

Present Shock: From Fear to Building Commonweal

By Martin Large

Why is the new British prime minister Boris Johnson relatively popular outside, say, Scotland, the *Guardian* newspaper and – dare I say it – the *Self and Society* bubbles? Ruth Eversley (*Guardian* Letters, 17 July 2019 (see <https://tinyurl.com/y3m5nbm3>) writes:

I doubt if there is a single *Guardian* reader who is unaware of the evidence that Boris Johnson is an equivocating, sloppy philanderer. What we need help with is understanding why so many people are willing to follow him over the cliff. Is it all self-serving myopia, or is there something more serious going on which we have failed to grasp?

Just as the Queen famously asked economists why they hadn't seen the 2008 financial crisis coming, so behavioural scientists are challenged to answer Ruth Eversley's question. Something very serious is going on with such strange phenomena as Johnson, and it's called 'present shock'. It's important to understand present shock, as it is being deliberately administered, for example by Dominic Cummings, the newly appointed special political adviser to Johnson. According to 'The civil servant' (*Guardian*, 1 August 2019) he is a 'shock doctrine aficionado' who represents the 'normalisation of a myopic ruthlessness and a corrupting desire to go for broke, to win by any means necessary' to Brexit by 31 October 2019.

Present shock consists of rampant insecurity, anxiety and fear. It is profoundly disabling. We may deny present shock, dismiss many likely consequences of Brexit as 'Project Fear', or want to escape; but nagging fears persist, as the threats are real. We are experiencing a reality distortion zone. The causes of current insecurity include a toxic mix of global heating, no-deal Brexit, poverty, rising inequality, precarious jobs, debt, prejudice, poor housing, knife crime, punitive welfare, attacks on human rights by a hostile Home Office, distrust of politicians and 'false news'.

There is a general feeling that things are getting worse, with no solutions in sight for a sustainable future. Current anxiety levels go way beyond our everyday human sense of existential anxiety, and manifest in unprecedented levels of child and adult mental ill health. Businesses are scared of a 'F**K Business' Johnson, and ex foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt, who are prepared to send businesses bankrupt for the sake of Brexit. Students are worried by debt. People fret about how safe their jobs, houses, pensions and neighbourhoods are. Many fear sinking into precarity. The NHS, a pillar of our security, is threatened by privatization. We are currently experiencing the hottest summer on record.

But present shock is by no means an accident. It comes from what Naomi Klein calls 'the Shock Doctrine'. Economic shocks, such as austerity,

are applied in order to secure our compliance to power, privilege and profit. To get people to work harder, make them afraid, as under Jeremy Hunt's bullying leadership of the NHS when he was health secretary. Wasting £1bn on Johnson's London vanity projects seems OK with his supporters, but let's not invest in social housing. As the late Labour politician Tony Benn used to say, to make the rich work harder, you pay them more, and to make the poor work harder, you pay them less. Implement the UK's punitive, 'skiver proof' universal benefit system and scrap social security. Socialize the banks' losses, and make ordinary people pay instead. Implement no-deal Brexit, even though it will make most of us poorer, and benefit the Brexit Party's Nigel Farage's elite neoliberal supporters, the 'Bad Boys of Brexit'.

These 'bad boys' in turn connect with Russia, dark money, tax dodging and Trump, as researched by Professor Molly Scott Cato, the Green South West MEP: 'This alliance came together before and during the referendum campaign. It attracted far-right ideologues, climate change deniers, tax-dodging foreign billionaires, specialists in voter manipulation, a convicted fraudster and a political operative described by David Cameron as "a career psychopath"'. Make Britain more secure by attacking Iraq and Afghanistan. Disaster capitalists and disruptors proclaim the benefits (to them) of the 'creative destruction' wrought by the chaos of Brexit, financial crisis or wars.

We face a perfect storm of insecurity.

Authoritarian leaders benefit from insecurity. They know that some people will support authoritarian leaders, because in a storm you cling to nurse for want of something worse. Such leaders, advised by behavioural scientists, know that the higher the levels of fear, anxiety and insecurity, the more present shock people will experience – so therefore the more that people will cling to them. The advice comes from behavioural scientists who draw on research such as by the renowned Tavistock Institute and by Karl Polanyi into the causes of fascism. In the 1930s Polanyi researched the casual links between social insecurity and both left and right authoritarian leaders. He was puzzled by the question of why democratic countries so quickly gave way to fascism, arguing that massive

insecurity is caused when capital, land and labour are commodified, to be bought and sold on the market. When financial markets dominate society, when people lose their workplace rights and suffer precarity, when land is marketized causing house prices and rents to rocket, then many people feel so powerless that they will give anything for security, to the point of sacrificing democracy.

In the 1950–60s, Tavistock researchers Fred Emery and Eric Trist were committed to making Britain a better place after the war through action research for more productive, democratic workplaces, for example with coal miners. They invented participative methods of large groups of people transforming organizations through co-creating desirable futures, and how to realise these. However, they also discovered that even successful organizations and piecemeal change could cause serious systemic disruption, and turbulent destructive change, if they ignored the whole context. Pushing too much piecemeal change, they argued, led to not just a turbulent but a white water, vortical world. Changes could be so rapid and contradictory that businesses and governments would suffer 'nervous breakdowns', as with Brexit. In this context, just consider the incessant government tinkering with schools and the NHS.

Emery and Trist observed that in an uncertain, volatile, complex, vortical world, people tend towards magical thinking, simplistic solutions such as 'Brexit' or 'Remain', silo thinking, so they don't see the whole picture – polarized thinking, fundamentalism and addiction to 'the new'. They seek to calm their inner fears through voting for charismatic strong leaders, and blaming 'the other', such as immigrants. Threatened people feel that they are trying to 'take back control' in what feels like a runaway world. So, for making sense and to meet security needs, they may fall back on cultural pathologies, often hyped by social media filter bubbles, such as xenophobia, racism, nativism, fascism, sexism, identitarianism, religious or market fundamentalism, terrorism and nationalism. But the magic silver bullet solutions only make things worse by causing more disruption. And if you are in the Brexit reality-distortion zone, you may ignore the likelihood of a no-deal Brexit leading to civil war breaking out again in Northern Ireland, Scotland breaking away from the United

Kingdom and social conflict in England. Emery and Trist argued that introducing more disruption, more shocks, more magic silver bullet solutions in an already volatile, white water world could lead to systemic breakdown.

So, they would have been deeply concerned about the deliberate war against reality waged by such people as Pavlovsky, Zurkov and Cambridge Analytica. Peter Pomerantsev of the London School of Economics argues that they aim to produce ‘radical relativism’, where constant spectacle drives out sense-making, with conspiracy replacing ideology, facts equating to lies, conversation collapsing into mutual accusation that every argument is just ‘information warfare’, and the sense that everything under your feet is constantly shifting, liquid, inherently unstable. Just think of the equivocating alternative facts of Johnson and Trump?

What to do? Polanyi, Emery and Trist helpfully analyse the causes and consequences of fear and insecurity for people and society. However, they also suggest solutions, including participative democracy, building civil society as a countervailing force to the market and the state, and reclaiming land, labour and capital. Above all, Emery and Trist advocated calming the vortical world, *slowing down*, like pausing Brexit for a re-think, so as to extricate ourselves from the reality-distortion zone we are in, and so establish common ground.

First, organizations, communities, businesses and government can slow things down, by reflecting together, analysing, building relationships, searching for a common desirable future and how to get there, based on shared values. For example, how to implement a Green New Deal by engaging people whilst reducing inequality. The Irish used deliberative democracy, a national Citizens’ Assembly, to slow down and resolve their heated, hitherto intractable abortion debate with information and debate. Stella Creasy, Rory Stewart and former prime minister Gordon Brown have suggested this process for helping resolve our EU relationship.

Secondly, reclaim our capital by bringing the runaway private financial system firmly under

democratic control, so that finance serves the common good once more.

Thirdly, land for people – capture the value of land for people, to bring about community-led, affordable, well-designed, zero-carbon homes in convivial neighbourhoods, for all and as a right.

Fourthly, dignify labour by strengthening workplace rights, ending in-work poverty and reducing inequality.

Fifthly, initiate the ‘cathedral project’ of the Green New Deal to re-design the way we live so as to adapt to global heating successfully.

Finally, consider how to build human security, health and flourishing. We have nothing to fear if we tackle the causes of fear. When we engage in co-creating our commonweal, then present shock vanishes, and energy is unleashed for the common good.

Selected Reading

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