

## Opinion

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## Vague solutions to inequality

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The Spirit Level argues for an equal society, but the book ignores the impact of economics, culture and neoliberal ideology

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Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett are right to [talk about inequality](#) and do so at length in [The Spirit Level](#), a debate that seems to have captured something about the anxieties and fears we have about modern Britain and life. Yet, despite its popularity and the claims of its authors, The Spirit Level does not offer a new egalitarian credo, and instead leaves crucial areas unexplored.

Wilkinson and Pickett pose that [inequality](#) hurts and harms all of us and set out to show across a range of international examples that more equal affluent countries are happier, more secure and have a better quality of life. In a 330-page book on inequality, the authors surprisingly say next to nothing about factors that created the rising tide of inequality we have witnessed these last few decades. Not only that, they take their argument that rising inequality has occurred as proven, and don't offer any historical examination even of the recent past.

Even more surprisingly, they dismiss in a couple of paragraphs the role of ideology in creating more inequality. Specifically neoliberalism is curtly dismissed, apparently because it did not set out to cause the symptoms of inequality such as teenage pregnancy, obesity, and greater levels of violence. This is naive and a complete misunderstanding of the nature of neoliberalism, centred on the encouragement of market relationships and inequality with all the symptoms that flow from this.

Following on from this, there is no recognition of how economics and politics have forged a new coalescing of power - not just corporate, but across society, from the media to culture and academia. This power has reshaped government, policy and the character of the state in the UK and elsewhere. There is no examination of the changing nature of the economy, as instead they focus solely on social factors. All we are offered are passing references to "the knowledge economy", "weightless world" and globalisation, all without any criticism offered. There is no grasp of the fact that these narratives have been used to legitimise winners in society and greater inequality.

Furthermore, while [The Spirit Level](#) draws on international comparisons, it offers no commentary on the different cultures of modern capitalism in the west. In particular, it has no understanding of the specific cultures of the English-speaking democracies.

New Labour apologists use this to damn the book, claiming it does not understand the dynamism and multiculturalism of the UK and US, but the problem is much deeper than this. Instead, what Wilkinson and Pickett have in common with their New Labour opponents is a lack of understanding of the "anglo-sphere": the UK, US, Canada, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand. In five of the six, brutal neoliberal experiments were unleashed from the 1980s unparalleled anywhere in the democratic world (Thatcherism, Reaganism, Rogernomics); the exception is Canada, which remained a much more equal society.

There is little on ethnicity and race, or addressing regional and sub-national differences in the UK. The Spirit Level has nothing to say on Scotland and Wales and their own specific patterns of inequality, Scotland being scarred by the worst health inequalities in western Europe. All of these weaknesses combine in their concluding chapters. Wilkinson and Pickett make the case for a "better society", along the lines of [Neal Lawson's and Compass's "good society"](#) and Richard Layard's "common good", and define it as "a more equal society in which people are less divided by status and hierarchy".

These warm-sounding phrases are nothing but euphemisms for the search for an alternative to the world neoliberalism created, while recognising the retreat from the grand hopes of socialism. But the phrases are so vague as to be meaningless. Who after all is against the "good society"? Weren't Thatcher and Blair motivated by their own versions?

"What can be done?" ask Wilkinson and Pickett, citing employee ownership and buy-outs as the road to a "better society", ignoring any mention of corporate governance, the power of the City and the nature of the open economy which sees foreign takeovers across society from Kraft to football, nuclear power to airports. The Spirit Level is written with the best of intentions, but there is a void at its heart. Its authors have set themselves up as offering a mantra for explaining our confusing modern times, and yet in so doing have offered an analysis which is problematic, partial and panglossian.

In their concluding thoughts, they suggest that progressive politics has for decades been weakened by the absence of any idea of a better society, instead becoming reduced to piecemeal policies. Their failing is the opposite: combining vague idealistic notions of a better society along with little practical, political or ideological suggestions for how we progress. The Spirit Level is not a bad book, but it is not a manifesto for new times. Instead, it is a symptom of the problem age we live in, of a Westminster political consensus sitting alongside a set of global orthodoxies which reflect the self-interests of an elite.