

Recovering from Shock

Antifascist Struggle in an Ongoing Pandemic

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Love in the Time of Covid

“Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.”

Philip K. Dick

We were about a year into the pandemic when I wrote here¹ about the beginning of my realisations around my own personal ignorance as my partner was learning to live with Long Covid, having gone from working out in the gym regularly and playing soccer two or three times a week, to barely able to leave the home. She hasn’t been the same since. In fact, the more she attempted to “push through,” the more ill she became. All that from a virus left to spread, and mutate – therefore more challenging for vaccines to tackle – and with damage to our bodies’ vital organs that we still don’t yet comprehend, but most certainly offering each of us around a 10% chance of getting Long Covid with every infection.

Before that time, I was one of those fools who – influenced by fictional narratives on both the big and small screen – assumed I caught a cold from, like, being cold, or that catching a cold or even worse illness was “good” for me (in fact, that’s simply not how our immune systems work).

You’d have thought I’d have bothered to put two and two together, not least because here in Sheffield, right by where I live, there is a burial ground for hundreds of people who died in the cholera outbreak of 1832, with a monument that is visible from many different parts of the city, and is considered to be a landmark of national significance. It sent a message through the years, but like many others I clearly stopped paying attention. Even landmarks just become another usual part of the scenery after a while, and we take for granted the lessons they offer us, treated like insignificant background for our in-focus Insta-lives of selfies at brunch.

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, I’d even had numerous conversations about how being cautious and wearing masks and avoiding illnesses seemed to explain why eventual sickness was hitting us so much harder because so many of us hadn’t been sick as often as we once had been, as though getting sick in general was somehow “good” for us (in fact, it was Covid itself that was weakening our immune systems). Professor Peter Openshaw, a respiratory doctor and immunologist from Imperial College London, argued that those commonplace narratives around some sort of “immunity debt” were ignorant: “This would not be a good message for public health,” he stated. “We would still have open sewers and be drinking from water contaminated with cholera if this idea were followed to its logical conclusion.” Yes, too many of us were ignoring the science of our pasts, and the logic it presented to us.

“There are layers to how incorrect this talking point, known as ‘immunity debt,’ is,” suggested political organiser, activist, and writer Julia Doubleday. “Firstly, your immune system doesn’t need to encounter viruses to get stronger. Pathogenic microbes do not strengthen your immune system. That’s why, instead of giving kids cholera on purpose, we clean the water. Secondly, wearing a mask or doing other forms of disease mitigation does not damage your immune system. Prominent outlets, critical of Trump at the beginning of Covid, [were] quick to debunk this lie back in 2020. Now they promote it.”²

Public health’s importance does not somehow render it immune from the influence of capitalist ideology, as though misinformation on this matter might be filtered and therefore couldn’t be carried through the airwaves for us all to breathe in – and believe in – at the behest of the

¹ <https://www.mediaactivist.com/the-worst-virus-still-remains/>

² <https://www.thegauntlet.news/p/institutional-covid-denial-has-killed>

capitalist class influencing establishment media. In fact, it was inevitable, especially as health concerns threatened “business as usual.” And so, we had been convinced, where public health was concerned, that two plus two can somehow equal... *five* . So many of us were so terribly ill-informed and ill- equipped to even begin to hope to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic when it hit. Similar to the financial crisis back in 2008, where capitalism’s acolytes implemented devastating austerity measures on the poor as banks were bailed out, they took advantage of our state of shock. It’s what Naomi Klein called the “shock doctrine”: the incredible tactic of exploiting collective disorientation in times of crisis – even when they are partially or wholly the result of capitalist devastation – to actually promote and extend capitalism *even further*.

Even the World Health Organization shared our state of shock, it seemed. At first, they claimed that Covid was not airborne, essentially dismissing masks – costing millions of lives – and then later announcing that it was, in fact, an airborne virus (behaving much like cigarette smoke), before eventually downgrading the pandemic from a global health emergency, therefore also downplaying the pandemic – to the delight of governments worldwide, many of whom had already been behaving as though there was no health emergency anyway. (Nonetheless, at the time of writing, even the WHO are still admitting that we do actually remain in a global pandemic – though you wouldn’t necessarily know from establishment media and dominant cultural narratives shaped by capitalist interests). And why might that be?

If You Can’t Eliminate the Threat, Minimise It

“The relentlessness of the pandemic, now in its fifth year, is drawn out by the persistence of its denial.”

Emily Dupree and Shelby Seier³

Those capitalist interests were genuinely, seriously concerned about the possibility of shifting narratives. As mutual aid initiatives emerged – as they often do in crises where communities realise capitalism cannot help them – David Graeber’s concept of “bullshit jobs” was also beginning to resonate, with apparently “unskilled” workers now being acknowledged as “essential” workers.

There were other capitalist concerns, too – around healthcare workers being applauded without a payrise while billionaires “isolated” on their yachts; other workers being compensated while avoiding their unsafe workplaces; even the homeless suddenly being housed in available buildings. All this risked exposing their sham of a system. And all that was before we even began to face the fact that large swathes of the global population remaining in poverty meant elimination of such a virus would become a near-impossible challenge.

“The £1 billion spent in the last year by billionaires on superyachts is more than the cost of fully vaccinating a country like Nepal, where Covid is inflicting a terrible toll,” stated Oxfam in response to a luxury lifestyle publisher announcing that the rich had embarked on a “super-yacht” spending spree to escape Covid restrictions.

³ <https://thesicktimes.org/2024/05/23/how-to-make-spaces-more-accessible-during-the-continuing-pandemic/>

sible-during-the-continuing-

“It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.”
Upton Sinclair

Nation states in almost every single part of the planet were so hard-wired into the global capitalist economy that the addiction to it meant irrationally and confusingly stopping and starting precautions over and over, unable to ever hold out long enough to eliminate Covid, because that would mean them weaning themselves off capitalism and its emphasis on endless extraction, endless growth, endless profits... which of course is absurd, and doomed – but they believe in no other way, and those at the top who benefit from it the most will never let go of it until the rest of us organise and force them to.

Handwritten notes by the UK’s former private secretary for public services Imran Shafi suggesting prime minister Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson asked: “Why are we destroying the economy for people who will die anyway soon?” Similarly, Rishi Sunak said it was time to “just let people die and that’s okay,” before succeeding Boris as prime minister.

“For capitalism to function, it requires two things: a steady supply of workers producing value and an unending flow of consumption to realise that value as profit for the capitalist,” wrote one scientist, educator, and organiser under the pen name Comrade Dremel. “The onset of a pandemic presented a challenge on both of those fronts. Workers getting sick en masse and being forced to stay home for a couple of weeks – or even dying or becoming disabled and exiting the workforce altogether – was only one potential headache for the capitalist class. Far worse was the prospect of workers staying home out of precaution, thereby grinding production to a halt. Consumers staying home and buying only the essentials would prevent the realisation of profits across huge swathes of the economy, cutting off the flow of capital necessary to keep the whole system running.”⁴

Capitalism and care cannot coexist. Capitalists themselves were quite accepting of that fact. So its advocates needed to act, and do so fast, while the general population remained in this state of shock and confusion exacerbated by constantly changing government health policy.

As a result, from the very beginning, the primary motive for those in charge – since the pandemic couldn’t realistically be tackled while under capitalism – was to instead minimise the threat, and get people back out there working, and spending, while they were still in a state of shock.

*“In 1836, John Wilkinson wrote, ‘One of the artifices of Satan is to induce men to believe that he does not exist.’ The sentiment was echoed in the 1995 movie *The Usual Suspects*, ‘The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.’ For those who are not of a religious disposition, the greatest trick ever played might be the attempted disappearance of Covid-19 as a cause for public concern.”*
*The John Snow Project*⁵

⁴ <https://clarion.unity-struggle-unity.org/let-them-eat-plague>

⁵ <https://johnsnowproject.org/primers/the-greatest-trick/>

Left in Shock

Stuck in this state of shock, the broad anti-capitalist response remained impotent. The Trades Union Congress, for example, posted a tweet repeating “jobs, jobs, jobs,” disastrously contributing to a narrative in opposition to the interests of the working class, and as a result actually essentially aiding and abetting their government here in the UK, who were themselves grappling with methods to get people back into bullshit jobs right alongside more essential work in the ongoing pandemic. Calls for comprehensive Covid precautions in the workplace, or even an unconditional universal basic income, were few and far between, leaving a huge opening for capitalist rhetoric to continue with little resistance.

What we needed was a shift in perspectives – around work, healthcare, housing, air filtration. What we needed was to expand existing mutual aid programmes to better connect with other intersectional initiatives within and between communities, to further challenge the capitalist orthodoxy, the hierarchy of the state, and the way we’ve been going about “business as usual” for far too long. What we needed was a masked “march for science” on a larger scale than the one that took place after Donald Trump’s rise to presidential power in the US.

But none of this happened. Instead, the streets were being occupied, largely unchallenged, by right-wing anti-maskers arguing, without irony, that the same surveillance state that had introduced facial recognition technology was now merely trying to force us to mask up in order to “control” us. Sadly, this was one of the few groups to take to the streets on the issue of Covid and, frighteningly, the only group to really challenge the government on its Covid policies in any way, as I’ll elaborate on later.

But the Black Lives Matter movement immediately demonstrated how ongoing protest could be carried out safely and effectively during Covid, as millions masked up and marched against anti-Black violence, while also raising awareness of related intersectional issues – including challenging the white liberal myth of Covid as some sort of “Great Equaliser.”

“Black communities, people of colour, the disability community at large, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and low-income communities continue to be especially hard-hit by the pandemic and the abandonment of Covid-19 precautions,” wrote clean air activists Emily Dupree and Shelby Seier. “The pandemic reproduces the very forms of ableism, classism, and racism that existed before 2020. There are millions of already systemically marginalised people who are being further pushed out of public life.”

“Governments and business got tired of having to put safety over profit and especially missed their ability to exploit people to their maximum potential in the name of capitalism,” argued the Black writer and health organiser Beauty Dhlamini. “Suddenly, a sociological invention of a ‘post-Covid’ world emerged. This was swiftly followed by a parallel shift, from media reporting to scientific studies, where the framing of the pandemic explicitly showed that it was mostly impacting black and native communities. And because our lives are seen as disposable, people stopped caring. A study by the National Cancer Institute highlighted that this realisation prompted white able-bodied people to consider themselves less vulnerable to Covid and therefore become disinterested in safety measures and precautions.”⁶

⁶ <https://www.redpepper.org.uk/society/health/the-world-pretends-the-pandemic-is-over-because-of-who-it-affects/>

“Confronting ableism and revealing its shared features with white supremacy asserts the dignity of disabled people and overcomes dehumanising practices that mimic white supremacist ideology,” stated organiser Adam Hayden. “And more, challenging systemic hierarchies in all their forms extends an opportunity for people in privileged positions to question their own complicity in dominant systems, and when liberated from misguided rhetoric, closer to embracing their full humanity by recognising the humanity in others.”⁷

“Most, if not all, supremacist ideologies at least have this fascistic core: they all advocate a view of society in which one group has natural entitlement to dominate the rest,” explained philosopher Maarten Steenhagen. “The fascistic core of health supremacism is the idea that those who are healthy are somehow ‘better’ people, and that society may and must protect their interests and flourishing (rather than the interests and flourishing of members of society at large).”⁸

Steenhagen hastened to add: “Keep in mind that this is a false essentialising claim: those who happen to be, or who perceive themselves as, healthy are imagined to be inherently, intrinsically, and perhaps even genetically better. This essentialist way of thinking about traits has – any psychologist will tell you – a facile and childish attraction on our minds. (Note also that there is no saying that individuals who espouse health supremacist beliefs actually are themselves healthy. It is the appearance and performance of being healthy and strong that counts on this worldview – any particular health supremacist may themselves very well have all kinds of unknown or unacknowledged underlying health complications.)”

Here in the privileged West, many of us had a first shot of receiving Covid vaccinations, yet one of my family members still refused to partake because they believed the vaccinations were “dangerous” – even while at the same time working for the National Health Service and audaciously aiding in the vaccination drive, apparently happy to “poison” a plethora of other people.

In other cases, it became apparent to me that some were actually content to follow the government’s rules, as long as it did not disrupt their usual routine. A different family member, who happily (and understandably) took up the government’s priority of their own age group to get ahead in line to be vaccinated, then ignored the same government’s definitions of vulnerable people by refusing to wear a mask or even take a Covid test before entering the home of my elderly – and, yes, vulnerable – parents. After my parents moved overseas, this same family member traveled to visit them, dismissing my concerns over the phone by saying “it’s relaxed now,” referring to the precautions of a government this person purportedly disliked and distrusted yet gladly followed the same government’s guidance on public health which, as stated, is influenced by political ideology.

I remember not too long ago my mother – upon seemingly realising the gravity of the Covid pandemic – asking me: “When do you think it will be over?” I replied that it would probably be over already by now if everyone in the world were able to take precautions. We needed to demand “everything for everyone” – rather than accept more supremacist ideology.

⁷ <https://truthout.org/articles/ableism-and-white-supremacy-are-intertwined-we-must-confront-them-together/>

twined-we-must-confront-them-together/

⁸ <https://indoxicate.me/dont-be-a-health-supremacist/>

The Shocking Experiments of Stanley Milgram

In the years immediately following the Second World War, many people were still coming to terms with the horrors of the Holocaust in Nazi Germany. One of its major organisers was Adolf Eichmann, who was on the run in the 1940s, captured in the 1950s, and finally put on trial by 1961. It was then that Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram asked: “Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? Could we call them all accomplices?”

So, Milgram began conducting a series of experiments to measure the willingness of study participants to obey an authority figure instructing them to carry out acts even as the acts conflicted with their personal conscience. The participants were led to believe that they were assisting an unrelated experiment where they had to administer electric shocks to a “learner.” The fake electric shocks gradually increased to levels that would have been fatal if they had been real – and the Milgram experiment found that a high proportion of subjects would fully obey the instructions, with every participant going up to 300 volts, and 65% going up to the full throttle of 450 volts.

What the Milgram experiment demonstrated was that far too many of us were willing to accept questionable, harmful, even downright terrible instructions, if these were coming from a supposedly trusted authority.

“It’s the job of experts and trusted voices to convey the truth and give you guidance,” argued Comrade Dremel. “Not only have they failed at this, they have engaged in an active disinformation campaign dedicated to making the pandemic ‘disappear.’ This has not been the result of a classic caricature of conspiracy – some tiny council of elites, gathered in the shadows to craft policy out of whole cloth. What we’re actually witnessing is the quiet collusion of class interest. This form of conspiracy is a feature of cultural hegemony, and it has aligned itself in direct opposition to public health and scientific reality. A ‘conspiracy’ of this sort takes place in full view of the public. Every actor within it has openly telegraphed motivations that we are all taught to see as acceptable: keeping the current economic system intact at all costs.”

It’s probably fair to say that, judging from media alone, the majority of the general population was unaware of this motivation, or they were at the least unaware of many alternatives beyond capitalism. And so all the irrational behaviour of authorities, with their stop-start precautions and mixed messaging to go with them, abused the collective trauma from a pandemic that most people were barely able to process, by adding confusion on top of it.

The saying is that *you can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can not fool all of the people all of the time* – and sure enough, even though many people weren’t necessarily able to work through their discomfort and suspicions with an anti-capitalist consciousness, they were damn sure something wasn’t right. And as Trump and Brexit both demonstrated, with most populist anti-capitalist alternatives scuppered, sabotaged, and stamped out, people are then much more susceptible to the seduction of extremist explanations, where the blame can ultimately be directed at people easier to target, and take on.

After all, there were of course some who weren’t following orders from authorities. One group in particular demonstrated their defiance to the state right from the start of the pandemic. But this particular group’s anger at the government wasn’t based on there not being enough care. It was based on their belief that there was too much care. Yes, emboldened by their largely-unopposed anti-mask marches early in the pandemic, the fascists – many backed by dark money – had fully crawled out from their cesspits to shout out that there was a conspiracy taking place, but not the

one in full view of the public. No, their conspiracy theory was, predictably, rooted in antisemitism and other vile bigotry.

Dark Ideology, Dark Money

In the spring of 2020, UK Prime Minister Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson had publicly stated: “One of the theories is, that perhaps you could take it on the chin, take it all in one go and allow the disease, as it were, to move through the population.” By the autumn, the Great Barrington Declaration was made, calling for “herd immunity” – the utterly bizarre claim that widespread reinfection would actually make the majority of the population immune to the widely circulating and mutating virus, which would then somehow suddenly stop spreading so much. If your head hurts, don’t worry: that’s a perfectly natural reaction to reading their “logic.” But there is a hidden agenda behind it, of course.

The Great Barrington Declaration, if you weren’t aware, was simply an open letter that had already been rejected by journals because, to the authors’ own admission, its content was “repeatedly dismissed as fringe or pseudoscience.” Unsurprisingly, the declaration had been sponsored by the American Institute for Economic Research (AIER), a libertarian free market think tank based in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, USA, with a history of promoting climate change denial and the “benefits” of sweatshop labour. But the influence of this billionaire-backed lobby group meant that much of the disinformation was inevitably picked up by the establishment media, who were often too busy attacking the opposing “Independent Sage” group of scientists because they were left-leaning. *Shock, horror!*

“Throughout the pandemic, media attention has been focused on reproducing official rhetoric through op-eds and interviews,” wrote Comrade Dremel. “The experts promoted above all have always been selected based on their proximity to power, both in terms of their official appointment and their rhetorical line. As governments and agencies solidified their pandemic-minimisation rhetoric and policies, individuals who championed that line became even more appealing. The lure of manufactured conflict allowed media companies to profit by highlighting astroturfed, unpopular movements protesting all forms of public health policy. Depending on their particular cultural bent, news corporations could position themselves either as ‘freedom-fighters,’ standing up to the government tyranny of half-baked precautionary measures, or as ‘champions of reason,’ pushing back against misinformation and science denial.”

“You need only gently propose that we might return to wearing masks on public transport to provoke hundreds of people on social media to bray ‘freedom!’ and denounce you as a tyrant,” stated George Monbiot. “Against their tiniest of freedoms – keeping their faces uncovered on trains and buses – the trolls weigh freedom from disability and even death, and decide that their right to breathe germs on to other people is the indispensable liberty.”

There was also the influence of the far right “trolls” inside the corridors of power. While masks were crucial in stopping the spread of Covid, their historical and present-day unequivocal effectiveness was suddenly being called into question. We were even being presented with that old go-to faux concern and call to “think of the children,” being told how young people were so badly suffering by not being in school, in the midst of a mountain of mainstreamed misinformation.

As someone who was pulled from the school system at the age of eleven due to the abuse I suffered there, it was difficult for me, personally, to easily swallow such stories about schools

anyway, given my mother stood up to the state to teach me at home by herself in order to transform my life, well-being, and indeed my education to develop my critical thinking and anarchistic tendencies.

As the pandemic continued, it was this way of thinking that inspired me to counteract fly-posting that appeared around my Steel City streets – from something called “The White Rose.” The name seemed familiar, and at first I wondered if it was some sort of Yorkshire-based group, since the white rose is the emblem of the county itself. But then I learned that their nonsensical stickers were being found all over the country. It turned out that the name was familiar because a non-violent resistant group based out of the University of Munich, Germany – who carried out an anonymous leaflet campaign in 1942 calling for opposition to the Nazis – were called the White Rose. Just as Hitler’s fascists themselves co-opted the term “national socialism” and more recently Trump’s supporters have attempted to push “maga communism,” this White Rose group in Britain was attempting to exploit confusion, frustration, and paranoia around the pandemic – and the subsequent start-stop precautions imposed by a government with inconsistent messaging – to present themselves as a way forward in opposition to tyranny.

They did this by using stickers featuring QR codes that lead to their Telegram group to access “information” (or, rather, disinformation) about Covid, such as claiming the pandemic to be a hoax, that vaccines are all part of an attempt to control the population, and that masking was unnecessary and even dangerous. That may make your head hurt again, but once part of the Telegram channel, the curious who have joined are then presented with posted and cross-posted content promoting antisemitism, white supremacism, and other hate propaganda.

Fortunately, I’d been able to procure some stickers that were just perfect for covering the vile disinformation of the White Rose, all created in a similar style while exposing the group for the bigots that they were.

If you’re starting to spot a pattern here through all this, it’s because right-wing ideology is wrapped up into Covid minimising for many reasons. It isn’t just the desire to “let it rip” to let the “free market economy” run its course, though that is of course a major factor. There is a reason capitalism relies on authoritarianism to sustain itself in a time of crisis, and fascists have been particularly keen to help promote Covid minimising and “survival of the fittest” Social Darwinism.

“Health supremacist ideology exploits the same cognitive loophole as the perhaps more familiar guises of supremacist thinking: white supremacism and male supremacism,” argued Maarten Steenhagen. “Like these other forms of supremacist thinking, health supremacism projects a fantasy of natural strength and dominance of a specific type of person, in an attempt to secure and perpetuate that type of person’s power. Where white supremacism projects a fantasy of the strong white body, and male supremacism a fantasy of the biological superiority of the male, health supremacism projects a fantasy of the superiority of the naturally healthy body. As a necessary corollary, it imagines anyone who is ill or disabled as inferior. In the health supremacist view, social entitlement and privilege should converge on those who are deemed healthy. Anyone who does not classify as such has a lower entitlement to exist – ideally, ill or disabled people should not exist at all. Disability rights activists have for decades been warning for these views.”

As mentioned, the White Rose were not unique in exploiting unrest, confusion, and anti-government sentiment while co-opting and utilising the language of “the left” to promote, and recruit for, their hateful cause. Before the Great Barrington Declaration, the far-right “free speech advocates” of the Spiked online network had long since penetrated establishment media, having

emerged from the libel trial and bankruptcy of “Living Marxism,” the magazine of the Revolutionary Communist Party. Their financial backers? The same as those behind the Great Barrington Declaration: the billionaire Koch brothers, the right-wing libertarian oil barons who have been at the heart of climate change denial in the US. The Spiked group had enjoyed links to Nigel Farage and arguably exerted their “anti-lockdown” influence on the UK government. Like Trump, Brexit, and the breaking of Corbyn’s “Red Wall” in the UK, Covid would become just another triumph for the far-right – yes, the same snowflakes that continuously cried and claimed they were being “cancelled,” all while gaining victory after victory, and demanding more. Even if their stickers had long been obliterated from my local streets.

But beyond the production and dissemination of such counter- disinformation stickers, there seemed very little Covid-related action coming from anti-fascists. I had spent the early years of the pandemic searching for it and – when I didn’t find it – simply trying to help stir it up somehow.

The Absence of Anarchism

“Politics hates a vacuum. If it isn’t filled with hope, someone will fill it with fear.”
Naomi Klein

Right-wing influences were only able to succeed in the aforementioned absence of a strong anti-fascist narrative. As shown, while people were in such a state of shock, they were much more vulnerable to exploitation by the narratives of the far-right groups using populist language and masquerading as the “champions of freedom.”

Far from anything resembling the chaos and “anarchy” depicted in old movies and television shows, anarchism – as you by now probably know – is basically the belief in order without power found in hierarchies (including the nation-state) and instead promoting participatory democracy and mutual aid as alternative ways of organising society in a horizontally-structured, harmonious way, with care at its core. From non-hierarchical workplace organising to worker co-operatives, the examples of anarchism in action right now, probably in your own town, are actually many and varied, battling on in a capitalist world. From such examples, it may not seem scary to you, but there’s a reason it’s portrayed and treated as a significant threat from those who benefit from possessing power in hierarchical systems.

“Many people seem to think that anarchists are proponents of violence, chaos, and destruction, that they are against all forms of order and organization, or that they are crazed nihilists who just want to blow everything up. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Anarchists are simply people who believe human beings are capable of behaving in a reasonable fashion without having to be forced to.”
David Graeber

With that in mind, you’d be right to assume that it would be the anarchists who would step up to challenge the far-right with more than just a handful of stickers. After all, anarchists are able to argue that – without waiting for authorities to instruct us – we, as communities, are quite capable of procuring and processing scientific facts to then act in accordance with them, in a way that is better and healthier for us all, not least the most marginalised among us.

It didn't quite go as you might expect. Anarchists were by no means immune from the shocks of the pandemic. You may remember that when it all began, there was initially a lot of talk about how the pandemic provided us with so many realisations, and how the genie was out of the bottle, because we'd be changing the way we do things – from questioning the work we do, or at least a better work/life balance, to working from home, and less travel for meetings that can instead be conducted via video conferencing, with opportunities for increased accessibility and inclusion. “It's all changed for the better,” so many of us declared, “and there's no going back!” Some of us knew about the possibilities of Jitsi Meet and video chatting on Signal, but Zoom were a large company with a marketing machine; ahead of the pack. Their entire *raison d'être* was basically remote work... but, given their corporate nature, even their bosses ordered their workers back into the workplace. It would be some sort of hilarious joke if it wasn't real, and cynical. But again, it's all the capitalists know: generate profits off the labour; perpetuate the property rent; keep the workers under control.

Some of us were still determined to defend ourselves, and one another, via a union. In 2020, I had wanted to revitalise my local branch of the Industrial Workers of the World – the “People's Republic of South Yorkshire” long since absorbed into the Labour Party institution in whatever form it manifested itself, leaving consistently radical politics essentially on the fringes of the city's culture. Nonetheless, I sent out a few social media calls to action, and eventually we managed to hold some online video meetings, with myself as “acting secretary,” to formally re-launch the branch and begin holding officer elections. However, I was astonished at some of these “fellow workers” speculating on our social events being entirely dependent on the government's pandemic “roadmap.” These were supposed “anarchists” who were just waiting for word from the government, the same authority who had just been encouraging handwashing and social distancing as methods to deal with an airborne virus. Later, others had scoffed at Covid protocols hastily implemented at the IWW conference, by suggesting “all that” Covid “was over.” (ICYMI: Covid is not over.)

By 2022, I was attempting to launch a Local of the Solidarity Federation in Sheffield, meeting with members from Liverpool and Manchester online, only for a fellow anarchist from my locality to reject repeating these meeting formats because they felt that they themselves were “no good online” and instead suggesting a pub as the next meeting place. I had told them that, in the ongoing pandemic, I was still taking precautions, not least while caring for my disabled partner, who was also interested, to which the individual responded that they only want “a real physical presence” and “really want to establish an anarchist community of people as much as possible,” which we can only assume, then, would be excluding disabled people. This was the end of my involvement in the endeavour, and the others proceeded with arranging their pub meeting, which was then cancelled due to stormy weather – the irony presumably lost on them. The local pub meeting may have been rearranged but, as far as I know, The Local has yet to materialise. Maybe that's what happens when you permit supremacist thinking to permeate into your “anarchist” spaces.

In fairness, these were not necessarily the most common sentiments, just the darned loudest – almost always spouted by white cishet men, often with “old union” slightly Stalinist attitudes completely ignorant to the importance of intersectional activism and the fact that, in the spirit of anti-authoritarianism, none of us are free until we are all free. (There's a reason a lot of the old “Marxists” had joined up with the far-right anti-maskers in a shared environment of toxic masculinity, chasing clout and craving power.)

“Are you opposed to fascist, supremacist thinking? I hope you are,” wrote Maarten Steenhagen. “But then just check if, over the past few months, perhaps under pressure from online media or acquaintances or family, you may have made comments or shown behaviour that has health supremacist leanings. Do you shrug when someone is not able to access the meeting you organised due to a health condition? Have you stopped contacting a friend after they have become chronically ill? Stopped being on their side because of it? Do you dismiss requests for making adjustments to society to accommodate people who are ill or have a disability? Would you pressure a colleague to meet up in a shared air space, even though they said they’d prefer not to? Do you go barefaced even when people around you mask up? Stop doing those things. Stop it, even if it’s uncomfortable. When you see others around you perform in this way, point out to them what they are doing. Act to change these behavioural patterns. We must expose covert forms of health supremacism as the fascist murmurs that they are. To adapt a phrase of Gorcenski’s, health supremacy doesn’t want your attention. It wants your inaction. Don’t give it what it wants.”

I wasn’t the only one experiencing disconnects in the anarchist movement. There have been so many more examples, from people like me, of those claiming to be our fellow “anarchists” adopting ableist attitudes and supremacist thinking, following government rules and roadmaps or even going along with capitalist culture, and consciously or otherwise paving the way for yet another far-right victory. Many even seemed quite content to adopt the same cognitive dissonance towards Covid as that used by those we criticised for continuing to consume animal products (the speciesist hierarchy of humans over animals, of course, long since rejected by almost all anarchists).

As an example of anarchist capitulation, even the Manchester & Salford Anarchist Bookfair quickly compromised on Covid – year on year.

The bookfair’s promotional postcards in 2021 stated “spread the word but not the virus,” with a note calling for attendees to mask up, test, or just no-show if they were unwell. For 2022, their postcard called on us to just “spread the word,” but at least still had a note asking attendees to mask up *if they can* and, again, no-show if feeling unwell. And, if you hadn’t already guessed, by 2023 the postcard simply said “spread the word,” and that was it. No mention of Covid whatsoever. And this was just a bookfair. Easy, right?

Red Emma’s offers books, with an organising space and even a coffee shop, but through most of those same years, they were still requesting customers to be masked and/or vaccinated. A Baltimore-based worker co-operative named after anarchist Emma Goldman, they were flyposted with notices claiming that they were using Emma’s name to actually adhere to “capitalist mind control” by advocating for “harmful” measures. (These angered “anarchists” were apparently unaware that while incarcerated during the 1918 flu pandemic, Goldman herself was actually one of the most vocal in demanding mitigation against airborne transmission vectors.)

There were numerous other similar “anarchists,” or libertarian socialists, who were busy being much more *libertarian* and certainly less *socialist* – suggesting individual freedoms meant the freedom to also cause harm, as though anarchism means “no rules” so that we can tear up codes of conduct, or even health policies, and respect the freedom of an individual to engage in hate speech or perhaps to run through a crowded supermarket swinging a buzzing chainsaw. It’s their right, right? Well, no, that would be ridiculous. One disabled writer put it beautifully: “Above all else we need to keep reminding people that we all share the air – so everyone has a responsibility

to protect their fellow human being. ‘Personal responsibility’ is never going to work and more people will die or be left disabled.”⁹

But the bullshit of individual “freedom” was still being thrown around – all while Elon Musk was proving to be more than a match for fellow billionaire Mark Zuckerberg’s misinformation by taking over Twitter, overhauling it as X, and claiming to be a “free speech absolutist” where people could engage in hate speech or hound marginalised people to hell, albeit at the same time he was banning anti-fascist narratives from his social media site.

When Musk’s friend Jack Dorsey took his money from Twitter’s sale and went off to help launch Bluesky, too many activists also fell over one another to grab an invite code to join his Twitter 2.0 Kool-Aid cult, rather than utilising the already-existing and genuinely decentralised social network of the “Fediverse”¹⁰ with its numerous servers maintaining inherently anti-fascist codes of conduct, offering marginalised and vulnerable people safer spaces to socialise, and organise – without the ads, algorithms, or disinformation campaigns running rampant behind the web walls of data-gathering social sites led by some “Tech Bro.” This “Tech Bro” – Jack Dorsey – would, of course, later quit Bluesky and urge people back onto Musk’s Nazi platform.

When Covid hit, Musk had said that “the coronavirus panic is dumb,” refusing to close his Tesla Fremont Factory in defiance of state precautionary policies, emailing his workers that Covid was a “specific type of common cold” and vowing that Covid cases would not affect any more than 0.1% of the population of the US, predicting that there would be “probably close to zero new cases” by the end of the next month, in a statement Politico called one of the most audacious, confident, and spectacularly incorrect prognostications of the year.

Ultimately, though, he and those like him got what they wanted anyway, didn’t they? The lies of the far-right were halfway round the world before the antifascists had got their boots on.

A Perfect Storm

All of these varying influences – pro-capitalism politicians, billionaires, outright fascists – seem like quite the cast of characters, all different but somehow connected, combined to create a perfect storm of Covid minimising, browbeating us all back to “business as usual,” promoting “survival of the fittest.” It just so happens that those at the top already had the best resources at their disposal to not just “survive,” but thrive.

Those influences all shared a vested interest in Covid minimising, and even though your head has likely hurt at their various messages cited here – because many at first seem contradictory – after some reflection, it becomes clear that they all still in fact co-exist to promote and protect “business as usual”: from concerns about the pandemic’s impact on the high street one moment... to opposing 15-minute cities the next; from “mental health isn’t a big deal” one moment... to “think of the children” the next; from challenging big brother government one moment, to rejecting face coverings the next.

That last example, in particular, is quite fascinating in the fact that the same people supposedly against state oppression managed to merge both their anger at “lockdowns” with their contempt for mask-wearing, even in a time of increased surveillance, including facial recognition technology, from government dominance that they claimed to dislike. Why? The same reason they

⁹ <https://disabledginger.substack.com/p/just-die-already>

¹⁰ <https://distro.f-91w.club/fedizine/>

claimed vaccinations were part of some terrible tyrannical plot to poison and control us while, in fact, many vaccinations quickly became difficult or even impossible for many of us to easily or freely access (both my disabled partner and I have been repeatedly rejected when requesting boosters). The reason right-wingers hate vaccination roll-outs and mask-wearing is as simple as the same reason Covid data collection has been largely abandoned: **it reminds people that we're still in a pandemic, and that Covid is dangerous.** And as stated already, capitalism and care cannot co-exist.

These “champions of freedom” never gave a shit about you or I, or about overbearing government, or the surveillance state, or workers’ rights, or intersectional struggles of marginalised people – quite the opposite. But they managed to act quickly, and exploit confusion, while too many anarchists – who just might have harnessed increasing disdain towards a hierarchical government with a hidden agenda, by instead highlighting the importance of community, mutual aid, masking, and science – were still dazed and confused, if not just caught napping. And we were all soon sleepwalking into something sinister.

Largely unchallenged, this gaslighting – this shock treatment – has led us even deeper into an era of Late Capitalism, where Covid can be denied and its effects can be ignored – even as it becomes a mass disabling event and all the while, perhaps not coincidentally, disabled people are under attack in a culture war where ableism, health supremacy, and eugenics are frighteningly increasingly normalised. Even in supposedly anti-fascist circles, as evidenced.

So with the war seemingly won, what is life like for the victors today?

In the Eye of the Storm: Clean Air

“What Covid has shown quite brutally is that the closer you are to power, the less likely you are to die. That realisation is shocking, and it’s going to run very deep, just as the financial crisis in 2008 ran very deep.”¹¹

Adam Curtis

“The wealthy have different houses, different cars, different lifestyles from the rest of us,” wrote science journalist Shayla Love. “These days, they also want to breathe different air.” And they usually do.

“In photos of 2023’s World Economic Forum – or Davos as it is commonly called, after the Swiss resort town where it annually occurs – you might not notice the HEPA filters,” wrote Julia Doubleday. “They’re in the background, unobtrusive and unremarked upon, quietly cleansing the air of viruses and bacteria. You wouldn’t know – not unless you asked – that every attendee was PCR tested before entering the forum, or that in the case of a positive test, access was automatically, electronically, revoked. The folks on stage aren’t sporting masks (mostly), so unless you looked at the official Davos Health & Safety protocol, you wouldn’t be aware that their on-site drivers are required to wear them. You also might be surprised to learn that if, at any point, you start to feel ill at Davos, you can go collect a free rapid test, or even call their dedicated Covid hotline. It’s hard to square this information with the public narrative about Covid, isn’t it?”

“The conference demonstrates how the rich and powerful are learning to live with Covid, and it’s not how they have decided the rest of us will,” stated the Counter Disinformation Project

¹¹ <https://jacobin.com/2021/03/adam-curtis-bbc-cant-get-you-out-of-my-head-interview>

while examining the precautions at Davos. “Why do those who make the rules have different standards for their workplaces than those they set for us?”¹²

You wouldn’t know unless you search for it, but many Hollywood productions still maintain precautions pretty well, too. Music stars also protect themselves. Adele required those attending her Las Vegas shows to have full vaccination and negative tests. In addition, she enjoyed an expensive installation of complex systems that combined dehumidifiers, purification units, water molecule dispersal and cooling fans in the preparation room that then guided that air around the stage when she performed. Meanwhile, Taylor Swift was choosing not to meet with fans, while her publicist – remaining in direct contact with the star each day – was sure to wear a mask when walking through venues.

Some of the rich and powerful even did okay for themselves as a result of the pandemic. In fact, many were actually even better off than before.

Four major non-profit organisations in the US collectively gained more than \$118 million by capitalising on the spread of medical misinformation earlier in the pandemic – in turn enabling them to strengthen their influence in statehouses, courtrooms, and communities across the country – as reported by the Washington Post. One former “playboy” sold ineffective PPE to the UK’s National Health Service, which helped him buy himself a couple of mansions. He wasn’t alone. Many others were gifted contracts from a government who supposedly had to be careful with public spending. As we learned from the financial crisis, what they meant was that they had to be careful with public spending... that their capitalist friends weren’t able to profit from.

Within months of the pandemic, US billionaires had already become \$565 billion richer. Since 2020, \$26 trillion (63 percent) of all new wealth was captured by the richest 1 percent, while \$16 trillion (37 percent) went to *the rest of the world put together*, according to Oxfam.

Heck, it even turned out that the trusty old WHO had upgraded their offices to protect against airborne virus at the very same time they were busy telling us all that Covid wasn’t airborne.

Yes, clean air for the famous, the rich, and powerful – Covid for the rest of us.

Fuck that. It’s time for self-defence.

The Shock is Finally Wearing Off

“We are all playing Covid roulette,” wrote George Monbiot. “The next infection could be the one that permanently disables you. I’ve been hit three times so far, and feel lucky still to be active. But I’ve lost a little every time: stamina, lung capacity, sleep, general fitness, however diligently I’ve exercised since. In all three cases, it seems, the infection has come from school. For families with school-age children, the chamber turns more often than for those without... The government still does almost nothing to make schools safe. There’s a powerful argument that just as cholera was stopped by cleaning the water, Covid will be stopped by cleaning the air.”

Sure enough, as the shock wears off, we are now witnessing the emergence of “clean air clubs,” as well as worldwide “mask blocs” distributing masks and other resources as part of mutual aid. I, and others, had discussed the possibility of creating a mask bloc here in Sheffield, particularly in the absence of any other “anarchist” groups carrying out much action to tackle Covid itself, never mind the minimising or denialism that such groups had participated in, consciously or otherwise. At the same time, “Breathe Easy” were launching a series of arts and culture events

¹² <https://open.substack.com/pub/counterdisinformationproject/p/davos-and-how-the-powerful-live-with>

for Covid-cautious folks. Sheffield Mask Bloc aims to complement these by making sure as many people as possible have the chance to access the resources required to be Covid-safe. This all started with just a couple of people. It can happen where you are, too. You can make it happen, rather than waiting for pre-existing organisations to do it when their cultures catch up.

“It isn’t a coincidence that more protestors are wearing high quality KN95 or N95 masks these days. For years Covid safe advocates and mask blocs, who are connected to diverse organising groups, have worked hard to educate allies and provide communities with free respirator masks.”

Dr. Lucky Tran¹³

We have to become the change we wanted; the change that governments did not – and will never – give us. “The universal experience of living through a great shock is the feeling of being completely powerless,” wrote Naomi Klein in her book *The Shock Doctrine*. “The best way to recover from helplessness turns out to be helping.”

As communities, we can move forward with initiatives that have intersectionality at their heart. (Because none of us are free until we are all free, right?) Now the shock is wearing off, we can become better orientated – better organised – and adapt for the pandemic era. We can also recognise the shock this had on groups that already existed, and give them the chance to change their cultures and ways of operating. None of this is about pointing the finger or laying the blame at our comrades; it’s simply about recognising the mistakes made and helping one another to re-organise. It’s never too late.

Violet Blue made a decision to do something that many of us probably ought to do, too: apply content warnings to news items that report in “post-pandemic” terms for false framing. The award-winning journalist has maintained the invaluable *Pandemic Roundup*¹⁴ since Covid began, but many of us are only just now fighting back in the information war. It is crucial that we do so. But words must be backed up by action.

“In times of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.”

George Orwell

As has been demonstrated, these are times of universal deceit, Covid minimising and down-right denial just a part of the push into Late Capitalism – to the point where even something so simple as wearing a facemask can become an overtly anti-capitalist, even revolutionary, act.

As someone said on Mastodon, *if you want a revolution...you’d better start dressing for the occasion.*

¹³ <https://med-mastodon.com/@luckytran/112328545853996249>

¹⁴ <https://www.patreon.com/violetblue>

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Jay Baker
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