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If lions could talk? Learning to live together in Britain

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'If lions could talk we would not understand them' is an observation attributed to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who spent time in the 1940s working as a hospital porter in London and a lab assistant in Newcastle. Ludwig had been a very rich man in his youth. In middle age he experienced a little squalor. He said that just as we could not understand the thoughts of a lion simply by being suddenly made able to speak to a lion, so most rich people in 1940s Britain would not have understood the thoughts, fears and understanding of most poor people through conversation or *vice versa*. There was so much more to the social gaps in language than occasionally slipping in a bit of Latin.

Today it is being argued that we are again as divided as we last were in the 1920s and 30s, and we again face the possibility of a long period of slight but sustained reduction in social inequality (Kasser 2002; Krugman 2007; Irvin 2008; Lawson 2009). We will again face the problem of realising that we do not understand each other, even if we speak the same language.

Inequality has consequences for the possibility of communication. In countries like Britain, where inequalities have been allowed to rise so much, poorer households cope with poverty collectively by getting into debt. The initial results of the first wealth survey to be undertaken since the 1970s (ONS 2008) showed that just before the crash, in 2007, some 35 per cent of us had unsecured debts of many kinds; 3 per cent had debt on store cards, 6 per cent mail order debts, 9 per cent hire purchase debt, 13 per cent had other unsecured loans and 20 per cent had credit card debt, many people having more than one type of unsecured debt. The debt rates were highest for people in employment, who are more likely to be given loans. The debt rates were highest of all for women aged 25–34. Most women aged 25–34 living in Britain have *unsecured* debt they are trying to repay. And this is all before including deferred student loans and mortgages.

From 1979 to 2007 successive British governments did not think the distribution of wealth mattered enough to measure it properly. From Margaret Thatcher to Peter Mandelson (who famously once said ‘we are all Thatcherites now’), ministers were seriously relaxed about wealth inequalities rising. Rising social and wealth inequality was similarly one of the main contributory factors causing financial speculation to rise quickly in the 1920s (Galbraith 1992 [1954]). In the immediate aftermath of the 1929 crash the wealthy assumed business as

normal would eventually resume. It took 50 years before we collectively forgot – and that business as normal began again. In 1929 those in power would have done better to have looked at what they had and how they could have better lived with it, rather than dreamed of a gilded age quickly returning. Today, in comparison to 1929, we are on aggregate richer beyond what anyone could have then dreamed, but we show little evidence yet of having advanced much further in our group thinking.

By 1999 the average American family held about \$5000 of credit card debt at any one time, paying about a fifth of that total a year in interest, but not paying off the balance. This debt rose dramatically as people were told they were living through boom years and, by 2002, it stood at nearly \$9000 per family there (Frank 2007). And, although that near doubling of recent years may shock, remember that it was in the 1980s that most adults received their first credit card and then (in those same brief 10 years) that personal credit card debt rose the fastest. Personal bankruptcies became six times more common in the United States between 1980 and 2002 as a result of all these changes, and bankruptcy rates carried on rising (James 2008). It is not that we were not telling stories of our times, but in both the books just referenced here, James's *The selfish capitalist* and Frank's *Falling behind*, and many similar recent books, the stories were mainly of *us*: the assumed quite rich, the bulk bookbuying market. Usually assumed men (like all the writers

in the reference list below). However, that market is changing. Consider university students.

In Britain around 1990 only a quarter of university students took out loans. Students tend disproportionately to be the children of the rich, but many are poorer and cannot rely on their parents to help them out. In 1990 that poorer quarter borrowed some £70 million between them all. Ten years later, after the abolition of maintenance grants, almost three quarters of university students had to take out loans (Greater London Authority 2002). Their annual debt was raised *twenty-five fold* in just one decade, to £1.8 billion. Debt was spreading up the social scales and escalating to amounts never before recorded. People began also to have to borrow more. Money that was being used often just to tide people over lasted for shorter and shorter periods of time.

It was during the 1980s that societies such as those of Britain and the United States changed from being relatively cohesive to becoming places where inequalities rose so greatly that the glue began to come unstuck. It was then that people began in each others' minds again to turn into different herds of animals, sheep and goats, lions and dragons. That was when it started again to become near impossible for one group to comprehend the fears, concerns and wishes of another group. By 1999 university students were being taught through their textbooks about others' debt (George and Wilding 1999, 142). By 2009,

just a decade later, we began to become more equal. The next cohort of university students faced a job market with fewer prospects and less support from parents; it became less of a necessity to explain strain, anxiety and poverty to students. It became easier for the students, if not many of their lecturers, to *empathise*. The stress trickled up. The children of the affluent became a little more sensitised again.

When worldwide inequalities rose to their most recently measured pinnacle, in 2007, Thomas Pogge noted how:

Wealth affects people's perceptions and sentiments, makes them much less sensitive to the indignities of poverty and much more likely to misperceive their own wealth as being richly deserved and in the national interest. (Pogge 2007, 143)

However, it is not just between continents that understanding is hard; just as much insensitivity can be found within a single town in an affluent country where the rich talk of the laziness, laxness, fecklessness and general uselessness of the poor in contrast to their perceptions of themselves as great risk-takers and great mental labourers, as highly efficient and sensitive people, when what they really have is a very highly developed sense of personal self-worth. It is difficult not to think like this if you are affluent. It is how most affluent people think, and if you

are rich and admit to being only human too: well, how do you excuse your riches (Cohen 2002)?

The age of excess is coming to an end. As Clive James astutely remarked at the end of 2008, getting rich just for the sake of it has now gone permanently out of fashion just as the codpiece did centuries before. Just as we don't expect the codpiece back again any time soon, history will hopefully not repeat itself again. We've been stung twice within the length of a single long lifetime. In 1915 and 1916, and again briefly in the late 1920s in the United States, the very wealthiest 1 per cent of 1 per cent of the population (0.01%) received more than 5 per cent of all national income. By 2008 inequalities had risen enough for that to happen again (Dorling 2010). What do those at the top say about their own lives and their own fears? What most frightens them? When a hedge fund manager was asked in 2007, he said: 'don't publish my name: If you publish things like that my children's lives get endangered . . . gun to his head . . . kidnappers . . . I'm not speculating; it does happen' (Peston 2008, 205). However, unlike poverty, there is an easy solution to having too much money.

In 1936 the writer George Orwell found that for the first time in his life waiters in cafes looked him in the eye. It was a shock. He was in Barcelona during the Spanish civil war. It was only when what had been normal was removed that he realised how strange normality had been,

how odd it was not to look others in the eye, how servile and rude language had become, how much better people treated one another when there were no 'better people', when all the cars were taken away and all travelled alike. The private cars were commandeered. They had only recently become one of the key symbols of status (Harman 2002, 400). Imagine you lived in a country where you could look everyone around you in the eye, where they understood you and you understood them. On Saturday 14 November 2009, all HBOS cash machines, branches and online banking stopped dispensing cash worldwide. It was put down to a power failure in Yorkshire (BBC 2009). What if one day it were not that simple? Who would understand you? Who would you understand, in a crisis?

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