



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Behavioural Insights from the Pandemic: Experiencing the State's Pseudo/Quasi
Sociological Approach to Social Control and COVID-19

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Hewitt, Des. 2020. "Behavioural Insights from the Pandemic: Experiencing the State's
Pseudo/Quasi Sociological Approach to Social Control and COVID-19." *Social Epistemology
Review and Reply Collective* 9 (7): 45-50. <https://wp.me/P1Bfg0-4Wa>.



This essay critically analyses the English State’s approach to social control during the pandemic and why the easing of lockdown is about more than economic recovery. I argue that the State, the current Conservative government, believes the pandemic will be a permanent feature of life for many years. If that sounds a simple argument then think about this question: one could ask, as the captain of the Titanic ([the Prime Minister](#)) presses on regardless of the gaping wound in the ship’s hull, how many more of us will die in the name of the ‘new normal’?

I will argue the government see the risks and are frightened of the danger of losing social control: as recent events have demonstrated, temperatures can easily reach boiling point.¹ However, they are seemingly impotent even with the availability of the evidence already available to them from science and social science; particularly individual and collective everyday experience and expertise on the way to frame effective messages on the pandemic and how to really ‘stay safe’ to a unsurprisingly frustrated public used to immediate gratification exists: it seems however something else drives the English State.²

But what is it, incompetence, a lack of preparedness, a deeply and reasonably held fear that society might well collapse into anarchy if the economy continues to stall, or because the [herd immunity policy](#) the government wanted to implement after abandoning testing and which was met with disgust when revealed, is easy to revert to because of recent events? This essay is written from personal experience, and very much driven by the feeling that the world the State and media present is not mine; a cognitive dissonance to say the least.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/03/is-coronavirus-really-in-retreat-in-the-uk>.

² <http://allcatsrgrey.org.uk/wp/download/engagement/2020-04-03-COVID19-Report-14.pdf>.

The Grim Reaper Advances

The Black Lives Matter demonstration and counter demonstration and [raves](#), although concomitant to economic concerns (ironically) as the scenes at Bournemouth beach are, are a useful enough mechanism as any to condition and justify to the public the acceptance of the ‘new normal’ (another unfortunate although less dangerous aspect of COVID-19 to emerge this year); thus, the grim reaper lurks, [barely in the shadows](#), as Leicester, Merthyr Tydfil, Doncaster, Leeds and Bradford and [Rochdale](#) and, many other towns, present to us like the spectre from Dickens’s ‘Christmas Carol’: [The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come](#).

Priti Patel’s condemnation of the scenes from [London](#) to Liverpool is like a cursory ticking off in the context of the obtuse style of [I understand their concerns because I have known racism myself but this behaviour is totally unacceptable etc., etc.,] It seems then, viewed through this prism of limited surveillance and discipline (in every sense), very much as though the government have reverted to the social Darwinist herd immunity policy; encouraged twice now by Dominic Cummings, first as policy, then by his own example, and the example of some members of the public themselves. During the pre-lockdown Coronavirus Downing Street briefing, the Prime Minister and the Chief Medical Adviser repeatedly made the point that like Leicester there will be fresh outbreaks of the virus and that through implication means more deaths. And yet the Prime Minister also repeated a new mantra: [go off and enjoy summer safely](#).³

A Quiet Life Again

Paradoxically, in a previous essay, ‘A Quiet Life’, I argued that plague was central to the history of our world and indeed, migration; it shaped the world as we know it now, and moreover, that partying (and the pub garden in those balmy April days) as Pepys did in the 1600s would be what everyone would really like to do to escape the terminal boredom of the media and social media the likes of Facebook bring to our lives (Hewitt 2020). But that was an individual’s experience and desire, amidst the dross of the digital world was, and still is, serving up. I also argued that the weekly applauding of the NHS supported the government and media’s [discourse](#) of its centrality and ability to cope through the pandemic was hypocrisy, as the shopping scenes at my local supermarkets testified to as did the ‘unseen’ street parties I witnessed near to my elderly mother’s house in Berkshire two months ago on the way home to Wiltshire, and yes, under the lockdown rules II was able to visit to provide care, medicines and food. I wasn’t really wishing for a world of widespread illness and death.

I also know that a warehouse, not all full of what could be described as essential stock, at which I used to temp during my days of university study, reopened two weeks into the full lockdown, despite the knowledge that the skeleton staff it employed were coming from homes they lived in with partners and some with children—I hasten to add that these were not key workers. When I asked the warehouse manager why, as I was intending to write an anonymised article, he said he’d have to think about that and why they took that risk. Now

³ <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2213-2600%2820%2930134-X>.

the pubs and restaurants are due to reopen, barring Leicester, on July the 4th, American Independence day and, apparently this year, ours too—liberation at last—or have we all secretly been at it? ⁴

So does the population really care or not and has the government seen this and taken its cue and lifted the lockdown too early, or is it taking advantage to follow the herd immunity policy it so clearly wanted to until the media revealed the government's intention to let the population become infected and see who was left standing at the end. The purpose of this essay is to look at the argument for the latter. Thus I argue the reality is that our government is truly incompetent and, cynical in a rather terrifying way: it wants us to accept death and loss, to maintain control, and of course, power. But can it, as politicians, according to the [Behavioural Insights Team](#) (also known as the Nudge Unit), state that politicians are not trusted while doctors and scientists are, but who makes the law?: the State that's who.

But however, the UK's politicians more often than not also present a picture of total incompetence as well as cynicism in ignoring the blindingly obvious; this would be laughable if not for the situation's obvious seriousness. The failing testing app outsourced to Serco after months and months already wasted, despite the examples from South Korea and others of the effectiveness of detection through meticulous tracing and tracking. The failure to intervene in Leicester, despite having been warned eleven days before of the exponential rise in cases per every 100,000 of the population, even despite the flaws in data collection and sharing highlights this, as the [Health Secretary Matthew Hancock](#), as he admits was warned well before he intervened by introducing England's first reintroduction of a localised lockdown. Speculative reports suggest a failure to abide by lockdown rules, by local garment businesses in particular, which employs the younger aged men that are now testing positive in Leicester is one of the factors for the spike in cases there. So is it exploitation of certain workers, a failure to convey the message of science to the public effectively in a trustworthy way, as the [Behavioural Insights Team](#) suggest, or a deliberate policy to return to the herd immunity policy as long as this is containable with the NHS will not be overwhelmed discourse or a deep seated fear of losing social control because of [quarantine fatigue](#)?

Salvation From a State Bent on Suicidal Policies

Perhaps somewhat ironically, it was the austerity dedicated coalition government of [David Cameron](#) that made much mileage out of using his so-called Nudge Unit, a revamped version of Behavioural Insights Team. [The Mass Observation Organisation](#), famous for exposing the truth about how the British felt during the darkest days of the blitz, is active at this very moment with regard to COVID-19: the experiences of those taking part are available now and [anybody can](#) contribute; and this is available to government via academic researchers and journals.⁵ The contribution by volunteers to the COVID-19 diaries is said to be significant compared to this time last year. What an irony then that the notion that good

⁴ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-journal-of-risk-regulation/article/uk-covid19-response-a-behavioural-irony/720899A7C7EE4228169E1B9CB3D20411>.

⁵ <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2213-2600%2820%2930134-X>.

old Blighty is in a struggle akin to the Second World War, a notion repeatedly promoted by Piers Morgan and others in the media, is reinforced through this historical connection; however, as I pointed out in ‘The Quiet Life’, comparing the war with the pandemic was like comparing apples and pears, especially as firstly we (science and medicine) are still trying to understand the virus, and are finding new complications and anomalies almost on a daily, if not weekly basis. Secondly, what apart from what the media and social media serve up do we know about how people are behaving and how they think and feel about the COVID-19 crisis.

My Experience in an Alternative Dimension

How does the idea of a nation united against a common foe compare with reality and have lockdown restrictions been respected by the majority? Watching Sky news today, on the 3rd of July, my ears prick up when I hear a report apparently from the emergency services, that tomorrow, the 4th July when lockdown ends for the majority in England, the police are preparing as though it’s the last Friday night before Christmas. Yet another irony, because in Quiet Life I said visiting my local Tesco’s here in Wiltshire during the unusually balmy days of April was like shopping at Christmas. And so tomorrow we can go the pub again, soon Greece will realise it’s missing out and accept the ‘air-corridor’ policy of the English government and we can all have that party.

Being a member of a certain popular Greek holiday island on Facebook I happen to know English people have in fact already successfully entered that country but I myself wait. I wait for the official announcement by Greece on the 15th July and worry; I worry because in the Alice through the looking glass world of the insurance industry and the State, my insurance for my holiday booked for September will be invalid even when the insurance is bought after the advice from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will have been that it is safe to travel there and, Greece allows English tourists to return; because I booked before the announcement. So how could the State frame its messages about COVID-19, lockdown restrictions, what we can and can’t do more effectively and logically to prevent frustration and loss of social control and to stop the spread of the virus? ⁶

Today as I waited outside the local building society branch of with my partner, I pointed out to the officious member of staff refusing access to more than one person at a time (because someone was inside an internal office making a phone call, otherwise it would have been two...), that in fact the risk of contracting COVID-19 standing two metres apart for a certain length of time was the same as standing one metre apart for half that length of time—I think that message went under the table.

My partner had been turned away from this branch twice before on the grounds her transaction wasn’t essential despite it not being possible on the internet, and funds had to be

⁶ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340736317_High_boredom_proneness_and_low_trait_self-control_impair_adherence_to_social_distancing_guidelines_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic.

deposited in person. Moreover, 20 minutes down the A4 in Berkshire, in a different branch of the same building society staff were only too happy to oblige. At the other end of the spectrum, and at the start of lockdown amidst the fear and panic, when a 75 year old neighbour of my partner asked a staff member of a local upmarket supermarket to self-distance, after he sneezed in the neighbour's face, the store manager came out and physically touched him by placing his hand on his shoulder and berated him for complaining and he was then surrounded by other members of staff. It seems the blitz spirit, so-called, really isn't alive and well, despite the likes of Captain Tom's laudable fund raising for the NHS. So how do we explain these anomalies?

How Research Could Help Us Build Knowledge and Direct Policy: Is Stay Alert, Control the Virus, Save Lives (Stay Alive) Really Adequate?

The Behavioural Insights Team say that effective messaging during the COVID-19 crisis would have looked like this: for example, the much vaunted anti-body test and its limited use and dismissal as not 100% effective and doesn't necessarily make you immune. The (international) [Behavioural Insights Team](#) (BHT) in conjunction with the World Health Organisation (WHO) state that removing the word immune from messages and asserting that even a test that is only 86% percent effective is better than negative messaging: stating that because in other similar viruses, for example with regard to the Sars CoV 1 virus etc., it did however mean you were much less likely to catch it is much more positive than pointing out the flaws—the daily Coronavirus briefings of course allowed/forced the politicians and scientists to present caveats on this and many other issues surrounding COVID-19. Interestingly the Behavioural Insights Team has also conducted studies on what happens when people start suffering lockdown/COVID-19 fatigue.

What is also very interesting is that the BHT have worked with the media, specifically some of the broadsheets to get a better understanding of what people are and are not understanding about government messaging. I would argue, as I did in *Quiet Life* that they are part of the problem. For example, TV's 'Good Morning Britain's' resident doctor who also writes, dismissed the wearing of facemasks until very recently when we finally took on board all the physical and psychological benefits of doing so, which the Insights and Team and WHO have been promoting for sometime after studying other countries and previous virus's such as MERS and SARS CoV.⁷ The BHT also point out that correcting incorrect messages only makes people question their original beliefs, it doesn't necessarily make them believe the new correct advice. The WHO said this in May as many lockdown restrictions being lifted were being planned and talked of by the English Government (available via the Behavioural Insights Team link); **Simply put, our behaviour today, will set the course for the pandemic.**

As governments lift restrictions, you, the people become the main actors. It is an individual as well as a collective responsibility. Follow the recommendations of your national authorities, limit social interactions, keep washing your hands, maintain physical distancing

⁷ <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2213-2600%2820%2930134-X>.

and reduce risk to the most vulnerable in our society, the elderly and those with chronic underlying health conditions. They rely on the choices you make.

So, my three messages today:

One—Communities: Remain vigilant and protect the gains. Our complacency is COVID-19's playground.

Two—Policy-makers: Keep attuned to what people are doing—listen, learn and adjust measures accordingly.

Three—To us all: we all have a role to play to keep COVID-19 at bay. Our behaviour determines COVID-19 behaviour. It's up to us now. Thank you.

In conclusion, what I take from this more than anything else is this: it is the responsibility of all, government and society to act together. And a rational act, taken collectively would not have been to allow the lifting of the lockdown completely yet.⁸ But as I argued in 'The Quiet Life' and here, we have not acted collectively and safely at all. The evidence from the US is that bars are the breeding ground for the virus; hence the sudden spikes in cases.⁹ The English government is surely not oblivious to this. This begs the questions I asked at the start of this essay: Is it social control or the opportunity to reintroduce the ludicrously reckless herd immunity policy—or is the government simply overriding scientific advice and implementing their own policy to save the economy and jobs?

It is a difficult balancing act, of course, but a combination of cock-up and contradiction seem to be the only real answer. After all, the Prime Minister has suffered a bout of COVID-19, has a new baby with his partner, so the idea that Social Darwinists such as Dominic [Cummings](#) could persuade him to take a course of action akin to genocide is equally ludicrous. But then again they know death is around every corner, for even they read the newspapers and watch the 24/7 offerings the media serve up, which give the new grim death tolls from the US and other countries that eased the lockdown too soon.

The State surely has ultimate responsibility for the permanence of death from COVID-19, and yet does so with so much expertise at its hands—that is, the lived experiences of people via the Mass Observation Organisation or the Behavioural Insights Team, and the rest of social science, a fraction of which is referenced here, they have clearly failed to persuade the public to behave responsibly.¹⁰ No sane person could possibly think that alcohol and COVID-19 will produce an inviting and enlivening cocktail: COVID-19's playground, in other words. We don't need behavioural insights to tell us that. But as Boris Johnson said, [don't fear the reaper](#), go out and enjoy the summer.

⁸ <http://www.journal-bpa.org/index.php/jbpa/article/view/147>.

⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53296689>.

¹⁰ <http://allcatsrgrey.org.uk/wp/download/engagement/2020-04-03-COVID19-Report-14.pdf>.