

# 1 From the void to COVID

## Explaining the left's support for pandemic authoritarianism

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

When COVID-19 lockdowns were imposed, many leftists claimed that this prioritisation of health over normal economic activity marked a watershed. Despite the defeat of left-wing populists like Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, even right-wing governments were being compelled to adopt radical policies, including monetary handouts, the *de facto* nationalisation of public utilities and corporate payrolls, and industrial intervention (Cunliffe, 2020). Many celebrated this abandonment of neoliberalism as an ‘opportunity’ for the left (e.g. Van Wynsberghe and Wargan, 2020), expecting a ‘New Deal-like revolution’ (Marcetic, 2022). The ‘lockdown left’<sup>2</sup> became perhaps the strongest supporters of COVID-19 restrictions, consistently demanding tougher measures and condemning any relaxation as a heartless prioritisation of narrow economic interests. Plenty of leftist thinkers have portrayed lockdown as a model for future social relations, a ‘positive biopolitics’ or a ‘dress rehearsal for the climate mutation’ (Bratton, 2021; Latour, 2021).

Yet what was predictable at the time, and is obvious in retrospect, is that the burden of COVID-19 restrictions and the pandemic itself fell most heavily on the poor, both in the West and globally. While the poorest in society were about twice as likely as the wealthiest to contract the virus, be hospitalised, and die, thanks to pre-existing health and social inequalities, lockdowns compounded their misery, having ‘a disproportionate impact’ on the poor, young, ethnic minorities, and women (Bambra, Lynch and Smith, 2021, pp. 15–28, 58). The economic consequence of lockdowns and associated policies like quantitative easing – massive un(der)employment, particularly for the lowest-paid and most precarious workers, coupled with bonanza profits for sectors like technology and pharmaceuticals – was an enormous wealth transfer from the poor to rich (Blundell *et al.*, 2020; Hacıoğlu-Hoke, Känzig and Surico, 2021). From March to December 2020, global billionaire wealth soared by US\$3.9tr while workers’ combined income fell by US\$3.7tr (Inequality.org, n.d.). The injury was compounded by the hyperinflation that followed lockdown, overwhelmingly driven by corporate profiteering (Tooze, 2022). The worst effects were felt in the global south, as many United Nations agencies had warned. Lockdowns caused the first rise in extreme poverty since

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1998, with the number of people earning under \$1.90 a day rose from 645m in 2019 to 751m by 2021, with women and youths worst affected (United Nations, 2021). Many scholars conclude that the harms of lockdown vastly exceeded the benefits – especially for the poor (De Laroche Lambert *et al.*, 2020; Bjørnskov, 2021; Briggs *et al.*, 2021; Herby, Jonung and Hanke, 2022).

None of this much interested the leftists, at the time or since. Beyond diverse but leaderless grassroots protests, anti-lockdown resistance – or even media coverage of the costs of lockdown – emanated exclusively from the libertarian right (Green, 2021, pp. 34–5). Insofar as the left noticed the devastating consequences, the response was limited to feeble calls for more state handouts or aid. There was never any sustained campaigning and certainly no re-evaluation of the policies causing this catastrophe. The political left – which historically claims to represent the poor – continued to support measures that Green (2021, p. 114) rightly calls a ‘war on the poor’.

This chapter seeks to explain this behaviour. Doubtless there are many potential explanations from many different disciplines that have yet to address this question, not least because most academics are part of the lockdown left. This chapter is a first cut from the perspective of critical political science. Its starting point is that the response to COVID-19 was not a ‘black swan’ event in which all social, political, and economic arrangements were suddenly inverted. Certainly, there were radical changes to our way of life. But the willingness of political forces to accept or support such changes must have been determined by whatever shaped their outlook *prior* to their introduction. As Green (2021, p. 173) rightly asserts, in one of the few analyses of the political response to the pandemic, the response to COVID-19 involved ‘a radical continuity of processes that had begun long before’.

However, the specific processes that Green identifies are unconvincing. He blames the rise of surveillance capitalism and, more prominently, China’s ‘soft power and cultural influence’ which ‘paved the way for the world to accept a model of Chinese authoritarian state control’ (2021, p. 185). Certainly, the Wuhan lockdown was the model that most Western states followed. However, to attribute this to Chinese soft power is unpersuasive. Studies of Chinese efforts to cultivate soft power usually highlight their failure, particularly in the liberal-democratic West (e.g., Zhu, Edney and Rosen, 2019). Indeed, well before COVID-19 anti-Chinese sentiment was growing, reflected in Donald Trump’s election and the subsequent Sino-US trade war, campaigns to ban Chinese investment in 5G and other sensitive areas, and the characterisation of Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative as ‘debt-trap diplomacy’. Western publics have grown increasingly hostile. By December 2019, 57 percent of Western Europeans viewed China unfavourably, and only 37 percent favourably (Silver, Devlin, and Huang, 2019). To blame China for Western choices exaggerates Beijing’s power and externalises the source of the problem. If China’s authoritarian, corrupt, and repressive model appears even slightly attractive, the alternative must be remarkably weak. This implies that we should seek an explanation in the internal decay of Western democracies themselves.

The few other existing accounts of the left’s response to COVID-19 tend to be shorter term. Several authors blame a backlash against right-wing populism. Once

figures hated on the left, like Trump, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, or Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, had apparently adopted a *laissez-faire* approach, the left reflexively and opportunistically attacked them as inhumane or unscientific, and adopted the opposite position, regardless of its rationality (Green, 2021, p. 124). Parenti (2022) blames ‘Trump Derangement Syndrome’ for the US left’s response, while in Britain, Hoare et al. (2021) argue that ‘the defeats represented by Brexit and the election of Johnson’, made the left ‘eager to use the pandemic to attack Boris Johnson’s government’. These were undeniably important dynamics in these particular countries but they cannot be extended to most cases. Even where the centre-left was in power, as in Portugal and Spain, for example, outcomes were broadly similar. Beyond these conjunctural explanations, then, we need to seek deeper, structural causes.

This chapter makes two main arguments to explain the Western left’s reaction to the pandemic. Firstly, it argues that the left endorsed anti-poor policies because it no longer represents the working class politically. Following Mair (2013), I argue that a ‘void’ has opened between the political class and Western citizens with the shift to neoliberalism since the 1980s, and that this has particularly affected the political left. This made these parties ignorant of working-class interests – a permissive cause of their behaviour during the pandemic. Secondly, I identify a more effective cause in ideological developments on the left since it has abandoned the working class and the project of socialist transformation. A key move is the shift from socialism, which saw the working class as the universal *subject* of politics, to Third Way intersectionalism, which views it as an *object* of politics, as just one of many vulnerable, oppressed groups in need of state protection. This emphasis on vulnerability and protection, already expressed for many years in a politics of fear and emergency, including around health, laid the ideological groundwork for a pro-lockdown stance.

### **The left and the void**

The first, permissive explanation of the left’s response to COVID-19 is its alienation from the working class that it historically claimed to represent. Savaged by the neoliberal offensive in the 1980s, left-wing parties and labour movements have abandoned their project of socialist transformation and embraced neoliberalism, while disillusioned citizens have retreated into private life. Consequently, left-wing parties are dominated by liberal professional-managerial class (PMC) elements with scant connection – indeed, often active hostility – to working-class people and concerns. Hence, these parties could hardly imagine the likely impact of lockdowns and other restrictions on the poor, let alone represent their interests in policy or campaigning.

This mutual estrangement of the left and the working class is part of a wider ‘hollowing’ of representative democracy, identified in Peter Mair’s *Ruling the Void* (2013). Mair demonstrates that, from the mid-to-late 1980s, political elites have abandoned their previous role of representing defined social constituencies, transforming into a professional political class. Political parties no longer seek to

cultivate ‘natural’ constituencies through grassroots activities but have become ‘catch-all’ electoral machines, pitching towards median and swing voters. Their policies, once representative of the interests of particular social blocs, have converged around a bland neoliberal centrism, offering little choice to voters. Citizens have recoiled into private life, with electoral turnout, party and union membership, partisan loyalty, and civic participation all collapsing. In the void left by the decline of representative politics, populist challengers now flourish, mobilising angry citizens against an unrepresentative political elite.

The rise of neoliberalism and the defeat of the left are central to this story. Social democratic parties could not resolve the multifaceted capitalist crisis of the 1970s. Either they were displaced by neoliberal governments, as in the US and UK, or they adopted neoliberal policies themselves, as in France or Australia. Although outcomes varied, the general result was the dismantling of the post-war social democratic, corporatist, developmentalist welfare state in favour of the neoliberal ‘competition state’ (Cerny, 1997). The power of trade unions was systematically eroded or violently broken. Trade unions were expelled from their corporatist footholds in the state. Trade barriers were reduced and capital unleashed, facilitating industrial offshoring to low-wage economies and the financialisation of the global economy, while wages and welfare were suppressed (Glyn, 2007). The new settlement was locked in by transforming state institutions to reduce democratic control and accountability, with decisions increasingly made by unelected technical experts or in remote, intergovernmental institutions like the European Union (Hameiri and Jones, 2016; Jones and Hameiri, 2022).

Left-wing political parties have been the worst affected by this voiding of representative democracy. Right-wing parties that have embraced neoliberalism have undoubtedly alienated some traditional conservatives, who resent the impact of pro-market policies on family, community, religion, and nation. But the neoliberal turn has clearly harmed left-wing parties more because it entails a wholesale abandonment of these parties’ former commitments to socialism – or even social democracy – and of working-class communities. The result has been a collapse in their electoral support. Across 22 advanced democracies, social democratic parties’ vote share has declined from an average of 34 percent in the mid-1960s to just 25 percent by 2019 (Polacko, 2022)

The social bases of these parties have also transformed. Historically, many social democratic parties were coalitions of middle-class liberal reformists and socialist workers’ movements. However, as these parties abandoned the working class, so the working class abandoned them, leaving them as predominantly bastions of the ‘progressive’ section of the PMC. In Britain, for example, the Labour Party has steadily haemorrhaged working-class votes since 1987 (Goodwin and Heath, 2019). Notwithstanding a brief reversal under Corbyn in 2017, by 2019 the Conservatives had a 15 percentage-point lead over Labour among the poorest fifth of voters, such that ‘Labour is no longer the party of those on low incomes’ (Goodwin and Heath, 2020, pp. 9–11). Indeed, the core of Britain’s main ‘left-wing’ party is now the metropolitan middle class. Similar transformations have occurred across the West. An EU-wide survey notes ‘the almost total exclusion of the working class

from politics at a national level, and still more from the spheres of influence at the European Commission', with barely four percent of legislators hailing from a working-class background (Hugrée, Penissat and Spire, 2020, pp. 108–9). In Britain, the figure was just three percent – a far cry from the post-war Labour cabinet, half of whom had held blue-collar jobs (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018, p. 107).

From this perspective, it should not be remotely surprising that the pandemic 'war on the poor' attracted little leftist opposition. The political left has ceased to represent the working class substantively or descriptively. Left-wing parties' links to the working class have shrivelled, leaving elites with little or no understanding of, and little sympathy for, working-class lives and interests. This probably made it difficult for left-wing governments or oppositions even to imagine the impact of, say, a stay-at-home order on those in manual occupations who could not work from home; or on single mothers living in cramped accommodation without outdoor space, suddenly forced to home-school their children – and find extra money to feed them, given the loss of free lunches because schools were closed. Anyone familiar with working-class lives would have realised that no lockdown could ever be tight enough to eradicate COVID-19, because over half of the population had to continue to travel and work (Shine, 2021). Anyone in close contact with the working poor would have quickly realised the detrimental effects of lockdown and lobbied for an alternative, like the 'focused protection' approach proposed by the Great Barrington Declaration in October 2020. Instead, left-wing parties served their real social constituency, the PMC, many of whom welcomed lockdown as a 'new lifestyle' featuring no commuting, working from home, more time spent with family, and increased savings (Green, 2021, p. 124).

### **Ideological shifts: vulnerability, moralism, emergency**

Arguably, however, this structural neglect of working-class interests and experiences is insufficient to explain the lockdown left's enthusiasm for COVID-19 restrictions, or their vicious reaction to any who questioned them. To round out the explanation, this section considers the ideological shifts attending the left's embrace of neoliberalism.

#### *From exploitation to oppression: vulnerability as the left's new lodestar*

The first, and perhaps most important, ideological development is the left's changing focus from the class relations of exploitation to de-classed notions of oppression. This has, first, led to the working class being relativised as just one of many oppressed groups requiring protection and, second, driven an agenda for state power based on mitigating vulnerability.

The drivers of this shift have been the defeat of the left and workers' movements in the 1980s, and the limits of those movements themselves. As working-class organisations were crushed, they could no longer be the basis for transformational politics. Meanwhile, feminists, anti-racists, and gay liberationists rightly argued that these organisations had in any case often been sexist, racist, and homophobic,

making new political forms necessary to achieve their goals. These developments were refined into a new ‘socialist strategy’ (sic) wherein the political primacy of the working class – traditionally seen by leftists as the main subject of history, capable of abolishing class society and unleashing human freedom – was abandoned. The working class was just one oppressed group among many; the left’s role was to knit them together into a counter-hegemonic coalition capable of taking power (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In practice, left-wing parties embraced this ‘rainbow coalition’ agenda to provide moral cover for their retreat from socialist transformation, forging ‘progressive neoliberalism’ (Fraser, 2019).

The moral motor of progressive neoliberalism is the fight against oppression, not class exploitation. This reflects the ideology of intersectionalism, which sees individuals as suffering various, intersecting, and compounding forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Compared to race, sex, gender, sexuality, and disability, intersectionalism neglects class. At best, there is sympathy for ‘the poor’ as a ‘marginalised’ group. However, in practice, intersectionalists are often highly ambivalent about the poor. Whereas Marxists located exploitation in class domination, intersectionalism, influenced by post-structuralism, sees oppression as circulating throughout social relations: in institutions or whole societies (‘systemically’ or ‘institutionally’), in discourses and practices (e.g., the idea that educational institutions need to be ‘decolonised’), and in everyday interactions (e.g., ‘micro-aggressions’, ‘unconscious bias’.). This potentially locates the source of oppression in the attitudes and behaviours of individuals and groups, including poorer people who are indifferent to the suffering of marginalised others.

From this perspective, the so-called ‘white working class’ can be a highly problematic political subject. Insofar as it occupies a subordinate, politically passive role as a ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘marginalised’ group, charitably ministered to by a progressive-neoliberal state and non-governmental sector, it can fit into this new world view. However, if (especially white) working-class people assert their own political subjectivity by protesting against the neoliberal order – such as by voting for populists, supporting Brexit, or mobilising in the streets like the *gilets jaunes* – they are apt to be characterised as threats to other marginalised groups as racists, fascists, etc. (Guilluy, 2019). The contemporary left is thus primarily concerned with controlling the working class, whether through condescending paternalism or through police action. Of course, this urge to control had in the past been a feature of left and trade union politics as it mediated between workers and the capitalist state. But now, stripped of any pretence towards transforming that state, control became the primary objective. This primed the left for a paternalistic and authoritarian response to COVID-19, particularly towards any independent working-class agency, such as protests against lockdowns and vaccine mandates.

Intersectionalism is part of a wider shift towards seeing the world through the prism of vulnerability. If oppression is diffused and reproduced through everyday social relations, we are all mutually vulnerable: women are threatened by men, homosexuals by heterosexuals, ethnic minorities by ethnic majorities. As Furedi (2005, pp. 76–7) notes, since the 1980s, the notion of ‘vulnerable groups’ has



gained currency well beyond the intersectionalist left, being applied to ‘children... women, the elderly, ethnic minorities, the disabled, and the poor’. However, contrary to Furedi’s claim that this merely reflects a detrimental cultural tendency that can simply be shaken off, there is clearly a material basis to this intensified sense of vulnerability. As Ramsay (2022b) argues, individuals *really have* become more vulnerable under neoliberalism. This is because the collective and political organisations through which they once hoped to control their circumstances have been destroyed or hollowed-out. The post-war state socialised risk through social insurance, welfare payments, public services, and the pursuit of full employment, providing citizens with a stable and predictable life course. When this state was rolled back, the individuals that emerged were not the fearlessly buccaneering entrepreneurs that neoliberals had anticipated; they were vulnerable, atomised individuals, fearfully exposed to harsh, globalised competition (Heartfield, 2002, p. 160).

With socialist transformation off the table, however, vulnerability can no longer be ended by establishing democratic control over social life; it can only be ameliorated through compassionate government policy – and this has become the lodestar of contemporary left politics. Reflecting these diminished horizons, the focus is on encouraging behavioural change. Vulnerability to climate change, for example, is not addressed through radical industrial upgrading, but through exhortations to recycle and consume less. Vulnerability to terrorism is managed through individual control orders and referrals of ‘at-risk’ individuals to deradicalisation programmes. Minorities’ vulnerability to mistreatment is addressed through hate crime laws and unconscious bias training which seek to regulate individual thought, speech, and conduct. Vulnerability to poverty is addressed through pressure on and support for individuals to find work. British New Labour minister Frank Field heralded such developments as the shift from the ‘politics of class to the politics of behaviour’ (cited in Furedi, 2005, p. 150). As leftist politicians lost their connections to, and authority among, the poor, they often resorted to insights from behavioural science to ‘nudge’ people into compliance (Malcolm and Sanders, 2015). The same methods were used during the pandemic (Dodsworth, 2021).

Through its new framework of vulnerability, the left has embraced the politics of fear and emergency. Historically, the political use of fear is associated with the right, which fanned moral panics about crime, immigration, and sexual morality in many Western states from the 1960s to the 1980s. In the neoliberal, post-political age however, the politics of fear is as likely to come from the left as the right (Robin, 2004; Furedi, 2005). This is not simply because elites wish to manipulate the public for wicked purposes. It is more often the case that, divorced from the societal interests and ideologies that once animated them, elites do not know what ends to pursue, and so latch onto fear as a means to ‘reconnect’ with citizens (Furedi, 2005, p. 107). Thus, since the late 1980s, politics has been animated by a series of fears and panics. These include, in roughly chronological order of emergence: nuclear war/ fallout (Chernobyl); HIV-AIDS; climate change; weapons of mass destruction; paedophilia; genetically modified organisms; diseases such as foot-and-mouth and new types of pandemic influenza; the millennium bug; medical

treatments like the MMR vaccine; terrorism; rogue states; populism/fascism; COVID-19; and now Russia. These fears have little in common, revealing their non-programmatic quality. Rather, by responding to (and fanning) the anxieties of an insecure public, politicians demonstrate their empathy and continued utility and legitimacy. Due to left/right political convergence, left-wing parties have tended to appropriate traditional right-wing fears. New Labour's campaigns against crime, anti-social behaviour, child abuse, terrorism and so on, are emblematic (see e.g., Waiton, 2007). The left has also fanned fear of the right itself (or national populists) by branding them as fascists.

The rise of a politics of vulnerability and fear has encouraged what Ramsay (2012) calls the 'insecurity state'. In traditional liberal thought, insecurity in the state of nature legitimises the rise of a powerful Leviathan: a sovereign state capable of maintaining order and security. Today, political elites officially recognise widespread insecurity within civil society, implying the failure of sovereign states to maintain security. And because governments 'that assume their own weakness can see only threats', there is a constant search for new threats that generate new laws and repressive bureaucracies, an 'institutionalised panic' where elites seeking to 'reassure citizens about their security' can only fan their anxieties, producing a tendency towards the 'pursuit of absolute safety' (Ramsay, 2012, pp. 230, 241). Moreover, given the neoliberal doctrine that 'there is no alternative', this objective is no longer weighed against any alternative ideological or societal goals; consequently, it tends to become unbounded, irrational, and highly disproportionate. Ramsay gives the example of a single murder in Britain in 2003, which drove the New Labour government to enact the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act, which would have subjected 11 million citizens to intrusive surveillance measures to prove that they were not dangerous to children (Ramsay, 2012, p. 230). At the end of history, we are left with a 'politics of survival' because 'if indeed there is no alternative, preserving the status quo becomes the principal duty of society' (Furedi, 2005, pp. 73, 90). This was clearly reflected in the left's response to COVID-19. Expressing a doctrine of universal vulnerability, the risks of the disease were generalised to the entire population, despite evidence from the outset that it mainly threatened the elderly and those with pre-existing conditions and co-morbidities (Dodsworth, 2021).

The response to COVID-19 also shared the moralistic character of many campaigns to address vulnerability. As policy differences between the left and right have contracted, the left has sought to express its distinctiveness by posturing as the virtuous champion of the vulnerable, while excoriating their right-wing opponents as heartless or evil. Today, 'to bear the burden of [vulnerabilities] and to share one's experience of them is valour, and to be aware of them and to identify with the burden of those at particular risk of them has become a virtue' (Ramsay, 2022a). This moralising further suppresses political debate about our values, policies, or end goals by presenting vulnerability and measures to alleviate it as an unalloyed, universal, and unquestionable moral good. This was reflected in the left's mauling of critics of COVID-19 lockdowns as heartless monsters who wanted to kill their fellow citizens. This moralism was echoed in government propaganda that valorised



rule-following while stigmatising rule-breaking as evil, even when targeting children. In Britain, teenagers were warned that breaking rules might ‘kill grandma’ (Dodsworth, 2021, pp. 86–7), while in Germany children were encouraged to believe they could ‘infect their parents’ who might ‘die in agony at home’ (Federal Interior Ministry, 2020).

The voiding of democracy and the end of left/right contestation has substantially transformed left-wing ideology and practices. The traditional focus on class exploitation has been replaced by a politics centred on oppression, vulnerability, and fear. The left seeks to legitimise itself by alleviating vulnerability but, having abandoned any hope of transforming society to abolish vulnerability, it now focuses on behavioural change and repressive social regulation. A generalised sense of insecurity tends towards the pursuit of absolute safety, untrammelled by other societal objectives; this is legitimised through a highly moralistic discourse that brooks little objection.

#### ***The domain of public health***

We can now explore how these features were expressed with specific respect to public health in the decades leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Health has been a key area for the development of the new politics of vulnerability. Diseases and disorders furnish endless threats to human wellbeing and, unsurprisingly in the more individualistic and post-political neoliberal era, there is more focus on individual welfare and survival than larger societal goals. Health has also been a particular focus for the left because, as architects and supporters of post-war welfare states, they have historically ‘owned’ this policy area, making it easier to put their opponents on the defensive. But conservative governments have also found health vulnerabilities useful in reconnecting with a fearful public. Perhaps reflecting their ‘progressive’ inclinations, medical experts have often gone along with this agenda even when the supporting evidence was weak.

An early indication of this was the management of HIV-AIDS by the Thatcher administration. Government scientists knew that HIV-AIDS would primarily be confined to homosexual men and intravenous drug users. However, rather than targeting these groups, the Thatcher government instead behaved as if the entire population was at risk. Through hard-hitting propaganda, individuals were urged to change their behaviour – to use contraceptives and avoid ‘risky’ practices – and told: ‘don’t die of ignorance’. Far from condemning this campaign, ‘the remnants of the left broadly endorsed [it]... (some criticising it for not going far enough) ... [only] some right-wingers challenged its scaremongering character’ (Fitzpatrick, 2001, p. viii). When the leftist physician Michael Fitzpatrick echoed these concerns in his book *The Truth About the AIDS Panic*, he was ‘accused of encouraging genocide and there were demands that [he] should be struck off the medical register’ (Fitzpatrick, 2001, p. ix). When it emerged that the authorities had deceived the public in the name of public health, liberals and leftists applauded this. A typical example was the *Guardian* columnist Mark Lawson (1996), who proclaimed: ‘the government has lied, and I am glad’.

This approach was scaled up globally in the 1990s as the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNAIDS took up the fight. Ex-WHO epidemiologist James Chin argues that activists and authorities deliberately ‘distorted HIV epidemiology in order to perpetuate the myth of the great potential of HIV epidemics to spread into “general” populations’, using ‘estimates and projections [that] are “cooked” or made up’. They saw this as a ‘glorious myth’ because it was ‘for a good cause’. The authorities rode ‘to glory’ on declining infection rates, which actually reflected the fact that most people ‘did not have sufficient HIV risk behaviours to sustain epidemic HIV transmission’ (Chin, 2007, pp. vi–vii, 163, 159).

Despite notable differences between the diseases, there are eerie parallels here to the management of COVID-19. First, despite the highly skewed risk profile of HIV-AIDS, the authorities projected a universal conception of vulnerability requiring universal changes in the conduct of individuals. Second, this was dishonest given what was known about the disease and yet scientists widely connived at the deception (see Woolhouse, 2022). Third, despite the jettisoning of traditional conservative pearl-clutching over deviant behaviour (gay sex and drug-taking), the campaign nonetheless had a highly moralistic quality, promoting new behavioural codes in the name of alleviating vulnerability. Fourth, there was ferocious intolerance of any criticism, even when voiced by medical practitioners, with calls for critics to be silenced and punished. Fifth, the left enthusiastically supported these measures while criticism came exclusively from the libertarian right.

Similar patterns were apparent in the series of other major health scares that gripped Western publics through the 1990s and 2000s. These included, in roughly chronological order: cot death, skin cancer, the pill, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (mad cow disease), passive smoking, the MMR vaccine, ‘Frankenstein food’ (genetically modified organisms), and pandemic influenza (such as bird flu). In most cases, there was a rational kernel to the panic: there really was a serious disease that would harm some (though not vast numbers of) people. Yet the ‘dominant – irrational – element was expressed in a level of concern that was out of all proportion to the danger’ (Fitzpatrick, 2001, p. 14). This was in part because, rather than emphasising the low overall level of risk, public health authorities ‘actively promot[ed]’ fear. In each case, panic ‘began among the scientists, spread to the politicians, and was amplified in their interactions with the media, which transmitted it to the public’ (Fitzpatrick, 2001, pp. 24, 29). Governments then strove to take decisive action to reassure the public, such as stockpiling drugs or banning dangerous products. Ostensibly left-wing governments, like New Labour in Britain, were often at the forefront of these developments.

Reflecting the tendency to empower technocratic and/or remote intergovernmental bodies, this agenda was increasingly scaled up to international level from the late 1990s. The European Union banned British beef after the ‘mad cow disease’ scare and outlawed genetically modified organisms, institutionalising the ‘precautionary principle’, which demanded absolute reassurance of zero risk to health from any new products or processes. Global health was also increasingly ‘securitised’, ostensibly to direct resources to poor, developing countries to help

combat infectious disease, but in practice only targeting illnesses that might spread to fretful Western societies (Rushton, 2011).

The new health agenda reflected three key elements of the political transformations described above. Firstly, it expressed political elites' attempts to reconnect with the public following the voiding of representative democracy. Although right-wing libertarians tended to criticise the new health scares and lifestyle campaigns as irrational and even totalitarian, this mistook their political character. Progressive neoliberals were not using health to build a totalitarian dictatorship, but rather to breathe a sense of moral purpose into their directionless politics. Health promotion became an end rather than a means to some other, sinister end. As Fitzpatrick (2001, pp. 66, 126) argues, for left-wing governments like Britain's New Labour, 'projecting an image of concern with health helped to shore up public approval', while the regulation of lifestyle established new 'points of contact between the state and an increasingly atomised society', a means to 'restore community and cohesion' after the Thatcherite onslaught.

Secondly, the neoliberal character of health promotion reflected the dearth of ideological contestation at the end of history. In the 1970s, leftists and increasingly assertive third-world governments had promoted a 'Health for All' agenda as part of a wider campaign for a New International Economic Order. This drew attention to the structural and socio-economic determinants of health and demanded huge wealth transfers from developed states to deliver better healthcare. This was paralleled within Western countries by growing attention to the social determinants of health, which linked poor health to class inequalities. In Britain for example, the Black Report, commissioned under Harold Wilson's Labour government, drew this connection, and Thatcher's bungled effort to suppress its publication gave the embattled left a rare opportunity to attack her ascendant right-wing government. However, following the defeat of radical forces in the 1980s, health promotion was safely appropriated by neoliberal governments. Since structural transformation was off the agenda, individuals were encouraged to take greater responsibility for their health, thereby reducing demand on public healthcare (Fitzpatrick, 2001, pp. 79–83). The public health agenda now expressed 'the outlook of a society that has abandoned any grand project, in which the horizons of the individual have been reduced to their own body' (Fitzpatrick, 2001, p. 7).

Thirdly, politicians' attempts to re-engage citizens occurred through the prism of vulnerability, which was universalised to whole populations, regardless of the scientific evidence. In the insecure context of neoliberalism, 'an unprecedented level of free-floating anxiety about health' arose, alighting on one scare 'before moving onto another' (Fitzpatrick, 2001, p. 24). Left-wing governments were not simply inventing fear but also responding to it. Yet, the rise of vulnerability as the left's lodestar did entail a response to health scares that was grossly disproportionate to the actual risks. As Ramsay (2012, p. 240) argues, in the insecurity state, vulnerability is 'taken to be the condition of the representative citizen'. Consequently, rather than a sober assessment of the risks (generally very low, except for certain high-risk groups), institutionalised panic was the default response, with the entire population framed as potentially vulnerable. As Fitzpatrick notes, public

health shifted from a precision approach, targeting small groups at high risk, to a ‘population strategy’ aimed at the whole of society (2001, p. 48). These policies were ‘not in the least inhibited by expert doubts about the validity of the evidence on which [they were] based’ (2001, p. 40). Indeed, scientists and physicians largely went along with the new agenda. Moralistic ‘intolerance of criticism and intense hostility towards any dissident opinion’, meant that ‘medical science [was] subordinated to political expediency’ (2001, p. 67). For example, health campaigners dismissed concerns that extensive cancer screening might be causing harm, asserting that screening was a moral good because it saved lives; this led to ‘the continuation of costly and ineffective programmes... [While their] harms... [were] passed over in silence’ (2001, p. 64). Rather than challenging the universalisation of vulnerability, campaigners more often competed to be seen as more vulnerable. The growing ‘men’s health movement’, for example, demanded that screening be introduced for specifically male diseases like prostate cancer (2001, p. 22).

### **Conclusion: explaining the lockdown left**

The left’s response to COVID-19 was not an unusual or freak event, but something that was decades in the making. Key material, ideological, and policy shifts had effectively geared the left to respond to the pandemic in a way that ignored working-class interests, generalised vulnerability, trafficked in fear, and was hyper-moralising and intolerant of criticism.

Ideologically, the universalisation of vulnerability was the most important determinant of the left’s response to COVID-19. Early attempts to reassure the public quickly gave way to the institutionalised panic of the insecurity state. A public exposed to an endless series of health scares was itself easily panicked. Early evidence that the disease mostly affected the elderly and infirm was ignored in favour of frightening estimates of fatality rates and mortality projections that were as much as 400 percent higher than reality (Green, 2021, pp. 11–12). Vulnerability was universalised, and a left that had long since accepted the horizons of neo-liberalism easily succumbed to the idea that ‘there is no alternative’ to lockdown.

For the left, to be moral means being on the side of the vulnerable; and, since everyone was vulnerable, the only legitimate response was to lock down as hard as possible. There could be no question of balancing control of the disease against wider societal objectives, since everyone was in danger. The left framed policy-making moralistically, as a choice between ‘saving lives or the economy’, which powerfully shaped public debate (Woolhouse, 2022, p. 64). Only a monster, it seemed (or an evil capitalist), could prioritise ‘the economy’, even though economic activity is the material basis for human wellbeing.

As with HIV-AIDS and subsequent health scares, this outlook ensured no left-wing opposition to state propaganda that emphasised universal vulnerability in order to secure compliance with the COVID-19 restrictions (see Dodsworth, 2021; also Woolhouse, 2022, pp. 107–8, 194). It also ruled out a ‘focused protection’ approach in favour of society-wide restrictions – not so much on scientific as on

moral grounds. Given that helping the vulnerable was an unalloyed moral good, the tougher the restrictions the better, for it implied greater moral virtue.

This outlook only varied when the logic of intersectionalism dictated otherwise. For example, the only time that a sizeable (but still small) number of British liberal and leftist legislators broke from their parties' general support for ever-tougher restrictions was over the issue of vaccine passports. This was not because, like their right-wing colleagues, they thought vaccine passports were unacceptable infringements on individual liberty but rather because, given vaccine hesitancy among ethnic minorities, they would effectively have been racially 'discriminatory' and 'oppressive', entailing 'segregation' (Big Brother Watch, 2021). Similar arguments were made by a few US progressives, who compared vaccine mandates to Jim Crow laws (Hutzler, 2021).

Otherwise, generalised vulnerability provided the moral basis to silence all criticism and ignore the harms of COVID-19 restrictions. As discussed above, moralistic intolerance towards criticism of health panics has been a feature of Western political life since the HIV-AIDS pandemic. Most scientists learned either to keep their heads down, or to play along, reflecting their personal political sympathies and/or their quest for resources and advancement. During COVID-19, those scientists who questioned lockdowns and other restrictions faced ferocious criticism from the lockdown left, including the deadliest charge of all: that they were 'right-wing'. This hostile atmosphere suppressed serious cost/benefit analysis of COVID-19 restrictions.

The ease with which so many people accepted the goal of 'saving lives' (from one disease) as the be-all and end-all of public policy also reflected the elevation of health – or simply mere survival – above all other social considerations in the neoliberal era. As we have seen, with the collapse of grand social projects – or even much of a sense of collective life – the idea that we might tolerate dangers or even deaths to achieve some greater objective can only appear callous, inhumane, and even totalitarian. Conversely, the objective of 'saving lives' had been normalised, even when this involved intrusive and authoritarian policies.

As well as creating strong public expectations of a response, the left's decades-long politicisation of health also provided a tried-and-tested means to attack the political right. As noted above, one of the key ways in which the political class has sought to re-legitimise itself and re-engage the public following the hollowing-out of democratic politics has been to fan and respond to public anxieties over health. This has been particularly useful for the left, because of its association with public healthcare, giving it a stick with which to beat the right. The specific features of this beating were shaped by contemporary political conditions ('Trump Derangement Syndrome' being one) but the beatings were not fundamentally novel. Essentially, the left attacked the right for its heartless disregard of the population's assumed vulnerability.

Finally, the response to lockdown also revealed the left's at best ambivalent, and at worst actively hostile, relationship to the working class. Since lockdown constituted a war on the poor, the left could only have supported it in a context where organised labour has been defeated and the political left is alienated from

working-class citizens. As long as ‘the poor’ remained in a relatively passive, victimised role, the left could still position itself as the defender of the down-trodden, occasionally calling for more welfare or enhanced sick pay (though doing little to secure it in practice, even when they had the power to do so).<sup>3</sup> Yet when working-class citizens began asserting their opposition to COVID-19 lockdowns and vaccine mandates, the left swiftly condemned them as ‘anti-vaxxers’, ‘COVIDiots’, conspiracy theorists, and – as so often – ‘fascists’. An example was the Canadian government’s attack on the Ottawa truckers’ protest. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau fled the capital and introduced martial law, branding the peaceful protestors as transphobes, racists, Islamophobes, and fascists. The left’s hostility to working-class perspectives and self-assertion explains why such protests remained divorced from any left-wing groupings and led, if at all, by assorted right-wingers and cranks. This mirrors wider political trends, where the left recoils from populist expressions of discontent with neoliberalism, leaving the field to the right.

### Notes

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- 2 I use this term indiscriminately because, virtually without exception, lockdowns attracted support from all organised leftist forces, from centrist social democrats to communist parties.
- 3 For example, when Britain’s Conservative government needed to renew the authoritarian Coronavirus Act but could not depend on its libertarian backbenchers, the opposition Labour Party could have demanded enhanced welfare to secure its support, but did not.

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