

Interview - Danny Dorling

Written by E-International Relations

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Professor Danny Dorling, a fellow of St Peter's College, Oxford, joined the School of Geography and the Environment in September 2013 to take up the Halford Mackinder Professorship in Geography. He was previously a professor of Geography at the University of Sheffield. Before a career in academia Dorling was employed as a play-worker in children's play-schemes and in pre-school education where the underlying rationale was that playing is learning for living. He tries not to forget this. His academic concerns issues of housing, health, employment, education, wealth and poverty. His recent books include, co-authored texts *The Atlas of the Real World: Mapping the way we live* and *Bankrupt Britain: An atlas of social change*. Sole authored books include, *So you think you know about Britain* (2011), *Population Ten Billion* (2013) and *The Equality Effect: Improving life for everyone* (2017). Much of Danny's work is available open access at www.dannydorling.org. With a group of colleagues, he helped create the website www.worldmapper.org which shows who has most and least in the world. Dorling is a member of numerous research clusters including Economy and Society: Transformations and Justice, Environmental Interactions and Political Worlds: Violence, Sovereignty, Knowledge. He is an Academician of the Academy of the Learned Societies in the Social Sciences, a former Honorary President of the Society of Cartographers and a current patron of Roadpeace, the national charity for road crash victims.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I work in Geography. The most exciting and worrying debate in my field is whether human beings, or (at the very least) current human civilization, will survive the climate breakdown caused by industrial global warming. When climate science is a core part of what your students study, and when we are currently seeing an acceleration, not just a rise, in average global land surface temperatures, it is hard not to list this first. There is a connection with economic inequality, which is what most interests me in human geography at the moment. More equitable, affluent societies in the world appear to pollute far less than more unequal societies do. Carbon emissions from more equitable, affluent societies are at least half as much per person, again on average, as in the most unequal of affluent nations.

Despite having as much money to spend, people in more equitable societies in the affluent world appear far happier to fly less, to think more carefully about their holidays, to arrange public transport better and use it far more often, to be willing to buy fewer clothes of higher quality and to throw away far less, to eat less meat and waste less heat. There are currently huge differences between different affluent countries in the differing degrees of economic inequality that each will tolerate, and this creates a natural experiment that is very interesting to observe. The most economically unequal countries in the affluent and semi-affluent world are the USA, UK, Russia, Turkey, Israel, Brazil and South Africa. Economic inequality appears to result in political and climate breakdown and to also be possibly influenced by it.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

All of us understand the world in ways that change over time. I was immensely lucky, although, if you disagree with my views you may view what happened to me as unlucky! I was born in England and my parents sent me to very normal schools in a small midlands car-factory town called Oxford (which had an even smaller university back then). So, I did not have to learn about British society at university. My parents were and remain socialists and

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internationalists. My family was mixed race and so I knew more about African history than most children around me. I was not segregated from an early age in a private or grammar school, as most of my older contemporaries were. However, the Thatcher government imposed severe spending cuts on schools like mine in the 1980s and so most of the teachers were very young as older teachers would not work for the low salaries in 'tougher' schools. I was taught Geography at school by some brilliantly imaginative, young, enthusiastic teachers. Kath Lewis, in particular, taught me A level in what I later learnt was her first ever year of teaching. She had a qualification in primary (not secondary) education and a desire to teach drama and dance. Fortunately, she did have a degree in Geography! But because she was not an old-fashioned Geographer, she made the subject interesting, which is so often not the case at school.

At university I was inspired by Peter Taylor, who founded political geography as a sub-discipline. It was just a matter of luck that I was taught by him, just as Immanuel Wallerstein's key history of the world was being published and that he was enthralled by that. Similarly, it was my good luck that my PhD supervisor, Stan Openshaw, was the geographer who worked out that thirty million people would be dead or dying in the UK a few weeks after nuclear war, if it were to break out. I learnt early on that you could use numbers to aid political understanding about international relations.

I continued to be lucky, lucky to work with Ron Johnston, Mary Shaw, David Gordon and George Davey Smith at Bristol, lucky to meet Dimitris Ballas at Leeds, lucky to be given the leeway (from a hard-nosed deal another academic had negotiated) to set up a research group at Sheffield, lucky that Ben Hennig decided he wanted to study with me in England, lucky to get to travel to New Zealand (and fly around the world five times) for work, and very lucky to be able to return home to Oxford where I currently work. Chance was the main factor at play at each key point in my career. At some points bad luck as well as good. I have also been extremely lucky never to be ill, and that my children are happy and well. It does not take much to knock you off-course. Along the way I have read thousands of books and papers and all those will have had an influence, but the greatest influences are probably the earliest. Living outside of the UK for a few months also helped me see the world differently.

You have given considerable attention to the issue of inequality and in your recent book *Do we need economic inequality?* you refute the orthodox notion that inequality is necessary for economic growth and social mobility. What are the most compelling arguments against economic inequality?

It is becoming almost too easy to argue against economic inequality because there is not a single country in the world that currently tolerates high levels of inequality where people are at all content. High inequality countries are far more economically inefficient, have lower productivity, a tendency to make extreme and damaging political choices, to generate worse health for their populations, lower levels of overall academic ability, greater poverty and far less happiness, including worse mental health among their elites. In contrast, as yet we have no example of an affluent country in the world that has yet become so equal that we are able to determine at what point you can have too much equality.

The most economically equal countries in the affluent world such as Finland and Japan, enjoy some of the best standards of health in the world, have low and falling levels of homelessness, good education systems and outcomes, much better mental health, job security, and tend to be far less militaristic. Countries like France and Germany, which are far more equitable than the UK or USA, enjoy higher median incomes, far better health services; cheaper, better, higher quality housing; and higher rates of entrepreneurship and innovation that far outstrip the Anglophone nations, which ironically labour under the false assumption that at least their inequality makes them more innovative!

Studies of the number of patents registered per head or scientific papers published per person help show just how unproductive even the research and university sectors are in more unequal countries. And we produce university league tables to suggest we are so good! In contrast, the most unequal countries enjoy the highest rates of obesity. And, finally in this list of woes, social mobility has repeatedly been shown to be higher in more economically equitable countries because the rich there do not have to fear their children deciding to undertake socially useful but less well paid work. They also do not have to fear their children mixing with children from families with 'only' average economic status, and perhaps starting a family with someone poorer than them.

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What do you feel is the main reason for the departure from the post-war consensus of Keynesian economics? What have been the most striking consequences?

In hindsight, the embracing of Keynesian economics just before and after the Second World War was part of a much wider shift in attitudes amongst the elite of the rich countries of the world. In most affluent countries, economic inequality had peaked around the year 1913 (it would peak a few decades later in the USA). The cost of the First World War, which was supposed to last just a few weeks, could only be borne by taxing the rich. That is why economic inequalities began to fall then. The fall was sustained because the Russian revolution helped concentrate the minds of the very rich on what can happen if you continue to take more and more. The attempt in the 1920s to return to pre-World War One inequalities failed, with a general strike in the UK and then a global economic crash in 1929. Keynesian economics has to be seen in that context. It was an elite reaction to crisis, a realisation that they had to share better; it was not just about generating demand.

The break with Keynesianism was most acute in the USA, which then saw the greatest rise in economic inequality begin in the 1980s and continue onwards and upwards. The break was partly a reaction to America not being 'great' any more, and to the Vietnam War going so very badly wrong for the most powerful state in the world. It is not hard to be great when most of your competitor economies have been reduced to rubble. The UK followed suit, but for differing reasons. Despite being on the winning side in the Second World War, the economy of the UK suffered greatly as the British Empire disintegrated. The British had never really understood how much of their wealth relied on their control of colonial markets. In contrast, countries which had been made much more equal, often by being on the losing side in the war or having suffered invasion and occupation during the last world war, were more likely to continue using Keynesian economics for longer and to also adapt this economics to something that was not the free market madness embraced by the USA. In those countries, such as Finland, Austria and Sweden taxation was increased and state spending rose after the great financial crash of 2008 so that people would not suffer just because of the mistakes of bankers.

Although inequality is seen across the globe, there are states that have pursued an economic model that results in a much more equal society. Denmark and Norway for example have famously taken a different path. What are the key characteristics of the economic and political models of such states?

They are normal. Denmark and Norway are like the majority of OECD countries which all enjoy some of the lowest levels of economic inequality ever known in the world. What we often don't understand in the UK and USA is just how weird we have become. Although in many OECD countries there were small rises in inequalities in the 1990s and 2000s most remain remarkably equal – the most equal countries in the world are all in the OECD. Since 2013 the large majority of OECD countries have seen economic inequalities fall and the levels they are currently at mean they're twice as equal as the UK. The best-off 1% in Switzerland take home half as much as the best-off 1% in the UK. The models that these other states have are very different from the UK with its stark class divides and the USA with its stark racial divides. Both such divides are sustained by very high rates of economic inequality.

In normal OECD countries children go to much the same schools regardless of the income of their parents. The education of all children is seen as important, and it is not the case that many times more is spent on a small minority of children attending private schools. In normal OECD countries there are no or very low university fees, and more children go to university as a proportion of all children, and – by age 24 – the population is far better educated and more able (including those who do not go to university, as vocational education in a more equal country is so much better). Politics is not dominated by the influence of a few so-called think tanks funded secretly by the super-rich, as it is in the UK and USA.

The political model of a normal OECD country is one of proportional representation in the vast majority of cases. And the majority political party is not far-right, as the Republicans in the USA are, or right of normal European Conservatives, as the Conservative party of Britain is – as I write, the UK Conservative party is aligned with fascist MEPs in the European parliament. The UK produced the biggest block of far-right MEPs in that parliament. It is the most far-right country in Europe (and its people and politicians mostly do not realize this).

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What specific policies need to be pursued for a more equal economic model to be achieved in other states, such as the UK and USA?

Thomas Piketty and his colleagues have shown that the single most successful policy to promote higher economic inequality is to keep the top rate of income tax high, or if it has been allowed to fall, to raise it again. A high rate of income tax is for example, 60% on income above £100,000, 70% on income above £200,000 and 80% on income above £300,000. When and where tax rates such as this are levied there is a very strong incentive not to waste money paying employees such ridiculously high incomes, as most of the money will go straight to the state and not to the intended recipient. For instance, if a young banker is paid £500,000 a year under such a regime then they will be taxed normally on the first £100,000 they earn in a year. They will then be taxed £60,000 on the next £100,000, £70,000 on the next £100,000 and £160,000 on the remaining £200,000 that they are awarded in that year. In total they will pay £60,000+£70,000+£160,000=£290,000 in tax on their income above £100,000, receiving just £110,000 of that £400,000 in their pocket. This has the effect of them not asking for a pay rise and that money being better spent by the bank on worse paid employees. In future, the bank employs fewer people on such high salaries. They might even become less greedy and better bankers.

In countries where income tax rates on top income are higher, less money is raised through such income tax – and that is the precise aim of this policy! Conservatives often do not understand this point. In contrast, in the UK today top rates of income tax are so low that the very rich pay themselves an enormous amount and so ‘contribute’ as much as a third of all income tax! But to what effect? Does this actually help? High rates of top tax also increase the freedom of the greedy to choose only to work more if they really want to work and not because of any addiction to money they might have developed. There are many other policies but raising top income tax rates, above all else, is the single most effective policy. If you want to read one book that explains this well see Robert Frank’s 2016 best-seller *Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy*. Frank also wrote the best-selling US economics textbook with Ben Bernanke. The magic effects of good taxation are now beginning to be understood by mainstream economists in the USA. But to know of these effects the USA had to first be allowed to get into such a mess as to show the whole world what goes wrong when top taxes are too low.

What impact can the pursuit of inequality in the most powerful and richest states (based on GDP) have upon developing countries?

The trumpeting of inequality as good by a small number of powerful and rich nations has had a terrible effect on some of the poorest countries in the world, especially where the advice of the economists of these countries, led by the UK and USA, was followed most closely. Those economists suggested that water supplies should be privatized, school fees introduced, the best health care should only be reserved for the rich (the most healthy) in these poor countries and so on and on. This is all today largely discredited and the politics of ‘greed is good’ is now only espoused by a few mavericks such as Donald Trump, but we forget that it was once mainstream advice from the economists of the most unequal countries to the leaders of some of the poorest countries in the world.

Very bad economic advice is one reason why South America saw inequalities rise so high in most of its countries; because USA economists demanded it. Moreover, the USA supported coups to prevent sensible governments increasing equality on that continent. The USA saw it as its backyard. Thankfully, some of the fastest falls in economic inequality have recently occurred in South American countries that have learnt to ignore and resist the USA. Similarly, former British colonies are more likely to have very high rates of inequality than other poor countries in the world because British economic advisors in the recent past spread the myth that inequality was good as it showed that you were rewarding the highest of talents and also not rewarding the so-called feckless.

In addition to all this, rich countries that support high inequality contain the majority of extremely rich individuals in the world who seek to gain a high ‘investment return’ by making as much money as they can out of poor countries and increasing inequalities in those countries as they do so. At the extremes they are involved in selling arms, in diamond mines, in extracting oil from the Amazon and selling opiates to the masses as painkillers. In contrast, the wealthy in more equitable, affluent countries are far more squeamish about exploiting people in the poorest countries of the world just so that they can become even richer. They are, to put it bluntly, more human and more humane. Equality is

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good for the rich. It makes them better people.

As part of your work as a geographer you have looked in to geodemographics and stated that Britain is the most divided country in Europe. What are some of the main reasons for this?

Britain is exceptional. It has the widest regional divides by income, by health, by house prices, by educational qualifications of anywhere in Europe. When one state, especially a large state, is so odd there has to be a special reason behind that outcome. What is so very different about Britain is that one hundred years ago, in 1918, it was still the heart of the largest empire the world had ever known. It was also, as far as it knew, the richest place on earth. In fact, Switzerland and the USA had already overtaken it by then (per capita), but as the GDP figures needed to calculate this would not be estimated for some years to come, the British still thought they were top dog.

The British elite had also absorbed theories as to why they were so special, theories that would never be properly dispelled in the century to follow. They believed in the 'British race' as an especially able and gifted race. William Beveridge suggested that the British middle class should each try to have at least four offspring 'for the good of the race', and by implication, for the good of the world. Cecil Rhodes is better remembered for such racist beliefs, but they were widespread then amongst the liberal intelligentsia. And they never were properly dispelled. They help to explain the survival of British public schools, and of the incredibly hierarchical British university system, as well as the continued dominance of London.

When the empire crumbled, and the USA reined the British in at Suez, Britain faced a turning point and it wavered throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. Its leaders could have chosen to have learnt the lessons of previous empires, to have downsized more quickly. Instead, there was strife. The unions were blamed for the economic fall that came from losing empire tribute (losing what had been captive markets). Immigrants from the empire, and later from Eastern Europe, were blamed for everything from why most schools were not great, to why good housing was always in short supply, and why most jobs were badly paid compared to those in most of the rest of Western Europe.

The Conservative government of 1979 abandoned the North of England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland as a 'price worth paying' to keep up appearances. They were the party directly descended from the families that had run the empire, including the major slaver families of England. With the big bang of banking in 1986 they sort to bring about empire 2.0. That failed in 2008. But by the time it failed they had transformed the Labour party into a mild Conservative party which saw no need to reduce regional inequalities. The peripheral regions of the UK were treated as the British had once treated their overseas colonies. An empire mentality is hard to lose. Only in very recent years, with the election and reelection of Jeremy Corbyn has that mentality been rejected by the Labour party. And with Brexit, Britain now suddenly faces discovering its true value in the world. It is always hard having been top dog. To become normal and actually have to make your way in the world without exploiting others to secure your riches is difficult, especially if you have not done this for a couple of centuries.

To what extent do you feel geography plays a role in creating the challenges and catastrophes mentioned? Are we all, as Tim Marshall has recently posited, *Prisoners of Geography*?

Geography is not deterministic. In implying this Tim Marshall makes some simple mistakes, but as he is a journalist and not a geographer, we should not be too hard on him. The fact that a damp cold archipelago of islands on the far north west coast of the Eurasian continent should have become the richest place on earth a century ago helps illustrate that physical geography is not key to political outcomes. It could easily have been the Korean peninsula that had become dominant worldwide, had the Americas first been reached across the pacific, rather than by Columbus in 1492. Or part of Africa could have been the place that decided that its meat was far too rancid and sent off ships in search of spices to disguise the rotting taste. We are far too ready to take the particular story we have and write it up as the only story that could have ever happened. It is not just individual histories that as so very much determined by chance, but also world history.

Geography does play an important role today in helping to illustrate how different decisions have very different outcomes. China is one of the most interesting examples today which we still tend to ignore because it does not fit the

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protestant banker migrant model of the United Provinces, United Kingdom and United States. With sea level rises to come, height above sea level is important now in a way it would otherwise not have been had we found a fuel source other than coal a little earlier. Thus, that geography matters and so does the geography of climate. Over the long-term climate change has always had a profound effect on human culture. Human civilizations did not just grow most prosperous where Africa met Asia and Europe because of the concentration of trade at that isthmus. The climate in the Middle East was also much wetter thousands of years ago.

Today it would make sense for people to be moved towards the new promised lands where the best sources of fresh water are to be found, rather than try so hard to make less and less habitable land habitable. Places have also been cursed by the resources found there: gold, oil, diamonds, and those who could more easily be enslaved. But it would be wrong to blame the place for the problems caused by what was seen as acceptable at each time. Just because the Congo was a good place to grow cocoa beans does not explain why so many children had their hands cut off by European colonizers, or why so few children in Europe are taught about that today.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Travel. Travel as much as you can. And try to spend time, months not weeks, living in another country, working closely with people in another country, preferably a country not like the one you grew up in. You can read as much as you like and write as many papers as others are willing to read, but there is no substitute for actually experiencing life in another place. If you are lucky enough to live somewhere that is more equitable, please do not mistake that for it being boring. Travel to a land with food-banks and people sleeping on the streets and spend a little time learning why you are so lucky. Of course, if you have been brought up in a more equitable country, and you are reading this, you will probably have mastered three or four languages. Get to mix with people in a more unequal place and listen to what they say, what they assume, what they fear and how many still resist what great inequality demands of them.

Had you been living in the late 1930s then two of the countries in the world with the highest and most rapidly rising inequality then were Germany and Japan. My grandfather got to spend some time in Germany in the late 1930s when he was a student of Geography. It shocked him. He learnt as much from that one summer trip as from his entire undergraduate degree. Most likely, if you are reading this, you grew up in inequitable times in an inequitable place and only speak one language well – English. You, the reader of this interview, are most probably American or English. And you are aiming to establish a career in one of the most unequal countries of the rich world, at a time when it is most unequal. So, be aware that your student loan is not 'natural' or 'fair' or even normal. You were just born in the wrong place at the wrong time. And, disproportionately you will have been born into the middle class, if not upper-middle class, if you are reading this. You will be white (the minority ethnicity of the world) and you will find discussion of inequality and personal origins a little, or greatly, embarrassing.

Be aware that the precarity of your position as a young scholar is not inevitable. As a PhD student in a more normal OECD country you would be a member of staff and would have a wage, not a debt. And be aware that – with luck – you are about to see great changes begin. Because the most unequal of countries never manage to maintain themselves at their peaks of inequality for long. However, there is always a fight to be had to regain greater equality. Whatever you do, don't aim to be in the 1% highest paid. Only 1% of people can ever get into the 1% and they tend to be an unhappy bunch in academia in the USA and UK. The highest paid in American and English universities are always thinking that those beneath them are near to rebelling and will soon be calling into question their huge salaries, narcissistic trophy building projects, and stupid unsustainable policies. They are not wrong to be afraid.

And finally, learn to be humble. Who on earth are we, in the most unequal of affluent nations, places that have created Trump and Brexit, to lecture others about international relations? If it wasn't so serious it would be funny.