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European Languages

زبانهای اروپائی

AUGUST 21, 2018

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22.08.2018

How Capitalism Erodes Mental Health

By examining our evolutionary past and history as egalitarian, cooperative, and supportive hunter-gatherers in the primitive era, we dispel the false idea that human beings, by their very nature, are competitive, aggressive, and individualistic. Human beings have all the psychological and social skills to live differently and inequality is not inevitable.

This is the view of epidemiology professors Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, authors of several books and other studies on the effects of social inequalities in the United States. In their new book entitled *The Inner Level*, they rely on a solid set of arguments to demonstrate that “inequality devours the heart of the intimate world and the social anxieties of the vast majority of the population.

In *The Inner Level*, the evidence shows the impact of inequality on mental well-being, but is only part of the new situation. Professors Pickett and Wilkinson question two key myths that some use to justify the perpetuation and tolerance of social inequality.

Let’s address the misconception that current levels of inequality reflect the existence of a justifiable meritocracy in which those of greater natural capacity rise and those who are incapable languish at heart. We understand that, on the contrary, it is inequalities in outcomes that limit equal opportunities; differences in achievements and achievements themselves are driven by inequality, not its consequences.

Pickett and Wilkinson argue that inequality is a major obstacle to the creation of sustainable economies that serve to optimize the health and well-being of both people and the planet. They say this is because consumerism is about self-improvement and competition for status is intensifying with inequality.

A recent survey by the Mental Health Foundation found that at one point last year, 74% of adults in the UK were so stressed that they felt overwhelmed and unable to cope. One-third were suicidal and 16% had self-injured at some point in their lives. These figures were much higher among young people.

In the United States, death rates are rising steadily, especially for middle-aged white men and women, due to “desperation,” which includes deaths from drug and alcohol addiction as well as suicides and many car accidents. An epidemic of distress seems to be affecting some of the richest nations in the world.

Studies in 28 European countries show that inequality increases status anxiety in all income groups, from the poorest 10% to the richest segment.

Another study on how people experience low social status, in both rich and poor countries, found that, despite huge differences in their material standards of living, people living in relative poverty around the world had a strong sense of shame and self-hatred. Being at the bottom of the social scale feels the same if you live in a rich country as if you live in a very poor country.

While the vast majority of the population appears to be affected by inequality, we respond in different ways to the concerns raised by the way others view and judge us. One such way is to feel overwhelmed and oppressed by distrust, feelings of inferiority and depressed self-esteem, and that leads to high levels of depression and anxiety in more unequal societies, say the authors of *The Inner Level*.

Psychotic symptoms, such as delusions of grandeur, are more common in more unequal countries, as is schizophrenia. Narcissism increases as income inequality increases, as measured by the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) from successive samples of the American population.

Another widespread response to the need to overcome what psychologists call the “social evaluative threat” is through drugs, alcohol or gambling, through comfort food, or through the use of status and conspicuous consumption. Those who live in more unequal places are more likely to spend money on expensive cars and to buy status goods; and are more likely to have high levels of personal debt because they try to prove that they are not “second-class people” by owning “first-class things.”

A CubaNews translation by Walter Lippmann.