Notes from lockdown

A series of reflections on some of the political and cultural impacts of the pandemic

Bordering during the pandemic

Georgie Wemyss and Nira Yuval-Davis

In our recent book *Bordering*, we discuss the paradoxical phenomenon that, under neoliberal globalisation, instead of disappearing borders have proliferated, both off- and in-shore - from consulates across the globe to everyday spaces like railway stations and places of work.[1] Bordering functions through processes rather than static boundary lines - and, like computer firewalls, borders are often invisible for some but impermeable to many others. Its excluding practices contribute to inequalities and precarities at every scale, from the global - as in the closing of borders to refugees - to the local - as in exclusions of migrant workers from access to health services, housing and work. They are forcing more and more people to be stuck in a precarious limbo, in grey border zones, with no possibility of building regular lives with civil, political and social rights.

It is important to examine the ways the pandemic has affected these processes of everyday bordering. Of course, it is far too early to know, or even predict, the longer-term transformations in bordering that the pandemic will bring. However, it is safe to say that, as after earlier major crises, such as 9/11 and the AIDS crisis - to mention just two major transformatory crises in recent decades - the 'new normal' is not going to go back to how things were, in several major ways. Everyday bordering, from the lockdown of individuals in their homes to the lockdown of regional and national borders, is at the heart of the technologies of control currently being used to try to contain the pandemic, and it is thus hard to believe that free movement will be restored any time soon.

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The reinforcement of boundaries

Free movement, of course, has never been free for most people. Border controls may be invisible or easily passed through by some, but they have been blocking the majority for many years. The main facilitators for passing through them are money and/or the possession of skills required by the neoliberal economy. We can see these permeable firewalls continuing to operate during the pandemic, at different ends of the scale. The super-rich are still able to travel in their private jets without being subject to the usual restrictions, and seasonal workers from Eastern Europe are being flown into the UK by the farming industry to ensure that fruit is being picked.

Two weeks into the lockdown, however, the Home Office published its guidance for post-Brexit immigration rules, aimed at preventing low-paid workers - those same key workers on which healthcare services are currently depending - from working in the UK. Even this glaringly obvious dependence on migrant workers could not deflect the government from its populist drive to restrict freedom of movement.

Across the globe, practices of everyday bordering have been reinforced by, and have themselves reinforced, the growth of nativist extreme right movements, which have brought to power authoritarian rulers in many countries, and were a major factor in galvanising support for Brexit in the UK. Blaming and scapegoating the 'Others' has been a reaction to the pandemic at every level, from Trump calling the coronavirus 'the Chinese virus', to social media blaming George Soros in the traditional antisemitic blood conspiracy theories, to the growing incidence of street hate crimes - including health workers reporting abuse from strangers for leaving their homes.

One of the positive 'side effects' of the lockdown has been the development and reinforcement of mutual aid groups in local communities. Neighbours have got to know each other, and have helped elderly and vulnerable people with their shopping etc. However, the other side of the strengthening of local bonds has been the rejection of 'others'. Local media have reported people crossing county borders as violating lockdowns - *Kent Online* reported 'Lockdown louts from London have been fined after once again invading the county', after being found by 'enforcement officers from the council who were patrolling the area'.[2] This has been aided by regional bordering policies, which in some countries, such as Italy, have meant the official closure of regional borders for non-essential traffic; in the UK, Sussex police, for example, praised 'the amazing community spirit across Sussex', whilst noting

that 'Unfortunately, a small number of people from outside of the county deemed it appropriate to visit the area'.[3]

The purpose of this argument is not to oppose bordering policies in the age of the pandemic, but rather to argue that using them as almost the only counter-pandemic measure is dangerous, both now and in the future. This is particularly the case given that voluntary lockdown policies on their own - without mass testing and sufficient protective equipment for those who are not in isolation - cost many lives, as well as creating psychological, social and economic hardships.

Some of the bordering practices operating during the crisis reflect continuing and intersecting political projects of governance and of belonging. Very few states have recognised all migrants as fully entitled members of society during the pandemic; only a few states have recognised the right of all members of societies for minimum income during the pandemic; and policies aimed at the exclusion and deprivation of all those who live in national and global grey limbo zones are endangering the lives of millions across the globe.

Everyday bordering policies are evolving in which the surveillance of people is reaching sci-fi dimensions. Similar Covid-19 related technologies are being developed globally by authoritarian and liberal governments. Israel has authorised counter-terrorism surveillance to track coronavirus patients; compulsory colour-coded health apps determine whether individuals can travel in China; and Russia uses face recognition technologies to enforce self-isolation. In Hong Kong and Singapore, Covid-19 apps identify locations and contacts of individuals. European governments are copying these apps whilst also collecting telecom data and using drones to spot transgressors.

Such developments add force to Yuval Noah Harari's speculations that the epidemic may normalise biometric surveillance, with authorities becoming able to detect people's emotions as well as their lifestyles and whereabouts. This would be the utmost paradox: a borderless world with the most tightly operated everyday bordering technology.

The extension of 'grey zones'

Increasing numbers of people are currently 'suspended' in grey zones across the globe - spaces whose residents live outside the protection of contemporary states.

These spaces are neither socially nor spatially neutral creations - they are likely to be occupied by specific groups living in particular places, and experienced differently according to individuals' social and economic positionings. We believe that national and local Covid lockdowns have led to a creeping expansion for these exclusionary and menacing grey zones: in the global north they are now inhabited by older citizens, low-paid care-workers in residential homes, precarious workers and overseas students; while across the globe they are making life even more difficult for mobile labourers and people seeking refuge.

The lockdown has had hugely disproportionate effects on elderly people confined in residential homes, and it has also extended the grey zone inhabited by citizens who were previously just about surviving in precarious jobs. And this zone has now become a looming prospect for increasing numbers of UK citizens, including those in previously 'secure' work, especially for those who need to cross income thresholds and demonstrate suitable accommodation to reunite with family living abroad. Furthermore, since the lockdown of universities, many students have been trapped in the UK, dependent on charity because the precarious work on which they previously relied no longer exists.

Racialised workers on cruise ships and migrant miners across the global south have become more like prisoners in the Covid-19 lockdowns. At the beginning of the pandemic the media focused on wealthy passengers stranded in the ocean on cruise ships, denied access to a series of ports and dependent on their governments to repatriate them whilst the crew who looked after them remained invisible. Three months later, sick and isolated crew from across the global south are confined to cabins in leisure ships registered to low-regulation states that exist outside the jurisdiction of the countries where they sail.

When lockdown policies were declared, in many cities, including in India and Chile, workers from rural areas were evicted and stranded with no public transport operating. The numbers of those who have died after starting to walk home to their remote villages are unknown, while many thousands who cannot prove their citizenship have been threatened with arrest and being put in detention camps, with no adequate sustenance, let alone proper care or social distancing. Documented migrant labourers, including in the Gulf states, have experienced unemployment and loss of income, but for the reserve armies of undocumented migrant labourers the situation is even worse: they have been forced in many countries to hide to

escape detention by the authorities.

Meanwhile, the longstanding grey zones in which some refugees have been forced to live for decades have become harsher and more dangerous. In Bangladesh, the government has withdrawn 80 per cent of humanitarian aid staff, severely limiting aid to the 900,000 Rohingyas confined to camps near the Myanmar border. In Calais, the minimal food resources provided by the French state to refugees have been halted, and food distribution left to a dwindling group of volunteers.

In the UK, hostile environment discourses and everyday bordering policies have led to asylum seekers not accessing health services to which they are entitled, in (justified) fear that their personal details will be reported to the Home Office, and/or because they are asked to pay full charges as private patients and cannot afford to pay them.

The worry is that with growing suspensions of democratic and civil rights under the pandemic regime, and the growing dependency on surveillance as the basic technology to regulate all citizens' movements, any rights-based approach which would protect those in the grey zones will be further delegitimised. People suspended in the grey zones are going to be even more excluded from the social and political contracts that states are currently engaged in rewriting.

This is an edited and revised version of blogs previously posted on the Social Scientists Against the Hostile Environment website: https://acssmigration.wordpress.com.

Notes

1. Nira Yuval-Davis, Georgie Wemyss and Kathryn Cassidy, *Bordering*, Polity 2019. One of the things we explore in the book is the many bordering functions that governments have imposed internally, through compulsory checks on migration status before engaging in many everyday activities/necessities - e.g. for work, study, housing, medical care.

2. https://www.kentonline.co.uk/folkestone/news/fines-issued-as-more-people-flout-lockdown-rules-225646/.

3. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-52279129.

NHS workers and the UK media

Hannah Hamad

Since the onset of the Covid-19 crisis in the UK, there has been more commentary and debate about NHS workers flying around the online media-scape than it has been possible to keep up with. However, some issues have risen to particular prominence over the weeks since the crisis intensified, some of the most noteworthy of which include the Tory hypocrisy of #ClapForNHS, the entrenched devaluation of nurses that this crisis has shone a new light on (and hopefully intervened in), and the NHS workforce's dependence on BAME people - who live and work under a government whose party is openly hostile to us.

News media footage of Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Chancellor Rishi Sunak standing either side of the door at 10 Downing Street clapping for NHS workers on 26 March has quickly become an iconic image of Britain in the time of Covid-19. But for those who support the existence, principles and mission of the NHS, the sound of their clapping rings hollow. The Tories have been attacking and eroding the NHS with damaging policy reform and legislation for decades. From the Thatcher government's introduction of competitive tendering, outsourcing and the marketisation of internal services, through the introduction of 'Private Finance Initiatives' under Major, the implementation of the Health and Social Care Act of 2012 under Cameron, and his ill-judged EU referendum - the outcome of which has produced a crisis in the NHS workforce like no other - the Tories have enacted change after damaging change to the detriment of the ability of beleaguered frontline workers to do their jobs as effectively and safely as they should.

The incongruous reliance by the PM and his spokespeople on the anachronistic and sub-Churchillian rhetoric of wartime when talking about the crisis, the NHS and its workers only emphasises a point that was made earlier this year by a character in the BBC's *Call the Midwife*. This is that the role played by Winston Churchill in the formation of a comprehensive NHS, free at the point of use, has long been exaggerated. (This is a point that continues to be disputed by historians. What is not in doubt is that Churchill's Tories voted against it 21 times.[1]) In the opening episode of the always socially critical, often radical, flagship Sunday night drama series that

aired at the beginning of the year - as the crisis was unfolding - the show's resident physician, Dr Patrick Turner (Stephen McGann), tore into the Conservatives. A clear line under the litany of hypocrisies they have uttered and enacted in the name of the NHS through the decades was drawn when the doctor lambasted remarks made about the health service in the depicted aftermath of the death of the former PM: 'The NHS had nothing to do with Churchill, or his party'. Today's NHS certainly has nothing to do with Churchill, and no amount of pseudo-wartime posturing and hypocritical hand-clapping by Boris Johnson or his cabinet will change this.

Lest we forget, it was just a few weeks ago, as the Covid-19 crisis was really taking hold in the UK, that the mainstream media was reporting on the staffing crisis in the NHS, which has been exacerbated by the exodus from the service of EU-citizen NHS workers who have left this country in their thousands in the years since the referendum. This produced a crisis in the workforce that left the UK in the position of having 43,000 vacant nursing posts at the outset of a global pandemic that has placed truly unprecedented levels of pressure on the service and its workers. And long before the Covid-19 crisis had even emerged, the NHS was already under more pressure than it had ever been, not just because of the recent departure from the service of these EU workers, but thanks to a decade of austerity cuts, and the negative impact of the implementation of the 2012 Health and Social Care Act, which fundamentally changed the nature of the service as we had previously known it.

On 2 April 2020, Louise Condon, Professor of Nursing at Swansea University, wrote an impassioned letter to *The Guardian* about the way in which the nation's nurses were being spoken about and depicted in the media: as she argued, in news reportage about frontline NHS workers treating and caring for the infected, the work of nurses was frequently being devalued, disrespected and de-professionalised.[2] This phenomenon, although it is far from new, seems all the more egregious at the present time, when nurses and fellow healthcare professionals and NHS colleagues are risking (and in some cases losing) their lives. Many will by now have seen footage of flummoxed Health Secretary Matt Hancock on BBC *Question Time* on 2 April admitting to Dame Donna Kinnair of the Royal College of Nursing that he didn't know that nurses dying of Covid-19 were at that time not even being counted: 'four doctors have died so far … and some nurses'.[3]

In Condon's view, representation and perception are an integral part of the undervaluing of nurses. In posing the question 'When will the media wake up to

the fact that nurses are not angels but highly competent clinicians?' she gets right to the heart of the issue - the media and popular cultural representation of nurses that has plagued public understanding of their professional status and clinical skills for decades. Thirty-five years earlier, nurse and writer Jane Salvage was already highlighting that in viewing the nurse as 'a selfless ministering angel' it was easy to lose sight of them as 'a skilled worker' doing 'a difficult and complex job'.[4] In the same article Salvage also drew attention to the extent to which the NHS has been dependent on the labour of nurses of colour throughout its history. This remains the case today.

In 2016 the BBC documentary *Black Nurses: The Women Who Saved the NHS* shone an important light not only on the crucial contributions made by BAME workers to the viability of the NHS as an institution right from its inception, but also on the racist abuses these nurses have suffered from patients and colleagues, and continue to suffer today. This is something that Sonia Sodha makes painfully clear in a recent *Guardian* article in which she holds the government to account for the racist policies of its party.[5] One of the most vicious of these has been its treatment of Windrush migrants, including 85-year-old former NHS nurse Icilda Williams, who, after thirty years' service nursing this nation, was repeatedly refused entry to the country after she retired.

It is not long since the Prime Minister left the intensive care unit and ward at St Thomas's Hospital in London, where he was treated for his Covid-19 infection by, among other NHS workers, lung specialist Dr Luigi Camporata, an EU national from Italy; nurse Luis Pitarma, an EU national from Portugal; and nurse Jenny McGee, an immigrant from New Zealand. He has been outspoken in thanking these nurses in particular for saving his life.

Time will tell if Mr Johnson's stance on the value of these NHS workers will extend beyond this individual expression of gratitude to reach his politics: whether, for example, when the worst of this crisis is over, he will re-evaluate reported Tory intentions to include the NHS in a trade deal with Donald Trump. Will his party, which cheered in the House of Commons in 2017 after they had voted down a bill to increase the pay of NHS staff, in time to come reconsider their literal devaluation of these workers?[6] Early signs suggest not. On 24 June 2020, a Parliamentary vote was taken on an opposition motion to introduce weekly Covid-19 testing for NHS and social care workers.[7] Johnson's Tories comprehensively voted it down. The clapping has stopped.

Notes

1. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/why-should-the-people-wait-any-longer-how-labour-built-the-nhs/.

2. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/02/its-time-nurses-got-the-recognition-they-deserve.

3. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-matt-hancock-question-time-bbc-video-nurses-deaths-a9446076.html.

4. Jane Salvage, 'Nurses - Behind the Painted Smile', *Spare Rib* No 153, April 1985. See also her book *The Politics of Nursing*, Heinemann, 1985.

5. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/05/nhs-heroes-and-targets-of-racists.

6. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6_MfQ9FloE. This has become more famous since the Covid-19 crisis, thanks to its widespread recirculation.

7. https://votes.parliament.uk/Votes/Commons/Division/802#noes.

Back to normal in Newham?

Joy White

It was seeing the bouquets of flowers outside the surgery that stopped me in my tracks. The rising and disproportionate number of deaths due to Covid, particularly among Black and ethnic minority communities, had been a main topic in the news for weeks. Closed shops, empty buses and long queues outside the supermarket let us know that we were in a period of quarantine or lockdown - depending who you spoke to. But it was on a walk in an almost deserted high street in May 2020 that the impact of Covid-19 really hit home. The flowers were for one of the GPs, who had died from Covid-19.

On 1 May the Guardian reported that in Newham people had been dying from Covid-19 at a much higher rate than anywhere else in the UK.[1] The borough is close to the UK's major financial districts - the City of London and Canary Wharf. Yet, in contrast to the great wealth of the City, Newham has for a long time been lived in by people on much lower incomes. As in other parts of the country, Covid-19 has revealed these inequalities in new ways.

Soundings

Situated roughly five miles to the east of the City of London, Newham is a predominantly young borough. With a median age of 31.9, and with 72% of the population claiming a Black or ethnic minority background, it is one of the most culturally diverse areas in the UK. The multicultural nature of the area is in keeping with its history as a location for significant migration from former Commonwealth countries and beyond.

Because of its location, Newham has been undergoing a period of extensive regeneration and redevelopment, particularly in areas near the docks, and around the Olympic Park in Stratford. House prices and rents have risen across the borough, but only a very small percentage of new builds are allocated to social housing. The new Crossrail route has three stations in Newham, making the area even more desirable for those that can afford it.

There are plans to create 35,000 jobs and 4000 new homes in the Royal Docks and 40,000 jobs in Stratford. Currently residents are employed mainly in occupations that are relatively low-paid, including health, care and retail. These patterns are unlikely to change for most residents.

Being a host borough for the London 2012 Olympics was supposed to bring benefits to the borough in terms of more jobs, better opportunities and affordable housing. Almost ten years later, promised opportunities have not materialised in any substantial way. Longstanding Newham residents are still low paid, with a below average median salary of 24,923, but they still live in expensive housing - London rents are some of the highest in the country, no matter which borough you live in. Newham is place of contrasts, with newly gentrified spaces displaying pockets of wealth while other parts of the borough experience some of the worst overcrowding in the country.

On a national scale the UK government's shambolic response to the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the gaping cracks in our systems. Dire conditions in the criminal justice system, the NHS, and in health and social care have been exposed.

We can see with great clarity what it is like to live with very little money, no back up and few resources. We are becoming more and more aware that for some the interactions with state agencies, benefit systems, and the police are fearful and problematic. We cannot help but know that living cheek by jowl in the inner city brings its own pressures.

Like many inner city areas, Newham has been on the receiving end of almost a

decade of austerity measures. Unemployment rates remain high, and 52% of children live in poverty. An 81% cut in youth services has left young people with little to do and few places to go.[3] Affordable housing is in short supply; despite regeneration, large numbers of people - 45 per 1000 - are still living in temporary accommodation.[4]

Throughout the lockdown period, young people have watched their parents going to work, or have worked themselves on the front line: in health care, social care, retail and delivery services. As lockdown is beginning to ease, what do we know about its physical and emotional effects? The repercussions of staying in and having little social contact, and the constant news bulletins about death, are yet to be revealed, but no doubt they will be long lasting. Somehow, we have to come to terms with widespread loss and grief, as well as the recognition that deaths were exacerbated by institutional racism, inequality and poverty.

As the economy goes into freefall, already there are rumblings of further austerity measures, with tax rises and cuts to public spending. A sharp rise in unemployment for young adults is predicted (including graduates). Young people need hope for the future and hope for a better world, and they are actively resisting the ways in which present social, economic and racial inequality are depicted as the natural order of things. Communities of mutual aid and support are being established and developed.

The government continues to borrow money to prop up the economy. Furlough schemes, payment holidays and 'bounce back' loans to keep us going for now. What happens when we return to 'normal'?

The blooms outside the GP surgery have dried up and been cleared away. Slowly, the shops in the High Street are reopening - although some of the smaller establishments are now up for let. But post-industrial Britain remains committed to a neoliberal agenda, as if there is no other way. It is almost impossible to create an independent life as a young Black adult in the inner city. Young people who have grown up in the UK over the last forty years are trying to create a stable foundation out of uncertain conditions - zero-hours and fixed-term contracts, and a gig economy where most tasks have been outsourced.

As one of the world's richest nations, we need radical reform. We cannot justify going back to how things were. The 'normal' that we had of hyper-individual, neoliberal affect presented as common sense has no place in the world that comes

after. Public services are not a drain on the economy: they are an investment into a society that needs to strive for fairness and equality.

Notes

1. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/may/01/covid-19-coronavirus-newham-london-uk-worst-affected-area.

2. https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/data/boroughs/newham-poverty-and-inequality-indicators/.

3. https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/assembly/unmesh-desai/youth-services-in-newham-cut-by-81.

4. https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/data/boroughs/newham-poverty-and-inequality-indicators/.

Race and craft in the Covid spotlight

Karen Patel

After the UK embarked on lockdown in mid-March, craft and creative organisations had to quickly adjust to the new normal. Crafts Council UK and Craft Scotland gathered sources of help for makers that included guidance on financial help available, tips for livestreaming craft and advocating for adequate financial help for makers at all levels. Arts Council England also announced emergency funds for arts organisations and individuals. During a very worrying time, professional makers have been trying to adapt to the new climate, but at the same time craft has never been more popular as a means to pass the time, with TV shows such the BBC's *The Great British Sewing Bee* being moved to a primetime TV slot and attracting around 5 million viewers. Many makers have also been turning their skills to making scrubs for health and care workers, or making and selling novelty cloth masks on Etsy. In Australia, the social studio in Melbourne has managed to save the jobs of all its employees by switching to sewing scrubs for health workers. While many are rightly worried about the future of the cultural industries post-pandemic, in some

areas craft seems to have found a role in the current crisis. But in thinking about all these changes, and what they mean for the future of the professional craft sector, there is an urgent need to address the deep inequalities that exist within it.

Inequalities and racism in craft

According to the Crafts Council's own most recent figures, the professional craft sector in the UK is dominated by white makers, and that has not improved in the past decade or so.[1] Since 2006, the proportion of makers from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds in the UK has remained at around 4 per cent, and this lack of change points to a systemic problem in the sector. My AHRC-funded research on supporting diversity in craft (in collaboration with the Crafts Council), suggests that the UK craft sector is far from inclusive, and that some craft spaces are unwelcoming for makers of colour. Some of the makers I have interviewed have told me about incidents of racism at craft fairs, and microaggressions from other makers, customers and suppliers. And some of the makers I have spoken to feel that value judgements about their work are frequently filtered through perceptions about their ethnicity, gender and sometimes class, making it especially difficult for them to build a successful career in craft.

Since January 2019 there have been ongoing debates about racism in knitting on Instagram, and time and again knitters of colour attempting to call out racism and microaggressions have been accused of 'bullying' and (pejoratively!) labelled 'social justice warriors'. In the meantime, in light of the recent increased attention on Black Lives Matter after all the events surrounding the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the Crafts Council, like many other organisations, sought to demonstrate their support for anti-racism by taking part in #BlackOutTuesday. However, this met with a lot of criticism, with makers of colour in the industry highlighting how the Crafts Council's own actions are not inclusive. The Crafts Council have subsequently admitted they need to do much more.

This latest wave of conversation about racism in craft indicates the need for systemic, fundamental change in the sector to address inequalities that are mostly determined by race and class. At the moment, people of colour are doing a lot of the labour of highlighting the need for change and holding organisations accountable. Black makers are again having to go through the exhausting task of looking at empty

statements and more racism online. This can adversely affect their work - some have been voicing their inability to make during such fraught and traumatising times for Black people around the world. All of this will not have the same emotional or mental toll on white makers.

Covid-19 and craft

The unequal impact of Covid-19 has highlighted the entrenched racial and social inequalities in UK society, and there is a danger that the crisis will only deepen existing inequalities across the board. We are already seeing this in the classed nature of the resurgence in domestic craft, with reports of stores such as John Lewis benefitting from the increased demand for sewing supplies and expensive fabrics. Those fortunate enough to work from home have the time and resources to turn their attention to making and baking, or developing their craft expertise. They can even choose to stay silent about Black Lives Matter and not engage at all with the protests or online conversations. Black makers simply don't have that luxury.

Albeit in different ways, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter resurgence have both initiated activity around craft. The surge in the popularity of craft has seen many more makers enter the market, contributing to the growth of a sector which seemingly has lower barriers to entry than other creative industries, given how sites such as Etsy and Folksy can provide online shopfronts for makers. But at the same time, through Black Lives Matter, a light is finally being shone on racism in craft in the UK context, and craft organisations seem to be willing to change and listen.[4] In both respects, there is a (tentative) positive outlook for craft in the UK after the crisis.

However, the impact of Covid-19 could make organisations go back to their previous ways of working, in order to bring back a sense of normality and 'safety' as they try to survive the financial and social repercussions of the pandemic. This fear is already being voiced in the theatre sector, as actor and director Kwame Kwei Armah has cautioned:

> Recessions and depressions make us smaller, not larger. We become our smaller selves and I fear that the lockdown may contract us, not expand us.[5]

It is crucial that this is not allowed to happen - in craft, or in any cultural industry.

Notes

1. Crafts Council, *The Market for Craft*, 2020.
2. https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/2/25/18234950/knitting-racism-instagram-stories; and https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tanyachen/knitting-micro-influencer-drama-naming-yarn-sjw-terms.
3. https://www.instagram.com/blkmakersmatter/.
4. https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/stories.
5. https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/jun/09/covid-19-theatre-diversity.

Mutual aid and radical neighbourliness

Deborah Grayson

In the run-up to the general election last year, my friend Sita Balani wrote a prescient blog about the politics of risk.[1] She was writing about canvassing for the Labour Party, and in particular what it meant for those of us rooted in particular kinds of queer, feminist and antiracist organising practices, with their emphasis on 'safer spaces', to engage in the fraught uncertainties of door-knocking. The Covid era has of course added a whole new kind of danger to knocking on strangers' doors, but the central theme of her blog has become even more apparent - that societal risks cannot be addressed within tiny bubbles of the radical left, and that there is an urgent need, as she put it, to seek 'mass social change, not pockets of safety'.

So, we have got busy again, and it seems like everyone I know is now bottom-lining a local mutual aid group. Conversations with friends, as we swap notes on WhatsApp etiquette and the best way to pick up prescriptions, have a similar election-time feel of a dispersed but powerfully collective experience. The key difference between now and then is *where* this organising is happening. While last winter we found ourselves travelling in Labour-branded woolly hats to marginal

seats, the lockdown has forced us to engage in a kind of organising that is arguably even more out of our comfort zones, with our literal, geographical neighbours.

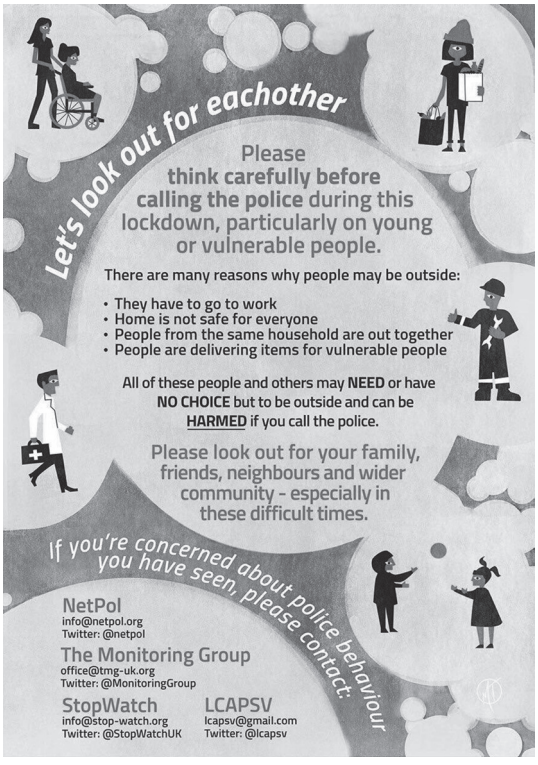
The focus on physical proximity is discomforting on a number of levels. For people who have rarely felt included in any clearly defined 'community', and who are well aware of how the concept is weaponised by the right, it is disconcerting to have to re-centre our relationships around basic material conditions like walking distance. Just *who* we are now apparently in community *with* can feel particularly arbitrary for transient groups and dispersed minorities, whose lives have till now been geared around maintaining relationships with people who cannot consistently be nearby. And there is something worryingly small-c conservative about fixating on forming relationships with people who happen to live on your street, especially when the worst of our curtain-twitching, Neighbourhood Watch-ful impulses are being actively encouraged by the state.[2]

The fact that different political projects could emerge from this groundswell of organising is the source of new opportunities and new risks. These have a different and more mundane flavour to door-knocking, in part because the actions of mutual aid groups are not necessarily being understood as involving a politics (the anarchist roots of the concept of 'mutual aid' having been successfully obscured). Arriving on someone's doorstep and asking them how they are planning to vote invites a possible confrontation precisely because it is unequivocally understood as a political act. Getting together with your neighbours to deliver shopping sits much more in the realm of Big Society-style 'little platoons'; this both provides a meeting point for the different kinds of people who might participate, and runs the risk of avoiding crucial questions about responsibility and power.

My current research project, Policing the Political, has been exploring many of these questions within wider civil society, focusing on how small organisations experience a loss of voice and political agency by constructing oppositional activities as 'political' and therefore illegitimate.[3] Given this, I have obviously been highly interested to see these same dynamics playing out within mutual aid groups. The process of silencing people by categorising certain actions as 'political' was particularly explicit in one WhatsApp group I'm in, when a woman who shared a petition to renationalise the NHS was shut down on the grounds that the group was 'not the place for politics' - although it had been considered uncontroversial to use the platform to encourage people to #clapforcarers on Thursday nights.

More often, the different political positions at play are more coded. A friend tells me about a bust up in her local group over whether to share a poster advising people to think carefully before calling the police, which some members said was 'outside the group's remit', though others felt their objections actually came from not wanting to criticise the state. Politics can also be embedded in processes - I've heard of groups who won't allow people to volunteer without a DBS check, or insisting people give their passport numbers and national insurance numbers to participate. Quite apart from concerns about who might have access to this data, these practices run counter to the whole principle of mutual aid by excluding large numbers of people who are likely to need 'helping' from being able to be a 'helper'.

And yet, this is where we find ourselves - often with no choice but to rely on those who happen to be close by, and very little leeway for other kinds of political action in the current moment. So how can we think about our role in this kind of organising, as people coming to these mutual aid groups with an analysis of how we have ended up here, and an understanding of the dangers of seeing this crisis in depoliticised terms? One thing we can bring to the table is an understanding that the public health crisis will be followed by a huge social and political crisis as we navigate unprecedented economic turmoil, and the full force of the measures required to reinstate capitalism after it has been demonstrated that it is not only deeply harmful to life, but also optional.



Perhaps one way to think about what we are doing is as a series of stages. Stage 1 we might call 'basic neighbourliness' - at this point we are making connections

and developing a sense of who we might be able to call on in an emergency, and reducing anxiety and helplessness by having a focus for taking action. Stage 2 is when we move on to 'advanced neighbourliness', where we take meaningful action to keep each other sane and well, supplement existing networks of support and try to prevent widespread destitution. Most groups I know of seem to be somewhere between stages 1 and 2, depending on the level of 'neighbourliness' that pre-existed the crisis, and the intensity of current needs.

However, these stages need to be followed by another, stage 3, which could be called something like 'radical neighbourliness'. This will involve engaging with the inequalities that led to certain groups disproportionately dying and becoming destitute, and building meaningful long-term solidarity across lines of power - and between different places - in order to resist oppressive state measures. To get here, we will need to take the opportunities that mutual aid groups provide for having new conversations about policing and borders and precarity and injustice, and to insist that 'neighbourliness' doesn't stop at running errands but encompasses a much deeper process of collective transformation. This will require us to exercise the 'forgotten revolutionary virtue of patience' - and to be willing to build and maintain relationships with people who may never conceive of this as 'political' activity.[4] This is the risky, frustrating but necessary work that will challenge and expand our 'pockets of safety', and point towards new ways of living together.

Postscript

This was written in late April 2020, and rereading it at the beginning of July it's interesting to see how the situation has unfolded. Probably the most striking inaccuracy was my assumption that the public health crisis would to some extent be resolved before the social and political crisis hit, when it now seems that the public health crisis (in England, at least) is going to run on much longer, and the social crisis has already begun. Political differences between mutual aid groups have become much more apparent, with some providing arrestee support for Black Lives Matter demonstrations, while others (like my own) have fizzled out as basic level requests dwindle. But the central point about the discomfort that focusing on geographical proximity brings to certain kinds of activists and organisers is also starting to seem like something we will have to navigate over a longer time period - especially if we have a winter lockdown.

Notes

1. https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4518-dangerous-spaces.
2. https://www.avonandsomerset.police.uk/report/breach-of-covid-19-restrictions/.
3. https://policingthepolitical.politics.blog/about/.
4. https://freedomnews.org.uk/five-quick-thoughts-on-the-limits-of-covid-19-mutual-aid-groups-how-they-might-be-overcome/.

Pandemic time

Alister Wedderburn

Every Thursday evening throughout April and May, Britain paused to applaud the people working on the frontlines of our National Health Service. We stood at our front doors, we leaned out of our bedroom windows, and we clapped. We clapped a Health Service that has been steadily underfunded by a series of governments that we and our clapping hands voted for. We clapped a Health Service that can't provide its doctors and nurses with adequate protective equipment, that can't test them when they feel sick, and that can't save them when they fall ill and die. We clapped the Health Service's staff, of whom over one in ten are immigrants, even as we demanded that people at our borders be treated with ever-increasing suspicion. The National Health Service is rightfully Britain's most beloved institution, but it is also its least politicised. Our love for the NHS is ultimately what will kill it. We will no doubt clap its corpse.

I am inhabiting the temporality of a dog. For the last fourteen weeks, my time has revolved around meals and once-daily walks. Everything else is mush. Sitting at my laptop in my living room window, I can see neighbours in the tenements opposite, sitting at their laptops in their living room windows. I'm not getting much work done, but my performances of professionalism do at least give some sort of glutinous, doughy structure to days that would otherwise be without form. I wonder if my neighbours are enacting similar performances beneath the proscenia of their window-frames. Maybe they're occupying that imagined state of manic productivity

against which I am constantly measuring myself?

The rhythms of everyday life have been altered over the last few months for all of us, but not to the same extent, and not in the same way. It's hard to reconcile the unbounded shapelessness of my life at the moment with the furious hyper-urgency faced by medical professionals, or with the chaotic and uncertain horror the sick and their families must now be navigating. As a childless university lecturer, I am similarly insulated from the gnawing anxieties of unemployment or eviction, and from the frantic plate-spinning suddenly required of parents, carers and many others. These vast disparities bring the temporal dimensions of pandemic politics into sharp focus. I am finding it impossible to think about the virus - its epidemiology, its economic and social effects, and the measures taken to contain it - without considering its impact on people's perceptions and experiences of time.

I took part in the NHS clap until the end, but after a few weeks the occasion came to feel like a hollow act of self-gratification: a complacent wave breaking across a howling, burning shore. Notions like 'Thursday' and '8pm' belong to another time: a time defined by the rhythms of work and leisure, week and weekend, and by academic and religious calendars. Their invocation at a time of crisis feels quaint, which is no doubt part of the reason why they have been invoked so urgently. To do something together, at a defined hour, is briefly to re-enact the tempo and cadence of a time we left behind several months and many thousands of deaths ago. This is understandably comforting - but is it also enervating? Might a collective desire to return to normal obscure the pervasive injustices that structure 'normality' for so many, or blind us to the opportunities for social transformation that our present moment presents?

There remains a commonly held assumption that social and professional patterns will at some point begin to re-establish themselves. Let's go for a drink once this is all over, my friend idly messages - though what 'this' is exactly, and what it being 'over' could possibly mean in the context of a five-figure national death figure and a global recession is anyone's guess.

But a much more pressing question than when we might be able to go back to 'normal' is whether such a return is desirable or even possible. If not, then one must also ask what changes might be achievable in a post-pandemic world, and how one might go about enacting them. The temporary breakdown of capitalist routine clearly presents opportunities to explore alternative configurations of solidarity and

rhythms of social living - opportunities that the Black Lives Matter movement are grasping brilliantly and inspiringly.

But these questions are not the preserve of the left, of course. The changes in work patterns we have been experiencing may also open the door to the expansion of neoliberal modes of governmentality and the erosion of hard-won workplace rights. In his book 24/7, Jonathan Crary writes of capital's ongoing battle with time: it has in its sights people's partitioning of time into seconds, hours, days and weeks; the demarcations we ordain between day and night, weekday and weekend, clocked-on and clocked-off; and the allowances made for infirmities like sickness or even sleep.[1] The logical endpoint of the neoliberal fever dream is, for Crary, the total abolition of these and all other differentiations, facilitating 'a generalized inscription of human life into duration without breaks, defined by a principle of continuous functioning'. This is the textureless omnipresent of 24/7: 'a time without time, a time extracted from any material or identifiable demarcations, a time without sequence or recurrence … an unalterable permanence composed of incessant, frictionless operations'.

The pandemic has hardly brought about incessant or frictionless activity: on the contrary, the economy has largely ground to a halt. Yet the shutdown has enabled or accelerated the radical reorganisation of what Crary calls 'human time' in ways that would have been unthinkable just a month or two ago. Given that nine million jobs are on furlough at the time of writing, with another three million people unemployed, it seems improbable that pre-pandemic rhythms of social life will effortlessly re-establish themselves after the re-opening of shops and offices. If market capitalism demands the flattening of human time into a featureless 24/7, then the lockdown is less a rod in its wheels than an unprecedented opportunity to restructure the conditions and meanings of social and professional life.

The most obvious lockdown-induced concession that many of us are making towards 24/7 time can be summed up by a single buzzword: 'flexibility'. Flexibility is already a central tenet of the zero-hours and gig labour markets, sold to workers as a guarantee of independence and choice; as a way of configuring one's life in accordance with one's desires. As anyone who has ever done a 'flexible' job knows, however, the unharnessing of labour from defined hours of labouring serves merely to allow work (or the spectre of work) to seep into every nook and cranny of one's consciousness. Under conditions of such uncertainty and insecurity, planning for

the future becomes impossible. 'Flexible' workers must instead organise their lives according to the demands of the 24/7 continuous present.

Zero hours contracts and gig work will no doubt continue to proliferate as lockdown loosens: if Johnson's government has an ideological imperative with respect to work, it is flexibility. 'Every generation wants their own version of #freedom to shape their own lives. This is about #choice #destiny', Liz Truss tweeted in 2018. 'This generation are #Uber-riding #Airbnb-ing #Deliveroo-eating #freedomfighters'. Johnson's vision of a post-Brexit 'Singapore-on-Sea' is largely about expanding these very same 'freedoms' - his utopia is a city-state that is maintained and sustained by a migrant underclass who perform piecemeal labour for day rates and live in desperately overcrowded conditions. This is flexibility's endgame.

Among the more securely employed, lockdown has demanded a move towards more flexible working patterns. The consequences of widespread working from home have been predictable: gendered imbalances of household labour have worsened, for example, with burdens of childcare, home-schooling and housekeeping falling disproportionately on women's shoulders. Work is now woven into the rhythms of many people's domestic lives, making demands on personal time, personal space and personal relationships. Mark Fisher's memorable equivalence between 'working from home [and] homing from work' comes to mind. These changes are certain to endure, to some extent at least. Some companies have already expressed interest in slimming down their workspaces, or doing away altogether with the inconvenience of paying for one.[2]

The upshot of all this in my industry is that already-casualised labour is being laid off, while more secure staff (myself included) are being told to become more flexible in order to pick up their slack. If the mantra of 'choice' has driven neoliberal programmes of consumption, then the mantra of 'flexibility' has driven its reconfiguration of labour. The virus provides an opportunity to expand and entrench these changes. After the pandemic, we may find that the temporal demarcations and partitions through which a life that includes more than labour is thinkable prove impossible fully to rebuild.

Yet for all these dangers, and for all the destruction to life and livelihood that the virus has already wrought, its dissolution of established patterns and routines also presents political opportunities - and Black Lives Matter activists

across the globe have not been slow to seize them. Bafflingly, the relationship of the current protests to the pandemic has barely been discussed. However, it is surely not entirely a coincidence that the two have emerged in concert. The pandemic has brought the basic, brutal facts of systemic racism into stark relief: the virus is disproportionately killing people of colour, for reasons that reflect our society's pervasive and racist inequalities in employment, education, healthcare, and housing. Yet it also seems reasonable to ask whether there might be some connection between pandemic time and protest time. These broad global coalitions are being built in a context of mass unemployment and furlough and in relation to the breakdown of everyday routines of social reproduction. They are also being produced by people around the world finding themselves with more time with which to think, plot, gather and organise, in ways which build on earlier organising traditions to fight longstanding grievances.

These connections will no doubt be traced by sociologists in the months and years to come. In the meantime, it is enough to note that a profoundly forward-looking politics has found a global voice at precisely the same moment that the temporal configurations structuring our everyday lives have dissolved. The protests seen in Minneapolis, London and around the world are making radical demands for social change based on an informed appraisal of the historical forces and trajectories through which present social formations have been brought into being. In so doing, they are refusing the temptations of nostalgia, they are refusing any sort of 'return to normal', and they are refusing 24/7's ahistorical omnipresent. Whether by accident or design, the Black Lives Matter movement's powerful call for social transformation also conveys a decisive rejection of pandemic time.

Notes

1. Jonathan Crary: *24/7: Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep*. London: Verso, 2013

2. https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-barclays-results-offices/barclays-ceo-says-putting-7000-people-in-a-building-may-be-thing-of-the-past-idUKKCN22B101.

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