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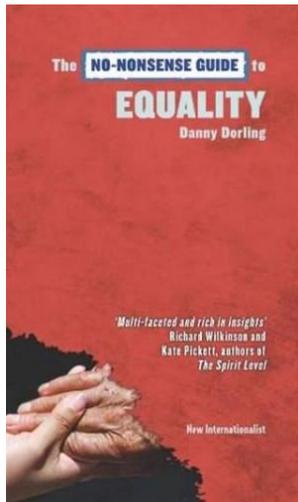
Book Review 2

The No-Nonsense Guide to Equality

By Danny Dorling

New Internationalist Press 2012.

Reviewed by Bernice Golding*



When invited to review this book I approached its content with eager anticipation, why you might ask? The answer is quite literally because I am so used to thinking about ‘inequality’ that the title of this book, in its very essence, challenges some of the fundamental assumptions that we may hold with regards to the way we observe, discuss and analyse social interactions in society. This book usurps some of these assumptions. The concept is straightforward; a ‘no-nonsense guide to equality, inequalities are not forgotten or dismissed; instead the reader is invited to think about equality and inequality in society and the impact that greater equality may bring with it.

It is a compelling read and, as its title suggests; it really is a ‘no-nonsense’ guide. The author presents an excellent comparative analysis of equality and inequality utilising international perspectives. The fact that Dorling integrates these comparisons throughout the book enables the reader to consider the issues within wider societal, historical, political and cultural constructs and discourses.

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The discussions in the book begin with a pertinent reminder that:

In a world that often lionizes wealth, it is worth remembering that no-one can be rich unless others are poor. In the world's more equal countries, more infants survive and people are generally healthier and happier. Equality pays dividends at every stage of human life, from babyhood to old age.

(Dorling, 2012, p.13)

This timely assertion provides the context for the ensuing discussions; it provides the reader with an indication, from the outset, of what to expect from the book. A real strength of this book is that it is written in accessible language which enables the reader to immediately grasp the context within which Dorling frames his discussions; these begin in Chapter One with his discussion of why equality matters.

Dorling asserts that the impact of inequalities in society not only affect those who are poor but also the rich. This in itself is an interesting way to position discussions about equality. Further, the way Dorling constructs the argument is one that juxtaposes issues of equality alongside considerations of inequality. This enables the reader to see why a focus upon a discussion of 'equality' may be more appropriate than constant reference to 'inequalities'. His analysis is interspersed with examples that further illustrate the key concepts discussed; which he addresses as a lifecourse issue rather than problematizing 'equality' or 'inequality' as discrete entities. He demonstrates how the pervasiveness of the 'issue' can affect individuals at any stage of their lifecourse; this, he suggests, manifests itself in different ways, dependent upon the stage at which the individual is at, in their lifecourse.

This is followed by an insightful discussion of what equality is and how inequalities are experienced in a worldwide context. Interspersed within these discussions are illustrative tables that provide an additional medium through which to view his arguments e.g. income inequalities by selected country. Reference is also made to contemporary writers on equality; writers who tended to be men from privileged backgrounds. Further, by addressing issues of 'equality' as a state that is not a permanent achievement, but one which needs to be fought for, won, lost or defended, he illustrates the complexities associated with a quest for greater equality in society. Significantly, he draws upon different aspects of social life and the differences inherent in any given society as he examines equality. This broader conceptual positioning includes some discussion of egalitarianism and the way in which it is applied when considering the role of equality in society.

In chapter three Dorling provides a contextual analysis of how equality can be won and lost. The author uses clear, specific examples of the way in which this concept manifests itself worldwide. Moreover, the way in which the issues are articulated ensures that the reader can position the assertions within broader social, structural and political contexts.

This is followed by the inclusion of an at times; stark analysis of change over time. This is conceptualised alongside a discussion of present day increases in inequalities utilising a historical and ideological analysis. Dorling, for example, reminds us of hunter-gatherer societies and the importance of co-operation within groups and equality. This serves as a stark reminder of the way in which contemporary societies have transformed; he addresses the transformative nature of society with his historically located discussions. In doing so the reader is provided with discussions related to; but not limited to, hierarchy, revolution and conquest, religion and the empire, the enlightenment, capitalism and corporate greed to illustrate how equality has changed over time.

This is addressed further in chapter five: where equality can be found, when Dorling asserts that “equality is looking forward to the weekend” (p.115) a time when there is freedom of choice. He reminds us that there is an onus upon us as individuals in society to conform to societal norms; the rules that govern our everyday ways of being, this differs at the weekend because the constraints of the ‘working’ / ‘learning’ week are not imposed upon us.

In his final chapter: How we win greater equality; Dorling explores concepts of devaluation; the perception that disadvantaged groups become stigmatised and that attitudes and labels enable this to prevail. As a reference point he reflects upon historical moments in time that signified the emergence of greater equalities and the good that is associated with these events. Dorling encourages the reader, through his analysis of significant events, to consider these concepts more astutely. In doing so he illustrates why inequality is so problematic for society and why we are either part of the problem or part of the solution. I could not agree more. This is why this book has proved to be the interesting read that I thought it would be and why I recommend it to anyone interested in concepts related to social inequality. Its only weakness, in my opinion, is that he could have told us more!