

The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger, by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. Foreward by Robert B. Reich
Reviewed by Jim McConnell

The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger, written by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett and published in 2009, compares wealthy industrial nations and argues that the degree of inequality within a society matters more for social well-being than overall wealth alone.

Wilkinson and Pickett contend that societies with greater economic equality tend to have healthier, happier, safer, and more cohesive populations, while societies with large gaps between rich and poor experience more social dysfunction across nearly every level of life.

The !Kung people of the Kalahari Desert in present day Botswana and Namibia, for instance, have a remarkable hunting custom. Before a hunt, hunters often exchange arrows with one another. When an animal is killed, the person who owns the arrow receives the social credit for the kill and assumes responsibility for distributing the meat, even if someone else actually brought down the animal. As a result, the prestige associated with successful hunting is shared throughout the community rather than accumulating in the hands of a few exceptionally skilled hunters.

Anthropologists have long recognized this practice as one of several cultural mechanisms that helped maintain the remarkably egalitarian character of !Kung society. Everyone knew who the best hunters were. Excellence was neither denied nor suppressed. Yet their culture deliberately prevented skill from becoming a pathway to domination, privilege, or excessive status. The question the !Kung seemed to ask was not how to reward achievement as much as possible, but how to preserve excellence while strengthening the bonds of community. Their answer was to weave individual accomplishment into a larger network of generosity, mutual dependence, and shared dignity.

As I read Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level*, I found myself thinking often of the !Kung. The authors make a compelling case that modern societies have largely abandoned the wisdom embodied in that ancient hunting custom. Rather than distributing prestige and fostering social equality, many contemporary societies organize themselves around status competition, wealth accumulation, and social hierarchy. The result, they argue, is not only economic inequality but widespread psychological and social suffering.

The Spirit Level is a provocative and emotionally compelling book written about inequality in modern industrial societies. Wilkinson and Pickett approach inequality not simply as an economic issue but as a profoundly psychological and spiritual one. They argue that extreme wealth gaps shape how people experience themselves and one another every day. In highly unequal societies, people become increasingly preoccupied with where they stand in relation to others. Social comparison becomes unavoidable. Status anxiety becomes a defining feature of daily life.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its insistence that inequality is not merely about material deprivation. The authors demonstrate that even people who are reasonably comfortable can suffer from the emotional consequences of living in a society marked by large disparities in wealth and status. Constant exposure to signals of success and failure can foster feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, and shame. The problem is not simply that some people have less. It is that entire cultures become organized around ranking human worth.

The discussion of violence is particularly striking. Wilkinson and Pickett argue that violent crime often increases in unequal societies because status humiliation becomes more intense. When dignity is tied closely to wealth, prestige, and social standing, resentment and anger can become explosive. The United States serves as a recurring example throughout the book, illustrating how high levels of inequality often coexist with comparatively high rates of violence.

Equally powerful is the book's examination of trust. The authors show that as inequality rises, trust tends to decline. People become less likely to trust their neighbors, their institutions, and even strangers. Communities become fragmented. Individuals retreat into private worlds, gated neighborhoods, tribal identities, or consumer pursuits. Material prosperity may increase, but many people experience a growing sense of loneliness and disconnection.

Perhaps the book's most important insight is that inequality harms almost everyone, not only those at the bottom of the economic ladder. Even affluent people living in highly unequal societies often experience greater stress, fear, social competition, and emotional isolation than people living in more egalitarian cultures. Inequality becomes more than an economic arrangement. It becomes an atmosphere, shaping the emotional climate of an entire society.

At times, *The Spirit Level* can be a dispiriting book because its diagnosis of modern life is so sobering. Yet it also carries a hopeful message. Human beings flourish best not in hypercompetitive social orders but in communities characterized by dignity, trust, fairness, and mutual respect.

In a sense, Wilkinson and Pickett are pointing us back toward a truth the !Kung understood long ago. A healthy society is not one in which a few people accumulate all the credit, wealth, and prestige. A healthy society is one in which success is shared, dignity is widely distributed, and the well-being of each person is bound up with the well-being of all.