

The biggest injustice in modern society is not economic inequality, but inequality of life expectancy.

by Blog Admin

*Inequality is often conceived of as the gap between the earnings of the richest members of society and those of the poorest. **Göran Therborn** argues, however, that beyond financial figures there are far greater inequities which affect modern society. Chief among these is inequality in life expectancy. He notes that there are striking differences in the health and wellbeing of UK citizens, with even different areas of a single city, such as Glasgow or London, displaying huge variations in the life expectancy of residents.*



Why are so many people so angry about the payouts given to bankers and business executives? And hardly anybody at the salaries received by Wayne Rooney, Fernando Torres, and the other Premier League football stars? While the former generate resentment, the latter are instead showered in admiration by sports journalists and fans alike. Envy is clearly not driving the anger at inequality, and I think it is a fair guess that a significant number of **Occupy activists** are also football fans.

Serious egalitarians, a group in which I claim membership, should try to sort out what is wrong with inequality, what is passable, and what kind of equality we actually want. Personally, I think the drenching of football in money and business is disgusting, and to the extent it will be shown to be linked to **match-fixing** and gambling syndicates, there will be a surge of rage. But as long as it is not, the overpaid Premier League stars may be seen as harmless butterflies, or peacocks. They entertain us, and their wealth does not really drain the economy.

Among the richest 1 per cent in the US, three in a hundred are sports and entertainment celebrities. The businessmen, by contrast, are ruling us, and certainly not entertaining us. As a group, the one per cent siphon off for themselves a substantial slice of the economy: in the UK about fifteen per cent. These are resources which could have had a better use than paying for multiple mansions, personal jets, and private Caribbean islands.

There are three things, above all, wrong with inequality. First, there is the economic squandering it entails: not only of private luxury, but also on vicious elite games, with missiles, bombers, drones, and what Winston Churchill once called “jolly little wars against barbarous peoples”. In between these little wars, the Camerons, Osbornes, and their ilk have the arrogance of inbred inequality to preach austerity and “deficit-reduction” to the rest of the population.



Calton, Glasgow, Credit: John Fleming (CC BY 2.0)

Second, economic inequality means social sundering: tearing cities and societies apart, between the **Etonians** (and their friends), and the children of single mothers or unemployed parents growing up in relative poverty, for a life of precariousness and social exclusion. Third, inequality generates and sustains political ‘dictat-ship’. In contrast to its much coarser cousin ‘dictatorship’, a dictat-ship has no dictator and prohibits neither electoral opposition nor social criticism. What it does, is deliver dictats to governments and parliaments: first of all about impermissible social and economic policies, but also of desired policies. In the UK, the city of London issues most of the dictats, with gentlemanly discretion, of course.

However, vicious as it is, economic inequality is not the worst of current inequalities. That particular prize in contemporary Britain goes to the significant *inequalities of life*. Poor, disadvantaged, socially downtrodden or excluded people have much shorter lives than the rest of us. In this respect the inner city periphery neighbourhood of Calton in Glasgow is one of the worst areas in the UK, although it is by no means a slum – far less a Third World shanty town. Actually, part of it looks rather nice. But for decades it has been hit by unemployment and poverty, and by the self-destructive abuses which accompany these problems. The gap in life expectancy between Calton and the leafy Glasgow suburb of Lenzie is 28 years – the same as that between the UK and Haiti.

Among London neighbourhoods, the distance is the same as between the UK and Yangon in Myanmar (Burma). Those living in Chelsea-Kensington have a life expectancy 17 years longer than people living in Tottenham Green. These chasms of life prospects – in the most elementary sense, of health and death – are not historical legacies. On the contrary, they are ongoing creations: between 1999 and 2008 the gap in life expectancy between London boroughs widened by almost four years.

The equality which serious egalitarians are striving for cannot be specified in figures of income distribution. What we are striving for is a world where every human being has the possibility of realising her/his capabilities, not being stunted in childhood by malnutrition and/or let down by wounded parents. A world where communities are possible and not severed by gates and checkpoints, where human resources are not squandered on elite indulgences and games, and where everybody has a say, unencumbered by elite dictats.

The worst aspect of UK inequality is not the nauseating career and wealth of “Fred the Shred” (who presided over the fall of the Royal Bank of Scotland, where I happen to have my little account), but of the average, not particularly disadvantaged Glaswegian girl, who at birth has twelve years less to live than Chelsea girls, or the Mancunian pensioner who at 65 can look forward to nine years less of retirement than the ladies of Chelsea, and on a miserable state pension at that.

Göran Therborn has a forthcoming book on this subject, 'The Killing Fields of Inequality', which will be available in Autumn 2013.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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