

EQUALITY WHEN? THE SUREST WAY TO HALT CLIMATE CHANGE IS TO TACKLE ITS CAUSE: INEQUALITY.

THE MODERN GLOBAL ECONOMY doesn't just run on fossil fuels; above all, it runs on inequality: the principle that some people are worth more than others, while yet others are worthless. The fossil fuel economy would not be conceivable without inequality; nor would its proposed biofuel "solution", entailing as it does yet more of the same dispossession of inconvenient people.

Quite recently, inequality has ceased to be "just" a moral issue. A large new body of research¹, accumulating since the 1970s, shows that inequality is making people physically and mentally ill, killing us prematurely, and devastating our environments through a long succession of harms, of which climate change is the coup de grace.

This gives the climate change movement a huge opportunity. Inequality is an outrage that touches us all in our everyday lives, and through its global effects. It speaks to our sense of justice; not just our sense of guilt. By making inequality its main target, the movement can awaken massive support right across society, and help to transform it for the benefit of all.

THE IMPACTS OF INEQUALITY ON PEOPLE AND ON THE PLANET, IN BRIEF

a.) **Inequality ruins people's lives, and kills them**, even in the rich but unequal countries that supposedly benefit from global inequality. In Oxford, being among the least-wealthy 20% takes 5.5 years off your life²; in the USA it's 14 years³. Whatever the immediate cause of death - heart disease, cancer, violence, alcohol or drugs - a major cause is the sheer stress of inequality: the fear and shame of being a "loser", which affects everyone. Even the rich die slightly younger in the unequal USA than in more-equal Britain or Sweden.

b.) **Inequality causes runaway overconsumption**, once people's basic survival needs have been met, and it grows in direct relationship to rising inequality. In part, the overconsumption is status-driven: people's life chances depend increasingly on maintaining appearances; even to feel good, or normal, you must consume. Overconsumption is also coerced: people must compete harder and harder for a reasonable place to live, decent education, health care; are forced to buy cars, or better cars, to commute to work in places (like Oxford) where they can no longer afford to live, and so on...

SOME PARTICULAR INSIGHTS FROM THE RESEARCH:

- **More-equal countries are more sustainable than less-equal ones.** Cuba (one of the most equal countries, at least till recently) is the only country in the world that achieves its UN Human Development targets without exceeding a sustainable ecological footprint⁴.
- **The more you benefit from inequality, the worse you are for the planet.** The world's richest 10% have a greater environmental impact than the rest of us put together. And most of their impact is due to the richest 10% of that 10% (i.e., to a tiny, irresponsible minority of the super-rich: 1% of us).
- **Two-thirds of cars are for social status!** It was calculated in the USA in the early 1960s that at least two-thirds of the cost of automobiles went on styling changes⁵ - i.e. to keep up

¹ Much of this research is covered in Richard Wilkinson's "The Impact of Inequality" (Routledge, 2005).

² NHS Health Profile for Oxford, 2006

³ Inequalities Are Unhealthy; Vicente Navarro; Monthly Review Volume 56, Number 2; <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0604navarro.htm>

⁴ WWF Living Planet Report 2006.

⁵ "The cost of automobile model changes since 1949"; Fisher, Griliches and Kaysen; Journal of Political Economy, October 1962 (discussed in "Monopoly Capital: an essay on the American Economic and Social Order"; Paul Baran and Paul M Sweezy, Monthly Review 1966, pp 138-141).

appearances. Inequality has risen massively since then, and far more consumer goods have become status goods, in far more countries.

- **The US government** started a global chain reaction when it chose to increase inequality at the end of the 1970s. Since then, the incomes of the wealthiest have soared, sucking swathes of society into increased working hours and a competitive-consumption war, leading for example to a 20% increase in the size of automobiles in the USA since 1985⁶; plus a vast increase in their numbers and a tripling of commuting time between 1983 and 2003.
- **We can reduce inequality rapidly when we want to.** The UK government did this during World War II with great popular support. Consumption fell to a fraction of its peacetime level - yet public health made its greatest advance of any period in British history⁷.
- **The wealthy, highly-unequal city of Bristol** sends no more of its children to university than the poorer but more-equal city of Sheffield. Yet Bristol spends vastly more on education, thanks to its huge numbers of private secondary schools - which also generate more car-journeys and car-ownership, particularly of newer and larger cars.
- **Unequal societies are more authoritarian, punitive, sexist and racist than more-equal ones.** e.g., incarceration rates in the US and UK have soared with rising inequality since 1980⁸. Increasingly harsh immigration controls seem to be part of the same phenomenon.

EQUALITY WHEN? WE NEED A TIMETABLE.

Knowing what we now know about inequality, we have no excuse for tolerating it. To accept inequality is to “volunteer” other people to diminished lives, early death, and to sacrifice their environment and ultimately our own as well. The question is no longer “is equality a realistic demand?” but “how soon can we achieve it?”

As far as people are concerned, a permissible time frame might be quite long: as long as inequality seems to be diminishing, even the poorest will tolerate it with good humour (which is why economic growth is so important to unequal economies: it gives the poor a faint hope that things are getting better). But the planet is less tolerant. 2015 is a date much-mentioned in climate change discussions, so why not aim for equality then?

Merely opening this debate could have some effect. It tells inequality’s creators and beneficiaries that their excessive wealth is simply antisocial and no longer acceptable.

The goal, however, has to be equality - not just less inequality. To accept some inequality means volunteering others for poverty and early death, which nobody has any right to do. And anyway, “civilised societies” pay frequent lip service to equality, human dignity and so on, so this is simply a matter of helping society keep faith with its own ideals.

And all societies that have ever practised equality have been significantly happier, healthier, and better for the planet than the ones that don’t.

Bob Hughes (*organiser of the Equality When? meeting*) - 07/11/2007

EQUALITY WHEN? COME TO THE MEETING: Oxford Town Hall, **Thursday November 22nd 2007, 7:15pm** to launch a public debate about the damage done to people and the to the planet by sheer, inexcusable inequalities of wealth. It will hear the evidence, and consider solutions, with **Danny Dorling** (Professor of Human Geography, Sheffield University) and **Richard Wilkinson** (Professor of Social Epidemiology, Nottingham). For latest information see <http://www.equalitywhen.org.uk> • bob@dustormagic.net • 01865 726804 • 07968 292499

⁶ Falling Behind, Richard Frank, University of California Press 2007. The weight of a Honda Accord (an average car) increased from 2500 pounds in 1985 to 3200 pounds in 2007.

⁷ Development as Freedom; Amartya Sen, OUP, 1999

⁸ Population Growth in U. S. Prisons, 1980-1996 Alfred Blumstein; Allen J. Beck; Crime and Justice, Vol. 26, Prisons. (1999), pp. 17-61.