AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY

UK at Spring 2017
Report of a Listening Post™ held in London on 19 April 2017

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:

Passivity, protest, agency and shame: Passivity and action are linked to freedom of choice and democracy. What were people trying to change by the Brexit vote and protest ? We can protest but have no agency. How do we develop agency ?

A member of society commented that as OPUS changes the Listening Posts are also changing, and there is a move to more reflexivity. Members commented on the fact that only half the group had turned up, we wondered 'who's not here' and why. OPUS as an organisation was set up to reflect society, but it seems largely populated by those with an interest in consultancy, so it is not inclusive. People have become passive and retreated. A member commented that 'as I watch Erdogan and Trump take power, I feel more isolated, it feels like a retreat from what was or is known, and it creates a sense of loneliness'.

A member commented that she had a sense of being 'the enemy within'. Just today the Daily Mail had talked of Theresa May holding the June election due to her anxiety about internal 'saboteurs' in Westminster, who would undermine her Brexit plans. Another member replied that he felt that mass media/tabloid communications are often unprocessed reflections of the social unconscious, there are often 'casual but potent words'. Such words hook into the unconscious.

Members returned to discuss change in OPUS itself. The new Director has come in with strong leadership and a clear direction, after a period when people felt disappointed with the failure of an interim leadership. The new Director has made

something of it. Not with a 'strong man' model of leadership, but by taking it forward in a positive way.

The current move towards populist politics and leadership offers easy solutions to complex issues – a member asked is it a form of fascism ? Another commented that Brexit was 'an old people's home'. People in the South wanted to blame Brexit on 'thick northerners', but the reality that was emerging was that Brexit was largely driven from the south of England by older and middle class people.

A new member spoke about this being his first experience of a Listening Post, and he observed that 'if you get what you voted for you're happy, if you don't you're not'. That's the way it is at the moment. However, we have had a plethora of voting opportunities, there has been 'lot of democracy' over the last year – we have not been denied that - since the referendum and again with the announcement of the election. People need to accept they won't always get the outcome they want. Age was identified as an issue, and this has led to intergenerational conflict. A You Gov poll stated that among 18- 24 year olds, only 25% voted to leave the EU, 75 % voted to remain. In the 24 -44 age bracket it was almost 50/50. In contrast, four out of five voters over 65 (one in five of the population) voted, and they predominately voted Leave.

People hold and express views legitimately, we need to accept them, we need acceptance and tolerance of difference.

Donald Trump's election in the USA has created similar questions. How can a person who reflects so much racism and homophobia get elected? How do we understand the underlying dynamics? How do we understand why he was elected, and what impact will he have on different communities. How can we understand why people vote? How do we know what we do does not influence people?

A member said that she thought that this question of why people vote the way they do is 'always assessed against a hypothetical reality', so how realistic is it? We cannot detach ourselves from our own prejudices. Another member commented she felt that there is a 'manipulation of our feelings and decisions, that is backed and influenced by 'millions of dollars of data analysis'. The risk is that this will take away our humanity. The dystopian vision is 'robots will take away our jobs, and big data will make decisions for us'. Mechanics and data are now increasingly important. Will they reduce our choices as humans? Are we gradually losing something vitally important?

A member spoke of reading recently that there are real costs to sending emails. Each email creates 20 grams of Co2, forwarding an email creates another 6 grams of Co2. So 'big data' is also a major contributor to global warming. Does it matter? Trump wants to boost coal production. In Canada, Trudeau also wants to boost oil and coal production, but he seems to have more of a 'halo' effect; that this is somehow good policy. It is a similar policy to Trumps, but with a different reaction from the electorate due to his different popular image. Such policy is carefully constructed, and we are constantly and subliminally prepared for it across many platforms.
A member commented that half of the expected group of 14 aren't here, this represents a microcosm of society's apathy. Another asked are those who are here

the 52% or 48 % ? Members spoke of passive aggression being a characteristic disease of the English.

Another member noted how she was trying to give up using Google as it is part of wider capitalist/data control system, but giving it up is now very difficult. This had a resonance for another member who knew friends who don't use Facebook or social media, and they will write letters instead. This seems more artistic and feels like an act of agency. He has often got these people in mind, and wondered are they more connected to nature and humankind ? Maybe letter writing will be the new vinyl. Abbey Road Studios still has a vinyl printing machine. Kindle sales have not overtaken the purchase of books, and sales of vinyl are on the increase as a reaction or resistance to digital technology. Do we develop our own agency through such actions?

Theme 2:

There is felt to be a high 'bar of risk' to step outside the class stratum. Moving from this increases our anxiety. But the increasing complexity and diversity of different parts of UK affects the rate of change.

The referendum had highest turnout of any election.

One member commented that there isn't currently a sense of political activism. Schooled in Liverpool, where there was always a sense of independence from Englishness - the English 'lived in the South in rose covered cottages'. Friends in the north who are trade unionists and supporters of Brexit feel that the structures of social protection, are now degraded. Many people feel abandoned to low pay, insecure work etc.

There was also never any proper discussion or positive debate about what membership of the EU really meant or could mean, so we had a protest vote. Is Brexit is about a reconstruction of the fantasy of an Englishness that never existed? A member commented that in the USA supporters of Bernie Sanders are now knocking on doors to convert others, his supporters are very active.

Members commented that in London as the referendum vote came through it felt like a revolution. The politics and social dynamics of the English civil war were very like the run up to the referendum, full of anger. There is still a 'historical silence' about the civil war. But at least after Brexit we don't have a million dead.

A member commented that the key concept in the Listening Post is safety. We won't be judged for having an opinion. Do we now need strict rules about how people express themselves? On the question of safety, on the way here he didn't feel safe on tube, a lot of men behave in an intimidating way in the way they occupy the space on the trains. There is a lot of 'playing status games'. How much risk should one take? A member commented on the gender split in room, three women on one side, the men on another.

Radio 4 reported on the recent anti Trump women's march in Washington, where one woman said 'I'm so tired of holding this fucking banner'. How do we understand

the passivity or aggression or action and conflict in the room. Does anger get confused with agency? Was the middle class Brexit vote outside of the main cities, because they have not got over the loss of the British Empire? Are they seeking nostalgia or avoiding shame ?

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:

The appropriate use and sharing of democratic power should enable us to feel nourished, but instead we feel powerless. We need the experience of a nurturing authority to change us, but the State hasn't provided a consistent and stable parental authority, it has been working for the rich - 'the posh boys'. This leaves us feeling betrayed.

When we are infantilised our anger is mobilised, so when we hear of people for things that we find unfavourable we are put in touch with our envious and angry feelings.

What does the infant do with these feelings? Is the paradox resolved through anger or is it buried deeper? Through good enough parenting most children get through it and can learn to tolerate ambivalence, but some don't and end up drug addicted or with severe anti- social or mental health difficulties.

The mature approach is accepting sometimes we get our way, and sometimes we don't. Good State (Parental) responsibility is essential if we are to create a facilitative society as a 'holding environment'.

The hierarchy of parental authority is symbolised within the State by: The people (electorate), House of Commons, House of Lords, the Royal Family and finally God.

But, betrayal and disappointment are the painful underside of all this.

The group picked up on the theme of idealisation: The Politicians (and us) start with the fantasy of the ideal State, and then they and we have to accept the reality of failure. Politicians always become corrupted by power (May saying she would not hold an election but calculating that the opposition is weak) and become something else other than what they set out to be. We can blame them but they carry the unwanted and disavowed parts of ourselves. (Note: after the referendum David Cameron left overnight). We have an idealised vison of what they're supposed to do, and therefore our reaction to it. Our disappointment - left confused or aggressive or feel isolated. Then the Daily Mail kicks in with its valency for stereotypical analysis. If

there had been tabloid press in France in the 18th Century, would they have had a revolution?

Hypothesis 1: When we are confronted with Brexit or the election of Donald Trump, we have to confront our own nationalism, protectionism and racism. Trump and Brexit represent contained forms of civil war, and populism is a way of containing revolution. However, by accepting this then the risk is that we become 'politically democratic but socially fascist'.

Analysis 2:

If the economy fails who will we blame, (or kill)? It was the middle class who brought Hitler to power. It seems that the extreme media commentary (peaceful exercise of freedom of expression) have provided a safety valve for the social processes of Brexit and the Trump election. To have such an outlet for change is healthy, if this closed down then there is a problem. A democratic society needs a sophisticated infrastructure, this is why in both the UK (tabloid press) and Trumps attacks on judges decisions felt so insidious. What Theresa May is saying by holding the Brexit election is 'I want to close down the debate, the diverse opinion, through the election process'.

Part of the current dynamic is a war between globalisation (finance and markets) and the role of the traditional Nation State. Is it an issue of tension between boundaries. The rational response is to desire a smaller state, 'to hold back something in order to go forward'. It is a coherent response to anxiety and change.

Big data is a code word for globalisation as a bigger power opposing human power.

But is global finance all bad ?If it can be channelled for the good of the nation state not just the wealthy then it can bring benefits and greater equality . This links to issue of the parenting role; the formation of identity is created from anxiety i.e. will another sibling get more than me. Therefore if politics is felt as discriminatory it directly feels intolerable to share. How this will get played out is the issue. Will we become customers of the NHS, or will the NHS continue to represent shared state responsibility?

But there has been an abandonment of the principles of equality, and now people feel desperate and are driven by envy. Since 2008 80% of the income growth has gone to 1-2 % of the population. Parts of the North have been devastated over this time. Refugees have often been dispersed to poorer northern areas, without any investment money to create new housing, education and health services. There is no or basic infrastructure to support their integration. This increases the sense of unfairness, and creates deeper pockets of social deprivation. This will increase the projections onto immigrants, by increasing the shame and guilt.

The question of power was raised several times in relation to social exclusion, and the dynamics that flows from this are of humiliation, shame, anger.

The Government plays into these processes by using phrases like they support 'hard working families'. The words are chosen carefully. There is a valency attached to

such words and phrases that gathers up the buried psychic energy, newspapers constantly adapt and change their ideological positions through sound- bites to attract new interest. The 'fourth estate' is a major power player of this vocabulary, with specific interests, and they do not have a valency to understand the unconscious. People can be mobilised by this dynamic language. We are caught between a mix of ideologically driven vocabulary and data driven statements. Will it pass ? What can we do about it ?

What we do know is that by using the Listening Post we are expressing our own agency as citizens to reflect on these processes. The act of people coming together is an act of agency and optimism, as is meeting new people and talking together. Is our valency for the group or is our valency for holding guilt on behalf of society? A member finally commented that we need to look within ourselves and ask why we don't see ourselves as wrong. Can we sit and be truly comfortable with ourselves and not feel need to put others down.

Hypothesis 2: Society is finding ambivalence difficult. How can we 'accept AND change' and how do we find the wisdom to know the difference between the two. We need the courage to change the things we can, and the serenity to accept those things which we can't.

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