

## Is Equality Set to Return as a Political Good?

**RICHARD WILKINSON / KATE PICKETT:**

### **The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better**

London 2009

Allen Lane, 352 pp.

(Translated from the English by Edgar Peinelt and Klaus Binder as »Gleichheit ist Glück – Warum gerechte Gesellschaften für alle besser sind.« Berlin 2009)

**W**inston Churchill (1874–1965) once summed up his experience with processed data as follows: »The only statistics you can trust are those you falsified yourself.« This can be interpreted in a number of ways: anyone listening to the party secretaries discussing the results on television after national and important regional elections in Germany would generally get the impression that every party had won.

Numbers are patient, it is said. Bad statistics can often be hidden or disguised and results can be »sexed up,« as illustrated recently by Eurozone member states, with dire consequences. Other sets of figures can be startling, however: in June 2010 the German Institute for Economic Research published a new study on income distribution in Germany. Income differentials between poorer and richer households are increasing and the middle class is shrinking. Society is drifting apart into a small and prosperous stratum and a broad and poor one. But the trend of income polarization is by no means merely a German phenomenon. In their book »The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better,« British social scientists Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson examine the consequences for society as a whole of this development, also taking into consideration the international dimension.

How is it that the societies of rich industrialized countries are more prosperous than ever before but suffer from such profound social problems? The USA, for example, has the highest per capita income but, at the same time, the highest homicide rate of the western industrialized countries. The authors think they have the answer: income and prosperity are not distributed equally. Once a certain level of social product has been reached, the more fairly income and prosperity are distributed, the healthier, happier, and more successful a society is.

But the consequences of unequal distribution are not borne solely by the poorer strata of the population. The well-to-do also feel the effects of a socially unequal society to a greater extent than previously thought. To take one example: in the USA the top 20 percent of the population have seven and a half to eight times as much money at their disposal as the bottom 20 percent – in Norway, by contrast, it is only around four times as much, despite broadly similar living standards. By comparison, Norway comes off much better in every area than the USA. A child born in Norway is healthier, generally does better at school, has

a longer life expectancy, and has less risk of becoming a victim of crime. This applies to all strata of the population.

In the course of research over several years the authors accumulated extensive statistical materials and compared income distribution mainly in the western industrialized countries. Germany is still in the upper third of generally more socially equal countries. The authors then linked this country index with data on social issues: trust, mental illness, addiction (which the authors link to mental illness), life expectancy and infant mortality, obesity, how well children do in school, teenage pregnancy, suicide, size of prison population, and social mobility. The data used in these researches come from the official surveys conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the UN, and the World Health Organization (WHO), generating a comparable and robust database. The book's Appendix is also very useful, added to the English paperback second edition (which also has a new subtitle: »Why Equality Is Better for Everyone«): it contains an explanation of where the data come from and the statistical approach taken. This makes the graphs easier to read and more comprehensible – one of the main criticisms leveled by conservative critics especially, who have attacked the imputed statistical evidence and claimed correlations in particular.

The authors are particularly adept in the detailed analysis of social malfunctioning and the chapter on mental illness, life expectancy, and obesity is convincing. It seems perfectly logical that higher pressure of competition and »fear of falling« in more unequal societies should lead to more mental illness.

Other derivations remain vague and ambiguous, however: in the chapter on suicide, for example, the authors assert – in contrast to their previous findings – that the suicide rate in less equal societies is lower than in societies in which income is more evenly distributed. Their explanation for this is that depressed people in egalitarian societies tend to direct their violence towards themselves. In more unequal societies, in contrast, depression tends to find external expression in the form of more violent crime and higher murder rates. This postulated connection between suicide rate and violent crime is not persuasive. Similarly, the connection between equality and global warming and resource scarcity also seems rather forced. It is wiser to stick more closely to the empirical findings.

In the Anglo-Saxon countries the book has met with a strong response, depending on political standpoint. What, for example, Polly Toynbee of the left-liberal Guardian newspaper praises as pioneering research (Toynbee 2009) is regarded by those on the right as fraught with contradictions.

Christopher Snowden entitled his critique »The Spirit Level Delusion. Fact-Checking the Left's New Theory of Everything« (Snowden 2010) and found fault with the fact that some countries had not been included in the data comparison and that much of the book refers solely to the northern European model countries. Snowden considers himself an independent journalist, but has ties to the Democracy Institute (with headquarters in London and Washington), a think

tank which can be identified, through its leadership, funding, and advisory committee, as an appendage of the Cato Institute – the traditional neoliberal »talent foundry« in the USA. Otherwise, his main claim to fame is his ideological-critical reappraisal of the anti-smoking movement.

Peter Saunders is from Policy Exchange, one of the most respected British think tanks, with close links to the Conservative Party. It is plain from the very cover of his study – »Beware False Prophets« – what he thinks of the line of argument he is criticizing: it depicts a shell game, the implication being that skillful manipulation makes it possible to achieve a desired (false) result (Saunders 2010). In almost as much detail as the original Saunders puts most of Wilkinson and Pickett's tables and figures under the microscope and re-interprets them within the framework of his own paradigm: what counts is not fairness and distribution, but primarily social product per capita – in other words, growth, not equality.

British sociologist Daniel Dorling, in his book »Injustice. Why Social Inequality Persists,« tries to uncover the deep-lying structures and thought patterns in our capitalist societies and political cultures which ensure that inequality is constantly reproduced and predominantly approved in public discourse as justified and beneficial for all (Dorling 2010). Under the aegis of a difference – and so also inequality – which is part of the nature of things an elite constantly seeks to legitimize itself as inevitable and convinces itself and mainstream public opinion that it has to take the reins of the economy and politics in its hands for the good of all, regretfully accepting that the exclusion of some segments of society is unavoidable. In parallel with the critique of neoliberal global financial capitalism in the wake of the bank crises of the past two years, appeal to the idea underlying the book »The Spirit Level« could now bring the long-spurned »good« of equality back into the political debate.

In their passionate closing chapter Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson venture out of the world of statistics into the political realm to offer a number of proposals concerning what changes need to be made: their prescriptions range from redistributive taxation, through restrictions on excessive wages at the top, to the closing of tax loopholes. The authors have also set up a foundation, the Equality Trust,<sup>1</sup> whose goal is the public dissemination of the results of their work and their political implementation.

To return to Churchill for a moment: at some points, in pursuit of the statistical evidence and the correlation between inequality and living standards they are looking for the authors get somewhat carried away, as a result of which the book here and there fails to convince. Inequality cannot be the reason for all ills and problems. But the book does show that it is with more equality and not with reference to the level of average income – »a rising tide lifts all boats« – that the

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1. [www.equalitytrust.org.uk](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk) – a response in particular to the critique by *Policy Exchange* may also be found on the website.

life circumstances of all parts of the population improve. This calls for a veritable paradigm change.

Statistical juggling or not, in pursuit of the right policies to open up people's life chances social democracy has also long overestimated the importance of markets, within the framework of which the issue of distribution is downgraded and the close connection between equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes ignored. Under the aegis of economization and consolidation programs in the wake of the financial and economic crisis (social democratic) governments have limited room to maneuver. Equality of opportunity under the aegis of fairer distribution, however, requires in particular intact welfare states and a decent level of public services, and both these things are in jeopardy.

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## FRANZ WALTER:

### **Vorwärts oder Abwärts? Zur Transformation der Sozialdemokratie**

Berlin 2010

Suhrkamp, 142 pp.

Individual accounts of the problems of European social democracy and the various parties and organizations which make it up are available in abundance. High time, therefore, for a synopsis, an analytical overview, a positioning of current processes within the framework of longer-term political and ideological contexts and lines of development. With »Vorwärts oder Abwärts?,« Franz