

## Book Review

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

Darren McGarvey's latest book *The Social Distance Between Us: How Remote Politics Wrecked Britain* explores the idea that 'proximity dictates how we identify and relate to society and the problems it faces - ultimately dictating how, and whether, we strive to resolve them'. Darren does this exploration in a book consisting of an introduction, two acts with an interlude between them and then a coda.

**Act 1- Proximity Warning** draws together materials and examples which I imagine are familiar to many who read *Concept* and who work in community settings. These include *The Spirit level*, *Chavs*, *The Tipping Point*, *Inequalities in Health: The Black Report*, the *Christie Commission* amongst others, alongside Darren's own TV series, where elements of Act 1 have been explored. As well as being helpful to have this comprehensive gathering of evidence, what also differs with this book is how Darren relates to the material and, most importantly, the relationships he has or develops as he explores his ideas. For me, these relationships and the intimacy of his exploration clearly demonstrate his premise about proximity. I can think of few other accounts which share the emotional components of this book - tenderness and anger - or mention love when exploring the consequences of the social distance between us.

In the **Interlude: When you don't know what you don't know**, Darren highlights how bad questions based on poor assumptions squander the opportunity to better understand and address issues. Here, I am reminded of Camara's astute words: 'When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist'. I recognise this tension in many of the funding strands of philanthropy and policy initiatives, where programmes are often created through a lens which misunderstands the issues or potentially helpful responses. In my experience, the most effective organisations are those which seek to work alongside those with 'lived experience'; to truly understand and shape responses together, while leaning into

uncomfortable truths which mean that they may have to rethink their assumptions, perceived interests and, in the end, help best by getting out of the way.

**Act 2- Fucked Left, Right and Centre** Darren brings strong criticism of every political hue. It is refreshing to have this focussed across all parties and doctrines. This act highlights some of the things I appreciate most about his work: his critical reflection skills and his ability to show up as himself, to notice what is going on, and share this. It shows a sense of humanity, connection and proximity often lacking when we seek to explore the mess we are in.

In the **Coda, Closing Remarks** Darren honestly reflects on the challenge of keeping his proximity alive once cushioned and restrained by the *'lucrative domain of legitimacy'*. I recognise his description, *'your incorruptible principles developed a sudden and convenient elasticity which, rather than proof of a forgivable lack of morale fibre, became evidence of your fair-minded maturity'* as a tension that lives in me and, I imagine, many of us though rarely spoken of. Darren goes on to discuss how it is easy to call for civility when you are cushioned from the impact of disconnected political decisions, observing that these cushions play into the unwillingness to accept the fact that life will need to change radically if radical change is to happen. Using the recent example of the Covid 19 crisis, he illustrates how it shows 'class' as a very alive dividing line in our society, vividly naming the differences in impact of the Covid 19 crisis by class experiences and consequences. He points out how, through the crisis, we learned governments will 'follow the science' when it is politically convenient, and I notice my frustration rise at the acknowledgement of what could be achieved if a similar approach was taken on areas where such evidence is often ignored, like poverty, connection and substance use.

Darren then identifies three actions which, if taken together, could reduce the social distance between us. Focussing on education as the *'primary guarantor of class inequality'* with education systems throughout the UK *'broadly segregated according to social class and where pathways to further and higher education, as well as the labour market, are set'* Darren calls for the advantages enjoyed by the privileged to be recognised and extended to all children. He references Finland as an example of how

we could bring equality to the education system. Recognising the relational connection between education and employment, Darren's next action focusses on strengthening worker representation to correct the distance here, and he offers a range of ways to increase accountability and reduce social proximity. His third action contains several proposals which focus on both the House of Commons and Lords. Again, these changes look to increase accountability and proximity. Darren also has specific suggestions for each of the potential demographics reading his book on how we can contribute to reducing the social distance between us, and encourages us to be alive to addressing the question: *'When it comes to social inequality in Britain, what if poor people aren't the problem?'*

For me, the premise of the book is clear. It is the distance between those experiencing and those trying to address problems that leaves them unresolved or worsened. This has been recognised in some spaces, with examples like Systems Changers, Poverty Truth Commissions and mentoring of civil servants by those experiencing the impact of their policies as examples of where minor changes may be taking place. At Social Action Inquiry Scotland, we are in the midst of exploring what helps and hinders social action. As we work alongside communities sharing stories of their experiences, I am interested to see how much class and social proximity will feature in what is identified. The inquiry findings will be available in late 2023. If you are interested in finding out more do get in touch [sam@socialaction.scot](mailto:sam@socialaction.scot)

It is refreshing, though uncomfortable, to be reminded by Darren of how much some practitioners and elements of the 'voluntary' and public sector actually benefit from the flawed assumptions of what can help or hinder. Whole careers, incomes and organisations are built on having power over, and resources to make, judgements of what others' norms should be and how they should live. Class rarely features as a relevant lens through which to understand personal experience. Instead, an acceptance and reinforcement of the hegemony which sees people as either deserving or undeserving, hardworking or lazy too often pertains. For me, this book clearly demonstrates how important it is that we look for the roots of social problems, and identify and name those who currently control the damaging assumptions, false beliefs and narratives being presented as facts

I am struck by the irony that after more than two years of messages about social distancing, the need is actually for increased social proximity, alongside a recognition of how problematic the behaviour of those holding systemic power is. As Darren McGarvey argues, we need to confront these contradictions if we are ever to hope to address the mess we are in.

**Sam Anderson**

**Co-chair Social Action Inquiry Scotland**