

The Spirit Level

Richard Wilkinson co-authored the book "The Spirit Level" with Kate Pickett. His key message is that inequality is toxic – not just for individuals, but ultimately for society as a whole. The book is a radical contribution to happiness research in the economic context. It describes the pursuit of satisfaction as an economic impetus on one hand, but also as a source of envy between people on the other.

The book is published by Penguin, 352 pp, £7.99

The middle class is wrong

The more unequal a wealthy society is, the greater its social problems. British social researcher Richard Wilkinson discusses why the growing gap between rich and poor is bad for everyone.

By John F. Jungclaussen and Christian Tenbrock, from die Zeit No. 13, 25 March 2010

DIE ZEIT: Mr Wilkinson, you believe that inequality is at the root of almost every social problem in wealthy industrialised nations. Why?

Richard Wilkinson: The statistics are quite clear in this regard. The larger the gap between rich and poor, the greater the social problems. This is true of criminality, violence, drug abuse, teenage pregnancies, health problems, obesity, education or life expectancy: everywhere you look, you see that "unequal" societies do significantly worse. And the difference is not a trivial one. In other words: in Western industrialised nations with a narrower gap between rich and poor, the murder rate is between one and six times lower. What is more, there are up to ten times fewer people in prison.

ZEIT: Which countries perform particularly poorly?

Wilkinson: The decisive criterion is the income of the richest and poorest 20 percent in the country in question. The difference in countries with a wide social rift is around twice as high as in those with lower levels of inequality. In terms of inequality and social problems, the US, Great Britain and Portugal are the worst performing countries. The best are Japan and the Scandinavian nations. Germany is generally in the middle of the range.

ZEIT: And do more equal countries really have fewer problems in every single case?

Wilkinson: We evaluated dozens of studies, and all of them lead to the same conclusion: in general terms, massive inequality renders a society more dysfunctional. No exceptions.

ZEIT: How does this come about?

Wilkinson: For instance, there is a correlation between inequality and education – and consequently career prospects. The connecting link is social status. However, purely economic models are not enough to explain this phenomenon. The psychological effects of inequality also need to be taken into account. People are very sensitive; they compare themselves and their status with others. Material inequality leads to status anxiety...

ZEIT: ... but what does parents' status anxiety have to do with the educational opportunities available to their children?

Wilkinson: Parents often unconsciously pass on their fears to their children. We live in a society in which cooperation counts for little, and people's self-image and self-esteem rests above all on material success. Children naturally pick up on this. They are surrounded by status anxiety from birth, which influences their values and the quality of their social relationships. In unequal societies there is less trust and less social cohesion. There is also a tendency towards more violence. This obviously affects children's educational opportunities.

ZEIT: So it's society's fault?

Wilkinson: Exactly. Inequality causes status problems for the parents, and children are aware of this.

ZEIT: What about individual responsibility? Surely obesity also has something to do with whether your diet consists mainly of hamburgers and chips, for example.

Wilkinson: Wrong. Social epidemiology has shown that the poor quality of our social relationships is the primary cause of chronic stress symptoms. People under stress eat in order to feel better, and they often choose foods with a high fat content. We have also learnt from research that stress and anxiety in early childhood have an effect on body weight.

ZEIT: Among wealthy countries, do the wealthiest do best? Is there a relationship between prosperity and social problems?

Wilkinson: No. Take life expectancy, for example: although per capita income in the US or Norway is much higher than in Greece or Portugal, there are no major differences in life expectancy. The same holds true for the other social indicators we examined.

ZEIT: Does that mean that above a certain level, gains in prosperity lose their significance?

Wilkinson: Yes, exactly. I believe that in wealthy Western societies, economic growth – i.e. increasing material prosperity – no longer brings any benefits.

ZEIT: The middle class won't find that a problem. It believes that it is hardly affected by inequality anyway.

Wilkinson: That is where the middle class is wrong. The social situation in more unequal countries is so much worse precisely because it is not just the poor who are affected. In more equal countries, for instance, around 8 percent of the population suffers from mental health issues, while in the US this figure is around 25 percent! Of course, social problems are particularly virulent among the lower classes. However, in unequal societies they are increasingly seeping through to the middle classes as well. In the long term, the average middle class child in Scandinavia or Japan will undoubtedly have better prospects than in the US or Great Britain. That child is less likely to become addicted to drugs or become a victim of crime, and has better chances of doing well at school.

ZEIT: Once again: is inequality really the root cause of all social problems: for example, isn't it significant that countries with greater inequality are also those with a higher ratio of migrants?

Wilkinson: But that is simply not true! Sweden and the US have roughly the same ratio of citizens born abroad. Countless studies have shown that there is no relation between a society's ethnic mix and its degree of inequality.

ZEIT: Economists have also claimed that inequality leads to progress, as it promotes innovation, competition and growth.

Wilkinson: It is true that in developing countries inequality can have a temporarily positive impact. However, as shown by our statistics, in industrialised nations this no longer applies. And if inequality really did promote innovation, in countries with a wide gap between rich and poor there would be a higher number of patents per inhabitant, for example, but this is not the case.

ZEIT: The gap between rich and poor is growing in Germany too. The assumption in politics is that this is primarily due to technological progress and globalisation. Is that not the case?

Wilkinson: I believe this view to be a massive oversimplification on the part of German politicians. In any case, the American Nobel laureate Paul Krugman sees politics as being clearly responsible for growing inequality. After all, in the early post-war decades, growing equality could be observed in all Western industrialised nations. This trend only changed with the liberalisation policies of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 80s. And since reunification, Germany has followed roughly the same model.

ZEIT: If politics is responsible for inequality: can it do anything to restore greater equality?

Wilkinson: It must! Since the financial crisis at the very latest, people realise that things cannot go on as they are. They feel that our societies have become tougher, more relentless and more "anti-social". They are troubled by the material wealth of the few and the social problems of the many. They know that a better life depends first and foremost on the quality of social relationships. And social relationships can only be improved by reducing differences in income.

ZEIT: What concrete action should politics take?

Wilkinson: Equality is a long-term project. It is not simply a matter of redistribution. Sweden achieves this through taxes, while in Japan differences in income are not so great. However, it is also necessary to strengthen economic democracy, e.g. by means of unions and increased co-determination or capital for buyouts by employees. If a company is transformed into a cooperative by means of increased co-determination, productivity rises. We know this.

ZEIT: Is there any point in spending money on fighting individual social problems without addressing the root problem of inequality?

Wilkinson: On one hand, there are – especially in unequal countries – epicentres of social crisis in which social cohesion has broken down entirely. In such areas, the welfare state has no option but to step in. For example, in cases of violence or drug abuse, it must intervene in childcare at an early stage. However, if politics fails to address the root of the problems, nothing will fundamentally change, which will over time become rather expensive and inefficient. Essentially, as a society we must ask ourselves whether we really want to live by the motto that the strongest get the lion's share while the weakest are left behind. Inequality divides a society and wears it down. I believe we need to recover a greater degree of cooperation and reciprocity. People want greater social equality.

*Questions by John F. Jungclaussen
and Christian Tenbrock*

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