

ROB NOONAN

CAPITALISM, HEALTH AND WELLBEING



RETHINKING ECONOMIC GROWTH FOR
A HEALTHIER, SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Capitalism, Health and Wellbeing

For those interested in health and wellbeing, this book is a must read. Drawing upon a wide range of sources, and through his simple and accessible writing style, Noonan explains how our current economic system drives many of the health and wellbeing issues we now face. Whether one speaks about growing income inequality or physical inactivity, one needs to understand the root causes of such problems. By eloquently explaining such causes – and offering solutions – Noonan enlightens the reader on how we can change society for the better.

—*Dr Lorcan Cronin, Lecturer in Psychology, Mary Immaculate College, Ireland*

Capitalism, Health and Wellbeing is a book aimed at health professionals, students who aspire to work in health promotion and the general public. While individual responsibility for modern health problems continues to be invoked, this book demonstrates that it is, on the contrary, collective choices, in particular of an elite, which make us sick. The link between capitalism and poor health no longer needs to be proven. We feel through Noonan's words the author's deep desire to fight against inequities. It is remarkable scientific work that he shares with us.

—*Dr Mélissa Mialon, Research Assistant Professor, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland*

While there is now an extensive literature on how economics and politics drive the health – for better or worse – of populations, Rob Noonan of the University of Bolton has provided an accessible volume that brings all of this work together and links it to how we live our everyday lives. How is it that in nations such as the UK wealth has never been greater, yet at the same time the numbers of poor are increasing? For Noonan, the answer is our economic system with its relentless drive for growth that leads to excessive consumption for some and deprivation for many others. Such an analysis is long overdue, and the volume will open up many eyes to the sources – and possible solutions – of our growing health and social problems.

—*Professor Dennis Raphael, School of Health Policy and Management, York University, Toronto, Canada*

Robert Noonan has written an engaging and robust book which explains how the current economic system is damaging our health. It is a rebuke to those who argue that simply achieving more economic growth will improve the health of populations. It is essential reading for local and central government officials who want to understand how to make our populations healthier and how to reduce health inequalities.

—*Professor Gerry McCartney, University of Glasgow, UK*

Rob Noonan has written a book that should be read by all those of us who struggle to make sense of the economic model that governs how we live our lives. He describes in detail how governments have acquiesced in a system that disregards the welfare of the vast majority of their citizens while complaining about the growing cost of fixing the damage that their policies inflict on health and well-being. This book provides an excellent agenda for the things that must change.

—*Professor Martin McKee CBE, Professor of European Public Health, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine*

A vital and sobering analysis of the impact of rising affluence: why is economic growth exacerbating health crises and how can the issue be fixed?

—*Stewart Lansley, Author of The Richer, The Poorer: How Britain Enriched the Few and Failed the Poor*

We are living at a time of multiplying crises in which the economic, social and environmental converge; global conflict is back to haunt us. This timely contribution challenges the capitalist paradigm that frames our health choices and offers a way out.

—*Professor John Ashton CBE, Former PFPH, Independent Public Health Consultant*

This page intentionally left blank

Capitalism, Health and Wellbeing: Rethinking Economic Growth for a Healthier, Sustainable Future

BY

ROB NOONAN

University of Bolton, UK



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2024

Copyright © 2024 Rob Noonan.
Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited.

Reprints and permissions service

Contact: www.copyright.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83797-898-4 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83797-897-7 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83797-899-1 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For my family.

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

About the Author	<i>xi</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>xiii</i>
Epigraphs	<i>xv</i>
Introduction	<i>1</i>
Part 1: Canaries in the Coal Mine	
Chapter 1 Balance: Too Much of Anything Is Bad for Us	<i>9</i>
Chapter 2 Gross Domestic Product, Productivity and Social Progress	<i>19</i>
Chapter 3 The Psychological Toll	<i>27</i>
Chapter 4 The Physical Toll	<i>39</i>
Part 2: Externalities and Underpinning Drivers	
Chapter 5 Income Inequality	<i>49</i>
Chapter 6 Disruption and Uncertainty	<i>59</i>
Chapter 7 Consumption and the Drive to Acquire	<i>67</i>
Chapter 8 The Rat Race: Keeping Up and Getting Ahead	<i>75</i>

Chapter 9	Working Harder and for Longer	<i>85</i>
Chapter 10	The Drive for Productivity Drives Physical Inactivity	<i>97</i>
Chapter 11	Walking Is Great for Health But Not Capitalism	<i>105</i>
Chapter 12	The Success Game Drives Productivity and Consumption	<i>115</i>
 Part 3: Making Better Use of History and Scientific Evidence		
Chapter 13	The Environment Shapes Our Health	<i>125</i>
Chapter 14	Thinking Long Term	<i>137</i>
Chapter 15	Conclusion	<i>147</i>
Notes		<i>153</i>
References		<i>155</i>
Index		<i>185</i>

About the Author

Rob Noonan grew up in Liverpool, England. He is a Reader in Health and Education at the University of Bolton. He earned his PhD from Liverpool John Moores University, and in 2018 was awarded the Professor Tom Reilly Doctoral Dissertation of the Year Award by the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences. His main areas of research are the behavioural and environmental determinants of health. He has a long-standing interest in the promotion of physical activity and wellbeing and tackling health inequalities, and has written and lectured extensively on these topics.

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgements

I've spent many years mulling over the ideas presented in this book. Come to think of it – well over a decade. They started to flourish after a (wise) friend posed some very radical ideas. At the time, I wasn't overly convinced that they had much mileage, because they really did challenge my thinking and understanding. But on reflection, it was these very ideas that in many ways gave me the motivation to set off on my own journey to discover what's really happening here and why. I'm pleased I listened.

I have so many people to thank for making this book possible. I have always considered human interactions as opportunities to learn. And there are many people I have been fortunate to speak to and learn from throughout my life. Whether that be on the street, up a mountain, on the golf course or over a coffee. At the gym, the park or whilst out cycling. All of these short conversations have framed my outlook on life and shaped my values. They have made me the person I am today.

I am also indebted to the generations of researchers and scientists whose tireless efforts and ideas have shaped human history, and got us to where we are today. To the authors whose work I have been so very fortunate to read, and whose ideas have inspired me, challenged my thinking, and in some way shaped the narrative of this book. While many of these people are acknowledged in the reference section of the book, there are of course many more that are not.

In my short career I have been fortunate to work at several universities and alongside many knowledgeable mentors and colleagues. They have given so generously of their time to listen to my views and read draft copies of my work. The text is greatly improved for their thoughtful feedback on this earlier work. To Stuart Fairclough for taking me on as a PhD student over a decade ago, and for his wise guidance and mentorship ever since. My gratitude extends to the many undergraduate and doctoral students I have had the pleasure of teaching and mentoring, who have motivated me to continually refine the clarity of my ideas. Through them listening to my views and me responding to their questions I've been able to further improve my own understanding.

I am also grateful to the places that have nurtured me, particularly Liverpool. Along my journey, I have learned that nothing quite contributes towards our health and wellbeing like our surroundings and personal relationships. This book simply would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of my friends and family. Only they truly understand my journey and my motives.

xiv Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to my parents, Mary and Brian for their selflessness and their time, and to my sister Sarah for simply being her. And of course, to my wife Gemma, who, for so long has endured countless conversations about 'growth' and the importance of measuring what really counts. Thank you for making me a better person. They have all shaped aspects of the book through their listening and feedback. This book is dedicated to them.

Finally, a big thank you, to you, for giving my book your time and attention. I really hope I have done justice to what I think are the most formidable social injustices and challenges of our time.

Epigraphs

The theories that drunkenness, laziness or inefficiency are the causes of poverty are so many devices invented and fostered by those who are selfishly interested in maintaining the present states of affairs, for the purpose of preventing us from discovering the real causes of our present condition.

Robert Tressell, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, 1914

When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another, such injury that death results, we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call his deed murder. But when society [ruling power of society] places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessaries of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live – forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence – knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains.

Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 1845

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

I've always been fascinated by the health of different populations and sort to understand where health is best. What is it that these healthy places do differently than others? How do the policies and the environments in different places promote and support health compared to other places? What is the culture like in different places? What are the social norms like? What influence do these social factors have on the way people live? How do people in different places spend their time and move around, and what impact do these decisions have on their own health, the health of other citizens and wider society?

Around the world, population health has improved at a staggering rate this past century. At the beginning of the 20th century, around 90% of the world's population struggled to meet the basic needs of life – from nutritious food and clean water to adequate shelter from the elements. Communicable diseases like cholera, typhoid and tuberculosis were widespread back then which led to child mortality rates being high and average life expectancy being low. Thanks to improvements in living conditions and advances in science, medicine and technology, high-income countries in the Global North have to a large extent overcome these health challenges and no longer experience widespread diseases associated with poverty and squalor. Today, these countries face new kinds of public health challenges. Aside from widening health inequalities, physical inactivity and obesity are at epidemic levels and we have a mental health crisis on our hands. But why? What's driving these new formidable public health challenges?

A commonly held belief is that they are the result of bad genes and biology, or down to idleness, laziness, weakness, lack of aspiration and low willpower. Essentially the downfall of the individual. Another explanation, the one I take up in this book challenges this view. It contends that these crises are the result of structural factors, and holds that our health largely depends on our environment and that our economic system – capitalism – challenges health and wellbeing. If income inequality and physical inactivity levels are going up and obesity and psychological distress are at epidemic levels, this says a lot about our environment. While there are many factors contributing to these crises, I've come to realise that our economic system – capitalism – is deeply implicated in them all.

We're frequently told that obesity, one of the major public health challenges of our time is caused by an imbalance between energy intake and energy

2 *Capitalism, Health and Wellbeing*

expenditure. But that's a very shallow explanation. To really understand obesity, you have to explore the social reasons that keep so many people around the world eating too many calories, sitting too often and not moving enough. Similarly, climate change – another formidable global public health challenge is caused by excess waste and carbon dioxide being emitted into the atmosphere. But why do so many people (especially in the Global North) continue to purchase so much stuff, use up so much energy, dump so much waste and emit so much carbon dioxide? In order to understand and tackle the world's most formidable public health challenges like obesity, physical inactivity and psychological distress, it's important to look beyond the (guilty) individual and to the environment, the wider economic environment. My goal in *Capitalism, Health and Wellbeing* is to explore how our economic system contributes to some of society's most formidable public health challenges and how we can make society not only healthier, and more socially just, but more sustainable too.

The relentless pursuit of economic growth (in a bid to improve living standards even more) has become more important than protecting and improving the health of all. The strong emphasis on continual economic growth and the distraction used to achieve it through advertising and government lobbying is so strong and effective that the blatant canaries in the coal mine – such as rising levels of obesity and psychological distress and the resulting healthcare costs that these bring go largely ignored. The government aren't immune to this distraction either. On the eve of the Conservative Party conference in 2021, the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson was asked to comment on how he would determine whether his levelling up policies were closing inequality gaps across the country. He suggested that we should ignore health benchmarks like cancer death rates and declining life expectancy, and should instead simply '*look at wage growth*'.¹

We have an incredible level of scientific understanding of what's good and bad for the body, what's good and bad for the mind and what's good and bad for the environment.²⁻⁴ But there's a huge disconnect between this scientific understanding and personal and political action. It's commonly said that the fish do not see the water. Poor living conditions and working conditions and resulting health damaging lifestyles are that common today that they are largely overlooked as a key root cause of poor health. Companies spend grotesque sums of money on advertising and government lobbying and do an excellent job at distracting the public from focusing attention on the waters that surround them. For me, if the fish do not see the water, a key role of educators is to make the largely invisible more visible. By providing an alternative perspective and making people aware of the health and planetary impacts of our economic system.

The only way for impactful population level change is to fill the blind spots in the public discourse, and in doing so, improve wider public understanding of *what's happening here*. Because all societies around the world are becoming more and more complex and more open to shocks than ever before, there has never been a period in history more reliant on a self-aware and highly educated population. A population able to adapt to change. Living in a globalised fast-paced world, it can be difficult to grasp what's happening around us, and perhaps more importantly, why it's happening. We have a wealth of information at our

fingertips, but it's not always easy to decipher which information is credible and which is not. But by asking who benefits you can start to navigate the noise, piece things together and make sense of it all. More often than not, after joining up the dots, following the path and making sense of it all, you will be looking at small gold coins. Or in today's world – digits on a screen. And once you do, you will see how everything is connected.

The current public health crises playing out in society have striking parallels with 19th century Britain. In the long term, the processes of economic growth are strongly related with advances in the prosperity and improved population health. But in the short term, rapid economic growth during the Industrial Revolution had adverse effects on population health. The disruption caused by rapid economic growth was reflected in widespread undernutrition and communicable diseases like cholera. Today, the disruption is reflected in widespread over-nutrition, physical inactivity, psychological distress and non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease. While there are indeed obvious differences in the causes of communicable and non-communicable diseases, there exist commonalities between them with strong evidence supporting the need for positive social and built environmental conditions in order for people to grow, work, live and age healthily.⁵

The rapid economic growth and industrialisation experienced during the Industrial Revolution led to rapid urbanisation which created social insecurity and a range of public health challenges. The public health challenges back then included overcrowding, squalor and a limited clean water supply. Collectively they gave rise to high rates of infectious diseases and premature death, especially among the poor. It was not until the government stepped in and implemented the necessary social reforms and environmental changes like street cleaning, the provision of sewage systems and clean water, improvements to housing and changes to working conditions through labour laws before population health improved. Simon Szreter, Professor in history and public policy at the University of Cambridge notes that unless mediated by the 'state', the disruption caused by rapid economic growth results in deprivation and this in turn leads to increased rates of disease and death. He calls these 'the four Ds' of rapid economic growth: disruption, deprivation, disease and death.⁶

In recent decades, the relentless pursuit of economic growth and the transformations that have evolved from it have delivered disruption in many social, environmental and political spheres of life. I reason here that because such disruption has not been adequately addressed by the government, society has witnessed a rise in social deprivation and inequality, and a greater incidence of disease and preventable deaths. The COVID-19 pandemic brutally exposed just how socially unequal Britain actually is in terms of health with life expectancy falling much more sharply in the poorest areas.⁷

I decided to write this book for two principle reasons. The first is personal. I live in the United Kingdom and year on year, I see fewer and fewer people walking about and speaking to each other on the streets. The people I come across are carrying more and more weight. They are acquiring more and more things but they don't appear to be any more content or satisfied with life. They are

4 *Capitalism, Health and Wellbeing*

continually striving for and wanting more. More money and more things. I see them working longer hours at the detriment to their health. But it isn't just about them undertaking more paid work and speeding up in the workplace. They're speeding up in other domains of life too. They're texting not talking, incurring debt not saving, driving not walking, ordering not cooking. Why the rush? Why the urgency? Why the need to be doing everything faster?

The environment around me is changing for the worse too. In a bid to maximise market competition, boost productivity and grow the economy – I see taxes being cut (to increase incentives to work) which is limiting the distribution of wealth and widening income inequality. Regulation is being cut (to increase consumer choice and drive down prices) which is endangering worker wellbeing and damaging the planet. Trade union power is being crushed which is giving companies greater freedom to suppress wages. Public services are being privatised which is sanctioning underinvestment, corner cutting and minimal accountability. As a result, many of the public parks and green spaces that greatly benefit our health are in rapid decline, and there're fewer and fewer communal places for people to meet and socialise. Specialist local shops – the lifeblood of communities – are being driven out by big chain supermarkets which are draining the locality's economic and social capital. What's more, public transport is in decline and our cities are becoming more and more car dependent. Rather than cutting, it's worsening road congestion, noise pollution and air pollution. And then there's the social pollution. Everywhere I look, advertisements surround me. They're on billboards, the sides of buses, they're on the television and in newspapers. Everybody is competing for my attention, my time, and above all, my money. And that's because our overarching governing economic ideology comprises a core set of values and beliefs centred on competition, self-interest, individualism, financial success and abundant consumption. Why so? To grow the economy, of course.

The second driver to writing the book is linked to my work as a researcher and educator. My research focuses on how the environment shapes health behaviours and inequalities in health. Through this work, I've become a firm believer in the social determinants of health – that health is heavily influenced by the social conditions in which people live, as well as inequities in power, money and resources. It angers me that this evidence continues to be left out of public and political debate. For years, a raft of empirical studies, books and blog articles have detailed the scale of income inequality, obesity, psychological distress and climate change but seldom have they explained the underpinning reasons why. I wanted to shed some light on what's really driving these social changes and public health challenges. I wanted to answer the questions that my students often ask.

Questions such as why we live longer than we used to but die of different causes? Why poor people die young? Why income inequality is rising at an unprecedented rate? How our economic system which emphasises competition, self-interest, productivity and consumption at all costs challenges our wellbeing? Why so many people in rich nations are materially wealthy yet suffering psychologically? Why so many people around the world are living with obesity? Why some countries have experienced more rapid increases in obesity rates than

others? Why so many people around the world are physically inactive and seldom walk? Why there's a relentless drive for automation in the workplace and for workers to work harder for longer? Why treating poor health is favoured over preventing poor health? How the environment shapes our health? And why all those activities which do improve our health and wellbeing – the priceless things like connecting with others, walking and giving our time aren't actively promoted or endorsed by mainstream media or corporations alike. These are the core questions I investigate in *Capitalism, Health and Wellbeing*. I will argue that the formidable public health challenges society faces are the price we pay for continual economic growth. They are the collateral damage so to speak.

In this book, I will demonstrate how tackling the most pressing public health challenges of our time requires a new kind of economics. Continual economic growth forces us to manufacture goods faster, deliver services faster, consume more goods and more services more often, work faster and work for longer. Essentially, it forces us to live our lives faster. No matter what the cost to our health or the environment. The easiest way to feel less stressed is to slow down. But slowing down isn't an option when the ultimate goal is to grow the economy. Decelerating is difficult even for those that understand the importance of balance and want to slow down. If we are living longer than ever before, why the rush to do everything faster?

There is no doubt that the causes of our current public health crises are complex. But the fact is many of them are afforded by our economic system which drives 21st century lifestyles. The impact of continued economic growth on human health and the planet's living systems is a fact of our existence. But it's the inconvenient truth that few people want to talk about. It's a modern-day social taboo. Our inability to even discuss its role is testament to how grave the problem actually is. In *Capitalism, Health and Wellbeing*, I argue that, the drive for continual economic growth is at complete odds with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and is a key driver to some of the gravest public health crises we face. I contend that if we're to achieve the United Nations SDG of health for all – then there's an imperative need to redesign the economic system and social progress metrics that promote productivity and consumption at the expense of health and wellbeing. What's more, for societies to achieve the SDGs, there will be a real requirement for governments to mediate the disruption caused by economic growth by way of devising and implementing regulatory policies which not only appreciate the collective physical, social and psychological impact that change brings upon citizens but to mitigate against the anxiety, insecurity and health effects it causes.

By fully exposing the concept of failure demand and showing how our economic system – capitalism – challenges our health and wellbeing, I hope to fill the blind spots in the public discourse and generate widespread debate across disciplines. If the ideas I present here give you a more holistic view of what contributes to your health and wellbeing, enable you to imagine alternatives, see how things can be better and realise the simple steps we can all take to enhance our sense of wellbeing and contribute to transformation at a time when social and economic change is needed – then my job here is done.

This page intentionally left blank

Part 1

Canaries in the Coal Mine

This page intentionally left blank