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Covid19 exposes the evil nature of conservatism

Jon Bigger

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The Tory government has totally mishandled the outbreak of Covid 19. We could sit and criticise the government for swaying this way and that in their guidance and their actions since the virus reached the UK; they certainly have a major issue communicating what they believe, why they believe it and crucially why the rest of us should trust them. The real problems arise though from their gut instincts and these have been on show over the last few weeks but so has a spirit of disregard for government and an acceptance that they will simply fail at protecting us.

Anarchists are at the forefront of setting up mutual aid groups across the country to ensure that vulnerable and elderly people will be protected from the worst effects of the social issues that arise with this virus. Mutual aid involves people reaching out to their communities and planning to provide practical help to people isolated. This can mean buying or cooking food for people. It can involve collecting prescriptions for those that need them. It is about building communities and working to ensure that nobody is left behind. This spirit is the default majority human response

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to disaster but it is often presented as exceptional and unusual because it is usually prompted by exceptional and unusual events. We saw it in the aftermath of the Grenfell fire for example. We call it “anarchy in action”.

Anarchists consider that mutual aid is natural and part of how species survive and evolve. However, we need to accept that conservatives, particularly the “new right” in leadership positions in the Tory party, have a different view. “Survival of the fittest” is trotted out by Tories as if it’s the only show in town. For them the weak will fall by the wayside and survival requires the deadwood to be left to get ill and die.

This has been communicated in a number of ways. They serve as a reminder of the dangers of this current government. First of all the prime minister, Boris Johnson, warned the country to expect to lose loved ones. He did this without a clear plan to attempt to radically reduce the chances of us actually having to face that reality. In fact, he did so stood next to his scientific adviser, Patrick Vallance, who went on to detail the idea of ‘herd immunity’.

Herd immunity is when enough bodies become immune to the disease to the extent that the disease cannot easily be passed around. Vallance went on to explain that as a country the UK needed to ensure that the virus infected people. In other words they want people to get it. This is on the basis that the virus is a seasonal one which will ebb and flow as the year progresses, maybe coming back next year. But of course, it might not be. In which case you’ve then seen millions infected and potentially hundreds of thousands killed by it. A letter signed by hundreds of scientists has been sent to the government condemning the logic of this idea.

So from the idea of herd immunity they swing to herd mentality and refrain from banning mass gatherings. Football matches would carry on as normal they said. Except that less than 24 hours later the Premier League and the EFL cancelled all games until April at the earliest. People and organisations out of government con-

friends, our neighbours and our communities; communities that have seen funding slashed in a decade of austerity.

The mutual aid groups springing up have to be the start, not the end. The ongoing project has to be to build real communities back up with people looking after each other beyond this virus. The government, either central or local will not react quickly enough in the immediate term. In the longer term we will have proven that society not only exists but it can be a literal life saver. Society can flourish without interference from government.

How things develop in the next few weeks and months is difficult to predict. What we do know is that everyone will be affected somehow by Covid19. No matter how we are each affected we have a choice on how to react. We can see it as an opportunity to make positive changes and do our best to help those around us. Meanwhile we need to be mindful of the harmful and destructive force of conservatism, encouraging us to see economic positives in death and pointing us towards doing nothing to help anyone but ourselves. We need to therefore be extremely sceptical of the Tory government and their supporters.

They are voting with their feet. Government cannot order football matches to carry on. They might yet force schools to stay open but they can't order kids to attend. Across the country people are starting to take control of their own lives. Across the country people are starting to realise that the UK are taking a different approach to other countries in combatting the virus. The prime minister appears in stark contrast to other world leaders.

The government has since said that herd immunity is not official government policy but they haven't stopped listening to the scientist advocating it. They now say they intend to force the elderly into isolation for a period of 12 weeks from this weekend. They also explained that when that happens there will be extra deaths, not from the virus but from neglect in our elderly population. This is because public services cannot match the level of demand. The mutual aid groups are going to be needed in order to ensure that as few people as possible die through hunger, loneliness and a lack of support. We have to accept that the Tory actions will wipe out significant numbers of people if we do not come together and take action. That being the case, knocking on your neighbours door to see if they're OK has just become a revolutionary and radical action. It can save lives the Tories don't care about.

On top of this the UK is one of the only countries taking measures which do not include the closure of schools. The official reason for this is that the measure wouldn't be necessary at this time. This is despite the fact most other countries are taking it that seriously. The real reason schools aren't being shut just yet is because there will be an inevitable knock on effect with staff in vital public services having to stay home to look after their children. A decade of austerity and decades of NHS mismanagement by the forces of conservatism have created a situation where the UK does not have enough staff for this disaster. Recent reports from Italy have shown that 30% of the people admitted to hospital with the virus needed intensive care. Part of the sudden spike in deaths in the country relate to the lack of staff and equipment. There is then

a knock on implication for routine and other services that hospitals usually carry out.

The evil of conservative economic policy has reduced public services to the bare bones just when we need our services to be plump and ready for extra demand. The market has provided us with a disaster. It is not enough to simply say that this would have been bad anyway. We know that. But it is a fact that free market economics has made it a whole lot worse. We are right to demand better and we are right to point the finger because there are specific people to blame.

If you think my criticism of Tories is an exaggeration take a look at the words of conservative columnist Jeremy Warner. On March 3rd he noted that the virus “primarily kills the elderly”. He went on to say ‘not to put too fine a point on it, from an entirely disinterested economic perspective, the COVID-19 might even prove mildly beneficial in the long term by disproportionately culling elderly dependents.’ What kind of benefit comes from the ‘culling’ of elderly dependents? The clue is in the bizarre phrase “disinterested economic perspective”.

Tories of the neoliberal variety controlling our government and in key positions in our media believe that capitalism has grown organically as our species has evolved. For Tories they are intertwined to the extent that capitalism seems natural, rather than a system that we could and should get rid of. It is as natural as the virus. Market forces provide and the virus provides. Survival of the fittest means you live to make a profit again tomorrow. Or you die. For them all the inequalities created by the system are justified as simple economic exchanges. Doing well and doing badly is all just natural. So, they sit back and watch it all unfold. Which is exactly what the prime minister has been doing: nothing, until public pressure forces his hand.

Capitalism is, of course, a choice. We can end it tomorrow if we choose to. As the powerful are invested in it we can expect it to carry on for a while. By choosing to look at the effects of the virus

in that detached impartial way, Warner sees a benefit to the mass deaths of older people. What he means is they are weak and therefore a drain on the economy. They need pensions and social care and all that costs money which has to come from richer people.

The Tory view is an evil viewpoint. It is one that encourages us to look at the vulnerable not with empathy and solidarity but with pity as we turn away. It is the cowards way to deal with the unprecedented death and destruction the world is facing and Warner should not just be ashamed but should frankly not be allowed anywhere near a keyboard, not to mention anyone over the age of 65. To think that people with his warped ideology are actually in power is terrifying.

Even when conservatives are being nicer about the virus they can't help but relate it to the economy. Conservative commentator and radio chat show host, Iain Dale, wrote on the Conservative Home website on March 13 that the virus could result in lots more people working from home. Everything comes down to capitalism for conservatives, while the rest of us think more about our family and friends or the match or what's on TV: otherwise known as living a life. Of course the chances of working from home greatly increase in line with your salary. Most people simply don't have the opportunity. The question on how people in the gig economy will gain money is yet to be announced.

On the same website Charlotte Gill moaned on the same day that poor old Johnson just ‘can't get it right’. She probably has a point actually. The chances are that this is so far out of his control that people will criticise him whatever he does. That isn't the same though as saying that he shouldn't be criticised. It means that we should all look very carefully at what he says and what he does as the morgues get full. We really could be reaching something that serious and frankly whether people like Boris Johnson or not is not going to be a particularly interesting topic for most people. This virus is not about the political class: it's about our family, our