Author Accepted Manuscript of Dorling, D. (2024) A review of Spatial Inequalities and Wellbeing: A Multidisciplinary Approach, edited by Camilla Lenzi and Valeria Fedeli, *Economic Geography*, Vol. 100, Issue 5-6, pp.462-464, https://doi.org/10.1080/00130095.2024.2433852 (accepted 1 december 2024).

Review by Danny Dorling of:

Spatial Inequalities and Wellbeing:
A Multidisciplinary Approach

Edited by Camilla Lenzi and Valeria Fedeli Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2024

Spatial Inequalities and Wellbeing is a carefully brought together collection of nine chapters written by over twenty separate authors from the regional science/studies tradition. The book appears at an apposite time. Why are so many people in some places are less happy than others, especially within the United States of America? What was it, in short, that lead to the geographical patterns of voting that resulted in the election of President Trump for a second period of office? This book, published long before that election and containing material from work done in earlier years, does not answer that question directly, but it does provide some interesting clues. Furthermore, if such questions interest you, and you like three-way interactions in your regression analysis, then this is especially the book for you.

Lenzi and Fedeli's book is international in scope, although with examples taken mainly from Europe. Some of the assumptions made at the beginning of the text could be questioned. For example, those assumptions for why economic inequalities have increased, where it is suggested that: '…enhanced globalization and super-fast technological changed, both achieving peak levels in the last couple of decades, represent the best candidate

explanations…' (page 2). However, if this were the case then why were economic inequalities falling in most countries during the white heat of technology years of the 1960s? And why are economic inequalities today so high in some rich countries but so low in others? A century ago, income inequalities were high in all rich countries. But, such nit-picking aside, the book is carefully introduced and curated and nit-picking opportunities are rare. So, what does it suggest?

Chapter 1 suggests lower productivity growth is associated with 'higher stages of development economies' (page 24). In some way this book is traditional in its outlook. A century ago, when the USA and UK were last the most unequal and, in many ways, even more unhappy states than they are today, academics were complaining that politicians *"…repeat, like parrots, the word 'Productivity', because that is the word that rises first in their minds; … When they are touched by social compunction, they can think of nothing more original than the diminution of poverty, because poverty, being the opposite of the riches which they value most, seems to them the most terrible of human afflictions*."[i]

Chapter 2 very usefully discusses the ways in which apparently negative attributions are used to shape discourses over the potential for inward migration to improve the lives of those already living there: 'A feeling of being left behind can contribute to the undermining of democratic structures and the strengthening of undemocratic forces.' (page 38).

Chapter 3 speculates on why and whether people are happier in big cities or small towns. Again, it is worth thinking here of the United States of America and the geography of the presidential election of 2024. However, the data used in this chapter is from the European Social Survey of people in a very different continent. Nevertheless, the parallels are fascinating. Control for poor health and what appeared to be a detrimental effect of not having many local social connections is explained away. Or, take into account who has universities degrees and the anomie disadvantage of the large city is outweighed by greater life satisfaction being achieved despite not knowing one's neighbours as often (pages 74-75). Although a formal test of a three-way interaction suggests that: 'residence in metropolitan centres increased the wellbeing gap between the tertiary educated and [the] much larger non-tertiary population, thereby lowering the average wellbeing of those in the metropolitan centres' (page 79).

Chapter 4 presents a careful study that shows just how much lack of security of tenure, not having a safe home, makes people miserable in large Dutch cities. Given that this is the case in the Netherlands, with all the protection for privately renting tenants that there is there, just try to imagine how much greater the fear and harm to well-being private renting causes elsewhere.

Chapter 5 turns to all of Europe and finds that there is a goldilocks effect where urbanisation reduces discontent, but only until it reaches a certain threshold (page 128). To sum up the nuance of this book – through empirical

models and well-argued treatise – it is explained that: ‘The narrative of a bucolic paradise, opposed to miserable urban idle, goes against both almost all theories of agglomeration and the empirical evidence of subjective wellbeing. Similarly, the celebration of the city and urban life as the unique path to happiness overlooks the costs of agglomeration, and their unequal impact on the wellbeing of different categories of people.’ (page 132).

Chapter 6 continues the different strokes for different folks messaging. Looking at data for Italy it confirms that there are regional differences in how people react to the situation of themselves and others around them, what they can ignore and what they do not ignore and that it is the most severe of inequalities that most need to tackle: the severity of poverty matters most greatly and the reduction of the largest of disparities (page 154).

Chapter 7 looks to Egypt and away from the riches of wealthy countries or even the middle incomes ones. The authors talk of thinking of a city for children, a city that is accessible, sensitive, liveable (page 173). Thinking about children is a useful way to get people who don’t want to think about poverty, unfairness, and inequality to consider such things despite their instinct not to.[ii]

Chapter 8 considers politics, again in Europe; again the parallels with the USA are interesting; again there is a regression analysis; again the results are complex; again we are looking at happiness and behaviour and the circumstances people find themselves in. For example, radical leftists are something of a universal, not particularly placed-based so not a cosmopolitan elite (page 196).

Chapter 9 turns to France and an interview – very interesting and different to the rest of the book. Daniel Behar, Professeur Émérite of the Lab Urba in Paris explains how: 'The political priority appears to be in a way the need to respond to the feeling of abandonment and the need for recognition. Lost territories give way to forgotten territories' (page 222). It is so a refreshing end to quite an empirical piece of work with a discussion of this kind and the global parallels are uncanny.

Do I have any criticisms? No, not really, this is a much better book than the vast majority of similar collections. It has been put together more carefully and it has been edited and constrained in size well. I was tempted to say that it is not very multi-disciplinary; but that would be wrong. At times the detail of the appendices of the regression models can seem a little over the top – but that detail is the truth of such studies and what matters most. This is an excellent book – it does what it says on the cover – and it does it well.

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[i] R.H. Tawney (1920) The Acquisitive Society, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Ch I, para 5; see: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/33741/33741-h/33741-h.htm

[ii] D. Dorling (2024) Seven Children: Inequality and Britain's Next Generation, London: Verso.