

LEVEL HEADED?

CHRISTOPHER SNOWDON critiques a new book on inequality in which the authors turn "speculative evidence" into "gospel truth"

One of the most talked about books of 2009 was *The Spirit Level* by the social epidemiologists Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson.

They have now released a sequel, *The Inner Level*, the theme and format of which is uncannily similar to the original.

A series of chapters make the case for income inequality causing a wide range of social ills before the authors round off with a rallying cry for "radical egalitarianism" and "economic democracy".

The Spirit Level relied on a succession of dubious scatterplots for evidence. The Inner Level has no shortage of similar graphs, but is more focused on explaining how inequality is supposed to cause so many problems.

At the heart of their explanation is the claim that "modern, free-market societies" cause status anxiety.

To keep up with the Joneses, people work ever longer hours and immerse themselves in consumerism.

This, so the argument goes, leads to mental-health disorders and substance abuse which, in turn, lead to worse parenting. And so the cycle continues.

If you are predisposed to believe that "lack of confidence and a sense of insecurity have reached a level of intensity that makes them perhaps the most

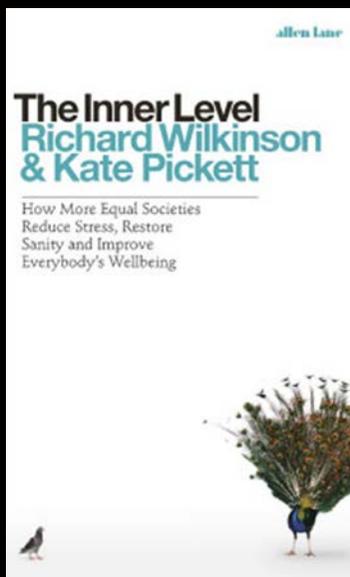
important limitation on levels of happiness and the quality of life throughout many rich societies" you are more likely to swallow what follows.

But if you have your doubts about whether "shyness" and "party anxiety" are bona fide mental disorders, you will want some evidence.

Or, at least, a coherent argument. The problem is that Wilkinson and Pickett are not very good at laying one out.

Unable to see a tangent without going off on it, they fill the book with mini-essays about everything from package holidays to psychopaths, the relevance of which is murky at best.

And yet the incoherence of the narrative serves a function. By disorientating the reader with a combination of science, folk wisdom, bald assertion and anecdote, they make the reader forget which of their claims are substantiated by credible research and which are hunches, guesses and wild extrapolations.



A common technique used here, as in *The Spirit Level*, is for a single piece of speculative evidence to be presented early on which has become gospel truth by the time they refer to it later.

This technique works in reverse, with the authors claiming they will prove something later in the book and then failing to do so. "We shall see in the course of this chapter and the next", they write, "that depression, psychotic symptoms, schizophrenia and narcissistic traits are all significantly more common in more unequal societies".

But we don't. They admit there are no internationally comparable figures for narcissism and they barely discuss depression, let alone compare prevalence in different countries, although they are able to find three studies in the literature that point to a relationship with inequality.

They devote a whole chapter to anxiety but there are no internationally comparable figures for this either, so they settle for the observation that anxiety and

inequality have both risen in the US, albeit not at the same time.

From such empirical molehills, Wilkinson and Pickett build mountains. Through a one-sided interpretation of cherry-picked evidence, they paint an unremittingly gloomy picture of life in "less equal" nations.

British readers, at whom the book is principally aimed,

measure of inequality – is currently 0.32, making it indistinguishable from France and Japan (0.32) and much closer to the "most equal" country of Slovenia (0.26) than the "least equal" country South Africa (0.63).

If we look at wealth inequality – which Wilkinson and Pickett never do – the UK is well below the supposedly egalitarian nations of Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

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are told they are either selfish and sociopathic, or depressed and subservient.

We are, supposedly, uncaring, unsharing, friendless hyper-consumerists, on the brink of mental illness if not clinically insane, who have retreated from society to admire ourselves in the mirror.

All because of income inequality! And yet the UK's Gini coefficient - the standard

What Wilkinson and Pickett present as an existential chasm between "more equal" and "less equal" countries amounts to a narcissism of minor differences between broadly similar capitalist societies•

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