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Going Viral: A Coronavirus Diary

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Mafalda by Quino



"Hello" "Keep your voice down, there's someone ill here" / "Your dad?" "No" / "Your mum?" "No" ...

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Coronavirus brings globalisation into focus by forcing attention onto the different layers of interconnectedness in our twenty-first century world. As the virus spreads around the planet in waves, the pandemic impinges on different social and economic sectors each according to its own rhythm, throwing them out of joint one by one. The synchronisation which normally keeps the whole system running harmoniously breaks down. It is precisely at the moment the system breaks down that we realise how interconnected it is. What is normally hidden because, as we used to say, it functions like clockwork, is exposed. We discover that while our clocks are nowadays calibrated atomically, public time is not at all uniform but constituted by the superposition of many different tempos.

Remember six degrees of separation? The theory that everyone in the world is connected to everyone else by a maximum of six steps. Also known as the six handshakes rule. This is the world of coronavirus: the rhythm of human contact, which is now forbidden us in the attempt to stop the virus in its tracks. It was still early in March when a healthy young friend who was due to come round emails to say he wouldn't come. He is self-quarantining because a friend of his who stayed overnight had begun to show symptoms. As someone in the elderly-at-risk-with-underlying-medical-condition category, I appreciate his consideration.

We are living in an accelerated world of multiple forms and layers of connectedness, which feed off each other and borrow each other's imaginaries. Metaphors are imported across different domains. Some people think of human brains as being like computers, though this is a reductivist fantasy which ignores biology, consciousness, and imagination. Contrariwise, computers become infected with viruses too, and we speak of things 'going viral' on social media. But the level of digital communication works faster than real-life social intercourse; initial transmission is

instantaneous, and then spreads out like a virtual Mexican wave. We've long been accustomed to being a mass audience for live broadcasting, but the pace, interacting networks and persistence of the internet make it qualitatively different.

As for the economy, the lightning-fast operation of the internet long ago transformed the operation of financial markets – and was one of the factors at play in the near-death experience of capitalism in 2008 – but the real economy has its own rhythms of production, which differ in different sectors. These have been intensified and accelerated by globalisation, which creates multiple just-in-time supply lines that reach across the oceans. When China imposed lock-down, factories were shut and production lines turned off, signs of economic disruption followed rapidly as the supply lines were interrupted.

The WHO delayed calling the outbreak a pandemic, but the escape of the virus was inevitable, carried around the world by the pace of round-the-clock air travel – not as fast as news (and fake news) on the internet but faster and more universal than any previous form of long-distance travel. Some countries began to impose controls on air travellers; others would do so later, as the virus spread further, while business people decided to stop travelling to meetings, airlines began cancelling flights, tourists stayed away (pity the ones stuck on forcibly quarantined cruise ships, where the virus spread rapidly) and hotels started losing business. (In some places, they would later be requisitioned for guests of a different kind.) The whole sector was one of the first to suffer a serious contraction of business. Shipping, whose rhythm is measured in weeks rather than days, was disrupted when container ships carrying goods from China stopped sailing, and supply lines snarled up as empty containers accumulated in the wrong ports. The financial markets became jittery and began to fall, losing value and then bouncing back before falling again, day by day, hour by hour, in the strange rhythm peculiar to fictitious money.

The equivocation of the stable genius in the White House didn't help, but every government is stymied by having to go it alone, because beyond the WHO there is no forum for global cooperation. It is now beyond question that globalisation has not overridden the prerogatives of the nation state. Even in the European Union, every state is acting on its own. This is not a new problem. Indeed the recent flow of refugees from zones of conflict or economic deprivation, and the climate emergency, both face the same difficulty. The UN is too cumbersome to work effectively. The Paris climate accord of 2015 came and went without achieving its aims; now the 2020 meeting, known as COP26, which is supposed to be decisive, has been postponed. Political leaders have been thrown off-balance, caught between the need both to act and to avoid panic (including their own) while taking a crash course in the science they need to guide them while hampered by their layman's ignorance (with rare exceptions like Angela Merkel). Not that the science is unequivocal; this is a novel virus, its behaviour as yet unknown, and the politicians who claim they are only listening to the scientists are not doing so entirely in good faith, but invoking science, at least in part, as a smokescreen to avoid

scrutiny. But science isn't magic and also has its rhythms. With present-day computer power and methods, it took only weeks to identify Covid-19 and make the genome sequence publicly available, allowing laboratories around the world to begin the search for a vaccine. But that takes much longer to develop and test in the proper way, maybe eighteen months, we're told. Meanwhile, each country's health system is also being tested and found wanting, even the best of them. Especially in the US, which excels in high-tech medicine but there's no real public health system to begin with, because it's all private and millions are excluded. The virus takes its time to arrive in North America, giving new meaning to the old adage – a disaster waiting to happen. And it will.

Television broadcasts footage of high-level international meetings where instead of shaking hands people touch elbows or even feet. But the virus, like the climate, has no respect for either social niceties or rank, and now we hear that as cases of infection crop up among officialdom, physical meetings are being cancelled and replaced by internet conferencing. This is also happening across education. The last academic event I was able to attend, early in March, was a small workshop at the University of Leicester where numbers were slightly depleted by two or three non-arrivals due to understandable reluctance to travel from abroad; two of them gave their contributions via an internet link-up. A few days later, arrangements are being made for me to conduct doctoral viva examinations by the same means. Not by any means the first time I've attended events where there have been remote contributors, nor interviewed a candidate by video link, but now this is clearly going to be widely taken up. However, that's only part of the story.

Like others, my own university has announced the suspension of face-to-face teaching and a rapid shift to online delivery of classes, which is already happening in schools around the world. This brings up all sorts of problems, quite apart from the question of who will look after the children if the schools are closed. One American contributor to a new social media group on 'pandemic pedagogy' observes that on-line school classes disadvantage the many poor families without home computers, and others where a single computer has to be shared with parents and siblings; mobile phones with high data costs, she adds, are no substitute. An example of the many ways in which the effects of coronavirus will fall unequally on the most disadvantaged. Not to mention the extra workload on teachers and lecturers suddenly expected to master the skills of online teaching in double quick time (and without commensurate recompense). Some of them will doubtless do so very creatively, but many will struggle. Meanwhile, in China, where online education has been developing fast for several years, there are now dozens of private companies applying AI to develop what they call 'adaptive learning', intended to 'personalise' the learning experience; this depends on sucking up data from users, making it the latest arm of surveillance capitalism. But what happens to education when you 'personalise' what is already personal?

This is the first global pandemic in the fully digital age, where the internet has made it possible to withdraw from the outside world while remaining connected to it.

Face-to-face now means something else: the faces on are screens. Our screens are deceptive, both personal and impersonal at the same time. Many people will resort to the internet to keep in touch with family and friends, as many already do, but now with greater anxiety. The 86-year-old television presenter Joan Bakewell, whose doctor has advised her to self-isolate, interviewed by video link on a television news programme, says that because of the internet, 'I'm not isolated even though I'm on my own in my home'. Many people will feel the same, some of whom have recourse to their screens precisely to break out of a loneliness they already experience. As we know, there's a trade-off: we cede our metadata, which the corporations trade on, intelligence agencies seek out, hackers steal, and data mining exploits. This is one sector of the economy that is already benefitting from the pandemic as internet use expands. Take the case of the video conference call app Zoom, which is marketed in both free and business versions, and since the pandemic broke out, saw a rise of well over 500% in daily traffic over the space of a month. Meanwhile, as China also demonstrates, mobile phone apps which track the user's movements in order to give them a health rating represent a new means of invasive state surveillance, which in China and other East Asian countries is already well advanced.

When a country's governance is not authoritarian, to act decisively against coronavirus means overriding democratic processes. Populations will have little choice but comply, in the interests of their own safety and as long as they can be persuaded that the measures taken are necessary. But the virus is not only invisible, it has, again, its own rhythm. It takes a week for the first flu-like symptoms to turn into acute respiratory distress, followed by the patient's admission to intensive care. If this works, the condition begins to abate within two or three days, otherwise it may take another week or so before the patient dies. This means that the daily figures, even if they're accurate, are polyrhythmic. They're like the Ghosts of Christmas – the past, the present and the yet-to-come – superimposed on each other: phantoms, which only reveal themselves retrospectively, when it's too late, because, as the deputy chief scientific adviser put it on April 6th, 'of course it takes time after people have been admitted to hospital for them either to get better, or very sadly to die', and it's too soon to see the effects of the lockdown so 'even if admissions start to stabilise they're expected to rise'. An odd use of the word 'stabilise'. When the government advise the elderly and other groups at risk to self-isolate, they add 'for twelve weeks'. People begin to realise that this is going to take a long time. In early April, questions start to be asked about whether the government has an exit strategy.

Some authoritative commentators have already begun to speculate about the long term effects. The doyen of Italian philosophers. Giorgio Agamben is worried about the limitation of freedom implicit in measures like 'social distancing' and the degeneration of human relations this might produce. The other person, whoever they are, even loved ones, must remain at a distance, intimacy is abolished.¹ "It is possible, given the ethical

¹ <https://artillerianmanante.noblogs.org/?=1344>

inconsistency of our rulers, that these provisions are dictated by those who have taken them for the very fear that they hope to provoke, but it is difficult not to think that the situation they create is exactly the one that those who govern us have tried to bring about repeatedly: that universities and schools are closed once and for all and that lessons are only given online, that we stop meeting and talking for political or cultural reasons and only exchange digital messages, that as far as possible machines replace all contact – all contagion – between human beings.” Perhaps the philosopher is prone to paranoia, but that doesn’t mean things might not turn out that way. On the other hand, we already know that the uses of the internet are both deleterious and beneficial, prone to both atavistic twitter storms and grassroots activism. This opposition has already altered the conduct of politics, and there is no reason why this will not continue. The problem is that activism depends on the gatherings, assemblies, street theatre and performance protest that are now impossible. For now, the popularity of the politicians is riding high. Everyone endorses national government action, even by a government it distrusts in other ways. But how long might this last? If parliaments now have to operate online, and populations likewise, why should this mean that democratic participation is suspended? We already have the institution of the online petition, but this is subject to the lottery of virality. Can we find more effective ways to exert democratic pressure online, assemble online, and call politicians to account?

2

Come coronavirus and the mainstream media have been busy generating a whole series of imaginary scenarios, stretching from the scientific to the historical to the fictitious. There are plenty of models to draw from. It seems that in France, sales of Camus’ *The Plague* have risen sharply. Perhaps we should all be reading Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Or Saramago’s *Blindness*. At all events, at the beginning of April there are reports of booksellers doing well, although it turns out that this only applies to the big chains with online sales who get their stock directly from the publishers. Not so the small independent bookshops, already struggling to survive, who depend on wholesale distributors that have stopped functioning. But there are all sorts of small traders whose survival is now threatened, like my local shoe-repairer who still trades in cash and wants paying in advance. Will he go under, I wonder. What chance does he have when the globalised world economy is in serious trouble, and our ill-equipped politicians don’t know which way to turn. Daily life is suspended while the powers-that-be scramble to keep up with economic and social collapse.

Each country paces their own response according to their own peculiarities, the extent of their exposure, the political susceptibilities of their governments and suchlike. In the UK, by the middle of March, the body politic has developed arrhythmia. Everyone in my real and virtual worlds seems to know what’s coming, but the government sticks to its step-by-step approach, which seems little different from old-school muddling through, and is widely criticised. Many organisations and institutions are in advance of the government and not only already applying precautions but instructing people to work

from home. This includes quite a lot of people, but only in certain sectors of the economy. However, universities with good IT departments are well placed to pull out all the stops, and we're soon using video-conferencing to hold department meetings; ironically, the first of them is better 'attended' than it used to be in the fleshworld. Among friends and acquaintances in my age group, great caution has become the rule of the hour. We have stopped travelling on the tube and going to concerts or the cinema, many of which are in any case shutting their doors, well before the Prime Minister announces the closure of pubs, restaurants, theatres and other social venues, and then three days later, on March 23rd, declares lockdown across the country.

As Covid-19 gets closer, the feeling I have is of an impending disaster movie, or maybe a docudrama series, which is still in the early stages of preproduction, with script conferences where various options and sub-plots are under consideration. Expect scenes early on of panic buying and empty supermarket shelves. In the middle of March, when I go to the supermarket at the top of my street, where I normally go for fresh foods and other stuff, they were out of toilet paper (although the newsagent a few doors away had some – 'Yes,' he told me, 'because I go and get them from the cash-and-carry'). A few days later I go shopping in mid-morning and find half the shelves bare and the other half depleted. No eggs, no milk. As I say to a friend in Mexico (with whom WhatsApp is already our normal means of keeping in touch), Britain has never seen such a thing before, even in the war, when food was rationed (though there weren't any supermarkets back then). But it's the result of a sudden confluence of factors: the social contagion of fear that induces panic buying and the incapacity of the supermarkets' supply lines in the face of a sudden surge in demand. What you have to ask is how many people are really panicking and how many just sensibly stocking up. The problem is that either way, both aberrant and rational behaviour by individuals has unintended consequences en masse. This we know – economics studies it in the abstract, social psychology does so empirically – but it's the kind of question that escapes the mainstream media, which is prone to jumping to conclusions and using exaggerated language.

The conversation with my Mexican friend serves to put things in perspective. Clearly the prospects in a country like Mexico (where the virus is late in arriving) are truly frightening. Who in Mexico can self-isolate and maintain physical distancing? Only the privileged, which in this context means the middle classes. Not the millions who live cheek by jowl in the shanty towns. There is a puzzle here. The global south, which comprises many more millions in these conditions, seems to be late in joining the party. Is this because these countries are less well integrated into world markets? Not 'developing', as current terminology has it, but as we used to say, underdeveloped, where the appurtenances of metropolitan living like health care are only accessible to the elite that comes and goes on the airplanes that carried the virus so rapidly to the West. Others, driven for various reasons to seek a better life elsewhere, must make the journey on foot and by illicit means for which they pay through the nose and which place their very lives in danger. These countries are the least equipped to cope with coronavirus.

What will happen when they finally succumb? And what will happen to the refugees already holed up in camps when the virus hits? And has the flow of refugees come to a halt, or have they just been squeezed out of media attention?

Here in Britain it takes a few days for the supermarkets to get their act together and get supplies flowing. They also embark on initiatives to give preferential treatment to special categories of customer like NHS employees and the elderly, as well as schemes for supplying food to the needy. They know it's good PR but the fact remains, they can certainly afford to do this. Nevertheless, questions about food supplies continue. Nobody talks much about the fact that about half of Britain's food is imported, but by early April, farmers are warning that without the usual seasonal migrant labour, harvesting will become a problem, and produce will end up rotting in the fields. In a country like England where you can buy grapes all year round, flown in from near or far according to the supply, this is a sudden reminder of something easily forgotten – that food follows the rhythm of the seasons. This in turn points us back to another inescapable factor: that we have made our climate unstable and it's in need of urgent repair. We already know what has to be done, but it's not just a question of abandoning factory farming in favour of sustainable agriculture, because food is so unequally distributed that rich countries have more than enough of it while poor countries suffer hunger and famine, and this could well be exacerbated by the pandemic.

Another rhythm develops within society (which in the halcyon days of neoliberalism Margaret Thatcher infamously declared did not exist). Round here, and across the country, by the middle of March, people are getting organised on social media in local groups to provide support for those who are self-isolating – getting their shopping done and the like. The government around this time is still vacillating, letting it be known that elderly people and those with 'underlying health conditions' will soon be asked to do what many people are already doing. Other terms enter the vocabulary, like 'social distancing', which is really physical distancing, although it has huge social implications. Despite the government's mixed messages, the frequent tendentiousness of the news media and the unreliability of the social media, the lesson of the situation is getting across, and the people around me seem less confused than they keep being told they are. Except for those who are found flouting the rules, because, as one columnist puts it, their "main news sources are the newsbreaks on Magic FM or Absolute Radio or BBC Radio 2" – in short, people who are not paying attention because they never pay attention; the kind who rarely vote (or perhaps if they do, give their vote to the far right).² There are a few reports of delinquent behaviour but the deepening state of exception also reveals real malfeasance, like a Harley Street doctor providing tests at £300+ a throw. Ethically speaking, this is on a par with the attempt by the President on duty in Washington to buy exclusive rights to a vaccine being developed in Germany. That is to say, devoid of any sense of ethics at all.

² <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2020/03/public-has-lot-questions-about-coronavirus-heres-how-they-could-be>

Everyone is affected one way or another. The student group I'm closest to are mostly doctoral students, often from abroad. One of my own is an Italian, studying part-time while working in community video, who has decided to return to Italy, on a flight organised by the Italian embassy, to be with his partner, which means suspending his studies. L. is a Spanish student studying for a doctorate in London who is also a filmmaker; she's been making a film about precarious labour in academia and the reasons for the strike at the universities that's just finished. When she first came to show me the rough cut of the film a while back, she was living in Brixton; then she moved to Chesham. While waiting to go off on a research trip, she's found an ingenious way to save on London living costs, namely, pet sitting, but it means she has to keep moving. Now she's worried that even though the funding is in place, her trip will have to be postponed. Then she writes to say that the family from the house in Chesham have decided to return from abroad and she has to move out, so she's going to stay with a friend in Bath. Just in time. Three days later De Pfeffel finally announces lockdown.

3

In the language of mainstream economics, coronavirus is what is called an externality, an event that comes from outside the system, but what it's doing is to expose the system's weaknesses and contradictions at every turn. I speak of one country here, but neoliberal governments everywhere display similar patterns. Most obvious is the primary arena of health care, which has been impaired since the 1990s by Thatcherite marketisation, and by austerity over the last decade. The former was accomplished by creating what was called an internal market, which split the NHS into purchasers and providers trading with one another. Different departments within the same hospital came to function as financially separate entities, and hospitals were forced to compete with each other for contracts from local Clinical Commissioning Groups. The order of the day (writes a columnist in the Guardian) was "throughput" and "maximum resource utilisation", and where hospitals previously operated at 85% capacity to provide a margin to deal with crises like a bad winter flu epidemic, 'for the last 10 years NHS hospitals, under intense pressure from an austerity-driven Treasury to demonstrate their "efficiency", have been forced to operate at 95% capacity.'³ The internal market was designed to open up the provision of services by facilitating the entry of private companies and subcontracted labour, with the effect of suppressing wage rises within the NHS and for many, reducing their security of employment through zero-hours contracts. Privatisation by the back door. The result was a permanent shortfall in staffing levels of both doctors and nurses, which now adds to the stress on the system.

A doctor writes that by mid-March the system was breaking down under pressure to meet the demands of the pandemic.⁴ The internal market, which saw some wards

³ https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/05/britain-boris-johnson-crisis-covid-19-pandemic-escalated-worse-leader?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

⁴ <https://flip.it/y94CK4>

stocking up on personal protective equipment while others in the same hospital went short, was being put on hold as provision was centralised within each hospital and then nationally. ‘Even the procurement of ventilators, which is now being funded and coordinated centrally, marks a huge step away from the normal system of hospitals, or departments within hospitals, being individually tasked with procuring necessary equipment in the most cost-effective way.’ In short, ‘the internal market has fallen apart overnight, proving that it was never fit for purpose.’ The crisis now reveals two faces. Immediate reality exposes the government’s failure to plan the provision of essential supplies and equipment, so while there seem to be enough beds to fill the new emergency hospitals, there are not enough ventilators, or protective equipment for doctors and nurses, paramedics and others who need it and are thereby being put at risk. Nor are enough people being tested, either within the NHS or in the community, which means a serious lack of data for the epidemiologists to work on, and nothing like the contact tracing which went on when the virus first arrived in the country, and is considered by the epidemiologists to be an essential tool in taking control of its spread. The countries in East Asia that managed to rapidly suppress the virus did so partly through rapid and extensive testing, and there is criticism of the government’s delay in doing the same here.

The other face of the crisis, which is currently in the shadow, is the long-term implications of this forcible undoing of the institution’s mode of operation. This is one of many questions of huge political import, which must now be high on the agenda of the forthcoming struggle to prevent a return to the status quo ante. Because it cannot be business as usual.

When unprotected hospital staff begin to fall ill, another historical aspect of the health system jumps into prominence, because the first deaths among doctors and nurses belong to ethnic minorities, reminding everyone that the NHS is heavily dependent on BAME staff, who make up 40% of its workforce. They are now seen nightly on television, as the media celebrates their heroic devotion to duty. The problem about this choice of words is the way it invokes the language of war. A television report on an intensive care ward begins ‘This is the frontline in a war. Everyday some battles are won and some are lost’. However sincerely intended, this comes across as a platitude that blocks intelligence and leads to false comparisons. Meanwhile another columnist asks ‘If coronavirus doesn’t discriminate, how come black people are bearing the brunt?’⁵ Official discourse digs up a phrase from ten years ago – ‘we’re all in it together’ – as if it was true then and is true now, but it isn’t. Existing social inequalities, exacerbated by the regime of austerity, are now taking a disproportionately heavy toll. A study finds that among more than 2000 critically ill Covid-19 patients in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 35% are BAME, or more than double the proportion in the wider population. It’s

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/08/coronavirus-black-people-ethnic-minority-deaths-pandemic-inequality-afua-hirsch>

even worse in the US: in Michigan, 15% of the population but 40% of the deaths are black; in Chicago it's 30% and 70% respectively, and in Louisiana, 32% and 70%.

There's another problem: the lack of integration between the NHS and the social care sector, already overstretched, which is largely in the hands of either private equity firms or charities (my niece works for one of these but is now on furlough because she has one of those 'underlying medical conditions'). Care homes are impacted by the lack of protective gear, the depletion of the workforce, and the absence of testing. As they turn into death-traps, reports emerge of clusters of old people being killed by the virus and dying alone. The sector also includes many more low-paid and precarious workers on the frontline (the term is difficult to avoid) distributing food, delivering medical samples, cleaning buildings, looking after children in need, and now a signal reversal takes place in public discourse as even the populist press grasps the truth: that the people who are the key workers in this society are not the bankers and the entrepreneurs but those who are paid the least and live without security from month to month. Coronavirus is only exacerbating a pre-existing condition brought about by the regime of austerity, in which nurses and teachers are among those who have had recourse to food banks even though they're in work because their employment pays too little. This is another deeply political question, which raises a fundamental issue about the social values enfolded within class society. Designating poorly paid jobs as low-skill is a way of ignoring the particular kinds of skill they in fact involve, like the individual and personal attention, not to mention emotional intelligence, of the carer. It is tied in, of course, with a truth long pressed by feminism, that much of this kind of work is performed by women within the family, either in the form of unpaid domestic labour or the low-paid labour of domestic helpers who form part of the informal economy. The welfare state does not eliminate the informal economy but reduces it by socialising a good part of the costs, paying them by means of taxes and state expenditure. The neoliberal dispensation changed this formula, enabling the new private social care businesses to profit by maintaining the myth of low-pay unskilled labour.

The government publishes a list of key workers, defined as those whose children are allowed to continue in schools which remain open for the purpose. The list makes very interesting reading because of the way it represents the skeletal structure of the state which comes to the fore in conditions of extremity. Alongside health and education are 'key public services' including justice, religion, charities, undertakers and public service broadcasting; administrative workers in local and national government; the food industry; public safety and national security, i.e., policing, the armed forces, firefighters, and the prison service. Transport is there too, and then an amorphous category listed as 'Utilities, communication and financial services', which lumps energy supply together with a highly complex interlocking infrastructure which allows all the others to function, in short, the digital pathways through which everything is now controlled. There is an unspoken assumption that the information technology on which we utterly depend is somehow beyond risk.

When people are told to work from home, this only reveals a structural division between those who can because they work in the ‘knowledge economy’ and those who work in factories or shops, construction or warehouses, in social or personal care or manual jobs which require them to move around (even when delivery drivers use GPS and mobile devices). But lockdown means that non-essential economic activity be suspended, throwing the economy, here and everywhere, into recession at best, and probably into full-scale depression. Faced with economic meltdown, the government comes up with an unprecedented scheme to mothball the economy. In order to save otherwise viable firms which are not considered essential, they will be allowed to place employees on furlough while the state covers 80% of their wages. This is momentous. Having already guaranteed the NHS would get whatever it needed, here is a conservative government, formerly committed to the small state of neoliberal ideology, throwing fiscal discipline away. But the plans reveal a clear bias towards bailing out capital rather than people and immediately exposes the much vaunted flexibility and low unemployment of the post-crash labour market as a sham, because it excludes some five million people, from actors and musicians to minicab drivers and motorbike couriers, from the self-employed on freelance contracts to gig workers on zero hours, who now find themselves jobless as theatres and concert halls, pubs, restaurants and fast food chains all shut down, and they’re forced back on a welfare system which is already dysfunctional.

This kind of precarious employment has been nurtured as a deliberate strategy. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash (writes another columnist) ‘the Confederation of British Industry – the bosses’ spokespeople – suggested the crisis was an opportunity to expand a “flexiforce” of precarious workers, with a reduced core workforce of permanent workers with full rights.’⁶ This ‘flexiforce’ includes ‘gas engineers, plasterers, pet sitters, carpenters, hairdressers, construction workers, bouncers, comedians, yoga instructors, chefs, sports coaches, delivery drivers, wedding florists, animators and theatre directors – you name it.’ The lifeline now offered to those not entitled to sick pay is less than £95 per week through the discredited universal credit system, with a 5-week wait for the first payment. This system, introduced in 2013 to simplify the administration of welfare, in fact traduces it, by punishing claimants for losing their job instead of supporting them. People have been forced into debt and even died while waiting, or because the system has sanctioned them. Ken Loach has made two very fine films about the system’s injustices. Nevertheless, applicants have shot up to 10 times the usual level and the system is overwhelmed. A surveys reports that around half of this precarious workforce would feel obliged to continue working even if they felt ill, simply to buy food and pay their rent.

The numbers in need are exploding: in the UK, 1.2m new benefit claims since the lockdown; in the USA, more than 17m filing for unemployment benefit in the space

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/26/universal-basic-income-help-self-employed>

of 4 weeks. The situation is worse than in the Great Depression. There *is* a solution, but it's a radical and controversial one, and it already has a name: universal basic income (UBI), whereby, instead of people claiming means-tested and inadequate welfare payments, everyone below a certain income receives an unconditional regular sum at a level commensurate with dignified life. Since it should not be beyond the skills of the software engineers to adapt existing systems to make these payments, the question is entirely political. In Britain, the government has rejected the idea, but it has international advocates on both the far left and the libertarian right, and various trial schemes have been run over the last few years, the best known of them in Finland. Their pros and cons are beyond the scope of these notes but its advocates are speaking up, calling this the very moment to bring it in. Even newspapers like The Financial Times, who recognise the need for large stimulus packages, suggest that some form of universal basic income makes sense.

There are many ways to implement a universal income scheme, and they depend on the political colour of whoever decides to do so. It sounds unlikely, but the USA is experimenting with a weak version by undertaking to send millions of people a means-tested payment, but it's only one-off. Proving that pre-coronavirus political divisions still hold, the strongest version is the one now being proposed in Spain by the left-wing coalition of socialists and Podemos, who have already requisitioned the private health sector, although it true that this is not an outright nationalisation and leaves open the question of what happens later. (The UK is merely taking control of private hospitals and paying for the beds.) The income scheme announced in Spain on April 6 is aimed at families that have lost their income and are not entitled to unemployment benefits, but the intention is to keep it in place after the crisis. It's not full-scale UBI, but corresponds to proposals already included in the electoral programme. A friend in Madrid tells me that business doesn't support it because they say they haven't been consulted, but the unions and NGOs do. It's hardly surprising that a government of right-wing managerialists like we have in Britain should pooh-pooh any such project, calling it 'operationally difficult' and suchlike, because it not only exposes the punitive nature of existing welfare, but it represents a real game-changer. And that is precisely why we need it.

4

Nature begins to reclaim its own. As lockdown empties the streets of traffic and people, wild animals that lurk in the periphery of cities and suburbs feel emboldened to explore. A new meme appears on the internet, of foxes roaming formerly busy roads and goats wandering down village high streets. Not all are genuine. But there's hard evidence from satellite data that with the cessation of traffic and the shutdown of factories, there is a marked fall in air pollution, in China, in Italy, in New York. Nothing demonstrates more clearly that it is human activity that has caused the climate emergency, which hasn't gone away, and that while coronavirus does its worst, our common reconstructed future still depends on confronting it without delay.

Intellectual and cultural life also have their own rhythms. Columnists and pundits, working at home, of course, have been rushing into print, and some very good journalism has appeared (otherwise I wouldn't be able to write this account, which shows what you can learn from the internet while staying still in one place). There is the feeling of a shift in economic common sense (although the same thing happened after the crash of 2008 and it didn't make any difference). Meanwhile, the first effect of lockdown is to curtail cultural and sporting events which are played before audiences, while museums and galleries close their doors and film production is halted as sets shut down. This rapidly reveals the same precarity of the gig economy as in other sectors, because the cultural sector is full of people employed as freelancers, which is really a euphemism for sub-contracted labour. The agents and independent producers that hire many of these freelancers are themselves at risk, their operations suspended. An article in the Guardian provides examples: a screenwriter, a lighting engineer, a comedian, an actor, the director of a theatre education company, an independent writer and lecturer, a live audio systems engineer, a dancer, an artist, a gallery worker, a cellist, a stage manager, a self-employed art tutor (my sister-in-law is one of these), a community artist, an opera singer, a theatre producer – all of whom are used to working hand-to-mouth, contract to contract, gig to gig, all of which have now been cancelled.⁷ According to a Musicians' Union survey, musicians in the UK have already lost an estimated £13.9m in earnings because of coronavirus, with the closure of live venues, schools, and due to social distancing, private teaching.⁸

Nevertheless, in the midst of the decimation of cultural life comes the affirmation of its vitality. Adorno spoke of the anthropological function of music as the property of bringing together communities, and in Italy, no sooner is the country put in lockdown than smartphone videos started to appear of people coming out onto their balconies and joining their voices together in song. Here an instrumentalist would lead the singing, there an opera singer would serenade their neighbours. Another phenomenon occurs. Performing musicians in different countries and different genres, keenly feeling the loss of contact with a living audience, turn to the internet to reconnect. Some begin freely offering performances on line, solo, duo, even whole families. Local community-based choirs, unable to rehearse together, turn to video conferencing to create synchronised online performances. Several of the great musical institutions – opera houses and orchestras – catch the mood of the moment by putting recorded performances on line for free. Other organisations follow suit, and you can also click your way through virtual tours of several of the world's great museums and art galleries, again all for free.

They are seeking, of course, to justify the very large subsidies they receive to operate in normal times, but they do so precisely by insisting on the common good of

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/mar/27/coronavirus-lockdown-affects-arts-workers>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/mar/23/uk-musicians-lose-139m-earnings-coronavirus>

their cultural function, to provide the spiritual and aesthetic sustenance that we need quite as much as the material. People find their relaxations, distractions and respite in many different ways, well catered for by the internet, which have nothing to do with edification or solace or depth of feeling, but this open cultural sharing exemplifies what our society perhaps now has a chance to learn anew, about the difference and relationship between the individual and the social, which has nothing to do with utilitarian or instrumental calculation but with empathy, fellow feeling, shared intelligence and solidarity. Someone on television (I think it was) captures it succinctly: ‘Medicine will get us out of the crisis, but it’s art which keeps us sane’.

The reckoning is still to come, but the shape of our political options is already clear. Either authoritarianism or the socialisation and redistribution of resources. Disaster capitalism will try to have its way but this time cannot in the end succeed, first because the only solutions it offers involve mounting debt at every level, and second because the whole structure of globalised neoliberal capitalism – which includes China’s capitalistic communism – is already threatened by serious environmental damage and the accelerating effects climate change. Covid-19, like previous coronaviruses, may itself be a result of ecological changes that result from intensive agriculture and the decline in biodiversity, which simultaneously threatens species survival and brings wildlife into closer contact with humans with whom to share their viruses. Perhaps China is prone to such viruses because of its predilection for exotic foods, but it is the USA, which in the second week of April overtakes China in the incidence of the disease, which now reveals the irrational character of the market mechanisms developed by agro-industry. They were described to me five years ago when I was in Greece shooting *Money Puzzles*, a documentary about money and debt, by a volunteer working in food distribution who had lost his shop in the country’s economic collapse. ‘The market,’ he said, ‘which they link to freedom, is actually rule-governed, full of contracts and concentrations. The concentration of the market leaves people out, and produce gets thrown away. We could feed every hungry person on Earth three times over with all produce that gets thrown away.’

One of the most recent reports as I finish writing these lines is that billions of dollars’ worth of food is going to waste as growers from California to Florida face a mountain of highly perishable produce for which roughly half their market has disappeared with the closure of restaurants, schools, stadiums, theme parks and cruise ships.⁹ Farmers are dumping fresh milk and ploughing vegetables back into the dirt at the same time that food banks are handling record demand and grocery stores are struggling to keep shelves stocked, because the supply lines which pass through the food processing industry have become scrambled. This immediately reminds me of the scene from the German communist film of 1932, Slatan Dudow’s *Kuhle Wampe* (for which Brecht had a hand in the script), in which commuters on a train discuss a newspaper

⁹ https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/08/human-impact-on-wildlife-to-blame-for-spread-of-viruses-says-study-aoe?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

report that in Brazil, they've burned 24m pounds of coffee because the bottom has fallen out of the world market. This is what happens in a depression, and that is where we now are, hardly more than three months since the virus was first identified.

Then I read on, to learn that while growers' associations are lobbying state or federal bodies to keep them afloat by buying their surplus to supply to the needy, there are also local farmers who are cutting out the middleman and starting to sell direct-to-consumer boxes of produce to local customers, a community-level initiative facilitated by mobile communications. It's the same means used by the local support group in my own neighbourhood, and as I learn from its social media page, by the fruit and vegetable wholesalers at New Covent Garden market who no longer have restaurants and hotels to supply. What is important here is the elimination of the middleman as the market returns to the local community. This is established principle for the green movement, and takes shape in farmers' markets and local shops and restaurants buying directly from the farm. As this now moves online, it can only strengthen community consciousness.

But the same principle of localisation applies to whole of agro-industry. Industrial agriculture is far too costly in all sorts of ways, through chemical pollution, the reduction of biodiversity, the energy cost, the processing industry which generates huge amounts of single-use plastic, and not least, transport. The goal of sustainable farming is not only respect for biodiversity and the soil, but also to reduce the distance between farm and market. Food should travel the least possible distance to reach the consumer, and diets return to a more natural regime. Perhaps the food corporations will see some sense in reining in their supply lines but what's needed is a new model of national self-sufficiency. That this needs to happen on a global scale requires a re-evaluation of globalisation. Every country needs to be able as far as possible to feed itself, use local renewable energy, and supply itself with all essential manufactures. Why can't the best knowledge/skills/design etc. be universalised while production and distribution is localised? This may seem a utopian demand but there are communities in many countries around the world where these principles are already taking root.

In order for this movement to flourish as it needs to, it needs suitably encouraging conditions implemented by resolute governments. These must be far-reaching and integrated with plans for other sectors of the economy if there's to be any chance that the present pandemic will not simply abate before giving way to another and even more intractable crisis. In short, we need the full New Green Deal, and we need it now. This means fighting the most deeply vested corporate interests, and that's a very big ask indeed, especially because it also has to take on the most shadowy corporate sector of all, big pharma. Brexit meant that this was already going to be part of the struggle over the future shape of the NHS, and how to defend its integrity from upcoming trade talks with the USA. It is big pharma that controls the patents, decides what drugs to develop and what they cost, neglecting research in areas they deem unlikely to be profitable or charging inordinately for them. As laboratories around the

world race to create the vaccine that is needed to neutralise the virus, we urgently need a different model, which will guarantee its profit-free universal distribution.

As we prepare to enter week four of the official lockdown, I think of two familiar mottos that have turned up on my timeline in recent days, both of which, despite their apparently difference stance, I take as political imperatives. The first is provided by Samuel Beckett:

'Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on'

The second comes from Bertolt Brecht:

'In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times.'

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