AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

**Britain and the World
at Summer 2014
Report of a Listening Post
held in London on 11th June 2014**

Encouraging the Reflective Citizen

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Part 1

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute and explore their experiences in their various social roles, be they work, unemployed or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations; or as members of families or 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 was to collectively identify, the major themes from Part 1. From the themes that emerged, the following have been drawn together under three broad headings.

Theme 1: Violence

Violence was an overriding theme throughout the discussion of experiences but expressed in different areas of life. It is taking place in the context of a deepening entrenchment of inequality in society (Picketty, 2014) returning to pre WW 1 levels of inequality in wealth and fuelled by a return to an aggressive capitalism which is creating social and economic dislocation.

An initial image conveyed the nastiness and dehumanising attitudes now abroad – the report of 'spikes' embedded in the entrance area of a new private apartment block in S. London to prevent homeless people sleeping there. This prompted a range of feelings and responses. One person pointed to the massive rise in homeless people around Kings Cross over the last year who were also noticeably 'smashed up' and " if they don't start with a mental health problem they end up with one ". Another person pointed out that the hardened homeless don't want to go into hostels "but it was also the case the rapid 75% rise suggests that this is a new and different constituency. The other response was "well I wouldn't want them in my doorway", noting also how this was a widespread problem for the mansions around Westminster Cathedral close to homeless shelter. It also prompted memories and fears of a return to the cardboard shelters and tents on Lincoln's Inn Field and of the Southbank in the 80s.

One member in rented accommodation then described opening letters sent by estate agents to the owner of his property, encouraging the latter to sell up. He happily put the letters in the bin, but the vulnerability of a rented home resonated. Finally, it was noted how a society we are not prepared to build social housing because it will undermine the private housing market and house prices. Having

no fixed abode for the LP was also a shared experience earlier in the evening with the change of locations, and for many arriving late and in the middle of discussions.

Violence reappeared in relation to the scapegoating of Muslims in British society. Birmingham prompted the question 'what is it all about ? While inspection has rightly raised issues of poor governance by mainly governor led academies introducing fundamentalist stances to religion in secular schools in Birmingham, this has been too easily conflated with extremism and terrorism by government and in the media . It was followed by reference to the success of ISIS the Islamofascist group in Iraq , who had just taken control of Mosul (previously called Ninevah) which it was noted had a large Christian community.

Violence closer to home was raised in various other contexts. Domestic violence was anticipated to rise during the World Cup. Along side FGM and its place in rituals linked to purity, there was it was suggested a new form of sexual violence linked to the way young women were being lured into cosmetic surgery/ vaginaplasty modelled on porn stars and driven by invisible interests under the guise of free to choose. Once rare, it was now more common and was seen as a form of violence when offered on the NHS. A different response "to not feeling good enough" called instead for developing a capacity to understand "that as an adult you have to live with what you are". Violence against women was also referred to in the case of the 400,000 women raped in Rwanda and now living with the children – the subject of a current high profile global conference. Finally, there was reference to the burial ground for 800 babies in Ireland from a mother and baby home ('under our noses/ turning a blind eye') . But in the end this too is as much a commentary on how young unmarried women were cast out by families for being a source of stigma.

 The WW 2 memorials were seen as often a sentimental glorification of war and of 'good violence ' . One person commented on how an *Any Answers* had been de-railed by someone talking about they resented having to go to war, seeing friends killed and nearly dying themselves – thoughts echoing her own fathers experience. The British are not clean and members thought it was good to hear children question whether they would go to war.

Attention then turned to the role of boarding schools in British culture. An ex boarder described how he would never forget the sight of a small boy locking himself in his mothers car in an effort to prevent her leaving without him. While boarding schools buy access to social and economic success, they were seen as places of glorified bullying and responsible for "killing very young children emotionally"|. A recent G2 had emphasised how it has also generated an emotionally stunted political elite. Finally, as capitalism invades previously unmarketised areas of life of the family, it was pointed out we are commodifying and outsourcing family life on which the generation of social bonds and emotional capacities are reliant.

Theme 2: Aggression and anxiety, contamination and cleansing

Interwoven in the discussion of the differing forms of violence were ways in which it is/isn't contained or challenged and the fears around contamination which violence generates. There was a poignant memory of a grandfather who took pity on people who were homeless and who would bring people home. The stories then passed on were of the smell left behind and even of catching scabies. But the lasting legacy was primarily that of "what a kind man" he had been. An experience on the earlier journey into the LP prompted someone to ponder whether we now find it harder to offer simple kindness to strangers …. do our smart phones generate a loss of sociability

and conversation …..or in the past did people on trains not similarly just bury their heads in newspapers?

The link between uncontained anxiety and aggression was forcefully conveyed in a story of how someone's ordinary, lovable, domestic cat was transformed if it went out the front door. It then turned into an aggressive animal who would even attack family members and children if spoken to – such was the fear and anxiety generated by the threatening and potentially violent world beyond the front door. Our capacity for aggression and violence is likewise triggered by current social and economic dislocations and the intensification of social anxiety is evident in the following examples .

Several references were made to the recent elections and UKIP's role in containing the "scary others " or as a "bucket into which you could put stuff ". In parts of Essex, the UKIP voting localities have the highest referrals to children's mental health teams. This posed the question ' what is being projected into these children by the adults in their lives?" The UKIP voter here was imagined variously in negative ways , as into flag waving, a chauvinistic football Dad forcing football on the uninterested son, or as "those who lived Thatcherism to the hilt ". One person noted a flag pole had gone up in his street and wondered " What flag would I fly ?". The question was raised whether there was an association between the much lower dependence on tranquilisers in London compared to many UKIP voting parts of the country?

Someone noted the various examples discussed were like a cleansing or disinfection… a need to be rid of the 'impure'. Does being bombarded with 'stuff ' lead to a compulsion to cleanse. But it was thought to be beyond a mere clearing out and the suggestion was that it was more akin to an obsessive, compulsive disorder - the punitive stance towards homelessness, UKIP, the fetish for hairlessness ..,.. the latter suggesting a child like state which raised an association to paedophilia.

Theme 3 : Critical thinking and understanding

One member vividly described how on a recent trip to Serbia "it was a relief to hear about trauma in in the here and now", rather than to experience the reaction of people who will say "you think too much". The latter implies that "maybe the real world is too difficult to face" . There was a readiness in this country to opt for the simple answer and for the seductions of giving something only five minutes attention. Another member described it as desire to latch onto something ersatz versus processing the real. A propensity to 'turn a blind eye' , grasping at illusions, "replacing the substantial with the superficial", "don't want to see what we have done" and " pretending atrocities are somebody else's mess"

The discussion about Scotland's referenda posed the question as why do nations want to break away leaving as in Serbia's case a pariah state. It raised the question whether smaller states do allow for more influence and a better chance of a unified view. But a contrary view questioned whether smallness was a route to social cohesion and just an illusion. Denmark and Switzerland are both small states but have significant right wing and openly racist political parties.

Likewise, while 'charity' was associated with love, the good image of major "charities" could be illusionary. It was pointed out that large 'charities' are now professionalised and often subcontracted to corporates. Because many are dependent on contracts their 'independent ' voice has been silenced since 2008 until recently - although more voices over the last year are now being

heard. They are also the focus of suspicion over enormous salaries that have come with such change. A recent flood in the Phillipines had not prompted a generous response to appeals depressing one member and suggesting that envy or passivity is being generated.

One member described how coming to the LP over the last year had helped her to 'think'. Making sense of the complicated nature of life today which she described as "like tectonic plates colliding with each other ". It calls for a capacity to think in terms of complexity and uncertainty rather than simple linear ways. The younger generation were seen as now very different and freer in their ability to think like this and better at managing uncertainty. In contrast one member felt disappointed in his own ' middle generation' with its "post modern, loathsome qualities", and fear of technology. New ways of thinking need to find their place in LP interpretations including the role of activism "which can sound shrill if it is outside the norm" and the concept of a "circular economy" as a working model for the best use of resources.

One member considered the loss of religion an important feature in how we struggle to make sense of these levels of violence. We have lost belief in evil, an acceptance of badness or that bad things can be cleansed. Is this unfinished business of the Enlightenment ? Can a new world of uncertainty make sense of violence in the same way as older religions and rituals could ? While loss of belief was seen as positive in many ways, it also means we don't have shared communal rituals to rid ourselves of the profane and contamination. Violence and the role of the sacred are closely linked in ensuring social cohesion. Ancient societies, including early Judaism , used sacrifice to ensure crops etc and like all such societies thereby preventing internal division and conflict in communities through violence to surrogates. Today this may translate into emotionally containing prayer rituals. But overall we have lost solid structures into which we can pour our differences (religion, family, public institutions) and have to live with uncertainty. If we can't deal with it, it get's chopped off. But another member argued the opposite : that we *have* invented new rituals and tribes and new forms of outpourings to wash away our imperfections and we need to accept a circular economy of growth and decay.

Part 3: Analysis and Hypothesis formation

The analysis ranged widely across the ways widening inequality, uncertainty and social anxiety was driving violence and scapegoating in society of marginal groups (the poor , homeless, Muslims), but also generating a rise in mental health problems (the homeless, young people). Family life is being commodified and faced with uncertainty, adults project anxiety into protest votes but also into children and this is being expressed in rising levels of child mental health problems. The loss of religion and of public institutions including the potential break up of the UK itself means that the social containers for resolving difference/violence/ maintaining social harmony etc are disappearing or changing and exposing unforseen consequences.

Hypothesis 1 :

Due to the lack of any recent civilian experience of being at war and due to the decline of participation in religion, we practise instead a secular, peacetime worship of 'progress', resulting in our developing a view of imperfection or blemish as something that can be eradicated rather than as an indelible mark of humanity that can only be managed and contained'

Hypothesis 2:

Alongside levels of new, extreme and uncontained anxieties in society, we have become accustomed to forming opinions without information (despite the ubiquity of information). As a consequence, we experience the wish to violently rid ourselves of the homeless, muslims, immigrants…… which is resulting in intense scapegoating in general, but alongside which the incidence of a more understanding response exists in particular, individual cases.