

# Where the Grass is Greener: Living in an Unequal World

\_\_\_\_\_ Frank Stilwell

(A review of D.M. Smith, Where the Grass is Greener: Living in An Unequal World, Penguin, 1979, \$6.85).

The geography of inequality is a controversial area of study. The measurement of social indicators for different suburbs, regions and nations has been a major concern of sociologists, geographers, political scientists and some economists in recent years. The flurry of activity has been such as to comprise what has been called a "social indicators movement". As Smith has noted in a previous article, attitudes range from the cautious view of indicators as a means to "improve our knowledge of the social state of the nation" and "help to focus our attention on the problems which need to be tackled" to the more ambitious view of social indicators "as the outputs of some system which can be modelled and manipulated in order to achieve public policy objectives".<sup>1</sup>

The social indicators movement has not been without its critics. The most general argument is that this approach tends to imply that socio-economic problems have their origins in locational phenomena. Thus, the approach constitutes "spatial ideology". Two examples will suffice. One involves the much-quoted statement by Gough Whitlam in 1972 that "in modern Australia social inequality is fixed upon families by the place in which they are forced to live even more than by what they are able to earn". This view has been criticised because it effectively redefined inequality in terms of spatial considerations rather than in terms of class i.e. relationships to the means of production.<sup>2</sup> A second (and more trivial) example from the popular press involves the reportage of a survey of medical and social problems in Sydney suburbs: among other things, the survey revealed differences between localities in terms of average weight of the population. The heading of the article read "maybe its your suburb that ruined your figure".<sup>3</sup>

David Smith is well aware of the potential misuses of social indicators. He has recently co-edited a book which deals extensively with the issues.<sup>4</sup> In the book under review he also acknowledges the problems while nevertheless forging on with the description of spatial inequalities. The empirical material falls into three main sections: (a) inequality among nations (b) inequality between regions within nations and (c) inequality between neighbourhoods within cities. The first of these is used partly as a general vehicle for description and discussion of the problems of the poorer countries. This is perhaps the weakest section, skating over a complex set of issues which have been much more adequately treated in the literature on imperialism and underdevelopment. However, its inclusion produces an important "backdrop" to the subsequent treatment of regional and urban inequalities. In each of the latter two cases four types of inequality are analysed: those associated with United States regions and cities, United Kingdom regions and cities, Peru and Lima, and cities and regions in the socialist-based economies of USSR and Eastern Europe.

These chapters contain little reference to Australian cities and regions, though there is plenty of other evidence on territorial inequality which can be used to make comparisons. Taking 1976 Census data, for example, we can get a general picture of Australian regional inequalities in terms of median personal incomes: the variation between the individual states is relatively minor but the metropolitan/non-metropolitan variation within most states is quite significant e.g. average incomes in non-metropolitan NSW were 72% of those in Sydney, and non-metropolitan Victoria 66% of those in Melbourne. At the intra-urban level, striking variations are revealed (even without allowing for the probable understatement of high incomes in the Census returns) e.g. for Sydney over 40% of households in the Kuring-gai municipality on the upper north shore recorded incomes over \$18,000 p.a., compared with only 8% in Marrickville and the City of Sydney. Variations in terms of other social indicators are also well documented in other sources.<sup>5</sup> Smith's book is useful, among other things, in providing the information with which one can compare this situation with that in other countries.

One important aspect of territorial inequalities concerns access to social services. Smith acknowledges this by the inclusion of a chapter on the distribution of health services, which is used as a case study of spatial inequalities. This section of the book contains a few pages on the situation in Sydney, drawing on previous work by Lawrence, Freestone and others. Indeed, this is a rather interesting section in that it illustrates the general point that spatial inequalities reflect inequalities which have non-spatial origins. The distribution of hospitals in Sydney is highly centralised. The Aboriginal population in Sydney is also centralised in the Redfern area. However, the Aboriginal people have chronic health problems: of the 6,000 Aboriginal children under five in Redfern, 64% are anaemic, 60% have parasitic bowel infection, 32% have at least one perforated eardrum, and so on. As Smith notes, "these conditions are more typical of an underdeveloped African nation than of well-to-do Australia". The problem is not primarily the result of difficulty of access to health services: the situation exists amid the densest concentration of health care facilities in the state. Rather, the problem is one of deprivation and discrimination involving a particular ethnic group.

Smith's own perspective is humanitarian: he is concerned with the injustice of the situation whereby a person's economic and social life-chances are systematically influenced by accidents of birthplace, and so on. The concern with social justice in a spatial context is reminiscent of some early work by David Harvey before he reformulated the issues in a Marxist framework.<sup>6</sup> The outcome of Smith's research work is a very useful collection of empirical material but one which needs further consideration of the roots of inequality in the relations of production. To answer "Who gets what and where?" ultimately requires one to ask "who owns what?" and "who exploits whom?" Though Smith does not make this step from description of distributional phenomena to analysis of class relationships, he would presumably recognise the need for it. In his own words, "the discussion of spatial inequality and spatial contributions to the process of unequal distribution thus necessarily develops into a broader discussion of political economy".

FOOTNOTES

D. Smith, Geography and Social Indicators, South African Geographical Journal, Volume 54, 1972.

See, for example, R. Catley and B. McFarlane, From Tweedledum to Tweedledee, ANZ Book Co., Sydney, 1974, p.11

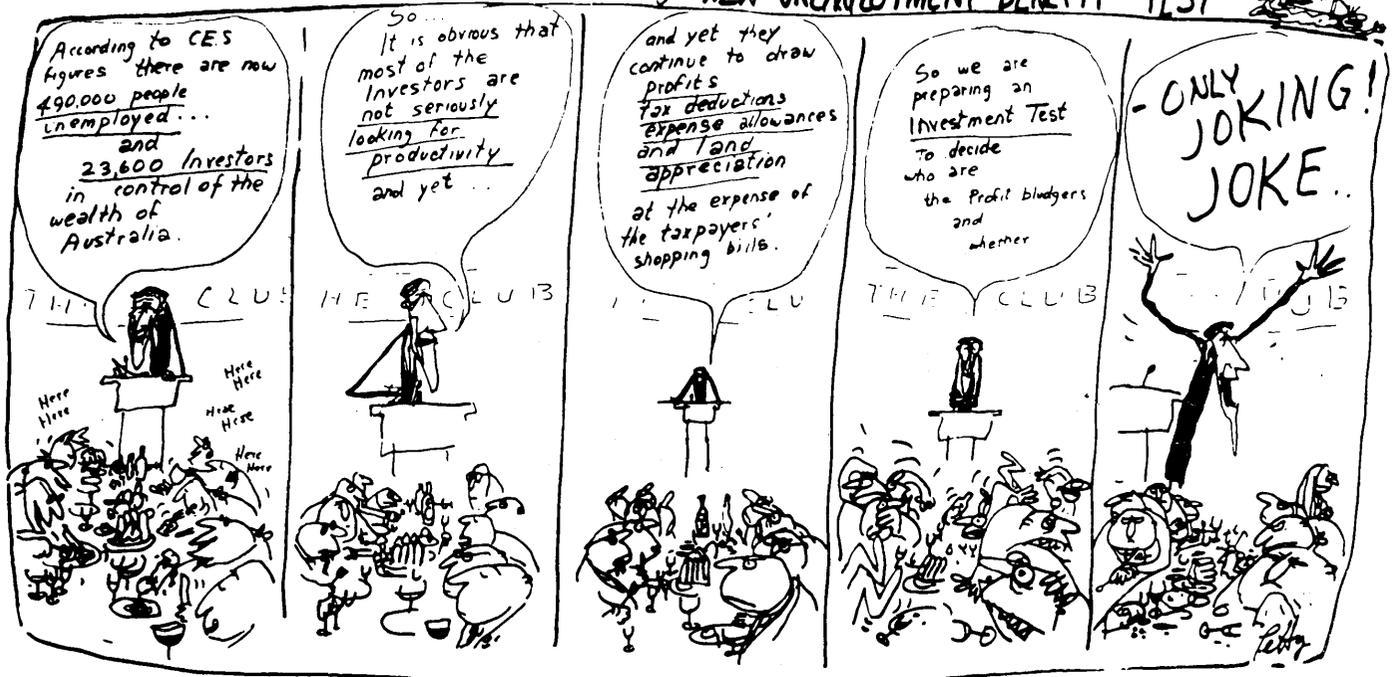
Sun Herald, 18.11.79

D.T. Herbert and D. Smith (eds.) Social Problems and the City, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979.'

See, for example, A. Vinson & R. Homel, Indicators of Community Well-Being, Department of Social Security, Canberra, 1976; and NSW Planning and Environment Commission, Social Indicators, Sydney 1978.

See D. Harvey, Social Justice and the City, Edward Arnold, London, 1973.

Petty's NEW UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFIT TEST



**Copyright of Full Text rests with the original copyright owner and, except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, copying this copyright material is prohibited without the permission of the owner or its exclusive licensee or agent or by way of a license from Copyright Agency Limited. For information about such licences contact Copyright Agency Limited on (02) 93947600 (ph) or (02) 93947601 (fax)**