



AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

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All That Is Solid, by Danny Dorling

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Our use of housing as an asset to be traded is a collective failure that is preserving inequality, finds Tim Hall

The majority of *Times Higher Education* readers are members of a global elite of the richest 1 per cent on the planet. However, I doubt that many of you spend your weekends lighting Cuban cigars with £50 banknotes. Danny Dorling, increasingly staking a claim as the UK's pre-eminent public geographer, explores why it is possible for us to be absolutely wealthy while feeling relatively deprived. The causes, outlined in his fiercely argued *All that is Solid*, are the dysfunctional hegemony that housing has assumed in the economic and social life of the nation, the inequalities it sustains and feeds off, and the damaging legacies of Thatcherism that laid its foundations of sand.

UK readers will be very familiar with the notion that the country is in the midst of a housing crisis. Along with the weather, it is really all we talk about. The narrative, typically, is one of housing shortage and spiralling prices. The stock answer is that we should simply build more, but this is one of the many myths Dorling demolishes. In doing so, his tone is anything but academic. His argument is polemic and wide-ranging, but, like all of his work, *All that is Solid* is thick with statistical and other evidence. If the UK's housing market even approached some sort of efficiency, it would not be in crisis. The country has more than enough stock for everyone to enjoy a comfortable bed and a roof over their head. In 2011 in England and Wales, Dorling notes, 66 million bedrooms serviced a population of 55 million. Even in central London there are more bedrooms than people, many of them empty each night. At the same time, across the city hundreds are illegally housed in rented garden sheds.

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The problem lies in the inequitable and inefficient ownership and use of Britain's housing stock. Fundamentally, the meaning of housing has changed in the UK. It is no longer seen – by the government, institutions, property capitalists and individual owners – as a right, but primarily as an asset to be traded. The outcome is potential misery for the young, the old, the poor, the reasonably well-off and most people in between.

We see this as inevitable, and Dorling is rightly critical of our collective failure to imagine alternatives. But, as he demonstrates with reference to the radically different housing landscapes of continental Europe, it does not have to be this way. Rent controls, land tax and greater criminalisation of landlords who act illegally, along with redistributive fiscal and regional policies are measures that all exist elsewhere and work to create fairer housing and fairer societies. The relationship between the two is entirely symbiotic. Policy, Dorling argues, should start by trying to distribute people better within the existing stock and to see housing as a collective rather than individual asset.

Depressingly, successive governments in the UK, shackled to the neoliberal impulse, have shown no political will to pursue such alternatives. Dorling sees the current coalition government as particularly culpable for its promotion of divisive and destructive policies. He is vitriolic in his criticism of the recently introduced “bedroom tax”, for example, which penalises social housing tenants with unused bedrooms. He considers it a “vile” levy that targets the wrong people in the wrong way and ignores the realities of social housing itself and the serious structural flaws that have come increasingly to characterise the wider housing market since the 1980s.

I doubt that Dorling has much time for the casino or the racetrack, but he knows their language and deploys it liberally. He talks of unbalanced markets and ill-informed buyers being routinely fleeced by knowledgeable housing “insiders”. This is painfully close to the racecourse lexicon of “mug punters” and “clever money”. Implicit in this is a recognition that the UK housing market has turned us all into professional gamblers.

I recently moved to a city in the South East of England whose attractions are somewhat undercut by a ludicrously unaffordable housing market sustained by little more than hot air and hope. Having sold my previous house, I am currently renting and contemplating buying in the area. To do so, though, requires me to throw hundreds of thousands of pounds of money I don’t have into what is in effect a volatile futures market. This is a market that promises dire consequences for those who get their fingers burned and who buy the wrong house, at the wrong price or in the wrong place. Do this and your future will bring, at best, years of negative equity and painful conversations with the kids about why they won’t be going to Spain this summer, and at worst payday loans, bankruptcy, insecure housing or homelessness.

Dorling is one of very few geographers actively shaping public discourse in the UK. He has previously made high-profile interventions on issues including global and national population change, health, inequality, poverty, politics and the relationships between them. His analysis and presentation have long been characterised by a clarity that is all too often absent from academic, or academically informed, writing. Back in the early 1990s when he first began to publish, there was a feeling in geography that he was somewhat out of step with the approaches fashionable at the time. Back then, too many of us spent too long crafting ever more elaborate, but ultimately disengaged, cultural theory, little of which endures. Geography’s failure to contribute to the big debates in ways that it could and should is a continuing concern for the discipline. Dorling’s belief in evidence, engagement and impact is helping to address that public lacuna.

In tone and thesis, this book is not dissimilar to Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett’s 2009 study *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*. No doubt the reaction to *All that is Solid* will be just as polarised, embraced on the Left while the details are nit-picked apart by critics on the Right, blind to its fundamental accuracy. *All that is Solid* is a powerful and important book for these times, albeit not one without flaws. It has an angry urgency that at times enhances the power of its arguments but elsewhere defuses them. It would have benefited from tighter, closer editing. There is a feeling of repetition in places, and a shorter, more focused book might have landed its blows more cleanly. Then again, perhaps it is appropriate that it sits, brick-like, in the hand.

Throughout, Dorling returns to the question of what will happen next. Is the current bubble, in London and the South East at least, about to burst? He sensibly hedges his bets, noting that the market's systemic volatility is greater than we tend to recall, making confident predictions difficult. That this bubble has largely been inflated by policies encouraging the inequitable distribution of the housing stock, historically low interest rates and hype from the property profession, is clear from Dorling's analysis. The feeling from reading *All that is Solid* is that it will not take very much for it to all come crashing down. That might mean that I can afford to buy a house in my hometown, but the price will be deeper impoverishment for millions. This is a form of national lunacy: the product of 30 years of growing inequality and the policies that have sustained it.

The author



"I like to make sandcastles on beaches," says Danny Dorling, Halford Mackinder professor of geography at the University of Oxford. "To make a good sandcastle you need a warm beach, high-quality sand (it varies with geology) and a stream.

"The stream is the hardest part to get right. It is no good if it's a trickle and not much fun if it is a sewage outlet. My dad is the Pied Piper of beach sandcastle-making and tends to collect other families on the beach with his amazing waterworks and castles. On a good beach, given enough time, you can end up with more than two dozen (of other peoples') children helping make a work of art out of just sand and water. My children think this is normal, and if they continue the tradition, then for them and their children it will be."

Dorling was born in Oxford and raised "in the Cowley and then Risinghurst areas of that city, to the south and east of the centre (the north and west are the wealthier quarters). I do think where you grow up has a huge effect on who you later become."

He cites an observation he made in a 2001 paper entitled "[How much does place matter?](#)".

"For me, given my past and my places, I am unlikely ever to be impressed by an A-level grade on its own (or even a string of As), or to believe it is much more than a signpost to your street, school and socialisation. I am unlikely to think that if you do not have a job it is because of your personal failing rather than the choices of the employers in your area, and what in turn affects them and your luck and status when you enter that market. I am unlikely to be convinced that people in Britain do not know these things themselves."

Dorling continues: "When I say I'm not impressed by a string of As at A level, it's worth pointing out that I am not involved with university admission at all – other than that I like to study the changing geographical patterns to them."

"I am not a super-confident speaker. I was never taught to do public speaking, for instance, and my spelling and grammar can probably be described as awful. But I think I was lucky to go to a normal school where everyone who lived around me also went. Being crammed to pass exams well at a young age is overvalued and doesn't teach you much of great use for later in life."

Of his early years, Dorling recalls: "I was not a particularly studious child, but I had a very stimulating childhood. I was the slowest to learn to read in my class. I learned at age 8 in Wood Farm Primary in Oxford. I was a very slow developer and much later found out that I am dyslexic."

"Being slow was not too much of a problem for me, because I went to a normal school with a wide range of kids in it. I was not set or streamed by ability until around age 13, and developed mostly from age 16 onwards. My O levels were not that good, but at age 16 I was good enough not to be asked to take CSEs. A few years later these two exams were merged into the GCSE, so the distinction is only meaningful if you are both old enough to remember it and didn't go to a school where you did one, or the other, or none. It was only really when I got to do A levels, and no longer had to work on things I really was not very good at, that I began to stand out."

There were, he says, people who inspired him along the way. "I do remember particular teachers – in primary, middle and secondary schools, and also particularly keen young university lecturers who made a difference. I always think it is a bit unfair to pick them out, but they know who they are."

Of his time at Newcastle University, where he undertook both undergraduate and doctoral study, Dorling notes: "I was not that unusual an undergraduate, other than that I had the same girlfriend all the way from secondary school through to postgraduate studies."

"I was a much more unusual postgraduate student. I worked far too hard and finished my PhD within two years. My brother Ben was killed on the Oxford ring road in 1989 when he was coming back from school. He was hit by a speeding car. He was in his last year at school."

"This happened between when I finished my undergraduate degree and started my PhD, so I threw myself into my doctoral work because I was angry about Ben dying so young. Most other people of my age, at least those who now work in universities who I most mix with, can remember when the Berlin Wall came down and all the events before and shortly after that time. I can't remember any of that. I don't think I watched the news or saw TV much that year."

Before becoming an academic, Dorling worked in early years education. "The pay was £3 an hour, which was not bad for the 1980s, if you had no one else to support, which I didn't. My rent as a student in Newcastle upon Tyne was £9 a week in my second year and £13 a week in my third year in 1987 and 1988. And because so many people didn't have jobs, and also so few got to go on to university, I felt lucky."

His academic career has included posts at Newcastle, the universities of Bristol, Leeds and Sheffield, the University of Canterbury in New Zealand and a visiting professorship at Goldsmiths, University of London. He took up a chair at Oxford in September 2013.

That post brought him full circle, geographically; after leaving Oxford aged 18 for Newcastle, he returned aged 46. He shares a home in Oxford with his wife, Alison Dorling, "and three children, although I try not to say much more about them because they (kindly) have not yet said much about me in print! But they are lovely."

The best thing about the city, he says, "is the 20mph sign on the road outside my window. I worry much less about my kids and other children living in a place with 20mph speed limits on most streets. And some of the old buildings in Oxford are quite nice. But what is most vexing about Oxford is that it is the most expensive area of Britain to try to be housed in outside of London. It needs some more housing. Fortunately it is also very flat, so building a little more housing around the edge (off the floodplain) would not spoil many peoples' views."

In addition to recent high-profile monographs – among them *Population 10 Billion*, *Unequal Health: The Scandal of Our Times* and *The 32 Stops*, all published in 2013 – Dorling is increasingly engaging with, and his views are sought by, policymakers.

Is it worth the effort? "Yes. If you have the patience needed to make good sandcastle that are made only to get washed away by the next tide, then you can deal with policy and politics. Almost all policymakers and many politicians are very well-meaning, often very experienced, and can teach you something too."

Dorling adds: "Dealing with particularly cynical or supercilious academics can be much harder than working with the most hard-nosed of policymakers. There is something about basing an institution on the idea of cleverness that means that if academics are not careful, university life can become less about understanding and more about performing. But there are always new frustrations that come along and help you forget the old ones!"

Karen Shook

All that is Solid: The Great Housing Disaster

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