

Covid and Society (British academy)

1. If we are to tackle covid successfully, it will be crucial that society has trust in the measures imposed by local and central authorities. That trust will be no less important when it comes to rebuilding society during and after some kind of normality has been restored. It is not just a question of trust, however. Pragmatically and morally trust is neutral: misplaced trust is at best ineffective, at worst pernicious. It is *trust in the trustworthy* that is really valuable. Individuals who feel they need a moral compass should make this principle their lodestar. The problem remains: how should we reconfigure our society and economy in such a way that they make trust in the trustworthy easier to practice. How can we be helped to recognise the trustworthy and to exercise discriminating trust?

This capability is obviously crucial in the middle of the covid outbreaks and will remain so when we try to rebuild society while also gradually learning to cope with covid (it is most unlikely to go away altogether). In that rebuilding we should put the concept of trust in the trustworthy at the heart of our endeavours. In political terms, such a focus requires the concept of participatory *citizenship*. Citizens are those who feel they have a stake in the community and can influence its decisions. Our aim is the wellbeing of citizens. This concept includes future citizens, as represented in the - still imperfectly implemented - Welsh guidelines on *The Wellbeing of Future Generations*. If the future sustainability of our planet does not become a guiding principle in our social and economic activity, then the wellbeing of future citizens cannot be ensured, indeed it is certain to be undermined.

We need therefore to pay especial attention to those aspects of our society which at the moment make it difficult to exercise citizenship and to practise trust in the trustworthy.

Two aspects of British society are proving especially damaging: (a) over-financialisation and (b) over-centralisation. Money is an ambiguous repository of trust: We trust it in so far as it enables us to obtain resources and services; but when its availability is very unequally shared in society, the resulting concentration of power and influence generates intense distrust and becomes detached from other moral values. Centralisation ignores the distinctive needs and resources of local communities, and therefore weakens citizens' scope for participation. Taken together, over-financialisation and over-centralisation are egregiously demonstrated in the covid test-and-trace fiasco: contracts were awarded to financial and security companies without experience in the relevant skills (though with close connections to influential politicians) while local authority and community procedures for detecting and moderating outbreaks of infectious disease were overridden.

2. Threats to wellbeing and mental health are best approached through the experience that most individuals find satisfaction and fulfilment in a caring relationship and/or when they are active members of a community which is doing something important and morally good. This can be practised in a family, through bringing up children, through sport, through a shared cultural activity, through working in a military formation, in a company providing goods or services, through the exercise of a profession or participation in a voluntary association. In such communities trust in the trustworthy is tested daily: most people feel at their best when they are enabled to behave in a trustworthy manner, or in

accordance with the principle (at the heart of most religions) 'Do unto others as you would they should do unto you'. If society is configured in such a way that such participation is facilitated rather than impeded (care, for example, becomes frustrating and depressing if adequate resources and personal support are not available), then it will become much easier for us to progress towards the sustainable way of life which is necessary to ensure tolerable life on this planet well into the future. The paramount socio-economic objective, then, is to promote sustainability and a caring community.

3. A vital, though often unacknowledged, interest we have as citizens, is in the rule of law. The politics of a society which promotes trustworthiness and sustainability must observe the rule of law, and citizens must be enabled to participate as far as possible in the making of laws and regulations which affect them, and to choose and if necessary change their leaders in a peaceful and orderly manner. A high level of trust in local and national authorities is essential for reducing the reach of the present pandemic and moving towards sustainability. Some kind of democracy is the best form in which to achieve this, since it enables people to express their opinions and choose those who govern them; democracy is also better able than alternatives to respond to crises and to change policies which are obviously not succeeding.

It is sometimes thought that authoritarian systems may be more effective than democracies in dealing with the climate crisis, since they can issue orders requiring people to accept the self-limitations necessitated by the creation of a more sustainable way of life. However, the experience of such regimes suggests that in practice they function, not through the smooth fulfilment of commands, but rather through oppression, discrimination and opaque patron-client relationships which exploit the people and the environment. Most people therefore distrust them but are unable to express their views, and instead resort to evading their commands and forming their own independent small groups of mutual trust and mutual support.

4. A huge influence on every facet of our society is the commercial or industrial company (or corporation). At the moment most companies take as their main criterion for success 'shareholder value'. This means that the purpose of the large company is no longer mainly the provision of trustworthy goods or services (making reliable furniture or safe electrical equipment, for example, or providing a service such as mass distribution of food or repairing household utensils), but rather the payment of maximum dividends to shareholders and the generous remuneration of directors and managers.

The principle of shareholder value ensures that the make-up of companies' executive boards does not reflect the stake which the community has in the success of their substantive purpose: employees, customers, suppliers and intermediates, and those affected by their effluents and discharges. This is especially damaging where private companies run social services such as health provision, social care or education. The British Academy at present has a fruitful project, under Colin Mayer, to highlight what changes need to be made in company law and practice to ensure that companies' substantive purpose genuinely takes priority in their behaviour over the remuneration of a few influential people. The reports of this project should contribute to our report on Covid and Society.

In addition progress is urgently needed on disentangling the complex ownership

structures of many companies, especially in international finance and services, so that beneficiaries can be identified, responsibility established for violations of the law, and involvement in tax scams and tax havens reduced or eliminated. At the moment tax havens enable powerful companies and wealthy individuals to escape responsibility for taxation needed to finance infrastructure and social benefits (health, education, communications, etc) which are indispensable for them to function at all. The proportion of social finance lost in this way is, in the nature of things, unknowable, but it may be considerable and certainly impoverishes our public services. As a result it weakens social trust, as citizens observe companies acting in ways which deepen inequality and seem completely detached from their local and day-to-day concerns. At present, moreover, law-enforcement agencies seem unable to assign criminal responsibility for fraud, even when practised on a large scale.

5. A huge problem which has been highlighted by the pandemic is social, ethnic and regional inequality. Areas of the country which have had the greatest involvement with financial services, especially London and the south-east of England, have become exponentially richer, while other areas, especially those till recently dependent on now closed industries and mining, have become poorer. Inequality not only deprives the less advantaged in obvious ways, but also tends to make all social problems worse. Unequal societies degrade trust in the trustworthy, as they have higher rates of mental illness, drug abuse, obesity and teenage pregnancy, a higher prison population, and lower life expectancy than more equal societies at a similar level of economic development.¹

The pandemic has intensified these problems and also highlighted them. It has made obvious the fact that some of our most vitally needed workers are the least well paid. And it has demonstrated that, when it is obviously essential, we can change profoundly the way our economy is run. This situation has given us both the motivation and the opportunity to find ways to alleviate inequality and social distrust.

6 Another major problem highlighted by the pandemic is mental ill-health. Even before the pandemic our social practices were tending to isolate individuals for much of their lives, especially in old age. Social media and various kinds of interactive technology (skype, zoom etc) have somewhat alleviated this situation, but many have felt that they cannot permanently replace face-to-face human relationships. Social media have also exacerbated problems by commercialising many personal relations, while their business model requires them to promote the circulation of ever more extreme messages, including those conveying religious, ethnic and class prejudice, hatred and even incitement to violence.

For various reasons mental health has always had low priority in the NHS, especially now that private companies have taken over some medical services. We need to consider whether there should be an alternative service, based on local communities.

Many young people grow up with alternating periods of unemployment and insecure low-paid employment, which undermine their confidence in the future. They also generate long-term mental health problems, which may obstruct individuals from engaging fruitfully in both the economy and the community on a permanent basis. Training should be

¹ Richard Wilkinson & Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: why more equal societies almost always do better*, London: Allen Lane, 2009.

organised both locally and centrally to give them the opportunity to learn skills and become engaged with the production or service economy on a permanent basis. The overall objective should be to build up personal resilience and self-confidence (in some languages this would be expressed as 'self-trust'). A minimum citizens' income would help to reduce the risks of retraining, and would also replace complicated social security regulations and the plainly inadequate universal credit. An aptitude for caring might perhaps be cultivated by a period of universal citizens' service in youth, either in the armed forces or in a serving or caring capacity.

7. Local authorities have seen their income and powers substantially reduced since the 1980s. They should once again be entitled to tackle processes which are best dealt with at the local level (housing, health services, education and social care, for example), and either given the resources to do so, or be given much more freedom to raise their own taxes.

Below the level of local authorities local assemblies need to be supported which enable individuals to contribute to their own community. Citizens' assemblies are one possible way of achieving this, to enable members of the public to learn about local and national problems and to generate suggestions which, in the case of national policies, can be fed into higher elected bodies. Compassionate and well-informed localism should become a guiding civic principle.

8. Much thought must be given to social media, followed by practical action. They do provide means of communication for many otherwise socially isolated people. At the same time they violate every principle of compassionate localism: they make disproportionate profits for their owners and managers, and they are organised in vast quasi-monopoly corporations, combining functions which ought to be distinct and fulfilled in separate companies. Thus Google combines a powerful search engine with directing clients towards favoured providers of goods and services; Amazon combines mass retail services with advertising. Facebook's business model, as already mentioned, depends on encouraging controversy and sometimes misinformation together with extreme and sometimes inflammatory postings, giving such postings precedence over meticulous, moderate or nuanced commentary. All such companies need to be taxed in the countries where they have users and brought under the rule of law, so that they can be held responsible for allowing their platforms to be used to mediate libel, known misinformation, hate speech or incitement to violence.

9. In general, then, we need to reshape our society, politics and the economy so as to strengthen participatory citizenship and to facilitate the exercise of trust in the trustworthy. That principle applies overall, and it emphatically includes strengthening confidence in the future, and therefore the generation of a sustainable way of life.