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Interview

Pen Picture: Danny Dorling is Professor of Human Geography at the University of Sheffield. He is interviewed by Jamie Bennett who is Centre Manager of IRC Morton Hall.

Danny Dorling is Professor of Human Geography at the University of Sheffield. His work has focused on trying to understand and map the changing social, political and medical geographies of Britain and further afield, concentrating on social and spatial inequalities to life chances and how these may be narrowed. His work has included detailed maps of changing patterns of inequality and wealth¹ and the impact of the economic recession². He has also considered how this has had an effect on people's lives, including the risk of being the victim of the most serious crimes³.

He has attracted growing public attention for his work and has been the subject of a glowing editorial in *The Guardian*⁴. His most recent books have taken a broader approach by questioning the orthodoxies that underpin contemporary society. In *Injustice: Why social inequality persists?*⁵, Dorling exposed the values, beliefs and prejudices that justify and sustain inequality and his most recent book, *So you think you know about Britain?*⁶, examined major social issues such as diversity, ageing, North-South divide, family life and population growth. His analysis is eye-opening and innovative, revealing a new way of looking at these issues.

This interview took place in August 2012.

¹ Dorling, D., Rigby, J., Wheeler, B., Ballas, D., Thomas, B., Fahmy, E., Gordon, D., and Lupton, R. (2007). [*Poverty, wealth and place in Britain, 1968 to 2005*](#), Bristol: Policy Press

² Dorling, D. and Thomas, B. (2011). [*Bankrupt Britain: An atlas of social change*](#), Bristol: Policy Press

³ Hillyard, P., Pantazis C., Tombs, S., Gordon, D., and Dorling, D. (2005). [*Criminal Obsessions: Why Harm Matters More Than Crime*](#)

⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/apr/30/in-praise-of-danny-dorling?INTCMP=SRCH>

⁵ Dorling, D. (2010) *Injustice: Why social inequality persists?* Bristol: Policy Press

⁶ Dorling, D. (2011) *So you think you know about Britain?* London: Constable & Robinson

JB: How would you define human geography?

DD: Human geography is about what happens to people as they are distributed around the Earth; what is important about where you are in what happens during your life. Anything that is spatial is human geography, but as almost everything is spatial this enables you to look at many different issues ranging from economics, to health, to crime. The question is how the geographical location, postcode or country is important in the arguments you are engaged in.

JB: You have created a role as a public intellectual, or public human geographer. You do not only work in academia, but have broadened out into work on TV, radio, publishing accessible popular books and even talking at festivals. Why have you taken on this role? What do you see as the value of it? And why do you think you are particularly suited to it?

DD: I didn't do it deliberately it slowly happened and then accelerated. It still isn't huge. I think it happened because I write in a colloquial way although I do that as I can't write in a more complicated way. The way I write and a lot of the way I talk uses simple English and is uncomplicated. The reason I did it is because academia can become boring and this was more challenging than only talking to eighteen, nineteen and twenty year olds from fairly privileged backgrounds, which is what most lecturing is. Also lecturing isn't that varied year to year, so it can feel like Groundhog Day. The outside work helps me to escape from that and go back into University life with something new to say. It's more challenging talking to a wider group of people than it is talking to fellow academics and students.

JB: A number of your works have focussed on the spatial distribution of wealth and poverty. What has your work revealed about inequality in this country and how it has changed over the last half a century?

DD: There has been a staggering concentration of wealth in particular parts of the country. Over the last half century, if you take house prices which are a large part of wealth, they have gone up most in the places where they were higher to start with. Not just gone up most in absolute price, but gone up most relatively: percentage-wise. We have now reached the point where over half of the marketable wealth in this country, that is the wealth that you can do something with such as lend it to someone else or spend it, is held by just 1% of people. When I went to University in 1986, it was about 18%. There has been an incredible concentration of wealth.

We have looked at poverty, which is not quite as dramatic but there has been an increase in relative poverty over this period, the poor have become more spatially concentrated away from villages and away from other now generally more affluent areas. The poor have had to move further towards cities, and in the last year for the first time since the 1930s we have seen an increase in absolute poverty, which we never expected to see again.

This is an interesting time in terms of income and wealth distribution. Things have been going in the wrong direction for quite a long time but currently that pattern is accelerating. House prices in the most expensive parts of London are going up at an unprecedented rate with properties costing many millions of pounds in some places, at

the same time, with benefit cuts and other changes coming in, we are seeing people who are finding it more difficult to buy food or heat their homes at the bottom of society, so the gaps are widening in terms of money.

JB: What has your work revealed about links between economic inequality and other social issues such as education and health?

DD: As the work that I and many other colleagues have been involved in over the last couple of decades has progressed, we have produced tighter estimates of how much income people have and as the data has become better, the predictive power to understand issues such as how likely someone is to do well in education or how likely they are to die, has increased. The dots on the graph begin to line up in a straighter and straighter line. Economic inequality is progressively explaining more and more of the distribution of people's chances of having poor health or poor education. By that I mean that the fit between the distribution of little money by area, and the distribution of premature deaths, or poor exam grades is becoming tighter. Society is becoming more predictable by geography than it used to be. You don't find that many areas where people are poor but they do well in education or live for a long time. There used to be a bit more geographical variety. Similarly, you won't find many places where the people are relatively rich but the schools (in aggregate) are not particularly good and overall health is poor. Over time that relationship has tightened up but also our data has got better.

JB: Sometimes people talk about a 'post code lottery' but this doesn't sound like luck, this sounds like a phenomenon constructed by society.

DD: Yes, it's constructed in an unconscious fashion. It isn't that there is a committee sitting there saying 'let's plan and drive this'. Instead it is a process, to use a social science term. Whatever has happened and why ever it has happened, progressively year on year any abhorration in the system, such as relatively cheap houses near a good school, has been sorted out by – for example – those houses becoming more expensive. So, people sort themselves out to make the lines on the graph line up. That is what happens in a country where inequalities are increasing in line with economic wealth. It is more important where you live as concerns what is likely to happen to you in future than it was in the 1960s or 1970s, when you were a bit more free to chose and a richer person might live in a poorer area without worrying so much about the implications. In the past there were some relatively well-off people in council houses, but that hardly ever happens now.

JB: What about links with crime and victimhood?

DD: Economic wealth links up with people's chances of experiencing victimhood, particularly crimes of violence or burglary, and also their chances of being or becoming a perpetrator. The victims and perpetrators tend to live relatively near to one another with these crimes. There are other crimes that the wealthy are far more likely to commit, but for which we have less data. The classic example is speeding. That is the crime most likely to involve killing someone in Britain. It is a crime that is commonly committed by very large numbers of people almost every day. Generally the chances of someone speeding will increase the more affluent is the area they come from. That is because they are more likely to own a car and they are more likely to

drive a longer distance. It would be useful to get data on the full gamut of crimes. We can get information on robbery, burglary and the crimes committed by poorer people, but it is more difficult to get data on the crimes committed by the more affluent, and often those harms are not thought of as crimes.

JB: Crime and victimhood are largely centred in poorer neighbourhoods. Is this as a result of how people in those neighbourhoods behave, the conditions in which they live or how crime is defined?

DD: All of those and more. I've seen some lovely work from schools recently where they took a local paper, looked at the court reports from Magistrates courts and mapped them by post code across their local town. This showed that concentration by perpetrator was not as marked as may be assumed, of course it was more prevalent in some areas, but it was also widely spread. It is just that a few areas in any town are often notorious, so when you read the local paper you notice addresses in those areas and tend not to clock the ones in other areas. Thinking that most crime occurs in just a few parts of town is the geographical equivalent of thinking that most buses arrive in pairs (you notice when they arrive in pairs). How crime is defined does have a great effect too. We do it less often now, but we used to imprison people for not paying their TV license. That would clearly have a massive effect on those who found it difficult to pay for a TV license. If you were to step back from the situation and ask what are all of the acts that are currently illegal, including paying people cash in hand when you should pay tax and so on, and you drew a map of illegal activity that you could be taken to court for and immoral activity (immoral such as forms of tax avoidance that verge on illegality as being theft) , you would find a different picture from crime mapping based on convictions or punishments.

JB: You have been part of a group that have talked about 'harm' rather than 'crime'⁷, for example there are many harmful and anti-social behaviours that are not considered criminal. A classic example would be that tax evasion is largely dealt with as a civil and administrative issue where as benefit fraud is treated as criminal.

DD: Yes, tax and benefit prosecutions are a classic example of this, of what is most harmful – in this case to all of us through depriving the exchequer of money – as not being labelled a crime. It isn't just that we have people or institutions avoiding say £90,000 of tax, it's that the sums of money are so much more enormous than people fiddling their job seekers allowance. The harm caused by tax avoidance/evasion (its all bad) is far greater than the harm caused by fiddling benefits. The general attitudes to benefit fraud as compared to tax fraud shows how crime and how it is defined is all mixed up with the idea that some people are more or less worthy. Many of our attitudes are still pretty Victorian.

What I am not arguing is that we should create a huge police state where we criminalise all of the behaviour of the upper and middle classes as well as the poorer

⁷ Hillyard, P., Pantazis C., Tombs, S., Gordon, D., and Dorling, D. (2005). [*Criminal Obsessions: Why Harm Matters More Than Crime*](#)

members of society. We would need storm troopers on the streets to do that. What we should do is to look at other countries, other times and other places where people rich, poor and average are more likely to act in a way that is social and moral and where they don't want to harm others by stealing from shops or not paying tax.

JB: If we looked at those times and places where such attitudes prevailed, what would we find? Would we find that they were more equal societies?

DD: They would tend to be more equal, although there are very unequal societies such as Singapore, which is the most unequal society in the rich world but has low crime rates. In general, Scandinavian countries and more equal richer countries such as Korea and Japan, have lower rates of crime and violence. In Japan this was revealed tragically after the earthquake and tsunami. Many people have a safe in their house where they keep savings and thousands of these were washed up and people simply handed them in. They didn't think of opening them up and trying to get the money out. It was anathema to do that, even though the people who owned the money may well have been dead. Had that been here, I don't think people would have acted in quite the same way. Also in a country like Japan, you can see people bend over and pick litter up without thinking about it, and being extremely reluctant to drop litter. These differences are part of a way of behaving when you think you are contributing to something greater than yourself as opposed to thinking you are a mug if you don't take what you can get. Going down the mug route creates an increasingly dysfunctional society.

JB: As we talk, it is a week after the riots around the cities of England. What are your initial observations on the nature and patterns of that disorder?

DD: What we need to look at is the log of incidents that were recorded, which has to be analysed properly. We also need the postcodes of those who have gone through the courts. That would give a proper assessment rather than picking out one millionaire's daughter and saying 'it's people from all walks of life'. There is an anodyne immediate reaction, but that work needs to be done.

My own view is that in many ways this is similar to riots we have had in the past. One difference has been a spill out into slightly different areas. We did some work on Charles Booth's maps of London, which showed the distribution of poverty and wealth in London in the 1880s, compared that with the middle of the last century and the most recent period. On the back of that research, which was conducted a decade ago, we showed that London has again become pitted by areas of poverty near areas of wealth as it was in the 1880s, a situation that had been changed in the 1950s and 1960s. The riots are partly reflecting the geography of poverty and wealth in London. However, more work is needed to analyse the situation and compare it with previous riots. I would also say that the immediate language and reaction was predictable and similar to what I remember of the riots in the early 1980s.

JB: The current Government has described what they perceive as a 'broken society'. In your view is that an accurate description of all or parts of the UK?

DD: It is better to say slowly breaking rather than broken. We were a more cohesive society in the 1950s, 1960s and particularly the 1970s. The 1970s is a period that the

current government hates because it was a time that was very bad for wealthy families (the tiny group of families from which almost almost all current cabinet ministers are descended). Since then we have been breaking and the gaps between us have been becoming larger (the rich have been getting richer, which is why so many in government are now millionaires). There hasn't been a point of breaking but if we carry on this course for another three or four decades then it would be fair to call the country 'broken' because it would be so extremely divided when compared to any other affluent country in the world.

JB: In your work you have discussed some of the reasons for the persistence of social inequality. What do you see as the beliefs that underpin this?

DD: There is a difficulty in countries that are becoming more unequal in that as they become more unequal, then people from the better-off part of society begin to justify their position as being something about them: they are bolder, a bit more special, they work harder, and they deserve it. The wider the gaps grow between people, the easier it is for the people at the top to justify these enormous gaps because the less they mix with and know about less well-off people. The set of reasons I have seen in how people justify this include that 'greed is good', 'we need to have wealth creators', 'the lower classes don't have it in them to do very much', and fallacious comments such as 'it's all about talent'. The language, where some people are seen as 'talented' and others as 'useless', becomes more prevalent in an unequal society. That language dies off in countries where inequality is reduced, where people are paid more similar amounts, it is then that they begin to realise that there aren't great differences in ability.

JB: Are there any international or historical examples of societies where inequality has been reduced successfully?

DD: It is worth starting at home. The greatest reductions in inequality in the UK took place between 1918 and 1978. This reductions were hardly visible in the 1920s but they were beginning (we can see that now in hindsight). After the Crash of 1929, there were incredible reductions in wealth and inequality, so that by 1939 half of the inequality that had existed in 1918 had gone. The Second World War helped to cement this and these reductions in economic inequality between families in Britain carried on improving afterwards as well. As I was growing up as a boy in the 1970s, the richest 1% of people in Britain only earned six times the average and four times after tax. Can you imagine a top banker earning only four times the average working wage? Not twenty times or two hundred times. You only have to look around the world to see that this is still possible. The bankers of Switzerland are paid less and there is much lower economic inequality in Switzerland as compared to the UK. We are an extreme. The only large rich country that is more unequal than us is the United States. However, the United States is moving in the opposite direction and becoming a little more equal and we are about to overtake it in the inequality league table, so we might well soon be the most unequal large country in the world in a couple of years time the way things are currently going. These views are based on figures produced by the International Monetary Fund as to how they view current trends in things like public spending altering. The fund predicts today that by 2015 the UK will spend a lower proportion of its GDP on public services than the USA for the first time ever. The UK already spends a lower proportion than anywhere else in Western Europe.

Given this, though all kinds of direct and indirect routes, it is hardly surprising that more people end up in prison as a proportion of the population in the UK than end up imprisoned anywhere else in Western Europe.

JB: The Government have proposed a 'rehabilitation revolution' where they aspire to reduce reoffending by people released from prison. One of their major strategies is to incentivise services to achieve this aim through social impact bonds and payment by results. How do you view this strategy?

DD: There is so much that is wrong it is hard to know where to begin. When I was first looking at criminology, I thought we had one of the highest rates of imprisonment in Western Europe because our judges and magistrates were being vindictive but there was good research I came across that showed like-for-like we were less likely to imprison people for similar offences than countries with a lower prison population. What has actually happened is that we have become more violent people; crimes are committed in Britain that are more vicious and cause more damage. We have one of the highest crime rates and it is because of those rates that we have one of the highest imprisonment rates in Western Europe. You have to ask what makes us such violent people?

Social impact bonds are not going to address the underlying rates of violence and anger. They won't increase commitment to a society where it makes sense to steal because all around you people are obviously stealing, just many of them are stealing legally through conning you into phone deals where you spend more than you thought for making a call, or they are conning you by paying less tax than you despite earning more. The general message in Britain is that you are often a mug not to steal, whether that stealing is petty theft or 'trousering' a banker's bonus made up of hundreds of thousands of pounds from the savings accounts of pensioners. IN the UK, more than anywhere else in Western Europe, people are told its getting money that matters.

Much of the reasons that people end up in prison are to do with the nature of our society. Rates of violence amongst men are often related to status and if you make people feel incredible unequal by the time they are young adults, you get more violence in general. You cannot have a country where the prospects at the bottom are declining and the prospects at the top are growing and not expect a high degree of violence and many other social problems. The idea that a private company will address this without touching the underlying social issues, that social impact bonds might use the power of the market to install cohesion, leads me to conclude that so little thought of any worth has gone into these plans that they almost certainly won't work.

However, what is more scary is what would have to be done in order to make these plans work? We should not be afraid of social impact bonds failing as much as we should be fearful of them succeeding. This is because they rely on a black box. They want to pay by results and not interfere in the means that are used to get that result. Singapore shows how a society can be culled into certain types of behaviour. With a strict enough police force you can stop people chewing gum. You can control rowdy children in schools by giving them drugs. We already do that. They do it far more in the USA. An entrepreneur funded by social impact bonds might come up with the bright idea of putting young people across a neighbourhood on some kind of sedative.

He or she could give them a cash incentive to take the 'medication'. What kind of drugs would they have to get people to take? What kind of supervision or control would have to be in place? In a sense the risk of 'the market' working in creating a low-crime society is much more concerning than it not working.

JB: A number of alternative strategies to criminal justice have been proposed. In particular, the Justice Reinvestment model is based upon principles of human geography: it is based on the argument that money can be saved by reducing the use of imprisonment and that saving should be reinvested in addressing the social causes of crime in the communities where prisoners come from. How do you view this approach?

DD: You have to start by looking at the amount of money there is in the criminal justice system. The higher education system is a £8 or £9 billion a year business and serves to recreate itself. We are hardly likely to become turkeys voting for Christmas. This is why universities in Britain have accepted mass privatization over the course of the last twelve months and the introduction of fees of (for now) up to £9000 a year to study at a university. Similarly, with the criminal justice system, there is an impetus to keep the system working as it is. You will have a problem unless you find a way to develop these schemes from within, so that prisons start to have an involvement in implementing them. It's a great idea it's like turning swords into ploughshares. But it won't work while budgets are being cut so rapidly. You have to have the same people producing the ploughshares who produced the swords otherwise they will keep producing the swords. Underlying all of this, there is a group of people who want to keep the country as unequal as it is but also make it more peaceful. I just don't think that is possible. A justice reinvestment model relies ultimately on a desire to reduce underlying inequalities and to live in a country with far less crime. For those who just think that many people are simply 'criminal' or have 'criminality' within them this is just a liberal fantasy and what are needed instead are more prisons.

We need to start by setting a target at government level so that as a country we become less unequal each year. We don't need to do anything more radical than move towards becoming the same as the median country in the OECD, which is the Netherlands. Looked at crime, victimhood and imprisonment rates there. This isn't about socialist utopia it is just about not being/becoming the most unequal rich country in the world. Aspiring to such a target would mean that you can have rational hope for your children's future if you are in the bottom half of the country economically. If politicians mean that and convince people that you mean that, then the majority will rationally have a reason for working hard and staying out of trouble. At the moment, if you are at the bottom of society, or even in the middle, your chances aren't very high of 'doing well' even if you do those things you are supposed to do and instead you might have a better chance if you behave badly.

Think for a minute to how people might react upon hearing that some group of bankers in London are now receiving part of their bonuses out of the government welfare budget for the profits they are making advising their clients on investing in Social Impact Bonds. I'm sure the bankers would be clever enough to find statistical ways to pretend that what they were investing in was having a social impact. Making a profit is what they are employed to do and if that involves diddling the tax payer out of money what's the difference between that and convincing someone to opt to move

to a mobile phone tariff that actually costs them more but is also very complex? IN short – you don't get a better world by trying to harness and encourage selfish instincts.

JB: What do you see as the future prospects for the UK in relation to poverty, wealth and inequality?

DD: At the moment, for the super rich their holding of assets and wealth are escalating in a way that they have never escalated before. Property rates are dividing in a way that they haven't since at least the 1930s. We currently have massive housing prices rises in the most expensive parts of London, dramatic house price falls in poorer parts of Northern England. Inequality in wealth in particular is rising faster than at any point it has before. None of this was expected. Normally recessions bring about a little more equality, at least in the short-term. This one hasn't.

I cannot see it carrying on for five or ten years like this. It isn't sustainable. I also don't think people at the top end of society want it to carry on like this. It is not part of plan 'A'. I suspect that we will start to move together if there is a second dip or a sustained stock market crash, in a similar way we did in the 1930s. It's not necessarily a happy way for this to happen, but that is my guess of where we are moving towards.

We are currently living in strange times as concerns the statistics on social, health and economic inequality where things that have not happened for decades are happening. We are currently a haven for the super rich of the world but that cannot continue for much longer as it depends on how safe London is seen as a place to live and a place to invest. It is hard to predict, though. I couldn't have predicted the crash in 2008 and the immediate impression afterwards was that it would be a great leveler, but actually it was the opposite.

JB: What is next for you?

DD: I am writing a short book discussing what is good about living in a country that becomes slightly more equal. I am writing about the benefits of achieving greater equality. I am interested in describing the nature of the prize of beginning to reverse the growing inequality trend. Its been such a long time since inequalities were last reduced in Britain that it sounds like rose-tinted reflection when people talk of the more equitable past. A lot of people write about what is bad about inequality but there isn't enough produced about what is good about equality. I'd like to focus on how many aspects of your life, not least freedom, can be improved by living in a place that is a little more equal than Britain, such as freedom to chose what job you might want to do, whether to have a job, where you want to live. I am looking at the positive reasons to change the direction in which we are moving at the moment. For people at the very top of society in particular, those who think they could live in gated estates in the future, I think they might not realise that living in gated estates is not as nice a life as living with other people where you have more in common and you don't have to be afraid. The rich are building high fences around their land and putting up gates at the entrances of where they live. I think growing inequality reduces everyone's freedom, but quickly we become acclimatized to being imprisoned in a particular way of living and can all too easily think that there is no alternative to ever growing inequality.