History of plagues

Jerome Roos How pandemics change the world, from the Black Death to Covid-19

Yanis Varoufakis on the EU in crisis
Suzanne Moore on life in lockdown

William Boyd on the forgotten fiction of the Second World War

New Statesman

Enlightened thinking in dark times

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Land of confusion

How mixed messaging destroyed national unity over coronavirus



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Dazed and confused

The Covid-19 pandemic would be a forbidding challenge for even the most judicious and experienced government. Ministers must simultaneously contend with a public health emergency and the threat of the biggest economic recession since 1706. It is the UK's misfortune, then, to be governed by one of the most callow and unimpressive administrations in postwar history.

Though Boris Johnson has boasted of Britain's "apparent success" in combating coronavirus, the story to date is one of carelessness and "failure", as Laura Spinney, author of *The Pale Rider*, a history of the Spanish flu pandemic, describes it on page 30. The UK has endured the world's second highest death toll (more than 32,000 people) after imposing a perilously late lockdown, and initially recorded one of the lowest testing rates. NHS and care home workers, meanwhile, have been imperilled by a chronic lack of personal protective equipment (PPE).

These initial errors have been compounded by a succession of haphazard interventions. Most recently, after a week of confused briefings, the government replaced its "stay home" message with "stay alert". Downing Street did not seem to have consulted the Scottish and Welsh administrations in advance of the changed message. In any event, the devolved nations rejected it, thus fracturing the hard-won unity over the virus among the four nations of the kingdom.

When Mr Johnson's address to the nation was eventually broadcast, on the evening of Sunday 10 May, it was received with widespread confusion, even derision. His order for people to return to work if they were unable to work from home – apparently as early as the next morning – was not accompanied by detailed guidelines on how their safety would be guaranteed. Are those who depend on public transport still expected to return to work? How should parents caring for children proceed? Should people now wear face coverings in public areas? None of these questions were answered or even acknowledged by Mr Johnson's address.

It was only the following evening – after rebukes from employers' federations and trade unions – that the Prime Minister referred to the need for detailed discussion: "If you can't work from home you should talk to your employer about getting back to work," he said.

For those who monitored Mr Johnson's performance as mayor of London and later as foreign secretary, this slapdash style came as little surprise. But the Prime Minister is now under greater scrutiny than at any time in his political life.

After his near-death experience with Covid-19, Mr Johnson seemed to find a new register. In a video message after he was released from hospital, he spoke movingly of the nurses who saved his life and hailed the NHS as "unconquerable" and "powered by love". But his poorly written broadcast on 10 May expressed little empathy. As the Labour leader Keir Starmer noted in his response, there was no reference to "when we could see our loved ones again" and no acknowledgment of the need for a "better society".



The haste with which Mr Johnson urged people to return to work partly reflects the costs the Job Retention Scheme has imposed on the government. But this enlightened intervention has been rightly extended until the end of October by the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak. The policy has prevented a spike in unemployment comparable to that in the US (where joblessness has already reached 14.7 per cent) and limited the fall in economic demand. Most crucially, it has prevented workers from being forced to choose between their safety and their living standards.

The government will never be able to compensate for the avoidable human harm caused by its early mistakes when it sought to mitigate rather than suppress the virus, but it can ensure they are not repeated. Having imposed the lockdown too late, it would be reckless now to end it too early, or to deny workers the protection they need. Mr Johnson's task, at this perilous hour, is not to claim success or to bluster – it is to avert any further failures. ●

ANDRÉ CARRILHO

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A WORLD IN TURMOIL

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Jason Cowley Editor's Note

Boris Johnson's (Eng)land of confusion, and how Labour is unifying behind Keir Starmer



IAN McGOWAN

One of the many problems for Jeremy Corbyn was that he was never able to convince his own MPs that he was the right man to lead the Labour Party. A party divided, as Corbyn's was, cannot stand and cannot win. His allies believe he was never given time and space enough to establish his credentials. It's true that many Labour MPs were from the beginning set on "bombing him out" of office, as the MP Jon Cruddas, who was no Corbynite but believed Corbyn deserved a fair chance, once put it to me. But Corbyn was always destined to be imprisoned not only by his past associations as an agitator and fellow traveller of radical causes but by his indolence. He may have entered the Commons in 1983, alongside Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and yet by the time he became Labour's accidental leader in 2015, he was still notably inexperienced and had never occupied a position of authority – unlike his old friend John McDonnell, who had been chair of the finance committee and deputy leader at the Greater London Council under Ken Livingstone.

Corbyn's first appearance at the dispatch box came when he led Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) four days after becoming Labour leader. He was aged 66. David Cameron, impressed by his opponent's calm performance, remarked afterwards that Corbyn's hands "were not even shaking".

"I don't get nervous," Corbyn told me when I asked him about that first appearance. "I just thought, 'Well, we've been through so much.' I finally got in there and sat down, ready to go up at the despatch box, and looked around and the place was absolutely packed. You couldn't move. Every single seat was taken. I thought, 'Wow.' There must have been about 2,000 people there in total, I suppose, inside the chamber. The galleries and everything, completely full. I thought, 'Wow – 2,000 people. And about 1,900 of them don't want me to do well!'"

****

Corbyn would painfully discover that successful leadership requires much more than charisma and personal conviction, as Boris Johnson is also discovering to his cost. To command authority and followership one has to demonstrate basic competence, especially among those colleagues who might disagree with you and perhaps not even like you. So far, Keir Starmer has impressed his shadow cabinet through his work ethic, diligent mastery of detail and composure under pressure. "In a democracy, real leadership is slow, quiet, diplomatic, collegial, and often frustrating," wrote James Mattis, the former US defence secretary under Donald Trump, in the *Atlantic* in December.

The new Labour leader has considerable patience, he is collegiate, and though he lacks charisma – he is not a noisy showman like Johnson or a populist radical like Corbyn – he does not lack authority. "Keir has brought us real clarity of purpose," Jim McMahon, the fast-rising shadow transport secretary, told me. "It's about professionalism and how we look to the country. He wants to show how to unite a party and to prove we are fit to govern."

****

What I like about Starmer's performances so far at PMQs is that his relentless, forensic style of questioning is not overheated. Nor does he resort to polemic or *ad hominem* attack. Rather, he meticulously commands the evidence to make an argument while also trying to tell a resonant story about government neglect and carelessness. The silence of the chamber enhances and dignifies his approach.

"There's a pattern emerging here," he said without raising his voice on 22 April to Dominic Raab, who was deputising for Johnson at PMQs. "We were slow into lockdown, slow on testing, slow on protective equipment. And now slow to take up [PPE] offers from British firms."

Starmer made the same argument in an interview in the 9-10 May issue of the *FT Weekend Magazine*, when he said: "The government has been slow in nearly all the major decisions." This is an example of what Bill Clinton used to call message discipline and, as the government flounders, it will form part of the inevitable indictment of executive failure.

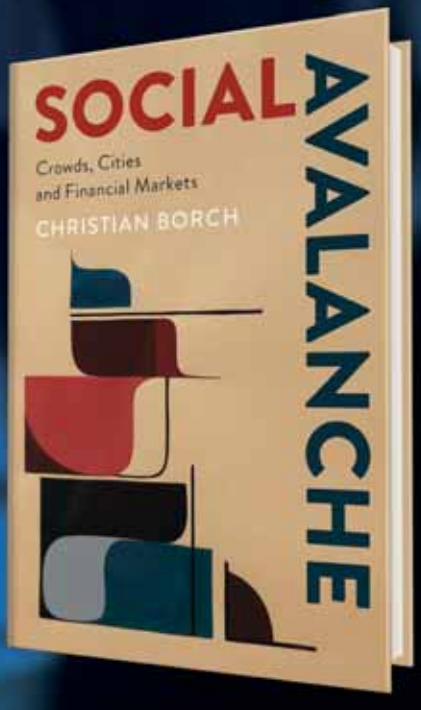
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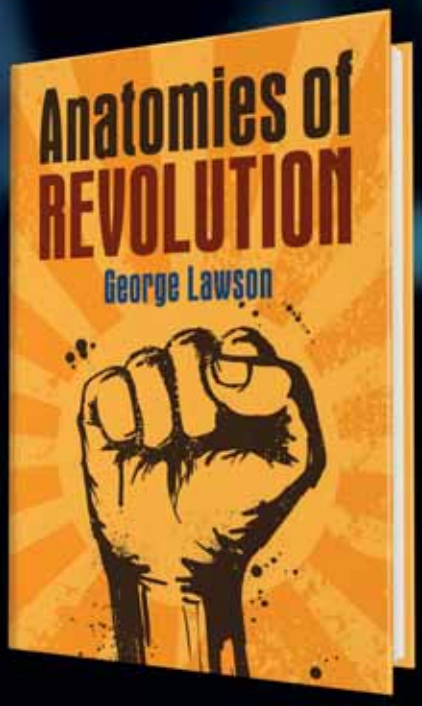
Like many, I was unimpressed by the incoherence of Johnson's widely ridiculed broadcast to the nation on 10 May. Before he was struck down by Covid-19, I wrote in these pages that the Prime Minister was struggling to find an appropriate voice in which to speak for and to the nation. The struggle goes on. The purpose of his prerecorded speech, after a week of selective briefings had resulted in sensationalist headlines about our supposed impending liberation from lockdown, was to provide greater clarity and reassurance. But Johnson's fist-clenched performance and ambiguous phrase-making merely deepened the confusion: the broadcast was condemned by business and education leaders, trade associations and trades unions. Most distressingly, he succeeded in fracturing the unity among the four nations of the United Kingdom, with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland rejecting the government's new "Stay Alert" messaging. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom was now speaking only to and for England.

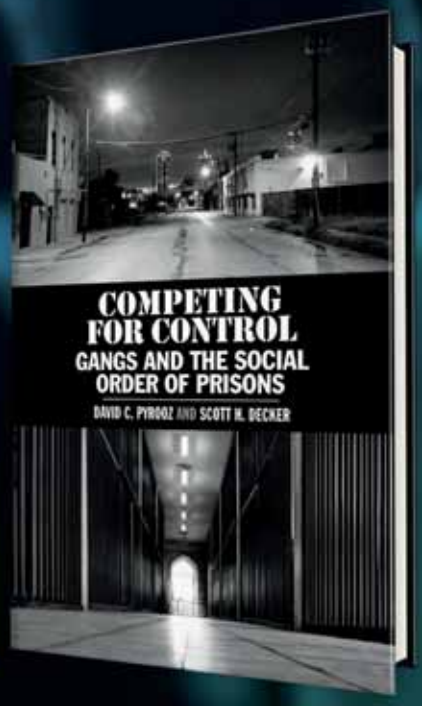
The contrast with the Queen's two recent pitch-perfect national broadcasts, the second on the 75th anniversary of VE Day, was striking. After the Queen's address on Palm Sunday, our columnist Helen Thompson tweeted, "The point of a monarchy is to remind us we collectively live in the seasons of time, and many years in the future people will still talk about what the Queen broadcast on Palm Sunday in this hour of crisis."

One day people may also talk about Johnson's broadcast on Sunday 10 May, two days after the Queen had spoken to evoke the spirit of wartime fellow feeling, but as a warning from history about mixed messaging and a loss of control.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Dr Phil Whitaker Health Matters

As we pass the pandemic's peak, the NHS needs to adjust to life in the shadow of Covid-19



According to the latest figures available on 5 May, hospital admissions with Covid-19 are now under 1,000 per day, down 70 per cent from their peak in early April. This is the best statistic we have with which to judge our progress against the pandemic. The daily total of confirmed new cases – still hovering around the 4,000 mark – is unhelpful: increased testing is simply confirming numerous mild or moderate cases that were previously going uncounted. But the numbers of patients requiring hospital care can reasonably be assumed to represent a fixed proportion of total infections – perhaps around 5 per cent. The smaller the number of admissions, the fewer the cases in the community.

This is palpable at my surgery. A few weeks ago I was being consulted by multiple Covid-19 patients every day; now a whole day might go by without my being contacted by anyone with symptoms. And the usual stuff of general practice is creeping back: acutely inflamed joints, possible epilepsy, refractory heart failure, suspected cancer. And mental health. Lots of mental health.

The important thing to note, though, is that it has taken six weeks of hard lockdown to suppress transmission this far. Boris Johnson's address to the nation on 10 May was undoubtedly confused, and it appears that the devolved nations are taking divergent paths, but one message seems clear: in England, at least, restrictions are easing. We're not going to drive infection rates much lower: we're going to try gradually to find the maximum return to normal life compatible with preventing another surge.

The challenge for the health service is how to move forward. In the space of a few exhausting weeks in late March and early April the entire system was reconfigured as an urgent- and emergency-only service. Now that the peak is behind us, and the aim is to live with endemic (as opposed to epidemic) Covid-19, a further reconfiguration is required. We're going to have to find ways of safely caring for patients with every other health condition, while assessing and treating the Covid-19 cases that will continue to present for the foreseeable future.

The key concept is going to be "hot" and "cold" work streams. To continue to suppress viral transmission, those with potential Covid-19 symptoms will need to be treated in separate facilities. Primary care has addressed this by triaging everyone on the phone first, and diverting anyone with viral symptoms to "hot hubs" for further assessment. At a minimum, this approach is going to need to continue well into 2021. Hospitals face huge challenges segregating wards into Covid-19 and non-Covid-19 zones. During the peak, private hospitals have been co-opted to act as "cold" sites for much urgent work, such as cancer care. This may need to continue for a considerable time, too.

Jettisoning unnecessary "health checks" could be a valuable reset

Even within a "cold" clinical environment, some asymptomatic people may be spreading the virus. To mitigate this risk, all patients coming into surgery are given masks and required to hand sanitise. Clinicians are using PPE and appointments are being spaced out to ensure a near-empty waiting room. In this way, we have been able to continue essential cold work such as childhood immunisations and certain high-risk disease and drug monitoring throughout the first wave. But the more routine work we bring back, the more difficult it will be to sustain these precautions. We are identifying our least well-controlled diabetics, respiratory patients and those with high blood pressure in order to prioritise their reviews.We will do as much as possible by phone, but many of these patients require face-to-face contact. And as they constitute some of the most vulnerable to Covid-19, it is imperative we keep the surgery "cold".

The reality is that much low-risk work is going to have to be shelved for the time being. This may, in fact, be a positive development. Many doctors have become increasingly sceptical about the direction in which government has been pushing the profession over the past two decades. Non-evidence-based "health checks" and a target-driven culture have led us to medicalise ever more healthy people as "at risk" of conditions such as heart disease, and to "treat" their risk with drugs, which themselves require ongoing blood tests and monitoring. Jettisoning all such activity – potentially alongside public health gains won by a lockdown-inspired enthusiasm for exercise, home cooking and a less frenetic pace of life – may be an extremely valuable reset.

So, too, in secondary care. Remember the endless headlines about burgeoning demand on A&E departments? Attendances have halved during the peak. There may be some people in need of hospital care who stayed away for fear of contracting coronavirus, or through concern about burdening the NHS. These sorts of patients we want to come back. But the others who really didn't need an emergency department for their minor problems? If they have discovered more self-reliance, or alternative sources of care, then that is all to the good.

At present, patients presenting with viral symptoms are highly likely to have Covid-19, so can be channelled into hot areas irrespective of testing. Fast forward to the autumn and winter, and the annual resurgence of other viral infections is going to pose an enormous challenge. Reliably distinguishing the Covid-19 "signal" from the rest of the viral "noise" is going to become impossible – particularly for patients with mild symptoms. Even if we have widespread rapid testing by then, the false negative rate – estimated to be around 30 per cent with current methodology – makes it an unreliable tool. The NHS is going to have to configure hot and cold services in a way that will allow a rapid expansion of hot capacity to cope with the next winter's viral season. Otherwise the health service itself may become a major factor in driving a second wave.

IAN McGOWAN

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Emily Tamkin on the wave of strikes in the US

Craig Spencer, an NYC-based doctor, on the frontline of the medical emergency

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Chance for change

Paul Collier makes good points in his essay about the need for decentralisation and diffusion of the knowledge and skills that support people and our society ("Capitalism after coronavirus", 8 May). But is it not the centralisation of the political, rather than the administrative, that is the problem? He is right that the system is deaf to real need and disconnected from expertise. But it is the political class that puts itself at the centre, and for whom control is more important than content.

In *Assembly*, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt point out that an inversion is needed. The strategy of identifying what we want needs to be diffused. Elected representatives then deliver through a civil service providing expertise. That aligns popular needs, decision-making, administration and outcomes. Similar thinking around the "market economy" might help. Responsiveness to human needs is more likely to occur with democracy in corporations. The Covid-19 crisis is opening up possibility for profound change.

C Merrill
Cardiff

LETTER OF THE WEEK

Alert to bad messaging

I read Harry Lambert's column (Politics, 8 May) with interest. The cunning partnership between Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings has hit the pandemic buffers and is fast losing purchase. This is particularly apparent in the "Stay alert" slogan, which appears to have missed its target by a country mile. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have all dismissed the current message, and this itself speaks volumes.

Brexit's messaging was sharp and misleading – but it was not life or death. In the case of this virus, it is. Dangerous times call for clear and pragmatic actions. Concise, unmixed messaging is what the public wants, and we will demand it in the months to come.

Judith A Daniels
Great Yarmouth, Norfolk

Matisse's women

I watched *Becoming Matisse* on Rachel Cooke's recommendation (The Critics, 1 May) – her reviews are my go-to when looking for new TV. As expected, I can only agree with her. Sophie Matisse is personable, intelligent, warm and watchable. The use of Henri Matisse's own diary entries is inspired and intimate. But I felt we only got close to the heart of things when we saw the various portraits of Amélie and learned of her support of and influence on Matisse. I learned about impressionism and post-impressionism as a (very opinionated) teenage girl, and I so wish I had also learned of the many, many women who contributed to global artistic movements but did not get the recognition they were due. "Vive la liberté" indeed!

Shona Cocksedge
Via email

Missing cricket

Jason Cowley's delightful column on an English summer without cricket is a welcome distraction from the virus (Editor's Note, 8 May). I was reminded of a party I attended in 1989 at 165 Railton Road, Brixton, for CLR James, who died shortly afterwards. More than 60 years earlier Learie Constantine had put him in touch with Neville Cardus who arranged for James's piece on Sidney Barnes to be published in the *Manchester Guardian*.

At the Oval in 1956 I saw Laker take all ten Australian wickets before repeating the feat at Old Trafford for England. James later reflected: "When Jim Laker writes that he bowled Bradman an over and knew that he had beaten him with every ball, he is talking about bowling at its highest. In the rout of the Australians in 1956 the decisive factor was not Laker's off-spin. It was that he had them on the run and kept them there."

A year later, in June, the first cases of an Asian flu pandemic, from China, hit Britain, going on to affect 9 million people. Yet that month, and again in July, Macmillan's health secretary, Dennis Vosper, refused to make a public statement setting out the threat the flu posed, arguing that it was not spreading in the UK.

David Murray
Wallington, Surrey

● *We reserve the right to edit letters.*

SUSPENDED ANIMATION BY REBECCA HENDIN



Observations



STR / AFP

IN THE PICTURE

Nurses embrace at a ceremony marking International Nurses' Day at Tongji Hospital in Wuhan, in China's Hubei province, on 12 May. Hospital staff around the world are facing the risks of the Covid-19 pandemic. International Nurses' Day falls on the anniversary of Florence Nightingale's birth in 1820.

Commons Confidential Kevin Maguire offers his pick of the week's best gossip from Westminster
Encounter George Eaton speaks with the former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis
First Thoughts Peter Wilby on staying alert, the need for accurate Covid-19 tests, and the troubles of the press
Trends Sophie McBain on dreams in the age of Covid-19



THE WORLD TO COME

Pandemics and the politics of time

On the future of public and private life

By Jan Zielonka and Stefania Bernini

One consequence of the coronavirus pandemic is the feeling that time has been suspended. Locked down at home, not knowing when our national quarantines will end, we are left to ponder the wisdom of the decisions governments have taken in the expectation that the world would continue to move like a chronometer – forwards.

Ideologically, no political project is viable without both a compelling vision of the future and a credible story about the past. Promoting particular interpretations of history and projecting different visions of the future is the life force of political parties and their strategists. Since the 18th century, the liberal tradition has understood time as a linear process of improvement. Against such progressive optimism, conservatives look back to pasts that appear morally superior to the present.

However, it was not conservative nostalgia that shattered liberal assumptions about time and progress, but the human-made catastrophes of the 20th century. Two world wars and the deadly technologies that accompanied them rendered the end of time a foreseeable prospect.

As the language of war is routinely used to talk about Covid-19, it may be useful to remember that the political, economic and social reconstruction that took place after the Second World War rested largely on governments' ability to present a vision of the future as a time of recovery and growing prosperity.

Postwar politicians did not limit themselves to talking of improvements to come, but sought new ways of managing time, both privately and collectively. Against the totalitarian aspirations of fascist regimes to gain full control over individuals' time, postwar liberal politicians promised to respect private time, while creating the conditions that would allow every citizen to enjoy it.

The management of time remains at the core of contemporary democracies. "Quality time", "flexi-time", and "leisure time" have become common themes of political and public debate. What these labels actually mean, however, depends largely on the political context in which they are used. When governments regulate weekly working hours, shops' opening times, or the length of the school day, they define the boundaries that separate our collective and individual lives.

Consider how many more free days workers enjoy in France than in Japan or the US. Or how many hours parents need to dedicate to childcare in Italy compared to Finland, where there is an extensive system of nurseries and schools. The allocation and enjoyment of time, that is, the question of how we spend our lives, is not a personal ▶

matter, but determined by political priorities.

Similarly, governments privilege some stages of the life-cycle above others in the allocation of resources; sometimes benefiting older people, sometimes younger ones. States regulate the transfer of power and property between different generations, most notably through inheritance taxes. In all their different forms, political decisions shape the extent to which we decide to invest our time in the future.

This extends to the most intimate aspects of our life, such as the decision whether or not to have children. The politics of time shapes social, family and individual life in very deep and concrete ways.

The pandemic has brought an enormous shock to the politics of time. The risk of contagion and the efforts to contain it have halted the usual flow of life and deprived us of something we took for granted: the ability to dispose freely of our private time. The scale of the epidemic justifies the stringency of the measures taken globally, but it does not reduce their significance.

Paradoxically, by forcing us into our homes, the state has trespassed the very border that used to distinguish liberal democratic polities from pervasive authoritarian regimes. The domestic sphere, which was constructed by 19th-century liberal thinkers such as John Stuart Mill and Benjamin Constant as the preserve of individual freedom, is now the place of citizens' supervised containment.

Our collective determination to survive the virus is making us comply. But what will happen once the virus is defeated? Will states quickly recede from our private time, or will they ask for ever greater powers to manage it, in order to mobilise much-needed human resources?

As the economic crisis erodes incomes and savings, will politicians be tempted to use emergency measures to keep control of increasingly restless societies? Putting forward a vision for the future is essential to any political discourse. But will our politicians be able to present us with one?

The politics of time will be at the core of the confrontation that will take place between democrats and autocrats in the post-Covid future.

For democrats to prevail, they will have to create a just and commonly shared vision of the future. A democratic approach to time will require not only the freedom to enjoy family or leisure time, but also a fair regulation of our working hours and the creation of a political environment that is conducive to civic participation.

The arbitrariness of selectively easing the current lockdowns does not bode well for the future. If demands are to be made on our time then we should be given something tangible in return in terms of access to public goods.

The postwar years offer lessons on how this could be achieved. But much of that vision was wiped out, not by a virus but by the political victory of neoliberalism from the late 1970s. Bringing back a decent and more caring idea of society, with no striking inequalities of "lived time", will help us look forward to a more uplifting future.

The alternative will be a society of resentful and nostalgic citizens trying to liberate themselves from imposed time constraints. Such a society would resemble the "goofus birds" imagined by the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (1969): birds that built nests upside down and flew backwards, because they were not interested in where they were going, but in where they came from. ●

Jan Zielonka is a professor at the universities of Oxford and Venice and Stefania Bernini is an assistant professor at the University of Venice

COMMONS CONFIDENTIAL

Speaking in spray paint

Kevin Maguire

Tetchy Boris Johnson was at his petulant worst, I'm told, in a conference call with the business lobby immediately after his televised address to a confused nation on 10 May. The Prattle Minister's growing irritation was audible as heads of the BCC, the CBI, the IoD and others interrupted his waffle about harnessing technology to prevent future pandemics in order to demand answers on the here and now. With the government keen for millions to return to work, factual replies were in short supply from the evasive chap supposedly in charge. Johnson speaks not so much in broad brushstrokes as spray paint to hide his ignorance of vital details.

Gavin Williamson may prove the best recruiting sergeant that England's teaching unions have ever had in his role as Education Secretary. My radar-lugged snout reported the Yorkshire Tory bluntly declared that he is focusing on reopening schools for Reception and Year 1 and 6 pupils because primary schools "aren't as unionised" as secondaries. That might change by 1 June.



Earning favourable reviews for his deft skewering of Johnson over the coronavirus catastrophe, Keir Starmer may be relieved the crisis allowed him to tip-toe out of a Kashmir minefield. Labour's leader calmed uproar among more than a million mainly Labour-voting Britons of Pakistani heritage by reasserting the party's support for Kashmiri self-determination after earlier declaring it a matter for the Indian parliament. Former foreign minister Denis MacShane dubbed Kashmir "pure political poison for Labour" and recalled marches in Birmingham against Robin Cook when he committed a similar gaffe in 1995.

The Lib Dems are considering a virtual conference in September to replace the Brighton shindig, and an online leadership contest. The TUC is also close to conceding that its annual Congress is another virus victim. Labour and the Tories continue to hope for the best while fearing cancellations. The hats of Lib Dem MPs Layla Moran and Wera Hobhouse have been thrown into the ring for the leadership, with that of acting leader Ed Davey expected to follow. Social distancing from the yellow bird is a national passion since it served as Cameron's patsy.

The Chilcot Inquiry into Iraq took seven years to publish, the Saville Report on Bloody Sunday spanned a dozen. My Tory contact whispered nobody should bet their house on a coronavirus public inquiry concluding before the next election.

With Dominic Raab the First Secretary, Robert Jenrick is now known as the Fourth Secretary to accommodate all the homes he owns, lets and rents. No wonder the Housing Secretary is a champion of the rentier class. ●

Kevin Maguire is the associate editor (politics) of the Daily Mirror

CORONAVIRUS CRISIS APPEAL

MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES
DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS



LILI-MARIE WANGARI IS MSF'S EMERGENCY COORDINATOR IN KENYA



An MSF infection prevention and control supervisor measures disinfectant to be used in cleaning an isolation area for COVID-19 patients in Likoni, Kenya. Photograph © Yann Libessart/MSF

Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) is providing urgent medical care and support in more than 70 countries to counter the COVID-19 pandemic. In Nairobi, the Kenyan capital, MSF teams are working in Kibera, one of the largest slum settlements in Africa.

"Because we know Kibera, we know how catastrophic an outbreak could be in this community.

We've worked here for more than 25 years, through the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s, when we cared for people at home, campaigned for access to treatment and were the first doctors to provide antiretroviral drugs to patients in a Kenyan public health facility.

Maintaining physical distance in Kibera is almost impossible, as it is in many slum settlements around the world. People live in tiny, overcrowded homes with few windows or other ventilation. These conditions make it easy for a disease like COVID-19 to spread, and very difficult for people to stay inside for long periods.

Access to clean water is extremely limited, with only 200 water points for the 200,000 people who live in the settlement, making regular hand-washing almost impossible.

My greatest concern is that a large proportion of people here have underlying health conditions, such as HIV and TB, and diseases, like hypertension and diabetes, that could put them at increased risk of developing severe COVID-19.

WHAT IS MSF DOING?

For the past two weeks, a team of MSF staff have been setting up a screening system in a tent at the entrance of a health centre in Kibera. We take patients' temperatures and control the number of people who come into the health centre at any one time. Should people have a fever, they go to see an MSF nurse for a more in-depth health check. We also have a clinical officer who manages an isolation room for suspected COVID-19 cases.

Our team is also providing training and support for infection prevention and control measures. This includes making sure staff are wearing the correct personal protective equipment, such as masks and gloves, and that there is a constant supply of water for hand-washing.

As well as making sure patients are safe, we want to protect health workers. Without them, there will be no response to COVID-19 and we could see a rise in deaths from unrelated health conditions. In the middle of this pandemic, we are determined that healthcare in Kibera will continue."

We are using nearly 50 years of experience fighting epidemics to protect the most vulnerable and save lives.

WE'RE SENDING MEDICAL TEAMS
Our emergency medical teams are working alongside local healthcare staff on the frontlines of the fight against COVID-19 in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. From war-torn Syria to refugee camps in Bangladesh and care homes in Europe, we're doing all we can to fight the pandemic.

WE'RE PROTECTING HEALTHCARE STAFF
We're setting up life-saving infection control measures to protect patients and staff.

WE'RE SENDING MEDICAL SUPPLIES
Our logistics teams are delivering protective clothing and state-of-the-art mobile hospitals.

THANK YOU

We can't do it without you. Please donate now to help us respond to the coronavirus crisis.

£28	can pay for protective plastic goggles for four doctors
£58	can pay for sterile gloves for 30 medics
£110	can pay for five protective suits to keep medical staff safe
£864	can provide a hand-held ultrasound used for detecting underlying health issues

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CALL 0800 055 7985

24 hours a day, 7 days a week or make your donation at:
msf.org.uk/pandemic

YES, I would like to support MSF's medical teams as they respond to the coronavirus crisis

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OR ☐ Please charge my VISA/Mastercard/Amex/CAF card:

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ENCOUNTER

The crisis has "turbocharged" the EU's failures

Yanis Varoufakis on Europe and Boris Johnson's recklessness

By George Eaton

For Yanis Varoufakis, lockdown has not been a time of contemplation. "I have more work now than I ever did. Everything has shifted to Zoom meetings, which means zero separation between the private and the public," he explained when we spoke recently, during one such video call.

The 59-year-old economist, former Greek finance minister and "erratic Marxist" has divided his time since Greece's lockdown began in mid-March between his summer house on the island of Aegina and his country's parliament in Athens. Varoufakis became an MP last July as one of nine representatives of MeRA25, the Greek wing of the pan-continental Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25), which he co-founded in 2016.

Varoufakis, who, in his 2017 memoir *Adults in the Room: My Battle With Europe's Deep Establishment*, excoriated the EU for the austerity it imposed on Greece, believes the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the same flaws as the eurozone crisis. "Even more so – it's the same category error: 2010 was a crisis of insolvency and the EU treated it like a crisis of liquidity, so they kept lending, and the only way they could pass these huge bailout loans through their parliaments was by attaching austerity strings to the loans.

"Now we have an issue of bankruptcy. The tide has gone out... capitalism has been suspended, both supply and demand. That leaves behind a trail of bankruptcies. And the EU continues to treat the problem as if it is one that can be solved by the means of loans. Covid-19 has turbocharged the failures in the handling of the euro crisis."

Does he agree with those commentators who predict that the pandemic could lead to the collapse of the EU or the eurozone? In response he quotes John Maynard Keynes, who observed that "the market can remain irrational longer than I can remain solvent". "Europe," Varoufakis explained, "is a very rich bloc, particularly the eurozone. There is so much wealth to fritter and waste – and that's exactly what they're doing, they are imposing stagnation upon the eurozone in a way that magnifies the imbalances that will end this experiment. But I may not be around to see it, because the wealthier an unsustainable system is, the longer it can be sustained.

"The more rigid the system becomes, the harder it is for it to break – but when it breaks, it will break with a gigantic bang," he warned. "That's my great fear."

Varoufakis, who opposed Brexit during the 2016 EU referendum, now believes that the UK should leave the current transition period without a new trade deal. "You should just get out now, without a deal. I didn't have that view two months ago but things change. The Michel Barnier argument that you can't pick and choose – if you want to have increased access to the single market, you have to take the single market as it is – has collapsed. The single market no longer exists. You already see that under the weight of the coronavirus crisis, the rules have been suspended... I hate to admit it, but if I was close to Boris [Johnson] I would say 'get out'."

The UK's handling of the pandemic has been viewed with concern in Greece, which had recorded only 151 deaths at time of writing after imposing a tough lockdown. "Most Greeks have taken the view that Johnson got his comeuppance, both personally and as PM, from endorsing an outdated and callous social-Darwinist approach to Covid-19."

Varoufakis may consider capitalism to have been "suspended", but he does not share the optimism of those

CLARA MOLDEN/CAMERA PRESS

commentators who have hailed this as a "social democratic" or "socialist" moment. "I listen to my friends and comrades, like Slavoj Žižek, who are struggling to conjure up optimism out of this mess," he explains, "and they leave me cold. . . Once we are out of lockdown, I believe that this liquidity is going to translate into two things: first, greater inequality; and second, greater nationalism."

Varoufakis emigrated to the UK aged 17 and stayed for over a decade, studying mathematics at the University of Essex, where he also gained a PhD in economics, before teaching at Essex, East Anglia and Cambridge universities. The Thatcher years were for him a debilitating lesson. "I remember when unemployment in the UK shot up to 3.5 million. I thought, that's it – now the working class will begin to organise and the bourgeoisie are going to get their comeuppance. And look what happened: the left was decimated and remains so to this day. There are no iron laws of history favouring the left."

Nor is Varoufakis enthused by Keir Starmer's leadership of Labour. He describes Starmer as a "sweet bloke, but totally harmless from the perspective of the establishment".

"It's undoubtedly the case," he added, "that a Starmer administration is going to be business as usual, with a kinder face and a few tweaks of policy to give some of the suffering people a little bit more. But this will not constitute an alternative [of the kind] that the Corbyn-McDonnell Labour Party was intending to put on the table."

Varoufakis is not short of what the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci called "pessimism of the intellect". But does he retain optimism of the will? "I have no optimism at all, zero optimism," he said, explaining that optimism requires evidence that things will change for the better.

"But I have hope. Hope is something you choose."

FIRST THOUGHTS

National confusion, newspaper troubles and goodbye to queues at the checkout

Peter Wilby

Nobody thought Boris Johnson was any good at detail. We did think he was good at clear, simple messages – or at least his cronies were. "Take back control." "Get Brexit done." "Stay at home. Save lives." Now even that gift has deserted him. The American news broadcaster Edward R Murrow said Churchill mobilised the English language and sent it into battle. Yet in his television address on the evening of Sunday 10 May, Johnson mangled the language and sent it to cause national confusion.

"We shall stay alert on the beaches." "We shall control the enemy on landing grounds." "We may be in a position to fight in some streets." "If at all possible, we shall fight in the hills when it is safe to do so."

Churchill, supposedly Johnson's role model, didn't talk like that when he rallied the British after Dunkirk.

Forget about the world

Johnson was clear, though, about one thing. We shall have a "world-beating" testing system. But why does it need to be world-beating? We're trying to beat a virus, aren't we? Tests that actually work and provide speedy and accurate information would do. If Johnson and his ministers scaled down their preposterous nationalist rhetoric and concentrated on the job at hand, we and they would be better off.

A terminal decline?

Are national newspapers, in decline for 25 years, now facing their long-predicted



extinction? Print sales are down by at least 20 per cent, mainly because customers are no longer picking up copies at airports, stations and motorway services. Though most papers report growth in online visitors, they are still struggling to persuade readers to pay for access.

Meanwhile, with the economy at a standstill, analysts predict a 50 per cent fall in advertising revenue over the year. Nearly all papers have furloughed non-editorial staff and cut journalists' pay. In an unusual outbreak of we're-all-in-it-togetherness, senior executives and editors have taken the biggest pay cuts – 30 per cent for *Guardian* board members.

Your papers need you

Is any help at hand? Yes, but not from a source that most journalists would unreservedly welcome. The government is spending £35m with news brands on advertising coronavirus instructions, nearly five times what it spent in the whole of last year. From the beginning of this month, it abolished VAT on all digital publishing sales. And ministers have appealed to the public to buy newspapers.

"A free country needs a free press," said Robert Jenrick, the Housing Secretary. After all, a Tory government wouldn't wish voters to get all their news from liberal elitists at the BBC.

The end of the queue

Also on the way out are notes and coins – since mid-March, I have used them only once, to pay the window cleaner. Will debit and credit cards follow? The other day, in the Marks & Spencer food store in Loughton, Essex, where I live quietly and unfashionably, I was surprised to find no checkout queue. The M&S app, which allows you to scan each item and pay for it instantly, had arrived, I realised. As the epidemic continues, expect such technology to spread rapidly.

That isn't all. A few days before lockdown, the Bank of England published a consultation paper on introducing digital currency. This would enable it to create money in a non-physical form that eventually finds its way into "digital wallets" on our mobile phones, just as notes and coins eventually get into our purses and pockets. So, to pay the window cleaner, I would just transfer funds from my mobile to his.

Many people, particularly because of privacy concerns, won't want to do this, despite banks' and big retailers' eagerness to get rid of dirty old cash, fiddly cards and costly staff.

But imagine that the Chancellor, to kick-start the economy, offers everyone, as some economists recommend, a one-off sum of £500 – and says it will be paid only into digital wallets.

Imagine, moreover, that the Bank of England, as its consultation paper suggests, pays interest on funds in your wallet. How many would still resist?



TRENDS

Dreaming of Covid-19

How sleep connects us

By Sophie McBain

In late March, shortly after California issued a shelter-in-place order to contain its coronavirus outbreak, Erin Gravley, a 29-year-old administrative assistant, had her first pandemic dream. She forgot most of the details soon after waking, remembering only that everyone in it was social distancing. The dream reminded Gravley of a book she'd read a year earlier, called *The Third Reich of Dreams*, an anthology of dreams documented and smuggled out of Nazi Germany by a Jewish journalist named Charlotte Beradt, who fled Berlin for New York in 1939.

Beradt's study charted how the terror and oppression of Nazism imprinted itself on citizens' collective subconscious. Some of those she interviewed dreamed of mind-reading machines or ominous new government departments and nonsensical bureaucratic decrees; a number of them dreamed that dreaming itself had been forbidden, others that they found themselves suddenly unable to raise their arms in salute.

Their strikingly similar dreams sometimes anticipated the horrors that were yet to come, of mass deportations and concentration camps. These nightmares were produced without any conscious effort on the part of the dreamers, Beradt observed, "they were, so to speak, dictated to them by dictatorship".

Gravley was intrigued by the suggestion that as well as offering insight into an individual's subconscious, dreams could shed light on our communal experiences. She posted a message on Instagram asking if anyone had experienced coronavirus dreams that they would be willing to share with her. A handful of people responded. On a whim, she created a website, idreamofcovid.com, to collect and publish dreams. The site went live on 26 March and it "took off" in a way she hadn't expected. By early May more than 2,200 people had sent her their dreams.

"Sometimes it feels, with all these different dreams coming in every day from people all over the world, like having your finger on the pulse," Gravley told me when we spoke by phone. It had amused her, for instance, that not long after she published a dream featuring Dr Anthony Fauci, the US's leading infectious disease expert, taking a shower (the dreamer is "thrilled" and "excited"), Fauci was played by Brad Pitt in a *Saturday Night Live* skit.

Gravley now spends at least an hour a day reading through strangers' dreams. "It feels very intimate," she said. Often people tell her about how they are having trouble sleeping, that they are anxious but don't feel they can talk to their family, that their partner is desperately sick. She recently included links to mental health resources on the website.

Visit idreamofcovid.com and you can browse strangers' dreams chronologically, by location or by theme, from "animals" to "Zoom". It's a surreal, poignant, often darkly comic online archive. The peculiarity of dreams, their abstraction, emotional intensity and crude symbolism, makes them feel universal: my dreams could be your dreams. Someone dreams that masks have become part of our faces, that their wardrobe is hanging with human organs, that people have started smuggling themselves out of their homes in shipping boxes, that they were disqualified from a post-pandemic global sex tape competition because they had hallucinated their partner and were just having air sex.

Each dream is illustrated with a delicate, whimsical drawing made by Gravley's 24-year-old sister, Grace, a receptionist and self-described "girl with an iPad and a dream" who taught herself to draw while studying plant science at university. At first Gravley only asked Grace to design the logo, but when Grace read through some of the submissions she thought, "Oh I want to draw the dreams – these are so cool!" The project was giving her a sense of purpose, Grace told me. "It's altered my perspective on humanity in general, how similar we all are," she said. "It's made me feel connected to some sort of cause."

Our pandemic dreams may be similar because our nightly journeys often reflect our waking lives, and dreams are thought to be a mechanism for processing fears and anxieties. Alice Robb, the author of *Why We Dream*, an exploration of the new science of dreams, told me: "One of the leading theories about why we have dreams is the threat simulation hypothesis, the idea that we're using dreams to process things that we feel anxious about or threatened by in real life. Dreams give us a chance to work through these fears in a lower-risk environment, by just imagining them, leaving us feeling more confident and more prepared to face them in the daytime."

Perhaps the resurgent interest in dreams suggested by websites such as idreamofcovid, as well as the plethora of news articles on pandemic dreaming, points to how we are all grasping for a sense of meaning amid such tragedy and upheaval. Perhaps, stuck at home, we also have less other stuff to talk about. Since starting the website Gravley has found to her surprise that, bar one dream about viruses in jars, she has stopped dreaming about Covid-19. She wondered if by reading strangers' dreams she had found a way to deal with her own anxieties during the day, and now no longer needed to do so at night. ●

DAVID REHOR, MILLENNIUM IMAGES, UK

Suzanne Moore The Diary

I miss travel and the company of strangers. I don't want to knit, and the clapping isn't helping



At first, I stupidly thought I was prepared for all this. I knew from day one the world had changed. Forever. When the government announcement came on 23 March, my family unit had already locked down.

We are self-contained, I thought. We don't need other people at all. We have enough. We are enough.

I said these things at the beginning and I meant them, then. But now my shoulders are up around my ears, I sleep too much or not at all, and the low-level whirrings of my mind distract me from doing anything much. It's got worse. Oh hello cortisol, my old friend. You make me ever-ready for flight or fight, you stop me being able to read a novel, you jumpstart time. Is it VE Day or Good Friday? No idea. This level of stress is a full-time job, and all I know is that Thursdays are terrible. Thursdays are the bad days. And that's before you even get to the fucking clapping.

Did you know physical jerks help? Exercise all the time? And loving-kindness meditations? There are apps! There is sourdough! And gardening, and painting, and gratitude diaries, and looking at trees!

Thanks all – but I have decided precisely what will help me. Quaaludes, circa 1979. So unless you can give me that, go away.

Mortality on the mind

Writing a diary reminds me of detention. Sadistic teachers used to give me lines; kinder ones would say, "Write ten pages about the inside of a ping-pong ball." Ah, the infinite white space, the empty little world… I could fill ten pages with nothing soon enough – a skill that has seen me through much.

Back then, thinking about nothing was imaginative. Now it means thinking about death – and hoping that it might be nothing. The answer to this, say concerned friends and every single sodding newspaper supplement, is to be hobbytastic. It's knitting or death.

Their generation

One day I wake up quite springy and find some sort of purpose. I talk to my daughters, two of whom are in lockdown with their respective in-laws. Both daughters live in small flats with small children, which is no fun at all – but the in-laws have gardens.

We are all well. My youngest is still with me. She's remarkable, really. It's her gap year, the time when one can usually work and travel. Now she is reading a lot of political theory and watching a lot of films and occasionally asking me things like, "What exactly is surplus value?" or, "Why have you never told me about the Jonestown massacre?" or, "Mum, what *is* a garden centre?"

It matters less to me that my life is on hold than that hers is. We fight, as I think she should leave the house more (vitamin D and all that). Then when she does, and I wonder if she has had a nice walk, she tells me she has "nothing but utter contempt for humanity". I shall leave her to her TikToks.

A lovely quarantine

Dave, my partner in crime, drinks a bottle-or-so of wine and emails me late at night saying that we should get flights to South Korea. "I don't care about the virus," Dave says. Okey dokey. I ask Dave if we once had a layover in Seoul. We think we did. I duly check flights. It seems we will be quarantined when we get there – so I tell Dave that maybe we could go for a couple of weeks' quarantine. It's about 3am; Dave thinks this is a good idea and I agree.

Not travelling really gets to me. It reminds me of the time I did a fear of flying course and took off from Stansted on a flight headed to Stansted. We just flew around while all the phobics sobbed and cried on the plane. Some had already bolted at security. Cognitive behavioural therapy has its limits.

At the time, flying from Stansted to Stansted simply amused me. Now I realise that going nowhere is much more exhausting than going somewhere.

Faces in the crowd

Music consoles me. Especially Neil Young's "On the Beach": "I need a crowd of people/ But I can't face them day to day." What I miss right now is being alone with others, in a cinema or at a gig. I miss the presence of possibility, the anonymous pleasure of strangers together. That's what "going outside" really means.

What connected us, even momentarily, is now a vector for virus, and my psyche will not accept this quite yet. It pines, it agitates, it won't stop. Even in dreams I am continually trying to make contact or impart information to those I can't reach.

Far from normal

My eldest tells us about the in-laws getting tested in Willesden. Her boyfriend's dad is a doctor, so understandably "did not want to be swabbed by a soldier" and did it himself.

"A soldier?" asks my youngest – and the sheer weirdness of the dystopian drive-through is shown to us in pictures.

The test results were unclear, so they then had to go to Lee Valley, where it was all done more effectively at Boots. "So it's the army or Boots?" my youngest says, in utter disbelief. Yes, I say, as though this is all normal.

"I'm shook," she says. "So shook."

Pause for applause

My ambivalence about the clapping as a compulsory performance increases when a friend tells me that when she was out for a walk with her husband at 8pm, a man hooted at them and shouted, "Don't you care about the NHS?" But then the highlight of my week comes when, after another bout of awful screaming in the flats opposite, I see the police cuff a man and take him away. Finally. This violent turd who terrorises women is arrested. He is up in the faces of the police officers. They are brave in more ways than one.

Maybe I shall find myself clapping for the police in this mixed up, crazy, broken-down old world? How totally unprepared we all are when it comes down to it.

IAN McGOWAN

Stephen Bush Politics

As the lockdown is loosened, those with the least are being asked to bear the greatest risk



One of the phrases I often hear applied to Keir Starmer is that he has made Labour "normal again". Unlike his predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn, he is comfortable using parliamentary procedure and the theatre of Westminster to advance his agenda. Starmer's leadership, unlike Corbyn's, rests not solely on his support among Labour members but on his domination of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). Frontbenchers are no longer allowed to overstep their briefs, and the PLP has both a greater stake in the leadership – Labour MPs could realistically end the Starmer project if they chose, which they couldn't with Corbyn – and a concomitant loss of autonomy. And, crucially, Conservative MPs aren't horrified by the prospect of a Starmer victory.

Almost everyone expected, whether they welcomed or opposed it, that a Starmer leadership would make British politics "normal again" after the Corbyn interregnum. What no one quite anticipated is that the coronavirus pandemic would also have a normalising effect.

In recent days, Boris Johnson has tweaked the guidance for life under lockdown, opening up traditional left-right dividing lines between his government and Starmer. Johnson's exit strategy presupposes a quick return to work for people on construction sites and factory floors, while those able to work from home continue to do so. Labour's support for a continued lockdown seeks to protect the health of all workers rather than prioritising an immediate return to full economic activity.

The problem is that the "normal" state of British politics is for Labour to lose elections and the Conservatives to win them. One of the handful of Labour leaders to break that streak was Harold Wilson, whom Starmer namechecked as an inspiration during his run for the leadership. But it was the legacy of Wilson's immediate predecessor, Hugh Gaitskell, that helped to introduce Starmer to the general public this week. During the height of the Suez crisis, in 1956, the prime minister Anthony Eden provided frequent updates on the BBC about his doomed misadventure in Egypt. Gaitskell, the Labour leader of the opposition, secured a slot of his own; a precedent that has since been codified in the corporation's charter. Starmer, who has made a habit of finding advantage in arcane procedures, used Gaitskell's example to deliver his own broadcast on 11 May.

The lessons Starmer has learned from Gaitskell go beyond merely bagging prime-time television appearances. Like Gaitskell before him, Starmer must lead the opposition at a time when the public remains largely supportive of the government – even though he believes that the Prime Minister is plotting a dangerous course.

Most politicians think that the government's popularity is temporary

But the government's popularity might prove temporary. Even those MPs who believe that Johnson has done a reasonably good job concede that, after a while, the grind of life in lockdown and the negative consequences of government decisions will puncture his balloon. "Starmer's problem is that he risks looking opportunistic because the stakes are so high," one minister reflected to me recently. "Our problem is that every mistake we make is catastrophic because the stakes are so high. I'd rather have his problem than ours."

More optimistic Tories think that voters will ultimately give the government the benefit of the doubt because of the severity of the crisis. Yet Johnson is not helping himself or his party. The government's new slogan, "Stay alert", is so broad as to be meaningless. It is trying to communicate too many messages at once: to encourage people who can to stay at home, without either spooking those who have to leave the house to work or appearing callous about the risks they face.

The mixed messages last weekend were accompanied by a fall in support for the government. Whether Johnson's TV address on 10 May was the direct cause is uncertain, but the backdrop was of growing numbers of voters starting to have serious doubts about government strategy and competence.

Those concerns are shared at the top of the Conservative Party. The cabinet is badly divided, with some favouring a prolonged lockdown – until a vaccine or palliative treatment is found – and others a swift exit. Pro-lockdown MPs blame those who want a swift exit for both the timing of Johnson's statement and for a series of leaks and rumours about the government's strategy. "We marched people up to the hill and said: nothing new!" one Conservative said, despairingly, of Johnson's TV broadcast.

Johnson now has the distinction of having irritated both sides, while the general sense of trouble ahead is increased by the regional and economic divides inherent in the government's strategy. The road to economic recovery means that people who cannot work from home but who earn a little above average are bearing the heaviest economic risk. These voters are concentrated outside London, tend to be male and work in manufacturing, or as plumbers or builders – the trades that contributed to the Conservative majority in 2019.

The lockdown already weighs heaviest on those with the least, who live in smaller accommodation and have less to spend on home luxuries. The new guidelines add to the disparity – the chunk of the population that can work from home is largely from the top half of the income distribution, the part that can't is mostly from the bottom half.

Adding to the unease of some MPs in marginal seats, the voters lost by Johnson's Tory party – those in professional jobs in London and the other large cities of England – are the ones taking a smaller share of the risk. To ask one's own voters to bear a bigger risk than those of your opponents is brave. To do so with such a muddled message is braver – or more foolhardy – still. ●

IAN McGOWAN

Anjana Ahuja Another Voice

Boris Johnson's "number theatre" dazzles and distracts from his vague and confusing guidance



Though we have become used to graphs, nobody expected a prime-time equation. But there it was, smuggled into the Prime Minister's address to the nation on the evening of Sunday 10 May.

The newly unveiled Covid-19 threat level alert system, Boris Johnson explained, would operate on a rising scale from one to five and be calculated in a very specific way. This number, according to a graphic that filled the screens of about 27 million bemused viewers, would be derived by adding R, the rate of infection, to the "number of infections". R, which is the average number of people to whom an infected person transmits the disease (more properly called the reproduction number), has plunged during lockdown from around 3 to between 0.5 and 0.9. The number of infections is very roughly around the 220,000 mark. Clearly, adding the two together does not make a number between one and five.

The parody of an equation evoked mathematical precision, but I suspect it was meant to convey something more modest: simply that both the reproduction number and the number of infections would be taken into account when deciding on the alert level. A threat level, whether from a virus or terrorism, is a matter of political judgement informed by expert analysis, rather than an absolute value that can be derived from fundamental mathematical principles.

For me, though, it was also confirmation of the "number theatre" that is offered up regularly by the government for public consumption. That elegant phrase was coined last week by David Spiegelhalter, Winton professor of the public understanding of risk at Cambridge University, to describe the oddly precise numbers being thrown out daily.

He said on the BBC's *Andrew Marr Show*: "We get told lots of big numbers, precise numbers of tests being done – 96,878. Well, that's not how many were done yesterday; it includes tests that were posted out. We're told 31,587 people have died; no, they haven't, it's far more than that." Spiegelhalter said he did not believe it was a "trustworthy communication of statistics".

It is almost as if the faux precision of the numbers, graphs and equations is intended to dazzle and distract from the lack of clarity elsewhere. Number theatre is primarily about showmanship, not science or public health.

And yet it is the public-health guidance that really matters. We must reasonably assume that Sunday's broadcast, accompanied by a new slogan, was a signal that the government wants us to alter our behaviour. The problem is that there is confusion about the behaviour change desired. This befuddlement was evident in the following days, with cabinet ministers being asked to clarify under what circumstances people could meet up with parents living in a different household.

A threat level is a matter of political judgement not mathematics

On Monday morning, Dominic Raab said that meeting both parents outside the home would be acceptable if social distancing could be maintained; by lunchtime it had been corrected to one parent only (I shall be setting a quiz for my parents; the winner is granted an awkward public stroll with the grandchildren in triangular formation).

Let us examine how the messaging has changed. The original Covid-19 slogan was admirably clear, if repetitive: "Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives", in yellow and red. This has been swapped for "Stay Alert, Control the Virus, Save Lives", in yellow and green. Is the switch from red to green a subliminal call to action? Do I no longer have to stay home or protect the NHS?

Make of it what you will, because Johnson is "actively encouraging" people to return to work. Caveats, though, litter his exhortations: go back to work if you cannot work from home, but avoid public transport. Social distancing should be maintained where possible.

For millions of commuters, public transport is the only route to work. So, if I can only get to work via the Tube or train, can I reasonably refuse to turn up? Can I also deny my labour if I am not a key worker and therefore not entitled to send my children to school? If I do use public transport and need a face covering as now recommended, should my employer provide a mask? What if social distancing is not maintained in the workplace?

Professor Susan Michie, director of the Centre for Behaviour Change at University College London, tweeted on 10 May that her "understanding is that returning to work is predicated on a guaranteed safe working environment – and presumably not having children to look after or vulnerable family members". That a behavioural expert on the government's scientific advisory group should need to "presume" what Johnson's address meant was telling. Meanwhile, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are sticking with the "stay at home" message, for fear of causing a spike in infections.

This is where we truly need the detail: how do we restart the economy without restarting chains of transmission? How do I adhere to the new slogan? How can I personally "control" the virus? Isn't that, in any case, the function of government, through testing, tracing and isolating? Ministers, dismissive of the accusation that the new rules are vague, despite struggling to articulate them, have appealed to people to use their own judgement. It looks suspiciously like setting us all up to take the blame when the second wave of infections comes, as it almost certainly will.

Although rough numbers can be handy for gauging progress, evidence-informed guidance is more useful than knowing whether 96,878 or 96,879 tests have been carried out. It is time to bring the curtain down on number theatre. ●

Anjana Ahuja is a contributing writer on science for the Financial Times

IAN McGOWAN

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Jeremy Cliffe World View

The Covid-19 crisis is a chance for progressive forces to rediscover their lost internationalism



In 2007 the Swiss newspaper *Tages-Anzeiger* asked the former Federal Reserve boss Alan Greenspan how he intended to vote in the forthcoming US presidential election. Greenspan essentially shrugged. "[We] are fortunate that, thanks to globalisation, policy decisions in the US have been largely replaced by global market forces," he replied. "It hardly makes any difference who will be the next president. The world is governed by market forces." The quote, cited by Adam Tooze in his book *Crashed*, says something of the world exposed by the subsequent financial crisis.

In doing so it also points to a paradox. That crisis was a product of unaccountable, untouchable global market forces. It should have been the cue for leftists and compassionate liberals – what one might call the progressive coalition – to build a rival political edifice to Greenspan's vision of a depoliticised globalisation. But it was not to be.

For a brief moment things looked otherwise. I had a front seat, working at the Party of European Socialists (PES) in Brussels. With the 2009 European election looming and Barack Obama's election win in its sails, the party's scruffy office near the European Parliament was abuzz with optimism about what felt like an international social-democratic moment. Two months before the election we hosted the Global Progressive Forum, at which leaders and campaigners from around the world affirmed a common commitment to a more democratic order encompassing finance, climate change, migration and workers' rights. It was as if they were reading the last rites for Greenspan's desiccated ideal of globalisation.

Then came the European election night. Despite the global exigencies of the moment, PES member parties in their respective countries had campaigned overwhelmingly on national matters. They slumped to a record low and nationalist populists made gains. The following years brought the eurozone crisis – international policy made with too little international politics – and the ensuing European national populist backlash. Meanwhile, in the US, the Obama presidency proved more parochial than many external sympathisers had hoped and ended with the election of Donald Trump and his fusion of flag-waving bombast for the poor with tax breaks for the globally mobile rich.

Chastened by its early defeats and the rise of populism, the progressive coalition has turned inwards and focused on shielding national electorates from those depoliticised global forces. The result has been a lost decade in which it has mostly offered voters either an unconvincing mix of ugly nationalism or tortured insincerity about "very real concerns" on immigration. Witness the French leftist Jean-Luc Mélenchon's claim that foreign workers "are stealing the bread" of French workers. Witness the politics of Sahra Wagenknecht of Germany's socialist Linke, who in 2018 complained to me about internationalist party colleagues too concerned with "cool, urban voters" and their "lifestyle debates". And witness Britain's Labour Party, whose past decade will go down in history for its constipation over immigration and Brexit. In each case the goal has been to steal back the principles of home, belonging and identity from the populists.

> Chastened by defeats, the progressive coalition has turned inwards

This is understandable, as these communitarian ideals have deep roots in the progressive tradition. Yet it is impossible to protect and uphold them at the national level alone without international cooperation. Individual governments can at best mitigate chaotic global forces, whether financial crises or waves of migration.

Or pandemics. With second waves now starting to break, Covid-19's spread threatens much of the world. The global economy is crashing. Humanitarian crises are looming. And once more, despite the obvious need for democratic international cooperation, countries are turning inwards. The US-China rivalry is turning into a new Cold War. The race for a vaccine threatens to pit country against country. Some economies, especially rich ones such as Germany, are insulating themselves with generous welfare stabilisers and others such as Lebanon are tumbling into crisis. The strength of the case for global leadership is matched only by the blatancy of its absence. Now is the moment for the progressive coalition to break from the failings of the recent past and rediscover its internationalist streak.

Fortunately just such an initiative, with just such an ambition, came into being on 11 May. Progressive International (PI) wants to re-internationalise the progressive coalition and raise its ambitions beyond the meagre business of shielding individual national electorates from unaccountable global forces. It wants to take on those forces directly, democratically and in the international space, where they roam free of oversight or debate. Capital and crisis are global, goes PI's mantra, so democracy should be too.

It began as a collaboration between Diem25, a leftist pro-European group launched by Yanis Varoufakis, and internationalist parts of the Bernie Sanders campaign in the US. But PI is pluralist and already includes heterodox writers and thinkers, including Arundhati Roy from India, the philosopher Srecko Horvat from Croatia, the refugee-saving mariner Carola Rackete from Germany and the pro-democracy literature professor Wang Hui from China. You do not have to agree with all of them – my differences with its British spokesman, John McDonnell, are well documented – to recognise that the sum is more than the parts.

So I wish PI well. Maybe it will go the way of our Global Progressive Forum in 2009, but if so the only winners will be Greenspan's stubborn "global forces". Or perhaps, just perhaps, PI will help make this the turning point that eluded us in 2009. The moment where progressive politics finally arrives at the only level where it can really, lastingly, achieve its goals: the global one. ●

IAN McGOWAN

How plagues change the world

Could the coronavirus pandemic have an effect as lasting and profound as the Black Death?

By Jerome Roos

The global crisis unleashed by the coronavirus pandemic is starting to look like a historic inflection point. While we do not know how long the outbreak will last and how severe its fallout will be, it is difficult to shake the feeling that we are now at a threshold between two eras.

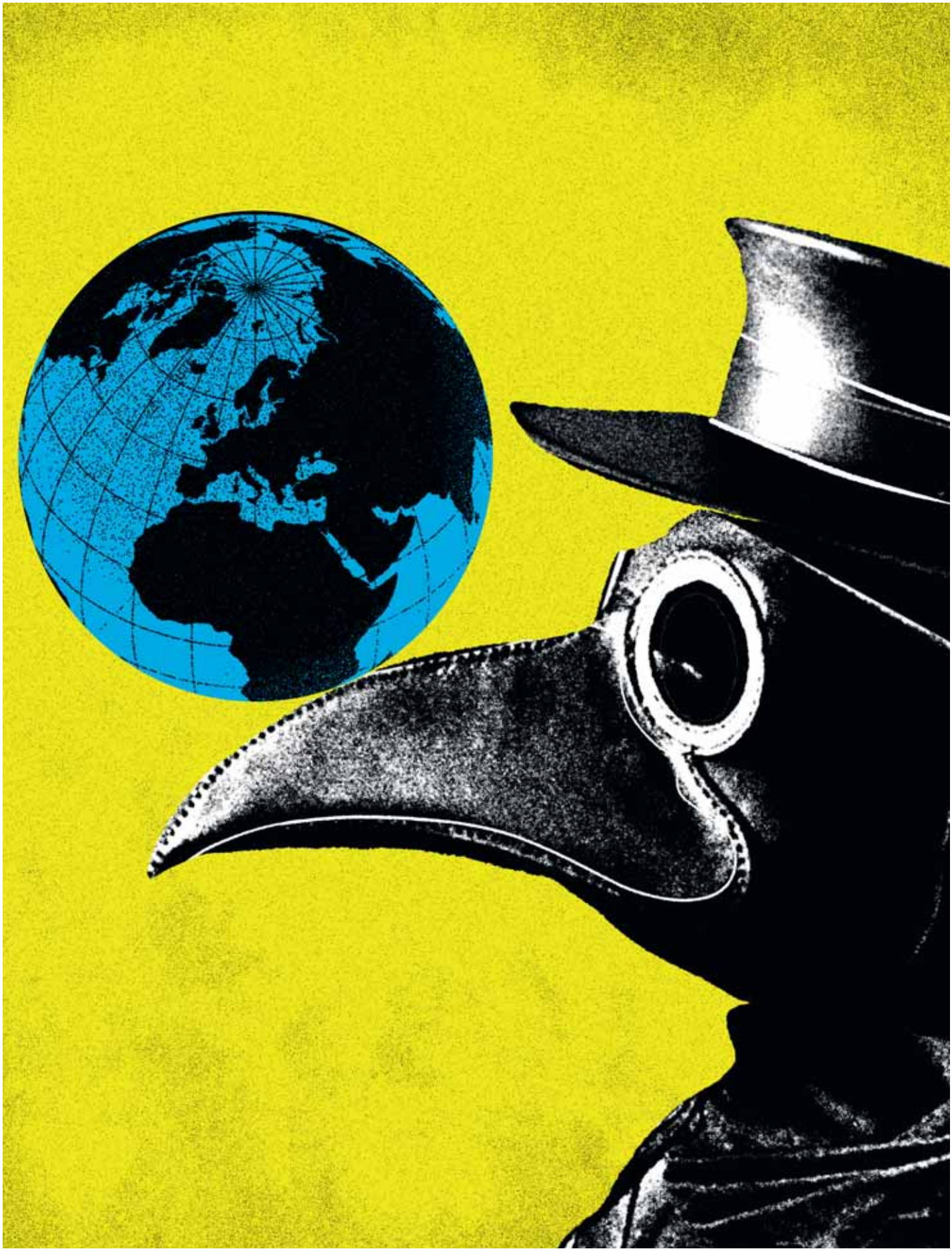
If anything, the inherent uncertainty of this moment recalls the original meaning of the ancient Greek word "crisis". A key term in Hippocratic medicine, *krisis* referred to the turning point in a disease, indicating either the beginning of recovery or the onset of death. A true crisis, then, is by definition a vitally important moment at which change has to come – for better or for worse.

The current crisis is not entirely without precedent. Throughout the ages, infectious diseases have left an indelible mark on the future course of world history: from the Justinian Plague that ravaged the Byzantine and Sassanid empires in the sixth century, to the horrific epidemics that destroyed the indigenous civilisations of the Americas after the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the 15th century. But if we had to single out one epoch-making pandemic, it would be the Black Death of the mid-14th century – a transformative event that heralded the "waning of the Middle Ages" and that would reshape the emerging modern world order in profound ways.

While Covid-19 is a different kind of disease, with a much lower mortality rate, the dramatic socio-economic ramifications of the pandemic raise an important question: could the crisis end up playing a similar role for the late-modern world as the Black Death did for the late-medieval one?

Will this pandemic, too, remake the world as we know it?

In the autumn of 1347, 12 Genoese galleys put into the Sicilian harbour of Messina. Upon approaching the ships for regular customs checks, local port authorities soon made a ghastly discovery: most of the men on board were either dead or dying. As the Franciscan friar Michele di Piazze wrote in a letter at the time: "The sailors brought in their bones a disease ▶



ADAM MAIDA

so violent that whoever spoke a word to them was infected and could in no way save himself from death." The victims "were stricken with pains all over the body and felt a terrible lassitude. There then appeared, on a thigh or an arm, a pustule like a lentil. From this the infection penetrated the body and violent bloody vomiting began. It lasted for a period of three days and there was no way of preventing its ending in death."

The terrifying ailment of which di Piazze spoke was bubonic plague. Caused by an infection of the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, the disease has long been endemic among the rodent populations of certain natural environments. Spread by the fleas feeding on the blood of infected animals, such as marmots, gerbils and black rats, the infection occasionally jumps over to humans. While the geographical origins of the 14th-century pandemic are hotly debated, the latest genetic evidence seems to point towards a sudden outbreak of plague – possibly induced by climate change – somewhere in the inner Asian highlands, with researchers' attention recently shifting from the Qinghai-Tibet plateau, primarily located in western China, to the Tien Shan mountain range at the Chinese-Kyrgyz border.

The subsequent spread of the disease was more than just an ecological phenomenon. Not unlike the process that spread Covid-19 around the globe, the Black Death was the result of a complex interaction between a pathogen naturally occurring in animal populations and a social organisation among human communities that proved highly conducive to its spread. The growing interaction between East and West played a particularly important role. While the late-medieval world was by no means as globalised as our own, it was still much more connected than we often assume.

Crucially, the Mongol conquests of the 13th century had briefly brought around two-thirds of the Eurasian landmass under the unified control of the largest contiguous empire in history. Although the vast realm of Genghis Khan's descendants ultimately fell apart into four competing principalities (khanates), commercial relations along the Mongol-protected Silk Roads continued to thrive well into the first half of the 14th century. It was the sudden increase in human mobility – in the form of Mongol armies and merchant camel caravans – that inadvertently enabled the carriers of the plague to escape their natural environment. Empire and trade conspired to produce what the French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie called in 1973 "the microbial unification of the world".



World conqueror: Mongol emperor Genghis Khan, whose armies may have spread the Black Death

In 1338, a powerful pestilence swept through the area bordering Lake Issyk-Kul, in modern-day Kyrgyzstan, among the Tien Shan mountains. This particular outbreak provided archaeologists with what has long been considered the earliest evidence of the Black Death, recorded on the grave-stone inscriptions of a Nestorian burial ground. By the early 1340s, the plague had reached the Mongol khanate of the Golden Horde and was raging through the southern Russian steppes. The commonly accepted theory is that the Golden Horde ruler, Khan Jani Beg, then brought it to the Black Sea when in 1346 his armies besieged the Genoese merchant stronghold of Kaffa on the Crimean peninsula. In his vivid account of the Black Death, the Italian chronicler Gabriel de Mussis wrote that the Mongol forces, soon ravaged by the outbreak, responded by hurling infected corpses over the city walls. The terrified Genoese fled by boat to Constantinople, whence they – and other Italian merchants – fatefully spread the disease throughout the Mediterranean world.

The Black Death reached the great commercial ports of Italy and Egypt in late 1347. From there, it raged like a wildfire across Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Four years and several recurring waves of infection later, at least one in three people in these regions were dead. "In what annals has it ever been read that houses were left vacant, cities deserted, the country neglected, the fields too small for the dead and a fearful and universal solitude over the whole Earth?" lamented the Italian Renaissance poet Petrarch. The mortality was so great that he feared future generations would doubt the veracity of his account: "Oh happy people of the future, who have

ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

not known these miseries and perchance will class our testimony with the fables."

Wherever it went, the Black Death left devastation in its wake. In Cairo, one of the Old World's largest and wealthiest cities, estimates are that as many as half of the population died in the space of several weeks – with an astounding 13,800 fatalities reported on the worst two days alone. Mass graves appeared throughout Europe at this time, as survivors hurriedly disposed of the accumulated corpses, often without administering last rites. In the introduction to his *Decameron* (1353), the Florentine author Giovanni Boccaccio noted that social bonds broke down as "this scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers".

In the short term, the pandemic caused widespread economic disruption and social distress. Confronted with the spectre of imminent death, many people stopped showing up at work. "Just like the townspeople," Boccaccio wrote, peasants "became lax in their ways and neglected their chores as if they expected death that very day." The French poet Guillaume de Machaut also wrote: "No one ploughed the fields/ Bound the cereals and took in the grapes…/ Since so many were dead." Some took to drinking, gambling or various other forms of licentious behaviour. There was a marked rise in xenophobic violence, as survivors in various parts of Europe turned on outsiders – especially Jews, whom they preposterously accused of having poisoned the wells.

The Black Death visited an unparalleled demographic disaster upon large parts of the Old World. The historian Bruce Campbell estimates that, in England alone, which had a pre-plague population of approximately 4.8 million, some 2 million people died as a result of the pandemic in less than two years. Around half the fatalities fell within the extremely deadly summer months of 1349. The socio-economic and political ramifications of this were profound. In his classic introduction to world history, the *Muqaddimah* (1377), the Arab scholar Ibn Khaldun recorded that the plague, which had taken the lives of both his parents, "devastated nations and caused populations to vanish… Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, dynasties and tribes grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed."

Apart from the astonishing mortality rate of the disease, what lent the Black Death its great transformative power was that it struck regions where the established order was already in an advanced state of decay. This was especially true of Europe, where feudal societies had been grappling with a series of severe crises for at least half a century, leaving the continent ill-equipped to respond to the outbreak. It was the combination of climate change, declining agricultural yields, recurring famines, rising debts, financial crises, rising social tensions, intensified political instability and the eventual disintegration of the Pax Mongolica – which cut off the lucrative long-distance trade between East and West – that left Europe in its weakened state. Adding a fulminating pandemic into this volatile mix created a perfect storm from which the feudal order would never fully recover.

As the initial shockwaves rippled throughout the continent, the plague almost instantly reordered long-standing social relations between rich and poor, lord and serf, turning the tables on Europe's ruling elite in previously unimaginable ways. As the historian James Belich points out, "the Black Death not only halved populations, but also doubled the average per capita endowment of everything – bullion, goods, buildings, animals, land and so on… If the halving of people and the doubling of everything else does not have a potentially revolutionary effect, what does?"

One immediate effect of this sudden demographic jolt was an acute labour shortage: there were simply not enough peasants to till the fields, not enough sailors to man the ships, not enough spinners to keep the textile looms going, not enough builders to construct new homes or artisans to produce the desired household items. This labour shortage in turn strengthened the bargaining power of urban and rural workers. Day wages increased, sometimes doubling or even tripling. In 1363, the Florentine chronicler Matteo Villani lamented that "serving girls and… stable boys want at least 12 florins per year, and the most arrogant among them 18 or 24 florins per year, and so also nurses and minor artisans working with their hands want three times or nearly the usual pay".

But higher wages did not necessarily translate into higher living standards. Wage labourers made up only a minority of the working population in the 14th century, and employers often responded to the rising cost of labour by simply hiring less of it. The fall in the amount of days worked contributed to the dramatic contraction of total economic output, causing commodity prices to rise and feeding into rampant inflation.

Members of the upper classes were keen to blame the spendthrift ways of the *popolo minuto*, the "little people." Villani claimed that, "The common people, by reason of the abundance and superfluity that they found would no longer work at their accustomed trades; they wanted the dearest and most delicate foods… while children and common women clad themselves in all the fair and costly garments of the illustrious who had died." Urban elites sought to reinforce their social status by imposing limits on wage demands and strict rules on the dress code for lower-ranking social classes, forbidding the poor from engaging in luxury consumption and dressing like the rich.

Such repression served further to erode popular respect for political authority. Desperate to maintain its privileged position, the nobility sought to secure its income through the spoils of war. While the Hundred Years' War between England and France had already begun in 1337, the conflict probably only lasted as long as it did because it proved to be a particularly lucrative exercise for fiscally squeezed noblemen. As the leading Norwegian historian of the Black Death, Ole Benedictow, notes, "the social elites, the political classes, so to speak, had a strong interest in keeping the war going" in the wake of the pandemic.

> "Cities were laid to waste, mansions became empty, dynasties grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed"

But the intensification of feudal belligerence came at a high cost. To compensate aristocratic warriors for their military services, kings were forced sharply to increase the tax burden on the peasantry. Soon, a wave of popular revolts rolled over the continent: from the French Jacquerie of 1358 and the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381, to the Florentine wool carders' revolt of 1378 to the rebellion of the Catalan remences in the next century. Many of these episodes revealed a strikingly modern attachment to egalitarian principles. In his *Florentine Histories* (1532), Niccolò Machiavelli cited a Florentine textile worker as saying: "You will see that we are alike; dress us in their clothes and them in ours, ▶



At attention: staff prepare to disinfect Wuhan Railway Station in Hubei province, China on 24 March

▶ and without a doubt we shall appear noble and they ignoble, for only poverty and riches make us unequal."

The most remarkable thing about the emerging post-plague landscape was the diversity of political outcomes across Europe. Faced with a common shock, different countries responded in radically different ways. In England, the popular struggles after the Black Death led to a new form of agrarian capitalism. In France and Spain, the aristocracy entered into an alliance with the monarchy, leading to a centralisation of political authority in the absolutist state. In Italy, power remained decentralised within city-states, allowing merchant oligarchies to entrench their particular form of commercial capitalism.

In the Near East, the outcomes were different still. The powerful military landlords of Mamluk Egypt pressed down so hard on the peasantry that local communities were forced continuously to till the fields and abandon their maintenance work on the Nile irrigation system, causing its canals to become chocked with silt and leading to long-term agricultural decline.

The Byzantine empire similarly went into its death throes following the plague, opening up a power vacuum for the Ottomans to fill, finally leading to the conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The rise of the Ottoman empire dashed European efforts to re-establish direct trade relations with the Far East. The Genoese, having lost their stronghold on the Black Sea, turned west in the hope of finding new commercial opportunities in the Atlantic.

Genoese merchants soon established a firm presence along the West African coast, and eventually became heavily involved in the Portuguese sugar plantations on Madeira and the Azores. The Portuguese and Genoese turned to the forced labour of captives purchased from African emperors and warlords for the manpower to grow this labour-intensive crop – giving rise to the Atlantic slave trade. Portugal's early colonial adventures soon triggered a competitive struggle with neighbouring Spain, culminating in the rival voyages of Columbus and Vasco da Gama. Aiming to circumvent the Muslim monopoly over the Far East trade routes, the Genoese explorer eventually stumbled upon the Americas, while his Portuguese counterpart circumnavigated Africa to find a direct route to India. A new era in world history had begun.

The Black Death, which had acted as a powerful catalyst in this complex chain of events, was truly an epoch-making event. The world eventually recovered from the late-medieval crisis it spawned, but if there is one lesson we can draw from this historical experience, it is that the social, economic and political consequences of a major pandemic can linger well beyond the immediate impact. This pandemic, too, will pass – but the after-effects may remain with us for a long time to come. Although coronavirus itself will not create a new world, the way in which social movements, political actors and international powers choose to respond to it certainly will. ●

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STR/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Emily Tamkin Inside America

Lockdown should never be compared to the genuine evils suffered by minorities in history



In early 1942, a few months after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, the apparent aim of which was to prevent anti-American espionage. Under the order, 117,000 people of Japanese descent living mostly on the west coast of the United States – the majority of them American citizens – were rounded up and forcibly relocated to internment camps across the nation. Their legal status did not protect them. They were given less than a week's notice before their lives were completely uprooted. More than 17,000 of the people interned were children under the age of ten, and several thousand were elderly or handicapped. They could not possibly have been spying on the US. The US didn't care.

Japanese-Americans suffered an actual grievance at the hands of their country. They were taken from their homes. They were considered guilty with no recourse to prove their innocence. Their only crime was their Japanese heritage, and for that they were imprisoned in camps, some of them for years. This was an act of collective discrimination, a denial of rights and one of the deepest scars on the face of American history.

The internment of Japanese-Americans was many things. It was not, however, the same as telling people, if they can, to please remain at home because of a global pandemic. Which is why it is curious that, on 5 May, a Republican justice on the Wisconsin Supreme Court compared her governor's stay-at-home orders to Japanese American internment.

The justice, Rebecca Bradley, pointed to a 1944 Supreme Court case in which it was decided that the US government had the right to exclude Japanese-Americans from certain areas of the country. "I'll direct your attention," she said, "to another time in history, in the Korematsu decision, where the [Supreme Court] said the need for action was great and time was short and that justified, and I'm quoting, 'assembling together and placing under guard all those of Japanese ancestry' in assembly centres during World War Two. Could the secretary under this broad delegation of legislative power or legislative-like power order people out of their homes into centres where they are properly social distanced in order to combat the pandemic?" Bradley also described the state's stay-at-home orders as "tyranny".

There was no need to direct attention to the Korematsu decision – named after Fred Korematsu, a 23-year-old Japanese-American who was arrested after refusing to leave his home in California, and who went on to become a civil rights activist – because what we have here in the context of lockdown is not discrimination against a group of people. Nobody is being ordered into camps because they are suspected of disloyalty to their country on account of their ancestry. We are being told to stay at home for our own safety.

> The enforcement of social distancing laws can be discriminatory

Here are a few other things that the stay-at-home orders are not. They are not, despite what the Idaho state representative Heather Scott recently said, redolent of Nazi Germany, "where you had government telling people, you are an essential worker or non-essential worker and the non-essential workers got put on a train". Despite comparisons drawn by right-wing protesters, those who cannot get haircuts or work out in gyms are not suffering like those six million Jews killed in the Holocaust.

The lockdown orders are not like laws imposed in the segregated South, and those defying them are in no way the modern-day equivalents of the civil rights activist Rosa Parks, even though the White House adviser Stephen Moore reportedly compared them to her. In 1955, Parks, a black woman, famously refused to give up her seat and move to the back of the bus, where she was told she had to sit.

What all of these cases had in common – the Japanese-American internment, the Holocaust, the Jim Crow South – is that they were violently discriminatory. You were singled out because you were of Japanese descent, because you were Jewish, because you were black. The law punished you because of your identity.

The stay-at-home orders are not discriminatory. They do not stipulate that only white Americans must stay in their homes. The idea that they would is unfathomable, not least because laws in the US do not discriminate against white people. That is why, as happened in Michigan at the beginning of May, armed protesters are able to occupy state houses to demonstrate against stay-at-home orders; it is why white women are able to compare staying in their houses to those calamities experienced by people forcibly moved from their homes into camps; it's why some are insisting that the lockdown is hurting them. It is because they live in a system designed to protect them from actual grievance that they enjoy the luxury of feeling aggrieved at imagined persecutions.

Staying at home is annoying. It is boring. It is lonely. For the 15 per cent of Americans who have lost their jobs in this pandemic, it is unimaginably costly. But it is not an act of persecution or discrimination, and only someone who had wilfully ignored the history of discrimination and persecution could think otherwise.

The enforcement of the laws, of course, can be discriminatory – but not against the white Americans calling them tyrannical. In Brooklyn and Queens, New York, half of residents are white but, respectively, 97.5 and 90.0 per cent of arrests over social distancing violations have been of people of colour, reports *Business Insider*. Black and Hispanic communities in New York are not typically known to come up with ludicrous historical comparisons to demonstrate that they are being discriminated against; those who know actual discrimination don't need to. ●

IAN McGOWAN

"We saw the virus coming and failed to respond"

Our contributors *Laura Spinney, Dr Phil Whitaker* and *Professor Michael Barrett* joined *Jason Cowley* to discuss pandemics past, present and future

The coronavirus pandemic is the United Kingdom's gravest crisis since the Second World War and we are now facing possibly the most severe economic downturn for 300 years. As we grapple with the consequences, there are lessons to be learned from history. In a recent *New Statesman* webinar, Laura Spinney, author of *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World* (2017); Dr Phil Whitaker, our medical columnist; and Professor Michael Barrett, an infection biologist at Glasgow University, joined Jason Cowley to discuss the government's response and much else.

Jason Cowley Laura, in an earlier conversation you used a resonant phrase to describe our response to coronavirus. You said we have a "peculiar memory for pandemics". What do you mean by that?

Laura Spinney When I wrote my book it was because there seemed to be this huge hole in our collective memory of the 20th century where we just forgot the worst catastrophe in it: the Spanish flu, which killed an estimated 50 to 100 million people in 1918. Little did I know that just three years on we'd be talking about nothing else. If I judge by the questions I've had since this pandemic declared itself, I'd say that we do have a very peculiar memory for pandemics, because everybody is immediately reaching for that historical reference, as the closest comparison to what we're experiencing now, and it probably isn't the best comparison.

There were two other flu pandemics in the 20th century: the 1957 Asian flu and the 1968 Hong Kong flu. The former didn't kill more than two million people and the latter not more than four million, depending on who you ask. That is a lot of people, but it's nowhere near the 1918 Spanish flu. You can see that those more recent pandemics are better references. But people are not talking about them.

JC Why do you think that is?

LS I don't know, but I think it's a problem. If we understood how frequent pandemics are then we might be able to plan in a calmer, more rational way, rather than getting to the next one, panicking, and not having put in place the preparations which the likes of the World Health Organisation [WHO] have been telling us to for decades.

JC The WHO has been under pressure – not least from Donald Trump – for being too slow to declare coronavirus a pandemic. It has also been criticised for being too soft on, or allowing itself to be overly influenced by, China.



Eerily empty: a deserted Parliament Square, London, seven weeks into the UK's lockdown

MICHELE MARTINOLI/SHUTTERSTOCK

LS I don't think that's particularly fair. The WHO was accused of overreacting to the 2009 Swine flu pandemic, which was a little bit of an anticlimax, and of under-reacting to Ebola at first. It's always trying to get it right, but of course it hasn't got a crystal ball. It declared a global health emergency at the end of January, and that step released the maximum powers and resources it had. It waited until 11 March to declare a pandemic. The WHO was trying to steer a fine line between panic and complacency. Then when they saw that governments were not reacting they declared a pandemic to stimulate them to do more.

JC Phil, how has it been for you working as a doctor on the front line interacting with and treating Covid-19 patients?

Phil Whitaker We are in the West Country, one of the least affected areas of the UK, and I'm glad, because as well as being a GP in practice, I also do work out of hours. Just to try to give you a sense of the scale here, usually out of hours, there might be 20, perhaps 30, telephone triage calls on the screen – these are patients we've got to call back and advise about their problem. In the early part of April, there would be about 170 calls, most of them related to coronavirus. That's in a part of the country where we've had some of the lowest rates.

The virus has had the most enormous impact on the NHS. In that late March period, we went into a rapid reconfiguration of the health service, separating it into two parts: one, emergency and urgent things only; second, gearing up capacity both in hospital and out in the community to deal with the surges of cases expected. Perhaps at the moment, the creation of the new Nightingale Hospitals look like they haven't necessarily been needed – that's good. But certainly at the time they were set up, we thought that kind of capacity would be required. The hospital sector has coped only because it has doubled or trebled its intensive care capacity. In general practice, we have set up dedicated "hot hubs" – surgeries or premises where all suspected coronavirus patients can be assessed away from the rest of the health service – to keep viral transmission down.

JC Mike, you've been involved in an ambitious project in Glasgow, working with the team constructing one of the three Lighthouse diagnostic testing laboratories to help the government meet its target of 100,000 tests a day. Can you tell us a bit about what's been going on?

Michael Barrett It was late March when we were asked to set up a lab to join the national network looking to diagnose NHS ▶

workers and then key workers. We had to completely transform laboratories into a sort of factory, taking swab samples from drive-through centres, isolating the virus, taking RNA [ribonucleic acid], putting them through a PCR [polymerase chain reaction], getting a result, and having that result analysed and fed back to the people coming in [to the drive-through testing centre] – all within 24 hours. We're running through many thousands of tests a day. I've found the experience extraordinary. There have been hurdles; there are huge supply chain issues. It's been a little frustrating watching the media looking at this 100,000 number and questioning it. The reality is that the numbers have gone up. The capacity is reaching a level where it will become routine that 100,000 are going through every day.

JC What do we know about the biology of the disease?

MB Some of the initial modelling and thinking was done based on predictions of how a flu virus pandemic might pan out. The Sars epidemic of 2003-04 also contributed to these models. As the epidemic or pandemic proceeds, you get more information to make the models ever more refined. One of the issues was that looking at the new virus and thinking of the 2003-04 Sars virus, there was an assumption it might be rather similar. But that initial Sars virus was relatively non-transmissible.

JC And Sars had a very high fatality rate, didn't it?

MB It had a much higher fatality rate in those who got infected, but because it was primarily infecting the lower respiratory tract rather than also the upper respiratory tract, it was much more difficult to transmit. We knew when people had the original Sars virus, because they were pretty sick, and they hadn't been transmitting it before they were pretty sick and put into isolation. The big problem with Covid-19 is that it replicates in the upper respiratory tract. There are many people who are asymptomatic but can spread the virus. That's really been largely responsible for the huge and rapid spread.

JC After news that a novel coronavirus had been discovered, and was spreading rapidly in Hubei province in China with lethal effects, began to be more widely known in January, you warned in a *New Statesman* article about what in effect has come to pass. You were deeply alarmed when many governments and experts were not. Why were you so alarmed early on?

MB The thing that alarmed me more than anything was that the Chinese were taking it so seriously. They'd been the epicentre of the Sars outbreak in 2003-04, and we now understand that the reason they acted in the way that they did is they had developed policies for any possible rerun of the original Sars epidemic. You could see that this new virus was being transmitted pretty quickly. The whole concept of closing down 11-million-people cities was extraordinary. I was a little bit surprised the rest of the world didn't catch on more quickly.

JC Laura, what are the lessons today from the Spanish flu pandemic, in which as many as 50 million people died, many in the Global South?

LS In some ways, the 1918 pandemic was one that followed its natural course. There were public health measures in some parts of the world, but they weren't terribly effective. And, of course, there was no vaccine, there were no antiviral drugs, there were no antibiotics, which would have helped with the bacterial pneumonia that killed most people. It was a very different world. In many ways, we are better off. We have much better disease surveillance; we saw this coming. But we've also repeated many of the errors.

You asked me about the WHO, and of it being accused of showing bias towards the Chinese. It may have looked like that to some, but maybe they were just trying to draw lessons from the Chinese. In general, I think, we failed: we saw it coming and we failed. Each nation looked at the last one to be affected and said, "What did they do wrong?" rather than, "What can we learn from them?"

JC Phil, do you think "failure" is the right word to describe the British government's response to the crisis?

PW Probably. It's just one word and it's a complex situation. There were a couple of weeks in early March where we were looking at Italy and thinking we were going to be different. It's difficult to know exactly, but I wonder whether there was an over-reliance on theoretical models that was somehow blinkering us to what was happening in real time in another western European country with not dissimilar demographics. In the very early phases, we were testing and tracing contacts and isolating people, when numbers were tiny. I think the other failure was to abandon that process of testing and tracing.

JC Do you know why that was abandoned?

PW The lack of testing capacity was a factor. There were two other things. One, this idea that the modelling was based quite strongly on flu, but Covid-19 – and also other coronavirus infections – is very different from flu. Covid-19 has got the capacity to send quite a proportion of affected people into hospital and into intensive care, which is what happened in Italy. The health service was overwhelmed. The modelling didn't strongly take into account that sort of hospital, critical-care capacity surge. The clinical picture of the virus causing so many people to require hospital care was a missed point that we perhaps should have seen from Wuhan, and certainly from Italy. The other thing is that Wuhan was the epicentre. The Chinese reacted extremely vigorously to control it there.

JC Although initially wasn't there an attempt to suppress the truth? According to reports, medical whistleblowers were arrested and intimidated.

PW That's true, but once the Chinese got the measure that they had another big problem on their hands, a bit like Sars, they tackled it very vigorously. But they had an advantage over us, in that they had an epicentre which they could try to close down, whereas we got a lot of seeding. The other failure was not to inhibit travel from affected areas. We didn't do any kind of border control or quarantining, which allowed multiple areas of seeding.

JC Mike, on Laura's theme of executive failure, what do you think?

MB The key issue is that people just didn't take it seriously enough, quickly enough, in government. I think that's partly to do with the fact that it was a faraway event. It wasn't something that anybody could really relate to based on our experiences in the UK. Even when it was in northern Italy, I don't think people understood or realised that this was happening here and now. It was when Italy locked down and Spain locked down and France was locking down, that the UK said, "OK, we need to lock down." I think there was a failure of understanding how big a problem this was likely to be.

JC I have a question here from one of our online audience: "The number of deaths is high in the United Kingdom, but compared to the Spanish flu and other pandemics these numbers are small, although still every lost life is tragic. Is the crisis really that serious?"



The people's PPE: Red Guards in protective masks during the Hong Kong flu epidemic of 1968

HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS

MB That's a big question. I would say, yes, it is serious. Through April we've been seeing a doubling of the death rate in the UK. We appear to have got over the worst of the epidemic now, though we could see a bounce-back. It is serious to get these numbers of people dying, but certainly we're not experiencing mass death of the population.

LS What happens next depends on us, and if we collectively don't take it seriously and don't come out of confinement in a gradual way, we could trigger another surge. I wanted to make another point about failure, having criticised the government. You asked me for lessons from history. One of the really interesting things that comes out of 1918 is that the optimal response in one place wasn't necessarily the optimal response in another. In 1918, just to give you one example, in many advanced countries the knee-jerk reaction was to close the schools. But there were two places that really interestingly didn't do that. One was New York City. They wanted to keep the kids visible in a city that was going through a huge wave of immigration. And in Odessa, which was in Russia at the time, which was in the grip of a civil war, they decided to keep the kids in school because it was the one safe place. In defence of our government, the right decision for one country might not be the right decision for another.

JC Do you expect a second wave in Europe as we begin to unlock – especially during the autumn and early winter, when seasonal flu will also be circulating?

LS It really depends on how seriously people take this lockdown. From the scientists I've spoken to, even they won't make predictions because this famous R number [the reproduction rate of Covid-19], which is what lots of these decisions are based on, is just an average. We don't have a picture of what is happening precisely across the population. It could come roaring back out of some pocket of high prevalence, such as a migrant camp or care homes. We have to understand that the world has changed. The world now contains Covid-19, and we shouldn't assume a new normal for some time yet. If we do, then we will provoke another wave.

JC Is there overconfidence about the capacity to produce a Covid-19 vaccine in the next 12 to 24 months?

MB Yes, we're overconfident. We've seen technologies that could in principle give us a fast-track vaccine, but that doesn't mean that they will create the right kind of immune response. That's why I don't think we're going to get there quickly. The end of this year will be the first indication as to whether or not we have got any sort of activity – which in itself is record time for getting any kind of vaccine to that level – but we shouldn't assume that we're going to have a protective vaccine any time soon.

JC So, we will just have to learn to live with and adapt to the virus?

MB If the vaccine does work, that will make things a lot easier, but I foresee that we will come out into a world that will be guided by some of the behavioural changes we're now seeing. We'll start wearing masks, we will socially distance. Goodness knows what is going to happen to some of those enjoyable aspects of our lives that involve mass gatherings, but I think for many months we shouldn't engage in those kinds of activities. I suspect we may be looking at a different way of living and working, possibly for years to come.

JC BAME communities seem to be disproportionately affected by Covid-19. How alarmed and worried are doctors?

PW Increasingly. We know that in socio-economic terms, BAME communities are relatively disadvantaged, and that socio-economic disadvantage makes people more susceptible to ill health. But if you try to take all of that out of the picture, there does seem to be probably around a two times higher, maybe slightly under, mortality rate among BAME individuals who contract Covid-19 compared to those who are Caucasian. That tells me there's something genetic going on. What particularly worries me is that colleagues who are from those black and ethnic minority backgrounds have been succumbing at a really worrying rate. We need even more swiftly to take people out of the firing line in virus-heavy clinical areas, because the outcomes for people from a different genetic heritage just look to be much worse.

JC Laura, what happened in the end to the Spanish flu?

LS For most of the 20th century people didn't have any idea of the scale of that disaster. They thought of it as a footnote to the First World War. Now that we have a much better understanding of it, I think there's a need to go back and think about some of the things that changed from the 1920s onwards, and see how the pandemic might have contributed to them. For example, the emergence of socialised medicine. It had been talked about before, but you see it being implemented from the 1920s. It's difficult to argue that the pandemic didn't contribute to that. ●

This is an edited transcript of a New Statesman webinar that took place on 7 May; a full video of the discussion can be viewed at newstatesman.com/events

FACTS AND FIGURES

Covid-19: a pandemic in numbers

Michael Goodier of the *New Statesman* data journalism team highlights some crucial new themes

The peak of Covid-19 deaths may have passed in the UK, but only now are we beginning to piece together how many people this first wave has killed.

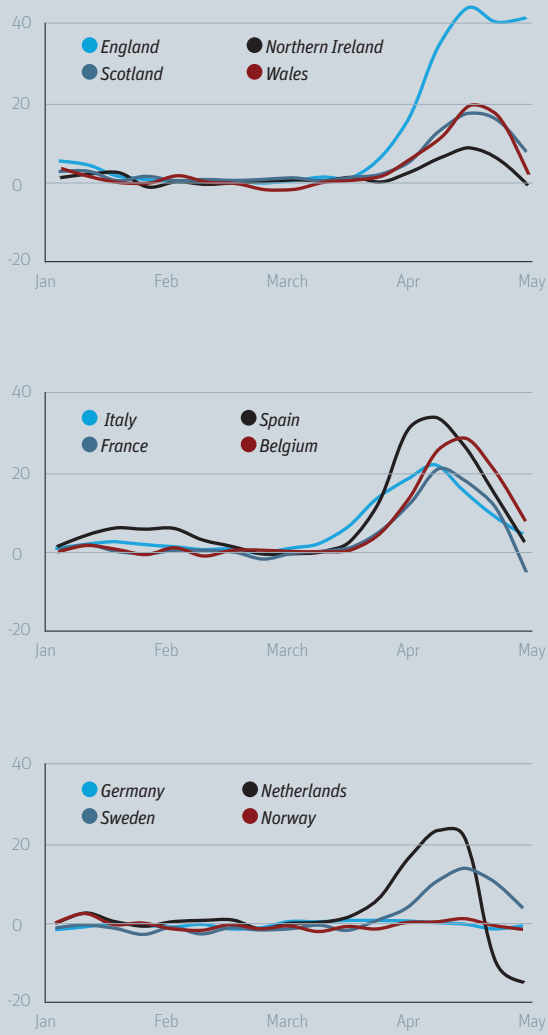
We know that the "official" death tallies announced by the government every day are an underestimate – they only include people who have tested positive for the virus, and until recently only included people who died in hospital. A better approach is to count the number of people who have died of any cause, and see how that compares with the same weeks in previous years. It is a reasonable (if imperfect) inference that these "excess deaths" will be either directly due to Covid-19, or due to the disruption to health and care services it has brought in its wake.

We now know that there were 46,380 more deaths than expected in England and Wales in the eight weeks to 1 May. The official death tally from Covid-19 stood at 26,251 on that date. There were 37,627 deaths in care homes in the eight weeks to 1 May, more than twice as many as expected.

England has seen extremely high excess mortality compared to other parts of Europe; places like Norway and Berlin have had barely any more deaths than usual throughout the crisis. ONS figures provide a localised picture of Covid-19 related deaths. While outbreaks have been scattered throughout the UK, overall the most deprived places have shouldered the heaviest burden. The peak has passed; the political reckoning may still lie ahead.

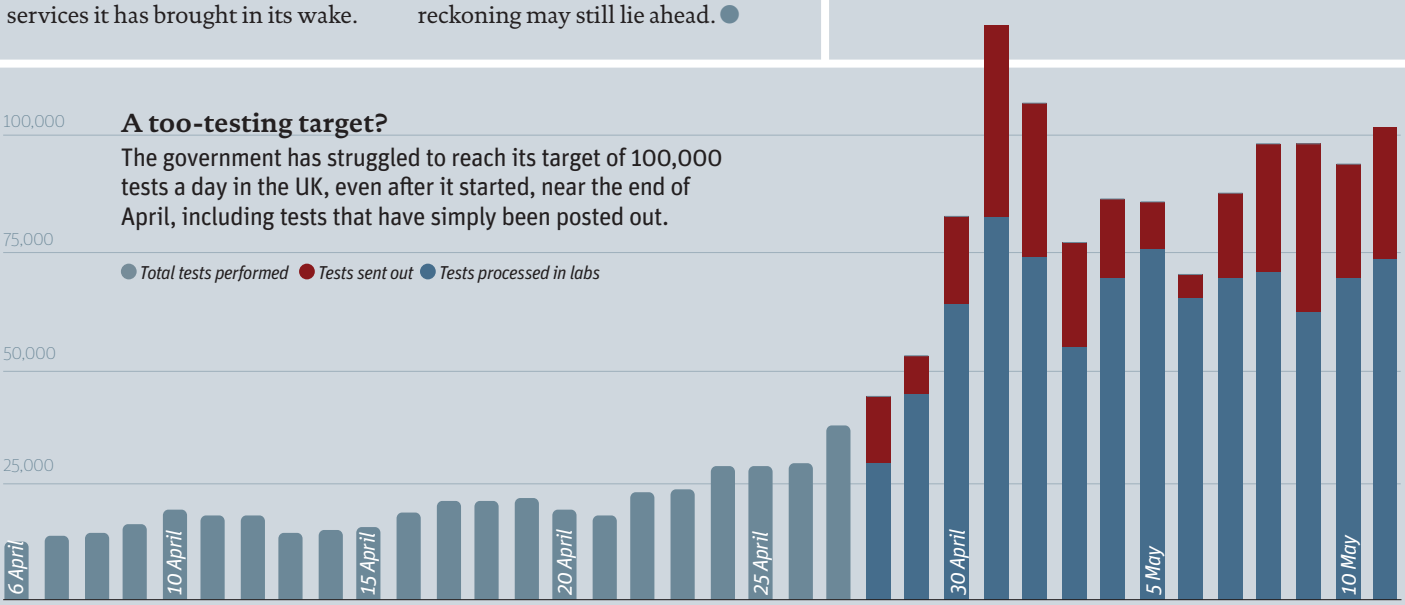
The sick man of Europe

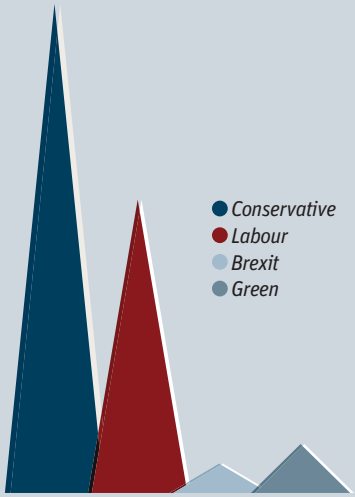
England is showing far higher rates of excess mortality than other European nations.



A too-testing target?

The government has struggled to reach its target of 100,000 tests a day in the UK, even after it started, near the end of April, including tests that have simply been posted out.





Popularity contest

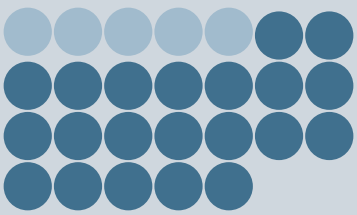
The Conservatives are polling at over 50% of the vote (YouGov/the *Times*).



Who benefits?

1.8m

More than 1.8 million Universal Credit claims have been made since 16 March.



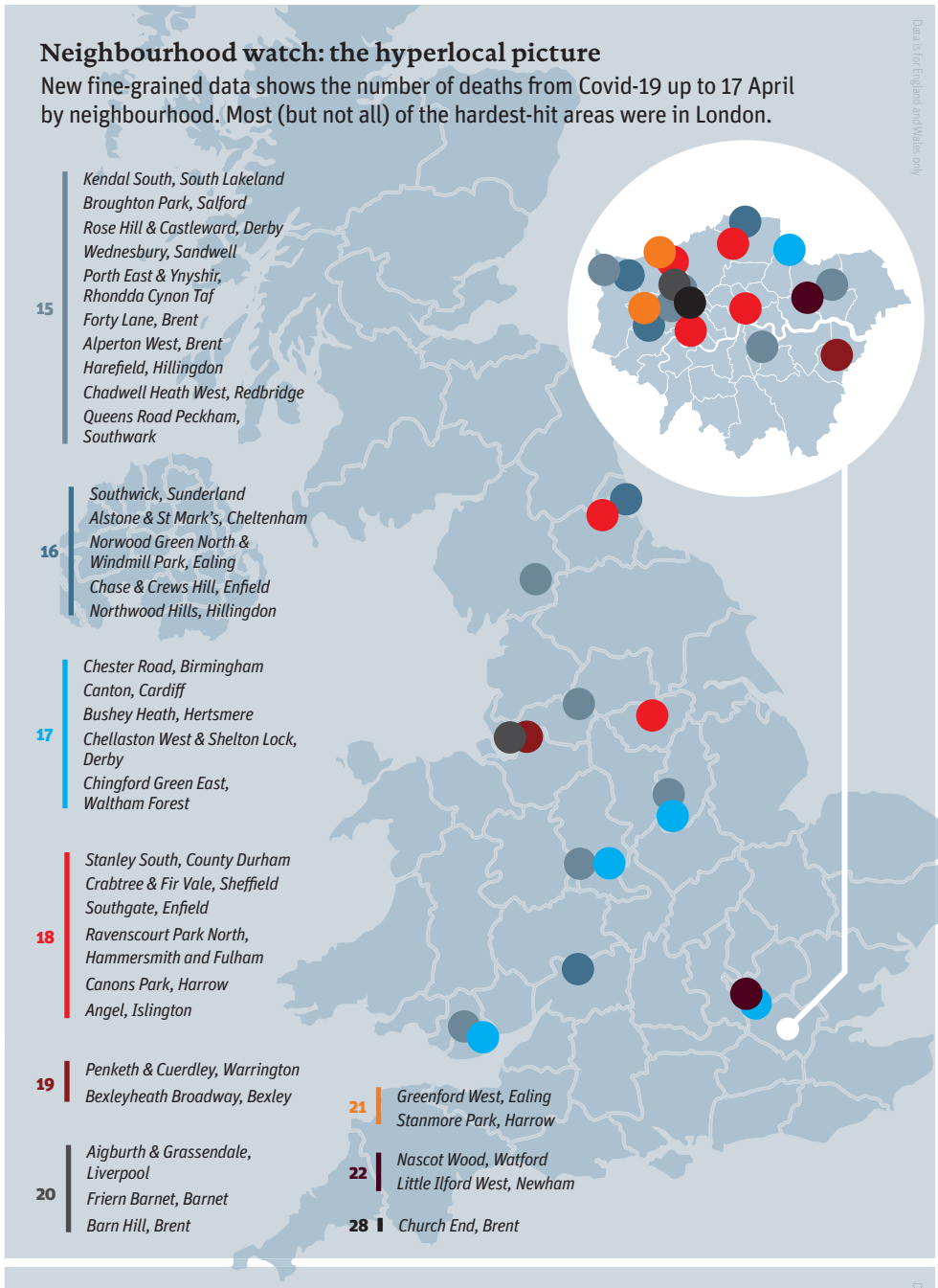
An unequal killer

Black people are 4.2 times more likely to die from Covid-19 than white people even after taking age into account, according to the ONS: that's 21 black deaths for every five white deaths.

Neighbourhood watch: the hyperlocal picture

New fine-grained data shows the number of deaths from Covid-19 up to 17 April by neighbourhood. Most (but not all) of the hardest-hit areas were in London.

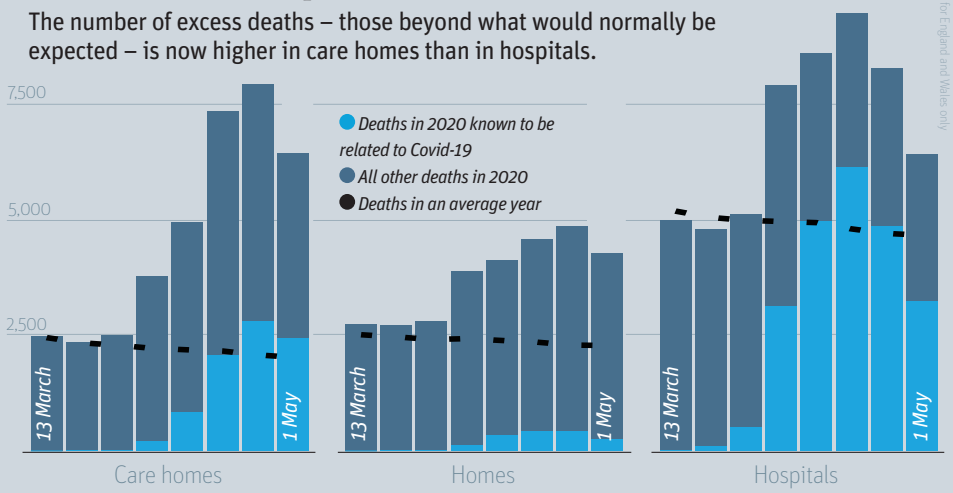
Data is for England and Wales only



A care-home catastrophe

The number of excess deaths – those beyond what would normally be expected – is now higher in care homes than in hospitals.

Data is for England and Wales only





NATIONAL ARCHIVES

The Big Four: from a series of foreign posters that were created during the Second World War in the US

The myth of "Britain alone"

The UK has long downplayed the awkward truth that its victory in the Second World War depended on the Soviet Union, the US and the British empire

By David Edgerton

On VE Day the streets of British towns and cities were bedecked with flags. If one looks carefully at the films and photographs from the time, it is clear that not only Union Jacks were flying. There were also flags of the many other countries fighting the Axis. Most prominent among these were those of the United States, the Soviet Union and China.

In its last years the Second World War was an internationalist war; a conflict that, from January 1942 – when 26 nations signed the Joint Declaration – was presented as being fought by the United Nations. Its leaders were the Big Four: Chiang Kai-shek, Winston Churchill, Franklin D Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin.

The idea of a United Nations was central to Allied propaganda. In the UK ceremonies were held on 14 June to mark United Nations Day, with all the flags prominently displayed. One of the most compelling cultural representations of this internationalism was Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's extraordinary film *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), where a heavenly world assembly of all the nations decides on who lives and who dies.

But the idea of the United Nations was more than propaganda. Units from different United Nations fought together. Bomber Command crews included men from the British Commonwealth as well as other Allied powers, too. The overall war outside the USSR was run by the Combined Chiefs of Staff from Washington, with Supreme Allied Commanders in different theatres of operations across the world. Committees made up of different nationalities also controlled Allied resources, munitions production and shipping. They were seen as the core of a new world government in the same way that the RAF and the US air force were believed to be the global police of a new age.

These internationalist sentiments were displayed on VE Day. Churchill's broadcast and speech to the House of Commons praised Russia and noted that "almost the whole world was combined against the evil-doers, who are now prostrate before us. Our gratitude to our splendid Allies goes forth from all our hearts in this island and throughout the British empire." The *New Statesman* at the time perfectly expressed the internationalism that defined the moment: ▶

> The common people of this country and of the Continental nations whose way of life Nazi Germany challenged are aware that they saved themselves, not by the wisdom of men "set over them in authority" – grateful though they may be to this or that leader whom the war threw up – but by their own exertions. They have seen that Fascism created through the vehicle of Germany a military weapon which could be broken only by the unity of the factory workers of Moscow, Coventry and Detroit, of the men who marched together into battle from the little fields of England and the wide steppes and prairies of Russia and North America. And they perceive, without illusions, that the defeat of Germany is only the beginning of a struggle to rid the world forever of the economic and political forces in which Hitlerism… was cradled.

That we forget this internationalist story is no accident. After 1945, the history of the Second World War was nationalised to serve particular political purposes.

British and US governments have long downplayed VE Day in favour of D-Day. The reason is not hard to find. The former highlighted victory in a war against fascism in which the USSR played a monumental role. The latter anniversary, though, had a different ideological message: it was a joint UK-US liberation of Europe from tyranny. It excluded Canada, Poland and other nations. D-Day also left out the complementary Operation Bagration on the Eastern Front. In the summer of 1944 the Red Army advanced much faster, and with heavier casualties, than the United Nations forces did in the west.

Central to our collective amnesia is the British emphasis on defeat and resistance in 1940 rather than on victory in 1945. The deliverance at Dunkirk, the heroics of the Battle of Britain and the cheerful coming together in the Blitz are at the heart of the story of Britain as a nation standing alone and fighting a people's war. This myth downplayed not only international alliances but also the vital role of the British empire.

Curiously enough, the story of the nation standing alone was essentially created in 1945. In his official VE Day declaration in the House of Commons, Churchill recounted: "After gallant France had been struck down we, from this island and from our united empire, maintained the struggle single-handed for a whole year until we were joined by the military might of Soviet Russia."

Churchill used the standard Conservative imperial "we", as he did when addressing what was sometimes known as the Imperial Parliament. As the USSR was one of the Big Three, Churchill could not but mention its role. After leaving the Commons, however, he spoke to the crowds in Whitehall from the balcony of the Ministry of Health in very different terms. He now maintained that the "British nation" and the "ancient island" had been alone, not the empire as a whole.

This was also the story told in "Mr Churchill's declaration of policy to the electors", the 1945 Conservative Party election manifesto, which although much concerned with empire and imperial trade, used a national rather than imperial "we". Churchill went on to use this image of the solitary nation in his influential six-volume history of the war, published between 1948 and 1953, which chided the US for its late entry into the conflict. Thus arose the myth that the nation was alone at the beginning of the war that Churchill eloquently expressed in his famous speeches.

Central to our collective amnesia is the British emphasis on resistance in 1940 rather than on victory in 1945

There were important reasons for insisting on the image of the lonely nation. The first was that the British role in combat in 1940-41 was relatively much greater than in 1945, when the UK was eclipsed as a world power by the US and the USSR. Nor was the empire what it had been in 1940; it was much more of a commonwealth of nations (outside of the colonies) that were part of the United Nations in their own right. Malaya, British Borneo and Hong Kong were still under Japanese control on VJ Day in 1945, when Japan formally surrendered.



There was also a pressing financial reason to insist that the nation, and not the empire, was alone in 1940-41. As peacetime approached, the British government knew it could not immediately pay for its vital imports, not least food, by exporting. During the war, most imports had not been paid for: the US and Canada supplied them for free, while the rest of the world, including parts of the empire, in effect lent them. The British government wanted the US to maintain its support into peacetime.

The argument Britain used was that the UK was owed a debt. It went like this: from 1939 with France, but from June 1940 to the end of 1941 alone, the UK was fighting for a common cause. The US should have been in the fight from the beginning. The UK had also bought large quantities of arms and supplies, and had even paid for the building of arms factories in the US (something often forgotten today). Furthermore, went the argument, it had reduced its exports and in effect borrowed from the empire and British-linked territories (giving rise to the misleading idea that it had bankrupted itself). The notion of Britain "standing alone" was thus a claim on the US, a rebuke to a Johnny-come-lately ally.

The US was having none of it. The Lend-Lease programme stopped soon after VJ Day. The new Labour government was forced to negotiate loans – which were finally paid off in 2006 – with the US and Canada to pay for essential food and raw materials. It was to go on to exhort people to work hard to achieve "economic independence".

Thus it was that what was understood as a war of allies, an imperial war and an internationalist war, came to be seen differently after 1945. The empire was airbrushed out, as were the United Nations, not to mention the great Anglo-French alliance that declared war on Germany in 1939. The war that had been an internationalist war of diverse peoples fighting together became in the national imaginary a British "people's war".

A lasting picture was constructed in which a new nation, Britain, fought alone and bankrupted itself in the process. Lest we forget, the war was not as it came to be remembered. ●

GRIZELDA.NET

Megan Nolan Out of the Ordinary

I'm not a sports fan – but I can't look away from Michael Jordan in the Netflix series *The Last Dance*



One thing that's fun to do during lockdown is try on some new personalities for size. You may as well lean in and commit, since they're being foisted on you anyway. I never planned to be "woman who spends six hours making minorly different versions of bechamel sauce", for instance, or "incapable of reading for more than three minutes at a time" or, most harrowing of all, "living sullenly alongside my mother while I turn 30". So while I'm at it, I'm giving a few other wildcards a go. This is why, for the past week, I've been texting friends and acquaintances and would-be lovers to say: "Hey, are you watching this Chicago Bulls doc? I'm a sports guy now!"

The Last Dance is an ESPN miniseries (also airing on Netflix) about the career of basketball star Michael Jordan and his final season with the Chicago Bulls in 1997-98. The documentary crew had complete access, so as well as game footage and interviews with Jordan and his teammates, we see locker-room goofing off and strains.

We see Scottie Pippen drinking a beer after a game with captivatingly profound enjoyment. We see gargantuan egos rubbing up against each other before dissolving into good-natured teasing. We see the odd general manager Jerry Krause being relentlessly pilloried by Jordan for his height, weight and social awkwardness, and then insisting to camera that it's the organisation that's great, not just Jordan. He wants to dissipate some of the hysteria, to flatten out his achievements so that they belong to the team and to management, but of course he can't, because Jordan is Jordan.

One of the most astonishing things about the series is to see the creation of the sports celebrity as we know it now. There had been famous American athletic icons before Jordan – Babe Ruth, Red Grange, Muhammad Ali – but Jordan was the first to grasp the totality of his stardom and monetise it to the relentless degree that is normal today. His glamour made Nike into one of the foremost brands in the world, and then he sold his image to Gatorade, McDonald's, Wheaties and Coca-Cola. His marketability transcended the NBA, and even the US. He had adoring fans, ready to be sold to, all over the world. Compared to some of his contemporaries – eccentric Dennis Rodman, say, or lovable and gregarious Magic Johnson, or even the winningly laconic Pippen – Jordan is a curiously uncharismatic figure. This worked in his favour. His personality, his USP, was purely and singularly that of the winner. He was the best at being the best, and that included being the best at making money. His ascending talent was perfectly confluent with his commodification in a way he nurtured with great intuitive intelligence. When Reebok sponsored the American Olympic team in 1992, Jordan hid the logo on his kit by draping an American flag over his shoulders, elegantly evading brand conflict with Nike.

> It's miraculous to see a body move the way Jordan's does

Jordan was heard to have responded "Republicans buy sneakers too" when challenged about his apoliticism. Rumoured to have been a misattribution for years, he finally cops to it in *The Last Dance,* but says he won't apologise for a throwaway joke to teammates. He is taken to task for not publicly supporting the African-American Democrat Harvey Gantt over racist Republican Jesse Helms in a 1990 North Carolina US Senate race (Helms won). He is more vocal now, speaking out against Donald Trump's attacks on protests by the quarterback Colin Kaepernick and the basketball star LeBron James. But, he says, in his heyday, when people criticised him for not supporting Gantt or for holding his tongue about Rodney King, an African-American beaten by police officers in LA, he was focused on basketball, busy being the best.

Why should a figure such as Jordan be automatically lined up to provide political dissent if it isn't naturally forthcoming?

Hearing such criticism from the likes of his teammate Craig Hodges, who put his career on the line to voice his politics, is one thing. When Hodges suggested that the Bulls and LA Lakers sit out the opening game of the 1991 season in protest at racial inequalities in the MBA, Jordon told Hodges he was "crazy". "What's happening to our people in this country is extreme," Hodges responded. But when the tutting is coming from white journalists, it gets a little maddening. Whatever his politics now, back then Jordan was acting in accordance with his personality. If we want to encourage the possibility of public dissent, we equally shouldn't demand it of athletes who have no inclination to, purely because of their race. If white celebrities are allowed to be blank-slate apolitical commodities who bear no burden of confronting the world's injustices, which they certainly are, then black celebrities must be, too.

Beyond the money, though, and the movies and magazine covers, there is finally just the movement. *The Last Dance* is full of reality-defying moments so majestically improbable you can't help but grin dopily at the screen, leaning in to check how it could have happened. Jordan grins, too, in the moments after he executes something especially unlikely, or one of the last-second triumphs he has an uncanny knack for – luxuriating in yet another instance of knowing he is better than anyone else alive at what he is doing, a pleasure completely alien to the rest of us.

It's miraculous to see a body move the way Jordan's does; he kept making me think of the Robert Lowell line: "Clearest of all God's creatures, still all air and nerve." At the best of times, let alone now, I feel my body as the slow, incompetent executor of my mind's desires. I think of them as two separate entities that bristle against one another. To watch Jordan is to see physical movement not as an action directed by thought, nor as separate, but as its own distinct kind of thought in and of itself.

IAN McGOWAN

Ian Leslie Left Field

The problem with our response to Covid-19 wasn't that we didn't have a plan – it was the opposite



Last year, public health experts from Johns Hopkins University ranked every country in the world according to its preparedness for a pandemic, following an extensive data-gathering exercise. Out of 195 nations, Britain came second, behind the US. While it's too early to make a definitive judgement on how countries have handled Covid-19, it's safe to say the post-pandemic scorecard will differ significantly. But if the UK falls down the list, it will not be because it did not have a plan. It will be because it stuck to its plan for too long.

In spring 2009, a new virus emerged from Mexico: a mix of human, pig and bird viruses that became known as swine flu (H1N1). The UK's chief medical officer raised an alarm, explaining that epidemiologists at Imperial College had forecast a worst-case scenario of 65,000 deaths. Panic ensued. The National Pandemic Flu service crashed. Ministers spent £1.2bn on urgent preparations, including the purchase of vaccines and treatments. In the end, there were only 457 deaths, a fraction of the number who die in a normal flu season.

Afterwards, the government faced widespread criticism for overreacting. The TaxPayers' Alliance called the response a "hugely expensive farce". Labour MP Paul Flynn denounced "scaremongering". The official inquiry, led by Deirdre Hine, was sober but pointed. It described the response as proportionate and effective while noting that ministers should not necessarily act on the basis of the worst-case scenario. An alternative approach, said Hine, was to calibrate the response carefully according to the data coming in.

In 2011, in the shadow of the much-criticised swine flu response, officials prepared a new pandemic plan. It was written with influenza in mind, since that was deemed the most likely threat. The plan adopts the more calibrated approach proposed by Hine. It puts a great stress on the need for "proportionality" and not overreacting. Read it now and you're struck by how much it seems to have determined the current government's initial reaction to Covid-19. What became known as the herd immunity strategy is outlined here: the 2011 plan states that "it will not be possible to stop the spread of, or to eradicate the virus". It declares, "The UK government does not plan to close borders, stop mass gatherings or impose controls on public transport during any pandemic." There is no mention of social distancing.

The plan emphasises the need to avoid spreading fear, and to encourage people to "carry on with their normal daily lives". It is sceptical about the value of face masks, banning travel to the UK and closing schools. It finds little evidence that stopping mass gatherings would slow transmission – indeed, it says keeping such events "may help maintain public morale".

> Countries that relied on scientific advice reacted more slowly

People make plans, but plans exert power over people. Covid-19 is not a flu virus but something new for which we don't yet have effective medications, and it is more infectious than Sars and Mers, the other two coronaviruses to have emerged since the turn of the century. Faced with the novel problem of an untreatable, highly transmissible virus, the government's current advisers seem to have found it hard to break with the plan they had – now unfit for purpose – and think anew.

Ours wasn't the only sluggish government. According to a study by public policy scholars, the European countries with less sophisticated governing capability reacted most swiftly; as soon as Lithuania, Cyprus or Bulgaria detected cases, they imposed restrictions. Countries that incorporate scientific advice into their policy process, like the UK, Spain and the Netherlands, were on average more likely to have responded slowly.

When making decisions, people often use simple mental short-cuts, such as copying what others are doing or running at the first hint of danger. Such behaviour, once classified by psychologists as irrational, actually springs from a deeper rationality. Weighing options takes time and energy, both of which come at a cost that can be higher than that of deciding prematurely. Sometimes it's best to act first and think later.

This is particularly true in an emergency, when the cost of inaction can be lethally steep. The longer someone takes to decide whether the cinema really is on fire, the more likely they are to die in the flames. People who seem to be acting in a rational, evidence-based way, always awaiting more data ("Have I seen smoke?"), are in fact practising a kind of higher stupidity.

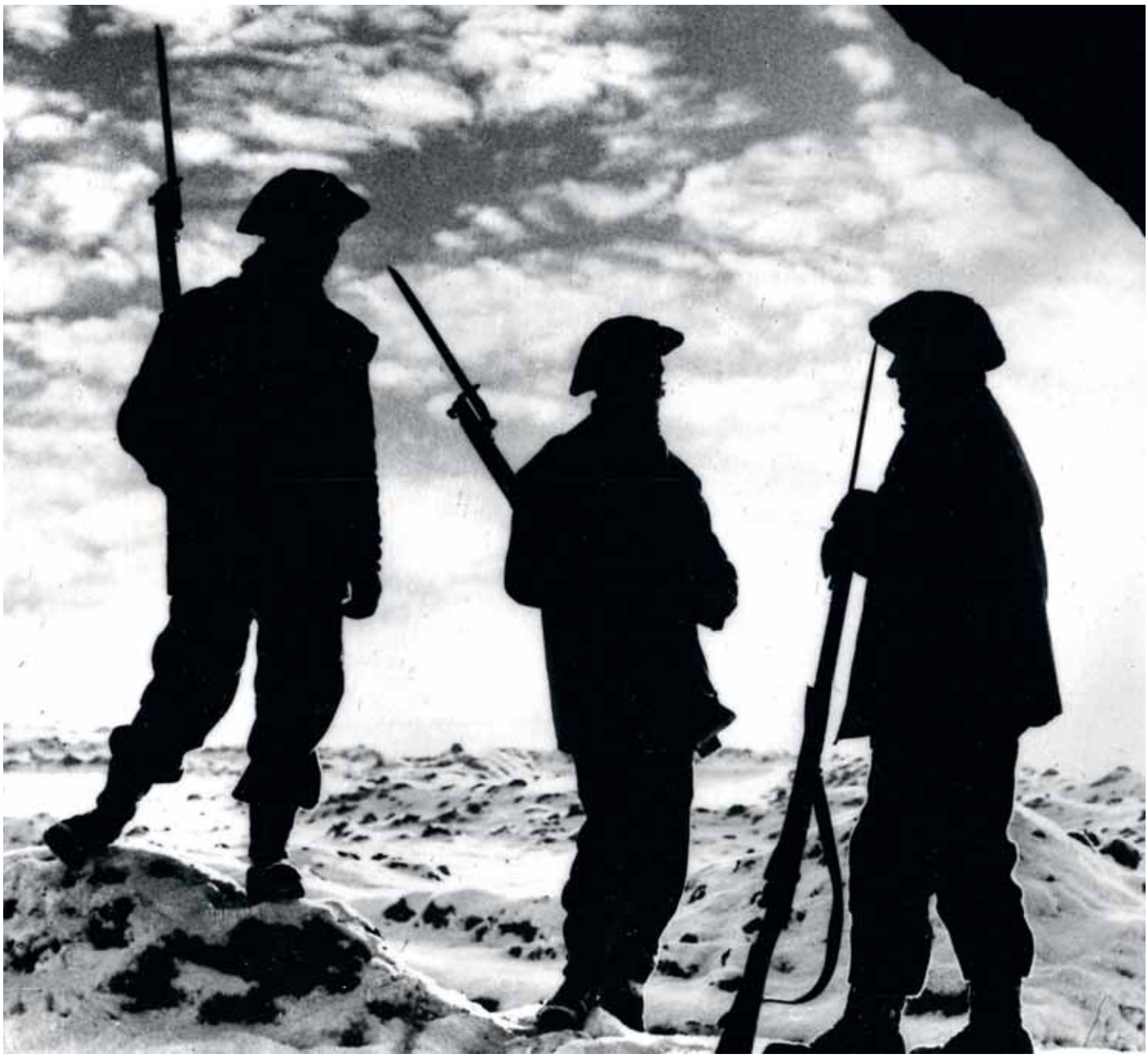
In February, Western governments were still attempting to find a middle way between the risk of a coronavirus epidemic and the risk of a wasteful overreaction, without grasping that the two risks are not the same. One involves a couple of billion pounds and some bad headlines; the other, tens of thousands of deaths and the worst recession for 300 years.

The same blindness is evident in Britain's failure to build stocks of PPE, or to prepare care homes for overflow from hospitals, both of which were identified as potential problems in Exercise Cygnus, the government's 2016 simulation of a flu epidemic. Spending to prepare for events that are unlikely to happen soon, if at all, can feel wasteful. But as the author Nassim Nicholas Taleb has remarked, you buy fire cover for your property because insurance is much cheaper before a fire than during it. Striving too hard for efficiency can lead to terrible waste.

The idea we could cleverly optimise our response to Covid-19 was a dangerous chimera that the government, hypnotised by its own plan, clung to for too long. Pandemic responses do not need to be proportionate; they need to be effective. In March, World Health Organisation official Mike Ryan summarised what he had learnt from fighting Ebola outbreaks: "If you need to be right before you move, you will never win." ●

IAN McGOWAN

The Critics



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Why British prisons aren't working

A spate of recent memoirs by former inmates and staff reveal the shocking reality of life behind bars in the UK

By Imogen West-Knights

Halfway through his book *A Bit of a Stretch* (Atlantic), and almost 24 hours into there being no water in the prison where he is incarcerated, Chris Atkins and his cellmate have a serious discussion about drinking the water sitting in the toilet. In Amanda Brown's *The Prison Doctor* (HQ), a recent double amputee who speaks no English is not provided with a disabled cell, and is not told why. In Mim Skinner's *Jailbirds* (Seven Dials), a woman so traumatised that she regularly wets the bed has her mattress paraded in front of other prisoners by the guards to humiliate her. None of these stories is presented as unusual.

In the past year or so, a handful of books have offered a sobering look inside the UK's broken prison system. *A Bit of a Stretch* is the documentary film-maker Chris Atkins' account of his nine months in Wandsworth, one of the UK's largest prisons; Mim Skinner's *Jailbirds* recounts her eye-opening time as an art teacher in a women's prison during her twenties; former village GP Amanda Brown's *The Prison Doctor* is a memoir of 15 years working in prison healthcare; and *Prison: A Survival Guide* (Ebury) is a practical look at how to get by inside by the activist, journalist and self-described "unreformed reprobate" Carl Cattermole.

When I first started reading these books, I could not have imagined that the need for prison reform each of them articulates would become much more urgent. Coronavirus has shone a shockingly bright light on existing injustices around the world, and prisons are no exception. At the time of writing, cases of the virus have been confirmed in more than half of the jails in England and Wales, and total 341 among prisoners and 364 among staff. Public Health England believes the true number of cases may be up to six times higher.

Chris Atkins, who was given a five-year sentence in 2016 for his role in a scheme to defraud HMRC of film-making funds, begins his book by letting us know, in no uncertain terms, that the situation is dire. He writes that his time behind bars coincided with "the worst prison crisis in history", and quotes a 2018 report by HM Inspectorate of Prisons that details "some of the most disturbing prison conditions we have ever seen – conditions which have no place in an advanced nation in the 21st century". Each of these four books confirms this impression a hundred times over.

The reality of life in British prisons is grim. Cattermole, whose no-nonsense guide to prison life enjoys something of a cult status among prisoners, writes that prisons have a budget of between £1.15 and £2.10 per day per prisoner, and that new residents should expect "small portions of crap food… gritty burgers, disinfectant-flavoured rice". Shower access is frequently withdrawn from prisoners as a punishment, and Atkins recalls one resident throwing his own shit at an officer in protest. Imagine, for a moment, how effective advice to "wash your hands" is in this environment. Before the outbreak I contacted the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) repeatedly to arrange a prison visit for this piece, and each person I spoke to kicked the can further down the road. I can understand why the ministry might not be keen for journalists to see the insides of prisons. Walls keep people out just as much as they keep people in.

The MoJ insists that prisoners receive "the same healthcare and treatment as anyone outside of prison", but these books tell us this simply isn't true. In one chapter of *The Prison Doctor*, Brown has to beg the prison governor to allow a man with a life-threatening abdominal infection to go to hospital. This is a problem partly of staffing: two officers are required to accompany inmates to hospital appointments. Staff shortages, Atkins tells us, are also the reason why thousands of prisoners in Britain spend 23 hours a day locked up in shared cells originally designed for single occupancy, for months at a time.

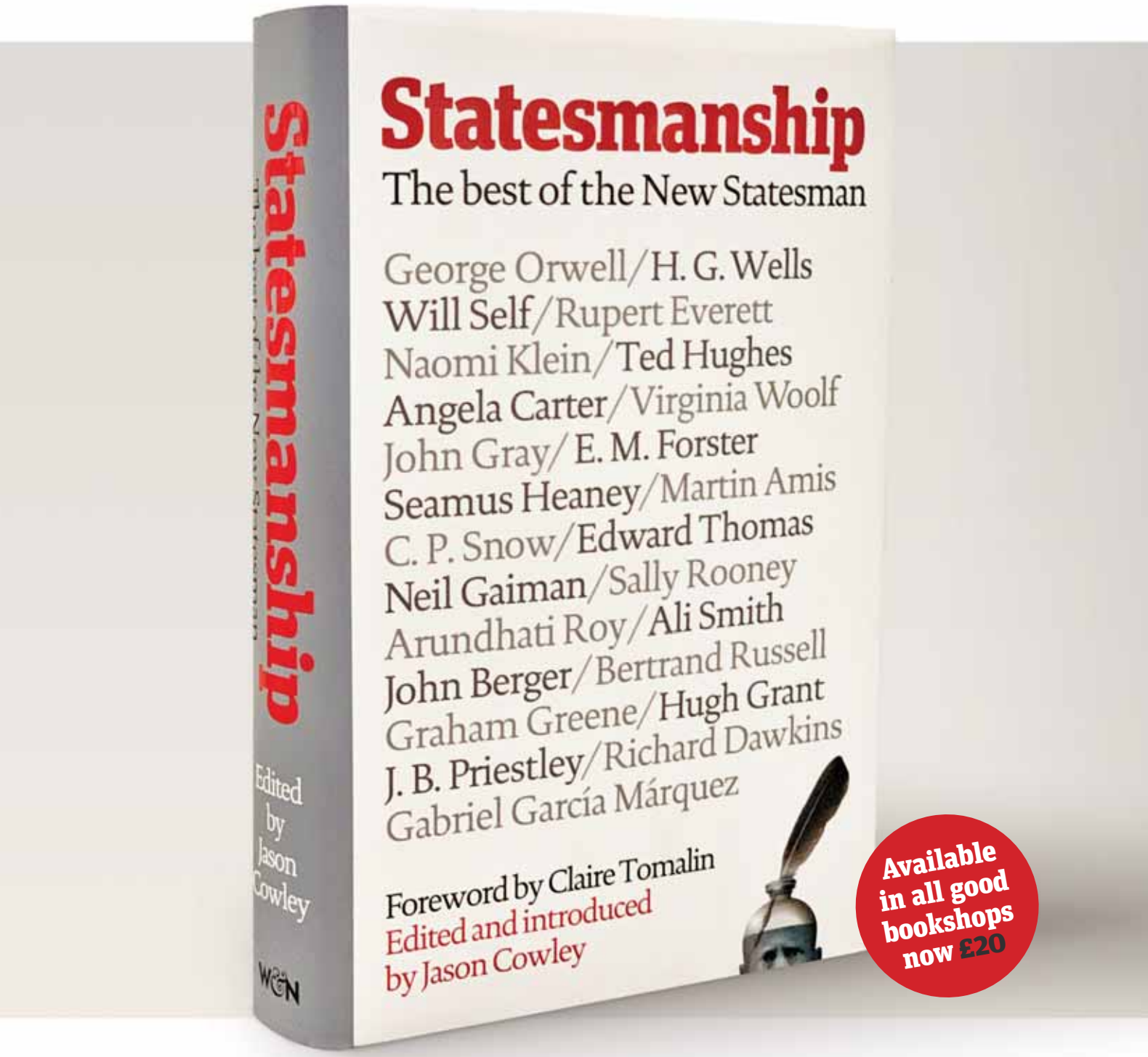
The emotional toll of life in prison is unimaginably heavy. Access to phone calls and visits is extremely limited, and is often withdrawn without warning or justification. When Atkins goes into prison, his son Kit is a toddler, and he writes movingly of his son asking over the phone whether he would be able to come to his birthday ▶



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party, and fighting back tears until the call was finished. The vicious irony of this is that the government acknowledges that family contact and support is proven to reduce reoffending and to contribute to prisoners' well-being, and yet does next to nothing to make it available.

The pain caused by lack of contact is borne by the families of prisoners, too. *Prison: A Survival Guide* contains a chapter written by a child whose father is imprisoned. "The struggles we face are never spoken about. We are never noticed," she writes. "How can Dad be strong if they're taking phone credit and visits away? They don't only punish Dad, they punish us."

All these books repeatedly emphasise just how desperate the mental health crisis has become in prisons. Atkins notes that MoJ statistics revealed suicides had reached a record high in 2016, with one inmate killing themselves every three days. Atkins signs up as a "listener", an inmate whose job it is to sit with other prisoners who are struggling and hear their problems. For inmates deemed a high risk to themselves, there is the mental health "observation cell", where they can be monitored for their own safety. Atkins notes that this cell was on the main thoroughfare of the prison where hundreds of prisoners pass each day, shaming occupants publicly in a way "reminiscent of putting lunatics in stocks in the village square".

> BT, which has a monopoly on prison phones, charges inmates eight times more than customers on the outside

Rehabilitation is paid little more than lip service in British prisons. Educational programmes are frequently unavailable due to staff shortages, or are prohibitively expensive. UK reoffending rates are extremely high – Cattermole notes that 61 per cent of people are rearrested, but that the proportion drops to just 19 per cent when people are in employment.

Employment is difficult to find when you have nowhere to live, however. Skinner tells us that 60 per cent of women are released from prison to no address. Homelessness forces people back into crime, dangerous living situations and drug addictions that led to their imprisonment in the first place. All of these books talk about how, for many people, staying in prison can feel safer than the hardscrabble life outside its walls. "I'm so scared," one of Skinner's students tells her. "What have I got out there? No house, no family, no support. Nothing."

Employment is also difficult to get if you have little to no education, and it is estimated that half of the UK's prison population are functionally illiterate. This is where the grand cycle of incarceration is most obvious. Atkins writes of a prison job he had, giving incoming prisoners an English assessment: "Seeing the appalling levels of literacy made it patently obvious why the cycle of reoffending perpetuated. Many of these guys simply couldn't operate in normal society."

Why are our prisons in such a terrible state? Cuts, cuts and more cuts. Cuts to mental health services, cuts to educational programmes, cuts to facilities, cuts to staff funding. Atkins writes that the huge amount of time prisoners spend locked up in their cells is "a direct consequence of officer numbers being hacked to the bone… between 2010 and 2015, the number of prison officers was cut by a third". Skinner puts it succinctly: "Politicians don't want to look like they're putting money into the prison system rather than the NHS."

The corporatisation of prisons is also to blame, and their management by private companies. Prisoners are a useful sponge for the government and private companies to squeeze for money. In jail you earn £5 a week. "Prisoners haven't received a pay rise since 1997," Cattermole writes, adding the MoJ makes £500,000 a year from in-prison spending. BT, which has a monopoly on prison phones, charges eight times as much as it does to customers in the outside world.

But prisons are also in crisis because they reflect a broken society. There is a drugs crisis in prison, for instance, because there is a drugs crisis outside of prison. Atkins writes that the most popular magazine in Wandsworth is *GQ*. "Prisoners drooled endlessly over Orlando Bloom's watch or David Beckham's shoes, believing they too could possess these luxuries if they sold enough drugs. Prison is what lies behind the mirror of consumer capitalism, the unseen consequence of telling everyone that they can have whatever they want."

Our society lets people down long before they end up behind bars. Cattermole writes that "the cause of so many crimes is either trauma or poverty, and prison makes you poorer and more damaged". In *Jailbirds*, Skinner tells us that this is particularly true of women, who tend to be victims of more significant crimes than those they are convicted of. In one class, she asks her students to draw a timeline of their life's journey so far. One of them responds: "Am I supposed to draw a load of fucking children's homes, then? And stick figures standing outside for all the blokes that abused us?"

Each of the books calls for things to change, but none is particularly hopeful about the prospects of it happening. We need a radical shift in how we think about prisoners. "The British public has developed a sadistic mindset towards prisons," Atkins writes, "and fiercely resists any policies that actually rehabilitate offenders". Even on a purely economic basis, the state of our prisons doesn't make sense. Reoffending costs the UK a staggering £15bn a year. By contrast, in Sweden, where there is a greater focus on educating and rehabilitating offenders, crime has fallen, which Atkins notes is doubly cost-effective: "Less money is spent catching criminals, and fewer people need locking up."

Prisoners are often people who have simply fallen through the cracks, or been unlucky in the circumstances of their birth. But it's no wonder people think of them as deserving of the worst treatment possible. Atkins cites some recent tabloid headlines: "PRISONERS PARTYING ON DRUGS, VODKA AND FAST FOOD" and "JAILS TO GET EVEN SOFTER". "Fear and sensation sells newspapers," writes Cattermole. "Only around 70 prisoners are serving full life sentences, but we're all characterised as psychos and paedophiles."

Each of these writers does an admirable job of keeping the doom and gloom at bay. "I sometimes think that everyone should spend a little bit of time in prison," admits Atkins. "It's comforting to know that there's humour, hope and kindness in even the darkest corners of the world." Skinner's book is full of lovingly drawn portraits of the women she worked with in prison, and she explains exactly why. "Humans are, on the whole, affected more by faces than facts." If her readers can come away feeling that prisoners are human beings rather than statistics, she has done her bit.

It seems tragically inevitable that coronavirus will run rampant through our prisons. It may already be too late, even with immediate and drastic action, to prevent this happening. And I suspect that even when it does happen, the unspoken question at the heart of each of these books will continue to go unanswered: why do we not care about the way our society treats the people it has failed? ●



How the war was written

If poetry was the literary form of the First World War, it was fiction that best expressed the reality of the Second

by William Boyd

My next-door neighbour for many years, Colonel Peter Peyman, was a veteran of Dunkirk. As a young subaltern he'd fought in the rearguard and had been lucky to be evacuated. After his death his widow bequeathed me his small library of books on Dunkirk, all works of reputable military history. They are thick with marginalia: "Rubbish!", "Never happened", "Wrong! I was there" and so forth. One can read a sentence like, "The 3rd battalion advanced under an artillery barrage and suffered many casualties" and, while acknowledging that the 3rd Battalion must have indeed advanced, have no sense of what it was to undergo the actual experience of being part of that fatal manoeuvre. In writing about war and warfare, the subjective view always wins over the objective when it comes to answering the fundamental question: What Was It Really Like? And this is where the novel comes into its own.

As if in response to this demand the Imperial War Museum has begun publishing a series of forgotten novels about the Second World War under the rubric of Imperial War Museum Classics (IWM). The criteria are fairly strict: the novels must have been written by people who directly experienced those aspects of the war they narrate and the books themselves must have "literary merit". The first four titles were published last year and now we have numbers five and six: Fred Majdalany's *Patrol* (published in 1953) and Peter Elstob's *Warriors for the Working Day* (1960). Each novel, in its own way, makes for singular and compelling reading, and not just because of the authenticity of the experiences related.

AKG-IMAGES

Fred Majdalany's short novel is set in the North African desert in 1943, after the Allied invasion of Operation Torch. As the title suggests it is the account of one particular patrol undertaken by a handful of men – led by an officer called Major Tim Sheldon – with the objective of scouting out one small strongpoint in the German lines. In fact the ordering and assembling of the patrol and the patrol itself bookend a long flashback where Sheldon remembers his convalescence in Algiers after sustaining an earlier wound. He visits a brothel. He becomes obsessed with one of his nurses and they have a brief affair before he returns to the front.

Majdalany himself served in the Lancashire Fusiliers in North Africa and Italy and like all the IWM novels *Patrol* reeks with the details, textures and felt-life of unrivalled autobiographical information. However, what sets his novel apart is the way he gives the context of this tiny local engagement its full import in the great scheme of the war. One can see how the individual soldier is the unwitting agent of a complexity of military decision-making stretching further and further away, back to distant generals at a distant HQ.

In this instance the mission of this particular patrol is arrived at almost by happenstance. Some sort of patrolling activity is mooted by a brigadier to keep the men on their toes. A place name on a map catches an adjutant's eye; he lazily suggests it as an objective for no specific strategic reason. Army wheels are set in motion and, on one particular night, Tim Sheldon and six soldiers creep out into the darkness of the African desert to meet their fate. This is how Majdalany sees the process, cast in a powerful metaphor:

> To have a spear-point you had to have a spear, though at times it did seem to take an awful lot of shaft to support very little point; but that was a prejudiced notion usually confined to those who chanced to be attached to the point rather than the shaft.

The tone of this passage is typical – and it also applies to Elstob's novel, as well as the other four IWM Classics published in 2019. Together these novels produce a remarkable harmony of voice: a world-weary cynicism and resigned stoicism. None relies on any kind of martial heroism – or the language of that trope – to make its point. War is deeply boring and uncomfortable, and intermittently utterly terrifying. You can hate your fellow soldiers as easily as like them. The officers commanding you may well be arrogant fools and idiots. You feel no great antagonism towards the enemy and a baleful eye is cast on those "back home".

Patrol
By Fred Majdalany

Imperial War Museum Classics, 192pp, £8.99

Warriors for the Working Day
By Peter Elstob

Imperial War Museum Classics, 320pp, £8.99

The battlefield in Peter Elstob's *Warriors for the Working Day* is Normandy after the 1944 invasion. His alter ego is a young tank commander called Michael Brook. The Sherman tank that Brook commands has a crew of five and the novel is intimate with the relationships between the competing personalities on board. There is plenty of banter and the graveyard humour of men confined in a tiny shared space is underscored by the knowledge that the Sherman was outgunned and under-armoured in comparison to the German tanks it was fighting. In his excellent introduction Alan Jeffreys reminds us that Shermans, susceptible to catching fire when hit, were nicknamed "Ronsons" after the advertising slogan used to promote Ronson cigarette lighters – lighters that lit "first time, every time". Beneath the coarse camaraderie is the knowledge that, when in action, the tank crew was in near-permanent, acute, potentially fatal danger. It added a very dark edge to their wisecracks.

Warriors for the Working Day is an exceptionally gripping account of what it must have been like to be a member of a tank crew as it fought its way through Normandy and across France towards the German frontier. It is a more conventional novel than *Patrol*, however. For all its pace and vivid colour Elstob has a tendency to reach for a cliché rather too often and, like many novels of its era, relies on a kind of cor-blimey demotic to convey character that hasn't aged well:

> They was windy – that's what they was – windy. They seen a few Jerry tanks and they said "Oo la la we've 'ad it" and they scarpered orf 'ome.

But the overall sensibility of *Warriors* is very similar to *Patrol*. Terms such as heroism, pluck, fighting spirit, derring-do and the other indulgent euphemisms meant to spur on men at war are in short supply. Men do behave heroically but with little forethought, more as a matter of instinct and survival than with a view of anything legendary and glorious.

Postwar, both Majdalany and Elstob had successful careers as writers. In addition to *Patrol*, Majdalany wrote a fine novel about the battle of Monte Cassino called *The Monastery* as well as writing military histories and working as a journalist for the *Daily Mail*.

Elstob also wrote well-received works of military history, but his progress after the war was altogether more rackety and unconventional. As an entrepreneur he and a partner made a fortune from a beauty product they invented called Yeast-Pac. He was also a successful balloonist – he almost made a transatlantic crossing in 1958 – and for many years he was a stalwart vice-president of the writers' organisation English PEN. However, *Warriors* is his magnum opus, just as *Patrol* is for Fred Majdalany.

But *Patrol*, I would argue, is more than just a grittily authentic voice from the front line; more than just a clear-eyed, unromantic record of lived wartime experience. Majdalany is evidently aware of the many literary resources available to a novelist and his exploration of the mind of Tim Sheldon often verges on very cleverly-handled, impressionistic stream-of-consciousness – a stylistic choice not often found in war novels. Moreover, the book is shaped with deliberate knowingness, its structure carefully and cleverly coming full circle, allowing it to be ranked alongside that other great book about the North African campaign, Keith Douglas's remarkable memoir *Alamein to Zem-Zem* (1946).

One of the consequences of this Imperial War Museum series is that it permits us to see how the novel came to be the dominant literary form of the Second World War – an intriguing contrast to the First World War, where poetry more or less reigned unchallenged as the way the imagination might engage with the conflict. Poetry was written by combatants between 1939 and 1945, but compared to the mass of excellent novels that were produced about the war it seems almost a pastime rather than a vocation.

Perhaps this is to do with the fact that serious poetry after the First World War had become "modern" and difficult and therefore appealed to an intellectual minority, while the novel was democratic and flourishing. Also, the soldiers of the Second World War were better educated and better read throughout the ranks than their equivalents in 1914-18. Novel writing was not an elite pursuit. Confronted by the astonishing subject matter that they were living through, soldiers, sailors and aviators decided that the novel was the best medium to try to make sense of what they were experiencing – the madness of a world at war – as this superb series will no doubt continue to demonstrate. ●

William Boyd's new novel, "Trio", will be published in October this year



Why we should not fight our fears

A timely memoir investigates the benefits of being afraid

By Sophie McBain

Nerve: A Personal Journey Through the Science of Fear
Eva Holland

Allen Lane, 288pp, £12.99

In July 2015, the journalist Eva Holland's worst fear came true. She was on a canoeing trip in a remote part of Canada and had returned to her campsite one evening to find a note left for her, telling her to phone her cousin right away. Her mother had collapsed with a stroke; she was unlikely to regain consciousness. Holland's mother died a few days later.

Holland was very close to her mother; they spoke on the phone four or five times a week. But she had also always feared becoming motherless because her mother had never fully recovered from the death of her own parents, and Holland had been witness to her lifelong grief. Holland felt certain that if she lost her mother, she too would be irreparably broken.

But she wasn't. After the dark months that followed her mother's death, Holland came to understand that she would be OK. Her life would always be a bit sadder, but she could cope. Having survived this, she began to wonder: could she face down her other fears? And what would it mean to live with less fear? Holland's first book, *Nerve*, is a lucid, affecting account of this personal quest, interwoven with an exploration of the fascinating science of fear.

"I've sometimes felt as though my life is less a pursuit of happiness and more an ongoing, endless duel with fear," Holland writes. As a child, she never ran as fast as she could in the playground because she feared losing control. She chafes at the idea that as an adult her fears are still holding her back; she wants to overcome her fear of heights and her fear of driving – the result of suffering four car accidents. *Nerve* sometimes feels less a book about fear than one about courage.

The first thing Holland did to try to overcome her fear of heights was skydive. As someone who shares this phobia, I cannot conceive of circumstances under which I would voluntarily jump out of a plane. This rash initial experiment was a failure: she hated every second of her fall and concluded that even if she became better at forcing herself into situations that terrify her, she wouldn't have solved her problem. Ultimately, she wants to be able to scale heights and drive on icy roads without feeling afraid. The therapy and experimental phobia treatments she tried next are all intriguing, but more interesting are the philosophical questions she grapples with. After all, fear isn't always a bad thing, it also helps us avoid danger. Sometimes fear may hold us back, but at other times it helps us tap into a resolve and strength we didn't even know we possessed. Maybe instead of hoping to be liberated from fear, the challenge of living well is to know when to embrace and listen to our fear, and when to fight it.

In his 1997 book, *The Gift of Fear*, the security consultant Gavin de Becker argues that people need to relearn how to trust their gut. De Becker believes that we have a keen ability to sense danger, but that too often we don't act on our instincts for fear of being rude or breaking social norms. Holland notes that in the decades since *The Gift of Fear* was published, science has started to reveal some of the mechanisms that could explain what de Becker describes as intuition. For instance, studies have shown that people are able to smell fear: we can distinguish between sweat produced by someone who is afraid and someone who is not, and the former primes a fear response in us, too.

In his book, de Becker tells the story of a man who walked into a shop planning to buy some magazines but left abruptly, without buying anything, because he experienced a terrible sense of foreboding. The next man who stepped into the shop was shot dead; he had interrupted an armed robbery. At first the man explained to de Becker that he'd just had a "gut feeling" something was off, but then he corrected himself. On reflection, a few things had struck the man as weird: the way the shop assistant had kept his eyes on the other customer when he entered, the customer's inappropriately large, warm jacket. We are more observant than we think we are, de Becker argues. "Intuition is soaring flight compared to the plodding of logic," he writes. It's certainly a comforting thought.

JAMES GODMAN/MILLENNIUM IMAGES, UK

I felt an icy chill reading about one of Holland's friends who cycled away at high speed from a man who had stopped to ask her for directions and then gave her the creeps by following her. "I'm sorry, you just scared me!" she shouted once she'd reached a safe distance. Later that day, the man murdered a woman he met on the same bike path. I thought of the times I have felt suddenly scared of a strange man and have found a way to escape fast, by changing train carriages or ducking into a shop or simply running away. We can so rarely measure whether our intuitions are accurate: were these overreactions or near-misses? Did the girl who was killed on the bike path sense the danger beforehand too, or did she walk blithely into her murderer's trap?

I tried to make sense of occasions when I, someone who is naturally anxious and fearful, have been in objectively dangerous situations and have felt curiously unafraid. When I was in my early twenties, a taxi driver in Libya held a knife to my neck, and what confused me later was how calm I was, how certain that I would make it out of the taxi unharmed. Had I correctly intuited that he merely wanted to scare me, or was I young and stupid enough to feel invulnerable?

I thought then about how many experts I heard warning about the approaching coronavirus pandemic and how I didn't feel afraid until it was far too late to mitigate the threat – until I was already living through the biggest public health crisis of my lifetime. In *Nerve*, the neuropsychologist Justin Feinstein raises the thought-provoking idea that our fear responses may no longer be useful for understanding modern society. Perhaps this explains why although most people alive today are safer and more secure than their ancestors ever could have hoped to be, anxiety disorders are skyrocketing. Our fear responses may be becoming maladaptive, Feinstein suggests, an idea I would have loved Holland to explore in greater depth.

Holland is an observant, entertaining, honest guide, and reading *Nerve* I found a new way to think about and understand my own fears: the ones so deep that I cannot even commit them to writing, my embarrassing and inexplicable phobia of birds, the new and specific fears I have for my loved ones as we struggle through this pandemic, and the drip-drip of anxiety that mounts with every day of bad news. Holland makes progress in overcoming her fear of heights and of driving, but more significant is her changing relationship with fear. Learning more about it has made her less afraid of fear itself – and perhaps that's something we might all hope for. ●

Suburban submission

Alex Clark

Box Hill
Adam Mars-Jones

Fitzcarraldo, 128pp, £9.99

Gently coercing readers into considering the most challenging of human situations – the possible approach of death, extreme physical limitation and, here, sexual and emotional abuse – via a montage of minutely observed mundanity is Adam Mars-Jones's stock-in-trade. In *Pilcrow* and *Cedilla*, the first two volumes of a projected quartet, the narrator described his journey from serious childhood illness and resulting disability to a young adulthood of spiritual and sexual experimentation by recording it in detail. This appeared at first fatiguing but gradually revealed itself to be the point: if your material horizons are curtailed, you'd better notice every millimetre and nuance of them.

In the John Cromer novels, Mars-Jones used length as a sort of friendly weapon; in *Box Hill: a story of low esteem*, it is compression. The slim and sprightly book, which won the 2019 Fitzcarraldo Editions Novel Prize, barely exceeds the entry requirement of 30,000 words. But if this is a *jeu d'esprit* then the game is a very dark one.

It begins with an 18th birthday: that of the narrator, Colin, on a Sunday in 1975. It's a far cry from today's performative carnivals; his "little mum" in hospital and his "little dad" traumatised and distracted, he has cadged a pillion ride to nearby Box Hill "to look at the bikes". In short order, he has tripped over one of their sleeping owners, formed a virtually wordless connection with him and fellated him. By the end of the day, he has moved into Ray's flat, where he lives for the next six years.

But this is not a love song. As the novel's subtitle implies, it's the story of an asymmetric relationship, one in which the ingénu – podgy, bullied, insecure Colin – submits entirely to a love object who is, it quickly becomes clear, a nasty piece of work. On their first night together, Ray rapes Colin, without even "a smear of the candle-grease that his leathers benefited from" and subsequently makes him sleep on the floor beside his black satined bed, where he remains for the duration of those six years, special occasions excepting. Ray also introduces him to the bike-cum-poker club, whose Saturday night card schools feature Colin fetching and carrying drinks and making himself available for sexual favours ("if this was some sort of commune, then I was part of what it shared in common. All for one, and Colin for everybody"). Such is his submission that one of his most cherished memories is of his feelings when another houseboy is introduced to the circle and Ray appears to spurn him in favour of Colin.

What is *Box Hill* about? In its 128 pages, it is both strikingly expansive and wilfully resistant to interpretation. Its portrait of Colin, who is recounting that period of his life from the vantage point of early middle age, is available only through his eyes, and yet so much seeps through: the particularity of his family set-up, the quality of his autodidacticism, the precise extent to which he understands what has happened to him.

And for those of a certain age, geographical and class background, the period detail is joltingly, exquisitely exact – not merely in the observation of concrete features, but in the way that Mars-Jones captures the texture and colour of English suburban life in

> The Seventies period detail is joltingly, exquisitely intact

the 1970s, caught somewhere between the remembered raciness of the Sixties and the sudden cultural and capitalist expansion of the Eighties. In this, as well as its depiction of a transgressive first love remembered, *Box Hill* put me very much in mind of Julian Barnes's *The Only Story*.

But of Ray, we know tantalisingly little. Colin never discovers his last name, his occupation, or anything much else about him, and, in one sense, likes it that way. There is, he tells us, "a bit of philosophy behind" his lack of curiosity. "In fairy stories, I know you're supposed to sympathise with the person who can't resist asking the fatal question, making the fatal discovery, but I never did. I mean, Mrs Bluebeard wasn't really on the ball, if she thought she'd settled down with a man who had no secrets. If all the doors in the spooky castle had been unlocked, if she could wander wherever she wished, her husband would never have appealed to her. He would have been just another smoothie she met at a party."

Colin, as he describes himself, would never have met a smoothie at a party, would quite possibly have never gone to a party at all. He was, in the crudest of terms, easy meat. And Ray, as this devastatingly suggestive and disquieting book suggests, bears out one of John Cromer's theories, in *Pilcrow*, that "as long as you used enough force of character, you could be as suburban as you liked". ●

Hitting rock bottom

John Niven

Sing Backwards and Weep: A Memoir
Mark Lanegan

White Rabbit, 352pp, £20



There and back again: the grunge singer-songwriter and recovered addict Mark Lanegan in 2020

We are all familiar with the myth of the rock star as junkie: floating on your opium cloud while bag men deliver to your five star hotel tomb. Towards the end of this extraordinary memoir, Mark Lanegan – singer-songwriter and former frontman with Seattle proto-grunge pioneers the Screaming Trees – gives us an extraordinary snapshot of the reality lower down the totem pole.

The chapter "Ice Cold European Funhouse" is a blow-by-blow account of a 72-hour period on a tour of Europe in the autumn of 1996, close to the near-nadir of Lanegan's heroin addiction. Beginning in the rain at a bus stop in Sheffield – where he tries to buy smack off some horrified fans – Lanegan takes a bus to Heathrow, then the Tube into London, then another bus to Bristol, then a flight to Germany and then a tour bus to Amsterdam, all the while going cold-turkey, vomiting, lashing sweat, "black miasma" threatening to blast from every orifice. At every step of the way he begs, steals and borrows money to get from one fix to the next. He is ripped off with fake drugs then mugged. The episode climaxes with Lanegan beating another would-be con-man dealer almost to death. These 20-odd pages are one of the most compelling accounts of squalor and misery ever committed to paper. In comparison, Bukowski at his most fevered reads like Somerset Maugham. Not that the rest of the book is exactly comic relief.

Born in 1964 in a small east Washington town, Lanegan comes from a long line of "bootleggers, dirt farmers, criminals, convicts and hillbillies". After his parents split, his childhood becomes an inventory of maternal abuse ("You're not my son") and paternal neglect ("I could do whatever I wanted") that culminates in Lanegan as a fully-fledged alcoholic and criminal while still in his teens. His head turned by British punk rock singles, he forms the Screaming Trees in 1985 and moves to Seattle at the end of the decade. Which is to say, at just the right time.

With sickening inevitability, he is forced to watch as almost every one of his peers slingshots around him. Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, Pearl Jam and Nirvana all rocket off to multi-platinum glory while success continues to elude Lanegan like a buttered eel, to borrow the late Dave Cavanagh's memorable phrase. It is one of the great strengths of this book (and, you suspect, one of Lanegan's as a man) that there is not a flicker of envy or bitterness about any of this. Indeed, in the case of Nirvana, you sense a fan's relief that the world finally recognises the colossal talent Lanegan saw the moment he befriended Kurt Cobain.

> He needs bronco-stunning amounts of crack and smack

If there is a criticism it is that, here and there, the recalled dialogue is wooden and stilted, reading not unlike a book that might be called "Secret Seven Hit the Meth Pipe". You hardly feel the breath of life in exchanges such as, "Tell me you two are not shooting heroin or, by God, Peter and Cliff are going to hear about it!" Or in "Lanegan, you are a complete time-wasting ass! What in the serious fuck do you think you're doing?"

But this is to niggle. Some passages are so wonderfully thick with addict-speak that, as with Burroughs, you'll read them two or three times to figure out exactly what is going on: "I would then cure the Chore Boy, blackening a piece of it with a lighter… then I'd take a previously prepared outfit full of dope and search until I got it in a vein. I'd register… and then, careful not to jiggle the rig [I'd] hold the tube out at arm's length and melt with a butane torch the biggest hit…"

What Lanegan is doing here is what constitutes a good time for him by the end of the 1990s: taking enough crack to almost cause a stroke and then pulling himself back from the edge with an enormous injection of heroin. As he observes himself late in the book, "how much simpler life would be if I was clean". Well, indeed.

But this lesson is not quickly learned. I said "near-nadir" earlier because once he returns to Seattle from that European tour, things really begin to fall apart. He is living on the streets, his belongings long sold off to obtain the bronco-stunning quantities of crack and smack he needs each day. His teeth are "rotting", he is "infested with lice". He shoplifts batteries to survive, and has torn tube socks wrapped around his forearms "as bandages, for the huge, gaping self-inflicted wounds". Finally – and the reader has an alarmingly slim number of pages nestling in their right hand when this happens – a guardian angel arrives in the unlikely form of Courtney Love, who gets him into rehab in California.

By this point his friends and mentors – the Gun Club's Jeffrey Lee Pierce, Alice in Chains's Layne Staley and, of course, Cobain himself – are all dead. Incredibly, given that Lanegan's whole life has been a slow motion suicide bid, he finds himself still alive, clean, and with his best work ahead of him over the next two decades.

Where Lanegan wins in his songs is also where he wins on the page: in the darkness of the confession booth, with nothing held back. On that level, the book is a triumph. ●

*John Niven's most recent novel, "The F*ck-it List", is published by William Heinemann*

DAVID LEVENE / GUARDIAN / EYEVINE

Always watching

Ellen Peirson-Hagger

Winter in Sokcho
Élisa Shua Dusapin,
translated by Aneesa Abbas Higgins

Daunt Books, 128pp, £9.99

In Sokcho appearances are as slippery as the squid the fishermen unload at the harbour. The town's location, on the far north-east coast of South Korea, close to the border with North Korea, already makes it a middling sort of place. During the summer tourists fill the beaches, but in the winter the seaside town becomes "entombed in frost" and visitors are few and far between.

The Prix Robert Walser-winning novel by French-Korean author Élisa Shua Dusapin, published in French in 2016 and now translated into lean English by Aneesa Abbas Higgins, centres around an unnamed young woman who, too, is hovering in the in-between. A graduate in Korean and French literature, she has returned from university to Sokcho, her hometown, to figure out her next move, working for the meantime in a tired guesthouse. Her boyfriend does have a name – Jun-oh – but is no constant; to-ing and fro-ing as he does between Sokcho and Seoul to interview at modelling agencies, considering plastic surgery, and suggesting it to his girlfriend too. "Everyone had things they could improve, he said."

The woman's focus on their relationship, much like her perception of her own form, is wavering. After just two days apart, Jun-oh's "image was becoming a blur"; when she looks at a photograph of herself, she is surprised to see how much her bones stick out. Even when preparing food she looks for her distorted image: "My spoon created ripples, smudging my nose, making my forehead undulate and my cheeks bleed into my chin."

The gaze of her mother, the only fishmonger in Sokcho with a licence to prepare deadly pufferfish, doesn't help. The pair share a physical intimacy – "I counted the drops of saliva leaking out one by one from her parted lips and onto my skin," she says as she lies next to her mother in bed – and a troubling obsession with appearance. "You look so lovely when you eat, my girl," says her mother, but after dress shopping, she warns: "You'll need to watch your figure so you can still fit into it." Fewer than 20 pages later, it's "You've lost weight again, you need to eat more." As these conflicting observations pile up, you begin to wonder whether her daughter's body really is morphing daily and noticeably; whether it, like everything else in Sokcho, exists in a state of extreme ambivalence.

Though slippery in its thematic effect, the language in this masterful short novel is to the point, written in sharp first-person and full of indirect speech. Many of the short sentences don't bother with verbs at all: "In their bin, two condoms, packaging from a night-time face cream, mandarin peelings," or, "My arms around him, unreal." The protagonist is a keen observer of people, cutting in the way those who hover at the sidelines often are in judging others.

She becomes increasingly entranced by the presence of Yan Kerrand, a French graphic novelist staying in Sokcho to find inspiration for his latest work. To him, she wavers between tour guide and unlikely romantic interest. She takes him to the Lotte Mart to buy ink and paper (he conspicuously chews the latter to test it before buying) and to the ominous, militarised border, dwelling on the occasions their hands have brushed and masturbating in the room next to his. She begins spying on him through half-opened doors as he works in his guesthouse room, drawing a female form that is "twisting", "warping", "distorting" on his sketchpad.

Most intriguing is the (also unnamed) young woman staying at the guesthouse to seek "refuge from the capital" after plastic surgery, her face temporarily hidden behind bandages that make her look "like a panda". One day the protagonist watches her peel off a bandage, "the wounds weeping". She "dug a nail into her cheek and scratched. Rooted around. Dug. Raked." The visceral texture of this scene is deeply uncomfortable to read. The woman has escaped Seoul to avoid wandering eyes, but still, she is watched.

Outside, "Oozing winter and fish, Sokcho waited."

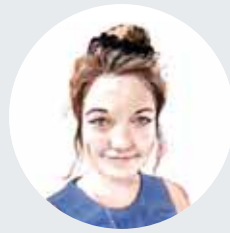


"You say the tree is missing and this is all that's left? It is my conclusion that this tree is absent without leaves"

BOB RATTRAY

WHY YOU SHOULD WATCH...

Grayson's Art Club



By Anna Leszkiewicz

The title of his recent Channel 4 show suggests we, the British public, are on first-name terms with the artist Grayson Perry; and it's true that this piece of lockdown telly has a charming sense of intimacy and playfulness. Filmed mostly in Perry's home studio – intercut with scenes from his other TV shows, grainy shots of the homes of other recognisable Brits, or pixellated smartphone footage sent in by Channel 4 viewers – there's a homespun informality to the whole affair. This is appropriate for a programme that insists that art – not the lofty, grand kind of art that sits only in gilt frames in expensive capital cities, but the kind that you and I can make in our homes, here and now – might help us through this crisis.

In the first episode, themed around portraits, Perry sits sketching his wife Philippa, chuckling at the eyebags that have appeared on her face over the years. "I have an idealised vision of you, Phil," he laughs. "So it's very hard for me to confront…" "The reality?" she offers, with a grim smile. We watch the couple pottering around, drinking cups of coffee and cleaning their kiln, as though they were on *Gogglebox* (the Perry family did appear on the celebrity version of that show last year).

"I'm well used to being turned down by the Royal Academy," a gruff off-camera voice says as he takes some wobbly phone footage of a sculptural portrait. "Grayson Perry turned me down a couple of years ago, but I don't hold a grudge." Perry wheezes with laughter at the country's attempts at recreating famous artworks as photos. I could do without the appearances of Channel 4's favourite comedians (such as Keith Lemon) but Grayson's meandering chatter – with his wife, other artists (amateur or otherwise) and direct to camera – is a balm.



The man who made America great

How wounded pride helped Thomas Cole inspire a national school of painting

By Michael Prodger

The origins of what has come to be adopted as the US's national landscape painting lie not in natural beauty but in wounded pride. In 1829 Captain Basil Hall, an English traveller and veteran of the Napoleonic Wars, published *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828*. The snooty observations it contained – on American life, manners, government and topography – caused a transatlantic furore. Hall's disobliging comments about the young nation included the suggestions that Americans were spittoon-using parvenus obsessed with money, and that not only were they rough around the edges but their political and cultural institutions were



Lands of innocence and experience: *The Oxbow*, painted by Thomas Cole in 1836

inferior to those of Europe. To add insult to injury, someone who hosted Captain Hall and his wife during their trip recalled that Mrs Hall also "indulged herself in certain criticisms upon the American ladies".

Those Americans were not a people subject to the cultural cringe or willing to be patronised by a scion of the Old World, and Hall's book prompted numerous outraged responses in the press and even in books: the sense of hurt continued to sting for a decade. One of Hall's criticisms, however, bore fruit. "Where the fine arts are not steadily cultivated," he had observed, "there cannot possibly be much hearty admiration of the beauties of nature." This affront to American sensibility was seen as a challenge and one painter in particular took it up.

Ironically, the artist was English-born. Thomas Cole (1801-48) came from Lancashire and moved to the US with his family in 1818. As a naturalised citizen he was instrumental in founding the Hudson River School, a group of landscape painters who took the river valley and its scenes – boatmen and hunters, waterfalls and weather – as their theme, and who formed the nation's first indigenous school of repute.

In 1836 Cole published his "Essay on American Scenery", which was, in part, a riposte to Hall. In it he lauded his adopted land, pointing out that its landscapes offered not just the sublime but also the picturesque and the beautiful – three themes that had been an important part of artistic discourse in Europe since the mid-18th century. What's more, he said, American landscapes were all the better for not being burdened by associations with ancient civilisations. "You see no ruined tower to tell of outrage," he wrote, "no gorgeous temple to speak of ostentation; but freedom's offspring – peace, security and happiness dwell there, the spirits of the scene." As he hit his stride his prose turned bright purple: "And in looking over the yet uncultivated scene, the mind's eye may see far into futurity – mighty deeds shall be done in the now pathless wilderness; and poets yet unborn shall sanctify the soil." One in the eye for the Old World.

That same year Cole gave a painted rejoinder to Hall too, ponderously titled *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm*, but better known as *The Oxbow*, and now in the Met in New York City. Mount Holyoke was a popular 19th-century tourist destination, some 145km west of Boston, overlooking the Connecticut river, that offered long-reaching views of the New England landscape (even Hall admired its vistas, despite the ginger-beer seller and fake hermit who could be found at the peak). Cole, however, treated it as both a literal and an allegorical place.

He came to the painting in the middle of working on his epic *Course of Empire* series, which showed the rise, peak and fall of a classical civilisation. His patron, the dry goods plutocrat Luman Reed, saw that work on the five paintings was wearing Cole down and suggested he try something else. Indeed, Cole had previously confessed in his diary that "my mind has been occupied with so many cares & anxieties, sickness of my Mother & Father etc, & so many interruptions that it has not been in proper tone for pursuing my profession". He felt he was being sidelined by younger painters and that "my best days are passing away without being able to apply talents I possess so entirely to my art as I should wish".

Cole had made sketches of the view in 1833 and for his painting he conflated a broader panorama and then, on a canvas nearly six feet wide, divided it diagonally in two. In one portion he showed wild nature – a storm tail passing overhead, leaving broken tree trunks and twisted foliage in its wake. In the other portion, beyond the glistening oxbow bend of the river, he showed an American Arcadia, all neatly tended fields, careful husbandry, peace and prosperity. Here is the futurity he spoke of and here, too, the idea of "manifest destiny" made real: Americans could and should tame the wilderness and shepherd it to civilisation.

> Here was the idea of the US's "manifest destiny" made real

Cole himself perhaps felt some ambiguity about the relentless recasting of the American landscape. The hill in the background bears logging scars that form the shapes of Hebrew words: one reads "Noah", the other "Shaddai" – the Almighty. What is not altogether clear in this Eden is whether God is looking down approvingly on man's work. There may be a boat and a barge on the river and farms on the plain, but there is only one human to be seen; it is a self-portrait of Cole at his easel, almost lost in the foreground undergrowth, as he fixes this moment of national transition in paint.

Cole has painted a series of contrasts: past and future, wild and temperate, innocence and experience, the sublime and the beautiful. There is a sense, too, that he knew how precariously balanced all these elements were. In his *Course of Empire* paintings he showed what fate had in store for an overreaching civilisation.

The painting met with great acclaim when it was exhibited and he pocketed a very welcome $500 for his trouble. What it proved, however, was that American artists could depict their own land in ways unbeholden to the European tradition. Intriguingly, X-rays reveal that beneath the paint of *The Oxbow* lies the outline of a quite different picture, one containing ranks of classical buildings. In making a distinctively American art, Cole quite literally overpainted all traces of the Old World. Basil Hall, meanwhile, suffered mental illness in later life and was confined to an asylum in Plymouth, dying eight years after *The Oxbow* appeared.

FILM

Autumn leaves

Ryan Gilbey

Never Rarely Sometimes Always (15)

dir: Eliza Hittman



No distance left to run: Autumn flees to a nondescript New York of concourses and bus stations

Never Rarely Sometimes Always is a muted film, low on fat and without a trace of hysteria, but it has at its centre the long-contested battleground of a young woman's body. When 17-year-old Autumn (Sidney Flanigan) stands in front of the mirror, the camera stares at her exposed midriff in mild wonder. When we next see that belly, it is covered with squiggles of ultrasound gel. The time after that, blotchy bruises are stamped all over it like clouds in a threatening sky. Autumn inflicts that damage herself after an online search for "abortion under 18 Pennsylvania" turns up the words "parental consent required". With her smart, supportive cousin, Skylar (Talia Ryder), she sets off one blue morning to take a coach the 200-odd miles to a nondescript New York of concourses, burger joints and bus stations. "This city has a lot of secrets and subterranean levels," someone says. That goes for Autumn, too.

The trip is an act of quiet bravery in the face of a coercive campaign that begins the moment Autumn sets foot in her local clinic. At her first sonogram, she is told to prepare for "the most magical sound you will ever hear", though what comes over the speakers suggests a fist frantically punching its way out of a bag. A grandmotherly doctor assures her that any doubts will evaporate once she holds her "beautiful" baby. (That word never sounded so ugly.) Then the woman plays an anti-abortion video, just to clear up any confusion.

Once Autumn and Skylar arrive in New York, the film zeroes in on the mundane details of what it might mean to travel far from home in secret to exercise agency over your own life. Obstacles appear trifling and bureaucratic: Autumn knows her family's medical insurance will cover the procedure but doesn't realise that her mother will be sent an itemised bill. Then it transpires she is further along than was first thought, and will need to travel to a different branch of the planned parenthood clinic the following day for the termination. With no money for even the crummiest flophouse, the cousins kill time through the twilight hours, shuffling from Chinese bakery to subway to an all-night arcade where Autumn plays electronic noughts and crosses against a chicken pecking around in an illuminated booth. Is it kinship she feels as she stares at the bird, or envy?

The cinematographer Hélène Louvart works almost exclusively in tight, clammy close-ups, Dardenne brothers-style. In doing so, she and the writer-director Eliza Hittman shift the emphasis from an unjust system on to the women it punishes. Like two other recent films by female directors – Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and Kitty Green's *The Assistant* – the picture addresses male abuses of power without ceding the dramatic focus to the aggressors themselves and reinforcing their supremacy all over again. The matter of the baby's paternity, for instance, is never dwelt on or allowed to become a gravitational centre. The father could be any one of the boys who taunt Autumn in the neighbourhood pizzeria. It could even be her own stepfather, who jokes about the family pooch's promiscuity ("Look how easy she is!") in a way that suggests he isn't referring to the dog at all.

> The script fills in the blanks without resorting to exposition

Evidence of male entitlement is rife. The most extreme example – the businessman on the subway who unzips his trousers as he stares at Autumn – is only at the far end of a spectrum that also includes the middle-aged customer at the supermarket where the cousins work, who misinterprets Skylar's good manners for a come-on, or the teenage pest who clasps her arm mere seconds after they meet, as though claiming her as chattel.

Hittman's script fills in the blanks without resorting to anything as prosaic as straightforward exposition. The movie opens on the stage of Autumn's school, where she stands in a pink bomber jacket and transforms the Exciters' barnstorming "He's Got the Power" into a sinister torch song, admitting through its lyrics what she can't express herself: "He makes me do things I don't wanna do/He makes me say things I don't wanna say."

That method of indirect confession provides a foretaste of the scene that lends the movie its title, in which Autumn is asked before her abortion to respond to a series of statements (such as "Your partner has refused to wear a condom" and "Your partner has threatened or frightened you") by selecting from four choices: never, rarely, sometimes, always. It's a devastating episode – shot in an extended take that allows emotion to overwhelm Flanigan's soulful Sinéad-O'Connor eyes, just as we've become accustomed to her stoicism – but the film isn't gruelling like the identically-themed *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*. Its subject is not suffering but strength, and the lasting impression it leaves is one of admiration for the unshowy solidarity of these young women, their little fingers interlocked during one scene like unbreakable chain links or an everlasting pinkie promise. ●

"Never Rarely Sometimes Always" is available to buy now from digital platforms and to rent from 27 May

TELEVISION

Victims of the virus

Rachel Cooke

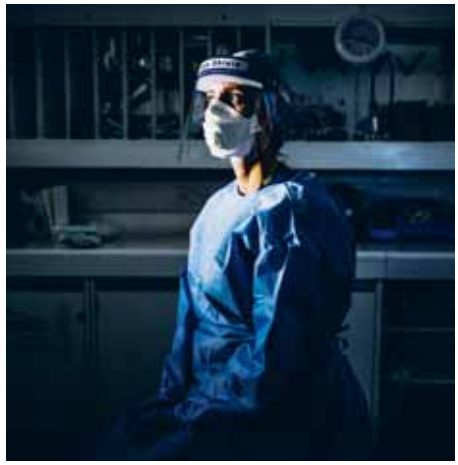
Hospital

BBC Two

How many minutes of *Hospital Special: Fighting Covid-19* (11 May, 9pm) did I watch before I began to cry? I'm not sure. Was it five, or ten? A man called Peter was the first (though not the last) to set me off: an 88-year-old father and grandfather, a husband of 60 years, a chemist turned inventor of liqueurs, whose family had come to Britain from Germany in the 1930s. I liked him so much: his straightforward, unsentimental manner; the gap between his front teeth; his thick, tousled hair, which stood up in humorous spikes about his head.

Peter was in the Royal Free Hospital in north London, struggling to breathe. He believed he'd caught Covid-19 at a dinner party, and you knew by the way that he spoke of this – even from behind his oxygen mask, he sounded wry – that he loved his life, and didn't want much to leave it. But he'd also had the big conversation with his GP, and if things were going to get worse, he did not want to be resuscitated. As he waited, then, for his immune system either to fight off the virus, or to be overwhelmed by it, he showed no sign of fear. "One chews through one's life," he said, quietly. "So many good things. We've had a good run." Oh, Peter – and Nancy, and Stanley, and Hussein. All of you. What a privilege to have been at your bedsides. For those of us who've been lucky, the pandemic has sometimes seemed rather distant, even a little abstract; it has gone on elsewhere. You, though, made it suddenly and intensely real.

If I sound mushy, I hardly care. These extraordinary films, executive produced by Lorraine Charker-Phillips, Simon Dickson and Jackie Waldock, should win all the prizes, and everyone in Britain should have to watch them, by law. The cameras were inside the Royal Free and Barnet hospitals from day one of lockdown – a remarkable thing in itself – and the result wasn't only movingly human. I learned more about both the strain on the NHS and its staff, and about the virus itself, than I've done from any amount of reading or TV news. We have heard, for instance, a lot about the government's failure to make sure hospitals have enough personal protective equipment. At the Royal Free, however, there were other, almost equally alarming shortages: of oxygen, and body bags. More than once, we listened as doctors rang patients' families to give them the worst kind of news. Here was kindness and empathy. But here, too, was dread and a terrible sadness: heads in hands, hands across eyes, faces turned from the camera. Professor Alan Salama, having spoken to a wife he feared would soon be a widow, seemed almost to stagger as he walked away down a corridor; his day's work had literally left him reeling.



***Hospital*: "everyone should be made to watch"**

How little doctors know about this new illness. "I've never done this before," said Martin Birchall, a professor of laryngology, as he prepared to operate on Nancy, whose breathing tube had become stuck in her larynx. Nancy, he informed us, was the first patient in Britain to suffer Covid-related laryngitis, a condition involving ulcers (patients on ventilators are now being given narrower tubes). Sanjay Bhagani, a consultant in infectious diseases, was trialling remdesivir, a drug previously used on Ebola patients. He, like every doctor and nurse, spoke of how powerfully dispiriting it is to have to try to treat a condition for which, at present, there are no effective medicines – and how relatively unusual.

What has stayed with me, though, is the terrifying disjunction between a Covid patient's outward appearance, and what may be going on inside his or her body. People often look, and feel, as though they're improving. They ring their families and talk of going home. But their doctors, armed with X-rays and bitter experience, know better. The virus is like some unseen hand. It reaches out and it strangles; its deadly work is swift and, to the layman, too seemingly sudden to be fully expected. Perhaps this accounts for the unexpected disbelief I felt as the titles rolled. I could process just about everything except for the utterly preposterous fact – the words on my screen hit me like an insult – that, in the end, not everyone made it. ●

RADIO

Mad, bad and related

Antonia Quirke

Fall of the House of Byron

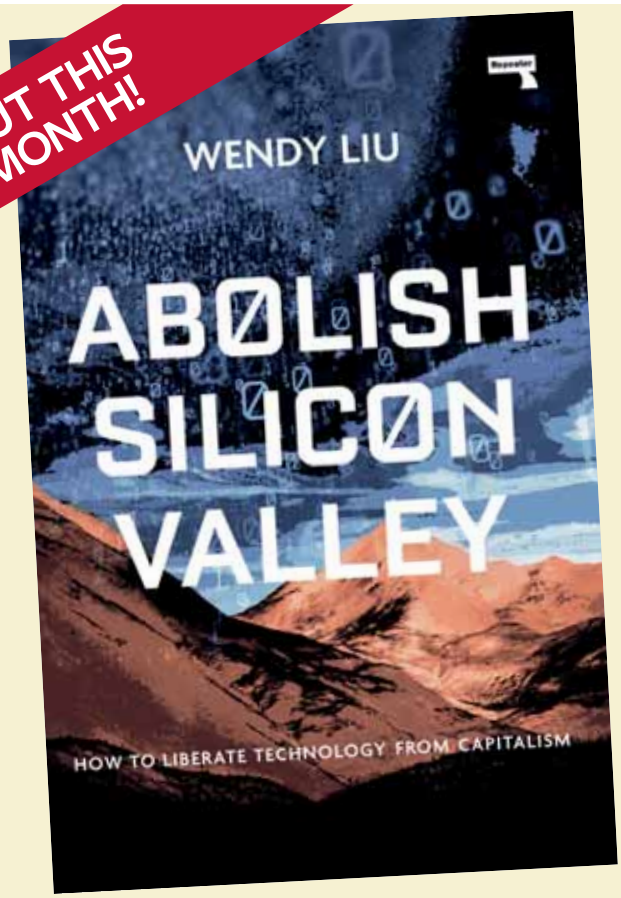
BBC Radio 4

Much has been written about the fleeting, rakish life of Lord Byron – but did you hear about his family? This rollick through the poet's ancestry (11 May, 9.45am), written by Emily Brand, is savagely abridged and beats tantalisingly at the ear – not least because it's delivered by Susannah Harker, sounding every bit as sinisterly pliant as she does playing Jane Bennett in the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* starring Colin Firth, currently (praise God) being repeated on BBC Four.

We open with the young poet, all club foot and black waves of too much hair, arriving aged ten at Newstead Abbey to take possession after the death of his villainous great-uncle. Byron finds the family seat reduced to "mouldering ruined facades" thanks to the "bottomless pits of extravagance" dug by various associated dipshit earls who were the opposite of average. They were, instead, legendary generators of legal battles and ravaged maids called Betsy. Death by French cannon. Gout stools. One uncle, an admiral, was lost at sea – the unfamiliar coast of Chile – after failing to avoid a mutiny thanks in part to a miserly wages master called (wonderfully) David Cheap. For five wandering years his meals were soup of "biscuit dust". Meanwhile, back at Newstead, a supply of aghast Amelias and other orphaned heiresses offered their joyless virginity. Words most used: murder, and claret.

Somewhere mid episode three (of five) I did vaguely think: where are we going with all this? I mean, I'm glad Brand researched and set it down in a book, but it's kind of for naught if not in preparation for, say, a following week of fevered, non-stop readings of all Byron's poetry. Just imagine. Picture Andy Serkis reading *The Hobbit* cover to cover, live online, as he did on 8 May, with no breaks for even a morsel of lembas, his eyes doing that Serkis thing, like a lunatic on the Underground. A week of the Byron family's astonishing, hilarious, morally abhorrent lust for life blowing the wrath of shame and destruction down on little limping George and his good hair. And then a week of Byron giving his resulting full-body jolts of things beautiful, electric and addicting. We would be rendered powerless to that force. The endorphins! "The great art of life is sensation, to feel that we exist, even in pain." ●

OUT THIS MONTH!



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Back Pages



MARIA KOVALEVSKAYA / EYEEM

Stefan Buczacki
Gardening

The lockdown is creating more and more first-time gardeners, and many of them are unsure of where, or how, to begin

Seldom in the history of British home gardening can so many people have been so unsure about what they are supposed to be doing. Lockdown and self-isolation have meant folk who have never previously been inclined to mow lawns, sow seeds, till soil, control pests and weeds, or propagate plants, have been seeking to rekindle long-forgotten skills or acquire new ones, and in a very literal sense learn on the job.

It is not easy, and there is a limit to the gardening expertise that can be learned through books, TV, radio, the internet – or magazine articles even! Gardening is learned by doing, and improvement comes only from experience.

Where does this leave today's locked-in, locked-down horticulturists? People I meet on my daily permitted walk tell me, across the required two-metre distance, "I just don't know where to start." And that, in a nutshell, defines everything. As I have been telling novice gardeners – of whatever age – for years, gardening successfully is largely about assessing priorities: knowing which tasks must be done today or this week, and which can be left a while.

So what are the priorities for a typical garden in May? Weed control is high on the list because weed growth is almost exponential at this time of year – and if weeds are left unchecked, gardens will not only soon look unsightly but garden plants will suffer under the weight of competition.

The first sowings of vegetable crops should be done as soon as possible to obtain early produce, although sowing can and should continue sequentially over the coming two or three months in order to obtain a succession of crops and not a glut.

The sowing of annual flowers should similarly be done soon, but there is no rush to put out bedding plants. Provided they are kept watered in their pots or modules, they can be planted as and when time allows, and if they are in the ground within the next month they will still make a good show this summer.

Lawns are growing fast, but mowing can always be put off for another week, given the effectiveness of good modern lawnmowers. And if you are concerned about the overall appearance, then trim the edges. I have always believed you can get away with murder in the garden provided your lawn edges are neat.

Hedges are growing apace, too – box hedges are generally ahead of the rest – but there is no need to rush to deal with them. They should be clipped as and when time allows. Although they may be looking a little ragged, it's important to avoid disturbing nesting birds, and bear in mind that many large public gardens are still clipping their yew hedges well into the winter.

And what about pest and disease control? There are some nuances here in that although some diseases and pests are more serious than others, that sort of specialist knowledge is only acquired over time. So my advice is to strike at any obvious problems as soon as you see them, using organic controls whenever possible. Roses especially will suffer if aphids and black spot are not stopped in their tracks.

I don't guarantee success with any of this, and there really is no substitute for experience, but above all, I do hope that when we finally emerge from the Covid-19 tragedy, we shall have more committed lovers of gardening than when we started. ●

Next week: Nina Caplan on drink



Nicholas Lezard
Down and Out

When I'm not under the spell of vivid dreams my waking life revolves around a duck

Thursday: I find myself sleeping more and more during the day. What else is there to do? The flat I'm in didn't have too many books in it to start with and even though I've been operating an aggressive policy of book-buying over the past year I'm having to start rereading them. So sleep it is, and the dreams I'm having are, like everyone else's, unusually vivid.

The problem is that with each successive nap, the brain takes longer than usual to distinguish between dream and waking reality. For this reason the erotic dreams are, of course, the ones I'm most grateful for, but today I spent ten minutes wondering whether the word "hevetor" was real or not, or whether I was losing my mind. Later, I find myself convinced that, with the right backing, musical crisps could one day be A Thing. (You play them like a Jew's Harp. They go "plink!")

Friday: A long walk to the butcher's. As I've said before, it's 20 times easier to find a tattoo/piercing parlour in Brighton than it is to find somewhere that sells pork bellies. But I crave Chinese food and my normal supplier of takeaways has shut down, so it's off to M&B Meats (real name) on the London Road. There I see a duck for £11.99, and I decide to treat myself. I roast it that evening with a dark soy and oyster sauce glaze and it is delicious, and there will be plenty of leftovers.

Saturday: Nothing happened today. Oh wait, I joined Britbox because it has all the classic *Doctor Who*s. I immerse myself in the Patrick Troughton era, although these days I look exactly like William Hartnell, only older, and with madder hair. I make duck liver pâté but I don't have a food processor or even a good knife, and one of the tubes gets stuck in my throat and I have to pull it out past the epiglottis, and you know what happens when you do that. I don't think I'm ever going to have duck liver pâté ever again. Pity, I used to like it.

Sunday: Weekly phone call to my mother. I won't reveal her age but it is impressive. Normally, when she says, as she always does, "when am I going to see you again?" I shiftily try to evade the question, but now when she says it I point out it is actually against the law for me to see her. This is a considerable weight off my conscience. Duck sandwiches for dinner.

Monday: Someone who uses runic lightning flashes instead of the letter "s" in his name sees my piece about selfish joggers on the Twitter and is rude to me. As I've got nothing else on, I have a look at his profile to see how I can wound him. It turns out he's an anti-vaxxer as well as a Nazi. One of his tweets boasts about how he plans to locate the grave of every NHS worker who's died of Covid-19 and dance on them. I bring this up in my reply. He responds: "I think I have haunted you enough to drive you searching through my twitter. you are nothing more than A compliant drone ready to bury anyone at the commands of your master." [Sic.] He has a point – Jason Cowley's word is law round here – but the joke's on him: he's provided enough material for a seventh of my column and he's not getting paid a penny. Duck soup for dinner.

Tuesday: Quiz night at the Covid Arms, organised by journalist and quiz expert Marcus Berkmann. It's very simple: 20 questions, no theme, of varying difficulty. I used to play this on my own and would get a miserable 13 or 14 but now I am on a team which includes some very clever people, we regularly get 20 out of 20 and only lose on the tie-break question.

There is a controversy every week. Last week's was about the colour of turmeric. Apparently there are some maniacs who think it's orange. This week's debate is, in a question about PG Wodehouse, whether "servant" is an acceptable alternative answer to "butler". (I am very proud of getting this one, as it had baffled the rest of the team, and I was beginning to wonder whether I was dead weight.) Marcus says it is. And I used to be his friend. Dinner tonight is another duck sandwich. The trick is to wait until really late at night, when you're starving, and use mayonnaise.

Wednesday: Off to the bath, and I catch sight of my wine belly in the mirror and actually scream. I've found a dumbbell and have, believe it or not, been using it, so for the first time in ages I have biceps, and some kind of shoulder definition. But everything between my tits and my groin, not inclusive, is a disaster. I actually look pregnant. Tonight's dinner is duck surprise, which is basically a duck sandwich, served with musical crisps and a nice glass of hevetor.

This England

Each printed entry receives a £5 book token. Entries to comp@newstatesman.co.uk or on a postcard to This England.
This column – which, though named after a line in Shakespeare's "Richard II", refers to the whole of Britain – has run in the NS since 1934.

Straw tiger
Armed police and a helicopter scoured the Kent countryside for a big cat on the loose following a call from a member of the public, only to find a model tiger made of chicken wire and resin sitting in a sculptor's woodland.
The Guardian (Andrew Steed)

The sound of moo-sic
Families are providing a bit of light relief in Belper by belting out a resounding moo from the front of their houses every night at 6.30pm for two



Tracey Thorn
Off the Record

I talk to my mum, who has been dead for nearly ten years, and I wonder, is this a prayer?

Ben and I have been rewatching *Rev*, the comedy series from ten years ago, about an inner-city vicar, Adam Smallbone played by Tom Hollander. Its tone and mood seem perfect at the moment, and the rev himself – flawed, human, full of uncertainty – is as funny as ever, but perhaps even more moving now.

I've always been an atheist, or at least, I've always thought so. A few years ago I devoured those books by Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, revelling in all that rationality, all that rebellious dismissal of faith. But I've backed off a bit now. The appeal to my powers of reason was strong, and comforting, providing a kind of certainty which in itself was reassuring.

Right now what I'm trying to get used to is uncertainty – about everything. We're all full of questions, with no answers. We don't know what's going to happen next. Am I, or is someone I love, going to get very ill? What will life be like in a week, a month, a year? How many of us have to suffer? And for how long?

These questions sound a bit like prayers to me. How long, oh Lord, how long.

Anyone religious worth their salt always talks about doubt, of course, and how it's as much a part of the experience as is faith. We are surrounded by it. I find myself most mornings walking around the weathered, leaning gravestones of the churchyard. If the church doors were open, I think I'd go and sit inside. Maybe I'd sort of pray.

In *Rev*, Adam Smallbone prays in a conversational way. His chats with God are often just him complaining. I find myself having conversations inside my own head, and I wonder, is this a prayer?

Being in the churchyard encourages the thought. I talk to my mum, who has been dead for nearly ten years. "Mum," I say/think, "you won't believe what's happening. There's a pandemic and we all have to stay indoors. Like, indefinitely. It's really, really weird. And I'm a bit sad and scared."

I wait for her answer, but I can't quite catch it.

A friend tells me her parents have a memorial stone in the churchyard, so I go and find it, and stand in front of their names. After a few minutes I reach out and touch the plaque and say, awkwardly, a kind of "bless you" to them, and is that a prayer? The breeze rustles the grasses, and the shadows move across the stones, and I think about my place in the world, my place in time, and I wonder, is that a prayer too?

Lines from poems come into my head, like these from Mary Oliver's "The Summer Day": "I don't know exactly what a prayer is./I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down/into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,/ how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,/which is what I have been doing all day./Tell me, what else should I have done?/ Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?/Tell me, what is it you plan to do/with your one wild and precious life?"

And Larkin's poem about churchgoing comes back to me, those lines about how even atheists will always find meaning in a church, "If only that so many dead lie round." Being surrounded by graves will tend to make you dwell on mortality, but then so does everything else at the moment. Perhaps I need to shake myself out of this mood.

Returning to *Rev* for one last time, I realise that I love even the opening theme song, which is a remix of "I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray" by Nat King Cole. I decide to make myself a playlist, with prayer as the theme. I add songs which are contemplative, and songs for the dance floor; some worshipful, some secular, or irreverent. Aretha, Mahalia, Madonna. Ian Dury, and the Jesus and Mary Chain.

I sing along with them on my walks, and think of the line attributed to St Augustine, "to sing is to pray twice". I've always loved that.

An old track by the Weather Prophets comes on, with its lyrics full of confusion. "Back in the same place but everything's changed," the song goes. "I walk the same roads but they're not the same… I almost prayed. I almost prayed." And I think. "Yeah, me too." ●

Next week: Sarah Manavis

minutes. Hundreds of folk are thought to have joined in the cattle chorus across the town.

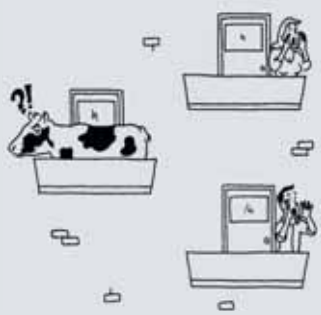
The Belper Moo Facebook group says: "Every evening from 6.30pm to 6.32pm the people are invited to fight lock-down loneliness and boredom by mooing from a window or doorway."

We want to see your photos and videos of you and your family mooing so please send them to editor@belpernews.co.uk and we will feature as many as we can.

Belper News (Amanda Welles)

Modern manhunt

A postman has been praised for his detective work after managing to deliver a parcel addressed to "somewhere in Sheffield".



Darrell Gilmour, 56, was baffled when he saw the vague address along with a rambling description of the intended recipient, David Easson. The sender did not know David's address and instead wrote all the details he knew about him on the parcel including that he has "a child, or a dog, or both".

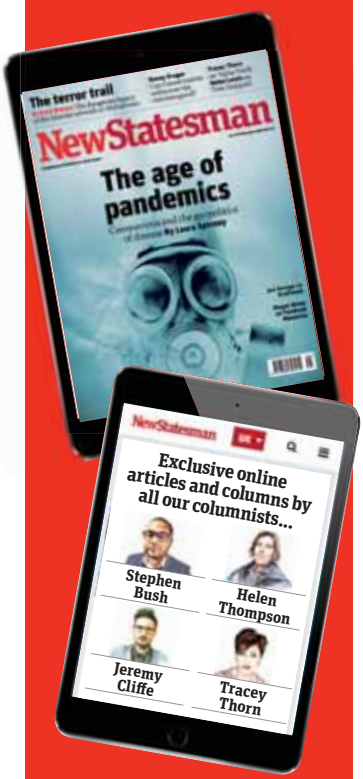
Darrell turned to social media to piece together the clues and hunt down David to deliver the package.

Yorkshire Post (Daragh Brady)

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Alice O'Keeffe
School's Out

We'd never meet Harry and Jack in the park. Unless, of course, we all just *happen* to be there. . .

"You're glitching, Lucas!" Seven-year-old Moe is in his bedroom shouting at the iPad, at the very top of his voice. Although I have explained to him that the device has a microphone, he prefers to converse so loudly that Lucas can probably hear him from his house, three streets away. They are on an app called Houseparty, which is how seven-year-olds hang out these days. You can video call, play quizzes and send messages. When they are not yelling about "glitching" (when the internet connection drops, freezing the screen), they are sending each other poo emojis.

I am downstairs, tidying the kitchen, again. All I seem to do is tidy the kitchen. I finish tidying it, blink, and find it needs tidying again. Somehow I don't mind. My world has shrunk to such a degree that I can't think of anything I would rather be doing. Just as I am finishing this round of tidying and beginning to wonder how to fill the next five minutes, my phone pings with a text from Husband: "Harry and Jack are in the park x."

Harry and Jack are Moe's mates from school. Mindful of the government guidelines that we are not permitted to meet with anyone from outside our household, we would never make plans to meet Harry or Jack. However, if Harry or Jack *happens* to be in the park, and Moe just *happens* to be there, too, we haven't broken any rules, now, have we? We have all just bumped into each other, by happy coincidence.

> Moe's thirst for play intensifies every day

"Moe!" I shout up the stairs, "Harry and Jack are in the park!"

There is a thud – presumably the iPad being thrown to the floor – followed by a thundering of feet down the stairs. By the time I've put down my tea towel, Moe is already by the front door, putting his shoes on. When lockdown started, chatting to his mates on Houseparty was a great novelty. But although he would never admit it, even Moe has started to tire of poo emojis. His thirst for physical play intensifies with every passing day.

Moe flies up the road and through the park gates. His older brother Larry is already kicking a ball (from a suitable two-metre distance) to his friend Archie. Harry, Jack and Moe gravitate towards the older boys. At first it's just passing, but then somebody sets out jumpers as goalposts, and somebody else ventures to do a little tackle, and before long a game has taken shape. Meanwhile I sit under a tree with Husband, Harry's Dad, and Jack's Dad. It's such a weird feeling, sitting there together; like, almost normal. I expect one of the other parents to intervene, to stop the game, to tell the kids not to tackle, to keep a distance. But it soon becomes clear that none of us has the heart.

"This is the first time Jack has played with other kids in six weeks," says Jack's Dad. "Just look at him. He doesn't even like football."

Jack is capering about, chasing the ball this way and that. Something close to ecstasy is written all over his small face. The boys' friend Holly rushes over wanting to join in, even though she usually hates football too. The kids tumble about getting gradually braver, running, passing, taking shots, celebrating their goals. It dawns on me that we are all beginning to imagine what it will be like to come out the other side. It has begun to feel conceivable, even if only for half an hour, that these restrictions will lift, and we will begin our long, slow crawl back to normality.

There is so much about lockdown that has surprised me. Turns out that I don't care in the slightest about shops, or cafés, or holidays. I don't even really care about pubs or concerts or art galleries. I can be perfectly happy living very simply, within an area of about two square miles.

The only thing I really miss, and my kids really miss, is other people. Life without others doesn't feel like living; it feels like waiting.

THE NS CROSSWORD 494: FINANCIAL TIMES BY SIMON

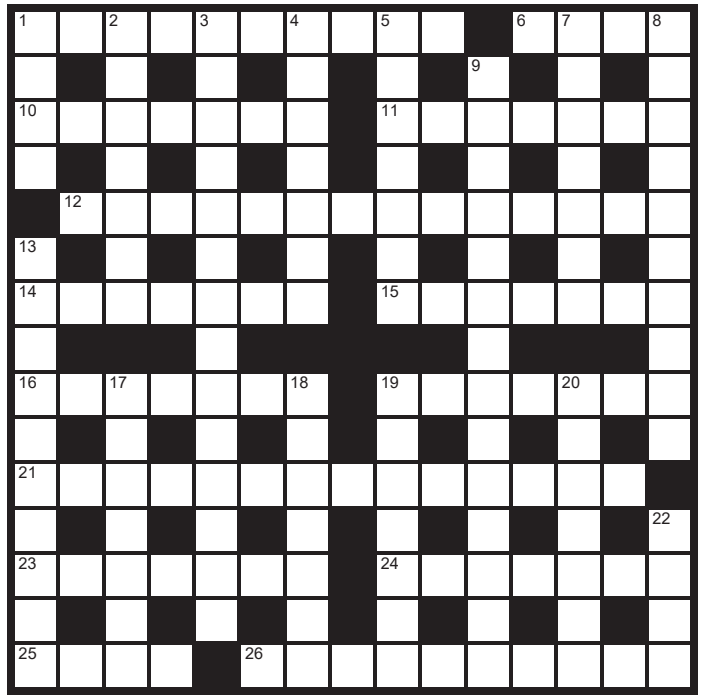
Across

1 No more room cleric organised going all round (4-6)
6 One among bachelors finds prejudice (4)
10 Six engineers or revolutionary with unknown governor (7)
11 Bond prize (7)
12 Alimony, Percy to arrange financial course of action (8,6)
14 Rodney went round gallery, went round and round (7)
15 Polecat, alpaca, etc, going round tree (7)
16 Shortfall provided back in December, one ton (7)
19 Buffoon takes award with loud instrument going round (7)
21 Levy on prominent part of body (11,3)
23 Princess, aficionado in anti-movement (7)
24 Vino ten drunk first, get weaving (7)
25 Greek character had lines of no legal force (4)
26 Union restriction less often seen nowadays on Sundays (6,4)

Down

1 Fourth part of the score (4)
2 Prevent employees from working during strike who do not start to register time at end of work (7)
3 Means of paying one's electricity bill? (7,7)
4 Sly creature about, hurried up within short distance (7)
5 Move mouth in time with insolence and unison (3-4)
7 Sign one letter (7)
8 Awkwardly I merely say it is done every six months (4-6)
9 Canon meditated about having removed impurities (14)
13 In favour of having conduit repaired during manufacture (10)
17 Pronged instrument can hold no more than this (7)
18 Laborious effort of a few inside track (7)
19 Reported attempt to get mushrooms that are three-headed (7)
20 Prophet originally had a bio (7)
22 The heartless politician being short-time worker (4)

This week's solutions will be published in the next issue of the NS



Answers to crossword 493 of 8 May 2020
Across 8) Pole-axed **9)** Ending **10/12)** Six degrees of separation **11/23)** Lockdown **12)** *See 10A* **16)** *See 18D* **17)** Scull **19)** Xmas **20)** Staying power **23)** *See 11A* **25)** *See 27* **27/25)** Social distancing **28)** She-devil **Down 1)** Covid **2)** Dead donkey **3)** Exegesis **4)** Adze **5)** Censor **6)** Idol **7)** Anecdotal **13)** Plump **14)** Tax bracket **15)** Gastropod **18,16)** Low water mark **21)** Nodule **22)** Snail **24)** Noir **26)** Sash
The title of the puzzle refers to Covid-19 (the solution at 1).

SUBSCRIBER OF THE WEEK

Judy Gordon



What do you do?
Retired journalist.
Where do you live?
Stockport, Cheshire.
Do you vote?
Always.
How long have you been a subscriber?
About five years.
What made you start?
I read it in my teens and twenties, then sporadically – I missed it.
Is the *NS* bug in the family?
I share articles with my son so maybe one day.
What pages do you flick to first?
Front to back, with The Critics as a treat at the end.
How do you read yours?
Something every day.
What would you like to see more of in the *NS*?
I think the balance is spot on.
Who are your favourite *NS* writers?
Paul Mason, John Gray, Jason Cowley. I miss Helen Lewis.
Who would you put on the cover of the *NS*?
The creators of a Covid-19 vaccine.
With which political figure would you least like to be stuck in a lift?
David Cameron.
All-time favourite *NS* article?
Too many to choose – that's its brilliance.
The *New Statesman* is...
Endlessly stimulating and currently superb.

NS Word Games answers

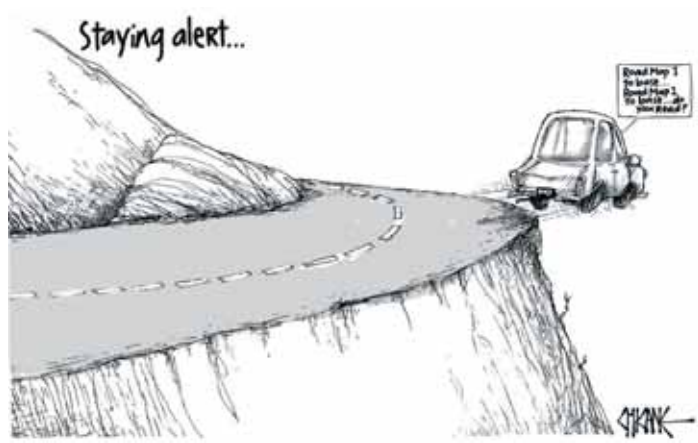
Donegal, Leitrim, Monaghan, Mayo, Offaly, Sligo, Wicklow, Darmstadt, (Hansestadt) Hamburg, Heidelberg, Cologne, Mainz, Worms

THE NS WORD GAMES 184: NUMBER-PLATES

Which counties in Eire issue number-plates with these two-letter codes?
DL
LM
MN
MO
OY
SO
WW

Which German cities issue these number-plates?
DA
HD
HH
K
MZ
WO

Anorak





THE NS Q&A

"I don't respect politicians like I respect Greta Thunberg"

Joe Wicks, fitness coach

Joe Wicks was born in Epsom in 1986 and is known as "the Body Coach". In March he broke a Guinness World Record after almost one million people tuned into "PE with Joe", which he films every day during lockdown.

What's your earliest memory?
Summer holidays in the south of France. We'd drive there in our Mini and stay in a tent, living off French sticks and Nutella. Me and my brother would enter the talent show at the holiday park, singing songs like Take That's "Back For Good".

Who are your heroes?
My mum, who raised us alone and made me the man I am. My wife, who is so loving, she makes me want to be kinder.

What book last changed your thinking?
Calm Parents, Happy Kids by Dr Laura Markham. I come from an upbringing of chaos, lots of shouting and swearing, but I don't want to be like that. This book made me a better parent.

Which political figure do you look up to?
I've never been that into politics, but Greta Thunberg has made me think about my actions. I don't respect politicians like I respect her. She's not trying to become famous; she's trying to wake people up.

What would be your *Mastermind* specialist subject?
The British comedy *The Office* because I'm obsessed with David Brent.

In which time and place, other than your own, would you like to live?
In the Sixties during the Motown period, with the Temptations, Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder, and at Woodstock in 1969 listening to Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin.

What TV show could you not live without?
Planet Earth, *Our Planet*... anything with David Attenborough is wonderful. The world may not be like that forever.

Who would paint your portrait?
Vincent van Gogh. When I was nine or ten my dad took me to the National Gallery and we saw the *Sunflowers* and van Gogh's self-portrait, and I learned the story of him chopping his ear off. My dad got me a postcard of *The Bedroom*.

What's your theme tune?
"Shotgun" by George Ezra. When I go into schools I play it and the kids sing it back to me. I think I'll have it played at my funeral.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?
My mum and dad told me to do what makes me happy, not to worry about what other people think. I've ignored so many people who have negged me. Now I've got a positive cheerleading voice in my head.

What's currently bugging you?
Nothing, because I've started doing 20 minutes of guided meditation every day. I'm learning to let go of anxieties, negative thoughts, bad energy. I'm only two weeks in, but it's changed my life.

What single thing would make your life better?
Another child. I've got two but I'm definitely up for a couple more.

When were you happiest?
Yesterday, when I got home from hospital with my broken wrist fixed, and had a big cuddle with my wife and kids.

In another life, what job might you have chosen?
A PE teacher. I kind of am that now, but I'm a world PE teacher. I do it online and I love that I'm doing it with millions of kids a day.

Are we all doomed?
I'm an eternal optimist, so I think absolutely not. We're blessed, life is a gift and time is precious. Stay connected and be kind and compassionate.

"Wean in 15" by Joe Wicks is published by Bluebird

KRISTIAN HAMMERSTAD

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