're all in this together - Towards the political practice of a Plural Left", in particular Jon Teunon and Salfordgal (London). Annabelle Lever's comments on Bill Kerry's "Taking Equality Out of the Left Ghetto" and David Chester's Land Value Tax suggestions of June 2009 in response to Colin Crouch's "After privatised Keynesianism" have all been used to construct just the first paragraph of this thinkpiece. Every comment is worth making. All changes how we think. A new generation of men and women is beginning to realise how it is both unjust and unrealistic to claim more than an extremely small impact as their personal contribution. But even the smallest impact is worthwhile. True social justice will both create and require much greater equality than is as yet widely accepted



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Compass is the democratic left pressure group,
whose goal is to debate
and develop the ideas for a more equal
and democratic world, then
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