

Richard Wilkinson & Kate Pickett

**The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone** (German title: Gleichheit ist Glück: Warum gerechte Gesellschaften für alle besser sind)

Haffmans & Tolkemitt (bei Zweitausendeins), 3. Aufl. 2009, 320 pp., € 19.90

People are better off in countries with only small social differences than in countries with big differences. This is, in short, the result of the research presented and commented in this book. The authors investigated the connection between the extent of social differences in a country and the physical and psychological well-being of its inhabitants and social peace. They analyzed data from 23 industrial nations. The criterion for measuring the extent of the social differences was the ratio between the average income of the top 20 percent of the society and that of the bottom 20 percent. In homogeneous countries with relatively small social differences (Japan and the Scandinavian countries), the top 20 percent of the society earn less than four times as much as the bottom 20 percent. In heterogeneous countries with big social differences (USA, Singapore, Portugal, England), the top 20 percent earn approximately nine times more than the bottom 20 percent. To determine the well-being the authors used various positive indicators like high life-expectancy, level of education, mutual trust, social commitment in humanitarian organizations and vertical mobility as well as negative indicators like infant mortality, mental illness, alcoholism, murder rates and prison population. For all indicators, countries with less social differences show the better values.

The above effects exist independently of the average income within the country and also independently of the fact whether the comparably low differences in income in homogeneous countries are the result of a high tax progression, like e.g. in Scandinavia, or of smaller differences in gross salaries like in Japan.

The authors took the data for their analyses from statistics of the United Nations and their sub-organizations, the World Bank and OECD. The analyses comparing countries were supplemented and confirmed by comparisons between the US Federal States, where we can also distinguish between economically heterogeneous Federal States (e.g. New York, Louisiana, California and Texas) and homogeneous Federal States (e.g. Utah, Wisconsin, New Hampshire).

Great income differences within a country are also disadvantageous to the upper class which seemingly benefits from them: in heterogeneous countries, life expectancy of the upper class is also lower than in homogeneous countries, and the level of education of children stemming from families with university background is lower in heterogeneous than in homogeneous countries.

What are the reasons for these effects? Social inequality leads to permanent stress. This applies likewise to human beings and animals; in order to generate stress in animal experiments, animals of different social statuses are shut in together. Continuous stress triggers a chain of hormonal processes that result in the reduction of learning ability, lead to aggressiveness and to a general reduction in functional capacity. It

would therefore be reasonable and in everyone's interest to reverse the widening of the social gap which has occurred during the past 30 years.

Wilkinson and Picket are epidemiologists, and they analyze the neo-liberal development from an epidemiologic point of view as a process that has made people ill. The last chapter of the book is about the question what has to be done to combat this plague. According to the authors, a more equal economic distribution can most likely be achieved by democratizing the economy. Employees of a company should also become co-owners and participate in decision-making. The authors have initiated an Internet portal providing information on the promotion of equal economic distribution: [www.equalitytrust.org.uk](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk)

This is an important book, which will play a crucial role in the socio-political discussions of the years to come.

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