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**COVID-19 and the Case  
Against Neoliberalism**  
The United Kingdom's  
Political Pandemic

**Mark Boyle**  
**James Hickson**  
**Katalin Ujhelyi Gomez**

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The United Kingdom's Political Pandemic

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**Plate 1** The National Covid Memorial Wall London (*Source* Pear on Willow CC BY-SA 4.0 24 May 2021)

The National Covid Memorial Wall on South Bank of the river Thames in London, UK, was created as a collaboration between the COVID-19 Bereaved Families for Justice and Led By Donkeys groups. Adorning the Wall are over 150,000 red and pink hearts inscribed with personal messages of loss and memorialisation. The Wall was painted by 1500 volunteers starting on 29 March 2021 over a ten-day period. Plans are afoot to ensure that the Wall remains intact as a permanent reminder of the collective trauma the global family has endured these past years.

<https://nationalcovidmemorialwall.org/>

*This book is dedicated to those who lost their lives to  
COVID-19 and because of COVID-19*

*We owe it to the families of those whose lives were taken to have the courage  
to search for, own, and strive to remediate the political progenitors of this  
global pandemic.*

*“a misconceived theory can kill” (Sen 1999, 209)*

# PROLOGUE

This book arose from an interdisciplinary research project on *British neoliberalism and COVID-19* conducted at the Heseltine Institute (University of Liverpool) and intended as a contribution to the (now active, May 2022) independent public inquiry into the UK government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place is a non-partisan, internationally recognised research institute and thought leader, bringing together expertise from across the University and policy communities, to co-create, impact, and influence public policies for tomorrow's cities. The institute has made a significant contribution to Liverpool City Region's COVID-19 response, including and in particular through its flagship policy briefings series (Series 1 Responding to COVID-19, Series 2 Recovery and Renewal). Further details about the Heseltine Institute and its COVID-19 policy briefings can be accessed at: <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute/>.

Readers should note that whilst substantially original, this manuscript incorporates portions of text from other related papers we have published:

Boyle M., Hickson J. and Ujhelyi Gomez K. (2021). *Change! Strengthening the Resilience of British Cities in Preparation for Future Pandemics*. Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place, University of Liverpool.

Boyle M., Hickson J. and Ujhelyi Gomez K. (2021). *Addendum—Conjectures and Refutations: Further Interrogating Potential Determinants of COVID-19’s Geographies*. Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place, University of Liverpool.

Boyle M. (2021). *Human Geography: An Essential Introduction*. Wiley.

Hickson J. (2020). *A Political Theory of Precarious Work*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of York.

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Of course, the views expressed in the book are strictly those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by the supporting institutions or funders identified above.



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## In What Sense a Political Pandemic?

**Abstract** With public inquiry processes now gathering momentum across the globe (not least in the United Kingdom itself), this book seeks to better understand the meaning and implications of the UK's particularly calamitous encounter with the COVID-19 global pandemic. The book is distinctive in that it mobilises an applied political philosophy perspective to pioneer fresh intellectual resources—both analytical and normative—to advance the thesis that the country's weddedness to an exhausted neoliberal politico-institutional-economic model—and not just, say, epidemiological shocks or political incompetence and bad decision-making—lies at the heart of its poor pandemic outcomes. To set the scene for the remainder of the book, the purpose of this chapter is to elaborate this thesis and establish its principal suppositions, conjectures, and ramifications.

**Keywords** COVID-19 · Neoliberalism · Public inquiry · Applied political philosophy · United Kingdom · Political geography · Neorepublicanism



## INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom (UK) government has long understood the threat posed by emerging and re-emerging communicable diseases. But it has too readily assumed that the country's comparatively superior health, wealth, and institutional capacities would mitigate risk and enable it to escape the worst: it would, instead, be countries in the Global South that would be most exposed to the brunt of any next generation global pandemic. It has come as something of a shock then that events have unfolded otherwise. Notwithstanding the very significant problems of data availability, variability, and quality, there can be no denying that the UK has found itself amongst those nations most incapacitated by the COVID-19 global pandemic.

This book has its origins in our quest to better understand the UK's encounter with COVID-19, what went wrong and what the UK government will need to fix if it is to—using the jargon of the day—'fail forward', 'build back better', 'emerge stronger', and/or 'recover, reimagine and rebuild'. Our pursuit of the causes of the UK's troubles however has led us to contemplate a number of fundamental questions of more existential import. We have arrived at the conclusion that to understand why the UK has been so injured by COVID-19 it is necessary to first understand the limited and ever deteriorating efficacy of the country's underlying politico-economic-institutional model—and in particular the meaning and implications of its forty-year experiment with neoliberalism. For us, the story of the harm which the pandemic has inflicted on the UK is best construed as the story of an emergent embroilment between an exhausted British neoliberal model and an epidemiological shock event—an entanglement which is proving consequential for both.

The purpose of this book is to elaborate this thesis and reason through its analytical and normative suppositions, conjectures, and ramifications—particularly as they bear on scholarship on each of British neoliberalism, the UK's post-pandemic political dispensation, government plans to build back better and strengthen the country's resilience, and UK public health governance, policy, and practice. In this opening chapter, we set out in greater detail the journey that has taken us to our port of embarkation. Introducing the novel *applied political theory* perspective we adopt, we then identify the new conceptual arsenal we believe this book brings to the table. We end by signposting the structure of the chapters to follow.

## IN WHAT SENSE A POLITICAL PANDEMIC?

A wealthy country boasting very high levels of human development and with strong institutions—including a world-renowned public health care system—the UK had been understood to have completed the epidemiological transition. Yet for most of 2020, the UK government struggled to suppress the SARSnCoV-2 2019 virus, and all too often it lost the battle. Spectators watched with incredulity as the world’s fifth largest economy recoiled from reported COVID-19 death rates and levels of excess deaths that at times ranked amongst the worst in the world. From early 2021 the story has taken a turn for the better. A bail out has come in the form of medical science. A cornucopian ‘miracle’—an effective vaccine developed at ‘warp speed’—has pulled the country back from the brink. But further viral mutation, transmission, and death look inevitable, and at this juncture complete eradication appears to be hopelessly aspirational. We are being advised that we will need to ‘learn to live with’ (hopefully low transmissible/low virulence) ‘endemic’ COVID-19 for the foreseeable future.

Whatever transpires, the UK’s relatively successful vaccine programme cannot and must not erase or obfuscate prior difficulties; history instructs that societies which rely on technological fixes to engineer themselves out of systemic crises rarely fail forward. If the UK is to emerge from the pandemic stronger, it is imperative that the government gets to the bottom of why the country has toiled so badly with COVID-19 and what these difficulties reveal about what must now be fixed if it is to strengthen resilience in preparation for future pandemic events—and indeed other shocks. To ‘build back better’ we need to better understand which systems, structures, and institutions are crumbling and why this blight is taking hold. Here we would do well to heed Amartya Sen’s sage advice that when it comes to people living in precarity and poverty, ‘a misconceived theory can kill’. Causality matters because only precise diagnoses will enable accurate prognosis and effective prescription. The UK can only emerge from the pandemic stronger if it fixes what is broken, but it can only fix what is broken if it understands what is actually broken.

In May 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that an independent public inquiry into the UK government’s handling of COVID-19 would be held, beginning in Spring 2022. In December 2021, Baroness Heather Hallett was appointed as chair of the inquiry. A UK-wide approach (England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland) is to be

adopted. The purpose of the inquiry is to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on public health and beyond, take stock of the efficacy of the government's response (its disaster risk management, processes, planning and decision-making, and its capacity for 'fast policy'), and extract lessons so that the UK government can prepare for future pandemic events. A problem this wicked is unlikely to yield to cheap explanations; if we are to untangle and appraise the complex brew of potential causal variables which have been mooted, a considerable and painstaking job of work lies ahead.

Clearly, virological factors are likely to have played a significant role in determining the trajectory of the pandemic in the UK; for sure any post-mortem will need to better understand the epidemiological determinants of pathogen lethality, mutation and contagiousness, circulation, diffusion, and exposure. Was the UK exposed to particularly potent and transmissible variants of the virus, and if so why? Could London's global centrality and connectivity have bequeathed an especially dense and porous mesh of capillaries through which the virus was able to travel?

But COVID-19 has been as much a political pandemic as it has been an epidemiological event. Hazards research has long taught us that the risk of harm from a hazard event = exposure (to that hazard event) × vulnerability (underpinning institutional-socio-economic-political capacity and resilience). We must not confine our attention only to the former. Speaking of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans in 2006, the late Neil Smith argued that there is no such thing as a 'natural disaster': "*In every phase and aspect of a disaster—causes, vulnerability, preparedness, results and response, and reconstruction—the contours of disaster and the difference between who lives and who dies is to a greater or lesser extent a social calculus*" (Smith, 2006, no page). We might paraphrase Smith and insist that there is no such thing as a *natural* pandemic event. It is through the social production of vulnerability and political failure that viral outbreaks scale into pandemics, pandemics translate into disasters, and disasters escalate into catastrophes.

If the UK's initial 'lessons learned' report published jointly by the House of Commons Health and Social Care, and Science and Technology Committees (2021) is anything to go by, it is clear the focus of the public inquiry will be upon government policy. And for good reason. In his book, *The COVID-19 Catastrophe: What's Gone Wrong and How to Stop It Happening Again*, editor-in-chief of the leading medical journal *The Lancet* Richard Horton (2021) argues that the elevated

impact of COVID-19 in the UK reflects at root government incompetence. For Horton, COVID-19 stands as the greatest science policy failure in a generation. The UK government did intervene in a consequential way to protect lives and livelihoods. But it failed to act with the necessary speed, stringency, or coordination to adequately limit the spread of the virus. Measures were often too little, too late; reluctant concessions to the spiralling crisis, rather than positive, proactive, and pre-emptive intervention at the earliest opportunity.

Whilst acknowledging that the UK government, by its actions and inactions, did indeed render the country more vulnerable than it needed to be and placed it at unnecessarily elevated risk, we contend that it would be a cardinal error to confine any inquiry only to government misjudgement, inertia, and ineptitude. What might we miss about the political production (and reproduction) of vulnerability if we confine attention only to public policy failures? It is not just the content, probity, and ramifications of discrete decisions made within the government that must be scrutinised. We must also consider the political theories and political projects that, both implicitly and explicitly, inform government decisions, and shape the choice architectures within which these decisions are made.

And so we might refine our formula: risk = exposure  $\times$  vulnerability where vulnerability = the efficacy of the underlying politico-economic-institutional model  $\times$  the efficacy of government's responses. The two domains—politics and policy—are functionally related. Countries will be at heightened risk of harm from COVID-19 (and other such crises) when fundamental socio-structural maladies inflate the impact of public policy choices and in turn public policy choices expose and aggravate structural-institutional precarities. A perfect storm will be the inevitable result: countries that find themselves in this position will be most likely to magnify COVID-19's deleterious impacts. Arguably, the UK falls into this category.

This book will advance the thesis that the UK government's decades-long experimentation with neoliberal institutions, ideas, ideals, and policies stands as a significant determinant of its poor COVID-19 outcomes. But chasing the chronicles of the UK's experience of COVID-19 is as much a point of entry for us as it is a point of terminus. There is a bigger story to tell here. We have written this book as a contribution to scholarship on the odyssey of the UK's neoliberal experiment and indeed the Odyssean travails of neoliberalism and neoliberalism redux more broadly. COVID-19 has intercepted neoliberalism at what appears

to be a threshold moment in its life course. The product of forty years of neoliberal rule, politico-economic maladies have weakened the country's resilience and rendered it especially vulnerable to emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases. But COVID-19's public health crisis and its concomitant social and economic aftershocks have in turn attenuated these maladies and catalysed a new moment of recalibration and structuration in the UK's neoliberal model. Alongside approaching neoliberalism as one of a number of potential progenitors of heightened risk of harm from COVID-19 then, we approach COVID-19 as itself a potential progenitor of history; a consequential episode in the tumultuous life of a politico-economic model.

### WHAT DOES THIS BOOK OFFER THAT IS NEW?

In forging this argument, we find ourselves in good company. Mobilising variously political philosophy, political economy, political ecology, feminist, and biopolitical framings, there is emerging a body of scholarship which is demonstrating the ways in which neoliberal reform and public health/harm from COVID-19 are interlinked. We are beginning to better understand the causal pathways and feedback loops at work and the ways in which the imbrication of one in the other is giving rise to distinctive co-evolutionary trajectories.

According to Stranding and Davies (2020) and Navarro (2020), prior neoliberal policies, boom and bust economics, fiscal consolidation and austerity, and the privatisation of health services, have denuded the Italian, Spanish, and US governments' capacity to respond swiftly and effectively to COVID-19. Likewise, in their comparative analysis of early stage responses to the pandemic in the UK, the US, Germany, and South Korea, Mellish et al. (2020) contend that the excessive ideological weddedness of the UK and USA rendered these countries particularly vulnerable. For Giroux (2021) and Sparke and Williams (2022, 16), the pandemic has "at once exposed, exploited and exacerbated" the health damaging legacies of neoliberal rule: "neoliberal plans, policies and practices advanced globally in the name of promoting wealth have proved disastrous in terms of protecting health in the context of the pandemic". Sultana (2021, 447) meanwhile makes a compelling case for considering together—through a feminist lens—the overlapping global crises of neoliberalism, socio-ecological and climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic, noting therein the ways in which each has "co-created new

challenges, vulnerabilities, and burdens, as well as reinforcing old ones”. In another contribution Glover and Maani (2020) question the extent to which the UK’s COVID-19 response—and its failures—will in time come to be seen as a moment of ‘peak neoliberalism’. In a similar vein, Saad-Filho (2020) has interrogated the extent to which COVID-19 has forced governments into such a massive Keynesian stimulus that the pandemic might in fact signal the end of neoliberalism. For Šumonja (2021) and Ryan, however, disaster capitalism and neoliberalism redux are the more likely outcomes.

So what is new about this book?

Ours is the first book length monograph that (to the best of our knowledge) forges this species of argument in the company of *applied political theory* and equipped with this scholarly tradition’s analytical and methodological tools. As such, our ambition is to develop a distinctive and novel rendering of the nexus between neoliberalism and country level COVID-19 outcomes and thereby to supplement, augment, and enrich—and not just embellish, fortify, and consolidate—existing literature and build capacity amongst scholars, politicians, and practitioners who believe that the neoliberalism-COVID-19 nexus lies at the heart of the UK’s poor pandemic outcomes.

We explain why it is important to interrogate the political theories that underpin public decision-making as well as to understand their secular actually existing groundings and situated and contested structuration. We call attention in particular to the pivotal importance of the concept of ‘freedom’ and critique the work that neoliberalism’s peculiar and parochial concept of freedom does—and indeed prohibits—in the world. We populate this critique with new analytic and normative content by juxtaposing neoliberalism’s philosophy of freedom with an alternative neorepublican philosophy of freedom. We revisit this dualism throughout the text, demonstrating at every turn how freedom should not be thought of as antithetical to social democracy but instead as its foundational pillar. We argue that British neoliberalism has (overtly and by stealth) taken custody of the concept freedom and in so doing has hindered the country’s capacity to deal with shock events.

We have invested heavily in settling upon a compelling analytical entrée. We believe that if we are to make sense of the UK’s deleterious encounter with COVID-19 we must ask first: what exact analytical problem does this encounter present? If we fail to frame and specify the problem adequately we will surely fail to discern and ascribe priority to

the progenitors that matter most, will fail to understand these progenitors in their richness and complexity, and will go looking for solutions and remedies in the wrong places.

So what is our port of embarkation? *We have chosen to think in terms of the tumultuous struggles of fallible leaders who, operating on a canvas produced by forty years of actually existing British neoliberalism (socio-economic-political-cultural legacies) and within the rubric of actually existing British neoliberal policy mentalities (politico-institutional logics) have been called upon to respond to an epic shock event for which there has been no playbook.*

To help us progress this meta-framing, we invoke the central idea of ‘choice architectures’—or what Jacques Rancière (2004) refers to as the ‘partition (distribution) of the sensible (permissible)’. Political actors, enmeshed in historical and parochial political logics, overwhelmed by an epidemiological disaster without precedent and facing cognitive overload and disablement, mobilise what intellectual and normative resources they have at their disposal to fashion a ‘common sense’ response. These resources—applied political theories and the choice architectures they spawn—both enable and constrain what these leaders are able to think and do.

Stated this baldly, this reasoning is not especially illuminating. It becomes more productive however when accompanied by three further analytic moves.

*a. Treating structure, agency, and structuration as co-equals*

We call attention to the ways in which different political philosophies—albeit in highly variegated, contextual, contingent, and contested ways—bequeath different public health sensibilities and permissible pandemic management options. But even as historical actors, it is agenic political leaders who embrace, domesticate, translate, and localise choice architectures and who in the final analysis make public policy choices and life and death decisions. And so whilst anchoring political constructs play a central role in creating conditions of possibility for pandemic management strategies, the enactment of these strategies too plays a central role in the situated structuration of the underpinning political common sense.

Readers will immediately notice that we are thus refusing to give analytical priority to any one of *structure, agency, and structuration*. In

fact our narrative arc seeks to hold all three in play at least as insightful categories of analysis.

- Structure. Whilst recognising that they only ever exist in actually existing form and are never truly hegemonic, we insist upon studying the logical integrity and coherent disciplinary technes of political theories and their choice architectures. The power of knowledge is what enables knowledge to become power. If not with reference to their allegiance to a coherent underlying political metaphysics, how else can we explain why so many western OECD governments got it so badly wrong?
- Agency. Whilst we recognise that all political leaders are embedded, situated, and historical actors, we take seriously their agency and autonomy and by implication their accountability. Whilst (deeply) functionally inter-related, there remains a distance to travel between choice architectures and actually existing choices. How else can we explain why not all neoliberal states performed badly and not all poor performers are neoliberal in their ideology?
- Structuration. Whilst treating structure and agency as meaningful categories of analysis, we recognise that ontologically, political theories and their practitioners exist only as processual and situated social relations. Choice architectures are neither stable and centred or fragmented and chaotic but restless and unpredictable, constantly becoming in situ and always in structuration. Only by approaching applied political theories in this way is it possible to understand disaster capitalism and neoliberalism redux on the one hand, and constitution of an Overton window on the other as contingent, original, and active accomplishments.

b. *Placing neoliberalism's metaphysical commitment to human freedom as non-interference at the heart of the UK's choice architectures and pandemic response*

At the heart of neoliberal logic is libertarianism and at the heart of libertarianism is the idea of freedom as non-interference. Arguably, it has been in and through this philosophy of human freedom that neoliberalism has most impacted the British government's pandemic response. Our