

We Will Be the Immune Herd: Fear and Loathing Under Lockdown

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Abstract

This experimental paper presents a chronicle of paranoid reflections, inscrutable nightmares and alienated psychogeographical wanderings amongst the interstitial spaces of an abruptly shut-down city. Welling up through this murky stream of consciousness, an image gradually emerges of the peculiar socioecology of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which capital and virus, animal and human, dream and reality, biopolitical management and governmental farce, become entangled in ever more surreal and disconcerting configurations. The narrative is framed by the targeting of the UK population as the future subjects of a putative herd immunity, which was initially posited by the government as the objective of its epidemiological strategy. The concept of herd immunity is deployed as a metaphor for the ideological closure of the political possibilities fleetingly opened by the crisis. Glimpses of the opportunity created by the lockdown for a radical break with the status quo are replaced by a realisation that this unique chance is being missed. Amidst a barrage of news reports, a plague of fever dreams and a litany of bewildering encounters with the rapidly mutating social and material fabric of the city, a terrible suspicion grows: an eventless future is coming into existence, and it will be inhabited by the Immune Herd.

Keywords: COVID-19; herd immunity; lockdown; psychogeography; surrealism

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I believe the moment is drawing near when, by a thought process of a paranoiac and active character, it would be possible... to systematize confusion and thereby contribute to a total discrediting of the world of reality.

– Salvador Dalí, 'The Rotting Donkey'

SATURDAY 14 MARCH 2020

The UK government has declared its intention to allow a 60 per cent infection rate in order to develop 'herd immunity' to COVID-19 (Boseley 2020). That's 40 million people, and the mortality rate is at least 1 per cent. A government explicitly planning for the death of 400,000 citizens would normally be denounced as genocidal. But these are not normal times, and the shoppers of Great Britain have displaced any such concerns into a wave of panic purchasing. The supermarket shelves in Manchester are bare. Aldi has limited

people to buying no more than four of anything, and desperate consumers are screaming at incredulous assistants. Toilet paper has sold out across the country in a mass reversion to the anal phase: the retention of the stool as the most rudimentary sense of being in some kind of control, in an aseptic world that is suddenly sick.

They arrive at Asda at 4 a.m. in time for the first deliveries and buy up the bog roll and other basics before they can even reach the shelves. The bread aisle was empty today. There was no pasta, no muesli, no tinned tomatoes and no money in the cash machines. Hand sanitiser has been sold out for days all across town. There is talk of a local Tesco where the manager blocked the door, refusing to let people leave laden with obscene quantities of things. The impoverished elderly population have to wait for their state pension to get supplies, and by the time they hit the shops, there is nothing left for them.

The only solidarity on the street is the camaraderie of junkies. Running along the canal path this morning, I passed a young girl gingerly slapping the vein on her pale arm, getting ready for the needle and receiving friendly instruction from a skeletal old-timer wrapped in a sodden sleeping bag. From our bedroom window after my shower, I watched another couple shooting up out of the brutal wind behind a block of luxury flats. I got dressed and turned my laptop on. An announcement came through on the live news feed: ten more people killed by COVID in the UK today – almost doubling the previous grand total of eleven. Meanwhile, the herd surges on through the gutted superstores.

TUESDAY 17 MARCH

On my way home this evening from a scavenging mission, gold light bled through quick dark clouds. The local Asda had been stripped bare. No toilet roll, of course, but now no kitchen roll either. No bread, eggs, pasta, onions, garlic, oranges, chicken, beef, pork, tinned tomatoes, milk, long life milk, coconut milk. Any kind of milk. The leftovers had been abandoned to a handful of bedraggled stragglers, who wandered in a daze through the detritus of a feeding frenzy – ripped up multipacks and discarded boxes, the few remaining products clinging to the shelves like the last scraps of meat on savaged bones.

SATURDAY 21 MARCH

The university closed its doors three days ago, by which time many of my foreign students had already fled the country. Through a labyrinth of airports, they trace their way to China and other parts of the world in which the virus is being combatted more effectively. The UK is on a faster morbidity curve than Italy. And far faster than China or Iran at their equivalent points in the spread of the disease (McLoughlin 2020). I slept and dreamt of a tsunami moving with revolting lentitude. We gaze up in disbelieving horror as it rears above us, beginning to sweep the stragglers up in its swell. We are scrambling for safety. But our actions are agonisingly slow. And now the wave begins to break above our heads.

MONDAY 23 MARCH

Oh, what a lovely Sunday. The sun was shining bright and warm, and no-one had a care in the world. The delightful parks of London were thronged with affluent citizens eagerly licking their ice cream cones as they watched their perfect children frolicking gaily in the playgrounds. In Snowdonia, the carparks were overflowing, and traffic jams stretched along narrow lanes between steep mountain walls. The tearooms of the Lake District were full to bursting as day-trippers from the cities gorged themselves on scones and clotted cream. Some made early starts to shop for picnics. They jammed in close around supermarket doors to bray indignantly at red-faced workers, who tried to hold them back while shouting that priority was being given to NHS staff. And across all these touching skins and mingled breaths, beneath the glorious sunshine, the virus thrived.

Experts project that the death toll will rise to 5000 within two weeks. Nurses are wrapping their heads in plastic bags in the absence of protective gear, and hospital staff are posing for pictures with the message: 'We stay at work for you, you stay at home for us.' But Boris Johnson still refuses to impose a lockdown. A report in yesterday's papers confirmed that the objective from the start has been to keep the economy alive and to let the old and infirm die: 'At one private event at the end of February, [Johnson's special advisor Dominic] Cummings outlined the government's strategy at the time in a way that was summarised by some present as "herd immunity, protect the economy, and if that means some pensioners die, too bad"' (Walker 2020).

WEDNESDAY 25 MARCH

Dolphins dart along the crystalline canals of Venice. Wild boar prowl the peaceful streets of southern Italy. On Monday, birdsong could be heard in the spring evening of a hushed London as the news crews waited outside 10 Downing Street for the Prime Minister's address to the nation. His message was at last to lock down. Fifty-three people had died that day, and media images of a seething London underground that morning had finally made his prior stance untenable. We must stay in our homes apart from necessary work, one form of exercise a day, and short excursions for food and medicine. But 'necessary work' remains loosely defined, and on Tuesday morning, the Tube was rammed.

There are reports of healthy people in their 30s beginning to succumb to the disease. And yet we still crowd around each other in the supermarkets, inhaling the rich air of one another's lungs. At the same time, the paranoia deepens. Masks begin to multiply across the faces of the frightened population, and some are now wearing visors, to stop the virus getting in through their eyes. The streets are haunted with the staccato rattle of dry coughs – in the shop, in the park, from the window of a passing car... At the mechanics', I step back, my gaze drawn to the fevered sweat beading on his brow. Driving back through the shining evening, among the empty lights of the abandoned city, along the graceful swoop of silent overpasses, past brightly lit billboards on which beautiful people revel in their health and freedom. At home, the news reports another 89 have died.

FRIDAY 27 MARCH

One hundred and fifteen people died in the UK yesterday. At 8 p.m., I heard clapping outside and the hollow crash of firecrackers exploding over the frozen city. We rushed to our balcony to join the nation in our applause for the NHS workers risking their lives on the frontline. The balconies of the blocks of flats surrounding the illuminated park were thronged with the shadows of people clapping, whistling and shouting, beneath a sky filled with stars and cleansed of airplanes. A vacant tram drew up at the station, and the driver stepped out onto the disinfected platform to clap along with the rest of us. After two or three minutes, the applause began to die away. We embraced, feeling a sudden flood of solidarity with the strangers around us, with the NHS staff and the people dying in the hospitals. That night the News at 10 showed similar scenes from around the country. An immense outpouring of national unity against this terrible disease. Families clapping in their porches and little gardens. Boris Johnson applauding in front of 10 Downing Street. Tower Bridge and the pinnacle of the Shard glowing with the blue light of the NHS.

It was a powerful experience of togetherness. A unified humanity against a vengeful nature. Prince Charles and a poor Black mother of three raising a young family in a cramped London flat are now both in the same boat. After all, both have symptoms of COVID-19. Charles was immediately granted a COVID test still unavailable to NHS workers and is currently self-isolating in one of his palaces in Scotland, along with Camilla and six staff (Davies 2020). But when the poor Black woman's husband called 999 to report her symptoms, which were severe, he was told that she was 'not a priority'. The next day she died. People in protective suits arrived and put her in a body bag. Her husband doesn't know where she was taken (Laville 2020). By day, the professional classes bask idly in the sunshine, secure in their furloughed bubble of health and security. By night, they watch those outside the bubble perish, safely contained behind their television screens. Then they step onto their balconies to applaud the NHS, enjoying that little bittersweet spurt of sympathy and unity. And for a delicious moment, I get off on it too.

Meanwhile, the London tubes are still filled with proletarians on zero-hour contracts. Boris Johnson is still refusing to ban construction work, insisting that it should be left to the discretion of employers. The trafficless streets of Manchester echo with the clang of the building site and the wail of emergency sirens. In the supermarket this evening, most people were wearing masks and keeping their eyes down. The same old tunes were piped through the speakers: 'Celebrate good times, come on!' The music was interrupted by a message instructing us to maintain our social distance: 'We're all in this together.' I got through the till just before closing time and filed along the aisle with the last remaining shoppers toward the exit doors. Above the carpark, the new moon was a scimitar of light.

MONDAY 30 MARCH

Last night I dreamt of swimming with a dolphin in a Venetian canal. We were suddenly dragged out to sea, and the playful dolphin was joined by a thousand others to become a seething mass of hungry flesh. That evening we drove along the deserted ring road that runs around the spectral city. On the electronic billboards that line the highway, the advertisements for fast fashion and package holidays have been replaced. One now provides instructions for social distancing. Another carries a simple white message on a blood-red screen: 'Stay Home'. On Saturday, I lined up with the rest outside the Aldi superstore, separated

from each other by two-metre divisions taped onto the pavement. One out, one in. We shuffled along in silence, huddled into our dark clothing against the bitter north wind. The queue ran along the side of a shut gym, the front of which was filled with inert running machines on which fitness enthusiasts once posed for the public behind the polished glass. Inside Aldi, the store was half-empty. The piped music had been turned off, and people quietly bought what they needed within the limits of the rationing.

That night I went for a run through the city centre – Saturday at 8 p.m. The streets were completely dead, except for the section around Piccadilly Gardens, which was scattered with cops, junkies and hunched figures sheltering in bus stops. A woman attempted to observe social distance as she handed small change to a homeless man. A man in a doorway covered himself in sheets of newspaper against the cold. From a police van window and a supermarket door, cops and security guards watched a man on spice stagger backward in a slow-motion collapse. My footsteps echoed in the maze of narrow allies that led back to our flat. A teenage prostitute stood over a man who fumbled to refill an emptied handbag. Dismembered crab legs lay splayed in shredded packaging spread across the pavement. An overturned pram had been abandoned in the middle of the street.

MONDAY 6 APRIL

British business activity is at its lowest ebb since records began, and the same is the case for the Eurozone. This week, traffic in the UK returned to levels last seen in 1955. Sensing the silence on the streets, the animals emerge. Mountain goats have taken over a Welsh village. Fallow deer graze on the green spaces of a London housing estate. Turtles hatch on urban beaches in Brazil and shuffle toward the surf across the empty sand. But British newscasters report that things are starting to look up – we have had two days of lower deaths and are ‘flattening the curve’. Soon the deer will be fleeing the booming cities and the goats will be getting slaughtered on the teeming motorways.

MONDAY 13 APRIL

Nine hundred and eighty died in the UK on Friday – the most in a single day so far. That evening I took my allocated hour of daily exercise alongside a redundant railway line that ran beneath a long row of looming tower blocks. One of their inhabitants was bashing his way through a six-pack on a nearby bench. He apologised for flouting the regulations, as if he could sense that I was a member of the professional class to whom he must owe some kind of explanation. He had been stuck inside his tiny flat for weeks with just his wife for company, and their constant bickering was driving him insane. Further on, in the woodland on the far side of the park, I met a fox padding lightly through the dusk.

On Sunday, I cycled across the city centre and out onto the ring road. The whole of Manchester was silent and still. The only movement was the mutely changing messages on the electronic hoardings in the bus shelters and the electronic billboards on the roadsides, warning the vacant streets of the invisible dangers of coronavirus and telling the homeless drug addicts slumped in the gutters to stay at home. People have begun snitching on their neighbours for violating the lockdown regulations as the rituals of the quarantine

begin to transform our personalities. In Wuhan, where the regulations have just been lifted, there are reports of people continuing to observe them anyway. I am changing too. The other night, someone passed too close to me in the park. Like the fox padding through the dusk, I could smell them, and they stank of human.

WEDNESDAY 15 APRIL

I am aware of the first creeping glimmer of a dreadful thought: *what if it never ends?* In the UK, the upper estimate for the number of people who will have contracted coronavirus by the time this outbreak has been brought under control is 10 million. That leaves 56 million still uninfected. And that means another wave, another lockdown, another release, another wave and so on until a vaccine is found or herd immunity is achieved. And what if the vaccine doesn't work? What if immunity is not total? What if this psychotic mote of dust mutates into another form, or many other forms?

The situation is beginning to get to people. I see them screaming at each other in deserted car parks and gathering around burning pyres in abandoned wastelands. They have started attacking mobile phone masts with petrol bombs in the belief that the virus is a ruse to get us vaccinated with a substance that will wire our brains to the Chinese state through the 5G network. I am also behaving strangely. I put on thick rubber gloves before entering the supermarket yesterday. They squeaked excruciatingly as I fumbled with a selection of plastic yoghurt cartons, and my generic blue mask was inside out. I had come dressed in a thick fleece, not realising how warm it was outside, and the unanticipated length of my shopping list required me to seize a second basket. Drenched in sweat and breathing heavily, I lurched with grim determination toward the last box of tinned tomatoes.

SUNDAY 19 APRIL

The past few nights have been thick with dreams: I am trapped in a concrete arena, in which an immense rusty iron piledriver is slamming down from a great height in random places. Cowering and scurrying, trying to predict where it might fall next, I realise in blank terror that I will never be able to rest, and that I will eventually be struck; I watch a young boy falling ill, vomiting, then puking blood, finally bright red blood pouring out of him in a constant rush. The husk of his still living body is passed to me in a wicker basket, and I am entrusted with his transport to an unknown destination; I am alone in a small windowless room, into which other people surge. Soon it is jammed tight, everyone crammed against each other and unable to move. We all want desperately to get out, but we are trapped by one another. My face is rammed close to the sweating neck of another man. Inhaling his breath, my sense of panic grows; my parents send me into an abandoned building to search for something unidentified on the top floor. I climb the darkened staircase and clamber into a deserted workshop in the attic, light spilling from the skylights across shiny wooden toys. I am gripped by a sense of obscure dread about the stench of death that fills the room. Behind a threadbare sofa, I find my own rotting corpse.

SATURDAY 25 APRIL

Four hundred and forty-nine new hospital deaths were reported in the UK on Monday – the lowest figure since the 6th of April. The news was filled with happy talk of soon 'getting back to normal', determinedly ignoring the fact that the numbers were almost certainly suppressed by having been compiled over the weekend. The following day, the death count spiked again to 823. In the cereal aisle in Asda, a pale man with long thin hair in a grubby blue parka started a conversation by saying, 'Don't worry, I won't come too close.' He'd been going crazy at home alone, unable to see his family or anyone else. He didn't understand what was happening, and he'd stopped listening to the news. I edged away from him toward the automatic tills. Later, in an overgrown Victorian park, I watched a man ramble through a river, smashing himself over the head with a broken brick.

Last Sunday afternoon, I went for a long cycle around Salford Media City. Web designers and digital editors were sunning themselves on their balconies or engaging in elaborate exercise regimes along the regenerated banks of the Manchester Ship Canal. Everyone maintained strict social distancing without a second thought. Beneath the spectacular high-rise flats, luxury saloon cars stood outside executive townhouses, arranged around neatly maintained cul-de-sacs frozen in mute perfection.

Running past piles of burning garbage outside a bursting scrapyard, picking my way around rotting trash tipped down the slope of another derelict park. Walking along the dust-blown streets, past boarded-up houses, piles of rubbish, hypodermic needles. All of this was already this way before the lockdown. What is this society we fear losing? Why do we want things to get back to normal? Two nights ago, the city was filled with smoke, the lamplight casting a hazy glow on empty roads, the air thick with the smell of bush fires raging on the moors. The sun has blazed throughout this lockdown, its unseasonal intensity prefiguring the far greater cataclysm to come in the form of climate change.

Dreams and reality proceed to converge into a nightmarish continuum. Last night I dreamt of travelling to the North Pole, in search of the last remaining region of receding ice. People camping around the edges of the final frontier town. Rats feeding on the black trash around them. Tropical flies rise from the garbage and begin feasting on my flesh in the freezing wind. I walk on toward an immense five-star hotel that towers above the shanty towns in the centre of the settlement. A glamorous celebrity has thrown herself out of a top-floor window and lies smashed and bleeding on the street.

SUNDAY 3 MAY

On the 25th of April, the UK registered another 819 official COVID deaths, pushing it over the 20,000 mark – the number that the chief scientific advisor once said we would have done well to remain beneath. A week later, the total stands at 28,131 – second only to the USA and Italy worldwide. But in a speech on the 30th, Boris Johnson announced that we were past the peak and on the downward slope. Even better than that, he explained, we were in a train ploughing through a tunnel that ran beneath the far higher peak that would have occurred without the government's decisive action. And now we could see 'the sunlight and the pastures ahead of us' (quoted in Jones 2020).

Everyone is straining for a view of alpine meadows like the ones that he described. The degrowth movement is circulating an open letter that it expects people like me to sign, calling on world leaders to take the opportunity to create a radical new economic model based on the coronavirus scenario – negative growth, no air travel, the abandonment of oil (Degrowth New Roots Collective 2020). George Monbiot likewise entreats the states of the world to let airlines and oil companies fail (Monbiot 2020). Last night we had a virtual dinner party with academic friends – miniature representations of themselves sitting opposite us at the table on a laptop screen. One of them spoke of drafting a call for a ‘COVID economy’, building on the emergent order of shortened supply chains, extensive public investment in social care and centralised planning for the provision of human needs. His image froze, his voice distorted, and we turned back to our food.

I too would like to move onto such green and pleasant pastures. But I fear that this is not at all where we are headed. Instead, the tunnel runs in a circle. It will spit us out where we began, and we will gratefully gambol back onto the same old grass, like cattle turned out of the barns after a long hard winter. We will be the Immune Herd.

When I drive the streets these days, their emptiness no longer strikes me as strange. After touching objects in public spaces, I clean my hands thoroughly without a second thought. I cheerfully meet students and colleagues in virtual spaces, as if we had always done so, and silently perform the dance of social distance with the strangers I encounter in the obsolete wastelands of material reality. Last night I dreamt another dream. Everyone is sick with the same disease. Their faces are swollen and distorted. People who were once friends and acquaintances of mine have started working for the government and are busily erecting barriers to prevent the rest of us from leaving. But no-one tries to go. There is a sense of tranquil resignation as everyone waits for the sickness that we all have to really take hold. Beautiful women walk arm-in-arm through verdant gardens, smiling winningly as their faces crumble. Boris Johnson leads us in a simpering round song rendered even more repulsive by the unforced nature of its cheer. Sitting with the rest of them and joining in the round, I realise with relief that we are all in perfect health.

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About the author

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