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Review **How can we rediscover the magic of more equal societies?**

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The Nordic societies and Japan have kept the faith with the goal of social equality. Why can't the rest of the world, asks ***Robin Stott***

Inequality is a significant marker for and cause of poor health. Why is it so persistent, and why isn't there a much greater clamour about it? Both these books explore these issues.

Both attribute the emergence of fairer societies after the great depression to enlightened public policies, such as genuinely redistributive taxation, regulation of the banking systems, and introduction of the welfare state. These were made possible by shared values of peoples drawn into the collective struggle to survive the depression and subsequent wars. Public service—personal action for the collective good—was widely considered to be an honourable and fulfilling way of life.

So by the end of the 1950s want, ignorance, disease, squalor, and idleness—the ills that William Beveridge defined in his report that formed the basis of the UK postwar welfare state as those most necessary to combat—had been much reduced. The United Kingdom and the United States were fairer societies than they had ever been; but with the felling of the Beveridge giants an unforseen new social dynamic emerged. No longer did our rich Anglo-Saxon societies believe that individual aspiration could be met through public action. Action for purely personal gain became the norm. Not so much, "What needs to be done for the public good?" but "What can I get for myself, preferably with tacit public approval?"

Dorling is crystal clear in believing that this came about because the powerful were anxious about losing their privileges in a more equal society. Implicitly and explicitly, the powerful recognised that the elevation of the market to be

the arbiter of good policy was likely to consolidate their hold on power. So instead of actions being for the public good, they had only to be for the market's good. Over the next 50 years the huntsmen of the apocalypse regrouped, added a fifth steed, and came galloping into our society in the guise of elitism, exclusion, prejudice, greed, and despair.

Dorling warns that all of us in the more privileged sections of society buy into one or other of these perceptions. Are the poor really less able, the bankers more deserving, the gated communities more important, the children of the rich more worthy recipients of the best university education, the poor innately more likely to commit suicide, become depressed, and fall into despair? Shouldn't the children of the rich be enabled to inherit their parents' property without paying much inheritance tax? Both authors (Dorling in a more forensic and hard hitting way) believe that many people in society's privileged sectors hold such views. Thus the everyday life of communities entrench the inequalities, making it ever more difficult to reverse them.

The Nordic countries and Japan have kept the faith, with equality as a societal goal. Their excellent health statistics testify to the benefits this brings and exemplify the truth of the fairness proposition. How can the rest of the rich world, particularly the UK and US, rediscover the magic of more equal societies? Neither author offers a blueprint; but both suggest that local community organisation—opening the political space for dissent and constructive dialogue—and brave leadership would help the vital change in thinking that they say is essential.

Because they don't examine policy options in any great detail, neither book explores how narrowing the wealth gap in rich countries will reverse the even greater injustice of our times: the spiralling gap between the have and have not nations. So while I can understand their reluctance to explore the ways forward, not doing so is a serious flaw in these otherwise thought provoking books, for surely any solutions proposed for rich nations must also address this gap. There are now fresh ideas, such as a global commitment to a fair shares deal for climate change (www.climateandhealth.org) and direct transfers of money to poor people,[1] which would move us to a fairer society

locally and globally and which afford health professionals specific platforms for advocacy.

In making it clear that they aren't offering solutions Dorling and Judt are staying true to the intuitively attractive Australian Aboriginal saying, "Traveller, there is no path, paths are made by walking." But surely we now know enough to put an occasional signpost in the sand? Our collective inability to act on the good information that we have made reading these books unsettling. It's clear that the health professions, which for at least 30 years have had excellent evidence about the importance of inequality to health outcomes, have not offered the leadership to combat the problem. Furthermore, in our own lifestyles and choices we often perpetuate or even aggravate inequality. Are we collectively buying into the view that Sophocles offers Electra's sister as a justification for her inaction: "Sometimes justice is too high a price to pay"?

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Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists

Daniel Dorling

Policy Press, £19.99, pp 400

Rating: ***

Ill Fares the Land: A Treatise on our Present Discontents

Tony Judt

Allen Lane, £20, pp 256

Rating: ***

Reference: 1. Hanlon J, Barrientos A, Hulme D. Just give money to the poor: the development revolution from the global south. Kumarian Press, 2010.