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A Quiet Life: An Essay Inspired by Steve Fuller’s ‘When A Virus Goes Viral—Life With COVID-19’

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Druids and Freedom

Living in Wiltshire close to Avebury and not too far from Stonehenge during the COVID-19 'crisis' has made me really quite pensive about the past. That is to say, I have been wondering how these small communities (although the [historical evidence](#) suggests movement across Europe to what were once well inhabited places as centres of healing, indeed, perhaps, to escape the plague) dealt with disease, and viruses that must not have been dissimilar to the coronavirus we are exposed to now. Indeed, archaeological evidence suggests travel from Spain to Orkney (said to once have been the centre of Neolithic and Bronze Age European civilisation), possibly via Stonehenge was common. But here, now in 2020, the chalk and flint fields and Downlands of Wiltshire present an ethereal landscape, evoking the druids of the past and, of more recent years, when free festivals were still permitted. [The Stonehenge Free Festival](#) for example; music and videos of these free events therefore—unsurprisingly perhaps—play an important part of my writing in this essay and is used to convey the essay's central subtext: our civilisation is but a blip in time and our existential concerns are too easily exacerbated and manipulated by the media.

Viral Communications

Indeed, what really made me think deeply about this was Steve Fuller's article, primarily written for his students, on how the current pandemic has gone 'viral' due to the existence of social media, and the scrutiny that governments and our over stretched health services face because of this; due to the past few decades of ideological under financing as Fuller points out.¹ Of course we must not forget the mainstream, wall-to-wall, 24/7 television coverage, and the often obtuse criticism, and indeed, the over the top and completely unnecessary scrutiny that programmes such as Good Morning Britain (GMB) have indulged in, particularly under the influence of Piers Morgan: did for example Mr Morgan ever consider that the Prime Minister might become ill as he crassly lambasted his failure to appear in front of his personal 'Star Chamber' (ironically, since the prime minister's illness, Mr Morgan has turned his vitriol towards those who tweeted against Boris Johnson etc., while the PM was in hospital): it's equally unlikely that Mr Morgan would have been buried (cremated) with all his

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/12/revealed-value-of-uk-pandemic-stockpile-fell-by-40-in-six->

earthly possessions had he been alive in Neolithic to Bronze age times, unless of course this rite was preserved for [establishment critical soothsayers such as he](#).

After all, we know what happened to Socrates although his criticism had a much more profound point, as did his pupil's Plato, (particularly about the value of writing) unlike the easy and sometimes ego boosting point scoring of the present critics in a situation in which we are pretty much impotent; we don't as yet know, as Fuller points out, know everything, if indeed much, about COVID-19 and how it works yet; recent evidence from South Korea suggests at least, that it may be possible to become re-infected with the virus, so the much vaunted panaceas of testing, and ultimately the development of a vaccine may yet turn out to be little more than wishful thinking. Mr Morgan may have to accept we are not in a wartime situation similar to post-Dunkirk, that is the blitz, with a dithering Fuhrer and Luftwaffe outwitted by a radar system which they failed to keep targeting, and so the hyperbolic notion of being 'British' will have little to do with it when we are confronted with a virus that has literally gone global; and so although we know its genetic construction we cannot shoot it down with missiles, and certainly not the febrile and over emotive conversations witnessed on social media and in the mainstream media.

The Centrality of Plague to Civilisation

So in the face of this impotence, what I want to concentrate on in this essay in a more serious way, (thus not simply an anti-media rant but an attempt at philosophical discourse) which I describe as a historical counterfactual argument against the way the current pandemic is managed, is how people, moreover their societies, would have dealt with this pandemic, without the constant white noise of the assorted media; and the lessons and implications for us now: would for example, our lives be quieter, if perhaps less insecure in many other ways; indeed, a [Quiet Life](#) not many miles from here but ones that are actively [critical of the status quo](#) without the endless Twitter and Facebook wars.² To attempt to achieve this, I want to travel briefly (and I certainly do not claim to be a historical expert on this area) through different historical eras from the Neolithic Bronze Age periods, to the Black Death and Bubonic plague of the 1300s and 1600s.

The evidence shows a mass migration from the [Russian Steppes](#) in about 5,000 BC. The original wooden henge is thought to have been constructed around then. Interestingly, the migration away from the plague in the east is argued to have changed the European gene pool; it is also argued that later (with some irony intended one feels) that the great civilizations of ancient Rome and China (AD165) collapsed for the same ostensibly the same reason but crucially, also because of the same sort of global interconnectedness and inequality that has allowed the coronavirus to spread.³

Boris Johnson will be well aware of these plagues of antiquity, as his hero Pericles, the great statesman of Athens, died from plague (typhoid) in 430 BC, although there were many positive as well as negative outcomes for the ancient Greeks then; and so just as it is often said that the history world is the history of migration then we might say that plague, that is pandemics, are the driving force of that history—we can certainly say as a famous

² <https://green-history.uk/articles/events/peace-events/counter-cruise-cosmic-carnival-july-1982>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/12/inequality-pandemic-lockdown>

philosopher once did, that history at present is moving from East to West—let us hope that this latest pandemic is not a case of the ‘End of History and indeed, the Last Man [Standing]!’ (Fukuyama, 1992).⁴ So anyhow, the imaginary about what life was like before the media, social or otherwise, was life cruel and short; was it common place to be murderer for a carrot as one of my former lecturers suggested, and thus life in the 21st century is so much better—or is it?

From the Frankfurt School to the analogous writings of Foucault, we all know about the oppression, regulation, restriction and rule of law the Enlightenment allegedly brought about. But it also—as well as creating the myth that science could save us from a natural world we are often impotent against as we are now—created the blame game. Not simply the anti-Semitism of fascism—and more recently ‘cultural Marxism’—but the constant critique of each other, (especially through social media despite the many charitable and other laudable projects launched through this) as we look to blame each other one way or another for our imprisonment in global capitalism—a global capitalism which I argued with Steve Fuller in a review of his book, *Nietzschean Meditations*, had finally, through its evolutionary motor and creative destruction has set us free, but only if we accept that our time, at least our civilisation, like so many before is at an end, and we may need to free ourselves from our earthly bonds, in mind and spirit to be truly and finally free of our chains. Alternatively, we can resume our lives as they were, populations depleted, healthcare systems bolstered for future pandemics or, we can indulge in the perverse relativism and moral equivalence of comparing the current death rate with past pandemics.

For example, the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 which is said to have infected up to 50 million people and killed anywhere between 20 and 50 million people worldwide. Of course, we can argue the world survived and continued pretty much as before except it was followed by the Great Depression, fascism, national socialism, the division of Europe by the Iron Curtain, and the US and the Soviet Union fighting each other by proxy for decades. How many people died in these wars and the holocaust? How many people died in the Great Smog in London in 1952—12,000, maybe more? How many people die every year during the Flu season? Or perhaps as is the *raison d’être* of this article, the imaginary of an Arcadia in Neolithic history would serve us better. And understanding why civilisations end and how life continues would serve us better than the constant, nay, incessant critique by media, underpinned as Fuller argues the panic over whether the health system can cope, and the professionals who work within the system have been let down by an incompetent government—not an astonishing revelation to many.

⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52236388>



The Message of Plague and Stonehenge for Our Own Lives

It is argued that Stonehenge by 2,500 BC was a hive of activity in southern England and that people travelled far and wide during its final stage of construction.⁵ Stonehenge was a settled agrarian community living far beyond the realms of a simple subsistence type society where people partied as they built and indeed, people such as the Amesbury Archer travelled from the Swiss Alps; archaeologists discovered he was missing a knee cap and had a dental abscess that had travelled deep into his jaw. It is believed he made his last fateful and painful journey as a pilgrimage and as a last hope of healing his broken body. So conversely perhaps after all, Stonehenge, Avebury weren't the quiet places I've conveniently imagined and news was carried far and wide across Western Europe, and so was cosmopolitan in character, but at least the present day druids of the media and social media didn't exist, for whatever the failings of our government and there are many, what we can be sure of is that civilisations rise and fall, and just as the Romans adopted many ancient British traditions, including some of those belonging to the tribes of Stonehenge.⁶

So, what of social life during plagues, how can we get a picture of how people behaved, if differently from now? In a recent piece Simon Schama for the Financial Times tells us that from Thucydides' *The History of the Peloponnesian War* to *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* that during times of plague people, even when at the risk of their own lives, continued to be the social animals.⁷ Aristotle argued we are 'acts of friendship were and are the most painful of casualties' and conversely, as Thucydides reported, a dejection of mind and fracturing of friendship for those who did not receive the social support they needed; those who had no visitors 'died forlorn'.

Interestingly, given our times and in argument to this essay, Schama states that:

Our generation is more fortunate. For once, the grotesque debasement of what it means to be befriended on social media has something going for it. Facetime, Instagram and Zoom allow comforting visits to the sick and distressed in ways denied to Thucydides' stricken Athenians and Pepys' Londoners walled in, as they were, behind a red cross daubed on their doors.

⁵ https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/british_prehistory/stonehenge_stoneage.shtml

⁶ <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/stonehenge/history-and-stories/history/>

⁷ <https://www.ft.com/content/279dee4a-740b-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

Despite the ability to digitally connect now, I would suggest that social media has us walled in behind our own ostensibly 'locked' doors. Leaving aside the laudable fund raising efforts for the NHS (which we have all already paid for through our tax system, but which the bailed-out banks really benefited from), the epidemic of fitness gurus, the endless foodie live cook-ins, hairdressing and very painful celeb and non-celeb mass sing alongs, following either GMB or the cardboard alternative of BBC Breakfast News on the red sofas represents a new form of torture the henchmen of the medieval world would have been proud of.

And given that on these particularly sunny Wednesday mornings of late April my local Tesco's looked as busy as at Christmas; the endless government warning, 'stay at home, protect the NHS' seems to have as much power as their dramatic Orwellian style public service announcements and daily briefings; terminal boredom. It seems we're just prisoners of someone else's making, or perhaps our own. The mainstream media, at the high and low end of the journalism spectrum endlessly critique the lack of personal protection equipment (PPE), and along with incessant critique of the failure of the testing programme seems to leave little choice: alcohol consumption at home is said to have increased significantly since the lockdown.

It seems dejection and petrification of mind is the overriding state of affairs, not the fracturing of friendships. Thus it seems as though the weekly applauding of the NHS (after our self-distancing, self-isolation parole trip to Tesco's) is our salvation. Perhaps as the main subtext of Fuller's article suggests, what's turned this pandemic into a panic, is the mass scrutiny of our healthcare system from outside and within via the media and social media. Indeed, the Prime Minister's first speech on resuming the reins of government—on the steps of Number 10—acknowledged the centrality of the NHS's survival.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2020/04/27/boris-johnsons-coronavirus-speech-full/>

And despite slightly contradicting what I argued above, the most significant recent development has been the announcement of simultaneous clinical trials of vaccines that may be approved by September, if they work. Quiet science and not social media (although doubtless they now collaborate via Zoom or one its variants) may in the end save us, as they have been attempting to with specific regard to pandemics for decades, but in the meantime we should remember how ephemeral our lives and civilisations are: the project to build Stonehenge lasted for up to 2,000 years, and eventually it was abandoned. It also seems, just as Schama argues Pepys did in 1665, they partied with abandon through the building of the great monument. How many of us, given the opportunity now could honestly say we wouldn't, if allowed (and despite our virtue signalling on FB and elsewhere) be in that pub garden? Better still at a free festival (not anything like 'Glasto', I hasten to add). Ever get the feeling the quiet life isn't working and it all just feels the same?

Knowledge for Today Only

A quiet life at the moment would be the heaven of a [tepee or painted wagon at Stonehenge](#) away from [the numbers](#) and the vociferous media (leaving earth for space doesn't always require a rocket and silicone gel to suspend our brains in); eventually the pandemic will end,

unfortunately, whether we will all meet again isn't as certain. Perhaps the best thing that will come out of it is a renewed belief in scientists and experts as it seems to me that everyone and their aunty expects the solution from them. However, in a final thought, it might be wise to take a leaf out of one of Popper's many writings and remember what we know today changes tomorrow, and so we should always be ready to accept changing and contradictory knowledge; moreover, accept that we will never know everything and the society we live in is but a bridge over a swamp, a bridge that needs its supports constantly shoring up—as society, the world and knowledge of how to make it work changes all the time. As Hegel (who Popper (1945) might have understood and agreed with on this point) said, the Owl of Minerva beats its wings at [each and every] dusk. The salutary lesson of this pandemic may be the realization that we are not [masters of the universe](#).⁸

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⁸ <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pr/preface.htm>