AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Britain and the World at Summer 2013
Report of a Listening Post held in London on 12th June

Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

Introduction

In this part of the Listening Post members were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or 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', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Members of society spoke of a general difficulty in moving around both physically and metaphorically. The relations expressed in this part seem to have a not-fulfilling nature, rather a source of unhappiness. Ordinary life feels heavier due to the need to deal with "degraded" relations. One member spoke of the difficulties of accessing a satisfactory care for a member of the family. No room for "intercourse" and thus no room for collaboration.

Members of society described situations in which the "familiar" becomes "unfamiliar". Members referred both to societal circumstances (e.g. holiday destinations that are becoming places of concerns) and natural circumstances (e.g. the weather that is becoming more and more unpredictable). In this it seems that there is no room/space for society to acknowledge those who in society are carrying unpleasant roles (e.g. whistle-blowers) that are taken and given for alerting us all. Members have spoken of experiences and organisations (e.g. EU, IMF) from which civic spaces and roles are excluded and become unbearable leading to openly breaking the agreed rules. Members have spoken of issues around limitations and gaps between private abundance and public poverty.

Family links and relations seem the only ones that can provide some sort of comfort and space and energy for facing the external world. There is an overall sense of worthless that seems to be contained, in a certain way, through some community initiatives that brings together people and can

block government's policies and decisions. One member spoke of the successful campaign that has halted the closure of three hospitals.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part Two the aim was collectively to identify the major themes emerging from Part One. The members identified several themes and these have been distilled into three major themes. They are:

1. An increasing feeling of helpless
2. Vulnerability
3. Lack of proper containment

1. *An increasing feeling of helpless*

Members spoke of a sense of massive frustration that is the result of a polarised situation in which, on one hand, the abuse of authority - represented by unelected international institutions - is mirrored, on the other hand, by a generalised mobilisation against unresolved issues that are still felt by our societies since the beginning of the financial and economic crisis in 20008 - leading to sterile confrontation. Religion, in this context, with its radicalised forms seems to represent a force that gives rise and legitimacy to a societal gang mentality.

This feeling of frustration is accompanied by an overall sense of burdensome. Members have spoken of the difficulties of looking after elderly members of the family and society as well as providing a good enough educational system for the younger generations. The NHS is a vehicle for carrying the former. In members' conversations it seems prevailing a continual display of guilt as a copying mechanism for making sense of a series of burdens otherwise unbearable. It seems prevailing a sort of lack of societal permission of experience happiness, regardless of the form that it can take.

Members described a series of instances in which the prevalent observed (or/and experienced) reaction is a snatched meaningless solution.

2. *Vulnerability*

Members described fear and vulnerability (in neighbourhoods, on holiday in familiar places, in cities and towns) as result of the transformation of our "familiar" spaces and roles in "unfamiliar" and "unknown" ones. One way of expelling this feeling it seems to be to criticise other countries and what is going on in their societies. It seems that in institutional and organisational terms one reaction to this overall sense of vulnerability is to tighten the

control mechanisms and increase a bureaucratic way of doing business and relating people, groups and activities. It is only when members of society find a way of rebuilding meaningful societal links, and in doing so strengthen their identity as communities, that this feeling is overcome and the local communities find energy to mobilise against and (in certain cases) to influence the environment they live in. The outcomes of these actions are of reenergising individuals, groups and communities.

3. *Lack of proper containment*

Conflict between individual identities and belonging to groups seems to be reflected in the conflict between societal and emotional obligations. The case of the relation with Europe is one where such conflict is played as well as the role the NHS and its perennial reforms plays in UK politics and society. It seems as if the experience of a society, and its institutions, torn between fuzzy boundaries (to which the social media contributes with its liquid nature) and tightens control mechanisms reflects a lack of proper containment from the difficulties and anxieties the current times carry.

Members describe a significant split between the private spheres of their life and the public ones. This seems to reflect a deeper division between societal and psychological processes that are not aligned. The role of psychoanalytic minded groups, as societal players able to contribute, has been raised as well as questioned. What and how can these groups get across in these stormy and bureaucratic environments? Is psychoanalysis being used for the good of society?

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, 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 the members 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 and Hypothesis 1

An increasing feeling of helpless

Analysis:

Increasingly the ability to control and manage societal processes is taken away from local and national arenas. International institutions are running the show and globalisation, rather than an Eldorado has clearly demonstrated to have also adverse impacts on ordinary daily life and it is not the road to endless development and wealth. The financial crisis started in 2008, and still felt, is there to demonstrate how – like terrorism treats – regardless the individual and societal responsibilities, the daily ordinary life is at risk from, some time, unknown sources. As consumers we can be heard but not necessary listen to like a citizen. Paternal and maternal influences are confused and no longer easily recognisable. Mandela and the NHS are fading away. The crisis of societal and organisational institutions has left the individuals feeling the and dealing with the complexity of this era on their own.

Hypothesis:

The increasing feeling of isolation and helpless seems to find a form of release in the central role the national identity is taking. The Olympics, in this country, and other events in other countries are vehicles for affirming a national pride, something to trust that otherwise cannot be located in societal structures and institutions that are no longer trustworthy. The 21st century presents itself as the century of newness led by globalised process, the national pride seems to be the societal defence mechanism to cope with the unforeseen anxiety that that process generates.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Vulnerability

Analysis:

The lack of trust in long established societal institution is the recognition that, as for the NHS, safety nets are broken and contributes to a strong sense of individual and collective vulnerability. There is no longer public space that allows and legitimises the feelings of familiarity and intimacy. Only the family is left and in the case of elderly members of the family these feeling are left, sometimes, to professionalised relations to carry.

Hypothesis:

Institutions that in the past were entrusted to carry the dependency needs are no longer existing or no longer reliable. Members of society are left experiencing connections without meanings that contribute to a sense of alienation. Death itself is everywhere or nowhere in a sort of meaningless limbo. Splitting becomes the main way of relating to societal issues: old vs.

young, male vs. female, EDL vs. Muslims etc. The other, or non-me, is not accepted or tolerated. It is the research, and the finding, of similarities, based more on fears and anxiety, that seems to fill the gap of the unmet dependency.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Lack of proper containment

Analysis:

In societal terms a benevolent authority, at times, has been associated with the possibility to construct and act as containment to societal anxieties. Of course this has not meant the absence of conflict but the recognition that our society and its processes had a degree of safety. The mature members of society can see that that world is crumbling but have difficult to engage with the connections (mainly in liquid form) that the new generations are creating. The overall experience is then of a fragmented reality dominated by splitting processes that escape any possible meaningful container of societal dynamics. It is only at local level that experiments of bringing the old and the new can be attempted

Hypothesis:

The search for some form of containment of the current dynamics does not bring members of society anywhere. The possibility for learning and mobilising energies for shaping the external environment are blocked by unworkable societal and individual anxieties. It seems that psychoanalysis and psychoanalytical minded groups are on the margins of this process and more often they are heard but not listened. It seems that they are to society what whistle bowlers are to organisations: necessary but just tolerated.

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