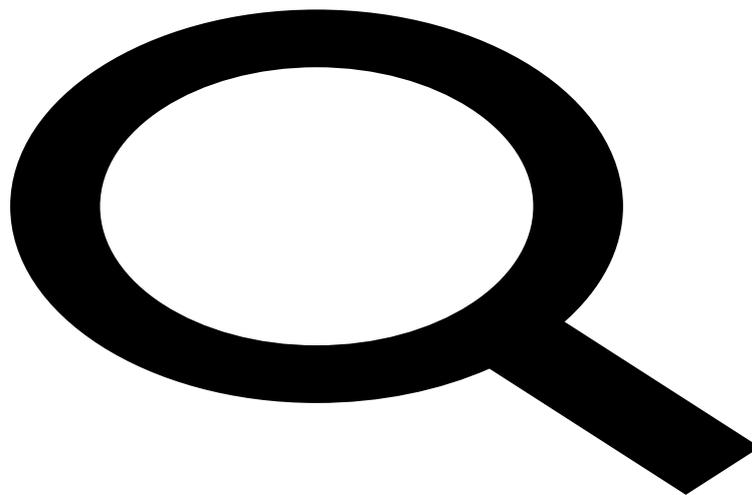


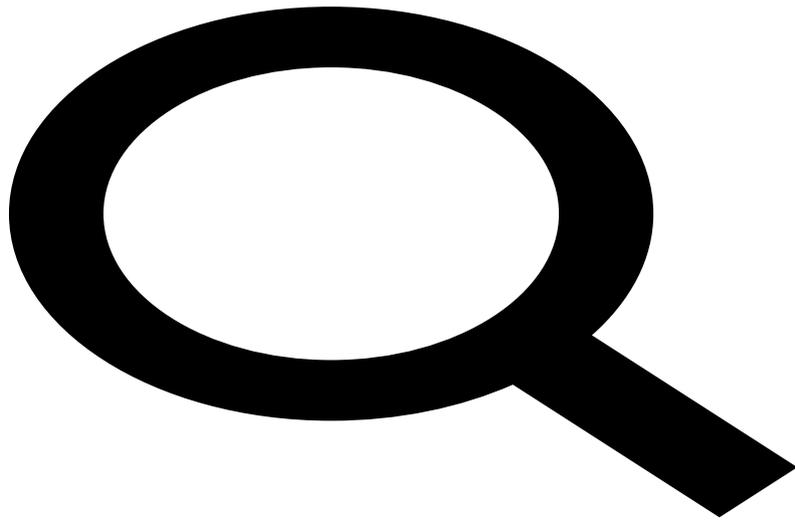
Let's talk about politics for once. It is common knowledge that in rich societies the poor have  shorter lives and suffer more from almost every social problem. In a quite fascinating book, [The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always do Better](#), epidemiologists [Richard Wilkinson](#) and [Kate Pickett](#) demonstrate that more unequal societies are bad for almost everyone - the well-off as well as the poor ([here](#) is the Guardian review, and [here](#) is Nature's). The remarkable data the book lays out and the measures it uses are like a 'spirit level' which we can hold up to compare the conditions of different societies. The differences revealed, even between rich market democracies, are striking. Almost every modern social and environmental problem - ill-health, lack of community life, violence, drugs, obesity, mental illness, long working hours, big prison populations - is more likely to occur in a less equal society. The book goes to the heart of the apparent contrast between the material success and social failings of many modern societies. The Spirit Level does not simply provide a key to diagnosing our ills. It tells us how to shift the balance from self-interested 'consumerism' to a friendlier and more collaborative society. It shows a way out of the social and environmental problems which beset us and opens up a major [new approach](#) to improving the real quality of life, not just for the poor but for everyone. Last but not least, (at least for the reader of the ICCI's [blog](#)), it is a very good piece of sociology based on cognition and evolution.

First, the evidence: There is a strong correlation between inequality and health and social problems.

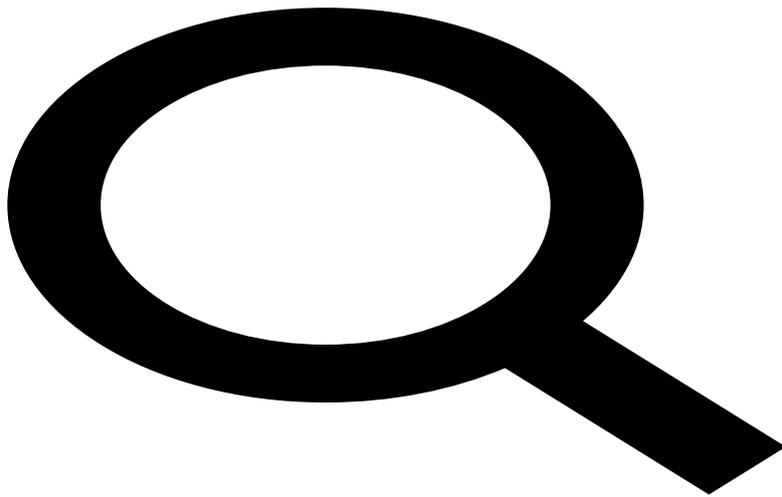


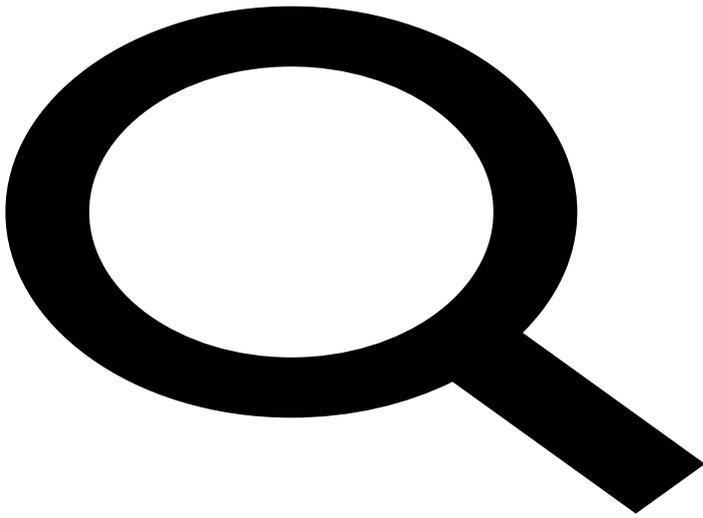
Income inequality is measured by the ratio of incomes among the richest compared with the poorest 20% in each country. The index of health and social problems combines data for 10 outcomes (trust, mental illness, life expectancy, infant mortality, obesity, educational performance, teenage birth, homicide, imprisonment, social mobility).

In contrast, there is no relationship between income and health and social problems.

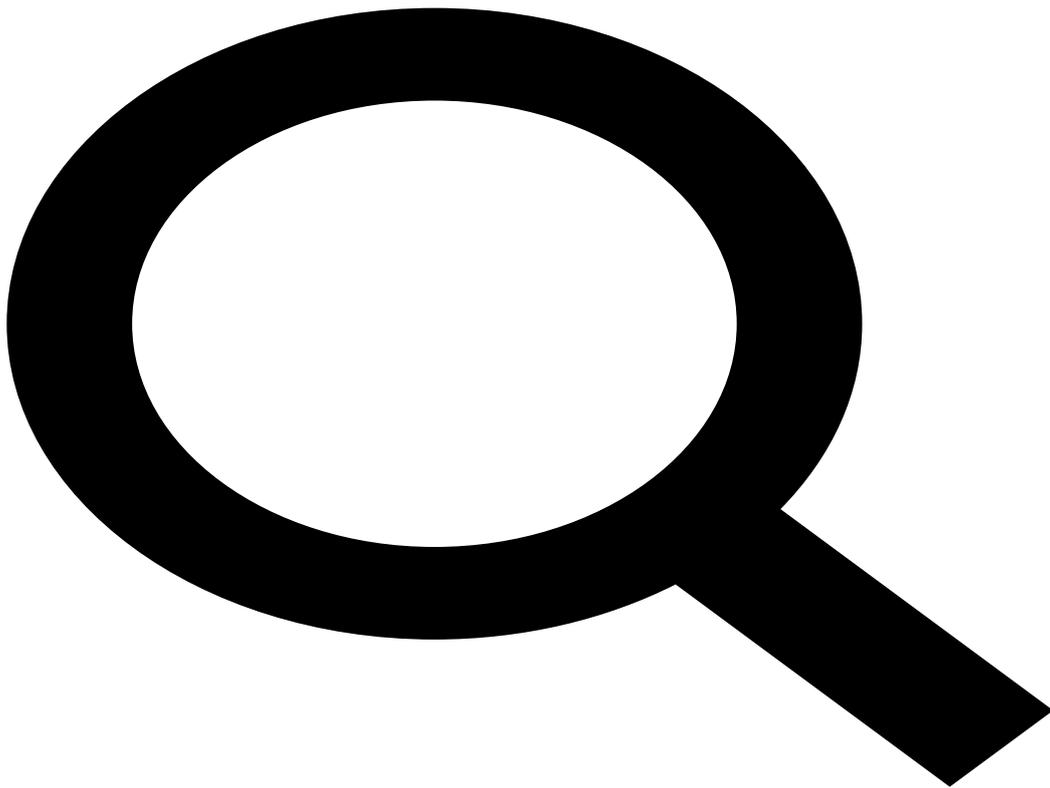


The same phenomenon is visible across the 50 US states:





Note that is consistent with the fact that over 10 000\$ per person, more money do not improve people' situation.



This global relationship between inequality and social problems is true for each component in particular, such as child well-being:



The Unicef index measured six different aspects of child well-being. Material well-being included

such things as living in a home with few books, or where no adult was employed. Health and safety included items like immunization rates and deaths from accidents. Educational well-being included scores on performance tests and the proportion of children going into further education. Peer and family relationships were measured by such things as whether or not children viewed their peers as kind, and the numbers of children living in single parent and step-parent families. Behaviours and risks included smoking and drinking, how many children had sex by age 15, etc. Subjective well-being included self-rated health and other measures of how children felt about themselves.

Mental health:



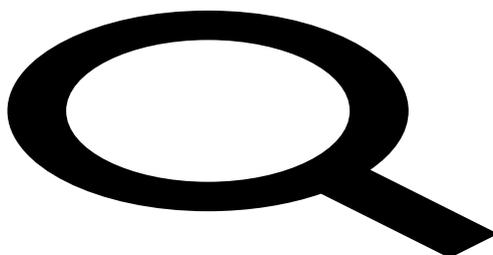
Or obesity:



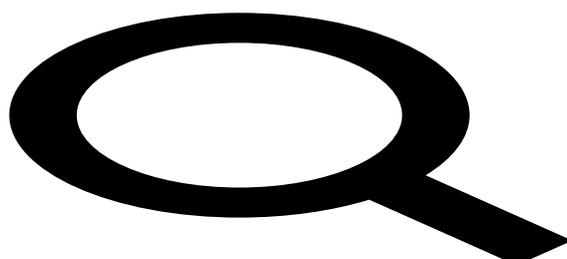
It may seem obvious that problems associated with relative deprivation should be more common in more unequal societies. However, if you ask yourself why greater equality reduces these problems, the common intuition is that it must be because more equal societies have fewer poor people. The assumption is that greater equality helps those at the bottom. However, the truth is that the vast majority of the population is harmed by greater inequality.

Across whole populations, rates of mental illness are five times higher in the most unequal compared to the least unequal societies. Similarly, in more unequal societies people are five times as likely to be clinically obese, and murder rates may be many times higher. The reason why these differences are so big is, quite simply, because the effects of inequality are not confined to the least well-off: instead they affect the vast majority of the population.

Compare for instance England and Sweden:



Or England and the US:



Inequality is bad for everyone, including the richest.

Note that this is not a question of culture (English-speaking countries, the West, the liberal, etc.).

The USA and Britain do badly, but so does Portugal. Although Portugal is unequal, like the USA and Britain, it is very different in many other aspects. Same observation for Sweden and Japan. They do very well, despite their big differences. Think about family structures. Sweden has a very high proportion of births outside marriage and women are almost equally represented in politics. In Japan, the opposite is true. Even the way in which Sweden and Japan achieve their greater equality is quite different. Sweden does it through redistributive taxes and a large welfare state. As a proportion of national income, public social expenditure in Japan is, in contrast to Sweden, among the lowest of the major developed countries.

Overviews of the bare facts and statistical evidence can be found in [The annual review of sociology](#).

OK - so far so good for the evidence. The opening question remains: Why is it the case that More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better? For Wilkinson and Pickett, the explanation has to be found in human nature. We can list three main causes in their book:

1) Humans belong to a social species (as many primates). As such, we have a drive for being at the top of the social ladder and we always crave for status. This has several consequences:

- People's self-esteem is indexed on others' performance and evaluation. The more unequal the society, the more people feel threatened. Indeed, Dickerson and Kemeny [reviewed](#) more than two hundreds experiments in which people's cortisol levels (a central stress hormone) were measured while they were exposed to an experimental stressor. They classified all the different kinds of stressor used in experiments and found that: 'tasks that included a social-evaluative threat (such as threats to self-esteem or social status), in which others could negatively judge performance, particularly when the outcome of the performance was uncontrollable, provoked larger and more reliable cortisol changes than stressors without these particular threats'. They suggest that: 'Human beings are driven to preserve their social self and are vigilant to threats that may jeopardize their social self-esteem or status'.
- The release of cortisol raises blood pressure and blood sugar levels, from which myriad health and social problems unfold. This seemingly hard-wired response has been well studied in social hierarchies of monkeys; low-status animals become predisposed to atherosclerosis and cardiovascular disease. Humans experiencing chronic stress exhibit similar symptoms, accumulating abdominal fat under the influence of a part of the brain associated with addiction. Cortisol overrides 'feel-good hormones' such as oxytocin, involved in establishing trust, and dopamine, the reward signal that reinforces memory, attention and problem-solving ability. Cortisol-induced stress predisposes some individuals to mental illness or violent behaviour. It can hasten the arrival of puberty, which may prompt premature sexual adventures, providing a plausible explanation of the high prevalence of teenage pregnancies in the most unequal societies. Cortisol also transmits stress to a fetus, with lasting consequences for physical and emotional development. The stress response may also lead to illicit drug use. Monkey social hierarchies provide a clue: dominant animals secrete dopamine and feel good about their place in the world, whereas monkeys at the other end of the status scale are more inclined to self-medicate - with cocaine if given the opportunity.
- Unequal societies decrease almost everyone's self-esteem and has consequences over children's aspirations (they have lower aspirations in more unequal societies) and their motivation when they realize that some of their peers are better equipped than themselves for educational challenges.
- People want to be as good as others. The bigger the differences, the stronger the need to meet others' standards. Frank observes the same phenomenon and calls it '[luxury fever](#)'. As inequality grows and the super-rich at the top spend more and more on luxury goods, the desire for such things cascades down the income scale and the rest of us struggle to compete and keep up. While

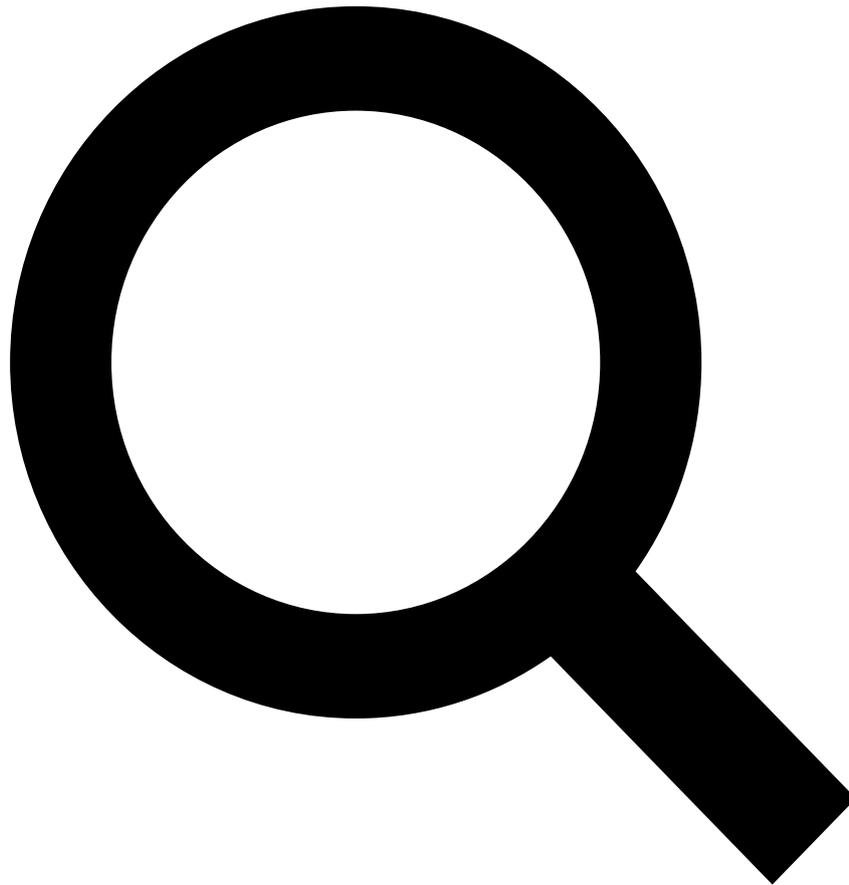
inequality has been rising in the USA and Britain, there has been a long-term decline in saving and a rise in debt. Robert Franck notes that in 1998, even though the American economy had been booming as never before, one family in 68 filed for bankruptcy - four times the rate in the early 1980s before the most dramatic rises in inequality. By 2002, unpaid credit card debt was \$9000 for the average card-holder. Looking at the evolution of this phenomenon over ten years, Franck found that bankruptcy rates rose most in parts of the USA where inequality has risen most. The growth of inequality made it harder for people to maintain standards relative to others. The increased pressure to consume leads people to save less and borrow more. This fits well with the fact that spending on advertising also varies with inequality - in more unequal countries a higher proportion of GDP is spent on advertising, with the USA and New-Zealand spending twice as much as Norway and Denmark. Work is of course another variable to increase your consumption and indeed, several studies have shown that people work longer in more unequal societies. Another study suggested that the decision married women make about taking paid work are also affected by personal inequalities: women who were married to employed men being more likely to take job themselves if they live in an area in which men's incomes are more unequal.

- People may use violent strategy to defend their status. The more we feel devaluated by those above us and the fewer status resources we have to fall back on, the greater will be the desire to regain some sense of self-worth by asserting superiority over more vulnerable groups. That's what social psychologists call '[displaced aggression](#)'. Examples include: the man who is berated by his boss and comes home and shouts at his wife and children; the higher degree of aggression in workplaces where supervisors treat workers unfairly; the way in which prisoners who are bullied turn on others below them in the prison hierarchy.

- Men, compared to women, have strong incentives to achieve and maintain as high a social status as they can, because their success in sexual competition depend on status (see Buss for instance). This explains not only why feeling put down, disrespect and humiliated are the most common trigger for violence; it also explains why most violence is between men - men have more to win and lose from having or (failing to gain) status. Reckless, even violent behaviour comes from young men at the bottom of society, who must struggle to maintain face and what little status they have often reacting explosively when threatened (see Wilson and Daly's famous study of homicide at Chicago).

2) Humans are a highly cooperative species (contrary to most primates)

Social support is central for humans and in the same way that competition is stressful, lack of support is painful. As [recently](#) demonstrated by Eisenberger and Lieberman, social exclusion activates the same neural network as physical pain.



Sociological studies suggest that people have less social support in more unequal societies. Indeed, people trust each other less in more unequal societies.



In [The moral foundations of trust](#) (see especially p. 187), Uslaner shows that, in the USA, people who trust others are more likely to donate time and money to help other people. 'Trusters' also tend to believe in a common culture and that Americans are held together by shared values. Similarly, in his famous [Bowling alone](#), Putnam links the rise of inequality in America and the fall of investment in collective activities. High level of trust means that people feel secure, they have less to worry about, they see others as co-operative rather than competitive. More generally, as Durkheim suggested long ago in *Le suicide*, having friends, being married, belonging to a religious group or other associations and having people who will provide support are all protective of health.

3) Human face a trade-off between quantity and quality strategy (as all living beings)

From an evolutionary point of view, living beings face a trade-off between [quantity and quality strategy](#). This [theory](#) predicts that people who learned, while growing up, 'to perceive others as opportunistic and self-serving and resources as scarce and/or unpredictable' would reach maturity earlier, be sexually active earlier, be more likely to form short-term relationships and make less investment in parenting. Bycontrast, people who grow-up learning 'to perceive others as trustworthy, relationships as enduring and mutually rewarding and resources more or less constantly available' would mature later, defer sexual activity, be better at forming long-term

relationships and invest more heavily in their children's development. In line with such a theory, several studies have also shown that early conflict and the absence of a father do predict earlier maturation – girls in such situations become physically mature and start their period earlier than girls who grow up without those sources of stress.



In the same way, the behaviour of boys and young men who grow up without fathers has been described as 'hypermasculine', with boys engaging in 'rigidly overcompensatory masculine behaviours' – crime against property and people, aggression and exploitation and short-term sexual conquests.



 A personal note and a 'cognition and culture' conjecture

Coming from a small town in the west of France, I remember being impressed by Parisian folks. They were so competitive! Talking about cooking, travelling, wine and so on, I often felt quite incompetent. But my feeling was not just about how skilled they were. I also had the feeling that they took life more seriously: They bought books for cooking (and so was I all of a sudden), they wrote diaries when they were abroad, they took a 'year off' to discover the world, they went to old European cities for their week-ends, etc. By contrast, in my more equal 'province' people seemed more relaxed. Of course, they cooked, they travelled, they took breaks, but it did not look like they were working on their lives. I'm not saying that the Parisians did not truly like what they did, they just did it more seriously. Was it a question of culture? In the light of The Spirit Level, it looks like it might come down to levels of inequality. Parisians live in a more unequal society where they have to do more to meet their standard of self-esteem and where they have to constantly promote their self. In province, by contrast, even in the same social class, with the same income and the same cultural background, people feel less threatened and are therefore less motivated to take their hobbies seriously.

Although it sounds [bourdieusian](#), this theory is quite different. It is not about lower classes trying to imitate higher classes; it is about the increase in competition within the same social classes. Furthermore, it makes testable predictions regarding the cultural spread of high-culture goods. The more unequal is your society, the more people should consume cooking classes, travel books, etc. Similarly, within the same society, people of a given social, economic and cultural background should buy more of these goods when they live in unequal cities than their counterparts living in less unequal cities.

Going back to politics

First, I'd like to quote Wilkinson and Pickett on poverty.

"Every problem is seen as needing its own solution – unrelated to others. People are encouraged to take exercise, not to have unprotected sex, to say no to drugs, to try to relax, to sort-out their work-life balance, and to give their children 'quality' time. The only thing that many of these policies do have in common is that they often seem to be based on the belief that the poor need to be taught to be more sensible. The glaringly obvious fact that these problems have common roots in inequality and relative deprivation disappears from view." (p 234)

Second, equality may also be a way to tackle climate change.

"We might hope that new technology will save us from the rigours of carbon rationing. However,

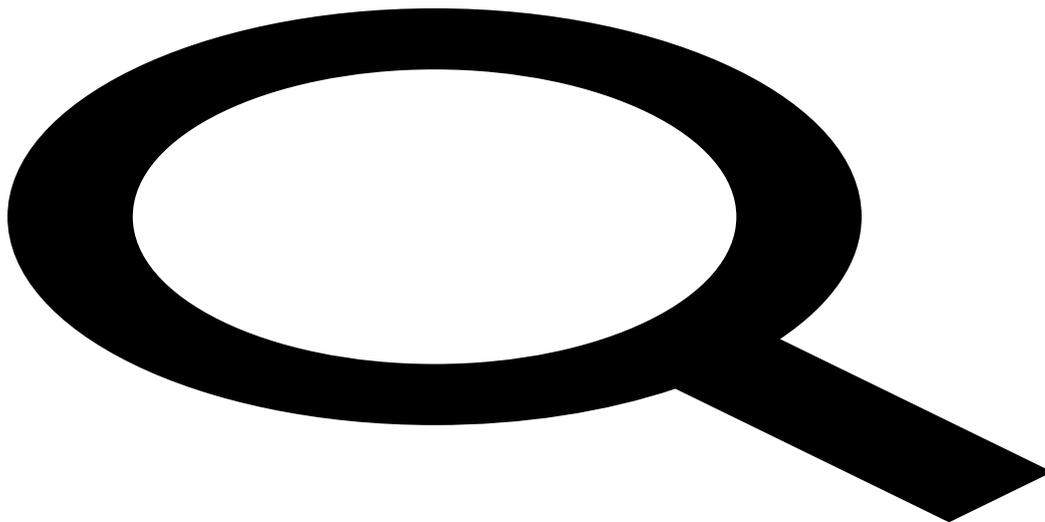
although green innovations which reduce fuel consumption and carbon emissions are an essential part of the change we need to make, they cannot solve the problem on their own. Imagine that a new generation of car engines is introduced which halve fuel consumption. Driving would then be cheaper and that would save us money which we would certainly spend on something else. We might spend it on driving more, or on buying a bigger car, or on more power-hungry electrical equipment – perhaps a bigger fridge-freezer. But however we spend the money put back in our pockets by more efficient car engines, our additional consumption will probably add to carbon emissions elsewhere and lose much of the original environmental benefit." (p. 219)

That's where equality is needed:

"Instead of policies to deal with global warming being experienced simply as imposing limits on the possibility of material satisfaction, they need to be coupled with egalitarian policies which steer us to new and more fundamental ways of improving the quality of our lives." (p.226)

A final note on base-ball

To conclude, you may not care about politics, health, equality, social mobility. That's fine because there is another argument. Studies based on thousand of base-ball matches show that the more equal the salaries in a base-ball team are, the better its performance!



(Bloom, 1999, p. 36)