AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY

UK at Autumn 2016
Report of a Listening Post™ held in London on 5th October 2016

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: Fear of overcrowding, sense of crisis and living on the edge, which instead of solidarity has led to a retreat into individualism, lack of generosity and empathy, lack of trust and scapegoating

Why do we always feel we are running late, sleeping, eating, working, looking for something we mislaid. Having to cope with the preoccupations forced upon us by the media (Theresa May, Farage). The government and media are distorting reality, it's all smoke and mirrors, rather than exposing what is really going on.

One member described how on her way to the venue, there was an evacuation of the station at Kings' Cross/Euston and with her bad ankle she felt she couldn't keep up, that she would be trampled upon, memories of 7/7 came up. In the end, it was only a case of overcrowding, but all the passengers overreacted. Barely contained panic, squished in the crush of people. A girl stumbled and was really shaken, everyone seemed on edge. On the Tube we are constantly told to follow the instructions, some attempt at order, but nobody really knows what is happening, so it feels surreal.

There is constant fear of overcrowding, and a worry about who is given priority or not in an emergency. How many foreigners are we employing – this type of discourse heightens levels of anxiety and panic, leads to hysteria rather than debate. We become more conscious of conflicts all around the world and economic problems, and it feels like we are ready to erupt/explode quite soon, but you have to worry about the fallout. Reminds many of us of Rivers of Blood speeches, the same sense of 'they will overwhelm us' which makes some members who came to this

country as immigrants wonder if they want to stay. For those who had just arrived in the 1960s and had a hard time becoming accepted, now it feels like that all over again, it's hard to make sense of what is belief or interpretation and what is real.

People no longer seem willing to cooperate with each other – are there really more people on the streets or is it simply that there are people on phones who are not getting out of the way. You feel like saying 'Please look up, I am here.' Everything feels harder, there is a lack of generosity, humanity, reciprocity. There is a sense of competition instead of collaboration, so there is gridlock, we see that in traffic everyday, people are doing it to themselves because none of them are willing to give way. What stops us from collaborating? Selfishness or fear that it won't be reciprocated. Lack of awareness, each one of us operating in our own little world, caught in our phone, iPad etc. The misguided Tubechat initiative, with people protesting – how dare they suggest we talk to strangers on the Underground, that's why the adverts run around the top in Tube trains, so we can avoid eye contact and pretend to read them. Other meagre initiatives, such as no mobile day, although some do feel you can have good conversations in trains and buses, usually about the shared misery.

Theme 2: Technological advances giving us a feeling of omnipotence, yet making choices for us, choices we are perhaps not emotionally equipped to make. Who is selected, who is excluded, where is morality in all of it?

Programme on Down's Syndrome and how technology is developing so you can find out much earlier and without intrusive testing if your future baby is likely to have it. But ethical dilemma: is it then immoral to decide not to do this blood test, and if you decide to go ahead with the pregnancy anyway should the state not be responsible for helping you care for you child, because it was your choice? It really raises questions about who do we want to include in our society. If we say we want a Downs-free society, it means we are saying they don't deserve a life. Yes, they can be a stress and burden on parents, but also a source of gratification. Yet what happens when the parents die and can no longer care for them? Terrifying to discover your own doubts, how cruel might you become if you hear about a child born with a disability which might mean they are going to die soon – would you help them along? Medical advances make it possible to save premature babies, so there are more of them who survive, but there is little real support for those parents.

Fear of the future, and society is taking advantage of the people who are not very vocal (such as the learning disabled). In 10 years we can get rid of all low IQs and then what next? Reminiscent of Eugenics movement in 1930s, which was not just the remit of the Fascists. By attempting to solve certain problems, we create more. Ethics and morality questions have moved on now, they have been replaced seemingly by science and technology and economics.

Theme 3: Chasing perfection, wanting to control bad things and push them away, only wanting to be told the upside of things, distrust of experts with bad news.

But is part of the reason why parents don't seem able to cope anymore (even with healthy children) that we have become more selfish, that we have expectations of

happiness, while in the past people would give without expecting anything in return. Infant mortality was commonplace in the past, but now we aren't used to having bad things happening to us, we feel it's our privilege, our entitlement to only have good things.

At the same time, how comfortable we are here, we are safe, not having police knocking on our doors, our homes reduced to rubble, and yet all we think is 'hope those refugees don't come here'. Some boroughs have accepted 20 Syrian families to settle there, but not all. In our comfort and safety, we feel pulled: should I contribute money, should I offer a room in my house? How do we learn to live with each other? In the US we see racism still raising its head despite years of awareness of it. It's merely that we had been suppressing racism, sexism and other things, but they all existed in the subconscious and now it has become permissible to voice them.

One of our members has to give a talk next week and was worried about lack of time and inspiration, but then her eyes fell on a First Aid poster and she thought how about an emergency toolbox for the soul. We all seem to be so distressed emotionally, we feel we are in a constant state of emergency, over which we have no control, so we try to cut ourselves off from the experiences which distress us. But we need to soothe and heal self and others.

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:

What God do we believe in – a god of perfection? In which case, where does badness and flawed stuff go in that case? We all want our ideal self, so modern man spends time constructing God through technology and money/economy. The instant gratification culture, self-soothing through retail therapy, rise of short-term thinking (the impatience of 'Googling it', having someone else to answer your questions and solve your problems).

Ultimately this is very infantilising – an addiction to quick fixes, designing any bad aspects out of our life, not having to live with uncertainty or vulnerability. The belief we can solve all our problems, so we dislike or deny complexity.

We are taking over from nature, it gives us a feeling of omnipotence, but are we psychologically equipped to deal with what next? Taking it to the next level, we face the choice: shall we go out in space, colonise other planets, explore and make ourselves omnipotent survivors, or shall we stay on our planet, bear our vulnerability and wait to die? The terrible choice of the 9/11 jumpers: jump from the 80th floor or wait to burn.

Hypothesis 1: Because society values instant fixes, we strive for perfection and happiness and lack empathy for vulnerability and deficiencies. The result is that we allow ourselves to believe in our omnipotence through technology but we are not equipped to deal with the ethical dilemmas it brings with it.

Analysis 2:

Overcrowding has become a real source of concern, the feeling that there is not enough for everyone, that we have to make the distinction between the deserving and the underserving, that there are not enough desks, beds, social care. So people end up expressing fear of the 'Other' and we've seen cases of black on black violence, hyper-sensitivity, hyper-alertness. Distortion of statistics and stereotypes about criminals – but criminal activities don't take place in a vacuum. Just looking at raw data without taking into account the psychosocial interpretation leads to hysteria. Where is it all going – Trump?

It is hard to accept that in complex situations there often is no solution at all. With warfare or Brexit, no matter how much you try to simplify, there is no binary black/white situation. We have to accept circular nature of events, contradictions and imperfection and the non-finished nature of most things. Hard for humans to bear, when we are so solution-focused – there is a certain dopamine effect to solving problems, having answers, crossing things off the 'To-Do' list.

Confusion and complexity seems to describe the state of the country and of people. Media selects the stories but the establishment itself is under attack. The IMF reported that Brexit was just the start, they expect to see this attitude elsewhere, an opposition to the establishment, right across the world. People don't trust the establishment, and not even themselves. And yet if we want to change something, we have to do it ourselves, push ahead or make way for the others? How to behave? In-fighting at the highest levels, chaos, it feels like a country on the edge, dwelling in uncertainty, each in their own corners and not meeting at all, unable to agree about anything, not even within the same party. There are no longer any good examples of how citizens should behave.

Morality has been smashed, there is such fragmentation, no common definitions or understandings of what it means to be moral. No guarantee that anyone will subscribe to your own personal values, so we feel we are not being listened to, and that if we are kind and trusting, we are viewed as stupid.

Hypothesis 2: Because the increasing complexity of the world around us can no longer be pacified with simple solutions, people are feeling overwhelmed and project their needs for clarity on societal leaders. The result is that they are giving away their own individual and collective power and responsibility, and, under the weight of unrealistic expectations, the leaders cannot fail to disappoint.

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