

The Dunkirk delusion

David Reynolds Why the myths of 1940 are still haunting Britain 80 years later

Lyndsey Stonebridge on the meaning and value of work in the age of coronavirus

Jess Phillips on her family lockdown
Amelia Tait on the art of wasting time

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THE GREAT MOVING LEFT SHOW



How the pandemic is transforming our politics **By Andrew Marr**





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NatWest

The big left turn

In 2008, as the financial crisis afflicted the West, many progressive politicians, notably Ed Miliband, spoke of a “social democratic moment”. Unprecedented state interventions, such as the bank bailouts, prompted talk of a new economic settlement. It did not amount to much.

Indeed, as we warned at the time, such hopes were always naive. The centre left was complicit in the deregulation and financialisation that precipitated the crash. In Europe, it championed the single currency and the creation of a monetary union without a complementary fiscal union. When the system inevitably faltered, social democrats could not credibly pose as its saviours. Instead it was the right that thrived by harnessing anxiety over immigration and by reframing a private sector crisis as one of public debt.

A decade later, as the state once more intervenes to underwrite the economy, commentators are again asking whether this could be a progressive moment. “It’s a wonderful time to be a social democrat,” the Dutch historian and author Rutger Bregman says on page 16. And in this week’s cover story on page 22, Andrew Marr asks whether the Covid-19 crisis could mark “the start of a big left turn”.

The essay’s title – “The Great Moving Left Show” – is an allusion to the late cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s January 1979 essay “The Great Moving Right Show”. At a time when many on the left dismissed Thatcherism as an aberration, he understood that the right was engaged in a potent mission not just to win electoral power but to redefine “common sense”. There is no equivalent movement on the left or the right today to the Hayekian New Right, but we can ask whether the crisis, like the collapse of the Keynesian consensus in the 1970s, represents a historical turning point.

In 1996, at the height of liberal triumphalism, Bill Clinton declared that the “era of big government is over”. His message was echoed by social democratic parties across the West. Yet in Britain, confronted by the threat of the largest recession since 1709, the state has returned to the centre of economic life. Like the 1918 Spanish flu, which spurred the creation of the egalitarian Swedish welfare state, the Covid-19 pandemic is remaking the case for social security as a form of collective insurance.

SEBASTIEN THIBAUT

Under David Cameron and George Osborne in 2008, the Conservatives opposed the fiscal stimulus introduced by the Labour government, before ushering in an “age of austerity”. By contrast, the present Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, has provided economic support of £330bn and, through the Job Retention Scheme, is paying the wages of 7.5 million people (a quarter of the private-sector workforce).

The crisis has accelerated the Conservatives’ pre-existing retreat from austerity economics. Under Boris Johnson, the party had already committed to higher NHS spending and to borrowing for investment (embracing a version of Labour’s 2017 fiscal rules). Though the right has been wedded to free-

market economics since the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, big government conservatism was never previously a contradiction in terms.

For this reason, among others, the left should resist the temptation to claim ideological victory. Rather than resolving the contradiction between Mr Johnson’s national conservatism and his embrace of a free-wheeling “Global Britain”,

the pandemic has deepened it. Once the crisis has passed, the temptation among many on the right will be to retreat to the familiar territory of tax cuts, deregulation, limited government and privatisation in pursuit of growth at any cost.

The former French president Charles de Gaulle once declared that it was his political mission to reconcile the left to the state (or authority) and the right to the nation (or democracy). In the wake of the 2008 crash, even as living standards fell, the right marginalised the left by claiming the mantle of nationhood. By intensifying focus on questions of borders and citizenship, the Covid-19 crisis could provide a similar opening. If we are witnessing the beginnings of a new consensus, the left must not merely hail the return of the protective state – it must respond to the return of the nation. ●



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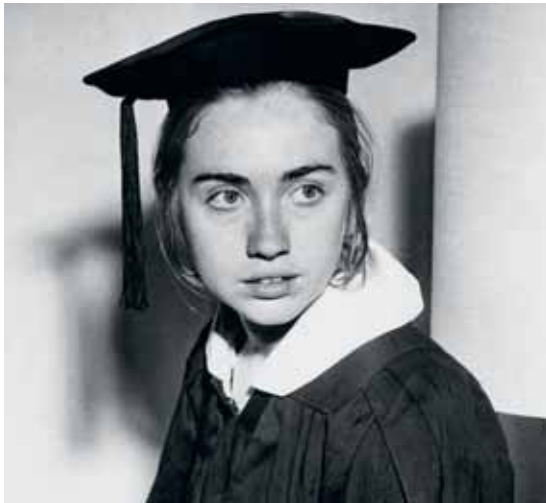
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"Wasting time can be good for you – feeling bad about it isn't"

Amelia Tait, page 39



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What Ivanka Trump "taking the red pill" means

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Jason Cowley Editor's Note

The tragedy of Tye Green Lodge care home is a parable of government neglect



In July last year an old friend who now lives in Brighton mentioned that he and his mother, Margaret, were visiting Harlow for the first time in many years. He and I had grown up in the Essex town and he asked if I wanted to return with my mother so that we could all meet for dinner. It was a nostalgic and poignant homecoming for Margaret, who would sadly die only a few months later.

One of the places she visited during that trip last summer was Tye Green Lodge care home in the old village of Tye Green, which long pre-existed the new town. There, Margaret reconnected with three former close neighbours: one was now blind and two had dementia. She told us over dinner that night about the visit, and it was moving to find out what had become of people I used to know and in whose gardens I played sometimes during the summer holidays.

In his original masterplan for Harlow, Frederick Gibberd, the chief architect-planner, was careful to preserve the long-established villages and hamlets that were subsumed into the west Essex new town (the original settlement of Harlow features in the Domesday Book). Even today, though much has changed from when I lived in the town for the first 18 years of my life, Tye Green just about retains something of the character of a village. And whenever by chance I hear mention of it, I can still picture the old houses with big gardens that we used to think were haunted and the working farm where my parents bought eggs and cream.

In March my interest was piqued when, on the BBC regional news, it was reported that Tye Green Lodge, which has 61 beds and is owned and operated by Quantum Care, a self-described “not-for-profit care provider”, had been quarantined after an outbreak of coronavirus. This was before Boris Johnson belatedly locked down the country on the evening of 23 March and before the crisis in care homes had become

such a matter of urgent national concern. I made a note to follow what was happening at the lodge, which is built on former scrubland – once known locally as the Orchard – where as children we used to hang out and climb trees.

From late March, over a four-week period, 17 residents of Tye Green Lodge and one member of staff died. Seven died in hospital after testing positive for Covid-19; the others are believed to have died with or from the disease but were never tested. The tragedy of Tye Green Lodge is a parable of what was happening in many of our care homes in the early weeks of the pandemic.

As the government equivocated and floundered, and pursued a policy of what amounted to benign neglect, patients were discharged from hospitals to care homes – as Dr Phil Whitaker reported in these pages – with often lethal consequences. There was no testing in these homes and many staff did not even have adequate personal protective equipment as some of them moved from home to home as itinerant freelance workers.

Could the deaths at Tye Green Lodge – and many other care homes – have been reduced or perhaps even avoided altogether? It's hard to know from the outside exactly what was going on in the home in March, but the catastrophic outbreak there does seem to have been exacerbated by a failure to test and trace, and by the government's woeful mixed messaging.

Quantum Care restricted all non-essential visitors to the home on 17 March, and two days later it wrote to all local Conservative MPs – there are no Labour MPs in Essex or Hertfordshire – appealing for staff and residents to be urgently tested. The first lodge resident to test positive for Covid-19 did so in hospital on 25 March, by which time it was already too late. Worse still, no testing was offered at the care home until

25 April, when Public Health England said it would test only “symptomatic residents”. Since then, all residents at Tye Green Lodge have been tested and, a spokesperson for Quantum Care told me, the home is now in a state of “recovery”.

Why does this small story matter? It matters because it reveals in microcosm much deeper problems. First, it reiterates how slow the government was to respond to the coronavirus emergency, especially in care homes. Second, it reveals that what happened at Tye Green Lodge (and other homes like it) was not an aberration but part of a pattern of long-term neglect: all UK governments, in recent decades, have evaded responsibility for the crisis in social care, preferring short-term fixes to the difficult choices that are required to grapple with one of the defining challenges of our times.

More than this, with each passing month, we understand more about the effects of the Cameron coalition government's witless austerity programme on the social fabric of the country. Ideological austerity starved the public realm of investment and, according to the Marmot Review published by the Institute of Health Equity in February, created a “lost decade”. We are living with the consequences, but this time the Conservative government has no one else to blame, unlike when Gordon Brown and Labour were blamed for the post-crash debt crisis of 2008.

The years ahead will test our national resilience and whether we have the stamina to address the interconnected crises exposed and accelerated by the pandemic. As the philosopher Michael Sandel put it in a recent *New York Times* piece, “We need to ask a basic question that we have evaded over these last decades: what do we owe one another as citizens?” And, one might add: what are we prepared to do about it? ●



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Dr Phil Whitaker Health Matters

The issue of reopening schools is vivid proof that our theoretical science has failed us



The UK government's plan to begin gradual school reopening from 1 June has provoked huge controversy. Some teaching unions have opposed it and have been joined, in a significant intervention, by the British Medical Association. Local government leaders in parts of Manchester, Liverpool, Hartlepool and Tyneside have indicated that they do not intend to comply, and none of the devolved nations appears willing to follow England's lead either.

To counter the growing rebellion, prominent cabinet ministers have been deployed in the media, asserting their confidence in both pupil and teacher safety while simultaneously invoking a quasi-military "duty" on the part of teachers to return to the classroom. As ever, we're told the government is following the science (while appearing reluctant to submit it to wider scrutiny).

The debate about school reopening provides a backdrop against which to examine these claims to scientific legitimacy. It's important to draw a distinction between two types of science going on here. One is theoretical, meaning it is based on models that attempt to predict how things will behave. The other is empirical, meaning it is based on observation and experience of how things have actually behaved.

To begin with, facing a novel disease like Covid-19, there was no empirical data. All that was known was: it is a coronavirus that can cause a potentially fatal respiratory distress syndrome. Countries such as Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea based their strategies on the nearest empirical "fit" – their experience of dealing with past, serious coronavirus diseases such as Sars. Testing, tracing and isolating (TTI) cases and contacts was at the heart of their approach from the outset, as were border controls to limit importation of new cases. Countries such as Britain relied instead on theoretical modelling to inform their response, but these models were based on influenza viruses (for decades, the assumption had been that the next pandemic would be a flu virus).

As time has gone on, the UK modelling has been adjusted to try to incorporate the empirical data that has become available about Covid-19. A seismic shift occurred in mid-March, when real-world data, including from Italy, was fed into the model the government was using to inform policymaking. The resultant, dramatically upscaled predictions for deaths and hospitalisations led to the sudden, panicked introduction of lockdown and the breakneck drive to expand ICU capacity, establish Nightingale facilities and empty hospital beds (which had the effect of discharging coronavirus-spreading patients into care homes).

The UK modelling was based on influenza viruses

Britain has suffered an appalling level of mortality, but the shocking predictions of late March, showing NHS capacity being exceeded many times over, never came to pass. The modelling must either have seriously overestimated the strength of the surge, underestimated the transmission-dampening effect of lockdown, or failed to anticipate how many fatal cases would occur in nursing homes and the community rather than in hospital – or most likely a combination of all three. The conclusion that ought to be drawn from this is quite how poorly the theoretical science is performing, yet the government continues to follow it seemingly without question – something that prompted the former chief scientific adviser, Sir David King, to establish a scientific advisory group in order to give voice to alternative perspectives and approaches.

How does this affect the question of schools reopening? At time of writing, there are just two things we can say with certainty about Covid-19 in children. First, out of every 100 symptomatic patients, only two will be children. We don't know whether this is because children are less

likely to contract the virus, or whether they acquire it at the same rate as adults but relatively few of them develop symptoms. We also don't know whether, or for how long, children are able to transmit the infection. The second certainty is that, notwithstanding a very few tragic cases, the infection rarely causes serious disease in younger age groups. Insofar as anything in life can be said to be safe, sending children back to school will be safe for them. But whether it will be safe for teachers and other adults in the school environment, and indeed for the communities into which pupils will return at the end of the day, is currently unknown.

We know from government pronouncements in early March that its modelling predicted that school closures would not make a significant difference to transmission rates. But a group led by the Norwich Medical School has evaluated the outcomes of different lockdown measures imposed in 30 European countries. While girded with caveats, their conclusion was that school closures were the most effective measure in suppressing transmission.

The widespread resistance to the early reopening of schools has its roots in our demonstrable overconfidence in theoretical science to predict how Covid-19 will behave in the real world. Ministers cite the example of Denmark, which has successfully reopened primary schools in socially distanced format, to justify their policy. This entirely ignores glaring differences between our two countries. Denmark suppressed its outbreak through early, widespread TTI and border controls. Danish schools are reopening in a completely different and safer context.

There is now ample evidence globally as to how best to counter Covid-19. We should acknowledge that our theoretical science has failed us, and continue to further suppress the epidemic while emulating the systems that experience abroad has shown to be effective, including greater freedom for specific regions to modulate their response according to their local conditions. That would truly be following the science. ●



Correspondence

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Allied, not alone

David Edgerton is right to argue against “The myth of ‘Britain alone’” (15 May) in the Second World War. But I have some additional observations.

No one can dispute the terrible losses and courage of the Red Army. But if Stalin’s USSR had not instructed German communists to refuse any united front against Hitler (because Social Democrats were “social fascists”) the Nazis might well have never taken power. The Nazis’ racist policies (Slavs are slaves) meant the Russians were forced to fight. If the Nazis had pursued a “charm offensive” as they did in France, Stalin might have found it harder to mobilise his people.

The war was not simply fought by an alliance of states. Many thousands of Germans organised and fought against their own government, both inside Germany and in the French Resistance.

Ian Birchall
London N9

A controversy arising from the Second World War does not seem to be going away. A document discovered by a small group of historians, who were allowed to look at the Vatican archives just before the lockdown, is likely to raise again the silence of Pope Pius XII during the Holocaust.

It reportedly revealed that in 1942 reports were received by the Vatican telling of hundreds of thousands of Jews massacred in Ukraine and Poland; the response was such information could not be relied on since Jews tended to exaggerate. In fact, that information did not come from Jewish sources.

The crux of the matter remains why the pope did not speak out during the war when millions were being murdered because of their race. At no stage was there a condemnation

LETTER OF THE WEEK

In search of a national story

In promoting internationalism above the national politics of “home, belonging and identity”, Jeremy Cliffe will repeat the mistakes of the defeated Remain and People’s Vote campaigns (World View, 15 May). Of course, there cannot be any effective challenge to the power of global capital without progressive internationalism. But the current crisis has shown that the idea of the nation and their governments remains powerful among electorates around the world.

Strong progressive nations are the building block for any internationalism that is not the dreaming of a global left elite. Cliffe writes as though the left has tried progressive patriotism for the past decade. The left has largely spurned the idea of the nation, which is why its attempts to engage with public concern on immigration, the EU or the town-city divide have been ineffective. If the left has no national story, the right will win again.

Professor John Denham
Via email

of these atrocities, despite other information being well reported during the conflict.

Of course, individual Catholics, including priests, acted bravely in trying to save Jewish lives. And in other Christian denominations, in Germany and elsewhere, there was also silence, or worse.

It would, however, be widely welcomed if the Vatican at the highest level acknowledged that not speaking out then against such murderous barbarism was shamefully wrong and a betrayal of common humanity.

David Winnick,
former Labour MP
London NW10

David Edgerton’s article was spot on. Unfortunately, “spin” is nothing new, as he points out. Many of us will remember the ugly rhetoric in confronting Argentina during the Falklands War of 1982. The Thatcher government was determined to use any means possible to promote its case, including the emotional strains of using an exaggerated patriotism, seeing Falklanders as “our” threatened people. The language of

government is pitted with “us” and “ours” vs “them” and “theirs”. Patriotism is a slippery concept that will be used to justify anything.

Keith Maton
Crickhowell, Powys

David Edgerton overlooks the strongest argument for his proposition. Between October 1940 (Italian invasion of Greece) and May 1941 (surrender to the Germans of the Allied forces in Crete), Britain had an effective fighting ally against the Axis powers – Greece.

Paul Watkins
London NW1

Defending the BBC

I agree with most of Simon Jenkins’s essay about the BBC News coverage of coronavirus (“The BBC and the journalism of fear”, 8 May). But his claim that he has “never heard a BBC reporter ask why a minister is not doing less” must be challenged.

BBC journalists frequently pressed Treasury ministers on whether George Osborne’s austerity measures were going

too far. Under Theresa May’s premiership there was regular questioning of the Brexit deal. And just recently BBC reporters have been asking ministers why the government is sticking to its timetable for leaving the EU in the face of Covid-19.

John Boaler
Calne, Wiltshire

Simon Jenkins is right to draw attention to the media’s failure, but it is more than just a question of “if it bleeds, it leads”. The problem is the media make no more distinction between “hard” and “soft” science than the politicians – and the science the government has been insisting it is following could not be much softer.

One consequence of the failure to see this distinction clearly is that, as Jenkins points out, it has taken the press weeks to realise that something might be amiss with the “science” by which we are being led to unnecessary deaths.

Professor Brian Winston
University of Lincoln

Trump’s childhood

I would suggest that the critique of Donald Trump as childish is, rather than an attack on children, an attempt to analyse his character and behaviour (Correspondence, 8 May).

From what I have read of his upbringing, there may have been extreme emotional dysfunctionality within the family, which may have led to his famous defensiveness as well as the self-promotion, stubbornness and failure to adapt, cooperate and focus.

Of course, this is only one part of the picture, but most dysfunctional people with political power have complex psychological backgrounds. Appropriate

help in their early years might have changed history.
Patricia Cooper
Budleigh Salterton, Devon

Lockdown life

My copy of the *New Statesman* came a day early last week and reading it lifted my spirits. A standout insight was from Suzanne Moore (Diary, 15 May), who wrote: "I miss the presence of possibility, the anonymous pleasure of strangers together. That's what 'going outside' really means." That's how many of us feel about life in lockdown.

Liz Storrar
Oxford

Regional needs

Thanks to Paul Collier for calling out centralisation in England's dysfunctional political system ("Capitalism after coronavirus", 8 May). Our political party system favours centralised power, despite the concessions the Conservatives have made to the state and "the science" to tackle the coronavirus emergency.

Labour has made a solid restart with a commitment to a more regional approach

under Keir Starmer, but faces appalling odds in our electoral system. If we are to engage the more community-based delivery of services that Professor Collier rightly espouses, Labour needs to embrace other political parties that support a community-led approach.
Trevor Cherrett
Devizes, Wiltshire

Jason Cowley (Editor's Note, 8 May) is right: we will all be changed by the crisis. But if the values that have come to the fore are to endure, there also needs to be deep structural change. Paul Collier implicitly draws attention to one example: the income disparities between certain professions. There needs to be greater fairness in the distribution of income, wealth and opportunity. Only with these foundations could a renewed sense of social solidarity continue to flourish.

Michael Haskell
Broughton, Flintshire

About time

In "Pandemics and the politics of time" (Observations,

15 May), Jan Zielonka and Stefania Bernini write that the risk of contagion has deprived us of the ability to dispose freely of our private time. I suggest that for many of us it has unexpectedly enabled more than it has deprived.

Sally Litherland
Salisbury, Wiltshire

Nature's healing

The past three issues of the *NS* have all included articles about the deep-healing "power of green". Last week there was Tracey Thorn's column (Off the Record, 15 May) with quotes from Mary Oliver's poem "The Summer Day".

My daughter works for a mental health charity in Bristol, also called Off the Record. They have initiated a scheme for 11- to 25-year-olds who can self-refer to the charity in times of mental unease or crisis.

Among other outdoor programmes, this scheme provides planting kits, with information on the sowing and care of the plants, and guidelines for healthy living. Within the first three days of its launch in April the scheme received 1,000 applications.

Now is the time for us to come together and insist on a new curriculum for young people that values the power of nature.

Sarah Backhouse
Lullington, Somerset

It was good to see Tracey Thorn is a fan of Mary Oliver's poetry (Off the Record, 15 May), but there is no need for an atheist to subside into prayer. Try Oliver's "Wild Geese":

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting – over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

Graham Williams,
New South Wales, Australia

Music to his mouth

Nicholas Lezard (Down and Out, 15 May) recounts his dreaming of "musical crisps". Surely he has a subconscious craving for Quavers.

Sean Cordell
Manchester

● We reserve the right to edit letters.

SUSPENDED ANIMATION BY REBECCA HENDIN



Observations



GLEBGARANICH/REUTERS

IN THE PICTURE

Nurses care for newborns at Hotel Venice, which is owned

by the BioTexCom reproduction clinic, in Kiev, Ukraine, on 14 May. At least 50 babies born to surrogate mothers

are stranded in the clinic as travel bans due to coronavirus have prevented the babies' parents from entering the country.

Commons Confidential Kevin Maguire offers his pick of the week's best gossip from Westminster

Encounter George Eaton speaks with Dutch historian Rutger Bregman

First Thoughts Peter Wilby on the government's daily press conference and job cuts in the media

Trends Oscar Williams on the US company Palantir's growing presence in the NHS



COMMENT

In search of the active life

What is “work” in the age of Covid-19?

By Lyndsey Stonebridge

According to the government, we are now supposed to be getting back to work. But what does “work” mean in the time of Covid-19? Amid the debates about how we might return to work, what is being forgotten is that work is a crucial part of what the 20th-century political philosopher Hannah Arendt called the human condition.

The government's Covid-19 recovery strategy, published on 11 May, states that people will be “eased back into work” as into a dentist chair: carefully, and with face masks.

The reason they need to be coaxed is, of course, the economy. At one point in the document, it reads as though it is the economy, not people, that has been sick: “The longer the virus affects the economy, the greater the risks of long-term scarring.” The economy needs ventilating, and people are its oxygen.

Arendt would not have been surprised by this commonplace personification. From the moral and political thought of John Locke and Adam Smith in the 17th and 18th centuries respectively, to Karl Marx in the 19th century, left, liberal, and right have all seen man as a labouring being, toiling away at getting machines, services, cash and liquid capital working. The economy “works” while we “labour”.

In her 1958 book *The Human Condition*, Arendt suggested we think again. It is not enough

to imagine that we graft away, striving for some imaginary point at which we might be free of labour: in future automation or artificial intelligence, for example; or in the venal fantasies of super-richness; in socialist utopias of common ownership that might liberate us from toil; or, if you are a Greek philosopher, in a life of the mind. For Arendt, it was the active life, the *vita activa*, that we need to attend to, the lives we live together with others, now and in the future.

Arendt's *vita activa* has three components: labour, work and action. It is her distinction between labour and work that should concern us now.

Labouring is simply what we do to survive. We labour to eat, to keep our bodies healthy, to keep roofs over our heads, and to keep life reproducing. All animals labour, with or without coaxing, as do slaves and women who, often literally, labour behind closed doors. There's nothing special about labour, save for the fact that without it we would die.

Work, on the other hand, gives collective meaning to what we do. When we work to produce something we both put something into and leave something lasting in the world: a table (Arendt, like many philosophers, was fond of furniture examples), a house, a book, a car, a rug, a high-precision piece of engineering with which we can order ▶

► the days into time, or keep a body breathing.

In short, what we work at makes up the human reality that we all share. Work is part of what Arendt called “human artifice”: it means that we are more than mere nature, and that we have made something that endures. We labour by necessity; we work to create a human reality.

Already in the 1950s, Arendt was worried that capitalist consumption would transform work into sheer labour. If we all make only to consume, we leave nothing in the world, and we lose that shared sense of the world. Make burger, eat burger, be burger. The collapse of the distinction between work and labour really matters because without the meanings work gives us there can be no shared ground for politics – for action, as Arendt called the third, and most important, part of her *vita activa*.

This is why her example of the table is so important. A table is a solid piece of craftwork. It is also something people sit around, together and yet apart; being social while keeping their distance. Without the table, Arendt said, there could be no forum for the politics of plurality that she thought societies should be aiming for. For politics to happen we need something that we can all gather around, but which also marks out the differences between us. That is what work gives us.

If people were upset when the government issued its call back to work on 10 May, perhaps this is because what they heard was not a request to return to work, but a demand for their labour. When, at that point, it was obvious that neither workplaces nor public transport were “Covid-19 secure” (that is, safe for human life) it was hard to escape the idea that we were not so much being coaxed back to work, as commanded to get our bodies back into the service of the economy – as though the scarring of its

lungs took precedence over the rasping of the guy who had no choice but get on the number 73 bus.

This was not simply a case of maladroit messaging. It was a failure to recognise the value not only of the work we have to do, but of the work we do together in order to be human.

This is why debates and policies about how we get back to work matter so much: we are also talking about what kind of human society we are – or want to be.

If taking the human value of work more seriously is key to a better politics, we should also grasp this opportunity to think about what counts as valuable work.

The economy “works” while we “labour”

Arendt might show us the way, but her philosophy only gets us so far. As feminists have noted, the labouring necessities of life Arendt described are also descriptions of traditional women’s work. The labour of keeping human bodies alive over the past three months has, in the main, been done by women and, at great cost, BAME people.

Making a table is a great thing, but the work of creating a dignified human being out of an ailing, suffering, possibly dying body is too. The NHS was set up to do that work.

What if instead of seeing the NHS as a frail but plucky thing that needs protecting, we thought of it instead as the table around which we all need to get to create a really different – and possibly more human – political future? What if getting back to work might also be a way of getting back to the human condition? ●

Lyndsey Stonebridge is the author of “Placeless People: Writings, Rights and Refugees”. Her forthcoming book on Arendt will be published by Jonathan Cape

COMMONS CONFIDENTIAL

Putting the Marx into marking

Kevin Maguire

Bruised Boris Johnson

waffling in No 10 about education, infrastructure and technology as three pillars in Britain’s future is, muttered my snout, an increasingly frantic attempt by the PM’s little helpers to paint their sugar daddy as a chap of action and thus shield him from coronavirus disasters. With UK-made ventilators reported to be running out of parts and testing chiefs complaining that the first they heard about Matt Hancock’s 100,000 target was on TV, Johnson’s regime continues to disintegrate.

Fresh derision was triggered

by suggestions that the government intended the second word in that much-ridiculed “Stay Alert” slogan to be an acronym. Labour culture vulture Jo Stevens accused a windmilling premier of secretly thinking “All Lazy Employees Return Tomorrow” whenever he mutters an “Alert” so confusing the only shock is that Johnson hasn’t translated it into Greek. Yet.

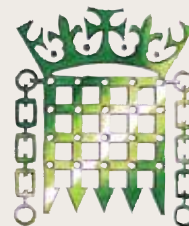
Guffaws on the TUC general

council after the *Daily Mail* portrayed militant moderate Dr Mary Bousted, joint head of the National Education Union (NEU), as a Cuban-lovin’ hard-left Corbynista. Comrades recall the one-time English teacher in London, whose past pupils include Labour peer Shami Chakrabarti, calling socialist union boss Mark Serwotka an “effing supercilious prick” after he reminded Bousted to wait to be called by the chair

to speak. Maybe the Tory rag confused her with NEU co-general secretary “Kevin the Red” Courtney, a Welsh firebrand who puts the Marx into marking.

Strangers’ Bar will be minus

its most familiar face when MPs finally return en masse: head barman Will Conway retires this month after 27 years pulling parliamentary pints. The quietly spoken GMB union activist witnessed heated arguments, drunks falling over, arrests and fisticuffs. As the watering hole’s enforcer, Conway always insisted most regulars were well behaved. I’m not surprised. Conceited new MPs who crossed him once quickly learned never to do it again.



All eyes turn

to Liverpool’s first black MP, Kim Johnson, whenever she appears on PLP video meetings.

She followed up what resembled a

fluffy pink dressing gown with wearing a baseball cap indoors. The Labour community organiser puts in the shade her male, pale and stale colleagues in collar and tie.

Spinners Shaun Roberts and

Sam Barratt quitting the Lib Dumb campaigns ahead of the inquiry report into Jo Swinson’s calamitous general election is a sign of a party starting again. The ex-leader is referred to as “Jo who?” by staffers who don’t want to follow them out of the door. ●

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

CORONAVIRUS CRISIS APPEAL



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

DONATE NOW

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

I WOULD LIKE TO MAKE A DONATION OF £

Please make your cheque/charity voucher payable to Médecins Sans Frontières UK

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

Cardholder name

Card number

Expiry date / Signature

Today's date / /

Title Forename(s)

Surname

Address

Postcode Telephone

Email

HEAR FROM MSF BY EMAIL. Sign up to our monthly email, Frontline, which provides first-hand accounts of our work. You will receive Frontline, occasional emergency appeals, requests for donations and event invitations.

Opt me in to email

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If so, you can make your gift worth 25% more at no extra cost. Please tick the box below.

I wish Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to treat all gifts in the last 4 years, this gift and all future gifts as Gift Aid donations. I am a UK taxpayer and understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations in that tax year it is my responsibility to pay any difference.

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NB: Please let us know if your name, address or tax status changes, or if you would like to cancel this declaration, so that we can update our records.

RESPECTING YOU AND YOUR PERSONAL DATA

Your support is vital to our work and we would like to keep you informed with first-hand accounts from our staff and patients about the lifesaving impact your support is having, from combating epidemics to providing emergency surgery.

We won't allow other organisations to have access to your personal data for marketing purposes and we won't bombard you with appeals.

By supporting MSF, you will receive our quarterly magazine Dispatches, event invitations, and occasional emergency appeals with requests for donations by post. You can change how you hear from MSF UK by emailing uk.fundraising@london.msf.org or calling 020 7404 6600. Visit our privacy notice for more: msf.org.uk/privacy.

Please fill in this form, place in an envelope and return postage free to: FREEPOST RUBA-GYZY-YXST, Médecins Sans Frontières, Bumpers Way, Bumpers Farm, Chippenham SN14 6NG. Alternatively you can phone 0800 055 7985 or make your donation online at: msf.org.uk/pandemic

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ENCOUNTER

“Optimism is an alibi for complacency”

Rutger Bregman on the human instinct for solidarity

By George Eaton

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic many people have been awed by the displays of human solidarity. In supposedly atomised societies, altruistic instincts have reasserted themselves (750,000 people have volunteered for the NHS, for example).

One of those who was not surprised is the Dutch historian and author Rutger Bregman. “Catastrophes bring out the best in people,” he writes in his new book *Humankind: A Hopeful History*. “I know of no other sociological finding that’s backed by so much solid evidence that’s so blithely ignored.” Over 463 pages he

seeks to dismantle the thesis – formulated and popularised by thinkers such as Hobbes, Machiavelli and Freud – that humans are inherently selfish.

“I found a disconnect between my own view of human nature and the ideas I was advocating and this book is an attempt to solve that,” Bregman, 32, explained when I recently interviewed him over Skype from London. His previous book *Utopia for Realists* (2014) promoted policies such as a universal basic income (UBI), a 15-hour working week and global open borders. As he debated such ideas he found

himself continually drawn to fundamental questions of human nature.

Having once taken a “relatively cynical” view, he was forced to revise his perspective as he interrogated new evidence from “diverse disciplines: anthropology, archaeology, sociology, psychology”. Far from humans being predisposed to violence, for instance, Bregman argues that the reverse is true: we find pain immensely difficult to inflict. “Most bayonets throughout history have probably not been used because soldiers just can’t do it, something holds them back. . .

the same goes for shooting the enemy. We’ve got this fascinating evidence from the Second World War, and also from other wars, that most soldiers couldn’t do it.”

But how does he reckon with the 20th century and the horrors inflicted by Nazism, Stalinism and Maoism? “I think we have to acknowledge that human beings are not only the friendliest species in the animal kingdom, they’re also clearly the cruellest.” Bregman is not, he emphasises, an optimist but a “possibilist”. All too often, he fears, pessimism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. “What I’m trying to do is to redefine realism, I’m trying to say that actually the cynic is naive. . . If you look at empirical evidence then you find that assuming the best in other people gets you the best results.”

He cites the pioneering Norwegian prison system, where inmate facilities include tennis courts, a sauna and even recording studios (music is issued by the Criminal Records label). “They have the lowest recidivism rate in the world [20 per cent, compared to 48 per cent in England and Wales], these are the most effective prisons.”

Bregman has spent lockdown in the Dutch town of Houten in Utrecht. “Nothing really happens here, you could die on the street and people wouldn’t notice. . . My life philosophy is that you need a boring private life if you want to have a more exciting public life.” (An echo of Flaubert’s dictum: “Be regular and orderly in your life, so that you may be violent and original in your work.”)

In January 2019, Bregman attracted global attention when he used his first appearance at the World Economic Forum in Davos to excoriate his wealthy audience: “Almost no one raises the real issue of tax avoidance, right? And of the rich just not paying their fair share. It feels like I’m at a firefighters’ conference and no one is allowed to speak about water.”

(Bregman was not invited to this year's conference.)

He speaks animatedly of how the Overton window – the spectrum of policies deemed acceptable by voters and the political class – has shifted left in the wake of the pandemic. “In the Netherlands we had our own prime minister [Mark Rutte] – a classic neoliberal – who in parliament said I believe in a big state and, deep down, the Netherlands is a socialist country. What is happening here?” He notes that 70 per cent of Europeans now favour UBI (according to a recent poll). “It’s a wonderful time to be a social democrat.”

But much the same was said after the 2008 financial crisis, why should this time prove different? “Progressives are better prepared than last time. I think after 2008 you could see the alternatives were not really there, but since then we’ve had Occupy, we’ve had the rise of Thomas Piketty as a rock star economist.”

He must, however, feel less hopeful of a world of open borders? “You’re right and here I am outside of the mainstream.” He warns of the consequences of long-term immigration controls: “Contact is the best medicine against hate, racism and prejudice. It’s something that we should be very wary of, the more segregation we have, the more of a problem that’s going to be.” But he maintains: “It’s a bad time to be a xenophobe and a populist because the usual rhetoric from the Trumps of the world doesn’t seem to work.”

In *Humankind*, Bregman quotes Chekhov: “Man will become better when you show him what he is like.” The notion that we already have the capacity to radically improve the world is both an exhilarating and a daunting one. What if pessimism is vindicated? Bregman measures his words with care: “Optimism is an alibi for complacency while hope impels you to act; it’s about possibilities.” ●

FIRST THOUGHTS

Government propaganda on the BBC, antibody tests and news industry carnage

Peter Wilby



The government’s daily press conferences, televised live on BBC One, have become little more than propaganda. Ministers recite dubious figures of tests completed, personal protection equipment secured and billions of pounds handed out to show they are busy, competent and caring. Questions, from journalists and the public, are too random to put them under scrutiny. Ministers thus build up political capital while opposition party leaders lack any comparable exposure.

I cannot think why Labour MPs aren’t making more fuss about this. The proper forum for ministerial statements is the House of Commons. Cross-examination should come from honourable members. There is no reason why such sessions shouldn’t be on the BBC. Government scientists could still hold press conferences, presenting data, but those fronted by ministers should end now.

Promises made

Alok Sharma, the Business Secretary, drones on in a monotone voice suitable for presenting the mid-year results of a firm of chartered accountants. So when I heard him say 30 million vaccine doses against Covid-19 could be ready by September, I assumed I had nodded off and dreamt it. Then I saw the next day’s papers. There were ifs and coulds in what Sharma said, but there weren’t many of those in the headlines. Perhaps I shall be proved wrong – in which case, I shall eat my mask outside Loughton station – but I think this promise will be like the

ones made about tests. Expect to learn in September that 30 million vaccines are in the post.

Known unknowns

Ministers describe antibody tests, which supposedly reveal whether or not individuals have had Covid-19, as “game-changing”. Yet scientists tell us that the presence of antibodies may not guarantee immunity from reinfection. And even if it did, nobody can know whether the immunity lasts for weeks, months or years. These “known unknowns” must have been evident in early March. So why did anybody think that aiming for “herd immunity” was a sensible strategy?

Vice squad

“Platforms are not just taking a larger slice of the pie, but almost the whole pie,” said Vice Media’s chief executive, Nancy Dubuc, as she informed staff of 150 job cuts. The “platforms” are Google and Facebook, which take content from news websites but monopolise advertising revenue.

Dubuc’s complaint is echoed across the media industry. *BuzzFeed News*, which seemed to have cracked the challenge of attracting under-35s to serious news, has closed its UK and Australian operations. The *Financial Times*, despite gaining 50,000 digital subscribers this year, has cut senior staff salaries by at least 10 per cent. The

Economist Group has cut 90 jobs. The business news website *Quartz* has reduced its workforce by 40 per cent and closed its London, San Francisco, Hong Kong and Washington, DC offices.

The epidemic is the immediate cause of this pain, but the malaise is deeper. Upmarket or middle-market, paywall or open-access, aimed at middle-aged high-earners or ambitious young hipsters, digital providers of serious news, thanks to Google and Facebook, don’t have sustainable businesses.

Smoke screen

The *Daily Mail* published an article by the artist David Hockney on the merits of smoking. Evidence from France and China, Hockney points out, suggests smokers are underrepresented among those infected with coronavirus. Researchers are looking into whether nicotine offers protection against Covid-19. The *Guardian* was offered the article first and turned it down. The *Mail* accuses it of censorship.

Let’s be clear about two things. First, the research, which the *Guardian* has reported, is into the efficacy of nicotine patches, not the cigarettes that Hockney still smokes in his eighties; doctors say that when smokers do get infected, they are more likely to suffer complications. Second, “censorship” is something done by governments, preventing certain facts and opinions appearing anywhere. Newspapers use editorial judgement, which the *Mail* would do if I sent it an article praising trade unions. ●



TRENDS

Secret data and the future of public health

Why the NHS has turned to Palantir

By *Oscar Williams*

In May 2003, the venture capitalist Peter Thiel and four co-founders launched the data-mining company Palantir. Named after an all-seeing crystal ball in JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and initially partially funded by the CIA, the company has secured a series of contentious but lucrative public sector contracts in the US, covering predictive policing, migrant surveillance and the development of battlefield software. But 17 years later, it is Palantir's work with the British government that is now under scrutiny.

In late March, the BBC revealed that the company, which is valued at more than £9bn, was one of several businesses, including Google, Microsoft, Amazon and the London data analysis company Faculty, that had been enlisted to build the Covid-19 "data store". The project, which

draws on 1,000 data sources per day, including anonymised Covid-19 test results and patient information, was conceived by NHSX, the National Health Service's digital transformation unit, to assess and predict demand.

NHSX hopes the project will guide government strategy and allow hospitals to coordinate the distribution of ventilators and other resources in the fight against coronavirus.

The project may aid the NHS's response to the crisis, but there are concerns over data privacy, lack of accountability and the long-term impacts on the health service.

More than 8,000 people have signed a petition for the government to "release details of the secret data deals". The Department of Health said on 14 May it would need another 20 days to consider whether to release the data-sharing

agreements, while assessing the balance between public and "commercial interests".

Palantir and Faculty's involvement with the NHS has drawn attention because they have played a large role in the project; Palantir provides the data engineering services collating the various anonymised datasets, while Faculty analyses the aggregated data. But the scrutiny is also driven by the companies' political associations.

The brother of Faculty's chief executive is Ben Warner, who reportedly worked with Dominic Cummings on Vote Leave. Warner used to work for Faculty and is now a data science adviser to Downing Street. Palantir, meanwhile, has been of interest to Cummings since 2015, when he reportedly told Christopher Wylie, the Cambridge Analytica whistleblower, he wanted to build "the Palantir of politics".

Thiel also has close links to the US government. A co-founder of Paypal and an early investor in Facebook, he was one of the few figures in Silicon Valley to publicly back Donald Trump, reportedly donating \$1.25m to support his 2016 campaign. In 2009, he wrote that he stands "against confiscatory taxes, totalitarian collectives, and the ideology of the inevitability of the death of every individual".

As *NS Tech* reported in April, 45 Palantir engineers have been working on the Covid-19 data store, and there is speculation that it can expect to win further contracts after the crisis.

NHSX has vowed that all the data processed by the companies involved in the project will be destroyed or returned to the NHS once the pandemic has passed. But a source close to the project suggested Palantir could be retained by the NHS to provide similar data-mining services.

Critics of the government's project claim there is an absence of accountability around the contracts. It was reported in April that the

deal did not go to competitive tender. Palantir has not previously worked with the NHS, but has been developing expertise in the UK healthcare space for at least two years.

The project's defenders say Palantir is well placed to process sensitive data, given that it is trusted by intelligence agencies, such as the CIA. A more pressing concern according to some observers is what the deal might mean for the health service's future.

"This goes beyond privatisation," said Lina Dencik, co-director of Cardiff University's Data Justice Lab. "What this will do... is to increase dependency on [Palantir's] technological infrastructure over time. The implementation of these technologies are restructuring organisational practices in such a way that risks displacing public infrastructure and the way policy is made. This gives [Palantir] enormous power in a different way to typical outsourcing."

Such fears have been fuelled by the NHS's complicated history with tech providers, as well as reports that the New York Police Department struggled to obtain analysis in a standardised format from Palantir after its contract came to an end in 2017.

Palantir did not respond to a request for comment about the dispute, but said that customers' "data and analysis are available to them at all times in an open and non-proprietary format".

Palantir's relationship with the NHS is likely to thrive under the Johnson administration. In Matt Hancock, it has a health secretary whose role as cheerleader for the tech sector has already raised eyebrows.

In Cummings, it also has a dedicated supporter who would like to remould the state in the image of Silicon Valley. The Covid-19 data store might be Palantir's first deal with the NHS, but it won't be the last. ●

Jess Phillips The Diary

My mother died nine years ago but she still received a shielding letter from the government



Embarking on writing a diary column – in the only place where my children do not endlessly bother me, on the left-hand side of my bed, sitting firmly in the groove I have sat in for weeks – is a little daunting. My diary is not spilling over with exciting events. The easing of lockdown has caused little in the way of easements in my own life. I suppose I could go Bridget Jones-style and write down my weight, which is certainly not a constant (in lockdown, what else is there to do but eat?).

I only have one parent now, so at least I didn't have to make them undertake an *It's A Knockout*-esque tournament for my attention. My mother died nine years ago, though she did recently receive a shielding letter from the government. Worry not, she is already shielded by her urn. Sadly, my father is quite elderly, has blood cancer and is himself in the shielding group – so we won't be hanging out in the park any time soon.

I have been able to take a walk with some of my girlfriends, which, after weeks with only men and boys for company, has been a precious relief. We had bumped into each other before we knew we had to be "alert", and were frankly terrified that by being together – even by happenstance – we would suffer the eye-rolling of passers-by.

I also went to Homebase, where I was bombarded by shoppers wanting to know when schools would reopen and when we could expect a vaccine. I have as much knowledge about this as I have about the plants I was buying, which will inevitably wither within the month.

My children's schools have been in touch asking if I want them to go back, though. I am lucky they are in school years that may return soon: my husband and I are due back at work and only have shielding grandparents for childcare. As a working parent, I don't see an alternative. Let's hope this has been better thought through than the non-existent plan to protect care homes.

A long time coming, a long way to go

While I sit in my bed-groove, damning my

spine to a lifetime of curvature, I have been working on the endless amendments to the Domestic Abuse Bill. The legislation previously killed off by two elections and a proration is back and, unlike those it aims to serve, seemingly unaffected by the virus.

The virus has shown the country, in vibrant technicolour, what it is like to feel unsafe in your home. It has allowed people to recognise that for some, home is a prison – and if you couldn't leave it, you would be at risk of severe harm and even death. The increasing number of domestic homicides in this time and the enormously overstretched refuges and support services in this country have, once again, put a spotlight on the struggle of those who live in fear.

The bill as it stands is not groundbreaking: at present it is just a shifting of the soil. Currently, it doesn't help migrant victims, it largely ignores children's experiences and doesn't go far enough to improve our civil and family courts. I sit here, safe in my home and surrounded by kind men who do household chores and bring me cups of tea, trying to create legislation that will actually break ground for those who are not so fortunate.

Vandals for justice

At the moment I am out and about, on the telly and in parliament, talking about violent perpetrators of abuse (spoiler alert: they are often men). This means that this week, some idiots thought that the way to prove me wrong was to perpetrate aggressive abuse towards me. Slow hand clap. I know what comes of speaking up; I literally wrote a book about speaking truth to power. Yet it never fails to surprise me how aggressively people will try to silence me.

This week I have been treated to fake pornographic images of myself, an online group writing stories about the abuse and murder of my sons, and people claiming that they have attempted to break into my home, following an actual attempted break-in and the vandalism of my office, which was daubed with "F4" – standing not for

Fred loves Jess, but Fathers 4 Justice. Nothing screams justice quite like non-essential criminal vandalism.

I do not hate fathers; I really like my own and wish I could see his face. I am pretty partial to the father of my own children, too, and nearly every father I come across who doesn't abuse their family. Call me picky, but aggressively attacking me and my family kind of proves my point.

The heroism of healthcare workers

This week was my eldest son's 15th birthday. I shall pause while you gasp at how someone so young could have a child so old who is now three inches taller than her. I have been given pause for thought myself over the past week about the birth of my son, because of the death from Covid-19 of a midwife who worked at the hospital where he was born. Safaa Alam was 30 years old. Her father had died only weeks earlier, and now her family have to face this loss.

My son, Harry, was born with the umbilical cord wound around his neck. He did not cry when he finally emerged into the strip lighting of Birmingham Women's Hospital. He was what they describe as "flat and blue". I remember it vividly. The Lamar song "If There's Any Justice" was playing in the theatre. A young porter was singing along, swigging from a can of Diet Coke and keeping me chuckling while the midwives rushed my baby off to a capsule to breathe life into his lungs. After what seemed like a lifetime, it became Harry's lifetime: I heard him cry. The air of calm that all the healthcare workers had created stopped me, a 22-year-old lying cold and paralysed on a slab, from losing my mind – and my son.

While I sing "Happy Birthday" to a frankly unresponsive and embarrassed teen this week, I shall wish that calm, professional preparation for the worst had been afforded to our healthcare workers, many of whom will never see their children's 15th birthdays. Thank you. Clapping is not enough. ● Jess Phillips is MP (Labour) for Birmingham Yardley

Stephen Bush Politics

Keir Starmer doesn't choose his battle before he knows he has won – and he has the Tories worried



In politics, the gap between a politician's virtues and vices is measured only by success. A few months ago, it was common for Conservative MPs to claim that one of Boris Johnson's strengths was that he didn't sweat the small stuff, which meant Downing Street avoided being pulled into passing rows that waste time and energy. But in the present day, it's hard to find Tory MPs who think that the Prime Minister's lack of attention to detail is a strength rather than a weakness.

When Jo Swinson's Liberal Democrats were doing well in the polls and her close personal allegiances with liberal-minded politicians across the Commons was helping to attract defectors, she was guided by a "close-knit team" of talented advisers. Now, a damning report into the party's disastrous general election has turned a positive into a negative: decisions about the party's future were made by an "inner circle" who brooked no dissent.

For the moment, Keir Starmer's vices are all virtues – at least as far as the average Labour MP is concerned. For the first time in more than a decade, Labour has a leader with a higher net approval rating than the party as a whole. Its prime minister-designate is, for now, an asset rather than a drag anchor. Starmer has made a string of impressive parliamentary performances, discomfiting first Dominic Raab, then Boris Johnson at Prime Minister's Questions. And these competent performances have lifted morale after the discord of the past few years.

Recent events have allowed Starmer to show off several of his good qualities. He is a master of detail, as one would expect of a former director of public prosecutions, and is up against a prime minister who prefers to use bombast and bluster in the Commons rather than to have his finger on the pulse of the government. Starmer is also adept at anticipating where the political battlefield will be. "Keir doesn't go to war before he's won," as one longtime ally put it. His first political demand, that the

government publishes an exit strategy from lockdown, has become the animating political question of the day.

The government remains ahead in the polls, but the private consensus in both parties is that the global trend for voters to reward incumbents during the early stages of the crisis will begin to unwind.

Starmer's approach in the chamber reinforces a political narrative that might well help him ultimately defeat Johnson: that the Prime Minister is a shallow dilettante and the leader of the opposition is a seri-

Starmer is often cited as an inspiration for Mark Darcy in *Bridget Jones*

ous operator for difficult times. Starmer is frequently cited as one of the inspirations for Mark Darcy, the love interest in Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (based on Jane Austen's Mr Darcy). If he keeps it up, you can see how the country might decide to exchange the flashy unseriousness of Johnson's George Wickham for Starmer's Darcy. There is an argument for the Conservatives in due course to replace Johnson with a steady administrator of their own: a role which either the current Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, or his predecessor, Sajid Javid, might, in different ways, occupy.

Meanwhile, Starmer has correctly predicted what the big issues of contention will be, whether on the debate over schools reopening or the relations between the devolved governments. But it's less clear what his position is on those issues.

On devolution, Starmer seems to be characterised by opportunism, criticising the government in Westminster for having a different approach from those in Edinburgh, Cardiff or Belfast, but without acknowledging that there are coherent public health reasons for the UK's four nations to exit lockdown at different speeds and with different strategies. On education and

the reopening of schools, the Labour Party's position is an exercise in avoiding blame.

The challenge of life in opposition, especially during this crisis, is: should Starmer's day-to-day priority be scrutinising the government, or constructing the case for its dismissal? Thus far, he has opted for the latter – and because he looks to be on broadly the right track, most Labour MPs are happy about that.

Starmer's team of advisers is seen as "close-knit" rather than a narrow cult. But who really has his ear? His inner circle is, at present, incomplete: the party is slowly hiring new parliamentary advisers and policy wonks to fill its top posts.

Starmer has a tendency to recruit those who broadly share his outlook and approach. Morgan McSweeney, his chief of staff, has long been considered one of the finest strategic minds on the right of the party and has been spoken of as a future general secretary for almost a decade. McSweeney, who was involved in Liz Kendall's leadership campaign in 2015, has spent much of the past five years working out how to win back control of the Labour Party. He put that experience to good use during Starmer's leadership campaign.

Simon Fletcher, Starmer's campaigns adviser, hails from the left – he was Jeremy Corbyn's chief of staff in 2015 – but is similarly feted as a smart political strategist. Claire Ainsley, Starmer's policy chief, is a former executive director of the anti-poverty charity the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. She defies easy categorisation, but those who know her use the same adjectives that are applied to McSweeney and Fletcher: "decent", "competent", "thoughtful".

What is not yet clear is which of Starmer's inner circle has the most influence – because so far he has managed to navigate the party across some tricky terrain without provoking major divides within his team. It often takes a political setback to reveal a leader's true influences and sympathies – just as it takes a crisis to expose their vices. ●

Helen Thompson *These Times*

I love football but the whole rotten edifice of the Premier League has been exposed by coronavirus



For the past month or so I have been wondering whether I really miss Premier League football. The first Saturday there was none, I rather enjoyed its absence. Being confined to the garden on a warm afternoon felt like a relief from the relegation fear that has had me, a West Ham fan, in its grip since our goalkeeper, Lukasz Fabianski, tore a hip muscle taking a goal kick in late September. That afternoon West Ham sat fifth in the table. When the season stopped, they were 16th, separated from the final relegation place by goal difference.

During this long football shutdown, I did panic at a headline suggesting a plan for five teams to be relegated, only to discover that this proposal entailed no clubs being relegated this season and five the next. In telling the story to my West Ham-supporting neighbour, I managed to alarm him as much as I had myself. But when a month later we ran into each other in the local park we didn't discuss football for the first time in the near decade we have known one another.

But dread isn't really an explanation for this absence of absence I experience each weekend. Relegation struggles are one of football's visceral pleasures for fans. In their near unbearable tension – when four or five clubs' fate can change with one comic mistake or one moment of sublime beauty – lies something close to the soul of how supporters experience football. You won't hear fans singing with more conviction than when, as they watch their club relegated, they belt out that they know they are, they're sure they are, they're their club till they die.

No, my problem isn't West Ham going down. It's the Premier League's whole rotten edifice, which this lockdown has exposed: the top clubs that wanted to use the government's furlough scheme; the players' absurd arguments against wage cuts; that the broadcasting contract looms over every move the Premier League considers; and the offensive pretence that fulfilling that contract would financially support the lower-league clubs facing ruin. One doesn't need to ignore the demons that haunted

pre-Premier League football to wonder what it means to love a game that in its highest professional form has become so bereft of any moral compass.

A season that recommences without supporters, where only those who can afford to pay for TV subscription channels on top of their match-day tickets can watch, in private, seems the Premier League taken to its commercial conclusion.

I remember West Ham playing Castilla (Real Madrid's reserve team) in the "ghost match" of October 1980. UEFA ordered the second leg of the Cup Winners' Cup tie to be played behind closed doors after some West Ham fans had behaved appallingly in the first game in Madrid. As I listened to the radio that evening, the stadium's emptiness

What I miss very deeply is football the way it once was

seemed pervasive. But the void was the fans' fault, and back then BBC radio commentary was an art form, an inexorable part of the game's cultural DNA, and not, like the television rights, an object of resentment whose gigantic revenue stream clubs must value more than the fans turning up to watch.

There have been moments these recent months when my mind has cast the havoc the virus has caused the Premier League as the denouement of a long story, one where the disease washes all the excess away and forces English football to start again. It is, of course, an illusion. I know full well that human beings have succumbed to apocalyptic morality since they first started telling stories about what happens when pestilence, or the flood, comes.

If the football season does restart in June, I also know I will watch all West Ham's games and that my relegation-fretting will return. I've cared for far too long about West Ham and football to stop now. When the grounds open again, I will be there, even

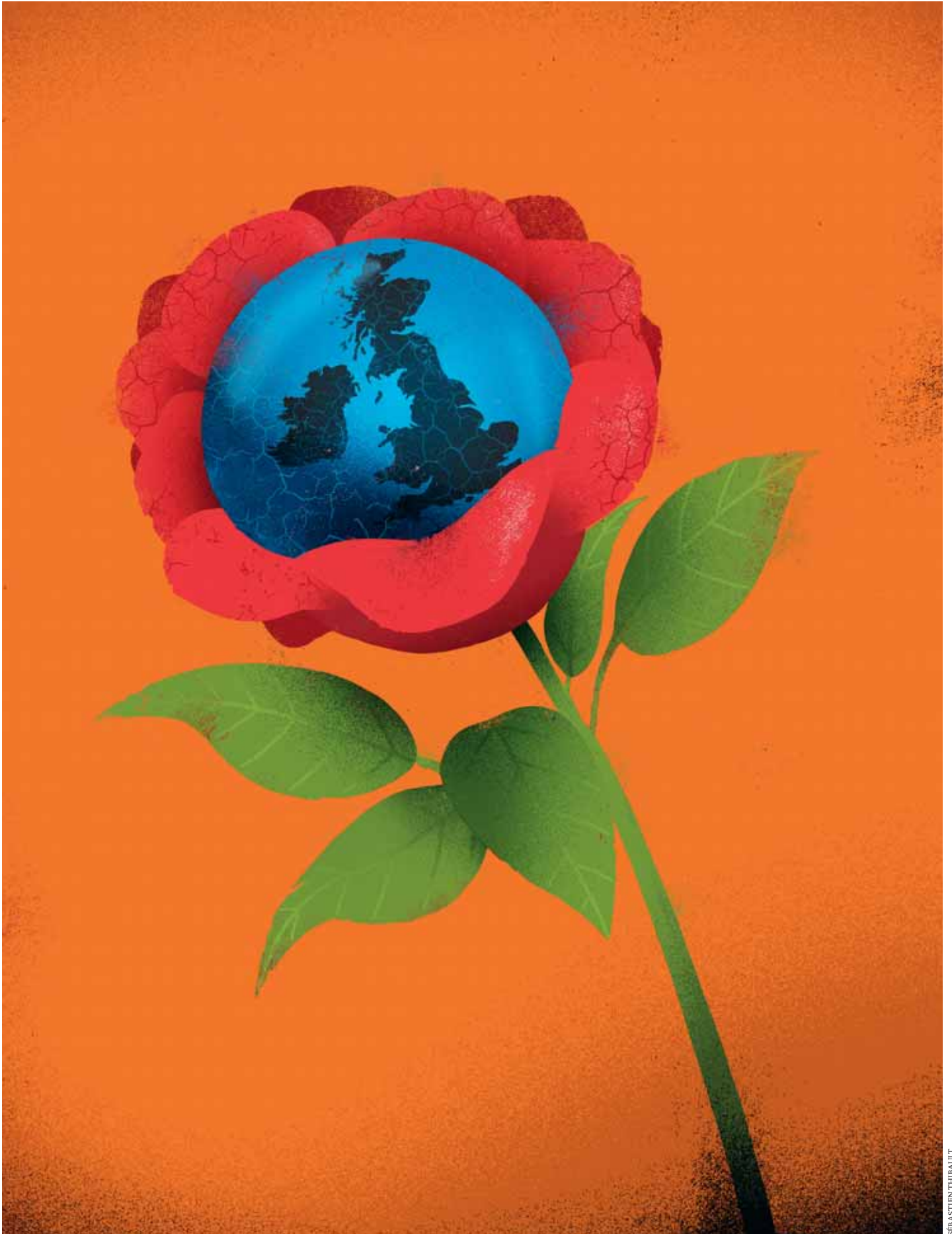
though I have never reconciled myself to West Ham playing at the London Stadium. When I am there, I am sure I will enjoy it because I still miss my match-day routines, my West Ham friendships. I probably miss the arguments about which players are to blame for the team's problems.

But these past few months have been a brutal lesson in what I have suspected for some time. My love for the club and for English football is now mostly about memory. The 10 May was the fourth anniversary of West Ham's final game at Upton Park and the 40th of West Ham's 1980 FA Cup final win when, as a second division team, they beat Arsenal 1-0. Reflecting on those two events, I unequivocally missed football. But what I missed very deeply was football the way it once was. And when I go to football now there is, somewhere around me, some other match present too, another place conditioning my emotions.

For the present, regardless of whether any more games are played this season, I want Liverpool to win the Premier League. But that victory would feel like what the past demands, a Merseyside redemption story that should be fulfilled. I would not have the same concern for "justice" if it were Manchester City 25 points ahead.

The first time I experienced relegation as a fan I was ten. West Ham lost their last match of the season 2-0 to Liverpool, and I sat in my bedroom letting the commentary on the radio dissipate, second by second, the last drops of a fiercely held hope. Four months earlier I had moved back to Nottingham, and the week before newly promoted Nottingham Forest had improbably won the First Division title under the leadership of Brian Clough. My parents said it would be understandable if I switched my allegiance to Forest. Rather pompously, I told them I was a West Ham fan for life. I was right. But I could not have conceived I would end up aware that I now support that football club out of time. ●

Helen Thompson is professor of political economy at Cambridge University



SÉBASTIEN THIBAUT

The Great Moving Left Show

How the pandemic could transform British politics

By Andrew Marr

Is this the start of a big left turn? The British death rate has been appalling. The politics of easing the lockdown – higher taxes, blurred rules – are already looking much harder than the politics of imposing it. The state has swollen hugely. You might assume, therefore, that the opportunities for Labour are real and significant. To which the answer is a resounding: hold on; be very careful; maybe.

Coronavirus has reminded everyone of the power of the state to act fast when it has to; and the value to society of public sector, mostly manual, workers. Obvious mistakes have been made on Tory ministers' watch.

The wider questions are more significant still. Does this global pandemic end a process of hyperglobalisation that began in the late 1980s? Will economies that are now much more heavily borrowed behave very differently during the 2020s? And above all, are voters likely to revise their attitudes to the “sweet treats” of recent times – from regular, cheap air travel, to out-of-season

imported foods and cut-price clothing? This is not really a Westminster story at all.

To try to think through its implications for British politics we need to hold in our heads two seemingly contradictory truths. The first is that there are a few events big enough to send political history in a different direction, and that Covid-19 looks like being one of them.

The second is that of the “now-next illusion” – the trap of thinking that today's vivid headlines are a good guide to the near future. Think back over the past few years. How long ago does the Cleggmania of 2010, and the revival of Liberal Democratic politics, seem? What's the influence of the dramatic Corbyn revolution of 2015 right now? Remember when Boris Johnson was defenestrated in 2016; finally scuppered, it seemed, by Michael Gove?

The pace of change in politics has been dizzying. Things have changed hugely in the past couple of months, but they can change back again almost as quickly. There

is an innate bias towards returning into the old groove, which excited commentators often forget.

We should assume that the political world in September 2020 will feel very different from the one of this spring and that the pressure to pick up things much as they were before Covid-19 will be strong. Of everything that wily master Harold Wilson said, “a week is a long time in politics” has slipped into ordinary speech because it is so usefully true.

The now-next illusion is a relatively banal concept, made interesting because of the tenacity with which our minds grab the immediate, crowding out the near future. An election result, a sudden rise or crash in the opinion polls – or in this case, the relative death numbers – can feel conclusive, even when we know perfectly well it concludes nothing.

So how does this fit with that first truth, that this viral epidemic can change everything? We must distinguish between ►

► important episodes in ordinary politics (Cleggmania, the spike in Labour membership under Jeremy Corbyn), and transformative, or hinge, moments. The latter happen when the intimate daily life of millions is directly affected in ways that don't then fade from their minds. The transformative moments arrive in the home and are remembered.

The overturning and rewriting of daily life during world wars is an obvious example, although in general I think the war metaphor for coronavirus is an awful one. Closer, more recent, examples include the 1974 three-day week under Edward Heath. This lasted from the beginning of January to the start of March, so a not-dissimilar amount of time to the 2020 lockdown so far. It too was a local response to a global problem – the oil-price shock – and it too had a direct impact on British households. Electricity rationing meant limited television and families using candles. Many workplaces had to shut down for at least some of the week. Many pubs closed. It was a moment when the politics “out there” walked into our private lives. Heath was never forgiven. People remembered.

The winter of discontent in 1978-79 did for old Labour what the three-day week had done for Heath. Again, ordinary, apolitical people noticed the rubbish piling up in the streets, the closure of parks and public services, the shortages caused by the lorry

hoarded. The military was brought in to help. Cobra was summoned and Blair hurriedly returned to London to direct events.

Alastair Campbell recalled this in his recent interesting, well-written philippic against almost everybody else in the *New European*. But apart from those directly involved, the fuel revolt has largely vanished from the national memory. The reason is that public opinion, having been behind the protesters, turned as soon as hospitals were threatened. The protest began to recede and, quite quickly, the government introduced budget help for motorists. The revolt was something most people noticed for a couple of weeks in the media, perhaps provoking them to fill up the car. But the government listened. The anger faded. Life went on.

This crisis is, of course, much more dramatic. A UK excess death toll standing at more than 50,000 people; the almost universal nature of the lockdown, and the potential damage to the economy – £300bn and counting, with big tax rises ahead, according to a Treasury document leaked to the *Telegraph* – make it more serious than 1974 or 1978, never mind 2000.

Both the three-day week and the winter of discontent changed the course of British politics, so it is logical to expect this crisis to do so as well. Although “now-next” is a useful cautionary corrective to keep in

It looks likely that the inquiry will come from parliament, rather than being a slow, judge-led one. Tory MPs will be marking their own ministers, which will make any criticism more biting. The blame game has already started, with briefings against the Health Secretary Matt Hancock.

But how will the public react? It's still early in the life of this parliament. The Tories are polling well. Ministers can't stop the public looking at the records of other countries that are out of lockdown before Britain, and with lower death rates. But there are similar mistakes occurring in France, Italy and even Germany. Britain has had her national successes, from the creation of the Nightingale hospitals to the dramatic funding of furloughing for employees. For the politically committed – Labour supporters, in particular – the government's failings may be obvious. But for the majority the situation may not be as clear-cut.

Today's ministers have forms of personal protection that earlier politicians did not. First, they have leaned on scientists, who are themselves generally respected. The crucial issue will be whether there was a lackadaisical, over-optimistic and not-quite-serious attitude at the top of government when the key decisions were made. But will the answer to this question be clear enough to sway the view of uncommitted people in the political middle ground?

That is crucial in terms of the national mood and verdict because this has been a national effort. We have fallen back fully in love with the NHS together, clapped together, given up social events and meeting loved ones together, and we have been frightened together.

But beyond that, we aren't experiencing the crisis in the same way. Being confined in a high-rise flat is dramatically worse than being limited to a big suburban house with a sunny, spacious garden. The gap between those who might be expected to keep working on short-term contracts in conditions that make social distancing difficult and those who can work from a new computer while sat at their kitchen table is a vast one. The generational divide and the higher death rates for black, Asian and minority ethnic Britons are other obvious divisions.

A politically brutal and angry time lies ahead, with a huge spike in unemployment and company bankruptcies over the next year, while taxes could rise by the equivalent of 5p in the pound, if we go by proposals in the leaked Treasury document. But there's also still an age before the next election.

There is a third factor which, to his many critics, seems incomprehensible: Boris Johnson has been, so far, a popular leader. When he fell ill and came close to death in

Government failings may seem obvious to the politically committed. But for the majority it may not be as clear-cut

drivers' strike and much else. It destroyed the government's incomes policy and its relationship with the trade unions. Again, it was remembered for a long time (not least because Margaret Thatcher made it a central part of her rhetoric).

One final crisis is worth mentioning, because it has been largely forgotten. I vividly remember the fuel protest crisis of September 2000 because as a reporter I was travelling with Tony Blair when his motorcade came up against lorry drivers bringing motorway traffic to a near halt. As petrol pumps ran out of fuel and refineries were blockaded, panic-buying spread around the country. In many ways, the episode provides a useful parallel with events this spring. The NHS had to cancel non-urgent operations and was put on “red alert” by the government. Supermarkets warned that they might run out of stocks. Hoarders

mind, this event seems transformative, not “political” in the usual sense.

Might Boris Johnson's Conservatives be able to ride this crisis in the way that Heath's Tories or Callaghan's Labour government could not ride theirs? That is quite possible. Nobody can say the arrival of Covid-19 was Johnson's fault. But then Heath was hardly responsible for the price of oil, nor Callaghan, personally, for inflation or a union culture that had built up over decades.

When the inquiry comes, it is hard to imagine that today's ministers will find it anything other than agonising. Keir Starmer's charge sheet from his first Prime Minister's Questions – that the government was slow on recognising the scale of the threat and on the lockdown, tardy on personal protective equipment, and slow on testing – will form the core of any critique. Care homes, too, will be front and centre.



The worst of times: rubbish piled on a London street during the winter of discontent, 1979

a London hospital there was a widespread sense of shock and grief. It wasn't all con- fected by an unctuously hand-rubbing "Tory press". His recovery and the arrival of his son were welcomed as good news by people who don't consider themselves natural Conservatives. His recent address on ending the lockdown, however short on essential detail, showed him finding a new, more serious tone. He is a man who learns.

Johnson is also still a relatively new prime minister. He doesn't face the weariness people felt when they watched Edward Heath or James Callaghan. Starmer's cau- tious, more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger, dryly sceptical tone feels well judged. The left is frustrated that he has not gone straight into "they are trying to cull the working classes" denunciation mode, but this is still the time for questions.

All of that is the case for the coronavirus crisis *not* taking Britain in a radically different direction. Even so, I think it will. Let's turn to the other side of the account.

Covid-19 is re-teaching us old lessons about the state – and here alone parallels with wartime conditions are not completely fanciful. When it needs to, it seems that the state can act with remarkable speed. It can kit out huge, modern hospitals in days. It can tell tens of millions of individualistic,

strop- py people how to change their lives, in excruciating detail – and be largely obeyed.

It can close down much of the economy, and yet use its power to bring millions of people on to the public payroll, while sup- porting individual companies in ways that would, in normal times, be regarded as a Stalinist fantasy.

Yes, the state has also made plenty of mistakes. But in the end, it has shown its might. Privately run companies slash their workforces and beg for help: even under Conservative control, the Treasury steps in.

Much of what traditional Toryism said was impossible or bonkers – the huge rates of borrowing and spending, the new police powers, the daily behavioural instructions and the overt, frank, eager reliance on ex- perts – came about overnight, and with al- most no dissent. Discussions about the role of the state won't be quite the same again. Beatrice Webb would be skipping around her garden, arm in arm with Sidney, singing secular hymns.

Meanwhile, the authority of the trade union movement may also be on the up. When union leaders urge caution and safety-first in the return to work, they are going with the grain of recent government advice, and nervous public opinion. Union criticism of the gig economy and short-term contracts will have sounded more resonant in wor- ried households up and down the country during lockdown.

We have all, meanwhile, rediscovered the importance of basic, public, physical work: the refuse workers and delivery drivers who kept going; the cleaners, the care home staff. A politics that speaks to them, and for them, is going to sound ever more patriotic and of the moment.

All this seems to roll the pitch in Labour's favour, even before the real political trouble for the government starts. That comes not when you are standing boldly at the podium during the storm, but when you're coping with the wreckage later. Winding back state support will be agonisingly difficult. Very many companies still alive today will go un- der. Who to support with state money – and for how long – will start to divide Tory MPs.

And then there's an even bigger question about how this is all going to be paid for. The recent leaked Treasury paper discusses new taxes on incomes, ending the pensions "triple lock", a public sector pay freeze, and renewed spending restrictions. Compared with a £55bn forecast deficit in the March Budget, it may rise to nearly £340bn. Even at low interest rates, this is an awesome extra borrowing burden, suggesting Brit- ain's public finances are as weak as they were when Clement Attlee took over from Winston Churchill in 1945.

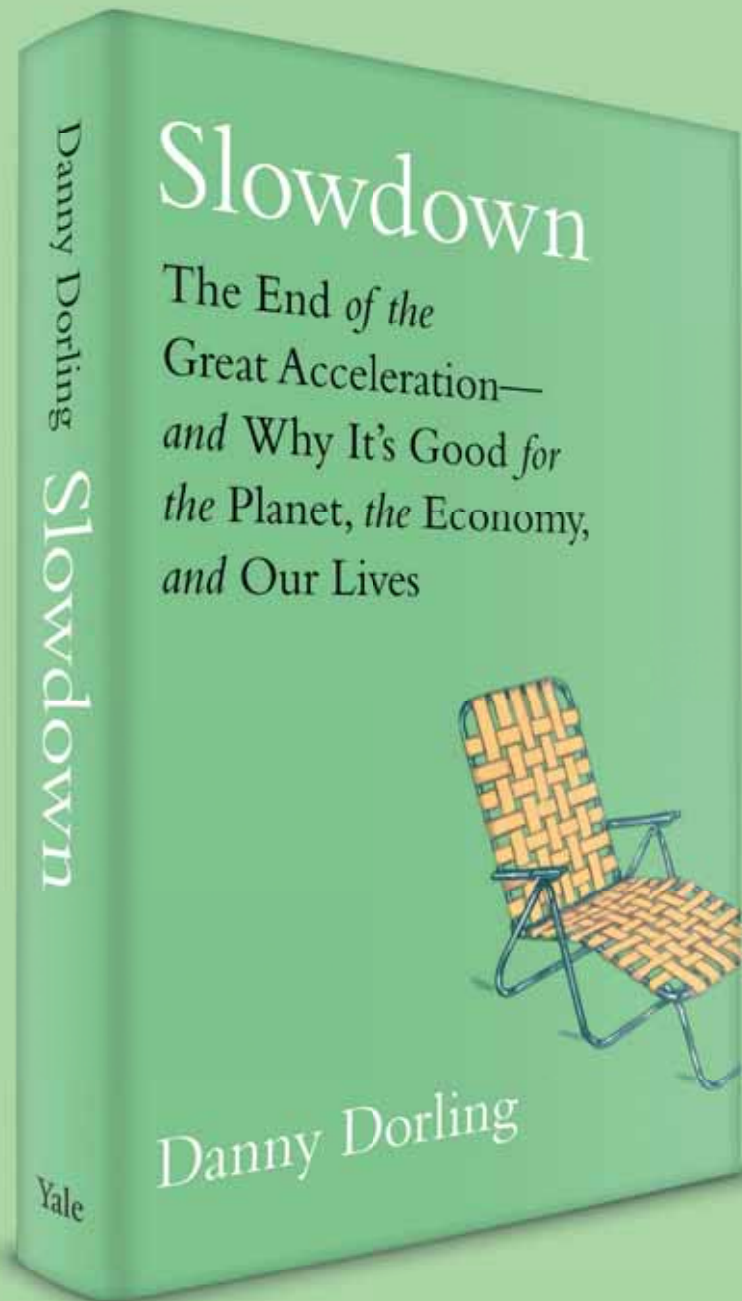
What to do? Johnson's problems are go- ing to come from the right. He appears to believe that a huge, animal-spirits revival of the economy will sort things out. That seems heroically optimistic. Conservative MPs elected in former Labour seats in the North and the Midlands will take one view, many radical Thatcherites the other.

Johnson's arguments after winning the 2019 general election would point to major public works programmes and borrowing as the way out. A higher spending, higher taxing Tory party certainly causes trouble for Labour. But reviving the activist state causes internal problems for the Conserva- tives too. On the right of the party they are talking about Covid-19 being Johnson's Iraq War. He may soon find his 80-seat majority also gives rebels greater scope. Blair could give him a warning about the political perils of triangulation.

But nothing here is inevitable. Starmer will have to be remarkably adroit in re- minding people of the value of the state and the cause of poorer-paid workers, while leveraging open Tory divisions and exposing Tory mistakes – without sounding like he is simply hand-wringing or carping. This is indeed his moment, but only if he proves himself bold, sharp and fast on his feet.

Above all, he needs a big, serious, prop- erly inspiring cause. Labour does well when it sounds optimistic. The power of the state is only of any interest if you have ▶

Despite what you *might* think, human progress has been *slowing* since the early 1970s



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► something you really want to do with it. A bruised and slowly recovering Britain, burdened by high levels of unemployment, salvaged by much larger amounts of state action than usual, will need a good reason to change direction. Post-Covid class politics won't be enough.

Looking at profound problems in the eurozone, and public weariness over Brexit, I don't see a "re-join" agenda being that big a cause. Quitting the EU without a trade deal will cause a huge political row later this year. Companies bent under the pressure of the lockdown will protest loudly. But the economic catastrophe of Covid-19 may make it difficult for voters to determine whether job losses have been caused by nation-state ideology or the virus – a near perfect camouflage for those who want the maximum possible break. Again, Starmer's bland caution is eloquent; though a moment will come when bland caution isn't enough.

Nothing that we have learned so far from the outbreak across the EU itself is terribly surprising. The Commission has been slow; national governments have been much more important; support from the richer northern nations to the poorer southern ones has been niggardly. Countries with the best funded health systems, best educated populations and most trusted officials have done better in suppressing death rates. Perhaps, rather than advocating an earlier return to the EU, the left would do better to open a discussion on "how can we be more like Germany?" Or, if that is too provocative, the Netherlands.

Yet still, none of this feels galvanising. Labour needs to think about the biggest threat facing Britain, and we all know what that is. The obvious approach is to use the enhanced authority of the state, increased respect for science and current feeling of solidarity to push a revived climate change agenda. Global warming, which may soon threaten food supplies around the world, is a far bigger threat to humanity than Covid-19 or even the next "Virus X". (An antibacterial-resistant pandemic would be something else.)

At this point: a brief commercial break. The World Wide Fund for Nature's documentary, *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet*, will be released later this year. You are hereby implored to watch it. The film not only brings home the devastating impact we are having on our thin planetary skin, and the proximity of apocalypse, but it also offers ways out of this hideous dilemma that are plausible, affordable and attractive to anyone with a streak of romanticism. A state that can throw up a Nightingale Hospital in a few days is a state that



Essential viewing: David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet is due for release later this year

can throw up coastal barriers, reconfigure our energy system and promote much more sustainable farming and fishing.

As an added inducement, this is a rare policy shift that would not divide but reunite the Labour family. John McDonnell, the former shadow chancellor, is an enthusiast for the cause. A lively environmentalism goes back a long way in Labour, to the early Fabians and before: this was William Morris's movement too.

None of which makes it easy. Take flying. The extra delay and fuff, and the greatly increased costs of air travel after Covid-19 offers politicians a choice. Do they move Heaven and Earth to reopen the airports and support cheap flights so that business traffic and holiday companies are functioning next year much as they were in 2019? Or do they seize this as a moment to change direction, asking us all to reconsider regular flying as a basic human right?

Then there is the geopolitics. In global terms, Covid-19 has already ramped up the increasingly poisonous feud between Donald Trump's White House and Xi Jinping's China. A global recession followed by a global trade war would indeed make the echoes of the 1930s unbearable. But to stop importing so many material goods from the other side of the world would be an environmental win.

This may be the time to start thinking about making such a change. This spring many of us have been reconsidering our values – with life, friends and family mattering more; travel and consumption less. We have noticed bluer skies and faster growing

greenery as a result of a brief cessation in pollution. Nature bounces back quickly. There is something here to celebrate. Building a new green agenda needs optimism. It must be more than the politics of doing less and saying no. It can only be achieved by offering a brighter, better landscape and healthier life – clean air, revived local nature, more time – in return for less wearily repetitive consumption.

Again, nothing is inevitable. It will need big leaders with considerable courage and imagination. The first thing they will have to do is to distinguish pro-environment localism from nationalism. This pandemic demonstrates the interconnectedness of the modern world. It doesn't matter to most of us where an effective vaccine is discovered first. We have been learning lessons from countries as varied as South Korea and Sweden. Yet there are already the first signs, from the US to Austria and Italy, that a pandemic spurs nationalism. It's an obvious argument against open borders that the centre left will have to resist.

None of this is easy. Nor are predictions. But I would make, nervously, two tentative ones – an "if" and an "unless". If the Tories try to pay for this by returning to austerity, hitting public sector workers disproportionately, they will destroy themselves, as well as making Britain an even angrier country. And unless Labour uses this moment in politics – when the state has shown its power anew, and "we are following the science" has become a universal motto – to put a revived and popular environmentalism front and centre, then it will find getting back into power almost impossibly difficult. ●

“We can’t return to business as usual”

Anneliese Dodds, Labour’s new shadow chancellor, has quickly risen from obscurity. So what motivates her? And how will she approach Britain’s deepening economic crisis?

By Ailbhe Rea

It is a sign of the times that political interviews are now conducted over Zoom or Skype. This is what I had arranged with Anneliese Dodds, recently appointed to Keir Starmer’s new shadow cabinet, when circumstances conspired against us, and Dodds was unable to speak over video call. Instead, I joined the shadow chancellor and her two young children on their daily exercise. “I’m so sorry about this!” she said down the phone, the wind catching on the receiver and the noise of her daughter and son in the background, as they headed for their government-sanctioned walk around Rose Hill in Oxford.

The scene encapsulated the strange circumstances in which Dodds has assumed one of the most senior positions in British opposition politics. As shadow chancellor, she is leading Labour’s response to one of the worst economic crises the UK has faced for centuries; as a parent, she is, like everyone else, trying to adapt to the “new normal”.

Dodds’ rapid rise “from relative obscurity”, as some commentators have put it,

means that the public knows little about her. A former academic in public policy, she was a Labour MEP between 2014 and 2017, before being elected MP for Oxford East – where she lives with her husband Ed Turner, an academic at Aston University specialising in public policy and the deputy leader of Oxford City Council – in 2017.

Dodds also served on the shadow Treasury team of her predecessor, John McDonnell. New to Westminster, she was prepared to serve under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership, even though she is not considered a Corbynite. She now finds herself close to the top of British politics during a pandemic and an economic catastrophe.

So, who is Anneliese Dodds, and what will she bring to the role of shadow chancellor?

Dodds isn’t from a political family. Her father, who worked as a chartered accountant, she told me, “got annoyed by things that were unfair, but not in an organised, political way”. On her mother’s side, “there

was a kind of aspirational conservative attitude”. When recounting her childhood in Scotland and university years at Oxford, she does so with the hesitancy of someone who has never been interviewed about these subjects before. Born in Scotland in 1978, she had a “happy”, “ordinary” childhood in the Aberdeenshire countryside. “I suppose I was a little bit of a square peg in a round hole. When I was at primary school people thought I sounded very English because my dad was brought up near Manchester so I had a bit of his accent. Sometimes I got a little bit picked on.”

She doesn’t mention her education at Robert Gordon’s College, a private school of which another notable alumnus is Michael Gove. What looms larger in her memory is her first job when she was a teenager, in the local pub, washing dishes: “Two pounds an hour, before there was a minimum wage.”

Dodds’ politics partly comes from her first experiences of work. “I had a lot of friends who were doing the same kind of job that I started off on, but were looking



forward to a lifetime of being paid £2 an hour. That shaped my view of things. Then, when I went to university it was just in the run-up to the 1997 election and a time of great optimism. I was involved with the Labour Party from then onwards.”

She studied politics, philosophy and economics at St Hilda’s College, Oxford, between 1997 and 2000, which coincided with the early New Labour era. It was a “revolutionary time” of “incredible excitement”, a university friend of Dodds’ recalled. “We were all behind that [Labour] government.”

Dodds laughed uncomfortably at the suggestion that Tony Blair catalysed her politics. “It was the Labour Party and, I guess, the kind of heritage of Labour in Scotland and across the UK, rather than any one individual.” Like Keir Starmer, she is reluctant to define herself by Labour’s past. Only after our interview, when speaking with Dodds’ contemporaries from university, does it become clear that she could have discussed her political awakening in the New Labour years without

coming across as a “Blairite”. Her relationship to the Blair government was not uncritical, as photographs of her protesting against the introduction of tuition fees in 1998 attest.

“I hate talking about myself. It’s a Presbyterian influence”

It was a sense of being unfairly advantaged that drew her to student politics, first as Junior Common Room (JCR) president of her college, then as president of the Oxford University Student Union (OUSU, not to be confused with the Oxford Union, the debating society). “I felt it was extremely unfair that so many people weren’t able to have the kind of education that I had, the kind of opportunities that I’ve been given.” Her main interest at the time was improving the university’s outreach work.

Contemporaries speak well of Dodds, as one “deeply committed” to left-wing values and “incredibly intelligent”; “a rare JCR president who didn’t let her academics suffer” (she was awarded a First). Her old university friends say she was deeply absorbed in her studies, and fascinated by the background and theory of politics, but was still “someone you could go to the pub with and have a good laugh”.

A fellow JCR president remembered how she was “never afraid to make her point” in meetings, and possessed a “calm, thorough approach; a quiet strength and resilience about her”. Becoming OUSU president requires a particular kind of ambition and confidence. Did she have a sense of wanting to go into Labour politics?

“I didn’t particularly feel like that at that stage.” Choosing her words carefully, she continued: “I guess I’ve never felt inhibited about standing up when I think there’s an injustice. Certainly when I was at school I wasn’t frightened of doing that. I wasn’t frightened about what people might say.” ▶



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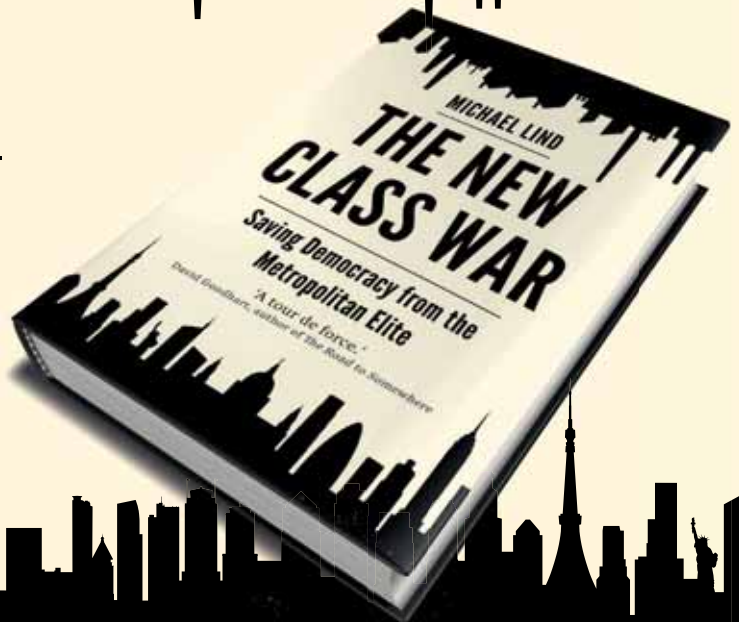
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► Does she have a memory of making a particular stand? She hesitated, then burst out laughing: “I hate talking about myself as well. This is a kind of Presbyterian influence from my childhood!” Unlike many politicians, she is reluctant to mythologise her upbringing.

Dodds has found her background as an academic helpful, “because for many years I was used to standing up and speaking in front of people who didn’t really want to listen to what I was saying”. Her research focused on how public policy in other countries could be applied to the UK. “In the UK we can be quite insular,” she told me. “What I think is quite interesting during this crisis is that we are comparing

contract in poor quality housing, and someone in Glasgow in the same circumstances.”

Dodds stressed that she doesn’t have “all the answers” when it comes to explaining Labour’s declining fortunes in Scotland. “It’s quite unhelpful when you have people from down south saying that they should dictate the situation in Scotland,” she observed, adding that the SNP has “been very clever” in adopting “a lot of Labour’s appeal over the years, and that’s made it very hard for us to develop a distinctive narrative”.

Despite having been an MP for less than three years, Dodds is popular among colleagues. John McDonnell has described her as “a superb member of my Treasury team”, “really talented” and “conscientious in all she does”. Dodds said she “learned a lot” from McDonnell’s efforts to promote

centre-left position in the party; ‘soft left’ is what it would be historically described as. Anti-austerity, investment in public services, not on the [Bennite] Campaign group side of the party.”

Dodds defines herself “just as Labour, and that should speak for itself. I have been happy over the years to work with people from all the different wings of the party. There is such a radical gulf between any variety of Labour and the kind of approaches that we see coming from [the Conservatives].”

After the party’s worst election defeat since 1935, MPs are cautiously optimistic that Labour’s prospects look brighter under Starmer. After a series of robust performances at PMQs, the new Labour leader has overtaken Johnson in the opinion polls for the first time. Although another general election is a long way off, Dodds’ chances of becoming chancellor are by no means fanciful.

How will she approach her role as shadow chancellor, as the UK faces recession? “Every member of parliament has large numbers of people contacting them whose lives have been turned upside down by what’s happened, whether it’s people who are directly affected by the disease in horrendous ways, or people who have lost their livelihoods, and who are struggling to keep a business afloat.” Her priority is “to make sure that we’re reflecting all of those concerns continually to government, making sure that people’s voices are heard as much as possible”.

Her other priority is “to ensure that we have a strategic perspective on all of this, making sure that we also have that chance to put forward our arguments for the future and how we come out of this. We can’t have a return to business as usual.”

Dodds’ approach to politics has been informed by the Labour Party members and activists she has known. They have taught her, she said, “about commitment and what that really means, always being open to people, and trying to get problems sorted out for people on the ground. That local experience is something that I try to reflect in my politics, and in how I conduct myself in this new role.”

Is there not a distinction between front-line politics and the politics of the grass-roots? “I don’t think there is. The political point that I would want to make is that in the Labour Party we always say that we’ve got to connect well with our grass-roots and work more with local councillors. We don’t always get it right, but we need to get it right. That is what socialism looks like in reality.” ●

There is a fascination as to what her “real” politics will turn out to be now she is not serving under Corbyn

ourselves with other nations and looking at how we can organise things differently.” She spent her academic career “always thinking, ‘Do we have to organise things in this way? What can we do differently?’” But she “always had one foot a little bit on the doorstep, and the other foot in academia”.

As a former MEP, Dodds is often considered an ardent pro-European, but “I was never somebody who supported the EU just for its own sake”, she explained. “It’s very much about what we can do, not just through the EU but through internationalist engagement generally. My view was always that we have multinational companies which operate across nations and therefore we need political forces that can engage with them.

“I worked a lot on international tax issues and tax dodging, but also competition issues – enormous companies like Amazon. You look at their throughput overall and it’s easily as large as that which passes through some smaller states. That means that we need internationalist political organisation, and you achieve that through a range of mechanisms. The EU isn’t the only one.”

As a Labour politician from Scotland, Dodds has found it hard to witness the left’s shift towards the Scottish Nationalist Party there. “Obviously, I’ve got a lot of friends who would describe themselves as being socialist and some of them have a nationalist perspective as well. I can’t see the difference between somebody who’s really struggling in Liverpool, is on a zero-hours

Corbyn’s economic policy in towns and cities across the country. McDonnell “keyed into the need to have that authentic input directly from people”.

Although many of these policies were difficult to sell to voters – a reality borne out by Labour’s crushing election defeat in December – those colleagues that I spoke to agreed that Dodds was “fundamentally loyal and hard-working to the team” in making the case for Labour’s economic programme.

This gets to the nub of Dodds’ politics. She served under Corbyn and has maintained good relations with the left of the party, but isn’t of that group. As with Starmer, there is a quiet fascination as to what her “real” politics will prove to be.

One colleague mentioned her pragmatism: “Very much in the mainstream, a fairly



“Po couldn’t believe the others had broken lockdown rules without him”



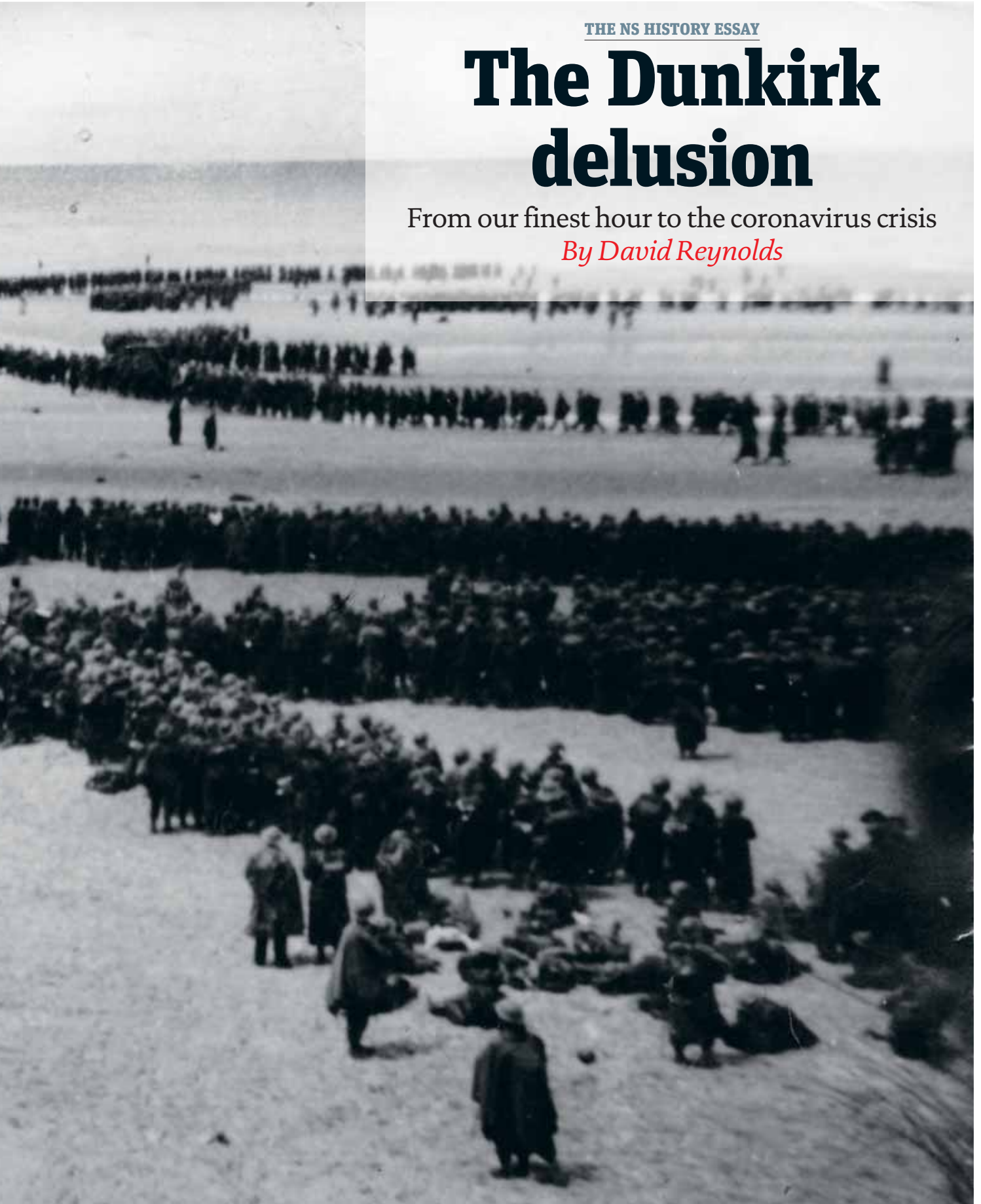
Stranded: winding queues of British troops wait to board the small boats that ferried them to larger vessels for transport back to the UK

THE NS HISTORY ESSAY

The Dunkirk delusion

From our finest hour to the coronavirus crisis

By David Reynolds



The story seems so familiar. Christopher Nolan's gripping movie of 2017 captured the highlights perfectly. Lines of British soldiers on a naked beach, praying for salvation. Enemy aircraft zooming in to bomb and strafe. Horror as Royal Navy warships are hit and the exhausted troops on board frantically struggle to escape their metal coffins. Intrepid Spitfire pilots going to the limits of their stamina and fuel to protect the boats below. The "little ships" manned by old men and young lads who arrive in the nick of time (cue Elgar) to help transport the soldiers back to the White Cliffs of home. There, amazed, they are hailed as heroes.

Dunkirk powerfully captures the frenzy of battle and the anonymity of sudden death. It also brings alive the unpredictable mix of courage and fear, panic and calm with which a group of human beings react to existential crisis. Despite being a saga of Britain and 1940, *Dunkirk* is a universal story (like the 2020 box office hit, *1917*) in which time and place seem almost secondary.

This is micro-history, detached from the big picture. The film gives us little idea why these men are on this beach. Its opening captions simply state that "the enemy" has driven them to the sea. No mention of the Germans. Only in the final shots do we glimpse two shadowy coal-scuttle helmets

Battle of Britain but also to the total revolution in global power politics that ensued in 1940-42. Exploring the world we lost along the road to victory may help us better understand Brexit Britain in 2020. And life and death under today's coronavirus shadow may, in turn, offer a fresh perspective on "our finest hour".

If the French do figure at Dunkirk, it's usually in a brisk side-story of predictable failure. Predictable because the German Blitzkrieg is seen as a demonically brilliant masterstroke, cutting through the Allied forces "like a knife through butter", or some such cliché that fits British stereotypes of ruthless Prussian military efficiency. And predictable also because the French seemed, well, "so French" – slow to react, still in shock after 1914-18, almost defeatist from day one. Winston Churchill caught that stereotype superbly in his war memoirs, writing about his visit to Paris on 16 May, six days after the German assault began, when he asked General Maurice Gamelin, the supreme commander of the French army, "Where is the strategic reserve? *Où est la masse de manoeuvre?*" With "a shake of the head and a shrug", Gamelin uttered just one word: "*Aucune.*" No strategic reserve. Stunned, Churchill turned towards the windows and gazed down into the gardens of the Quai d'Orsay. There he saw

incompetence of the High Command" but, as befitted a doyen of the Annales school of historical sociology, he found its roots "at a much deeper level" in the society, values and *mentalité* of a whole generation.

Underlying this interpretation is the delusion that great events must have equally great causes, reaching deep into the past – so that, in effect, the decisive moment has been decided long before. In reality, however, 1940 exemplifies a different theory of historical causation, featuring Machiavelli's *Fortuna* or what Frederick the Great called "His Majesty, King Chance".

In material terms, most historians agree, there was nothing inevitable about what happened in May 1940. The German armed forces in the West did not compare well with those of France, Britain and the Low Countries. Hitler could deploy only ten Panzer divisions, with 2,439 tanks between them. They faced a French army that was more fully motorised and with 3,254 tanks, as part of an Allied force totalling more than 4,200 tanks. What's more, most German tanks were inferior in firepower and armour. Nor did Hitler have clear air superiority: although France had been slower than the RAF in converting from biplanes to monoplanes, it had recently been reinforced by several hundred modern fighters bought from the US, and the overall balance again favoured the Allies (4,469 planes to 3,578). The Germans did have a definite advantage in some areas, such as anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons, but the idea that they enjoyed overwhelming superiority for waging modern industrial war is a fiction.

That's why, in 2000, the Harvard historian Ernest May, turning Bloch on his head, gave his own study of 1940 the title *Strange Victory*. Crucially, French leaders were unable to put themselves into the mind of a man whose bravura desperation generated one of the most audacious gambles in military history. As a result of their failure, 1940 became the fulcrum of the 20th century.

In the wake of the Munich conference in 1938, Hitler had concluded that the British and French were "small worms" who would not stop him next gobbling up Poland, especially after his non-aggression pact with Stalin in August 1939. But the worms finally turned and in September Hitler faced a war in the west for which he was unprepared. Yet he turned crisis into opportunity, boasting: "In my life I've always gone for broke." Aware that Germany had little chance of winning a prolonged conflict once the global empires of Britain and France had been fully mobilised, he demanded an all-out offensive on the Western Front that autumn. It was "a gamble," the Führer told his generals. "I have to choose between victory and destruction."

To keep the Panzer drivers going night and day for 72 hours, there were ample stocks of fuel – and amphetamines

on the edge of the frame. As for the French, they are background noise. Manning a roadblock near the start of the film. Or clamouring to join an evacuation boat and being sternly told "English Only!" There's also that laconic line from the Royal Navy operations officer at Dunkirk (Kenneth Branagh), "I'm staying, for the French" – a fleeting allusion to the courageous rearguard who helped gain time for the evacuation.

These lacunae expose the dangers of focusing on epic moments, pulled from their historical context. "Our island story" has often been told in this deluded, myopic way, not least the tale of what now seems the proto-Brexit summer of 1940. Yes, we should remember Dunkirk. But not just to honour the heroism. We need to set the micro into the macro. That means situating Dunkirk in the Battle of France that precipitated it, one of the most astounding upheavals in the annals of warfare. It also means treating the Battle of France as overture not just to the

"venerable officials pushing wheelbarrows of archives" on to "large bonfires". The evacuation of Paris was already under way.

It is a passage of consummate artistry. In a few deft word-strokes, Gamelin's Gallic shrug and those "venerable" gentlemen evoke the *faiblesse* of the Fourth Republic. Watching the smoke from the bonfire of French vanities, Churchill struggled with "one of the greatest surprises I have had in my life".

Afterwards, many in Britain claimed they saw it coming because Thirties France was obviously "rotten" to the core. The eminent French historian Marc Bloch, himself a veteran of May 1940, penned the classic indictment *Strange Defeat* a few months later, though the book was only published posthumously in 1946. The "immediate occasion" of the debacle, according to Bloch, was "the utter



Master strategist: Panzer general Heinz Guderian, who played a key role in reworking *Fall Gelb*, sitting in a military plane

The first version of *Fall Gelb* (Plan Yellow) envisaged the principal thrust into Belgium in November 1939. There the German army would have encountered the main weight of the French army (104 divisions) plus 22 Belgian divisions and ten British. But the start date was twice delayed and eventually postponed until the spring of 1940. Over those months the plan went through several iterations, inspired partly by Hitler himself, which shifted the centre of gravity some 70 miles south to the Ardennes and then into France across the Meuse River at various points between Dinant and Sedan.

So, instead of a right hook, reminiscent of the fabled Schlieffen Plan of 1914, the strongest thrust would now be a left hook, codenamed Sickle Cut (*Sichelschnitt*), targeting the weakest French divisions placed behind the supposedly impenetrable Ardennes forest. What would happen if the Germans did manage to cross the Meuse was left hanging, but in the mind of Heinz Guderian – the Panzer general who, with staff officer Erich von Manstein, played a major role in reworking Plan Yellow – the logical end point of the left hook was quite clear: the Channel coast.

The risks were immense. Seven of Germany's ten Panzer divisions were allocated to General Gerd von Rundstedt's Army

Group A for the thrust to the Meuse. The other three would lead the feint into Belgium. Not one Panzer division was kept in reserve. What's more, in the first days of the campaign von Rundstedt's tanks were stretched out in long columns on four forest roads and would surely be detected by Allied planes if the Panzers did not reach the Meuse by 13 May. To keep their drivers going for 72 hours, there were ample stocks of fuel – and amphetamines, known as *Panzerschokolade* (tank chocolate). Even if the Germans did get across the Meuse into open country, they then would offer an exposed left flank to French reserve divisions along the Aisne river. Little wonder that one sceptic, General Feodor von Bock, claimed that *Sichelschnitt* was “transcending the frontiers of reason”.

But the plan was also driven by a “mad logic”, to quote the historian Adam Tooze in *The Wages of Destruction* (2006): the logic of a man who saw the world as a struggle between races and nations, in which only the strongest would survive and conflict was the mechanism of international selection. If war was inevitable and Germany's relative position would only deteriorate, it was therefore better to fight soon rather than too late. Making the best of necessity, *Sichelschnitt* actually followed classic Napoleonic logic: achieving local superiority by

maximum possible concentration of forces and maximum possible surprise. On the flanks – Army Group B in Holland and Belgium and Army Group C facing Luxembourg and the northern edge of the Maginot Line – the plan, on Tooze's calculations, conceded two to one superiority to the enemy. At the *schwerpunkt* – focal point – on the Meuse, however, the Germans could expect superiority of nearly three to one.

By May 1940 Berlin's once wary high command had been won over. The *Sichelschnitt* plan looked brilliant, on paper. But wars are not won on paper.

La Marfée looms over the west bank of the Meuse. A steep massif some 1,100 feet high, it's a superb viewpoint – looking out eastward across the Ardennes towards Bastogne, 50 miles away. Down below, to the north, on the opposite side of the river, is the town of Sedan, dominated by its vast château-fort – a site of memory for French and Germans alike. On 1 September 1870 the French army, led in person by Emperor Napoleon III, was encircled outside Sedan by the Prussians. Its humiliating surrender triggered revolution in Paris and the unification of Germany. The Marfée was the headquarters of Helmut von Moltke, the ►

► Kaiser's victorious commander.

Fast forward nearly 70 years to Whit Sunday, 12 May 1940. The massif was now a strongpoint for the French 55th division, from which its observers watched in amazement as columns of tanks belonging to Guderian's XIX Panzer Corps emerged from the Ardennes to grind their way through Sedan, virtually undefended. By evening they had reached the east bank of the Meuse. But the French blew the bridges just in time, and their artillery on the heights opposite were now in position to destroy the enemy below. Yet the French commanders rationed their fire, sure that it would be days before the Germans had enough engineers and artillery in place to risk a crossing.

French confidence was not entirely unreasonable. Getting the Panzers through the Ardennes had been no picnic. The four columns of tanks and trucks along the Franco-Belgian border – one of them snaking back 150 miles to the Rhine on 13 May – amounted to what the historian Karl-Heinz Frieser called “the biggest traffic jam known to date in Europe”. And operations in the north had been delayed by unexpected Dutch resistance, for which the inhabitants of Rotterdam paid a terrible price in the fire-bombing of 14 May. But Hitler's overall strategy worked. In Marc Bloch's image, the invasion of the Low Countries served as the matador's cape, distracting the French bull, while the Panzers delivered the fatal thrust on the left. And Guderian's lack of artillery – much of it horse-drawn and still stuck in the Ardennes – was to be redressed by another terror weapon: tactical airpower.

From 7am on 13 May, Dornier Do 17s bombed French artillery positions on the west bank with mounting ferocity. During the afternoon they alternated with squadrons of Junkers Ju 87s, the “Stuka” dive-bombers. The load each plane carried was small – a single 550lb bomb, often landing off target – but the psychological effect was devastating. The French could see the Stukas assembling high above, circling like birds of prey, before they broke into line formation and hurtled down almost vertically, amid a rising screech from their sirens. One French officer on the Marfée recalled how, as the first bombs came, “everyone tightened his back, gasping, teeth clenched. The earth shook, seemed to part.” There would be a few minutes of respite, before new waves of Stukas descended, again and again. In the end, he said, “we were there, immobile, silent, backs bent, shrunken into ourselves, mouths open so as not to have the eardrums burst”. Not surprisingly, many French gunners panicked and fled.

As French fire faded away, small groups of German soldiers – intoxicated by the



Hero of today: a mural of 100-year-old veteran Captain Tom Moore, who raised £30m for the NHS

Luftwaffe's success – seized their chance to cross the river in rubber dinghies and push rapidly forward. By evening shock troops of the elite Grossdeutschland Division had battled to the top of the Marfée, not far from the site of Moltke's old command post. As yet they had no tanks or guns. But young engineers, stripped to the waist in the heat, got the first pontoon bridge up by late afternoon and built a 16-tonner, suitable for armour, overnight. By morning on 14 May the Panzers were chugging across.

It was a similar story downriver at Dinant, where Erwin Rommel – commanding the 7th Panzer Division – got some of his troops across even earlier on the 13th. The following day, as the Germans consolidated their bridgeheads along the Meuse, the Allies began to fight back. French units mounted some piecemeal ripostes and dozens of British and French pilots sacrificed their lives in support. But it was all too little, too late.

By the afternoon of 14 May the Germans controlled the Marfée and the other ridges along the west bank, debouching on to the Bulson plateau beyond. Surveying miles of open country to the west and south, Guderian asked his staff (perhaps

rhetorically) whether they should create a flank guard facing south against a possible French counter-attack or begin the drive to the Channel. One officer (probably grinning) quoted back to Guderian his favourite maxim, *Klotzen, nicht Kleckern*. This has been translated by Alistair Horne – whose study of France in 1940, *To Lose a Battle* (1969), remains a classic – as, “Wallop them, don't tap them.” Guderian issued orders to wallop the French all the way to the sea.

Over those crucial five days from 10 May, France's High Command had been pretty much out of it. Gamelin, a military intellectual with a priestly manner, kept his HQ in the Château de Vincennes, just outside Paris – close to his political masters, remote from the front. He didn't even have a radio transmitter. The chain of command was clunky, communications were primitive and most eyes were fixed on what was believed to be the main battle in the Low Countries. Only on 14 May did the magnitude of the Meuse breakthrough become clear at Vincennes.

London was no better. Churchill, who had only become prime minister on 10 May, was preoccupied with the intricacies of forming a coalition government. He only



grasped the danger on 15 May when awakened in bed at the decidedly un-Churchillian hour of 7.30am by a panicked phone call from the French premier Paul Reynaud, who shouted (in English), “We are beaten; we have lost the battle.” The next day the prime minister’s encounter with Gamelin in Paris confirmed that France’s will to fight was evaporating. Thereafter Churchill jugged desperately, maintaining some RAF fighter support for his ally while husbanding men and resources for “a certain eventuality” – Whitehall’s euphemism for French capitulation. But by 26 May it seemed Britain might well go the same way, with most of its army trapped on the Channel coast.

It was against this background that events at Dunkirk unfolded. On 24 May Hitler halted the Panzers – whose men and tanks needed to regroup after their manic 150-mile dash – and entrusted the Luftwaffe with the honour of finishing the job. He rescinded that order on the afternoon of 26 May but by then the French and British had created a defensible perimeter and Admiral Bertram Ramsay, from his bunker at Dover Castle, had improvised

an evacuation plan involving some 850 vessels spearheaded by nearly one-fifth of the Royal Navy’s 200 operational destroyers.

Between 27 May and 4 June some 338,000 troops were rescued from Dunkirk. About a third were French, most of whom (including Marc Bloch) were shipped back across the Channel to rejoin their army. Of the grand total, more than 70 per cent were evacuated from the East Mole (a concrete breakwater nearly a mile long), where they boarded destroyers and minesweepers. The fabled “little ships”, including pleasure boats, fishing vessels and Thames launches, therefore played a secondary role. But they were invaluable in ferrying men from the beaches to the big ships, and their impact on national morale was immense.

The British public was far behind their government in waking up to the crisis. The end of May was just three weeks since the war in western Europe had begun (comparable to the timespan in 2020 between Boris Johnson proudly declaring on 3 March that he’d been “shaking hands continuously” on a hospital visit and his announcement on 23 March of a national lockdown). People were aghast at the unfolding news from France and 26 May 1940 was designated a National Day of Prayer. That helps to explain the frequent allusions a week later to the “miracle” of Dunkirk. The dawning sense that this was now a “people’s war” was perfectly captured by those “little ships”. On his BBC radio “Postscript” on 5 June the author JB Priestley said that the motley armada’s “excursion to hell” and back would feature in the story told to “our great-grandchildren, when they learn how we began this war by snatching glory out of defeat and then swept on to victory”. The next morning the *Times* was already enjoining its readers to draw inspiration from “the spirit of Dunkirk”.

easily be exaggerated. Neville Chamberlain, once the arch appeaser, took the PM’s line, and Halifax’s own position was coloured by “despair” at the “frightful rot” Churchill talked “when he works himself up into a passion of emotion” instead of using his brain to “think and reason”. Both men were understandably living on their nerves.

It is also essential to remember that these cabinet discussions were conducted during the early days of the evacuation, when the outcome seemed grim. On 26 May it was expected that only 30,000 to 50,000 men could be evacuated; on 28 May Churchill told his colleagues that if they could get 100,000 away, that would be “magnificent”. The final total of a third of a million was not only a huge relief but also meant that Britain had saved what Churchill called “the whole root and core and brain of the British Army”, despite losing most of its heavy weapons. This totally changed the terms of the cabinet debate.

On 4 June Churchill warned the Commons not to delude themselves that a “deliverance” was a “victory”, adding: “wars are not won by evacuations”. Britain’s survival in 1940 was the result of many factors, some of them British – such as the country’s island position, the cutting-edge air defence system forged in the 1930s, Churchill’s leadership and the heroism of the RAF – but we should also remember that “our island” could still draw on the resources of the empire and that the Luftwaffe lost nearly 30 per cent of its front-line strength in the Battle of France.

Whatever the reasons, that Britain fought on in 1940 was of world-historical importance. If it had succumbed, aside from the implications for this country, Franklin Roosevelt could never have persuaded Americans that Europe was now

As a result of Hitler’s audacity and the failure of France’s leaders, 1940 became the fulcrum of the 20th century

In late May the inner war cabinet had considered a French proposal to try to dissuade Mussolini from entering the war. This broadened out into a discussion of whether to use him to sound out Hitler’s possible peace terms. In 1999 the US historian John Lukacs built up these five days in May into a moment that “could have changed the world” – revolving around a “duel” between Churchill and his foreign secretary Lord Halifax that replayed the Thirties arguments over appeasement. The duel can

their front line. The US would have stuck to defending the Western Hemisphere instead of building up Britain as the base for liberating Europe from Nazi domination. A different 1940, in short, would have meant no D-Day, no Marshall Plan, no Nato. . .

Britain after Dunkirk therefore played a vital part in eventual victory. But only a part. Once again, the dramas of micro-history can obscure the bigger picture, because the Fall of France revolutionised the whole struggle, turning it into a true world war on a ▶

► scale and intensity far beyond 1914-18. Throughout that earlier conflict, the French had always maintained a Western Front. In 1940 the Western Front collapsed in four weeks; it was not created anew for four years. Amid that power vacuum, the war was transformed in three salient ways.

First, Mussolini did indeed enter the conflict. After the fall of France, it seemed stupid for Italy not to grab some of the spoils. Yet his army was unprepared for war – as proved by the Greeks and then by British empire forces in North Africa – and had to be rescued by Hitler. But Il Duce had opened up a Mediterranean conflict that would distract Britain, and then the US, until 1944.

Hitler's triumph in France also changed his own position. Unlike the rumbles of discontent in 1939, the German high command responded rapidly to his order on 31 July 1940 to prepare an invasion of the USSR in 1941 – years earlier than planned. Having rolled over the French, they did not expect the Red Army – still recovering from the bloody nose inflicted by little Finland – to pose much of a problem. But Operation Bar-

myth of white racial superiority on which the European empires had depended.

The Fall of France turned the British away from the Continent, but it also triggered transformations of world politics that eventually eclipsed Britain as a global power. What Churchill called a “special relationship” with the US helped to shore up its international reach for a while but in 1973, by joining the EEC, the country seemed to have accepted an essentially European identity. Yet that did not prove to be the case. Brexit is an attempt to turn away from the Continent and go global, without accepting that the capacity to operate as a strong, independent power is far more limited than it was before the Second World War.

During this new twist in our national story, delusions about Britain Alone in 1940 have often been on parade. Boris Johnson loves to drape himself in the mantle of Churchill and to depict Brexit as the latest phase of Britain's heroic efforts to stand up against a German-dominated Europe. On 15 May 2016 the *Daily Telegraph* headlined one interview: “Boris Johnson: The EU

his party's ageing membership: “We have got to sound like we actually like this country. We have got to be patriots of the Britain of now and not the Britain of 1940.”

Of course, the national saga of 1940 was remarkable and truly historic. It has also grown more lustrous over time, together with the reverence for Churchill. Yet in 2020 this country is now in the grip of an existential crisis that will define the lives and outlook of all who survive it. This is also a “people's war” in which survival turns on the heroism of medical staff, continuing to work despite inadequate protection, backed up by thousands more in factories, shops, transport and supply chains who keep essential services going. The “front line” dead are disproportionately from the black, Asian and minority ethnic groups who, unlike 1940, now make up around 14 per cent of the UK population. And it's going to be a long war.

While the politicians fumbled, it was Britain's nonagenarians who managed to speak to the nation. Captain Tom Moore became a household name by raising over £30m for NHS-related charities by pushing his walking frame 100 laps around his garden ahead of his 100th birthday. His wartime service in Burma and his advanced years could have justified sitting back as a member of the “greatest generation”, but Captain Tom said that in 2020 “the doctors and the nurses, they're all on the front line, and all of us behind, we've got to supply them and keep them going”. They were the “heroes” of today's war. “I've always been an optimist,” he added. “I do believe that the future is going to be much better.”

The country's 93-year-old monarch also struck an apt note in her speech on 5 April, at the height of the Covid-19 panic. The Queen reminded the nation that she had experienced 1940 first-hand, recalling in words and images her first radio address during the Blitz. She praised “the attributes of self-discipline, of quiet good-humoured resolve and of fellow-feeling” that “still characterise this country”. And she expressed the hope that “in the years to come everyone will be able to take pride in how they responded to this challenge” so that “those who come after us will say the Britons of this generation were as strong as any”.

All very low-key. No reference to Churchill, the empire or the next 1,000 years. Yet maybe her speech helps to identify a “finest hour” experience for people of the 21st century – for Britain now not then. Spoken by a leader who, like Captain Tom, knew 2020 and 1940, to a country that needs to value its past and also believe in its future. ●

David Reynolds is the author of “Island Stories: Britain and its History in the Age of Brexit” (HarperCollins)

Today, while the politicians fumbled, it was Britain's nonagenarians who managed to speak to the nation

barossa, which began in June 1941, proved a very different story to the ten-day steeplechase from the Meuse to the Channel. The German army was totally unprepared for a long campaign against a vast country with far greater resources. To quote Hitler's biographer Ian Kershaw, the hubris born in 1940 led directly to nemesis in 1945. The war ended with the Red Army in Berlin, facing off against an Allied army in which the British were junior partners to the Americans. The two new “superpowers” soon began their own contest for mastery of Europe.

The third transformation unfolded more slowly but was global in scope. After Hitler's victories in 1940, France, Britain and the Netherlands were in no position to defend their Asian empires. Japan started to move into French Indochina and in 1941, after the initial success of Barbarossa, Tokyo's military leaders decided that this was their moment to go for broke, with a Pacific equivalent of *Sichelschnitt* at Pearl Harbor. In time the Japanese, too, were broken, but not before their victories in 1941-42 across south-east Asia and the Pacific had undermined the old colonial order. Images of bony British officers in baggy shorts signing the surrender of Singapore helped destroy the

wants a superstate, just as Hitler did.” And the saga of little ships has been deployed again in the Covid-19 crisis, as a shorthand for the improvisation needed in a crisis for which the government was unprepared.

On 18 June 1940, just as France was asking Hitler for an armistice, Churchill tried to rally his people with these words: “Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves, that if the British empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, ‘This was their finest hour.’” Nine years later he used “their finest hour” to entitle the 1940 volume of his war memoirs: exhortation was now description. And by the end of the 20th century the idea of 1940 as “our finest hour” had become a national cliché.

Yet consider the sense of “finest”: 1940 was the peak and it has been all downhill ever since. That also seemed to be the implication of Johnson's words on the 75th anniversary of VE Day earlier this month, celebrating “quite simply the greatest generation of Britons who ever lived”. Hardly a clarion call for the future. During the Brexit debate Tory minister Matt Hancock warned

Amelia Tait Out of the Ordinary

You can't always be productive – now, more than ever, we should bask in the glory of wasted time



I am both extremely good and extremely bad at wasting time. Good if you're measuring success via the quantity of time wasted – I probably have about two or three productive hours in an entire day. Bad if you're judging via the quality of time wasted – though I spend my days playing video games, diving into obscure internet forums, and (on one occasion we shan't talk of again) watching episodes of *Neighbours* from 2002, I never fully enjoy myself. Instead, my brain spends every wasted moment reciting mean mantras: *you are a worthless idiot, you are a stupid bitch*.

My time-wasting is so severe that I've been known to procrastinate leisure – to put off actually having fun. I might've finished work for the day and want nothing more than to sit down and watch, say, *Citizen Kane* (this is a lie to make up for the *Neighbours* thing), but instead I lie in bed watching clickbait YouTube videos. Yes, although I have an Olympian's stamina for time wasting, I am a Year 8 pupil on Sports Day when it comes to enjoying my wasted time.

This is becoming a bigger problem. As the world remains (mostly) in lockdown, we are realising, one by one, that we can't be productive for every hour of the day. Let's say you used to wake up an hour before work to get ready and have breakfast, and your commute was bang on the UK's average – around an hour every day. Let's say that after work you used to do something social for at least two hours – go to a film, eat at a restaurant, have a few pints. That's at least four extra hours you now have to fill every day. (For those with London commutes and complicated hair-styling routines, it's more like seven. For those with kids, sorry.) Surely we can all accept that it's not possible to be productive in every single one of these extra hours? And yet the self-loathing thoughts don't go away.

I'm not totally alone in my point of view – almost from the very beginning of lockdown, people began to argue that a pandemic is not the perfect time for productivity. On 6 April, the *New Yorker* published a piece

entitled, “The Truth About Isaac Newton's Productive Plague” in response to people who were claiming that now is the perfect time to write a novel/discover gravity. “The idea that the plague woke the brilliance in Newton is both wrong and misleading as a measure of how well we apply ourselves during our own plague spring,” argued the science writer Thomas Levenson in the piece. But even though we are now beginning to accept that we don't have to produce works of genius during lockdown, I haven't yet seen anyone go further and argue something I'm increasingly coming to believe: that it's now actually quite important to waste time.

Wasting time can be good for you – feeling bad about it really isn't

We don't know, really, how long lockdown will last, and we don't know what society will look like when we emerge. Those of us who are lucky enough to stay at home during this pandemic are currently playing a waiting game – we have to run out the clock. Many have already found that after baking a loaf of sourdough, painting a watercolour, or running 5K, there are still hours left in the day. The answer isn't to bake yet more bread (which, after all, contributes to the ongoing flour shortage). The answer isn't to beat yourself up. The answer is to bask in the glory of wasted time and ignore the mean voice in the back of your head.

Psychologically, this is good for you. For years, employers have bemoaned “cyberloafing” – the wasted time an employee spends on Facebook or personal emails during work hours. Yet more recent research has shown that cyberloafing is beneficial for employees. A December 2019 study from the University of Florida found that employees spend two hours a day using the internet for non-work purposes, and concluded that this is a coping mechanism that

allows us to handle stress and also improves job satisfaction. Conversely, a 2014 study from Johannes Gutenberg University, wonderfully titled “The Guilty Couch Potato: The Role of Ego Depletion in Reducing Recovery Through Media Use”, argued that when people feel guilty about consuming entertainment media, the psychological benefits of leisure are depleted. In short: wasting time can be good for you; feeling bad about it really isn't.

Yet it's difficult to reset our ingrained cultural mindset. If you google “wasting time”, the majority of the results feature the words “how to stop”. Time-wasting has been considered immoral by everyone from Immanuel Kant (who saw self-improvement as a duty) to Charles Darwin (“A man who dares to waste one hour of time has not discovered the value of life”) to a curlicue quote I once saw on Khloé Kardashian's Instagram Stories. This isn't a universal problem: the Italian phrase “*il dolce far niente*” refers to the art of doing nothing, and perhaps this is the art we should be mastering with our extra free time.

After all, Darwin spent five years on the HMS *Beagle* and who knows how long drawing zoological images. If he'd had access to cheap plane travel and a phone camera, perhaps he too would have seen the need to “dare” to “waste one hour”. But those who have studied Darwin's schedule have found that, on average, even he worked about four to five hours a day. Darwin spent his spare time reading, writing letters, walking and (hooray!) napping. Over the course of the past few centuries, our attitudes to work have become grotesque: a 2019 study found Britons put in the longest working hours in Europe (around 42 hours a week). Though we are expected to work eight-hour days, a 2019 study by Ginger Research found that the average UK worker is productive for just three of these – and yet the world still turns.

I don't know how to turn off my negative thoughts, but if I manage to, then the most productive thing I will have done this pandemic is to learn to waste time properly. ●

Jonathan Liew Left Field

Newcastle United fans back the club's takeover by Saudi Arabia. Do they bear moral responsibility?



“Keep your nose out,” one of the replies warned. “Go home, woman,” chided another. The insults continued to pour in. “Bore off, pet.” “Move on and stop trying to cause problems.” “Bounce, ya Turkish spy.” “Piss off.” “Go away, for fuck sake.” “You’re clearly being used by Amnesty.” “Nothing to do with us.”

Who, then, was this insolent provocation, and what had she done to stir such scorn? She was Hatice Cengiz, and she posted an open letter on social media urging the fans of Newcastle United to resist the takeover of their football club by a consortium backed by the sovereign wealth fund of Saudi Arabia – the country and regime widely believed to be responsible for the murder of her fiancé, the journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Alas, Cengiz’s plea was largely ignored. “You have suffered a loss, but end of the day it’s not our problem,” was one of the typical replies. Others suggested she was not his real fiancée; one user that “[Khashoggi] deserved everything he got, no sympathy here”. And although not all Newcastle fans would voice their disapproval in such base terms, the vast majority disapproved nonetheless. Asked whether they would be in favour of their club being purchased by a state culpable for numerous human rights abuses and accused of a litany of war crimes in Yemen, 97 per cent of respondents to a survey by the Newcastle United Supporters Trust said they would.

This warm embrace of one ruthless tyrant has its roots in the revulsion towards another. In the 13 years since Mike Ashley bought Newcastle, adding one of English football’s most famous clubs to his stable of discount leisurewear shops, he has become one of the sport’s most despised owners. If it was not the indiscreet Sports Direct branding plastered all over their beloved stadium, it was the ill-advised coaching appointments, the two relegations, the lack of investment in the training ground and transfer market, and the general feel of tawdriness, of a club

and a city having its sap steadily drained from within.

Having craved Ashley’s departure for years, Newcastle fans are not prepared to get too squeamish about who might replace him, or whichever grieving widows want to tug on their heartstrings in the process. This has, in turn, generated its own wave of condemnation. If, as human rights organisations believe, Saudi Arabia’s interest in Premier League football is driven primarily by a desire to paper over its crimes, to what extent will Newcastle fans be tangentially implicated? More broadly, to what extent should fans be expected to bear a moral responsibility that the game’s other stakeholders – players and coaches and sponsors and broadcasters – mostly are not?

Formerly engaged supporters are now passive and powerless

This is the crux of the debate that has been raging over recent weeks. When challenged, Newcastle fans are quick to point out that Saudi investment touches our lives in ways that barely occur to most of us. It is merely football’s uniquely prominent position in the cultural conversation, they argue, that has made them a target.

There’s a sadly revealing aspect to this reasoning. Whenever we use Twitter or Slack, order a taxi or food delivery via Uber, watch a Disney show, or click on an *Independent* article, we are using a product funded in part by Saudi investment. But that relationship is purely transactional, a simple interface of business and customer. Traditionally, the relationship between football fans and their clubs has always meant something more.

Certainly, when so many Liverpool fans protested against the ownership of US businessmen Tom Hicks and George Gillett a decade ago, or Manchester United fans against the Glazer family takeover before

them, or Newcastle fans against Ashley’s stewardship over the past decade or more, it was on this basis: that a football club should be more than an investment vehicle. That it is irrevocably embedded in its community. That in some important sense it belongs to all of us.

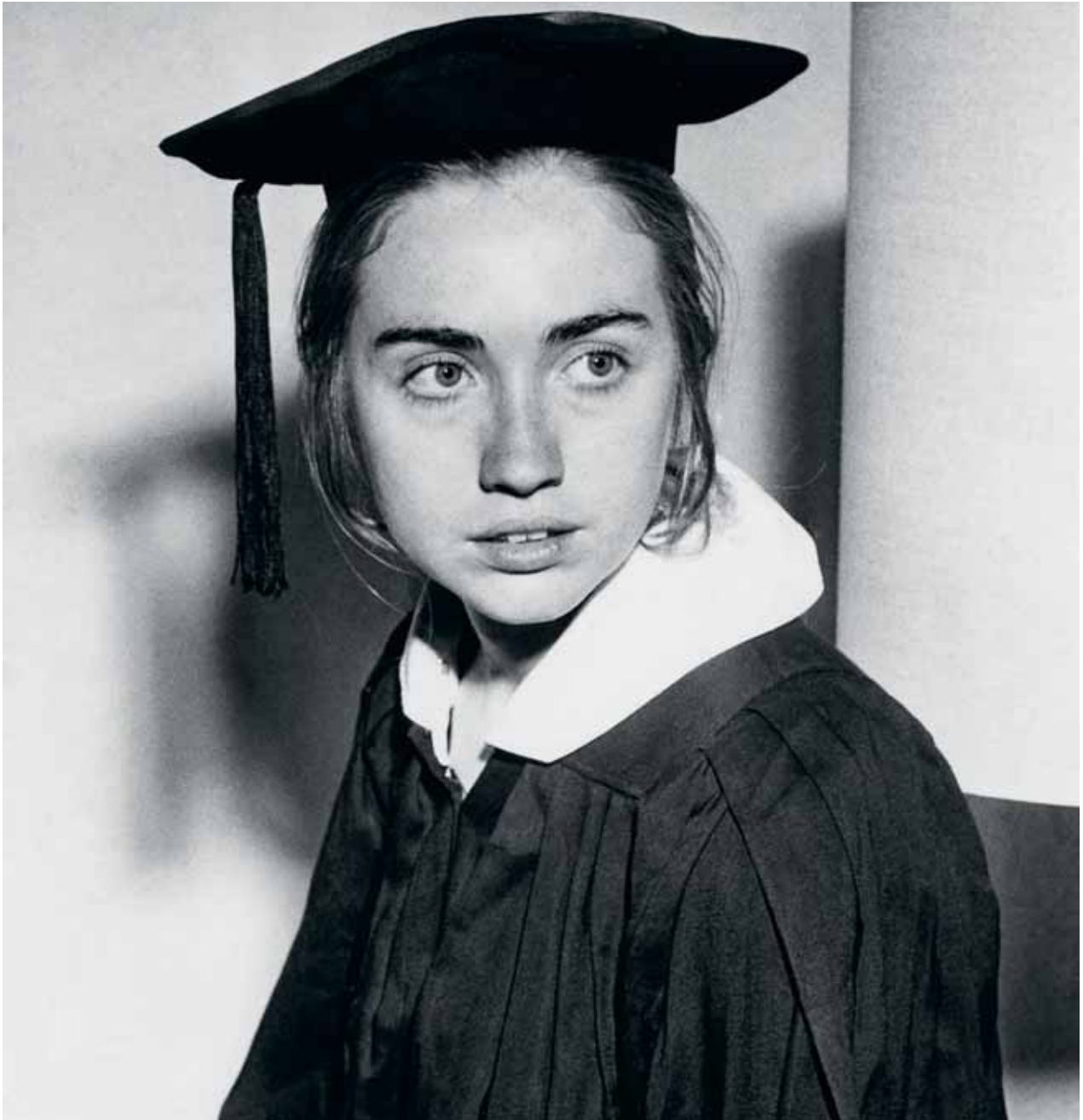
It is an idea that feels less relevant now, with Newcastle’s takeover on the verge of completion, and fanciful stories already emerging of how the club might splash its new wealth. As it turned out, Newcastle fans’ beef with Ashley had very little to do with zero-hours contracts, labour rights, his eccentric business practices or that he was the first Premier League owner to put staff on furlough, despite a club turnover of £179m and a personal fortune of £2bn.

Rather, his biggest crime in the eyes of supporters was parsimony: a failure to lavish his wealth with the sort of earth-scorching abandon that has rendered Roman Abramovich at Chelsea and Sheikh Mansour at Manchester City virtually immune to internal criticism. Even if the Saudi deal fails to go through (it is currently pending Premier League approval), Newcastle fans have already shown their hand. And currently, it’s holding up a middle finger to the widow of a murdered dissident in the hope of a few big signings in the summer transfer window.

This sounds like a blanket condemnation. In fact, it’s merely an admission of where fans sit in the order of things. Shorn of any real influence, deprived of any meaningful stake in their club, shut out of their stadiums for the foreseeable future, perhaps it’s no wonder that so many have simply plumped for the path of least resistance and maximum gratification. The sadness is that what football once liked to imagine as its engaged support is now better understood as a passive, powerless consumer base. It’s ironic that in many ways, this was a process that Ashley has spent 13 years trying to perfect. ●

Jonathan Liew is a sports writer at the *Guardian*

The Critics



JOHN M. HURLEY/THE BOSTON GLOBE VIA GETTY IMAGES

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Infected by ideas

For writers from Daniel Defoe to Susan Sontag, plagues offer a window on to a rapidly changing world

By Leo Robson

Is language a pestilence? Are bad ideas contagious? Is there safety in numbers? Are emotions dangerous? Or will they keep us going? Is the species frail? Is the species resilient and brave? Are we driven by prejudice and suspicion? Or can we put aside our grievances? Is love a disease? Is love the only cure? If you believe the successive claims advanced by the writing on infectious disease, the answer to all of the above questions is: yes. “You ne understand allegory,” a young woman chides her cousin, Pogge, in James Meek’s recent novel *To Calais, in Ordinary Time*, set in the 1340s, during the Black Death. Well, if that’s the case, Pogge would be hideously ill-equipped to confront the work of Meek and dozens of forerunners going back millennia.

At the start of the *Iliad*, the founding work of the Western tradition, the narrator commands the Muse to sing of the anger – “*menis*” – that emanated from the Greek warrior Achilles, killing countless men. Why did his anger have this impact? The direct reason pertains to military strategy – you don’t want a hothead for a leader – but Homer also aligns anger with deadly infection, and not just metaphorically.

Agamemnon, who angered Achilles, aroused the same emotion in the god Apollo, who vented his anger by cursing Agamemnon’s soldiers with a plague. By line 75 of the poem, anger has been thoroughly

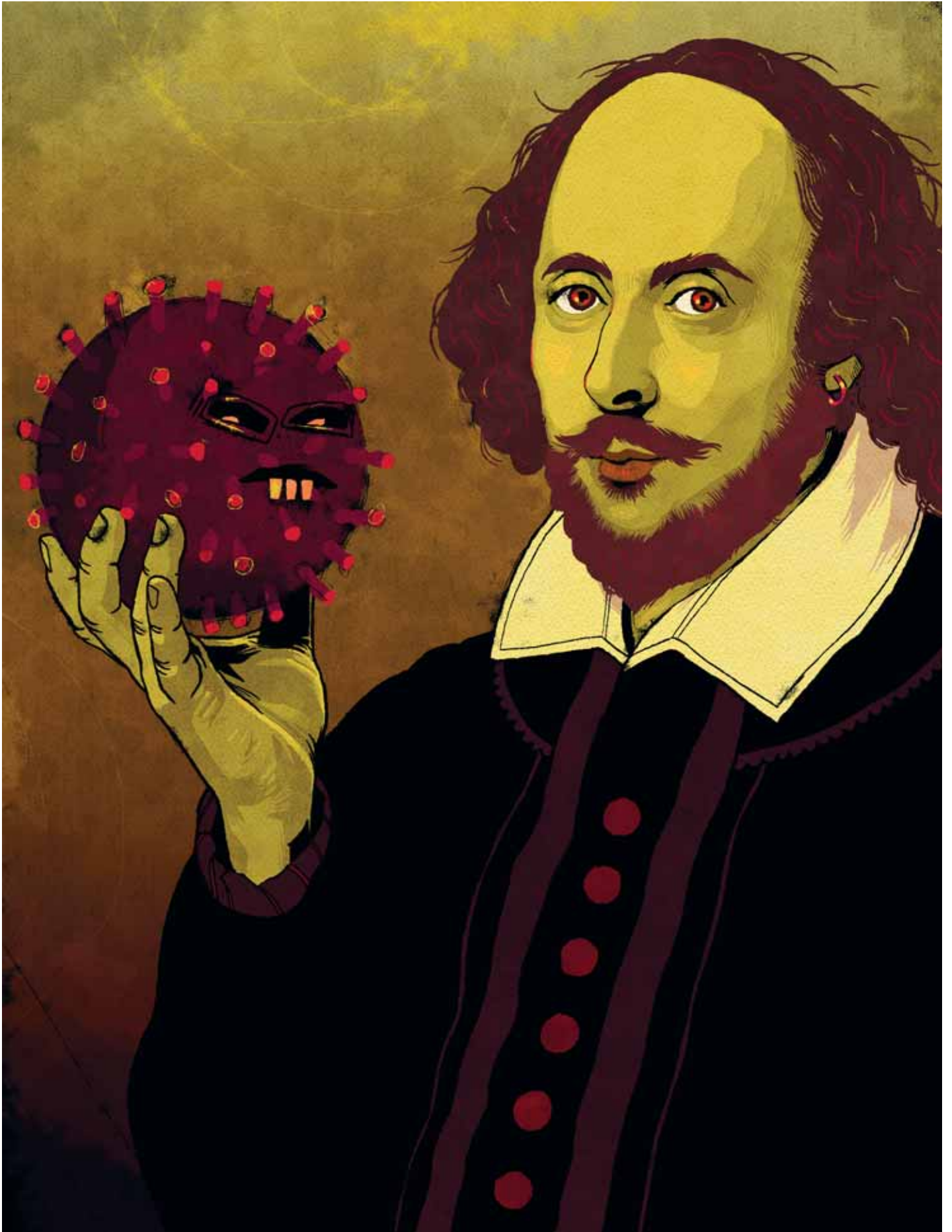
established as something that spreads and kills. (It’s believed that Apollo’s chosen vector was mice.) Acts of rage originate in other acts of rage, the airborne transmission of negative emotion being bolstered and abetted by real-life biological warfare.

The literary epic migrated to Latin by a process of contagion called “*imitatio*” or “*aemulatio*” or, later, “tradition” (handing-on) and “influence” (flowing-in). Homer’s most notable successor, Virgil, didn’t concern himself with epidemics – he was too busy with the line of genetic descent that culminated in imperial Rome. But scholars still scratch their heads over the multifarious symptoms and effects of the livestock plague he depicted in the *Georgics*, applying scientific thinking to a form of writing that was more concerned with symbolism. When the academic Eric Langley calls *Troilus and Cressida* “one of Shakespeare’s most notably plaguey plays” in his book *Contagious Sympathies*, he doesn’t mean that it concerns an epidemic but that its portrayal of gossip and slander channelled prevailing fears about communities being sites of contamination. In Langley’s account, *Troilus and Cressida* bristles with a mixture of real and figurative threats: “Atomic activity, invisible bullets, insinuating verbal volleys, objectifying gazes.”

Langley invokes the idea that the rise of individualism is linked to the rise of

infectious diseases. Following the Black Death in the 14th century, outbreaks recurred throughout Europe and the Mediterranean for centuries. The spectre of plague was significant not just in the history of medicine and society but of subjectivity – how we see ourselves and especially one another. Self-reliance became indistinguishable from self-protection. The whole Renaissance period, Langley explains, performs “a philosophical flinch” – away from community and solidarity towards “self-quarantined”. The network by which a virus spreads is built on the same principle as intimacy. And so intimacy – or at any rate proximity – must go. Shakespeare, somewhat inevitably, was in two minds about the validity of this position, understanding the neurosis while emphasising the allure of human engagement.

The bubonic plague that raged in London in 1665, almost exactly 50 years after Shakespeare’s death, exerted an inevitable effect on literature, and especially the new form that had emerged to reflect the rise of individualism. You might think that Daniel Defoe’s 1722 novel *A Journal of the Plague Year*, being set in London, would offer a noisy, urban contrast to his island story *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). But introduce the plague into a teeming metropolis and you’re soon left with silence. Folk memory of what had beset Defoe’s home town ▶



REBECCA HENDIN

► when he was a small child enabled him to compose another portrait of isolation and estrangement.

A Journal of the Plague Year begins with an account of “word of mouth”: the news that the plague “was returned again in Holland”, brought there, “they say”, from Italy, or the Levant, or Candia, or Cyprus. Testimonies vary. Voices conflict. The narrator, HF, composing his history at a later date, is looking back at a period where there were no newspapers to “spread” rumours and reports; it was letters from abroad that germinated gossip at home. Though he is an eyewitness to a historical event and trying to construct an official record, the writing heaves with metaphors that suggest Defoe’s

as being akin to “plague-infection”.

In Charles Dickens’s work, the phenomenon that he called, in *A Child’s History of England* (1851), “that terrible disease, the Plague” is a source of imagery for collective fevers. *Bleak House* (1852) begins with a single-word sentence that identifies both the setting and the theme: “London.” And what typifies Londonness? First, the deepening mud through which pedestrians jostle one another’s umbrellas “in a general infection of ill temper”. Then, the fog, which spreads up and down the Thames, catching in the “eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners”. In the chapter of *Little Dorritt* (1855) entitled “The Progress of an Epidemic”, Dickens writes that a moral infection,

infectious enthusiasm about Merdle’s offer, Dickens explains that it “is the manner of communicating these diseases; it is the subtle way in which they go about”. Even when Dickens was approaching the Great Plague as a historian, he wrote that it was urgent to cut off the dead from “communication” with the living. As metaphors impinge on real life, so reality becomes a tissue of metaphors.

In Defoe’s third Robinson Crusoe book, *Serious Reflections* (1720), the narrator defends symbolic allegory as being akin to all fiction-making. He claims that “it is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not”. If we’re allowed to make up things from scratch, then surely we are allowed to substitute a bed for an island, or represent confinement with shipwreck, in order to portray the feeling of loneliness. The next canonical novel devoted to portraying the onset of a disease – this time, a rat-borne epidemic in an Algerian town – was Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (1947), which takes Robinson’s creed as its epigraph.

It is striking that Camus felt as inspired by Defoe’s allegorical method, pursued and examined in the Crusoe books, as he was by another novel by the same writer on his exact subject. (Like Defoe’s HF, Camus’s narrator is an amateur historian working from documents and testimonies.) But then one of the things mobilised by plague is thought. The novel of contagion is always a novel of ideas. “This was where fear began,” Camus’s narrator writes after the citizens of Oran begin dying, “and with it, serious reflection.” Camus was using the subject to reflect on the impact of fascism – the “brown plague” that had so recently infected France – and also the compound of ideology and action known as colonialism.

Philip Roth restored the plague novel to the literal plane in his wonderfully intricate final novel, *Nemesis*, replacing the “194-” setting of Camus’s novel with a vividly realised 1944, in which a polio outbreak claims dozens of children in New Jersey. But even here, in a book immersed in a time and place and a real set of fears, analogies of contamination soon pile up: fascism, American anti-Semitism, the pervasive impact of the Second World War, and endemic flaws in human beings.

Roth’s title could be translated as “anger”, from the Greek goddess of revenge, bringing us back to the Homeric vision of the force that – with the help of gods and mice – lays waste to humanity. (“Nemein”, in Latin, means “I spread”.) Roth explores the question of what brings us down. This isn’t just polio or even European fascism. It’s the

Social epidemics, Dickens writes, originate with wicked men but soon reach good ones

intentions are not purely documentary. “It was a very ill time to be sick in,” he recalls. Sometimes the figurative and literal are divided by a mere semicolon: “The face of things, I say, was much altered; sorrow and sadness sat upon every face.”

A century after Defoe, Mary Shelley wrote, in *The Last Man* (1826), perhaps the first speculative thriller about a plague – a tradition that exists to this day and seems to have been unusually boisterous around 40 years ago, with Stephen King’s *The Stand* (1978), Dean Koontz’s *The Eyes of Darkness* (1981) and, at a lower level of cultural impact, Stanley Johnson’s *The Marburg Virus* (1982), which is being reissued this summer under the more putatively resonant title *The Virus*. But mass pestilence became rare in western Europe, and there was no plague novel that built on the innovations in realist storytelling developed by Defoe and his contemporaries.

Writers were keen to invoke plague as a by-no-means dormant threat, or – more often – mine the subject for symbolism. Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment* (1866), imagines a pandemic that has no symptoms beyond human estrangement. In *Middlemarch* (1871), contagion is present in the realm of human thinking. Mrs Cadwallader realises that her opinion of Dorothea Brooke had been “infected” with her husband’s “weak charitableness”. Members of the Vincy family exhibit an immunity to the evangelical mindset that treated “the few amusements which survived in the provinces”

like a physical one, can spread with the malignity and rapidity of the plague, and will lay hold on people in the soundest health and develop in the most unlikely constitutions. Human creatures, he reminds us, “breathe an atmosphere”, and it would be a blessing on mankind if the tainted were confined or even “summarily smothered” before their poison can be “communicable”.

It’s that old word of mouth again. The epidemic in question is talk of the remarkable financial return offered by the investor Mr Merdle. Where or from whom did the amiable and gullible Mr Pancks contract this prevalent disease? It would be no easier to say, Dickens asserts, than if he had taken a fever. Social epidemics, he says, originate with wicked men but soon reach good ones. When Pancks begins to hold forth with





Spread the word: John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* tackles the Aids epidemic through gossip

impossible decisions wrought by infection. Bucky Cantor, a Newark teacher, decides to make a run for it and seclude himself in the Pocono Mountains, but we later learn that he had already contracted polio. As in Camus's novel, a first-person narrator emerges from the community voice in the final section of *Nemesis*, to suggest the porousness of borders between the individual and the collective emphasised by plague-logic. During the half-century between *The Plague* and *Nemesis*, a whole sub-genre developed and to some degree faded out: fiction about Aids.

John Guare's 1990 play *Six Degrees of Separation* is a plangent comedy about the proximity of everyone on the planet that employs a narrative method based on gossiping: one character laments that she and her circle of friends have "become these human jukeboxes". So it's an ironic touch that Guare's hustler character manages not to contract the illness despite multiple acts of unprotected sex in 1980s Boston and New York. "I do not have it," the hustler Paul tells his victim-cum-mentor Ouisa. "It's a miracle. But I don't."

Aids posed a challenge to writers. How – as, say, a gay novelist writing in the 1980s – could you possibly avoid it? Alan Hollinghurst did so in his 1988 novel *The Swimming-Pool Library*, by portraying the "last summer" (1983) before homosexuals were wholly aware of Aids, relying on hindsight to cast a dark hue over his portrait of hedonism. And how to confront it? In the introduction to his book of stories about the virus, *Monopolies of Loss* (1992), Adam

Mars-Jones proposed "a customized form of the novel" – perhaps a footnote that interrupts and swamps the story. Susan Sonntag took a more conventional – though still powerful – route in her 1986 short story about the beginnings of the Aids crisis, "The Way We Live Now", portraying Chinese whispers pin-balling around New York:

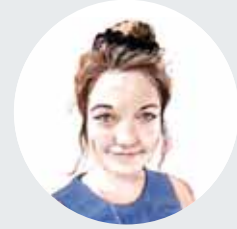
At first he was just losing weight, he felt only a little ill, Max said to Ellen, and he didn't call for an appointment with his doctor, according to Greg, because he was managing to keep on working at more or less the same rhythm, but he did stop smoking, Tanya pointed out, which suggests he was frightened, but also that he wanted, even more than he knew, to be healthy, or healthier, or maybe just to gain back a few pounds, said Orson...

"The Way We Live Now" is constructed almost entirely from telephone calls – gossip is being conducted not, as in the work of Defoe and Dickens, in cafés or on street corners, but by people in different living rooms. "I've never spent so many hours at a time on the phone," one character, Stephen, complains, while Lewis says that "when the phone rings I'm scared to answer because I think it will be someone telling me someone else is ill".

But while technology offers a parallel to disease in the speed and ease of connection – as a useful allegorical tool when telling a story about transmission – what it enables in reality is distanced, "self-isolated" living. So the route by which a virus spreads might be roughly akin to a network, but that's as far as it goes. Sometimes a metaphor is really just a metaphor. ●

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

Antiviral Wipe



By Anna Leszkiewicz

"This is a worrying time for all of us, but it's important to laugh!" Charlie Brooker sounds unconvinced as he says this, banging his homespun cardboard desk in frustration. So begins the coronavirus special of his comic BBC review show usually known as *Charlie Brooker's Screenwipe*. Starting "2,000 billion years ago, or 'January' as I like to call it", Brooker reflects on the weeks before the pandemic hit the UK, the ensuing government reaction, and the surreality of the "new normal".

There are plenty of laughs. Beautifully, almost poetically mild insults thrown at Matt Hancock somehow make him seem a more risible figure than any caustic barb could have done. He is alternatively described as "Health Secretary and your sister's first boyfriend with a car, Matt Hancock", "Peter Pandemic", "the estate agent boy", and "this boy called Matt Hancock", doomed to spend his days answering journalists' questions "like he was in a sort of call centre in hell". (I was delighted by a cameo from the *New Statesman's* very own Patrick Maguire quizzing the government on their economic modelling of various lockdown exit scenarios, which prompted a long pause and a polite murmur of, "Um, Chris, go ahead...") "Apprentice" finalist Rishi Sunak and Chris Whitty ("Tintin prematurely aged after watching his dog drown") get their turn, too.

By focusing on the weeks before lockdown, Brooker exposes the government's farcical inaction with startling clarity. Certain clips – such as the now-infamous moment Boris Johnson boasted of shaking hands with coronavirus patients – seem incomprehensible. All this makes for an hour of television that is frequently more rage-inducing than funny. ●



Scotland's heart of darkness

The SNP will not admit what it knows: that the economic consequences of independence are dire

By Colin Kidd

**Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgotten:
The Great Mistake of Scottish Independence**

John Lloyd

Polity Press, 224pp, £20

Speaking in the Commons in 1922, Winston Churchill reflected on the changes which the Great War of 1914-18 had wrought across the globe. A “cataclysm” had “swept the world”, drastically changing “modes of thought” and “the whole outlook on affairs”, while imposing huge strains on institutions in almost every land. But, notwithstanding this worldwide catastrophe, some things remained unchanged. “As the deluge subsides,” Churchill famously remarked, “we see the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once again.” The Irish Question that so preoccupied British politicians in the spring and early summer of 1914 hadn’t gone away.

A century on, will the Scottish Question, which so exercised commentators in the months before the Covid-19 crisis, possess the same enduring limpet-like purchase on politics? Or will coronavirus last so long, and have such transformative impacts on society and the economy, that when it is over Scots will find they have little appetite for another bout of major upheaval?

We have no idea. The recent Alex Salmond trial – puffed as the Scottish political sensation of the decade that would split the SNP – struggled for airtime as the media obsessed over coronavirus. Every Thursday evening Scots come out at eight o’clock to bang pots and clap for the NHS, just as they do in England – and with no perceptible sense that they are doing this exclusively for the NHS in Scotland. Rather an understated Britishness reigns. On the other hand, Nicola Sturgeon has been a reassuringly competent presence at the helm in Edinburgh, and the most obvious policy missteps have been those of the UK government in London. It is a standard rhetorical trope in nationalist circles to describe the UK as a “failed state”. Hyperbole, of course, but not without some traction in the bumbling Johnson era.

John Lloyd’s devastating argument against Scottish independence is predicated on pre-Covid-19 economic and fiscal realities. Of course, in our strange new normal these realities no longer constrain the UK Chancellor Rishi Sunak. But even when the surreal pertains, there still has to be an eventual accounting. What the pandemic has done is to make the question of Scotland’s share of the UK’s ballooning government debt paramount in any future calculation of the viability of independence.

The economic prospects for independence were already dismal – as the SNP leadership knows all too well, but is reluctant to share too openly with the public. Evasion, spin and obfuscation of harsh truths are all, inevitably, part of the weather of democratic life; and there’s as much point in complaining about these as there is in moaning about

grey cloud and drizzle. But sometimes the untruths involved are so enormous, their consequences and implications so devastating for the run of ordinary people, that the articulation of a big lie comes at a psychological cost to the politician.

The leading politicians of the SNP, Lloyd surmises, must experience this sort of foreboding. For they know that the first decade or more of Scottish independence, as an infant state struggles to establish its credibility with the markets, would necessarily be an era of deep cuts in public services. In particular, Scotland would no longer be the recipient of Barnett largesse; under the UK Treasury's Barnett formula, Whitehall currently funnels to the Edinburgh government an extra £1,900 per head each year above English norms. An honest slogan for Scottish independence might be, Lloyd suggests: "It's Scotland's austerity."

None of this is a laughing matter for the politicians involved. Certainly not for Nicola Sturgeon, grimly obsessed with independence from her youth, but equally committed to social justice. Does she ever wake up in the wee hours of the morning wondering whether the supposed long-run benefits of independence will make up for the certain material impoverishment of so many lives in the short to medium term? Lloyd asks whether the brightest and best in the SNP leadership "believe their vastly overconfident forecasts". They cannot know whether an independent Scottish state will provide anything like the standards of prosperity that its citizens now enjoy as part of the sixth-largest economy in the world. "The prospect," Lloyd conjectures, "for all their public confidence, must be, in reflective moments, terrifying for the party leaders."

This is the SNP's heart of darkness, the antithesis of the gleaming Scandinavian-style social democracy it outwardly promotes. Yet the horror is not confined to private nightmares. Conscious that the Pollyannaish optimism of the Scottish government's prospectus for the 2014 referendum – the 2013 white paper "Scotland's Future" – had not convinced the electorate of the viability of independence, the party commissioned a further study from its own Sustainable Growth Commission (SGC), headed by the former MSP Andrew Wilson and containing five academic economists on its 14-person board.

The report of the SGC, published in 2018, contrasted with the SNP's 2013-14 vision of a prosperous oil-based future. Rather the SGC charted a decade of difficult slog. Although the SGC's tilt away from milk-and-honey fantasy towards a grittier realism was tentative, and still accompanied by some selectively optimistic projections,

that was enough to earn a few marks of disapprobation.

When the SGC report was formally launched at the SNP's spring conference in 2019, its chair was not invited to speak. Moreover, the party's hard "Scexit" zealots did not like the SGC's recommendation that Scotland ties itself to sterling for the first decade of independence, and voted to amend the report accordingly. Not that the currency question yields any substantive positives for the nationalists. Professor Ronald MacDonald, Scotland's leading expert on exchange-rate regimes, forecasts that the Scottish economy's balance of payments deficit would produce a 30-40 per cent depreciation in the Scottish currency within five years of independence. The SGC's commitment to a market economy also provoked howls of complaint from the nationalist ultra-left. The SGC report remains the SNP's dirty semi-secret: technically in the public domain, but marginal to the national conversation.

Strangely enough, there's another embarrassment that the SNP scarcely talks about these days: oil. Whereas for half a century – and as recently as the 2014 referendum – the SNP binged on about oil-based prosperity, in an age of Extinction Rebellion and with the price of oil futures occasionally dipping into negative numbers, oil has slipped from the agenda, without so much as a mumbled apology. Yet, as Lloyd notes, if we remove the environmental issue from the equa-

Lloyd makes clear that economically the case for remaining in the Union is a no-brainer. Why, then, have nationalists and unionists been running neck and neck in the opinion polls? In December 2019, just before the general election, one poll had independence on 46 per cent, and its opponents on 47 per cent. In late January, independence was on 43 per cent, the case for the union on 42 per cent. Why have matters been so delicately poised, when the economic case seems so overwhelming?

Partly it's because of a complicated counterfactual calculus. Middle Scotland is attached to the Attlee welfare state; but how is that best preserved? In a UK where one wing of the governing Conservative Party – though not Boris Johnson himself – wants to expose post-Brexit Britain to the full gale of market forces? Or in an independent Scotland guided by social democratic principles? There is risk involved in either option. How can Scots be sure that the Barnett formula won't be scaled back as the Johnson government attempts to consolidate its position in the forgotten north of England? But would that be worse than the hair-raising trapeze artistry involved in running Scottish public finances in the absence of the UK safety net? Although, as Lloyd demonstrates, Scotland currently enjoys the munificence of Barnett combined with a wide measure of political autonomy, the SNP never bothers to mention that the undoubted social benefits which nationalist

An honest slogan for Scottish independence might be, John Lloyd suggests: "It's Scotland's austerity"

tion, the SNP was probably right to make the case for oil in the 1970s, when, in retrospect, there was an economically robust argument for Scottish independence. Intolerable as this must be to Scottish nationalists, independence was once a viable choice, but, crucially, is no longer: "Oil was the game changer which came too early in the game. Its growth, and that of the nationalists' support, were out of sync." If only the "political surge" had come sooner, or the "oil discoveries" had happened later, when the SNP had become the Scottish party of government, then independence could have made Scotland, with prudent governance, almost as rich as Norway. But that is no longer an option. The long-term future for North Sea oil looks bleak, with high decommissioning costs. How long, indeed, before we hear the disconcerting refrain, "It's England's oil"?

rule has brought come "courtesy of a large subsidy from Westminster".

Besides, we've already encountered the phenomenon of an electorate voting against its own interests in the 2016 Brexit referendum. Scotland is no different. There is a widespread desire to "take back control". The twist, of course, is that in the case of Scotland, it is EU Remainers that the SNP is wooing with the sorts of arguments that Scotland's double unionists – the 30 per cent of the voters who are pro-UK, pro-EU – rejected both in 2014 and in 2016. It is this group of voters that the SNP hopes desperately to win over, but of which the Johnson government still seems casually and obtusely oblivious. Every time a government minister plays to an English gallery of Brexiteers, a few small-c conservatives in Scotland decide to risk the ride on the ▶

► independence roller-coaster. While the Union still “serves Scotland best”, Lloyd believes that “Brexit strains it”.

The problem derives ultimately from what Lloyd calls Britain’s “no-constitution constitution”, the loose ensemble of statutes, conventions, prerogative powers and unreflective practice under which the UK is governed. However unsatisfactory to the tidy-minded, Britain’s uncodified arrangements largely worked – until Brexit, the moment when, as Lloyd argues, the long-silent English nation made itself heard. We did not realise that our multinational democracy was so fragile, that its continued success required pan-British competitiveness between parties, and the absence of stark democratic differences between Scotland and England. But that, alas, came all too vividly into focus the morning after the Brexit referendum.

Worse still, first Brexit and now Covid-19 have sucked the wind out of constitutional reform initiatives. Moreover, as both Labour and the Conservatives have become largely English-based parties, so their focus has narrowed. Does a Conservative Party strongly inflected with English nationalism really have the will, or self-interest, to unpick the UK’s lopsidedly Anglocentric constitution, especially in the wake of coronavirus, when even Brexit finds itself relegated to the pending tray?

Under Theresa May and so far under Boris Johnson, the Tory withdrawal from the EU has blithely ignored the fundamental principles of the 1997-98 devolution settlement: that whatever was not specifically reserved to Westminster under the 1998 Scotland Act falls within the remit of the Scottish parliament. Wavering unionists are under the impression – misleading or not – that the sovereign Scottish nation that voted on 18 September 2014 to remain in partnership with the rest of the UK has subsequently been, as nationalists believe, “dissed” and arguably demoted to the humbling condition of England’s vassal state.

Lloyd is right to be worried about the polarising character of any future referendum. Would a 50 per cent +1 decision give an independent Scottish government the legitimacy to tackle the crisis in the public finances with which it would immediately be faced? Moreover, how does a binary referendum even begin to capture the ambiguities of the typical Middle Scottish voter: pro-UK, pro-EU and shown nothing but disrespect by Westminster since 2016, yet whose public services are cushioned by central government at an extra £1,900 a head per year above English levels? ●

Colin Kidd is professor of history at the University of St Andrews



Counterfactual Clintons

What if Hillary and Bill had never married?

By Johanna Thomas-Corr

Rodham: A Novel

Curtis Sittenfeld

Doubleday, 432pp, £16.99

On the eve of the 2016 US presidential election, the American author Curtis Sittenfeld published a short story called “The Nominee”, which inhabited the mind of a former first lady now running for president herself. “It’s strange how much I feel and cannot say,” Hillary Rodham Clinton – for it is she – confides to the reader as she submits to an interview by a

combative female journalist at the time of the Democratic convention. It was a delicious, audacious, near real-time exercise in biographical fiction, teasing at the discrepancy between Clinton’s public, pantsuit-wearing persona and her real feelings. At a time when the whole world was looking at Hillary Clinton, here we were looking at the world with her.

By then, Sittenfeld – now 44 and the author of six novels plus the excellent short story collection, *You Think It, I'll Say It* (2018) – had already established a reputation as a writer prepared to do a little psychological breaking-and-entering in service of her fiction. Back in 2008, she published *American Wife*, a thinly veiled “fiction” memoir about the former first lady, Laura Bush. In Sittenfeld’s version, her heroine is a book-smart woman who secretly disagrees with her husband’s policies but whose guilt-ridden early years help explain why she silently stood by him through his disastrous handling of the Iraq War.

The novel, unfashionably sympathetic, became a surprise bestseller. But Hillary Clinton was always a more obvious choice for the Democrat-voting author. Sittenfeld has now returned to the defeated candidate. Again, she awards herself an all-access pass to Hillary’s mind – beginning when she’s a student – but while events in “The Nominee” could conceivably have happened, in the novel we are in a historical subjunctive, where after dating for four years, Hillary never married Bill Clinton. We can’t take anything from 1974 onwards for granted. “The present is the frailest of improbable constructs. It could have been very different,” as Ian McEwan wrote in his own recent counterfactual novel, *Machines Like Me*. Sittenfeld’s protagonist echoes that when she says: “really, it could have gone either way”.

The overall effect is very different from “The Nominee”. The short story was closer to a highly imaginative form of journalism than fiction. The question that kept you reading was: does this feel like Hillary? Reality provided the context. After the first third of *Rodham*, the context is fictional. Almost everything rests on how far you buy into Sittenfeld’s wayward, rather wistful vision of the past 40 years. The questions that keep you reading are hypotheticals: will this Bill and Hillary eventually wind up together? Will they make it to the White House – and, if so, in what order? But another question nags at the enterprise. Is this anything more than liberal wish-fulfilment – a chance to right not only the cosmic wrong of the 2016 election but everything leading up to it?

Rodham opens with an arresting prologue, in which diligent young Hillary delivers the first-ever student commencement speech at Wellesley College in 1969, a “bracing”, “idealistic” manifesto of “constructive protest” for a generation swept up in civil rights and anti-Vietnam War struggles. But the next 30 or so pages are stiff and flatfooted, cluttered with unnecessary detail about potluck dinners and legal aid work that

sound plausibly earnest – but plausibly dull.

When Hillary meets Bill, the troubling idea that this is essentially fan-fiction began to enter my mind, Sittenfeld the ultimate Hillary stan. The pair flirt by reading out their CVs to one another. The attention of the swaggering, sax-playing Southerner unnerves the earnest Midwesterner. “It doesn’t make sense that someone like you wants to be the boyfriend of someone like me,” she tells him.

The story becomes more involving once Hillary and “handsome lion” Bill start to sleep with each other, though the fan-fic atmosphere still looms large in the lavish descriptions of her “intolerable ecstasy”. There are scenes of naked sax as he serenades her with marching songs. Sometimes the histrionics just about work: “Falling in love was shocking, shocking, utterly shocking.” But I suspect that Sittenfeld simply felt duty-bound to go there – “he blew on the mouthpiece and held his fingers over the buttons” – in order to add the sex scenes that all the memoirs and biographies missed out.

More interesting are the early intimations of Bill’s “simultaneity of appetites”. When the pair meet late at night in a diner, he dips French fries into her ice cream and, at the offer to retreat to her room, orders more

Thomas of sexual harassment. Meanwhile, Bill runs for the 1992 presidential race but drops out over similar allegations. In this version, his marriage to a simpering woman, rather than hard-headed, legally trained “equal”, is what radically changes the alignment of presidential history. Bill couldn’t have done it without Hillary.

Sittenfeld gives us a compelling account of the career Hillary might have had, complete with all the sexism and media chicanery she would have confronted on her path to the Oval Office. Among the real-life characters she encounters is Carol Moseley Braun, the first woman of colour to be elected to the Senate. In this version, Hillary doesn’t believe Moseley Braun is organised enough to seal a victory and runs against her, prompting some chewy reflections on racial equality.

It isn’t her only dirty decision (there’s another crucial one involving Donald Trump). But Sittenfeld comes out squarely in defence of her heroine as she weighs up the human longings and moral reckonings that lead to such political compromises. “Sometimes I think I’ve made so few mistakes that the public can remember all of them,” says Hillary, “in contrast to certain male politicians whose multitude of gaffes and trans-

Their relationship is fuelled by fierce intellectual connection but his libido soon becomes a problem

food: “Wasn’t this moment about sexual tension rather than eating? But Bill, apparently, could be hungry for multiple things at once.” Their relationship is clearly fuelled by fierce intellectual connection but his libido soon becomes a problem, despite Hillary’s pragmatic attempts to develop a plan to deal with it (“strategising made me feel as close to him as sex”). She dutifully follows him to Arkansas – he sees the governorship as a springboard to the presidency – but here Sittenfeld starts playing loosey-goosey with the facts. Clinton’s philandering ultimately sends *Rodham* her own way.

We now skip forward to the early 1990s, where Hillary, an unmarried law professor at Northwestern, Chicago, is being courted by the Democrats to run for Senate. She’s a cautious, quick-witted professional, committed to public service – her only sin is to be caught up in a fraught but touchingly chaste affair with a married colleague. Scenes of sexual tension unfold as they watch the Senate hearings in which Anita Hill accused Supreme Court judge Clarence

gressions gets jumbled in the collective imagination, either negated by one another or forgotten in the onslaught.” While Hillary still faces a hostile media, Sittenfeld suggests that without the added baggage of Bill, she is able to nimbly dodge any lingering scandal. Hillary could do it without Bill.

There is much to admire in Sittenfeld’s writing. Her ear is attuned to inconvenient truths and double standards, particularly misogyny in America. She specialises in awkward encounters and surprise shifts in power, and these elements feed into Hillary and Bill’s story, both true and alternate. Her characters are usually more slippery than they initially seem but secretly yearn to be unravelled, as we see in one memorably excruciating scene with the pair in their 50s.

But it’s hard to see how *Rodham* frames the events or issues in any new way – or wouldn’t have been more truthful reframed as fiction. It glimmers with relevance but doesn’t ever justify its need to be written. ●
“Rodham” is published in e-book and audio, and available to pre-order in hardback



Coffin half-full kind of guy

Woody Allen's memoir, salvaged from the “#MeToo zealots”, is as witty as it is problematic

By *Ryan Gilbey*

Apropos of Nothing: Autobiography

By Woody Allen

Arcade Publishing, 400pp, £24.20

Woody Allen is a lowlife. A misanthropic imbecile, a second-rater, a runt and a louse. An immature, maladjusted wreck, a fatuous dunce, an ignoramus, a schnook and a klutz. In a directing career spanning more than half a century, he happens also never to have made a great film. The source of this invective is Allen himself, and it is in generous supply across the 400-odd pages of

his autobiography *Apropos of Nothing*. With self-esteem like that, who needs the critics, the public and what he calls the “#MeToo zealots”?

Or, for that matter, a lily-livered publishing house. Employees of Hachette staged a walkout in protest over the acquisition of *Apropos of Nothing* by the company's Grand Central Publishing imprint: it was an attempt to censor an author who has

been exonerated after multiple investigations into whether he molested his adopted daughter, Dylan Farrow, when she was seven. Now 34, she stands by those accusations, which were first made after Allen's former partner Mia Farrow discovered he had been sleeping with her 21-year-old adopted daughter, Soon-Yi Previn. (Allen and Previn, to whom the book is dedicated, remain together: they married in 1997 and have two adopted daughters.)

The cowardice of a powerful publisher, however, is altogether more egregious. Stephen King was among those who expressed alarm earlier this year when the publication was called off. “The Hachette decision to drop the Woody Allen book makes me very uneasy,” he tweeted. “It's not him; I don't give a damn about Mr Allen. It's who gets muzzled next that worries me.” Thank goodness, then, for Arcade Publishing, an American imprint of Skyhorse Publishing, which has put out into the world what is, in many respects, a lively and invaluable book – easily the best thing Allen has produced in at least 20 years – and, in others, a showcase for dismaying lapses of tact, taste and judgement that will sway anyone still on the fence about loathing Allen.

The book's first half is a blast, piling on the sort of glittering social and cultural detail familiar from Allen's films *Annie Hall* and *Radio Days*, along with a wealth of vivid imagery. Allen describes his “weak, wan and degenerate-looking” uncle delivering newspapers around Brooklyn until he “dissolved like a pale wafer”. His parents “disagreed on every single issue except Hitler and my report cards” while his mother always “made sure there was fresh cheese in the traps”. His account of childhood cinema-going is steeped in ripeness and colour, with discontentment setting in only once he discovers that Fred Astaire movies “were not documentaries”. Mortality presents its own problems. “I had never agreed to be finite,” he complains, describing himself as a “coffin half-full” kind of guy.

Chronology is largely respected, though the hope (on page 193) that his very public scandals are “not the reason you bought this book” would be more convincing had he not gone in for so much appetite-whetting up to that point. He refers to “that whole mishigas” as early as page 19, alludes to “the Appropriate Police” 11 pages later, wonders on page 62 whether a statue in his likeness has been “pulled down by irate citizens with a rope like Saddam Hussein's” and recalls thinking, when he made headlines in 1965 for a supposed bad-taste routine at Lyndon Johnson's inauguration gala, that he would “never again in my lifetime be on the front page of newspapers. I got that wrong.”

Already prodigiously talented, and earning as an 18-year-old gag-writer triple the combined wages of his parents, he blossoms in Los Angeles while working under Danny Simon (Neil's brother) at NBC in the 1950s.

The blissfulness of this era is equalled only by Allen's relationship, around 15 years and two marriages later, with Diane Keaton. Contrary to the general assumption, their romance is over before they are first seen together on-screen (in Herbert Ross's 1972 film of Allen's stage comedy *Play It Again, Sam*) and thereafter he counts her as one of his most loyal friends. He writes with infectious joy and vitality about this "female Huckleberry Finn" who dresses "as if her personal shopper was Buñuel" and loses her job at a cinema concessions counter for eating all the candy. That lip-smacking comic detail reveals its unhappy flipside decades later when Allen reads in her memoir of the bulimia she concealed from him.

It's only to be expected that the book should get bogged down in defensiveness and explanatory justifications once it reaches his cataclysmic break-up from Farrow. No wonder he quotes at length Previn's allegations of the physical and psychological abuse meted out by her adoptive mother, or clings to similar testimony by Allen and Farrow's adopted son Moses as though it were the Ten Commandments. What has been lost in much of the agitated discourse on this subject is that Dylan isn't the only family member who claims to have been abused. Many opponents of Allen who have been quick to believe that he is a paedophile have simultaneously turned a deaf ear to the accounts by Moses and Previn of Farrow's cruel and intolerable abuse. Can't all three of them be telling the truth?

The one unambiguous fact here is that the Allen/Farrow domestic set-up was a crucible for suffering and dysfunction from which no one has emerged unscathed. *Apropos of Nothing* would have been a tougher book to write but a more rewarding one to read had Allen accepted his own part in this ugliness, rather than merely itemising the injustices, disproving specific allegations and scattering barbed one-liners on Farrow ground ("I check to make sure Mia casts a reflection in the mirror").

What he calls "the gale force of the second wave of the hideous false molestation accusation" arrives in 2017 when, in a twist few screenwriters would have dared attempt or anticipate, it is his own estranged biological son Ronan Farrow who breaks the Harvey Weinstein story, boosting the #MeToo movement and reviving the allegations against Allen. For the first time, this has a calculable impact on his film-making. Amazon reneges on its deal with him and

actors turn him down flat: "Not working with me had become the thing to do – like everyone suddenly being into kale." Some of his former cast members atone for their sins, among them Timothée Chalamet, the young star of *A Rainy Day in New York* (streaming in the UK in June but still unreleased in the US), who allegedly tells Allen's sister Letty Aronson that publicly disavowing the beleaguered director might help his chance of winning a Best Actor Oscar for *Call Me By Your Name*. (It didn't.) Hillary Clinton refuses a campaign donation from Allen and Previn, which leads the author to wonder whether their offer of \$5,400 would have tipped the election her way.

Allen can be convincingly poignant: when he writes of the red and yellow autumn leaves "dying but not going quietly", he is addressing more than just a change of season. He is also very funny on his maligned Kafkaesque comedy *Shadows and Fog* ("Marketing tests showed it did not appeal to homo sapiens") and his relationship with his wife (who considers him "some kind of savant – I forget the full term").

Some jokes fail outright. When he speculates that Cary Grant's request for him to autograph several books may have been moti-

women who played them. Helena Bonham Carter, we discover, is "wonderful and beautiful", Sharon Stone "very beautiful", Emma Stone "beautiful in an interesting way". Léa Seydoux is "a ten plus", while Naomi Watts is "very beautiful" with "the sexiest two upper front teeth in show business", and Scarlett Johansson is "sexually... radioactive". Rachel McAdams "looks like a million bucks from every angle", which puts her some distance behind Farrow, who resembles "a zillion dollars" when Allen first meets her in the early 1980s; whether these figures have been adjusted for inflation we aren't told. Mira Sorvino, who won an Oscar for playing a porn star in Allen's execrable 1995 comedy *Mighty Aphrodite*, "couldn't appreciate how gifted and attractive she was". A more empathetic writer might have wondered in retrospect whether those feelings of inferiority were related to being harassed by Harvey Weinstein during this period. A gallant one would have avoided passing comment altogether.

The worst is reserved for Barbara Hershey, who is "delicious to behold and gave new meaning to the word *eros*". Michael Caine, who took the role of Hershey's lover

Actors turn him down: "Not working with me had become the thing to do – like everyone suddenly being into kale"

vated by a desire to sell them on eBay, even dozy readers might consider this unlikely given that Grant died in 1986, nine years before that website existed. Other slip-ups are indefensible and self-sabotaging. He refers to "poor Louis CK" and that stand-up performer's "harassment problems" – an unusual turn of phrase to describe a multimillionaire comedy superstar who masturbated in front of budding female comics against their wishes. That pales alongside a mistaken-identity anecdote revolving around a recent dinner invitation from Roman Polanski.

Elsewhere it is Allen's prose rather than his circle of friends that lets him down. A phrase like "some leggy tootsie" is clearly a stab at the Runyonesque, while the "stacked miracles" at the Playboy Mansion and the "adorable birds in their miniskirts" on Carnaby Street in the 1960s constitute an attempt, however clumsy, to evoke an era linguistically.

But it is disappointing that a man who boasts of the juicy female roles he has written can be so complacent describing the

and brother-in-law in *Hannah and Her Sisters* when Jack Nicholson dropped out, told Allen he felt that "if you just go up to her and touch her, she would have an orgasm". Did either man share this salacious conjecture with Hershey herself? We aren't told. Either way, she can read about it now along with the rest of the world. Lucky her.

Admirers of Allen will be accustomed to taking the rough (the past two decades of his films, say) with the smooth (most of the work that precedes them), and any book that didn't contain its share of maddening flaws, oversights and insensitivity would scarcely be representative of him. The surprise is that he remains such a winning comic writer and chronicler, showing himself even in the closing pages to be the same sorrowful wit ("I'm 84, my life is almost half over") and bruised romantic (on the high price he paid to be with Previn: "All worth it") as he ever was, and no less inclined to love-bomb life's miseries with bathos. "Like Bertrand Russell, I feel a great sadness for the human race," he laments. "Unlike Bertrand Russell, I can't do long division." ●

Off to dreamland

How Nicolaes Berchem offered his canal-side patrons vistas of a golden Arcadia

By Michael Prodger

John Constable was not known for his sharp tongue, but in 1836, in preparation for a series of lectures he was to give on painting to the Royal Institution, he proposed to do mortal harm to two fellow artists. In a note to a friend he announced his intention “to murder Both and Berghem on Thursday next at a quarter to four o’clock”. What sparked his ire?

Jan Both and Nicolaes Berchem were two lauded Dutch landscapists of the mid-17th century whose work had found favour in aristocratic and royal collections across Europe, while Constable himself was an admirer, indeed a spiritual student, of the Dutch school. Their crime, as he saw it, was that they were not Dutch enough. Rather than stick to the naturalistic portrayal of the Netherlands’ waterways, woods, windmills and meadows, Both and Berchem were among the artists who had turned Italianate. They had swapped grey northern skies for the golden light of the south and exchanged the burghers of the Low Countries for the rustics of an antique land.

Constable’s faux-homicidal displeasure was a sign of changing tastes. In the 17th century Berchem (1620–83) was a painter to be reckoned with. His limpid idylls fetched double the price of the earthier pictures of his teacher Jan van Goyen and by the end of the century they changed hands for three times as much. His paintings, of which he made more than 800, were luxury products for the upper classes rather than for the aspiring middle class that drove the art boom of the Dutch Golden Age. By Constable’s time, however, they were beginning to be seen as confected gewgaws when compared to the more authentic work of Rembrandt, Jacob van Ruisdael and Van Goyen.

At his best, Berchem deserves better. His mellow visions of Arcadia offered an alternative to the austere and approved classical landscapes of Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain, with their intellectually respectable myths and allegories. As exemplified by *Peasants by a Ruined Aqueduct*, painted between 1655 and 1660, and now in the National Gallery, Berchem’s pastorals represented a form of innocent escapism and they are in many ways utterly inconsequential – except in their beauty. They are untrue to nature, show neither reality nor allusions, they contain no narrative or tension, but nevertheless, these roseate views, full of the poetry of tumbled buildings, warm scented air and silence, have a hinterland.

It was long thought that Berchem’s Italianate landscapes were the result of a visit he made across the Alps in the early 1650s. However, no documentary evidence exists for such a journey and nor are there any topographical sketches to be found. It seems rather that he invented Italy in his mind and painted that invention. Other Dutch artists had made the trip, from Rogier van der Weyden in the 15th century and Pieter Bruegel in the 16th to Pieter van Laer, Berchem’s older contemporary. Indeed, so many Dutch painters gathered in Rome in the early 1600s that they were known as the *Bentvueghels*, birds of a feather. Berchem knew their work, in part because his father-in-law was a picture dealer, and was heavily influenced by it.

Not that Berchem lost himself in his Elysium. He understood what the market wanted and he set out to provide it. His first teacher was his father, Pieter Claesz, and the young artist initially wanted to paint history and biblical scenes. His change of surname seems

to tie in with his change of direction. Arnold Houbraken, the Dutch Vasari who between 1718 and 1721 published a collection of artists’ lives called *The Great Theatre of Dutch Painters*, said that Berchem took his name from “*berg hem*” – “save him”. He needed saving once, when his fellow apprentices had to hide him from his irate father who had chased him into the workshop to give him a beating, and later when the young painter changed his mind at the last moment about going to sea. In fact, Berchem is the name of his father’s home town.

Berchem did not fully abandon the higher artistic genres, and biblical scenes and mythologies appear throughout his career – as well as scenes of cavalymen when they enjoyed a brief vogue. It was, though, the Italianate landscapes that made his fortune. He followed the patronage from Haarlem to Amsterdam and back again, becoming a member of the Reformed Church along the way and amassing enough money to be able to buy a garden with an orchard and a “new and pleasant summerhouse” in a well-to-do part of Haarlem in the 1650s. He also developed a thriving print career and could make 100 guilders from an edition of a single etching at a time when a master carpenter earned 200 guilders annually.

Regardless of the business side, Berchem’s artistry is of a high order. He may have painted innumerable variations of those picturesque stock peasant figures, cows and hills, but he combined them poetically to give an echo of the happy countryman, *beatus ille*, of Horace and the shepherds of Virgil’s *Eclogues*. If he offered his canal-side patrons the prospect of travel through time and space to an Italian dreamland, then he made sure they went first class. ●





FILM

The sweet relief of romcoms

In lockdown, I'm craving romantic comedies – and 2003's *Down With Love* is a pure sugar high

Simran Hans

The only movies I'm interested in watching right now are romantic comedies. I'm low-energy and craving something sweet, so I've been bingeing on the kind of films I loved as a teenager. I rewatched *Bend It Like Beckham* (it's about New Labour) and *Burlesque* (it's about the recession), pondered the fall of Richard Curtis, witnessed Diane Lane *Eat Pray Love* her way across France (*Paris Can Wait*) and Italy (*Under the Tuscan Sun*) in linen trousers. But I was unprepared for the pure sugar high I would experience after watching 2003's *Down With Love*. It left me so giddy I watched it twice.

The year is 1962 and Barbara Novak (Renée Zellweger) is in New York City to promote her new book *Down With Love*, a girl's guide to sex without marriage. Magazine journalist and "ladies' man, man's man, man about town" Catcher Block (Ewan McGregor) is determined to prove Barbara's thesis wrong – and so he invents a plan to make her fall in love with him, donning a pair of glasses and a Texan accent and disguising himself as a gentlemanly astronaut named Zip Martin.

The flirting, scheming and Sixties setting are lifted from the trio of beloved "bedroom comedies" made famous by Doris Day and Rock Hudson; the film is part homage to, part parody of films like *Pillow Talk* (1959), *Lover Come Back* (1961) and *Send Me No Flowers* (1964). With their double entendre-heavy dialogue and teasing split-screens (*Pillow Talk* showed Day and Hudson taking a bath "together" in their separate houses), those films were suggestive about the appetites of their characters, acknowledging the sexual revolution without fully embracing it. Like most conventional romantic comedies, bedroom comedies tended to end in marriage.

Upon its original release, *Down With Love* was dismissed as cheap pastiche, with the *Guardian's* Peter Bradshaw arguing that it updated the original by "adding yet more archness and irony, while subtracting any innocence or unassuming charm that might conceivably have made you feel affectionate about it in the first place". Multiple critics compared it unfavourably with *Far From Heaven*, Todd Haynes's love letter

to Douglas Sirk's 1955 melodrama *All That Heaven Allows*, released the previous year. This seems a little unfair given what director Peyton Reed (*Bring It On*) and writers Eve Ahlert and Dennis Drake were going for.

The film is glossy, goofy and lightweight by design; worlds away from Haynes's carefully wrought prestige drama. The premise of Barbara's book suggests women substitute chocolate for sex; this is not a serious movie. In the window of Barbara's gorgeous penthouse is a skyline that looks as though it's been painted on cardboard. McGregor delivers a monologue about his 16in... socks. There is a bizarre end-credits musical number called "Here's to Love" (supposedly McGregor's idea; he'd recently starred in *Moulin Rouge*, and Zellweger in *Chicago*).

Perhaps naysayers were confused by the extraordinary mid-century production design, assuming that serious attention to period detail meant serious imitation rather than playful tribute. Barbara's enormous apartment in particular is dreamily transportive, with its fire pit and spiral staircase (immediately after watching, I found myself googling "Champagne coupes, set of six"). So are the clothes, especially a frilly satin overcoat in bright, Barbie pink (Mattel launched the doll in 1959) that Zellweger wears draped dramatically around her shoulders. *Mad Men* was still four whole years away.

An animated opening credits sequence is soundtracked by a Michael Bublé cover of a Judy Garland song; watching it 17 years after its release, the film is a bizarre, fascinating look at the Sixties filtered through early Noughties nostalgia. And 2003 was a boom year for the romcom, with genre staples *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, *Something's Gotta Give* and *Love Actually* released alongside a glut of wannabes (*What A Girl Wants*, *Intolerable Cruelty*, *Just Married*, *The Fighting Temptations* and the universally panned *Gigli*, a vehicle for the then engaged Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck).

A number of reviews wasted their word counts on scrutinising Zellweger's athletic figure, not considering the ingenuity of her casting as a relatable good girl in the mould of Doris Day. In both *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back*, Day played an unmarried career woman; Zellweger had recently starred as the avatar for city-dwelling single women in 2001's *Bridget Jones's Diary*. "I said women should refrain from love, not sex," says Zellweger's Barbara, advocating for erotic fulfilment "à la carte" and walking with a wiggle. It feels like something Bridget might say. ●

"*Down With Love*" is available to stream in the UK on Amazon Prime Video

TELEVISION
**Nerds
 on tour**
Rachel Cooke

Monkman & Seagull's Genius Adventures

BBC Two

Somewhere in south London, Eric Monkman and Bobby Seagull are sitting in a sky-blue pedalo on a greenish municipal pond, gazing at an inflatable globe. Together, they're trying to work out the longitude of an imaginary island to which they have just travelled (yes, in their pedalo!) and, to be frank, it's all a bit baffling. As anyone with eyes can see, they're in a suburban English park, not the north Atlantic. ("Westward, ho!" shouts Seagull, pointing in the direction of... where, exactly? I'm going for Nunhead, or perhaps East Dulwich.) But it's also rather touching in its way. The only other presenter I can think of who would not be utterly embarrassed by such a charade is Lucy Worsley, though she would doubtless have disguised herself as Emma, Lady Hamilton, before boarding her stately vessel.

Actually, Monkman and Seagull do indulge in a spot of dressing up in this series (18 May, 9pm), a travelogue inspired by the geniuses of the Industrial Revolution (they were in London to visit the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, home of John Harrison's marine chronometer of 1759, the first timekeeper to allow a navigator accurately to assess a ship's longitude). In part one, they donned frilly shirts and false moustaches to impersonate Nevil Maskelyne, the astronomer who was the first person to measure the Earth's mass, and Joseph Priestley, the chemist who discovered oxygen (or, as he called it, "dephlogisticated air"). Mostly, though, they're in mufti, which in their case means a shirt and tie, items they wore even when overnighting in a mountain bothy. Did Monkman, in fact, *sleep* in his tie, up on that Scottish hillside? Who knows. But the sight of him trying to squeeze his sleeping bag back into its sheath the following morning was really something: he was St George, and it the (lightweight, polyester) dragon. Wrestle the beast to the ground, Eric, and watch your glasses while you're at it!

Monkman, who is from Ontario, and Seagull, who's from Newham, met when they each captained teams on *University Challenge* in 2017. Since then, alongside academic careers, they've parlayed their famously cheery nerdishness into a nice little line in radio and TV. As a double act, they bring to mind Morecambe and Wise,



Adventurers: Eric Monkman and Bobby Seagull

though obviously they're somewhat less funny. Their manners, like their clothes, are quaint, which makes them seem older than they are (both are in their thirties). But they're weirdly juvenile, too. "Which would you rather fight?" Seagull asked Monkman, as they drove their blue Mini down a country lane. "One hundred duck-sized horses, or one horse-sized duck?" Monkman took the question very seriously, not even allowing himself to be distracted by the Haribo in the glove compartment. "One horse-sized duck," he said finally, after a period spent gazing at the horizon.

Their route comprises a kind of greatest hits of British science and engineering: in Cromford, Derbyshire, they visited Richard Arkwright's cotton mill, the first to have its shuttles powered by water; in Birmingham's Thinktank museum, they saw a James Watt steam engine, later performing a bizarre interpretive dance to demonstrate its revolutionary mechanism – quite how the nice Brummie blokes watching on didn't collapse into laughter, I'll never know. It was as if Raymond Baxter and Michael Rodd (kids, these two were the redoubtable presenters of *Tomorrow's World* back in the day) had suddenly joined Pan's People (kids, this was a campy troupe of... oh, never mind).

The show's budget appears to be on the tight side. Pitching up in Oxford for a ride in a hot air balloon – it was from Christ Church Meadow in 1784 that pastry chef James Sadler successfully flew up and away – our heroes were told it was too windy for safe flying; the coffers apparently not allowing for an overnight stay, it seemed they could not come back another time. Disappointment flickered across their faces. But then they clambered into its basket anyway. If you can sail the high seas in a fibreglass pedalo, you can float high above the Cotswolds without leaving the ground. Vroom! I thought of two small boys in a driveway, happily pretending to drive a parent's stationary car. ●

RADIO

**The making
 of a legend**
Antonia Quirke

**Little Richard: A Whop Bop A Lua –
 A Whop Bam Boom**

BBC Radio 2

Oh, the mad mystery of rock 'n' roll. Half the fun of listening at the crack of dawn to this hilarious, uplifting documentary (16 May, 4am) was hearing people trying to work out how on earth a human being like the late Little Richard came to be – sifting for clues through his youth and influences.

Singing as an exhibitionist child to his preacher father in 1930s Georgia, he imitated the women in the choir to perfect his signature yelp. Having joined a travelling circus as a teenager, he met the female impersonator Billy Wright – all make-up and choreography. He forced his own band to wear false eyelashes and to think of themselves as chorus girls. ("They hated it.") This was Little Richard: ambitious, confident, staggeringly camp. ("Sing like Ray Charles? I refused.")

In interviews, he is unstoppably amusing. ("My idol was Moses!") Clips of him in original recording sessions defy aural logic. "You seem to be straining," complains the studio manager for "Good Golly Miss Molly". Little Richard coughs, affronted. Then gives forth a howl: rococo energy incarnate. You feel it in the back of your teeth. I used to think of Sam Cooke live at the Harlem Square Club as the benchmark for audiences wild with excitement (listen to it on YouTube), but one session band member turns up here and declares giggling with Cooke "boring". Definitely, it was Little Richard who'd inspired a whole new level of chaos and glee and shock.

Or was it? The baffling history of music! Those early encounters with people such as Wright seem, to me, key. How *close* so much great rock (and early film) is to vaudeville and music hall. Chuck a brick out of the window in the US in the 1930s and you'd hit some original and strange entertainer who'd been touring since 1890 in perfume and greasepaint. Bob Dylan is always going on about Gorgeous George, the "Human Orchid" wrestler. Every time Little Richard opens his mouth, as much as a whole complex hinterland of gospel music you hear *that* particular American echo – of buffalo tamers and sawdust under the trapeze. Of clowns being carted off across the Great Plains to the barely controlled mayhem of the unsuspecting crowd... ●



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Back Pages



Nina Caplan Drink

Wistful memories of my last meal out in London – at a Greek restaurant full of interesting Greek wine – are all that’s feeding my imagination in lockdown

The news that Greece is lifting its lockdown – a reward for acting firmly and swiftly, resulting in just 150 deaths and the prospect of some kind of summer tourist season – prompted wistful memories of my last meal out in London. Early in March, I visited Ampéli, a new Greek restaurant that popped up on one of those cosy little Charlotte Street spaces that seem to change hands every five minutes – a fate this place will, I hope, avoid.

Greece’s famous wine is Retsina, flavoured with pine resin, but judging the country’s impressive roster by a drink that was probably

born of gastronomically suspect nostalgia for the resin-sealed amphorae of Classical Greece would be as unfair as presuming that all Greek women sing, or throw tantrums, like Maria Callas.

Ampéli welcomed me with a “new age” Retsina, made from the Savatiano grape by Mylonas (they describe it as “fruity and herbaceous”), but I preferred the same winery’s naturally sweet Savatiano, a delicately acidic peach-and-apricot dessert wine. But here I have leapt from starter to dessert, which seems foolish as this meal has had to feed my imagination for the past three months, and

may need to for many more.

I have long loved Xinomavro, a northern red variety with the elegance and restrained power of Pinot Noir. Also Assyrtiko, the white grape of Santorini, where thirsty centenarian roots reach deep into volcanic rock, and the grapes shelter within clustered vines that resemble grounded birds’ nests. Assyrtiko makes a pure, stony wine as dramatic as its birthplace: a rocky crescent formed during an enormous volcanic eruption that some say sank the city of Atlantis.

Gerovassiliou in Macedonia makes a sensually perfumed Malagousia that danced lightly

with charcoal-grilled kohlrabi; an Assyrtiko from Crete was more austere than its lees-enriched Santorini cousin: the former suited marinated sardines, while the latter was better with smoked aubergine. Mavrodaphne by Rouvalis in the Peloponnese was savoury, almost salty, while my beloved Xinomavro crossed (by Chatzivariti) with Negkoska, which I’d never heard of, made a great pairing for octopus.

Writing this, from lockdown in rural Burgundy, whispering those poetic, unpronounceable names, makes me want to weep. There probably isn’t a bottle of Greek wine for sale between here and Paris, but what is really inducing my tears are the freedoms that now seem as tragically inaccessible as Atlantis. Sharing an unusual dinner, cooked by someone else; choosing from an exciting wine list; or even jumping in the car and driving down through Italy to Greece itself. I’d stop in trattorie, buy wine to bring home. Why did I never do this, when I could, and will I ever have the chance again?

Atlantis, claimed the philosopher Plato, was a utopia that foundered when the inhabitants became corrupt, greedy and immoral. Its destruction, by a volcano-induced tsunami, resembled the biblical flood, and I like to think that what survived and propagated were not animals but grape seeds. Vines, flourishing on ancient volcanic soil, are a reminder that every apocalypse trails possibility in its wake. At the centre of any inferno is a cool, calm stream of good wine, made with a dedication that can outlast disaster, flavoured with hope, capable of conveying us to different places and better times. ●
Next week: Felicity Cloake on food



Nicholas Lezard Down and Out

I have, over the years, resembled each incarnation of Dr Who, and how I wish I could turn back time

By the time you read this I shall, God willing, have celebrated my harumpty-somethingth birthday, which this year falls on Rogation Sunday. My violent friend Ben – you know, the one who likes breaking his own bones if he can't break anyone else's – wants me to join him, his wife and some of his football hooligan friends and their wives on the beach for socially distanced margaritas, but he wants to start at eight o'clock in the morning, which means my getting up at 7am. If he thinks, I tell him, that I'm getting up at 7am for any other purpose than having a pee before going back to bed again, then he must be barmy. Besides, Rogation Sunday is a time for prayer and contemplation; and, of course, rogating.

The prayer I will probably skip, on the grounds that I really don't think my word counts for much Up There, but I am sure there will be a lot of contemplation. There isn't an awful lot else to do, and harumpty-something is widely recognised as the age when you can't kid yourself any more, when you finally realise that the sands of time

are now very much more in the lower half of the hourglass, and that if you are going to make anything of your life, you'd better get on with it.

The traditional benchmark for achievement is the age at which Jesus died (there seems to be quite a bit of religion in this week's column; what's all that about?). That age is now invisible in the rear-view mirror. I used to say to myself, "Hey, no rush, Samuel Beckett didn't achieve fame until he was in his late forties," but my forties have come and gone, and I have precious little to show for them – although a friend did drop me a line the other day saying she'd been doing a clear-out and had found an old copy of the school magazine with a poem in it by me. It's been downhill ever since, I suppose.

Meanwhile, I grow old. It is much better than the other thing – ie, not growing old at all because you're dead – but still... My great-uncle Julien died on the operating table at the age of 56. Thirty years ago a beautiful woman in Warsaw read my palm and said that I would not reach old age, and that really spooked me, for everyone

knows that fortunes told in eastern European accents are considerably more accurate than fortunes told in any of the variants of native English speech. (Unless, of course, they are threats made by Cockney gangsters. Those *always* come true.)

I'm still friends with her, as it happens: a couple of years ago I brought up her prediction and she laughed, saying she had no recollection of it. Well of course she didn't, she wasn't the one being told she was off to an early grave. (Talking of graves, today I learned that the Church of St Thomas à Becket in Box, Wiltshire, has a grave with a pyramid-shaped tombstone on it, designed so as to prevent the deceased's wife from dancing on it.)

But if I really wanted to be punched in the solar plexus by *tempus fugit*, I don't think I'm going to do better than a recent discovery. As I might have mentioned long ago, sheer accident has contrived to make me resemble, in certain respects, each incarnation of the Doctor since Christopher Eccleston. In his day, I favoured a leather jacket a bit like his; when David Tennant slipped into his Converse trainers, I was already in mine, the gift of a lover who wanted to dress me; my children put me in a fez and bow-tie when Matt Smith came along; and I was a grumpy Peter Capaldi lookalike

bang on time for his turn in the police box.

But now, as I look at my growing, greying locks in the mirror, the Time Lord I now see is William Hartnell, the first Doctor. I have very dim memories of him from the first time round; no one, I thought, could possibly be older. He was certainly the most decrepit person I had ever seen on a television screen. Even my grandparents, I thought, looked younger than him. I did a little checking, and here is my discovery: when Hartnell took on the role, *he was two years younger than I am now*. I had to have a little lie-down when I saw that, and whenever I think I've got over it, I find I haven't and have to have a lie-down all over again.

But at least, touch wood, I am not lying down permanently. I have been displaying quite a few of the symptoms of Covid-19; the worst being some explosive diarrhoea, which I didn't even realise was a symptom until our own excellent (real) doctor, Dr Phil Whitaker, told us so in this very magazine a couple of weeks ago. I'll probably never know for certain if I've had it or not, but if I had then I suspect it would have carried me off by now. Anyway, three more days to go, as I write, until my birthday. Now, if you will excuse me, I have some serious rogating to prepare for. ●

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.

All that glitters

A fashion trends feature suggested readers "channel Princess Stardust and dress red-carpet ready". The intended reference was to the My Little Pony character Princess Twilight Sparkle. *Correction in the Guardian* (Kate Rimmer)

Virtual bleatings

An educational farm made up for loss of revenue during the lockdown by hiring out goats for Zoom conferences. Cronkshaw Fold Farm in



Sarah Manavis Under the Influence

Coronavirus has changed every mundane detail of our lives – including email etiquette

I hope this column finds you (genuinely!) well in these increasingly uncertain times. I also hope that you and your loved ones are keeping safe throughout this unprecedented situation. It's an extraordinary period that we're living through, isn't it? I hope you are staying sane despite the crazy reality we're living. How are you getting food? Do you have masks? Is everyone in your home practising social distancing?

When lockdown started, email etiquette quickly became yet another monotonous part

of our lives. Since mid-March, inboxes have been filled with nearly identical messages – a whole new set of Covid-19 clichés. Our message previews now look like one long list of the same virus-referencing phrases – all somehow managing to induce both eyes-glazed-over boredom and deep anxiety.

While there are more creative options in the coronavirus email canon, there are also the greatest hits. Hoping that someone is actually well – or as well as they can be! – in these

“strange”, “unprecedented”, or even “apocalyptic” times is one classic. Other common openings will enquire whether someone is staying safe, sane or secure during this pandemic (the twee among us may refer to Covid-19 as “the C-word”). Now everyone's digital correspondence begins like that of a Victorian gentleman: trusting that their message finds the recipient, and their family, in good health. It seems inevitable that Gmail will make it a suggested auto-response within the coming weeks.

The response required from the previous staple of “how was your weekend?” looks mercifully easy compared to today's mandatory coronavirus small talk. Instead of simply saying our weekend was good or that, yes, we are glad that it's finally Friday, we must detail every element of our living situations – where we are, how we're doing, who is immunocompromised in our household, and how we're finding working from home. Our outboxes have become Dickensian chronicles of the dullest facets of our lives.

You might be wondering why these conventions have been adopted so quickly. The likely answer is that emailing is, even at the best of times, a mundane task. Trying not to sound trite has always been a challenge, causing many of us

to labour over the perfect ratio of exclamation points or how to make common phrases like “no worries if not!” appear less banal. It's a lethal combination of boring and pressing, and its capacity to trigger self-loathing is astronomically disproportionate to what the job actually is: communicating basic information over approximately three sentences.

This is exacerbated by our present reality – while we're stuck indoors, the minutiae of our lives is amplified. When your whole existence becomes restricted to your home, running out of milk or a meeting running over can feel like the worst thing that has ever happened to you. What were once irritating but ultimately minor tasks become a Sisyphean hellscape. It may feel like a fresh email is landing in your inbox every moment, each one demanding an immediate response. Sometimes it's easier to give in to the clichés than to fight them – especially when our collective brainpower under lockdown is trending towards zero.

While the more creative types may avoid leaning on these crutches, shirking them comes with its own set of conundrums. If I try to devise a unique, pandemic-referencing opener, will I look like a try-hard? If I don't mention it at all, will I seem insensitive or uncaring? Will doing either reveal that I might be overthinking it? Perhaps in the form of a column, printed in a national magazine?

Many people will always find writing emails painful. And now, with so little pleasure to be had day-to-day, having to do it may feel even worse. But while these coronavirus tropes could be seen as a menace, adding to the repetitive nature of our current lives, using them wisely could also be an opportunity – finally, a way to autopilot through a long-dreaded chore. ●

Next week: Tracey Thorn

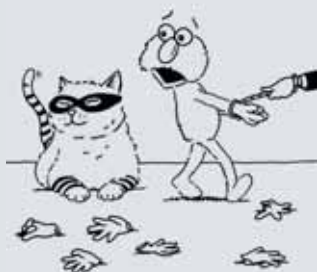
Rossendale, Lancashire, charges £5 for ten minutes, Dot McCarthy, 30, its owner said. Email requests from as far afield as Australia, New Zealand and Canada are arriving at the rate of ten per minute, she added. McCarthy's goats have been booked for church services, a top UK company and a virtual rave in Berlin. *The Times* (Amanda Welles)

Cat's out the bag

A Derbyshire moggy named Elmo has been unmasked as a real-life cat burglar after

being caught stealing items from his neighbours' homes and gardens.

But the pilfering puss only has eyes for one prize: swiping



gardening gloves and marigolds, which he takes home to embarrassed owner Vikki Maddocks. Over a 12-month crime spree, Elmo has stolen 14 pairs of gloves and a peg bag from residents living in Belper. *Derbyshire Times* (Daragh Brady)

Late to learn

“Our cleaner is working from home. We have Zoom calls and she tells us what to do.” *Quote in the Sunday Times* (Terry Timblick)

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Alice O'Keeffe School's Out

Nobody can write a book in these conditions. Except, it seems, seven-year-old Moe

It's 2pm, and I'm lying on my bed, staring at the ceiling. The wind is whistling down the street outside; it's not park weather, which I'm secretly pleased about, because it provides us with the perfect excuse not to leave the house all day. In the early stages of lockdown, we were desperate to go outside; we crammed long bike rides, walks and runs into our hour of daily exercise. What were we thinking? It's so much nicer and less tiring just to stay at home.

As I gaze up at the familiar patterns of cracks and bumps, I congratulate myself on the fact that I am not wearing my pyjamas. It's important, I feel, to get dressed in the morning, even when you don't, strictly speaking, need to. The day we don't get dressed at all will be the day we know lockdown has finally beaten us, and all standards have been abandoned. But for now we are firmly on top of things. I even brushed my teeth this morning. Or did I?

It dawns on me that the kids haven't made any noise for a long time. This is puzzling. Especially as the iPad is on my bedside table, so I know they can't be sneaking in a gaming

session. What are they up to? Eating all the biscuits? A decade of parenting has taught me that silence is usually a bad sign. I dutifully heave myself into a vertical position and trudge to the doorway.

Perhaps Moe could make this family millions

"Larry?" I call. "Moe?"

No answer. Definitely the biscuits. I head downstairs to the kitchen, where I find seven-year-old Moe sitting at the table, hunched over a notebook. He doesn't seem to notice me come in.

"What are you doing?"

"Writing my book," he replies, without looking up. "It's going to be published by Bloomsbury."

This is a blow to the heart. The deadline for my own book was supposed to be the end of May, but I've been struggling to summon up anything like the focus required, what with the global crisis raging around us. Quite clearly, nobody can write a book under these conditions.

Except Moe, it seems. I peer at the page in front of him.

"The Viking Bible", it says at the top, in his laborious joined-up writing.

"Hmm. Nice title," I observe.

"I know," he says. "It's going to have eight chapters."

"Good number." I still don't know how many chapters my book is going to have, and I've been working on it for two years. Planning has never been my strong suit. "What chapter are you on now?"

He leafs back through several pages. "Seven," he says.

Well and truly shamed, I slink off to make myself a cup of tea. We parents like to think we know our kids, but the truth is we don't have a clue.

Moe has always had a chaotic physical energy; he has never particularly liked reading, let alone writing. At school he struggles to concentrate; his teachers always say he lacks confidence, and he's needed special help with maths. I've reassured myself that he's just not the kind of boy who likes sitting at desks; he's built for running around in the woods.

But by the time I have finished my cuppa, he has scribbled "THE END" at the bottom of the page and thrown his pencil down on the table in the manner of a Wimbledon champ tossing his T-shirt to the crowd. "We can send it off this afternoon," he announces.

I pick up the book and give it a skim. It's a ripping tale of two Vikings, who have long blond hair, wear shades and fight their enemies using bone nunchucks. Sure, it's a little trippy and disjointed in places, but it definitely has more commercial potential than anything I have come up with. I mean seriously, could *The Viking Bible* be the next *Game of Thrones*? Perhaps, if I handle this writing craze right, Moe could be the one to make this family millions. He could buy Husband and I our golden-years house in the country; clear up the tricky business of our total lack of pension planning. You heard it here first: lockdown could be where it all began... ●

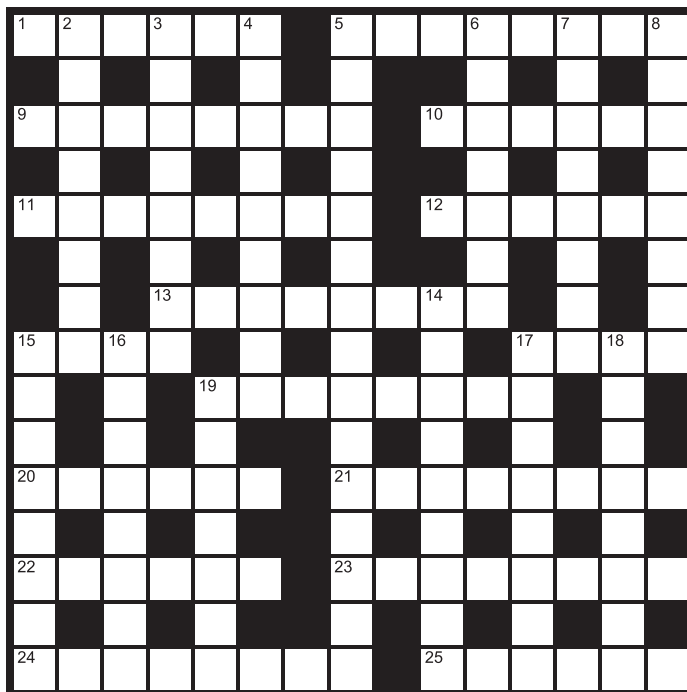
THE NS CROSSWORD 495 BY ANORAK

Across

- 1 Talks succeeded. Tops! (6)
- 5 I'm back in easily-managed home (8)
- 9 Odd songs about Lincoln coming back for lunches for horses (8)
- 10 Some metal forgings returned recently (2,4)
- 11 Pastor arrived and delivered a sermon (8)
- 12 Small and cosy, eventually (6 or 2,4)
- 13 Takes away some French pamphlets (8)
- 15 Harris? Lewis? Just a little! (4)
- 17 The legend of the lispig spinster (4)
- 19 Tennis star with a very small amount of time (6,2)
- 20 Two alternatives about one-time soapbox speaker (6)
- 21 Travel, travel back and travels around inside for fruit (8)
- 22 US inventor lacking arrogance, on reflection (6)
- 23 Mechanic works by hill (8)
- 24 Range of summer temperatures during this decade (8)
- 25 Online comments of small bird? (6)

Down

- 2 Private secretary admits Roger's awful educational advance (8)
- 3 Poor deal. Bad idea for Australian city (8)
- 4 It's the gap between mouth and plate that's the trouble! (9)
- 5 Not sausage, David, stewed – it's bad for you (15)
- 6 Children, I note, following workers (7)
- 7 Instantly enveloped (2,1,5)
- 8 At this hour, even the Left panicked! (8)
- 14 Article on the only books on channel (3,6)
- 15 In slack times Rocker's rival may be pushy (8)
- 16 Crumpled coat in burning case (8)
- 17 The speed of fashion will become less intense (8)
- 18 Dismiss tutor who wronged (5,3)
- 19 Concern for the watchman (7)



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

Answers to crossword 494 of 15 May 2020

Across 1) Full-circle 6) Bias 10) Viceroy 11) Premium 12) Monetary policy 14) Rotated 15) Catalpa 16) Deficit 19) Tomfool 21) Corporation tax 23) Infanta 24) Entwine 25) Null 26) Closed shop Down 1) Five 2) Lockout 3) Current account 4) Reynard 5) Lip-sync 7) Initial 8) Semi-yearly 9) Decontaminated 13) Production 17) Forkful 18) Travail 19) Triceps 20) Obadiah 22) Temp

SUBSCRIBER OF THE WEEK

Peter Berry



What do you do?

Retired.

Where do you live?

Leicestershire.

Do you vote?

Yes – Labour. Been a socialist all my life.

How long have you been a subscriber?

Just over a year.

What made you start?

That the NS was refreshing, open and honest in its reporting.

Is the NS bug in the family?

No. Just me at the moment.

What pages do you flick to first?

Cover to cover, like a book.

How do you read yours?

I make it last the week.

What would you like to see more of in the NS?

I'm happy with the varied content as it is.

Who are your favourite NS writers?

Nicholas Lezard, Jeremy Cliffe and John Gray.

Who would you put on the cover of the NS?

David Attenborough.

With which political figure would you least like to be stuck in a lift?

Any member of the cabinet.

All-time favourite NS article?

My latest is Erica Wagner's interview with Grayson Perry: a man to be admired for his principles and kindness.

The New Statesman is...

Informative, both in breadth and depth. ●

THE NS WORD GAMES 185: RIA TO RIM BY ANORAK

Each definition leads to a solution which includes the trio of letters indicated, successively.

RIA Percussion instrument

RIB Without force or vitality

RIC Simple crane with lifting tackle slung from a boom

RID Kitchen white good

RIE Sequence

RIF Bitter rivalry

RIG Warship, smaller than a destroyer

RIH Comic verse containing the name of a famous person

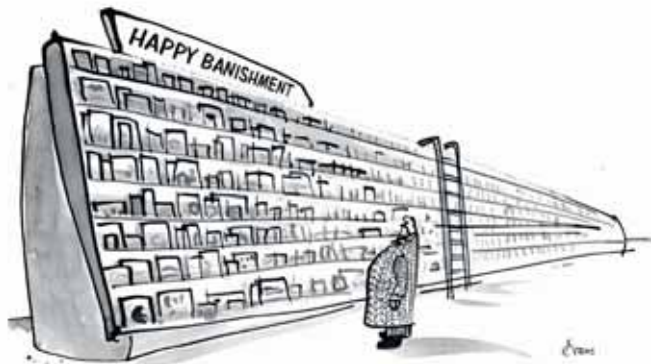
RII Entrance to a Japanese Shinto temple

RIJ Location of the national art collection of the Netherlands

RIK My goodness!

RIL Tiny shrimp-like crustaceans eaten by whales

RIM Bitterness, behaviourally



NS Word Games answers

Triangle, moribund, derrick, fridge, series, strife, frigate, clerihew, torti, Rijksmuseum, crickey, krill, acronymy



THE NS Q&A

“I’d like to be the subject of a very unflattering nude by Freud” Robert Webb, comedian

Robert Webb was born in Lincolnshire in 1972. One half of the double act Mitchell and Webb, he is best known for the sitcom “Peep Show” and is a regular comedy panellist.

What’s your earliest memory?

A washing line on a sunny day in Dolly Patchett’s garden. Dolly was a friend of my grandmother’s and used to look after me. I feel sure my view of the drying clothes was from a pram.

Who are your heroes?

As a child, Steve Austin, closely followed by Han Solo and Zorro. I’m not sure I have an adult hero but I could build a reasonable case for saying my wife, Abigail Burdess, is the best person I’ve ever met.

What book last changed your thinking?

The Biology of Desire: Why Addiction is Not a Disease by Marc Lewis, a cognitive neuroscientist and former addict. It’s a convincing explanation of addiction as a pattern-making mental process.

In which time and place, other than your own, would you like to live?

I can’t say I’m keen to go back in time at all. I’d have to take me with me, which would spoil it. I suppose Steventon in Hampshire in the 1790s so I could hang around trying to become friends with Jane Austen.

What would be your Mastermind specialist subject?

As it happens, I went on the celeb version,

chose “The novels of Ian McEwan” and came third. Only Sir Clive Sinclair did worse and he had chosen the rather more ambitious “British inventions since 1945”.

Which political figure do you look up to?

John Smith. As smart as Blair and Brown but more unifying, hugely personable. He would have made a great prime minister.

What TV show could you not live without?

I don’t feel that way about any current TV show but I would be a worse person if I had never seen *The Young Ones*.

Who would paint your portrait?

I’d like to be the subject of a deeply unflattering nude by Lucian Freud, hung in the front room to titillate visiting relatives.

What’s your theme tune?

Anything by Toto.

What’s the best piece of advice you’ve ever received?

“Anyone in the creative industries who is going to achieve anything is probably out of bed by 10am.” This was at college from a friend who was in a band. I nodded grimly and contemplated the sacrifices ahead.

What’s currently bugging you?

A few months ago I replaced cigarettes and alcohol with exercise and ice cream (net effect on weight: holding steady) and I don’t get to go out for either as often as I would like.

What single thing would make your life better?

An extremely large garden.

When were you happiest?

Whenever I’ve had the feeling I’m in the right place doing the right thing. My first term at university would be an example.

In another life, what job might you have chosen?

The problem with “another life” questions is that once you change one thing you’ve changed everything. In another life I grew up in different circumstances and would be a different person, maybe even one who is less precious about questions like these.

Are we all doomed?

On an individual level, yes – life is lent to us by nature so no matter how early, we have to give it back. As a species, though? You’d have to ask an expert. ●

Robert Webb’s debut novel, “Come Again”, is published by Canongate

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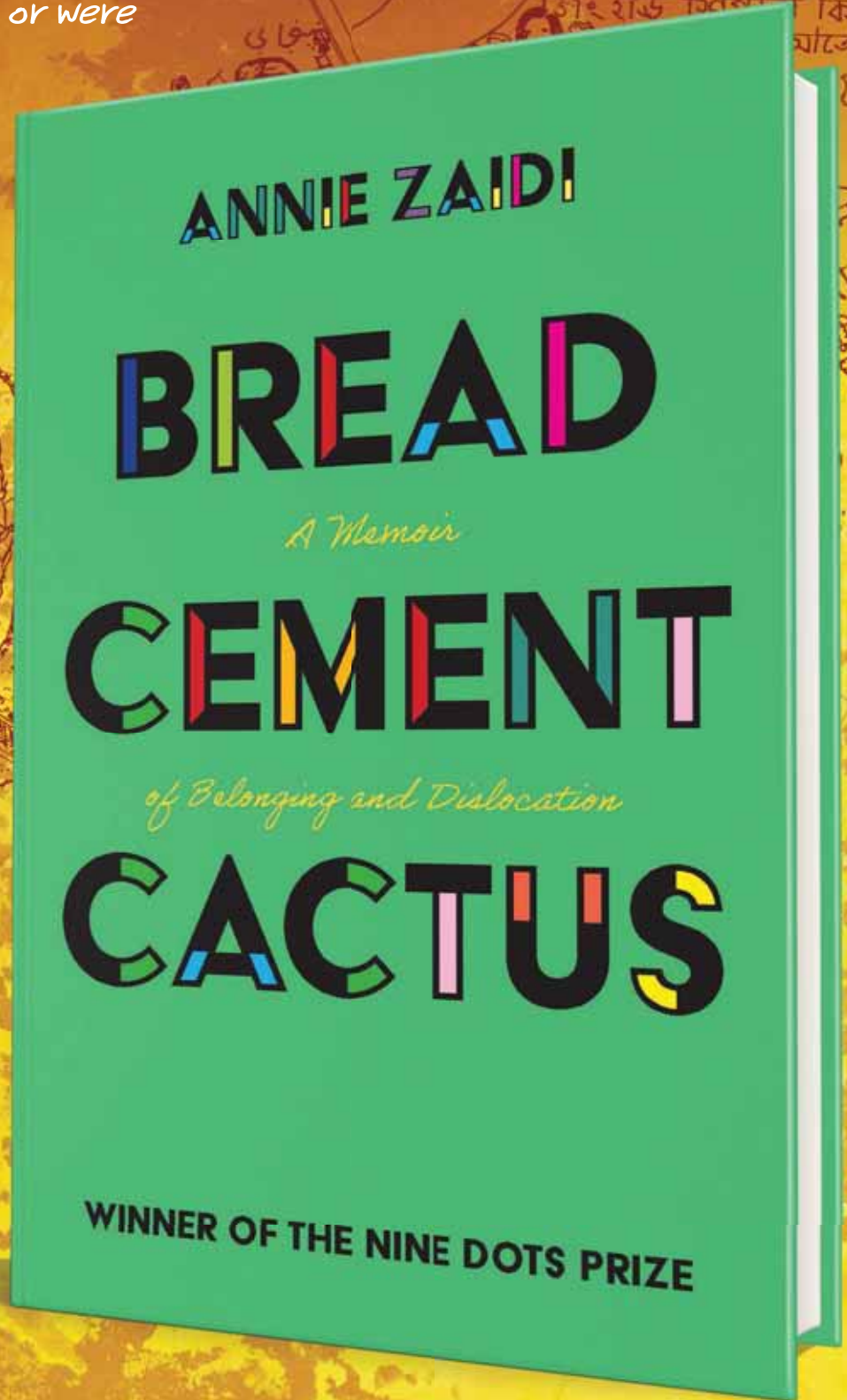
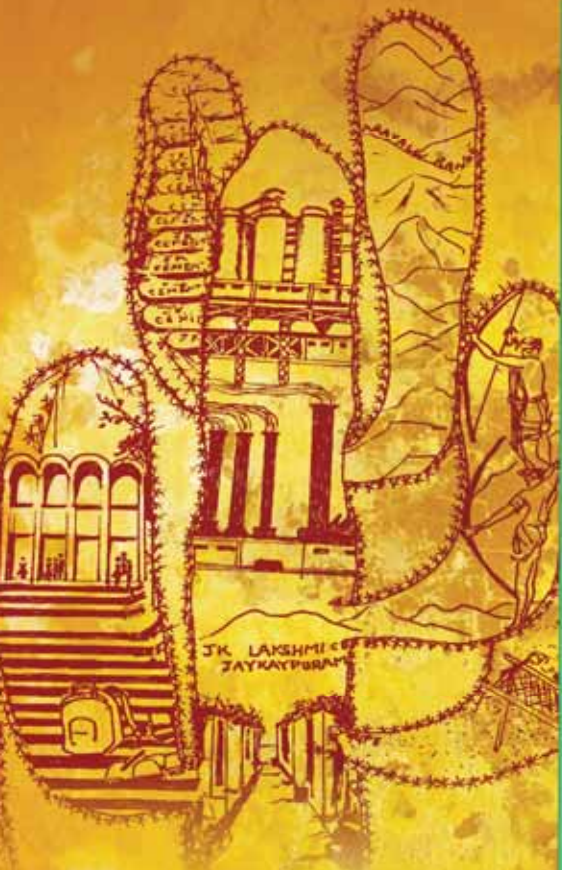
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I used to think it was hilarious: to survive only to be prosecuted. I was too young to know what people did - or were willing to do - to survive.



THE
● ● ● NINE
● ● ● DOTS
● ● ● PRIZE



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