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PROSPERITY FOR WHOM? SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE AND THE UK ECONOMY

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Abstract

The UK cost of living crisis has thrown the government's Levelling Up agenda into sharper relief. With inflation at its highest rate in three decades – and with the effects of the pandemic still keenly felt in many communities – disparities are only set to widen over the coming months and years. This Working Paper draws on policy literature, historical research, and contemporary data to explore how persistent patterns of inequality have developed in the United Kingdom – and to demonstrate why holistic models of change are needed. Though policy makers rarely reach back into the past, preferring to look to a brighter, greener future, history helps us to consider how patterns of systemic injustice persist and shapeshift over time. Only by acknowledging historic trends and seeking radical alternatives to existing economic models can we attempt to design an inclusive vision of prosperity.

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INTRODUCTION

The UK cost of living crisis has thrown the government's Levelling Up agenda into sharper relief. The fall in real incomes is already having uneven effects across the income distribution, hitting low-income households the hardest. With inflation at its highest rate in three decades, and the value of benefits dwindling, the picture is only set to get worse over the coming months and years (Corlett and Try, 2022; FT, 2022). The long-awaited Levelling Up white paper (DLUHC, 2022) signals a welcome shift towards greater devolution and community empowerment. But critics doubt whether the emphasis on place-based inequality – a strategy that skims over the complex and intersectional issues present within neighbourhoods, households, and social groups – is sufficiently bold and transformative (Harris, 2022; Newman, 2021; Tomaney and Pike, 2020). As the pandemic has demonstrated all too clearly, British society is plagued by all kinds of structural inequalities, including those of ethnicity, race, and gender (Moore and Collins, 2020; Meghji and Niang, 2021). Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, and recent political scandals in the UK, transformative action is needed to restore faith in governments, strengthen democracy, and increase trust in institutions. This will entail putting social value before economic value; prioritising the views of the most marginalised groups in society; and paying attention to the hyper-local ways in which social and economic problems manifest.

In recent years, developments outside of politics have been empowering a movement for change. Books for general audiences have shone a light on the experiences of people of colour in the 21st century (e.g., Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Akala, 2018;

Saad, 2020), while television documentaries¹ and heritage initiatives² have worked to underscore Britain's relationship to slavery, empire, and colonialism. Campaigns against structural racism gained momentum in the spring of 2020, when Breonna Taylor and George Floyd were murdered at the hands of white police officers in Kentucky and Minneapolis respectively. These high-profile events brought new supporters to the Black Lives Matter movement (2013–) and helped to shift the UK conversation away from a focus on the failures of the US towards systemic racism at home (Otele et al., 2021; Njaka, 2022)³. Protests broke out around the country, most notably in the city of Bristol, where demonstrators tore down a statue of the merchant Edward Colston (1636–1731), laying bare his links to the Atlantic Slave Trade. Through similar efforts to decolonise knowledge and public space, questions around history, culture, racism, and resistance are 'now being posed with greater urgency' (Fowler, 2020; for example: Meghji and Niang, 2021).

Other issues have been reflected and refracted through the prism of the pandemic, too. Hostile immigration policies (Lock, 2022)⁴, the climate emergency (Moore and Moreno, 2022); wealth disparities (Dibb et al., 2021); xenophobia (Gao and Sai, 2020); institutional misogyny (Halliday, 2022); gender-based violence (Johnson, 2022; Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2020); child poverty (Adami and Dineen, 2021) – not to mention the crisis in adult social care (UN Women, 2021; Beford et al., 2022) – these are all issues that plague UK society in the 2020s, underlining the need for a new social contract (Shafik, 2021).

1 E.g., 'Black and British: A Forgotten History' (2016). Directed by Naomi Austin and Shabnam Grewal. Written by David Olusoga. BBC Two, 9 November.

2 See, for example, the National Trust's Colonial Countryside Project: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/colonial-countryside-project> [accessed 18 May 2022].

3 The UK government has been slow to acknowledge this conversation. See, for example, the Sewell Report on race and ethnic disparities (CRED, 2021), which was widely criticised for minimising the problem of systemic racism.

4 The Nationality and Borders Bill (2022) is the most recent piece of legislation to compound migrant-status based inequalities. See: <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3023> [accessed 17 May 2022].

Understanding how we got to where we are is crucial if we are to successfully re-design prosperity for the 21st Century. This IGP working paper weaves past and present case studies into a critical discussion of the UK economy and its baked-in, systemic inequities, arguing that ‘Levelling Up’ will not work against the backdrop of a shrinking social safety net and a new raft of neoliberal policies. Our arguments are fourfold.

In what follows, we develop these arguments through a discussion of four problem areas: the health care system, the labour system, the food system, and the environmental crisis. We conclude with reference to some of the transformative work that is going on around the UK at the community-level, highlighting potential pathways to a more just and sustainable future.

- 1) Policymakers need to take a whole-systems approach to change, appreciating the ways in which different kinds of systemic injustice – racial, environmental, gendered, generational, and geographic – are interlinked.
- 2) We need to step outside the growth and development frameworks that have created systemic problems in the first place (Moore, 2015; Cassiers, 2015; Jackson, 2017; Hickel, 2020), with their particular commitment to unrevised notions of progress, efficiency and productivity⁵.
- 3) The past four centuries of economic growth have created spaces and places where some livelihoods are more precarious than others. Even within regions, social groups are often on very different pathways and trajectories, depending on intersectional inequities and historical experience.
- 4) The changes proposed in the UK Government Levelling Up White Paper do not depend on a deep critique of structural injustice; nor do they appreciate the hyperlocal ways in which problems manifest in certain areas. Levelling Up will continue to perpetuate dangerous forms of ‘slow violence’ (Nixon, 2011) unless the social security net is widened, and more radical changes adopted.

⁵ The ONS’ ‘Beyond GDP’ initiative represents an important step in the right direction. Following on from the Environmental Audit Committee’s Spring 2022 inquiry into ‘Aligning the UK’s economic goals with environmental sustainability’, to which the IGP gave evidence, the government recently announced its plans to publish quarterly statistics on climate change, alongside quarterly estimates of GDP: <https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2022/05/12/looking-beyond-gdp-and-providing-insights-on-climate-change/> [accessed 17 May 2022]. However, the ONS has yet to release quarterly data on systemic inequality, and it is doubtful that measures of this kind will emerge under the current government.

1. THE HEALTH OF THE NATION

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed ‘systematic, avoidable and unfair’ differences in health outcomes across the UK population and between different population groups (McCartney et al, 2019, p. 22; Marmot et al, 2020; Public Health Scotland, 2021). During the first wave of the pandemic (March–May 2020), the rate of death involving Covid was four times higher for Black Britons, three-and-a-half times higher for British Bangladeshis and Pakistanis, and two-and-a-half times higher for British Indians when compared to the White British population (ONS, 2021; Hooijer and King, 2021; Meghji and Niang, 2021). Mortality rates were also worst in the most deprived parts of the UK. By April 2021, 345 deaths had occurred for every 100,000 people in Blackburn and Darwen, compared to 68 deaths per 100,000 people in South Cambridgeshire, leading the All-Parliamentary Group for Longevity to calculate that, if the most deprived parts of the UK had the same health record as the most affluent parts of the UK, 40,000 fewer people would have died from Covid across Britain (APPGL, 2021, p. 4).

The UK is not distinct in this respect. Countries across the Global North have recorded high rates of Covid infection among minority ethnic groups, demonstrating just how enmeshed health inequalities are in broader social and economic power structures (Hooijer and King, 2021). In the UK, as elsewhere, the pandemic has exacerbated hospital and GP waiting times (BMA, 2022). And yet, waiting times are longest in areas of high deprivation: places where austerity cuts over the past decade have hit primary and secondary care services the hardest (Holmes and Jeffries, 2021). In the lead up to the crisis, the NHS was already under

strain, with record numbers of patients turning to crowd-funding websites to pay for their own private medical care (Burn-Murdoch, 2022). And this pattern is set to continue, with 6.1 million people currently categorised as waiting for NHS treatment in England (BMA, 2022)⁶.

“The NHS has long prided itself on being open and cosmopolitan, but we should not mistake ethnic diversity for racial equality”

Long before terms like ‘lockdown’ and ‘social distancing’ entered public discourse, these inequalities were evident in population health trends (DHSS, 1980; Department of Health, 1998; Marmot et al., 2010). Research from the past ten years confirms that people from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to suffer from a wide range of serious health problems, including kidney failure, stroke, and diabetes (Kidney Research UK, 2021; Fazil, 2018; Gulli et al., 2016). While some of these trends can be linked to high rates of deprivation among ‘BAME’⁷ communities (rates that are themselves deeply problematic and evidence of systemic racism) we must also consider the role that overt prejudice plays (TIDES, 2022). In Britain today, Black women are over four times more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth than white women, raising important questions about unconscious bias in the healthcare system and the silencing of particular patient voices (MBBRACE-UK, 2021; Meghji and Niang, 2021, pp. 135-6). Everyday experiences of racism breed mistrust and suspicion in state authorities. Meanwhile, histories of state

⁶ Figures recorded February 2022.

⁷ We include the acronym ‘BAME’ in inverted commas to draw attention to the contested nature of this term. Although it is still common practice for some organisations to refer ‘Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic’ groups, many public bodies and institutions, including the UK government, are now acknowledging the problematics of this acronym: a reductive term that has its roots in colonial othering practices. As Chinelo L. Njaka (2022) observes, ‘BAME represents an obvious fiction of unity, whereby the heterogeneity and specificities of the various groups are hidden under the broad generalisation that they are not part of the White majority ethnic group’. (p. 11)

violence and medical discrimination leave an imprint on collective consciousness, contributing to health trends like vaccine hesitancy (Woodhead et al., 2021; Millward, 2021; Bivins, 2007). Some ethnic minority groups were slower to come forward for the Covid-19 vaccine, mirroring childhood immunisation patterns, and patterns of uptake for the influenza vaccine among pregnant women (Forster et al., 2017; NHS England and NHS Improvement South East, 2021; Walker et al., 2021).

The UK health system is not serving ethnic minority communities as fully as it could. And yet, ethnic minority communities are serving it – and have been doing for decades. When the NHS opened its doors in the late 1940s, it was quickly overwhelmed by the post-war labour shortage, prompting the government to look overseas for new recruits. In the 1950s, much of this supplementary labour came from former and existing colonies in the Caribbean, where the NHS led specific recruitment drives to source hospital auxiliary staff, trainee nurses, and domestic workers (Snow and Jones, 2011). Similar schemes were led by London Transport and British Rail to address shortages in the transport sector. By the late 1970s, foreign recruits made up over 10% of student nurses and midwives in Britain; two-thirds of these individuals came from the Caribbean, many from Jamaica. (Snow and Jones, 2011) Simultaneously, as white British doctors set their own sights overseas in this period – to higher wages and new life opportunities in North America and Australia – the NHS found itself under increasing pressure to recruit trained professionals from abroad. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, growing numbers of doctors migrated from South Asia to England to start or continue their medical careers – patterns that are still observed today (Bivins, 2019).

The NHS has long prided itself on being open and cosmopolitan, but we should not mistake ethnic diversity for racial equality. Structural injustices remain in the UK healthcare system, reflected in the fact that over 90% of ‘very senior’ managerial roles across NHS trusts and clinical commissioning groups are occupied by white people. (NHS Digital

Stats for England, 2021). Individuals from Black ethnic backgrounds are underrepresented among GPs and consultants, and although doctors are statistically most likely to belong to Chinese or Asian ethnic groups, White doctors are most likely to be in the highest paid positions (Milner et al., 2020). Tellingly, although 20% of UK nurses and midwives are people of colour, there were just eight Directors of Nursing from ‘BAME’ backgrounds (just 3.4%) in 2019 (Bivins, 2019).

At the same time, people of colour are overrepresented in lower-status areas of medicine, particularly roles involving mental health work, care of the elderly, and care of the chronically ill (TUC, 2016; Snow and Jones, 2011). Since UK-trained doctors tended to gravitate away from these jobs in the middle of the twentieth century – towards other specialisms or to other countries entirely – migrant workers stepped in to fill the gaps in NHS provisioning. As the historian Julian Simpson (2014) summarises, ‘Migrant doctors have tended to be disproportionately represented in junior roles, unpopular geographical areas, less prestigious fields of medicine, and positions involving unsociable hours. They have not simply complemented the medical workforce and been seamlessly integrated into the body of doctors working in the NHS. They have taken on roles that are shunned by many local medics’ (History and Policy website, unpaginated). As the sound of clapping rang out across the nation in the spring of 2020, these important conversations about structural injustice were mostly lost in the noise.

2. LABOUR MARKET INEQUALITIES

The healthcare system was not the only UK system to be affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The UK labour market, too, has faced significant challenges in recent years, first with the impact of Brexit, then with the UK national lockdowns and associated furlough schemes, which transformed UK spending behaviour in 2020–2021 and dealt out unforeseen shocks to certain sectors. While some of these trends are likely to prove short-term in their effects, the UK is also experiencing a long-term trend towards rising labour precarity, one seen throughout OECD countries since the financial crisis of 2008 (Shafik, 2021). With rising levels of part-time work and self-employment, and growing numbers of zero hours contracts, work in the 21st century ‘gig economy’ is increasingly synonymous with precarity.

Although differences of definition make it difficult to pin down precise numbers, estimates suggest that over half of UK gig workers are also in permanent employment. For many, gig work is not a lifestyle choice, but a way of supplementing an existing income and guarding against the rising cost of living (Taylor et al., 2017, p. 25; Balaram et al., 2017; Adams-Prassl et al., 2021). The growth in low-quality work is another issue, with many workers driven into underemployment through flexible contracts, or overqualified for the jobs that they are undertaking. Commentators acknowledge the benefits of flexible working, and insist that gig work is here to stay, simply requiring better regulation (Taylor et al., 2017). But at what cost for employment rights and the fiscal social contract more broadly? As society continues to age, growing increasingly reliant on overstretched care workers (Bedford et al., 2022), we ignore the issue of precarious work at our peril.

While digital platforms like Uber and Deliveroo have shone a light on the gig economy, workforce casualisation has a much longer economic history. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social investigators were exercised by the problem of precarity. Through their research

and activism, individuals like Seebohm Rowntree and Eleanor Rathbone, together with organisations like the Fabian Society, fought hard to highlight the issue of in-work poverty, canvassing against low wages and casual labour in seasonal trades such as dock work (Whiteside, 2017). It is noteworthy that low wages and flexible contracts are today concentrated in supersized, global firms that site their UK warehouses in parts of the country hit hardest by deindustrialisation. ASOS’ main UK warehouse, open all hours due to intense shift work patterns, is in the former coal-mining town of Grimethorpe in Barnsley, while Amazon’s largest UK site is in the port town of Tilbury in Essex – an area where unemployment persists following the decline of dock work in the 1970s (Spary and Silver, 2016; El-Sahli and Upward, 2017). In these and other ways, pockets of deprivation have persisted in the UK, intertwined with extractive forms of capitalism throughout the past two hundred years.

And yet, despite these strong historical precedents, our on-demand lifestyles have also created distinctly modern problems. Large online retailers operate tight production schedules to ensure quick delivery turnarounds, often using zero-hours contracts to manage flexible demand. As undercover reports confirm, these arrangements can foster exploitative relationships in which ‘pickers’ and ‘packers’ are treated like disposable commodities. Shifts can be cancelled at any time, often when agency workers are already on site, having paid for public transport. One noteworthy investigation into the clothing company, Sports Direct (Goodley and Ashby, 2015) found that the firm practised a ‘three strikes then fired’ policy for offences such as gum chewing, while a follow-up investigation in 2020 (Goodley) observed that the company prohibits workers from leaving the premises during their unpaid lunch breaks in a clear breach of employment law. The same firm was found to operate degrading security measures throughout the working day and to dock worker pay for even a few minutes’ lateness. Since

many warehouse workers are classified as self-employed, they have no entitlement to sick pay or holiday pay, and face having their assignments terminated when unwell or caring for relatives (Spary and Silver, 2016).

“The past four centuries of economic growth have created spaces and places where some livelihoods are more precarious than others... ASOS’ largest UK warehouse is in the former coal-mining town of Grimethorpe in Barnsley, while Amazon’s main UK site is in the port town of Tilbury in Essex – an area where unemployment persists following the decline of dock work in the 1970s”

Although Sports Direct’s largest warehouse is also situated in a former English coal mining town, like many large-scale, low-paying firms, it relies heavily on cheap migrant labour from Eastern Europe. Migrant workers and workers from (certain) ethnic minority groups are among the groups most likely to experience precarity in the UK labour market (Pósch et al., 2020). Moreover, whilst the relationship between precarious work and exploitation is not a linear one, precarious workers ‘are likely to be at high risk of experiencing labour market non-compliance [...] appear[ing] rarely to report, or seek justice, when faced with [such treatment]’ (Ibid., p. ii). These patterns of injustice mirror broader structural inequalities in the labour market. According to a study by the Trades Union Congress, one in eight Black workers were in insecure work in 2016, compared to a national average of one in seventeen and an average of one in twenty for white workers (TUC, 2016). In the same year, the employment rate for white workers was 76%, but as low as 64% for minority ethnic workers, and 54% for Pakistani and Bangladeshi workers specifically (TUC, 2016). As several research studies have

observed, Pakistani and Bangladeshi workers are the most disadvantaged ethnic group in the UK labour market, with observed knock-on effects for rates of child poverty in Pakistani and Bangladeshi households (Khan, 2020; Parker, 2021)⁸.

These racial inequalities are profoundly disturbing, but also historically unsurprising. UK migration systems, rooted in histories of colonialism, racism, and xenophobia, have long coerced certain groups of workers into low-waged, casualised, and demeaning forms of labour, as James Vernon’s recent work (2021) on the history of Heathrow Airport demonstrates clearly. For Vernon, Heathrow shines particularly stark light on the tensions between British immigration policies and British labour market policies in the decades following the Second World War. When the Commonwealth Immigrants Act was passed in 1962, eroding the foundations of the 1948 British Nationality Act, Commonwealth Citizens found themselves corralled into separate airport queues, where they were often subject to racial abuse from immigration officers, even when in possession of a British passport (p. 235). Many Commonwealth Citizens were denied entry to the UK in this period, reflecting what the author defines as an ‘increasingly... racialized security state’ (p. 217). Though Bangladesh joined the Commonwealth in 1977, 1 in 30 migrants from Bangladesh were refused entry to the UK in 1977, compared to 1 in nearly 6000 from Canada (p. 227). And yet, notes Vernon, ‘those who ended up working in the most precarious outsourced jobs at the airport were very often the Commonwealth citizens, mostly women of colour, whom the immigration system had been designed to exclude’ (p. 217). Whilst repudiating non-white citizens on the one hand, the airport benefitted from the racialised segmentation of the labour market on the other, employing disproportionate numbers of ethnic minority workers in low-paid, low-skilled, and insecure jobs like cleaning and catering (Ibid).

Considered in broader perspective, Heathrow reminds us that specific sectors of the UK economy – like catering – are intertwined with histories of racial

⁸ Despite high rates of child poverty in minority ethnic households, UK anti-poverty campaigns have often shied away from acknowledging racism in their marketing campaigns. As Alexandra Wanjiku Kelbert observes, Save the Children UK’s 2012 campaign employed images of mostly white children to drum home the message that child poverty ‘shouldn’t happen here’. (Kelbert, 2022).

capitalism. The fast-food sector was expanding in the post-war decades, creating a sudden demand for cheap, flexible labour in the food industry. The work permit system sought to address this in the 1960s, by creating opportunities for workers from China, Hong Kong, and the Indian subcontinent to enter the UK job market as cooks and waiters in the ethnic food industry. Yet rather than providing livelihood security, work permits placed limits on migrant workers, channelling them into the fragile, informal economy and restricting their opportunities for economic self-determination (Baxter and Raw, 1988). A case study of the Chinese catering sector (*ibid.*) reveals that workers were often locked into patterns of overwork and exploitation due to tied accommodation agreements. Moreover, the permit system reproduced British gender norms, categorising men as workers and women as dependents, and overlooking Chinese women's important contributions to family economies. (Baxter and Raw, 1988). These factors made it exceptionally difficult for East Asian workers to break into the formal economy or to become socially mobile in the post-war decades, even as they plugged an important gap in British labour supply.

In the 21st century, our food system is still heavily reliant on the outsourcing of low-paid, low-skilled, and precarious jobs to migrant workers (Coulson and Milbourne, 2021). International food manufacturing firms exercise disproportionate control over the British food industry, and their rise to prominence over the last three decades has caused independent food retailers and manufacturers to decline in number (Lever and Milbourne, 2017). Just as nursing jobs in the healthcare sector were unappealing to the UK workforce in the 1950s, so too are low-paid jobs in the agri-food sector unappealing to the UK workforce today. Following expansions to the EU in 2004 and 2007, migrants from Central and Eastern Europe have increasingly stepped in to fill British labour shortages, undertaking jobs in slaughterhouses and meat processing plants that are 'widely recognised to be dirty, dangerous, demanding and unattractive to UK workers' (*ibid.*, p. 307).

Lever and Milbourne's study of migrant workers in the meat processing sector in Wales (2017) found

that arrangements of this kind reinforce patterns of social segregation. Not only are migrant workers spatially dislocated from the communities in which they are based – 'located "out of sight and out of mind" [on] bland industrial parks' – but they are also often informally segregated to improve production efficiency: Portuguese-speaking workers on one production line, Polish-speaking workers on another. 'In many places', note the researchers, 'the position of migrants as outsiders is maintained by the use of contracts that are often referred to as 'unlimited' or 'open ended', but which in reality... represent 'zero hours' contracts that lack any agreed allocation of working hours' (p. 314). Once again, these arrangements prioritise profits over secure livelihoods, making it difficult for migrant workers to acquire the human capital skills needed to flourish in the labour market more widely (p. 311).

As demonstrated in the next section through an extended discussion of the UK food system, precarious contracts are just one of the many problems associated with the ways in which we produce and consume food as a society.

3. WHY FOOD MATTERS

Workers in slaughterhouses and meat packing plants found themselves particularly vulnerable to Covid-19 when it swept through the United Kingdom in the spring of 2020. Environmental factors (low temperatures/ high humidity levels) made meat plants especially favourable sites for transmission. But unsafe working conditions were also contributing factors. As the BMJ was quick to observe, ‘insecure poorly paid employment... long hours and coercive contracts; a reliance on migrant workers housed in inadequate overcrowded accommodation [...] and limited or non-existent hygiene measures’ all gave the virus the upper hand in the meat industry (Middleton et al., 2020, p. 1). Unsurprisingly, given the rise in precarious work across Western nations, similar outbreaks were seen in meat packing plants in Germany, Portugal, and the United States within the same timeframe (Ibid.).

Places that rear, kill, cut, and process animals have long been sites of public health concern (Hardy, 2014). In order to understand why vast meatpacking plants exist at all, we need to understand the ways in which eating habits were changing in Britain in the middle of the twentieth century: a time when wages were increasing, the social security net was expanding, and livelihoods were growing more secure. These changes in the cost-of-living brought meat products within reach for working populations at precisely the same time that intensive farming methods were diminishing costs on the production side. Mirroring specialised breeding programmes in the United States, UK farmers began rearing broiler chickens at scale in the 1950s, cramming ‘large flocks [of birds] inside ever larger sheds’ to benefit from economies of scale (Godley and Williams, 2009, p. 276). As demand grew, UK chicken production rose from a modest 5 million in 1954 to a remarkable 377 million by 1976 (Hardy, 2014, p. 192). This was rapid transformation of the food system in a staggeringly short space of time.

The intensification of food production in the second half of the twentieth century produced cheap food for western nations. But these changes ultimately came at a cost for people and planet. Intensive breeding practices are a major cause of foodborne pathogens and antimicrobial resistance, working to spread disease risk globally (Pilling, 2022; Dumbleby, 2021; Hardy, 2014). Livestock farming is also one of the main causes of greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs), with food accounting for 26% of global GHGs, and animal products making up 56% of the food emissions category (Lang, 2020, p. 218). Although agroecological principles are slowly gaining traction, the UK farming sector suffers from siloed and conservative thinking due to a lack of gender and ethnic diversity within the sector (Coulson and Milbourne, 2021). Farmers experiencing poor mental health and high rates of in-work poverty struggle to contemplate transformational adaptation, given the very real challenges of livelihood insecurity. Then there is the problem of zoonotic disease emergence itself, of the kind seen recently with the SARS-CoV-2 pathogen. According to recent research, land-use change due to livestock rearing is the principal cause of emerging infectious disease worldwide (Dumbleby, 2021, p. 23; Montenegro de Wit, 2021, p. 102). With animals bred to exhibit little genetic variation and packed together tightly in small pens, often on top of recycled faeces, intensive farming provides the ideal conditions for opportunistic pathogens to transmit quickly through animal hosts (Wood and Fevre, 2021; Montenegro de Wit, 2021).

Reducing meat consumption to mitigate climate change is now a top policy priority, with the National Food Strategy recommending a 30% reduction in UK meat consumption over the next ten years (Dumbleby, 2021, p. 11). But eating less and better-quality meat is not always a straightforward option for those on low incomes. Away from the media headlines about food stockpiling, many people who

had previously been well-fed fell into food insecurity during the pandemic, including disproportionate numbers of ethnic minority households⁹. In August 2021, the Food Foundation reported that 2.4 million British children had directly experienced food insecurity – defined as ‘the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food’ – in the previous six months (Goudie and McIntyre, 2021, p. 8). Even before the pandemic, the problem of food poverty was acute, with an estimated 700,000 UK households using foodbanks in the year to mid-March 2020 (Bramley et al., 2021, p. 2; Lambie-Mumford, 2017). The 370,000 households supported by the Trussell Trust alone in this period included 320,000 children (Bramley et al., 2021, p. 2).

The public response to Marcus Rashford’s FareShare campaign – a campaign that delivered free school meals to children at home during the Coronavirus crisis – was overwhelming in 2020, prompting the government to extend funding for its Holiday Activities and Food programme for a further three financial years¹⁰. But for all the awareness raising, child hunger remains a pressing problem. The eligibility criteria for assessing food insecurity varies widely across the four nations. In England and Wales, low-income households must earn less than £7,400 a year after tax and benefits to qualify for free school meals, while in Northern Ireland the threshold is fixed at £14,000 (Goudie and McIntyre, 2021). And where families slip through the net, it is food banks, rather than governments, who step in to help. As Nadja Durbach observes (2020), this flawed social contract model has a long political history dating back to the early nineteenth century. From the workhouses of the 1830s to the welfare foods service of the 1940s, government solutions to population hunger have been, at best, strongly bounded – and deeply enmeshed in other economic priorities.

These priorities become clearer when we consider how our food habits are embedded in histories of global commerce. In the UK today, around half of

domestic food purchases fall under the category of ‘ultra-processed’ foods: products like sweetened breakfast cereals, crisps, white bread, soft drinks, packaged soups, chicken nuggets, and chocolate (Dimpleby, 2021). We can trace the origins of these processed food products back to the UK nutrition transition, a period between the 18th and 20th centuries when rapid economic growth powered a move away from diets rich in cereals and fibre towards diets high in sugars, animal fats, and refined wheat. The UK nutrition transition made food cheap and plentiful for Britons. But cheap food came at a cost for global prosperity. As an imperial power, Britain was able to use her economic might to outsource food production to other parts of the globe, downscaling agricultural production at home and importing large volumes of wheat, sugar, cheese, butter, and meat from far-flung settlements and colonies (Otter, 2012).

In the 21st century, the UK’s globalised food system continues to threaten landscapes and livelihoods elsewhere on the planet, particularly in the Global South (Willoughby and Gore, 2018). An important piece of research commissioned by Oxfam in the late 2010s investigated twelve common food products sourced by UK supermarkets ‘from a range of representative producing countries spanning Asia, Africa and Latin America’ (Wilshaw, 2018). Tracing backwards through the supply chain, the researchers found that agricultural workers in the Global South were below the living wage to produce food for UK consumption in the case of all twelve food products. Wages were particularly low where agricultural work was categorised as female work, as in the case of Kenyan green bean pickers (earning 53% of the living wage) and Indian tea pickers (a meagre 38% of the living wage) (Wilshaw, 2018). It is a cruel irony that many of the food workers in question were themselves trapped in cycles of food poverty. ‘In Thailand, over 90% of surveyed workers at seafood processing plants reported going without enough food in the previous month’ (Wilshaw, 2018, p. 5). And ‘[o]f those, 54% of the women workers said there had been no food to

9 A related factor here is structural racism in the labour market; ethnic minority workers were statistically more likely to experience job loss in the pandemic (Richmond Bishop and Bailey, 2021). On the intersections between race, food poverty, and gender see Woods, 2019.

10 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/holiday-activities-and-food-programme/holiday-activities-and-food-programme-2021> [Accessed 20 January 2021].

eat at home of any kind on several occasions in that time' (Ibid.)

Recent work on food justice emphasises the importance of moving beyond the 'nature/society dichotomy' to consider the effects of our globalised food system on the non-human world, including the earth's natural properties (Coulson and Milbourne, 2021). Clean air, soil, and water are necessary for ecological survival, and it is crucial that our vision of food justice is wedded to a long-term vision of environmental sustainability. This is not currently the case. At present, the UK imports vast quantities of its fresh fruits and vegetables from warmer nations, drawing on the scarce water resources of drought-prone countries like India, South Africa, and Mexico (Lang, 2020). And because its food is transported over such long distances it racks up huge carbon emissions in food miles, contributing to the problem of global warming (Dimbleby, 2021, p. 131). In many cases, environmental harms come together to form pockets of human harm. In pineapple growing regions in Costa Rica, to take just one example, pesticide use has been linked to land pollution, health problems and even some fatalities among agricultural workers and their families¹¹. The emphasis on protecting the rights of (UK) consumers, as opposed to the livelihoods of foreign food workers needs to change.

One final food problem requiring complex policy intervention in the United Kingdom is the issue of childhood obesity. Levels of obesity have risen sharply in the UK since the 1980s, with over ten white papers and policies designed to target the problem in England since the millennium (BBC News, 2020). According to latest figures from the Health Survey for England, 28% of children aged 2–15 and 63% of adults aged 16 and over were overweight or obese in England in 2018 (Cheung, 2018; EHRC, 2020; NHS Digital, 2018). One in ten reception-aged children fell into the 'obese' category specifically (EHRC, 2020, p. 90). These patterns are deeply worrying and incur large economic and health costs over time.

During the first wave of the pandemic, an estimated 62% of UK hospital deaths from Covid occurred in individuals who were overweight or obese (Sanderson Bellamy et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2020)¹². The UK Government spends an estimated £18 billion per year on health conditions related to high BMI, including heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension. (Dimbleby, 2021). And in 2019/20 'there were just over 1 million hospital admissions where obesity was recorded as the primary or secondary diagnosis' (Dimbleby, 2021, p. 25).

Although the latest scientific research suggests that genetic variation is partly responsible for obesity (some of us carry variant forms of the FTO¹³ gene, which is thought to interfere with impulse control) our genes do not guarantee that we will become obese because environmental factors interact with gene expression (Jackson, Llewellyn and Smith, 2020). People with socio-economic resources find it easier offset the genetic risks of weight gain through activities like healthy eating and regular exercise. However, the opposite is true of poverty; households on low incomes tend to be time poor as well as resource poor and face additional barriers to cooking and purchasing healthy food given the rising costs of public transport use and energy use (Dimbleby, 2021). It is well recognised that fast food outlets proliferate in areas of high deprivation – what are referred to in the literature as 'food swamps'. In England, the most fast-food outlets per capita are found in Blackburn, an area of multiple deprivation, ravaged by deindustrialisation, where rates of child dental decay are four times higher than in the affluent unitary authority of South Gloucestershire (Lang, 2020; Appleby, Reed and Merry, 2017). Despite a century of economic growth, the problem of child malnutrition thus persists in the UK. Just as poor, working-class children were noticeably shorter than their affluent peers in the 1900s, today, children from deprived socio-economic backgrounds are significantly more likely to be overweight or obese (Fitz Roy, 1904; EHRC, 2020).

¹¹ <https://www.bananalink.org.uk/news/costa-rican-government-promises-to-regulate-pesticide-use-in-the-pineapple-industry/>, accessed 6 May 2022.

¹² Data collection took place between 1 February 2020 and 25 April 2020. The category 'overweight or obese' refers to a BMI value of 25 or more.

¹³ Alpha-ketoglutarate-dependent dioxygenase FTO.

4. SLOW DEATH AND SLOW VIOLENCE

The concept of ‘slow death’, proposed by the late cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2007), shines analytical light on the social gradient of obesity across the Global North. For those trapped in cycles of in-work poverty, the process of simply getting by in life – paying bills, servicing debts, bringing up children, caring for sick relatives; completing endless cycles of low-paid work under precarious working conditions; is difficult, stressful, and exhausting. Whilst in theory the neoliberal project promises ‘the good life’ to all hard-working members of society, in practice it forecloses opportunities to certain groups of people, causing them to attach themselves to harmful forms of behaviour that appear and feel gratifying, but slowly damage their health and wellbeing in the long term. Since ‘food is one of the few spaces of controllable reliable pleasure people have’, today’s cheap fast-food culture fills a void for low-income families (Berlant, 2007, p. 778). Over time, however, processed food consumption leads to a kind of slow perishing, as rates of obesity and diabetes increase, disproportionately affecting the poorest members of society.

This notion of striving towards but never quite achieving ‘the good life’ is reflected in a whole host of other consumer behaviours, including short-term borrowing. The market for payday loans expanded dramatically in the UK in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Although new legislation was introduced in the 2010s to try to curb predatory lending, loan volumes began increasing again in 2017, in line with the rising cost of living (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 420; Langley et al., 2019). Like processed foods products laden with calories and concentrated flavours, payday loans provide temporary relief from the experience of livelihood insecurity. But these short-term cycles of getting by and coping place people further and further away from conditions of true flourishing (Anderson et al., 2020). Short-term fixes accumulate into long-term cycles of debt and poor mental health, chipping away at the optimism that surrounded the loan purchase in the first place. Like the appeal of fast

food, then, short-term borrowing can be understood as a kind of ‘cruel optimism’: a form of existence under capitalism in which ‘life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable’. (Berlant, 2007, p. 754).

We cannot address the problem of the payday loan market unless we adopt a holistic approach to insecure livelihoods. Mental health and financial (in)security overlap as systems, and these systems are in turn connected to structural injustices within the UK healthcare system, education system, food system, labour market, and housing market. Poor and marginalised groups experience disproportionate risks.

One of the clearest examples of structural injustice in recent years was the Grenfell Tower disaster, a fire that swept through a twenty-four-storey block of flats on the Lancaster West Social housing estate in North Kensington in 2017. Of the 72 individuals who lost their life in the event, 57 were from Black and Minority Ethnic communities (BBC News, 2020). Grenfell has been termed one of the UK’s ‘worst modern disasters’ (Ibid). Yet this disaster was predictable – an act of ‘slow violence’ to use Rob Nixon’s formulation (Nixon, 2011; see also Galtung, 1969). A public inquiry into Grenfell in 2021 found that a resident had repeatedly raised concerns about fire safety prior to the event, only to have his claims dismissed or ignored by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and its Tenant Management Organisation (Booth, 2021). Crucially, the fire itself garnered immediate media attention, whereas associated acts of (slow) violence did not. Austerity cuts affecting poor and marginalised communities disproportionately; a chronic social housing crisis spread across decades; and the council’s profit-minded decision to install highly flammable cladding to the building in 2016: these were all acts of institutional violence that remained silent over time, slowly bubbling over into something catastrophic.

If acts of slow violence build gradually, it follows that we must look to the past, to the conditions which have allowed ‘suffering, risk and premature death’ to be ‘fold[ed] into the fabric of everyday life’ for certain communities (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 625). Whilst it would be easy to think of Grenfell as an isolated case of local governance failure, racial discrimination in the UK housing market has a long and pernicious history (Gulliver, 2017). It is unsurprising that on this occasion, too, the state failed to provide safe, decent, and affordable accommodation for Grenfell’s (mostly) minority ethnic families.

To the East of Grenfell, a ten-minute walk away, lies the gentrified neighbourhood of Notting Hill, now known as an affluent, plutocratic area, but once a site of deprivation and slum housing. In the 1950s, many Commonwealth migrants found themselves excluded from the social housing market due to the structural bias of UK housing officers, who, following needs-based housing allocation policies, exercised racist judgements about Black and South Asian tenants and their domestic lifestyles (Rogaly, Elliott and Baxter, 2021). Faced with few alternatives but to submit to the fees of opportunistic white property moguls, Commonwealth migrants were often squeezed into multi-occupancy homes in places like Notting Hill, where they were overcharged for damp, run-down rooms, and subject to racial violence and intimidation. In these and other ways, structural racism has created patterns of informal segregation housing, with minority ethnic communities concentrated in certain urban areas, ‘and economically deprived areas in particular’ (ibid., 2021, p. 8).

“Severe housing inequalities in areas like Kensington and Chelsea underscore the importance of the IGP’s mission to undertake highly granular data collection about communities’ quality of life”

Qualitative research by the IGP demonstrates that access to good quality housing is a key driver of subjective well-being. Yet many ethnic minority groups face severe barriers to decent and affordable accommodation, even in the 21st century (Charalambous, Pietrostefani and Woodcraft, 2021).

According to data from the English Housing Survey (2017–2018), 40% of the residents of high-rise rented social housing blocks are from Black, Asian, or ‘other’ minority ethnic groups – with ‘BAME’ groups accounting for just 14% of the UK population in comparison (MHCLG, 2019, Annex Table 1.3). Owing to the effect of labour market inequalities, ‘BAME’ working adults devote significantly more of their income, on average, to the cost of housing (Rogaly, Elliott and Baxter, 2021). Rates of owner-occupation are thus significantly lower for Black African (20%), Black Caribbean (40%), Bangladeshi (46%), and Pakistani (58%) households when compared to White British households (68%), with many ethnic minority groups experiencing disproportionate rates of homelessness (Rogaly, Elliott and Baxter, 2021). Each of these factors compound patterns of informal segregation, making it statistically more difficult for minority ethnic groups to rent or buy in affluent residential areas. Based on index of multiple deprivation scores, in 2019 ‘people from the Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic groups were over 3 times as likely as White British people to live in the most income-deprived 10% of neighbourhoods’ in England (MHCLG, 2020). The severe housing inequalities in areas like Kensington and Chelsea (Snowdon et al., 2017) underscore the importance of the IGP’s mission to undertake highly granular data collection about communities’ quality of life. As the Joseph Rowntree Foundation recently observed,

‘That higher rates of overcrowding among some BAME communities, driven by issues of poverty and affordability, are one factor in higher death rates during the pandemic is an egregious inequality’.

(Rogaly, Elliott and Baxter, 2021, p. 7; see also Meghji and Niang, 2021).

5. TOXIC GEOGRAPHIES

While the term ‘slow violence’ has been applied to a whole range of societal issues, by far its most common application is to the issue of environmental damage. ‘Climate change, the thawing polar ice caps [...] oil spills, deforestation, acidifying and warming oceans’: these crises all represent ‘a violence that is neither instantaneous nor spectacular, but instead is incremental. It builds attritionally and its calamitous repercussions are postponed over [...] a variety of time-frames’ (Nixon, 2011).

“Current economic structures encourage the view that nature is separate from mankind and a free resource to be plundered. But in truth, resource extraction has always come at a cost for humanity. It is simply that certain groups within society have paid the human price”

Drawing on Nixon’s concept of slow violence, the geographer Thom Davies nevertheless observes that the effects of environmental degradation are immediate for certain communities. He uses the example of so-called ‘Cancer Alley’ in southern Louisiana to demonstrate the point. Along this 85-mile stretch of the Mississippi River lie 136 petrochemical plants and 7 oil refineries, chugging out harmful air pollutants to the planet and to the region’s local inhabitants (Davies, 2019). In the small town of Reserve, to name but one example, the risk of cancer from air toxicity is fifty times greater than the US national average (Lartey and Laughland, 2019a). Health vulnerabilities are thus disproportionately high in the region. Yet many local people face systemic barriers to good quality healthcare, hailing mostly from poor communities and communities of colour. Sixty percent of Reserve’s inhabitants are Black American, and per capita income in the town

is forty percent lower than the US national average (Ibid.). As environmental justice campaigners continue to protest the future of the chemical plants in Cancer Alley, links to past injustice have not been forgotten. Pontchartrain Works facility in Reserve, now known to be emitting harmful levels of the chemical agent chloroprene, is located on land that was once a rice plantation: a business built and run with enslaved African labour. In this way, histories of slavery and patterns of present-day health inequality collide in Louisiana (Laughland and Lartey, 2019b). Racial capitalism has produced a ‘toxic geography’ of systemic injustice (Davies, 2019).

Cancer Alley is a shocking case that has garnered a lot of media attention. But toxic geographies occur in the UK context, too. In February 2013, nine-year-old Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah died of a severe asthma attack following three years of rapidly declining health, during which time she had been admitted to hospital 27 times for seizures and respiratory attacks. Ella had lived within thirty metres of the congested South Circular Road in Lewisham, Southeast London, throughout her life (Laville, 2020). In a landmark inquest in December 2020, coroner Philip Barlow concluded that Ella had ‘died of asthma, contributed to by exposure to excessive air pollution’: the first pronouncement of its kind in the UK (Ibid., 2020). One of the main causes of her asthma was exposure to nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter, produced by vehicle emissions close to her home.

While Ella’s case remains a particularly striking one, it is clearly symptomatic of a much larger, unseen problem, one that affects developing children disproportionately, given that they take in air at a faster rate than adults, and experience everyday life at a smaller remove from vehicle exhaust pipes (Watson and Clarke, 2017; UNICEF UK, 2018). According to an in-depth report by the FIA foundation

in 2017, nearly 400,000 children lived in parts of London that ‘exceed[ed] the guideline annual mean values for nitrogen dioxide’ set by the World Health Organisation’ (Watson and Clarke, 2017, p. 5) In the same year, over 800 schools and colleges in the city were within 150 metres of roads that ‘breach[ed] legal limits for air quality’ (Watson and Clarke, 2017, p.5) It is noteworthy that London’s poorest families have low rates of car ownership, whilst being statistically more likely to live in built up areas, close to major roads (Ferguson et al., 2021). Although they are least likely to contribute to the problem of air pollution (dramatically so when compared to the wealthiest 1% of the UK population), they often suffer the worst outcomes and effects (Watson and Clarke, 2017; Oxfam, 2020)¹⁴.

Current economic structures encourage the view that nature is separate from mankind and a free resource to be plundered. But in truth, resource extraction has always come at a cost for humanity. It is simply that certain groups within society have paid the human price. Whether in the case of enslaved labour (the US South), nuclear disasters (Chernobyl), or human-engineered famines (Bengal), extractive industries have long spelt out profit for some classes, and slow decline for others.

“Policymakers must consider how a new basket of public goods could eliminate toxic geographies once and for all”

In the British historical context, one of the clearest examples of this is coal mining. As late as the 1970s, British coal miners were fifteen times more likely to die from occupational lung disease; three times more likely to die from bronchitis; and four times more likely to die from pneumoconiosis complicated by tuberculosis than the average working man (McIvor and Johnston, 2004a, p. 245). Due to the geographical nature of the industry, these high rates of illness were concentrated in certain pockets of the UK – places like Lanarkshire in Scotland and Selby in North Yorkshire, where opportunities

for livelihood security declined dramatically as deindustrialisation took hold. Although protective measures were introduced in the 1950s to try to limit the damage inflicted, many miners felt compelled to work without respirators to maximise their earnings (McIvor and Johnston, 2004b). An industry that extracted coal from beneath the earth’s surface – causing the climate to warm at such a rapid rate – was thus an industry that obliterated working-class bodies for profit in the distant past.

Paying attention to the ‘embodied politics of climate change’ (Wilson and Chu, 2020) is a vital exercise, highlighting the links between extractivism and present-day environmental inequalities. In addition to solutions such as Low Traffic Neighbourhoods¹⁵ – schemes which recognise the uneven distribution of environmental harms – policymakers must now consider how a new basket of public goods could eliminate toxic geographies once and for all. Improving public services and extending public offerings to include public transport and sustainable housing would pave the way for a new social contract based on secure livelihoods and a commitment to quality of life for all (Moore and Collins, 2020). Time and again, we must return to the question: whose skin is in the game as we attempt to design solutions for the 21st century?

¹⁴ Recent research suggests that systemic inequalities are also present in levels of indoor air pollution exposure, in part due to the ventilation issues associated with low quality/low-cost housing (Ferguson et al., 2021).

¹⁵ See: <https://madeby.tfl.gov.uk/2020/12/15/low-traffic-neighbourhoods/> [accessed 7 June 2022].

6. GREEN AND PLEASANT LAND?

The work of British coal miners powered a major industrial revolution in the nineteenth century. But capital was needed to begin the process of extracting coal from beneath the earth's surface on a mass industrial scale in the first place. Where did all this capital come from?

In recent decades, historians have grown attentive to the ways in which Britain's 17th and 18th century economies paved the way for the industrial revolution, and in turn, to the ways in which the history of mechanisation is intertwined with the history of the Atlantic Slave Trade. The Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery at UCL explores what happened to former British slave-owners and their estates following the 1833 Abolition Act: an act that outlawed slavery, whilst awarding twenty million pounds to former British slave-owners in 40,000 individual payments as 'compensation' for enslaved people freed in British colonies (Hall et al., 2014). As this research demonstrates, money from the compensation agreement flowed down through male family lines into investment in heavy industry in the nineteenth century. James Lindsay, the 7th Earl of Balcarres (1783–1869) was awarded payouts for eleven compensation claims in Jamaica in the 1830s, his father having served as governor of Jamaica between 1794 and 1801. The Earl 'was able to use his family's wealth – derived in significant part from slavery – to invest in the profitable coal industry, creating the Wigan Coal and Iron Company when he added more collieries and ironworks to the family holdings in 1865' (CSLBS, 2022a; Hall et al, 2014)¹⁶. When he died in 1869, his will proved effects under £70,000, equivalent to around eight-and-a-half million pounds in today's money (CSLBS, 2022a).

Slave money poured into the political and economic life of Britain in other ways, too, often metamorphosing

from one form of capital into another. Shadows of slave-ownership are still apparent in politics today. For example, the Conservative MP for South Dorset, Richard Drax, is a direct descendent of the wealthy landowner, William Drax, who, alongside his brother Sir James Drax, established a large commercial sugar plantation in Barbados in the late 1660s (HouseHistree, n.d.). On the eve of abolition, 275 enslaved people were working on the Drax Hall estate on St George; an estate that Drax went on to inherit in 2017, following his father's death (CSLBS, 2022b; Lashmar and Smith, 2020b). As well as holding land in Barbados, the MP is also heir to the Drax family estate in England, residing in a Grade I listed manor house in Dorset, set in 7,000 acres. Charlborough House, as it is named, is part of the larger 14,000-acre Charlborough estate, making the Drax family 'the largest individual landowners' in the county (Lashmar and Smith, 2020a). As noted by the grassroots, black-led collective, Land in Our Names (LION), 'unequal access to land is particularly stark in Britain, where land ownership is often inherited, and concentrated into the hands of a few wealthy (white) individuals and families'. Over 50% of English land is owned by just 1% of the English population, with 30% of land possessed by aristocracy and gentry alone (Shrubsole, 2019). People of colour are also significantly more likely than white people to live in England's 'most green space deprived neighbourhoods' (Friends of the Earth, 2020). The issues of land justice, climate justice, and racial justice are deeply and delicately intertwined (LION, 2022).

The issue of land redistribution intersects with future prosperity. But to tackle this issue effectively, we must also consider the issue of land degradation. Human processes like industrial agriculture act upon the earth, stripping it of its natural resources and creating a range of environmental problems (chemical run-off,

¹⁶ James Lindsay, 7th Earl of Balcarres [Biography], Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery Website, available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/21571>. [Accessed 16 February 2022].

extreme weather conditions, droughts, famines, soil erosion, pollution etc.) Rather than thinking about land as a private asset, a commodity that states, corporations, and individuals own, we need to start thinking about land as a communal resource: one that is spread over the whole globe and shared between nature and humankind. When seen from this relational perspective, the earth becomes an intrinsic part of our value system: something to nurture, rather than something to extract value from. As we continue to mitigate against the effects of climate change in the lead up to 2030, this will involve swapping harmful and degenerative practices for resilience-building alternatives that restore nature and protect biodiversity.

One of the most pressing environmental issues of our time is the issue of land fill. At present, much of the waste produce by the UK population is simply shipped elsewhere – ‘out of sight, out of mind’, to use food scholar Tim Lang’s expression (2020, p. 245). In 2017, China imposed a ban on plastic waste imports from Western countries, reversing a long-term trend on which the UK food system had largely depended. But rather than using this ban as an opportunity to rethink the resource recovery sector, the following year, the UK simply ‘diverted’ its waste to other countries around the globe: ‘15,000 tonnes went to Turkey, 4,000 tonnes to Indonesia, 3,000 tonnes to Hong Kong, and so on’ (Lang, 2020, p. 245). By outsourcing its problems once again, the UK missed a vital opportunity to enact radical change by confronting and remodelling a broken system.

The emerging European resource recovery sector reflects a growing recognition that material waste must be managed closer to home (Gregson et al., 2016). But even in Europe, the dirty work of recycling is still remaindered to the poorest groups in society; the problem remains out of sight and out of mind. In the UK, migrant workers from A8 member states are over-represented in the resource recovery sector, with some UK agencies tellingly listing Polish language skills as ‘desirable’ for this

type of work (Gregson et al., 2016). Giving evidence to the Migration Advisory Committee (2014), many employers stated that they preferred to recruit migrants into low-paid, low-skilled jobs because these workers demonstrate ‘a superior work ethic to British workers’, particularly in roles requiring ‘unpleasant conditions’ and ‘unsociable hours’ (MAC, 2014). In waste environments, workers are exposed to all kinds of health and safety risks, from dust allergies and skin reactions (textile recycling) to life-limiting injuries and fatal accidents (metal recycling) (Gregson et al., 2016). The resource recovery sector has also been home to cases of modern slavery¹⁷ as recently as 2015 (Gentleman, 2021). From the 17th century through to the present, exploitation – often masked as self-exploitation (‘a strong work ethic’) – is a theme that runs through our economic history.

The issue of gender inequality is another clear problem here. At present, men comprise 79% of management roles in STEM jobs and 86% of management roles in SET jobs (Wilson and Chu, 2020), rendering it unlikely that the ‘high-skilled high-paid’ green jobs approach will challenge gender disparities (HM Government, 2020). Meanwhile, in the domestic setting, ‘[n]otions of green citizenship – or the making of the good green citizen who recycles, shops locally, mends clothes and cooks from scratch – is notoriously blind to questions of ‘who is doing this unpaid household work?’; the answer to which is most often women’ (Wilson and Chu, 2020, p. 1096). Just as India’s economic boom relied on the cheap and unpaid labour of girls and women (Ghosh, 2021), so too will the UK’s ‘green’ transition exploit the sexual division of labour in society, unless transformative social justice models are embraced (see Rai et al., 2019). UK policy discourse ‘does not incorporate strategies for collectivising caring services [...] but instead... continues to assume that this kind of reproductive labour will be indefinitely available’ (Wilson and Chu, 2020, p. 1096).

17 Although used here, ‘modern slavery’ is a contentious umbrella term for a wide variety of exploitative labour practices. Recent scholarship criticises the term for calling to mind a fairy-tale narrative of criminal villains and innocent victims: a framing that distracts from the systemic problems in our society (hostile immigration policies, problems within the sex work sector) that allow labour exploitation to exist. For critical assessments see Gutierrez Huerter et al., 2021 and ‘The truth about modern slavery with Emily Kenway’ (2021).

CONCLUSION

Whilst we need a sustainable approach to future prosperity, terms like ‘clean growth’ and the ‘green industrial revolution’ (DLUHC, 2022) risk concealing the systemic injustices outlined in this paper. What we need is an economy built around a radically new vision of human and planetary wellbeing. What we have are ‘green’ economic plans that pay lip service to change, whilst perpetuating an age-old fixation with GDP growth and productivity (E.g., HM Government, Ten Point Plan, 2020). In all of this, the historic roots of present-day injustices – what we might term the ‘legacies of injustice’ – are obscured.

Redesigning prosperity for the twenty-first century means confronting the ways in which these exploitative structures are baked into our economics. It means addressing systemic injustices head-on and seeking radical alternatives to existing economic frameworks, rather than working within these frameworks to initiate slow progress and piecemeal reform. Although paradigmatic change might seem like a gargantuan task, we need only look to the slave abolition movement to see that whole systems change is possible. For the ecological theorist Montenegro de Wit, abolition can be productively applied to a whole range of global issues, from racial capitalism to industrial animal agriculture. As noted in her recent article on this phraseology (2021), ‘Abolition is fundamentally about rejecting the idea that foundational structures of social life are solid, natural, or unchangeable’; it teaches us that ‘reform is not enough’ and encourages us to think in positive rather than destructive terms about breakdown, interruption, and renewal (pp. 118–122). Economic theorists are increasingly gravitating towards ideas of total transformation, too, opting for models of reproduction, circularity, and within-limits growth over linear models of ‘development’ or progress (Raworth, 2017; Soper, 2020). As these

thinkers emphasise, it was colonialism that allowed Europeans to imagine a future of accelerated growth in the first place: one in which goods, services, and profits would continue to rise exponentially (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 626). A new economic paradigm built around principles of social justice and sustainability is long overdue.

Achieving this vision won’t mean starting entirely from scratch. The UK is already home to a wide range of cutting-edge ideas and regenerative solutions, many of them community-based (Maughan and Ferrando, 2019). Take, for instance, the Brixton Energy Solar¹⁸ project in London, where residents have worked together to develop their own solar energy co-operative in response to fuel poverty and climate change, installing solar photovoltaic arrays on two of Brixton’s largest social housing estates, at a saving of 51 tonnes of CO₂ emissions annually. Or take The Ubele Initiative in Haringey, and its subsidiary project, Black Rootz: projects that seek to build resilience and social cohesion within the African diasporic community, through activities like asset building, community horticulture, and enterprise development¹⁹. Part of a patchwork of initiatives aimed at amplifying the voices of minoritized communities around the country, these projects demonstrate the value of working through global challenges from a localised perspective, and combining thinking about social, cultural, environmental, and economic problems²⁰. The lessons are clear. As we continue to look to the past to understand the fractures within modern British society, we must also rethink the present from the vantage point of a more socially prosperous future.

18 <https://brixtonenergy.co.uk/> [accessed 23 March 2022].

19 <https://www.ubele.org/> [accessed 23 March 2022].

20 See also the KIN network: <http://www.kinfolknetwork.com/> [accessed 4 May 2022].

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