



AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY

**Report of a special OPUS Listening Post® on Brexit  
held at the forum of the Birkbeck Counselling Association  
at the Tavistock Centre at 7.30pm on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2017**

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**PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES**

*In this part, the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences in their various social roles, be they: in work, unemployed or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, voluntary or leisure organisations; or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives': the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.*

**PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES**

*In Part 2, the aim collectively was to identify the major themes emerging from Part 1.*

**Theme 1: Loss**

*Loss of authority, identity, faith, voice, way out, reason, certainty  
Jumping into a void/fear of the unknown/ idealisation of chaos*

I want to be hopeful but feel very uncertain whether we can turn things around. It feels like mainly bad things are happening.

I am not anxious but afraid. We are parachuting into a void. How could we be so stupid?

I feel ignorant. I don't know what anything means. I find myself obsessively watching the news, searching for answers, but I don't have any.

My background is from a South Wales mining community. In London it is hard to realise how bad other people's lives are – with house prices so low in South Wales, people are effectively trapped and unable to move. They were taken in by the lies and misinformation to think their lives would be improved.

I feel emotionally disturbed – really shocked to be on the losing side and full of resentment at having to suffer unchosen consequences.

We have been given the experience of what it is like to be the losers in a system and to have no voice. This is important. We don't like to see ourselves as the privileged elite who want to perpetuate a system that benefits us.

It is so hard to sort out reality from speculation. Even the divisions don't feel real. I can't tell what is and isn't real.

I feel anxious about a long silence.

There is a change in who has (and who has lost) a voice, control and autonomy.

## **Theme 2: Othering and Fragmentation**

*Emotional and physical disunity/societal self-harm/mutuality of ill-feeling*

There is a 'them' and 'us' feeling around but it is our own hatred relocated in others. It feels vicious.

I don't know why Brexit is such an emotional issue. There is such an outpouring of hatred.

I have a refugee heritage and find myself on the receiving end of hatred.

Brexit has given people permission to complain about immigration.

I was a refugee 50 years ago and the feeling of what it was like to be unwelcome has resurfaced.

I am an immigrant to this country by choice but I have been made to feel excluded and am angry about it. To have to apply for indefinite leave to remain is so humiliating.

Everyone on both sides voted because of strong feelings. Everything became closed to debate. There was no voice of reason in the discussion.

There is no rationality in this debate – we all cast an emotional vote.

I have felt the outpouring of hate and wanted to apologise to other people for this. It doesn't feel like my country now.

We feel projected envy at refugees coming over and spoiling our comfortable lives.

I was furious that there was a referendum.

I felt excitement at the chaos it would create – a sadistic pleasure that things were being shaken up.

I have always been a nerd about politics but now everyone is interested. Politics now matters!

Brexit is like civil war; it has torn families apart. When we met up recently, the Londoners in my family sat on one side of the table and the others sat on the other side. We were divided by our votes. There was no meeting of minds.

It feels like Brexit has created a division between the generations. I have overheard young people saying that over 50s should not be allowed to vote.

It has changed my sense of identity. I want to move to Scotland, to escape to a place where people are nicer but my Scots cousins said an English person would not be welcome!

I feel split – I am part refugee, part northerner in terms of heritage. I can see how Londoners are perceived as smug, as they benefit from the EU. Part of me wants to stick two fingers up at that.

I feel as though these divides were always there but now have a name. It is not just about nationality, it is about class and region too.

It unsettles me not to be able to reach a depressive position on this issue.

I grew up in South Africa. I fear the return to a similar sort of insularity and isolation.

The paranoid-schizoid position is the only route to change – through fragmentation. Maybe this tells us we can't go on the way we are.

I feel hopeful about change coming through fragmentation and reformation.

### **PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION**

*In Part 3, the participants were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here, participants were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world: their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them.*

#### **Analysis 1: Loss**

The powerful feelings experienced since the referendum by many citizens on the winning and losing sides has reinforced the idea that voting was a profoundly emotional act for everyone whether or not their choice was also informed by reason.

The binary choice required at the ballot box forced all citizens to disown their ambivalence and project the part of themselves that did not support their voting choice onto others. Citizens are caught up in a mutually reinforcing circle of projective identification.

Through projective identification, citizens are being given a taste of the other's unwanted experience: 'Remainers' (making an essentially conservative, pro-establishment and conformist choice) are left feeling voiceless, powerless, marginalised, angry, excluded and despairing at the impossibility of escape from their circumstances; while 'Leavers' (making an essentially pro-freedom, anti-authoritarian and non-conformist choice) are being left feeling powerful, validated, entitled, hopeful and proprietorial about their country.

Both sides experience a curious 'jouissance' at their displeasure, privately consoling themselves by relishing the feeling of self-righteousness, anger, contempt and rage towards those they disagree with, each side adopting a position of moral superiority that enables them to despise and condemn those they disagree with for their presumed ignorant, bigoted, illiberal or anti-democratic views.

However, neither 'side' is willing to accept responsibility either for their own feelings or those evoked in others. This avoidance of responsibility makes citizens feel leaderless and rudderless and exacerbates our concern for the future.

Citizens are pervaded by a generalised sense of loss – experienced as a kind of melancholia rather than mourning as they are unable either to pinpoint what it is they have lost or accept the conclusion that it is irretrievably lost.

As with all melancholia, this leads to a hollowing out of the ego, causing citizens to retreat into themselves and feel despondent for whatever they feel might be lost – be that power, influence, empire, unity, understanding, confidence, faith or the ability to identify a solution.

This state of melancholia alternates with mania, as citizens lash out at imaginary others – either the feared but unseen migrants, the invisible, unaccountable Eurocrats or the bigoted, ignorant 'deplorable' Brexiteers – and find themselves unable to distinguish reality from unreality however avidly they watch the news or keep up with current affairs.

**Hypothesis 1: By identifying with the cause of Brexit or Remain, citizens are being overwhelmed by projective identification with the disowned feelings of the other, leaving them in an unstable, bipolar state of collective melancholy and mania.**

## **Analysis 2: Othering and Fragmentation**

The relentless march of globalisation has accelerated the pace of change and left many citizens feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope. Globalisation has led to an increasingly transient and disparate workforce, a broader network of interactions between different people and cultures and a reduction in face-to-face discussion. This has brought about a retreat from difference and greater uncertainty about collaboration and mutual understanding.

Globalisation has also raised our awareness of many seemingly-intractable global issues, from climate change to nuclear proliferation, drug trafficking and human trafficking, genocide and famine, religious fundamentalism and financial misconduct. These, when added to our existing local and national concerns, make us want to disown responsibility for addressing them, fantasise about a (past or future) time of unity and accord, and become desperate for a leadership that can provide solutions.

In being asked to vote in the referendum, citizens have felt betrayed and abandoned by their leaders who have avoided the responsibility for taking important decisions that they were elected to take. This has given citizens a heightened sense of insecurity, a disillusionment in conventional politics and an openness to a new kind of

leadership in the forms of demagogues and extremists offering the seductive illusion of control.

However, this desire for control voices a fear and shame at being abandoned and out-of-control, resulting in a form of societal self-harm enacted through increasingly reckless and unstable behaviour, a wish for the worst to happen and a withdrawal from conversation.

**Hypothesis 2: By being given back responsibility for a major decision with an unknowable outcome, citizens feel leaderless and abandoned, left like orphans to fight among themselves, giving rise to deep-seated fears about impending misrule, anomie and the breakdown of civil society.**

Convener: Sandy Henderson, OPUS Director