

## ***The social barriers to sustainability.***

*To avert climate change, we must outlaw inequality and open the borders.*

*by Bob Hughes*

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. And an ever-growing mountain of evidence indicts inequality as the real driving force behind all the harms, and more, that have finally led to climate change. A world without inequality is not just desirable, it is necessary, and urgently. And it can be achieved. Outlaw inequality, and the emissions will fall away, as the pressure of the market's hidden foot begins to ease off the accelerator.

Inequality has recently ceased to be "just" a moral issue: hard data are appearing, in ever-greater abundance and coherence, on its material effects. The best-known of these, so far, are its health-effects within more-developed countries (not between countries - but we will come to that). Life in an unequal country, or region, is shorter and nastier than life in a more-equal one. In the USA (the world's most unequal rich country), being among the least-wealthy 20% takes 14 years off your life and diminishes its quality in ways that go too deep and wide to quantify. In Britain the penalty for being in that lower fifth is 7.5 years. In Oxford the penalty is 5.5 years. And it affects everyone: even the rich die slightly younger, and lead slightly worse lives, in highly-unequal USA and UK than in more-equal Sweden or Japan. Knowing this means that anyone who tolerates inequality must now accept full responsibility for other people's misery, illness and early death.<sup>1</sup>

What is less widely discussed, so far, is the environmental cost of all this inequality. Here are some indicative findings:

- Inequalities are far more costly, in environmental terms, than income-differences alone might predict. For example an Oxford University study in 2006 found that 61 per cent of all travel emissions came from individuals in the top 20 per cent (those earning £40,000 a year or more), while only 1 per cent of emissions came from those in the bottom 20 per cent (with incomes up to £10,000)<sup>2</sup>. Sheffield University's Danny Dorling reckons that:

*it is almost certainly an underestimate to claim that the richest tenth of the world's population have a greater negative environmental impact than all the rest put together. [...] And, of the richest 10th of the world's population, the richest 10th consume more, even than the other half a billion or so affluent.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> See Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson "The Spirit Level: why more-equal societies almost always do better" Penguin 2009; Richard Wilkinson "The Impact of Inequality" (Routledge, 2005); Inequalities Are Unhealthy; Vicente Navarro; Monthly Review Volume 56, Number 2; <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0604navarro.htm>; Oxford data from NHS Health Profile for Oxford, 2006

<sup>2</sup> Travelling in the right direction: lessening our impact on the environment; Brand, Preston and Boardman (2006) Final Research Report to the ESRC: <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/PO/releases/2007/february/travel.aspx?ts=3>

<sup>3</sup> Danny Dorling, personal communication 28/9/2007, citing Worldmapper.org and WWF Living Planet Report data. See also Dorling; "Injustice: why social inequality persists", Policy Press, April 2010 (in press).

This extraordinarily disproportionate impact is explained not by their wealth per se, but their wealth relative to the rest of the population. The whole idea of “wealth” becomes disastrously skewed in an unequal society, as we will see below.

- Rich countries generally have far greater ecological impacts than do poorer ones - but a country's impact may not relate so much to its wealth, as to its wealth-inequality. The WWF's 2008 Living Planet Report showed that the two countries with the greatest per-capita ecological impact were the United Arab Emirates and the USA, with ecological footprints, respectively, of 9.5 and 9.4 global hectares (Gha) per citizen in 2005, compared to a sustainable footprint of just 2.1 GHa. If wealth is defined in terms of human wellbeing and development, then this need not carry any ecological price at all, as shown by highly egalitarian Cuba, which had a footprint of just 1.8 Gha, and is even regenerating forests that were destroyed in the earliest days of imperialism. In 2006, Cuba was the only country to achieve both sustainability, and good-quality lives for its people (as measured by the UN's Human Development Index - HDI - included in the WWF's 2006 report). Some countries that are almost as wealthy in crude terms as the UAE and USA, but which are more equal, have nowhere near the ecological impact. Rich nations are deceptive units of comparison because they do less and less productive work, especially the dirty work, within their own borders. But even so, a striking relationship is observable - see Appendix 1.

- In the USA, a strong relationship has been established between inequality and environmental degradation. A 1999 study by James K. Boyce at the University of Massachusetts found that more-unequal states (like Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi) had several times more, and worse, pollution, and weaker environmental laws, than more-equal states (like Minnesota, Maine and Wisconsin)<sup>4</sup>. These are also the states where other ill-effects of inequality are most prevalent: from exposure to crime, to infant mortality, to suicide, to the chances of being incarcerated, to the chances of being washed out of your home by a passing hurricane.

- Human impact grows when inequality grows, globally and within nations<sup>5</sup>. IPCC figures show that atmospheric CO<sup>2</sup> equivalents increased more than twice as fast during 1995-2004 (the first ten years of the World Trade Organisation's existence, when the brakes really came off neoliberal growth and world-wide inequality soared) as during 1970-1994.

- The same pattern even appears in the archaeological and historical record. The first evidence of environmental degradation due to human activity is associated not with agriculture as such (as was widely assumed) but with the emergence some thousands of years later of intensely unequal, aristocratic societies in the Eastern Mediterranean around 5,000 years ago. The same sites also yield evidence of the human health problems associated with inequality: “the ordinary people have five times more dental lesions than their ruler and are up to 4 percent shorter. An average Bronze Age male farmer from the eastern Mediterranean would stand 167cm (five feet six inches); 6 cm shorter than his ruler and 10cm shorter than his hunting ancestors”.<sup>6</sup> This pattern of inequality, depletion of natural resources and human immiseration is the leitmotif of early-modern European history, reflecting the course of feudalism, helping explain the rise of capitalism itself in Northern Italy and the Low

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<sup>4</sup> James K. Boyce: “Is inequality bad for the environment and bad for your health?”; *DifferenTakes* 8, Spring 2001; Population and Development Program at Hampshire College, Amherst.

<sup>5</sup> “The rate of growth of CO<sub>2</sub>-eq emissions was much higher during the recent 10-year period of 1995-2004 (0.92 GtCO<sub>2</sub>-eq per year) than during the previous period of 1970-1994 (0.43 GtCO<sub>2</sub>-eq per year); (Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report, IPCC)

<sup>6</sup> Martin Jones; “Feast: why humans share food”, p. 248

Countries, and culminating in the spectacular exodus of the European poor to the Americas and Australasia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>7</sup>. By 1914, the average British conscript was 5 inches (12.7 cm) shorter than his officer<sup>8</sup>. Europeans have only regained their hunter-gatherer stature in the last two or three generations - but only thanks to cheap fossil fuels and intensified exploitation of the rest of the world.

This knowledge is new, and political dynamite for anyone with the courage to use it. The epidemiological studies (by the likes of Michael Marmot and Richard Wilkinson) only began in earnest in the 1970s; the archaeological evidence only began to emerge in the 1980s, so it is little wonder if the penny has taken a little while to drop among the broader community - especially when one reflects on how deeply and forcefully we have all been acculturated, over scores of generations, to accept inequality (with even militant trades unions setting their sights no higher than retention of relatively low-paid, unpleasant jobs, instead of demanding control of the work by workers themselves, and a fair share of the vast wealth produced).

How does this damage happen?

### 1. EMULATIVE CONSUMPTION: THE CRIPPLING COST OF PUTTING A PRICE ON RESPECT

Inequality does its work in two ways - first, by the “emulative consumption” described more than a hundred years ago by Thorstein Veblen in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899 - not to mention by Adam Smith himself in 1759, in his *Theory of the Moral Sentiments*). In a unequal world, says Veblen, life becomes above all a battle for respect and to avoid “invidious comparisons”; “everyday life is an unremitting demonstration of the ability to pay”. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett chart in detail its effects on health and to some extent on the environment in their recent book *The Spirit Level: why more equal societies almost always do better* (2009). Le Monde’s environmental editor, Hervé Kempf, delivers a blistering account of it in *How the Rich are Destroying the Earth* (2008), and draws links between rising inequality and state violence and erosion of democratic rights. The rich not only spur each other on in their extraordinary feats of overconsumption, but also transform consumption all the way down the social pecking-order, turning whole societies into high-performance planet-trashing machines, as everyone is drawn into an intensifying struggle for ever-more fragile respect (and self-respect): from the billionaire who needs apartments in London, Paris and New York and a yacht with a helipad just to keep face with his peers; to the working-class families that must spend more than they can afford on a car that makes them look wealthier than they are, lest they be seen as “losers”; to their children, terrified of the scorn awaiting them should they turn up to school in the wrong trainers.

### 2. POSITIONAL CONSUMPTION: PRIVATE GOODS BECOME PUBLIC BADS. THE LINK BETWEEN GLOBAL AND LOCAL INEQUALITY.

Whereas emulative consumption is driven by frail human psychology, “positional consumption” is 100% material: forced on us by factors that physically shape our lives. It was first described by British economist Fred Hirsch in *Social Limits to Growth* (1977). “Positional

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<sup>7</sup> The phenomenon of land-exhaustion in Europe since the tenth century is described and analysed by (e.g.) Fernand Braudel “Civilization and Capitalism 15<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> Century” (1981); Immanuel Wallerstein “The modern world system”(1974); Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, “Poverty and capitalism in pre-industrial Europe” (1979). Bob Sutcliffe has estimated that: “from the early nineteenth century to the 1920s, more than 60 million Europeans migrated to America and Australasia, of whom 5.7 million went to Argentina, 5.6 million to Brazil, 6.6 million to Canada, and 36 million to the United States.” (quoted by Teresa Hayter in “Open Borders: the case against immigration controls”, Pluto 2001)

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Marr, “A History of Modern Britain”, Macmillan 2009.

goods” are ones whose value is reduced, or which cease to be luxuries and become necessities, if others have them too. Hirsch’s analogy is standing at a football match to get a better view; if everybody does it, nobody is any better off. Country cottages and “unspoiled Greek islands” are classic positional goods, whose pursuit blights entire countries with terrifying speed. With private cars, positionality has become a central fact of life: once enough people are using them, they become obligatory; and anyone who wants to continue leading a “normal life” must find the money to play a game whose ante is continuously being raised. Likewise private schools and private healthcare: the more others use them, the more (and the more urgent) reason there is for you to use them too, or be left behind. Which is very good for GNP (the whole neoliberal project can be seen as one of turning as many goods as possible into positional goods) but of diminishing benefit to anyone or anything else. As Danny Dorling has observed, the English city of Bristol spends vastly more money on secondary education than does similar-sized Sheffield, because it has an extraordinary number of private secondary schools. Sheffield has hardly any. Yet both cities send almost identical numbers of children to university.

Actually, to call these things “private” is misleading: they have massive public impacts. A “private estate” dominates and diminishes the lives of everyone it excludes, or who even tries to conduct their life in its vicinity. Private helicopters intrude on the lives of millions (and especially in hotspots of inequality like Sao Paulo, which has more private helicopters than Manhattan). These things are unlike genuinely private goods (such as a meal, decent clothing, or a good night’s sleep, whose enjoyment affects only the person enjoying them).

Hirsch observes that even good A-levels are “positional goods” when the supply of nice jobs (doctor, lawyer etc.) is restricted: having straight As becomes no longer adequate; A-stars are needed, plus interesting extra-curricular accomplishments. And the education that provides these good things becomes positional, especially when it is dominated by an elite, private sector. Hence the Bristol taxi-driver who works double shifts from the time his daughter is two years old, to get her into and through one of that city’s five elite, private-sector all-girls schools - adding 2 extra tonnes of CO<sup>2</sup> to the atmosphere every year<sup>9</sup>, and wearing himself out. He is not necessarily driven by crude ambition, but by fear for his daughter if she has to go the disparaged, local, state secondary school.

But being a doctor should not be a prize for which people fight each other: the more good doctors, the better, surely, and this is the approach taken in Cuba. There, doctors come to you rather than you to them. Their carbon footprints are about the same size as everyone else’s. They are not a species of aristocracy, as elsewhere, yet the profession still has no difficulty attracting recruits - and Cuba achieves almost the same health outcomes as the USA, for one twentieth of the expenditure. (Which while bad for GNP is good for the planet).

Housing is possibly the most ridiculous positional “good” of all. As Danny Dorling puts it: “In a more unequal society, everyone is less free to choose where they live”<sup>10</sup>. His 2007 Joseph Rowntree Foundation study *Poverty, Wealth and Place in Britain, 1968 to 2005* showed how hard the “exclusive rich” must now compete for diminishing numbers of desirable locations and to avoid undesirable ones, at huge and ramified energy cost throughout society: extra hours must be worked to secure the same amount of housing (two salaries instead of one); extra journeys must be made as “islands” of respectability and safety become smaller and

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<sup>9</sup> Calculation based on a taxi driver using 10 litres of diesel/shift, producing 7.15 kg of Carbon. If he does this 5 days/week for 10 years (260 days/year = 2,600 days) he produces 2600\*7.15 = 18,590 kg of carbon (18.59 tonnes) into the atmosphere. Carbon figures from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmselect/cmenvfru/929/3091706.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Danny Dorling, “The trouble with moving upmarket”; Guardian 18<sup>th</sup> July 2007.

more isolated. As the despised interstices of respectable society atrophy and become unproductive, more and more resources are sucked in from beyond the national borders. Hence foreign wars, intensified exploitation and corruption of resource-blighted countries, and ever stiffer, more militarised national borders. Parallels can be drawn between NATO's beleaguered garrisons in Afghanistan, and Britain's wealthiest 1%: both groups need increasingly to travel by helicopter. (And in Sao Paulo, the risk of kidnap makes the helicopter almost compulsory).

Yet it is easy to see how housing becomes a public good if no house is allowed to be built that does not enrich its surroundings. This is how houses were once built (and the rich have snaffled most of the surviving specimens as charming rural hideaways). Such houses could be built again, starting tomorrow. But not by any market, only by people.

Instead, in the unequal countries (and even more so, on this increasingly unequal planet), work of all kinds has been relocated, increasingly, to suit the rich.

Within the national borders, this means more time must be spent in cars, a need for more reliable and safer cars, leading for example to a 20% increase in the size of automobiles in the USA since 1985<sup>11</sup>; plus a vast increase in their numbers and a tripling of commuting time between 1983 and 2003. For an illustration of how this happens in the UK, see Appendix 2.

Globally it means more migration: people must live, and to help them do that the bravest and ablest embark on trials and journeys that out-Odyssey Odysseus a million times over, every single day, wherever there are borders between rich and poor. Internationally there are thought to be about 300 million of them (and this does not include the hundreds of millions of 'internal' migrants, especially within China). They are the "dark matter" of the neoliberal universe, without which no budget would ever balance; its "ragged-trousered philanthropists", working almost for nothing (and often actually for nothing), doing the work the rich countries' own paupers have been priced out of by the crippling costs of living. There are three-quarters of a million illegalised migrants in Britain alone, trapped here to a greater or lesser extent by the draconian anti-immigrant laws that made them illegal, and which have led to a lucrative revival throughout the UK of slavery, debt-bondage and death through overwork<sup>12</sup> - not to mention the increasingly acceptable racism that keeps the whole system going.

**AN ANSWER: PRIORITIZE PUBLIC GOODS; REDEFINE "PRIVATE WEALTH"; OUTLAW INEQUALITY; AND SCRAP IMMIGRATION CONTROLS.**

In Hirsch's analysis, positionality supercedes older and more limited notions of private and public wealth, and embraces Ruskin's useful but hitherto ignored idea of "illth"<sup>13</sup>. The opposite of a positional good might be either a public good, which enriches everyone's life, whoever it belongs to, or a private good, whose consumption is an entirely private matter, affecting nobody else. Warm clothes, decent food, leisure, creative activities and personal relationships come into that category, but most of what we currently call "private wealth"

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<sup>11</sup> "Falling Behind: how rising inequality harms the middle class", 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.

<sup>12</sup> For example as described by Hsiao-Hung Pai in "Chinese Whispers: the true story behind Britain's hidden army of labour", Penguin 2008. See also Rahila Gupta: "Enslaved: the new British slavery", Portobello 2007; and Dan McDougall: "[When I hear of girls working in London who swallow acid, I know it could have been me](#)"; Guardian 24/5/2009

<sup>13</sup> Ruskin developed this idea in his influential essay, "Unto this last" (1860)

certainly does not (see above). The industrial “private sector” generally is anything but. And as for the private press and privately-owned media, these are nothing less than assaults on the public realm by private interests intent on controlling it.

Clean water, a beautiful garden, a good sense of humour, or any skill you like to name, are or could be public goods. Public transport, housing, libraries, theatres, cafés, parks and schools of all kinds are clearly public goods - and the planet and its people need more of them. But there has never been an economic policy informed by this concept of maximising public good while eliminating the positional, and we need one now.

Above all we need to reduce inequality because this, ipso facto, means less competitive and less positional consumption - and less of almost any type of morbidity you care to name, from homicide to obesity. We can do this rapidly when we want to: the UK government did it 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 history<sup>14</sup>. Central to this project is the removal of all borders that, instead of properly defining zones of responsibility, have come instead to separate an “us” from a “them”. The obscenity of EU and US border fortifications against the world’s poor, and the cancerous network of agencies and commercial interests serving them, is a terminal symptom of the divisive malaise the societies they pretend to protect have harboured for far too long: the divisions of class.

#### **TIME FOR ANGER, NOT GUILT. EXPOSE THE LINK BETWEEN INEQUALITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE.**

Climate change is a social justice issue, but till now it has largely been presented as a problem of collective guilt. “We” must repent and mend our ways. It spreads the blame in a way that mocks democracy, pretending that the poor and the rich are somehow equally responsible. Meanwhile the real crime - the very existence of rich and poor - continues to create havoc. There are powerful interests who are quite content if social justice stays out of the climate change debate and no doubt will fight tooth and nail to keep it out. There are also climate change activists who care nothing about their fellow-humans’ rights, let alone their happiness - but they had better start taking an interest in them, because until the grievous infringements of dignity most of humanity endure are addressed there will be no civilised end to the climate debate. But when people’s sense of injustice is engaged, mountains can be moved, fast.

- It links personal reality to global reality.
- It speaks to the sense of social justice which we all share, and shows that it is relevant. It appeals to our desire for solidarity and hatred of injustice; not just personal guilt.
- It opens up and informs a wealth of opportunities for action and engagement - wherever the poor are abused by the rich.

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Appendix 1: Examining the 2006 WWF figures, Danny Dorling found that although some of the more-equal countries do not on the face of it look particularly virtuous, when one corrects for these countries’ biocapacities (the amount of real, usable land they have within their own borders) their eco-footprints begin to fall into rank, with ecological impact and inequality

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<sup>14</sup> *Development as Freedom*; Amartya Sen, OUP, 1999

closely matched. I have added Gini coefficients (where I could find them) to a selection of countries. (The Gini figure rises with inequality.):

Table 1:

	National eco-debt	Gini		Individual eco-debt	Gini
United Kingdom	-237.7	36.0	United Kingdom	-4.0	36.0
Germany	-216.5	28.3	Belgium	-4.0	33.0
Italy	-163.7	36.0	Netherlands	-3.7	30.9
France	-142.7	32.7	Spain	-3.2	34.7
Spain	-132.2	34.7	Greece	-3.2	34.3
Netherlands	-59.4	30.9	Malta	-3.2	26.0
Belgium	-41.3	33.0	Switzerland	-3.0	33.7
Greece	-35.1	34.3	Italy	-2.8	36.0
Portugal	-25.5	38.5	Luxembourg	-2.8	26.0
Switzerland	-21.9	33.7	Germany	-2.6	28.3
Denmark	-10.2	24.7	Portugal	-2.5	38.5
Austria	-9.2	29.1	France	-2.4	32.7
Malta	-1.3	26.0	Denmark	-1.9	24.7
Luxembourg	-1.1	26.0	Austria	-1.1	29.1
Ireland	1.6	34.3	Ireland	0.4	34.3
Norway	4.9	25.8	Norway	1.1	25.8
Iceland	24.1	25.0	Sweden	4.3	25.0
Finland	28.2	26.9	Finland	5.4	26.9
Sweden	38.0	25.0	Iceland	80.4	25.0

Sources: Eco-debt figures from personal email from DD, 2007, using WWF 2006 data; Gini figures from UN website.

## Appendix 2: Positional automobilisation in Swindon, UK.

Some of the most powerful mechanisms driving positional consumption seem to happen just outside peripheral vision. For example, in Britain, many banks and building societies (mutual financial organisations) moved their headquarters out of drab town centres to new, “prestigious” out-of-town settings during the 1980s and 1990s (the word “prestigious” became a stock-epithet in UK advertising copy during that period, reflecting the growing importance of status). This was partly straightforward Veblen-consumption (corporate status became more important as competition intensified as regulations were relaxed) and partly to accommodate the needs of an enlarged, motorised sales-force (in turn, the consequence of turning pensions into positional goods, as marketised private pensions were promoted in opposition to state and job-based pensions).

In one case, which I witnessed in the early 1990s, the Nationwide Building Society moved its headquarters out of its old premises in the centre of the lacklustre West of England town of Swindon into a new, steel-and-glass atrium-style building, amid landscaped carparks, close by the motorway. This meant that several hundred low-paid and mainly female clerical, catering and ancillary staff could no longer travel to work easily by bus, or do family shopping in their lunch-hours. So, between 1994 and 1997 (when I worked there) Nationwide’s car parks gradually became fuller and fuller - mainly with fairly old cars. Executives complained that they were being filled up with “bangers”. Tennis courts and flower-beds were paved over to make way for them. Even so it became necessary to arrive at work earlier and earlier to be sure of getting a place. Low-paid staff had been coerced into the automobile economy, to play their part in the monstrous ramping-up of carbon emissions that marked that decade, with impacts that left no corner of the planet untouched.

This local saga seems to have been part of a general trend: Oxford University's Amanda Root has found that in the UK there was a 90% increase in women with driving licences during the 1980s and 1990s; for the first time there were as many female drivers as men (there had been only half as many in 1975-6); but the women only drove one fifth as many miles as the men<sup>15</sup> - reflecting a type of car usage, and the low status that went with it, that I witnessed in Swindon.

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<sup>15</sup>"Transport and Communication"; Ch 13 of *Twentieth Century Social Trends*, ed Arthur Halsey and Jo Webb, 2000.