**BEYOND THE POLITICS OF ABC:**

**PANDEMOCRACY, FEAR, AND SOCIAL SAFETY NETS**

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This paper explores the interplay between crises, opportunities and democratic change. A vast body of scholarship underlines that crises very often open ‘windows of opportunity’ that can, on some occasions, lead to radical shifts in the role of the state and the design of public policy. But even if a radical shift occurs, it may prove to be temporary, with relationships and processes quickly reverting to pre-crisis modes once the immediacy of the crisis has abated. Drawing upon the empirical analysis of recent events in the UK, the central argument of this paper is that although Covid-19 revealed the existence and social impact of deep and structurally entrenched inequalities it is unlikely to lead to a far-reaching or long-term shift in post-pandemic democratic governance. The distinctive and original element we seek to bring to this argument is an explicit focus on the role of emotions (notably fear) within debates concerning the legitimate role of the state.

For those interested in social change and democratic politics, the core and fundamental insight of the Covid-19 pandemic arguably has very little to do with disease control, social epidemiology or the role of ‘the experts’ within policy-making processes. A more provocative perspective might suggest the main insight emerging out of the pandemic actually relates to the manner in which it (i) exposed the existence of deep-seated embedded structural inequalities and (ii) therefore posed a significant challenge to neo-liberal state-theoretic assumptions about the reach and role of the state. From the United Kingdom to the United States and from India to Indonesia, socio-economic inequalities have shaped the Covid-burden in ways that reflect *pre*-pandemic social vulnerabilities. In the United Kingdom, this has been starkly reflected in the disproportionate impact that the disease has had upon black and ethnic minority communities. In this context, what’s interesting about Covid is the manner in which long-standing assumptions about the respective roles of the state and the individual shifted dramatically in ways that pose distinctive questions for *post*-pandemic models of democratic governance. Put very simply, the boundary between the public and private spheres was redrawn. The crisis opened a ‘window of opportunity’ that facilitated the discussion and implementation of policies that would not otherwise have been interpreted as credible options. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (i.e. ‘furlough’) being a case of point: a rapidly established financial safety net protecting 11.6 million jobs at a cost of around £70 billion.

It is in exactly this context that this paper explores whether the Covid crisis might create the political space through which a more long-term and radical shift in the relationship between the individual and the state might be considered. Such consideration would recognize and seek to counter those embedded inequalities that Covid has exposed in such tragic terms. This paper explores this topic through three research questions:

**RQ1**. Is it possible to characterize a dominant *pre-*pandemic conceptualization of the role of the state and the individual in relation to major social challenges?

**RQ2**. To what extent did the pandemic challenge that dominant conceptualization in terms of both theory and practice?

**RQ3**. What are the key principles of policy that might enable government to forge a new *post*-pandemocratic settlement given the structural weaknesses that Covid has exposed?

We suggest that it is possible to identify or characterize a dominant *pre-*pandemic conceptualization of the role of the state and the individual in relation to major social challenges (i.e. RQ1) and draw-upon Elizabeth Shove’s work on what we characterize as ‘the politics of ABC’ as a powerful analytical framework that can be utilized to posit the potentialities of post-pandemic politics. In order to develop this point we explore how Covid challenged the sustainability of this framework (RQ2), but seek to develop and refine Shove’s approach by emphasizing the role of emotions and, more specifically, the politics of fear in terms of mediating state-societal relationships. Having illustrated the crisis-linked malleability of previously dominant assumption we draw upon the notion of ‘the Overton window’ to assess for forging a post-pandemic legacy that exceeds the politics of ABC (RQ3), suggesting that policies such as UBI constitute a potential means to this end.

**PART I. PRE-PANDEMIC POLITICS**

It is, of course, impossible to provide a detailed account of pre-pandemic politics in a way that is sensitive to the country-specific idiosyncrasies of different regions, nations and communities. This section, and to some extent this paper, is working across a very wide canvas, which, in turn, demands the use of fairly broad and sweeping analytical brushstrokes. It is hoped, however, that by setting out an argument that is focused on the exposure of social inequalities and vulnerabilities in a Covid context and linking them to future-focused debates about the collective capacity of societies and the role of the state that we will stimulate further fine-grained country specific analyses. We also seek to add to the analytical toolkit in a way that will add greater tone and texture to those analyses by emphasizing both the changing emotional landscape in which Covid occurred, and by highlighting the role of fear as a very specific connective emotion that to some extent defined state-society relationships during the pandemic. However, to assess the drivers and extent of change, it is necessary to have at least some foundational conceptualization of *pre*-crisis, *pre*-pandemic politics. But is it possible to offer a dominant *pre-*pandemic conceptualization of the role of the state and the individual in relation to major social challenges [i.e. RQ1]?

We suggest that it is and that this conceptualization is best articulated in the work of Elizabeth Shove on public policy and social change.

From her work on climate change and energy efficiency through to her more recent work on the obesity crisis, the focus of Shove’s scholarship has been on the need to recognize and expand the interpretive lenses through which we seek to understand and therefore address major societal challenges (Shove 2010; Blue, Shove & Kelly 2021). The notion of ‘re-framing’ is a central element of Shove’s work, and it is a notion that we seek to draw-upon *vis-à-vis* whether the Covid-crisis facilitated a re-framing of arguably dominant assumptions about the role of the modern state (i.e. RQ2) and whether that might create an opportunity for longer-term shifts (i.e. RQ3). Put simply, Shove’s work – conducted with a range of colleagues and co-authors – is focused on reconceptualizing theories of social change through a critique of what she interprets as the dominant ‘ABC model’. In this model social change is framed as a matter of individual **a**ttitudes, that drive **b**ehaviour, that people **c**hoose to adopt. This is a rational-choice derived model of social action in which the notion of choice is absolutely central. It emphasizes personal responsibility and therefore dovetails with neo-liberal conceptions of the state in which the role of politicians and public servants is to ‘persuade, price, and advise’ individuals on the basis that when given better information and more appropriate incentives individuals (i) will change their **a**ttitudes, (ii) alter their **b**ehaviour and/or (iii) make **c**hoices that are better aligned with addressing social challenges (i.e. ‘ABC’). The emphasis is one that almost deifies the individual, freedom of choice and a model of almost transactional, technocratic or consumer-based politics.

Three further points help us develop and engage with Shove’s work: the first emphasizes *direction*, the second *blame* and the third *difference*.

*Direction*: one of Shove’s main critiques is that ‘the politics of ABC’ with its linear-modelling and simple assumptions rarely ‘works’ in real-world conditions and when set against ‘super-wicked’ social challenges. Irrespective of the provision of information and advice, individual behaviour often remains stubbornly resistant to change. Indeed, as social scientists have revealed more about the existence of entrenched cognitive biases amongst both individuals and groups it is possible to suggest that instead of reconsidering the utility of this dominant frame there has been a clear attempt to promote, develop and intensify its reach and depth. Put slightly differently, there is a link between Shove’s work and the pre-pandemic emphasis amongst policy-makers on behavioral psychology and the power of ‘the nudge’. Nudging works through a focus on the ‘choice architecture’ presented to individuals in the hope that emphasizing some options and linking them to clear information about the benefits choosing them (while disincentivizing ‘bad’ choices through pricing or presentation) will change attitudes, effect behaviour, and lead to pro-social choices. Nudging is essentially a more sophisticated approach to ‘the politics of ABC’ (alcohol is hidden, cigarettes packaged with pictures of disease-ridden body parts, fresh-fruit presented at head-height, etc.). Cognitive biases are recalibrated (pensions payments are activated by default in new employment contracts to exploit a natural tendency to inertia) but the bottom-line is that individual choice and a belief in evidence-informed behavioral change is dominant within this model of ‘liberal paternalism’.

*Blame:* arguably the most devastating critique of ‘the politics of ABC’ is to be found not within Shove’s scholarship, or the broad literature that questions the moral ethics of ‘nudging’ people towards a specific but generally hidden choice agenda, but in Keith Dowding’s (2020) *It’s the Government, Stupid*. ‘The argument of this book’, Dowding writes, ‘is that while there is individual responsibility with regard to our behaviour, the major responsibility for social failures is that of the government’ (p.xi). Where Dowding connects with Shove is through his criticism of a dominant conceptualization of state-society relations in which market-like relationships are predominant and personal choice is the cardinal quality.

[O]ver the past 50 years one specific ideological viewpoint has dominated. And that is the cult of personal responsibility, propagated not only by politicians but also by moral and political philosophers (p.xii).

What Dowding charts with great effect through a focus on gun crime, obesity, homelessness, gambling and drugs policy is either the gradual withdrawal of state-based control mechanisms (i.e. liberalization, regulation, etc.) and/or a refusal to countenance the implementation of such measures. Whereas government once took on a degree of direct responsibility for the health and wealth of all their citizens, Dowding argues that ‘a process of privatized blame-shifting’ has occurred, whereby responsibility for dealing with major social challenges has been, through ‘the politics (and logic) of ABC’, placed on individuals. Obesity, homelessness, gun crime, gambling and drug addiction are redefined not as governmental failure but as the consequences of individual poor choice. (Hence the sub-title of Dowding’s book, ‘How governments blame citizens for their own policies’.) This critique not only *politicises* personal choice but it also focuses attention on the existence of choice vis-à-vis the selection of policy tools and instruments. As Table 1 illustrates, taking this forward it is possible to differentiate between three broad governmental responses:

**Table 1. Nudging, Pushing and Shoving**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Tool** |  | **Individual****Discretion** | **Role of** **the State** | **Example** |
| *‘Nudge’* | A hand’s-off approach emphasizing personal responsibility and choice with the role of the state restricted to providing information and advice. | High | Limited | The positioning of alcohol behind screens so that customers must consciously ask for it; Colour-coding (‘traffic-lights) schemes to emphasise recommended daily consumption levels.  |
| *‘Shove’* | The introduction of regulatory structures that interfere with the market in order to incentivize individual choice.  | Medium | Mixed | The introduction of minimum pricing on alcohol, or a ‘sugar tax’ on soft drinks and confectionary.  |
| *‘Push’* | The introduction of legal compulsion to behave in a certain manner. | Low | Extensive | Age restrictions. Limited opening hours. Banning of certain liquors. Prohibition.  |

The value of Table 1 is threefold: (i) it contextualises and locates Shove’s critique of the dominance of ‘ABC’ approaches; (ii) it underpins Dowding’s point that the more direct and extensive a government’s policies become (i.e. if the state takes responsibility for ‘pushing’ and ‘shoving’ people) the harder it is for them to engage in blame-shifting strategies about the impacts and consequences of those policies; and (iii) it flows into a focus on difference.

*Difference:* In many ways what Shove’s and Dowding’s contributions serve to focus attention on is the existence of choice and alternative ways of framing, conceptualizing and understanding the respective roles of the individual and the state. As already mentioned, there is a strong sense in which ‘the politics of ABC’ is imbued with a highly technocratic set of cost-benefit assumptions that risk almost depoliticising public policy (politics defined as little more than ‘lifestyle’ choices). What Shove and Dowding also emphasize is the fundamental weakness of *over*-emphasizing personal responsibility and *under*-emphasizing the existence of other more sophisticated framings (Shove) and the latent capacity of the state to protect vulnerable individuals from the impact of systemic economic, technical or scientific tides of change (Dowding). Put slightly differently, both scholars rally against TINA based assumptions and narratives (i.e. ‘there is no alternative’). The difference is therefore directional in the sense that Shove’s work ‘looks out’ through an emphasis on everyday social life, social practice and social complexity in order to expose the cultural drivers (social and historical trends) of behavior. Dowding comes at exactly the same social challenge but with an approach that ‘looks-up’ to the role and responsibilities of national governments to adopt a more proactive attitude that recognises the existence of embedded structural inequalities. ‘My argument is that we should not place the burden of responsibility for body shape on to people personally’ Dowding argues in relation to obesity ‘but to recognise that government, and the society that elects governments to regulate as they will, are responsible (p.64).’

Our argument is not that this emphasis on personal responsibility over collective intervention is novel. In many ways it is exactly the same argument that C. Wright Mills made in his classic *The Sociological Imagination* (2000 [1959], 8) with its emphasis on the role of the social scientist being to make the connection “between ‘the personal troubles of milieu’ and ‘the public issues of social structure’. Our argument is that the Mills’ warning was generally not heeded and, if anything, the centrality of market-logic within managerialist prescriptions for thinking about policy increased towards the end of the twentieth and into the opening-decades of the twenty-first century. As such, and in alignment with Shove, Dowding and the work of many other scholars, ‘the politics of ABC’ can be characterized as the dominant *pre-*pandemic conceptualization of the role of the state and the individual in relation to major social challenges. With this answer to RQ1 in place it is possible to move on to RQ2 in order to assess the extent to which the pandemic challenged that dominant conceptualization in terms of both theory and practice. The next section engages with this question and charts the rupturing of pre-pandemic assumptions. But its major contribution is the emphasis it brings to the discussion on the role of emotions, in general, and fear, in particular, as a key explanatory variable in understanding the recalibration of relationships. This is a distinctive, significant and generally overlooked contribution to the debate about the state and the individual in times of crisis.

**PART II. PANDEMIC POLITICS**

Shove acknowledges that the politics of ABC could be extended with any number of other letters. Our argument in this section is essentially that an ‘E’ for emotion could usefully be inserted; or, more specifically, not inserted as if simply some mechanical elements of a linear process but acknowledged as arguably *the* key contextual variable within which ABC processes occur. Certainly, given the qualities and functions of fear that we discuss below, there is good reason for those studying the politics of ABC to focus on emotions as well, especially since that focus is perfectly compatible with the blame shifting and individualizing tendencies of that form of politics. Recent elections and referenda in the UK have been awash with not only highly emotive rhetoric – by which we mean speech meant either to convey some of emotion of the speaker, to appeal to the emotions of the audience, or both – but also *meta*-emotional rhetoric – by which we mean speech about emotions, including about the emotions people have, what people do with emotions, and what emotions do to people. Such meta-emotional rhetoric was deployed by both sides in the Brexit debate, for example, in the form of claims that how people voted would be decided by how people ‘feel about themselves’ (see Degerman 2018). Those *who felt* ‘left behind’ by politicians and society were explicitly encouraged to vote to leave the European Union. (Similar narratives have been used in relation to ‘the forgotten people’ in the United States or ‘the peripherique’ in France.) The apparent implication of this is, on the one hand, that politicians cannot be blamed for pitching the wrong policies since people do not really care about those anyway, and, on the other, that politics is about changing individual emotions rather than addressing the structural issues that have given rise to those emotions in certain populations. So, focusing on emotions can be a means to divert attention away from their interpretation and acceptance as ‘public issues’ (i.e. collective challenges that can only be addressed through a collective societal response, and are therefore within the legitimate purview of the state) to ‘private troubles’ where the emphasis and responsibility is clearly placed on the individual.

But while considering the role of emotions in the politics of ABC adds depth to this analytical framework, we do not intend to simply append an ‘E’ or leave it hanging as some kind of floating signifier. That is because emotions can be complicating factors in the politics of ABC as well, something which this section illustrates by examining the role of fear in the context of the COVID crisis. Fear, we suggest, can be understood as part of the reason why *pre-*pandemic policy assumptions had to be set aside. To an extent, fear may also slow down the return the politics of ABC, but it is unlikely to halt it.

In order to locate the role of emotions and specifically the importance of the ‘fear factor’ within contemporary arguments concerning post-pandemic politics (the topic of the next section) it is necessary to engaged with one simple question: why is fear an important emotion, especially in the context of the previous section’s focus on ‘the politics of ABC’ as the dominant pre-pandemic conceptualization of individual-state-society relationships?

We approach this question by breaking it down into two elements: first, focusing on does fear matters; before (secondly) relating its significance to a focus on understanding pre, during and post-pandemic socio-political change.

Why fear is politically *important*: There are several different theories about the essential components of emotions, in general, and fear, in particular. Among the candidate components are evaluations, feelings, physiological changes, physical expressions, and behaviours. For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to adjudicate which of these components are in fact essential. Most theorists would agree that fear often involves all of them: an evaluation of something as a threat, an unpleasant feeling, increased heartrate and activity in the amygdala, widened eyes, and a tendency to escape the threat (see Scarantino and De Sousa, 2018). By virtue of these components, fear has several potential benefits. Drawing on the work of Michael Brady (2018), we can identify four that are of particular political importance. The first two are epistemic and motivational (78-80). Fear tends to consume our attention, focusing our thoughts on understanding the nature of the threat and how we can escape it; crucially, it also motivates us to act on our conclusions. Brady suggests that these functions are intrinsically linked to the unpleasant feeling involved in fear and many other negative emotions, like anger and shame, a feeling that we cannot ignore and that we want to escape (31, 78). This feeling distinguishes fear from mere non-emotional evaluations of threat, and helps to explain why the latter is less a less effective mobilizing force in politics than the former. After all, there are many things that we evaluate as potential threats, yet spend little time thinking about actually acting upon them to reduce their risk. Why? Because we do not fear them. If we were really fearful (i.e. full-of-fear about a threat we would, in all likelihood, do something).

The third benefit is that fear can be communicative and socially symbolic. Bodily expressions and acts of fear – like physical trembling or hurried speech, screaming or running away – communicates to others to others that there is danger or risk that is ideally avoided. Such expressions are also arguably authentic in the sense that they constitute an unmediated and automatic reflection of the fearful subject’s values and beliefs. This flows into a fourth benefit of fear: its capacity to induce social cohesion. As often illustrated in times of war or in the wake of natural disasters, fear can mobilize individuals and communities to unite in the face of a shared fear thereby helping to foster trust, solidarity and a collective identity between people who may otherwise have little in common (Brady 2019: 122-126). Although the capacity of fear (or ‘fearfulness’) to act as a form of social glue or a tie that binds is rarely considered in the broader literature there is also a flip-side dynamic (again rarely discussed) which deserves identification and elaboration – fear as a tool of governance. There is, of course, an immediate need to lay down some normative and analytical markers around this notion of fear as a tool of governance. As a vast body of historical and comparative scholarship has explored in great depth, fear as a tool of control is a common dimension of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. The simple and far softer interpretation of ‘fear as a tool of governance’ that we seek to highlight in this paper is, although not completely unrelated, quite different and can be explained in two simple steps (hence the focus on ‘flip side’ dynamics).

*Step One:* Fear is a critical emotion within social psychology due to the manner in which it focuses public attention and support for defensive strategies around a specific topic (i.e. bottom-up, socially-constructed).

*Step Two*: In designing and delivering their strategies to mitigate the sources of specific societal threats and fears politicians and public servants may have to maintain and manage ‘the fear factor’ in order to ensure public compliance.

Three brief points help develop this two-step schema. First and foremost, these ‘steps’ are clearly not completely separate and it is more accurate to conceive of them as co-existing within a fluid and dialectical relationship. Secondly, seeking to perpetuate the public’s fears about any topic – from invasions to contamination or from the risk of shark attacks to asteroid strikes – could be used for illegitimate reasons by unscrupulous governments or rulers. And yet, thirdly, seeking to impart at least some element of fear is already a common aim in public policy. The introduction of legal requirements for manufactures of cigarettes to place photographs of cancerous tumors on packets is clearly intended to impart an element of fear in the potential purchaser. With the weaknesses of the ‘ABC model’ of social change (discussed above) in mind, it is worth very briefly mentioning the Enlightened Tobacco Company and its attempt during the 1990s to shed light on the rapacious nature of capitalism and to deter young people from smoking. In essence, the strategy involved attempting to utilize the fear factor in an incredibly blunt manner by producing a new brand of cigarettes called simply ‘DEATH’ that were packaged in black alongside a skull and crossbones. On this occasion, the **a**ttitude of the primary market (students) defied expectations. DEATH cigarettes became highly fashionable on university campuses and sales boomed: **b**ehaviour appeared to be pro-death, and **c**hoices were made to smoke more.

Setting the abject failure of the Enlightened Tobacco Company to achieve its objectives, the simple point being made is that it is possible to develop a coherent political narrative ‘in defence of fear’ (see Degerman, Flinders and Johnson, 2020). And yet, and as already emphasized, fear does not inherently serve constructive ends. Much depends on what we fear, how much we fear it, and what we take to be appropriate responses to our fear. When the threat is misconceived, the intensity of our fear exceeds the threat (or prevents us from responding to it), or the means of addressing it are noxious, the epistemic, motivational, communicative, and social cohesive functions of fear may become destructive too. Harnessing the functions of fear to fight the pandemic was, hence, a challenge for the government, one that, at least in the UK context, can be schematically divided into two temporal stages in which different sets of problems come into focus: early in the pandemic and late/currently in the pandemic.

Early in the pandemic, the government needed to *engender* and *align* public fears. This is a critical point. The task of *engendering* fear pertains to the virus and related vectors and risk factors. After nearly two years of living in what might be termed the ‘Covid context’ it is easy to forget that we do not naturally fear social interaction in the way we might naturally fear snakes or sharks. Humans are social animals and, as such, physical contact with other people (touching and hugging), being in crowded spaces (night clubs or football stadiums) and seeing someone’s face (free from masks or personal protection equipment) are generally sources of pleasure which trigger positive emotions (excitement, joy, hope, love, etc.). The emotional trauma of Covid reflected the manner in which basic human interaction became something to fear. The key point we are trying to make, however, is that to some extent governments around the world had to reinforce and legitimate these fears in an attempt to encourage public compliance with mitigation measures (wear a face mask, wash your hands, stay at home, etc.). Statistics were one notable tool in these efforts. Ubiquitous charts representing rates of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths, effectively became a kind of prescriptive barometer of fear. That the government tethered the severity of restrictions to these rates suggests that government policy was in an important sense to have been *fear-led* rather than, as Boris Johnson claimed, *science-led*. While infections and fear low, the government stuck to *nudging*, then moved to *shoving*, and eventually to *pushing* as infections and fear spiked (see table 2). Arguably, a ‘science-led’ policy approach would not have waited for infection spikes to occur since such phenomena could be and were statistically predicted. Moreover, that it took so long for the government to re-introduce restrictions following their easing over the summer and fall of 2020 is further indication of how close the relationship between those charts and virus-related fear became, since ministers and the public alike resisted expert calls for harsher, ‘push-based’ restrictions until the situation had deteriorated.

**Table 2. Nudging, Pushing and Shoving during the Covid Crisis**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Tool** |  **Example** |
| *‘Nudge’* | The emphasis on ‘hands, face, space’, alongside narratives of ‘following the science. |
| *‘Shove’* | The requirement that people should wear a facemask in shops and on public transport. |
| *‘Push’* | The legal obligation to stay at home and not travel (i.e. ‘lock down’).  |

Engendering fear of a particular object or set of objects is not enough to harness the functions of fear. After all, many people had other fears that they perceived as equal to or outweighing threat of COVID, and, as Ned Lebow (2021) points out, ‘people and politicians are reluctant to make difficult trade-offs between highly valued ends’, which can lead them to act harmfully or too slowly. Fears, therefore, also need to be *aligned*. Government messaging that there was no trade-off between addressing COVID and protecting other ends, like wealth, could be interpreted as one means of achieving this. Claims like these were of course unlikely to convince individuals facing the threat of being unable to provide for themselves and their families as a result of COVID restrictions. The introduction of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme was, therefore, probably the most effective means of aligning other fears (i.e. job loss and poverty) behind fear of COVID, since it removed the need to choose between the end of trying to contain the virus and the end of staying financially afloat. The need for individual choice in this instance was in other words taken out of the equation because the government moved beyond ‘nudge’, ‘shove’, and ‘push’ by instead beginning to ‘catch’ people. ‘Catch’ in this sense relating to the creation of an economic social safety net in the form of the furlough scheme.

Why does this matter and how does it ‘fit’ with the central argument of this paper?

First and foremost, the introduction of the furlough scheme matters because it reflected a fundamental rejection of the dominant pre-pandemic conception of state-society relationships. Pre-pandemic, as the previous section outlined, a highly individualized and market-based set of assumptions about the role of the state and the individual had existed. This conceptualization can be summarised (*qua*. Shove) as ‘the ABC approach’ to ‘doing politics’ (RQ1). This section has explored how the pandemic challenged and changed this conceptualization (RQ2). Looking back and using the UK as an empirical case study it is possible to see an initial attempt to reframe the ‘ABC approach’ in the face of the pandemic through an emphasis on the provision of information and data that was intended to influence changes in individual behaviour (i.e. ‘hands, face, space’). Tracing the evolution of the crisis, what is particularly noteworthy is the manner in which the scale of the pandemic almost outgrew the response capacity of conventional individually-focused modes of response and ministers were gradually obliged to open-up the Overton window to a broader range of policy tools. Broader, critically, in the sense of involving a far more direct and collective role of the state. The policy spectrum therefore changed to include elements of ‘push’ and ‘shove’ in which the freedom of the individual was explicitly constrained by the state; and as a consequence it became impossible (*qua.* Dowding) for the government to blame the public.

The answer to RQ2 is that the practical and intellectual malleability of the dominant pre-pandemic conceptualization was tested to breaking point and in the end the government was forced to engage in a wholesale recalibration of the boundaries between the public and the private sphere. The scale of the state in terms of both financial spending and social intervention increased to (and beyond) a level only ever previously experienced in times of war. In short, the dominant logic of TINA collapsed; just as the existence of a ‘yoyo economy’ (i.e. ‘you’re on your own’) actually seemed open to new support structures. The next section moves to RQ3 and to an assessment of whether a post-pandemic settlement might see a more permanent shift in the role of the state and an attempt to correct the structurally embedded structural inequalities that were revealed in such a stark way by the pandemic. It achieves this through a focus on the debate – and, indeed, the piloting of – models of Universal Basic Income (UBI).

**PART III. POST-PANDEMIC POLITICS**

The timing of the pandemic was particularly unfortunate: decades of de-industrialisation had stripped communities of wealth that might provide sources of local resilience; the Global Financial Crisis had destroyed many small and medium sized businesses and subsequent austerity politics had critically reduced safety nets developed in the wake of Europe’s last great crisis, World War II. Public services have been stretched further by a general trend, identified by Standing (2021), toward deskilling. Doman specific entities have been stripped of resources (see Pettit 2021b) and asked to support previously distinct domains, with medics taking on the role of benefits agents (Johnson, Degerman & Geyer 2018) and police officers the role social workers (Simpson 2019) leaving both completely overwhelmed (see Dewhurst 2020).

Had the virus struck at a time in which public health had not been affected by decades of welfare cuts and underfunding of state services, it may have been subject to more robust obstacles. There may have been entrenched safety nets to catch people falling into destitution from the financial fall-out of the pandemic. Instead, it struck at a time in which those with the worst immunity and greatest susceptibility to the virus (see Mena, et al. 2021; Sa 2020) were also those most likely to need to be in public spaces in order to work or to care for others (see Hussein, Stevens & Manthorpe 2013). If they themselves were not seriously ill, they were liable to spread infection to those who would become so: their parents or grandparents or those to whom they were providing services.

Standing (2021) and others have referred to such individuals who could not afford *not* to be in public as members of a precariat whose work is increasingly elided with labour, whose labour stripped of skill, and whose participation in the economy piecemeal and insufficient, not just to advance their interests, but to sustain them independently of state support. For such people, the pandemic served to foreground existential fear of destitution, which serves as an extrinsic mortality cue for death, and contributed to a rise in mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression and trauma (see Johnson, Johnson, Webber & Nettle 2020). Given the breadth of cues, there is every reason (Koob, Powell & White 2020) to suggest that these factors will increase what Case and Deayton (2020) describe as ‘deaths of despair’. While we have previously argued that fear of communicable disease can be perfectly rational (Degerman, Flinders & Johnson 2020; Johnson, Flinders & Degerman 2021), fear of destitution in a modern, affluent society ought to be seen as a consequence of failure in policy: people recognize that the state will no longer catch them and that the precarity of their condition has real, existential meaning.

This structural failure was only compounded by laissez faire concern for personal responsibility. At the beginning of the pandemic, there was a widespread sense that dealing with transmission ought to be seen in the same sense as sustaining an income (see Christensen 2009): that individuals ought to bear the consequences of their decisions. As such, individuals made choices based on relative risk of mortality and security of income. For young people in the gig economy, not getting a COVID test or not abiding by isolation periods because of the absence of a safety net was perfectly rational (see Tapper 2021; cf discussions in Faulkner 2021; Pettit 2021a). Those rational decisions led to macro-level disease transmission and imposed unprecedented financial burdens on societies. Neo-liberal government had little answer (see Pettit 2021b). As the pandemic wore on, it became clear that even people in societies with long traditions of privatized healthcare were unwilling to be subject to such thoroughgoing levels of personal responsibility. There was a demand, which was satisfied in all but the most extreme cases (see Kalil, et al. 2021), for government to intervene (see Honeycombe-Foster 2020). Often, that intervention, through lockdowns and self-isolation mandates, required substantive constraints on negative liberty (see Berlin 2002). Increasingly, it became apparent that a set of decades-old, settled neo-liberal principles had actively contributed to the crisis and been rendered obsolete by conditions on the ground (see Johnson, Flinders & Degerman 2021). There was no market solution to the need for intensive care beds. There was no market solution to the need for vaccinations and no means of denying the pivotal role that government plays in training researchers, creating medicines and funding research. There was no market solution to transmission of new variants via international travel and commerce. Only governments could close borders and limit transmission.

Accordingly, public opinion shifted on what constituted TINA. Having endured a decade of austerity politics, the general public began to call for transformative policies of the sort that some had long regarded as being natural responses to the Global Financial Crisis (see Britain Thinks 2020, 35). Politicians across the spectrum disavowed a return to the old normal (Schomburg & Sandle 2020). It was not clear, however, what ‘new normal’ policies would look like. The Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, was heavily influenced by trade unions in adopting furlough schemes and mortgage payment holidays that provided unprecedented levels of support to individuals (e. g. Unite 2021). He also presented a range of gimmick-like stimulus packages, such as the ‘Eat Out To Help Out’ programme (see Hutton 2020), which was an effective enormous subsidy to the leisure industry and which contributed to the second lockdown (Fetzer 2020), and stamp duty holidays, which contributed to house price inflation (Staton 2021). Each of these policies were, clearly, crisis-dependent. However, elements hinted at a possible new normal.

While there has been increased talk among politicians of a return to normal politics and of the importance of fiscal responsibility (see Committee of Public Accounts 2021), it is simply not possible for government to do so. The challenges are just too great. Automation is likely to produce unprecedented job losses (see Standing 2016), reducing the capacity of private sector employment to catch people and raise them out of poverty (see Barry 2012), while the ability of individuals to consume independently of state funding (see discussion of contradictions in Jessop 2013) is already changing and will continue apace. Moreover, much economic activity will become unsustainable by virtue of its contribution to climate change (see discussion in Clark & York 2005) – the contradiction of infinite growth on a finite planet (see Park 2015) is simply unsustainable. Mass unemployment and human extinction via climate change are two direct and very real existential threats worthy of fear.

The ability of states to return to pre-pandemic governance to deal with these two crises is undermined further by confusion over the role of domain specific entities and what it means to ‘catch’ people. In recent decades, individual personal responsibility has been used as a justification to strip welfare systems of the ability to catch people as they fall into destitution. Governments have increasingly relied nudge or push responses, promoting discourses of deserving and undeserving poverty and increasing conditionality in welfare payments. The consequence is that welfare systems based on assessing needs and means are just too complex, inefficient and slow to react to changes in people’s individual circumstances to catch ever increasing numbers of those falling as a result of the two crises (see Nettle, et al. 2020). The short-, medium- and long-term consequences of this on health, in particular, are profound. Poverty, inequality and insecurity are social determinants associated with a significant increase in non-communicable and, critically, communicable disease. The lesson of the pandemic is that prevention is cheaper than cure and running down population health reduces the ability of societies to withstand future pandemics or even the mental health and obesity crises.

In contrast to the rolling back of the state in welfare, there has been an advancement of the state in terms of catching moral vice and promoting virtue through ‘shoving’ in the Criminal Justice system. In recent years, The Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) has been supplemented by The Psychoactive Substances Act (2016), both vestiges of post-Victorian concern over illegitimate pathways to happiness (see Brown 1915). This expansion of the state is justified as a means of catching individuals as they slide into moral decline and pollute society as a consequence (see Clark 1976). Yet, there is no evidence that prohibition of the ‘vice’ of drug prevents self-regarding harm, since even in *sharia*-governed societies, drug use and associated crime persists. There is, though, much evidence that prohibition causes other-regarding harm on a grand scale (see Coyne & Hall 2017). The criminality, violence and black marketeering associated with the prohibition of alcohol in the United States from 1920-1933 via the 18th Amendment is exceeded today by that associated with the prohibition of other drugs globally (see Levine 2003). This catching is both detrimental to the individuals caught and to society as a whole and reduces, again, the ability of society to deal with crises.

In order to deal with the fall out of the pandemic and the coming crises, a new normal policy framework needs radically to recalibrate its understandings of what the state can achieve with regard to safety nets and the management of personal pleasures. Policy makers need to be guided by concern for catching people via upstream economic interventions (NCCDH 2021) that affect social determinants of health (Black Report 1980) and material outcomes and to roll back the state in dealing with downstream, self-regarding activities, such as their use of drugs. The domain general entity, government, needs to ensure that domain specific entities are properly resourced and their authority limited to their specific remits: medics need to be allowed focus on dealing with morbidity and preventing mortality, rather than acting as gatekeepers to the benefits system (Johnson, Degerman & Geyer 2018), while Police Officers and members of Criminal Justice System more generally need to focus on preventing other-regarding harm and punishing offenders, rather than acting as social workers.

Government is, reluctantly, beginning to understand this imperative. The UK Government’s Prevention Agenda is intended to shift understanding of the National Health Service (NHS) away from the ‘National Hospital Service’ (see Department of Health and Social Care and Hancock 2018). It is aimed specifically at avoiding morbidity and mortality but has yet to advance substantive policy measures to that end beyond The Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) (2013), which constituted a limited and indirect intervention via taxation on business. This may be because it appears either to fail to understand the material basis of health or to reject ideologically the ‘pushing’ on personal economic matters (see Neville & Pickard 2017) or the resulting radical socio-economic implications on policy.

There is a need for policies that do not just catch people when they fall but hold people back from falling. We could call these ‘holding policies’. This term that aptly evokes Donald Winnicott’s (1960) concept of holding, which roughly describes circumstances that foster and sustain a sense of security and capacities for dealing with adversity. Universal Basic Income (UBI) is a key example of such policy. UBI is a system of regular, predictable and secure cash transfers to all citizens irrespective of wealth, income and employment. Models of impact developed from the epidemiological literature suggest three pathways to promotion of public health (Johnson, et al. 2020): improved satisfaction of need via poverty reduction (Johnson, Degerman & Geyer 2019), reduced stress by mitigation of inequality (Johnson & Johnson 2018), and behavioural change associated with reduction in extrinsic mortality cues (Johnson, Johnson, Nettle & Pickett 2020). People whose income increases can secure better housing and nutrition. The security of income enables them to escape abusive, stress-inducing interpersonal domination within organizational hierarchies. The attendant increase in perceived lifespan means that people invest more in their long-term interests and eschew hedonistic, short-term behaviour, such as drug use, which is correlated with socio-economic status (SES) (e.g. Galea & Vlahov 2002). The implication is that, by catching and holding people through universal welfare programmes, policy has the side effect of achieving many of the outcomes presently pursued through the criminal justice system (see Pepper & Nettle 2017 on ‘extrinsic mortality cues’).

UBI is confounding to both pre-pandemic Shove/Dowding assumptions. It has been criticized for reducing the incentive to work, for being too expensive (see Martinelli 2017) and for stripping individuals of responsibility. As an upstream intervention, it recognizes the socio-economic bases of outcomes and actively endorses the notion of government responsibility, since no other agent is capable of affecting those determinants in the post-pandemic context. Interestingly, public opinion seems to recognize both the mechanism of the policy and the need for the policy itself. Nettle et al. (2020) showed that, against a high baseline, support for UBI increased significantly during the pandemic, with fear attendant to recognition of widespread risk of destitution leading to support for efficiency. Indeed, polling in left behind constituencies suggests that, while people recognize that utility, their reasons for support differ according to material circumstance: homeowners see value in health security; renters see value in economic security (Johnson, Johnson & Nettle forthcoming). Those reasons are interdependent and the pandemic has demonstrated, dramatically, the interdependence of individuals in different material circumstances (see Gulland 2020).

**Conclusion**

The pandemic has fundamentally unsettled a number of assumptions about policy making. The recognition of vulnerability and the limitations of the private sector have increased the legitimacy of the state as an economic actor in the eyes of the public. The emotions fostered by pandemic vulnerability have no natural end: there are crises of climate and unemployment that pose genuine existential threats. It is easy to see how these crises compound one another and leave society ever more vulnerable to another pandemic made more likely by the expansion of humans into animal habitats. The only responses that have the capacity to deal with these crises are those that have the potential to expend political capital: the abrogation of any capacity to nudge, push or shove with regard to work or personal vice and the arrogation of tax raising powers to fund universal welfare schemes. This pragmatic response is one that accepts that a portion of the population will free-ride, that crime will persist and that many will engage in hedonistic pursuits. It is guided by evidence that holding people in a state of functioning by providing a materially secure context holds the vast majority of individuals, and that catching people when they engage in acts of hedonistic vice drags them down through the criminal justice system to the detriment of society. There is simply no alternative capable of addressing post-pandemic crises successfully. The question is whether political parties can overcome the short-term electoral foci of liberal democratic government to do what is in the best interests of the populace.

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