



BOOK REVIEWS

RICHARD WILKINSON AND KATE PICKETT

The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger

New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010 (US edition). xv + 331 p. \$28.00.

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level* has become a bestseller since it was first published in Britain last year. It is an ambitious book with a clear message: while economic development in poorer countries contributes substantially to human wellbeing, gains in income in affluent countries count for less and less. This theme is endorsed in a foreword by Robert Reich, former US Secretary of Labor in the Clinton administration. Newspapers, commentators, and politicians across the developed world have praised the book and taken its message to heart. However, economists and political scientists in particular tend to be more reluctant to accept the conclusions. Judged on its academic merits, how sound are the authors' arguments?

As their starting point Wilkinson and Pickett, two British epidemiologists, state that the evidence "shows that we have got close to the end of what economic growth can do for us" (p. 5). In other words, this is the end of politics as we know it and perhaps, the authors hope, a beginning of politics that are more sensitive to distributional issues. They support their contention by reference to Richard Layard's (2005) claim that national income is now entirely unassociated with happiness in rich societies while furthering income equality would raise average happiness levels. This starting point exemplifies one of the main problems with the book: the authors too often base frequently compelling discussions on less than ideally robust foundations. Layard's claim on which he builds the case in his book, for example, is still controversial, not least in happiness studies where recent research finds evidence of income effects but not of distributional changes (see, e.g., Stevenson and Wolfers 2009; Bjørnskov et al. 2008). *The Spirit Level*, in short, is a reflection of its authors' strong partisanship, which is both its strength and a major weakness.

Wilkinson and Pickett support their claims throughout by referring to published research, mostly by American and British social scientists, and by presenting 47 scatter plots, nine histograms, and five other figures. To ordinary readers without firm statistical training, this approach appears to represent careful and "painstakingly marshaled" evidence, as *The Economist* put it. However, to readers with a background in economics or political science, the evidence in the book is wanting. When seeing strong conclusions drawn from scatter plots and other simple figures, for example, one has to ask three questions: 1) are the relations driven by outlier observations; 2) are the findings robust to controlling for other relevant factors; and 3) are the relations likely to be causal? Surprisingly often, Wilkinson and Pickett's claims fail to address one or more of these questions.

A first test for any reader, regardless of education level, is the "thumb test": place your thumb over what looks like the most influential dot on a scatter plot. Surprisingly often in this book, this dot is either the United States or Japan, and uncomfortably often the thumb test makes the clear association between inequality and



some desirable feature disappear. Examples include obesity (p. 92–93), aspirations to low-skilled work (p. 116), and homicide frequency (p. 135). Likewise, in other plots such as those between inequality and women's status or foreign aid (pp. 60, 61), it is apparent that virtually the entire associations are driven by the Scandinavian welfare states. Conversely, a plot on page 21 that seems to show that an index of health and social problems is unrelated to average income suddenly exhibits a clear negative correlation when one hides the US observation.

The Swedish economist Andreas Bergh recently tested question no. 2, the robustness of Wilkinson and Pickett's central claims. Bergh's (2010) starting point is that if inequality affects health, happiness, and other central features of our societies, reductions in inequality ought to result in improvements in those factors. Employing data from the same sources as Wilkinson and Pickett, Bergh shows that once either average income, the number of physicians per 1,000 people, or average calorie intake per day is taken into account, the result that income inequality negatively correlates with life expectancy at birth disappears. Both Bergh's recent work with Therese Nilsson (forthcoming) and Gerring and Thacker's (2008) similar work in political science reach some very different policy implications from those of *The Spirit Level* when exploring what can be done to improve the health of a population. In general, very few of the conclusions on which this book rests are replicable using econometrics, even when one is not explicitly dealing with the causality issue.

The bottom line is that this is a well-written, stimulating polemic. It nevertheless suffers from the same problems as one-trick ponies: if the one trick does not impress you, the show is a failure. Wilkinson and Pickett's trick simply does not hold up to empirical scrutiny. When assessing this book as a contribution to the debate on the "right" level of income differences in modern society, it is a highly interesting, sympathetic attempt at addressing some of the important problems of Western societies. Yet, when assessing this book from a scientific point of view, one is forced to conclude that it is a failure.

Aarhus University
Denmark

CHRISTIAN BJØRNSKOV

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SUSAN E. KLEPP

Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760–1820

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When did Americans first begin to consciously limit their family size? Which Americans were they, and what did they hope to accomplish by having smaller families? Susan Klepp offers remarkably specific answers to these questions, especially since she dates "the beginning of the decline at about 1763" (p. 10). She studies the few early American records that can be used to construct age-specific birth rates: 2,800 families that she and five other historians have reconstituted from examining genealogies and church records. She concludes that women in the "revolutionary era" (1760 to 1820) started childbearing later, stopped sooner, and had fewer children than married women in the "colonial era" (1680 to 1780): an urban TFR of 8.6 vs. 9.2, and a rural TFR of 9.0 vs. 9.7. In turn, the TFRs from the "nineteenth-century era" (1800 to 1870) were lower still: an urban TFR of 8.1 and a rural TFR of 8.4. These total fertility rates are notably high since they assume that all women married at age 20 and remained married until 50. Careful estimates by Coale and Zelnic (1963) cited by Klepp (p. 8) set the TFR for the US white population in 1800 at 7.04; their corresponding estimate for 1870 was 4.55.

The reconstituted families include 1,378 families living in rural Lancaster County, 744 families living in Philadelphia, 300 Jewish families living in cities along the eastern seaboard, 219 Quaker families living in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, 149 families descended from "wealthy colonial forbearers," and 29 free, Dutch-speaking families of African heritage living in New York and New Jersey. Klepp makes no claims that these families were representative of all American families, but she does use their fertility statistics to date the beginning of "family planning" in America and to contend, quite plausibly, that fertility fell "more rapidly in the East than in the West, in the North than in the South, among city folk before country folk," and among the "middling sorts" before the "very rich" (p. 265).

Although many demographers might find fault with the small non-random sample of Americans that Klepp uses to answer her "when" and "who" questions, they should persevere and read the interesting central chapters of the book, where Klepp answers the "why" question by examining almanacs, novels, letters, diaries, paintings, laws, and medical writings. In these sources Klepp finds evidence that the social and political upheaval brought about by the American Revolution profoundly affected how women thought about themselves, their relationship with their husbands, and their reproductive role. For example, in the political writings and personal letters of Esther Reed, Klepp finds a woman who linked political