

Sarah Kerr

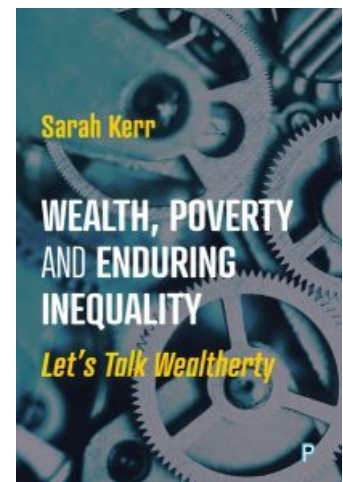
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## Q&A with Sarah Kerr on Wealth, Poverty and Enduring Inequality

*In this interview with Anna D'Alton, Research Fellow at LSE International Inequalities Institute Sarah Kerr discusses her new book, **Wealth, Poverty and Enduring Inequality: Let's Talk Wealtherty**. The book argues that to tackle inequality today, researchers, policy makers and society at large should stop focusing on the problem of poverty and start focusing on the problem of extreme wealth concentration.*

***Wealth, Poverty and Enduring Inequality: Let's Talk Wealtherty. Sarah Kerr. Policy Press. 2024.***

**Why do you argue as the book's central premise that we spend too much time and resources researching the problem of poverty, and not enough time trying to understand the problem of wealth?**



We already know a lot about poverty: **how much there is**; how it **changes over time**; the **experience of those living in poverty**; the relationship between **poverty and gender, poverty and "race"**. Since 1961, the government has collected **data sets on incomes** helping us understand relative income inequality (and relatedly, poverty), and regular reports from charities and think tanks on **deep poverty and destitution** tell us about the intensity of poverty. It feels fair to suggest then, that lack of *knowledge* about poverty is not what is hampering action to address it.

At the same time, and astonishingly, we've only had government-produced **long-run data on wealth and assets** since 2006, and the first report of the **World Inequality Lab** didn't come out until 2018.

But given that we are now starting to understand the magnitude of **its impact on other forms of inequality**, our research on poverty should start to look upwards. **Policy sociologists started making the case for this in the early 2000s**. The point I make in the book is that emerging knowledge about wealth and its social effects should make us, *at the very least*, question the ongoing legitimacy of poverty as the primary focus of anti-poverty scholarship.

## Why do you consider it important to study not only wealth and how it is accumulated, but its social effects? What are some of the adverse social effects of wealth concentration?

In a way, how wealth has been accumulated over the long *durée* helps to explain many of its enduring social effects. For example, racialised and gendered patterns of wealth extraction during the colonial and early industrial eras continue to **pattern asset ownership today**: women still hold less wealth than men; non-white ethnic groups tend to hold less wealth than white ethnic groups. Intergenerational transfer through gifting and inheritance propels these racialised and gendered inequalities into the future.

And of course, because ownership of financial capital bleeds into ownership of high levels of social and political capital (described in work like that on ***Limitarianism*** by Ingrid Robeyns), then the rich have a disproportionate influence on the design of the legal systems and processes from which they themselves benefit, and on the media which is so successful in promulgating justificatory narratives for the very wealthy (for example, the ‘self-made entrepreneur’ trope). The tightening of the relationship between wealth, the media, and politics, and its evident impact on social stability is another of the social effect of extreme wealth that we should be concerned about.

## How do you define the concept of “wealtherty”?

It’s important to say straight away that wealtherty is a working definition – and I’m really open to people adding new ideas, or challenging the ones there. Like all models and concepts, it is only relevant if it is useful. This answer builds on the one above, because wealtherty is about making the case that the social effects of wealth inequality are diffuse.

The four basic components are:

- 1) *The active enablement of hyper-concentration*. This is about the legal code and the ‘effective’ institutional strategies that enable every increasing extremes of wealth ownership;
- 2) *The perpetuation of social and policy divisions* based on this distinction (fiscal and social policy, claimants and customers). This is about governing richer and poorer populations *differently*;
- 3) *Unequal access to political power and influence*. This is about dominating political discourse and

steering it to reflect the needs of the rich; 4) *Active gatekeeping of epistemic and epistemological resources*. This is about gatekeeping who gets to know and what constitutes knowledge.

Wealtherty exists when the dynamic between these elements is self-sustaining and has made itself invisible – a form of wealth privilege. This makes it unlikely that beneficiaries of the system will be motivated to enact change.

## What could be gained from bringing the ideas of “wealtherty” into mainstream policymaking?

I think its benefit lie in the simple principle of attempting to recognise the *multi-faceted social workings of wealth* so that we can understand what needs to change. Wealth inequality is not simply a revenue question that can be resolved through the imposition of a wealth tax (although a tax would be a great start!). It is also a social and economic justice issue. And if we can recognise how it shows up in this expansive way, then we are more likely to be able to act on it.

In [Danny Dorling’s review of my book](#), he rightly questioned the tractability of neologisms like wealtherty. Is wealtherty really going to take hold? Possibly not. But the point of new concepts is to shift ways of thinking, not necessarily to accrue diagnoses of whether the concept is watertight. It undoubtedly isn’t! But can it help to shift how people think? Is it *useful*? Can it help to pivot more scholarship, more policy focus, more public concern, upwards?

## What led you to the interdisciplinary approach you take in this book, which integrates sociological studies of wealth with ideas and case studies from visual culture and spatial theory?

When you have an interdisciplinary background, you approach a question with different perspectives and traditions in your toolkit. I was listening to a [Financial Times podcast with Angus Deaton](#) recently in which, on reflecting on what is wrong with the discipline of economics in its current form, he referenced its tendency to sideline psychology, ethics, history, psychology, sociology and to leapfrog from graphs straight to policy solutions. I love this insight – it’s great to have a Nobel Prize-winning economist suggest that the only sensible way of coming to know about things like the economy is to detour through the humanities!

I used a range of different sources (Jobcentre Plus office designs, workhouses, the report from the Work & Pensions Committee Inquiry into the Rollout of Universal Credit and [Survival Sex](#), minutes of meetings between the state and the super-rich, critical art photography) to try and recuperate what Foucault (whose approach to genealogy I used in the book) calls a ‘profusion of lost events’ or “things that ‘are meant to be without history’” into new perspectives on our now. And I explored

these using approaches from philosophy, art history, network ethnography and historical sociology to seek to understand how polarisations between richer and poorer people today are renewals of much longer-durée “orientations”. I was inspired by this **insight from historical sociologist Professor Gurminder Bhambra**: She says that only ‘through acknowledging the histories that produced them and the historiographies that have obscured them’ can we address “the injustices that disfigure the world that we share in common”. My history of wealtherty is about just this: recognising and acknowledging the histories that have produced contemporary injustices.

## **You cite a marked contrast in the UK government’s disposition towards the poor and the wealthy: one is subject to great surveillance and scrutiny, while the other enjoys privacy and ignorance. Can you elaborate on this disparity and its effects?**

I looked at the very different ways of governing richer and poorer people and identified different dispositions of the state towards each group: ignorance (in the **agnotologists’ sense of the concept**) in its government of the rich, and ‘scrutiny’ in its approach to the poor. I observed that in their financial relationships with the state, richer people have recourse to privacy, where poorer people are compelled to complete disclosure. I include examples in the book, such as the way Universal Credit demands complete disclosure from claimants, and builds in real-time transfer of income data from His Majesty’s Revenue & Customs (HMRC) to the Department for Work and Pensions. I contrasted this with the way that the **principle of cooperative compliance** (in practice, voluntary disclosure for taxation purpose) operates for the wealthiest through the Wealthy External Forum in HMRC.

Then I looked at how and where these dispositions started to emerge (in the poor laws, and early income taxation, for example, towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries). I concluded that the effects of these dispositions *over time* is to naturalise financial privacy for wealthy people and complete disclosure for poorer people. It normalises a corrosive absence of trust in how the government treats poorer people, and an equally corrosive (and much more socially and environmentally costly!) abundance of trust for the very wealth, which is often at odds with their actual fiscal behaviours.

The idea of using wealtherty as a perspective is to ask, What orientations are at work for this population and why? With what effect? What are the values that mean these norms aren’t applied to other populations? And more fundamentally, what is the role of wealth in producing these divergent orientations? Drawing attention to the naturalising of these different dispositions is the first part of being able to do something about them: showing how they were made can help us think about how they can be unmade.

# How does the unequal way in which knowledge is produced (with the rich involved and the poor excluded) impact and shape other forms of inequality?

I look at unequal knowledge production throughout my book. For example, wealthy trusts and foundations – and individuals – provide funding to bodies like The Tobacco Research Council, or The Marshall Institute which publish forms of ‘distraction’ or ‘red herring’ research. This research serves to produce artificial doubt over things where there is, in reality, significant scholarly consensus (like climate change, or the harmful effects of tobacco). The effect is to extend the life of physically and environmentally harmful corporate behaviours which disproportionately negatively impact poorer people. The relationship between money and knowledge-making is a useful lens to bring to the analysis of think tank activity, as I do in my case study of the Centre for Social Justice: What is being produced? Whose money is enabling its production? Who benefits? Whose values are represented? Whose aren’t?

In the penultimate chapter of my book I look at how the state talks to and is talked to by richer and poorer people through the lens of something called **epistemic injustice**. This is a way of accounting for the excesses or deficits of credibility that a person or group of people might be subject to because of positive or negative identity prejudice. It provides a framework for analysing communication between people with more or less power to understand better how power relationships are defined and defended at the level of individual communicative acts.

As well as hearing from those harmed by social policy, we should also hear from the harm-causers: the companies paying low wages; the think tanks perpetuating unhelpful narratives about pathways to poverty; the landlords letting out homes unfit for human habitation; the media organisations vilifying or parodying the lives that people living in security are often forced to lead. Wealthy is about always seeing “the social” as being about all of us – richer and poorer people alike – and not letting some groups hide or reveal themselves as is convenient.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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## About the author



Sarah Kerr is a Research Fellow at the International Inequalities Institute. She completed her PhD at the UCL on the long legislative history of inequality between richer and poorer people. Her research interests include forms of justice-making, power, and the historical sociology of wealth.

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