
London has become a global epicentre of the winner-takes-all, 1% landscape, and a walk along the length of The Bishops Avenue in Hampstead (N2 postcode) epitomises all that is wrong with the current era of concentrated, globalised wealth (see images below): there are a surprising number of derelict, empty properties as overseas owners let the properties rot while the land value continues to skyrocket; older, more modest properties are being torn down for mega-mansions; and heavily-fortified properties speak to the ill-gotten gains of gangster capitalism, both in the UK and beyond.

*Images taken by G. DeVerteuil, November 2014*

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Part Detroit, part Beverly Hills, The Bishops Avenue begs the observer to make some sense of it—how has this landscape come to be? And with what consequences, both for the real world generally and to radical geography more specifically?

Danny Dorling has always been at the forefront of answering such questions, literally putting inequality on the map for some 20 years now and championing a traditional version of social geography that prioritises above all population welfare and the quest for social justice. He has recently been appointed the Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography at Oxford University, and his upward trajectory has been based on a prolific—but never profligate—production of empirically-based, highly-accessible work that has attracted considerable academic attention yet increasingly reached beyond to the general public, the press and policy-makers. He could be considered a “public intellectual” in the Wacquantian sense of making a critically-engaged social science accessible to the masses (see Wacquant 2008). His new and eminently comprehensible book–provocatively entitled Inequality and the 1%—emerges at a time of resurgent interest in inequality. Here it is not only Thomas Piketty’s (2014) Capital in the Twenty-First Century but also Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett’s (2009) The Spirit Level, Saskia Sassen’s (2014) Expulsions, and Andrew Sayer’s (2014) Why We Can’t Afford the Rich (2014), building on pioneering and prescient work in the United States such as Robert Reich’s (1991) “Secession of the Successful” and Evan McKenzie’s (1994) Privatopia. There is a deep sense among academics that inequality has risen to levels not seen since the Gilded Age and the Roaring Twenties—in the UK, Dorling tells us that the top 1% now earn 15% of the aggregate income and hold 53% of the wealth. The golden era of equalisation in the immediate postwar period is gone but not out of reach, for as Dorling explains, inequality is artificially constituted and sustained. But how does this
particular work stand out from these other titles in an increasingly crowded field—what makes it especially useful not just for the general public but crucially for radical geographers?

Dorling’s main argument is that in the post-2008 era, the 1% are more than just at the top of the income distribution, which is statistically fixed anyway: by taking more and more of the income and wealth pie, they have become increasingly insulated, a drain on society, and damaging to social unity, social policies and social priorities, leading to social corrosiveness, strife and protests; in other words, they extract more than they create, and this has pernicious economic, social and political effects. They do so directly by monopolising income and wealth during a time of externally- and internally-imposed austerity while creating few employment prospects for the remaining 99%. But crucially, Dorling argues that the 1% is “more than just economics—it is the culture that divides and makes social mobility so painful, both for those dropping down the income and wealth scales and for those going up” (p.24). This is a culture of creeping elitism, with a disproportionate influence on politics (given that many top politicians are originally from, and work on behalf of, the 1%) that denigrates the poor, celebrates unearned riches, calls for lower taxes (already far lower than they were in the 1970s), and cuts welfare to the bone, with predictably negative effects upon the most impoverished who own no wealth and whose income is almost entirely composed of government benefits. What is truly shocking is how the 1% have also benefited from the 2008 crash: “since 2008, after the initial shock of the drop in the value of their stock holdings, the rich in both the US and the UK manoeuvred to become much richer” (p.3). Dorling’s focus is primarily on the UK, but with frequent allusions to the American situation and its dubious promise. Indeed, the spectre of American-style inequality looms large in this book (for a
comparison, see DeVerteuil 2011), as the UK is currently far more unequal than places like Japan and Sweden based on key social and health measures, and far more like the US, although not yet as extreme (p.181). A powerful argument is that while the UK “lags” behind the US in terms of inequality, both nations are increasingly out of step in the Western context, which underlines the critical role of the state in mediating inequality. For instance, the UK’s 1% is far richer and outsized when compared to the rest of Europe, which may partially explain why the 2008 financial crisis both originated on British soil and found its salvation in government bailouts.

The book is structured around four avenues through which the 1% have separated themselves: a privatised schooling system leading to polarised social mobility; disproportionate access to well-paid work leading to increasingly unequal access to employment and remuneration via the bloated financial sector; a lax tax regime yielding unfettered wealth accumulation centred on London housing (alongside stunning poverty) and globalised tax evasion, draining the (now) deregulated national economy; and better overall health outcomes while the poorest see their life expectancy, youth unemployment, access to healthy food, and levels of desperation and shame only worsen since 2008. In the final section, Dorling asks what is to be done. He proposes a “slow revolution”–a “non-violent war of attrition on concentrated wealth is needed, and it is beginning” (p.174), the product of mainstream disgust with the greed of the 1% that is leading to pressure to impose an across-the-board equitable taxation system (such as the one in place during the much-maligned 1970s). Many nations already operate under such a system whereby the 1% are effectively curtailed via taxation policy. Indeed, not all nations experienced a surge of inequality in the post-2008 era–some even saw declining wealth among the 1% (e.g. Iceland), but others such as the US and UK protected them in
a clear case of accumulation by dispossession. Yet even without governmental intervention, the 1% may collapse due to their own greed—even Hayek admitted that markets have little to do with fairness!

Dorling’s book will surely divide readers into two camps. Those who do more empirically- and policy-driven research will find much to commend in the relentless data-driven exposition and analysis, a shining example of Elvin Wyly’s (2009) “strategic positivism”. Crucially, Dorling’s systematic approach is a timely addition to the still-anaemic geographic work on the top 1% of the income distribution (but see the recent volume on the super-rich edited by Iain Hay [2013]; Sébastien Breau [2014] here in Antipode; and older work by Beaverstock et al. [2004]). One cannot have a full picture of inequality without considering their machinations in the generation and deepening of inequality, deeply enmeshed in what Sayer (2014) deems not a “politics of envy” but a “politics of injustice”, an emulation of a dysfunctional class. Dorling’s book is an exercise in vigilance against the undue impacts of the 1%, and in that respect, the 99% will likely find the empirical data revelatory, providing much-needed ammunition in the fight against concentrated wealth. The book’s focus on structural outcomes complements some of the more conceptually-driven work that relies heavily on social theory and political economy. It is perhaps no wonder that many of the advance reviews of the book are from activists, campaigners and freelance/popular writers, rather than (radical) academics.

While providing this crucial empirical ammunition, to those conceptually-driven radical geographers with longstanding interests in inequality and class—and I admit probably not Dorling’s principal audience for the book—the empirical lessons and litanies will come as no great surprise. The very richness of the empirical project and the
accessibility of the writing and analysis seem to come at the expense of any pretence of conceptual insight or connection to previous academic work, be they David Smith’s (2000) “place of good fortune” or the movements against the 1% so articulately described in David Harvey’s (2012) Rebel Cities (see also DeVerteuil 2009). The reader will find few nods to work from Marx, Engels, Lefebvre, Smith (Neil and David M.), Hardt and Negri, Gibson-Graham, Swyngedouw and Massey. Perhaps even more suspect, Dorling’s proposed solution does not argue against capitalism itself, just an unfettered version that has enabled and emboldened the 1% to become disproportionately wealthy and powerful. A slow revolution necessarily involves a lot of patience, waiting for the cycle of private greed and public disgust to right the excesses of the 1% through their own contradictions and dead weight. Implicitly, Dorling follows a rather Rawlsian, liberal view of justice—tinkering with the system without calling for radical overhaul. Following on from this, it would be difficult to find a radical geographer these days who is not excruciatingly familiar with the injustices of rising inequality—the real issue is what to do about it, and Dorling’s approach may seem too incremental in a globalised world where curtailing the 1% in the UK and the US—and their global windfall since the late 1990s—has proven elusive. Returning to The Bishops Avenue, Dorling can help us understand the landscape and its current trajectories, but is perhaps less useful in envisioning its eventual dismantlement.

References

(last accessed 27 January 2015)