

The Spirit Level: A Response

The Spirit Level is a hugely important book which has already had a significant impact on some strands of progressive opinion in the UK. Let me give you a couple of anecdotes to illustrate its success. I was in Brighton a couple of weeks ago, and walking past the large branch of Waterstones (Britain's leading high-street book retailer) in the centre of town there, I saw that the most prominent display in the window was for *The Spirit Level*. Perhaps this isn't surprising, given that Brighton is now officially the most radical town in Britain, having just elected our very first Green M.P. (the excellent Caroline Lucas), but it was heartening nonetheless. Just a couple of days later, we held a hustings for local parliamentary candidates at my University. I was delighted to hear Chris Brice, the Liberal Democrat candidate for the East Ham constituency (a poor and highly multicultural district of East London), quoting directly from *The Spirit Level*, as he set out a position which was far more radical, and far more believable, and far more popular with the students, than that taken by the Blairite Labour Member of Parliament, Stephen Timms. So the book has already had an impact, providing a common point of reference for progressives from a range of political traditions; and this impact is well deserved, given the quality of the argument that it presents.

Broadly speaking, *The Spirit Level* argues that on a very wide range of indicators, both the personal well-being of individuals and the functionality and collective health of nations is affected by the relative equality of income distributions within given societies; that the well-being even of the richest members of a society is partly dependent upon the relative income equality characterising that society. While the evidence which the authors present for the relationships between rates of crime, obesity, mental illness, teen pregnancy, mortality, etc. etc. all show quite clearly that once

they have passed a certain threshold of economic development, rich countries benefit from a more equal distribution of wealth, it is of course possible to argue about the causal relationships involved, and it is ultimately only possible to speculate about the mechanisms of that causality even if it is accepted as being demonstrable. To my mind, where the book makes its most persuasive case that income equality as such is a causal factor in determining a range of social outcomes - irrespective of the cultural, political and social differences between different countries - is in its comparison of Sweden and Japan with other wealthy developed economies. Socialists and social democrats are used to looking to Sweden as a model of egalitarian progress and enlightened living, and we are used to being told that Sweden's small, homogenous population creates unique conditions which cannot be replicated elsewhere. Japan, on the other hand, has a very weak welfare state and an enormous, dense population, and a much more socially-conservative culture than liberal Sweden; but it also has a corporate culture which shuns excessive pay differentials. As such, it shares with Sweden very low levels of income inequality, and very similar sets of indicators of personal and social well-being, and very little else. This is a very powerful argument that equality as such, by whatever means it is achieved, is beneficial to a society and all of its members.

So on its own empirical terms, *The Spirit Level* is extremely convincing. At the same time, from a philosophical perspective, the book is extremely persuasive to me, because it seems to bear out a particular truth which has always been axiomatic to my thinking, both in my academic work and in my political activities and indeed in every part of my life. *The Spirit Level* quotes the 17th century English poet John Donne, and his famous assertion that 'no man is an island'. In the poem from which this line is taken, Donne goes on to say that every death diminishes every individual, in a very profound meditation upon the relationship between mortality, being, and sociality, which pre-dates Heidegger and Derrida by several centuries.

No man is an island,
Entire of itself.
Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manner of thine own
Or of thine friend's were.
Each man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.

These lines of Donne's give expression to an intuition which many people have shared over time, but which is not easy to justify or even properly to express in the languages of modernity. *The Spirit Level* seems to demonstrate, with mathematical precision, that this intuition is correct. But there are a number of questions which the book inevitably raises rather than answers. For example: what does it really mean to observe that we are all somehow interdependent, to the point where another's poverty is bad for my health? What are the actual mechanisms by which inequality leads to poor physical and mental health even for members of the elite? And what might the attempt to identify these mechanisms tell us about what it means to be in the world, to be human, or even something more than just human?

At several points in the book, the authors of *The Spirit Level* suggest that the most obvious mechanism by which inequality is translated into measurable bad outcomes is via the production of stress. To put it simply, highly unequal societies are assumed to be highly stressful environments, with a range of deleterious consequences. Why should this be, particularly? Well on the whole the book tends to posit stress as resulting from the competition for status, the resulting low self-esteem of high-status individuals, and the parallel insecurity experienced by high-status individuals. What

seems to be very important here, although the book does not alight upon it as a key feature of its analysis, is the kinds of stress produced in a highly competitive social situation characterised by weak social attachments both within and across different social strata. I think this is important to draw out, because *The Spirit Level* does not actually claim to offer any evidence of what the effects of inequality might be in social context characterised by, for example, rigid caste distinctions, where the rate of social mobility and the rate of individual competition is much lower than in the advanced liberal capitalist societies which make up the sample examined in *The Spirit Level*. My point here is not to suggest that rigid caste distinctions might be a good thing, but to point out the importance of a highly competitive, individualistic culture in producing the effects which the book attributes to inequality alone. Indeed, my contention would be that some of these arguments become more convincing if we attribute the negative effects in question not simply to inequality per se, but to the effects of that competitive individualism which is endemic to the culture of liberal capitalism. Now this is not to say that anything in the book is wrong, and its authors could easily retort that the best way to reduce the tendency to competitive individualism in a given society is to reduce levels of relative inequality (which I would agree with); but it is not quite clear from the evidence that a society which was highly unequal but not very competitive (which might well be a description of many pre-modern societies), would suffer from the same sets of problems. So at some points in the argument, I would want to complexify it by suggesting that it is not only inequality as such, but inequality combined with, exacerbating and intensifying a culture of competitive individualism which is ultimately typical of liberal capitalism, and which the heroes of liberal capitalist thought (from Thomas Hobbes to Tony Blair) have often assumed to be either desirable or an inevitable expression of human nature, which is the problem.

Following this line of thought, it seems to me that *The Spirit Level* often uses the term 'equality' to name something for which, properly speaking, 'equality' would only be a metonym. That is to say,

clearly measurable equality of income could in fact only be one aspect of the complex character of the imagined good society which the book tries to evoke. The term 'equality' appears here as a metonym for something else which it struggles to name and to measure, which would be this: a certain set of conditions under which the creative capacities of human sociality can express themselves fully. Many of the social evils which the book links to inequality- obesity, drug abuse, depression, violence - seem to be responses to a lack of opportunities to engage in particular kinds of activities which involve self-expression and self-development in meaningful collaboration with others.

In particular, it seems to me that one of the subtexts of the book is a story of populations relentless self-medicating, using TV or drugs or junk food or prescription anti-depressants or alcohol, to compensate for the fact that certain quite ordinary kinds of joy are closed to them, and that in all of these cases this joy which is denied has something to do with the opportunity and capacity to collaborate and to create: to cook a meal, to play sports, to share time with friends, to engage with forms of culture which require some level of educated participation. As such, the book seems to me to raise the question of how we conceptualise not just equality, but the importance of various kinds of communal and collective life and the opportunities for creativity that they afford, because all of its findings could be interpreted - and some of them demand to be interpreted - in terms of an understanding of the value not just of equality as such, but of a certain experience of collectivity, of collectivity as a truth of the human condition which is characterised both by a certain reciprocity and by certain scope for collective expression which is necessary to the realisation of creative potential.

Now we come here to the way in which the book to some extent reiterates a very old and central claim of much radical thought: the belief that the maximum capacity for acting freely in the world

which can be available to people can only be achieved in collaboration with others. This is a proposition which is often presented in either quite an abstract or quite a utopian form, as when Marx & Engels, in the Communist Manifesto, call for ‘an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.’ But it is easy enough to demonstrate the logic of this position. Almost every human capacity, which is also to say every real positive freedom, is dependent upon some form of collaboration with others. Despite the great myths of liberal individualism, as individuals we have no power at all, and so no freedom to do anything much apart from curl up in a corner and starve to death. What can any person actually do in the world without the assistance of others, and why would they want to do anything at all without others to do it for or with?

Now, it follows logically from this observation that the maximisation of such capacities must be dependent upon a certain equalisation of access to sources of power, to resources and opportunities, because a radical diminution of anyone else’s capacities ultimately diminishes their capacity to collaborate with me; be it directly, or indirectly through the medium of all of the vast institutions and systems of production, exchange, communication and transformation which constitute global society. This is not just abstract but a very concrete reality. For example, we in the West are often told today that our futures lie in the ‘creative industries’, but as long as the workers in China who make our shoes are always too poor to buy the computer games which we design or the books we write, then our chances of finding a mass global market for our ideas are severely curtailed.

At the same time, however, it follows that this reciprocal maximisation of capacities cannot occur if equality simply means uniformity. Only a diversity of experiments and innovations can enable any group on any scale to maximise its creative potential, and the authors of *The Spirit Level* are ultimately explicit that they do not regard economic equality as necessarily equivalent to social and

cultural uniformity, that in fact they even seem to suggest at one point that equality of incomes might be a precondition for the possible emergence and full expression of other kinds of diversity.

If we were to take the implications of this observation even further, then we might conclude that what the book calls 'equality', and what equality of income might be taken as just one measurable sign of, has to be understood as in some sense an expression of the multiplicity which is inherent in the social. To put this another way, the book suggests that purely economic equality is a precondition for the expression of multiplicity in the non-economic spheres. Now, for me this is a very important point, because it is crucial to understand that sociality as such, the very nature of that being-together which constitutes all groups, is always a condition of multiplicity. This might sound very obvious, until we reflect on how far certain very well established ways of thinking about the nature of individuality and sociality reject it. Both nationalist traditions and the liberal tradition tend to assume that collectivity means uniformity. To nationalist and ethnocentric traditions, this is a good thing, allowing the common identity of a people to express itself in a shared culture. To the liberal tradition it is a bad thing, and can only be overcome by freeing the individual from the ties that bind her to tradition, locality and custom. However, from the point of view that I am putting forward here, and which I think is necessarily implied by some of the findings of *The Spirit Level*, the assumption which these traditions share is quite mistaken. Just as every so-called 'individual' is in fact a complex, multifarious and multiple set of desires, memories, interactions and identifications, every collective is also a highly complex multiplicity. While many institutions and customs may work by stabilising that multiplicity into an apparent uniformity, I would argue that they can only ever do so at the expense of a certain dynamic creativity, the potential for which is inherent in the productive multiplicity of every group. What *The Spirit Level* ultimately gestures towards, I think, is the possibility of renewing forms of politics which seek to actualise this democratic potential.

This question of the relationship between equality and multiplicity touches upon one of the main problems which is often invoked with reference to any egalitarian politics. The idea that equality equates with uniformity, that egalitarianism must lead to homogeneity, is a very persistent one in modern capitalist culture. This is understandable for a number of reasons. On the one hand, capitalism is obliged to tell this story because it is the key story with which it justifies its own tendency to generate massive inequalities: these inequalities, we are told, are the price worth paying for the extraordinary variety of comforts and commodities which only this economic system can generate. On the other hand, there is clearly some good evidence for the argument that there is a direct link between cultural homogeneity and social equality. The golden age of social equality in the highly-developed world was clearly the era of post war social democracy - the 'the glorious thirty (years)' as the French call it. This was certainly one of very few epochs in British history when the gap between rich and poor shrank considerably, and this change is often rightly attributed to the deliberate pursuance of social democratic objectives by successive governments during this time. But the pursuit of these objectives was itself greatly facilitated by the general conditions of the time, and the emergence of a society which, being based on mass production and - for the first time in history - mass consumption, tended to generate a relatively homogenous and conformist culture. This was also the epoch when the greatest, and most tragic, of the great experiments in 20th century egalitarianism - Soviet and Chinese communism - certainly seemed to lend some weight to the thesis that real social equality could only come at the price of a cultural and ideological uniformity which could only be imposed by the most murderous totalitarianism.

Even when we look at the key examples of egalitarian societies adduced by *The Spirit Level*, we have to acknowledge that, for all of their other differences, Japan and Sweden are notable among modern wealthy democracies for their relative cultural homogeneity. This is not to say that cultural

homogeneity necessarily leads to income equality, by any means, but there is strong evidence that it is more difficult to pursue a policy which promotes such inequality in a situation of cultural diversity. This has been particularly striking in the British case, where it seems quite clear that the historic legitimacy of post-war social democracy was fatally undermined in the 1970s by growing anxieties about the emergence of a multicultural society amongst the white working class, and where the recent general election made quite clear that fears over the social implications of mass immigration remain the single greatest obstacle to the popularisation of a progressive political agenda.

However, where some leading figures in the British Labour Party are right now arguing that, in effect, the only way to respond to this problem is to take up the language, attitudes and policies of the Right with regard to immigrants and their families, I think that the logic of the situation should lead us in a quite different direction. In fact, it should lead us to recognise the need for a vigorous and radical cosmopolitanism, as a key feature of any egalitarian politics today. An egalitarian cosmopolitanism, we should be clear, would be quite different from that liberal cosmopolitanism which was a key feature of 'Third Way' thinking in the 1990s. Liberal cosmopolitanism is happy to promote mobility for individuals, and to allow goods, ideas and labour to flow freely around the globe, as long as all of them contribute ultimately to the accumulation of profit. What it is less happy to embrace or face up to are the changing needs and compositions of the communities which are brought together, torn apart, and re-configured by this process. Following both Derrida and Hardt & Negri, we could say that the only ethical and acceptable attitude to the issue of migration is to say that everyone should have the right to travel anywhere, and that every community has an unlimited and illimitable duty of hospitality towards whoever may come to join it. In concrete political terms, and in the terms established by *The Spirit Level*, this would have to mean that it was a duty of governments to ensure that all of the needs of both existing and new members of our

constantly-evolving communities were met, whatever the circumstances by which those communities came into their current states. But this should not be seen, as it invariably is by the proponents of standard liberal economics - of a question of 'costs' and 'burdens' being imposed upon 'taxpayers'; it should rather be seen as a process by which communities themselves embrace the conditions of possibility for their own creative renewal, and are enabled to do so by the institutions which should serve them.

This is an argument which may sound very utopian in the context of present-day Western Europe, riddled as it is with anxieties about the destabilising effects of immigration from the East and from the South. But I think it can derive strong support from the findings of *The Spirit Level*, especially in the light of my assertion that the book illustrates the extent to which the capacities of all members of a community are mutually-dependent. I want now to explore this idea a little further. So let's stop for a moment reiterate, yet again, the single most radical and dramatic finding of *The Spirit Level*: that equality is good for everyone. This is critical point. Most liberal thinkers would quite happily acknowledge that from certain points of view, social equality is beneficial to the community, understood as a functioning collective unit. What they would generally object to, however, is the supposed restrictions on the freedom and consequent well-being of the individuals making up that community which is the cost of any deliberate attempt to equalise incomes. The book's objection to this position is robust, demonstrating that in fact the well-being of each individual is affected by the level of income inequality characterising their community. But in fact, I think that the implications of this observation are far more radical than this, because they should tend to problematise the very idea of 'the individual' as such.

John Donne's assertion that 'no man in an island' may sound at first like a rather sentimental statement of the obvious, but if we follow through the logic of this thought, and of the findings of

The Spirit Level, then we soon get to the point where it is not quite clear what we mean by ‘the individual’ at all. If almost every aspect of my being is conditioned and constituted by my relationships with others, to the point where my capacity to act in the world is dependent upon that of others, then what is left of the idea of the individual as the fundamental unit of experience, which is so central to modern political thought, culture, and common sense? Just think of the assumptions which are built into our ordinary ways of talking about our experience of the world and ways of intervening it: they all tend to assume that our experience is essentially private before it can be made public, that we have some secret inner life which is the most precious and important thing about us, that our feelings are possessions to which we have some inalienable right, that creativity is all about the expression of some unique inner essence which we all have, and which artists are particularly good at expressing. All of this is demonstrable nonsense, but we hardly have any other way of talking about ourselves and our relation to the world, it often seems. It is for this reason that I would say that the challenge which *The Spirit Level* opens up for us is that of finding ways to think, to feel, and to exercise a freedom which is not merely a property of individuals (or of some unitary collective).

In fact, of course, the idea that there is something wrong with the idea of the individual, and that we need other ways of talking about experience, is a central idea in a long tradition of radical thought which is as old as the modern ideal of the individual itself. From Spinoza, through to Marx and Nietzsche, and more recently to the work of thinkers such as Deleuze, Nancy, or Negri, or the great British writer Raymond Williams, we have a long tradition of criticisms of this way of thinking and attempts to formulate alternatives, all of which I think offer some useful concepts with which to elaborate the findings of *The Spirit Level*, and which in many ways can be argued to have assumed its findings, which are exactly what they would have anticipated.

Spinoza, for example, writing way back in the seventeenth century (a couple of generations after John Donne) in his critical response to Descartes's classic formulation of the rational, private modern self, argues that the mind and the body are inseparable, and that the most basic elements of human experience - joy and pain - must be understood in terms of an increase or a decrease in the body's capacity to act in the world (which is also to say, in Spinoza's terms, an increase or decrease in the perfection of the mind). The most basic good for Spinoza is joy, which he understands as an experience of an increase in the body's capacities. Spinoza - who also advocated an ideal of democracy as the complete and completely shared sovereignty of the community (which Hardt & Negri call 'the rule of everyone by everyone') would have absolutely predicted that in a society characterised by great inequality, many would suffer from forms of pain which would register themselves as physical symptoms.

In the nineteenth century Marx, of course, was the greatest advocate of a society in which (to quote again) 'the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all', and from his earliest writings Marx was explicit that the capitalist division of labour which is at the root of social inequalities also tended to trap the human subject, in particular, over-specialised social roles. This is a very important point which is often overlooked in reconstructions of Marx's political philosophy: Marx ultimately hoped that communism would liberate the human subject from being trapped in a particular social role defined by work. In this we can say that the modern individual, defined by her job or by the commodities she buys, is problematic for the radical tradition precisely she is too limited and constrained in her capacities. So it is not that that the radical tradition is opposed to the idea of individual freedom: it is rather that the individual is not nearly free enough. And on this point, as surprising as it may be to some, Marx would even concur with Nietzsche. Although he is often misrepresented as a philosopher of individual freedom, Nietzsche at his most lucid is entirely contemptuous of the very idea of the individual, arguing instead that multiplicity - not unicity or

individuality - is the basic fact of existence. Finally let me add to this list of nineteenth-century thinkers the great Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin, whose book *Mutual Aid* also prefigured many of the findings and assumptions of *The Spirit Level*, on a scale not limited to merely human experience, by showing that many species of animal, including humans, had only survived and prospered by evolving their instincts and capacities for cooperation and reciprocal care.

From the twentieth century, we could cite any number of philosophers, theorists, sociologists, psychologists, etc. Perhaps one of the most interesting, and least well-known, is Gilbert Simondon, a French philosopher who was a great influence on Deleuze. Simondon's preoccupation in his major work is with the very idea of individuation as such: that is to say, the processes by which individuality comes about, in the physical world, in biology and amongst human individuals and groups. To put things very simply, for Simondon there is no individual thing or person or group as such - no completely fixed and finished thing or group or person - but only various processes of individuation, which always carry with them traces of the pre-individual field into from which they emerge and into which they intervene. For Simondon, the group and the individual are always in process, and while the individual does possess a certain autonomy, it is essential to recognise the extent to which the pre-individual - the genetic, social, cultural, inheritance of each individual - shapes both their very individuality and the milieu in which they exist and outside of which they could not function. Simondon posits, to give just one example of some of the implications of his thought, that spirituality is always an expression of a certain consciousness of this pre-individual reality.

Deleuze, in his own work and in his work with Guattari, was to develop these observations into a view of all reality as constituted by complex processes which undermined any simple notion of individuality at all. Crucially, for Deleuze and Guattari, the liberal individual self is not simply a

myth, but is one way of experiencing the world which is actively and systematically encouraged by capitalism. From this perspective, it is capitalism itself which encourages and promotes a mode of experience which places the hungry, greedy, lonely individual at its centre. For Deleuze & Guattari, desire - which they see as the great productive force which makes everything happen in the world - is by nature collective, but capitalism works precisely to turn every human body into an isolated unit which can only experience desire as lack, as need, as craving, rather than as a reservoir of creative potential. From this perspective, yet again, the modern western conception of individuality is not liberating; it is a prison.

Finally, I should mention Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, whose work is a synthesis of, among other thinkers, Marx, Spinoza and Deleuze. For Hardt & Negri, contemporary capitalism functions by organising huge numbers of people into a vast creative and productive networks, and feeding off their labour and their collective intelligence in a thoroughly parasitical fashion. The key point which we can draw from their view here is that the extraordinary dynamism and creativity which constitutes global culture and industry today could all proceed perfectly well without the relentless drive to accumulate profits, which is what generates the massive social inequalities which *The Spirit Level* rightly decries.

Once again we come to a point which I made earlier about *The Spirit Level*. That is that at times the book seems to present issues of equality and inequality as if they can be detached from their socio-economic context, despite the fact that all of its examples of highly unequal societies are ones which have been clearly shaped by aggressive forms of neoliberal capitalism (this is as true of Portugal as it is of the U.S. or the U.K). At times, then, I find myself wondering again whether ‘inequality’ (like ‘equality’) is not sometimes used in the book, if only by accident, as a metonym for something else: for the injustice, individualism and enforced competition which characterise

neoliberal society. Although the book is quite frank about acknowledging the role that corporate power plays in cementing and maintaining income inequalities, it is decidedly coy about naming neoliberalism as such, with its consistent belief in the rigorous imposition of a competitive way of life on everybody, everywhere, in whatever context. The authors of *The Spirit Level* actually claim that for the architects of Thatcherite and Blairite neoliberalism in the UK, ‘there was no government intention to lower social cohesion’. Well, I think there are former mining towns in many parts of Britain in which the inaccuracy of that statement is still clearly visible: the Thatcher government in 1984 most definitely set out to destroy the social cohesion of those communities which were united in opposition to its programme, and it succeeded. Or just consider these lines from a 2005 speech by Tony Blair:

“The character of this changing world is indifferent to tradition.

Unforgiving of frailty.

No respecter of past reputations.

It has no custom and practice.

It is replete with opportunities, but they only go to those swift to adapt, slow to complain, open, willing and able to change.

Unless we "own" the future, unless our values are matched by a completely honest understanding of the reality now upon us and the next about to hit us, we will fail.

And then the values we believe in, become idle sentiments ripe for disillusion and disappointment.

In the era of rapid globalisation, there is no mystery about what works: an open, liberal economy, prepared constantly to change to remain competitive.

The new world rewards those who are open to it.”

That sounds to me like a positive declaration of war against the very idea of social cohesion.

So if I have any quibble with *The Spirit Level*, it is that it once or twice shies away from dealing with the specificity of this particular issue: the fact that the neoliberal ideology which has been hegemonic throughout the capitalist world for decades now, quite explicitly demands and tries to enforce a kind of competitive individualism which greatly exacerbates the various problems that it identifies with social inequality. At the same time, I think that this observation should draw our attention to the fact that while it may shun all measures to promote income equality, neoliberalism does itself believe in a certain kind of equality. Neoliberalism is predicated on the assumption that there is only one desirable form of social relationship, and that is the commercial relationship in the open market. This is a very important point, and I think that it is crucial to understanding the reasons for the genesis of many of the social and health problems which *The Spirit Level* identifies. Neoliberalism simply does not want us to experience any kind of agency, any kind of power, any kind of freedom, any kind of capacity for collaboration or creativity, outside of commercial relationships. It wants us to buy happiness, and to earn the money to do so by selling our labour as cheaply as possible in a flexible market. It wants teachers and doctors and nurses to treat their patients as customers and it wants citizens of a polity to behave like customers of a shop. In forcing all of our possible relationships and sources of pleasure or power into this one constrictive model, it is surely neoliberalism in particular which generates so much anxiety, depression, obesity, anger and impotence. The crucial point to grasp here is the logical connection between a competitive way of life, an unequal society, and the imposition of a persistent normativity. While neoliberal culture *claims* to liberate us from tradition, offering us the chance to invent ourselves anew, it does so only to present us with an incredibly narrow scale against which to measure our success in taking advantage of that opportunity. We are all free, as long as all we want to be are entrepreneurs, TV celebrities, or supermodels. And this brings us back again to a crucial point: the reason we must reject neoliberalism's imposition of this mode, and demand a kind of equality that it cannot permit - just as *The Spirit Level* insists - is because that is the only way to release the creative energies of our

communities and to enable a rich diversity of relationships, of institutions and of experiments in living to blossom. But I would suggest that ultimately our aim here would be something which cannot be contained within any simple concept of 'equality': it would instead be a radical plurality of modes of being which would exceed any such horizon.

It's worth noting two final points before I wind up here. One is that defenders of neoliberal politics, like Blair, can be genuinely committed to *certain kinds* of egalitarian social engineering, insofar as they genuinely believe that individuals must be enabled and allowed to compete on a fair footing in great race of life. This is why they tend to pursue policies which a genuinely 'meritocratic' dimension, trying to create 'equality of opportunity', especially for the young. But as the British thinker Michael Young pointed out when he first coined the term 'meritocracy' for just this purpose, meritocracy is a dead end, which only leads to a competitive, atomised and hierarchical society. Equality of opportunity is not enough: equality of outcomes is the only truly social democratic goal, which is why *The Spirit Level's* hard-headed advocacy for simple incomes equality by any means necessary is so important.

The other point is that in fact, it is not just neoliberalism alone which tends to produce this flattening-out of all social relationships into commercial transaction. In fact, as Marx showed long ago, this is inherent in the logic of capitalism itself. Integral to all capitalism is the tendency to transform goods and services into commodities, to make them into things that can be bought and sold. For that to happen, these things must all become equivalent to each other through the abstract mechanism of the cash price. To put this another way - everything must become something that we can buy or sell. While the objects in question - from shoes to homes to meals to holidays to psychotherapy sessions to opportunities to meet potential partners to opportunities for education to stock options to credit instruments - may all be very different from each other, capitalism works to

make the nature of our relationship to them exactly the same: they all become something that we buy or sell.

So - who could have guessed it? - it is Capitalism itself, after all, that is the real problem. And where does that leave us? Must we, once again, declare that only a total revolutionary overthrow of 'the capitalist system' can possibly achieve any of our social and political objectives?

Not necessarily. Because when talking about 'capitalism, I think that it is always very important to be clear exactly what we are talking about. When I use this term, I am not talking about the totality of social relationships which organise the world today. I am not even talking about all forms of commodity exchange and commerce. Rather I am talking, in specific terms, about the relentless pursuit of profit, of capital accumulation as such. It is the production of and circulation of commodities *with the sole goal of accumulating more capital*, which is the practice of capitalism properly understood, and it is very far from being the only thing that goes on in the world, even in the world of commerce.

In fact, this is precisely what the authors of *The Spirit Level* recognise in their final considerations of what political conclusions we should draw from their study. They suggest that all kinds of institutions, and not just state institutions - most notably various kinds of co-operatives, worker-owned companies, mutual trusts, etc. - could take on the roles which corporations play in the contemporary economy. I am in perfect agreement with this, and it chimes perfectly with the analysis of thinkers such as Hardt & Negri. If we accept that the elites who cream off all the profits of capitalism - most notably, of course, the financial speculators who plunged the world into chaos just a couple of years ago - are basically parasitic upon the creative co-operation of the millions of workers, thinkers, designers, creators of the world who are *not* capitalists, then it follows that it

must be possible, and quite easy, to create institutions which can allow this creative energy to develop without channelling most of its output to fuel the luxury lifestyles of a few bankers. This collaborative creativity is something that we all engage in every day: at our workplaces, in our schools, with our friends and families, on *facebook* and *myspace*. It is what makes all of our lives worth living and what generates all of the material goods upon which human life depends, and yet its inherent logic - which tends towards conviviality rather than competition, towards creativity rather than mere consumption, towards plurality rather than conformism - is the opposite of the logic of neoliberal capitalism. In this sense, we are all anti-capitalists already, and it is in our very creative conviviality which we see the potential for something more than what we have.

Just look at the music industry today. The digital revolution has made it possible for artists to produce, record and distribute music in a collaborative dialogue with each other and with their listeners, entirely bypassing the traditional structures of the industry. The creativity is still there, and the opportunity for artists to support themselves is still there. The music is still there and the audience is still there, and the communities which they generate for themselves are still there. But the industry as a capitalist enclave is in crisis, as the institutions whose only function was to turn that collective creativity into a site of profit-making (the record labels, the commercial music media, etc.) are crumbling. Good riddance to them! In this I think we might see a real sign of hope for the future, which bears out the accuracy of Hardt & Negri's analysis, and shows us the outline of what a radical economy might look like in century to come. In showing just how deeply interrelated and interdependent we all are - and in showing some of the ways in which this ought to be a source of joy rather than fear - *The Spirit Level* provides us with a powerful impetus to pursue that future with all the energy we can.