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Challenging injustice: the importance of collective ownership of social policy

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Beveridge's former 'five giant evils' – Disease, Idleness, Ignorance, Squalor and Want – are different now (Stephens et al, 2008: 7–8). With the new five modern evils of elitism, exclusion, prejudice, greed and despair, injustice begins to propagate itself more strongly. Writers like me find it easy to say what is so very wrong, but usually struggle to make suggestions as to what could and should be done.

Some say that it is easy to criticise but hard to find solutions. The central argument here is that it is beliefs that matter most – the beliefs that enough of us still hold – the beliefs that underlie most injustice in the world today. To ask what you should do after you dispel enough of those beliefs is rather like asking how to run plantations after abolishing slavery, or how to run society after giving women the vote, or how to run factories without child labour. Elitism, exclusion, prejudice, greed and despair will not end just by being recognised more clearly as unjust, but that recognition is a necessary precursor.

All the five faces of social inequality that currently contribute to injustice are clearly and closely linked. Elitism in Britain suggests that educational divisions are natural. Educational divisions are reflected both in the misfortunes of those usually poorer children who are excluded from life choices because they are seen as not having enough qualifications, and also through the supposed achievements of those able to exclude themselves, often by opting into private or otherwise segregated education.

Elitism is the incubation chamber within which prejudice is fostered. It provides a defence for greed. It increases anxiety and despair as endless school examinations are taken, as people are ranked, ordered and sorted. Those who reach the top are mostly those with most early advantages, mixed up with a few who are unusually pliant and conform to what they are told to do when young. This perpetuates an enforced and inefficient hierarchy in our most unequal of affluent societies, such as the UK, the USA and Israel. Elitism is a profound injustice.

Just as elitism is integral to all the other forms of injustice, so is exclusion. The exclusion that rises with elitism makes 'the poor' appear different, exacerbates

inequalities between ethnic groups and causes the racial differences we identify so easily and do not realise are so temporary – racism and wider prejudice always shifts to new targets over time but a minority are often excluded simply because they are said to be racially different.

Similarly, rising greed could not be satisfied without the exclusion of so many, and so many would not now be excluded were it not for extreme greed. But the damaging consequences of exclusion caused by the greed of the rich spread upwards to the rich. They even reach up to those who appear most successfully greedy: rates of despair might be highest for those who are most excluded, but even the wealthy in rich countries are now showing many more signs of despair, as are their children.

Growing despair has become symptomatic of our more unequal affluent societies as a whole. The prejudice that rises with exclusion allows the successfully greedy to try to justify their greed as apparent reward for some superiority, and makes many others think they deserve little. The divisions and ostracism that such prejudice engenders further raise depression and anxiety in those made to look different, the apparent failures, 'the losers'.

When inequalities rise, those who feel that they have succeeded in life usually begin to behave more callously towards others. As elitism incubates exclusion, exclusion exacerbates prejudice, prejudice fosters greed, and greed – because wealth is simultaneously no ultimate reward and makes many without wealth feel more worthless – causes despair. In turn, despair brings us into a state of apathy and prevents us from effectively tackling injustice.

Removing one symptom of the disease of inequality is no cure, but recognising inequality as the disease behind injustice, and seeing how all the manifestations of injustice which it creates, and which continuously recreate it, are intertwined is the first step that is so often advocated in the search for a solution to injustice (Dorling, 2015). Each route to that solution only differs in style, not substance.

In 2014, Janet Yellen, the new chair of the US Federal Reserve, described growing inequality as un-American (Gongloff, 2014). Public surveys, however, showed how far US public opinion still had to go (Da Costa, 2014). The American public could still be sold the American dream even as inequalities rose and rose ever higher in the USA and the dream became a fantasy even more removed from reality. Shortly after securing control of the presidency, in October 2017, Donald Trump sacked Janet Yellen.

It is in the most unequal affluent states of the rich world, the USA, UK and Israel, that injustices are most commonly presented to the public as fair, right and proper, where walls are built the highest and minorities are excluded most vigorously. It is in these places that the worse of politics is found (Dorling, 2016), and where the environmental damage from behaving so badly is usually greatest (Dorling, 2017).

The table below shows the 20 richest countries for which comparable data on inequality exists from before and after 2004. In ten of the twenty, inequalities have been rising. In the other ten they have been static or falling. There is no

inevitability that inequality always rises. Since 2015 it has been falling in more nations than rising (Dorling, 2018). There are huge differences between otherwise similarly rich nations. The degree of inequality and injustice you live under is a choice that is made and which is constantly changing.

Table 1.1: Household income inequality, most affluent countries of the world, 2004–13

Quintile ratio 2005–2013	Ratio from 2004 or earlier	Change 2004–05 to 2013	County	Rank
10.3	6.4	3.9	Israel	1
9.8	8.4	1.4	United States	2
7.6	7.2	0.4	United Kingdom	3
7.6	5.4	2.2	Spain	4
6.9	6.5	0.4	Italy	5
6.4	6.2	0.2	Greece	6
5.8	7.0	-1.2	Australia	7
5.8	5.8	0.0	Canada	8
5.4	3.4	2.0	Japan	9
5.3	6.1	-0.8	Ireland	10
5.2	5.8	-0.6	Switzerland	11
5.1	5.6	-0.5	France	12
5	4.5	0.5	Belgium	13
4.7	4.3	0.4	Germany	14
4.6	4.7	-0.1	Austria	15
4.5	5.5	-1.0	Netherlands	16
4	4.3	-0.3	Denmark	17
4	3.9	0.1	Norway	18
4	3.8	0.2	Finland	19
3.7	4	-0.3	Sweden	20

Note: The table shows the ratio of mean incomes of the best-off 20% of households to the worst-off 20%. The 20 most affluent countries in the United Nations Development Programme's 'highest affluence group' are included.

Source: UNDP, *Human Development Reports* for 2015 (Table 3) and 2005 (Table 14).

The power of crowds

Almost every time there is a victory for humanity against greed, it has been the result of millions of small actions mostly undertaken by people not in government. Examples include: votes for women, Indian independence, civil rights in America,

or that earlier freedom won just to be able to say that the earth goes around the sun, a victory against the power of those holding most of the riches of those times and their prejudices.[1]

People can choose between falling into line, becoming both creatures and victims of markets, or they can resist and look back for other ways, other arguments, different thinking. When they have resisted in the past, resistance has been most effective if exercised by those thought to be the most powerless. But we quickly forget this. We need to be constantly reminded.

Almost anyone who gets near the top of any institution is self-selected by a desire for superiority – unless there is evidence of some other strong and intrinsic motivation. That is part of the reason why the harmful effects of inequality go all the way to the top. More inequality means we are all more obsessed with status, and those who get furthest up are the most obsessed; the main exception is those who are born to assume superiority (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2015).

The antidote to being dominated is to act collectively, otherwise all that results is a new aristocracy. It is true that some people genuinely want to get to the top to help others. The quote 'Never underestimate the power of persistence' is usually attributed to Nelson Mandela, but Mandela's power was a movement outside of his prison. It was a movement of millions.

It is also often said that: 'The struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.'[2] Thinking that you have to do all your thinking anew and alone is the wrong place to start. To remember earlier times, times before you were born, you need stories, stories that tell you it need not be like this, because it has not always been like this.

Overcoming the power of kings

The latest era of growing inequalities is coming to an end. It is something that cannot go on forever, and so it will not. But it will not end without the millions of tiny acts required to no longer tolerate the greed, prejudice, exclusion and elitism that foster inequality and despair. Above all else, these acts will require teaching and understanding, remembering what is fundamental about being human, remembering compassion:

> The human condition is fundamentally social – every aspect of human function and behaviour is rooted in social life. The modern preoccupation with individuality – individual expression, individual achievement and individual freedom – is really just a fantasy, a form of self-delusion … (Burns, 2007: 182)

Accept that individuality is an illusion – we all have and are both kith and kin. Start to behave differently, and even the most apocalyptic of writers will agree that every act of defiance, no matter how small, makes a difference; whatever '... we do or desist from doing will make a difference …' (Bauman, 2008: 39). We can

never know precisely what difference, and have no reason to expect our influence to be disproportionately large, but nor should we expect it to be especially small.

It is equally vital to recognise that none of us is superhuman (Dorling, 2012). Seeing yourself as special can lead to loathing others you see as lazy or feeble and below you. This contempt can often be hard to disguise, and is clear to see in the expressions of some right-wing politicians when they talk of 'the poor'; they appear to feel dirty just talking about 'them'. At its extreme, for those who hold this disgust for others, social cleansing is attractive – removing the poor because you think they are dirty. This is how fascism begins, and it always ends in death. A fascist is someone who believes it is right to kill. Fascists differ in how dirty they get their hands. They range from the small town doctor slowly dispatching his elderly female patients, to the planner creating the new clean city designed to hold only the chosen few.

Because none of us are that special, trusting a small coterie is dangerous. It makes no sense to expect others to do great deeds and lead us to promised lands, at least not with any reliability. We are slowly, collectively, recognising this, learning not to forget that, although we can learn without limits, we may not get that far when we each try to learn on our own; our minds were not made to live as we now live:

> The world is indeed a strange and mysterious place, but not because of any hidden causal order or deeper purpose. The mystery is largely in the operations of the human mind, a strange organ capable of creating its own vision of reality with little regard to how the world really is. (Baggini, 2008: 181)

We need each other because we have evolved not to be loners. Without tolerance and understanding of each other we are all capable of causing great harm through persecution.

In our minds we can either despair or celebrate our stories. Sometimes we can see absolute immiseration as food prices soar and barbarism takes place in wars on terrorism that repeat older histories of persecution. From other moments of our histories we can tell numerous celebratory stories where injustices have been progressively defeated, the power of kings overcome, principles of equality in law secured, slavery abolished, voting franchises extended, free education introduced, health services or health insurance nationalised, minimum incomes guaranteed (including for unemployment, sickness, old age and childcare). In these celebratory tales, legislation is won to:

> protect the rights of employees and tenants, and ... to prevent racial discrimination. It includes the decline of forms of class deference. The abolition of capital and corporal punishment is also part of it. So too is the growing agitation for greater equality of opportunity – regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. We see it also

> in the increasing attention paid by lobby groups, social research and government statistical agencies to poverty and inequality over the last 50 years; and most recently we see it in the attempt to create a culture of mutual respect for each other. (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009: 260–61)

We see hope in a redistributive budget in the USA under Obama that could not have easily been imagined as possible a year earlier than it was created. We see despair in the votes for Trump by millions who did not see change coming quickly enough for them and who were taught to be fearful of others. We see hope in the contempt in which many of those who have taken most are now held, the tax avoiders and art hoarders; but we can also see the danger of a return to business and misery as usual.

'The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living' (Marx, 1907). We see our history, our future, our nightmares and our dreams first in our fickle imaginations. That is where we first make our present, in minds which each mix the same ingredients so differently. How we come to live is not predetermined. Across Europe we see change: in a narrow majority of European countries Table 1.1 above shows *equalities* to be rising. Political parties that once would never have made it near the sidelines came to power in Greece in 2015, and are now contenders for power elsewhere. In Britain in 2016, 52% of those that voted in the referendum[3] decided to leave the EU because they were told it was the only way things could get better. They were fooled but still they showed they would act. In France in 2017 the Front National threatened to take power. They did not even come close. Everywhere the masses can now threaten the power of modern political kings and dynasties.

Geographically all it takes is a little imagination, a little 'wishful thinking', to see that a collection of movements will achieve the change so many wish to see in the world; these are movements that need only to exist in our imaginations in order to work. If we have and spread enough faith that they will work, then they will work. These are movements to '... make our own world from below [where we] are the people we have been waiting for' (Shah and Goss, 2007: 17). These are the opposite of movements towards world government: too many of those have been proposed '... in which the best stocks could rule the earth' (Connelly, 2008: 380). These are, instead, movements where it is proclaimed that '... the future will be amazing, and after that the whole world will become a better place. [Because] if we cannot make that happen, then no one can' (Magnason, 2008: 279). And these are movements about which people who advocate them repeatedly tell us that: 'It can happen – so long as everyone does not leave it for somebody else to do …' (Kelsey, 1997).

The words above were written before the most recent wave of protests; before the Arab spring that began with the death of Tarek al-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia on 17 December 2010; before Los Indignados was created in Spain in 2011 (BBC News, 2012); before Syriza became the second largest party in the Greek Parliament in 2012; before the Occupy movement swept around the

world, reaching Australia in 2013; before the Podemos Party was formed in Spain in 2014; before, as I wrote in 2014: '*all the events of 2015, 2016 and 2017 which – whatever they are – are unlikely to be predictable, minor, or unrelated to the change that is now upon us'*. The dawning of a fairer world is in front of us as the old order that René Descartes saw take form on the dockside in Amsterdam in 1631 abates (Stott, 2010). In 1631, when still a young man, René Descartes noticed that all around him people had stopped thinking about much beyond earning money. He said: 'In this great city where I am living, with no man apart from myself not being involved in trade, everyone is so intent on his profits that I could spend my whole life without being seen by anyone.' Dany-Robert Dufour, who first pointed out what Descartes was really seeing, goes on to explain: 'Descartes's capitalist Amsterdam has now conquered the world. It is not just that everyone in this planetary city is now involved in trade; trade is now involved in everyone in the sense that it shapes us all' (Dufour, 2008: 168-9).

Change is never simple. It takes a wider geographical perspective: the kind of perspective that Descartes and Dufour – almost four centuries afterwards – were both grasping for. This short chapter has only just touched on the changes within the wealthiest of nations. Look further afield and a far more optimistic picture begins to take form. Elsewhere in the less rich world are billions of people about to learn from our mistakes. Social policy has to be the product of millions of minds, thousands of books, hundreds of manifestos. When a small group tell you they have all the answers – beware. But also beware pessimism. Even if you live in one of the most unequal and pitiful of affluent nations by the mistakes of your leaders you send a message around the world: Do not act like we have acted, do not follow us, because there lies folly. Social policy learns as much from the mistakes as from the successes.

Notes

1 This list is taken from Steel (2008: 247) and Kelsey (1997: 370–71).

2 This itself is, of course, just another of those lessons so easily forgotten by humans, given that our brains have not evolved to cope with having to remember so much. The original quote replaced 'people' by 'man', but that has now changed in the telling. For four versions of the chant being remembered and repeated see Field (1999: 74). Patrick Field quotes Milan Kundera, as recorded in turn by Neil Goodwin in *Life in the fast lane* on the M11 road protests. See also Bauman (2007: 84), also referring to Milan Kundera's novel *Slowness*. Milan Kundera originally wrote these words in *The book of laughter and forgetting* in 1979. For a much fuller quote and explanation, see http://vannevar.blogspot.co.uk/2009/03/struggle-man-power-memory-forgetting.html

3 The 52% majority in the referendum was about 30% of the whole UK population, so it is best to avoid saying 'the majority of the population'.

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