

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, The Spirit Level. Why equality is better for everyone. London, Penguin, 2010. 346p.

Book review

The Spirit Level. Why equality is better for everyone is an excellent text that analyses the social cost of inequality for all members of society, as inequality does not harm only the poor, but also middle and high class. The Spirit Level is a masterpiece that places inequality and its effects as the main challenge of the future of the western democracies.

Richard Wilkinson, who is a professor Emeritus at the University of Nottingham Medical School, and Kate Pickett, professor of epidemiology at the University of York, point out, after many years of research, that poverty is not only a political or economic issue, but rather a medical and biological condition that affects everyone. The poor struggle for survival, as the rich suffer from anxiety, stress, fear and emotional problems, makes them seek comfort in obsessive shopping and consume psychoactive medicines.

According to Wilkinson, who has studied Economic History at the London School of Economics before training in Epidemiology and Pickett, who has studied Physical Anthropology at Cambridge and Nutritional Sciences at Cornell and Epidemiology at the University of California-Berkeley, countries with the biggest gap between the rich and the poor are confronted with many social and medical problems related to low levels of trust, low rates of life expectancy, poor children's educational performance, and scarce social mobility, as well as high levels of mental illnesses (including drug and alcohol addiction), high scores of infant mortality, high index of obesity, high numbers of teenage births, high rates of homicides and imprisonments.

The research of Wilkinson and Pickett is based on 23 rich countries, namely Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the United States of America, taking into main account the reports from the United Nations Development Programme Human Development Indicators, US Census Bureau: Gini ratios by state, survey data and census from different countries, as well as academic studies regarding social and medical issues.

"The Spirit Level" is divided into three parts with sixteen chapters, in which many facts and figures are presented in order to illustrate the correlation between key variables and consequences of income inequality. The first correlation shows that levels of trust between members of the public are lower in countries and states where income differences are larger. In this sense, people trust each other more in the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands than in Mediterranean countries. Sweden has the highest levels of trust, with 66 percent of people feeling that they can trust others. The lowest level of trust is noticed in Portugal, where only 10 percent of the population believe that others can be trusted.

On the other hand, the relation between income inequality and mental illness seems to be rather associated as is reported by Wilkinson and Pickett, who are also distinguished epidemiologists: "A much higher percentage of the population suffers from mental illness in the more unequal countries". In this context, it is not by chance that one million British children – one in ten

between the ages of 5 and 16 – are estimated to be mentally ill. It has been suggested that in any secondary school with 1,000 students, 50 will be severely depressed, 100 will be distressed, 10-20 will be suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder and between 5-10 girls will have an eating disorder. Meanwhile, in the USA, 6 percent of children have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, a behavioral syndrome, characterized by serious distractibility, impulsiveness and restlessness.

Besides, almost 10 percent of children aged 3-17 faced moderate or severe difficulties in “the areas of emotions, concentration, behavior, or being able to get along with other people”. In this light, Germany, Italy, Japan and Spain have fewer than 1 in 10 people suffering from mental illnesses, whereas in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK the numbers are higher than 1 in 5 people, and in the USA higher than 1 in 4.

Wilkinson, who is also an Honorary Professor at the University College London and visiting professor at the University of York, and Pickett, an expert in health care, consider that inequality is associated with low life expectancy, higher rates of infant mortality, shorter height, poor self-reported health, low birth weight and depression. However, they distinguish that differences in health may exist within any population.

In the UK, health disparities have been a major item on the public health agenda for over twenty-five years, and the current National Health Service Plan states that “No injustice is greater than the inequalities in health which scar our nation”. Similarly, many studies in the USA report that a 28-year difference in life expectancy appears at the age of 16 between blacks and whites living in some of the poorest and some of the richest areas. In this sense, life expectancy of middle class members is longer than those of working class in most unequal countries. In agreement with Wilkinson and Pickett, there are many different causes of death to see which have had the biggest class differences in health. However, they have found that deaths among working-age adults, deaths from heart disease, and deaths from homicide have the biggest class differences.

Obesity and unequal income are other factors that show the gap between the rich and the poor. The levels of obesity tend to be lower in countries where income differences are smaller. For example, in the USA, just over 30 percent of adults are obese; a level more than twelve times higher than the one in Japan, where only 2.4 percent of adults are obese. Besides, in the USA, there are no states with levels of adult obesity lower than 20 percent. Colorado has the lowest obesity prevalence at 21.5 percent, compared to 34 percent in Texas, which enlists itself with the highest one.

This relation with inequality and obesity by geographical region suggests: “The level of obesity among adults is higher in unequal US states”. The same tendency is noticed among children: “The level of obesity among children is higher in unequal countries”. In the Netherlands, 7.6 percent of children aged 13 and 15 are overweight, as in the USA one-third of children are overweight, standing for 25.1 percent.

Wilkinson and Pickett also analyze the relation between inequality and performance in education. According to the authors, children living in low-income families experience more family conflict and disruption and are more likely to witness or experience violence as well as live in more crowded, noisy and substandard housing, as the quality of the home environment is directly related to the income. Besides, the interaction between parents and children, as well as the care for kids, are linked to social inequality. The impact upon the aspirations, norms and values of people affects children’s educational performance. Social inequalities in early childhood development are entrenched long before the beginning of formal education, through brain development in prenatal stage. According to the report given by the authors, by the age of three, children from disadvantaged backgrounds were, from an educational point of view, already up to a year behind children from more privileged homes.

For example, “children are dropping out of high school more in the unequal states in the USA”. The lowest drop-out rates in the American states are noticed in Alaska, Wyoming, Utah,

Minnesota and New Hampshire, accounting for about 12 percent. In three states, Mississippi, Louisiana and Kentucky, more than a quarter of children drop out of high school with no educational qualifications. In terms of literacy scores in relation to parents' education across the developed world, taking four countries (the UK, the USA, Finland and Belgium) into consideration, it is noticed that the UK and the USA have the worst levels of inequality and literacy scores, compared to Belgium and Finland that have performed better. In this context, domestic conflict and violence, parental mental illness, poor resources and little time, and income background will affect development in children.

According to "The Spirit Level", there is a strong tendency for the more unequal countries to have higher teenage birth rates. At the top of the league of the group of rich countries, the USA has a teenage birth rate of 52.1 (per 1,000 women aged 15-19), more than ten times higher than the one in Japan, which has a rate of 4.6.

In the same way, in the UK there is a gradient in teenage birth rates per household income from poorest to richest. The percentage of young British women who become teenage mothers in relation to household incomes is an example of this correlation. Each year, almost 5 percent of teenagers living in the poorest quarter of homes have a first baby.

In fact, the most unequal countries of the developed world, the USA, the UK, New Zealand and Portugal have much higher teenage birth rates relative to older women's birth rates than the more equal countries, such as Japan, Sweden, Norway and Finland, which have teenage birth rates that are lower relative to the rates of birth of older women.

The research carried out by Wilkinson and Pickett shows that there are social class differences in both teenage conceptions and births, but the differences are smaller for conceptions than for births, because middle-class young women are more likely to undergo abortions. Teenage birth rates are higher in communities that also have high divorce rates, low levels of trust and low social cohesion, high level of unemployment, poverty and high crime rates.

Wilkinson and Pickett also study the relation between homicides and income, reaching the conclusion that homicides are more common in the more unequal countries. For instance, in the USA murder rate is 64 per million, more than four times higher than the one in the UK (15 million) and more than twelve times higher than that of Japan, which has a rate of only 5.2 per million. It is also noticed, as reported by the author, that homicides are more common in the more unequal US states. Louisiana has a murder rate of 107 per million, more than seven times higher than that of New Hampshire and Iowa, which are bottom of the league table with murder rates of 15 per million.

The authors consider that the association between inequality and violence is strong and consistent, and it is also noticed that there is a relation between feelings of shame, disrespect, humiliation and loss of face among people at the bottom of society, deprived of all the markers of status, who often react explosively when they feel threatened or when they try to gain status and social recognition through violence.

Another correlation analyzed by Wilkinson and Pickett is the frequency of finding that "the number of imprisoned persons is higher in the more unequal countries". In the USA, the number of imprisoned persons has been increasing steadily since the early 1970s. In 1978 there were over 450,000 people in prison, by 2005 there were over 2 million: the number had quadrupled. In the UK, the numbers have doubled since 1990, growing from around 46,000 to 80,000 in 2007. In fact, in February 2007, prisons in the UK were so full that the Home Secretary addressed judges, asking them to send only the most threatening criminals to prison. This contrasts strongly with what has been happening in some other rich countries. During the 1990s, the number of imprisoned persons was stable in Sweden, but declined in Finland; it rose by only 8 percent in Denmark, 9 percent in Japan. More recently, rates have dropped in Ireland, Austria, France and Germany.

Following the results of the research carried out by Wilkinson and Pickett, in the USA there are 576 people in prison per 100,000 which is more than four and a half times higher than the one

in the UK, at 124 per 100,000, and more than fourteen times higher than that of Japan, which has a rate of 40 per 100,000.

The authors of “The Spirit Level” point out that societies with greater inequalities, where social distances between people are greater, where attitudes of “us and them” are more entrenched and where there is a serious lack of trust and fear of crime, public and policy makers alike are more willing to imprison people and adopt punitive attitudes towards the “criminal elements” of society.

With reference to social mobility, as to the possibility to get better social or economic position, the authors indicate that countries with greater income differences tend to have much lower social mobility. In fact, far from enabling the ideology of the American Dream, the USA has the lowest mobility rate among these eight countries. The UK also has low social mobility, West Germany places itself in the middle, whereas Canada and the Scandinavian countries have much higher mobility.

As reported by Wilkinson and Pickett, the spending of a country on education is an indicator of its social mobility, as education is the main engine of social mobility in modern societies. It may be noticed that people with a higher degree of education earn more and have higher social status. In this sense, Norway is the most equal country; almost 97.8 percent spending on school education represents public expenditure. In contrast, in the USA, the least equal of this group of countries, only about two-thirds (68.2 percent) of the spending on school education is public money.

The authors also highlight those cultural differences that are created in societies with the greatest income differences, describing the way in which the amount of money and resources become of paramount importance in order to emphasize cultural social differences, in terms of the accent of rich people, their clothing, language, choice of reading matter, the television programs they watch, the food they eat, the sports they practice, the music they prefer, and their appreciation of art, which will contrast with the ones of the poor. The distinction and “good taste” of rich people is used to maintain their position in social hierarchy which will be translated into discrimination and downward prejudice to prevent those below them from improving their status. In this regard, the way in which class, taste and snobbery work to constrain people’s opportunities and wellbeing are, in reality, painful and pervasive means of creating social exclusion.

Wilkinson and Pickett conclude that more egalitarian countries live well with high living standards and much better social environments; according to their research, Japan, Norway, Sweden and Finland are more equal countries in social and economic terms than the UK and the USA of the list of rich countries analyzed by the specialists.

The “Spirit Level”, which is based on medical and scientific research, is an exceptional text that helps us understand the nature of inequality and gives us a dose of responsibility for the level of equality or inequality created in a country. Furthermore, the text proposes the development of politics based on recognition of such a society, as well as viewing politics as a way of improving people’s social and emotional wellbeing by changing their economic circumstances.

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