

Unequal Britain: An academic defence of social inequality

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The report *Unequal Britain: attitudes to inequalities after COVID-19* by the Policy Institute at King's College London is indicative of the hostility of an upper middle-class layer in academia to the class issues posed starkly by the pandemic.

That COVID-19 is a “poor man's disease” which has hit the working class hardest—driven into unsafe workplaces under the policy of herd immunity—is a verifiable fact.

It led the *British Medical Journal* to accuse the world's governments of “social murder” in their response to the pandemic. Its editorial, “Covid-19: Social murder, they wrote—elected, unaccountable, and unrepentant”, drew attention to the phrase's origin with Friedrich Engels, the lifelong collaborator of Karl Marx.

Describing the “political and social power held by the ruling elite over the working classes in 19th century England”, the BMJ wrote, Engels' “argument was that the conditions created by privileged classes inevitably led to premature and 'unnatural' death among the poorest classes.” Social murder was “very real today, exposed and magnified by COVID-19. It cannot be ignored or spun away.”

Ignored was exactly the response of the media to the BMJ's damning indictment. *Unequal Britain* is an attempt to spin away the class causes and implications.

The study was based on an online questionnaire of 2,226 adults who had registered specifically to participate in such surveys. It divides those participating by support for either Conservative or Labour and those voting for Leave or Remain in the 2016 Brexit referendum. This is supposedly to provide balance.

It notes that the pandemic has “ruthlessly exposed how our vulnerability to shocks varies hugely, determined by a complex web of existing inequalities, across genders, age groups, races, income levels, social classes and places.”

But social classes do not feature in the report. In fact, “class” only appears once in its 88-pages. Its central

thrust is against arguments that “Greater action on inequality” is a “logical progression from the unprecedented state intervention that's been required to weather the COVID-19 crisis”. Rather “the crisis has, for the most part, not bridged political divides in support for action on inequality, and there is only a limited consensus on what the country's most pressing inequalities are,” it asserts.

Even if one puts to one side such critical matters as the fact that we are not “after Covid-19” but still very much in it, and that the “unprecedented state intervention” has largely consisted of massive bailouts for the super-rich, the authors assertions are not supported by their own findings.

The report begins by noting there is “significant agreement” that the most serious inequalities are geographical (61 percent) and the outcome of “disparities in income and wealth” (60 percent).

Six in 10 (62 percent) believe Britain was somewhat or very unequal before the pandemic, with just 12 percent believing it was “relatively equal”. More than eight in 10 (81 percent) believe the gap between high and low incomes is too large, compared to 1 percent who say it's too small.

Questioned as to the impact of the pandemic, 84 percent believed inequality between more and less deprived areas would widen, and 81 percent that this would be the case as regards income and wealth. Three-quarters considered widening geographical/income inequality to be a very big, or fairly big problem.

These are extraordinary majorities. However, the report dismisses the concerns expressed on income inequality specifically, complaining that “public perceptions of the extent of economic inequality often diverge from reality.” People “significantly overestimate” the concentration of wealth amongst the rich, showing that “the public” have only a “general, 'ordinal' sense of the extent of wealth

inequalities...”

Far more time is spent assessing the apparent failure of people to place racial and gender inequalities on a par with income. One result that especially exercised the authors, and the *Guardian* newspaper, was that 4 percent believe black people earn less or are more likely to be unemployed because they have a “less in-born ability to learn”.

That the question was posed in this way is extraordinary on its face and, as would have been expected, it solicited a racist response from a tiny minority. But the entire questionnaire is loaded along these lines. Much is also made of the fact that, when asked what role “luck” played in people losing their jobs during the pandemic, 31 percent said it was very or fairly important. When asked to choose whether individual performance played a role in job losses, 47 percent selected very, or fairly likely.

The report concludes that such answers show the British population have strong “meritocratic and individualistic tendencies”, which “temper calls for action on inequality.”

No objective observer, even considering the skewed and limited nature of the survey, could draw such a conclusion. While the authors assert that it proves most people believe “hard work and ambition remain key drivers of success”, the findings again and again show a majority believe socio-economic factors, in particular wealth—for which read class—inequalities, are the major drivers.

With regards to the impact of the pandemic on education, health and income, the overwhelming majority responded that the low-paid and poor, especially those living in deprived areas/conditions, would suffer most.

Racial and gender inequalities were similarly identified with social circumstances/context. 67 percent considered rising income inequality between ethnic minorities and white people a “big issue” and (65 percent as regards rising income inequality between men and women).

Asked to what extent they agree or disagree that the pandemic proves the need to redistribute income away from the rich, 51 percent agreed (18 percent opposed), while 55 percent supported government measures “to reduce differences in income levels”, (15 percent against).

Despite this, the report concludes that there is “no widespread appetite for change” regarding government action on inequality. According to one of the authors, Professor Bobby Duffy, this is because Britain “starts from a relatively individualistic worldview” and that “our perspectives on these issues [inequality] are deeply

divided and tied up with our underlying values and identity.”

He would make such an assertion. Director of the Policy Institute, he was previously “seconded to the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit.” At first glance this appears a strange place for an apparent progressive. But then Duffy is part of the Progress Network, launched last year, by its parent, New America.

Headed by Anne-Marie Slaughter, a former high-ranking State Department official and close associate of Hillary Clinton, the New America think tank produces policy papers in line with the interests of the US military and intelligence agencies and the corporate establishment. Its Progress Network spin off is aimed at challenging “the inevitability of chaos and collapse by connecting and amplifying prominent voices pointing our world in a more positive direction...”

The survey is part of the institute for Fiscal Studies Deaton Review of Inequalities, which is studying “inequality not just of income, but of health, wealth, political participation, and opportunity; and not just between rich and poor but by gender, ethnicity, geography, age and education.”

“This will give the UK government, and those in other developed countries, a far clearer and more holistic view of the effectiveness of available policy options, how they can best work alongside each other and the trade-offs between them.”

The IFS is a pro-market research foundation, specialising in UK tax and public policy to shape fiscal decisions in the interests of the wealthy. The “trade-off” means finding academic justifications to oppose any redistributive measures in favour of working people.

True to form, the *Guardian's* Polly Toynbee was on message. Invoking Tony Blair's refusal to talk about inequality, she suggested current Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer was justified for his “caution” on the issue. The report meant “those on the left are forced to confront some dismal realities about British public attitudes”. “Tackling inequality” may be a “rebarbative word with too many voters”, she wrote.



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