

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

**Richard Wilkinson
and Kate Pickett,**

(2009) Allen Lane, 331pp,
ISBN 9781846140396, £20hardback.

Review by Robert Moore

The thesis of *The Spirit Level* is simply stated, 'At almost any level of income, it's better to live in a more equal place' (p.84). Readers familiar with Wilkinson's work on health inequalities will be aware that in more equal societies everyone, at all income levels, enjoys better health and life expectancy than in less equal societies. The USA, for example, spends nearly three times as much per head on health as Sweden and has a life expectancy of three years less. The USA is the most unequal society and Sweden one of the least. Wilkinson's methods are extended in *The Spirit Level* and applied to a wider range of social issues including mental health, educational performance, teenage pregnancy and violence, the latter including illiberal and punitive public attitudes and high rates of incarceration.

In the poorest countries of the world, at the very lowest levels of GDP per head, small increases in national income improve life expectancy but the gains diminish quite rapidly. So the argument in *The Spirit Level* refers to what were known in older sociology courses as 'advanced industrial societies' amongst which the USA, UK, Portugal and New Zealand are the most unequal and the Scandinavian countries and Japan the least unequal. The authors test their international findings against comparisons between the states of the USA. Within the USA the relationship between inequality and 'doing badly' on the chosen measures holds up.

The Spirit Level generated considerable discussion within the Radical Statistics group because of the difficulty readers encountered with the graphs; one of the authors joined the discussion and directed us to a helpful website that more fully explained the data sources and the measurements of inequality used. In presenting an argument so heavily reliant on statistical analysis there is, plainly, a problem of accessibility for more general readers. Simplification may be necessary, with the presentation uncluttered by technical detail. This nevertheless needs to be balanced against the needs of a more

statistically informed reader. The balance was not quite right here and a more technical appendix might have been a useful compromise. But publishers can often over-rule authors' judgements in these matters.

The causal chain between inequality and 'doing better' are not easy to tease out but the authors, again following Wilkinson, concentrate on status and esteem, anxiety and stress as key links. In C. Wright Mills' words they explore the interplay of self and world.

Readers of *The Spirit Level* reading Toynbee and Walker's *Unjust Rewards* may reflect upon the likely impact of the former on the expensively educated and profoundly ignorant elites who inhabit the City of London. I'm sure the latter would sing in unison, 'We shall not be moved'. But why should we care what the 'masters of the universe' know and believe? If they form the pool from which governments seek advice on company regulation, taxation and benefits policies, then we should care. *The Guardian* recently published data on the ratio of CEOs' remuneration to their employees' average wages. The 'top' CEO's package paid an average worker's annual wages in half a day, the top six CEOs took home every day what an average worker earned in a year. The list stopped at the fifteenth most unequal company where CEOs were collecting an average worker's annual pay in half a week. Some forms of inequality have recently hit the headlines; contracted (but certainly undeserved) bonuses for the failed managers of financial institutions being conspicuous among them. In many of the same firms workers are losing their jobs, with scant compensation. Any resentment created by the situation has mainly been directed against migrant workers, rather than overpaid executives and tax-dodgers. Who will apply the Wilkinson and Pickett spirit level to a selection of British firms?

Wilkinson and Pickett devote a chapter to *trust*. As inequality increases, trust declines. The government's 'social cohesion' agenda may be muddled and incoherent but it is clear that it sees trust as an important element of social cohesion. The government also wishes to build strong communities (of an approved pattern). Herein lie policy contradictions; closing post offices, reducing public transport, cutting local education budgets, shutting libraries, all deprive neighbourhood populations of essential resources around which 'community life' might be sustained. Most importantly anti-terrorism legislation and the requirement for us all to spy for the UKBA will undermine trust and make 'social cohesion' even less attainable.

Pursuing equality is presented as 'the politics of envy' much as the pursuit of racial equality is turned against its advocates as 'political

correctness' or 'reverse racism'. Wilkinson and Pickett now enable us to reply that the pursuit of social and economic equality is the politics of welfare.

It might be fanciful to suggest that the pursuit of *equality* (not just equality of opportunity) will make for a society in which there are higher levels of trust and lower levels of fear, because even if the British government was less evidence-averse it would be extremely unlikely to address the inequalities with which it is so 'intensely relaxed'. *The Spirit Level* therefore poses the question of *interests*, both ideal and material: should policy be directed to the maximisation of the welfare of the whole population or to serving the interests of the few – who nevertheless have to pay by living unhealthier lives in a less happy society?

However we read this book – and respond either as scholars or activists – we must remember our roles as educators. A colleague presented undergraduate sociology students with comparative data sets on which they worked in class; one outcome was to show the UK's poor performance on a number of the indicators chosen by Wilkinson and Pickett. The association with inequality was duly noted and the students concluded that because the UK could not be all that bad, the figures just had to be a coincidence. From this opinion *they* could not be moved.

Robert Moore
University of Liverpool
rsmoore@liverpool.ac.uk