Inequality and Oxford

DANNY DORLING

In every university city in which I have lived a colleague has always pointed out how remarkably socially divided that city is. There is usually a road which is emblematic of the divide. One along which you pass by the homes of every social class, from high to low. As a child growing up in Oxford I was told that the emblematic example was Divinity Road. The social distance from the former ambassadors' residences at the top of the hill to the drug dealer's dwelling near the bottom was as steep as the road itself. I came back five years ago to find the bottom gentrified and the top elevated out of the price range of any retired ambassadors who lacked 'family money'.

Equitable cities are all alike; every unequal city is unequal in its own way. One reason the UK attracted so many migrants from more socially equal European countries is that inequality produces the chimera of opportunity. But there are far more opportunities at the bottom in more unequal cities. People with very large amounts of family money don't clean their own homes, work behind a counter, or have a rudimentary understanding of DIY.

Each English city I have lived in has had an area, ranging from just half a square mile in size to ten times that in which the housing was entirely unaffordable, or at least unaffordable to even the highest paid person in the public sector. Newcastle, Sheffield, Leeds, Bristol – each has its exclusive enclaves. The Oxford I left as a child was mostly affordable. The price gap between neighbourhoods was measured in 1986 as being just a few thousand pounds and everyone in need with children qualified for a council house in the city. I came back to find a weird dystopia where the poor were being offered housing in Birmingham and oligarchs were rumoured to be purchasing around Park Town.

In each English city I have lived in someone has at some point told me that it is "the most divided city" in England. In truth, in contrast to what is normal in Europe, almost all English cities are remarkably divided, but Oxford is divided in its own special way. For such a small city it has managed to not only maintain but also increase some of the steepest social gradients found anywhere in Europe. These are the divides along and between its streets, its schools, and which typify Oxford society. This should be a great embarrassment to those of us who work in the University, but it mostly isn't – which is one of the key reasons the divides are so wide and have grown.

The academics of the University of Oxford appear largely unaware of the role their University plays in tilting the playing field of the city so sharply. Instead of that being acknowledged, what I hear most often are complaints that the housing allowances are not enough to permit one to live in a posher area – in those streets where those fortunate enough to be members of colleges that buy property for their governing body live.

In other universities I have sat on committees set up to monitor the extent to which the university is helping the wider interest of the people in the city. Oxford was the first university I have worked in where the prevailing attitude appears to be that the city is lucky to have the university and exists largely because of it and to service its needs. I say prevailing, because many of you are exceptions to the common view. But if you are an exception please speak up a little more loudly.

The University 2013-2018 strategic plan began by claiming that the structure of the University and colleges 'creates an enduring sense of community' and an academy identity that is 'life-long'. This is questionable, but as someone who grew up in Oxford I can confirm that, so far, I have had a life-long sense that the University is not that interested in the communities of the city. The old plan included a commitment to contribute effectively to the social life of the city. So why are local people, including school children, still barred from our libraries in term time? Opening the doors would be the least we could do.

The plan stated that 'We believe that the size of the student population should be determined by the University's capacity to provide a high-quality education to every student.' I was struck by the arrogance of the statement. No university is an island, even one as surrounded by water as Oxford's. Were that criteria truly applied then the student body could grew ever larger, the staff would swell, and the city would become a one-horse town. The reason Oxford is better than Cambridge is that there is so much more to the city than just a university, or two. But that advantage is being squandered.

The university's commitment to the wider community of Oxford in the 2013-2018 plan fitted neatly on a single page, page 10. It reads like the wish list of a selfish lover. Everything the university wanted to further its own expansion and desires was suggested as something it was doing for the wellbeing of the local community! Space does not permit a line-by-line analysis but this should be plain to any clear-eyed reader.

The university is currently consulting on the 2018-2023 strategic plan and Congregation will consider a draft on 30 October. The current draft contains just one paragraph on how the University will 'build a stronger and more constructive relationship with our local and regional community'. Remarkably, it is an even more blatant statement of how we will continue to do what we want to do while declaring some of that as: 'reaching out'. The document will likely be dissected by future social scientists to help explain the *Brideshead Revisited* moment we are living though today.

I hope to be proved wrong. Perhaps Congregation may insert some lines in the plan that read: "In 2018-2023 the university will examine the extent to which its members' actions over the course of the last century have contributed to Oxford's current social problems. We will try to understand the extent to which we are responsible for the city being the most unaffordable to live in in the UK, having the tightest of greenbelts, having one of the most divided school systems in Europe, and suffering from a health divide between Oxford's

neighbourhoods that has grown so widely in recent decades."

It is laudable that the draft 2018-2023 plan includes a promise to 'increase the opportunities for staff and students to travel sustainably around Oxford on bike or foot; benefitting their health and wellbeing and improving the local environment through traffic free cycle and pedestrian routes'. But the traffic problems of Oxford need to be solved for everyone in the city, all residents and tourists, not just for our staff and students in our part of the city. Many tens of thousands of people drive across the green belt every day spewing out pollution while the university boasts of its low carbon commitments.

If the colleges as charities were more cognizant of their public interest remit they would look at the wider picture. Soon the first new secondary school since 1963 is to be built in the city. As I write it has no suitable site. Which college has offered up the fields it does not need or use for such a wonderful educational purpose?

The draft plan states that: 'A staff and student housing programme will be developed to deliver additional accommodation to mitigate the impact of the high cost of private sector accommodation in Oxford.' But where will the people who staff the shops of the city live, who clean the hospitals and cater to the tourists that are attracted, after all, by the University?

On education you can divide the children of the city of Oxford into ten cohorts of equal size from those sent to schools from which it is almost impossible to emerge without a string of A's to those who will almost certainly not be going to any university. All this is predictable from home postcode and parental income. It is almost entirely unrelated to any inherent genetic endowment that each Oxford child may have.[1] Very few children know others outside of their cohort. It would be hard to design a more segregated social system than this in such a small space.

You may say that the schools of Oxford and the social divisions within the city are no concern of the University, although some schools are named after the colleges that helped found them. You may point out that a few undergraduates volunteer to tutor, but you know how little that has helped. Or you could ask what the University could do to help and why we do not know what that is. There is a great irony that at the very time we talk about decolonizing the university, we barely notice how we have been colonizing the city.

Our attitude matters. The maintenance of pristine cricket pitches hardly ever played on while local schools have had to build over their fields due to lack of space sends a message. The burning of 'the boat' by particular colleges when they are head of the river after summer eights–while local schools cannot afford basic sports equipment–does not go unnoticed. There is a painful juxtaposition of new foodbanks and local teachers bringing in food for their pupils to eat, within a short distance of high tables where people (like me) can eat every day for free.

Oxford had soup kitchens in the past. There was a period when they were not needed and the university was more open to students from a wider range of backgrounds. It may be complex but that is no excuse for us to pretend the problems of the city we live in are not also our problems. While we build new constructions out of the most expensive stone and marble, people in the city are sleeping in sheds. And some of them will serve you in some capacity today, but you can pretend it is not happening.

I went to a primary school in Wood Farm and was recently asked by a former pupil, when she learnt we had both attended the same school, where my dad worked on the line. I had to say he didn't–not everybody's father did. That same week an old alum asked me which Oxford college I had studied at as an undergraduate. In similar fashion, I had to say that I had not. If you have to look up where Wood Farm is then you do not know the very small city you are working in.

Of course there are positive signs too–often aided by heads of houses who grew up in a more progressive era and desperately wish to see it return. At least the university now becomes acutely embarrassed about admission and does much better than a tier of other universities that rank below it in widening access. At least we now hire from a far wider pool rather than concentrating so much on appointing so many men (and a few women) who gained their own degrees here.

My view of the university is that somehow the parts are much nicer than the whole. It is a place full of well-meaning and concerned staff whose aggregate kindness and sincerity somehow fails to return a net positive outcome. This is a conundrum.

Oxford University is a product of its geography and our society, of being at the heart of England in many different ways. When England was last at a peak of economic inequality in 1913 the university was not a progressive place. When England was most equal in the 1960s and early 1970s the university was changing its intake to include many more women and within the space of a few years more of the working class than it had taken in its entire history. Inequality stupefies the mind. Our new 'aspirational' targets are to take less than a single extra new student per college from the poorest 40% of society. Do we really have so little faith in our own ability to do better?

Oxford University often ignorantly blames the country's schools for not producing children with enough A's for its admission tutors to consider. But it is much more plausible to blame the current state of England for making Oxford University so unimaginative in terms of what it does, and in not realising that what little it does do to reduce inequalities is so ineffectual.

However, there is a silver lining. The Brexit embarrassment might help. As Brexit takes the shine off England's many claims to greatness, even if Theresa May were to revoke article 50, we are–as a nation–going to have to take a long hard look at ourselves. The Brexit embarrassment helps demonstrate why being so out of touch is so bad. Oxford excels at out of touch–creating young men and women that it separates from society who then so often blunder when in high office.

Incidentally, if May does revoke Article 50 – and she has the power to do so without having to consult a single official up to about 10pm on 29 March 2019 – I would suggest we quickly commission a statue of her. There is a space on a plinth of Oriel College high above the high street where a lonely-looking man appears to be about to step out and fall. I would suggest bringing him safely indoors and putting her up there instead. But we'll still be debating our strategic plan long into Trinity term, so there is no need to put that particular suggestion in the strategic mix yet. We will know where we stand on Europe long before we have agreed what our real aspirations are. However, we have – potential.

[1] There are tiny but still very interesting genetic effects on potential. Thankfully we do look at these in different ways now, rather then be-lieve it is sensible to send the children of dons to America, as we did during World War Two, to preserve their special genes! See: Morris, T. et al. (2018) Testing the validity of value-added measures of education-al progress with genetic data, British Educational Research Journal, DOI: 10.1002/berj.3466