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Series preface

The first Left Book Club (1936–48) had 57,000 members, had distributed 2 million books, and had formed 1,200 workplace and local groups by the time it peaked in 1939. LBC members were active throughout the labour and radical movement at the time, and the Club became an educational mass movement, remodelling British public opinion and contributing substantially to the Labour landslide of 1945 and the construction of the welfare state.

Publisher Victor Gollancz, the driving force, saw the LBC as a movement against poverty, fascism, and the growing threat of war. He aimed to resist the tide of austerity and appeasement, and to present radical ideas for progressive social change in the interests of working people. The Club was about enlightenment, empowerment, and collective organisation.

The world today faces a crisis on the scale of the 1930s. Capitalism is trapped in a long-term crisis. Financialisation and austerity are shrinking demand, deepening the depression, and widening social inequalities. The social fabric is being torn apart. International relations are increasingly tense and militarised. War threatens on several fronts, while fascist and racist organisations are gaining ground across much of Europe. Global warming threatens the planet and the whole of humanity with climate catastrophe. Workplace organisation has been weakened, and social democratic parties have been hollowed out by acceptance of pro-market dogma. Society has become more atomised, and mainstream politics suffers an acute democratic deficit.

Yet the last decade has seen historically unprecedented levels of participation in street protest, implying a mass audience for radical alternatives. But socialist ideas are no longer, as in the immediate post-war period, 'in the tea'. One of neoliberalism's achievements has been to undermine ideas of solidarity, collective provision, and public service.

The Left Book Club aspires to meet the ideological challenge posed by the global crisis. Our aim is to offer high-quality books at affordable prices that are carefully selected to address the central issues of the day and to be accessible to a wide general audience. Our list represents the full range of progressive traditions, perspectives, and ideas. We hope the books will be used as the basis of reading circles, discussion groups, and other educational and cultural activities relevant to developing, sharing, and disseminating ideas for radical change in the interests of the common people at home and abroad.

The Left Book Club collective

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the people in the West Midlands who have helped with this book for their kind contributions.

Jeremy Seabrook
2016

...those whom God doth punishe with povertie, let no man seeke to oppresse with crueltie

—An Ease for Overseers of the Poore,
published anonymously in Cambridge, 1601

Introduction

'Rich' and 'poor' are ancient, apparently inseparable opposites; sometimes antagonistic (the rich monopolise the necessities of the poor), at others symbiotic (without the wealth-creators we cannot afford the social amenities we need). The words are so clear, and so deeply embedded in linguistic habit, that we have almost ceased to ask how people come to be included in these categories: they are self-evident, unavoidable. The rich, like the poor in scriptural admonition, will always be with us.

This book is concerned with what makes people poor in modern societies, and what prompts governments to relieve or to aggravate poverty. The economic condition of 'the poor' – an abstract collective noun – has been the object of much attention throughout history, not least because of their capacity to disrupt or interfere with the established order. Their social and political potential for mischief has been a matter of great concern to ruling elites. They have been in receipt of both punishment and leniency, according to the temper of the age. It might have been thought that in countries as rich as ours, the poor would be treated with consideration, if not tenderness. This is far from being the case.

The condition of poor people in societies of unparalleled wealth raises certain questions. Since most people in Europe, North America and Australia are no longer poor, those who remain so have become victims of a popular contempt that was absent when a majority of the people lived in poverty. (What the wealthy minority thought about them is another matter, since they have been constantly referred to in disparaging

terms – the great unwashed, the masses, the hoi polloi, the common people; more recently, the underclass, trailer trash, losers.)

'The poor' have been only crudely differentiated, usually into groups understood to be meritorious or culpable, that is, deserving and undeserving. Much effort has been expended on defining the virtuous poor by ascribing exculpatory causes to their poverty. Everyone knows that widows and orphans, the lame, halt and blind may be poor through no fault of their own; while the idle and vicious, the feckless and addicted, the degenerate and improvident are thrown into the category of the perverse and wilful. If an aura of piety surrounds the idea of the blameless poor, denunciations of those who have brought upon themselves their own misfortune are far more resonant and morally charged. There is something satisfying in the condemnation by the righteous of those they see as unworthy and excluded. And a minoritised poor – welfare cheats, scroungers, skivers, parasites, free-loaders, beggars – attract a lexicon of abuse in rich societies, in which majorities no longer insecure can congratulate themselves on their own (often less than merited) prosperity, while expressing their loathing for those unable, for whatever reason, to avail themselves of the abundance which developed societies have placed, at least in theory, within the reach of everyone.

The economic function of the poor in our time is twofold. They serve first of all as a constant reminder that yet more economic growth is essential in order to remedy their plight and to lessen their – already diminished – numbers; and secondly as a spur to further self-enrichment by those who have already achieved much, since to fall into poverty is a fate not to be contemplated. Poverty must remain grim, a state

to be dreaded. For this reason, poverty in the contemporary rich world has a strong element of contrivance: it must remain as a deterrent, in order to encourage the respectable and the well-to-do to avoid it all costs.

There is clearly a contradiction in these purposes: piety is at war with condemnation. This is not difficult to explain – the 'need' for constant economic expansion must be maintained, since this is the vital purpose of the economic system itself; yet this increasing plenty must still exclude significant cohorts of people, in order that they may be brandished as a scarecrow at those comfortably situated. In other words, the poor must be punished, but they must on no account be permitted to vanish, for their presence is essential: to be scourged, but not into disappearance.

This dual function makes for a certain complexity – ensuring poverty-abatement but not poverty-elimination is quite a tricky task in an economy that produces annually some £2 trillion in GDP. But remarkably effective ways have been found to ensure that enough people remain poor, or on the verge of poverty, to prevent the rest of us from becoming complacent or, even worse, admitting that we have enough for our needs; such an admission would, of course, be catastrophic for an economy which depends upon a perception of perpetual scarcity in order to keep on expanding.

This book tries to show how certain individuals remain or become poor; and also to account for efforts by the present government to impoverish them further, in the interests of maintaining a sense of insecurity among the better-off. 'Reforms' to the welfare system should be seen in this light; for they ensure that poverty – as a carefully maintained and harrowing experience – is in no danger of being eradicated,

and that the poor, unlike many other creatures in the world, are in little imminent danger of becoming an extinct species.

The 'causes' of poverty may be sought primarily, not in the easy moral categories beloved by politicians, but in the profound inequalities that are part of the great diversity of human characteristics. It is difficult to ascribe individual responsibility to the existence of such a distribution, which is why we tend to concentrate solely on *behaviour*, to which everyone is expected to conform, despite their differences in endowment, inheritance and capacity. Some cultures, of course, value certain human attributes above others; but, in general, a particular set of observances, decencies and codes of conduct is exacted in all societies. Those which prevail in our privileged moment make it rare indeed for people to make a virtue of restraint, frugality and abstention from consuming as much as human beings can when they set their minds and money to it.

While researching this book, I was struck by the factors, some profound and ineradicable, some easily remediable, which had determined the state of want and lack of basic necessities in the lives of people who might appear as failures, as unsuccessful, poor or marginalised; and by how little of this complex skein of circumstances could be reasonably interpreted as a result of their own wilful behaviour. Who, with any other option, actually makes a 'choice' to sit in the rain or under a bridge stinking of piss, holding out a styrofoam cup to receive pence from passers-by?

In the judgements and condemnations lie archaic remnants of morality long overtaken by what we now know about human psychology, the nature of societies, and the inheritance of individuals. Is it an absence of imagination, an inability to

enter into the experience of others, or a residual conviction in the existence of an unqualified 'free will' that makes us humiliate poor people? It is a constant refrain of the successful that 'If I could rise out of poverty and disadvantage to become what I am today, why can't he or she?' The argument suggests that because some people have been able to make good in the world, despite the most horrific circumstances of birth and upbringing, it must follow that if others fail to do the same, they are in some way guilty and must be stigmatised accordingly. Rather than singing hymns of gratitude to their good fortune, those who have risen in the world often prefer to turn indignantly upon those incapable of following the path they have 'chosen', and to condemn their inability to do so as a moral failure.

The wounds and injuries suffered by many poor people do not enter into the crude calculus by which benefit systems, social security arrangements or welfare provisions operate. Yet if anything close to 'social justice' were to be established, it would be necessary to inquire into the situation of those disadvantaged a) psychologically (lovelessness or bereavement, neglect or cruelty in childhood), b) intellectually (people endowed with a modest capacity for reasoning), c) socially (the inheritance of generations of servitude or slavery), d) mentally (the chance distribution of emotional and psychiatric disorders), e) linguistically (those in a society they do not understand), f) culturally (people whose traditions and norms are at odds with the dominant social values), g) genetically (inherited diseases and health conditions, including some very common ailments, prone to heart disease and cancer), h) accidentally (victims of traffic or other accidents), i) traumatically (especially through war, crime or natural catastrophe),

or j) randomly (as in the distribution of certain characteristics, such as timidity, fear, anxiety or recklessness). Many other human features readily stigmatised – idleness, promiscuity, irresponsibility, anger – were not actively selected by those who exhibit them. And this takes no account of the predictable trajectory of human lives – the dependency of childhood, the ability to procure and sustain labour that will provide a living, the process of ageing, decline and death.

It was an awareness of these complexities that informed the basic premise of the welfare state: to answer need at the point where it was identified, irrespective of the cause. 'Need' is no more enhanced by virtue than it is cancelled by unworthiness. The provision of welfare was originally against the known vicissitudes of human life, and broadly, against the vagaries of economic cycles – times of full employment, of recession, of economic change, of the impoverishment of some groups and the prosperity of others. It was a fairly blunt instrument, but the misfortunes to which all humanity is prey at one time or another endowed it with a sense of fairness and propriety, recognised and approved of by a majority.

If the subsequent partial privatisation of provision for unemployment and old age, as well as private health insurance and education services, the raising of fees for university education, the necessity for the individual to make his or her accommodation with a capitalism become global, have combined to make the idea of a welfare state appear as redundant as many of those to whose afflictions it was designed to respond, the biggest contributor to its apparent dispensability has been the growth in prosperity and the rise in living standards. This has made a majority feel secure in providing for their own needs (with the exception of the National Health

Service, which remains one of the most loved institutions in Britain, the erosion of which is both feared and resented), and has created a sense of daily well-being for a majority who do not foresee long periods of dependency upon State support. This, together with the spectre of spiralling 'welfare costs', has made possible the government assault on the well-being of poor people, with only modest resistance from the still-prosperous majority, who, confident that they will not fall into want, often feel distant and uninvolved in the fate of the unfortunate. 'There but for the grace of God go I' was a common reaction at a time of mass insecurity and poverty; but as we have become richer, the grace of God has become, like the finances required by welfare, a scarce resource, and we need no longer look with the same compassion upon those in whose wounded lives we might once have been able to read our own possible destiny.

It cannot be a lack of resources that prompts cuts in welfare in a country which, despite the recent recession, has never been richer, and in which a potlatch of excess co-exists with a pinched, skinny misery. If a country virtually bankrupted by the Second World War could find the wherewithal to institute a universal welfare system, the claim in that same country, awash with luxury, ostentation and extravagance, that it can no longer afford to care for its least fortunate is so blatant an untruth as scarcely to need refutation. If public anger against government policy has been muted, this is probably because the actions of government are seen by the poor as simply yet another malignant visitation among many, as part of the bleak landscape of the deprivation they have come to expect in life.

There are two obvious tasks facing today's dissenters and radicals, although the fact that they are self-evident does not make their accomplishment any easier. These are not the

overthrow of capitalism (of which there seems little chance), and certainly not acceptance of the current 'reforms', which is a euphemism for the undermining of welfare. The first is to strive for greater fairness, in which the wealthiest will make a just contribution to the well-being of those out of whose labour, acquiescence and powerlessness their fortunes are made; the second is to embark on a genuine reform of welfare, which will provide the damaged and injured of capitalism with a decent subsistence that does not debar them from full participation in the life of society, however eccentric and wasteful that society may have become.

Such feasible improvements demand a more humane understanding of the needs of the vulnerable and deprived; the more so since many of those vulnerabilities and deprivations have been artfully and cunningly wrought, in order to maintain poverty rather than to alleviate it. As it is, personnel administering the benefits system are themselves undervalued in an unequal society, and the low worth in which they are held gives them an added inducement to visit their own resentment upon those they are supposed to serve. More sensitive training and appreciation of the life of people who use all welfare services should be instituted. A more responsive approach to 'casework' by the social work profession (itself also discredited in our baleful, welfare-hating age), should be available, and assessments of need not left to a mechanistic calculus, the justice of which few are in a position to monitor. Assessing the needs of other human beings is not an ignoble undertaking, the drudgery of ill-paid functionaries. It should be endowed with prestige and a sense of 'vocation' (that curious word which meant 'calling', not necessarily by God, but by the heart and imagination, themselves now atrophied organs in a dust-dry

system increasingly void of compassion). A renewal and re-dedication of the welfare state is on few political agendas; probably because it is the first requirement of a regenerated humane society. That political parties vie with each other in denouncing the poor, and in pleading the artificial poverty that prevents the richest societies in history from assisting those in need, should be denounced for the cant that it is.

The thrust of the present Conservative 'reforms' to the welfare system has deep historic roots, and they are the opposite of what is required to bring relief to the poor. It imposes an ideological rigour that stifles and conceals real needs. The 'discipline' of reduced incomes, the sanctioning of benefits, the withdrawal of support, evoke an old and – it had been thought – discredited tradition of compulsion enshrined in centuries of punitive poor laws, workhouses and all the other instruments and institutions of 'correction' for those spectres at the feast of wealth and power, who, if excluded from it, were obliged to serve it with mute and subservient respect.

There are two main themes addressed in this book: first, the personal, social and psychological forces that contribute to contemporary poverty; and second, the failure of those who have the capacity to do so to offer any useful or plausible remedy other than their own prejudices. That this latter process has so far worked better than the government might have expected – with relative social peace and the easy crushing of dissent – does not mean that such a happy situation will last for ever. The direction in which capitalism is moving – as Oxfam reveals that the richest 62 people on the planet own as much wealth as the poorest half of humanity – does not suggest that the poor will remain for ever quiescent, or even in a permanent minority. Pressure on new generations, the degradation of work, the

insecurity and fragility of general prosperity, the accumulation of private debt, long-term stagnation of incomes, the disparagement of public sector workers, homelessness, people being forced to work at levels far below their capacity, the unstoppable growth of inequality – all this scarcely confirms the picture of progress the government paints, any more than it supports its vision of a 'high-wage, low-welfare, low-tax' economy. Poverty, in societies of such wealth, is economic violence – a phenomenon that goes unrecognised as such because 'economic forces' (with their coercive overtones) are noted for their impersonal nature, their capacity to deprive by stealth, so that impoverishment appears as a 'natural' phenomenon.

Patience and resignation have always been commended to the dispossessed by those who have withheld from them, or robbed them of, a decent sufficiency. And for long periods they have shown acquiescence and fortitude. But such qualities, admirable though they may be, are not inexhaustible. Sooner or later, they will rise up to instruct ruling elites, rarely with the magisterial loftiness with which they have themselves been treated, in the necessity for greater humanity and forbearance.

The sudden awakening of the much paraded (but for the past six years at least, slumbering) social conscience of Iain Duncan Smith, and his resignation from government in March 2016, undermined the principal pillar of Conservative social policy, and admitted to the world that its devotion to austerity is elective. He confirmed the story of this book, and what many have long suspected – that 'reform' of the welfare state is simply a euphemism for demolition.

Jeremy Seabrook
March 2016

Welfare cuts: the wider context

The welfare state was the supreme achievement of decades of popular struggle against poverty, insecurity and squalor. That it should now be subject to a systematic erosion, if not demolition, has troubling implications; for upon it depend many other gains won from an industrial system, into the service of which the people of Britain were pressed two centuries ago. A comprehensive welfare system provided the security on which a wider distribution of wealth and the opportunities that come with it were possible; and out of that enhanced well-being grew a greater tolerance of diversity and acceptance of different identities. These developments, all relatively recent, have been presented as evidence of 'progress' in the capitalist system. One obvious question raised by the attrition of welfare is whether these advantages could *only* occur in capitalist society.

The compensations delivered to the people in the last few decades should be regarded with a certain scepticism. For if capitalism bestowed upon the people the welfare state, with its protections against the social evils of unemployment and poverty and the existential uncertainties of ageing, sickness and loss, it did so only after earlier threats to its survival – the aftermath of a fascism that had convulsed Europe, and the golden promises of a socialism that were to remain unfulfilled. For some time, it was assumed that the welfare state was part of a permanent arrangement. The fact that it represented merely a temporary compromise between capital and labour has only recently begun to dawn upon us, as the representatives of capitalist restoration set about the destruction of that humane institution. George Osborne has declared a new 'settlement'

in place – of 'higher wages, lower taxes and lower welfare'. It seems that an economic order which once gave can also now take away. The dissolution of a system dedicated to the health and welfare of the people is described as a withdrawal of 'luxuries we can no longer afford' – in a world that has never been richer.

Because the welfare system is the foundation on which many of the most admired achievements of our society are founded – affluence and the growth in tolerance of different ethnicities, faiths, gender and sexual orientation – it follows that, if social protection can be eroded, nothing else is safe. Without the welfare state, how would economic well-being have been possible? If people had remained prey to the malignancies of nineteenth-century capitalism – malnutrition, disease and misery – the pleasures of plenty would have been tainted, to say the least. The great consumer boom could scarcely have taken place if hunger, dirt and sickness had continued to dominate popular experience.

And later, how would the much-advertised humanitarianism, anti-racism, the rights of women and of lesbians, gay men and transgender people and those with disability, have come about, without the underlying security provided by the apparently happy marriage of welfare with consumerism? The stability that permitted a more liberal society was part of the social edifice which is now being undermined.

The significance of this is startling. It should not be imagined that an inherent love of people of colour, of lesbians and gays, or even of women, lies at the root of capitalist freedoms. These emancipations are recent, opportunistic developments, originally calculated to contrast with the social repressions of the Soviet system. They have served, not principally to

liberate those enfranchised by legislation enshrining equality, but primarily to assist capitalism in defining and defending itself against its enemies – and its most implacable enemy now is, of course, Islam, which has taken over from communism, and its predecessor fascism, as the greatest challenge to its supremacy in the world. It is hardly incredible that a system which, with such clamorous self-congratulation, introduced a welfare state to protect the weakest could subsequently pull it apart, that the same system could not annul what we have been encouraged to see as 'irreversible' gains in the social sphere, namely, an abhorrence of racism, a concern for the freedom of women, a commitment to the rights of lesbians, gay men and other minorities.

After all, racism and the subjection of large parts of the world in its name were more than acceptable until the day before yesterday; men were punishable with imprisonment for 'homosexual acts' until the 1960s; and most women lived in forced carceral domesticity until well into the twentieth century. More than this: racism was, as it were, the official doctrine of the high imperial age; and the idea that colonial peoples were 'not ready' for self-government was a tenacious – and violent – conviction among those who resisted the liberation of former colonial possessions. Today's champions of women, ethnic minorities and gays would be less insistent if they did not have in their sights the oppressions of a religious ideology against which to proclaim their credo of liberation. And even among the noisy emancipations of capitalist 'progress', there are always forces eager to undo what they see as the 'mischief' of anti-racism, the infringement of a Christian prohibition on same-sex relationships, and the control by women over their own bodies. Indeed, these forces

have already become more strident in this age of contrived 'austerity' which has, miraculously, spared only the rich.

The claim that such emancipatory benefits - now promoted by social and economic arrangements established by elites which, until very recently, expressed either distaste or indifference towards them – are possible only under the benign influence of a capitalist system is a useful political tool with which to belabour repressive and authoritarian regimes around the world. Many of these, of course, also bear the ossified values of a defunct imperialism – oppressive attitudes dumped by colonial powers on other cultures, which they subsequently made their own, even as the imperial entity saw the error of its ways and moved on. One has only to think of the penalties for homosexuality in Uganda, Nigeria and other territories once occupied by Britain; exotic weeds planted by colonialism that took on an autonomous and invasive life of their own. Enlightenment on the evils of patriarchy, same-sex relationships and, above all, racism are very late developments within the Western heartlands; and values which were treated as imperishable truths only one or two generations ago, have been consigned, if not to oblivion, then at least to a provisional forgetting. Languishing in the conserving chambers of memory, they remain available to be dusted down and paraded once more should the ruling elites consider this necessary for their own self-preservation.

If confirmation were needed that 'values' are adopted and discarded according to political expediency, and not because they are inherent in 'our' world-view, we only have to look at the way in which the Soviet Union was regarded by the West in the 1950s and '60s. At that time, among the horror stories about communism frequently aired in the Western media was

its failure to make distinctions between men and women: images were broadcast of 'viragos' driving tractors, female labourers on building sites (so different from the pert and pretty images of Hollywood), and offered as evidence of the unsexing power of socialism, while children were consigned to State nurseries soon after birth in order to compel women into the labour force. This was a time when gender stereotypes in the US and Europe were expressed in that staple of early TV adverts, the excited 'housewife' enthusing over some new product, while male breadwinners with creased brows came home after a tiring day at the office to conjugally dutiful wives who set their supper before them and warmed their slippers. With the eclipse of communism, it is as though the 1950s critique of its emancipatory role in women's lives had never occurred, and today we take for granted, as an aspect of our own 'universal' values, what was not so long ago held up as a repelling example of communist 'inhumanity'.

We are also living with other consequences of that earlier political struggle, which have baleful implications for the world. Until the 1960s it remained unclear whether communism would lose out to its capitalist rival, but in the competitive race between them, the mere affluence of the 1950s bloomed into the florid consumerism of later decades. While the Soviet Union could offer its captive peoples only inelegant, malfunctioning goods in the steel-grey landscape of a monochrome socialism, the West dazzled its own people – and the wider world – with the variety and inventiveness of its productive power. This proved to be the most critical guarantor of its victory over its rival. The imagery of abundance and luxury not only assumed a life of its own, but also induced a whole world to 'vote with its feet', seeking out the source of plenty

in the great scattering of people of our time. This is also part of the aftermath of that now-forgotten competition between the West and the Soviet Union. Today's refugees, now told that 'the streets of London are not paved with gold' and that Britain is not 'a land of milk and honey', can be excused for their confusion: for the past 40 years they have been the recipients of an imagery depicting in high colour the wealth and comfort of the Western world.

The claim that all the desirable changes we have seen are possible only in capitalist societies is employed to discourage any straying from the path required to maintain them. The 'advances' we have achieved are uniquely a result of our way of life; the road we have taken the only possible road to freedom. There is, of course, always a long way to go. But the admonition is clear: any interference with, or questioning of, the wise values of the settlement under which we live can lead only to loss, breakdown and violence.

These developments have sprung from the continuing growth and expansion of capitalism. They have undoubtedly cleared spaces for previously oppressed people to flourish. The maintenance and further extension of these freedoms allegedly requires continual – indeed, unending – economic growth. This is the basis for the lately achieved liberties, which exist only *within* capitalism's closed world of economic necessity. That world is, however, *not* coterminous with the wider world on which it depends – as the ruinous consequences for the biosphere, the earth and its climate, have now made plain.

The enlargement of liberties within industrial society has incurred costs which do not show up in its accounting system. It is now commonplace to acknowledge that many of the reckonings of economic growth have been externalised,

rigorously excluded by the ideological instruments employed by economic reason. Among these, many of the most obvious are rarely out of the news: unstoppable movements of people disturbed by the imperatives of globalism, wars over water, the spread of diseases like Ebola, resource depletion, species extinction, pollution, ocean acidification, and, of course, the global monoculture of consumption, which is not only the fastest-growing cult in the world, but is also raising the temperature of the planet – both physically and socially – to dangerously feverish levels.

The conditions that have produced both social tolerance and global warming are attributable to spectacular economic growth, whereby, through the alchemy of capitalism, prosperity became affluence, affluence became consumerism and consumerism itself has become *consumptive*, a global wasting disease. From the start, the iconography of the good life had a hyperbolic quality; its self-advertisement and anthems to its own capacity for production served a function other than that of answering human needs. That is to say, it was a caricature of what it claimed to be, a deformation of the simple concept of 'sufficiency', which it mocked, since it was not accompanied by a sense of security, but by an urgent desire for more – that imperative of capitalism which, apparently successfully, grafted itself onto human desire and its yearning for transcendence. The resulting hybrid was described as 'human nature', as though all human striving could be answered by the growth and expansion of one economic system.

This is why the time of plenty was also mysteriously accompanied by an obscure sense of penury. It appeared that an ancient craving to secure enough for our sustenance was no longer a realisable or desirable goal. The longing for 'more' was

actually not a human aspiration, but a capitalist inspiration: and once that was accepted as the objective of 'progress', no one would ever again be able to define what constituted enough for human contentment. Caught up in an externally generated compulsion towards growth, what was labelled 'human nature' was in effect the nature of an economic system; and many of the pathologies of the modern world stem from this falsification at source of human need, desire and yearning. The rewards, gifts, prizes and freebies showered upon people suggested a newly benevolent capitalism, an apparently spontaneous giving such as the world had never before seen. This might – given the brutal history of industrial society – have alerted us to the idea that certain penalties were lurking beneath the politics of burnished surfaces and the presentational gifts of the masters of public relations.

In other words, the decorative attributes of this version of development – social, economic and human – serve to obscure the great open secret of the 'advanced' world; namely, that the 'laws of economics' are no such thing: they are merely the rules of the only game the rich are prepared to play. Politicians are their proxy players, and any who refuse to observe these conventions are duly declared 'unelectable', as the false sense of crisis generated by Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader of the Labour Party clearly demonstrated.

As welfare is diminished, so other elements of life are compromised – perhaps not dramatically at first (although this can occur with tragic suddenness for those who lose their livelihoods due to illness or other misfortune) but by degrees, insidiously – not least of them, the freedoms implied in the term 'purchasing power'. In the USA, this form of popular potency has virtually stagnated for 40 years (except

among the very rich). In Britain, in 2014, the average weekly disposable income was at an eleven-year low, and its recent reversal has been dependent upon a deepening indebtedness of households. The reasons for this are not far to seek: the globalisation of the Western developmental model means that all countries of the world are set in competition with each other, and it becomes necessary for the erstwhile privileged countries (or 'economies' as they are sometimes called) to vie with low-wage entities formerly known as 'underdeveloped'. The implications of this are sometimes described as 'a race to the bottom': a competitive striving to reduce wages and increase productivity at any cost, even if this means maintaining large numbers of people at subsistence levels or below.

In this way, the direction of travel of today's pioneers, these voortrekkers with their heads turned towards the past, becomes plain. Not only are many young people, as well as the expellees of industrial life, the marginal and the demotivated, cut off from the expectations of permanent 'improvement', but even more people are nourishing economic growth with increased personal borrowing and a descent into unpayable debt. At the same time, there has been a fading of what we formerly acknowledged as 'British values' – tolerance, fair play and sympathy for the underdog. These are transformed into rancour against strangers and the elevation of individual self-interest, while we regularly step over the bodies of the underdog, the derelict, the refugee or the victim of misfortune, covered by cardboard and rags in the doorways of abandoned shops.

This is accompanied by a fearful, even superstitious, dependency upon the market – a system that lavishes its rewards and withdraws its favours in ways not amenable to distributive justice, so that human beings, once the playthings

of the gods, are now at the mercy of equally capricious and unanswerable markets. Not for the first time, humanity is in thrall to its own creation.

Being there: a sense of place

To appreciate how the reimposition of these market doctrines affects flesh and blood, there is nothing like being in the places where such experiments are being carried out, sites remote from the experience of those who have conceived them.

The great epic of industrialism and its aftermath has bitten deeply into the landscape of the West Midlands. There are rough rural traces where metal workshops, forges, factories and pits have scarred the countryside. Big cities and small manufacturing settlements are separated from each other by areas of heath, canals, marsh and woodland, so that the seasons can still be read in these wild spaces – in spring, gorse and blackthorn; in summer, elder, dog-rose and willow-herb; in autumn, pale Michaelmas daisies, golden rod, bunches of black elder fruit and red hips and haws; and in winter the red stalks of cornus, dry sedge and the silvery seed-pods of traveller's joy. The local people also retain long memories of a vanished country way of life, while still enjoying fishing or bird-watching (some years ago a bird-lover in Bilston explained to me that 'In August the goldfinches feed on sugar-babbies [thistle seeds] as they blow over the railway sidings. Then they'll go onto the hard-heads [rose hips]; then when they're coming into condition for breeding, they'll feed off the dandelions in spring. That's when they come into full colour'). Industrial workers kept ferrets for catching rabbits, poached game, raced pigeons and cultivated allotments; all of which co-existed with

industrial activity, fatefully lodging metal dust under the skin and in the lungs, leaving a permanent taste of metal on the tongue; or spreading coal dust, which also entered the bodies of pit-workers, alongside the feral smell of leather, or the iron savour of factories making locks, bolts, screws, rivets, chains, anchors and naval equipment – no wonder the people of the Black Country ('black by day' from smoke pollution; 'red by night' from furnaces in which the fires never went out) were regarded as a people apart. They were described by fastidious Victorian observers as 'savages', 'coarse' and 'foul-mouthed'; but theirs was an heroic labour of extraction, manufacture and creativity, without which the imperial pretensions of Britain would have been impossible.

The cities later expressed a defensive pride in their rough industrial function through civic buildings, ornate town halls with foundation stones laid by some European connection of Queen Victoria, libraries and art galleries, market halls with wrought-iron metal and stained glass, parades of shops, as well as soaring church spires and chapels designed to convert a population they never quite captured, since even when new they were rarely half full. Many of these structures still stand, in stranded and shabby splendour, too grand for the shrunken purposes of de-industrialised towns and cities; in livid stone or terracotta, with cupolas and carvings of sheaves of corn and hammers and shovels, representing agriculture and industry. Wolverhampton Art Gallery, designed to show the world a different face of the city from that associated with manufacturing, is a repository of the Victorian sensibility, containing sumptuous story-telling pictures such as *Widowed and Fatherless, The Harvesters* and *The Pet Bird,* and reminding the citizenry of a world beyond factories and

forges in paintings of Dante and Beatrice and the ruins of Rome, scenes from Spain, Egypt, China and the Chunar Gur Fortress near Benares…

Alongside the exuberant nineteenth-century city architecture, other structures and monuments testifying to later municipal improvement have also become archaic – among them the 1930s Wolverhampton Civic Hall and the nearby plaque to Emma Sproson, 'Red Emma', the first female councillor in the city, and a feminist and socialist. Meanwhile the 1980s brutalist sprawl of council offices has been increasingly deprived of its purpose by centralising governments, as 'the provinces' have been transformed from distinctive localities into mere suburbs of globalism. In the city's Queen Square, the equestrian statue of Prince Albert – unveiled by the grieving Queen Victoria in her first public appearance outside London after his death – is no longer recognised by a new generation, for whom he is just 'the man on the horse'.

Alongside the railway lines and canals, and in the town centres, there are decaying warehouses, mills and pubs, soot still clinging to their red brick, the wasting lattice of their roofs admitting fugitive sunlight into dank mossy areas that scarcely saw daylight for a century. Ring roads have carved their scrawl into the urban fabric, making islands of town centres; motorways stride across the countryside like concrete centipedes, in the shadow of which silver-painted graffiti shows who now lays claim to these abandoned territories.

Reminders of a pre-industrial past also survive: in Wolverhampton's Queen Street, the elegant eighteenth-century County Court is up for sale. This fine building evokes the wretched who passed through its imposing doors, those tried for poaching (caught, perhaps, in the man-traps that

were also manufactured in Wednesfield, from where they found their way into the parks and woods of landowners, or to slave plantations in the Caribbean), brawling, horse-stealing or the theft of a silver snuff-box from an employer, and who duly received their disproportionate deserts. The new court building is a menacing bulk, a grey fortress redolent of a different kind of wrongdoing: knife-crime, drug-dealing, grievous bodily harm. The two structures mock each other – the pillars of the eighteenth-century palace of justice meted out savage punishments for minor crimes; while the relative leniency of the dispensers of justice in the ugly contemporary structure is evidence of the altered sensibility of our time.

The workers of early industrialism are long gone, while into the diminishing red-brick terraces thrown up to serve the workshops and factories another population came – people from the Caribbean and South Asia, invited to take on jobs in the twilight industries, and to service transport and the health service. Their children and grandchildren now occupy what were originally the raw settlements of industry; inward-looking, self-protecting communities whose values of neighbourhood, family and cultural solidarity rouse ironic echoes of the people now vanished from the streets.

In the city, memory mingles with the present, as people recount their lives to one another: it seems experience is not subjective or private at all, but part of a collective pool of common understanding to be shared rather than hoarded – at the bus-stop, in the pub, on a park bench, even in strictly contemporary establishments like Greggs or Costa Coffee. After 9.30 a.m., the bus into the city centre is full of older people whose passes are valid after the rush-hour. A casual conversation, an observation overheard, provide unprompted

insights into ordinary lives. A woman on the bus, perhaps in her late fifties, spontaneously starts talking about the bedroom tax. Her hand grips the metal bar of the seat in front of her; the sun strikes the wrinkles on a hand into which the wedding ring has become embedded in flesh. Without preamble, she says 'It's only a small flat. My mother died in that room. I feel I'm paying rent for her spirit.'

In an old-fashioned pub, a bleak drinking place untouched by the social amenities now associated with alcohol, a man of about 30 holds an audience of older men. 'I really fancied her. She kept looking at me, and in the end she came over and said "I'd like to have your babies." I said "OK, I'll go and fetch 'em for you. They're staying with their nan since their mam done a runner."'

A heavy-faced woman sits down with her Lidl shopping bags on a metal seat in the city centre. It is a warm summer afternoon, and her face is flushed. Warm enough for you? She is her brother's carer, and tells how she has observed his painful descent into dementia; a story familiar now in a society in which remembering was once crucial to surviving poverty and exploitation. As she spoke, I wondered whether there is some hidden connection between individual forgetting and the erasure of an industrial past which we could not quickly enough put behind us? She sheds a few tears and offers me a strong mint. Her brother's short-term memory started to go when his wife died, and he still sometimes asks where she is. For his sister, unmarried, it was natural that she should take him to live with her. Although the neighbours are kind, she dreads the coming of winter, when the curtains are drawn and *the loneliness of being together* overwhelms her. The television plays all the time; distraction and irritant. Although under

pressure to work, she cannot leave her brother, who no longer recognises the streets in which he spent all his working life as a roofer. She nursed their parents until they died and then spent a few years working in a shop – 'the happiest time of my life' – until she stepped back into the shadow of caring. Sometimes angry with her brother, she weeps with remorse at the harsh words she utters. She has one friend, who will look after him if she wants to go out; but since this friend is her only source of comfort, where would she go on her own?

'My neighbour went into respite care. Her son told her it was just for a few weeks. While she was there, he sold the house, so there was nowhere for her to go back to.'

Onto the ornate Victorian exuberance a new city has been grafted; geometrical, less ornamental – colleges, hospitals, apartments, rectangles, cubes, squares. These physical changes are reflected in social attitudes, although there is a time-lag between them, so that entrenched attitudes remain. Just as two cities co-exist, so, too, do conflicting values, especially towards gender and race. Whenever I spoke to older people about their children, they would tell me their son was a mechanic, a truck driver or a shop worker, while their daughter was married and lived in Birmingham or Derby. It was always the man's work that was mentioned and the woman's status – a folk-memory which no longer applies in the modern world, where women have often become the principal earner.

The relative social peace in the cities has been assured partly by the separation of lives led by people of different cultures and ethnicities; lives intersecting only functionally – in shops, in the health service, on public transport and more substantially only in ethnically mixed neighbourhoods. A man from Jamaica who worked as a psychiatric nurse says 'Racism has

gone underground since it became unlawful. In psychiatric hospitals, people do not cover up their feelings. A woman needed to be cleaned up because she had soiled herself; she said to me "Get away from me, no black man is ever going to see my bum."'

In the monumental Methodist chapel, where a foundation stone announces the worthy who laid it in the 1890s to the Glory of God, meals are offered to the hungry. Cornelius is in his forties. 'Last night I slept in the toilets in West Park. The night before that in the Bilston toilets. My cousin is disabled and in a wheelchair, and he has the keys to the public toilets. He lent them to me so I have somewhere to sleep.' He pulls aside his jacket and a set of keys, carefully labelled, hangs round his neck. 'I sleep in the baby-changing place – my feet reach the hand-dryer which is warm. I had a debt of £500 to the Council for a flat they said I had not handed the keys in for, and that has followed me for 26 years. I used to work in Quicksilver, I was called in whenever the manager dipped his hands in the till, which happened quite often. I can't work now, and there's too many CCTV cameras everywhere for a life of crime. My father is from Jamaica and my mother is on her fourth husband somewhere.'

An elderly woman with wispy white hair, sun shining against it so that it forms a silvery aureole behind her, says 'I buried my husband yesterday.' I say how sorry I am. Her weepy eyes are palest blue. A neighbour, overhearing, whispers. 'No she didn't. He died years ago.'

In St Peter's Church, an elderly Muslim sits in a pew, reading through some Christian booklets for children. His family, originally Hindu from Gujarat, came by way of Kenya to Britain. He converted when he learned that Islam supersedes

all the religions that went before, and represents the last and definitive word of God. All the stories of the Jews and Christians, he says, lead up to the moment when Mohammad (PBUH) revealed truth to the world.

A café in a shopping centre: spindly chairs and tables, watery hot chocolate and weak coffee; the space echoes with children's cries, chatter and a shuffling of feet. A young woman, with two children and a Pakistani man of about 40, looks defiantly at two older women. 'I know why they're staring.' I smile at her, and she says to me 'I know what they're thinking. You can see it in their face. I was 15 when I met him, and he is the love of my life.' The man looks embarrassed. I say a few words in Urdu: he knows even less than I do. He tells me he is a van driver, and although his family resisted his marriage, they have come to respect his wife. At intervals during a busy day, people's lives open up to a moment of tenderness or vulnerability; the young woman wipes a tear at the compliment from her partner.

A woman sits in the churchyard on a bench overlooking a bed of blazing red geraniums. Here sister died recently. 'We had to wait nearly three weeks before the funeral. It's the Muslims. They have to be buried on the same day, so we have to wait. Even in death they get all the advantages.' It later turned out her sister's funeral had been at the Crematorium. I point out that Muslims have to be buried, so they couldn't have taken priority at the Crematorium. She said 'You don't understand' and walked away.

In the areas occupied now by no-longer-recent migrants and their descendants, archaic attitudes linger, ghosts of not-quite-extinct cultures. In a household of Pakistani heritage, we sit in a front room like a modernised version of an old working-class

'parlour': the outsize three-piece suite is covered with shiny plastic, so you are constantly at risk of sliding onto the floor; a plasma TV screen the focus of attention formerly occupied by a coal-fire; a cabinet full of china, trinkets and ornaments. The woman says 'They have two disabled girls next door.' 'Oh that's sad.' 'It's worse than sad', says the man. 'The husband tried to make her have an abortion because the babies were girls. Twice.'

Among men – not all of them older – from the Indian sub-continent, there is a dark murmur of resentment at what they see as the 'excessive' independence of women. 'They no longer listen to their guardians and husbands. They have picked up all these ideas about freedom, which is against our beliefs and our culture.'

These fallen patriarchs look apprehensively upon the rise of a new generation of women with careers as social workers or teachers, and are silenced by assertive observant young Muslim women – the passionate teenager, arguing against her parents in favour of the veil, who asks 'Have you never heard of the difference between bare-faced lies and veiled truths?'

In the public spaces where people's lives cross, moments of shared laughter are followed by melancholy reflection. Two young women sit at a table in the sunshine outside a café. One leans forward and says to the other 'He rolled up a tea-towel tight and stuck it in his pants. … When he kissed her, she went to squeeze it and it was soft.' At another table, a woman talks of a friend who went on holiday to Malaga. 'They went out for a few drinks, and when they got back to the hotel, she felt thirsty, so she drank the carafe of water beside the bed. Only it wasn't water. It was the cleaning fluid they used to clean the

container, which had been left in the carafe. Her brain swelled up and it killed her.'

Another sensibility lies beneath the daily business of work, child-raising, shopping and entertainment; a sense of the poignancy of life, the inseparability of its absurdity and its pleasures. In these post-industrial places, where people have lived through bewildering change, there runs a feeling of the arbitrary nature of things, the mutability of life; and with it, a far from extinct sense of solidarity, a realisation that misfortune can happen to anyone, that we shall all in our turn need the compassion and consideration of others. These values were borne by the welfare state, embodied in its agencies and institutions. They may have become hardened, no longer experienced with the vital urgency of an earlier, more insecure time. They have become dormant, waiting to be reasserted and reclaimed from their slumber in the private life of a competitive individualism. A political movement that can get beneath the skin of the clichés that float on the surface of political discourse remains tantalisingly just beyond reach. If politics leaves people cold, this is because none of it engages with a deeper humanity. There are currents of feeling in these communities, subterranean sentiments more profound than the banalities of official rhetoric, advertising slogans and received ideas. Laying hold of these deeper emotions is difficult for a political party of labour, which only two generations ago was attuned to a deep awareness of our shared destiny, our mortality and our need for the solidarity of strangers in a dangerous world – an awareness which the hucksters of this age have still not managed to dispel, despite the formidable means at their disposal for communicating the sour misanthropy of their view of the world.

The fall of industrial male labour

In the assault on the welfare system, certain groups have been disproportionately affected: women, the young, people with disability, ethnic minorities, single parents. But there is little to be gained from establishing hierarchies of suffering: despite the social shifts that have occurred with the dissolution of Britain's manufacturing base, older working men and women still bear the physical and psychological stigmata of an industrial age that has passed away.

It was upon the epic of male industrial labour, and women's unchosen subordination to it, that the wealth and power of Britain depended. Men formed for, and within, a culture of labour now effaced have received little sympathy in the recent past. But if we want to understand what has made possible the erosion of the welfare state, it is also necessary to consider the fate of older men, the descendants of those drawn into involuntary industrial servitude in the early stages of the manufacturing industry. They have been just as unceremoniously evicted from that industry in our time. Their consent was never sought, neither in the establishment of the industrial system nor in its abolition. All the momentous changes in our lives – from the nature of livelihoods to the waging of war – have been imposed by powerful others, by-passing anything remotely resembling democratic assent; and this remains constant through time.

Ken Fielden is a small wiry man in his early sixties, with a sharp mind and an intelligence that would have earned him a university education had he been born one generation later. He is at the end of a tradition of working-class intellectuals, who did much to form – and transform – the understanding