

LET'S NOT FALL INTO THE AUSTERITY TRAP | Linda McQuaig
PHILIP K. DICK AND ENGLISH MASS MURDERERS | Trevor Hoyle
CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, BILLIONAIRE-STYLE | Sam Pizzigatti

ColdType

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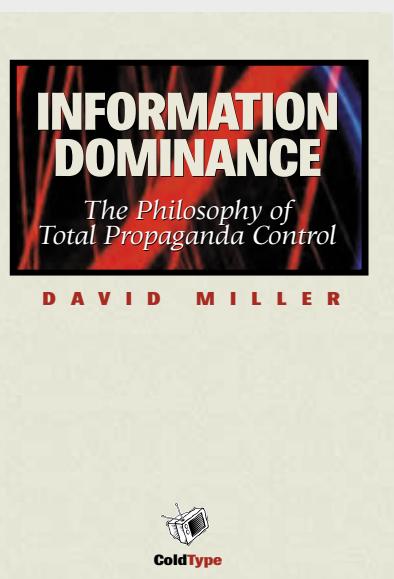
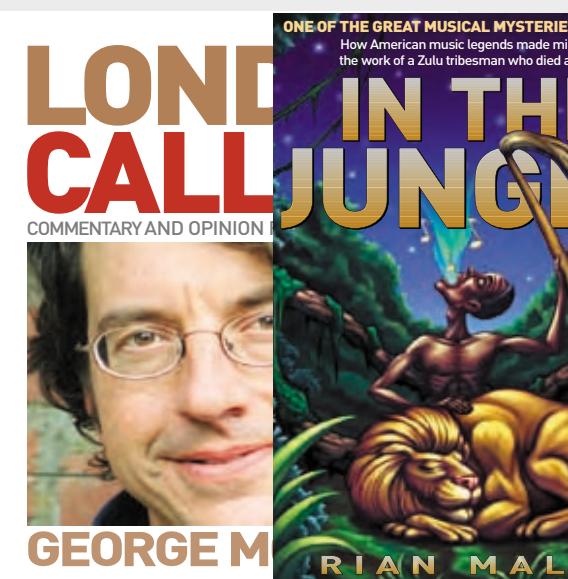
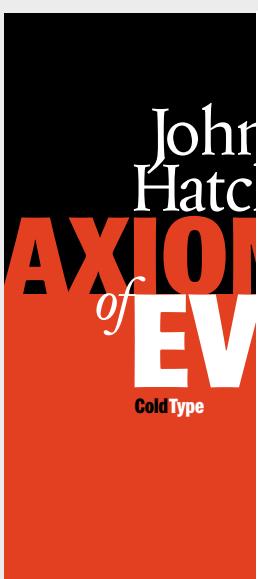
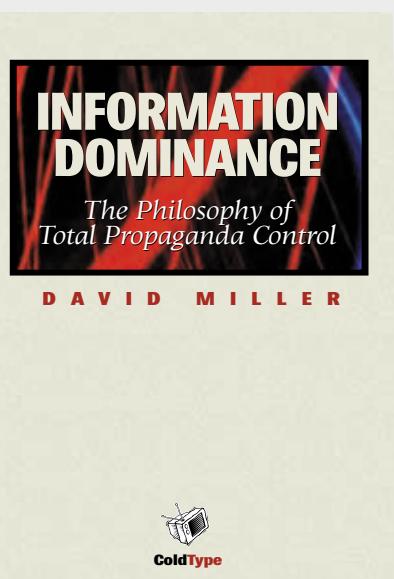
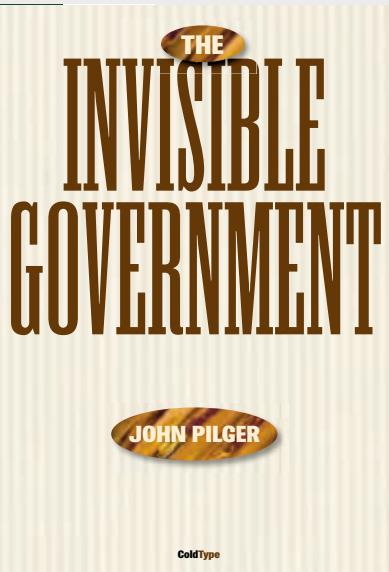
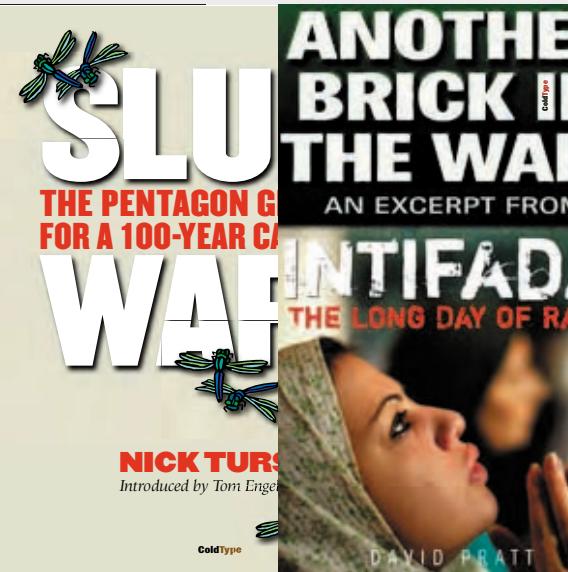
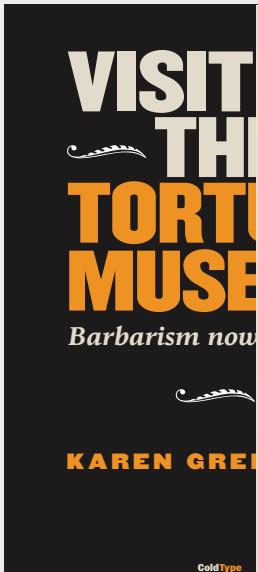
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Insights



Bob Geffen's \$590-million yacht.

Art: Instagram

lethal reality is built on dominant structures that keep serving the financial priorities of the powerful. Emphasis is often less about saving lives and more about saving the stock market. The storyline becomes more about “opening”, less about dying, even though opening is sure to cause more dying.

Patterns of economic injustice are so basic to US society that they amount to deep cracks in its foundation. Under the weight of catastrophe, whether hurricane or recession or pandemic, the cracks split wider and wider as more human beings – disproportionately poor and people of colour – fall into the abyss.

Corporate media narratives routinely bypass such core truths about cause and effect. Heart-breaking stories have scant context. Victims without victimisers.

Fuelled by ultra-greed, Trump’s approach is a kind of scorched-earth non-stop campaign, an extreme version of the asymmetrical class warfare going on all the time.

“The world before Covid-19 was a deeply unequal place”, the progressive publisher OR Books noted in an email to supporters this week. “Now, in the pandemic, those inequalities are only more stark. Across America and around the globe are fabulous riches for a

Norman Solomon

It's all about class war

Journalists aren't supposed to “bury the lead”. But when death is the topic and corporate power is the culprit, the connection routinely goes unmentioned.

Class war – waged methodically from the top down – is so constant and pervasive that it might seem unremarkable. The 24/7 siege to make large companies more profitable and the wealthy more wealthy is going on all around us. In the process, it normalises avoidable death as a

cost of doing business.

Overall, news media are part of that normalisation. While negative coverage of Donald Trump has been common due to his handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, media outrage has been muted in relation to the magnitude of the dying in our midst – at a time when most of the dying could have been prevented.

Deaths tend to become less “newsworthy” as the numbers mount and shock gives way to tacit media acceptance. A new

Insights

tiny few and deepening immiseration for everyone else".

A swiftly infamous Instagram post by David Geffen ("net worth" \$8.7-billion) in late March, showing his \$590-million yacht at sunset as the pandemic took deadly hold in the United States ("isolated in the Grenadines avoiding the virus . . . I hope everybody is staying safe"), became a symbol transcending avowed politics. Geffen is no right-winger. He's a liberal. In the 2018 election cycle he gave \$1-million to Democratic congressional super PACs. He went on to become a donor to Pete Buttigieg's presidential campaign.

But the most pernicious and ultimately destructive actions of the super-wealthy are not so overtly gauche. The poisons are laced with soothing PR, while the rich movers and shakers play by the rules that capitalism has constructed for the voracious acquisition of wealth at the expense of everyone else. In that sense, the worst class-war crimes are the ones that adhere to the rules and don't get singled out for condemnation.

Consider the pathology of Jeff Bezos, reputedly the world's richest person, who commented that he couldn't think of much else to spend his money on besides programmes for space travel, while back on planet Earth the extent of misery due to poverty is staggering. Said Bezos: "The only way that I can see to deploy this much financial resource is by converting my Amazon winnings into space travel. That is basically it".

For the likes of Bezos and other elite winners of riches, in the words of songwriter Tracy Chapman, a future awaits: "I won't die lonely / I'll have it all prearranged / A grave that's deep and wide enough / For me and all my mountains o' things".

A few months into 2020, capitalism is running amuck in tandem with the coronavirus, like some headless horseman galloping over dead bodies. Meanwhile, for US news media, accustomed to covering faraway disasters, a reflex has set in close to home – turning the page on deaths, increasingly presenting them as numbers. An anaesthetised pall of acceptance is descending on us.

"For the person who dies there is an end, but this is not so for the person who grieves", psychoanalyst Stephen Grosz has pointed out. "The person who mourns goes on living and for as long as he [or she] lives there is always the possibility of feeling grief". In his book *The Examined Life*,

Grosz wrote, "My experience is that closure is an extraordinarily compelling fantasy of mourning. It is the fiction that we can love, lose, suffer and then do something to permanently end our sorrow".

The corporate system is looking for its own forms of social "closure" in the midst of this pandemic's colossal deadly upheaval. Already, we're supposed to accept. Maybe you don't want to call it class war. But whatever you call it, the system always makes a killing. **CT**

Norman Solomon is co-founder and national director of RootsAction.org. He was a Bernie Sanders delegate from California to the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Solomon is the author of a dozen books including *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*. He is executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy.

Sam Pizigatti

Civil disobedience, billionaire-style

Early last month, billionaire Elon Musk defied local public health officials and reopened his flagship Tesla auto assembly plant in Fremont, California. Public safety

officials had ordered that plant shut down – over Musk's fierce opposition – almost two months earlier.

"Dumb" concern about the coronavirus, Musk had raged

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with that shutdown impending, had morphed into a useless “panic”. On March 19, the day he reluctantly closed his Fremont plant, Musk confidently predicted new Covid-19 cases would be running “probably close to zero” by the end of April.

At the end of April, that zero nowhere to be seen, Musk doubled down on his bluster. He promoted a video so full of coronavirus misinformation that YouTube took it down. Musk would become even more desperate when county officials announced plans to extend their original shelter-in-place orders.

“This is fascist. This is not democratic. This is not freedom”, Musk stormed in an April 30 conference call with business journalists and investors. “Give people back their goddamn freedom”.

Musk would go on to sue Alameda County for the shutdown, trash the county’s top health officer as “unelected & ignorant”, and declare his intention to yank Tesla out of California.

Then the confrontation finally climaxed, Musk announcing that his Fremont plant would reopen – with him in it.

“Tesla is restarting production today against Alameda County rules”, Musk tweeted. “I will be on the line with everyone else. If anyone is arrested, I ask that it only be me”.

Nobody arrested Musk.

Nobody stopped the workers streaming into his plant, either. The workers, to be sure, weren’t entering in solidarity with their



Art: Khalil Bendib / OtherWords.org

hyperventilating boss. Quite the opposite. They had good reason to suspect anything Musk might have to say safety-related. Within the auto industry, Musk’s Tesla has become notorious for operating in wanton disregard of safety standards. Safety violations at the Fremont plant, Forbes reported last year, have “dwarfed” the violation totals at other big American auto plants.

So why, given Tesla’s sorry safety record, did workers go back to work when the company’s own Return to Work playbook offered no game plan for testing returning employees for the coronavirus?

The simple reason: The workers at the Fremont plant didn’t have much choice. If they didn’t return, a Tesla email informed them, they would go on “unpaid leave” status. And they also, Tesla not so subtly threat-

ened, could find themselves losing their state unemployment benefits.

Musk had, in effect, forced Tesla workers into the same lose-lose bind that faces meatpacking workers in states like Nebraska. Return to work, put your health in jeopardy, and make your rich employers richer or shelter in, keep yourself and your family safe, and go hungry.

Elon Musk, meanwhile, now sees nothing but win-win everywhere he looks. America’s billionaires, he has demonstrated, can do whatever they want. They stand above the law. Musk himself is facing no apparent consequences for defying public authorities on the reopening of the Fremont plant. His triumph has been complete.

But why did reopening that plant matter so much to Musk? Why did he feel so compelled to directly challenge civil authority

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in the middle of a pandemic?

We don't have to guess why. We just need to look at the historic – and widely celebrated – pay deal that Musk brokered with Tesla a bit over two years ago.

This March 2018 agreement lavishes upon Musk a series of stock option awards that will kick in over a decade-long span if Tesla's "market capitalisation" – the sum value of the company's shares – hits a dozen ambitious predetermined targets. That market cap stood at nearly \$59-billion when Musk signed his pay deal. To collect on the deal's total enormous incentive jackpot – an estimated \$55-billion – Musk would have to grow Tesla's market cap by over ten-fold, to \$650-billion.

If Musk pulls that off, one auto industry trade journal noted after the pay deal's unveiling, the options Musk would pocket would likely make him "the richest man in the world by a massive margin".

Other observers scoffed at that possibility. The world's seven largest automakers, they pointed out, together held a combined market value of just \$575-billion. Musk's pay deal, critics charged, merely amounted to another of his flashy publicity stunts.

Musk and his fanboys didn't see things that way. True, Tesla had never shown an ability to operate profitably, and, yes, the Tesla market value would have to skyrocket in a relatively short amount of time. But Amazon, Domino's Pizza, and Netflix had all registered leaps as proportion-

ately grand as the Tesla pay deal envisioned. Tesla could make that leap, too.

By the end of 2019, some serious leaping had begun, as Tesla registered its first quarterly profits. Then, three weeks into 2020, Musk reached his pay deal's first incentive threshold when Tesla shares closed at over \$569 a share. That price nudged the company's total market value more than \$100-billion.



ABOVE THE LAW? Tesla boss Elon Musk defied California health edict.

But Musk, under his pay deal's terms, didn't just have to hit that \$100-billion market-cap target. He had to keep Tesla's average market value above \$100-billion over a six-month span. That didn't seem to pose any problem – until the coronavirus hit and threatened to shut down Tesla's Fremont plant.

For Musk, a shutdown couldn't have come at a more inopportune time. The company was just ramping up its new Model Y

sport utility vehicle. Without a successful Model Y, Tesla's share price could tank and Musk could lose out on the biggest executive pay windfall in global corporate history.

No wonder Musk freaked.

The Tesla shares, in the end, didn't tank. Musk's all-out offensive against California public health officials, his enthusiastic willingness to subject Tesla workers to corona risk, stiffened the spine of Tesla investors. On May 4, Tesla shares closed at \$761, a price high enough to bring the company's 60-day average market capitalisation over \$100-billion. Reaching that milestone triggered the first batch of stock options in Musk's pay deal.

The options gave Musk the right to buy Tesla shares at the company's \$350 January 2018 share price. He could hang on to the shares or turn around and sell them at the \$761 May 4 closing price. Either way, Musk's personal net worth would stand \$700-million higher.

Musk now has eight more years to clear his pay deal's next 11 "valuation hurdles". If he clears them all, the value of his personal Tesla stock holdings could total over \$200-billion.

A nice decade's "work".

Should the rest of us care about any of this? Only if we value the difference between democracy and real-life fascism, a difference that Musk so recklessly clouded when he hollered "fascist" at public health officials just trying to keep Americans safe.

Musk's successful bullying has

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vividly revealed that our duly elected leaders and the governments they lead cannot, when push comes to shove, adequately safeguard the health and well-being of average working people. Democracy cannot work particularly well – or endure particularly long – when those we elect cannot protect us from the wealthy and powerful who loom large so high

above us.

Fascism, by contrast, feasts on such moments. **CT**

Sam Pizzigati co-edits *Inequality.org*. His recent books include *The Case for a Maximum Wage and The Rich Don't Always Win: The Forgotten Triumph over Plutocracy that Created the American Middle Class, 1900-1970*.

Linda McQuaig

Let's not fall into the austerity trap

Slowly, cautiously, the deficit hawks are daring to come out of the shadows. These are the well-heeled folks, from conservative think-tanks and political circles, who for decades have successfully pushed governments to impose austerity and social spending cuts on the rest of us, in the name of keeping government deficits small.

With Canada reeling from the devastating economic shutdown caused by the coronavirus, these usually cocky deficit hawks haven't yet mustered the nerve to come out fully against what is proving to be popular with the public – a dramatic ramping up of Ottawa's spending to shield Canadians from financial despair.

But, led by former Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper, the deficit-slaying crowd

is starting to re-emerge, determined that the pandemic doesn't become the transformative event that could spell the end of the deeply unequal, corporate-dominated economic world they've constructed in recent decades.

After five years of near-silence following his 2015 electoral defeat, Harper took to the *Wall Street Journal* to proclaim the increased spending "economically ruinous" and to warn that if governments "fail to practice mild austerity proactively, a brutal kind will be thrust upon them". This is the same language deficit hawks used in the 1990s to frighten Canadians into believing that, unless we drastically cut government spending, we'd hit the "debt wall" – the perilous point where international investors would no longer lend us money.

Harper insisted in his op-ed that Canada "came close" to defaulting on its debt – hitting the debt wall – in the 90s. It's a scary tale, but not even remotely true.

In fact, even as the carefully stoked deficit hysteria reached a fever-pitch in the mid-90s, Canada retained the very top credit rating – Triple A (Aaa) – indicating that the prestigious Wall Street ratings agencies ranked it one of the safest places in the world to invest. Below were many countries with credit ratings stretching down to Baa3, and then below them, countries ranked "high-risk". Lower still were dozens of African nations that didn't even get a credit rating; international markets had cut them off long ago.

Now that's the debt wall, but Canada has never been anywhere near it. The deficit hawks knew this. Yet they still railed against Canada's debt, generating sufficient fear that Canadians accepted the brutal social spending cuts delivered by Liberal finance minister Paul Martin in 1995.

Since then, the doctrine of small government has prevailed, virtually unchallenged in public debate. Until now.

The deficit hawks are hoping to revive the hysteria they created in the 90s. But let's not be duped again. This time, let's pay attention to a true debt story – the story of how we ran up a gigantic debt fighting World War II and we weren't intimidated by it after the war.

While our debt today is about 35 percent of GDP, by the end of

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the World War II it reached a massive 130 percent of GDP. “But no one cared!”, notes economist Jim Stanford, director of the Centre for Future Work.

We didn’t even pay down that debt! On the contrary, we racked up more debt in the early post-war decades, as Ottawa invested heavily in infrastructure and expanded the size and scope of government.

The debt kept growing, but the economy grew faster, making the debt burden relatively lighter. By the mid-70s, our debt amounted to only about 20 percent of GDP.

We never actually paid it off; we just effectively outgrew it, says Stanford. Those years are sometimes called “the golden age of capitalism” as the economy prospered and a strong middle class emerged.

The deficit hawks can’t deny these facts, but they suggest this wouldn’t work today.

In fact, with today’s record-low borrowing costs – with interest rates effectively close to zero – we’re well positioned to run up a huge debt at virtually no cost, allowing us to put Canadians back to work and begin building the

infrastructure needed to transition to clean energy.

We could actually be on our way to a very different and promising future. But, count on it, the deficit hawks will soon be circling menacingly overhead, hell-bent on preventing any diversion from the austerity they’ve confined us to for decades. **CT**

Linda McQuaig is a journalist and author of *The Sport & Prey of Capitalists: How the Rich are Stealing Canada’s Public Wealth*. This column originally appeared in the Toronto Star.

Thomas S. Harrington

Technocrats and authoritarianism

It is important in these days of constant calls to heed the advice of “experts” on the spread of the Coronavirus to recall the intimate historical links between the concept of technocracy and the practice of authoritarianism.

As soon as the ideal of a truly representative democracy moved to the centre of European and American life at the end of the 19th-century, those slated to lose power under this new social order began touting the advent of a supreme modern wisdom, transcendent of disputes, that would spare us all the inherent

messiness and inefficiency of government by and for the people.

Interestingly, Spain played a key role in the development of this ideological current. During the 1920s and 30s it took on a form known as “anti-parliamentarianism”, which held that only a clairvoyant class of military patriots, unencumbered by ideology, could save the country from the immobilism and corruption generated by party politics.

When, after World War II, the idea of social salvation by men in uniform had lost much of its earlier lustre, these efforts to save the people from themselves

shifted their focus from the military to men of science, broadly understood. The term technocrat first came into wide usage in the late 1950s when Spanish dictator Francisco Franco entrusted the management of his country’s economy to a group of thinkers from the ultra-right wing Catholic organisation Opus Dei.

These men, who would engineer a shift from a policy of nativist protectionism to one much more centred on foreign investment were many things, but people without ideology they were not. However, that did not prevent the regime and its many new banker friends around the world from presenting them as exactly this. Sadly, many outside observers came to believe it.

The central conceit of technocratic thought was, and is, that there exists in data-based, scientific knowledge a clarity that

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will, if bottled and distributed correctly, free us from all types of unproductive debate.

However, both the past and present proponents of this construct tend to forget a very important thing: that those who collect data and interpret it are social beings, who are therefore also political beings, and thus, by definition, non-objective in their selection and deployment of “facts”. This makes their pose of being “above politics” perniciously dangerous for society. Why? Because it puts us all us in the position of having to implicitly accept their wisdom as neutral, and beyond retort, even as they inscribe it with all sorts of epistemological and ideological biases.

There is perhaps no more clear example of this than recent campaigns to free the internet from so-called “fake news” and supposed efforts to “incite violence”.

In regard to the first goal, it should be remembered that there is no such thing as 100 percent “real news”. Rather there are a spectrum of interpretive possibilities regarding the verisimilitude of the claims being by various actors about this or that phenomenon. In other words, serious getting to the bottom of things is always a relatively disordered and uncertain business that seldom results in unassailable conclusions.

And yet we now have companies tied umbilically to the US-EU-Israeli axis of military and business power telling us that they have algorithms that can free us from that inherent messi-

ness by eliminating “fake news” from our screens.

Do you really think they have no ulterior motive in offering this “service” to us? Do you really think that the operative notion of “fakeness” in their algorithms won’t in some way – perhaps even in large measure – be conflated with ideas those from this power configuration view as having the potential to undermine their particular strategic goals?

In regard to the aim of freeing us from hate speech and incitement to violence, is it really objectively true – indeed can it ever be determined to be objectively true – that singing the praises on the Internet of, say, Hezbollah, is inherently more an incitement to violence than praising the US military in the ways that have become almost obligatory in our public spaces and celebrations?

Though you or I might not see it that way, the paramilitary group based in southern Lebanon is, for many around the world, a heroic resistance force that is fighting against what they seen as serial encroachments upon their land as well their way of life.

And then there is the not so small matter of numbers of people maimed and killed. When we look at the statistics side-by-side there is not even a shadow of a doubt as to who has killed or maimed more people in the Middle East. The US military is so absurdly “ahead” in this game of – to use one well-known definition of terrorism – employing “violence or the threat of

violence, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political goals”, it isn’t even funny.

But the last I heard, no algorithm was being developed for saving the denizens of cyberspace from those fulsomely praising our championship killing machine. This, even when its online partisans use hyper-aggressive and ethnically insulting language to justify past murders, or to bless the commission of new ones.

And yet, this grossly disparate treatment of two fighting forces, which can only explained is in terms of the embedded ideological predilections of those running the operation, is consistently presented to us in the language of “above-the-fray” technical neutrality.

That most people in the country apparently buy into this transparently lame technocratic apology for flat-out discourse control is perhaps the most frightening aspect of it all.

If we are really interested in democracy, we cannot passively cede to the ethos of technocracy that our lazy and cowardly politicians and their media servants are now relentlessly foisting upon us. **CT**

Thomas S. Harrington is professor of Hispanic Studies at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. His most recent book is *A Citizen's Democracy in Authoritarian Times: An American View on the Catalan Drive for Independence* (University of Valencia Press).





Dougie Wallace

Facing the future

Just a few months ago wearing a mask in a supermarket would have led to a police call-out. Now it's normal

Text by Lida Hujic

FADED with news headlines that were often confusing, at times fear-mongering, but usually morbid, as the Covid-19 pandemic carved its deadly path of contagion across the world, London-based photographer Dougie Wallace set out to document in his distinctive style the “only show in town” – shopping for food.

“Initially, confused and frightened shoppers cleared the supermarket shelves of anything they could get their hands on, but now the panic has settled down to a regimented orderliness, where customers wait patiently to enter the shops, killing time by staring into their mobiles or reading newspapers and books”, says Wallace.

“White-collar workers dress down, their professions allowing



Other masks are more inventive – ranging from artistic and homely to, well, bonkers – heavy-duty industrial masks, paper bags, and motorcycle crash helmets

them to work from the comfort of their homes, but the rebels dress up in an effort to defy often-arbitrary restrictions. Meanwhile, supermarket employees soldier on, keeping things moving, at great personal risk from the Covid-19 virus that threatens with every intake of breath”.

The humble face mask has become the symbol of the crisis. Wearing masks should have been recommended for all, and compulsory for the most vulnerable. Instead, the utilitarian stock of medical-

grade disposables and painter’s masks quickly ran out due to the UK government’s unpreparedness for the pandemic and the resulting fear of stock depletion of medical masks for frontline workers. So people made do with what was readily at hand and made their own. Some home-made masks are simply functional, following online advice showing how to make them from such unlikely material as J-Cloth and rubber bands (“preferably hair bands”), handkerchiefs, T-shirts, and even socks. Others are more inventive – ranging from artistic and homely to, well, bonk-





Although – as the politicians are so keen to tell us – we are “all in this together”, the real heroes of this story are the supermarket staff

ers – heavy-duty industrial masks, paper bags, and motorcycle crash helmets, the wearing of which would have been enough reason for cautious shop managers to call out the cops just a few months ago.

Although – as the politicians are so keen to tell us – we are “all in this together”, the real heroes of this story are the supermarket staff: uniformed security guards control shop entrances on a one-in, one-out basis, as in nightclubs. Checkout staff, directly facing customers, each a potential carrier of this deadly disease, are on the front

line, with floor staff helping customers trying to observe the newly imposed two-trolley-width distancing rules – which is all but impossible when stocking shelves in the narrow aisles of a Tesco Metro. Employers, who initially seemed reluctant to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) for shop floor staff (rumour had it, for fear of customers finding them unsettling), gave in and introduced safety measures. A new barricaded shopping landscape emerged, with plexiglass partitions for checkout lanes and branded uniforms, aprons and T-shirts, all blasted with slogans such as “Please keep 2 metres-apart”.



Wallace says, “Because of the strict new laws on movement, I’m really only allowed to go to the shops in the area I live in Islington, and Sainsbury’s Whitechapel Super Store, where I shop for my mum.

“Street photography”, he adds, “can be challenging at any time, but navigating through the health warnings of two-metre distance-keeping makes the challenge of getting a good shot even greater.

“I’m shooting with my Olympus EM1 Mark 3, which is small, fast and light. The secret is to avoid eye contact and the giveaway of looking at the back of the camera.

“I’m really only allowed to go to the shops in the area I live in Islington, and Sainsbury’s Whitechapel Super Store, where I shop for my mum”



"There's the professional hazard of holding a camera close to my face while trying not to touch my eyes or mouth"

"Even shooting every day, it's still counter-intuitive which, I tell myself, explains why I dropped my flash during my first outing.

"Add to this there's the professional hazard of holding a camera close to my face while trying not to touch my eyes or mouth, and remembering to regularly sanitise my hands and equipment. Documenting life in the presence of this invisible enemy is perilous work, but we're all learning how to do this new thing together".

CT

Dougie Wallace has published six photobooks. The newest, *East Ended*, was recently released by Dewi Lewis at www.dewilewis.com





C.J. Hopkins

Brave New Normal (Part Two)

The world is entering a world of totalitarian fascism, and what makes me really cranky is that we're not doing anything to stop it

MY columns haven't been very funny recently. This one isn't going to be any different. Sorry. Fascism makes me cranky. I don't mean the kind of fascism the corporate media and the fake Resistance have been hyping for the last four years. God help me, but I'm not terribly worried about a few hundred white-supremacist morons marching around with tiki torches hollering Nazi slogans at each other, or Jewish-Mexican-American law clerks flashing "OK" signs on TV, or smirking schoolkids in MAGA hats.

I'm talking about actual, bona fide fascism, or totalitarianism, if you want to get technical. The kind where governments declare a global "state of emergency" on account of a virus with a 0.2 percent to 0.6 percent lethality (and that causes mild, flu-like symptoms, or absolutely no symptoms whatsoever, in 97 percent of those infected), locks everyone down inside their homes, suspends their constitutional rights, terrorises them with propaganda, and unleashes uniformed goon squads on anyone who doesn't comply with their despotic decrees.

I'm talking about the kind of totalitarianism where the police track you down with your smartphone data and then come to your house to harass you for attending a political protest, or attack you for challenging their illegitimate authority, and then charge you with "assault" for fighting back, and then get the media to publish a story accusing you of having "set up" the cops.

I'm talking about the kind of totalitarianism where the secret police are given carte blanche to monitor everyone's Internet activity, and to scan you with their "surveillance helmets", and dictate how close you can sit to your friends, and menace you with drones and robot dogs, and violently pry your kids out of your arms and arrest you if you dare to protest.

I'm talking about the kind of totalitarianism that psychologically tortures children with authoritarian loyalty rituals designed to condition them to live in fear, and respond to absurd Pavlovian stimuli, and that encourages the masses to turn off their brains and mechanically repeat propaganda slogans, like "wear a mask" and "flatten the

curve", and to report their neighbours to the police for having an "illegal" private party ... and to otherwise reify the manufactured mass hysteria the authorities need to "justify" their totalitarianism.

Yeah, that kind of stuff makes me cranky. And you know what makes me really cranky? I'll tell you what makes me really cranky. It is people who publicly project themselves as "anti-authoritarians" and "anti-fascists", or who have established their "anti-establishment" brands and "dissident" personas on social media, or even in the corporate media, either zealously cheerleading this totalitarianism or looking away and saying nothing as it is rolled out by the very authorities and media propagandists they pretend to oppose. I don't know exactly why, but that stuff makes me particularly cranky. I'll provide you with a few examples.

The militant "Portland anti-fascists" who the corporate media fell in love with and made famous for bravely fighting off the Trump-loving Putin-Nazi Menace over the last four years, as soon as the



Corona-Totalitarianism began, did what all true anti-fascists do when the state goes full-blown fascist ... they didn't "smash the state", or "occupy the streets". They masked-up and started making vegan hand sanitiser.

Popular Internet "anti-imperialists" started accusing everyone opposing the lockdown of being part of some far-right Republican plot to "promote mass death under the banner of freedom" or to "normalise death" to benefit rich people, or being members of a "death cult", or something. Celebrity Socialists took to Twitter to warn that we would "shortly have the blood of thousands of people on our hands", and call us "anti-vaxxers" and "flat earth fucks". Indie political and military analysts patiently explained why governments needed to be able to pull people out of their homes against their will and quarantine them. Anarchist anthropologists averred that the lockdown wasn't damaging the productive economy; it was only damaging the "bullshit economy", and those

Analysts explained why governments needed to be able to pull people out of their homes against their will

complaining about being out of work were people whose work is "largely useless".

Others simply looked away or sat there in silence as we were confined to our homes, and made to carry "permission papers" to walk to work or the corner grocery store, and were beaten and arrested for not "social-distancing", and were otherwise bullied and humiliated for no justifiable reason whatsoever. (We are talking about a virus, after all, that even the official medical experts, eg. the UK's Chief Medic, admit is more or less harmless to the vast majority of us, not the Bubonic Fucking

Plague or some sort of Alien-Terrorist-Death-Flu ... so spare me the "we-had-no-choice-but-to-go-totalitarian" rationalisation.)

My intent is not merely to mock these people (ie, these "radical", "anti-establishment" types who fell into formation and started goose-stepping because the media told them we were all going to die), but also to use them as a clear example of how official narratives are born and take hold.

That's somewhat pertinent at the moment, because the "Brave New Normal" official narrative has been born, but it has not yet taken hold. What happens next will determine whether it does.

In order to understand how this works, imagine for a moment that you're one of these people who are normally skeptical of the government and the media, and that you consider yourself an anti-authoritarian, or at least a friend of the working classes, and now you are beginning to realise that there is no Alien-Terrorist-Death-Flu, just as there were no "WMDs", no "Russian hackers", no "pee-tape", and so it dawns on you that you've been behaving like a hysterical, brainwashed, fascist minion of the very establishment you supposedly oppose ... or at the very least like an abject coward.

Imagine how you might feel right now. You would probably feel pretty foolish and more than a little ashamed of yourself. OK, what would do about that? Well, you would have a couple of options.

Option Number One would be admit what you did, apologise to whomever you have to, and try like hell not to do it again. Not many peo-

ple are going to choose this option.

Most people are going to choose Option Number Two, which is to desperately try to deny what they did, or to desperately rationalise what they did (and in many cases are still actively doing). Now, this is not as easy at it sounds, because doing that means they will have to continue to believe (or at least pretend to believe) that there is an Alien-Terrorist-Death-Flu which is going to kill hundreds of millions of people the moment we stop locking everyone down, and forcing them to “social distance”, and so on. They will have to continue to pretend to believe that this Alien-Terrorist-Death-Flu exists, even though they know it doesn’t.

And this is where that Orwellian “doublethink” comes in. People (ie, these “anti-authoritarians”, not to mention the majority of the “normal” public) are not going to want to face the fact that they’ve been behaving like a bunch of fascists for no justifiable reason. So, what they are going to do is desperately pretend that their behaviour was justified and that the propaganda they have been swallowing, and regurgitating, was not propaganda, but rather, “the Truth”.

In other words, in order to avoid their shame, they are going to do everything in their power to reify the official narrative and delegitimise anyone attempting to expose it as the fiction that it is. They are going to join in with the corporate media that are calling us “extremists”, “conspiracy theorists”, “anti-vaxxers”, and other such epithets. They’re going to accuse those of us on the Left of aligning with “far-Right Republican militias”, and “Boogaloo accelerationists”, and of being members of the Russian-

Reality is consensus reality ... and a new consensus is being formed at the moment

backed “Querfront”, and assorted other horrible things meant to scare errant leftists into line.

Above all, they are going to continue to insist, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that we are “under attack” by a “killer virus” which could “strike again at any time”, and so we have to maintain at least some level of totalitarianism and paranoia, or else ... well, you know, the terrorists win.

It is this reification of the official narrative by those too ashamed to admit what they did (and try to determine why they did it), and not the narrative or the propaganda itself, that will eventually establish the “Brave New Normal” as “reality” (assuming the process works as smoothly as it did with the “War on Terror,” the “War on Populism”, and the “Cold War” narratives). The facts, the data, the “science” won’t matter. Reality is consensus reality ... and a new consensus is being formed at the moment.

There is still a chance (right now, not months from now) for these people (some of whom are rather influential) to stand up and say, “Whoops! I screwed up and went all Nazi there for a bit”. But I doubt that is going to happen. It’s much more likely that the Brave

New Normal (or some intermittent, scaled-down version of it) will gradually become our new reality. People will get used to being occasionally “locked down”, and being ordered to wear masks, and not to touch each other, and to standing in designated circles and boxes, like they got used to the “anti-terrorism measures”, and believing that Trump is a “Russian asset”. The coming economic depression will be blamed on the Alien-Terrorist-Death-Flu, rather than on the lockdown that caused it. Millions of people will be condemned to extreme poverty, or debt-enslaved for the rest of their lives, but they’ll be too busy trying to survive to mount any kind of broad resistance.

The children, of course, won’t know any better. They will grow up with their “isolation boxes”, and “protective barriers”, and “contact tracing,” and they will live in constant fear of another killer virus, or terrorist attack, or Russian-backed white supremacist uprising, or whatever boogeyman might appear to menace the global capitalist empire, which, it goes without saying, will be just fine.

Me, I’ll probably remain kind of cranky, but I will try to find the humour in it all. Bear with me ... that might take a while. **CT**

C. J. Hopkins is an award-winning American playwright, novelist and political satirist based in Berlin. His dystopian novel, *Zone 23*, is published by Snoggsworthy, Swaine & Cormorant. Volume I of his *Consent Factory Essays* is published by Consent Factory. He can be reached at www.cjhopkins.com or www.consentfactory.org.

Joe Allen

No fear of Corona in Sedona, Arizona



ANOTHER WORLD: Sunrise at Cathedral Rock, Sedona.

THE charming Sedona art dealer shook my hand without hesitation. That's how I knew I'd escaped to the right place. She stood a couple of feet away as we talked about Arizona's current efforts to reopen the economy. Galleries and restaurants were now open – with restrictions – as well as health spas and state parks. A few cautious tourists wore face-yarmulkes, but most were grinning up at the desert sun.

Over the last two months, the state's conservative governor had refrained from the tyrannical lockdowns employed by neighbouring

Handshakes, statues, hippies, and a state of magic between the prickly pear and a juniper tree

states. To everyone's surprise, dead bodies hadn't piled up in the streets. The art dealer may be as liberal as shaman-blessed kombucha, but even she was impressed by her state leader's response.

"He never forced places of worship to close", she told me. "He simply asked them to stop gather-

ing until it's safe. The choice was theirs to make".

As we chatted, the landlord came by to discuss the excitement of the coming week. He gave her a big hug – shook my hand eagerly – and handed her a colourful poster with the new "reopening guidelines" – six feet of distance, wear a mask, no touchy feelies. Superstitious practices, supported by science, meant to ease the panicked consumer back into the marketplace.

When I asked the dealer if she was afraid of the Demon Germ, she flashed a white smile and said, "I believe in strong immunity". This

woman radiated such health and vitality, I had to wonder if art has the power to heal.

As our conversation turned to the natural order, she pointed out various features on the crimson rock walls that enclose the city. To the east, one formation resembles Snoopy napping on his doghouse. To the south, I saw a craggy elephant-headed Ganesh reading a self-published pamphlet about UFO cover-ups. These ancient stones hum with so many good vibrations, they'll rattle your brains loose.

Sedona was built at the feet of towering blood-red pinnacles and layered sandstone buttes. The scene is so inspiring, even a jerk like me can take a deep breath and relax. Since whites first settled here in 1876, this cowboy town has attracted eccentric artists, mushroom mystics, and worn souls in search of healing. Along the main street, that potent energy manifests as magic crystals and vulgar displays of yoga.

This is where late stage capitalism meets the harmonic convergence. The prominent wall of The Center for the New Age – an establishment offering everything from psychics-for-hire to flying saucer tours – features the obligatory multicultural mural you find in every artsy town, but with a ridiculous woo-woo twist. We see the Earth encircled by a rainbow enclosed by an impossibly diverse group hug. A Navajo sorceress, a blond hippie, an African priest, a braless Latina, an Aztec heart-eater, and an ethnic elf all hold hands in an unbroken circle.

The bartender says, "Sorry, fel-



Photo: Joe Allen

WINGED WOMAN: James Muir's Caduceus statue at Sedona emerges from a globe cracked in two like an eggshell.

las. The funny farm is next door".

This spiritual cheese is delightful, but the most distinctive work in town is by local artist James Muir. His monumental bronze pieces have been commissioned for public spaces all over America. The sculptor is a West Point grad and Air Force veteran, so naturally his subjects tend toward patriotic symbolism, soldier memorials, and Christian iconography.

One fine example is "Cornerstones of Freedom", a bronze installation at Sedona's war memorial park. The statue pays homage to three key documents in democracy's sacred canon: the 13th-century Magna Carta, the Declaration of Independence of 1776, and the US Constitution. To either side are Lady Liberty and blindfolded Justice. Across the park is "Athena's Prayer", a life-sized female soldier in US uniform, an avatar of the war goddess of ancient Greece.

At the south end of town, Sedona's Holy Cross Chapel now houses a 30-foot bronze crucifix created by Muir. The cross is a gnarly old tree bearing three golden apples. A giant Jesus stares down at photo-snapping tourists with unnerving wide eyes.

As a child of the West, Muir works from his spiritual home. But somewhere behind the national pride and religious particularity lurks a vision of mystical unity. The guy may be a hard-knuckled badass, but you can't hang around Sedona's magic crystals every day without some rainbow woo rubbing off on you.

Muir's soaring "Caduceus" is inspired by the mythic staff of Hermes, the mischievous messenger of Olympus and androgynous god/goddess of magic. Today, this winged staff is the emblem that sets doctors apart from armchair doctors.

Muir personifies this totem of vitality as a winged woman. She emerges from a globe cracked in two like an eggshell. The apocalypse reveals perfected being. A pair of serpents – a python and a cobra – twist up her body like reptilian maypole ribbons. According to the artist's description, these snakes symbolise the interaction of the physical and spiritual principles. They evoke the spiralling structure of DNA.

Two versions of "Caduceus" have been consecrated on Highway 89A. On the west side of town, a solemn 12-foot tall bronze sanctifies the Sedona City Hall. On the east side, tourists waddle beneath her jade-green twin. The statue's gaze is gentle, but serious. The plaque at her feet reads: "[T]he 'Caduceus' has become an Angel of

Healing rising ... to heal the Earth and all its inhabitants with Love as the Master Physician".

The woman's forehead is adorned with a jewel that, like the Eastern third eye, "represents vision with full intuitive insight and acuity into the esoteric world of healing and metaphysical reality". A Rose Cross, esteemed in certain occult circles, hangs around her neck. The feather in her hair represents the Egyptian concept of ma'at, the "cosmic order," or "Truth". By layering these ancient symbols, Muir traces history of Western medical science back to the early observations of Greek philosophers and the primal intuitions of Egyptian priests.

Modern medicine is the arrogant heir to magic. Today's believers douse themselves in hand sanitiser instead of holy water, even in their own churches. We've progressed from the four humours of Hippocrates to ill-humoured harpies wearing PPE burkas in the grocery store. It's a new normal for a new age.

A few miles south, Cathedral Rock's thick sandstone base glowed red in the setting sun. Its spires cast narrow shadows across sage and juniper shrubs to the east. The desert seemed empty as always, except that somewhere some asshole was blasting electronic music – thump thump thump thump thump thump. And was that a sitar solo? The beats echoed off the sandstone walls. Suddenly howls erupted nearby. At first I thought it was techno-averse coyotes, but as I ascended the rock face, a coven of hippies came into view.

Thirty of them were performing

I thought it was techno-averse coyotes, but as I ascended the rock face, a coven of hippies came into view

the sacred noodle dance on a high plateau, their pink faces wild with delight, their floppy arms waving like spaghetti in a boiling pot. A neo-boombox pulsed in the centre of their circle. When a pan flute solo faded in, they howled again like the wolves of Chernobyl.

Most were young and gorgeous, braless and shirtless and free, with a few gray heads bopping here and there. You could almost see their germ-clouds intermingle. Vaporous tendrils caressed each face in turn. A cool desert breeze passed through us, and the sharp odour of cannabis-infused armpit hit my nostrils. I stepped over to have a chat.

They were friendly enough. In the hippie tradition of unsolicited metaphysical rants, a former firefighter named Jewel explained how she'd discovered the origin and goal of human evolution.

"The experience was, like, so spiritual, I yelled at my friends to stop calling it a 'trip'!" Her companions nodded knowingly, muttering "yeah" and "totally", and the music thumped on. "We are all, like, sparks of God, separated out and put into these bodies. That's why we love to play with each other – God doesn't have eyes and ears. God can't touch anything because God doesn't have any fingers.

"We are God's eyes and ears and fingers. That's how God gets to play, and that's why we're all here, together".

I told her that acid usually made me see demons. For whatever reason, Jewel didn't want to discuss God's nasty habit of eating His own sparks by the million, so I climbed up to Cathedral Rock's summit.

I found a secluded seat at the top, between the spires, looking out on the dry landscape. A black lava plug lifted up from the red sandstone. The magma had probably pushed through to the surface some sixteen-million years ago, when volcanoes roared from here up to Idaho. I wondered if this crumbling mound of black stone might extend all the way down to the molten mantle below.

The rusty sandstone was laid down a quarter of a billion years ago, when dinosaurs and flowering plants were still a feverish dream. Eons of rainfall uncovered and carved out this crimson cathedral, inch by inch. As the earth gave way to water, this enormous rock proved to be one moment closer to eternal life than its neighbours.

I sat between a blossoming prickly pear and a juniper tree whose roots cling to the highest rocks. Venus chased the setting sun. Two pissed-off hawks shrieked overhead, fighting for the top perch on the pinnacle. The noodle-dancers howled down below. It may be hard to believe in angels and demons and alien life, but if you take a long look around, it's obvious that magic is real. **CT**

Joe Allen writes about race, robots, and religion. These days, he's based out of a survivalist bunker on wheels.

George Monbiot

A cluster of panic and indecision

The UK was second in the world for preparedness. Then Boris Johnson and his gang deliberately de-prepared us

We are trapped in a long, dark tunnel, all of whose known exits are blocked. There is no plausible route out of the UK's coronavirus crisis that does not involve mass suffering and death.

If, as some newspapers and Conservative MPs insist, the government eases the lockdown while the pandemic is still raging, the eventual death toll could be several times greater than today's. If it doesn't, and we spend all the warm months of the year in confinement, the impact on our mental and physical health, jobs and relationships could be catastrophic.

We have been told repeatedly that the UK was unprepared for this pandemic. This is untrue. The UK was prepared, but then it de-prepared. Last year, the Global Health Security Index ranked this nation second in the world for pandemic readiness, while the US was first. Broadly speaking, in both nations the necessary systems were in place. Our governments chose not to use them.

The climate modeller James Annan has used his analytical methods to show what would have happened if the UK government had imposed its lockdown a week earlier. Starting it on March 16, rather than March 23, his modelling suggests, would by now have saved around 30,000 lives, reducing the rate of illness and death from coronavirus roughly by a factor of five.

But even March 16 would have been extraordinarily late. We now know that government ministers were told on February 11 that the virus could be catastrophic, and decisive action was urgently required. Instead, Boris Johnson told us to wash our hands and "go about our normal daily lives".

Had the government acted in February, we can hazard a guess about what the result would have been, as the world has conducted a clear controlled experiment: weighing South Korea, Taiwan and New Zealand against the UK, the US and Brazil. South Korea did everything the UK government could have done, but

refused to implement. Its death toll so far: 263. It still has an occasional cluster of infection, which it promptly contains. By contrast, the entire UK is now a cluster of infection.

While other countries either closed their borders or quarantined all arrivals, in the three months between the emergence of the virus and the UK's lockdown, 18-million people arrived on these shores, of whom only 273 were quarantined. Even after the lockdown was announced, 95,000 people entered the UK without additional restrictions. In fact, on March 13, the UK stood down even its own guidance, which had gently requested travellers from Italy and China to self-isolate. This decision, taken as other nations were stepping up their controls, seems baffling.

Similarly, on March 12, Johnson abandoned both containment and nationwide testing and tracking. A week later, the status of the pandemic was lowered, which meant that the government could reduce the standard of personal protective equipment required in hospitals, and could shift infec-

tious patients into non-specialist care. Again, there was no medical or scientific justification for this decision.

Exercise Cygnus, a pandemic simulation conducted in 2016, found that the impacts in care homes would be catastrophic unless new measures were put in place.

The government insists that it heeded the findings of this exercise and changed its approach accordingly. If this is correct, by allowing untested patients to be shifted from hospitals to care homes, while failing to provide the extra support and equipment the homes needed and allowing agency workers to move freely within and between them, it knowingly breached its own protocols. Tens of thousands of highly vulnerable people were exposed to infection.

In other words, none of these are failures of knowledge or capacity. They are de-preparations, conscious decisions not to act. They start to become explicable only when we recognise what they have in common: a refusal to frontload the costs.

This refusal is common in countries whose governments fetishise what we call “the market”: the euphemism we use for the power of money.

Johnson’s government, like that of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, represents a particular kind of economic interest. For years politicians of their stripe have been in conflict with people who perform useful services: nurses, teachers, care workers and the other low-paid people who

The war against utility is necessary if you want to privatise public services

keep our lives ticking, whose attempts to organise and secure better pay and conditions are demonised by ministers and in the media.

This political conflict is always fought on behalf of the same group: those who extract wealth. The war against utility is necessary if you want to privatise public services, granting lucrative monopolies or fire sales of public assets to friends in the private sector. It’s necessary if you want to hold down public sector pay and the minimum wage, cutting taxes and bills for the same funders and lobbyists. It is necessary if corporations are to be allowed to outsource and offshore their workforces, and wealthy people can offshore their income and assets.

The interests of wealth extractors are, by definition, short term. They divert money that might otherwise have been used for investment into dividends and share β . They dump costs that corporations should legitimately bear on to society in general, in the form of pollution (the car and road lobbies) or public health disasters (soft drinks and junk food producers). They siphon money out of an enterprise or a nation as quickly as possible, before the tax

authorities, regulators or legislators catch up.

Years of experience have shown that it is much cheaper to make political donations, employ lobbyists and invest in public relations than to change lucrative but harmful commercial policies. Working through the billionaire press and political systems that are highly vulnerable to capture by money, in the UK, US and Brazil they have helped ensure that cavalier and reckless people are elected. Their chosen representatives have an almost instinctive aversion to investment, to carrying a cost today that could be deferred, delayed or dumped on someone else.

It’s not that any of these interests – whether the *Daily Mail* or the US oil companies – want coronavirus to spread. It’s that the approach that has proved so disastrous in addressing the pandemic has been highly effective, from the lobbyists’ point of view, when applied to other issues: delaying and frustrating action to prevent climate breakdown; pollution; the obesity crisis; inequality; unaffordable rent; and the many other plagues spread by corporate and billionaire power.

Thanks in large part to their influence, we have governments that fail to protect the public interest, by design. This is the tunnel. This is why the exits are closed. This is why we will struggle to emerge. CT

George Monbiot is a columnist for the *Guardian*, where this article first appeared. His website is www.monbiot.com.

Trevor Hoyle

Did Philip K. Dick dream of English axe murderers?

He's sitting on a low sofa in a medium-sized airless room gazing up at me, eyes quickening and then blinking with nervous inquiry ...

I WAS staying in Anaheim at the Hyatt, across the road from Disneyland, with my wife and son. We had done the Grand Canyon, Aspen, the Durango-Silverton Railroad, and were spending a few days in Los Angeles before driving up to San Francisco along the highway where James Dean crashed his Porsche 550 Spyder in 1955.

This was September 1978. A sultry Sunday evening.

I had no qualms about taking the freeway down to Santa Ana where Philip K. Dick lived. Streets in the US go on forever, often several miles in length, and finding Civic Center Drive almost the minute I came off Interstate 5 seems like a miracle. I drive for five minutes and decide to pull over to get my bearings. The building I'd stopped outside was typical southern California white stucco, four-storey, with Spanish-style wrought iron-work guarding the entrance. The address number was the same fancy metal scroll: 409. I checked the piece of paper in my hand. Out of an avenue of ten thousand numbers, by curious happenstance, this was the address I was seeking.

It did seem odd, but I wasn't too

alarmed; it was already turning into a melodramatically fraught kind of evening.

Alongside the rank of mailboxes set in the stucco wall were cards bearing typewritten and scrawled names, and alongside each one a button and speaking grille. I didn't expect to see "Philip K. Dick" in the slot reserved for Apartment C-1. But there it is: no pseudonym, no alias, no subterfuge. One of the world's greatest SF writers, whose name emblazons from a million paperback stands, is right there on a piece of pasteboard for any common-or-garden passing stranger to read and identify.

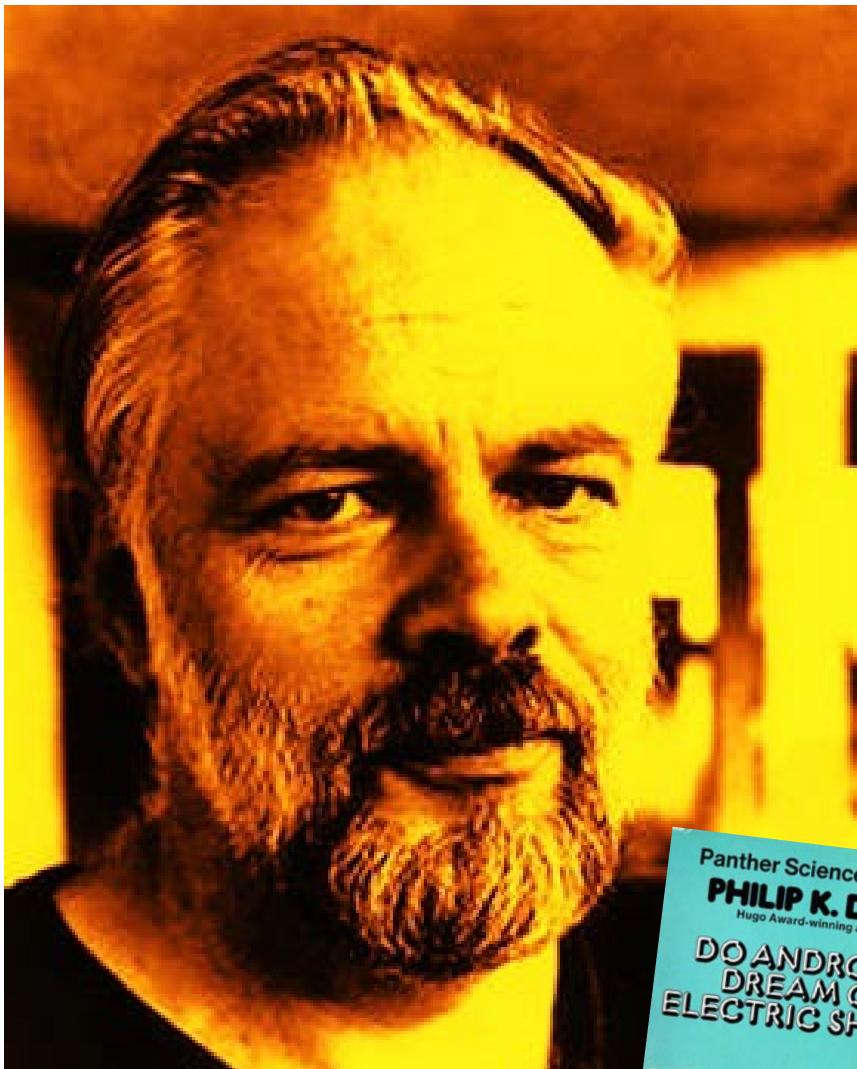
A sense of alienation and trepidation constricts my breathing. What to do – turn about? Retreat down Interstate 5 to Anaheim and Disneyland (but *this* is Disneyland!) or stop at the nearest neon-lit liquor store and grab a six-pack of Bud?

Instead, I clear my throat, press the button, and ease my mouth close to the grille. It feels like an exam question reverberating inside my head: "Explain who you are, what you want, and why you've come six

thousand miles to press the button on Philip K. Dick's mailbox in a single concise and comprehensible sentence that doesn't make you sound like the Bloody Lancashire Axe Maniac brought up on "H" certificate Universal movies".

The explanation is redundant. None is required. Before I can speak, a click to my left tells me that the Spanish-style wrought-iron gate has been released remotely and is even now swinging open on noiseless hinges. The stifling melodramatic evening increases its clammy grip. I enter the paved courtyard. The white stucco walls are replaced by a sullen brown. Concrete steps lead upwards. I climb slowly to the next floor, turn a corner and come upon a short corridor of doors, the first of which is signed "C-1." I don't need to knock because the door is visibly ajar by a few inches.

(As if, let us suppose, One of the World's Greatest SF Writers had been expecting, indeed eagerly anticipating, a visit this Sunday evening from the Bloody Lancashire Axe Maniac. Well, relax, Phil, here I am. As promised. No, don't go for your blaster – my



SCI-FI KING: Philip K. Dick, author of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, which became the film *Blade Runner*.

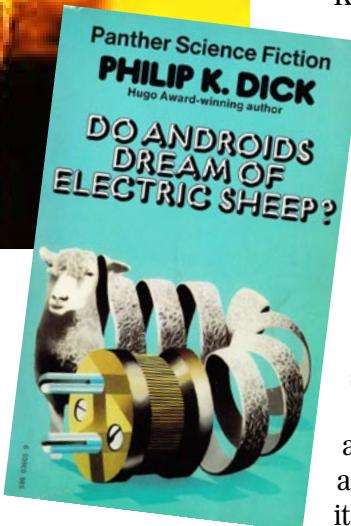
blood-rimmed, hair-matted, axe is faster and ten times more deadly than any intergalactic toy you could ever dream up.)

A dim carpeted passage leads to a door showing a crack of light: just as this is your dim carpeted passage to an eyeball confrontation with P.K.D. (One of the World's Greatest etc, etc), who, when I timidly tap and enter, is sitting on a low sofa in a medium-sized airless room gazing up at me, eyes quickening and then blinking with nervous inquiry as they flicker to and

fro, searching for the weapon this unknown intruder must surely be toting.

I stand mute on the threshold, my right hand gripping the doorknob for something to hold on to.

In appearance he is exactly as I expected him to be, because I hadn't expected anything. I must have



been in shock, and brain-numbed, because to this day I can't for the life of me recall his physical appearance, which must come as a disappointment to those waiting to learn what Philip Kindred Dick looked like in the flesh.

The only exact description I can offer is from a photograph taken in 1979 (the year after my visit) which shows him as ageing, greying, bearded, wearing a crumpled white T-shirt over his bulging paunch with the motto CAL STATE. But this I do remember: he was in the act of taking a pinch of snuff from one of 20 or so small round tins resting on an upturned cardboard box lid balanced on his knees. Does he speak? Nope. Merely gazes up at me with a fractional crinkling of eyes somewhat Slavic in cast, as I recall.

Knowing Phil's long and illustrious history of drug-taking (*A Scanner Darkly*) I am somewhat discombobulated by the snuff-taking; rather like finding Dylan Thomas sipping lemonade through a straw while working on his embroidery. Still, I'm able to stumble over a few breathless, introductory phrases which seem to do the trick.

The evening which began as sultry and purple takes on a deepening tinge of unreality and unsettling domesticity: sitting in Philip K. Dick's rocking chair in Philip K. Dick's poky apartment talking to One of the World's Greatest etc, etc, is bizarre; no other word for it.

Minutes pass, and then my phantom-like admission to Apartment C-1 is explained by the arrival of the person Phil had been expecting (and into whose spacetime

vortex the Lancashire Axe Maniac has blundered with uncanny precision). This turns out to be another writer of science fiction, a friend and acolyte of the master named K.W. Jeter. They swap greetings while I smile and rock and drink a can of Bud from the six-pack the friend has brought.

Travelling through America has a celluloid familiarity, and the distinctive ring of an American phone in the small apartment is enough to render the entire experience cinematic. Phil exits left to bedroom. Door closes.

"Probably his third ex", says K.W. Jeter, sotto voce.

"How many exes has he got?"

"Five. Or it could be his second having school problems with their daughter".

"That must make life complicated", I say fatuously.

K.W. Jeter merely shrugs and tips Bud down his throat.

"How does he manage to get any work done with all these interruptions?"

"Phil works at night. Loads the deck with six hours of classical tapes, plugs in the headphones, and rattles away till eight in the morning, then grabs a bite of supper and goes to bed. Two thousand words, give or take, five nights a week".

Here at last is something tangible to grasp hold of: I understand this practical talk. It deals with realities and comforts me. So it is the real Philip K. Dick after all, not an imposter under an assumed name. The man actually works here (in this dismal cramped apartment!), producing the books I have read. And I'm in it too, with K.W. Jeter, a burnhole in the carpet and a card-

I face the unreality of who and where I am: a Lancashire lad pissing into the lavatory bowl of One of the World's etc, etc

board boxlid of snuff in tiny pots.

Twenty minutes later and Phil remains stubbornly absent. I can hear his muttered voice from the bedroom. The current crisis with Ex1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 has yet to be resolved.

Eventually nature calls. It's all of nine paces from the rocking chair to the bathroom, where I relieve myself, examining as I do so the clutter of toiletry artefacts of mid-life bachelorhood in 20th-century America ... yet the sight and sound of my ablutions resurrects once again the audacious unreality of who and where I am: a Lancashire lad pissing into the lavatory bowl of One of the World's etc, etc.

It also brings with it a sobering insight.

5 ex-wives + dependents = 1 small poky apartment.

Phil has been sucked dry. He has been, as they say, through the mill. He has bravely soldiered on, bruised and battered, writing his books against the assault course of his personal battles – his ex-wives and partners, his dangerous dalliance with the Californian drug scene – and beached himself here in Apartment C-1, Santa Ana, still miraculously sane, or nearly so, working through the night to pro-

duce his 2000 words, taking snuff in moderation.

The man is an object lesson and an inspiration. I feel humbled and sadly wiser.

The rest of the evening, on Phil's return, is spent talking about what writers invariably talk about: advances, contracts, royalty percentages, subsidiary rights, the avarice of publishers. (We share the same British editor, Nick Webb, which is how I was able to obtain Phil's address.) I find that I get bigger advances in the UK for my books than Phil gets in the US for his, which astonishes me and further explains his life-style.

Before I leave, K.W. Jeter signs two of his books for me and Phil shakes my hand and wishes me well. I have nothing to give in return for these gifts of hospitality and friendship. Not even a blood-stained axe as a memento. **CT**

AFTERWORD: Dedicated with respect and gratitude to the memory of Philip K. Dick (1928-1982), one of the world's greatest science fiction writers. Every word of this account is true. Our meeting took place before Ridley Scott had adapted *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* as the film *Blade Runner*. Apparently, Phil saw and approved some rough-cuts of early scenes of the film a few months before he died.

Trevor Hoyle is a writer and novelist based in Lancashire, England. His most recent novel is the environmental thriller *The Last Gasp*, published by Jo Fletcher Books (Quercus). His website is www.trevorhoyle.com.



Photo: John Rothwell

BEARING ARMs: Protester at an American Patriot Rally against the Covid-19 shutdown in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Christine E. Black

Some questions for the men with rifles

As we sit uneasily through this world-wide panic, we may learn by questioning narratives that too-often pit us against each other

BELONG to one of the historic peace churches. Where I worship there is a sign in the hallway that has become dear to me. It is known as the Quaker Peace Testimony, a Declaration to Charles II in 1660. It says, “We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever; and this is

our testimony to the whole world”. It goes on to describe the spirit of Christ, as the writer sees it. The language is lovely and poetic.

I would never carry a gun to a public protest, and I have been in many public protests and demonstrations, especially against the US government’s wars in Iraq and

Afghanistan. Sometimes counter protesters screamed in our faces, blocked our way, or created a gauntlet through which we had to walk. In one, I wondered afterwards why the Washington DC police stood by and let the screaming and blocking happen.

I have never owned a gun and have no interest in owning one. I don’t remember ever touching a

gun and know very little about them. Recently, I watched, along with others in this country, as men, and some women, openly carried guns to the steps of the Michigan State Capitol in Lansing and then into the capitol building.

If I was a reporter covering the story of that protest, I would want to ask one or two of the protesters, “Why did you decide to bring a gun to this demonstration and carry it out in the open?” Because they made a decision so different than the one I would make and because lockdown has created such a climate of fear and panic amid a storm of daily conflicting opinions and information, I would be genuinely interested in their response. It may help with understanding. I would want to include their comments in my story on the protest and others like it, protests that have been written about across US and international newspapers with reporters saying the gun-carrying protestors are “Right-wing extremists”, “White Supremacists”, and “Nazis”.

I am not so concerned by those demonstrators who carried Confederate flags at the Michigan protests; after all, a flag is just that – a flag. Those displaying it may be wrong, but who am I to interpret a flag’s meaning to someone else? A flag doesn’t shoot someone – a person does.

Similarly, I could stand on a street corner with a sign that says, “All wars are wrong”, or “This war is wrong. End it”, and someone could scream in my face that I was unpatriotic, hated this country, or was a traitor – that’s their right. In the early days of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, wars that most of the public now agree were

Who am I to interpret a flag’s meaning to someone else? A flag doesn’t shoot someone – a person does

horrible mistakes, I remember a news commentator criticising protesters aggressively on TV: “Once troops are committed, you shut up!” he said. He would have not liked me standing on that corner with my sign.

Critics may say I was not supporting the soldiers, for instance, or I was lowering the morale of the troops. All these charges have been levelled against peace activists who protest the money and lives spent on the government’s wars. Some people have said that soldiers fight in wars so that I am able to stand there with my sign. Some have said that conscientious objectors were wrong to object while men were drafted to fight and others volunteered. I may not agree with or understand this thinking.

Those who oppose the government’s wars have been accused of getting more people killed; ironically, anti-lockdown protestors are now accused of getting more people killed by the Coronavirus.

So, If a guy wants to show up at an anti-lockdown protest with a Confederate flag, I may think he’s wrong, may not like the flag or its history; however, I cannot jump inside his head and know what that flag means to him at the time he decided to carry. It’s a flag. It doesn’t shoot someone any more than my

anti-war sign shoots someone. He has a right to carry as dumb a sign or flag as he wants to. He has the right to think that my sign is dumb or naive or misguided.

I would never show up at a protest with a sign that says, “Jesus is My Vaccine”, but I have seen that sign in a picture of an anti-lockdown protest. I get a flu shot most years, and I took my children to get all doctor-recommended vaccines. However, I know that many people feel strongly about vaccines and their risks or harms and feel a need to protest. Similarly, I often question government and mainstream media information and regularly seek alternative sources. When I bought water bottles for my sons at Target, I worried about BPA and cancer because of my reading of the dangers of BPA. I wondered why in a country with expensive bureaucracies, tasked with testing products and ingredients for public safety, would a mom like me have to worry about which water bottle would be safest for my sons.

Some men at anti-lockdown protests are wearing desert camouflage. I wonder if they bought it at an army supply store, or are they vets who were sent to fight the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? If I was still a reporter, I would ask them. Most of the US public supported those wars, and both Democrats and Republicans voted year after year to fund those wars, sending about eight percent of the population, mostly men, to war, some serving eight or 10 tours, which is physical and psychological savagery.

Previous wars sent men into combat once, sometimes twice; so

those recent multiple deployments were unprecedented. At Fort Bragg, one of the largest military bases in the world, most of the population at the base and surrounding town voted for Trump – and probably will again later this year. We could ask why and listen as we are entering another presidential election season.

Journalists have noted that anti-lockdown protests have few or no black or brown people present. NPR ran a story recently on who is doing the so-called essential jobs during the government lockdowns. The answer is black and brown people, mostly women. They are changing bedpans and giving baths in nursing homes, working in chicken factories, checking groceries, working at drive-through fast-food joints. Mexican men in my area are laying pipes, repairing roads, running powerlines. Black and brown people may not be attending protests because they are at work, exhausted by labouring at jobs the rest of America doesn't want to do – and didn't want to do before lockdown. This virus panic exposes important

I wouldn't carry a gun to a protest, but that man in Michigan and I may have common concerns

socio-economic, gender, race, and class issues that we should examine more closely.

Highly paid journalists, politicians, and bureaucrats still have incomes and are able to work from home. When they question where black and brown people are at anti-lockdown protests, I may wonder: who is cleaning their houses, taking care of their elderly parents, doing their hair and make-up and nails (if they are on TV), tending their yards and gardens, nannying their children? Who is doing farm work and working in dairy plants?

In this time of fear and confusion, we may learn from people different from us. I wouldn't carry a gun to a

protest, but that man in Michigan and I may have common concerns. I also dislike government over-control and lockdown. Further, I have protested the government's control over war-making with its ensuing waste, losses, and destruction.

The man with a gun in Michigan and I may both have old parents and children in school. We may share worries about sickness and death and getting accurate information to help care for ourselves and our families. We both make decisions about work and want to have enough money to survive and provide for children.

As we sit uneasily through this world-wide panic, we may learn by questioning dominant narratives that too-often pit us against each other. **CT**

Christine E. Black's work has been published in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *New Millennium Writings*, *Nimrod International*, *The Virginia Journal of Education*, *Friends Journal*, *Sojourners Magazine*, *English Journal*, *Amethyst Review*, and other publications. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and the Pablo Neruda Prize.

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Bob Dreyfus

Covid-19 ignites Trump's latest war on the CIA

Attempts to link outbreak to Wuhan laboratory should remind us of the US government lies that led to the invasion of Iraq

HERE'S a meme that appears now and then on Facebook and other social media: "Those who don't study history are doomed to repeat it. Yet those who do study history are doomed to stand by helplessly while everyone else repeats it."

That's funny. What's not is that the Trump administration and its coterie of China-bashers, led by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and aided by Arkansas Republican Senator Tom Cotton, have recently been dusting off the fake-intelligence playbook Vice President Dick Cheney used in 2002 and 2003 to justify war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. At that time, the administration of President George W. Bush put enormous pressure on the US intelligence community to ratify spurious allegations that Saddam Hussein was in league with al-Qaeda and that his regime had assembled an arsenal of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. Fantasy claims they may have been, but they did help to convince many skeptical conservatives and spooked liberals that a unilateral, illegal invasion of Iraq was urgently needed.

This time around, it's the Trump administration's reckless charge that Covid-19 – maybe man-made, maybe not, advocates of this conspiracy theory argue – was released perhaps deliberately, perhaps by accident, from a laboratory in Wuhan, China, the city that was the epicentre of the outbreak late last year. It's a story that has ricocheted around the echo chambers of the far right, from conspiracy-oriented Internet kooks such as Infowars' Alex Jones to semi-respectable media tribunes and radio talk-show hosts to the very highest reaches of the administration itself, including President Trump.

Unlike with Iraq in 2003, the US isn't planning on going to war with China, at least not yet. But the Trump administration's zeal in shifting attention from its own bungling of the Covid-19 crisis to China's alleged culpability in creating a global pandemic only raises tensions precipitously between the planet's two great powers at a terrible moment. In the process, it essentially ensures that the two countries will be far less likely to cooperate in managing the long-term pandemic or collaboratively

working on vaccines and cures. That makes it, as in 2002-2003, a matter of life and death.

Back in 2002, the Bush administration launched an unending campaign of pressure on the CIA and other intelligence agencies to falsify, distort, and cherry-pick intelligence factoids that could be collated into a package linking al-Qaeda and weapons of mass destruction to Saddam Hussein's Baghdad. At the Pentagon, neoconservatives like Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith set up an ad hoc team that eventually took on the name of Office of Special Plans. It was dedicated to fabricating intelligence on Iraq.

Just in case the message didn't get across, Vice President Cheney made repeated visits to CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, to badger analysts to come up with something useful. In 2003, in *The Lie Factory*, which I co-authored with Jason Vest for *Mother Jones*, we reported on how Wolfowitz, Feith, allied Defense Department



officials like Harold Rhode, and neoconservative apparatchiks like David Wurmser, then a senior adviser to Iraq-war-touting State Department Undersecretary John Bolton (and now an unofficial advisor to Donald Trump on Iran), actively worked to purge Pentagon and CIA officials who resisted the push to shape or exaggerate intelligence. A year later, veteran spy-watcher James Bamford described the whole episode in excruciating detail in his 2004 book, *A Pretext for War*.

In 2020, however, President Trump is not just pressuring the intelligence community, or IC. He's at war with it and has been busy installing unprofessional know-nothings and sycophants in top positions there. His bitter antipathy began even before he was sworn into office, when he repeatedly refused to believe a sober analysis from the IC, including the CIA and FBI, that President Vladimir Putin of Russia had aided and abetted his election. Since then, he's continually railed and tweeted against what he calls

"the deep state". And he's assigned his authoritarian attorney general, Bill Barr, to conduct a scorched-earth offensive against the work of Special Counsel Robert Mueller, the FBI, and the Justice Department itself, most recently by dropping charges against admitted liar Michael Flynn, briefly Trump's first national security advisor.

To make sure that the IC doesn't challenge his wishes and does his bidding, Trump has moved to put his own political operatives in charge at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, or ODNI, created as part of an intelligence reorganisation scheme after 9/11.

The effort began in February when Trump named US ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell as acting DNI. A highly partisan, sharp-elbowed politico and spokesman for former National Security Advisor John Bolton, he harbours far-right views and is a Trump loyalist, as well as an acolyte of former Trump aide Steve Bannon. On arriving in Bonn as ambassador, Grenell soon endorsed the rise of Europe's anti-establishment

ultra-right in an interview with Bannon's *Breitbart News*.

To bolster Grenell, the administration has called on another ultra-right crusader, Kash Patel. He has served as Republican Congressman Devin Nunes's aide in the campaign to discredit the Russia investigation and reportedly acted as a White House backchannel to Ukraine during the effort to stir up an inquiry in Kiev aimed at tarring former Vice President Joe Biden.

Following that, the president renamed Congressman John Ratcliffe of Texas, one of the president's most enthusiastic defenders during the debate over impeachment, to serve as Grenell's permanent replacement at ODNI. In 2019, Trump first floated Ratcliffe's name for the post, but it was shot down days later, thanks to opposition from even Republican members of Congress, not to speak of intelligence professionals and various pundits. Now, he's back, awaiting likely confirmation.

It remains to be seen whether the Grenell-Ratcliffe tag-team, combined with Trump's three-year

campaign to disparage the intelligence community has softened them up enough for the administration's push to finger China and its labs for creating and spreading Covid-19.

As is often the case, that campaign began rather quietly and unobtrusively in conservative and right-wing media outlets.

On January 24th, the right-wing *Washington Times* ran a story entitled "Coronavirus may have originated in a lab linked to China's biowarfare program". It, in turn, was playing off of a piece that had appeared in London's *Daily Mail* the previous day. Written like a science-fiction thriller, that story drew nearly all its (unverified) information from a single source, an Israeli military intelligence China specialist. Soon, it moved from the *Washington Times* to other American right-wing outlets. Steve Bannon picked it up the next day on his podcast, *War Room: Pandemic*, calling the piece "amazing". A few days later, the unreliable, gossipy website *ZeroHedge* ran a (later much-debunked) piece saying that a Chinese scientist bioengineered the virus, purporting even to name the scientist.

A couple of weeks later, Fox News weighed in, laughably citing a Dean Koontz novel, *The Eyes of Darkness*, about "a Chinese military lab that creates a new virus to potentially use as a biological weapon during wartime." The day after that, Senator Tom Cotton – appearing on Fox, of course – agreed that China might indeed have created the virus. Then the idea began to go... well, viral. (Soon Cotton was even tweeting that Beijing might possibly have deliberately released the virus.)

Written like a science-fiction thriller, that story drew nearly all its information from a single source

By late February, the right's loudest voice, Rush Limbaugh, was on the case, claiming that the virus "is probably a ChiCom laboratory experiment that is in the process of being weaponised." (A vivid account of how this conspiracy theory spread can be found at the *Global Disinformation Index*.)

Starting in March, even as they were dismissing the seriousness of Covid-19, both Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo repeatedly insisted on referring to it as the "China virus" or the "Wuhan virus", ignoring criticism that terminology like that was both racist and inflammatory. In late March, Pompeo even managed to scuttle a communiqué from America's allies in the Group of Seven, or G7, by demanding that they agree to use the term "Wuhan virus". It didn't take the president long to start threatening retaliatory action against China for its alleged role in spreading Covid-19, while he began comparing the pandemic to the 1941 Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor.

And all of that was but a prelude to the White House ramping up of pressure on the CIA and the rest of the intelligence community to prove that the virus had indeed emerged, whether by design or accident, from either the Wuhan Institute of Virology or the Wuhan Center for Dis-

ease Control, a branch of the Chinese Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. An April 30 article in the *New York Times* broke the story that administration officials "have pushed American spy agencies to hunt for evidence to support an unsubstantiated theory that a government laboratory in Wuhan, China, was the origin of the coronavirus outbreak", and that Grenell had made it a "priority".

Both Trump and Pompeo would, in the meantime, repeatedly assert that they had seen actual "evidence" that the virus had indeed come from a Chinese lab, though Trump pretended that the information was so secret he couldn't say anything more about it. "I can't tell you that", he said. "I'm not allowed to tell you that". Asked during an appearance on ABC's *This Week* if the virus had popped out of a lab in Wuhan, Pompeo answered: "There is enormous evidence that that's where this began".

On April 30, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence issued a terse statement, saying that so far it had concluded Covid-19 is "not man-made or genetically modified", but that they were looking into whether or not it was "the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan". There is, however, no evidence of such an accident, nor did the ODNI cite any.

The run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2002-2003 should be on all our minds today. Then, top officials simply repeated again and again that they believed both Saddam Hussein's non-existent ties to al-Qaeda and his nonexistent active nuclear, chemical, and bioweapon programmes were realities and

assigned intelligence community collectors and analysts to look into them (while paying no attention to their conclusions). Now, Trump and his people are similarly putting their fat fingers on the scale of reality, while making it clear to hopefully intimidated intelligence professionals just what conclusions they want to hear.

Because those professionals know that their careers, salaries, and pensions depend on the continued favour of the politicians who pay them, there is, of course, a tremendous incentive to go along with such demands, shade what IC officials call the “estimate” in the direction the White House wants, or at least keep their mouths shut. That is exactly what happened in 2002 and, given that Grenell, Patel, and Ratcliffe are essentially Trump toadies, the IC officials lower on the totem pole have to be aware of what their latest bosses expect of them.

There was near-instant push-back from scientists, intelligence officials, and China experts about the Trump-Pompeo campaign to finger the Wuhan lab. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the preeminent American scientist and Covid-19 expert, promptly shot it down, saying that the virus had “evolved in nature and then jumped species”. That’s because actual scientists, who study the genome of the virus and its mutations, unanimously agree that it was not generated in a lab.

Among America’s allies – Australia, Britain, Canada, and New Zealand – in what’s called the Five Eyes group, there was an unambiguous conclusion that the virus had been a “naturally occurring” one and had mutated in

Actual scientists, who study the genome of the virus and its mutations, agree that it was not generated in a lab

the course of “human and animal interaction”. Australia, in particular, rejected what appeared to be a fake-intelligence dossier about the Wuhan lab, while German officials in an internal document ridiculed the lab rumours as “a calculated attempt to distract” attention from the Trump administration’s own inept handling of the virus.

Finally, according to *Bloomberg News*, those studying the issue inside the intelligence community now say that suspicions it emerged from a lab are “largely circumstantial since the US has very little information from the ground to back up the lab-escape theory or any other”. In the end, however, that doesn’t mean top IC officials beholden to the White House won’t tailor their conclusions to fit the Trump-Pompeo narrative.

John McLaughlin, who served as deputy director and then acting director of the CIA during the Bush administration, believes that we are indeed seeing a replay of what happened in Iraq nearly two decades ago. “What it reminds me of is the dispute between the CIA and parts of the Bush administration over whether there was an operational relationship between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda”, he said. “They kept asking the CIA, and we kept coming back

and saying, ‘You know, it’s just not there.’”

Whether the tug-of-war between Trump, Pompeo, and the IC is just another passing battle in a more than three-year-old war between the president and the “Deep State” or whether it’s something that could lead to a serious crisis between Washington and Beijing remains to be seen. Ironically enough, in January and February, the IC provided President Trump with more than a dozen clear warnings about the dangers to the United States and national security posed by the coronavirus, following clarion calls from China and the World Health Organization that what was happening in Wuhan could spread worldwide – warnings that Trump either failed to notice, disregarded, or downplayed, through March.

Were Donald Trump not so predisposed to see the intelligence community as his enemy, he might have paid more attention back then. Had he done so, there would undoubtedly be many less dead Americans right now and he wouldn’t have had to spend his time in his own lab concocting what might be thought of as batshit excuses for his dereliction of duty.

By the time this affair is over, the invasion of Iraq could look like the good old days. **CT**

Bob Dreyfuss is a contributing editor at the *Nation* and has written for *Rolling Stone*, *Mother Jones*, *the American Prospect*, *the New Republic*, and many other magazines. He is the author of *Devil’s Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam..* This article first appeared at www.tomdispatch.com





Gordon Parks

Law and disorder

Acclaimed photographer's latest work takes us on a journey back to the 1950s – a largely hidden world of violence, police work, and incarceration in the USA



WHEN *Life* magazine asked Gordon Parks to illustrate a recurring series of articles on crime in the United States in 1957, he embarked on a six-week journey that took him and reporter Robert Wallace to the streets of New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

Unlike much of his previous work as staff photographer at the magazine, the images were made in colour using only available light. The resulting eight-page photo-essay, *The Atmosphere of Crime*, was noteworthy for its bold aesthetic and sophistication, and how it challenged pervasive stereo-







types about criminality in mainstream media. The photographs provided a richly-hued, cinematic portrayal of a largely hidden world of violence, police work, and incarceration, depicted with empathy and candour.

Parks rejected clichés of delinquency, drug use, and corruption, instead opting for a more nuanced view of the social and economic factors tied to criminal behaviour.

The Atmosphere of Crime, 1957, co-published by Steidl and the Gordon Parks Foundation, in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art, transcends the romanticised gangster film, the suspense of the

THE ATMOSPHERE OF CRIME, 1957

Gordon Parks

Published by Steidl
www.steidl.de

US \$40 Can \$56

crime caper, and the racially biased depictions of criminality then prevalent in American popular culture to provide a rare window into the working lives of those charged with preventing and prosecuting criminals. Parks used his camera to do what it does best: record reality so vividly and compellingly so *Life*'s readers understand the

complexity of these chronically oversimplified situations.

The book features an expansive selection of never-before-published photographs from Parks' original reportage, together with a series of insightful essays and the full issue of *Life* in which the photographs were originally published.

The Atmosphere of Crime, 1957 is published on the occasion of the forthcoming collection installation at The Museum of Modern Art, *Gordon Parks and The Atmosphere of Crime*, which will include selections from the museum's recent acquisition of 56 photographs from the series. **CT**



David Cromwell

An illusion of protection

The pandemic, the UK's 'criminal' government and the public distrust of the media

ANY notion that the UK government actually considers that its primary responsibility is to protect the health and security of the country's population ought to have been demolished in 2020. The appalling death toll that continues to mount during the coronavirus pandemic is largely rooted, not merely in government "incompetence", but in criminal dereliction of its core duties in a supposedly democratic society.

At the time of writing, the UK has the highest death toll in Europe, and the second highest in the world (the US has the highest). On May 12, the death toll from official UK figures exceeded 40,000 for the first time, including almost 10,000 care home residents. A study by academics at the London School of Economics estimates that the actual death toll in care homes is, in fact, double the official figure, more than 22,000.

Government ministers have scrambled to protect themselves from such damaging facts by spouting empty rhetoric. Health Secretary Matt Hancock actually declared on May 15, "Right from the

start we've tried to throw a protective ring around our care homes. We set out our first advice in February... we've made sure care homes have the resources they need".

Palliative care doctor Rachel Clarke, author of the bestselling book *Dear Life, Your Life In My Hands*, rejected his deceptive claim, "This is categorically untrue. Care homes were left without testing. Without contract tracing. Without PPE [personal protective equipment]. Without support. You can deny it all you like, Matt Hancock, but we were witnesses – we ARE witnesses – and believe me you will be held to account".

It is important to note that the coronavirus death toll is even higher than official figures because people are dying from heart disease, cancer, strokes and other illnesses that would otherwise have been treated had there been no ongoing pandemic. Chris Giles, the *Financial Times* economics editor, has been tracking the number of total excess deaths, issuing regular updates via Twitter. He noted that "a cautious es-

timate" of excess deaths linked to coronavirus up to May 15 was an appalling 61,200.

University of Edinburgh researchers have estimated that at least 2,000 lives would have been saved in Scotland – a staggering 80 percent of the total – if the government had introduced the lockdown two weeks earlier. Rowland Kao, professor of epidemiology and lead author of the study, said there had "definitely" been enough information about the coming pandemic in mid-February. If the lockdown had been imposed across the whole of the UK on March 9, rather than March 23, "you would expect a similar effect to the one seen in our research on Scotland".

In other words, there would have been an 80 percent reduction in the death toll across the whole of the UK: around 26,000 lives saved (assuming the official undercount by May 3 of 32,490 fatalities). This is a truly shocking statistic and a damning indictment of the Tory government.

Countries outside the UK have looked on aghast as the pandemic death toll rose quickly, given the advance warnings of what was



happening abroad, notably in Italy and Spain. Continental newspapers have been highly critical of the UK government's response to the pandemic. The German newspaper *Die Zeit* noted that, "the infection has spread unchecked longer than it should have. The wave of infections also spread from the hospitals to the old people's homes, which could also have been avoided. The government is now trying to pretend to the public that it has the situation under control".

The Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant* told its readers, "the British were insufficiently prepared for the pandemic, despite the presence of expertise in this area. The country has been catching up in recent weeks. Much of the harm has already been done".

And in France, *Le Monde* said, "Despite Europe's worst mortality, probably too late entry into confinement and a blatant lack of preparation, the British have so far supported Johnson".

Here in the UK, honest and responsible journalism would have made it clear, regularly and prominently, that many deaths were avoidable and a consequence of damaging government policies including

- the imposition of "austerity" in past years;
- the deliberate corporate-driven break-up of the National Health Service;
- the government's lack of preparedness for a pandemic' and
- the belated move to lockdown

and the present rush to "open up the economy" and send children back to school.

If we had an actual functioning mainstream media, it would be holding this disgraceful government to account, properly and comprehensively. BBC News, as the country's well-funded 'public service' broadcaster, would be to the fore of critical and forensic journalism. In a piece published on the progressive ZNet website, Felix Dennis dissected the government-friendly propaganda campaign in the UK media, including the BBC, "On April 10, as UK daily deaths became higher than any recorded in Italy or Spain, media coverage led with Boris' recovery [after being in intensive care], while BBC News' main headline was about the 'herculean effort' of the Gov-

ernment to provide NHS with PPE. Subsequent headlines featured nurses describing treating Johnson as ‘surreal’, something they’d ‘never forget’, and that he was “like everybody else”; orchestrated artificial grassroots support to boost public opinion about Boris and his government seem likely. The notions of supporting the country and supporting its leader are being conflated”.

In a small concession to the damning truth, BBC News aired Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter, a statistician from the University of Cambridge, who was granted a moment on the Andrew Marr Sunday programme to call the government’s daily press briefings “completely embarrassing”. They are “not trustworthy communication of statistics” and no more than “number theatre”. But this was a deviation from the broadcasting norm which has regularly seen BBC correspondents, notably political editor Laura Kuenssberg, serving up meek accounts of the crisis on prime-time BBC News at Six and Ten. An article in the *Economist* was actually titled, “The BBC is having a good pandemic”, even as it quoted one unnamed senior BBC journalist who let slip that, “the [BBC] bosses are keen that we come out of this with the sense that we looked after the interest of the nation, not just our journalistic values”.

In effect, there should not even be the pretence of “impartiality”, but a shoring-up of state propaganda by the BBC on behalf of the government. In fact, this has long been the reality of BBC performance ever since BBC founder John Reith wrote in his diary during the 1926 General Strike that

“The virus ... is not an argument that can be won with buffoonery, bluster and Churchillian soundbites”

“they [the government] know that they can trust us not to be really impartial”.

One welcome exception was the *Panorama* programme investigating the appalling lack of preparation for the pandemic; not least the inadequate provision of PPE for NHS staff and workers in care homes. But, in yet another sign that any dissent will not be tolerated, Tory Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden then attacked the BBC for straying momentarily from the state-approved script.

Piers Morgan has been a strong and sustained voice challenging government ministers about their policies in his role as a lead presenter on ITV’s *Good Morning Britain*, and on his Twitter account which is followed by over seven million people.

In a devastating indictment of the government, Morgan wrote, “the virus isn’t like Brexit. It’s not a political ideology that can be open to debate, or an argument that can be won with buffoonery, bluster and Churchillian soundbites”.

Morgan has been so robust in his challenges to the government that ministers, including Boris Johnson, now appear to be afraid of being interviewed by him, refusing to appear on *Good Morning Britain*. As journalist

Peter Oborne observed, “It is disgraceful that the Johnson government boycotts a major national TV news show during a national emergency”.

Morgan went further, “Once we allow the Govt to boycott news outlets like @GMB for asking ministers tough questions, it’s a slippery slope to a totalitarian state. Other news organisations should share our disgust at this, because they could be next. Or they will soften criticism to avoid a ban...”.

The latter, no doubt, as anyone who has heard of the propaganda model or read *Manufacturing Consent* will be well aware.

In anticipation of Boris Johnson’s much-trailed speech to the nation on Sunday, May 10, ludicrous celebratory press headlines appeared a few days in advance, “Hurrah! Lockdown Freedom Beckons” (*Mail*), “Happy Monday” (*Sun*), and “Magic Monday” (*Daily Star*). This highlighted wide-scale press subservience to the government’s foolish and dangerous agenda of getting the country “back to work” as soon as possible, putting working-class employees, those most dependent on public transport, at particular risk.

Indeed, when Johnson actually delivered his speech that Sunday evening, having been carried aloft by heaps of hype from billionaire-owned newspapers, he declared, “We now need to stress that anyone who can’t work from home, for instance those in construction or manufacturing, should be actively encouraged to go to work”.

But, as Tom London warned via Twitter, “People will be bullied, threatened, starved back to work

when it is not safe and they are risking their lives and the lives of those they are close to. Neoliberalism has reached its pinnacle of selfish individualism sacrificing the lives of others to feed its greed".

The muddled and deluded address to the nation was greeted with confusion, scepticism and even derision in many quarters, with the *Mirror* saying on its front page, "Lockdown Britain, It's chaos". The prime minister's speech was, however, acclaimed by the usual suspects of the extremist press, including the *Mail*, *Express* and *Sun*, as well as by the more "respectable" billionaire Murdoch-owned *Times* and billionaire Barclay brothers-owned *Telegraph*.

The *Mail* waxed lyrical about the prime minister setting out "the first steps to free Britain", while cautioning, "Boris keeps handbrake on". The *Express*, as though copying and pasting from the same government press release, headlined "Boris: our route to freedom... in baby steps". The *Telegraph*, also reading from the government 'freedom' script, went with, "the long road to freedom".

Rational commentary had to be found elsewhere. Richard Horton, *Lancet* editor, tweeted after Johnson's speech, "My interpretation of Boris Johnson this evening: the pandemic of Covid-19 in the UK is much more serious than we have been led to believe. Johnson was unusually serious, fists clenched, no jokes about squashing sombreros".

Horton made additional critical comments in a series of tweets, then concluded, "Finally, you saw our Prime Minister preparing his defence for the public inquiry, 'We didn't fully understand its effects'.



TABLOID TALES: How the UK tabloids celebrated in advance of Johnson's announcement that Britons should "get back to work".

I'm afraid that argument won't succeed. A PHEIC [Public Health Emergency of International Concern] was called [by the World Health Organisation] on January 30. And then you dropped the ball Prime Minister. That was criminal. And you know it".

Recall the now infamous "Superman" speech that Johnson gave in Greenwich on February 3 when he extolled the supposed virtues of competition and "free" trade, even in the face of the alarming threat of the pandemic. Here is the relevant extract, available on the government's own website, "We are starting to hear some bizarre autarkic rhetoric, when barriers are going up, and when there is a risk that new diseases such as coronavirus will trigger a panic and a desire for market segregation that go beyond what is medically rational to the point of doing real and unnecessary economic damage, then at that moment humanity needs some government somewhere that is willing at least to make the case powerfully for freedom of exchange, some country ready to take off its Clark Kent spectacles and leap into the phone booth and emerge with its cloak flowing as the supercharged champion, of the right of the populations of the earth to buy and sell freely among each other".

Never mind "bizarre autarkic rhetoric". What is truly bizarre is that as late as February 3, when Johnson was ignoring WHO advice and wider medical calls to "test, test, test" and to move into lockdown, and during a period when he missed five emergency Cobra meetings, he was proclaiming inanities about Superman. Instead, Johnson's focus – if he can

ever be accused of possessing ‘focus’ – was on Brexit and avoiding any measure that might impinge on “free trade”.

Last month, as pandemic-related deaths mounted alarmingly, a Sky News poll unsurprisingly showed deep public distrust of British television and newspaper journalists. Only 24 percent said they trust TV journalists, while 64 percent said they do not, giving a net score of minus 40. Meanwhile, a mere 17 percent said they trust newspaper journalists, while 72 percent said they do not, giving an overall net score of minus 55. The figures were tucked away at the bottom of Sky’s article.

Also last month, a *Press Gazette* poll showed that around half of those who responded believed public trust in journalism had fallen since the outbreak of the pandemic (around one third believed it had risen, and the rest said it had remained the same). *Press Gazette* also reported that a new survey by PR firm Kekst CNC showed a collapse in confidence in the media in the four countries surveyed: the UK, US, Germany and Sweden. The UK and Sweden both saw the biggest fall in confidence in the media with a net loss of 21 per cent. Moreover, a special report by Edelman Trust Barometer covering ten countries, including the UK, showed that journalists are the least trusted source (43 percent) for information about the pandemic, below ‘most-affected countries’ (46 percent) and government officials (48 percent).

Of course, this lack of public trust in the media is not limited to coverage of the pandemic. Given

Press “freedom” is a cruel sham; highlighted even more sharply on the recent World Press Freedom Day

the narrow-spectrum right-wing and establishment press dominated by rich owners, and edited by compliant editors with ideologically-aligned views, and given that BBC News so often slavishly conforms to UK press reporting, it is no surprise that overall British public trust in the media is so low.

In fact, a recent extensive annual Eurobarometer survey by the European Union across 33 countries reveals that the UK public’s trust in the press is once again rock bottom, even below the former Soviet Union countries of Lithuania and Latvia. As Brian Cathcart, a professor of journalism at Kingston University in London, observes, it is the ninth year out of the past ten that the UK has been last.

The survey results were met with the usual tumbleweed non-response from the British press. Our search of the ProQuest newspaper database yielded just one passing mention in the national press by Alan Rusbridger, former *Guardian* editor, referring to last year’s survey. (Inevitably, Rusbridger also praised the BBC for its ‘all-round and in-depth excellence’ on coronavirus coverage.)

As Cathcart said, “so predictable that an industry with an

appalling trust problem chooses to address it by suppressing the evidence of distrust”.

But then, press “freedom” is a cruel sham; only highlighted even more sharply on the recent World Press Freedom Day. UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab had the temerity to tweet his support, “a strong and independent media is more important than ever for transparency”.

Peter Oborne rightly highlighted Raab’s hypocrisy, pointing out the glaring case of Julian Assange, “The WikiLeaks founder continues to rot in Belmarsh jail as the US demands his extradition on espionage charges. If there was an ounce of sincerity in the foreign secretary’s claim that he is a supporter of media freedom, he would be resisting the US attempt to get its hands on Assange with every bone in his body”.

Oborne also lambasted the British press, “British newspapers will not fight for Assange. Whether left or right, broadsheet or tabloid, British papers are agreed on one thing; they’ll fall over each other to grab the latest official hand-out about British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his fiance Carrie Symonds’ baby. Or the new Downing Street dog.

“They will, however, look the other way when it comes to standing up for press freedom and Julian Assange”.

He added, “How pathetic. What a betrayal of their trade. Client journalism. An inversion of what newspapers stand for. If the British foreign secretary is two-faced about a free press, so are British newspaper editors who say they care about press freedom. With even less excuse”.

Lancet editor Richard Horton, mentioned earlier, says that the British government's response to the pandemic is "the biggest science policy failure in a generation". As noted at the outset of this essay, this has not been mere government incompetence, but a fundamental failure of its supposed commitment to protect the public. The truth, of course, is that the government is "elected" to represent the elite interests of its principal backers: financial muscle and corporate power, backed by its propaganda wing misleadingly labelled the mainstream media.

A longstanding feature of the state has been its reliance on secretive state and military institutions working hard to preserve the status quo. You may recall the threat of a military coup from a senior serving UK army general in 2015 should Jeremy Corbyn ever be elected Prime Minister. In December last year, investigative journalist Matt Kennard reported that UK military and intelligence establishment officials had been sources for at least 34 major national media stories, following Corbyn's election as Labour leader in September 2015, that had cast him as a danger to British security.

As Noam Chomsky has long pointed out, supposedly democratic states regard their own populations as the state's greatest threat, even in so-called 'free' societies,

Former heads of UK intelligence agencies are profiting from the 'revolving door' between government and business

"Remember, any state, any state, has a primary enemy: its own population". – Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power*, The New Press).

This is why surveillance of the public is such a priority for governments.

In a recent in-depth article as part of the exemplary Declassified UK series, Kennard and Mark Curtis note that, "There is money and power in identifying Russia and cyber attacks as the key security threats facing Britain – but not in addressing the more important issues of pandemics and climate change".

Former heads of UK intelligence agencies are personally profiting from the 'revolving door' between government and business, report Kennard and Curtis. They cite examples:

- Former MI6 chief Sir Richard Dearlove has earned more than £2-million from a US oil company.
- Another former MI6 chief, Sir John Sawers, has earned £699,000

from oil giant BP since 2015.

● Sir Iain Lobban, former head of GCHQ, has become director or adviser to 10 private cyber or data security companies since leaving office in 2014; his own cyber consultancy is worth more than £1-million.

Kennard and Curtis write, "Since 2000, nine out of 10 former chiefs of MI6, MI5 and GCHQ have taken jobs in the cyber security industry, a sector they promoted while in office as key to defending the UK from the 'Russian threat'."

They add, "The British government has been told for over a decade that the 'gravest risk' to the country is an influenza pandemic, which its National Security Strategy identifies as a 'tier one priority risk'. Yet the security services have largely ignored health threats, despite claiming they are guided by the UK's security strategy."

If successive UK governments were genuinely serious about boosting the public's security, they would be working flat out to protect the population from pandemics and climate breakdown. But then they would be protecting the interests of the majority. And that is not why they are in power. **CT**

David Cromwell is co-editor of *media Lens*, the UK media watchdog. Its website is www.medialens.org

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Ron Saunders

The queer performers who inspired Little Richard

The better his influences are understood, the more the gleefully subversive energy that suffuses Richard's work can be appreciated

SINCE Little Richard died on May 9, he's been rightly celebrated as one of the most exciting and influential performers in the canon of American popular music. But in most tributes, the full story of his artistic development has been slighted.

This is a pity, because Little Richard's music is deeply rooted in an underground tradition of queer black performance that's also worthy of celebration. Indeed, when I have lectured on Little Richard's work to my students, they're often surprised and delighted to learn about the subculture that contributed so much to his artistic persona.

His hairstyle, makeup and lyrics were inspired by fellow performers such as Billy Wright and Eskew Reeder. The better their influence is understood, the more the gleefully subversive energy that suffuses Richard's own work can be appreciated.

Little Richard – born Richard Penniman – honed his craft as a teenage drag queen in touring minstrel tent-shows and vaudeville revues, as well as in an extended

network of clubs and bars in the southern and eastern United States known as the "chitlin' circuit." In a 1967 interview, singer Lou Rawls offered his own memories of playing the circuit:

"These clubs were very small, very tight, very crowded and very loud. Everything was loud but the entertainment. The only way to establish communication was by telling a story that would lead into the song, that would catch people's attention."

African American studies scholars L. H. Stallings and Mark Anthony Neal have both observed that, while it wasn't explicitly identified with sexual outlaws, the chitlin' circuit nevertheless provided a space for queer black artists to flourish.

It was within one of these spaces in the city of Atlanta – either



INSPIRATION: Esquerita (above); Billy Wright with Little Richard (below).



the Royal Peacock or Bailey's 81 Theatre – that Little Richard first met Billy Wright.

Wright had also started out as a female impersonator but had more recently established himself as a singer. He would score four top 10 hits on the R&B charts from 1949 to 1951.

Little Richard admired Wright enormously. In Little Richard's words, Wright wore "very loud-coloured clothin' and shoethin' to match his clothin'," which Little Richard began to imitate. He also copied Wright's pompadour hairstyle and even began using the same brand of pancake makeup.

Billy was equally fond of Little Richard, helping to secure his first recording session with RCA in 1951 – using the very same musicians that had backed up Wright on his own records.



AN AMERICAN ORIGINAL? Not quite. Little Richard's style owes much to gay performers of the 1950s.

Both men were creditable R&B artists, but their recordings from this period offer no hint of the spectacular flamboyance that they apparently projected in person. The queer style that had brought them together was too outré to even consider trying to capture on tape.

A year or so later, Little Richard met another young black queer performer named Eskew Reeder at a bus station in Macon, Georgia.

As Little Richard told the story, he picked Reeder up and took him home, where Reeder played him a version of *One Mint Julep* by The Clovers on the piano. Little Richard was bowled over, immediately asking for lessons, and thereafter adopting aspects of Reeder's style – playing blues licks in the uppermost register of the keyboard with the right hand, while supplying a pounding, rhythmic accompani-

ment with the left.

Reeder later suggested that Little Richard's trademark falsetto whoop was also inspired by his own approach to vocalisation.

Eskew Reeder would eventually adopt the stage name of "Esquerita." It was a phonetic pun on his own name in which we can also hear a winking homoerotic suggestion: "Esquire Eater"; a scatological joke: "Exreter"; and perhaps even a prescient tribute to queer theory: "Askew Reader."

Esquerita didn't release any recordings until 1958, more than three years after Little Richard achieved national stardom with *Tutti Frutti*; but Little Richard always acknowledged the original direction of influence.

Esquerita's 1958 sessions con-

vey a flamboyant wildness that exceeds even Richard's most exuberant recordings. The almost indescribable B-side, *Esquerita and the Voola*, is a case in point – a strange mixture of pseudo-classical piano riffing set to a booming floor-tom rhythm, over which Esquerita warbles like a pop-opera Valkyrie.

Today, *Esquerita and the Voola* stands as the missing link between barrelhouse boogie-woogie and Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* – a vinyl slice of queer black cabaret that must have left most record company executives and radio DJs utterly baffled.

In my view, it's inconceivable that Little Richard would have recorded *Tutti Frutti* if not for these prior encounters. The song draws its manic energy from the queerest stops on the chitlin' circuit. In fact,

the original lyrics were a paean to the pleasures of anal sex:

*Tutti Frutti, good booty,
If it don't fit, don't force it,
You can grease it, make it easy*

Although Little Richard loved incorporating the song into his live shows – according to him, it used to “crack the crowds up” – he never imagined it could be a hit.

But one day in 1955, he found himself in New Orleans at a recording session for Specialty Records with producer Bumps Blackwell. Blackwell hadn’t yet heard anything that excited him when they called it a day and headed across the street for dinner and drinks at The Dew Drop Inn. Liberated from the confines of the studio, Little Richard began to play the barroom piano in the uninhibited style of the clubs. Blackwell’s ears pricked up: This obscene, irresistibly driving number was just what he was looking for.

Pat Boone’s success with a bland cover of “Tutti Frutti” is emblem-

Blackwell’s ears pricked up: This obscene, irresistibly driving number was just what he was looking for

atic of the racial inequities of the 1950s music industry. But once you know the origins of the song, the Christian crooner’s clinical and clueless take on Little Richard’s swingingly queer hymn becomes ironically piquant.

A similar frisson energises the sublimely joyous *Long Tall Sally*. This time, Little Richard and Blackwell didn’t even feel the need to change the words. When Richard hollers in the second verse –

Saw Uncle John

With bald-headed Sally,

He saw Aunt Mary comin'

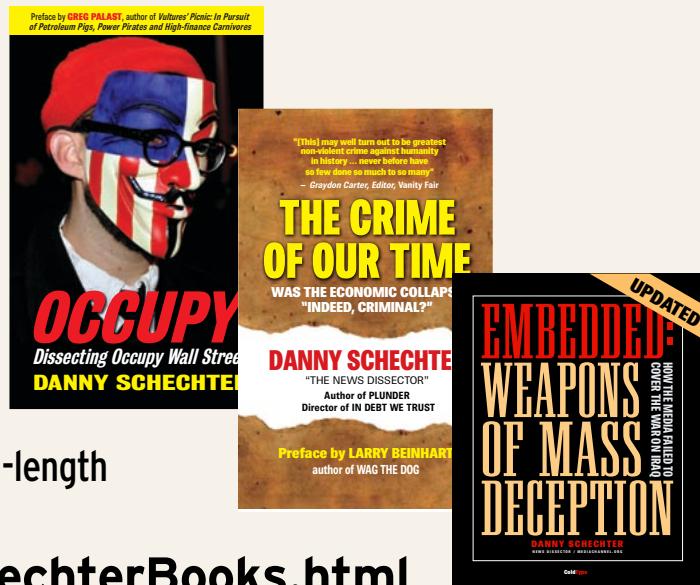
And he jumped back in the alley

– even the most naïve listener must know that Uncle John is up to the best kind of no good. But as the scholar W. T. Lhamon Jr. observes in his underappreciated cultural history of the 1950s, *Deliberate Speed*, in the drag shows of Little Richard’s apprenticeship, “baldheadedness was preparation for one’s wigs.” So Long Tall Sally – one of the original rock ‘n’ roll bad girls – may also be a bit of a bad boy, while Uncle John may be working both sides of that alley. Today, we might even describe Sally as a seductively nonbinary object of queer desire.

Little Richard’s rock ‘n’ roll brought the margins to the centre, and that was one reason why it mattered so much. It’s also another reason to mourn his loss – and to play his music loud. **CT**

Ben Saunders is Professor of English at the University of Oregon. This article was first published at www.theconversation.com.

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Andrew Fischer's Random Thoughts



Art: David Anderson / www.dandersonillustration.com

Name game

DOES anyone else wonder how pharmaceutical companies come up with the names for their new products? One of the latest I've noticed is Ozempic from Novo Nordisk, for the treatment of type 2 diabetes.

The generic name for this drug is semaglutide. So how did Novo Nordisk get from semaglutide to Ozempic? I'm glad you asked. Well, in the good old days a medication's brand name had at least some connection to its real name. For example: Bufferin/buffered aspirin, Aspercreme/aspirin, Coca Cola/coca leaves. Okay, these are just patent medicines, but you get the idea. In any case, Ozempic strikes me as one of the more serious offenders because it has a theme song with vocals to go along with its silly name. In 1974 the song *Magic* was released by a

group named Pilot. Instead of "Oh, oh, oh, it's magic", we hear "Oh, oh, oh, Ozempic". It's hard to imagine the ad agency's pitch to Novo Nordisk's executives. Perhaps one of them countered with "Hey, hey, my, my – Ozempic will never die", à la Neil Young. Or maybe "Hey, hey, we're not Monkees – Ozempic's not monkeyin' around". I assume a drug's name just needs to be catchy these days, so TV viewers will remember it and call their doctors the next day craving some Vyerti, Pizensy or Tepezza.

Some other recent interestingly-named pills include Evenity (portmanteau of event/eternity?), Sunosi (generic name solriamfetol – sun/sol, get it?), Zulresso (zulu/espresso?), and Egaten ("E gotten sick 'cause e ate too much"). Ak-lief (trifarotene) at least says what it provides – acne relief – so kudos to everyone involved. Many more of these can be found at www.fda.gov, and a web search will ap-

prise you that others have similar feelings about these weird drug names. You can also find several amusing medication name generators out there.

Life & times

SPEAKING of advertising, I've always been highly impervious to it. Television, radio, print ads – almost all of them fall on deaf ears (and eyes, so to speak), unless I happen to be in the market for a specific product. If I'm thinking about new tires, then I'll notice every advertisement for them. If I'm not, I won't see or hear a single one. Sure, I may "sense" such things, but my brain automatically filters them into its bottomless "to be deleted" pit.... With that background in mind, when I was a mere lad of 16 (apologies to Sam Cooke) I became a member of a target audience for my mom's

friend, Mrs. B. She was working for a marketing firm and asked about setting up an interview with me. I believe I was supposed to get a small stipend, perhaps \$5, for taking a survey. That's \$1,000 in today's money! Well, not quite, but it may very well be after the Federal Reserve's current Covid money printing spree.

A few days later Mrs. B. showed up, handed me a *Life* magazine (RIP, 2000) and said that all I had to do was read the magazine normally (not standing on my head as usual) and she'd come back in a week to do the survey. So I looked through the magazine while "on the throne", read some of the articles, skipped others, and looked at the pictures (especially of the latest Hollywood starlet)

Mrs. B. returned as scheduled, and we sat down for what I thought would be an annoyingly protracted series of questions and answers. She took out a pad and began, "Tell me about the ads you remember in the magazine." Oops. I couldn't recall a single one. I briefly thought of making something up – "Well, there was a soup ad" (there always was, back then) – and then hemming and hawing and guessing what else might have been in the periodical. Unfortunately, my mother was in the room and she could always tell if I mouthed the littlest ever white lie. So I fessed up. "I don't remember any of them". The two women could hardly believe it, but it was true. "I just ignore them", I stated matter-of-factly. Needless to say, Mrs. B. didn't get her survey and I didn't get my \$5. "Life is unfair," I grumbled silently.

I was involved with a woman ten years my senior. It was a tangled affair, her marital status was "angrily separated"

The guest room

SOMETIMES my mom would ask me at the dinner table, "Do you have anything to tell me?", with a tone that suggested she already knew about one or another of my occasional misdeeds, and was waiting to see if I'd lie about it. I didn't start calling her bluff until I was in my mid-forties. She was always "on" to me.

Case in point: when I was in my twenties I was pleasantly involved with a woman ten years my senior. It was a tangled affair, since her marital status was "angrily separated" with a couple of kids, and I was unemployed and living with my parents for a few months.

After several motel assignations at my expense, I pleaded for a no-cost coupling. Her house was out, so my parents' modest condo was in. Naturally, however, the house rules included a ban on canoodling....

Nancy (as I'll call her) arrived at noon, and my mom was at part-time work about 40 minutes away. To make sure she was still working I called the store and asked if she could bring home something, shaving cream, perhaps. Thus Nancy and I had at

least 30 minutes together, plus a buffer to clear out of the condo....

Of course, 25 minutes later the front door creaked open. "What the -- ?" I wondered aloud, but there was nothing to wonder about. My mom had figured something was up and broke a land speed record getting home. Loud enough for any hearing-impaired neighbours to hear, she asked, "Are you having a matinee, Andrew? Anyone I know?"

Lying next to me in bed (the guest room's, not my parents' at least) Nancy thought this was quite hysterical. I, however, was highly annoyed.... What to do? What to do?... I quickly jumped up, donned a robe and bolted out of the room.

"Mom, you have to leave so we can get dressed and go". I don't recall her reply, but I told her that given the situation there was no other choice.

She walked down the hallway. Nancy (still giggling, especially about the "matinee" characterisation) and I got dressed and left the building via a side stairwell.

Later, the only repercussion I suffered was a stern "no more matinees!" edict. Not too bad, although I still don't see what the big deal was. After all, we'd been in the guest room and I was a guest, right?

CT

Andrew Fischer is an accountant and author of two books. *Purgastories*, a collection of short stories, is available at amazon.com. He enjoys his fiancée and designing board games; the latter can be downloaded at no charge from boardgamegeek.com.

Final Words

On the Lockdown

“I hate this word, ('lockdown') because it does not seem to me to be fitting to describe free people in a free country. But we are no longer such people, or such a country. We have become muzzled, mouthless, voiceless, humiliated, regimented prisoners, shuffling about at the command of others, stopping when told to stop, moving when told to move, shouted at by jacks-in-office against whom we have no appeal. We are learning, during this induction period, to do what we are told and to become obedient, servile citizens of a new authoritarian State. We are unlearning the old rules of freedom.”

– Peter Hitchens:

The New Authoritarian State's Dream, Daily Mail

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