



COVID-19 Online LISTENING POST

Part 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS & EXPERIENCES, PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES, PART 3: ANALYSIS & HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

United Kingdom, London, 21st May 2020

Analysis:

In the London Listening Post, the lead convener was beset by technological difficulties ahead of the meeting. As a consequence, he entrusted his younger, less experienced colleague to facilitate the meeting. This unanticipated turn of events captured something of the UK national context (Boris Johnson's incapacitation and delegation of responsibilities to younger, less experienced colleagues).

An early contribution highlighted the apparent futility of attempting to control events that perhaps cannot be controlled. If it is impossible to predict the future, why did the OPUS conveners behave as though such control could be enacted? Why the preoccupation with a specific format or methodology? Why the need to form any hypotheses at all?

Later, the question was asked, "Who's in charge?" This contribution seemed to indicate something pertinent to the country, as well as the Listening Post; that a sudden change in leadership will always have an unconscious impact upon the group. Related questions concerning the ability of individuals to take up their autonomy and/or personal authority were also expressed.

Another contribution enquired whether, as participants of the Listening Post, we were really able to reflect upon the "raw experience" of life under lockdown. Could we engage with our personal experiences, or was the apparent desire to describe and understand social, political and even global events a response to something quite unbearable in ourselves?

An association was made to Dante's hell, in which there are apparently many levels, all presumably bad. This association, combined with others – the novel, "*Lord of the Flies*", the movie, "*Contagion*" – seemed to lend support to the theme of "dystopian futures". We are in the middle of a crisis, of which none of us can know the outcome, and we fear the worst.

Elsewhere, we heard contributions that described a feeling of being "inside out", or perhaps "outside in". This feeling corresponds to the external reality of life being turned upside down – to use another metaphor – or that everything is not as it should be. We are, of course, living through a profound period of uncertainty.

In many of the contributions, the feeling of "outside in" seemed to correspond to a real fear of the outside getting in, not only in the form of the virus, but also in the form of other people who may be carrying the virus, and even others who could, out of desperation, perhaps resort to looting and pillaging. Are such fears realistic? Again, we do not know.

It may be that the group was engaged in a form of reality testing. How close are we to complete and utter social collapse? Are these fears unfounded or could this actually be happening? Some contributions drew attention to the possibility of future collapse, whilst others acknowledged that for many, the cracks in our society are already visible. Have we as citizens been “sleeping on the job?” What is happening “in the basement” of our society?

A pertinent question was asked: “Where is the enemy? Is it in my neighbours?” The truth is, we do not know. This apparent vagueness and ambiguity gives rise to something far more terrifying – the notion that the enemy is, in fact, ourselves. As another contribution put it: “the nasty in me.” We experience moments of rage and, unable to contain our emotions and with no obvious place to send them, it is not a case of the “inside out” or even the “outside in” but rather the “inside in”.

And now the light. Many of us have taken up new hobbies or re-engaged with our communities, through “mutual aid” groups, for example. Some of us have even been touched by moments of wonderful kindness, for example, the person that reached out to an old friend after reading an inscription on a park bench: “she wouldn’t have gone for that walk, she wouldn’t have found that bench and made contact [without lockdown].”

Hypothesis:

In times of crisis, we look to our leaders for guidance and support but are disappointed to find none. We’re faced with the task of taking up our own authority, but it’s easy to lose touch with reality when we’re alone. Fear, confusion, anger and despair can be mitigated by sharing. Therefore, we rely on others for help, and are pleased when meaningful contact is made.

General thoughts after this series of Online International Listening Posts

In times of coronavirus, the fear of death compels us to stay at home, lock the doors and not let anyone in. The neo-liberal ideology may have convinced us that we are able to survive on our own, but how realistic is that when we depend on others for such basics as food and supplies, as well as love and companionship?

As we voluntarily isolate ourselves from the world, what damage is done to our human psyches; our human nature, as lockdown continues indefinitely? We find that our sense of camaraderie, the feeling that *we’re all in this together*, wears a little thin when it is our loved ones that are suffering and dying alone and that there is absolutely nothing we can do to help. How do we grieve when we have no one to rely on but ourselves?

How do we survive in a world where death is our central preoccupation; where fear of contracting the virus, guilt over potentially passing it on, or shame at being seen out in public potentially breaking the rules, determines everything that we do? How much suffering can a person endure before this empty façade, the façade of neo-liberal individualism, crumbles and disintegrates before our very eyes?

If it turns out we’re not all in this together, that the rules do not apply equally to everyone, that the sacrifices we made in good faith were all in vain, how do we contain the rage that erupts within us; and to whom do we direct our fury? Are we not all, in some ways, at least partially responsible for allowing this façade to continue? What steps could have been taken, perhaps *should* have been taken, in the months, years, even decades before this crisis erupted?

We are reminded *everything will be ok*, and it will be – at least for those of us who are fortunate enough (some might say privileged). We will survive for a few more years until the next crisis, or the one after that. Yet none of us really believe anymore, in our hearts, that *things can only get better*.

It was just another lie, heaped upon others that have slowly eroded our perceptions of reality. Like the rising tide against the shore, it happens very slowly; but it is happening.

Let's not wait until the next crisis before we act. Let's start planning now. If we do, there is a chance we can save lives. That has to worth it, right?

Rob Stuart, May 2020.