

Foreword

The world is changing rapidly. A century ago almost all accounts of the lives of the poor were written by the rich and often for the rich. Occasional exceptions, such as *The ragged trousered philanthropists* (Tressell, 1914), proved the rule. Lisa Mckenzie begins her account of life in St Ann's with her reaction to reading George Orwell's observation that the poor smelt.

Fifty years ago social observation had become the territory of the concerned middle class and other only slightly less affluent outsiders. In this book Lisa talks more warmly of Ken Coates' and Richard Silburn's studies of St Ann's, published as *Poverty: The forgotten Englishmen* by Penguin in 1970. But these were still outsiders' perspectives, shocking the English middle class of the day by revealing that areas remained in England where not all children had shoes. Ken had been a Nottinghamshire miner, but only came to that because he refused to be conscripted into the army.

Today those who have been poor increasingly write their own stories of living in poverty. Lisa's family were Derbyshire agricultural labourers and Nottinghamshire miners with few other employment opportunities. From leaving school around the age of 15 she worked at the Pretty Polly factory making tights until she was 25, then worked part time in shops in Nottingham city centre. She has been homeless, and afraid. She did too much too young. She had a mixed-race child and lived in St Ann's as a young mother.

Lisa later spent many years at Nottingham University becoming a social scientist – learning how to use long words, to anonymise the identities of her interviewees, to call people by their surnames when writing, to read obscure texts, to produce a PhD thesis and to get funding to study the estate she lived on – but she didn't have to struggle to know what she was talking about. She only had to struggle to learn how to talk about it in the ways expected for a largely middle-class, academic readership.

Today we translate. We describe the different worlds we live in to each other as those worlds move apart. More and more people try to span these worlds. Observation is not longer enough; immersion is no longer enough. As the gaps between our experiences grow it becomes ever more necessary to hear largely first-hand, unadulterated accounts, the descriptions from the inside.

In *On the run: Fugitive life in an American city*, Alice Goffman (2014) recently told of her experiences of living for six years in one of the poorest quarters of the US – that is the US equivalent of this UK book, but Lisa gets nearer to the bone.

Lisa also works from the inside, but with the greater insight because she is that much closer to those she is reporting on. There is much less surprise expressed in this book at the state of things, and much more surprise about how little many academics and the rest of the affluent (or mildly affluent) understand the world they share. Lisa's recent immersion has been in the university; she has always been in the city.

The very different roles of women and men are clear in both McKenzie's and Goffman's work. Goffman's America is more violent; prison is much more usual for men, while eviction is the common and comparable experience for women. Even in the poorest parts of Nottingham it is still not the norm for the majority of men to have been in prison or so many relatively young women to have faced the bailiffs and been put out on the street with their children. But the poorest areas of Nottingham are now moving in the direction of Detroit and Los Angeles.

There are other connections between life in the poorest parts of the US, the most economically unequal of all large rich nations, and the UK, the most economically unequal in Europe. For example, men in the poorest parts of Nottingham subscribe to conspiracy theories more and more readily to explain why they are where they are (p 96). Often UK-recycled conspiracy theories come from the poorer parts of the US, from where the YouTube videos are posted, suggesting that 'the Illuminati apparently infiltrate and control American hip-hop music' (p 97). Lisa recounts '...elaborate theories that relate to the American hip-hop artist and rapper Jay-Z, and his wife and pop star diva Beyoncé who, they believe, are puppets for the Zionists' (p 97). These theories cross the Atlantic just as easily as the 747s that daily

carry so many bankers between London and New York, one every two minutes at peak times.

Getting by continues a tradition of reporting on the poorest areas, but it also continues the tradition of updating how that is done and by whom. It has only taken one hundred years to move from well-meaning upper-class men writing these accounts, to today having them written by more knowledgeable working-class women. One hundred years may seem a very long time but it is a revolution. Not only are the class divides growing but more and more people are trying to leap over those divides to explain one rapidly changing world to another rapidly changing world.

Lisa describes some of the names now given to babies in the neighbourhood: Shanelle, Dior, Tyree and Ymani. Contrast them with the names the extremely rich Candy brothers gave their children at a similar time: Isabella Monaco Evanthia and Cayman Charles Wolf.

The Candy brothers, Nick and Christian, are not that differently named from any Lisa or Danny, or George, Alice and Ken – but forenames in future will be much more of a class give-away than in the recent past. We (in the upper middle) tend to ridicule the names of those at the bottom and the top, without realising just how odd apparently ‘normal’ names may soon become.

We are dividing. Just as upper-class people increasingly live in upper-class ghettos, sending their children to upper-class schools – not just to give them a huge head-start but to try to escape the class prejudice that very posh kids might experience in the average state school – so too some of the lowest-class people stay in St Ann’s because it provides ‘safety from class prejudice’ as Lisa puts it. The rich and poor stay in places you might have thought they would try harder to leave, despite the cost for both groups.

For the upper classes, their schools and houses cost a fortune. They may feel they have to send their children to boarding school, because it is the done thing. For the lower classes, the cost of the stigma of living in the poorest area – of not being offered jobs because of your postcode, and the cost to your children’s life chances of not getting out if you can get out – is also partly outweighed because leaving is not the done thing. How would you fit in elsewhere? It is not

the done thing to trust others who are not like you, and this applies whether you are very rich or very poor.

Lisa ends her story by explaining how the police still fit people up and what results when that happens. The police stand between rich and poor. They keep order, not just in the literal sense of apparently preventing trouble by being about, but the social order between the haves and have-nots.

For much of my life I thought we were moving away from the racism and police violence I saw as child. We may have, a bit, but I have also been getting more posh. And much now is getting worse. It's not just the cuts and the food banks. It's also the attitude, including the attitude of authority. Or as Lisa puts it,

I realise that Britain is a far more dangerous place for our children than it was prior to the shooting of Mark Duggan. The fear of the young black, or mixed-race, man, and the loathing for the families who live on council estates, have been institutionalised and legitimated through the courts and our legal system. (p 192)

People are getting by, but it's getting much worse at the bottom, and you are unlikely to know the half of it because that is the way it currently is. Britain is once again as economically unequal as it was when Orwell was writing in the 1930s. The best-off 1 per cent once again take 15 per cent of all income.¹ In the years in between we came together and then fell apart – we came together before, when we began to recognise just how bad the repercussions of falling apart really are. There are worse things than just 'getting by' and we are currently heading towards them.

Danny Dorling
Oxford, October 2014

¹ Dorling, D. (2014) *Inequality and the 1%*, London: Verso Books.