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Editorial

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One of the eminent French philosopher Alain Badiou's best-known concepts is the idea of the 'Event' (Badiou, 1988). Capitalised to symbolise its significance, a political 'Event' is not merely the occurrence of something cataclysmic that significantly underlines the dominant order's failings, contradictions, and habitual injustices – even though events do tend to occur within the context of existing socio-cultural, political, or economic antagonisms. Rather, the political Event is something of seismic political resonance that has the potential to generate a powerful fidelity to a new order, revise beliefs, instigate new political discourses, or a way of living and governing society. Therefore, such an Event is both destructive and creative. It not only makes the continuation of the old order impossible but unavoidably in the process marks the beginning of something new. The precision and fidelity that the Event inspires symbolic change: moving forward we speak, think, and act through the lens of the Event. Christ's crucifixion was arguably a religious Event. For Badiou, the Russian Revolution and the French Revolution were both examples of political Events. If we look back through history then, 'True Events' that result in substantive change, therefore, are rare.

Thus far, the 21ˢᵗ century has arguably been a century of failed would-be/could-be 'Events'. The global financial crash (GFC) of the late 2000s was calamitous for the global economy and ordinary working people. It exposed the folly of neoliberal ideological beliefs that the masses are best served by allowing economic and financial elites to engage in footloose speculation on global financial markets and demonstrated the vast inequalities opening up between those responsible for the crisis and those most affected by its consequences. At the time, there was great talk that the GFC spelled the end of neoliberal capitalism, that there was no going back, and that the

global shockwaves generated by the GFC would propel a radically new political economic order into existence. But the GFC failed to materialise into an 'Event'. It failed to create a fundamentally new discourse or inspire fidelity toward a radically new way of social life and economic governance.

As we all know, in the aftermath of such a crisis generated by neoliberalism, mainstream politicians from across the political spectrum nevertheless continued to draw on neoliberalism's language, myths, and mottos, positioning the very same logic as the only means out of the crisis. When such politicians drew on the neoliberal falsehood that taxes pay for public spending – an ideological myth that provided the political-economic rationale for austerity as something unpleasant but necessary and inevitable – there was no fundamental challenge forthcoming. The best that could be mustered, it seemed, was an anti-politics which grumbled about the unfairness of the global economy and chanted hollow mantras about the suffering of the 99%. But this did not create a new way of seeing, speaking, and acting in the world. While it was an incident of major historical significance, it did not materialise into a political Event in larger Badiouan sense.

The same could also be said of the 2011 uprisings which saw protests stem from the Arab Spring to political movements, riots and unrest in Europe and North America. Once again, the political order and neoliberal economic value system was questioned as it appeared that the whole world was protesting. It felt that a new world order was imminent and on the horizon. Neoliberalism had failed the world again. The indignation, the anger, the discontent suddenly was collectively present in numerous countries around the world. Yet, despite the noise and unease, nothing emerged of political significance; opposition activists could not muster the energy or support to offer a legitimate alternative. No such Event emerged.

Is the Covid-19 pandemic going to amount to another failed would-be/could-be Event? The presence of a new virus coupled with, in some cases, the widespread use of untested restrictions, produced pandemic context which exposed the fragility of long, globalised, just-in-time supply chains, prompting increased calls for de-globalisation, shortening of supply chains, and increased sovereignty around energy, food, minerals, and other critical resources. The falsity of neoliberal mantras that public spending is funded through tax revenues, as sovereign nations with the power to create currency spent huge sums of money to tackle the pandemic at a time when the tax base was shrinking at an alarming rate. Current issues of inflation stem from supply chain problems, corporate price hikes, and geo-political events rather than pandemic-related public spending. Calls for a 'return to normal' were short-lived, dismissed as either undesirable or impossible, and were replaced by a slogan repeated by political leaders across the world who universally promised to 'build back better'. This was the 'new normal' we were told we would encounter after the lockdowns. Certain commentators even made tongue-in-cheek suggestions that we move away from the Gregorian calendar and its use of BC/BCE and AD/CE, in favour of BC (Before Coronavirus) and AC (After Coronavirus). The ultimate verdict on this remains inconclusive as we continue to feel the ramifications and shockwaves, shockwaves that are further amplified by the war between Russia and Ukraine and a cost-of-living crisis.

The papers in this special issue of *JCCHE* offer up criminological and zemiological analyses of different aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic. All of the papers herein reflect on the political, economic, and socio-cultural context that preceded the pandemic, while also speculating as to what lies in store for us in the future. Simon Winlow and Emma Winlow consider whether or not the neoliberal era is coming to an end. Implicitly, Winlow and Winlow discuss the macro-economic change generated by the Covid-19 pandemic along the lines of the Badiouan event. They outline how policy and fiscal and monetary responses to the Covid-19 pandemic kicked many of neoliberalism's shibboleths into the long grass. They tentatively argue that one can hear the wheels of history beginning to turn once again, as governments across the world increasingly begin to both speak and act in terms of economic nationalism, sovereignty and security. Nevertheless, they observe that the *language* (if not the practice) of neoliberalism remains a tedious presence on the political stage, a truth exemplified by the recent prime ministerial contest in the UK. Winlow and Winlow's paper, therefore, examines this contradictory state of affairs in its wider political context, with serious implications for criminology and zemiology.

Anthony Ellis's contribution provides a critical forecast on violent crime as the world emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic. Focusing primarily on the United Kingdom, Ellis offers up a contextual analysis of violence in Britain prior to the pandemic, considers the impact Covid-19 and lockdown measures had on violence during the pandemic, but most significantly provides a forecast on violence post-pandemic. In his forecast of violence, Ellis's timely article considers the amalgamation of the legacy of austerity, the impact of lockdowns, and the current cost-of-living crises alongside wider tensions generated by climate change, politics, and cultural issues.

The potential Event invites the possibility that political, economic and social life can be different thereafter its evolution. In their critical piece which focusses on the introduction of the Covid-19 vaccination passport in many countries, Telford, Treadwell and Bushell evaluate the use of the 'Covid-19 passport' which governments brought into use to supposedly 'manage the transmission' of the virus. They show how the scheme was scientifically and ethically unsound, showing how it violates ethical principles of informed consent and further entrenches some unvaccinated peoples' sense of political and medical mistrust. They frame the passports' introduction within a wider context of the death of the social and the 'Other' which they posit are part of our potential shift towards a post-social, contactless world where a primacy to technology has precedence over actual physical human interaction. All this falls within a general trend, they suggest, of increased technological and digital surveillance as part of a 'surveillance capitalism'.

During the social void of the lockdowns, the surrogate world of digital entertainment was embraced even more so as a means to distance ourselves from the Real and in his article examining the potential dystopian futures presented to us in film and series mediums, Briggs critically analyses the potential for these stories to play out in real life. Using such portrayals of end-of-world scenarios and dystopian future films and series as possible avenues for our potential trajectory, Briggs speculates about our future in a post-Covid world using aspects of Žižek's (2018) critical discussions on *hope* and *hopelessness* and Tom Moylan's (2020) concept of the 'dystopian

structure of feeling'. In the main, Briggs argues, the power of such fictitious future depictions of political, economic and social life act as the disavowal for our current potential trajectory and simultaneously act as the emotional cushion which removes us from engaging with the gravity of our current predicament.

In reality, as we saw quite quickly in the pandemic context, politicians and policymakers were far from being concerned with what was happening to precariously placed groups. Policies and approaches - engaged in the name of preventing viral transmissions - in more ways than one, did detriment to the most vulnerable groups in society. Reporting from Bulgaria, Dimitar Panchev ethnographically documents what such policies did to the already-socially-stigmatised Roma and Gypsy populations who, in the wake of the restrictions, needed to continue to generate money in the societal margins. He posits that the restrictions not only reduced their marginalised activities but acted as a magnifying glass on their activities when they did not conform to what was expected of them thus inviting further intervention from the authorities.

In the book review section, Emily Setty offers reflects on Briggs et. al's stand-out book, *Lockdown: Social Harm in the Covid-19 Era,* which offers up a comprehensive and critical overview of the multifarious harms that emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly those stemming from the various non-pharmaceutical interventions – such as lockdowns and other public health restrictions – which became the dominant mode of tackling the virus.

Finally, in our 'Conversations' section, Professor Simon Winlow sits down to talk with Thomas Raymen about his recent book *The Enigma of Social Harm: The Problem of Liberalism* (Routledge, 2022). Among other topics, Professor Winlow quizzes Raymen on some of the key ideas of the book; the nature of human flourishing and its role and relationship in defining social harm; whether or not harm has any positive role to play in our lives; and whether or not fields such as criminology and zemiology should simply return to philosophy.

On that note, we warmly welcome you to the issue and hope you enjoy.

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Article

Is the Neoliberal Era Coming to an End?
Ideology, history and macroeconomic change in the shadow of COVID-19

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Abstract

It is easy to become enthralled by foreground events, especially when they are as devastating as the Covid-19 pandemic. However, to really get a sense of what is going on, one must also look at the background. Beyond the pandemic's spectacular foreground, we have seen a range of changes that might encourage the more optimistic among us to believe that the neoliberal era is approaching its terminus. Barely comprehensible sums of money have been created to cushion the pandemic's heavy blows, and a range of policy initiatives have emerged that are obviously antagonistic to the main shibboleths of neoliberalism. However, the language of neoliberalism remains. The myths that assisted neoliberalism to maintain its global supremacy for over forty years – especially those that misrepresent our money system – continue to be presented to the general public as if they were unchallengeable truths. So, what is really going on? Looking principally at events in Britain, this article attempts to shed some light on the evolution of global capitalism.

Introduction

All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.

Arthur Schopenhauer

It has become quite banal to suggest that the world has been changed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Its sheer scale and the rapidity with which it transformed the normal run of things immediately seem to confirm that the pandemic was an event of truly historic magnitude: impossible to predict before the crisis, at least in its details, and, at its close, impossible to ever go back. The pandemic has already spawned a cacophony of radically divergent critique. Much of this critique has focused on what we might call the foreground of the pandemic, and here there is much to explore: infections, hospitalisations, deaths, lockdowns and their diverse effects, public health responses, and so on. However, when faced with truly transformative events, it is often useful for critical academics to take a step back and momentarily focus on what is going on in the background.

While it is vital that we get to grips with the intricacies of the pandemic and its variegated effects, we also need to construct a clear-sighted conjunctural analysis of our present times, which will inevitably be characterised in large part by the sudden arrival of Covid, state, market and social responses to Covid, and Covid's protracted diminution and gradual disappearance from the forefront of the public imagination. Such an analysis might, for example, shed light on the various ways in which the framework of neoliberal capitalism and its individualised and increasingly fractious social order – the world that existed *before* the pandemic – informed its development and shaped its effects (Briggs, 2021a, b). It is certainly true, for example, that the long-running inadequacy of public investment in core services exacerbated the crisis (see for example, Barrera-Algarín et al, 2020; Navarro, 2020), and there is also clear evidence that the neoliberal faith in the global marketplace, its long and intricate supply chains and its 'just in time' production methods, was quickly revealed to have been dangerously misplaced (see for example Free and Hecimovic, 2020). However, as the pandemic recedes into history, we also need to know how and to what extent the pandemic and its effects have informed, encouraged or enabled the evolution of neoliberal capitalism itself.

If we really focus on what is going on in the background of the pandemic, obvious suggestions of change come into sharp relief. Whether the pandemic was used by elites to disguise or rapidly speed up changes that were already in place, or if the actual experience of the crisis itself prompted elites to pursue specific forms of change, is an issue of some complexity, and it seems destined to be argued over for some time to come. However, no matter upon which side of the argument one falls, it is difficult to dispute the fact that significant changes have indeed taken place. These changes need to be interpreted and placed in an appropriate context. The world is clearly changing markedly at a fundamental level, despite the fact that changes of the sort discussed here often avoid public discussion and can often take time to fully come to

fruition. It behoves critical academics to construct rigorous and informed accounts of where these changes came from and where they might be taking us.

The first step is to acknowledge that capitalism is a self-revolutionising system (Winlow and Hall, 2012). It changes its features when it is expedient for it to do so. It has already proven itself able to silence or integrate antagonistic cultural critique and rapidly adapt its processes of production, distribution and exchange (ibid; Hall and Winlow, 2007). At the moment huge, rapacious global corporations are attempting to launder their reputations by adopting the language of identity politics (see Winlow and Hall, 2022, for discussion). While global corporations have long attempted to position themselves as somehow antagonistic to the dour, exclusionary and steeply hierarchical world of the old capitalism (see for example Frank, 1998; Heath and Potter, 2006), and open to forms of change that do not threaten profitability, the language of identity politics is new. We are also seeing a range of corporations reposition themselves in the market as they become more keenly aware of the opportunities and challenges associated with the ongoing energy transition (see Jacobson, 2020) and the interconnected, multidimensional, and starkly uneven processes of deglobalisation (see for example Lee and Park, 2020). Capitalism is both willing and able to alter its surface features in order to defend profitability and the amoral exchange relation that lies at its core (see Hall, 2012). *Capitalism adapts* (see Winlow et al, 2015). Throughout its long history it has passed through a number of distinct epochs in which it has taken a different form and mobilised rhetoric to assuage dissent. Now, in 2022, at what seems to be the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, we again seem to be standing at a crucial historical juncture. Capitalism's neoliberal era appears to be coming to an end. Recent changes to economic policy – which seem to be occurring across the globe but at varying speeds and to varying degrees – afford us the opportunity to develop a range of grounded, informed but still speculative attempts to identify the shape and content of what might be capitalism's next evolutionary phase. However, a range of paradoxes and contradictions remain in play, and little can be relied upon. Despite the ubiquitous upbeat political rhetoric and a strong popular desire to 'get back to normal', change is most assuredly in the air. It has advanced to such a degree that, in order to 'get back to normal', the state clearly needs to engage in activities that seem very much beyond the parameters of the neoliberal era's 'normal' policies and principles. In the next section we consider the rise of neoliberalism and the ideological support systems that have allowed neoliberalism to continue unchallenged for so long. We will then look in more detail the various forces that are currently threatening the continuity of neoliberalism.

Background

The rise of neoliberalism in the nineteen seventies resulted in large part from the general mismanagement of Keynes's economic model and the social democratic political framework that for a time rested comfortably upon it (see Mitchell and Fazi, 2017 for discussion). A series of economic shocks opened the door to free market capitalism's most committed devotees, who quickly marched in and spread out across the political spectrum in an effort to erode faith in the state while marketing their own ideological commitments as a new and dependable package of replacement policies that could overcome disabling orthodoxies and drive economies forward.

For years they had worked behind the scenes, pushing free-market thinking forward in a range of core institutions and elevating free-market economic policies to a position where they could be seen and appraised by political, financial and economic elites (see Slobodian, 2020). In the shadow of a broad and multifaceted economic crisis, they were able to convince many classical liberals in the west's right-leaning political parties that the problems faced by western economies were caused by a bloated, interventionist state that taxed its population too highly and placed counterproductive regulatory impediments in front of employers, investors and innovators. A range of small-state policy initiatives – that, when joined together, were eventually labelled 'neoliberalism' (see Harvey, 2007) – were then positioned as the answer to the problems caused, notionally at least, by the state's overreach into virtually every sphere of human life, and its total inability to successfully manage the ostensibly inevitable shift to a new, fluid and interconnected global economic marketplace. Of course, many centrists and centre-left political figures immediately bought into the narrative of social democratic exhaustion and decline and accepted that change was necessary.

For many, the Second World War and its immediate aftermath required the state to grow and intervene in social and economic life is ways that it had never done before. However, now the larger European nations had been rebuilt. With the aid of what seemed to be the largesse of the Americans, many European nations had picked themselves up off the floor and forged a path back to growth. But now the economies of many western nations appeared to be faltering. Productivity had declined and economic interventionism seemed to have reached its endpoint. The post-war state's habit of attempting to manage and manipulate core feature of the national economy by this stage appeared to be restraining the dynamism and creativity these economies needed to grow, diversity and drive forward popular living standards. In creating and sustaining coddling cultures of dependency and slothfulness, the state had impeded human freedom while snuffing out the innovation and vigour that could transform economies and the lives of consumers. Continuing to utilise the same old social democratic tools to address what appeared to be very new problems was an exercise in stupidity. New tools needed to be fashioned. New ideas needed to be thrown into the mix. As it stood, the state seemed ponderous and ill-equipped for the challenges that lay ahead (see for example Friedman, 1993). Its fundamental remit needed to be reimagined, and the people freed from its outdated, disabling paternalism. Thanks to the diligence and forbearance of neoliberal economists and lobbyists, who had waited for years for their chance to shine, a new range of tools were at hand.

There existed a popular desire for change. The old orthodoxies had been systematically mismanaged to the extent that, by the mid-seventies, they seemed entirely bankrupt. In an atmosphere not dissimilar from that which exists today, there was a sense that dissatisfaction could no longer be borne and something new must inevitably be brought into being (see Shepherd, 2015; Martin Lopez, 2018). That the doctrines of neoliberalism were able to displace those of social democracy is an issue of some complexity, but for our purposes a basic sketch will suffice.

The matriculating political class – eager to throw off dour convention, embrace change and truly make their mark upon history – adopted and enacted a range of policies, laced with suggestions to boundless freedom, that seemed destined to drive economic growth, technological innovation and progressive social change (see for example Griffiths, 2014). The economists who advocated the adoption of such policies carried a significant degree of gravitas and seemed entirely free doubt (see Stedman Jones, 2014). The policy programmes they recommended were, they claimed, logical, evidenced and absolutely necessary. The recommended policies would boost freedom and self-reliance, encourage innovation, drive technological change, improve consumer lifestyles (see Friedman, 2020) and, crucially, prevent the inexorable slide of developed and developing nations toward tyrannical, inhuman state power (see Hayek, 2001). State spending and involvement in the formal economy should be immediately reduced and kept to an absolute minimum. State assets should be returned to the market, and traditional forms of state activity should be yielded to profit-orientated corporations and businesses. In terms of economic management, the state should focus upon attracting private investment by doing everything that could be done to ensure corporations, businesses and the inordinately talented investment class were able to realise high and sustained profits (see Friedman, 1993). High profits – which were of course partly dependent upon low costs, the most important of which was, and remains, wages – would attract private investment, which would in turn create jobs, drive economic growth, improved productivity and supply the tax revenues many mistakenly believed the state needed to cover its shrinking spending commitments.

The policies associated with neoliberalism were myopic, anti-social and based upon only the most shallow, thoughtless and mathematised accounts of human motivations as they enter the economic sphere (Hall and Winlow, 2015, 2017). However, despite its manifold problems and the diverse pains that accompanied its introduction, neoliberalism was able to transform itself into an unchallengeable orthodoxy that extended its reach around the entire globe. In spite of the destruction it left in its wake – rising inequality, destructive de-industrialisation processes, unemployment, under-employment, dilapidated infrastructure, poverty, rising debt, the privatisation of public goods, and a range of slow-motion crises in key institutions caused by a lack of investment and the warped assumption that the private sector would drive up quality while driving down costs – neoliberalism managed to shed its ideological skin to become for political and business elites pure common sense (see for example Lloyd, 2014, 2018; Kotze, 2019). It also, of course, became common sense for most economists (Mitchell and Fazi, 2017), and the news media's economics commentators who presented dogma as if it was uncontested fact at every available opportunity (Winlow and Hall, 2016; Kotze and Lloyd, 2022).

This is the true prize that awaits those ideologies that achieve genuine supremacy. The battle of ideas quietens as one ideology establishes its central tenets as common sense, an ostensibly impartial baseline against which all other policy proposals can be measured (Winlow et al, 2021). Neoliberals, especially from the nineties onwards, imagined themselves not as committed ideologues but as measured pragmatists entirely free from ideological commitments. We often tend to understand our own ideological commitments in this way. We see them as rational, evidenced, informed and clear, whereas the ideological commitments of the other

distort reality to the extent that he or she simply cannot accept what 'rational' people know to be true.

In this way, the ideology of neoliberalism disappeared from view, at least to those who espoused it. Many neoliberals in government, business, the university, media, and in large transnational organisations – for example, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organisation, the European Commission – refused to utter the word, in case their commentary was interpreted as a partial validation of the ideological critique offered by the few remaining leftists who continued to care about the structure and management of the global economy. Instead, they saw their own approach to economic management as objective, evidence based, and entirely free from the corrupting influence of ideology. Using the restrictive models produced by neoliberal economists as their guide – the most important of which is perhaps the Phillips Curve, and the various adaptations and elaborations it inspired (see Mitchell et al, 2019) – shrinking the state and freeing capital investment just made sense.

The triumph of neoliberalism was such that, in the wealthier western nations, virtually every mainstream political party was forced to accept its core features simply to be taken seriously. While some radicals continued to linger on the side lines of the west's formerly leftist political parties, they were reduced to the status of dusty relics to be laughed at for their political and economic naivety. Politics fell out of history, tumbling downwards, its role reduced to the simple administration of what already existed (Winlow et al, 2015).

A period of consensus follows the elevation of one ideology into common sense. The neoliberal consensus has, so far, managed to sustain itself for over forty years, outlasting even the post-war social democratic consensus that continues to frame the political dreams of the non-identitarian left throughout much of the developed world. Now, in 2022, we can finally detect signs of change. However, it remains unclear whether neoliberalism will disappear entirely, change itself, or somehow forge its way through a broad range of obvious material challenges. What is clear, however, is that neoliberalism will not be brought to an end by the left's iconoclastic cultural critique, and nor will it be finally dispatched into the dustbin of history because the left has managed to convince a significant proportion of the general public that it has an attractive alternative at hand.

That mainstream politicians from across the political spectrum believed, even after the global financial crisis, that neoliberalism continued to function as economic 'common sense' is an obvious indication of two interconnected issues worthy of brief consideration here. First, it indicates the impoverished nature of the leftist politics (see Hochuli et al, 2020; Winlow and Hall, 2022). When asked what she considered her greatest achievement, Margaret Thatcher immediately identified Tony Blair and New Labour. When your most significant political opponents adopt your language and policies as their own, success is assured. New Labour accepted that Thatcher had won the economic argument and happily drove the neoliberal bandwagon forwards, in the apparent belief that economic contestation had been overcome and that working people fared better when the new footloose global oligarchy fared better (Winlow et al, 2017). New Labour also accepted that Thatcher had won the social argument. 'There is no

such thing as society', Thatcher famously averred. New Labour, with its faux-progressive focus on meritocracy, possessive individualism and consumer aspiration, eventually came to champion this sad creed.

When in government, the mainstream left instituted a range of policies that actively made things harder for ordinary working people (see Raymen, 2018; Telford and Lloyd, 2020; Telford, 2021). The mainstream left's response to the global financial crisis is a particularly apt indication of its total immersion in the logic of neoliberalism. It had cut itself adrift from its own history. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, it was simply floating on a sea of liquified liberal rhetoric, devoid of meaningful ideals and plans for positive change, entirely unable to define a new role for itself in an era of compulsory, depoliticised liberalism. We might add that liberalism itself appeared increasingly bereft of a positive agenda. After a century of ideological supremacy, it seemed spent, beset by ennui, its powers dispersed between hungry economic liberals and quarrelsome cultural liberals. The exhaustion of liberalism – which had ascended to the level of an umbrella ideology, under which many ostensibly diverse ideologies gathered – added to the prevailing sense of historical stuckness, panoramic cynicism and decrepitude. Western societies, many believed, rather than moving forward towards some vague ideal, were gradually folding in on themselves. Trapped between decadence and poverty on one side and freedom and conformity on the other, they had no destination in mind, and no regard for the ideals of the past that might once have functioned as a guide.

The left's acceptance of the perverse logic of austerity (Blyth, 2015; Ellis, 2019; Webber, 2021) seemed to suggest either its inability to understand how national economies work or its willingness to disguise economic truths from ordinary voters in order to maintain a status quo that enriched a tiny elite at the expense of everybody else. Identifying which of these two options best fits the mainstream left during these years is quite a difficult task, but, given that the quality of political debate had descended to levels never before seen in the modern age, it is entirely possible that the left's acceptance of austerity was suggestive of both.

An absurd cacophony of folksy neoliberal rhetoric – which centred upon belt-tightening, 'living within our means', ensuring the next generation wasn't saddled with our debts, and so on – was issued from virtually all points on the political spectrum. The central political question of the time in many nations was not whether state services should be cut, and nor was it what else might be done to address the effects of the crisis. All seemed to agree that radical cuts to state spending were inevitable, and so the issue disappeared as a point of discussion. Instead, the central political question of the day, the issue that framed the theatrical jousting between the political representatives of the democratic left and right, was the speed at which cuts should be imposed. Neoliberalism had transformed the field of political contestation to the extent that only policy responses rooted in neoliberal doctrine could be considered a rational response to a global crisis neoliberalism had itself created.

That so many leftist politicians reached for policies crafted by the neoliberal right is indicative of the left's voluntary disintegration and intellectual capitulation. The mainstream left's adoption of neoliberalism, and the general acceptance of neoliberalism's basic principles

elsewhere on the left, assured neoliberalism's continued supremacy. In the academy, many radical leftists remained focused on the injustices of the cultural field, and rather bored by neoliberalism's continuing triumph (see Winlow, 2012). Of course, most radical academics accepted that neoliberalism was unjust, but many of their policy responses to the injustices of the age paradoxically indicated the triumph of neoliberal capitalism itself. The left's traditional call for unity and common cause was ignored, as was neoliberalism's focus on unyielding competition. The new drive was to identify and dispense with the things that inhibited the market performance of particular identity groups (Winlow and Hall, 2022). Neoliberalism was naturalised. Competition was accepted as an unproblematic feature of social life. Unity and common cause were abandoned as core components of radical leftist thought.

Political critique had become entirely negative. Radical academics, the majority of whom hailed from the liberal middle class, busied themselves listing those things to which they were morally opposed, while occasionally issuing vague calls to power elites for the rather modest reform of the economic processes that shape our present way of life. What was missing was a positive politics that bypassed gestural reform and identified something new that must be brought into being.

If the global financial crisis represented neoliberalism's nadir – inasmuch as the 'free-market' system had failed, and faith in the self-regulatory nature of markets had obviously paved the way for the crisis – the crisis's immediate aftermath seemed perversely to be its apogee. Neoliberalism had failed, and yet it continued. Despite the new opportunities that had opened up to push history in a different direction, no alternative programme was able to emerge. The left, overwhelmingly, accepted that all future political battles would take place on the field of culture, and the field of economics remained off limits. At neoliberalism's weakest moment, all seemed to agree that the only option was to use the power of the state to nurse the failed market system back to health. Key features of neoliberal policy had produced devastating outcomes, especially for ordinary people, and yet the political class remained totally committed to the efficacy of those very same neoliberal policies.

The European Union's response to the global financial crisis should be considered a further indication of neoliberalism's wide-ranging success (see for example Hall and Antonopolous, 2016). The troika's treatment of indebted member states was brutal, and yet, especially in the eyes of British leftists, the EU was understood to be an essentially progressive political force. The Eurozone's regulatory structure prevents member states from spending lavishly in the public interest. State spending must not radically outstrip the state's 'income' in the form of tax, and national governments are obliged to restrict their involvement in the formal economy. Few British leftists are willing to countenance the EU's structural commitment to neoliberalism. Most prefer instead to focus on its supposedly positive cultural aspect. Of particular significance here is the EU's commitment to free movement, which many British leftists like to imagine is a reflection of the EU's commitment to the wonders of cosmopolitanism rather than a reflection of a deeper commitment to the free movement of labour and thus the primacy of private capital investment over people.

No compelling alternative was available for the people to rally around. There was no alternative policy programme available for politicians to look to in the hope of setting a new course (see for example Kuldova, 2018; Reiner, 2020). And so, after the global financial crisis, the behemoth of global neoliberalism simply slouched sluggishly into the future. Deprived of energy, shorn of belief, it continued simply because there seemed no other option. No genuine alternative – at least none that could be countenanced by elites – existed upon which could be built a rational path away from the decaying shell of the neoliberal project. Of course, new programmes and policies were sketched out, but the producers of these new programmes and policies were placed firmly at the margins of political, cultural and academic life. It was, of course, their willingness to defy convention and speak openly and honestly about the inherent flaws of the neoliberal project that saw them marginalised in the first place. It was easy for those at the centre to portray those at the margins as unworldly radicals whose hair-brained schemes would ruin the economy and plunge the national population into even deeper hardship. However, those at the centre also had a further, highly effective and time-honoured strategy at their disposal: those at the margins could be simply ignored. Alternative ideas and approaches simply did not receive an airing in popular fora, whereas those willing to again press the population to accept the unavoidability of austerity, the terrible threat posed by the deficit and the necessity of cutting state services were wheeled out across the mainstream media to reaffirm the hard borders that had been placed around acceptable knowledge. This regrettable situation endured until the Covid pandemic opened a window that allowed western populations to again look upon policies external to the logic of neoliberalism. In opening this window, the pandemic also created an opportunity for escape and hence the possibility that the engine of history could be restarted.

Neoliberalism and Covid: Can Neoliberalism Survive?

We have spent the last few pages recapping the basic features of neoliberalism and state responses to the global financial crisis of 2008 because that crisis represented a key juncture in the history of capitalism. It too, like the covid pandemic, was a crucial historical event. However, the global financial crisis was not so significant that it propelled western nations back to history. The post-politics of neoliberalism endured. It also began to evolve. Neoliberalism after the global financial crisis was deprived of its most vocal cheerleaders and stripped of all remaining idealism. It lost its passion for creative destruction and became coldly technocratic. No one really believed in it anymore. Rather, its policies continued to be enacted because they remained the only conceivable policies. The dialectics of history had ground to a halt, and no-one appeared to know how to get things moving again. The absurdity of mainstream politics became more extreme. Career politicians continued to talk in grandiloquent tones about abstract ideals while attempting to draw attention away from the fact that their actual policy agendas signified their continued commitment to the orthodoxies that had caused the crisis in the first place. Most career politicians remained terrified of being labelled a spendthrift who would run up the country's debts, and the entire field of democratic politics remained entirely devoid of ambition. Neoliberalism had placed firm limits on what was achievable. To think beyond these limits was to invite derision and slander.

The Covid-19 pandemic represents another key juncture in the history of neoliberalism. The question now is, will neoliberalism again manage to survive another global historic event bursting with potential? Will it be forced to adapt itself to an altered vista? If it does adapt, how will it adapt? Is it really possible that neoliberalism will pass into history? Is its well-worn economics playbook now judged impractical and ineffectual by key political constituencies, and, crucially, if it is, what new economic models can emerge to fill the gap?

At first glance, it may appear that neoliberalism again finds itself free from any significant external antagonist capable of spurring the dialectical movement of history. Communism continues to be associated in the popular imagination with absolute evil, and socialism has, in Europe at least, been watered down to the extent that its original meaning has been lost. The cultural radicalism that now provides the far left with its energy can be easily accommodated within the broad framework of neoliberal governance. It is possible that material changes to the natural environment could provide the impetus needed to sustain an idea with enough intellectual and political heft to alter the trajectory of history, and I will explore this possibility in the pages that follow. However, it is also possible that neoliberalism will again evolve in a process of *internal* dialectical transformation. It may ditch key policy agendas, jettison some of its most notable shibboleths and begin to craft a new range of policies, while attempting to convince all, including its most fervent adherents, of the continuity of its core commitments, and that all appearances of change are either illusory or merely context specific.

Before the pandemic, it was already possible to identify vague but potentially significant forms of change within the overall corpus of neoliberalism. These changes appear to have been spurred on by a range of material challenges that could be neither addressed satisfactorily by existing neoliberal policy frameworks nor kicked into the long grass and ignored. The changes themselves appear to have been for the most part understood by the neoliberal polity as momentary pragmatic deviations from established practice. As soon as these material challenges had been overcome, they could once again return to a purer neoliberal model. However, other policies emerged that indicated a firmer determination to strike out in a new direction. Perhaps the most notable intervention here was made by Donald Trump, who indicated his willingness to withdraw from standard global neoliberal trade arrangements and return to a measured and reimagined protectionism in order to boost the American jobs market and re-establish the United States as the world's leading productive economy. Trump, of course, remained entirely committed to key features of neoliberalism but, nonetheless, his willingness to reverse standard neoliberal flows of trade and capital signified a marked departure from neoliberal orthodoxy. Many on the mainstream left dismissed Trump's intervention as a horrific re-emergence of national populism and remained firmly of the belief that economic globalisation was generally 'progressive' and essential for 'global justice'. Talk of 'American jobs' was rooted in a vulgar patriotism to which the American liberal left remained firmly opposed. However, the election of Joe Biden as President did not prompt a rapid policy about-turn, at least in terms of global trade. Critical of Trump's economic programme before the election, once in office Biden continued where Trump had left off and, if anything, pushed down more firmly on the accelerator of deglobalisation, propelling the US towards a new era of economic nationalism. Tensions with

China, which of course possesses the world's largest export economy, have been mounting steadily since Trump's election (see Foot and King, 2019; BBC News, 2020), and, contrary to expectations, the rhetoric coming from key figures in the Biden administration is now more extreme than ever. We will return to this theme in a moment.

Environmental crises, resource depletion and the pressing need for developed nations to embark upon an 'energy transition' had been left to atrophy in the background throughout the neoliberal era. Slowly, these issues began to attract more attention and suggestions of a new global accord began to emerge. National governments made repeated commitments to address emissions and reliance upon fossil fuels (see Dimitrov, 2010). At first, these things seemed merely gestural, but as time passed a number of national governments seemed to summon up the courage to bypass neoliberal protocols and invest sovereign currency to support change (see Krogstrup and Oman, 2019, for discussion).

Of course, central to this gradual evolution of political attitudes was a growing awareness that corporate and banking elites were finally becoming cognisant of the fact that the energy transition would indeed yield a huge diversity of profitable investment opportunities. As old markets diminished, new markets were beginning to emerge (Raymen and Smith, 2021). Even huge corporations tied to the old fossil fuel energy system could evolve, survive and eventually profit in new and rapidly developing markets. However, for high profits to be realised, especially in the short to medium term, the state would have to invest heavily to facilitate change. Markets would need to be nurtured to life and supported by both the fiscal and monetary policies of national governments. Corporations of course remained keen to externalise as many costs as possible, and, as had been the case since the dawning of the industrial age, most of these externalised costs could be pushed towards the state.

Some politicians in the main political parties judged it expedient to accept at least a modest return to state investment. Confirmed pragmatists with an eye for an opportunity, they recognised that there was political capital to be made from the energy transition and the greening of the economy, especially if state investment could be made to quickly yield new job opportunities and economic growth. However, for the state to embark upon this course required a significant shift in direction. While the standard small-state rhetoric of the neoliberal order remained at the forefront of political debate, a tentative willingness to return to what looked like social democratic state investment began to emerge.

Throughout the neoliberal era, the emphasis had been upon what became known as 'fiscal responsibility' (Fazi and Mitchell, 2019). State spending needed to be kept to an absolute minimum. Everything should be done to ensure that state expenditure did not radically outstrip the money it took out of the national economy in the form of tax. Those elements of state activity that did not play a significant role in facilitating market activity needed to be trimmed back and kept to an absolute minimum, ostensibly in order to protect ordinary voters from the terror of higher taxes. If obvious funding gaps began to emerge, the private sector should be offered tax cuts and reduced government regulation to encourage investment. However, the sheer scale of change required to meet climate targets and actually create a new low-carbon economy seemed

to necessitate a measured suspension of this arrangement. Corporations and their shareholders would not countenance the forms of capital investment needed to, for example, establish a new infrastructure for sustainable travel. Only the state could respond.

In many respects, this takes us back to the fundamental deadlock of neoliberalism. Its entire edifice rests upon a disavowed contradiction. While neoliberals talk a great deal about shrinking the state and enabling innovative markets to carry us into the future, throughout the neoliberal era free markets have relied upon this kind of state support and investment. Markets often require state support to get up and running, and once they are up and running, they tend to need various forms of assistance from the state to sustain profitability and prevent collapse. And even with the continuous but rarely discussed support of the state, markets still somehow manage to regularly break down. And when markets break down, all eyes inevitably turn to the state.

The global financial crisis of 2008 is an obvious case in point. Neoliberals had long argued that the state needed to be kept as small as possible and withdraw entirely from market intervention, yet once markets had again failed, it was the much-maligned state that was expected to perform a sudden about-face, intervene in markets and bail out 'too big to fail' banks and corporations (see Sorokin, 2010). There is no magic money tree, neoliberals often proclaim. And yet when markets collapse, whole orchards of magic money trees somehow materialise to reinflate markets, protect capital investment and bail-out a range of private enterprises.

Following the global financial crisis, neoliberals explained that the barely conceivable sums of money used to bail out stricken banks would have to be paid back, but to whom the British state – which, as the sole producer of British pounds, never has to borrow the currency that it alone produces – would have to pay back this money remained something of a mystery. The obvious critical conclusion is that a magic money tree does in fact exist, but it can only be used to support and sustain what we mistakenly call the 'free market'. It cannot be used to create employment, extinguish poverty, bolster our welfare state, beautify and improve public space or reinvigorate our decrepit education and healthcare sectors. The fundamental contradiction between neoliberalism in theory and neoliberalism in practice remains operative, and we should not rule out the possibility that what looks like a return of systematic state intervention and the loosening up of fiscal policy will prove to be yet another context specific deviation that can be quickly ditched as investors are given the support they need to reap sustained profits from new markets.

In Britain in the years before the pandemic, these issues had very slowly gathered pace. Most mainstream politicians were in favour of transiting to a greener economy but opposed to the forms of public investment needed to actually bring such a thing to fruition. Markets, clearly, were incapable of delivering large scale change, and so, while many busied themselves searching for a middle ground, it seemed inevitable that the state would again have to locate the magic money tree. The pace of changed picked up during the general election of 2019. In that campaign, Boris Johnson expressed his desire to invest in the de-industrialised north in an effort to upskill the workforce and bring back manufacturing jobs (Conservative Party, 2019). Many

assumed, reasonably enough, that Johnson's newfound desire to hold out the hand of friendship to the traditional working class signalled nothing more significant than the centre right's vulgar opportunism and its desire to exploit, in the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum, the breakdown of the relationship between the traditional working class and the Labour Party.

If this was indeed Johnson's strategy, it proved remarkably effective. Numerous 'red wall' seats fell to the Tories, many for the first time in many decades. Johnson's Tories followed up their 2019 electoral success with a raft of policies it gathered together under the rhetoric of 'levelling up'. Michael Gove, who was to become the government minister for 'levelling up', penned a remarkable paper in which he outlined a vision of a new socially responsible Toryism that was much to the left of the neoliberal Labour Party and more in keeping with the core principles of social democracy than the prevailing neoliberalism (see Gove, 2020). Perhaps it would be the Tories, rather than the intellectually bankrupt Labour Party, that would finally free the nation from the deadening orthodoxies of neoliberalism?

Certainly, the policies associated with the 'levelling up' agenda, even though they were at the time only vaguely sketched out, certainly seemed to signal a willingness on the part of the Tory Party to dispense with core elements of neoliberal orthodoxy. Of course, most on the left greeted the 'levelling up' agenda with mocking cynicism. It would all amount to nothing, many Labour spokespeople told their audience. Yet in this response laid buried a significant truth. Even if 'levelling up' amounted of naught, at least the Tories were willing to again talk about large scale public investment and the return of productive employment. The Labour Party under Starmer were moving at speed in the opposite direction, assured that future success for the party lay in being more neoliberal a marginally less morally reprehensible than the Tory Party. Key to this strategy was Starmer's attempt to convince the voting public that, after Corbyn's brief stint as leader, his new Labour Party would be characterised by fiscal restraint. On his own policy priorities, he remained characteristically vague. As he busied himself attempting to convince the public of his commitment to the status quo, the Tory Party continued their march onto traditional Labour Party territory, drawing the support of voters bored of the overblown theatricality of party politics and keen to listen to anyone willing to discuss the introduction of new policies that would benefit ordinary working people.

And that was not all. Johnson's 'levelling up' agenda also suggested that he took seriously the capture of Red Wall seats and would fight hard to retain them. The modern structures of political alignment that had shaped post-war politics in Britain had, of course, been crumbling for decades. In the 2019 general election, it was clear that virtually nothing of those structures remained. Johnson and his advisors would have been mindful of these changes, and aware that, in the old industrial working class, a significant seam of political support was there to be mined. If the Tories could return to their origins and ditch the liberalism that had subsumed the party since the rise of Thatcher, Britain's political landscape could be entirely transformed. The huge number of British voters who leant left on economics but marginally to the right on cultural matters remained unrepresented. And statistics proved conclusively that, when taken as an

undifferentiated whole, the overwhelming majority of the working class had come to favour the Tories over the Labour Party (see, for example, YOUGOV, 2021).

The developing but still fragile political accord between the Tories and the old industrial working class can, in some respects, be considered a rekindling of ancient alliances. Conservatism has long been a feature of working-class culture (e.g. Stacey and Green, 1971; Pugh, 2002), and before the advent of the Labour Party in 1900 many working-class voters had routinely given their support to Conservative Party candidates. The Tory Party of that time was dominated by aristocrats and business elites. However, most were confirmed Christians, and some noteworthy figures certainly carried with them a sense of noblesse oblige that aided the introduction of minor progressive reforms in the latter half of the nineteenth century. And crucially, the overwhelming majority of Tories remained unashamed patriots (Winlow and Hall, 2022). Many Conservatives in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were antagonistic to high levels of immigration and committed to the maintenance of what they saw as the nation's traditional customs and cultures. This obdurate antagonism to high levels of immigration chimed with the national populism that had taken root in the old industrial working class which, at the time, formed the great bulk of the population. Today, of course, it is common to interpret this antagonism to immigration as an effect of bigotry and xenophobia, and it is certainly true that racism among the working class of the early industrial age was much more common than it is among the British working class today. However, it is also vital to acknowledge that much of the common antagonism to high levels of immigration was rooted in material reality. Immigration certainly could render insecure the jobs of the old industrial working class. For much of the nineteenth century, many industrial labour markets remained non-unionised, and of course, before the development of reasonably functional welfare system, the loss of a job was often catastrophic. Industrial employers were, of course, happy to exploit popular anxieties about job losses to place downward pressure on wage levels, and often the abundance of replacement labour was used to justify the dismissal of petitions for higher wages and better workplace conditions (see Winlow and Hall, 2012, 2022). This is not to suggest that anxieties about the competition posed by recently arrived immigrants did not fuel, or even mutate into, cultural antagonisms towards specific ethnic groups, but it is to suggest that popular dissatisfaction with high levels of immigration should not be thoughtlessly cleaved from economic processes and presented solely as a cultural issue.

The Tory Party of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth century fared quite well among the working class because many of its most notable figures were unreservedly patriotic. Many of these figures also acted as patrons for established forms of working-class leisure. Aristocratic Tories enjoyed football, boxing, horse racing, gambling and games of chance, and they could also be heard indulging in occasional bouts of boardy humour that breached the decorum of the day (see for example Pugh, 2010). While the gaps between the Tories and the industrial working class were of course huge, there were a small number of rather narrow but symbolically important cultural meeting points that kept open the possibility, even after the rise of the Labour Party, that members of the working class could lend electoral support to the aristocratic Tories.

Johnson's weak, conditional but symbolically important fledgling relationship with elements of the contemporary post-industrial working class seemed to signal his willingness to abandon some of liberalism's key shibboleths and adopt some of those elements of traditional conservatism many thought dead. Some members of his cabinet also spoke out against the growing influence of radical political correctness, which appeared to be working its way slowly to the top of a number of the nation's core institutions. Again, it remains unclear if these proclamations will lead to anything concrete, but they certainly drew a good deal of working-class support.

More concrete proposals were forthcoming. Billions of pounds were allocated to improve broadband connectivity; billions more would be used to update and extend transport infrastructure in the provinces; schools and adult education would receive extra funding; forty new hospitals were to be built; a new points-based immigration system would be introduced; billions were allocated to revitalize a range of economically depressed towns in the Midlands and the North, and a range of government jobs would be moved from London to Darlington, Glasgow, East Kilbride and Wolverhampton. Added to this was, of course, a general commitment to embark on a green industrial revolution that would aid the country's transition to Net Zero (HM Government, 2020). £26 billion was initially allocated to this undertaking, but more money would soon be made available.

These and other new Tory policies suggested that Johnson's government were willing to embark upon a new course away from neoliberalism. In truth, the sums of money mentioned in government White Papers were not particularly earth-shattering, but they were nonetheless significant. However, undoubtedly the most significant policy intervention to come from Johnson's government, a policy starkly at odds with every feature of the prevailing neoliberalism, was the UK furlough scheme. The Coronavirus job retention scheme, introduced by Rishi Sunak in March 2020, eventually cost the UK government around £100 billion (Narwan, 2021). The UK government undertook to fund 80% of the wages of all employees unable to attend work as a result of lockdowns. Additional funds were made available for the self-employed. It was an extraordinary undertaking.

Again, the magic money tree had been found, and, in response to the obvious economic stresses of the pandemic, Johnson's Tories seemed set to continue vigorously shaking it. Before the pandemic, it would have been impossible to imagine any British government paying workers 80% of their wages *not to work*. It is of course possible to argue – now, at the close of the pandemic – that the furlough scheme did not go far enough, and that some workers were unable to benefit, just as it is possible to argue that the scheme was from the outset wide open to exploitation and fraud. However, aside from the fact that this extraordinary government intervention helped millions of working people to stay afloat during an incredibly difficult historical moment, what was really significant, for our purposes at least, was the broader symbolism of the intervention. Just like the immediate aftermath of the global financial crisis, the state had stepped forward to create hundreds of billions of pounds to prevent the crisis from deepening. This money had not

been taken from a mysterious vaunt underneath Whitehall, and nor had it been borrowed from financial markets. It had simply been created with a few strokes on a computer keyboard.

How would it be possible for key political figures to maintain the pretence that money was in short supply when it was perfectly obvious that the British state had the capacity to produce billions upon billions of pounds whenever it saw fit? How would they convince the public that there was no money available to pay for desperately needed public goods? If £100billion could be instantly created to fund the furlough scheme, why did there remain such a huge emphasis on cost cutting and penny pinching? Why had Britain left the NHS, its education system, universities, and the entirety of its welfare system to descend into rack and ruin?

Faced with yet another clear example of the British state's ability to produce as much of its own sovereign currency as it might ever need to address an immediate crisis, some economics correspondents and figures close to genuine institutional power dared to go off-piste and acknowledge that the only real impediment to state expenditure was the perennial threat of rising inflation. Some also acknowledged that states with their own sovereign currency never need to borrow that currency on financial markets. In some dark corners of academic life, there was also a growing awareness that the state did not depend upon tax revenues to fund its spending commitments. Slowly, imperceptibly but assuredly, these ideas began to percolate more widely in the public imagination. In 2020, Stephanie Kelton, a leading economist and proponent of Modern Monetary Theory, published *The Deficit Myth* (Kelton, 2020), a book that carefully picks apart a key feature of the neoliberal approach to state finances. The book, aimed at non-academics, quickly became a best-seller around the world. Once rigid and apparently dependable features of neoliberal ideology seemed increasingly shaky and liable to crash to the ground.

But at this point we are again returned to paradox, and the path away from neoliberalism becomes muddy and ill-defined. After making gestures that a move away from neoliberalism was in the offing, and then ostentatiously throwing off the cloak of fiscal responsibility to spend lavishly in the public interest in the midst of the pandemic, Johnson's Conservative Party now seem paralysed by the fear of truly freeing themselves from orthodoxy and following through on their policy priorities. The magic money tree that the Conservatives had vigorously shaken during the heights of the pandemic had again disappeared from view. As inflation began to rise – the result of supply side problems rather than a growth in government spending – the financial levers available to government again seem to have been reduced to slight adjustments to interest rates and taxation. The state, possessed of the ability to create as much of its sovereign currency as it might ever need, again refused to spend in the public interest. Fiscal restraint was again paramount, and the people would have to suffer. Any reasonably objective observer of the government's fish-tailing economic and fiscal policy proclamations must on balance conclude that a return to the basic fundaments of neoliberalism is the likely course.

However, that we will continue along the path of deglobalization seems more assured. One of the key features, thus far, of Biden's term in office is his willingness to ratchet upon tension between the US and China and forge ahead with plans to return production and private

investment to the United States. The pandemic encouraged many previously steadfast in their commitment to neoliberal globalism to see the utility of such an approach. At the start of the pandemic, many western nations relied enormously upon production in the Far East and lengthy and intricate supply chains that moved goods from East to the West. In Britain, the furore about the availability of PPE (personal protective equipment) for healthcare professionals, and the huge amount of money the government was forced to spend to procure goods suddenly subject to massively increased demand, is an obvious case in point (see for example BBC News 2021). Lockdowns and the introduction of vaccine passports also disrupted supply chains, and as supply chains were disrupted, fuel shortages began to bite. What Britain and other western nations had given up when they accepted the offshoring of production was becoming painfully clear. In the shadow of the pandemic, the assuredness of production and supply seemed to grow in importance relative to low production costs that could be found at the end of long, complex and less secure supply chains that snaked around the entire circumference of the world.

Biden's COMPETES Act (see Whitehouse, 2022) indicates the seriousness of the United States' commitment to a new era of economic nationalism. Huge sums of money are involved, and it seems inevitable that many other western nations will immediately follow suit. The geopolitical consequences of the United States' rapidly freeing itself from neoliberal globalism to return to an economic model focused on short, secure, employment-generating national supply chains are of course significant. China, Russia, Pakistan, India, and possibly Brazil and Mexico, seem to be striking a new path away from the United States and its closest allies, and conflict may lie ahead.

The current crisis in Ukraine has already encouraged Britain to push ahead quickly with an economically nationalist agenda. The EU too, while in a slightly different position, is keen to reduce its reliance upon imports. Russian gas accounts for about 40% of the EU's natural gas imports (Horton, Palumbo and Bowler, 2022), and 'energy security' has suddenly become a hot topic for governments across the west, and much further afield. As the war in Ukraine rages on, Boris Johnson has announced a new energy plan for Britain, the central feature of which is an aspiration to provide 95% of the country's electricity from low-carbon sources by 2030 (BBC News, 2022). Tied to this broader strategy, Johnson has also announced plans to nationalise key parts of Britain's electricity system. This move will apparently be 'the biggest intervention in the UK's energy network for decades' (Millard, 2022). Again, these developments seem to indicate a slow, partial and uneven move away from some key aspects of neoliberal economic policy.

A Note on Politics and Culture

Space prohibits us from offering a comprehensive overview of potential challenges to the neoliberal progressivism that continues to hang like a pall over our cultural life, but it would be remiss of us to close the article without acknowledging that national populism still possesses the energy needed to drive further change. However, while national populism certainly has the potential to displace neoliberal progressivism, whether a new political movement can emerge to harness the support of millions of ordinary people currently disconnected from mainstream politics remains to be seen. We have already noted that the Conservative Party in Britain has, in

a rather circumspect manner, begun to move in the direction of economic nationalism. However, the Tories have moved hardly at all to seize upon the opportunities provided by growing popular antagonism towards the hyper-liberalism that forms the allegedly 'progressive' aspect of the today's ruling ideology (Fraser, 2020; Hall and Winlow, 2020). Acting decisively to curtail immigration or jettison the most irrational aspects of identitarianism from our core institutions would receive the support of a sizeable majority of voters, including many on the left half of the political spectrum. However, despite widespread support for a new range of cultural policies that might carry the country away from compulsory hyper-liberalism, most mainstream political leaders continue to fear the reaction such policies would inspire in metropolitan media circles, and so they continue to conform to the core tenets of neoliberal progressivism. Again, it is possible to identify numerous loose bricks in the wall that protects neoliberalism's cultural project, but no-one has yet stepped forward decisively to begin the process of pushing firmly against it in an effort to topple it over.

Conclusion

We have suggested that for anyone attempting to forecast the future of neoliberalism, there exists, at the present time, a range of apparently contradictory indicators that must be critically appraised and accounted for. There are both positive and negative signs. The rhetoric of neoliberalism remains tediously ubiquitous across the political spectrum, from the shrinking but still significant band of economic liberals in the Conservative Party, through the national populists of UKIP and the soporific centrism of the Greens and the Liberal Democrats, past the vacuous weathervanes of the Parliamentary Labour Party, and all the way to the cultural radicals of the far left. While these groups remain quite different in terms of their overall political commitments, each has accepted and depoliticised key facets of neoliberalism. And yet amid a cacophony of voices endlessly repeating the absurd cant of cold neoliberalism, it is just about possible to hear a few fleeting sounds that suggest history may soon begin to move western nations slowly in a different direction.

Many western nations now seem committed to the process of deglobalisation, and it is here that we can detect real positivity. Neoliberal globalism has, without question, damaged our natural environment (Girdner and Siddiqui, 2008; Brisman and South, 2019; Raymen and Smith, 2021), corroded our social order (Winlow and Hall, 2012; Atkinson and Blandy, 2016), displaced and disempowered ordinary men and women (Green, 2011), inspired a broad range of exploitative production practices (Lloyd, 2018; Pun et al, 2020), and concentrated obscene wealth in the hands of small but staggeringly powerful oligarchy (Piketty, 2017). Of course, we should withhold the optimistic assumption that the end of neoliberal globalism will mean a new and updated social democratic age will soon be upon us. There are positive signs, but not yet enough to justify such optimism.

However, a key tipping point has now been reached. Even national governments keen to retain neoliberalism's global economic framework will be forced to accept the arrival of a new era of economic nationalism as the larger western economies are slowly realigned to reflect new priorities. The process of deglobalisation still seems to have a very long way to go, even though

the war in Ukraine has given added impetus to the desire of many western states to claw back from the global marketplace the wherewithal to identify their own priorities while securing their own national interests. However, while a new era of economic nationalism seems likely to soon emerge, it is not yet clear if this new economic system will be typified by international accord or violent competition. Today, no nation is capable of being fully self-sufficient, and so foreign trade will remain of great importance. It seems clear that, while much of this trade may be mutually beneficial, some of it certainly won't be. Rather than rule-bound forms of trade, we may see new, one-sided and essentially extractive economic arrangements emerge. There is already byzantine corporate scramble underway to acquire and profit from raw materials found in nations incapable of vigorously defending their own interests.

Beyond all of this, it is vital to reconsider the dialectics of historical change. The continued absence of a compelling alternative again gives neoliberalism the opportunity to evolve slowly and gradually. The ways in which neoliberalism evolves in the post-pandemic era will reflect obvious material challenges that, with every passing year, come into sharper relief. Deglobalisation and the energy transition will force neoliberalism to adapt some of its strategies, and perhaps even curtail some of its most egregiously damaging practices. Inevitably, some of its features will fall by the wayside while others are carried forward into the future.

Neoliberal globalism has been a particularly brutal form of capitalism, more closely aligned to the callousness of the nineteenth century laissez faire model than the social democratic capitalism that immediately preceded it. Of course, neoliberal thinking remains ubiquitous in many major institutions, and neoliberalism can quite easily be adapted to take a national form. However, we should keep in mind that neoliberalism is but a model of capitalism. The disappearance of neoliberalism does not herald the disappearance of capitalism, and while there are certainly positive signs, we should not underestimate capitalism's ability to adapt. The disappearance of globalism is, for us, hugely positive. However, capitalism will most assuredly continue. Its future form may well be more brutal, more steeply hierarchical, more exclusionary, more fractious and more war-like than the neoliberalism that today we are so keen to be rid of. The fundamental issue preventing a resounding return to history is the continued absence of a noteworthy antagonist to the ruling capitalism. The left – who for much of modern history we have looked to in the hope that it might create and popularise a compelling alternative – remains wholly bereft and incapable of mounting a significant historical intervention.

As we appraise the possibility of neoliberalism coming to an end, it is vital that we remain coldly realistic. The facts of the matter are this: The left is dead, and, in the present epoch, there are few signs that it can be brought back to life. The field of politics remains sterile, moribund, and absent of the faith and ambition needed to drive the nation forward into a new epoch with vision and purpose. Neoliberalism may well fall, but it will not fall because the left has popularised a compelling alternative and rallied the people to the cause. The continued absence of a serious, committed and tactically astute left at this crucial juncture, in which it is again possible to push history in a positive direction, significantly increases the possibility that the next capitalist epoch will be just as brutal as the last.

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Article

Tick, Tock, Boom!

A Critical Forecast on Interpersonal Violence in Post-Pandemic UK

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Abstract

This article offers a critical forecast on violent crime as the UK, and other parts of the world, begin to emerge from the global Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictive measures imposed in response. The introductory section provides a contextual discussion to frame the following three thematic sections that separately address key issues related to the issue of violence contemporarily. Following this, the article firstly places into context the rise in serious forms of violent crime across England and Wales that occurred in the years preceding the arrival of Covid-19. Secondly, it considers, briefly, the pandemic's impact upon violence, specifically the effect of lockdown upon patterns of violence. Thirdly, and finally, the article provides a critical forecast, which draws together some of the points identified in the initial introductory discussion and the preceding two sections. This final section suggest that serious violence may become a more significant issue in the UK's post-pandemic context of inequality, austerity legacy, the harms of lockdown to vulnerable groups, and the cost-of-living crisis.

Violence, Criminology and Post-Pandemic Capitalism

This article offers a critical forecast on interpersonal violence as the UK transitions towards a post pandemic state. For clarity, the term post-pandemic state, as used here, refers to the ceasing of restrictive public health measures. The use of this term by the author does not imply that the virus is no longer in circulation, nor a threat to public health. This opening section of the article provides brief pointers towards post-pandemic shifts in political economy that should be prioritised for analysis and theoretical explanation by criminology because of their potential consequences for violence, harm and governance more broadly. This section also briefly considers some critical points in relation to the discipline's mainstream theoretical corpus, which has been criticised recently from differing positions. Some of these critiques are acknowledged here and used to inform the critical forecast presented in the final section of the article.

As this article will discuss in more detail, serious violent crime in England and Wales had been increasing considerably in the years immediately preceding the Covid-19 pandemic. Criminological interest and engagement with this sudden increase was fairly limited at the time. The discussions that did take place, often dominated by the media and politicians, were largely confined to matters of 'toxic masculinity', gangs, cuts to the police, poverty, and Drill music (Ellis, 2019). This is not to say these issues were and are irrelevant for understanding violence, only that these debates very often lacked sufficient attention to the complexity of this trend. It was here that mainstream criminological theory, if it had been in a better position to address questions of contextualised aetiology, could have interjected more forcefully into that debate (ibid).

More important questions to ask now though, are how, and in what manner, the pandemic and the post-pandemic context might 'interact' with the varying conditions that had contributed to increasing violence? The possible drivers of increased knife-enabled crime and violence towards women in domestic settings, for example, will not have simply subsided following the arrival of a respiratory viral pandemic and the associated public health measures enacted in response. Relatedly then, it is pertinent to ask what impact the pandemic and the evolving background of global political economy may have upon violence in the future? These are significant issues to which criminology must devote attention.

The Covid-19 pandemic is the most disruptive global event so far of the 21st Century. The pandemic had important impacts upon violence (Eisner and Nivette, 2020) that this article will discuss in more detail. Lockdowns restricted options for exiting violent intimate relationships, largely affecting women, and altered the delivery of frontline services in regular contact with children and young people at risk of becoming victims and/or themselves perpetrators of violence (Briggs et al, 2021c). For these reasons, and others that will be considered in this article, the pandemic may have considerable affects upon violence in the future (Ellis, et al, 2021). Although the harm and disruption the pandemic generated must be situated against the context into which the virus emerged. The virus emerged into a world still feeling tremors from the global financial crisis almost a decade earlier. Economic inequality, populist movements from the Right and the Left, Brexit, and the presidency of Donald Trump, were all symptomatic

of issues to which the neoliberal system of governance and variant of capitalism could not provide adequate solutions. Nevertheless, neoliberalism continued in a zombified state in the years before Covid-19 (Peck, 2010), while its ineptitude was only further exposed through poor governance of the pandemic (Briggs et al, 2021a; Jones and Hameiri, 2021).

Many have speculated already upon how the covid crisis might impact upon the future of politics and the global economy, especially given neoliberalism's zombification and the growth of populist movements in the years after the financial crisis (Briggs et al, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2021; Hochuli et al, 2021; Schwab and Malleret, 2020). Social theorist Paolo Gerbaudo (2021) recently referred to the post-pandemic period in the West as 'The Great Recoil', suggesting that the embryonic neo-statism that began to develop in the years prior to Covid-19's arrival will now override the tainted reputation of globalism and the free market dogma of the neo-liberal era. This evolving context raises significant new questions for the discipline of criminology, particularly in relation to impacts upon victimisation, crime and harm, and the role that states in the post-pandemic future will occupy in the regulation of citizens and the capitalist system.

In a recent and notably prescient analysis of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), Hall et al (2022) conclude by noting the importance for criminology of understanding the evolution of post-pandemic capitalism and the tensions this may generate with regards to regulation, notions of sovereignty, as well as the harms emerging from within and that will also spill out of these spaces into the wider environment and populace. In their analysis of SEZs they identify quite contradictory developments at a wider level of governance that indicate an acceleration of 'certain varieties of privatisation while also demanding new, advanced forms of social, governmental and macroeconomic intervention' (15).

Indeed, such changes are contradictory in that firstly, they signal capitalist development is potentially now evolving beyond neoliberalism into a more 'retrogressive' condition akin to feudalism that intensifies processes of capital accumulation under the banners of 'national prosperity' and 'growth'. While secondly, different actors and agencies are now engaged in lobbying for changes in forms of regulation and control that evidences changing expressions of sovereignty and 'in many ways draw similarities with the local arrangements found in feudal societies' (ibid: 14). Lightly regulated markets and spaces of para-sovereignty, such as SEZs, will be justified ideologically as a means for states to attract investment and generate growth in the wake of the economic consequences of the pandemic. While, simultaneously, continuing to provide spaces that act as safe havens for investments and assets, signifying commitment to capital accumulation for elites that has been a long-standing historical feature of capitalism that was briefly interrupted most recently by the mid-20th Century post-war consensus (Harvey, 2005).

Of course, state interventions, such as the Furlough Scheme, exposed further the myth that the state had 'gone away' under neoliberalism and demonstrated that its power and resources had rather been oriented to better serve the needs of capital (Mitchell and Fazi, 2017). The unprecedented (in more recent history at least) scale of state intervention in response to Covid-19 signalled the possibility that states could yet assume a more active role in alleviating other contemporary threats to human wellbeing. In particular, the myriad and imminent threats from

capital accumulation regimes, economic inequality, environmental change and consequent large-scale human migration, as well as the current inflationary crisis. Violence arising from these conditions will largely harm more structurally disadvantaged groups and may ultimately pose serious risks to the maintenance of social order, particularly in parts of the Global South (Moncada, 2013; Parenti, 2011). It is incumbent then on criminology to scrutinise closely these varying developments during a period when more effective democratic governance and state intervention are arguably required to address crises that are emerging on a global scale. Simultaneously, the discipline must also adapt existing, as well as develop new, theoretical ideas to offer explanations of these affects upon violence and other forms of harm.

On the issue of violence and future violence, which is this article's central concern, criminology currently lacks, some have argued, suitable theoretical frameworks through which to explain violence, as well as crime and harm more generally, in the contemporary era. Some have argued that the discipline has been, and remains, stuck in an aetiological crisis (Hall, 2012), still reliant upon outdated ideas that bear little resemblance to the complexity of human subjectivity and that cannot fully grasp contemporary crises (Gadd and Jefferson, 2007; Hall and Winlow, 2015; Raymen, 2021). Writing around a decade ago, criminologist Simon Winlow (2012) argued that human violence has been largely treated as a 'tangential' issue within criminology and that renewed theoretical attention to the generative bases of violence and violent subjectivities in the contemporary era was needed. Sociology, a significant importer of ideas to criminology, has also been accused of routinely neglecting the importance of violence for understanding social formations and relations both historically and contemporarily (Ray, 2011). Walby (2012) describes this 'marginalisation' of violence as a product of the dominance of accounts of violence that draw inspiration from the 'civilising process' (Pinker, 2012) and that locate the 'problem' of violence at society's peripheries from a now stable civilised core.

More recently, and with colleagues, Walby (2015) has offered a strong critique of both sociological and criminological attempts to explain violence. Walby et al focus their critique upon staple 'mainstream' contributions to criminological theory, such as anomie, control and subcultural theories. The key thrust of their critique is the collective neglect of gender within these theories and the pressing need to integrate into mainstream theory contributions that currently occupy a sub-disciplinary area addressing gender-based violence. These are significant critical points, further reinforced by the 'shadow pandemic' of violence against women and girls that accompanied the global spread of Covid-19. Addressing this issue more directly, Walklate (2021) has recently argued that when confronted with the gendered nature of crime during the pandemic criminology can no longer regard feminism as a 'stranger' nor ignore the significance of gender as a structuring variable in crime.

While interpersonal violence is highly gendered, gender in isolation is not the sole structuring division driving trends in serious violence and needs to be considered alongside political economy, especially as this looks set to mutate and arguably already is mutating. The distribution of serious interpersonal violence contemporarily largely coincides 'with the spatial consequences of neoliberal restructuring' (Ray, 2011: 82), which has been significant in driving

divergent trends in serious violence since the second half of the 20th Century (Dorling, 2004; Ellis, 2019). Neoliberal capitalism has generated contrasting fortunes for human populations in terms of their exposure to interpersonal violence and other harms by carving out spatial enclaves across the globe that are securely contained, highly exclusive and attract capital. Simultaneously, the chasm in material wealth between the world's richest and poorest that has burgeoned during neoliberalism's reign has created other spatial enclaves characterised by extreme neglect, expulsion and capital flight where interpersonal violence is a more prominent issue (Atkinson and Millington, 2019).

As neoliberalism dies what some are describing as a very slow death (Streeck, 2016) how the reconfigured global political economy might shape trends in violence requires criminology's attention. It is vital then, especially as economies re-configure into potentially more 'retrogressive' forms (Hall et al, 2022) and states adapt to 'govern' capitalism and social life post-pandemic, that criminological theory is attentive to the impacts upon these existing social structures that are strongly linked to violence as well as the spaces that currently experience greater levels of violent behaviour.

This brief opening discussion and the literature cited represent some crucial critical interjections into the discipline's 'mainstream' theoretical canon, which risks becoming further ossified if it does not address the emerging political economic context and its wide-ranging consequences. Given the complexity and the significance of what has begun to be outlined here, this article now attempts to address tentatively some of these conditions and their impacts upon violence in the UK context through a 'critical forecast'. To this end, the article is divided into three additional substantive sections.

In the next section, the article firstly explores the 'epidemic' of violence in England and Wales prior to the arrival of Covid-19, situating this against the socio-economic context of the post-recession, austerity period. In the second section, the impact of the pandemic upon violence is considered briefly from some of the available evidence. In particular, the paper addresses the purported reduction in public forms of violence and reported rises in violence located in private, domestic dwellings. This general trend was observed internationally, with the UN referring to domestic abuse, and violence against women and girls generally, as a pandemic that has shadowed the spread of Covid-19. Research indicated, as restrictions were eased in England Wales in 2020, that public forms of violence also increased, particularly in deprived neighbourhoods, which justifies further an attentiveness to gender and social class in relation to violence going forward. Finally, the third section of the article provides a critical forecast and conclusion. This final section takes account of the key issues raised in the preceding sections.

The Epidemic before the Pandemic

Prior to the arrival of Covid-19, England and Wales had been experiencing what was described as an 'epidemic' of violence. With reference to recent changes in levels of knife-enabled violence within the country, Chair of the Police Federation John Apter spoke of British society becoming 'a more violent place'. Similarly, the chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime,

Labour MP Sarah Jones, claimed this epidemic was escalating to such a degree that it should be considered a 'state of emergency' (Dearden, 2020).

This epidemic of violence arrived after a prolonged period of reported decline in the numbers of serious violent crimes. This decline had provided some welcome relief following the frightening ascent of recorded homicides in the UK, and across other Western nations, from the late 1970s to the late 1990s. It has been suggested that the prolonged period of decline that followed the end of the 20th Century could be attributed to alterations in routine activities and lifestyles of particular groups, the adoption of criminal justice initiatives focused specifically upon reducing serious violence between men, and the wider securitisation of many Western nations (Miles and Buehler, 2020). While the recent increase in the overall homicide rate immediately prior to Covid-19 has not reached the levels that were recorded during the late 1990s, the increased frequency of serious violence in this recent period posed some significant questions about why the pattern of decline reversed.

Between 2015-18, the overall homicide rate in England and Wales increased by 39% and this was largely driven by violent incidents involving knives and sharp implements (Morgan et al., 2020). In 2018, killings by a knife or sharp instrument were the highest ever recorded (ONS, 2020a). Police-recorded crime and NHS hospital admissions data, both confirmed that there had been consecutive recorded rises in violent offences involving knives that began around 2015 (ONS, 2019). In March 2020, offences involving knives were the highest recorded since 2011, with the bulk of these recorded offences largely concentrated in the poorer districts of several large English cities (Grierson, 2020). Younger males from deprived neighbourhoods were the predominant victims of this wave of lethal weapon-enabled violence in public spaces, as they had been during the last period of consecutive increases in homicide that occurred during the final decades of the 20th Century (Dorling, 2004; Morgan et al, 2020). Analysis of stabbings that occurred in London during this most recent epidemic period before Covid-19 were found to be greatest amongst young males from deprived neighbourhoods (Vulliamy et al, 2018). Focused analysis conducted by the Home Office on the increased homicides reported during the period prior to Covid-19 found strong correlations with deprivation, with a greater proportion of recent killings concentrated in the most deprived parts of the country (Morgan et al, 2020).

This analysis by the Home Office referred to a range of possible short and long term 'drivers' operating at micro and macro levels that may have contributed to these rises (Morgan et al, 2020). It is difficult to disentangle and isolate the direct effects of these specific drivers upon the changes in recorded levels of violence observed prior to Covid-19, and questions remain with regards to whether they were the product of short or long term drivers. The report's authors suggest specific short-term drivers may have had greater affects upon certain forms of homicide that have contributed disproportionately to pushing up the overall rate in the pre-pandemic period. For instance, increases in drug-related homicides resulting from rivalries and feuds between younger males involved in the distribution of illicit substances, which accounted for more than half of the recent overall increase. Evolving drug distribution methods referred to as 'county lines', where violent drug distributors located in overcrowded urban markets establish

potentially more lucrative operations in rural and coastal towns, have been implicated in this upsurge of recent killings as well as increased knife-enabled crime outside of large urban areas (Robinson et al, 2019).

While the distinction between shorter and longer-term drivers in the Home Office's recent report (Morgan et al 2020) is a helpful one, they are by no means mutually exclusive and should not be regarded as such. Rather, their complex interaction should be acknowledged and recognised. In the case of short-term drivers for recent drug-related homicides for instance, these cannot be separated from the longer-term destabilising effects of neoliberalism and attendant de-industrialisation of Western economies. These longer-term changes to political economy disproportionately affected life in working class communities and the institutions representing their political interests, which provide an important historical backdrop to serious violent crime in economically disadvantaged areas.

Previous experience of being violently assaulted, fear for personal safety, lack of trust in the police, and association with delinquent peers, have all been identified as factors that drive weapon-carrying, and use, contemporarily (Brennan, 2019). Persistent possession of weapons and the use of serious violence also correlate with intensifying forms of disadvantage in which legitimate unskilled and skilled work are minimal and 'conflict has become a way of life, from bullying at school to 'turf' and neighbourhood rivalries' (Squires, 2009: 143). Preparedness for violence, as well as the carrying and use of weapons amongst specific groups of younger men and boys, can be understood then as a partial reflection of contemporary 'neighbourhood and urban conditions in which absence of work opportunity and labour market discrimination generate more insecure male identities' (Atkinson and Millington, 2019: 209). These identities are primed for engagement in criminal markets or are at greater risk of recruitment into, and exploitation within, drug distribution networks.

In-depth research exploring the lives of this demographic of younger men that inhabit spaces subject to multiple forms of deprivation and who experience the greatest risks of being stabbed or murdered, reveals for some of them multiple traumatic experiences of victimisation and perpetration across both domestic and public spaces. Their early childhood socialisation was often characterised by threat, insecurity, and a process of psycho-somatic 'hardening' (Ellis et. al, 2017). Examination of county lines drug distribution networks indicates the vulnerability of these groups of young men, who, with limited options in today's economy, are more likely to believe drug markets offer lucrative financial rewards and social status (Robinson et al, 2019).

Importantly, what envelops these microcosmic spaces of insecurity, aggressive interpersonal competition and hopelessness that dot the contemporary British landscape, is deepening economic inequality, the harmful consequences of the recent austerity programme, and culture at the 'end of the end of history' (Hochuli et al, 2021). This is a period in which no viable alternatives to neoliberal capitalism and consumerism have emerged. In addition, workers' movements have been severely dis-empowered and seen their membership dwindle. Wages across many sectors have experienced severe and prolonged compression, while public services have been subject to privatisation and rounds of efficiency savings (Mitchell and Fazi, 2017). It has

been suggested that a perpetual monotony of the present has persisted during this period, in which many people have become de-politicised, infatuated with consumer lifestyles, and gripped by a sense of hopelessness and cynicism concerning the future (Hochuli et al, 2021).

Indeed, young people growing up during the ascent and eventual zombification of neoliberalism have become caught in a structural and cultural pincer movement. Economic re-structuring and the widening of inequality during the late 20th and early 21st centuries have had considerable effects upon many young people's lives, particularly those from working class communities. Many young people face the choice of low wage employment that is de-unionised and lacking positive symbolism (Lloyd, 2019), or continued post-18 education and the considerable amounts of personal indebtedness that accompany this (Dorling, 2015).

As a result, many young people have become increasingly dependent upon parents and carers, remaining in the 'youth' phase of the life course for much longer than previous generations. Simultaneously, consumer culture has infantilised younger adults, blurring the boundaries between previously more clearly demarcated phases of the life course (Hayward, 2012), while plugging considerable numbers of young people into cyclic routines of consumer-based hedonism and pleasure-seeking (Fisher, 2009; Winlow and Hall, 2006). The tantalising lure of consumer items combined with restricted education and employment opportunities, have generated a 'toxic trap' for some particularly disadvantaged young males attracted to the high-risks but potential quick-wins of illicit drug distribution (Irwin-Rogers, 2019).

While rates of lethal violence against women have remained lower than that of men in England and Wales since around the middle of the 20th Century, the numbers of women killed from violence also began to increase immediately prior to the arrival of Covid-19. Between the year ending March 2017 and March 2019, the number of women killed by violence rose from 165 to 241 (ONS, 2020a). Several years earlier, following the 2008 recession and contrary to the findings of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), violence against women had been increasing and in part due to repeated incidents of victimisation that had been removed from the analysis of data gathered through the CSEW (Walby et al, 2016). Walby et al (2016) argued that these trends not only revealed long suspected inadequacies in mainstream victimisation survey instruments, but also cast doubt upon claims that periodic rises in violence are mere blips and temporary diversions from the longer-term historical precedent of declining violence (Pinker, 2012). More specifically though, these trends reveal and further reinforce the routine and repeated nature of men's violence towards women in intimate settings (Walby et al, 2016).

The Coalition government's austerity agenda had a further damaging and disproportionate effect upon women and vulnerable groups of young people, generally heightening their risks of experiencing violence. Programmes of cuts restricted women's opportunities to exit abusive relationships by reducing their incomes, enhancing their economic dependency upon abusive men and reducing the resources available to refuges offering accommodation and support for the victims of intimate abuse (Walby et al, 2016). Alterations to welfare provision scaled back benefits for young people, including access to housing benefit, and introduced a punitive system of sanctions for 'non-compliance'. Research exploring the

impacts of these welfare reforms in conjunction with limited job opportunities in one region found young people in precarious situations turning to the informal economy, in which the risks individuals face of experiencing violence increase considerably (Bond and Hallsworth, 2017). While research with school staff and youth workers found that with fewer resources available many experienced considerable difficulties in providing sufficient support, care and guidance for young males more at-risk of engaging in violence and becoming gang-affiliated (Irwin-Rogers et al, 2020).

To some extent, evidence of increased interpersonal violence prior to the pandemic was the result of a complex array of shorter and longer 'drivers' that shared an inter-dependent relationship. How these drivers were affected by the arrival of the pandemic will be considered in the final section. Before addressing this, the article will briefly consider the more direct impact of the pandemic upon trends and patterns in interpersonal violence.

The Arrival of Covid-19 and the Secondary Pandemic

The arrival of the novel coronavirus, Covid-19, to the UK's shores in 2020 sparked an unprecedented set of public health measures designed to curb transmission of the virus. In the absence of known effective treatments, management of the virus hinged upon the imposition of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs), which included the full closure or curtailing of economic sectors that were deemed 'non-essential', social distancing, and confinement to homes. Reliance upon these measures across nations within the UK endured to varying degrees throughout 2020 and 2021 in response to recorded transmission levels and the number of cases requiring hospitalisation. The arrival of Covid-19 and imposition of these varying measures generates significant questions regarding their interaction with the conditions precipitating violence. This is especially pertinent in the case of England and Wales, where, as the previous section indicated, violence was becoming a more significant, arguably endemic issue.

While the almost immediate over-night ceasing of social contact and interaction between members of different households drastically reduced the potential for some serious forms of violence involving predominantly groups of disadvantaged young males in public spaces, this measure was temporary and arguably does little to disturb the structural underlying causes of such violence; if anything, it potentially generates further risks, as will be considered in the final section of this article. Simultaneously, reduced violence in public does not seem to have been matched by reduced violence in domestic spaces, where risks appear to have been potentially heightened in part as an unintended consequence of the imposition of these restrictive measures.

As Eisner and Nivette (2020) noted, there are discernible 'generators', or what were referred to in the previous section as 'drivers', of violence arising as a direct result of the pandemic. These too can also be considered either proximal or distant given their potential to have immediate, or more longer-term, affects upon levels of violence. More proximal generators, that the previous section referred to as short-term drivers, are likely to have more immediate impacts upon violence patterns and pertain largely to aspects of what criminologists often refer to as 'routine activities'. Distant generators, which are more difficult to isolate and measure in

terms of affects, refer to the psychological, social and economic effects from the pandemic and that are more likely to exert an influence upon levels of violence at a later longer point in time. It is likely then that these generators will exert differential influence as the pandemic evolves, and, as it eventually subsides.

From a 'routine activities' perspective, which addresses the more proximal violence generators, such as, opportunities to commit violence and 'weakened' targets, the requirement to remain at home and the closure of various institutional and social settings dramatically altered the situational dynamics of possible violence as has been alluded to already. By virtue of greater time being spent in domestic dwellings and amongst those with whom individuals share a home, the risks of violent abuse and harm occurring within this setting increase considerably. While the closure of the night-time economy, schools, retail, reduced public transport, and bans on public gatherings, greatly reduced many of the situations in which violence may take place in public.

These general assertions have been borne out to some extent by the evidence emerging from studies assessing the pandemic's impact upon different forms of violence. Recorded crime data gathered internationally confirmed that many societies experienced declines in public forms of violence as various health measures designed to reduce human contact were initiated (Eisner and Nivette, 2020). Internationally, numerous studies suggested that recorded incidents of violent abuse, particularly in domestic settings, were possibly increasing and disproportionately affecting women and children (Ellis et. al, 2021). Although conclusions remain cautious and rightly so given the difficulties of establishing genuine rises in non-lethal forms of violence. However, early indications do confirm similar overall trends within the UK, with reported increases in intimate-partner abuse and child-to-parent violence (Condry et al, 2020; Ivandic et al, 2020) largely found in domestic dwellings.

Evans et al (2020) found that in some states in the US there were reductions in calls to domestic abuse helplines when lockdown measures were first implemented, this was despite anticipation of increased demand. Rather than an indication of reduced levels of abuse, reduced demand for support was considered the result of victims' fears of reaching out for help while abusers were more regularly present in the home and likely to be subjecting the former to more intense and prolonged surveillance and control. The economic consequences of the pandemic in the US also made exiting abusive relationships more difficult once restrictions were eased, with women of colour, immigrants and those without a college education identified as more likely to find themselves financially entangled with abusive men (ibid).

Pandemics of infectious diseases engender emotional states in humans, that, for some, may heighten the potential for engaging in aggressive and violent behaviour (Peterman et al., 2020). Stay at home orders, as well as the closing down of societal institutions and sectors of the economy concentrated most human activities within domestic dwellings, which became hubs of work, education and social life. Sudden and prolonged confinement to homes may significantly affect family dynamics. More time spent at home in the presence of abusers with restricted access to support, heightens vulnerability of potential victims. Stress and tension resulting from

prolonged confinement heightens perpetration risks. This is particularly an issue in families where there is an historical precedent of abusive behaviour. The uncertainties and pressures that may arise concerning family finances, or the employment status of individual members, may also induce stress and further heighten the possibility of conflict and abusive behaviour. Previous studies, particularly in East Asian societies that have experienced outbreaks of several respiratory viruses in recent years, do confirm increased incidents of interpersonal violence within families during pandemics (Zhang, 2020).

The threat of violence within domestic settings outside of pandemic contexts, particularly its gendered nature, are well known and documented. On this point, Sandra Walklate (2020) has argued the crime and harm that occurred during the pandemic was a continuation of the intimidation and abuse that many women and children experience routinely from men who are often known to them. Rather than the pandemic acting as a cause of gendered violence, it should be regarded as an event that heighted the vulnerabilities of groups already disadvantaged and likely to experience abuse from men.

As restrictions eased in England and Wales and greater movement and interaction between citizens were allowed once again, violence reportedly increased in the most deprived parts of the country and exceeded the levels that had been recorded immediately prior to the pandemic in those areas (Kirchmaier and Villa-Llera, 2020). In addition, the numbers of people seeking treatment in A&E for violence-related injuries in England and Wales increased after the easing of restrictions from the lockdowns that were implemented during 2020 and 2021 (BBC, 2022). Not only does violent harm experienced during the pandemic period appear to be highly gendered, but it also weighs heavily upon the most deprived. These issues, as well as others that emerge from this and the preceding section of this article, will now be considered further as part of a critical forecast on violence in post-pandemic UK.

Discussion: A Critical Forecast

Evidence suggests that the UK was insufficiently prepared for a viral pandemic and that neoliberal states proved throughout the Covid-19 crisis to be 'dysfunctional for solving very basic social problems' (Jones and Hameiri, 2021: 21). Indeed, the austerity agenda had considerably weakened health and social care in the UK prior to 2020, which hampered attempts to respond during the pandemic and resulted in avoidable deaths and considerable harm to frontline health professionals (Briggs et al, 2021b).

The legitimacy of neoliberalism across Western nations was already in serious question before Covid-19, with several examples of political and populist movements forming in direct opposition to many of its key tenets, yet unable to succeed it. The virus has revealed further neoliberalism's various weaknesses and accelerated the transition towards possibly new political arrangements in numerous states. The political substance of these new arrangements is not entirely clear yet but may take forms that seek to straddle state-led capitalism alongside more conversative values that fit a 'post neoliberal model', in which elements of the neoliberal system

remain (Hochuli et al, 2021). This transition remains laboured, accompanied by a range of 'morbid symptoms' that are characteristic of the 'interregnum' that some theorists argue has persisted while neoliberalism dies a slow death in the absence of a viable alternative system to replace it (Sassoon, 2021; Streeck, 2016).

The likely eventual 'death' of neoliberalism does not necessitate that a more just political economic system will follow though, or that important principles of neoliberalism itself, particularly economic ones, will disappear entirely as addressed in the previous paragraph. As was also stated in the opening section of this article, early signs indicate an evolution in capitalism, accumulation patterns and attendant state sovereignty that, so far, appear to represent a resurgence of aspects of historic accumulation and governance regimes, particularly those resembling feudalism (Hall et al, 2022). If these emerging developments offer some basis for tentative speculation, one can likely assume that they will continue to generate conditions conducive for capital expansion and accumulation that benefit groups holding considerable wealth and assets.

The current global threats of climate change, economic inequality, and more recently high inflation are intimately connected to capitalism's contemporary productive, extractive and consumption processes. The most recent threat of high inflation is arguably the result of the effects of excess corporate power and resultant profit-margins built up since the 1970s, combined with bottlenecks in supply-chains resulting from the pandemic (Tooze, 2022). This crisis is reflective of the current distribution of power between capital and labour that has developed through neoliberal economic policies. That relationship may yet shift depending upon the outcome of what will likely be other industrial conflicts that will follow recent action by the RMT Union in the UK. What this and other global crises generate in the post-pandemic context then, is heightened tension between capitalism's core historic tendencies and renewed demands for enhanced forms of protection and support as global threats become increasingly disruptive to social life and impinge directly upon the lives of individuals.

For criminology to begin to make sense of the potential implications of this evolving context for interpersonal violence it would be prescient to, first, recall these important, poignant and straightforward words about its genesis:

> For murder rates to rise in particular places, and for a particular group of people living there, life in general has to be made more difficult to live, people have to be made to feel more worthless (Dorling, 2004: 190)

Straightforwardly, current conditions appear at first glance to be conducive to increased levels of interpersonal violence in varying forms. Indeed, a recent report by the Global Peace Index suggests that the global pandemic has ushered in 'a new wave of tension and uncertainty' (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020: 2) on top of rising incidents of civil unrest in Europe during the period 2011-2018, nearly half of which were violent in nature.

The cost-of-living crisis in the UK alone will make life for many that are structurally disadvantaged increasingly difficult in the way Dorling suggests, that much is certain. What will likely accompany this are renewed feelings of worthlessness combined with, for some, an emboldened sense of 'special liberty' (Hall, 2012), as they find themselves disadvantaged in capitalism's disavowed inequality structures yet psychically captured by its potent status symbols and consumerism.

Public trust and faith in elites was fragile before Covid-19 in the UK but has arguably worsened following repeated accusations of corruption within government as well as revelations concerning the failure of various ministers and officials to follow public-health measures imposed during the pandemic. Early on, accusations of corruption in the process of the procurement of UK government contracts for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) began to surface (Conn et al, 2021). As was often the case throughout the pandemic, the 'state of exception' (Ahearne and Frudenthal, 2021) generated at this time of unprecedented crisis became a convenient justification for various governmental actions or inactions, decision-making, and a general lack of due diligence or oversight. As the pandemic continued, the acting Health Secretary's affair with his aide and evidence of parties held at Downing Street and attended by the Prime Minister himself surfaced. These various revelations against the contextual backdrop of neoliberalism's various failures, have culminated in a considerable crisis of legitimacy that now presents itself in an incumbent Prime Minister awaiting a successor.

The dysfunction evident through the mismanagement of the pandemic extends further to the post-pandemic period of recovery, which in its current guise will not likely sufficiently address the various socio-economic issues generated before the pandemic's arrival and that the pandemic itself has further exacerbated. A recent report examining the consequences of benefit cuts and the withdrawal of the Furlough scheme in one of the most deprived districts of England, suggests these changes, alongside rises in the cost of living, are creating a pending poverty catastrophe in the area and within geographical areas experiencing similar levels of deprivation and disadvantage (Etherington et al, 2022). The government's 'levelling up' agenda is unlikely to fully address the complex legacy of distrust, cynicism, and harm caused by the virus and the government's handling of the crisis. Neither will it prove sufficient to tackle the longer-term legacies of de-industrialisation and the more recent post-recession austerity programme that had further entrenched deprivation across numerous parts of the country. While the paucity of measures in the latest budget announcement to temper the spike in fuel and energy prices, as well as other commodities, provides a strong indication of insufficient political will to act upon those conditions that could provide the generative basis for social unrest in the future.

It was suggested recently that the cumulative effects of Covid-19 and the lockdowns initiated in response, had possibly started a ticking time bomb of future harm through the activation of more distant, or longer-term violence generators that will not be immediately felt (Ellis, 2021). On the contrary, these are more likely to be 'slow' in their affects upon individuals and communities, but with exponential potential to spark off violent incidents and conflicts (Ellis, 2022). The spiralling costs of living are likely to only enhance the vulnerability of those

households on low-incomes or that are without a wage-earner. These conditions are likely to fuel feelings of desperation and hopelessness, which risk transforming into resentment and anger, particularly amongst men with few prospects. These conditions are also likely to reduce the options available to those trying to exit or escape abusive home lives. Just as many abused women struggled to escape during the turbulent years that followed the economic crisis of 2008, many potentially face an immediate future of entrapment and enforced dependency as avenues to exit abusive relationships may begin to close off.

Given the complex, yet possible, links between trauma and violent behaviour, experiencing and witnessing abuse during the confinement of lockdowns may yet serve as a particularly potent generator of future violence amongst some individuals, particularly if this is combined with a bleak and prolonged period of recovery after the pandemic (Ellis et.al, 2021). Additionally, low trust and lack of legitimacy often correlate with increased violence in societies (Ellis, 2019), as does personal preparation for violent conflict when combined with prior experience of violent victimisation (Brennan, 2021). If some economically disadvantaged and vulnerable young people were at greater risk of experiencing and or committing violent harm before the pandemic, it is difficult to see how this will have changed as a result of it.

While evidence still needs to be collated on the impacts of the pandemic and its interaction with the socio-economic conditions that preceded it, some voices from frontline services supporting families, as well as disadvantaged children and young people at-risk of abuse, exploitation or engaging in crime, have spoken about the chasm that has opened-up between them and those they tried to support throughout the lockdowns (Briggs et al, 2021c). Re-connecting with vulnerable groups to provide support now restrictive measures across the UK have ceased is vital, but likely to present significant challenges. Indeed, the National Youth Agency (2020) has reported recently on the detriment of Covid-19 measures to the many years of work spent developing trust and positive working relationships with vulnerable young people. Notwithstanding the pandemic's potential to heighten vulnerabilities, as has been discussed already, the National Youth Agency report raises several concerns about the exploitation of young people online during periods of lockdown and the risks this poses in terms of involvement in illicit markets and attendant levels of future violence.

The future remains uncertain, but increasingly points towards the gathering of proverbial storm clouds. Criminology must now direct its attention towards understanding and theorising these developments with a firm theoretical focus on mutating political economy and its affects upon structuring divisions, as well as various forms of interpersonal violence and harm more generally.

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Article

Passport to Neoliberal Normality?

A Critical Exploration of Covid-19 Vaccine Passports

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Abstract

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic governments across the world including in France, Canada, Lithuania, Austria, Italy, and Ireland imposed 'vaccine passports' on the premise that they would curtail transmission of the virus, reduce COVID-19 related mortalities, and enable society to return to *neoliberal normality*. However, vaccine passports raise several issues that have not been given sufficient attention within the social sciences. Vaccine passports should be of criminological and zemiological concern because of their harmful consequences upon social relations, surveillance implications, as well as how they aid a return to *neoliberal normality* with all its criminogenic implications from corporate boardrooms to zones of permanent recession. Therefore, this article offers a critique of vaccine passports. It is structured into three key themes: (a) scientifically and ethically problematic, (b) the death of the social and the 'Other', and (c) digital surveillance and freedom. The paper begins by exploring how vaccine passports make little scientific sense and further entrench some unvaccinated peoples' sense of political and medical mistrust. It then discusses how they amplify social divisions, creating the unvaccinated Other in society and intensifying the neoliberal shift towards a post-social, contactless world. The article closes with an outline of how vaccine passports were cast as enabling a return to neoliberalism and freedom, hinging upon an assumption of harmlessness while cementing the negative ideology of capitalist realism.

Introduction

Starting with the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine in the United Kingdom (UK) in December 2020, the rapid commercial manufacture, clinical testing, regulatory approval, and deployment of various COVID-19 vaccines has been an essential tool in societies fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst the pandemic exposed how neoliberalism left many societies unprepared to deal with a health crisis, political corruption, and various entrenched social inequalities (Briggs et. al, 2021a; 2021b; Gerbaudo, 2021; Raymen and Smith, 2021; Sparke and Williams, 2022), it is generally believed that the roll out of the vaccine programme in the Western world has been one of the few positive outcomes of the pandemic era and cast as 'an unrivalled scientific achievement' (Nguyen et. al, 2022: 1). At the time of writing in June 2022, approximately 65.9% of the global population has been administered at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, with a total of 11.9 billion doses dispensed across the world (OWD, 2022). This has resulted in a sustained reduction in COVID-19 related hospitalisations and fatalities, even when transmission rates are high.

However, the debate over 'vaccine passports' continues in many nations. Often referred to as 'covid certification', 'immunity certificates', 'digital covid certificates' and 'green passes', they form a digitalised or paper certificate that enable people to demonstrate their health status by displaying proof of either full vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test result. The certificate is then required for various purposes which can encompass accessing domestic and international travel, attending bars, gyms, and restaurants as well as highly populated entertainment venues such as music concerts and football matches. Therefore, they reduce public health restrictions for the vaccinated, while ensuring that the unvaccinated cannot partake in much of civil life.

In February 2021, Israel was the first nation to implement a 'green pass', while in September 2021 many provinces in Canada such as Ontario and British Columbia enacted the scheme as a condition for people to enter 'non-essential' places, including cinemas and restaurants. In July 2021 Ireland and France made the pass compulsory for access to leisure facilities, while in September 2021 Italy became the first European country to enforce the pass for all employees. President Joe Biden's United States of America (USA) opted against issuing the passports federally, leaving it up to the Governors of individual states to decide (Jecker, 2021). Whilst the Governors of many states including South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and Texas banned their usage, the Governor of New York implemented the scheme which became known as the 'Key to NYC' (Gostin, 2021: 2). In July 2021 the European Union (EU) also enacted the 'digital covid certificate regulation' (Wilford et. al, 2021), requiring individuals to display proof of either full vaccination, a negative test result or recovery from COVID-19 to travel across its member states.

The imposition of both COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine passports have generated protests around the world. For instance, vaccine passports in France led to several months of social unrest into February 2022, while some have argued that they could ignite insurrection and civil war in South Africa (Kevin et. al, 2022). Moreover, protests occurred in Italy, Spain, Austria, Portugal, Luxembourg, England, Sweden, and Greece, though perhaps most emblematic of this

dissatisfaction are the 'truckers' in Canada. Across January-February 2022 many Canadian truckers, most of whom were vaccinated, drove up to 3000 miles to the Canadian capital, Ottawa, demanding the removal of COVID-19 restrictions including the vaccine mandates (Ling, 2022).

Vaccine passports raise troubling issues that have been given little attention within the social sciences, including in criminology and zemiology. Vaccine passports ought to be of criminological and zemiological concern due to the harmful consequences they wreak upon social relations, surveillance implications, as well as how they aid a return to *neoliberal normality* with all its criminogenic implications from corporate boardrooms to zones of permanent recession (Hall, 2012; Hall and Winlow, 2013). By neoliberal normality we primarily refer to the continuation of neoliberalism for the immediate future, evidencing it via Harvey's (2007) conception of neoliberalism as a class-based, restorative economic project that seeks to redistribute wealth from the bottom to the top of the social structure. The deepening of this restoration has been clear since the advent of the pandemic in March 2020, with social inequalities and the economic gap between the rich and poor increasing to historically unprecedented levels (Green and Fazi, 2022). For instance as Briggs et. al, (2021b) highlighted it would now take the average Amazon worker eight weeks to earn what the world's second richest man, Jeff Bezos, earns in a second (Gerbaudo, 2021). Meanwhile, living standards for most people continue to decline as we slowly enter a new political economic phase (see: Raymen and Smith, 2021). Neoliberalism's cultural partner of consumerism and its associated value system of radical individualism and aggressive competition will, of course, also take many years to undo (Ellis, et. al, 2021; Raymen, 2016; Raymen and Smith, 2021; Smith and Raymen, 2018; Winlow and Hall, 2013). Notwithstanding these issues, most debates surrounding vaccine passports have primarily focussed on the benefits of reopening the economy vs the passport's privacy risks, but Renieries (2021) suggests:

> "This narrow lens ignores a wide array of other, potentially more worrying concerns, particularly with regard to the risks of driving further inequity, discrimination, exclusion and stigmatization."

This article therefore offers a critique of vaccine passports. It is structured into three key sections. The first section - scientifically and ethically problematic - documents how the scheme is scientifically and ethically unsound, explicating how it may violate the ethical principle of informed consent and further entrench some unvaccinated peoples' sense of political and medical mistrust. The second section – the death of the social and the 'Other' – elucidates the exclusionary nature of vaccine passports, amplifying the neoliberal shift towards a post-social, contactless world. As we will see, this is particularly the case in South Korea with their ideological state commitment to an 'untact' society, which is based upon an increasing primacy to technology rather than human interaction. The final key section – digital surveillance and freedom – discusses how vaccine passports form part of a broader increase in technological surveillance during the COVID-19 pandemic, creating the potential for user data to be mined for profitability as part of 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2019). The paper closes with an exploration of how vaccine passports were cast as heralding the immediate return to neoliberal normality and

freedom, outlining how this hinged upon an assumption of harmlessness (Raymen, 2021) while cementing the negative ideology of capitalist realism (Fisher, 2018).

Scientifically and Ethically Problematic

Throughout the pandemic most governments suggested they were 'following the science' to address COVID-19, with many scientists taking a central role in political life and acting as public figures. Mathematical models in particular were utilised to present worst case scenarios regarding hospitalisations and fatalities, providing political impetus for vaccine passports on the rationale that they would reduce COVID-19 cases and mortalities (Sleat et. al, 2021). However, these models are littered with deficiencies including erroneous modelling assumptions and high sensitivity depending upon the inputted data (see: Ioannidis et. al, 2022). Face masks were also imposed by many governments, although the evidence on their efficacy in curtailing transmission remains inconclusive (Briggs et. al, 2021a; 2021b; Dodsworth, 2021). This was the rhetoric originally offered by many governments at the start of the pandemic, although some reversed their position in the hope of reducing peoples' fear of the virus, giving them confidence to go out shopping again to stimulate a resurgence in the economy (Briggs et. al, 2021b; Dodsworth, 2021). Therefore, science is often politicized to fulfil select political aims under neoliberalism – known as the 'medical-political complex' (Abassi, 2020: 1) – whereby evidence is cherry-picked to align with a political agenda (Dodsworth, 2021).

There is no scientific consensus that vaccine passports would be an effective tool in society's fight against COVID-19. The World Health Organisation (WHO) does not support their usage, citing many reasons including the unequal global rollout of the vaccines and how the passports would restrict travel for those that have not yet been fully vaccinated. The Nuffield Council on Bioethics also outlined their reservations, claiming there is 'too much scientific uncertainty and there are too many unresolved ethical concerns' (Cited in Jecker, 2021: 1). Whilst some commentators in the British Medical Journal suggested they may be a useful mechanism in reducing fatalities, others claim the passports would lessen but not eradicate the risk posed by COVID-19 (Sleat et. al, 2021). This is because people can continue to transmit the virus after being fully vaccinated (Green and Fazi, 2022). Such transmissibility was illuminated at the outdoor Boardmasters music and surf festival in Cornwall, UK, in August 2021. Although vaccine passports were in place, nearly 5000 people tested positive for COVID-19, meaning it essentially acted as a 'super-spreader' event (Sleat et. al, 2021).

Whilst COVID-19 vaccines are effective in significantly reducing mortality, the immunity afforded by them diminishes rather quickly. Research on the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine ascertained that immunity declines after around six months, with effectiveness dropping from 88% immediately after being fully vaccinated to 47% after five months (Tartof et. al, 2021). Similarly, Fabiani et. al, (2022) found that the effectiveness after the second dose of COVID-19 mRNA vaccines generally declined to 33% after six months. This resulted in the deployment of booster vaccines which further reduced the likelihood of infection, hospitalisation, and death, particularly for individuals who were high risk such as the elderly. However, the short term efficacy of these vaccines raises questions around the extent to which natural immunity might

provide comparable levels of protection against COVID-19. Kojima and Klausner (2022) suggest that individuals with COVID-19 anti-bodies possess low-rates of reinfection, perhaps decreasing a person's risk of reinfection by at least 80.5% up to ten months after testing positive. Likewise, Shenai et. al, (2021) demonstrate how natural immunity may provide superior levels of protection against COVID-19, claiming vaccinated individuals may be 27 times more likely to be reinfected than those who are unvaccinated but have recovered from COVID-19. This potentially means that recovery from COVID-19 should be considered equal to full vaccination, as is the case in some countries such as Switzerland and Italy (Shenai et. al, 2021), although it also illuminates how there is little scientific basis for vaccine passports to curtail transmission, hospitalisations, and fatalities.

The requirement that citizens possess a vaccine passport to access civil life regardless of their health status, age, and risk of harm to the disease is rather dubious. Shenai et. al, (2021: 13) claim it would amount to a 'questionable legal and ethical standing, based on suspect medical necessity and even a potential for harm'. One form of possible harm lies in requiring all children and teenagers to receive full vaccination as part of the vaccine passport scheme. Whilst vaccination is arguably essential for those youngsters who have underlying health conditions and are at an increased risk of harm to COVID-19, the virus does not generally pose a serious threat to children or teenagers, with deaths being extremely rare (Briggs et. al, 2021b; Giubilini et. al, 2021). Moreover, the imposition of vaccine passports across the Western world would potentially encourage take up of the vaccines amongst low-risk children on the premise that life will return to normality quicker, further delaying the fragmented rollout of vaccines to those vulnerable groups in the Global South who need the vaccination far more (Kevin et. al, 2022), thereby inadvertently prolonging the pandemic.

Emphasising the importance of vaccine uptake as part of the passport scheme pressurises people into getting the vaccine, particularly during a time when many people were suffering from lockdown fatigue and largely wanted an end to the restrictions (Dodsworth, 2021). According to many commentators, this emotional manipulation violates the bedrock of ethical medical treatment – informed consent (Dodsworth, 2021; Kevin et. al, 2022; Porat et. al, 2021). Informed consent for human subjects in medical procedures intensified in global importance after the horrors of the Second World War, including the medical experiments that were conducted on Jews and other prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps, culminating in the 1947 Nuremburg Code which embedded informed consent in law as one of the core ethical standards in medical treatment. This means human subjects must be free from threats of harm, coercion, influence, and duress throughout the process of medical treatment and interventions. However, where vaccine passports were imposed, they often operated in a context of 'structural coercion' (Kevin et. al, 2022: 15). Myriad consequences were attached to not being fully vaccinated such as the potential of losing one's job and livelihood. For example, in September 2021 in France 3000 unvaccinated health workers were suspended for refusing the vaccine (BBC, 2021). Such actions were fuelled by the rhetoric utilised by French President, Emmanuel Macron, who stated the aim was to 'piss off the unvaccinated' (Cited in Kevin et. al, 2022: 16). Moreover, in Greece from December 2021 unvaccinated people aged over 60 were fined €100

each month, with the monies raised going towards Greece's underfunded and understaffed hospitals (Lavelle, 2021). Despite the detrimental impact of this - particularly upon elderly citizens who were already struggling economically - the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis claimed it was the 'price to pay for health' (Lavelle, 2021).

Vaccine passports also do little to address the often-complex reasons surrounding low vaccination uptake within certain social groups, particularly within the BAME population (Dodsworth, 2021; Hall and Studdert, 2021; Jecker, 2021; Lyon, 2022). These are likely to remain disproportionately low as we enter the post-pandemic era (Hall and Studdert, 2021). Recent survey research in the USA, for example, highlighted that vaccine hesitancy is most pronounced amongst poor ethnic minority groups who live in socially marginalized areas, possessing lower than average incomes and poorer educational attainment under neoliberalism (Nguyen et. al, 2022). Reasons often cited for their comparably low rates of COVID-19 vaccination include fears over potential adverse reactions and the long-term side effects of the vaccine. Adverse reactions have been relatively rare and primarily minor such as short-term fatigue and headaches (Krantz and Phillips, 2022; Rosenblum et. al, 2022). However, other scholarship in the UK has identifed fears expressed amongst racial minorities that were often attached to various conspiracy theories around COVID-19 (Fuller et. al, 2021). Such concerns point to a profound distrust of the government, public health, and the pharmaceutical industry.

However, some of this medical mistrust in countries like the USA has its roots in historical events (Nguyen et. al, 2022). As part of the USA Government's 1932 Tuskegee Syphilis Study, around 400 black men with syphilis were informed that they would receive treatment and care for their infections. However, the government intentionally left the men untreated to observe how syphilis would naturally progress, thus violating their informed consent (Fuller et. al, 2021). Although an antibiotic treatment through penicillin was found for syphilis in 1947, the government continued the study until 1972. Such state sponsored violence has left many people from BAME communities suspicious of the medical system as an institutionally racist structure (Fuller et. al, 2021). Religion can also play a part in vaccine hesitancy. For instance, sections of the Muslim community in the UK previously expressed worries about the halal status of the COVID-19 vaccines (Fuller et. al, 2021).

Considering the above, there is evidence that vaccine passports may intensify unvaccinated peoples' COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy. Drawing upon survey research in Israel and the UK (N=1411), Porat et. al, (2021) indicate that many unvaccinated people view the passports as eroding their bodily autonomy and freedom of choice, essentially coercing them into getting vaccinated. Rather than governments utilising pressure and coercing the populous into vaccine uptake via the passport scheme, scholars remark that it is essential they utilise more ethical means of persuasion (Abrams et. al, 2021; Porat et. al, 2021). Whilst 'nudging' is likely to compel some people to immediately take up the vaccine, it may have damaging, longer term impacts including further eroding the already threadbare public trust in politics and public health. This is particularly the case in many Western nations like the USA and UK, where trust in politicians had reached an all-time low in the neoliberal era (Briggs et. al, 2021a 2021b; Telford, 2022).

As we have seen, vaccine passports are littered with scientific and ethical conundrums, though they also intensify various social divisions and antagonisms. This includes the shift to a post-social world and the identification of a vilified 'Other' in society. We present these issues as the central topic of debate in the next section, with a particular focus on South Korea.

The Death of the Social and the 'Other'

As mentioned, vaccine passports have been presented in countries throughout the world as an aspirational means by which residents can return to neoliberal normality. However, the social divisions that vaccine passports open up present themselves as something of an affront to the premise of a restored quality of life, particularly for some of the less technologically adept citizens like the older generation who could potentially become left behind. Throughout the pandemic, governments persistently singled out the needs of the elderly population in efforts to control the spread of the virus, in part because they constitute the bulk of mortalities; for instance, the average age of mortality with/from COVID-19 in the UK is 82 (Briggs et. al, 2021a; 2021b). However, there has been a dearth of debate about how a vaccine passport might be managed amongst the elderly themselves. While some countries offer a paper certification scheme, most have focussed upon rolling it out digitally via a smartphone app (Beduschi, 2022). Although the proportion of the older population owning smartphones has increased across the world in recent years, it remains relatively low. For example, in the UK smartphone ownership stands at 65% for the 65+ age group, while in South Korea it stands at 53.8% for those aged 70+ (Statista, 2021). Moreover, these smart devices may only be used by elderly people for basic calling and texting, rather than downloading, installing, and setting up the apps required for presenting a vaccine passport. This can present a somewhat daunting process for those who are not as familiar with these technologies. Technological barriers and the perceptions of them may also act to dissuade some of the elderly community – particularly those who live alone or have minimal existing social connections – from going out at all. This will only serve to compound the vulnerabilities that already exist among the older population, especially loneliness, social isolation, and atomisation (Dury, 2014), all of which have steadily increased throughout the neoliberal era (Stiegler, 2019; Winlow and Hall, 2013).

South Korea presents an interesting case in point. Throughout the pandemic, the South Korean government deployed a series of invasive surveillance and tracing mechanisms, some of which were superfluous to the contact tracing process itself – an individual's gender, age, local routines, and places visited were all published publicly online. This allowed a range of inferences to be made about one's identity, who they may be visiting and for what purpose (Jung et. al, 2020). Known as the 'COOV app', the nation's digital vaccine passport was mandated in November 2021 and must be downloaded via the App Store which generates a unique QR code. Facilities deemed as high risk such as clubs, karaoke rooms, gyms and saunas were classified as 'vaccine zones' and were out of bounds for all except the fully vaccinated and thus vaccine passport equipped. Cinema multiplexes launched 'vaccine pass' theatres where customers were allowed to eat and drink whilst viewing their chosen film. Whilst the pandemic highlighted an

increased need for 'contactless interactions' to curtail transmission of the virus and reduce fatalities (Beduschi et. al, 2021), South Korea's pandemic response including the COOV app is reflective of an existing economic commitment to building what they refer to as an 'untact' society (see: Lee and Lee, 2020).

The country has been investing heavily for some time in a shift to 'human-free' technological solutions with unmanned shops, restaurants and other contactless services rapidly displacing human labour and face to face interactions with people across the country (Kim, 2020). This shift has been enabled by sustained investment in advanced technologies. These include automatic dispensers, e-banking, unattended kiosks, and self-service counters, with customers receiving text messages with time slots to pick up pre-ordered items (Lee and Lee, 2020). Many citizens have welcomed this move, particularly the highly individualistic younger generation who prefer 'solo shopping' (Lee and Lee, 2020: 10) rather than engaging in what they perceive as the awkwardness of social interaction.

South Korea's pandemic response including the COOV app have thus solidified their ideological commitment to an untact society, since the use of robots and other electronic services could be perceived as reducing the risk of viral transmission in food and other consumer settings. Vaccine passports also further compound the issues around contactless interactions in an atomised social world, whereby encounters with other people are deemed as stultifying and a potential affront to one's freedom and sovereignty. Therefore, it might be argued that South Korea's amplification of an untact society represents the pinnacle of what some scholars have identified as *the death of the social* under neoliberalism (Hall, 2012; Raymen, 2016; Stiegler, 2019; Winlow and Hall, 2013). Technologies including the COOV app enable people to sustain the retreat from civic life and social interaction. Such a contactless world makes it difficult to forge social bonds and civic ties that often enrich peoples' lives and might provide them with a sense of collective identity and social inclusion.

Although in an untact world people might be present in the same space, utilising their COOV app to gain entry, they are essentially 'alone together' (Turkle, 2011). Utilising the anti-social tools of pandemic management to keep people at a distance, they are fragmented and cut adrift from the social. Given the atomisation above it is perhaps unsurprising that social isolation and loneliness are at relatively high levels in South Korea, with many South Koreans often feeling anxious, depressed, and suicidal (Kim et. al, 2021). Suicide rates are 2.4 times higher than the OECD average and particularly high amongst young people, with many feeling socially disconnected and hopeless (Gselamu and Ha, 2020). Moreover, while there are other important contextual issues to consider which are beyond the scope of this article (see: Anderson and Kohler, 2013; Yoo and Sobotka, 2018), the country possesses one of the lowest marriage and fertility rates in the world (Yoo and Sobotka, 2018) as opportunities to meet and develop relationships with others continues to diminish.

The amplified death of the social has also been mirrored in other neoliberal nations whereby the imposition of vaccine passports morphed into lockdowns for the unvaccinated. In November 2021, for instance, the Austrian government locked down their unvaccinated citizens

(later changed to a full lockdown) and legislated to ensure the vaccine becomes mandatory from Spring 2022, involving fines of up to €3,600 for those who continue to refuse it. In January 2022, Italy banned those without the new 'super' health pass – which stipulated that the scheme was valid indefinitely for the fully vaccinated and those who had recovered from COVID-19 - from public transport, coffee shops and other public services. In adopting similar rhetoric to the French President and Greek Prime Minister, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi magnified social divisions and tensions, remarking that 'most of the problems we are facing today depend on the fact that there are unvaccinated people' (Cited in Serhan, 2022). These types of tactics seem to point not so much to a desire to protect the population including the unvaccinated from harm, but more towards debasing those who are becoming increasingly seen as inconvenient and defective. Instead of explicating the complex reasons previously outlined for some people not getting vaccinated, they have often been labelled as merely crazy, flat-earther conspiracy theorists, 'criminals', 'rats' and 'subhumans' who deserve to 'die like flies' (see: Fazi, 2021). As Whitehead (2018) explains, the process of Othering has occurred throughout history, involving the separation of humanity into 'us' and 'them', with a derogatory term often delegated to a group of people who are classified as different and demonised. The readiness to vilify the unvaccinated Other is rooted in a deep-seated behavioural disposition that emerged well before the COVID-19 pandemic took hold.

These behaviours are reflective of a cultural shift that has accompanied the rise of neoliberal capitalism across much of the world over the past half century, with its injunction towards market values such as competitive and egoistic individualism rather than social solidarity (Harvey, 2007; Raymen, 2016). The hegemony of these values has generated a 'post-social' society whereby other people are increasingly identified as an enemy to eclipse, rather than a source of mutual aid and thus social sustenance (Hall, 2012; Raymen, 2019; Sloterdijk, 2011; Stiegler, 2019; Winlow and Hall, 2013). This shift has ushered in a separation of one from another, atomising and individualising social relations and creating the optimum conditions for the demonisation of the unvaccinated Other to proliferate (Whitehead, 2018). As mentioned, vaccine passports threaten to create a two-tiered society whereby those who are vaccinated can access public space and those who are unvaccinated cannot, effectively casting the vaccine hesitant as the threatening and menacing Other in society.

Such cultural characteristics have been further distilled by the broader restrictions that accompanied vaccine passports such as anti-social distancing and lockdown measures. Under lockdowns, the sense of *objectless anxiety* - an anxiety that is driven by an absence of certainty about the potential harms we may be exposed to and what we can do about them (Hall, 2012; Raymen, 2019; Winlow and Hall, 2013) - became more palpable. Although there was some perception that COVID-19 has killed millions of people around the world and is lurking somewhere nearby, we have much less of a sense about exactly where it is, who has it, how to best protect ourselves, and who we can trust and rely upon in a post-social world. The state-sanctioned withdrawal of our proximities to friends, family members and work colleagues served to widen the gap in the erosion of regard for the Other, as we retreated into our microspheres of subjective space behind closed doors. Vaccine passports further amplify this disregard, since

much of public space becomes inhabited only by the vaccinated, engendering a vaccinated social bubble. However, the tendency to occupy these *bubbles* (Sloterdijk, 2011) is an established part of social life under neoliberalism as we have moved:

> towards a society that appears increasingly orientated towards nihilistic atomisation and pragmatic economic self-interest, and in which there remains no space for the traditional substance of civility and sociability (Winlow and Hall, 2013: 103).

Therefore, the unvaccinated stranger is a source of tension and incredulity; an antisocial Other who is not prepared to acquiesce with both the vaccine rollout and passport programme and should expect to be punished for their transgressions, even if that means further social alienation and the deprivation of resources that they depend upon for their livelihood. Essentially, vaccine passports formalise this regime of Othering, where the binary between the socially considerate, responsible individual and the reckless transgressor comes into sharp focus.

So far, this article has explicated how vaccine passports are scientifically and ethically questionable. It has outlined how they amplify the construction of the vilified unvaccinated Other and intensify the death of the social, with a particular focus on South Korea. The paper's final section explores the surveillance implications of vaccine passports. It discusses how they form a technological fix to return to a highly harmful way of life for the foreseeable future – neoliberalism – and its harmful conception of freedom.

Digital Surveillance and Freedom

Embodying an 'epidemiological turn in digital surveillance' (Taylor et. al, 2021: 11), the rise of public health surveillance mechanisms has been a key component of the COVID-19 pandemic. As previously stated, digital contract tracing has been rolled out to track contact between citizens to detect if they encountered somebody who is infected. This occurred alongside national scale public health data modelling and epidemiological tracking to monitor the geographical and social spread of the virus. Such tracking mechanisms have been used to notify populations of areas where COVID-19 cases and mortalities are high and inform them of sensible behaviours and measures to reduce the risk that the virus poses (Lyon, 2022). Whilst surveillance is often thought of as being observed by someone in authority, Lyon (2022: 33) suggests that under neoliberalism - particularly during the pandemic - surveillance has largely been conducted by:

> the smartphone. Today, the watching is no longer primarily literal, as with a camera; surveillance is achieved through *data*. And a key connector between persons and their surveillors is the phone – which is why I often refer to the smartphone as a PTD, a Personal Tracking Device.

Digital vaccine passports downloaded via an app on a smartphone present several surveillance issues, tethered to global technology companies who have lobbied many governments to present their solutions and thus utilise crises for their own economic gain (Lyon, 2022). Crises throughout neoliberalism have often been utilised to further the social, economic, and political

interests of powerful actors in society (Harvey, 2007; Sumonja, 2021; Telford, 2022; Žižek, 2018), particularly under states of emergency which often results in the expansion of surveillance mechanisms (Zuboff, 2019). This was clear after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA, where technology companies presented various solutions to monitor 'suspect populations' in the name of increased security, involving an unprecedented expansion of state and corporate surveillant powers (Nagra and Maurutto, 2020; Zuboff, 2019). Such measures involved new information communication technology systems, linked databases including facial recognition software and digital profiles as well as a range of technological security procedures in airports including tighter border controls (Levi and Wall, 2004). This was enacted under the ideological banner of preserving freedom, civil liberties and the West's cherished way of life, even if they paradoxically undermined both the rule of law and the liberties that they purported to protect (Nagra and Maurutto, 2020; Zuboff, 2019). In fact, such logic has been utilised by Sahakian et. al, (2021) in their advocacy of COVID-19 vaccine passports, claiming they are a small price to pay for the preservation of health and return to normal life. Indeed, it is as a consequence of the emotive and fractured state of national and international debate on the pandemic and vaccine passports that we ought to highlight here that we are not conspiracy theorists. We know COVID-19 is real and we are aware that it has caused immeasurable suffering to people across the world, including to our own family members and friends. We are also not arguing that vaccine passports are part of some COVID-19 surveillance conspiracy. Rather, as critical criminologists we are interested in analysing historic crises and the social changes that they often generate, including the validity of vaccine passports, their potentially harmful consequences and how they could be utilised by powerful actors to further their economic interests, as documented above.

This is particularly important given that digital vaccine passports on a smartphone also present the possibility of function creep (Lupton, 2022), whereby the data mined from the smartphone app is subsequently used for other purposes by technology companies, not least because many governments' public health operations often involve some form of partnership with private companies for data analysis (Lyon, 2022). Zuboff (2019) refers to this as 'surveillance capitalism', where technology companies extract information about us via internet and smartphone apps activity and utilise it to be stored and sold as behavioural data to big business. Private and personal routines and behaviours - which have historically existed outside of capitalist markets – are now increasingly used to maximise profitability rather than to enrich the lives of the population. Such behavioural data is often used to predict future decision making, often nudging us via targeted advertisements into buying consumer products online through personal devices like smartphones, thus negating our autonomy and privacy.

It is worth expanding our analytical gaze to probe the features of surveillance capitalism and its relationship with state regulation in more detail. Although some scholars have emphasised the importance of public scrutiny and stringent governmental regulation in limiting the vaccine passport's potential for surveillance (Beduschi, 2022; Lee and Fung, 2022), there is something of a paradox at play here. Levi-Faur (2009 2017) identifies the concept of 'regulatory capitalism' where state regulations and rulemaking are becoming reconfigured to facilitate the expansion of capitalist governance. As we have seen in the response to the pandemic, the private

sector has deployed considerable expertise in developing health surveillance technologies and risk measurement tools. Despite valid questions over data ownership and privacy, their input has been seen as crucial in shaping COVID-19 regulations and mandates set by governments. These regulations then go on to determine the potential scope for commercial opportunities, market share and profit making (Farrand and Carrapico, 2017). In this way, the private sector is fully incorporated into state regulatory networks as they both act in concert to further the growth of technological forms of social control and surveillance capitalism. Without the active participation of the state as a regulatory enabler for market growth in surveillance capitalism, its presence as a lucrative channel of global investment would be seriously diminished or even rendered obsolete. This points not to a state retreat under neoliberalism but rather a reconfiguration in the relationship between governments and global capital (Levi-Faur, 2009). It is also important to note the pace at which regulatory reconstitution takes place. In the context of the pandemic, the rapid mandating of COVID-19 control mechanisms meant that there was little opportunity for public debate, political scrutiny, and careful analysis.

Instead, vaccine passports were primarily heralded as signalling the end to public health restrictions and the return of individual liberty (Beduschi, 2022; Brown et. al, 2021; Giubilini et. al, 2021; Kevin et. al, 2022; Porat et. al, 2021; Sahakian et. al, 2021), and as mentioned, their rollout occurred in a context whereby many people longed for a return to freedom and normality (Briggs et. al, 2021a 2021b; Ellis et. al, 2021; Dodsworth, 2021). Therefore, vaccine passports were cast as a 'technofix' (Sandvik, 2021: 210) and part of broader technological infrastructure whereby:

> digitised COVID surveillance and control have presented a techno-utopian portrayal, in which these technologies are positioned as offering more effective and efficient pathways to managing the COVID crisis (Lupton, 2021: 9).

The technofix provided by digital vaccine passports as a means of quickly returning to neoliberalism rested upon an *assumption of harmlessness* (Raymen, 2021). Throughout the neoliberal epoch freedom was tethered to individualistic and commodified hedonistic pursuits, awarding primacy to the satisfaction of one's desires. As previously alluded to, the staple features of capitalism's post-war era - particularly in the West - such as relative community spirit and social bonds had faded into the historical background (Hall, 2012; Sloterdijk, 2011; Stiegler, 2019; Telford, 2022; Winlow and Hall, 2013). 'Me first' egotistical individualism gradually frayed civility and sociality, with liberty becoming synonymous with *freedom from* all external constraints and authority, conceptualised as negative liberty (Berlin, 1958; Hall, 2012; Raymen, 2019; Smith and Raymen, 2018).

Commodified leisure was central to negative liberty. People often viewed it as a human and moral right to holiday abroad several times each year, engage in consumerism's 'fast fashion' by buying more and more commodified items that were quickly disposed of to make way for new ones, while interpersonal social relations reached a historic low as a post-social society emerged (Raymen, 2016; Smith and Raymen, 2018; Winlow and Hall, 2013; Žižek, 2018). Such a

conception of freedom was linked to a range of harms encompassing interpersonal envy and selfishness, insecure working conditions, private indebtedness via credit cards and loans, mental ill health, resource depletion and global warming (Hall, 2012; Smith and Raymen, 2018; Stiegler, 2019). This freedom for Žižek (2018) is actually unfreedom, since the citizenry possessed no choice but to choose from a narrow menu of commodified consumer items and experiences, while the real freedom to change the co-ordinates of neoliberal political economy was regarded as a baseless utopia that would only lead to something far worse. The citizenry could have all the freedoms they desired; but not that one.

As the cultural critic Matthew Arnold previously observed: 'Freedom is a very good horse to ride, but to ride somewhere' (Cited in Harvey, 2007: 25). Neoliberalism's trajectory of continual social crises, resource depletion, criminogenic conditions, global warming (see: Raymen and Smith, 2021) and the possibility of future pandemics are not the most pleasant destinations. In fact, Beacon and Innes (2021) advocated the rollout of digital vaccine passports partially on the premise that they will be useful in addressing future pandemics. However, this glosses over the causes of pandemics and addresses only symptoms. Indeed, it has been suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic was partially caused by neoliberal capitalism's commodification of nature, deforestation, agricultural destruction and the concomitant global warming, resulting in the disruption of ecosystems and enabling emerging diseases to move from animals to humans as in the case of COVID-19 (Lyon, 2022; Sparke and Williams, 2022; Sumonja, 2021; Telford, 2022). This intensifies the likelihood of new infectious diseases emerging, since increased water temperatures allow bacteria growth and water-borne pathogens to spread far easier (Telford, 2022). Therefore, the imposition of digital vaccine passports to deal with both the COVID-19 pandemic and future ones that may transpire only serves to cement what Fisher (2018) termed capitalist realism.

This is a negative structural ambience whereby it is easier to imagine global warming and future pandemics wreaking havoc across the world than it is to imagine the end of neoliberal capitalism. Capitalist realism has been a political characteristic of many neoliberal governments across the world over the past few decades where vaccine passports emerged including in the USA, France, Greece, Ireland, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. It is no coincidence that these countries also harbour myriad inequalities such as sizable levels of unemployment, poverty, mental ill health, criminal activity and an unprecedented gap between the super-rich and poor. The immediate focus on short-term technological fixes like digital vaccine passports tends to obscure the ways in which the pandemic is tethered to neoliberal political economy, while negating the construction of a more equitable form of economic and social organisation. This solidifies the negative sense that nothing lies beyond neoliberalism; such cynicism, scepticism and 'acceptance of this state of affairs is the hallmark of capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2018: 539).

It is important to highlight that we agree the pandemic represents 'a moment of shock and disorientation, which opens a space in which to redefine prevailing assumptions' (Gerbaudo, 2021: 7), though we assert that vaccine passports aided a return to neoliberal normality at least

for the foreseeable future. Whilst there are various debates over how neoliberalism functions (for instance: Harvey, 2007; Telford, 2022; Winlow and Hall, 2013), it is generally agreed that it contains an economically restorative component whereby wealth is redistributed from the lower orders to the top of the social hierarchy. As mentioned, economic inequality catapulted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with the world's super rich generally accumulating more and more wealth (Briggs et. al, 2021a 2021b; Green and Fazi, 2022). Neoliberalism's socially corrosive behavioural relations encompassing egotistical individualism, competition, selfishness and post-sociality are also deeply embedded and will arguably take many years to redress (Ellis, et. al, 2021; Raymen, 2016; Raymen and Smith, 2021; Smith and Raymen, 2018; Winlow and Hall, 2013).

While it could be argued that the 'corona statism' (Gerbaudo, 2021: 6) evidenced through the pandemic including tectonic forms of financial support via the furlough schemes challenged the assumption that nothing could change and set aside some of neoliberalism's key characteristics (Raymen and Smith, 2021; Telford, 2022), the system has historically displayed a remarkable ability to mutate and survive, changing when it needs to in order to embark upon a new phase of capitalist growth and expansion (Gerbaudo, 2021; Sparke and Williams, 2022; Sumonja, 2021). Despite the state's various forms of lavish spending and economic support, some governments have recently emphasised the rhetoric of fiscal responsibility and expressed some caution regarding further myriad public investment (Sparke and Williams, 2022). Whilst a new phase of capitalism is slowly emerging involving an energy transition to renewables with implications for neoliberalism's longevity (see: Raymen and Smith, 2021), for the immediate future we remain ensnared within *neoliberal normality* with all its harmful implications for social life.

Conclusion

The roll out of the vaccination programme changed the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing widespread protection against the virus and significantly reducing hospitalisations and fatalities. However, the accompanying imposition of vaccine passports in many countries around the world marks a troubling development. Many people protested against their implementation, suggesting the passports threatened to create a two-tier society based upon one's vaccination status (Green and Fazi, 2022). Such political discontent might well have contributed to some governments recently expressing their intention to end the passport scheme (as of Spring/Summer 2022). Whilst the South Korean government have not announced plans to roll back their COOV app, governments in Northern Ireland, England, Italy as well as many states in the USA like New York have signalled an end to the scheme. France have also scrapped the scheme for access to leisure facilities; but have kept it in place for entry into hospitals and care homes until at least July 2022.

This rolling back of vaccine passports at the national level is also perhaps an indication that the world is gradually emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. Many governments have announced a 'living with Covid' strategy, with pandemics historically lasting for around two years as the virus morphs into a far less virulent form and becomes endemic (Briggs et. al, 2021a

2021b). However, it appears likely that some form of vaccine passport will be required for travelling abroad; as mentioned, one example of this is the EU's 'digital covid certificate regulation' scheme. Nonetheless, it would also be rather naïve to suggest that this current national rolling back reflects a brief blip in vaccine passport's longue durée. Many of the emergency measures enacted after other crises such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks eventually became permanent and normalised features of society (Lyon, 2022; Nagra and Maurutto, 2020; Zuboff, 2019). As the digital infrastructure remains robust and adaptable (Lyon, 2022), it is not unforeseeable that governments could roll some form of health passport out again. This is particularly the case during the winter months when conditions are favourable to the intensified transmission of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases, as well as during the pandemics that await us in the future.

As this article has elucidated, the imposition of vaccine passports is scientifically and ethically problematic. Whilst they gloss over the waning efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines, they contribute to the *amplified death of the social* in many neoliberal societies, particularly in South Korea in light of their ideological commitment to an untact society. Neoliberalism's erosion of social bonds and primacy to competitive individualism laid the foundations for the vilification of the Other to proliferate during the rollout of vaccine passports, with the unvaccinated Other identified as a careless and irresponsible transgressor who should be chastised for their wrongdoing. Moreover, the premise that vaccine passports enable a return to neoliberal normality and freedom rests upon an assumption of harmlessness, glossing over the ways that today's *unfreedom* is associated with a litany of structural harms (Raymen, 2019; Smith & Raymen, 2018; Žižek, 2018). Ultimately, the implementation of vaccine passports as a technofix further congeals the negative ideology of capitalist realism; no fundamental political economic change is possible while neoliberal normality continues for the foreseeable future. This serves to accept the inevitability of a future characterised by perpetual crises, not least global warming, future pandemics, and the associated human distress in a post-social world where insecurity, uncertainty and instability have become structural norms.

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Article

Hope, Dystopian Futures, and Covid-19 as the 'Event' that Changed the World (Forever?)

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Abstract

Film and series writers have for some time projected imaginative yet sometimes quite real possible end-of-the-world scenarios. The evolution of blockbuster science-fiction films from the mid-20th century onwards initially generated scenarios related to threats to humanity from alien invasions. Then, towards the 1990s and at the turn of the 21st century, there emerged climate-related catastrophes, impending meteorite or asteroid collisions, bio-attacks as well as the general collapse of politics, law and order and revision of social life on earth into some perpetual violent and hostile land. In the same vein, other possible futuristic apocalypses have also been depicted through the inception of 'unknown' and 'fatal' viruses which all but wipe out humanity save one brave hero or heroine who takes it upon themselves to rescue the future from the past: somehow, however, averting the crisis and the world is saved. In many of these films, the devastation left on the planet inevitably resets humanity and in the aftermath the dawn of a new future lies in the responsible hands of a few survivors. All the while, only 'hope' somehow got them through. Using such portrayals of end-of-world scenarios and dystopian future films and series as possible avenues for our potential trajectory, this paper speculates about our future in a post-Covid world using aspects of Žižek's critical discussions on *hope* and *hopelessness* (2018) and Tom Moylan's (2020) concept of the 'dystopian structure of feeling'.

Introduction

How humanity might end has for some time been the subject numerous dystopian films and series. Fritz Lang's seminal science-fiction film *Metropolis* (1927) characterises a failed utopia where an oppressive ruling class manages an underground enslaved proletariat. Lang's dystopian vision in fact is based on Marx's concept of class antagonism and the division of society. Though *Metropolis* was considered to be a science fiction film, it wasn't until the introduction of the *film noir* genres in wartime American cinema during the 1940s that a sub-genre of dystopian films began to emerge more frequently, often with more disturbing content. This amalgamation of science fiction and film noir *"reinvented the critical energy of the historical novel by allowing for a narrative model of history that positioned the present as the future's past"* (Leigh et al., 2013: 122). Thereafter blockbuster films such as *World Without End* (1956), *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) and *Planet of the Apes* (1968) - all of which reflect themes of oppression, autocratic government and post-apocalyptic warnings - were to become among the most popular post-war science fiction-based dystopian films.

Such films were to form part of the evolution of blockbuster science-fiction films from the mid-20th century onwards. Then, towards the 1990s and over the turn of the 21st century, such films started to reflect climate-related catastrophes, impending meteorite or asteroid collisions, bio-attacks as well as the general collapse of politics, law and order and revision of social life on earth into some perpetual violent and hostile land. In the same vein, other possible futuristic apocalypses have also been through the inception of 'unknown' and 'fatal' viruses which all but wipe out humanity save one brave hero or heroine who has taken it upon themselves to rescue the future from the past: somehow, however, averting the crisis and the world is saved. In such films, the devastation left on the planet inevitably reset humanity and in the aftermath the dawn of a new future lies in the responsible hands of a few survivors. 'Hope' was to what we clung.

As the 21st century progressed, the more recent omnipotent presence of independent internet film and series streaming services started to alter the interpretation of many of these previous depictions, evermore focussing on dystopian futures. Likely related to what Mark Fisher (2009) terms as 'capitalist realism', these representations reflected a sense that it was easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. It is probably no surprise then that, prior to 2020, much of the 'loss of hope' about a better world was mirrored by the grave infractions of 21st century neoliberal life: increasing global instability, war and conflict; sharpening inequality; manmade climate change; increasing unemployment and poverty; and swelling youth disadvantage and disaffection. All of this just seemed to be oscillating between a simmering and boiling point, ever more regularly supressed by an asymmetrical politics and thus appearing as sporadic and disconnected issues in the swirl of 24/7 news media reporting (Winlow et al, 2015).

And this was the world into which the Covid-19 pandemic emerged, and for many people in the West, it felt like the 'lived experience' of such films. As mainly an elderly cohort died of

the virus, whole industries collapsed, millions upon millions of people lost their jobs, and people living in poverty expanded as lockdowns, social distancing, self-isolation, curfews, and mask wearing became the uniform means of managing the transmission and spread of the new infectious virus. Public spaces and social life were symbolically redefined to generate 'compliance' to a 'new normal' in which we were told to avoid physical contact with people and instead encouraged to seek refuge in our own personal digital worlds by means of escape and therapy (Briggs et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the installation of these measures radically altered the global political economy as nation states threw seemingly unlimited money at furlough schemes and vaccinations. Life as we knew it was changing, *"transiently shattering the widespread sense that everything will continue to stay the same"* (Žižek, 2020: 34).

In the confusion, narratives such as the 'Great Reset' and 'Building Back Better' quickly became popular political mantras as there seemed to be new hope for a greener, sustainable and fair and more equal future. Freudian theory around the 'death drive' - or the drive toward destruction in the hope that something new and better could emerge - would suggest then that the Covid pandemic was in fact a desired endgame. Was this the opportunity to solve the myriad failures of neoliberalism and offer us hope for the future? For McGowan (2013), such political investment in a 'better future' and perfect social equilibrium is destined for failure. This is because McGowan suggests we misdirect our pursuit of such a future by focussing on its accomplishment rather than what impedes it, which, essentially continually delays its realisation or perpetually reproduces behaviours that veto its realisation.

Using such portrayals of end-of-world scenarios and dystopian future films and series as possible avenues for our potential trajectory, this paper speculates about our future in a post-Covid world: a world characterised by a 'potential reset' and 'new ambitions' for social organisation. The intention is to use popular culture as a framework to explore life under neoliberalism (See Wakeman, 2014; Raymen, 2017; Wakeman, 2017 for similar examples). The paper first addresses elements of the function of ideology in both a pre- and post-pandemic world and makes use of Žižek's critical discussions on *hope* and *hopelessness* (2018) and Tom Moylan's (2020) concept of the *dystopian structure of feeling*: described as our collective surrendering to the socio-political dystopia of neoliberal capitalism and the ensuing relinquishing of utopian aspirations. To do this, I then make use of a small selection of dystopian films made over the years to highlight these concepts. The paper then moves into a more concrete analysis of dystopian films some of which pertain to deadly, humanity-threatening viruses. Parallels and inconsistencies are made with the recent Covid-19 pandemic in this respect as I try to discuss how the thread of *hope*, and indeed, *hopelessness* depicted in the films are in fact the residual feelings we experience about the current political and social status quo.

Ideology in the pre- and post-pandemic world

Even though crises have long been a feature of capitalism, its most recent form (neoliberalism) was once again further exposed by the 2008 financial crisis (Winlow et al., 2015). This caused deepening levels of pessimism and cynicism in Western societies. From an ecological perspective,

the capitalist system collided head-on with the material limits of the planet. Furthermore, we have witnessed the unfortunate normalisation of detrimental situations for any human being, such as the withdrawal of our rights, increased work and social precariousness, economic inequality, and new consumption habits due to resource scarcity. War, conflict, government oppression, violence, social unrest and terrorist acts complement these uncertainties as we receive this standardised living experience through perpetual images of such myriad crises through the media and internet (Streeck, 2016). We are simply left with a situation absent of viable political economic solutions and a belief that there is no alternative (Fisher, 2009). Perhaps, as Walter Benjamin (2016) so accurately put it, humanity seems inseparable from its own barbarism and potential destruction. Yet all the while distracting consumer cultures and symbolic fictions instead govern our subjective realities as other spectres dominate our horizons such as the dissolution of truth, the erosion of shared values and a perverse and farcical politics which make it difficult to take seriously.

How might we back out of this seemingly troubling social cul-de-sac? Surely, there can be hope for a world falling apart at the seams. Surely, there is a way of reversing seemingly irreparable damage neoliberal capitalism has caused (and continues to cause)? Yet, despite tokenistic political moaning and persistent criticism, the system has remained stubbornly resistant to meaningful change, essentially continuing to deploy and promote market solutions to complex problems and accentuating consumer spending both as economic necessity and the source of subjective satisfaction. For some reason, in these troubled times, even the most pessimistic diagnosis of our future ends with an uplifting hint that things might not be as bad as all that. There is always that there is *light at the end of the tunnel*. Žižek (2018) argues that it is only when we have admitted to ourselves that our situation is completely *hopeless* - that the light at the end of the tunnel is in fact the headlight of a train - then can fundamental change emerge. As it stands, progressive hopes are currently wrongly directed towards fixing the existing situation not only because they involve patching up failed policies with the same approaches but also because everything we hope will not happen is, in fact, very likely about to happen (Žižek, 2018). That is, unless individuals, once again, summon the political resolution to act decisively. The fact we return to this utopian solution merely confirms our political stymie: stuck in a never-ending cycle of fetishizing a future we can't realise (McGowan, 2013).

Discounting everything that has happened in the recent times such as the calamitous and farcical state of politics, the two-year global pandemic which sent whole societies into economic freefall, the war between Russia and Ukraine that is generating millions of additional refugees clambering for safety, let's imagine a wonderful future every day. The problem lies in the abyss that separates *the reality of the things we deny from our own conscience* from that future to which we aspire. The utopia becomes an impossibility. Marxists would say that utopias are therefore unachievable because they are not connected to the concrete structural conditions of society and, as such, are dangerous. In contrast, sociologists and philosophers such as Karl Mannheim and Ernst Bloch believe that the transformative potential of utopias cultivate a desire for social changes and thus enable alternative ways to the actual the political economy of social life (Matos, 2012).

Conversely, dystopias or the imagined state or society where there is great suffering or injustice – are what Yates (2020: 16) describes as *"upside down utopias"* or *"bad utopias, imaginary societies where the conditions of existence are much worse than those of real societies."* It's hard to imagine a situation worse than our current trajectory especially when the hope initially galvanised at the beginning of the pandemic seemed to dissipate quickly as we regained our conscious cynicism and craved the old temptations of life pre 2020 (Briggs et al., 2020). Powerful commercial ideologies obfuscate the sinister and dark elements of our reality, and we are made to think it is 'not as bad as it is made out to be' when in fact it is worse. Yet dystopias are those societies in catastrophic decline where diminishing numbers of the human race are left to negotiate environmental ruin, the fight against technological surveillance, and oppressive and violent government control. We can directly relate resistance to Covid-19 policies and measures to this plight in this respect as people protested in countries such as the UK, USA, Italy, Germany and France among others against the increased prominence of digital identification and scrutiny for their activities and behaviours.

Now, two years later, despite the pandemic, everything seems to remain the same. Boucher (2020: 2) observes that there are *"the same multinational corporate capitalism, the same global state system, the same neoliberal economic policies, the same worldwide social inequalities"*. Perhaps then we are living in what Tom Moylan (2020) terms as a contemporary 'dystopian structure of feeling' in that we passively accept this return to neoliberalism as a collective surrendering to the socio-political dystopia of neoliberal capitalism and the ensuing relinquishing of utopian aspirations. Yet, by idealising such a utopian post-covid future, we merely underline our dependency on our corrosive relationship with the neoliberal system (McGowan, 2013).

Multiple layers of this *hope* in the face of *hopelessness* can be identified in current film and series productions. Bold and brave stories of how humanity can fight against climate change, settle wars, and do justice to grave inequalities. Yet very often such background catastrophes are generally moulded around foreground tales of love, sex, protection and tragedy, loss and suffering, thus reducing their potential impact. Viewers are solicited to empathise with the characters and their feelings than the far more graver situations of impending global doom. Films and series about how social consciousness that crosses the strands of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, animalist, environmentalist can prevail when faced with life and challenges in a harmful economic system seeking a world in which everyone has the same value as humans. Utopia breathes, it lives on and feeds this 'dystopian structure of feeling' (Moylan, 2020). By equal measure, the same mediums similarly project gone-wrong worlds of violent Artificial Intelligence (AI) robot governance, warped climate ravaged desolation, and, of course, the devastating spread of deadly viruses. Just like we experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, every alternative to many of these futures offered to us in these mediums is different, but they all have something in common: the loss of our freedoms. In this respect, if we:

> …want to see in a clear, distilled way today's ideology, look at Hollywood. It's a clearer image than in our much more confused real lives. It's simple, Hollywood as an indication of where we stand in ideology. (Gook and Zizek, 2020: 366)

The Covid-19 pandemic and the hopelessness of the future: Exploring the pandemic through dystopian films

Fittingly for this paper, Peck (2010) used the analogy of the living dead to describe neoliberalism's *"dead, but dominant"* post-crisis incarnation in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. If we recall, in the aftermath, riots and political protests rippled across several western states. Despite this, however, no political movement or body was able to seize the opportunity to bring about radical and lasting change to socio-economic life in the west (Winlow et al., 2015; Telford and Wistow, 2019). Indeed, in the years since, despite further protests - largely because continuing structural schisms characteristic to neoliberal capitalism continue to damage society - many western economies reasserted policies of fiscal consolidation and wage depression (Mitchell and Fazi, 2017). Despite its zombified state, neoliberal capitalism's *"limbs are still moving, and many of the defensive reflexes seem to be working too"* (Peck, 2010: 109).

And in the wake of Covid-19, still the neoliberal zombie spasmed and convulsed as, aside from the misery the virus brought, protection protocols failed and elite digital and pharmacological business interests got wise to take advantage of another crisis situation (Klein, 2007). The spread of the new virus left millions of health compromised and elderly people dead but simultaneously permitted for restrictions to be put in place to manage the virus which created a parallel damage. All the while, the populace were fed images of people dressed up in white protective clothing, masks and visors dealing with seemingly motionless bodies in heavily manned hospitals. We were also bombarded with daily briefings on the number of people who were infected, in hospital or dying. At the time, it felt like a dystopian film/series come true especially when such depictions start in some present-day form of orderly utopia before descending into dystopian situations of the rabid infected.

Once you choose hope, anything is possible

A good marker of measuring this Moylan's 'dystopian structure of feeling' is placing handsome, perfect-looking heroes in impossible situations which require impossible manoeuvres to overcome the impending doom. Known more simply as a 'happy ending', the journey against all odds and in the face of adversity is made not only to draw out foreground love relationships plots but to emphasise a sense that we invest in hope, we can do anything. Films such as *Armageddon* (1998) are emblematic of this. The all-star cast of Hollywood pin ups including middle-aged heart throb Bruce Willis (AKA Harry), the baby-faced Ben Affleck (or A.J,), and the innocence Liv Tyler (or Grace) – as well as billions of other people – face certain extinction as an asteroid cluster head towards earth. The protagonists are thrown into a scenario which demands that NASA sends them - a team of the world's best deep core oil drillers - to train as astronauts so they can forge a hole into the asteroid into which they will insert and detonate a nuclear bomb to split the asteroid in half. Improbable to say the least. While the story mainly revolves around the love between A.J. and Grace, and Harry's self-sacrifice as he remains on the asteroid to blow it up while the rest of the team escape, the film ends with the world being saved and life as we know it resuming to how it was – minus Harry of course. Science, technology and politics win the day. Hell yeah, high five.

However, in reality the post-political landscape which carries with it a structural sense that all politicians are mere administrators of the status quo means there is no interest in our rescue: only the concentration of political economic power at the expense of a growing precariat (Standing, 2021). In *Elysium* (2013) – a film set in 2154, humanity is acutely divided between two classes of people: a superior elite who live aboard a luxurious space station called Elysium, and the rest live a hardscrabble existence in a climate ravaged, violent and hostile Earth's ruins. In this respect, the parallels are significant with the *Hunger Games* trilogy (2013, 2014 and 2015) in which the super-wealthy elite live in the aesthetic paradise of The Capitol of Panem while the rest of the population live in the repressed poverty of earth's desolate wastelands. In Elysium, the air is pure, the houses are grand, the gardens are bountiful, and a select number of people are seemingly perfect. On earth, however, crime, disorder, decay and disease dominate a larger population of people who fight out a miserable existence of living in poverty or working for the elite on Elysium. Strict digital ID protocols and AI robot policing protect the citizens of Elysium and oppressively govern the people on earth. Periodically, there are attempts from earth's citizens to take down Elysium and install its systems of health remedy to cure its diseased population, but Elysium's hostile defence systems simply destroy spaceships seeking to take such a risk.

Despite these living conditions, there is little organised, collective action from the masses. Change can only come it seems from the meritocratic heroism of one person. When Max (Matt Damon) has his life hanging in the balance, he agrees to undertake a dangerous mission that could bring equality to earth's population, but Secretary Delacourt (Jodie Foster) vows to preserve the pampered lifestyle of Elysium's citizens, no matter what the cost. Max manages to highjack the digital system that governs Elysium and enters its atmosphere. Crashing into the perfect surroundings of its gardens, Max heads towards the technological control hub to install new instructions for Elysium's politics, policing and way of life. In the end, he heroically sacrifices himself in order to wipe away all the class distinctions that separate the earthbound from the Elysium-dwellers: Thanks to the code uploaded from Max's head, every slum rat on planet Earth is suddenly bestowed with Elysium-level citizenship. With hope and determination, anything is possible – even overthrowing an oppressive world system.

And it's the same with *Geostorm* (2017). After an unprecedented series of natural disasters in the form of floods and tidal waves threaten the planet, the world's leaders - strangely and unusually almost incredibly willing to work together to halt a catastrophe instead of creating one - unite to create a successful intricate network of satellites to control the global climate and keep the world safe from devastating floods. As the film resolves in the inevitable happy ending marked by the floods receding, the astronauts hug, the control tower celebrates, and the US president looks quietly content as he can secretly celebrate another four years in office on the back of saving the world. The elation and relief are felt around the world even as far as India where a young poor boy is reunited with his dog he lost. The rich and poor are equally celebratory. The elation is summed up in this closing speech by Hannah Lawson (played by Talitha Eliana Bateman) about how hope conquered all:

> Everyone was warned, but no one listened. A rise in temperature, ocean patterns changed, and ice caps melted. They call it extreme weather. They didn't know what "extreme" was. In the year 2019, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods and droughts unleashed a wave of destruction upon our planet. We didn't just lose towns or beachfronts. We lost entire cities. The East River swallowed Lower Manhattan. A heat wave in Madrid killed two million people in just one day. But in that moment, facing our own extinction, it became clear that no single nation could solve this problem alone. The world came together as one, and we fought back.

In reality, however, we know our political system could never operate so sublimely. In the context of virus films, we see similar representations of utopian resolve. In *Flu* (2013), made in South Korea, the film follows the evolution of a deadly new strain of flu virus. The inception of this new disease comes from the ugly and failed 'other' of neoliberal capitalism - illegal immigrants - who are purported to be the virus convectors when a container full of them are discovered dead. Yet the airborne virus escapes rapidly infecting people on metros, in shops, everywhere. Graphic depictions are made of the air particle transmission when the protagonist - who found the immigrants - indiscriminately passes the virus on to everyone in a pharmacy store where they all become infected. The pharmacist infects people on a bus with children. Some of them infect other children in their class. The next scene is one of the original contractors who throws up blood on the screen. Soon after, this very contact, is on a hospital bed where around him analyse numerous white-coat professionals with visors and masks. They conclude how *"all his organs are failing"* and report it to the public-health authorities who then warn the politicians who then laugh it off.

Suddenly, the hospitals convert into breeding grounds of viral death – all the while people of all ages, are indiscriminately infected and dying as the unstoppable virus takes no prisoners. Masks seem to do very little and social distancing is compromised as a panic ensues. Then the politicians finally decide to take action: the lockdown, only briefly doubted because of the impact of business, is immediately engaged. Those displaying symptoms are further isolated in an infected quarantine zone (IQZ) beneath a sports stadium to receive medical treatment, even though there is no known cure.

There is unease in the camp due to a communications blackout, difficult living conditions, confrontations with gasmask-wearing guards, sporadic gunfire, and rumours that infected people are being killed. Pressure from Leo Snyder of the WHO and politicians force the president to break a promise to release the uninfected after 48 hours, and fights break out. When an infected soldier is fatally shot by an officer, a mob becomes enraged and storms the camp - one of whom among them has developed anti-bodies (somehow). The rest of the film oscillates between oppressive attempts to curtail transmission involving the army and 'a mob' as they are described before the political realisation that hope may lie in a vaccine, summed up in this quote from the Defence Minister *"when cornered humans can't stay calm, if fear takes over after the report, it'll be scarier than the virus itself."* The infected are not only beaten but receive bombing from the airforce as a means to punish their resistance. All seems to be drifting massively out of control

and should the violence have continued; the end of the world would not have been far off. Not to worry, however, the film ends happily when a child makes an emotional plea about the treatment of the infected and suddenly everyone feels bad, planned attacks to kill off the infected are aborted and the protagonists are sent off to a medical complex to generate the vaccine.

Feel-good endings generate ideological hope and feelings of solidarity, however, during the Covid-19 pandemic such collective momentum quickly dissipated as everyone pretty much realised that there was no hope for change (see Briggs et al., 2020). We see similar components of a sense of improbable adversity and from it, comes hope in the film *Alive* (2020). While a dangerous virus ravages a Korean city, Joon-woo (Yoo Ah-in) tries to stay safe by locking himself inside his apartment. The mysterious disease that causes those infected to attack and eat those uninfected, starts to be broadcast in the news media. From his balcony, Joon-woo sees a panicked crowd fleeing and being attacked. When he opens the door to the hallway, a neighbour enters but he too succumbs to infection and attacks Joon-woo. Blocking his front door with the fridge, our hero posts a rescue request on social media and stocks up food, much like we did during the pandemic. As we saw during the coronavirus waves, high-populated, urbanely dense in the film multiplies infections. With zombies roving the streets looking for fresh meat and no fellow survivors that he knows of, our protagonist has no choice but to cut himself off from the rest of the world, as if in self-quarantine. Indeed, similar assessments were taken by some people during the Covid-19 pandemic who did not leave their place of residence for months, even up to a year and a half in a few cases (Briggs et al., 2021).

The doubt and loneliness eat quickly away at Joon-woo's psyche, and he attempts suicide after hearing his family might have been killed by zombies. Just as he is about to lose hope, he discovers another survivor in a nearby apartment. Kim Yoo-bin (Park Shin-hye) signals to him and together they try to escape. The ending scene rekindles a sense of hope from a hopeless situation. Joon-woo and Kim Yoo-bin shoot frantically at the blood-thirsty zombies who have cornered them on top of a building. Joon-woo runs out of the few bullets he has left in the gun but continues to pull the trigger in disbelief that he has run out. The music slows as the mad zombies run towards them, but the inevitability of their death is countered by the appearance of a rescue helicopter which not only quickly disposes of the infected but also pulls them aboard.

The crippling feeling of loneliness is a recurrent theme throughout *Alive* and all the characters display a sense of solitude and separation much like we felt during the pandemic lockdown experience. But the theme of hope is so strong that in one moment, one character, Lee Sang-Chul allays his own loneliness by refusing to let go of his zombified wife. In this respect, there is even a sympathetic juncture between coping with loneliness by developing attachments to distorted versions of their loved ones. But the hardship lived becomes the solidarity in the relationship between Joon-woo and Kim Yoo-bin and forms the feeling of hope at the end of the film.

False hope is better than no hope at all

Rendering the conclusion to a film with a utopian sense of hope dangerously endows us with a sense of false hope because it conceals the reality of a dystopic situation. This parallels directly with our experience during the Covid-19 pandemic where political ideologies and liberal messages of hope and resilience not only camouflaged the true damage - in the Real sense – but also sought to supress the possibility of the future damage (Ellis et al., 2021). Films like *Contagion* (2011) do exactly this when they typically foreground the intimate relationships and decisions of a few people and backdrop the suffering of the rest of the planet. The plot concerns the spread of a contagious virus transmitted by respiratory droplets which then demands medical researchers and public health officials to identify and contain the disease. It begins when Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow) returns to Minnesota from a Hong Kong business trip, she attributes the malaise she feels to jet lag. However, two days later, Beth is dead, and doctors tell her shocked husband, Mitch Emhoff, (Matt Damon) that they have no idea what killed her.

Soon, many others start to exhibit the same symptoms and a global pandemic explodes. Again, the transmission of the virus – much like Covid-19 – was fast ahead of any interventions made by the scientific community and political elite. Doctors try to contain the lethal microbe, but society begins to collapse, and social order disintegrates into looting and violence as a blogger (Jude Law) fans the flames of paranoia. Interestingly, even in the event of the vaccine availability and some sense of hope, social life remains on tenterhooks and deeply fragile. In the closing scene for example, in which people are queuing for the vaccine, there is a mix of people wearing masks and looking forlorn – much like we witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic. One man starts coughing to which the woman turns around and says:

> **Woman**: *Would you mind covering your mouth, please?*
>
> **Man**: *Fuck off, lady.*
>
> **Announcer in white suit, mask and visor**: *We will only be allowed to give out 50 doses today* [there is a small scuffle in the queue and someone barges to the front before others rush forward].
>
> **Woman**: *Excuse me, there is a line here.*

Thereafter the mob crowd break into the prescription area, smashing the glass in the process, before stealing the doses. In the following scenes, a martial law governs and there seems to be no authority. People loot stores and steal food from supermarkets. Rubbish piles up in the streets, churches are empty, schools are vacant, airports are silent. Such is the desperation that in the next scene, in where Mitch is queuing for a food pack, there is an announcement from a man in a clinical suit and mask saying how the food aid has been exhausted – much like the empty supermarket shelves we witnessed during the pandemic as people panicked purchased. Suddenly the few people with one are wrestled to the ground and people try to raid the truck: Mitch says *"there is nothing in there"* as they shout in desperation. At the close of the film, we are given a stern

warning of the evolution of the following pandemic round the corner with the continued man-made disturbance of the world's eco systems. Is false hope really better than no hope at all?

Ten years on, *Contagion* was from withdrawn Netflix in the UK after its morbid popularity was associated with its similarities to the coronavirus pandemic. By March 2020 - which marked the general commencement of the pandemic across the West - the film was the seventh-most-popular film on iTunes, was listed as the number two catalogue title on Warner Bros. compared to its number 270 rank the past December 2019 and had average daily visits on piracy websites increase by 5,609 percent in January 2020 compared to the previous month. HBO Now also reported that Contagion had been the most viewed film for two weeks straight (Stolworthy, 2020). In February 2021, British Health Secretary Matt Hancock revealed that watching the scramble for vaccines in *Contagion* inspired him to order a much larger quantity of Covid-19 vaccines for the UK than his advisers recommended, thus accelerating the UK's eventual rollout of its vaccination programme ahead of other European countries.

Effective vaccines are also the solution to the zombie virus in *World war Z* (2013) which also features a global pandemic. The film begins around twenty years previously in China, which covers up the outbreak and engineers a military crisis with Taiwan to avoid appearing weak internationally. Much like the early labelling of the Covid-19 variants (UK, Indian, etc) the disease becomes known as 'African Rabies' when cases in South Africa become widely known. Other than Israel, which institutes a 'self-quarantine' and constructs a border wall, most of the world largely ignores the threat for the next year. Much like Trump's potential for re-election in 2020, in the film, the USA is depicted as overconfident and distracted by an election year, while a widely marketed placebo vaccine, Phalanx, creates a false sense of security.

The following spring, a journalist reveals that Phalanx does nothing to prevent zombification, and that the infected are not victims of rabies but rather walking corpses, sparking an event known as the 'Great Panic'. Order breaks down around the globe, with rioting, breakdown of essential services, and indiscriminate culling of citizens killing more people than the zombies themselves. South Africa leads other countries in implementing a drastic contingency plan which designates large groups of survivors as human bait, distracting the undead while small safe zones regroup and build up resources.

Seven years later, after a UN conference held off the coast of Hawaii, leading world nations decide to go back on the offensive. New tactics have to be invented for a war of extermination in which every last zombie must be destroyed to avoid reinfection, and casualties are high. An unnamed British Army general comments as the war ends that there are *"enough dead heroes for the end of time."* Ten years after the official end of the Zombie War, the world is still heavily damaged, but slowly on the road to recovery. Millions of zombies are still active, mainly on the ocean floor, mountains above the snow line, and in arctic areas. Numerous political and territorial changes have occurred, and the overall quality of life has diminished, including shorter life expectancies, limited access to running water and electricity, and an ongoing nuclear winter. Nevertheless, the majority of those who have survived have hope for the future, knowing that humanity faced the brink of extinction, and won. This resulting dystopia

still generates a kind of fake belief that somehow everything will be ok. At least, we are able to disavow in the ideological narratives which stem from these films which simultaneously block engagement with the depth structures that generated widespread suffering during the political mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Fetishistic disavowal and embracing hopelessness

Rarely do out political representatives deal with the gravity and complexities of our current political and economic situation and frequently negate the implications of decisions they make which then exacerbate it. Žižek summarises this *fetishist disavowal* as, 'I know, but I don't want to know that I know, so I don't know', as a complex process of subjective denial and the denial of one's position in the world relative to others. Such a subjective rejection of the gravity and reality of a situation on account of the potentially traumatic associations it may generate represents a turning away from truth (Kuldova, 2019). By ignoring such injustices and failing to establish political opposition and galvanising collective interest for change, we continue to be complicit with the same struggles thus reproducing the oppressive continuation of neoliberalism and the capitalist order.

We see this most prominently in the denial to investigate the impact of lockdowns around the world and the fact that clear and credible evidence not only exists confirming lockdowns made almost no difference to infection rates (Bonardi et al., 2020) but also disproportionately impacted the worlds most impoverished people (Agoramoorthy and Hsu, 2020). Such *fetishistic disavowal,* as Žižek (1989) writes, confirms an excessive adherence to certain beliefs and practices and a simultaneous denial of the indisputable damage lockdowns produced. Presenting alternative arguments to how Covid-19 was managed resulted in half of the scientific world being labelled heretics, 'science deniers' and 'conspiracy theorists': a sad symbolism of the failings of our current political juncture.

This is because, during the pandemic, ideological compliance to government measures were categorically made dominant through government-funded media entities. The voices of the other half of science - represented in this case by world-renowned and prize-winning virologists, immunologists and pathologists who formed the Great Barrington Declaration - were muffled and still continue to be hushed. We see a similar characterisation of this *fetishistic disavowal* in the 2021 film *Don't Look Up* when the overwhelming efforts two low-level astronomers, Dr Randall Mindy (Leonardo de Caprio) and Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence), have to warn mankind of an approaching comet that will destroy planet Earth and with it all of humanity.

At first, Randall and Mindy approach the president (Meryl Streep) with the warning but are denied time while a receptionist's birthday is celebrated. A day or two they get their moment, but are bitterly disappointed when their case is not taken seriously by the president or her staff because of its inevitability, the president jokingly responds, *"You cannot go around telling people that there is a 100% chance that they're gonna die."* They leave distressed and decide instead to send their message out through the media. In the process, they are invited to a series of appearances on a daytime morning show which trivialises the issue, making it farcical. Dibiasky loses her

composure and rants about the threat aptly summarised in her critique of the political elite's management of the virus and general posturing:

> The truth is way more depressing. They're [the politicians] not even smart enough to be as evil as you're giving them credit for.

Mindy, on the other hand, receives public approval for his looks and with that succumbs to fame and stardom and the plastic celebrity crowd surrounding the 'crisis', losing touch with his family and the initial mission of creating awareness about the comet. As how information was controlled about Covid-19, actual news about the comet's threat receives little public attention and the threat is denied by a top donor to the president with no background in astronomy. Then, the billionaire CEO of BASH Cellular and another top president donor (who is made out to be some equivalent to Elon Musk in real life) discovers that the comet contains trillions of dollars' worth of rare-earth elements. The White House agrees to commercially exploit the comet by fragmenting and recovering it from the ocean, using technology proposed by BASH in a scheme that has not undergone peer review. Again, we see similar parallels when all faith was placed in 'experts' from Imperial College who produced the core rationales for lockdowns in the UK from non-peer reviewed evidence (Ferguson et al., 2020) in the face of knowing that such modelling had major flaws (Ioaniddis et al., 2022).

All the while - and much like Covid-19 during the swirl of misinformation-disinformation - the world opinion is divided. There are those who believe the comet is a serious threat, those who decry alarmism and believe that mining a destroyed comet will create jobs, and those who deny that the comet even exists, crudely representing our post-political, post-pandemic context of a world in which truth is a myth and belief has splintered (Žižek, 2001; 2020). Becoming frustrated with the administration, Mindy finally snaps and rants on live television, criticizing the president for downplaying the impending apocalypse and questioning humanity's indifference. All the while, the world is seemingly stuck within this disavowal about the end of the world. Cut off from the administration, Mindy reconciles with Dibiasky as the comet becomes visible from Earth.

Mindy, Dibiasky, and the ostracised scientist Oglethorpe, organize a protest campaign on social media, telling people to 'Just Look Up', and call on other countries to conduct comet interception operations, while the president starts an anti-campaign telling people 'Don't Look Up' - thus validating fetishistic disavowal. In particular, the rhetoric in one speech doesn't even hide from its disdain and disgust for the electorate when one politician says at a rally *"They want you to look up because they are looking down their noses on you"*. The president then cuts Russia, India, and China out of the comet-mining deal, so they prepare a joint effort to deflect the comet only for their spacecraft to explode but BASH's attempt at breaking the comet apart also goes awry, and everyone realizes that humanity is doomed. And it is when the comet hits. Only at that moment, does Mindy, Dibiasky, and Oglethorpe savour the last few moments on earth with those they truly love and thus the inevitability and hopelessness of the moment becomes film's ending. Only by confronting the reality of the gravity of the situation, do Mindy et al. find resolve, a peace almost.

The hopelessness of the present situation is similarly evident in *12 Monkeys* (1995) - a film about how James Cole (Bruce Willis) - who is imprisoned in the 2030s - is recruited for a mission that will send him back to the 1990s where he is supposed to gather information about a deadly virus which will in the future exterminate the vast majority of the world's population. The information Cole gathers is to supposedly help scientists find a cure and to reverse the current misery the world seems to be in in the 2030s. The reason is because the said virus, somehow released in 1996, wipes out almost all of humanity, forcing survivors to live underground in hidden slums and it is conspired that a group known as the *Army of the Twelve Monkeys* is believed to have released the virus.

Cole arrives in Baltimore, 1990, not 1996 as planned; he is arrested and incarcerated at a mental hospital on the diagnosis of Dr. Kathryn Railly (Madeleine Stow). There he encounters Jeffrey Goines ('Goines junior' hereafter played by Brad Pitt), a mental patient with environmentalist and anti-corporatist views, perhaps because these views air the stark reality of subjective consumer dominance. He is the son of Leland Goines ('Goines senior' hereafter), a wealthy, respected scientist who is embarrassed by his son's severe mental illness and covers it up by giving Jeffrey a token job in his corporation in which he has little contact with the public. In one scene, he says:

> There's the television. It's all right there — all right there. Look, listen, kneel, pray. Commercials! We're not productive anymore. We don't make things anymore. It's all automated. What are we for then? We're consumers. Yeah. Okay, okay. Buy a lot of stuff, you're a good citizen. But if you don't buy a lot of stuff, if you don't, what are you then, I ask you? What? Mentally ill. Fact, Jim, fact — if you don't buy things: toilet paper, new cars, computerized yo-yos, electrically-operated sexual devices, stereo systems with brain-implanted headphones, screwdrivers with miniature built-in radar devices, voice-activated computers...

In this scene, Jeffrey Goines seems to act as the voice of the Real, attempting to penetrate the veil of the consumer Symbolic Order. His 'delusion' is put down to his desire to create a new world where humans become extinct, and the world is instead governed by animals. Goines sees the world as insane as the people around him in the asylum: *"You're here because of the system. All the doors are locked too. They're protecting the people on the outside from us from the people on the outside who are as crazy as us"* he says in a rabble to Cole in one scene.

Goines junior is the supposed leader of 'The Army of the Twelve Monkeys', a group of animal rights activists who believe that the human race should be exterminated to make way for a 'new world' dominated by animals. Under Goines junior chaotic leadership, however, the group is merely a nuisance that commits small acts of vandalism. Meanwhile, mistakes and mishaps in the time travel means that Cole appears in various parts of history. Disoriented, he tries to explain that the virus outbreak has already happened while he is, meanwhile, troubled by dreams involving a foot chase and shooting at an airport which is to be the parallel reality of his own death.

Cole is then shunted back to the lab with the scientists. Told to glean information on the origin of the virus and re-correct the past - and thus establish a new future - Cole is handed a gun as he now suspects it has nothing to do with the army of the 12 Monkeys, when after several missions into the past, hypothesises *"so now it's not about the virus at all. It's about following orders, doing what you're told."* However, there is, it seems, no hope for the people Cole observes in his time-travels. As he says at one point, *"all I see are dead people"* referring to the future demise of humanity. As a result, it's tough to refer to the '30s here as the 'future', and likewise to call the '90s the 'present.' Cole goes out of his way to tell the residents of the earlier era that they're in the past and that the true present is the post-apocalyptic hovel from which he came. It is as if he has had the privilege of seeing how shit the world is in the future and has the bittersweet opportunity to visit the world before its rapid demise. At the same time, it is as if Cole reconciles with himself that no matter what he does, he cannot change the future and thus the film defers away from 'surviving a plague' more towards making a meaningful life on the eve of a crisis. It is a journey from hope to hopelessness.

A central message prevalent in *12 Monkeys* is that the past is fixed and can't actually be changed. Now, as in 12 Monkeys, it feels increasingly as though our minds are situated in the years to come, as though we are already looking back on what's happening to us right now in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic from the vantage point of the future calamities. People speak about the collapse of civilization with startling regularity. Some stockpile toilet roll, food stock and guns for the coming war of all against all, others merely summarize their depressed outlook by letting it out in forums like Twitter. In *Melancholia* (2011), another planet is on a collision course with Earth but the plot focusses on the individual difficulties of two sisters, one of them trying to recover from a heavy bout of depression and the other a failed marriage. Even though everyone on earth dies and humanity ends – its to say the situation is totally hopeless - the story is not about this but about the sisters' subjective resolve as this takes place. They make a symbolic stick tent, hold hands, cry a bit and then die in the flames from the collision. Like *Don't Look Up*, and *12 Monkeys*, we are drawn to feel more united by a feeling like anything good is living on borrowed time and, in the wake of the collapse of society, individualised peace and harmony is the best we can hope for: it almost feels like a kind of future therapy session.

Hoping for hope and the death drive

An incoming comet is also said to mark the potential end of humanity in *Deep impact* (1998). Unlike *Don't Look Up*, where levels of hopelessness continue to build to a climax of unavoidable destruction, in *Deep Impact*, the hopelessness is uncovered, and a plan is made to counter the end of the world. Even though the impending death of nearly everyone on the planet, the characters still act out a sense of *hope for hope* itself in the uncertainty. This time, and much like the real-life political disavowal around general social problems, the U.S. government keeps the crisis under wraps, but a savvy reporter Jenny Lerner (Tea Leoni) uncovers the truth - forcing U.S. President Beck (Morgan Freeman) to announce his plan. Grizzled astronaut Spurgeon "Fish" Tanner (Robert Duvall) and his team land on the comet, lay explosives, and hopefully deter the object from its doomsday course. If not, humanity will have to prepare for the worst.

In the end, however, the plan fails and from an almost-totally-demolished Capitol at the ruins of Washington, D.C., President Beck gives a speech about the massive damages of the first impact, which also included Europe and Africa; and the intentions and hope of rebuilding civilization. 'Hope survives' is the film's motif. Hope lives beyond hope itself.

And it's the same for *Omega Man* (1971) filmed more recently as *I am Legend* (2007). Robert Neville (Will Smith) is a virologist and a survivor of a man-made plague that transforms humans into bloodthirsty mutants. It's been three years since civilization came to an end, and the loneliness has taken a devastating toll on Neville. By day, he scours New York City for food and supplies while sending out desperate radio messages in hope that someone might respond, and by night, he attempts to find a way to reverse the effects of the virus by experimenting with his own blood. He is motivated by a future hope beyond the hope of his current situation. Once again, in this post-viral apocalypse, there is a feeling of desperate loneliness as Neville talks not only to his dog but to mannequins, he has erected in a local DVD store where he goes to make conversation with them. The film also oscillates between the present time and the traumatic death of his wife and son as the apocalypse was unfolding; he has their suffering on a kind of subjective playback akin to the 'drive to repetition' (Lacan, 1988).

Neville knows he is significantly outnumbered by the nocturnal creatures and the odds are against him, because all the while, the infected wait for him to make a mistake that will deliver Neville into their hands. When there is some response to the messages, a seemingly convenient single woman, Anna (Alice Braga), and her son, make contact but after so much time alone, Neville struggles with the reintroduction of socialising much like we did after the lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, respectively. As he discovers a potential cure with his newfound companions, the mutants get wise and invade his stronghold having learnt how to compromise it. But by a stroke of luck, Anna's arrival has coincided with the latest strain of antidote actually working, so when Neville, Anna, and her son barricade themselves in the lab, Neville is able to extract a vial of the cure to give to Anna and then sacrifices himself so she can escape the creatures. Neville is killed but the cure is safe and arrives at the encampment with Anna, his life's work was not futile, and Anna gives a speech essentially declaring Robert Neville a legend. Suddenly, society is reset and there is a chance to reconstruct a new future.

Both *Deep Impact* and *I Am Legend* emit a sense of *hope beyond hope*. Catastrophic global events are what we can only hope for as they permit us to transcend our current predicament of raging inequality and farcical politics. And it is hoped that the unknown chaos that ensues leads to the installation of an equitable and just society (Winlow and Hall, 2013). In this respect, they relate to notions of Freudian death drive in that the innate discontent and inequality produced by neoliberalism alongside its injustices yield only social destruction, from which a cleansing rebirth is sought. The pandemic, we thought (or were told) was to mark such this moment in history but more than anything it has, once again, confirmed the failures of neoliberalism and our ability to disavow those very failures.

Concluding thoughts

When Covid-19 started to spread across the world, the reporting followed all the same contours as the *Contagion*, *World War Z*, Alive and *I am Legend*. Suddenly humanity was in imminent danger, quarantines were issued, panic ensued, and the world suddenly lost all sense of normality. While this had the potential to create a sense of chaos and even though somehow the risk was everywhere, the restrictions and regulations gave a sense of security in our activities and decisions and we blindly conformed. People were told not to socialise, keep distance from each other and take other similar individual precautions as a means to deflect the wider, structural mismanagement of the virus. Even though research shows the transmission of the virus bypassed many of the restrictions including border closures (Liebig et al., 2021; Malapati, 2021), lockdowns (Briggs et al., 2021) and mask wearing (Bundgaard et al., 2020), authoritative white-suited, visor-adorned, mask-wearing subjects brought the fiction to life: we were living through the evolution of a global pandemic. Politicians even made decisions on how to manage Covid-19 having had inspiration from dystopian films!

In this paper, I have tried to suggest that in order to understand today's world, particularly in the context of a variety of future dystopian possibilities, such films discussed here are significantly important. It is only by engaging with these mediums that we confront fundamental existential and ontological components that we are unable/unwilling to confront in our own reality. We know that manmade climate change continues to do irreparable damage to whole countries, uprooting whole societies forcing them to clamber to other countries. We know that war, conflict and violence occur and perpetuate misery for millions of people around the world. We also know that our politicians cannot cope with these challenges and, although promises are made to remedy them, the continual pursuit of market interests make them empty. But it is easier and psychologically comforting to disavow; it is easier to suppress unpalatable information rather than confront it. Just like the political elite and media collectively disavow in *Don't Look Up*, it is easier for a Symbolic Order to operate around manufacturing peoples' interests and desires through consumer markets than confront the misery and social deficits generated by neoliberalism. So the structural sense of capitalist realism makes utopian change feel impossible and only reserved for fiction (Fisher, 2009) because our continual pursuit of it oscillates around its achievement rather than on its impediments (McGowan, 2013).

In this respect, the fundamental delusion today is not only *to believe* in such dystopian films but to also take such fiction seriously. In fact, it is not to take fictions seriously enough. We think these warped depictions are fictitious, but they tell something authentic about our current circumstances, acting as a broken mirror reflecting back a distorted reflection. Many of the films discussed offer us an ideological utopia, a place for belief in a world with no belief, a hero or heroine who can save humanity among a world if self-interested individuals. In this respect, the films simultaneously assist in our own real-life disavowal of the very real problems the world confronts. The ever-widening wealth gap, which is pushing more and more people into precarious poverty while, at the same time, consolidating the wealth and power of a few is a direct parallel with the dystopian futures of *Elysium* and *The Hunger Games* and other popular Netflix hits such as *Squid Game* (2021) and *Platform* (2019). The sense of isolation in a post-pandemic

world is felt hard in the films *Alive* and *I Am Legend* which both depict quarantines and curfews – when there is no one left, we can only invent our own company and playback/reconstruct our lives around our broken memories/traumas (Lacan, 1988).

Dystopian films are perceived as *another place,* but they become a more intimate place on to which we can project our beliefs, fears and things from our inner feelings. Is it really the brutal Real out there that disturbs us or is it the fantasy presented to us in these films? As Freud may have posited, it is through these mediums that we escape into a dream to avoid a deadlock in our own life. However, when we soon realise that the 'dream' is even more horrible than the reality, we start to crave the safety of the consumer distractions in the Symbolic Order. So in essence, escaping into the fiction of such dreams are for those who are not strong enough to cope with our reality and conversely reality becomes for those not strong enough to endure their dreams.

The lure of dystopian films therefore is their ability to portray what we currently experience and fear in a way that deceives us: the ultimate paradox of cinema being in the binaries of belief and hope in that *"I believe in conditional mode, I know well it is a fake, but I let myself be emotionally effected"* and, at the same time, *"it gives me a sense of hope, when I know things are in reality hopeless".* Rescuing the world from impossible humanity-ending scenarios such as *Deep Impact, Geo-storm, Armageddon* and *The Day After Tomorrow* do precisely this, thus lulling us into a false sense of our own safety and thus reinforcing the comfort of the Symbolic Order. So the loss of hope further aggravates the structural feeling of capitalist realism; nothing lies beyond the stultifying confines of a world characterised by global warming, war and conflict and growing disaffection and exclusion. We are either left to accept the impending doom and our mortality (*12 Monkeys, Melancholia*) or, in the wake of it all ending, left to hope for a hope that is perhaps already lost.

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Article

Old Ghosts, New Regrets

Drift and Fragile Life Trajectories in the Context of the Pandemic

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Abstract

With the onset of the pandemic, the precarious position of Roma communities in Bulgaria, particularly young people and their future prospects, seem bleaker than ever before, reaching new heights with regards to their insecurity. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, conducted prior to and post several lockdowns during the pandemic (2020-2021), this paper will place forward the argument that the crisis we are currently witnessing, the unprecedented levels of multi-faceted social marginalization and exclusion are intensified by 'old ghosts' that have haunted social policy for decades and the withdrawal of the state during the lockdowns will most certainly have a devastating impact – 'new regrets', one's which cannot be overcome by simply providing access to the consumer market economy, the mantra on which the pathways towards revitalization are premised.

Introduction and Methodology

The last two years have been illuminating in terms of what has been going in Bulgarian society for the past 30 years. As we are heading towards the exit of the pandemic, the country holds the 2nd place globally of Covid-related deaths per million[1], the bottom of the table when it comes to vaccination rates in Europe[2] and the society is polarized even as to what is happening in Ukraine and why. A recent poll conducted by the sociological agency Alpha Research in the beginning of March 2022 has indicated that almost a third of participants (31.8%) still approve of Vladimir Putin, despite the invasion of Ukraine, with another 20% being unable to make up their mind[3]. So what is actually happening? I think the answer is simple: the levels of social division in the country have reached an all-time high, but the roots of these divides, including the framing of the pandemic as the need for social distancing were already there (Furedi, 2020), we simply further intensified certain aspects of these processes – solidifying personal boundaries, privatizing spaces and inflating the individual safety bubbles that we have become so accustomed to. The conceptualization of the pandemic even divided the Bulgarian academia and has further increased the separation that has haunted the field of the social sciences in the country. On one hand, during the first year and two lockdowns that took place in the country, we have witnessed a level of theoretical abstraction by which C.W. Mills would probably be perplexed (Raychev and Stoychev, 2020; Sabeva, 2020; Deyanov, 2020, Raychev and Konstantinov, 2021), seldomly being grounded on empirical data that has to do with the fragility of life trajectories during the lockdowns. On the other hand, as the pandemic progressed, we also saw examples of good empirical research that has attempted to look at the effects of lockdowns of mental health (Bakracheva et al. 2020; Bakracheva et al. 2021), vaccine hesitancy (Mitev, 2021; Kineva 2021a), precarious lives and the impact of lockdowns (Panchev, 2021b; Panchev and Genov, 2021; Venkov, 2020; Tsoneva, et al. 2021), including an assessment of some of the possibilities for overcoming the crisis (Kineva, 2021b).

The study on which this paper is based has been ongoing since 2015 in the form of a long-term ethnographic project, initially funded for six months by Plovdiv Municipality between June and December 2016, after which I have continued my fieldwork independently (Venkov and Panchev, 2016; Panchev, 2019; Panchev, 2021a). The onset of the pandemic and its development necessitated a more unconventional methodology (see Briggs et al., 2020; Briggs et al., 2021a,b; Genov and Panchev, 2021), as I was forced to collect empirical data online through social media such as Facebook in the form of online news articles, and in the form of online ethnographic field notes collected from personal conversations and communications with people who found themselves in a situation of complete lockdown in the 'Stolipinovo'[4] between March

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[1] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1104709/coronavirus-deaths-worldwide-per-million-inhabitants/ (Last accessed on 23.07.2022)

[2] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1196071/covid-19-vaccination-rate-in-europe-by-country/ (Last accessed on 23.07.2022)

[3] https://bnt.bg/news/prouchvane-na-alfa-risarch-za-bnt-63-ot-balgarite-podkrepyat-reakciyata-na-es-na-voinata-v-ukraina-namalyava-odobrenieto-kam-v314959-303679news.html (Last accessed on 23.07.2022)

[4] As I have argued elsewhere (Panchev, 2021a), the neighborhood of 'Stolipinovo', situated in the second biggest city in Bulgaria – Plovdiv, has often been conceptualized as 'the biggest urban ghetto on

and May 2020. Before the pandemic, some of my respondents had migrated to work and live in England and Germany but returned home before the state borders closed. Online respondents were recruited on the basis of their 'online visibility', i.e. possession of a computer with regular and stable Internet connection and / or smartphones with mobile internet. This is an important criterion to consider, as there are still households in certain parts of 'Stolipinovo' that do not have access to them.

The data collected and the empirical data presented here are complemented by interviews and observations typical of 'conventional' ethnographic fieldwork conducted in July 2021 improvised urban residential areas inhabited by poorer local communities (Panchev 2021a; b). For the purposes of the analysis and to preserve their anonymity, all names of the participants have been replaced by pseudonyms. Although the material presented here is, to put it mildly, fragmentary as to the data collected so far and it is beyond the scope of a journal article to provide an all-encompassing analysis of the processes of social marginalization in Bulgaria and how they are interconnected with ethnicity, the analysis provided here is motivated on the one hand by the urgent need to give a 'voice to the voiceless' in the post-Covid period, something that to date is largely ignored from academic accounts and analysis in my country, apart from the findings of one small-scale unrepresentative survey (Venkov, 2020). On the other hand, I believe that more than ever the emphasis should be placed, and public and academic attention should be focused on current trends not only in 'Stolipinovo', but also in Bulgarian society as a whole, concerning the ongoing fragmentation of the labour market in certain sectors such as construction, a tendency that has disproportionately affected the Roma and Turkish ethnic minorities in the country since 1989 (Kirov, Markova, Peycheva, 2014).

By way of summarizing the introduction, the paper also outlines the new directions and vectors in which modern precarious urban life is moving (Stending, 2013; Briggs and Gamero, 2017), whose precariousness and fragmentation are further intensified in the context of the pandemic, and representatives of various minority groups worldwide have been disproportionately affected by lockdowns (Matthewman and Huppatz, 2020). To put it differently, I am simply stating that what was happening in the context of the pandemic is not an entirely new phenomenon, as far ethnic minorities such as the Roma are concerned but is simply an intensification of processes directly related to neoliberal policies and regimes of governance, which have led to what Loic Wacquant defines as 'advanced marginality' (Wacquant, 2008). It's as simple as that, namely, in trying to overcome the impact of the lockdowns and deterioration of mental health (Briggs et al., 2021b), we resorted back to the same old mantra and messages of consumerism, even engaging in practices of hyper-consumption (Briggs et al., 2020; Angelova et al., 2021) at the expense of producing more and more precarious lives (Tsoneva et al., 2021; Deneva, 2021). Having outlined the some of the issues that the paper raises, the next section will provide a wider literature review context as to where we were before the pandemic with regards to social inequality and marginalization in Bulgaria problems that for

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the Balkans', however such framing and labelling fails to take in account the complex nature of different ethnic and religious communities that reside in the quarter.

three decades have disproportionality affected ethnic minority groups and people living their lives in the city shadows (Briggs and Gamero, 2017).

Old ghosts, poverty and pre-pandemic lives on the edge

Problems related to poverty, social policies and 'dependence' on social assistance are linked to heated debates not only in the media and public space, but they have also become part of our daily lives, yet here is often a lack of wider public understanding about the roots of poverty and social exclusion and the handling of available statistical data and indexes is in itself selective and often misleading (Atanasov, 2018a). Therefore, the purpose of this part of the paper will be to initially present a summary of the positions and surveys that indicate how exactly the problem of poverty and inequality has sky-rocketed over the last decade in Bulgaria. The idea for next-to-no interventions in the economy and the advocating for a curtailing of the 'welfare state' have long been a part of the discourses of the Institute for Market Economics, for example. Such ideas for less dependence on the state can be compared to discourses that such right-wing think tanks institutes across the Atlantic have propagated and eventually succeeded in bringing it into the form of 'social policy'. As I have argued elsewhere (Panchev, 2018), whilst hiding behind analytical abstraction and statistics, as well as the representation of poverty in the form of numbers, over and over again the Institute has willing failed to cover the experience of poverty and tackling it in everyday life, what is left for offering an alternative interpretation of the myth of the 'generous welfare state', namely - people cannot survive living solely on social benefits and actually the majority of them rely on incomes generated by their participation in an informal economy that was aggressively dismantled with the introduction of lockdowns. The end result of this is an acceleration of the experience of drift (Ferrell, 2012) which has to do not only with spatial dislocation and the lack of normative stability, as Ferrell argues, but it also describes ontological insecurity and living in a constant fear of falling off the edge of society, a condition that many people, and minority ethnic groups in particular, were already subjected to prior the pandemic.

The main problems of the Bulgarian social assistance system are rooted in the non-existent assessments of the impact of the implementation of a social policy, as well as the lack of focus, consistency and interconnectedness between policies from one government to the next. There is also a need for a number of structural and legislative changes to help both improve public services and optimize public spending. It is necessary to ensure the most effective targeting of budget expenditures to the people who need them most. A similar logic is followed by the analysis of right-wing think tanks in Bulgaria, one of which lobbies for the introduction of an income criterion as a method for allocating the resources of the 'welfare state'. This in itself would be a temporary solution to the problem but bearing in mind the size of the grey economy in the country[5] and the fact that most residents of the 'Stolipinovo' neighbourhood, even if

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[5] For the purposes of the analysis under the term 'grey economy' I will refer to economic activities that are not accounted for in official statistics, i.e. they are unaccounted for and are neither taxed, nor monitored by the government. According to data published and discussed in Schneider (2015, pp. 12),

employed by an employer, do not always have employment contracts with them as the forms of employment themselves do not always imply a secure job and income that can be obtained at the end of the month. Here we come across the problem of 'gray poverty', what exactly it is and whether it can be measured. This is a purely defining problem, but it also affects the way we think about 'poverty' in general.

When we talk about poverty, we more often than not consider that it can be objectively measured, i.e. our understanding overlaps with the idea of absolute poverty, it is shaped by numbers presented by economics on different media. Although similar indicators are used by the World Bank to define and measure extreme poverty in the developing world (for example, a poverty line of one or two dollars a day), poverty is measured differently within the EU. The so-called poverty line (in Bulgaria its equivalent is BGN 413 (211 Euros) for 2022) shows how many people fall below a certain level of income. The specificity of this indicator comes from how the poverty line is defined - whether it is a fixed limit of 1 or 2 dollars per day (purchasing power parity, i.e. adjusted for different price levels in the countries concerned), whether it is a line based on a certain minimum consumption (e.g. the amount needed to obtain a certain minimum of calories, etc.) or is a relative line based on income levels in the country (e.g. percentage of average income). In the EU, poverty is defined relatively. So what did the situation look like in Bulgaria before the pandemic?

In 2019, Bulgaria set a new record in terms of economic inequality in the country, and registered a Gini coefficient of 40.8, the EU average being 30.9. This is the highest level, at least since the Second World War, that our country has reached in the international index, and from data available (Bratoeva-Manoleva, 2018; Eurostat 2022), the negative impact of the lockdowns during the pandemic and the ongoing political crisis in the country one can argue that, sarcastically speaking, we will certainly remain a convincing leader on the topic of social inequality in the European Union. Our country has consistently taken first place around 2016, winning the 'battle' for leadership in this negative ranking against other leaders in inequality in the EU - Lithuania, Latvia and Romania. In 2017, for the first time we jumped the Gini coefficient limit of 40, followed by a negligible decline in 2018 to 39.6, as it turned out to be an exception, rather than a long-term tendency (Draganov, 2020).

The problem of economic inequality in Bulgaria has not gone unnoticed by the European Commission, which for years in its reports defines the situation on this indicator in our country as 'critical'. The low budget dedicated to social welfare, which is partly due to the low level of tax revenues and the lack of progressiveness of the tax system, have been cited as the driving force behind the rising levels of social inequality in recent years (Kasabov, Atanasov, Grigorova, 2018).

Eurostat also publishes data on the Gini coefficient before social transfers (pensions, child allowances, social benefits, unemployment benefits), which shows that even highly regulated economies such as those in Europe produce high levels of inequality of about 51 Gini index (54.8 for Bulgaria) in 2018, which is significantly reduced by social transfers. In our country

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the share of the grey economy in Bulgaria amounts to 30.6%, the highest in the European Union, whereas the average of the EU-28 is 18.3%.

such are mainly the pensions, which reduce the inequality to 43.3, and all other forms of redistribution reduce it only to 40.2 (Atanasov, 2018b). In comparison, the average level in the EU of about 51 coefficients before pensions and other social transfers falls to 35.9 after pensions and to 30.8 after other social transfers, which indicates a significantly greater impact of those systems in the EU, which have as their main function namely to balance the inequalities generated by the market (ibid.; see also Eurostat, 2022).

The combination of economic growth and high levels of inequality means that newly created wealth is concentrated at the top of the income chain, as evidenced by data presented by the then Minister of Finance Vladislav Goranov to the National Assembly at the end of 2019. They show that more than half of Bulgarians (53.8%) earn up to BGN 500 per month (around 250 Euros), and nearly 80% - up to BGN 900 (450 Euros), not including about 2 million retirees with an average pension of about 370 BGN (180 Euros). At the same time, only 1% of the people in our country earn more than BGN 6,000 per month (3,000 Euros), and in this narrowest group at the top of the pyramid the inequality is even greater. The share of people in severe material deprivation still fell in 2017 from 31.9 to 30%. Given that the EU average is 6.7%, this indicator should fall significantly faster given the free movement of workers and the Union's cohesion policies, but this process is undermined by the lack of social systems (Draganov, 2020).

Dispelling the myth of a 'generous welfare state'

Linking the problem of social assistance, dependence and ethnicity are problems that cannot and should not be limited only to Bulgaria, in fact they have been 'haunting' countries and Eastern and Central Europe (Szelenyi, 2001; Revenga, Ringold and Tracy, 2002; Bodewig and Sethi, 2005). Such trends can be observed in many of the economically developed countries in Western Europe and across the Atlantic (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). Of course, the debate over the dependence of the poor on the 'generous welfare state and the services provided by social assistance is not new, on the contrary - it underpins Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher's policy of limiting responsibilities that the state has to its citizens. Thus, instead of seeing in the context of a new economic model attempts to save those who are directly affected by the closure of large factories, plants and industrial complexes (as was the case in Bulgaria after 1989), the shaping up of a policy takes place, one that aims to punish poverty, criminalize it and turn those who can barely make ends meet into scapegoats (Wacquant, 2009). Being poor is tantamount to not being able to take responsibility for your own well-being and success. This, in turn, is backed by a strong dose of cheap television and media propaganda which aims not only to gain popularity, but also to provide the public with a generalized and collective image of the Roma ethnic minorities as a 'problem' (Brealey, 2001; Georgieva, 2013; Messing and Bernath, 2017) who should be responsible for what is happening in society, even more so during the pandemic (Georgieva, 2022). This conceptualization of the Roma as a 'social problem' become something of an axiom - a statement that cannot be proven but seems obvious because it is constructed as shared knowledge and the 'ethnicity' card has been played over and again in both local and national elections by right-wing parties and their representatives.

This negative portrayal of the Roma ethnic minorities is also backed up with the ideas of right-wing economists, who have been imposing the thesis that it is precisely because of social benefits in Bulgaria that the Roma are unemployed - the benefits demotivate people to seek employment, which is not much different from Charley Murray argued decades ago (Murray, 1984; 1990), effectively paving the way for the 'withdrawal of the state' (Bourdieu et al. 1999). A large part of the Bulgarian national budget is spent on social assistance, they claim. Aid for the socially disadvantaged has recently been cited as the reason for the country's growing foreign debt. The consolidated state budget shows that 51.6% of current expenditures for 2014 were used for 'Social Security, Assistance and Care'. But this does not mean that these funds are social benefits. '60% of the costs of social assistance and insurance are actually expenditures for pensions and less than 6.7% are used by the Social Assistance Agency (SAA) for social benefits' (Grigorova, 2016, p. 7). In addition, 'SAA reports show that in 2015, 52,279 people and families were assisted, **with the average monthly amount of assistance per household being BGN 84.67 (42 Euros)**' (ibid, p. 19; emphasis added, D.P.). If we put in in the context of the national average cost of living, a family of four would require **1,757 Euros (without rent)**, whereas a single person would need **at least 567 Euros (without rent)** to make ends meet[6]. In that case, we can hardly speak of an 'overly generous social system'.

One of my previous texts has already talked about how, in the climate of a neoliberal policy imposed for decades, citizens are gradually becoming users of social services, 'clients' (Panchev, 2018). Thus, even those who really need social assistance become 'clients of social institutions'. These customers, after starting to use certain services, become consumers (Bauman, 2004). Here, however, along the path of our logical chain we come across a small stumbling block. Being a consumer means that we have the right to make choices. And do the 'users' of the 'services' so generously provided by the Social Assistance Agency actually have the right to vote and choose? Rather, they are put in a stalemate in which they either have to try to use what they are supposed to do as members of society, and thus inherit a certain stigmatizing label that defines them as dependent, lazy, etc. or to give up the minimum they can get (and it really is the minimum) and look for alternatives to deal with the situation in which they find themselves (Bauman, 2001; 2011; Winlow and Hall, 2013). With the symbolic dimensions of social assistance, the effectiveness of aid in our country cannot be sought, just as we cannot expect that 1 BGN thrown to a beggar will lift him out of extreme poverty. And if there is poverty that is visible, then an even bigger problem are the multiple hidden levels of poverty (Bray, et al. 2019), which remain outside official statistics.

But although it is invisible in documents, these hidden dimensions of poverty undoubtedly exist. Not only do social benefits fail to lift those in need of poverty, but they are also insufficient to provide even food for the final recipients. And the people in the unexplored and uncovered parts into the radar of social workers at all and do not have the opportunity to receive these minimum social benefits. Here we must include the group of the 'working poor',

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[6] Cost of living in Bulgaria: https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/country_result.jsp?country=Bulgaria (Last accessed on 23.07.2022)

and there are some among the people from 'Stolipinovo', with whom I maintain regular contact. What have I learned from them so far about social assistance and lack of access to it? Very often the criteria that need to weed out the needy from those who are doing relatively well financially do not work and as a result, the former sometimes remain invisible to the radar of the social system. In the moments when they have to negotiate with representatives of the SAA, the effect of 'secondary victimization' often appears, where the needy, being victims of the negative effects of an aggressive market economy, fall victim to a structure that should lay the foundations of a way to overcome poverty and extreme poverty. The stigmatization of the poor, the sick and the unemployed leads to the deprivation of social benefits, from which everyone subsequently suffers, a tendency which has been documented both across the Atlantic and in Europe (Wacquant, 2008, 2009; Briggs and Gamero, 2017).

Are we not talking then about poverty which directly affects over 1/3 of the country's population even before the pandemic? According to data published by the National Statistical Institute, the average number of unemployed persons in 2015 was 330,816. Of these, 73% do not receive unemployment benefits - no work experience or the period in which they are entitled to benefits has expired (Grigorova, 2016). This group also includes the long-term unemployed who have not been employed for more than a year. They may have received compensation, but the period has already expired, as the maximum period for which this insurance risk is covered is one year, even for employees with more than 25 years of service. Unemployment benefit in itself, however, should not be thought of as social assistance, because it is directly dependent on what income a person is insured with, in other words, what is withheld in the form of income tax resembles the payment of contributions to an insurance fund, i.e. unemployment is already thought of as a risk against which everyone must insure themselves. Why is this a problem? Some of my contacts in the neighbourhood have been disproportionately exposed to the risk of long-term unemployment for years, at least because the places where they would otherwise work are gone and lost, and the active labour market policies specifically targeting the Roma have amounted to nothing more than a temporary shift 'from benefits to brooms', leading to hyper competition for low-skilled job available on the market (Beremenyi et al. 2013). Since these jobs are gone, then we come to the problem of the need for retraining or working in the informal economy, at least because there are no benefits for the unemployed. This, in turn, requires innovative coping and survival strategies, developing a sense and experience of things that could be done within an informal economy that needs to support people living in a household:

> **Yashar[7]:** People are not poor. People want work, there is work, but they do not give it to us. That is why we are poor, that is why we are led by poor people. They are

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[7] At the time of the interview, back in 2016, Yashar was 33-years old and was running his own barber shop in the in the neighborhood. A year later (2017), whilst struggling to get a secondary education diploma from one of the local schools, he decided to move out of the neighborhood and departed with his family of three to Dortmund, Germany. Although he was returning on a yearly basis to Bulgaria for the summer holidays, since the beginning of the pandemic he has decided to settle down permanently in Germany.

all powerful people. Everyone is hardworking. They can do anything. They can do anything and say, one person, right, one person is walking and there is no money. I dream at the moment to say one person has no money. This man is thoughts - Every man here is like that - smart, very smart. However, there are no possibilities. The man thinks. . . I can make a lamp, let's say I can make a lamp. However, I have no money to take a tool to do it. And to sell it. He doesn't have a diploma, he didn't go to school, he didn't have a profession for this job. He learned from somewhere, isn't he, a smart man and he's already caught, he knows how to do it, he knows how to do it. However, there is no money - to take parts to do it. And what does this man do - first he goes down here with his brother: looking for a job. From the rich or goes from the companies where there is work. Do they give him a job - he works for a while, 1-2 years, collects money, leaves work, goes and gets parts, makes a workshop and starts producing stuff. By himself. We are like that.

D: So he prefers to work alone than to work for someone else?

Yashar: Because, yes, he shouts, there is work, come, you will work. You go to work and say how much you are getting paid, everyone asks 'How much do you give per month?'. The employer says BGN 300 or BGN 400 per month. This man also has Bulgarians doing the same job - BGN 800-900, at least BGN 800 in salary.

In this case, we can talk about labour market activity, which would be defined as 'unemployment'. In fact, we are talking about innovative forms of entrepreneurship that allow the maintenance of a certain standard of living without leading to extreme poverty and its reproduction in the next generations. Even those who have their own business and pay municipal tax for the use of a certain plot of land in the neighbourhood, also feel the need to work even in two places to be able to support their business in times when it is not profitable:

Dimitar: And then was there a lot of money to start the business? Was it difficult in the beginning?

George[8]: It was very difficult in the beginning, because I did not have the funds. Just as winter has begun, and no one in the construction sector is working in the winter. And after 3-4 months I rented a new apartment and started working.

Dimitar: Construction work again?

George: Yes, construction and where I spent that money and put it here in the store. And then we renovated the shop completely. And the business started. 1 year was perfect. For example, I paid 40 leva (20 Euros), I took it here.

Dimitar: And how long did it take before you started earning from the store?

George: 'It's not over to tell you.' I keep investing my money here. Where I work privately and earn here.

Dimitar: Do you work private, extra work?

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[8] At the time of the interview (2017) George was 45 and was residing in the well-off part of the neighborhood, working in construction, and running a shop for home and kitchen utensils. Since the first lockdown he has been unable to re-open the shop and like Yashar, has left with his family for Germany.

> **George:** When I find a job, I go, I work.'

In the conditions of constantly disappearing jobs, their replacement with part-time work and the high dose of uncertainty, the search for livelihoods requires relying on a well-established network of contacts among our acquaintances and friends, as well as the constant search for opportunities to benefit some income:

> **Dimitar:** Are you worried from now on (I ask his wife). How does she manage when she has no money?
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> **Atanas[9]:** 'No, I have to find it.' She, my wife, I didn't let her think that way. And I will not leave her. When she sees that she is not ... For example, if I sleep at home and she is not (i.e. meaning he's lazy), this is something else. She's watching me struggle, you know? This is not no. That doesn't mean it doesn't. I can find, I have a chance, right, if I'm struggling while I'm out, I'm trying to find some money. This does not mean that it will not - I will find; I will definitely find. I have no chance to leave this child hungry (points out the little boy, author's note).
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> …
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> **Dimitar**: Are you officially unemployed? For the state?
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> **Asen[10]:** I am unemployed. I owe money to a bank, I took out a loan of BGN 6,000 (3,000 Euros). I intended to buy an apartment of my own, then it was very cheap, but I could not find one. And I put the money in the stock market (the vegetable market). I tried this job.
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> **Dimitar:** Did you win something or lose them?
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> **Asen:** I just lost them.' I didn't have time to slow down at least a little. So peppers, so potatoes, so I don't know what, I found it, I took it. One third I either took the money or not.
>
> **Dimitar:** You dreamed on the grocery stock market how you will win.
>
> **Asen:** No. When I was looking to buy an apartment, on the one hand I was asking how not to lose my money. To invest them somewhere because money can't sit aside at this time. I withdrew the money; in the third month I was laid off. Otherwise I was fine. BGN 50 salary per day (25 Euros)"

In these conditions, dependence develops and the need to rely on the extended family, as in most cases it is the financial resources available to its retired members (although they themselves are minimal), may to some extent otherwise the detrimental effects of temporary employment:

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[9] Atanas used to have a private glazing shop. Recently, in June, as passed by his place, I noticed his workshop had been demolished in the summer of 2021, forcing him and his family to move out of neighborhood, according to his neighbors. I have been unable to trace his whereabouts.

[10] Asen, in his mid-30s at the time of the interview (2018). As the bank was pushing him to repay the loan, he migrated to Frankfurt, Germany, where he was working unofficially in the construction sector.

Dimitar: And how much is your pension here?'

Hasan[11]**:** BGN 160. Is this money!? Should you pay for electricity, should you pay for water, should you eat? Or give the children some money? Those children, the grandchildren want: 'Grandpa, give 1 lev, grandfather, give 50 cents.' - Come on, where!? I will not eat! I will sleep, drink a glass of water and go to bed.

Dimitar: In my opinion, after a certain age the children should give to you.

Hasan: I talk about grandchildren, little ones. The children, you look at them, don't have them tonight, for example. I have BGN 5, BGN 10. Should I eat and should they sleep hungry? I will sleep hungry! I will take a glass of water, tomorrow 'Allah kerem!' We say in Turkish 'Allah kerem!' God, you trust him. Tomorrow I can earn BGN 20! I can earn BGN 5. Bereket versin!

Dimitar: Okay, is this happening?' With you? Have nothing to eat in the evening?

Hasan: It happens, of course. So many [people like that] are [living] here!

Asen: For example, I go around every night. It's not good to say ... And I have boys who, don't misunderstand me, I collect the rest of their food, for example. Well, there are two or three families that I visit and give to them. To have and not to have! I don't ask, I just leave it to them. A shopkeeper, when he saw me, 'What are you doing?' And I pulled him aside and explained what I was doing. 'Every night you will pass from here' - he is a salesman, he does not mind giving one or two loaves of bread. And I'm struggling ...

Social assistance networks within the community create not only lasting bonds of trust, but also a sense of sharing and cohesion, the need to do everything in your power to ensure your existence in an extremely unfairly ordered economic and social reality, a type of bonding that during the lockdowns served as a safety net for the neighbourhood, as I have shown elsewhere (Panchev, 2021b). If we imagine the world as a poorly designed racetrack with a destination of 'success and security', we will actually see that the chances are not evenly distributed. Some start the race with a big lead, simply because for them the distance is much shorter, others try to run the whole destination, but do not always manage to finish, and others do not even have the right to participate in the race itself, they are just spectators of a spectacle to which they have been denied access, even though they have paid for their ticket to the competition in advance. Something similar is happening with unemployment benefit programs (which, as described above, actually act as an insurance mechanism rather than a tool for a fairer distribution of resources and opportunities for reintegration into the labour market). Even within the community itself, the fact that a person can be described as 'unemployed' carries a certain stigma, it is a sign of inability to cope with the lack of ways to 'make a living', which we must understand quite literally, not as a clichéd metaphorical expression. The dysfunctional system for the 'unemployed' is often even more of a hindrance, as it relies on the visibility of 'unemployment', without actually taking into account the excessive constraints it imposes in itself, in replacing incomes that are extremely

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[11] Asen's father.

insufficient for a normal existence. Labelling 'unemployed' does not mean that its bearers do not pay their dues to the state treasury:

> **Ahmet:** Gypsies didn't pay taxes?' Am I not paying? For the apartment every year tax 130 BGN, for the car 200 and so many levs. I pay BGN 130 for electricity every month. And I pay as much as you pay, and for me the bread is 1.20, not 60 cents! Well, there is someone in the neighbourhood who is socially weak, but I'm sorry, they earn 36 leva for two weeks of work!

> **Asen:**... Or receive social benefits, no. He will take BGN 100 or, for example, BGN 150 social assistance, they have to work for 15 days. In my opinion, those 15 days that the job centres make them work, most of them are sure that they do not work. You are on the face; you are at work. It's two o'clock, you're still on the face. And when it's 15 days, it's obvious that you don't work anywhere - and you deserve it.

Even when temporary employment programs at the Labour Office are thought of as something that is 'deserved', at least in the eyes of those who do not depend on them, those who are recipients and recipients of this type of 'social service' share their own your frustration and dissatisfaction with the system. The information about the amount that the locals receive as compensation varies due to their provision, but it is extremely insufficient for survival:

> 'I sit in front of a coffee-shop kiosk in one of the improvised areas with Manush (about 50 years old, has three sons, two of whom work in France, the third has recently returned from there, and is currently working in construction,) we are sitting at a table in front of the bench closest to his home. Earlier today he went to sign for the benefits he receives as unemployed and passionately tells me about the mandatory 15 days in which he has to work something on the program. 'For 40 leva a month, which one next?" Should I pay for the travel expenses, should I look for them at home? 'Shortly afterwards, at my request, he went to them and brought me his social documents, handed them to me to review and saw that he had been on the stock exchange since September 2015. He had not previously received such benefits. I ask him what he was doing before he was fired: 'Before that I was a security guard at the lung hospital for two years, and seven years before that I was there as a general worker. However, now that this has happened, there is no work anywhere. The woman works for the municipal cleaning company, but the money is not enough, I do not want my sons to send me, they have families, to look after them, I told them - to have for them. Here, the woman will come home from work in a while, I haven't earned anything today, I won't give her a single lev to travel by bus tomorrow, I just don't know how we will manage..." **(fieldnotes, May 2017)**

Dead eyes see no future: Drift and Precarious Living in the context of the pandemic

The more critical analysis of the year of the pandemic have shown that social inequality in Bulgaria is on the rise (Penkova, 2021; Kolluru and Semenenko, 2021) and we can clearly identify the winners and losers. The registered decline in the national GDP for 2020 was -4,2% and the

country found itself in a deeper recession that the financial recession of 2009. How do we conceptualize what is currently happening? Contra popular understanding, instead of more fixation on space, I think the pandemic has exacerbated and already happening process, one that Jeff Ferrell (2012) defines as *drift,* i.e. the constant movement and displacement in space, a consequence of the crisis of modernity, but a crisis that is fundamentally ontological because it is related to the subjective experience of problems that can be registered 'objectively', for example the effects of the Transition or the global financial crisis that followed a decade later, which did not pass Bulgaria by, and which also affected the residents of the 'Stolipinovo', as many migrated en-masse to Western Europe and became a flow of the cheap labour force that feeds with blood and sweat the German, French, British, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese economies (Deneva, 2021). A crisis that moves on more than one trajectory and that cannot be covered by a single analysis or within a single theoretical plane. It is a crisis that finds its dimensions is refracted biographical stories and experiences and notion of drift seems to have fully embraced current experiences, the existence as a normative and spatial dislocation, the result of both economic development and economic collapse, to develop precisely in these situations, the purpose of which was to prevent drift. Uncertainty and drift go hand in hand. 'Moving from one house to another, from one country to another, sleeping in cars or temporary shelters, "occupying" streets and railway stations with their presence, those who have been deprived of security find very little of what is offers in the form of spatial or normative stability' (Ferrell, 2012, pp. 241). This constant state of drift is both a symptom and a strategy for dealing with everything that overtakes us, it can be documented in the form of 'broken" narratives and stories of social experience, whose only unifier is the narrator, and through the act of narration itself, an attempt is made to give meaning to the present, which seems to be devoid of such, unlike the past, in which time and its course were 'lived'. Post-pandemic, for example, even in the centre of Plovdiv, near the Dzhumaya Mosque, men can still be found coming from Sheker Mahala (a neighborhood similar to 'Stolipinovo' and waiting every morning for years to be hired for short-term construction work, but their presence remains unnoticed. Thus, one of the planes on which drifters move is presupposed by the unfavourable position they occupy economically in society, even in cases when it comes to labour migration outside Bulgaria. This can be seen in the following two stories:

> **Ivan[12]:** I work here in the neighbourhood now, and when Recep calls me something I help him. I used to work in construction companies, and I built hotels by the sea, but there were no contracts, they paid by hand, and the health workers did not pay. I was a general worker, now I put the cards I need. I had to take BGN 3,000 from one of the companies. however, they kept saying that there was no money, I went to their office several times, there was still no money! You can't convict them, can you, because you don't have a contract, what will you tell them in court, if you don't have a document, neither the medical staff paid you, nor anything. And I stopped dealing with them. Otherwise, before that, there was another company, the boss before he died and his daughter to take over the

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[12] At the time of the field work last year, Ivan was 48 years old. During my last visit to the neighborhood in June, I understood from Recep that he had passed away due to Covid complications. Recep himself has closed down his carpenter shop and currently lives in Dortmund with the family of his son.

business - I worked there. They paid for everything from start to finish. Even when his daughter died, he wanted me to go to work for them in Sofia. By the sea, as we were, at least the rooms were covered, but you don't have an apartment for Sofia, you have to find it yourself, you have to pay the rent separately, I can't sleep on the site. And I gave up. Now I don't make a lot of money, but at least that's enough to cover my needs here, do as many repairs as I can. Recep something like he needs help coming, I will call him to help me for the door to install it tomorrow or another and so time passes. I went to France for a while, but there was no work, we went to work for two days and we were out of work for two weeks, I was forced to return. I've been working in construction all my life, now I put drywall in the neighbourhood whoever I want, so I make a little money.

...

Fikret[13]: I've been working in France for several years, collecting garbage there, recycling whatever the French give, hauling garbage to Paris,' they say, walking around in a van and sleeping in it at night in the parking lots, but the police are constantly chasing me. allow it to stop in the center and constantly move from one place to another. Now I came home because my father died, years ago we left with him, but he came home here because his health was not good. And now as such - I went home immediately, to arrange the funeral and everything else. I wanted to take the family and the children to study in France, but now it can't happen, we can't all sleep in the van, I have to think about something to rent, rent there and then take them to me. **(field notes, August 2021)**

The above presented personal accounts can be thought of as characteristic of a large part of the life stories of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. Their respondents' biographical narratives are characterized by frequent refraction of the biographical trajectory, uncertainty, displacement and constant manoeuvring between what is thought 'outside' as a normative order and law and the informal, which is stigmatized and denied. At first glance, however, what is thought to be legitimate must also be problematic so that it can accept the deviant, at least because they both represent the face of the same coin. Such life trajectories are in themselves possible as a direct consequence of the disintegration of public order, the labor market and the various pledges of struggle that have held the boundaries of identity until the beginning of the democratic transition in Bulgaria. Holes, deviations, and contradictions and lack of predictability appear in place of straightforward and relatively earthquake-protected life trajectories, and carry with them a sense of disorientation and dislocation. This problem can also be thought of spatially if we think of 'Stolipinovo' as a failed modernist project of social engineering and the creation of social cohesion based on a common national identity. With the disintegration of the regime, this ideology also disintegrated, and with the closure of many of the factories in the immediate vicinity of the Eastern administrative district of Plovdiv (where the neighbourhood is located), the spatial control mechanisms created to hold this urban space have ceased to function. The situation in which a large part of the residents of the 'Stolipinovo" district find themselves after the mass closure of industrial enterprises leads to their labour migration to Western Europe,

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[13] Fikret, 25 years old at the time of the fieldwork, prior to leaving for France he used to be a barber's apprentice in the neighborhood.

where not all of them manage to establish themselves permanently due to the lack of established social networks. in some of these same transitional populations that are stigmatized, they become drifters that are visible and precisely because of this visibility are thought to be problematic, i.e. they become even more visible: 'closing urban spaces to drifters does not offer a solution to the problem, but exacerbates it' (Ferrell, 2012, pp. 245-248).

Engaging with the idea of drift as an ontological state is an effect of a person's 'being-thrown-into' in the world (in Heidegger's sense) as a founding one, and the way he or she inhabits a space and gives it meaning through its habitus shows that beyond The widespread myths are in fact that the people of 'Stolipinovo' (but not only there) resort to using various innovative strategies to deal with the difficulties faced by the stigmatized residents of the neighbourhood with their limited formal labour market. These are dynamic entrepreneurship, flexibility, network of resources, etc., and most of the locals can be defined as 'ghost entrepreneurs' (Medarov et al. 2015). Indeed - outside of institutions and written contracts - but these are the choices and decisions that people have to make every day, as the local authorities punish and penalize poverty:

> As we stand with the former 'owners" in front of the remains of the demolished house a few hours earlier, a 40-year-old man passes by, pushing a smashed shopping cart in front of him. He stops by us, and talks about the demolished houses and how this is a systematic municipal policy, with a mixture of anger and frustration in his voice shows me a few bags of shredded chicken and offal, which he put at the bottom of the cart: 'Here, all one day I wandered around the buckets in Plovdiv to collect some money and buy this meat. For 2 levs per kilo, do you think that this is real chicken meat, which they sell me here is like the one from the shops? We eat garbage, but if you have a family waiting for you - what will you do ?! "Without waiting for an answer, he continues to push the cart down to one of the makeshift residential areas.**(field notes, July 2016)**
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> …
>
> It is very rarely that I get have the chance to hop in the car of an 'illegal taxi driver", but hardly are there any 'legit' such cabs available on the busy weekends, as they are all booked and work with 4 and 5 star hotels at the famous SPA resort. As I sit on the front seat next to the driver, we start a conversation around the usual topics – how's work on the weekends, and the personal story that follows sticks with me throughout the whole day: 'You know, I used to be an electrician by training, and was working as maintenance in the R. 5-star hotel. I was long hours, 12-hour shifts and the pay was BGN 1000, but they have a scheme - you are insured on the minimum wage and the rest you get cash in an envelope at the end of the month, they are evading taxes. And the local owners have established a monopoly, most of the them are also members of the city council, so they have the mayor in their pockets, the wages are fixed, the have reached an agreement among themselves, so that wherever you go – it's the same pay. As the pandemic started, we were also forced either to go on paid holidays, as I did, others we laid off without notice and had to apply for a job seeker's allowance. In the end of May when I returned to the hotel, the asked me "Did you not receive a call by the management?" I told them I haven't. I call the boss, he did pick up his phone, later

> the HR told them they have laid me off, effective immediately. So here I am now, driving an illegal cab...' **(field notes, February 2022)**

Such forms of employment are unfortunately for many a normal part of everyday life, invisible forms of work that are directly related to survival every day (see Ferrell, 2006), and in this sense the lives of these drifters are truly life on the border and the edge of the socially acceptable, and their very activities are sanctioned and criminalized, many of them in the context have become 'essential workers with dangerous bodies' (Deneva, 2021), as their work has been of essence to kick-start the economy again. They are despised, considered as a dangerous contagion and threat (Panchev, 2021b), yet their economic exploitation in factories and agriculture was of vital importance, how otherwise could we indulge in the pursuit of our consumer passions when the world stool still? The precariousness of lives on the edge during the last two years has been further exemplified by the plight of Ukrainians toward Southern, Central and Western Europe. Although the majority has been welcomed in host countries, the amount of economic support for them has generated widespread frustration and anger, again of symptom of divided societies, and elsewhere Ukrainian Roma have experienced discrimination in countries such as Moldova and the Czech Republic.

Conclusion

This paper started out with a bold statement that the pandemic has hardly changed much with regards to the social fabric of Bulgarian society but has rather intensified processes that have already been in place for more than a decade. On the first theoretical attempts at thinking about the pandemic provided by Ivan Krastev – *'Is it tomorrow yet?'* (2020) has argued that we were experiencing a sense of déjà vu – the economic crisis of 2008 and well as a refugee crisis of 2013-2015, as we attempted to close down our borders and exclude our own groups of the population that are so essential to the economy, as they collectively have wired more than BGN 8 Billion[14]. Many were afraid they would lose their freedoms related to mobility within the EU, yet Europe seems more connected that ever before, as After the initial moral panics around vaccines and the restrictions premised on the notion of 'the common good', the average consumer became increasingly fed up with being deprived of 'essential rights" such as shopping sprees in malls and began to protest by occupying exactly those same spaces of consumer freedom. A more radical example is the suicide of a heavily in-debt woman in a shopping mall in Plovdiv earlier this year, an act of desperation, maybe even a form of a political protest. against the unfairness of the post-Covid world she has to live in and cannot cope with. I would consider it a reality check, as while we were getting out of the first lockdown, credit companies seized the opportunity and literally began to offer fast-track credits and loans on the streets in Plovdiv, praying on people's debts and precarious positions. A vaccination campaign that failed miserably was re-packaged in consumer vouchers offered by hypermarkets and that was sufficient to make segments of the mistrustful population to get vaccinated. Whilst binging on dystopian movies and novels such as '1984",

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[14]https://www.novinite.com/articles/196349/Bulgarians+Abroad+have+Sent+Home+More+than+BGN+4+Billion+in+2018 (Last accessed on 23.07.2022)

'Brave New World, 'Brazil', 'Lord of the Flies', Animal Farm', 'A Clockwork Orange', 'Gattaca', 'The Matrix', etc. in our own comfort zones and safe spaces, we willingly denied ourselves the opportunity to make sense of the unfolding crisis before our very eyes. After all, who's actually interested in social suffering, if economic recovery is premised on the spending capabilities of everyone, including the frowned upon Roma communities – we don't want them, yet the money they are willing to spend in expensive holiday summer resorts at the Black Sea are more than welcome? The field of the social sciences is notoriously bad at predicting the future, but the last few months have demonstrated that we are heading into the unknown more socially divided than ever before. The social revolution and global uprising that many commentators so eagerly anticipated and predicted has been postponed indefinitely, but how can one use the same tools and mantra and expect different end results? Contra others, I am not arguing for a new religious ethos and a new world order premised on a different economic model, but rather focusing on basic things such as the rebuilding and reinvestment in communities. Now, more than ever, what seems to be missing is understanding based on empathy, not more sophisticated predictive mathematical models that we have utilized for two years now and that have failed us again and again.

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Conversations

The Enigma of Social Harm: The Problem of Liberalism

An Interview with Thomas Raymen

In this issue's conversation piece, Professor Simon Winlow sat down to talk with Dr Thomas Raymen about his forthcoming book, *The Enigma of Social Harm: The Problem of Liberalism* (Routledge, 2022). For a number of years now, Raymen has been writing about the harms that emerge at the intersection of commodified leisure and consumer culture, and like many others operating in the border zones between criminology and zemiology, social harm has served as the conceptual foundations to this body of work. But in his forthcoming book, Raymen begins to question and challenge the stability of these conceptual foundations. On what basis can we say that something is harmful? How are we supposed to judge between competing opinions on the harmfulness of a particular behaviour, practice, or industry? Can we avoid drifting off into relativism when it comes to judgements about harm?

In an age of deep cultural and political discord about what is and is not harmful, it is clear that providing answers to such questions is more important than ever. But in appraising the current state of the concept of social harm in academic scholarship and every-day life, Raymen finds a concept in an underdeveloped state of disorder, trapped in interminable deadlocks and shrill disagreements about what should and should not be considered harmful. Drawing on a novel blend of moral philosophy, social science, psychoanalytic theory, continental philosophy, *The Enigma of Social Harm* endeavours to explain the genesis of this crisis and identify what we need to do to resolve it, and in doing so travels from Graeco-Roman antiquity to the present day, exploring trends and developments in moral and political philosophy, religion, law, political economy, and culture that have contributed to social harm's present conceptual crisis.

Among other topics, Professor Winlow quizzes Raymen on some of the key ideas of the book; the nature of human flourishing and its role and relationship in defining social harm; whether or not harm has any positive role to play in our lives; and whether or not fields such as criminology and zemiology should simply return to philosophy. *The Enigma of Social Harm* is available to pre-order now with Routledge.

* * * *

Simon Winlow: *Tom, thanks for agreeing to discuss your book,* **The Enigma of Social Harm: The Problem of Liberalism***, which is about to be published by Routledge. The book falls right at the centre of this journal's remit, and so I'm sure many readers will be keen to hear about it. First, can you give us an overview of the book, and tell us why you were motivated to write it?*

Thomas Raymen: Thanks, Simon.

At its most basic, the book is about the health and condition of the concept of social harm. Does it have good, strong ontological and epistemological foundations? Which is simply to say: do we have a strong and robust set of means for determining whether or not something should be considered socially harmful that both academics and society more generally agree upon and use in everyday life? Is this set of means a good set of means and do we have good reasons for accepting them? Does the set of means we're using stand up to close scrutiny? Can it show itself to be superior to rival approaches for determining whether or not something should be considered harmful and thereby defeat those rival approaches through a logical argument?

And as you might expect, the book argues that in many important respects, the concept of social harm is not in a healthy condition. If all were fine and well, there wouldn't be much of a book to write! So what I argue is that the concept of social harm is actually in an underdeveloped state of disorder and confusion. And this is problematic because the field of zemiology and research from a broadly social harm perspective is growing at a rapid pace, despite the fact that the concept on which all of this research is based is lacking solid foundations. If you build a house and the foundations aren't strong, cracks begin to appear in the external walls, the floors might not be level, and if those problems get severe enough the entire house could collapse. This would be a shame for the study of social harm because it is a concept that I think is immensely important and promising. My critique of the concept of social harm isn't a prelude to throwing it all in the bin. It's a prelude to shoring it up and ensuring that the use of the concept of social harm remains meaningful. If the study of social harm falls into pluralistic incoherence, where the concept of harm can mean whatever a particular individual or group wants it to mean, you wind up with wildly conflicting claims in society around what is or is not harmful. I would argue we are seeing increasing evidence of the use of 'harm' and 'social harm' in this plural-individualistic way, and at that point the concept of social harm sinks into irrelevance.

Basically, everything I read and researched indicated that we needed to go back to the beginning and establish some firm conceptual foundations for social harm, and the first step in doing so is to actually acknowledge that the concept is in a problematic condition. So the book is first about making the argument that the concept of social harm is in the unhealthy condition that I claim it to be. From there, it explores why the concept finds itself in this unhealthy condition, with the view that if we can understand where things have gone wrong and where the concept has run into problems, we can begin to go about rectifying those issues. So while the book does end with a suggestion of where we go from here in actually tackling this problem, and weaves these suggestions throughout the book, this is not its core purpose. The book is predominantly focused on the first two tasks. The latter question of how to resolve this problem is sizeable enough to be a book (or a series of books) in its own right, and it is a book I fully intend on writing in the future.

In terms of motivation, it was quite simple really. I was doing work around leisure and consumerism that used the concept of social harm as its foundational starting point. And as I reflected on my own work, I realised I was using the terms 'harm' and 'social harm' quite freely and in a relatively intuitive and uncritical manner. Why was I able to call this or that harmful? On what basis? How could I counter the arguments of others who might dispute my claims that this or that was harmful in a way that could logically defeat their position? So I began to interrogate the concept more and more and increasingly arrived at the conclusion that my research was resting on pretty shaky foundations. I stand by my previous work and maintain that it was decent, but it was a problem that the concept on which it was based seemed to be lacking any meaningful foundations. Part of the reason for this was that what I was lacking most was an adequate idea of human flourishing, of what is truly valuable and good in human existence. I was lacking an idea of how to live well and what it means to truly flourish as a human being. And I found that this absence is actually part of a very deep cultural, moral, and political philosophical trend, one that unavoidably prohibits there being any robust coherence to the concept of harm.

Also, over the past few years I've seen 'harm' and adjacent terms thrown around in both academic and everyday life in ways that are quite contradictory and, in some cases, arguably reckless. Today, it increasingly feels that as a society we are agreeing less and less on what should be considered genuinely harmful or harmless, and how to rank order harms and so on. So often it is like we are speaking different languages to one another when it comes to harm and are consequently becoming socially and morally unintelligible to one another. Anthropologists used to go off to far-flung places to research and understand cultures and ways of life quite alien to our own. Today, the alien is within, and I don't mean that necessarily in terms of increased diversity, immigration, multi-culturalism and so on. Actually, what I'm referring to more are people with the same ethnicity, who were born in the same nation, who grew up in the same region, town, or city. People who, despite having all these shared characteristics, nevertheless seem to be becoming politically, culturally and morally alien to one another. Not just a healthy level of different, but fundamentally *alien,* strange, unfamiliar, and incomprehensible. And that

strangeness to one another is often manifested most in questions around harm. So that further convinced me that this concept required closer consideration. From there, my own curiosity led me down the rabbit hole and the final result was the book.

Winlow: *I like it. At the moment, any individual or social group, even those regularly accused of harming others, can proclaim themselves victims of harm because we have no worthwhile conception of harm and no systematic understanding of the place of its in our societies. Am I on the right track?*

Raymen: You're absolutely on the right track. In the absence of a robust conception of harm and human flourishing, what is and is not harmful is increasingly determined by the feelings, experiences, and interpretations of the sovereign individual, and this process itself is a product of liberalism's ascendence to a position of hegemonic dominance. You see this particularly in the realms of lifestyle, culture, sexuality, leisure and consumerism – those spheres of life which are positioned as the remit of free individual choice. This produces a very confusing picture. One of the examples I use in the book is where anti-obesity campaigns have been criticised as harmful because they allegedly stigmatise and invalidate the self-worth of obese people. Something which is focused on helping people by reducing the physiological harms of obesity is automatically reframed as harmful and destructive to their emotional wellbeing. This can only occur because we lack a clear, robust, and shared understanding of human flourishing, something which in the liberal universe is deemed as far too paternalistic and constraining. Instead, we have embraced a pluralised, privatised and individualistic approach to conceptualising human flourishing where the negative freedom of the sovereign individual is sacred, and they are free to decide for themselves whether or not they are flourishing.

In this context, how are we to decide between these two positions? We can't. We're trapped in this interminable cycle between two incommensurable positions. Equally, you see the problems of liberalism's deference to the experience and feelings of the sovereign individuals with regard to things such as micro-aggressions. A particular social interaction or behaviour is perceived by the victim as being laced with some form of prejudice and is therefore experienced as harmful. At the present moment, it does not seem to matter whether or not the perception or interpretation of events is accurate or not. In fact, there's currently no possibility of determining the harmfulness of the action in an objective sense because what matters is that the individual experienced the interaction as harmful. This is actually embedded in the Crown Prosecution Service's own definition of hate crime. I'm not for one moment saying that harmful microaggressions do not exist and that every claim is just the fictitious creation of the individual's imagination. I am simply saying that in the absence of a coherent concept of harm, and in a context that is so deferential to the sovereign feelings of the individual, we are relatively powerless to challenge or assess the validity of such claims, claims which often result in quite harmful consequences for the alleged perpetrator – loss of livelihood, abuse on social media, labelling as a bigot of some variety and so on. So harm can end up being inverted where, as you say, the

perpetrator of harm can position themselves as a legitimate victim, and the eventual victim of harm is positioned as a perpetrator. So it's a serious issue, not a peripheral one.

Winlow: *You've mentioned 'human flourishing' again, and I know that that concept has become quite important in the broader social harm literature. But what do you mean by 'human flourishing' exactly?*

Raymen: Wow, that's a huge question. An almost timeless question. I'll do my best to answer it without complicating things too much. This answer might go on a bit though!

So the first thing that I think is worth saying is that in the book I use the term 'human flourishing' in a way that is quite different from how it has been used in the broader social harm literature so far. I don't know how you'd describe my approach. NeoAristotelian? MacIntyrean? It doesn't matter too much for now. But I would argue it is a more substantive approach to human flourishing, whereas the existing social harm literature has arguably used the term human flourishing in a more formal and liberal-individualist way that divorces the term human flourishing from its original Aristotelian roots and hollows it out. I understand people working in this field might balk at that 'liberal individualist' description, but I'll try to explain why I use that description, and hopefully that will clarify the distinction between these existing uses of human flourishing in the social harm literature and my own.

So as I just mentioned there, human flourishing is originally an Aristotelian term. Aristotle argued that the purpose, the *telos*, the end of life was *eudaimonia* or 'human flourishing'. Human flourishing is not just happiness or simply 'doing right', but rather *living well* and living a good life. Nor was human flourishing understood as something subjective that could be autonomously defined and determined by the individual. One's *telos* was considered to be objective, and the individual could discover their *telos* – that to which they should strive and would bring *eudaimonia* – according to the social roles they occupy, the social communities and communities of practice of which they are a member, their occupations, their pastimes. All of these things have goods *internal* to their practice, and if one pursues these goods and practices the virtues necessary for them, then they will flourish as human beings. For the Aristotelian or NeoAristotelian point of view, human flourishing is about the pursuit of excellence. Am I a good parent, friend, colleague, community member, or practitioner of this occupation, social practice, or pastime? And I don't necessarily mean excellence in the sense that you're the best at these things and achieve various awards and accolades, but do I pursue the goods internal to these practices to the best of my ability? Do I practice the virtues necessary for this? Do I practice these virtues in all aspects of my life? So human flourishing, from an Aristotelian point of view, is about knowing how to live well. It is about practical wisdom and the education of our desires. Knowing what is best and most valuable in human existence and knowing how to choose wisely. If one achieves this, they can flourish, and this flourishing is the end of human life. It's obviously a good deal more complex than this, but that description will do for now.

This is in quite stark contrast to how the term human flourishing has been used in the existing social harm literature. Take the work of Simon Pemberton. He has developed what is, in my view, the most advanced conceptualisation of social harm to-date and he describes social harm as the systemic compromising of human flourishing. Others have done so as well, but his is the most developed and prominent. Now Pemberton's approach to social harm and human flourishing is rooted largely in the work of two guys called Doyal and Gough and their theory of human needs, which interestingly enough is itself based on the liberal philosopher John Rawls's theory of justice and his 'thin theory of the good'. Drawing on them, Pemberton argues is that in order for human beings to flourish certain basic human needs have to be met. He provides a range of examples such as health and healthcare, both physical and mental; economic security through stable well-remunerated employment; access to education and housing; freedom and autonomy to make decisions and live one's life as one chooses and so on. If a human being does not have these basic things, Pemberton argues, then they cannot flourish. And if they are denied these basic human needs by various political, economic, ideological or socio-cultural forces, then they are being socially harmed.

With all of this I don't quibble much at all, and in many respects, I admire Pemberton's work a great deal. Certainly, none of us can hope to truly flourish as human beings in any sense – Aristotelian or otherwise – if we do not have homes, health, education, stable employment and so on. Where I have an issue is that what Pemberton provides isn't actually an account of human flourishing at all. What is being provided here are a set of *pre-requisites* for flourishing, rather than an actual account of what it means for a human being to flourish, of what it is to live well, to live a meaningful life, of what our energies should be directed toward and what we should pursue and avoid and so on. There's a big difference. In Pemberton's account, there's no actual *content* to human flourishing. When it comes to what actually constitutes human flourishing, how we should live our lives and what goals and ends we should pursue in order to flourish, it remains up to the individual to decide. All that's really being said here is that individuals must have a certain set of human needs in order to enact their private and sovereign view of human flourishing. Therefore, this perspective is fully at home within the broader philosophical and cultural context of liberal individualism. This of course is entirely unsurprising given that the underlying influence of Doyal and Gough is itself informed by John Rawls's liberal egalitarianism. This is why I describe this as a liberal-individualistic conception of human flourishing.

The upshot of this, and why I take issue with it, is that it doesn't help us resolve the issue we discussed earlier of pluralistic incoherence when it comes to harm. In fact it perpetuates it. If we are saying that social harm is the systemic compromising of human flourishing, and we are *also* saying that what constitutes human flourishing is to be determined autonomously by the sovereign individual, then harm does come to mean whatever one wants it to mean. It also doesn't provide us with any means of resolving disagreements and conflicts when it comes to harm. When two individuals' differing and privatised conceptions of human flourishing come

into conflict and jeopardise one another, whose human flourishing is to be privileged? How are we to decide between them? We can't. We have no means of doing so.

The other issue this raises is that if we don't have a shared vision of what constitutes human flourishing, how are we to consistently evaluate whether that flourishing is being compromised and being harmed, beyond the denial of certain pre-requisites? This prevents us from saying with any definitiveness that certain activities, industries, or practices are harmful in and of themselves and compromise human flourishing more generally. A good example of this are things such as gambling, social media, or recreational drug use. The harms of these activities are well-documented and frequently researched. But when individuals are confronted with this information, they often point out that only a small proportion of individuals become gambling addicts or die from drug use. Many individuals might say that social media, gambling, or drug use is actually essential to their own conceptions of human flourishing. As a result, the best an approach such as Pemberton's can do is show how such practices harms *some* individuals, in *some* situations, under *particular* circumstances by compromising some of their basic human needs. But it can do no more than this. So long as there are enough people whose basic human needs aren't compromised by these practices, so long as there are people who think that such activities are central to their human flourishing, and so long as we have no genuine account of what human flourishing actually entails that can contravene those claims, we can't describe those industries and practices as fundamentally harmful and contrary to human flourishing. We have no means for saying that individuals should not be directing their time and energy towards such pursuits. When we ask people why they gamble, take recreational drugs, or spend vast amounts of time on social media, we get a typical medley of responses such as 'because I want to', 'because I enjoy it', or 'because it makes me feel good'. These reasons aren't particularly good reasons and are deeply liberal-individualistic reasons. But without a more comprehensive notion of human flourishing, we're powerless against them, and have no means of saying that a particular practice, industry, or market should not exist or have any place in our society. Consequently, the practices, industries, and markets that inflict these harms can stay in place by default, the more extreme harms they produce continue, and we can only cross our fingers and hope that individuals avoid them. But their legitimacy, while perhaps slightly tainted, is not entirely ruined, protected as it is by the negative liberty of the autonomous individual.

So for all of these reasons, and many others that are discussed in the book, I argue that what we need is a more substantive conception of human flourishing, a conception of the true Good from which we can derive an understanding of harm.

Winlow: *So would you say that harm can be understood as activities that restrict this more detailed conception of human flourishing?*

Raymen: In a word, yes. I think we can. Some people have critiqued Pemberton for using "human flourishing" in his conceptualisation for harm because it introduces an ethical

component that is seen as too subjective and messy, and that we should have a more constrained and rigid definition of harm. I don't agree with this critique whatsoever. The problem is in the other direction: not that human flourishing has too large a presence, but that the way it has been conceptualised in the social harm literature is actually too anaemic, too insufficiently developed to be meaningful.

Harm is an unavoidably evaluative term. We can't rely on *a priori* definitions when it comes to harm. So often, when the concept of social harm is pondered, people ask "what *is* social harm?" For me, this is a stupid question, because the standard response would be "in relation to what?" So I feel we need to be asking a more epistemological question of how can we know, with confidence and good reason, that someone or something is being harmed? And knowing this requires us to first have a clear ontological understanding of persons, institutions, environments, animal populations and so on. An understanding of what they are, of their nature. We know that the global climate is being harmed because we know how it ought to ideally and normally function. We can say the same for animal populations. We have some idea of their nature, their *telos,* and as such have a clear idea of when they are and are not flourishing. Why should this be different for people, for social roles and practices, for communities and institutions? If we are to know whether or not someone or something is being harmed, we need to have some coherent idea of what it means for that person, practice, or institution to flourish. And establishing this knowledge of what it means to flourish is a fundamentally ethical task bound up with ethical questions. We shouldn't shy away from this. Ethics and morality is, and should be, central to the study of social harm. But not in an emotivist way.

Winlow: *I'm pleased that you stress the importance of understanding the nature and impact of harm, rather than simply advocating for the immediate extinction of all forms of harm. I say this only because the common call to immediately end 'harm' seems to ignore the complexity of life and suggests a rather blinkered attitude toward that which can be considered to be good. So, for example, many philosophers have noted that one cannot truly appreciate happiness, or satisfaction or contentment, without also having experienced sadness, dissatisfaction and struggle. Some of those things commonly categorised as 'harm' can yield positive effects, would you agree?*

Raymen: Yeah, so I actually talk about this very briefly in the last few pages of the book. It's a tricky one, for reasons I'll outline in a moment, and I actually think it's useful to be able to distinguish conceptually between harm and unpleasantness, which I think the current literature struggles to do. So you're right, in the *Ethics,* Aristotle suggested that the journey toward true human flourishing is unavoidably difficult, with pain, suffering, failure, and discomfort all coming along the way. Arguably, we can never lead a truly good life without some kind of suffering or unpleasantness. We intuitively understand this basic point with little cliche sayings like "if it's easy, it's not worth doing" and things of this nature. We tell our children these things when they're trying to master a particular skill and are getting upset, or where they aim for a goal and fail.

Where the problem arises, and where we have to be careful, is that this is susceptible to ideological manipulation. Genuine harm can be bent and recast as that which is unpleasant but ultimately beneficial and necessary. In your own research on violence and trauma you'll have seen father's beat their sons in the name of "toughening the boy up". A violence that, through the ideological lens of the violent father, is transformed into the good, an unpleasant thing which ultimately shapes and moulds the young boy into something better and prepares them for the cold realities of the world. This of course is plainly absurd. Well-tempered, calm discipline, on the other hand, while unpleasant for any parent or child, helps that child to learn how to live with others effectively, how to live in a society of rules, to learn important social customs and so on. At a more macro level, we've seen in the past how rolling back of state support for the most deprived and vulnerable has historically been justified "for their own good", to rid the underclass of their feckless laziness and so on. Post-crash austerity was exactly this, right? Depicted as a necessary unpleasantness that we'd rather not endure, but that we must go through if we're to get the economy back on a stable footing and blah blah blah. Any economically literate person knows that this is blatantly incorrect and wrongheaded. But it's an ideological distortion. But this potential for the ideological distortion of something that is ultimately useful is true of many things. Fear is useful in many senses, but we see how it can be manipulated for ideological purposes. Despite this, it would be madness to just 'do away' with fear because fear keeps us safe in many respects. We just have to guard against this ideological manipulation to make sure that when we're fearful of something, we have real, genuine reasons to be fearful.

So this is where, once again, a robust and coherent account of human flourishing comes in. If we have a clear *telos*, a clear idea of flourishing and how to get there, it becomes far easier to discern between genuine harm and temporary but necessary unpleasantness. The former is that which prevents us from achieving the *telos* of human flourishing, the latter ultimately enables it. So this question and this distinction is actually quite important in understanding where harm begins and ends, and in providing some parameters to the concept. I could be wrong, but it's not something that the existing literature I've read has considered in much detail. The end result is a general social tendency that pushes to eradicate that which is unpleasant but actually good for us, because it has been erroneously conflated with "harm".

Winlow: *I was also pleased to hear that you draw on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. How does MacIntyre's philosophy influence your thesis? How can his work be brought together with an Aristotelian account of human flourishing?*

Raymen: Alasdair MacIntyre, for me, is one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century. It amazes me that he isn't mentioned more frequently in the social sciences and criminology if I'm honest. His philosophy is so insightful, his writing is immensely readable (which isn't always the case with philosophy), and the content of his work is extremely relevant for where we are today. *After Virtue*, his most famous work, is probably more relevant now than

it was when it was first published back in 1981. And encountering that work was a real turning point for me, and heavily influenced the way I went about the book.

And he basically opens that book with the claim that the language of morality is in a grave state of disorder. We lack, he argues, a shared ethical background or basis for morality, and instead possess a series of rival ethical positions whose starting points are fundamentally incommensurable. Each of these positions are internally coherent, but they're so incommensurable with one another that they cannot logically defeat one another, because their starting premises are so wildly different. So one of the examples he gives is the topic of abortion. You've got one side whose starting point is rooted in the right of the mother to choose. The other side argues for the sanctity of all life. That this is a human life we're killing and so on. What MacIntyre argues is that each of these positions, while internally coherent, cannot logically defeat the other, and therefore the individual engaged in this moral dilemma cannot provide good reasons for choosing one set of starting premises over the other. Each side provide their various arguments, but inevitably just end up back at their starting premises. Given that the starting premises cannot logically defeat each other, when we wind up back at this point two things tend to occur.

First of all, the individual has to make an arbitrary choice on the starting premises they choose to adopt. So take me, for instance. I'm pro-choice on the abortion issue. I can provide all the arguments for why women should have the right to choose and so on. But what I can't do is actually provide an answer that logically defeats the starting point of those pro-life individuals who say that this is a human life, that all human life is sacred and so on. All I can do is provide further arguments that are generated from, and justify, a position of individual choice. The arguments I make only 'defeat' the arguments of a pro-lifer if the listener already accepts the starting premise of the individual's right to choose. I saw this recently when there was all the scandal around the legal ruling in the US. Someone tweeted something along the lines of "*I respect people who want to be pro-life with their own bodies, but don't impose that on other people. Why can't pro-lifers just get on with that position?*" Ostensibly, this sentiment is "respecting" those who are pro-life, but they're "respecting" it according to a starting position of individual choice, and this isn't the starting position of pro-lifers whatsoever. If it were, there would be no issue. Pro-lifers tend to argue that abortion is a sin, that it is never acceptable, and that it is not our right to choose which foetuses live and which die. Neither side's starting premises can logically defeat the other on its own terms because they're so incommensurable.

So you're at an interminable deadlock, and at this point things become a bit tautologous such that deciding which set of starting premises to accept becomes a somewhat arbitrary choice, one that is based on feeling, intuition, my own personal biography, religion etc. To me, pro-choice just *seems* the right answer, but I can only give justifications from a pro-choice position. And this is precisely what makes these arguments so interminable. It's not just that they go on and on, but that they can literally reach no resolution, which is why on a whole host of issues you tend to see

the repetition and assertion of certain mantras on each side, which are usually just a catchy summary of their basic starting premises.

The second thing that happens is that, as a result of these deadlocks, such debates merely become what MacIntyre describes as a 'manipulative clash of wills'. And this is where *emotivism* comes in. Because individuals engaged in disagreement cannot logically defeat the starting premises of our opponents, what we increasingly see is highly emotive arguments. We see arguments that tug at the heart strings, try to inflict feelings of guilt or shame. Increasingly – particularly on social media on a whole host of issues – we see people try and denigrate the character of others, make them look evil or stupid or disingenuous. Wild accusations of racism, fascism, misogyny, transphobia are hurled at opponents in order to try and thrust them onto the back foot. This is designed to try and elicit the support of onlookers as well...if you sympathise with any aspect of this opponent's argument, you must be x, y, z type of bigot. This is arguably truer now than it has ever been. We live in a thoroughly emotivist culture in which, increasingly, various moral claims are no more than the manipulative expressions of already and arbitrarily held personal preferences, beliefs and so on. People with knowledge of moral philosophy will know emotivism as the 'hurrah-boo' theory, in which a moral claim simply translates into 'I approve/disapprove of this, do so as well'.

Given what we were saying previously, where questions of harm are unavoidably bound up with ethical questions, I argue that we're in a similar position when it comes to questions of harm, and I apply MacIntyre's discussion of this to the field of social harm and various zemiological issues throughout the book. MacIntyre himself is a Thomistic Aristotelian, and so argues that we need to develop a new account of human flourishing, a more objective and rational account that shows how a NeoAristotelian approach to morality and ethics can logically defeat utilitarian ethics, deontological ethics and so on. And I try to do something similar with social harm, and demonstrate how taking a broadly NeoAristotelian approach to the Good and to human flourishing is necessary if harm is to establish any coherence, and considers what stands in the way of this.

Winlow: *So, if I can briefly recap, you claim that we need to better understand what harm is and what it is not. We need a robust account of human flourishing against which we can better appraise harm. We need to engage with the field of ethics and morality to better identify beneficial social ends. We cannot continue to proceed on the basis that it is up to the individual to choose for him or herself what is harmful. Am I heading along the right lines?*

Raymen: Yep. Absolutely along the right lines there. And when it's put like that, it sounds very simple. But in actual fact, all of those things you list off there are incredibly thorny issues. They're deeply philosophical issues really, and the question of harm is a very knotty philosophical problem, one that hasn't really been given sufficient attention in the literature. It is almost as if

the field has avoided these kinds of questions, and just decided to get on with the business of investigating whatever type of harm they're interested in, speaking about the harms of this or that, without there really being a consistent, coherent, and solid conceptual foundation underpinning it.

In certain social harm texts, we're actually seeing prominent social harm scholars question whether or not the concept of social harm needs a firm ontological basis whatsoever. Which is strange given that one of the major rationales for developing the study of social harm was that it would be a field with a foundational concept that was ontologically superior to crime. This is what the editors and contributors of the first major social harm text, *Beyond Criminology*, agreed upon: that crime is a socio-legal construct, and is therefore vulnerable to more subjective relations of power and inequality which ultimately render it a somewhat arbitrary concept. So the purpose of this new field was, firstly, to develop a more ontologically robust concept that could act as an alternative or a remedy to this arbitrariness; and secondly, use this concept to draw attention to those harms which were previously excluded from view by the somewhat confining lens of crime or illegality. So the study of social harm is currently in a really strange place. It seems to be very keen on pursuing the second goal of exposing and drawing attention to new and different forms of harm. But simultaneously, it seems to be moving *away* from that first goal of establishing a firm, consistent, and coherent ontological basis for harm, and even questioning whether we need to do this at all. This, to me, is illogical. The second goal can only have any meaning if you diligently pursue and prioritise the first goal. Otherwise, claims of harmfulness can become just as arbitrary, if not more so, than labelling something as criminal.

Winlow: *One of the great benefits of social harm as an area of social research is surely that it is a necessarily interdisciplinary undertaking. To understand environmental, social, subjective or economic forms of harm, we need to roam across the social sciences and humanities, and in some cases STEM subjects, in search of concepts, frameworks and so on that can illuminate the causes, contexts and effects of harm. What do you make of claims that the study of social harm, or zemiology, can and should be considered a discipline distinct from cognate fields?*

Raymen: From a purely intellectual perspective, I have never fully understood the need for a distinct discipline of zemiology. As you say, the beauty of the study of social harm is that it transcends disciplinary boundaries. It encourages - even demands - that we all become polymaths and become learned in a really wide range of areas. This is a great thing when disciplines are becoming ever narrower, and when academics are identifying themselves in increasingly niche ways according to a very specific research topic. In fairness, I'm not sure zemiologists necessarily intended to set themselves up in distinction to all those other fields necessarily. It seems that their desire to establish a separate field stemmed more specifically from their beef with crime and criminology, and a desire to distinguish themselves from, or even usurp, that field. Although while I understand and can appreciate the arguments for that, I've also never been particularly convinced by them either. Perhaps I'm missing something there though.

That being said, I suppose what a distinct field does encourage is this kind of dedicated thinking about the concept of social harm that might not take place otherwise. I guess I envisage "zemiology" more as a collective literature that people from disparate disciplines - economists, biologists, computer scientists, environmental scientists, geographers, anthropologists, criminologists and so on - can dip into periodically and contribute to, while also doing other non-zemiological work in their "parent" field. Rather than zemiology being a standalone discipline in its own right, I guess I envisage it as a sub-discipline of *all* disciplines, if that makes sense. So you'll have zemiological urban studies scholars, zemiological computer scientists, zemiological political economists and so on.

If I'm being brutally honest though, I'm not that passionate about these kinds of debates either way. So long as we are all doing good work where people are encouraged to stretch out into new terrains of knowledge in order to answer zemiological questions or address zemiological problems, then that's all that matters.

Winlow: *Well, you have identified a range of problems with the contemporary study of social harm, and you've identified a range of new ideas that can support more robust and comprehensive analyses of social harm. I now have to ask, given the turmoil of contemporary western societies and the huge range of harms that are bearing down on ordinary people, what do you think are the most important areas to which social harm researchers should turn their attention?*

Raymen: Well we're a society beset by crises on all fronts at the moment, so it's not like there's a shortage of serious issues to focus on. Climate change, energy security, food security, housing, supply chains, climate migration, labour exploitation, massive inequalities, social, cultural and political unrest, corruption, the emergence of a kind of neo-feudal era, digital technologies, digital surveillance and various regulatory regimes that can crop up through that. Take your pick, I could go on and on. But this is precisely why the study of harm is so important.

But we need to do more than just denounce how unfair all this is. I heard someone once describe criminology and zemiology quite disparagingly as "appalling-ology", where we take a topic, document it, and the analysis effectively amounts to "isn't it *appalling!*". I think that's a little harsh and and does a disservice to a great deal of work in this field. But at the same time, that perception doesn't just come out of nowhere either. I've probably been guilty of a bit of "appalling-ology" it in the past. We do live in an age of anti-policies and anti-politics. Anti-fascism, anti-racism, anti-corruption, anti-money laundering, anti-capitalism, anti-gentrification. There are lots of movements calling for the abolition of this and that. Defund the police, abolish prisons. This kind of anti-politics can be quite problematic because I would argue it actually produces a libidinal attachment to the very thing one is against.

I talk about this a bit in the book. Various types of anti-politics always involve a strong libidinal investment in the imagination of a utopian future where the thing one is anti has been eradicated. Once we have gotten rid of x, y, z, then things will be so much better, enjoyment will follow. The problem is that, as with anything, such futures are also bound up with fantasy, and fantasies can only be truly enjoyed when they are prohibited to us. Our enjoyment of the fantasy is dependent on distance from it. So when we achieve the abolitions and eradications that a particular anti-politics desires, proponents of that anti-politics are forced to confront the emptiness of the ideal, and the gap between reality and fantasy. So what does the proponent of anti-politics do? They declare that we're not 'there' yet. That we haven't eradicated or abolished the thing we're 'anti' to a satisfactory degree. That more work needs to be done and more awareness needs to be raised. Perhaps we redefine what we mean by certain terms in such a way that significantly expands their application. And this occurs because the existence of the thing one is 'anti' actually constitutes the means through which one enjoys the fantasy of its eradication. I would argue that, to a certain degree, this is exactly what is happening on the field of cultural and identity politics, to the point that it actually begins to inspire a backlash of real regressive prejudices. And around and around it goes.

So the field of social harm studies needs to do more than simply provide an exhaustive list of things for us to be against, but consider what we are for. It's easy to be against corruption, gentrification, climate change, fascism and so on. After all, who could be in favour of these things? But what are we really *for*? What kind of world do we actually want and imagine inhabiting, besides one that has simply eradicated the things that we're against? There's a difference here, I think. So this is a central question that should always be in the background and requires a bit more imagination.

Winlow: *So, we need another discipline! A discipline allied to zemiology, but one concerned principally with the good, with how we can truly live well, with how those things might be brought to fruition, and so on. But doesn't this discipline already exist? Aren't many of these concerns proper to philosophy, and moral philosophy in particular? Isn't the study of how ideals might be enacted, and how we can live good and better lives, fundamental to other fields in the social sciences?*

I am being slightly flippant here, but this relates to what I believe is the hidden injunction issued throughout your book. That injunction is to get comfortable with complexity, to use diverse intellectual resources, to dispense with the performative radicalism that dominates the social sciences, and instead commit to fully understanding the diverse problems that beset our societies. The book, to me at least, can be read as a polite but serious critique of dominant modes of explanation. It is what we would've once called a 'critique of ideology'. It explores in multiple ways the inability of the ideology that dominates contemporary social science – progressive liberalism – to truly illuminate the problems of our time, or to offer us any substantial route away from our present impasse. As you've just said, so much of contemporary politics is negative – we are against those things we do not like but for nothing that

can be named, described or brought to bear on the world. All of this is of course filtered through the lens of freedom: we are against those things we believe to impinge upon freedom, and very often, if we are for anything, it is simply a nebulous, insubstantial conception of freedom, which basically means 'I should be free to do as I please. Nothing external to myself should have power or authority over me'.

Raymen: With regards to your first point, yes, I think that in philosophy and moral philosophy we already have a field capable of doing that, and I actually think the social sciences need to return to philosophy more wholeheartedly. All social science disciplines are essentially rooted in philosophy, right? Social scientists know this, it's not news to anyone. But as we have created more and more disciplines and sub-disciplines these philosophical roots nevertheless seem to have been forgotten or relegated in importance. The social sciences have become much more empiricist. When social scientists draw on philosophy, they seem to do so in a very selective and instrumental way, drawing on a particular idea from a particular philosopher in order to support a particular empirical observation or to beef up an ideological point. Individual ideas from philosophy are employed as bolt-ons rather than as foundations, and as a result I find that there is a real lack of philosophical knowledge in the social sciences or an understanding of how best to engage in proper philosophical thinking about these kinds of issues. And this is understandable. It's not like we're ever really taught this stuff as students, beyond a cursory mention of particular figures or their selective use to illuminate a particular empirical point or topic. At the moment, it's a battle to keep more abstract theoretical modules that are specific to a discipline on our degree programmes, let alone introduce more general philosophy modules. I didn't learn much of anything about philosophy as a student. I've learned about philosophy in a more auto-didactic way through reading. But I agree, recognising that this field actually requires a return to philosophy would go a long way here, rather than always thinking we need to form a new discipline. What is zemiology really, other than philosophy and moral philosophy that is applied to various social problems? So yeah, I guess I see zemiology as a kind of applied philosophy, but an applied philosophy that nevertheless has to keep one foot in the realms of pure philosophy and abstract thought around ethics, human flourishing, human nature and so on.

To your second point around the hidden injunction of the book…I suppose you're right. I've never really thought of it in those terms as an 'injunction', possibly because it's not something I set out or intended to do. I wrote this book over the course of about three and a half years, and it was a very open-ended and indeterminate process, a real process of discovery. And as I started going down the rabbit hole, it became obvious to me that I needed to draw on a diverse range of intellectual resources. I needed to get beyond the social sciences really, and begin to look at and better understand religion, philosophy, and economic and cultural history and how they all tied together. I didn't see how I could write the book without looking at these things.

And doing that was a very enlightening process. It became very clear to me how the harms that permeate our society, and the current problems and difficulties we have in conceptualising social

harm, are a direct product of the kind of philosophical liberalism that has long pervaded our society and our institutions, and has shaped our way of understanding ourselves, the social, and the relationship between the two. So yes, the book can be understood as a polite cajoling to think beyond liberalism's domain assumptions. But I have to say, this is not a blame game. It's not a case of pointing fingers and laying blame at the feet of liberals and shouting *"YOU'RE RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS!"* I have never wanted to do that, because for starters it's unproductive, and secondly, it's never as simple as that. These kinds of problems are always multi-causal, so it is never as simple as finding a single villain that is responsible for all our ills. Yes, I argue quite firmly that liberalism is a major barrier to developing a shared notion of the Good; that it not only impedes but prohibits coherent conceptualisation of social harm, and the formation of a better and truly ethical world. But then the question arises: well if it's so bad, then how did liberalism ever come into being? Where did it come from? How did it achieve such success and why would anyone think it was a good idea? So I go to great lengths to demonstrate how liberalism itself was made possible by preceding forces and processes which unintentionally created the conditions in which liberalism could not only be conceived but flourish as well. This is why I delve back into histories of antiquity, religion, and economic and cultural history, because they're an indispensable part of the story. So that kind of villain-seeking is, for me, antithetical to academic enquiry. It's always been a case of honestly appraising where we are, what hampers our difficulties around conceptualising and preventing social harm, and then trying to understand how we have arrived at this position.

Winlow: *Ok, thanks for taking the time to talk to me and for offering fulsome answers to my at times rather anodyne questions. I enjoyed the book immensely. It certainly deserves to be widely read.*

Raymen: No problem, it was my pleasure. I hope plenty more people engage with the book as keenly as you have.

Book Review

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While there have been notable exceptions, the silence of critical social scientists on the ramifications of the global response to the pandemic has, to use a tired phrase, been deafening. *Lockdown: Social Harm in the Covid-19 Era* provides a corrective to this complacency and challenges readers to interrogate the social, structural and political contexts from which 'lockdown' – a term used in the book to refer to all so-called 'non-pharmaceutical interventions – emerged, and within which it is having what are arguably catastrophic impacts. The authors adeptly interweave first-hand testimonials from their extensive ethnographic research with a detailed analysis of the macro-level data and socio-structural contexts surrounding lockdown in order to illustrate the damage and destruction caused by the policy choices made in response to the pandemic, which are distinguished from the direct physiological impact of the virus itself.

The book demonstrates that the effects have not been evenly felt – perhaps explaining the apparent silence from the relatively 'privileged – detailing how the harms of lockdown have disproportionately impacted the already vulnerable, disadvantaged, and marginalised and have served to further entrench social and structural inequality on a global scale. The book should, therefore, be a siren call for a more balanced and informed discussion about lockdowns and what it means to say that such measures are enacted for the 'greater good'. While the arguments are sophisticated and nuanced, the book is written in a readable and accessible style and is relevant to academic and applied audiences as well as members of the public more broadly.

The authors begin, in chapter 1, by outlining the theoretical underpinnings to the book; notably, the ultra-realist approach to thinking about social harm, which is used to interrogate both the positive and negative motivations to harm, thereby nuancing any simplistic attributions of culpability or malice. The chapter contextualises the current state of politics under neoliberal capitalism within which the pandemic unfolded. While the relevance of this context becomes clearer throughout the book, some signposting here to the arguments to be made would help raise the discussion from the purely academic. Chapter 2 then notes that while the timing and nature of lockdown differed between countries, it was ultimately overwhelmingly 'global' in nature. The authors' ethnographic research spans a highly impressive range of countries (which would be a feat in ordinary times let alone in the circumstances of lockdown) and the book establishes that the harms are both global and local. The chapter provides a critical take on the slandering of an interrogation of lockdown as 'denial' or 'conspiracy' and argues for calmer and more even-handed discourse. The authors tackle the issue of 'the science' and how the wider socio-structural factors that shaped the contexts of policy making in response to Covid-19 were marginalised from public discussion. They outline the evidence for 'focused protection' given the 'collateral damage' of lockdown. The chapter foregrounds what is to be examined in the rest of the book: the disproportionate effect on the already disadvantaged and the intergenerational transfer of harm to young people.

Chapter 3 examines the public and policy narratives around illness and death during the pandemic in which there was a ramping up of consciousness and anxiety particularly in the contexts of the global North/West where illness and death were previously not immediate everyday concerns. It critiques the depiction and perception of risk from Covid as 'random' despite evidence that risk levels were stratified in terms of age and co-morbidities, as well as the ongoing 'shifting of the goal posts' to justify lockdown. Likewise, the authors question the prevailing political and media narrative about the benefits of lockdown in terms of preventing deaths and protecting the health service which, they argue, left "little space to debate or question the implementation of the lockdown measures" (p.63). They contrast this with the lack of acknowledgment of the harms of lockdown or the socio-structural and political contexts impacting the risks associated with covid. The chapter powerfully illustrates the extraordinary the change in how pandemics and viral infections are reported on and discussed and the ritualistic and symbolic forms of compliance with this new narrative that have emerged (and associated shaming of dissenters). The authors question whether we would talk about other illnesses and causes of death in the same way; they posit that the discourse around Covid-19 meant that illness, death, and other damaging consequences arising from the lockdown were not given the same airtime or factored into policy making, suggesting that not all lives held equal value.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the 'losers' and 'winners' of lockdown. The discussion spans the implications for individuals, businesses, and industries and the entrenchment of inequalities in health, wellbeing, and prosperity around the world. It identifies how these implications unfolded within a context of existing global tensions and divisions and the growth in socio-economic and educational inequality that has taken place. Chapter 5 calls out the vested interests

of the elites (and ensuing corruption) and locates these interests within neoliberal capitalist structures characterised by underinvestment in healthcare and individualised consumerism. These chapters also foreground how one does not have to be 'elite' to have benefited from lockdown. The middle-classes have also been somewhat protected from the economic impacts lockdown and were able to comply within relatively comfortable circumstances, a point returned to later in the book when discussing how a myopic focus on avoiding infection from Covid-19 at all costs was a luxury perhaps unavailable to some.

Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 discuss what lockdown meant in different contexts. Starting with 'western society', the authors pinpoint the divisions that have unfolded in experiences and perceptions of the pandemic and lockdown. They distinguish between the 'working-from-home' contingent and the 'front-line' workers who continued with business as usual which, arguably, facilitated the possibility of lockdown for the former. This chapter is particularly valuable for foreshadowing what is later discussed in terms of emerging from lockdown and addressing the divisions that have developed and deepened during this period. The authors then examine the treatment of the elderly and vulnerable. They pull no punches in emphasising how, in a context of longstanding underinvestment in healthcare systems around the world, the elderly and vulnerable were thoroughly let down. The authors discuss the lethal effects of the under-preparation of care homes, both in terms of the direct impact of Covid-19 on residents and the indirect harms caused by the imposition of shielding requirements, along with the cancelling of life-saving medical treatment and operations which affected the population at large. Also discussed are the impacts on those for whom 'staying home' was certainly not 'staying safe', namely women and children experiencing domestic and intimate partner abuse. Overall, the chapters suggest that the response to Covid-19 has caused great harm without actually addressing the risk to the vulnerable, nor the socio-structural contexts that shaped the unequal terrain of risk and the unequal impacts of lockdown. In public discourse, it is sometimes characterised as callous to suggest that risk is stratified, but surely greater acknowledgment of this incontrovertible truth would have enabled policy makers to focus more fully on how to effectively protect the vulnerable and reduce collateral damage, rather than on how to maximise compliance with indiscriminate measures that had questionable impact. In short, rather than worrying about whether a group of teenagers were congregating in a park, should the focus not have been on how to protect care home residents and how to maintain the provision of life-saving healthcare for conditions other than covid?

Acknowledging those who were already 'locked up', the authors discuss the damage to prisoners caused by the appalling physical and psychological conditions created and exacerbated by lockdown in prisons. It considers the dire circumstances for asylum seekers, which the authors discuss in terms of wider long-standing anti-asylum seeker sentiments. For those 'locked out'—migrants, refugees, the stateless, and the homeless—the authors identify the socio-economic impacts on those within already precarious and transient circumstances. It is here that the *luxury* of prioritising Covid-19 becomes apparent. The authors detail how for the already precarious, the economic collapse and withdrawal of services have been nothing short of catastrophic, while in war-ravaged countries like Syria there was no infrastructure for responding to the pandemic

to begin with. The authors note that the global inequities here often fall beneath the radar because of the lack of available data, an issue they identify across the harms discussed in the book.

Chapter 10 returns to the theme of 'compliance'. The authors problematise the individualistic binary of the "*responsible* (complier) vs *negligent* (non-complier) citizens" (p267, original emphasis) and examine the social and structural contexts around compliance. Essentially, they argue that the ability to comply is shaped by one's conditions, as they evidence throughout the preceding chapters. They also note the experiential factors that impact compliance and critique the castigation of dissenters and protestors with no acknowledgment of why they were resisting the lockdown or how their living conditions under lockdown shaped such dissent. The chapter critically engages with the question of morality, as compliance with public health measures were undoubtedly framed by governments, healthcare services, the general public and even academic research in explicitly moral terms. *Lockdown* critically challenges such framing. If people were/are complying with lockdown due to factors such as personal concerns about health, what they see going on around them, and pressure from governments, media, and fellow citizens, then to what extent can it be concluded that compliant individuals were exerting any moral agency? This question of moral agency is all the more pertinent given the harms caused by the measures with which citizens were complying. Is it moral to disregard these harms or render them necessary for the greater good?

Chapter 11 discusses the 'residue' of lockdown. It considers the emerging evidence of non-compliance among the elites and the associated damage to trust, the divisions in perception and experience of lockdown (which are continuing to entrench regarding differences in willingness to take the vaccine), and the ensuing *trauma* of lockdown in terms of mental and physical health and wellbeing. The authors posit that for some, the so-called 'new normal' is devastating and holds no hope. Perhaps unfortunately for readers, chapter 12 concludes on a pessimistic note. The authors do not attempt to address whether lockdowns are 'effective'. Instead, as social scientists, they examine the impacts of lockdown in a world already characterised by inequality. They challenge readers to conceive of lockdown as a policy choice that had very real, if often insufficiently acknowledged, harms. While, in line with the ultra-realist perspective, they note that these harms were not necessarily intended, they suggest that the cure has been worse than the disease and question the legacy for current and future generations.

While they proffer that repairing the damage will require political leadership and a commitment to overcoming and healing divisions, there is little regarding the way this could be achieved. A question to perhaps consider is, what will the legacy be if a consensus builds that the cure has been worse than the disease? How will people feel about having experienced a lockdown that caused untold suffering and misery, for unclear gain? This is a question that the book cannot yet answer, but it certainly points to potential legacies particularly given the building evidence of hypocrisy and non-compliance among the elites responsible for devising lockdown rules. At a time when the impacts of lockdown become more apparent each day, the book should, at the

very least, act as a wake-up call within the field of social sciences to start taking these harms seriously and subjecting them to the same level of critical analysis as other areas of policy, such as that seen regarding the imposition of austerity measures in response to the financial crisis. For those of us who have long been horrified by the policy choices made in response to the pandemic, the book represents an invaluable resource for developing our understanding and arguments about (and, perhaps, against) the 'new normal'.