

What Comes Next?

In 2007, I was the co-author of a little book entitled *Feelbad Britain*.¹ Its opening sentence was:

The starting point for this analysis of contemporary British society is simple: the observation that in an era of apparently unprecedented overall material prosperity and economic stability, people seem to feel no better than before and quite possibly worse. Obviously the “feel-bad factor” affects us all in different ways and to different degrees, but there is enough of it about to suggest a general trend across society, amounting to what we would characterise as a crisis in social relations and others have called a “social recession”. We are a society of people who don’t appear to like themselves or each other very much. Twenty-first century Britain, our country, is afflicted with a deep-seated and widespread social malaise.

We went on to describe this social malaise in many different forms including such diverse factors as obesity, depression and anxiety, behavioural problems in children, prison population, drug addiction and chronic indebtedness.

The book made a small impact at the time but it was swiftly overtaken by a factor to which we paid a passing reference but whose importance we largely failed to realise; the global financial crisis which gathered pace with the collapse of Lehman Brothers at the end of 2008. We noted the failure of Northern Rock and even used the phrase “global financial crisis” but failed to appreciate the extent to which this would usher in the subsequent vast bailout of financial institutions and the years of austerity which would make our phrase “*unprecedented overall material prosperity and economic stability*” seem rather outdated. It is, perhaps, a sign of just how unexpected was the scale of this crisis that three of the four authors of *Feelbad Britain* were professional economists.

In 2010, two academics specialising in epidemiology, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, made a vastly more substantial contribution to this social-malaise, *The Spirit Level*.² In the words of the Equality Trust³ founded by the authors, the book highlights the “*pernicious effects that inequality has on societies: eroding trust, increasing anxiety and illness, (and) encouraging excessive consumption*”. It shows that for each of eleven different health and social problems: physical health, mental health, drug abuse, education, imprisonment, obesity, social mobility, trust and community life, violence, teenage pregnancies, and child well-being, outcomes are significantly worse in those rich countries with greater inequality.

The inequality about which they wrote has deepened in the UK since 2010. A report⁴ from the Office for National Statistics in 2020 that showed that, over the past decade, median income for the poorest fifth of the population fell by 4.8% to £13,800, mostly in the last four years, while that of the richest fifth increased by an average 0.7% a year to £62,400. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of this decline is the impact on health. In 2010, a report by Michael Marmot noted the effect that inequality had on differential health expectations. In 2020 in a report which reviewed this Marmot Report ten years on, the same author came to the conclusion that: *England is faltering. From the beginning of the 20th century, England experienced continuous improvements in life expectancy but from 2011 these improvements slowed dramatically, almost grinding to a halt. For part of the decade 2010-2020 life expectancy actually fell in the most deprived*

¹ Unfortunately now unavailable in its original form though a set of essays containing the original work with the same title can be found on Amazon at only £0.21! Perhaps that is why the only customer review calls it “*the stupidest book in history*”. The essay can be found [online here](#).

² *The Spirit Level*, R.Wilkinson and K.Pickett, Penguin Books, London 2010,

³ [The Spirit Level](#)

⁴ [Average household income 2020](#)

*communities outside London for women and in some regions for men. For men and women everywhere the time spent in poor health is increasing.*⁵

In the first years of this century, this problem, which might be simply termed ‘unhappiness’, attracted a good deal of attention from a variety of other academics, perhaps most importantly Richard Layard, an eminent economist at LSE, once a key adviser to the Labour Party on welfare policies. Layard’s definition of happiness was:

By happiness I mean feeling good – enjoying life and feeling it is wonderful. And by unhappiness I mean feeling bad and wishing things were different. There are countless sources of happiness, and countless sources of pain and misery. But all our experience has in it a dimension which corresponds to how good or bad we feel

and so is his perception of how happiness has evolved in modern societies

*There is a paradox at the heart of our civilisation. Individuals want more income. Yet, as society has got richer, people have not become happier. Over the last 50 years we have got better homes, more clothes, longer holidays, and above all better health. Yet surveys show clearly that happiness has not increased in either the US, Japan, continental Europe or Britain.*⁶

I have summarised his work and that of others in a personal essay⁷ which offers the fairly obvious conclusion that this apparent rise in personal unhappiness could be placed squarely on the way in which neoliberal economic policies came to dominate the world in the early 1980s; in Gramscian terms to form the prevailing hegemony. One consequence of all this work is that the Office of National Statistics began an annual publication of a complex ‘well-being’ or happiness index which, unfortunately, only goes back to 2014.

After the financial shock of 2008, attention shifted to the fundamental problems of the neoliberal economic policies which seemed to be the root cause of the ‘feelbadness’ about which we wrote and to the political turmoils which swept over Europe. In 2019, Paul Collier, an Oxford economist, summarised the result of this social malaise as follows: “*Anxiety, anger and despair have shredded people’s political allegiances, their trust in government and even their trust in each other...Deep rifts are tearing apart the fabric of our societies. They are bringing new anxieties and new anger to our people, and new passions to our politics.*”⁸ Throughout Europe, these rifts have fundamentally altered the face of politics, in particular causing the virtual collapse of some long-established social-democratic parties and the rise of political formations with little or no political history such as the 5 Star Movement in Italy or New Democracy in Greece. The most disturbing aspect of this has been the rise of far-right political formations in many European countries with such as the French National Rally Party led by Marianne Le Pen and the Freedom Party in Austria actually on the edge of forming governments in western Europe. The rise of Alternative für Deutschland to be the effective opposition in Germany is also disturbing. The growth of authoritarian right-wing groups in eastern Europe is an established fact.

In the USA, the rule of Emperor Trump has, thankfully, ended but the passions which surrounded his rule have not subsided leading to what some observers have described as an attempted coup including a riotous invasion of the Capitol preceding Biden’s inauguration. It is difficult to believe that we have heard the last of such as the Proud Boys or, indeed, of Donald Trump.

There has not been an equivalent shift in British politics or, perhaps it would be better to write, in English politics given the effective obliteration of the Labour Party in Scotland, once its heartland.

⁵ [Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On](#)

⁶ R. Layard, *Happiness*, Penguin, London, 2005

⁷ [The Pursuit of Happiness](#) by Mike Prior

⁸ P.Collier, *The Future of Capitalism: Facing the New Anxieties*, Penguin, London, 2019

In a way we have been lucky that our own right-wing or neofascist 'leaders' have been more figures of fun than apparent dangers to the democratic state. Even so, the startling Brexit vote and the collapse of the so-called Red Wall of Labour seats in England suggest that something is shifting in our political system. In fact, it is not too far to suggest that the British political and constitutional system is broken with the two, previously dominant, parties in a state of disarray and the national makeup of the country pulled apart.

A dozen years along from *Feelbad Britain*, the book's thesis seems a little behind the times given the political storms of these years and the social turmoil of the Covid pandemic. However, in the midst of our current crisis, I have wondered just how much this sense of 'feelbadness' contributed to these political storms and how much it will contribute to the stormy times which we will face once we have come through it. Certainly, one feature of the current health crisis is how much inequality has been a factor in infection rates and deaths, something recorded by Danny Dorling.⁹

To return to Gramscian terminology, the final breakdown of the neoliberal hegemony in 2008 has led to a period of inter-hegemonic turmoil similar in some ways to the 1920s and 70s which also formed such periods. I have written previously on this at some length¹⁰ but, to simplify, the concept of hegemony was proposed by Gramsci to solve the problem which had beset all European radicals, particularly Marxists, for decades; why the subordinate working class failed to overthrow the dominant capitalist class even after its own oppression and exploitation had been endlessly revealed. Why even then they failed to follow Shelley's impassioned words to:

*Rise, like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number!*

written in 1819 despite the oppressed being many and knowing that the oppressors "were few".

Hegemony can be defined as the way in which dominant groups in society maintain their dominance by securing the spontaneous consent of subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated construction of a political, ideological and economic consensus which incorporates both dominant and subordinate groups. It needs to be acknowledged that, even as it provides a conceptual basis for resolving Shelley's conundrum, hegemony remains a somewhat mysterious process, something which has always bothered some Marxists who want to retain some form of economic determinism. The problem in part lies in the heart of my definition, that hegemony is both 'spontaneous' and the result of 'negotiated...consensus'.

As noted above, the disturbing political feature of the past dozen years of inter-hegemonic crisis is the emergence of forms of authoritarian governance which can be loosely described as fascism combining both a kind of spontaneity and also political negotiation. Trying to pin down just how this might resolve itself in the disparate states of Europe let alone the chaos of the contemporary USA is impossible. However, one disturbing thought is that the extreme authoritarianism of the measures required to combat Covid could provide a social boost to this trend. In this country, one obvious consequence of such measures is that they have greatly heightened the sense that the United Kingdom is increasingly disunited with four separate governments applying different rules of conduct. This impact is heightened by Northern Ireland becoming even more isolated by the complex customs rules that now apply to it after Brexit.

Just how far this separation will go is difficult to judge though the SNP have clearly set out their agenda for independence. One very machiavellian thought, worthy perhaps of Dominic Cummings, is that the Conservative government will, with public great reluctance, accede to another independence referendum knowing that in England and Wales, they have an almost unassailable lead. In 2019, the Conservative majority in these two countries was a rather astonishing 158 seats. It is true that in 1997, Blair won a landslide victory in England but that was when the Tories dropped to just 33.7% of the vote and the LibDems won 18%. Before then it was back in 1966 that Labour won a majority of English seats. England has been a Conservative country.

⁹ [Want to understand the Covid map? Look at where we live and how we work](#)

¹⁰ [Hegemony and all that stuff](#)

But whatever the results of nationalist manoeuvres, one thing is clear; that as we emerge from the shadow of Covid, the constitutional and social character of the United Kingdom will be under great strain. Leaving aside the question of just how far apart the countries of the 'United' Kingdom will become, Covid has brought into sharp relief the problem of England with its very centralised governmental system trying to cope with the regional aspects of Covid without any clear regional structure to implement any measures. There is a good reason for this difficulty which is that England is a country which has never had any such structure. Again, I have written about this elsewhere¹¹ but, to summarise, England is not, of course, a state; it is itself a region within a state albeit one that has a powerful internal belief that it is a nation with a clear and indivisible sense of nationhood. One odd consequence of this, so ingrained that it passes without comment, is the national insistence on having separate international sporting teams. Imagine having a teams called Catalonia or Bavaria playing in the World Cup but that is, in effect, similar to the teams currently called 'England' or 'Wales' in various forms of football.

This assumption that England is one indivisible nation remains so ingrained that it is an effort to realise just how unusual it is in modern Europe. Most large European states accept that they are formed from regions that have such different cultures, even languages, that they are almost different countries in everything save the political formation. Just how unstable this makes the country varies widely. In Spain, Catalan and Basque independence means that the country perpetually hovers on the edge of dissolution whilst in France, acceptance of separate national languages from Brittany to Nice to Alsace seem to satisfy most separatist desire. In Belgium, Flemish/Walloon contestation has led almost to the formation of separate countries whilst in Germany, the *länder* structure seems to satisfy nationalist aspiration.

The thing that separates England from other large European countries, apart from the fact that it is not a country as state but, politically, a region within a state, albeit the dominant one, is that it has its own creation story based upon conquest. Other European countries tend to accept that they were created by a process of amalgamation or, in the case of some of the smaller countries, by the division of states even though this amalgamation or separation might have been, in part, based on war. England, historically, either conquered all the other constituents of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland or, in the case of Scotland, had a perpetually antagonistic relationship until King James, almost accidentally, brought the two nations together, nations which remain quite distinct. This history extends to the country of England itself with a 'conquest myth' starting with Alfred hiding in the marshes of Athelney before emerging to begin a long war against the Danes which eventually led to the formation of England. Despite subsequent reconquest by the Danes and then the French takeover, this central idea of a country called England ruled first from Winchester then London remained dominant even if its northern boundary sometimes seemed a little hazy. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare seems a little unclear as to whether Northumbria and Cumbria belong to England or Scotland or are separate countries.

There is little doubt that introduction of some kind of regional structure within England is necessary to reform its highly centralised government which has, in many ways, shifted little from the time of Henry VIII and remains almost comically archaic. What other country, for example, could have as a senior member of its government, a minister entitled the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, an office apparently created in 1491? The first attempt at such reform was undertaken by Oliver Cromwell who set up ten regions covering England and Wales and ruled by his Major-Generals. This venture did not end well and little else was done until the early 20th century when various forms of regional authority were set up to look after such diverse matters as electricity supply and road development. Nine "standard regions" were set up in 1946, in which central government bodies, statutory undertakings and regional bodies were expected to cooperate. Various other regional structures were looked at throughout the second of the century mostly with the intention of developing some kind of regional economic planning though always without any democratic involvement or, perhaps crucially, any kind of revenue raising power. The number of such regions varied between seven and ten. The key underlying feature of the later efforts was the glaring disparity between the setting up of new 'parliaments' in three sub-regions of the United Kingdom defined as nations and the centralised structure of by far its largest component, England.

¹¹ [The Land of Lost Content](#)

The Blair government made some quite strenuous efforts to set up regional structures. In 1998, regional chambers were created in the eight English regions outside London under the provisions of the Regional Development Agency Act. The powers of the assemblies were limited, and members were appointed, largely by local authorities, rather than being directly elected. The functions of the English regions were essentially devolved to them from Government departments or were taken over from pre-existing regional bodies, such as regional planning conferences and regional employers' organisations.

It was originally intended that these should develop into elected bodies following referendums and one such, the London Assembly, was set up in 2000. However following the electoral rejection in 2004 of such a plan in the North East, the idea was dropped and, after 2007, under the new Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, the regional assemblies were effectively phased out, something which was completed after 2010 by the Coalition Government though the London Assembly continues in existence.

The fact of the continuing existence of this Assembly highlights the underlying problem with any form of new regional structure for England; the overwhelming financial dominance of London and the South East. This dominance can be placed in personal terms quite simply; if one lived in 2020 in Richmond-on-Thames then your median full-time weekly pay would have been a bit over £893 whilst in Islington it was £843. In Great Yarmouth, it would have been £473 and in Blackburn, £457 weekly. Regionally, in 2020, the median annual earnings in London were £41,017 whilst in Yorkshire and Humberside they were £27,856.¹² Of course within these places, there were great disparities in such earnings with some poverty in Islington and wealth in Yorkshire. But the overall picture is clear.

This disparity is reflected in the share of national production in the various regions which shifted dramatically in the last century. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, the economies of the South East (including London) and the North were roughly on level pegging, accounting for 35 and 30 per cent of British gross domestic product respectively. By the end of the twentieth century, the South East's share had risen to 40 per cent while the North's had dropped to 21 per cent. From a position near parity, the regions had so diverged in their fortunes that the output of one was twice that of the other. Through boom and bust, London then increased its share by another 5 percentage points between 1997 and 2017.¹³ There is a small population disparity between the two regions but not enough to account for such a huge swing.

This kind of regional disparity is not confined to the UK; other countries in Europe have shown similar features¹⁴ in particular, the Paris region in France and southern Germany as well as the well-known north/south divide in Italy. However, the scale and time-scale of the long-term relative shift does seem to be a particularly British phenomenon.

Wilkinson and Pickett showed a decade ago how such income and wealth disparities led to acute social problems including, as I noted above, physical health, mental health, drug abuse, education, imprisonment, obesity, social mobility, trust and community life, violence, teenage pregnancies, and child well-being. There can be little doubt that the problem of 'feelbad Britain' which we wrote about has got worse in the years since. It is astonishing that in 2019, more than 20% of the UK population was living in poverty, around 14.5 million people, whilst some 2.4 million including more than half a million children, were totally destitute at some point in the year., This was an increase of about 50% compared with 2017.¹⁵ There can be little doubt that one consequence of Covid will be that these numbers will increase in 2021.

¹² Taken from [the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings time series of selected estimates](#)

¹³ Frank Geary and Tom Stark, *What happened to regional inequality in Britain in the twentieth century?*, **Economic History Review**, 69, 1, 2016,

¹⁴ Simona Iammarino *et al* [Regional inequality in Europe: Evidence, theory and policy implications](#)

¹⁵ [UK Poverty 2020/21](#)

This does paint a very bleak picture of a country soon to emerge from an unprecedented health emergency with stretched public and private finances, high unemployment, a lot of problems with ongoing mental and other health issues, Brexit problems and a political system wracked with uncertainty. There is no one single solution to these issues. The first step is clearly recognition of the scale of inequality and just how important it is to rectify the situation. However setting up a 'Northern Powerhouse', a perhaps rather unfairly derided initiative by the Coalition Government in 2015, became little more than a PR exercise when unaccompanied by specific and wide-ranging initiatives. There has been much talk of a "Green New Deal" after Covid but without any clear policy flesh on the phrase. In particular, such talk does little to capture the essential underlying problem of gross inequality.

The best this essay can do is to introduce the idea of a 'solidarity of the shaken', a phrase first used by the Czech philosopher, Jan Patočka, who died in 1977 after his involvement there with the Charter 77 movement. The phrase means

a particular bond that originates between people who have experienced a strong disturbance of the certainties, big and small, that hold their lives in place.

The "shaken" is an individual whose everyday assurances have been overturned by a deeply shocking experience, which allows them to change their perspective on life. From Patočka's point of view, the shaken are "those who are capable of understanding what life and death are all about, and so what history is about", as they have regained the true meaning of their own life through the experience of an actual danger. By rediscovering the meaning of their death, human beings can also understand what life really is, i.e. something that cannot be restricted to ordinary every day experience, or limited to mere facts.¹⁶

There can be little doubt that the worldwide experience of the pandemic can be seen in these terms; its dangers but also in the sense of various kinds of community solidarity that it invoked. It has to be said that at the moment that there is little sign of the kind of leadership needed at all levels emerging in our political parties but time will tell.

Meanwhile all I can do is finish with a song, one that my choir is currently 'zooming' but will, hopefully, soon be singing together:¹⁷

*We shall be known by the company we keep
By the ones who circle round to tend these fires
We shall be known by the ones who sow and reap
The seeds of change, alive from deep within the earth*

*It is time now, it is time now that we thrive
It is time we lead ourselves into the well
It is time now, and what a time to be alive*

*In this Great Turning we shall learn to lead in love
In this Great Turning we shall learn to lead in love*

¹⁶ [Charter 77 and the "solidarity of the shaken"](#)

¹⁷ [Thrive East Bay Choir Performing We Shall be Known by MaMuse](#)