

Review: Radical: Free or Token?

Darren McGarvey (2022) *The Social Distance Between Us*. London: Ebury Press, hardback, 400 pp., ISBN 9781529104080

Introduction

Few other recent events encapsulate the gulf between the ruling class and disenfranchised more fully than the Grenfell Fire of 2017. Tantamount to social murder rather than disaster, the litany is now well known: a rentier class fat on public contracts and cost-cutting on basic safety measures, with the full knowledge of a Chelsea and Kensington Council more concerned with generating commercial income from the sale of public assets, and a Prime Minister unwilling or afraid to console survivors. Even the Editorial Board (2017) of the New York Times saw that a British state “infatuated with austerity and deregulation” had “gone too far in shedding its fundamental duties to protect public health and safety”.

While shocked by the nature of the tragedy, none of it came as much of a surprise to writer, rapper and TV presenter, Darren McGarvey. Indeed, the notion of distance between the haves and have-nots, and how this informs the way in which societal issues are defined and related to, forms the premise of his second book *The Social Distance Between Us*.

As with his first book *Poverty Safari* McGarvey’s approach is highly digressive. The societal issues he examines include the brutal, and brutalising, effects of permanent austerity measures, the policing of welfare claimants, land ownership and rising health inequalities; though it could be argued that ‘distance’ or indeed detachment is not particularly visible in the author’s first-person singular style and he appears to have a well-developed talent for pre-empting any criticisms. Many of his remedies—including Finnish-style education, union participation and workforce transformation as well as proportional representation and compulsory voting—are, however, distinctly progressive.

McGarvey (2022, p. 346) acknowledges the contradictions within his new upwardly mobile class position—now within the top 8% of earners in the UK—when he says, ‘my world has opened up, the possibilities seem endless, but I cannot shake my certain knowledge that things are getting worse for those I fear I may be leaving behind. I feel the immense gravity of that promise of prosperity bearing down on me, pulling me further from the world I know.’

While McGarvey feels he has been corrupted by his newfound wealth, status and prestige, he attempts to redeem himself by outlining ways which might ameliorate the ‘worst proximity gulfs in education, the labour market and within our democratic institutions which, when taken together will bring social classes closer together, create conditions for widening equality and bring those in power closer to the action and accountability.’

He seems keen to want to rebalance ‘Britain’ but arguably (2022,p. 361) rescues himself from regressing into the politics of ‘Ukania’ by pointing out that ‘

I will always work for Scottish Independence – it offers greater proximity between me and the politicians I vote for – I recognise at the time of writing that dream looks a little distant.

For example, McGarvey (2022, p. 353) proposes the solution available in Finland, where ‘education is free at all levels from pre-school to higher education and while private schools can and do exist, they are forbidden from charging fees and from implementing exclusive selection processes.’ Moreover, ‘all textbooks, lunch and transport for children who live outside the immediate vicinity of the school are provided for by the state. At upper secondary level, all pupils are entitled to a free school meal and even in higher education this is state subsidised.’ Straightforward socialist solutions for an Independent Scottish Republic, it could be argued.

Drug-Related Deaths in Scotland

As a trade unionist, recovery activist and independent advocate for those using drugs and alcohol in East and Midlothian, I was particularly interested in how McGarvey

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uses his own lived experience, his considerable literary skill and love of language to engage with the damning scale of Scotland's drug deaths, by some margin the highest per capita in Europe, as well as his perception of its causes and prescriptions for change.

Two discourses exist in Scotland's attempt to deal with the crisis: firstly, harm reduction through opiate-substitute-therapy (OST) mainly in the form of methadone; and secondly, the view that, through Treatment Centres and 12-Step programmes, complete abstinence is possible for everyone. Harm reductionists believe total abstinence is an unrealistic goal for many addicts and may increase the chances of failure and death, and this approach remains prevalent in Scotland and backed by advocates such as Matheson and Robertson (2022, p. 19) who maintain:

In Scotland drug policy and consequently the progress of evidence-based treatment options has been struggling for many years. Political inaction is brought about by a complex chain of legal and operational obstructions with local authorities deferring to national Government which in turn is paralysed by non-medical requirements rather than implementation of a clinically progressive policy.

For McGarvey, these "areas of disagreement are evidence of an experiential gap – a problem of proximity where harm reductionists regard many in the recovery movement as being distant from the evidence while they themselves are regarded by the recovery movement as being remote from the truth of addiction as it is experienced".

There would appear to have been some change of heart in the Scottish Government's response to drug-related deaths and to the campaigning work of the likes of the Recovery movement and McGarvey himself, with an increase in residential rehabilitation and detox places at the Lothian and Edinburgh Abstinence Programme (LEAP) — an organisation highly sceptical of harm reduction approaches—and is one of the first projects to be funded through the Scottish Government's Residential

Rehabilitation Rapid Capacity Programme, with a target to treble the number of publicly-funded residential rehabilitation placements to 1,000 by 2026.

McGarvey's appraisal of the key agencies working in the Drugs Sector – such as the Scottish Drugs Forum and the Scottish Recovery Consortium - appears to be spot on. He (2022 p 140) claims, with justification, that such agencies are so enmeshed with Scottish Government that it was unable or unwilling to support, for example, the Proposed Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill (2021) which, if enacted, would have given substance users the right, enshrined in Scottish Law, to treatment services including independent advocacy,

These Drug Sector agencies, he argues (2022, p 140), remain quiet “until the more seasoned lived experience campaigners force change from the outside”, and “only then, once the dirty work has been performed by those willing to speak truth to power, do the leading lights once again re-emerge, at a politically safer moment, to welcome the wonderful change that has occurred, and re-attach themselves to the new political paradigm they did almost nothing to create”.

McGarvey is correct when he says the key agencies in the Drugs Sector in Scotland distanced themselves from the Proposed Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill (2021). The Bill was drafted by Stephen Wishart, whose background, according to McGarvey (2022, p. 140), is “in housing and homelessness, where similar systematic problems exist”. The Bill was proposed to the Scottish Parliament by Douglas Ross, then leader of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party. Leaving Douglas Ross to propose such an important Bill displayed, it would seem to me, a lack of political competence or political naivety on the part of the ‘lived experience campaigners’.

These discourses around drug policy are not just esoteric and confined to the Scottish context but reveal the biopolitics of power. The right to access to medical assisted treatment for substance users that is embedded and enshrined in Scottish Law is now being advocated by Alan Miller, Professor of Practice in Human Rights Law at the University of Strathclyde. Miller in March 2022 was appointed by the then First

Minister, Scottish Government, as Chair of the National Collaborative process to integrate human rights into drug and alcohol policy; McGarvey and his ‘lived experience’ associates securing, therefore, a result of sorts.

The drug deaths, however, continue, as McGarvey resolutely points out, to rise.

Causality

In terms of why this crisis came about, McGarvey (2017, p. 107), however, is resolutely ahistorical. In *Poverty Safari*, for example, he stated, “The truth, whether we want to accept it or not, is that when it comes to poverty – not as a political football but as a global phenomenon in which we all play an active role – there is no one actor or group that we can blame with any certainty.”. Yet the political history of the last half century alone belies this statement. And it is nowhere more apparent than in Scotland itself where the rapid and forced de-industrialisation instigated by the Thatcher government was categorically aimed at destroying the solidarity, confidence and militancy of the working class, particularly the mining communities in urban Scotland.

As Phillips (2008, p. 183) noted, “The radical Right lamented the particular position in Scotland, but only because this embodied in a more pronounced form than the rest of the UK the industrial features that it regarded as especially undesirable: publicly subsidized heavy industry which was highly unionized and labour intensive”. It is also likely that the ‘deferred revenge’ of the Right against these communities was partly owing to the centrality of the Scottish miners’ leaders, Mick McGahey and Lawrence Daly, in the strikes of 1973-4.

It is vital to note that, as a result of this assault, as MacWhirter points out, ‘The communities that gave meaning to the lives of hundreds of thousands of working-class Scots disintegrated’ (quoted in Collins and McCartney (2011, p. 505), and the loss of shared purpose, meaning and collective support finds its corollary in the incidence of drug-related deaths, as well as those related to alcohol, suicide, and violence. Indeed, all the features that McGarvey describes so vividly.

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Conclusion

According to Nick Cohen (2017) of the Guardian, “McGarvey is a rarity: a working-class writer who has fought to make the middle-class world hear what he has to say.” The book does, however, present certain contradictions. On the one hand, many of the solutions recommended by McGarvey are highly transformative. On the other, it could be argued that one of his key remedies - individual personal responsibility and self-help – is a central feature of the neo-liberal playbook, equally at home with Oprah and Norman Tebbit. It is simply the dominant narrative of the last 40 years, developed by Thatcherism, culturally refined by New Labour and currently helping to sustain austerity. Equally such statements that “there will be no revolution. Not in your lifetime. This system will limp on and so must we”, might explain why McGarvey’s (2017, p. 113) work has gained plaudits from the FT, Daily Mail and why the BBC has commissioned much of his work. One has to ask, would a genuine radical be comfortable with such endorsements, let alone advertise them?

Indeed, a key feature, and strength, of the British State has been its ability to assimilate and defuse dissent through inviting radicals to the table. As Miliband pointed out,

It was not only inside the House of Commons that ‘the Great Ones, the Powerful Ones, the Lordly Ones’ were simple, unaffected and friendly towards men like (Scottish Labour Party firebrand David Kirkwood): no Society function was really complete in 1923 without the presence of one of the rebels from the Clyde. (Miliband, 1961, p. 96)

The quote may not be entirely appropriate. The Red Clydesiders within the Labour Party who were so dazzled by the world of Westminster at least had a cogent understanding of the distribution of wealth and power within the country and a plan of action based on class solidarity to transform this. While McGarvey attempts an overview of wealth and power, and introduces some very decent options, arguably his individuated fatalism and lack of systemic analysis writes its own invite to any ‘Society function’.

I do concur, however, with McGarvey's analysis of the sources of power in property ownership, his ability to illustrate these inequities through, for example, the criminal tragedy of Grenfell and criminality of the Duke of Buccleuch's odious land ownership in Scotland. Moreover, a central theme of his book, along with notions of proximity and social distance, is the current denial of the concept of class with McGarvey (2022, p. 24) arguing:

The concept of class arose and has persisted despite concerted efforts to flush it from public consciousness not because it creates social division but because it so accurately describes the forces which drive it.

McGarvey's book can be seen as a call to action embedded in praxis, with a theoretical prism displaying elements of class analysis, and a healthy part of his strategy is to goad the reader: 'The status-quo's days are numbered in low digits. This is your society. This is your life. This is your time. And so, all I ask is this: what are you going to do about it?' (see McGarvey 2022b, p. 15) An excellent question for readers of Concept which might be summarised as 'what as educators and citizens are you going to do about the inequities resulting from a one-sided class war?'

Despite concerns about assimilation, *The Social Distance Between Us* is a considerable achievement. The contradictions, however, require resolution.

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