

Maslow, the Shire and Brexit

We have reached a point where no simplistic explanation sheds much light on our present situation. Old themes, like party, prosperity, region or class no longer provide adequate explanations of national behaviour. There is something deeper, more compounded (multi-factorial) at work. I propose that whoever you are, the circumstances of our time are likely to have produced *a sense of threat in terms of limiting your potential* that you can no longer ignore. There have always been such threats, poverty, health, economic factors, bad luck, mistaken ventures, change including innovation, but now they all seem to be pitted against you and call for an amount of work you may be unable or unwilling to marshal and even if you did, good results are not guaranteed.

You may, as our Prime Minister says, already be working flat out on two or three jobs and still unable to pay your way. I suggest that in addition to the obvious suffering, *there is a whole new, unexplored category of JAMS (Just About Managing) at the level of psychological insecurity*, who are able to make their way now, yet are terrified of an imminent future where they are not. So what is afoot?

My very good friend Mac Andrews has proposed an insightful perspective on the psycho-social dynamics of our present situation. He employs Maslow's hierarchy to explain how increasing suffering, in psychological, sociological and economic spheres has forced large groups of the people DOWN the hierarchy, rather than - as we came to expect in post-war years - a journey UP.

Stick with me for a moment while we revisit the basic model and then we'll apply Mac's analysis to see what shows up. Here it is, in its simplest form, showing progression, up the levels from the bottom that we might expect it in a civilised society where there are opportunities for growth and development, leading eventually to our highest aspiration, self-actualisation at the top - becoming the best we can be:

1. At the base are survival mechanisms, the level called **physiology** really refers to survival of the body, the vessel of life.

2. Next comes **safety**, a safe home is pretty important here.
3. Then **belonging**, the feeling that you are part of a meaningful group, people like you to an extent, who share some of your hopes. Family is the simplest example of this - but not everyone has a happy or strong family, or much contact with friends or family at all. This week's report on Loneliness describes this growing problem. I see it daily in our Talk for Health work. There is detail here: [Red Cross and Co-op Loneliness](#)
4. Then, standing on - and dependent -on these three, comes **self-esteem**, a sense of a worthwhile self with a contribution to make, someone who has significance and is deserving both of rights and respect.
5. Last but not least, if all four of the lower states are in place there opens up the potential for **self-actualisation**, developing and moving towards the best that we can be.

The basic contention of Maslow - and the human potential movement - is that if growth is inhibited by problems at any level, then suffering will follow. Moreover, the more basic (lower) the level at which problems exist, then the sufferer will be excluded access to the higher levels. In other words that suffering will be compounded not just by particular problems of health, safety or belonging, but also by denial of access to higher potentials. This is a key element of today's suffering that is never mentioned in analyses, yet is amongst the most crippling, because it diminishes the possibility of escape.

So someone who is not safe, say a homeless person, cannot expect to experience the higher levels, belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation - except perhaps in exceptional moments. Even more crucially, anyone who has serious physiological issues is likely to be bound up in managing those - a critical problem in an ageing population, where co-morbidities (more than one illness) increase with every decade of life. And this will compound their suffering as they are excluded from bigger possibilities.

In a nutshell, the hierarchy charts the path towards the sense of a fully functioning, aware & powerful human being. Any interruption to the passage up the hierarchy will inhibit that sense of autonomy and potency.

Mac's application of this humanistic model argues that **we have driven a huge number of people down, rather than up, this hierarchy**. Let's consider the group who voted in largest numbers to Leave the European Union, white men over 45, living in the English regions. What has happened to these folk? A key factor is the disappearance of 'manly' work, once the province of many who did not prosper at school. When manly industries, classically mining, steel, building were prominent, many men could expect to follow in their father's footsteps and take up work in these industries. In recent years **combined** forces have combined to lead to the disappearance of this kind of work, globalisation, technology (e.g. robotics), loss of union membership and privatisation - including reduction in government investment/support - together with new kinds of insecure working

arrangements, like zero-hours contracts, minimum pay.

In Maslow's terms this has difficult consequences; the lack of manly or heroic work contributes to a loss of self-esteem (2) in local male populations. Even today it is difficult to think of a man saying, "I work in a call centre" with any real pride. Pride was the glue that held many working-class communities together. Remove it and you have less motivation to endure suffering.

At Maslow's (3), Belonging, there is damage too: men once felt proud to belong to their local communities of working men. They worked shoulder to shoulder, drank shoulder to shoulder and walked and talked the same way. I can't really see the guys working in Tesco bonding and sharing in the same way, can you?

Globalisation too, has led to the offshoring of these industries to other countries where resources are more plentiful, but particularly, labour is cheaper. This is a kind of double-whammy to men: "my job is gone and some foreigner has got it."

And all the while neo-liberal economics allowed the bosses to drive down wages, or simply not increase them and the gap between the low paid and the rich grew bigger and bigger. As Tony Judt points out, inequality has grown every decade since the late 1970's after 100 years of decreasing.

In Maslow's terms our ordinary male working population has now lost access to levels 1, 2, 3, the levels literally where 'life is good,' with ever more doubt about level 4, safety, and increasingly at level 5, faces a struggle for survival. For example with inconsistent & low pay, Level 2 or Safety becomes unreliable. As such a man I cannot pay my rent, I must choose between food, Christmas presents or heating, We are nearer to being evicted from our house, We have no reserves and I wake in the night terrified.

We have pushed huge swathes of the population down even further, to Level 1, where physical survival and that of our family is most of what we can see. Hence what you might experience as the obsession with the NHS. This is the only safeguard between such a man, his family, and destitution. That's what underlies the fear of the breakdown of social care, or care in the community. If I come out of hospital where will I go? Councils are spending less than 1% of their budgets on Social Care.

The NHS is the one remaining barrier against destitution in the event of misfortune. [For these reasons it is UKIP's biggest mistake to suggest privatisation of the NHS. That will scare away the very folk they are trying to attract.]

As I write this, I am deeply moved by how sad it is, how avoidable, how lacking in planning and concern for their constituents has been the manoeuvring of politicians: how thin and self-satisfying their ideology as the industrial regions collapsed and hope faded. This is a national disgrace, no less!

I am also aware of the role that individualism - or you might say self-centredness - has played in all this. And of my own part in a career spent trying to improve the seductiveness of marketing to play to the inadequacies and insecurities of customers. Looking out for No 1 was all very well while you were potent, but now, at 70, it doesn't seem as authentic or effective. How will I maintain my potency in these fading years?

No wonder we long for an ideal past when all was well and we were the centre of the world. A Britain of the story-books, a place of safety, free from worry or hunger, where everyone has a thatched cottage, a bit like Tolkien's Shire, with a comfortable (council?) hobbit-hole for all.