
Life in a time of COVID — 30 July 2020

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In 1985 the Colombian novelist, Gabriel Garcia Marquez published *Love in a Time of Cholera*. It reminds us that love and loss are constants in life. Consistent with the magic realism of which Marquez has been a master the novel follows a complex portrayal of love, abandonment and reconciliation despite all that surrounds the characters of the novel. I cannot write with Marquez's ethereal quality but I do know that epidemics and pandemics are life changing. Like total war in the twentieth century which acted as a midwife of change and upheaval, the Russian Revolutions, the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire—so the COVID pandemic has challenged political order and questioned the truthfulness, competence and general credibility of political leaders: Johnson in the UK; Trump in the USA; and Bolsonaro in Brazil. Will we be grateful for COVID? Will it prick the populist bubble?

The collision of the COVID pandemic with other festering ills — black lives matter perhaps the most prominent example — has galvanised political protest on a global scale. There are also so many unknowns particularly in authoritarian states like Russia, North Korea and China. It is certain though that current trends towards insular nationalism — the UK's departure from the European Union, for example — progress at an arthritic pace. Boris Johnson's resort to Churchill rhetoric invoking war time exhortations is remarkably vapid. The belief that heroic language will keep citizens onside in this scenario does not conceal state failure: slowness to act; the lack of action in respect of care homes for the aged frail; the mismanagement of education.

Keeping Life Going

I am fortunate. I live in a rural location in east Leicestershire, some 12 miles from the city of Leicester. According to the *Office for National Statistics* there are no COVID deaths in the area where I live. Eleven miles away ONS has reported 51 deaths in the City. That is not too far away. I use ONS statistics for my research and because I have retired from full-time employment. I was already in contact with ONS for a lifestyle questionnaire: Do I own my house? Do I have any part-time employment? Are you over seventy years of age? My answers to these questions over a year ago mean that I am on the ONS list. So, it was no surprise that when the telephone rang I should be asked by a volunteer ONS agent whether I would be prepared to participate in the in COVID testing regime. I volunteered and also volunteered my wife. She agreed. Our sense of civic responsibility told us that we should participate. We were visited every week by a string of volunteers — nurses, pharmacists and students. Here we were then, the good citizens agreeing to have throat and nose swabs in our front garden, observing social distancing and gingerly returning our swab sticks in a sealed bag, duly photographed by

a smart phone and then, apparently, rushed to a laboratory in Birmingham. Why not Leicester? The volunteer swab taker did not know.

Society was being mobilised and we listen to the briefings on the BBC World News Channel. The formal dramatization of the display the engine of the state was working. Or was it? Nicola Sturgeon, the first minister for Scotland, seems to have a different plan. Mark Drakeford, for Wales is toeing the line. We marvel at the experts. Their authority is needed to prop-up the waffling Johnson and the graphs are slick too.

After this initial view of the government's efforts we concluded that the government had acted with due haste even though the journalists were asking awkward questions. Robert Peston's exaggerated pronunciation and his questions throw a spanner in the works. Then, Laura Kuensberg, of the BBC, starts to get stuck-in and ready to skewer Johnson. The PM had surely been dreading this moment? Her stern authority and politeness cause Johnson to flap like a seal stranded on a beach. The government had been too slow to respond to the emergency. Let's have supper and a glass of wine. We make our way to the kitchen.

After this initial grandstand view of the state of the nation we begin to think how we might cope with the social isolation. We learn how to queue to shop. No ration books, as was the case in World War 2 and its aftermath. No petrol coupons, as at the time of the Suez crisis in 1956. We walk. We join a quiz night with friends using *What'sApp*. But then real life kicks in. My mother-in-law, Betty, has fallen in the bathroom. She is 94 years of age and has gashed her head. She has used her pendant necklace alarm. We drive for 20 minutes. We arrive. Paramedics are already with her. Thank goodness for the pendant alarm. The paramedics recommend that she is taken to hospital. We have been here before, many times but not in the time of COVID. Will it be safe? Will Betty be safe? We make our way to the Leicester Royal Infirmary. We sanitise our hands. Is COVID more dangerous than MRSA? I wonder, anxiously. Betty has recovered. My wife negotiates her mother's release from the hospital. We bring her home. Thoughts about COVID recede but only temporarily.

The experience of COVID goes on and I begin to consider COVID's transformative power. Rather like total war in the twentieth century which required the mobilisation of whole societies, pandemics have a peculiar ratchet effect. The tests that society faced in 1914-18 and 1939-45 were immense. The tests transformed British society; the Union of the 4 nations was probably stronger than it had ever been. I knew that my parents had survived the war. Indeed, if it had not been for the Blitz of the Clyde in 1941 my mother and father would not have met and I would not be who I am!

Reflections

I look around to see what COVID might be comparable to. The so-called Spanish Influenza pandemic of 1918-21 came to mind. I knew this because of family collective memory. I had an uncle born in 1918: both his parents died in the epidemic and my uncle and his sister were adopted but by different parents to be parted until they were united again in 1998. Will COVID wreak such havoc? I then start to scour my book collection and light upon a reference to the

Russian flu of 1889-92. What was this? I had taught history for 36 years but I had not encountered the Russian flu. There was a certain menace about the term. I was aware of a different rumour in early 1915 that Russian troops had allegedly landed in northern Scotland and were marching, ‘with snow on their boots’ south to London and then on to the Western Front. Mass mobilisation creates its rumour mill grinding out a societal hysteria? The Russian flu of 1889-92 had carried off the Duke of Clarence and Avondale, the grandson of Queen Victoria. That the flu had taken a member of the Royal Family was alarming. Was anybody safe? The worst affected city was Sheffield: ‘a considerable number of persons have been attacked, amongst them several medical men’ (*Sheffield Morning Post*, 13 April 1891). The so-called Russian Flu had originated in central Asia affecting Bokhara and making its way west and arriving in Sheffield via the port of Hull. The Russian flu was regarded with fear and indeed some hysteria. So, COVID began apparently in the Chinese city of Wuhan and then spread to Europe and beyond.

Sunday 29 March

It’s the beginning of summer? The clocks go forward one hour registering BST but the COVID lockdown hangs over us. I drive 5 miles to my Mother-in-law’s flat. I am just checking that she is OK but I have to reset her large font electronic clock and reset the time in line with BST but she does know it is Sunday and she seems happy but does not appreciate the danger of COVID or the huge effect that it will have on her life: no community bus service into Leicester; the end of old people’s lunches at the local church; and the end of the keep-fit exercise group. Since the death of her husband, Dennis, she longs to go out and socialise and have a natter with the new circle of friends that she has made. I think this will be hard.

Sunday 5 April 2020

I go to my mother-in-law (Betty). She is so pleased to see me and wants to get out for a walk and some fresh air. We walk around the Nether hall Housing estate, built in the early 1950s by Leicester City Council. At the time, it was a haven for the post-war families to move out of the city, near green fields. Now, the estate is run-down except for those whose houses that are now owner occupied since the Thatcher revolution of the 1980s. What were formerly front gardens are now standing spaces for cars. The optimism of those post-war years can still be seen; a stream, a brook runs down the centre of a grassed area and a pedestrian footbridge is still intact although the stream itself is scattered with the usual detritus of the now — plastic bottles, beer cans. What ever happened to the Keep Britain Tidy Campaign? Betty kept going but by the time we returned to her flat she was tired. ‘Do you want a cup of tea? Do you want a biscuit?’ I agree to both.

28 June 2020 — Hopes Dashed

The R number is coming down. The government is easing the lockdown but plans to manage an orderly phased departure from lockdown take a jolt. *The Sunday Times* reports the possibility of a spike in COVID infections in Leicester. The picture is not clear but it is claimed that the

outbreak is located in the North Evington district on the east side of the city. It is essentially an area of immigration — both long- and shorter-term — dating back to at least the Uganda Asian crisis of the 1970s which prompted one of the great waves of post-colonial migrations following Idi Amin's coup. Since that time, Leicester has become a significant destination for migrants from multiple departure points around the globe; and, because of its largely harmonious race relations, it was designated Home Office city for asylum seekers and refugees from Afghanistan, Iran and Somalia. This is a major setback for a city that has prided itself as a multicultural city. Elsewhere — London, Manchester and Liverpool — post-lockdown pressures have spilled out to street riots in Brixton, Maida Vale and elsewhere. The Leicester case is alarming and news coverage on BBC East Midlands Today is quick to capture a local story that is nationally significant. The lockdown spreads ire and it is cast in a subliminal racist manner. The extension of the lockdown area to suburban Oadby and Wigston has lit the touch paper. It prompts a sense of indignation with the people of Oadby feeling a sense of stigma that they have been bracketed with immigrants in the city.

Leicester's elected Mayor, Sir Peter Soulsby, expressed concern in radio interviews that should the city be faced with an extension of lockdown restrictions for the city when the rest of the country was essentially moving out of those restrictions carried certain dangers of civil unrest. He has requested further information from the government, apparently slow in forthcoming, before any local lockdown is applied. The Secretary of State for Health has the power to do so under the 1985 Public Health act. The extension of the lockdown in Leicester takes on a new strand when the *Sunday Times* runs a story when an 'undercover' reporter gains access to a number of clothing textile factories to expose sweat shop conditions — £3.50 per hour — for employees producing garments for the fashion chain Boohoo. There is to be an inquiry. Lockdown continues. Sir Peter says that the government is intent 'on making an example of us' (BBC East Midlands Today).

What else will COVID bring? A colleague in the School of History sends out an email suggesting that the University should carry out research on stories of migration. She is in luck the East Midlands Oral History Archive EMOHA is housed in the University. There is a flurry of replies. I feel a research application coming on.

Postscript

A recent commentator has suggested that it may well take 65 years to recover from the COVID pandemic. It probably took around 30-40 years to recover from the effects of the two world wars in the twentieth century. The prospects of the post-1945 generation (baby boomers) is often seen optimistically despite rationing and Britain's debts to the USA. Then, Britain had a safety valve of Empire and government was able to encourage emigration to the settler nations of the Commonwealth — Canada, South Africa, Rhodesia, New Zealand and of course Australia. What are the opportunities for our children and our grandchildren? We have two granddaughters who are about to start university this autumn and we have a queue of younger grandchildren who should be going back to school in September. What are their prospects? Will

they emigrate? But where to go? The nation is already heavily burdened as a consequence of the 2008 crash and although the government is pumping money into the economy there is no guarantee of ‘sun lit uplands’. Rather, there will be winners and losers. What kind of world will they inherit?