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The Real ‘Strangers’ Among Us

Those who declare the UK to be an island of estranged individuals are the ones who should be looking closer to home, writes **Danny Dorling**

Imagine our communities in years to come. The elderly, smiling on park benches as parades of perambulators pass by. The young, pushing grandchildren – Britain’s next generation – and everyone with happiness in their hearts.

Imagine a future of harmony, a sense of community, a feeling of quiet progress. Children doing well and mixing happily with others. Cities rebuilt, renewed; all neighbourhoods safe and clean. Britain a pleasant land of friends and acquaintances, of nods and smiles, of familiarity and comfort. Social hierarchies smoothed down to gently rolling hills of mild privilege above wide meadows of decentness.

During the 1950s, more so in the 1960s, and especially in the 1970s, this future mostly came to pass. Children’s families had security of tenure. They lived in homes from which they could not be evicted if the rent or mortgage were paid – and it almost always was paid. There was full employment (for men). Cheap new housing (for most). New schools and hospitals (for all). A green and pleasant land, if a little rose-tinted around the edges of our memories.

For a time, the most strangest and unusual of all people, the aristocracy, and the somewhat weird servant-keeping classes had largely disappeared – because they had assimilated.

But then new strangers began to appear among us. People whose lives resembled ours less and less. Increasingly speaking differently, living in enclaves, taking much more than their fair share. We did not see their children in the parades of perambulators. They began to bring up their children separately from ours. They

hoarded money, looked after their own, and were increasingly remote from the rest of society – while telling us how essential their presence, and contribution, was.

Occasionally these incomers took over whole neighbourhoods, although more often they just built higher walls and clustered together in streets where they felt safer – away from us. As social interactions diminished, they succeeded more and more in avoiding our eyes, and then our spaces. We began to notice that they dressed differently, behaved differently. In their minds the worst thing that could happen would be if one of their children fell in love with one of ours.

The new strangers hid their real religion and beliefs; their laws about what was right and wrong, acceptable and forbidden. They had their own customs and traditions, rituals, holidays, words and manners. They talked of how today is not a progressive era, but a tragic one. They pretended to feel our pain, saying that ‘things don’t always get better’ and implying they had the solution – which was to accept having them in charge. They claimed to be traditionalists – but they were immigrants; the real strangers in this land.

These strangers were once a part of us. They never quite belonged, but in the past they could mostly pass as normal, despite, as children, usually looking and sounding a little different. They might have been brought up separately, in minor private schools, or schools that had been grammars; but back then their parents were not paid that much more than everyone else. They might have had a little property, or been highly successful professionals. A stockbroker in the 1960s was usually not rich, just well-off. Work in the City was once a relatively normal job, unlike today when being successful in finance sets you so utterly apart.

But despite always having had some advantage, in those days they could pass for one of us. In their youth they listened to the same music, and tried to dress and speak the same as us. Today, their children are far easier to identify just from a single spoken sentence, or a haircut, or how they walk tall.

Today, fees for private schools are very much higher. To separate yourself, you have to be able to take a much greater share of other people’s money. House prices around favoured state schools mean you cannot live there unless you, or a close relative, have somehow expropriated greatly. Today, no one makes their way into these areas by their own sweat and toil. Inheritance matters once again. This is why they don’t want their children mixing with yours.

These strangers are fixated on you and what you think and feel because they fear you. They need to tell you what is good for you because they have financial interests to protect, and greatly unequal wealth distribution to maintain. They tell you that growth, not redistribution, is the answer. They push a politics of what ‘most people in

this country would agree with'. They talk about Muslims and anti-racism 'wokeness', to show how connected they are to the masses.

These strangers peddle stories of the dangers of immigrants and 'grooming gangs', and how young men need to have strong, macho role models, and of what they call common sense.

To protect what they and their families have stolen – or, in softer language, amassed – they need you to be afraid. Not of them, of course, because they do not want you to see them as strangers – they are your clever friend, they roll up their shirt sleeves and occasionally wear hard hats. Instead, they want you to be afraid of imaginary monsters in the dark.

These strangers inhabit think tanks and policy units. They attend dinner parties and rub shoulders with the great and good of the media, universities and business. We used to call it gentrification when they took over whole neighbourhoods. What an old fashioned class-war concept, they reply. The strangers are pleased if you know that they once attended a state school – their badge of having once mixed. But school choice for their children is a private matter, not open for discussion.

The strangers malign the past, discrediting the old politics of achieving a good home and life for everyone. Instead they promote private house-building wherever there is 'demand', rather than better using the stock and space we have.

They are patronizing. They tell you not to worry your little heads over economics. It is complex, they say; and what they are offering is the only way possible. Work very hard, and perhaps you can join the adults in the room who look after the little people. They do, however, have to discipline the poor: those who have too many children, the disabled who do not try hard enough to work, and the old who have not saved enough money to avoid going cold in winter.

In their youth, these strangers had more leisure than most. Looked after financially by their parents, they could travel, and dabble in whatever was fashionable in political fringes. Many have a story of their exciting activist past. They have always lived elite and economically secure lives, but thought they were normal.

They are strangers today because they are as distant from the rest of us as the old-fashioned one-nation Conservatives once were. Some may have a sense of why people in the UK really are estranged. But they will not fit in with their peers if they mention it is really about money; not skin colour, not immigration, not tradition. Very often they cut their political teeth in gentrifying London boroughs around the turn of the millennium. They are almost always white, mostly men, mostly in their 50s and 60s. Often they turn their jeans up to try to mimic the cool of their youth, sometimes to help highlight their statement trainers, or exciting socks.

They are the beneficiaries of social atomisation. The ones whose parents grabbed more and more when the old solidarity was dismantled in the 1980s. They are the products of people who ‘bought well’. Under their rule the price of beer rose in pubs so that only they can drink in them. A third of children in England now grow up in a home owned by a private landlord. Even more children now have no summer holiday. Under the strangers’ rule, schools have been academised, hospitals split into competing trusts, and doctor and dentist become distant.

As they carefully curate their own children’s futures, they peddle myths: that darker-skinned people are the strangers; that racism is understandable and acceptable; that we have to tighten our borders, celebrate the best of our history, grow our military, double down.

They tell us that there is no alternative – other than the fascists who will come if we don’t accept their slightly more mild-mannered, but still racist, future. Under their rule they will deport more people on planes than the last lot. They will appear on our screens with more and more Union flags behind them. And they will warn you of the threat of strangers. In reality, however, it is their kind you will never actually meet.

They don’t live near you or mix with you, and they want far better things for their children than yours: houses, education, private health care, villas abroad. Your children will, at best, work to keep their offspring in the manner to which they have become accustomed. They have no wish to sit on a park bench in their old age, looking out at a mixed society as perambulators pass by. They only imagine themselves as safe if Britain can be an island of strangers. And they want you to fear – or better still hate – your neighbour.