Do the Swedes really aspire to sense and the Portuguese to status? Cultural activity and income gap in the member states of the European Union

Recently published research from the field of sociology suggests that the Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) finding, that there is a strong correlation between the scale of income inequality within a country and the severity of multiple, discrete health and social problems, is also relevant to cultural activity. The study demonstrated that, among the 22 European countries analysed, there was a strong association between the income gap within a country and the cultural activity of its citizens. Cultural activity was found to be significantly higher in egalitarian countries, such as Sweden and Denmark, than in highly stratified countries, including Portugal, Poland and Greece.

Published in the journal International Sociology, the research investigated the relationship between income inequality and cultural activity in 22 European Union countries in an attempt to explain the markedly varied rates of cultural activity in different countries in the EU. Such variation could not, according to the authors, be fully explained by conventional explanations, such as lack of leisure time and appropriate artistic education, or the number of prospective recipients - the percentage of people inhabiting large urbanized rather than rural regions, the scale and quality of mass education within a country, and the financial status of its inhabitants. It was hypothesised that Wilkinson and Pickett’s argument that in more highly stratified countries status, and its visible markers, is of greater importance than in more egalitarian countries, could be used to explain the variation of cultural activity across Europe. According to this theory, an increasing income gap shifts people’s focus to work related activity in a view to attaining high-status and material goods, rather than to less visible independent, non-commercial culture.
Methodology

In order to test the (above) hypothesis, the study analysed the correlation between social inequality, measured with the Gini index and the income quintile share ratio, and (a) the percentage of people employed in the cultural sector, with reference to the active workforce in the country (b) the percentage of people who have read at least one book in the last 12 months (c) the percentage of people who have visited an art gallery/museum at least once in the last 12 months and (d) the percentage of people who have been to the theatre at least once in the last 12 months. The study used Eurostat data on employment in the cultural sector in the 27 EU states in 2005 and on cultural activity in the EU in 2007. The analysis involved 22 EU members for which data on both cultural activity and social inequality, measure by the Gini index and the quintile share ratio, were available.

Results

The study found a strong correlation between income inequality within a country and the cultural activity of its inhabitants, as measured by book reading, theatre attendance and art gallery/museum attendance. The less egalitarian a country, the less frequently people read books and attended theatres, art galleries and museums and vice versa. The study, however, found a less strong and non-statistically significant correlation between the number of people employed in the cultural sector and the scale of income inequality. While high employment in the cultural sector was found in more egalitarian countries (Sweden, Denmark and Finland) and low employment in their less egalitarian counterparts (Poland and Portugal), Estonia and England both highly stratified countries, had a high percentage of employment in the cultural sector, while the Netherlands, neither particularly egalitarian nor unequal country, had the highest.

Discussion and conclusion

Although, conventional explanations of low cultural activity – scale of absolute poverty and low indicators of, particularly higher, education – cannot be discounted, Poland is particularly enlightening as a case study of the relationship between income inequality and cultural activity. Poland has, according to the authors, reached a stage of socioeconomic development that emphasises the struggle for status over culture. Its citizens’ are rapidly becoming
wealthier and better educated yet have little time for cultural activity due to preoccupation with pursing the better paid and acquiring visible markers of economic wealth.

There are, however, exceptions to this theory, most notably Great Britain, with both high cultural activity and high inequality. Unique social and economic circumstances therefore, in addition to income inequality, remain important to levels of cultural activity. In the light of this, the authors argue for further research, in particular attention to the mechanism which links income inequality and cultural activity.

Reference

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