

UNITED KINGDOM

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# LE MONDE *diplomatique*

## The hour for change

What this pandemic is now showing is that some goods and services should be placed beyond the laws of the market. Delegating our food, our protection, our capacity to take care of our living conditions to others is folly. We need to take back control



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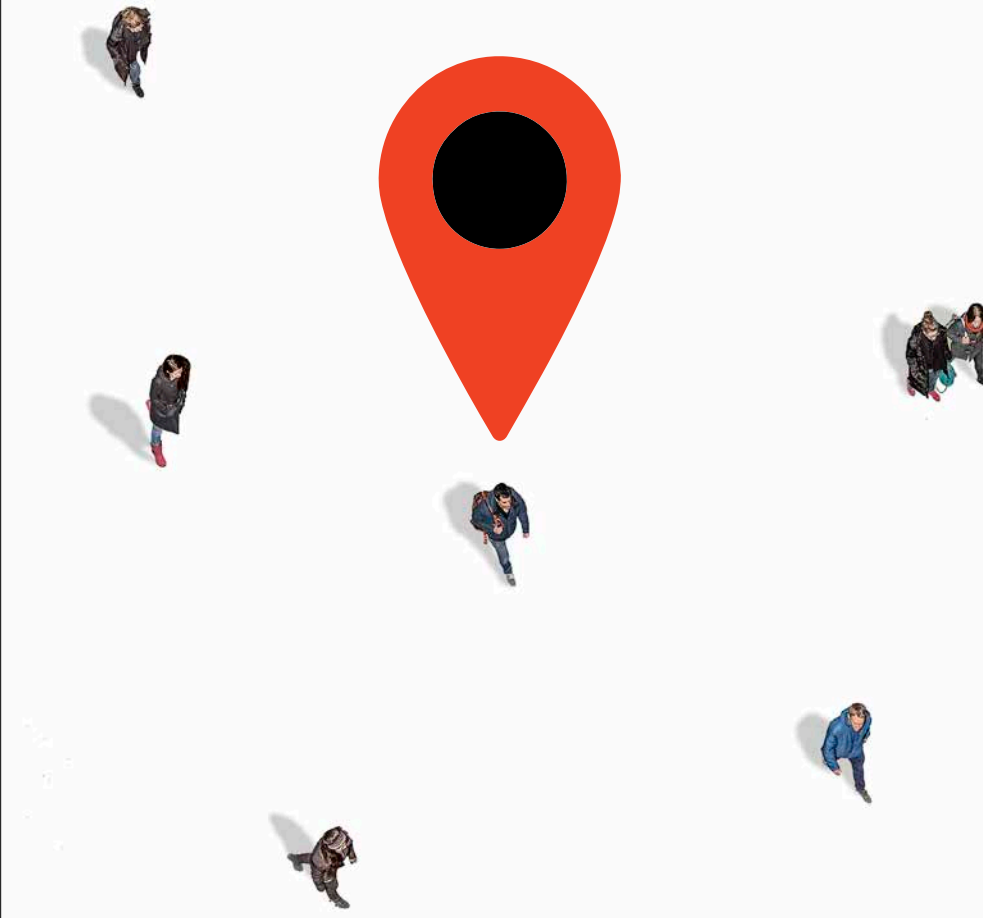
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# Do it now. Right away

What happens next? Will the world be saved, but only for the rich few, as in 2008; and will digitisation and surveillance become the new order?

Serge Halimi | Translated by Charles Goulden



**W**HEN THIS TRAGEDY IS OVER, will everything just go back to the way it was? For 30 years each new crisis has raised unreasonable hopes that the world would return to reason, come to its senses, end the madness. We have dreamed of containing, then reversing, a sociopolitical dynamic whose deadlocks and dangers were finally understood.<sup>1</sup> We hoped that the Black Monday stock market crash of 1987 would end runaway privatisation, and that the financial crises of 1997 and 2007-08 would halt happy globalisation. They didn't.

The 9/11 attacks led to criticism of US hubris and distraught questions like 'Why do they hate us?' Those didn't last either. Even when they are heading in the right direction, ideas alone are never enough to get things done. That needs people. But it's best not to rely on the politicians who were responsible for the disaster in the first place, even if those pyromaniacs are skilled at making sacrifices for the greater good and pretending they have changed, especially when their lives are at risk, as are ours today.

Most of us have never experienced a war, a military coup or a curfew first-hand. At the end of March, nearly three billion people across the world were under lockdown, many in extremely trying conditions; most were *not* writers watching the camellias bloom in the garden of their country house. Whatever happens in the next few weeks, Covid-19 will be our first experience of a global threat – not something you forget quickly. Even our current political leaders will have to take some account of that (see *The unequal cost of coronavirus*, page 4).

And so they are doing. The European Union has suspended its budget rules; France's president Emmanuel Macron has postponed a pensions reform that would have penalised hospital staff; the US Congress has voted to send most Americans a cheque for \$1,200. But, after 2008, neoliberals accepted a spectacular increase in debt, fiscal stimulus measures, the nationalisation of banks and a partial reintroduction of capital controls, all to save their economic system. Austerity then allowed them to take back everything they had given away during the general panic, and even achieve some 'advances': employees would now work harder and longer, under more precarious conditions; 'investors' and rentiers would pay less tax. The Greeks paid the heaviest price, as their public hospitals, short of funds and drugs, saw the return of diseases everyone thought eradicated.

## A good day to bury stuff

What seems to be the road to a total rethink may in fact lead to a 'strategy of shock'. In the hour after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, a special advisor to a British government minister circulated a memo saying 'It's now a very good day to get out anything we want to bury.' She might not have been thinking of the ongoing restrictions that would be imposed on public freedoms in the name of fighting terrorism, let alone the war in Iraq and the disasters that Anglo-American enterprise would bring. Twenty years on, you don't have to be a poet or a prophet to imagine the shock strategy that is on its way.

## The crisis will make knowing whether it is still possible to exist without the Internet either more pressing, or totally irrelevant

Besides the 'stay at home' and social distancing directives, all our social interactions may be turned upside-down by the rapidly advancing digitisation of society. The crisis will make knowing whether it is still possible to exist without the Internet either more pressing, or totally irrelevant.<sup>2</sup> In France, everyone must already carry their ID at all times; very soon, a mobile phone will be not just useful but a requirement for monitoring purposes. Since banknotes and coins are potential transmitters of infection, credit and debit cards are now guardians of public health; they will also make it possible to list, log and archive every purchase. The decline of the inalienable right to anonymity (if no laws are broken), as seen in China's 'social credit', or surveillance capitalism, is becoming part of our consciousness and our lives. Our only reaction is naïve astonishment.

Even before Covid-19, it was already impossible to catch a train in France without providing your personal details. To access a bank account online, you had to let the bank have your mobile phone

number. If you went for a walk, you were sure to be caught on CCTV. The health crisis has moved things on. In Paris, drones monitor areas closed to the public. In South Korea, sensors alert the authorities if someone has a temperature that makes them a danger to the community. In Poland, people in self-isolation must have an app on their phone to confirm they are at home, or put up with unannounced police visits.<sup>3</sup> The public supports surveillance measures in a time of crisis, but the measures always survive the crisis.

The coming economic revolution will contribute to a world where freedom is further restricted. Millions of food shops, cafés, cinemas and bookshops have closed to prevent infection. They cannot do home delivery, and are not lucky enough to sell digital products. How many will reopen when the crisis is over, and what state will they be in? The outlook is better for distribution giants like Amazon, which is hiring hundreds of thousands of delivery drivers and warehouse staff, and Walmart, hiring another 150,000 'associates'. Who better understands our tastes and choices? This crisis may turn out to be a dress rehearsal for sweeping aside the last resistance to digital capitalism, and the coming of a society without human contact.<sup>4</sup>

Unless protests, actions, political parties, peoples and states change the script. Many say 'Politics doesn't concern me', until the day they realise it is *political* choices that force doctors to decide which patients live or die. That day has come. It is worse in central Europe, the Balkans and Africa, whose medical professionals have for years moved to safer countries where they are better paid; the situation there too is a result of *political* choices. We probably understand this better today: staying at home also makes us stop and think. And want to take action. Right away.

## Everyone understands the costs

Contrary to Macron's suggestion, it is no longer a matter of 're-examin[ing] the development model our world has followed'. We already know it needs changing. Right away. And since 'delegating our protection to others is folly', let us end strategic dependencies that exist only to preserve 'free and undistorted competition'. Macron has said that France must make a break, but he will never make the crucial one. We should not just provisionally suspend, but condemn outright the European treaties and free trade agreements that have sacrificed national sovereignty and made competition the supreme objective. Right away.

Everyone now understands the cost of delegating the provision of millions of face masks and pharmaceuticals, which hospital patients and staff, and distribution and supermarket workers, depend on for their lives, to supply chains that stretch around the world and operate on zero inventory. Everyone understands the cost to the planet of deforestation, offshoring, waste accumulation and mass travel. Paris welcomes 38 million tourists a year, more than 17 times its population, and boasts of it.

Protectionism, environmentalism, social justice and public health have come together. They are key elements of an anticapitalist political coalition that is powerful enough to impose a programme of breaks. Right away ●

Serge Halimi is president and director of *Le Monde diplomatique*

**Correction** In our March issue, the article 'The microbes, the animals and us' should have described Covid-19 as the disease, rather than the name of the virus

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# UK risked all on virus experiment

Covid-19 revealed that some governments already had a health strategy based on risking, even losing, some of their citizens' lives to preserve the national economy. The UK tried for a while to implement it

**Théo Bourgeron** | Translated by Charles Goulden

**U**K PRIME MINISTER Boris Johnson announced on 12 March a government strategy that was risky at best. As it was no longer possible to contain the spread of the virus, rather than impose radical lockdown measures as in Italy, Spain and some Asian countries, the UK would aim to 'reduce the peak [of infection], not suppress it completely' so as to 'build up some kind of herd immunity' in the population.<sup>1</sup> There would be no home confinement, no school closures, and no ban on mass gatherings, notably football matches.

The government's expert advisors, not knowing exactly what proportion of the population would need to be infected to achieve herd immunity and stop spread of the virus, suggested a worst-case scenario of 80%. Once herd immunity was achieved, the UK could again prosper on the international stage without fear of further outbreaks. But Johnson admitted in his announcement that 'many more families [would] lose loved ones before their time.' Up to 500,000 people might die.<sup>2</sup>

Under pressure from the World Health Organisation (WHO), public opinion and many in the scientific community, Johnson eventually modified his policy. On 16 March he advised against attending mass gatherings and asked anyone with Covid-19 symptoms to self-isolate, though without significantly changing his position that the epidemic was inevitable. On 23 March, after widespread flouting of government requests for (physical) social distancing and with some London hospitals already at saturation point, he finally decided to impose a nationwide lockdown.

From a scientific viewpoint, the UK's initial approach was not unreasonable. Rather than seeking to eradicate the epidemic, it aimed to control the spread of the virus through the population by concentrating infection among the least vulnerable and asking those most at risk, the elderly and those with underlying health conditions, to self-isolate for a long period; the immunity acquired by those less at risk would then protect the vulnerable.

## Concern about 'social fatigue'

Though only the British dared to set it out in such bald terms, others have contemplated this approach. When Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte said he expected a large part of the population of the Netherlands would eventually catch the virus, he meant the same thing. The US effectively took the same approach during the first phase of the epidemic: in mid-March, when the SARS-Cov-2 virus, which causes the Covid-19 disease, was already spreading across the US and the majority of cases could no longer be traced to an identifiable source, the federal government had adopted only minor or symbolic measures, such as banning flights from high-risk countries, leaving each state or municipality to manage its own risk. Nearly 27.5 million people in the US have no health insurance and the average cost of a hospital stay is over \$4,000 per day. France's strategy was not significantly different until tighter social distancing measures were announced on 12 March.

The British approach, however, stemmed from a libertarian stance,

a neoliberal vision of the scheme of things. Patrick Vallance, former president of R&D at pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) and now chief scientific advisor to the government, said that, in an open world with unequal healthcare systems, the coronavirus would inevitably continue to spread and might even become seasonal. Though the virus could be totally contained by drastic measures like those used in China, it was inconceivable for a country like the UK to tolerate a lockdown lasting more than a few weeks, let alone longer lockdowns repeated in consecutive years.

**The virus could be contained by drastic measures like those used in China, but it was inconceivable for a country like the UK to tolerate a lockdown of more than a few weeks**

Vallance's statement was based on the concept of 'social fatigue' formulated by the Behavioural Insights Team or 'Nudge Unit', set up by David Cameron in 2014 to introduce behavioural science into government decision-making,<sup>3</sup> and strengthened by the influence of Boris Johnson's special advisor, Dominic Cummings, a fervent admirer of behavioural economics. Strict lockdown measures would be not only detrimental to the economy, but socially intolerable in the long term. Vallance believed the victory of Asian countries (China, Singapore) over SARS-Cov-2 through a travel ban was illusory. As soon as those countries were again open, which the British experts regarded as essential for a society to flourish, new centres of infection would appear, requiring further costly lockdown measures; indeed, China is now 'importing' new cases of Covid-19 from Europe.<sup>4</sup> The only solution was to allow the virus to spread, but to slow its pace.

Over the last few decades, neoliberal globalisation has developed rules and institutions for international coordination on epidemics. The WHO advocates a global approach, with 'open' management of the spread of the virus: it is in favour of locking down cities and regions in countries that are affected, but against closing national borders (counterproductive because it is not 100% effective and hinders contact tracing) and embargos on medical materials (which lead to surpluses in countries that are expecting an epidemic and shortages in countries already affected). The WHO is the core of a system for managing epidemics in a world made up of supposedly cooperative countries.

But some western countries have now broken away from the multilateral international system of the 1990s and



2000s. A key example is the US: it is hard to apply WHO rules to a country like Iran when it is under US sanctions and forced to trade with China to survive, and when even its right to humanitarian aid is being challenged.<sup>5</sup> Yet allowing this regional power with a population of 81 million to become a hotbed of Covid-19 would condemn both Europe and Asia to repeated further outbreaks.

## 'The virus will inevitably spread'

The UK doctrine represents a new stage in the neoliberal approach to epidemics. Developed between 2010 and 2017 on the basis of several Department of Health and Social Care and National Health Service (NHS) reports, it is backed by researchers in medicine and epidemiology, social psychologists and behavioural scientists on the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Advisory Committee. From studies of the major influenza pandemics of the 20th century, it concludes that the UK's economic links with the rest of the world make it impossible to contain a pandemic: 'Modern mass global transit also affords opportunities for the virus to be rapidly spread across the world... This means that it almost certainly will not be possible to contain or eradicate a new virus in its country of origin or on arrival in the UK. The expectation must be that the virus will inevitably spread and that any local measures taken to disrupt or reduce the spread are likely to have very limited or partial success... and cannot be relied on as a way to "buy time".'<sup>6</sup> This means the government has no choice but to allow the virus to spread through the population, while trying to flatten the infection peak and ensure effective communication to avoid panic.

This policy allows the UK to quickly resume its place on the international stage, but forces its partners to accept the spread of the virus. Unsurprisingly, the WHO and European Union are highly critical.<sup>7</sup> But the UK strategy did not come out of the blue: it is a result of the development of radically individualist health doctrines within the ideological corpus of rightwing governments, especially in the UK and US. Many commentators note how, over the last decade, the ideological centre of gravity of the UK Conservative party has gradually shifted from the centre-right

towards the position of the radical right thinktanks, often eurosceptic, climate-sceptic and libertarian, that have been based in Tufton Street, Westminster, since the Thatcher era.

Well before the coronavirus crisis, and despite the resurgence of measles epidemics in the UK, these institutions were recommending that the government abandon its policy of compulsory vaccination against childhood diseases. Some felt the herd immunity achieved with optional vaccination was already good enough,<sup>8</sup> others proposed to replace it with free market mechanisms. The Adam Smith Institute suggested that parents be paid to have their children vaccinated in the name of 'internalising externalities' – that society should offer financial payment for the health benefits that it draws from the individual behaviour of vaccination.<sup>9</sup>

## UK government finally backed down

During the epidemic's Chinese phase, many neoliberal journalists looked forward to the crisis demonstrating the superiority of western neoliberalism to Chinese authoritarianism. In February, France Culture journalist Brice Couturier saw it as 'Xi Jinping's Chernobyl', which would discredit the Chinese Communist Party as Chernobyl had discredited the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> These commentators saw the crisis as an opportunity for a full-scale experiment in economics. The control group – China, Hong Kong and Singapore – would use the classic state-led solutions of compulsory confinement and internal and external travel bans until the virus was eradicated from their territories; the treatment group – western countries, especially the UK – would adopt solutions based on state-organised laissez-faire without closures or lockdowns, based on channelling infection towards the least vulnerable groups. At the end of the experiment, these two models would be assessed in terms of deaths, bankruptcies and percentage points lost from GDP: a natural experiment with an exorbitant price of hundreds of thousands of lives.

The UK government finally backed down. Responses to the crisis are subject to the limits of the production structure. Over the last four decades, European businesses have pursued

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<sup>1</sup> 'Coronavirus: science chief defends UK plan amid criticism', *The Guardian*, London, 13 March 2020 <sup>2</sup> 'Johnson under fire as coronavirus enters dangerous phase', *Financial Times*, London, 12 March 2020 <sup>3</sup> Tony Yates, 'Why is the government relying on nudge theory to fight coronavirus?', *The Guardian*, 13 March 2020 <sup>4</sup> See Shivani Singh and Winni Zhou, 'China's imported coronavirus cases rise as local infections drop again', *Reuters*, 14 March 2020 <sup>5</sup> See Eli Clifton, 'Amid coronavirus outbreak, Trump-aligned pressure group pushes to stop medicine sales to Iran', *The Intercept*, 05 March 2020 <sup>6</sup> 'UK Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy 2011', Department of Health, London, 2011 <sup>7</sup> George Parker and Laura Hughes, 'Johnson set to ramp up UK response to coronavirus', *Financial Times*, 15 March 2020 <sup>8</sup> Len Shackleton, 'Compulsion is not the answer to the recent fall in vaccination uptake', Institute of Economic Affairs, London, 9 October 2019 <sup>9</sup> Sam Bowman, 'A neat solution to the vaccine problem', Adam Smith Institute, London, 18 February 2015 <sup>10</sup> Brice Couturier, 'L'épidémie de coronavirus peut-elle être le Tchernobyl de Xi Jinping?' (Could the coronavirus epidemic be Xi Jinping's Chernobyl?), *Le Tour du Monde des Idées*, 10 February 2020



WHEN A BLACK SWAN GLIDES ACROSS THE WORLD

## UK risked all on virus experiment

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zero-inventory management and just-in-time production in order to gain a few points of return on capital and maximise shareholder value; now they face a collapse of supply chains. Governments, forced into fiscal competition, have cut back on spending. Public services and hospital beds have been 'optimised', as have strategic inventories; France faced the start of the pandemic on its territory with zero stock of FFP2 face masks.

Are countries that experienced the shift to neoliberalism in the 1980s economically capable of organising a lockdown on Chinese or Singaporean lines? There was some surprise when French president Emmanuel Macron talked simultaneously on March 12 about defending society's most vulnerable and supporting businesses. But the fact remains it will take more than a couple of weeks to exit from neoliberalism, and the emergency production of medical services and food must rely on the economic infrastructure established over the last 40 years.

The huge suffering caused by this pandemic is also stirring rebellious feelings. The hundreds of thousands of deaths the epidemiologists expect, and the loss of many loved ones, as in Johnson's warning, could lead to serious unrest. The epidemic caused major protests in China, with a surge in on-line political debate, barricaded roads in Hubei province and Hong Kong residents protesting against mainland Chinese nationals moving into their territory. Just as free trade created huge social tensions in the UK in the 19th century,<sup>11</sup> the perception that Covid-19 is spreading uncontrolled makes people very anxious.

Surveys show public opinion is pressuring governments to adopt stricter social distancing measures, not the reverse. A recent survey in the UK showed 41% of people felt the government was not taking strong enough action, while only 12% felt it was.<sup>12</sup> In France, social distancing measures such as school closures have huge public support, and the least well received of the 12 March measures was the decision to keep public transport running. If the new health strategies outlined in this article were implemented, we could expect popular reaction on a scale reflecting the sufferings endured.

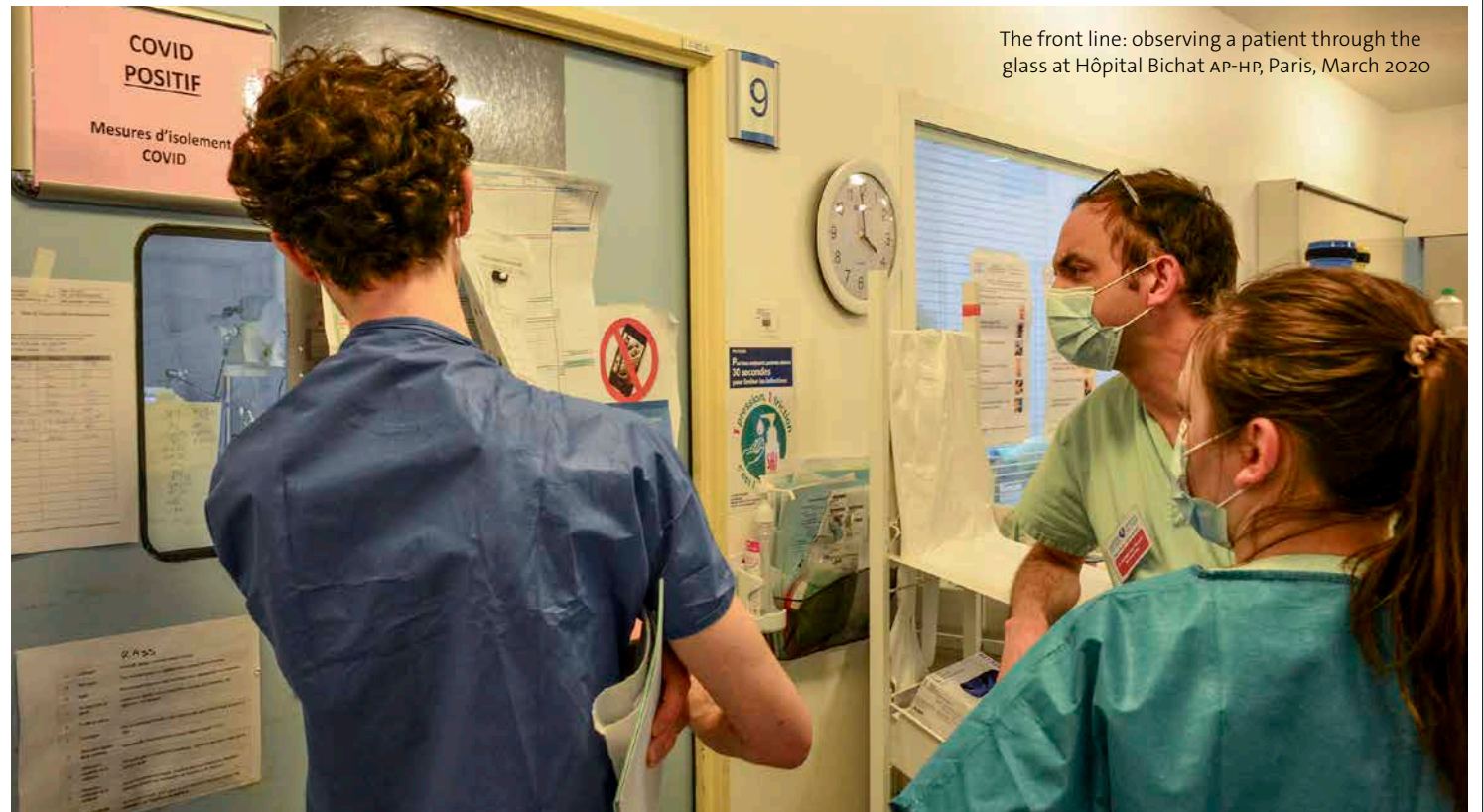
Governments should not be given more latitude than they already have been. In this crisis, they are caught up in the conflict between the production structures of their country and the sufferings caused by the pandemic. We are not seeing political choices, but an approach to dealing with extreme events in the late phase of neoliberalism that is just beginning. The UK strategy on Covid-19 was only a strategy: under pressure from public opinion, the Johnson government retreated. Strategies may not be infallible, but neither are they mere fantasies: they reveal how a regime's thinkers look for solutions to save the regime from its contradictions and crises, though without asking if a regime that calls for inhuman solutions is worth saving ●

<sup>11</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Farrar and Rinehart, New York, 1944 <sup>12</sup> Toby Helm, 'Only 36% of Britons trust Boris Johnson on coronavirus, polls find', *The Guardian*, 14 March 2020

## The unequal cost of coronavirus

War, revolution, state failure and lethal pandemics have all been known to reduce inequalities within a society. Will the coronavirus crisis reset society's priorities towards health and equality, or will it be back to business as usual?

Renaud Lambert and Pierre Rimbert | Translated by George Miller



The front line: observing a patient through the glass at Hôpital Bichat AP-HP, Paris, March 2020

MAGICIANS know how to misdirect an audience's attention so that they miss what's in front of them. During the current Covid-19 pandemic, a graph with two curves, much reproduced by the media worldwide, has used the same trick. The x-axis represents time, the y-axis the number of severe cases of the disease. The first curve rises sharply to show what happens if the disease spreads unchecked, crashing through a horizontal line that represents hospitals' maximum capacity. A second curve shows what happens if Covid-19's spread is slowed by confinement measures. It's lower, flatter, and stays below that critical line.

The graph highlights the need for urgent action: slowing the spread of infection will stop health services being overwhelmed. But journalists who focus on the two curves gloss over something important: the horizontal line representing the number of critical care beds available appears to be a given, but this 'critical threshold' is in fact the product of political choices.

## Age limit for intensive care?

The curve needs to be flattened because austerity policies have lowered that line for decades by stripping out health service capacity. In 1980 France had 11 hospital beds (all types combined) for every 1,000 inhabitants. Now there are just six, and Macron's health ministers suggested in September entrusting them to 'bed managers', who would be responsible for allocating this scarce resource. There were 7.9 beds per 1,000 Americans in 1970, but only 2.8 by 2016.<sup>1</sup> According to the World Health Organisation, Italy had 922 critical care beds per 100,000 inhabitants in 1980. By 2010 that had dropped to 275. The priority is the same everywhere: cut costs. As a result, on 6 March the Italian Society of Anaesthesia, Analgesia, Reanimation and Intensive Care (SIAARTI) said Italian A&E doctors were doing disaster medicine and warned that the lack of resources 'might necessitate setting an age limit for access to intensive care'.<sup>2</sup> In eastern France they are also now talking of battlefield medicine.

So the coronavirus crisis is as much the result of deliberately running down health systems as it is of a dangerous disease. The mainstream media, which repeats the cost-cutting mantra, has avoided critical examination of these political decisions and instead philosophically debated who should be saved and who allowed to die. But this

time, cheap magician's tricks won't be enough to make the political question disappear: Covid-19 is making it clear that economies are organised even more aberrantly than previously supposed.

As airlines flew empty planes to retain their take-off slots in March, a French virology researcher described how neoliberal bureaucracy had discouraged fundamental research into coronaviruses.<sup>3</sup> Another researcher in the US tweeted, as if a jolt was needed to show how badly awry things have gone, 'Reductions in air pollution due to Covid-19 in China have probably saved 20x the number of lives than have so far been lost to the virus. Does not mean pandemics are good, but rather that our economies absent pandemics are bad for health.'<sup>4</sup>

## This epidemic can be pushed back only with a collective, coordinated and comprehensive approach that engages the entire machinery of government

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

The greatest absurdity isn't the risk of drug shortages because of offshored production or the financial markets penalising Italy after its government imposed its first public health measures. It's inside the hospitals. Since the mid-2000s, activity-based costing (ABC), has allocated hospital funding not by assessing need but according to the number of 'medical activities' carried out, each invoiced as in a business. Were it applied in the current crisis, this marketisation of healthcare imported from the US would quickly throttle hospitals receiving the most severe Covid-19 patients, who require artificial ventilation: ventilation is costly in time, but much less well funded under an ABC model than many of the medical tests postponed because of the epidemic.

The microbe causing the most stringent confinement measures ever imposed in peacetime seemed initially to have broken down the divide between the Wall Street banker and the Chinese worker. Everyone faced the same threat – until money reasserted itself. On one side were those who could work remotely from their detached houses, one toe in the swimming pool; on the other, those who are normally invisible, the care workers, cleaners, supermarket employees and distribution staff who came out of the shadows to face risks that the well-off can avoid; teleworkers cooped up in small apartments with fractious children, and homeless people who would love to have a home to be confined to.

The conservative historian Jean Delumeau noted in his typology of collective behaviour in times of plague that 'when the danger of contagion appears, people at first try to ignore it.'<sup>5</sup> Heinrich Heine wrote in his diary that after a cholera epidemic was declared in Paris in 1832, it was 'a bright and sunny day, [and] the Parisians swarmed more gaily than ever on the Boulevards.'<sup>6</sup> Soon, the rich fled to the country and the government quarantined the city. Then, suddenly, wrote Delumeau, 'familiar frameworks were abolished. Insecurity was created not only by the presence of the disease, but also the loss of structure in aspects of the everyday environment. Everything was different.' The inhabitants of Wuhan, Rome, Madrid Paris, New York and London are experiencing this loss of structure on an unprecedented scale.

## Once seen as wrath of a vengeful God

The great plagues of the Middle Ages and Renaissance were often interpreted as a sign of the Last Judgement, the wrath of a vengeful God unleashed on a world nearing its end. People implored God for mercy or looked for someone to blame, such as Jews or women, as the humble ass is blamed in La Fontaine's fable 'The Animals Sick of the Plague'. In Europe in the 21st century, the coronavirus has struck secularised societies that, since the financial crisis of 2008, have all been affected to varying degrees by a feeling of loss of control over the environment, politics, finance, demographics and migration.

In this apocalyptic atmosphere, with images of Notre Dame in flames and debates on the coming collapse, attention has turned to the state, which has worsened the problem by wilfully breaking the health system but remains the only institu-





tion able to order and coordinate a response to the epidemic. How far will the state go? In February, Hubei province's weeks-long lockdown of 56 million people, enforced closure of factories, and monitoring of citizens by drones with cameras and loudspeakers provoked mockery and criticism of the iron fist of the Chinese Communist Party. On 5 March *L'Express* magazine suggested that 'no lesson can be drawn from the Chinese experience on the possible duration of the epidemic. It has slowed there thanks to drastic confinement measures which are probably unenforceable in our democracies.' But faced with viruses that don't care about the superiority of 'our' values, it has been necessary to prioritise centralised decision-making over economic liberalism.

The director-general of the World Health Organisation (WHO), Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has said that 'this epidemic can be pushed back, but only with a collective, coordinated and comprehensive approach that engages the entire machinery of government.'<sup>7</sup> Collective, coordinated state intervention is the antithesis of the market. Within a few days, the way we make sense of society was turned upside down: everything was different. Ideas of sovereignty, borders, limits and even public spending associated for half a century in public discourse with national populism or North Korea were suddenly advanced as solutions in a world previously run according to the cult of capital flows and budgetary rigour.

The avant-garde of the journalistic establishment suddenly discovered, amid the panic, what it had previously ignored. 'Might it not also be said that, ultimately, this crisis is inviting us to rethink whole aspects of globalisation: our dependence on China, free trade, aviation?' Nicolas Demorand asked on 9 March on France Inter, a radio station that has for years welcomed fierce critics of protectionism, such as Daniel Cohen.

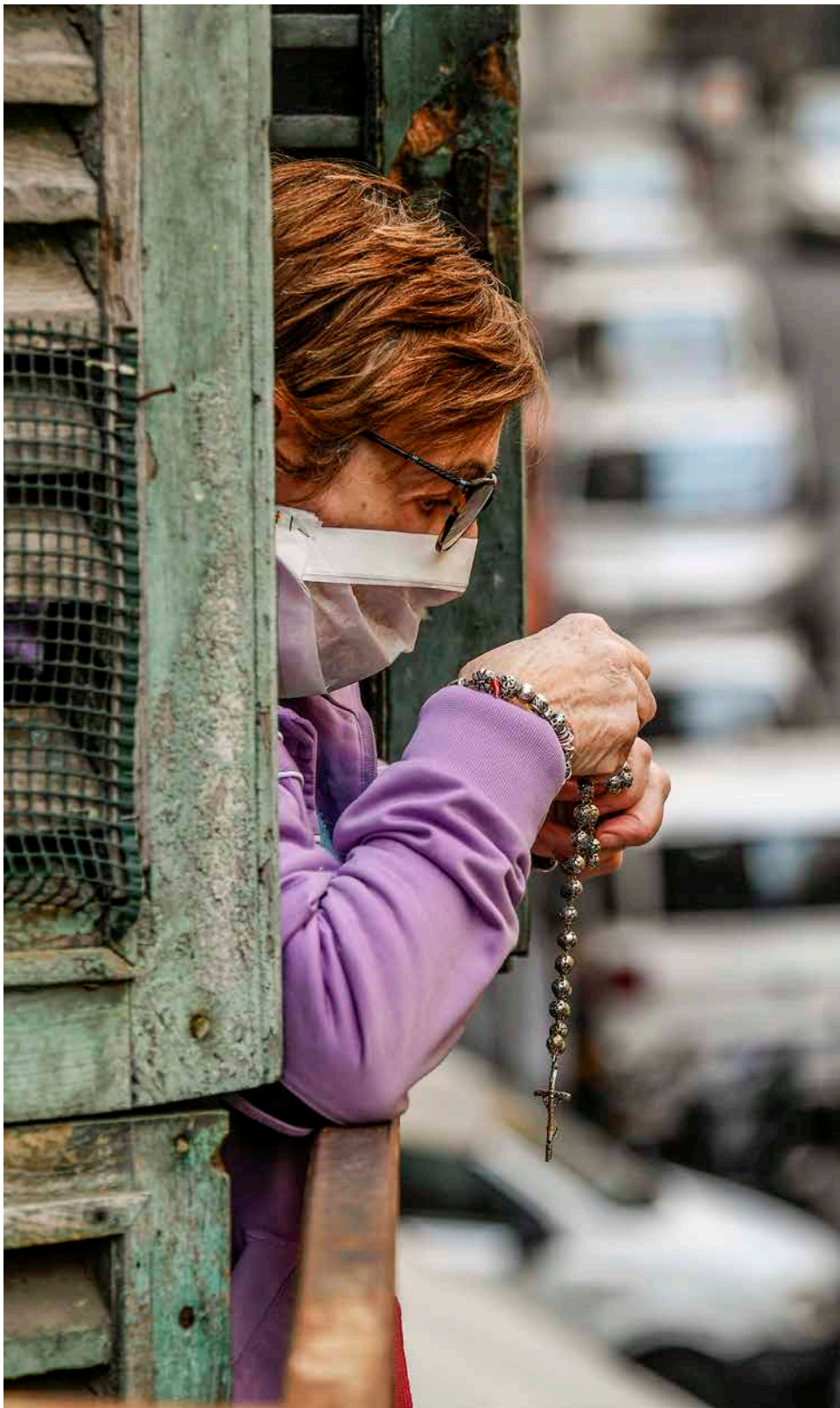
The logic of the market must have profoundly altered attitudes if it took a deadly pandemic to make the state listen to what doctors have been saying for decades. 'We need a public hospital structure that undertakes to have beds permanently available,' doctors André Grimaldi, Anne Gervais Hasenknopf and Olivier Milleron wrote in *Le Monde* on 11 March. 'The new coronavirus has the merit of reminding us of the obvious: we don't pay firefighters simply to attend fires, we want them to be ready and waiting in fire stations, even when they are just polishing their fire engine and waiting for the siren.'

#### Not knowing what you don't know

Capitalism managed to perpetuate and renew itself between the crisis of 1929 and the end of the second world war by incorporating in its institutions, often unwillingly, the popular demand that provision should be made for the unexpected: fires, diseases, disasters, financial crises. Planning for the unexpected meant setting aside the logic of the market, which fixes prices according to the laws of supply and demand, discounts the improbable and models the future using equations in which societies count for nothing.

The blindness of the standard economic model, taken to its extreme on trading floors, struck the former trader and statistician Nassim Nicholas Taleb, who in *The Black Swan*, published just before the 2008 crisis, wrote of short-term economic forecasters, 'The problem with experts is that they do not know what they don't know.'<sup>8</sup> Taleb suggested that it was absurd to neglect the unexpected in a world characterised by the proliferation of unexpected events – 'black swans'. In March 2020 anyone listening at their window to the silence of a city in lockdown might reflect on the state's determination to divest itself not only of critical care beds but also of the means of planning, by devolving them to insurance and reinsurance multinationals.<sup>9</sup>

Will the rupture caused by the pandemic reverse this? To factor the unexpected back into the management of public affairs, see further than cost-benefit analyses, and implement environmental planning would mean nationalising most services vital to the life of modern societies, from cleaning to digital networks to health: such a change rarely happens in normal times. A historical perspective suggests that change of this magnitude generally lies beyond the scope of normal political decision-making. The Austrian historian Walter Scheidel of Stanford University



has written, 'Throughout recorded history, the most powerful levelling invariably resulted from the most powerful shocks. Four different kinds of violent ruptures have flattened inequality: mass mobilisation warfare, transformative revolution, state failure, and lethal pandemics.'<sup>10</sup>

Have we reached that point? Far from certain, given that the economic system has historically shown an extraordinary capacity to absorb increasingly frequent shocks created by its own irrationality, so much so that the most brutal of these shocks tend to benefit the guardians of the status quo, who use crises to tighten their grip on the market. This disaster capitalism, anatomised by Naomi Klein before the 2008 recession, is untroubled by the exhaustion of natural resources and erosion of social welfare institutions that could mitigate crises. Klein optimistically suggests that 'we do not always respond to shocks with regression; sometimes, in the face of crisis, we grow up – fast.'

President Emmanuel Macron sought to give this kind of impression in his address to the French people on 12 March. He spoke of his desire to 're-examine the development model our world has followed for decades and which is revealing its defects in broad daylight, [and to] re-examine the weaknesses of our democracies. What this pandemic is now showing is that free healthcare irrespective of your income, history or profession, and our welfare state are not costs or charges but precious goods, vital advantages when fate strikes. What this pandemic reveals is

that some goods and services should be placed beyond the laws of the market. Delegating our food, our protection, our capacity to take care of our living conditions to others is folly. We need to take back control.' Three days later, he deferred pension and unemployment benefit reforms, and approved the introduction of measures previously regarded as impossible – limiting staff dismissals and abandoning all budgetary constraints.

Circumstances will accentuate this change: with the collapse of share prices, the president's obsession with directing savings and executives' pensions towards the stock market might almost appear a visionary stroke of genius. But suspending labour laws, restricting public freedoms, financing big business and exempting it from the social security contributions on which the health system depends is not a radical break with previous policies. This massive transfer of public money to the private sector is like the state bailouts of banks in 2008, where the bill came in the form of austerity imposed on workers and public services. Recapitalised banks meant fewer critical care beds.

That is why Macron's epiphany recalls that of Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008, after Lehmann Brothers collapsed. He announced to stunned supporters, 'A certain idea of globalisation is coming to an end with the end of a financial capitalism that had imposed its logic on the whole economy and contributed to perverting it... The idea that markets are always right is folly.'<sup>11</sup> Once the storm passed, the folly began again ●

Throughout history, the most powerful levelling invariably resulted from the most powerful shocks. Four kinds of violent ruptures have flattened inequality: mass mobilisation warfare, transformative revolution, state failure and lethal pandemics

Walter Scheidel

Fear: in March, Italy exceeded the death toll for all of China

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<sup>1</sup> OECD <sup>2</sup> 'Raccomandazioni di etica clinica per l'ammissione a trattamenti intensivi e per la loro sospensione' (Clinical ethics recommendations for admission to intensive care treatment, and suspension of that treatment), SIAARTI, Rome, 6 March 2020 <sup>3</sup> Bruno Canard, 'J'ai pensé que nous avions momentanément perdu la partie' (I thought we had temporarily lost the game), 5 March 2020, academia.hypotheses.org <sup>4</sup> Marshall Burke, assistant professor in earth system science at Stanford University (@MarshallBBurke), Twitter, 9 March 2020 <sup>5</sup> Jean Delumeau, *La Peur en Occident, xive-xviii siècle* (Fear in the West from the 14th to the 18th century), Fayard, Paris, 1978 <sup>6</sup> Heinrich Heine, 'The Cholera in Paris', letter 6, *The Works of Heinrich Heine*, 1893 <sup>7</sup> WHO director-general's opening remarks at the media briefing on Covid-19, 5 March 2020 <sup>8</sup> Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: the Impact of the Highly Improbable*, Random House, New York, 2007 <sup>9</sup> Razmig Keucheyan, *Nature is a battlefield*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2016 <sup>10</sup> Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton University Press, 2017 <sup>11</sup> Speech given in Toulon, 25 September 2008





# Putting profit before healthcare

Germany is testing half a million people a week while France only tests those with severe symptoms. Has big pharma's pursuit of profit left a nation woefully under-equipped?

Quentin Ravelli | Translated by George Miller



Urgent: producing test kits for Covid-19 in Cheongju, Korea, March 2020

As stock markets plummeted in March, shares in pharmaceutical company Gilead Sciences rose by 20% on the news of clinical trials of their antiviral remdesivir for the treatment of Covid-19. Inovio Pharmaceuticals gained 200% after they announced an experimental vaccine, INO-4800. Alpha Pro Tech, which makes protective masks, gained 232%. And shares in Co-Diagnostics rose 1,370% on the announcement of a test kit for the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) which causes Covid-19.

How can some people be getting rich in the current chaos while there are not enough protective masks even for doctors and other essential care workers, and diagnostic tests are still unavailable to most people three months into the pandemic? Why are these tests at the centre of the debate in South Korea, Germany, Italy, the US and Australia, but avoided in France, whose top health official, Jérôme Salomon, only envisages their mass use 'at the end of confinement'? Contrary to the French government's statements, quarantine is not the only weapon in this war; how we organise our society and economy

matters too. This is a crisis of health, research and production policy, and the pharmaceutical industry is central to it, though carefully kept out of the public debate.

In recent weeks, the pandemic has revealed the cracks in a social model founded on the belief that healthcare should yield profits, a belief used to justify ever more stringent budget cuts for staff and patients. In France, where ICU beds and A&E departments are at capacity and the Inter-Urgence collective has been campaigning for more resources for months, health professionals are now having to make desperate choices between care which is vital – with ever fewer treatments on that list – and a growing number of treatments that must be sacrificed. In places such as Alsace, resource shortages are already forcing life-and-death decisions. By 22 March 271 people had died in eastern France, while just across the Rhine in Baden-Württemberg, where the population is twice as large and the virus longer established, only 23 had died. Why?

One answer is the pharmaceutical industry's highly political position in the French healthcare system. The industry

produces the tools that enable virus testing, vaccination and treatment. France is desperately short of test kits, which use a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) to identify the virus by rapidly multiplying its DNA, and yet they are easy to produce. Many companies have entered this huge, erupting market: Abbott, Qiagen, Quest Diagnostics, Thermo Fisher, Roche, BioMérieux. The technology is inexpensive at around €12 (\$13.40) for a kit that sells for €112 (\$125) in France, where patients pay half that cost. But the technology can be subject to prohibitive pricing agreements in a market monopolised by a few large companies, such as Abbott and Roche, which sell local labs technological platforms at exorbitant cost.<sup>1</sup>

## South Korea's drive-through testing

Even acknowledging these economic limitations, why had France done only half as many tests per million inhabitants as Iran or Austria by 20 March? With fewer than 40,000, it lagged far behind South Korea (316,644), Germany (167,000), Russia (143,619) and Australia (113,615).<sup>2</sup> South Korea has set up drive-through testing and booths with built-in rubber gloves where medics collect swabs from behind a sheet of glass. Its systematic testing followed by contact-tracing for every Covid-19-positive patient has made it possible to break the chain of transmission by isolating the right people. So confinement measures there are far less restrictive, death rates among patients lower, and the fatalities much lower than in France, despite South Korea's proximity to China, where the virus began.

Testing is one blind spot in France's approach to the epidemic. There is a related complication: the shortage of reagents, the essential chemical components of tests that establish the presence of the virus. There is little publicly available information about these, where they come from, what their function is, or how much they really cost. Why not end all secrecy, suspend patents for their composition, and tell the public where they come from and how they are made?

The second essential weapon is a drug that will cure Covid-19. According to a Chinese government statement, favipiravir, the active ingredient in the anti-flu medicine Avigan produced by the Japanese company Fujifilm, has given 'very good results' against the virus by accelerating recovery. Kevzara, a monoclonal antibody inhibitor that blocks Interleukin-6 (IL-6) receptors and is used to treat rheumatoid arthritis, has been evaluated by a partnership of Sanofi and Regeneron and may reduce lung inflammation in severe cases. This emergency repurposing of existing treatments reveals an absence of proper health planning and shows how feverish opportunism has replaced industrial policy.

The argument that pandemics are impossible to predict and research will always be on the back foot does not hold up: pandemics may be unpredictable, but it is possible to act pre-emptively and steer research on the basis of an integrated vision of science, medicine and ecology. Such research cannot be a short-term quest for profits. It needs to be long-term and to meet the population's needs, and in structural terms that is not where the money is: 17% of the world's population uses 85% of all medicines, and there is more research into drugs for depression and obesity than treatments for infectious diseases, though those are the biggest killers globally.

**Pandemics may be unpredictable, but it is possible to act pre-emptively and steer research on the basis of an integrated vision of science, ecology and medicine**

When crises occur, this imbalance creates aberrant situations. The third essential weapon, vaccines, provides many examples. President Donald Trump, perhaps with an eye on future election, tried to buy the patent for a vaccine against coronavirus from German company CureVac exclusively for US use, provoking a flat refusal from Angela Merkel and an instant €80m (\$89m) grant for the company from the EU. This haste reveals a truth about the pharmaceutical industry: research priorities are governed by financial incentives and the quest for patents, so major companies cut investment in essential medical areas, including infectious diseases, both bacterial and viral. And even when there is research, it's too slow to be properly responsive: the Modern Therapeutics company, considered likely to be first to develop a vaccine, will not be able to bring it to market for several months, though this did not prevent an uptick in its share price when it announced its plans.

Being able to establish who actually has the virus would remove uncertainty and reduce demand on the emergency services and the need for lockdowns. Isolation and confinement would be proportionate to the true spread of the virus and not to hypothetical risk calculations, which can lead to people

getting tired of government restrictions, and defying them.

Mass testing would also be democratic healthcare. But that presupposes planning, or state control of the pharmaceutical industry, so it would be hard to implement in a capitalist system based on profit. There is already class discrimination: by mid-March, 18 French parliamentarians and two ministers had been tested, though all but one said they felt in good health; for the rest of the population testing has been limited to the most severe cases. Social inequalities in healthcare provision are real, and testing has become a class privilege.

Public research funding does not make up for the deficiencies of corporate funding. Projects that run for years are often abruptly terminated by budget cuts. On 4 March researcher Bruno Canard, an expert on RNA viruses (those, such as SARS-CoV-2, with ribonucleic acid genetic material), wrote, 'In 2006, politicians' interest in SARS-CoV disappeared; no one knew if it would return. Europe withdrew from big foresight projects, ostensibly to satisfy the taxpayer. Now, when a virus emerges, researchers are called on to mobilise quickly and find a solution overnight. Five years ago, we and colleagues from Belgium and the Netherlands sent letters to the European Commission, saying that we had to pre-empt.'<sup>3</sup> Canard insists that 'fundamental science is our best insurance against epidemics',<sup>4</sup> though some branches of bacteriology and virology get meagre funds for applied pharmaceutical research or fundamental microbiology.

The French National Research Agency's €3m (\$3.35m) 'flash appeal' looks derisory, after years of declining investment and other similar epidemics. After the coronavirus that caused MERS in 2015, and SARS in 2003, which began in China infecting 8,096 people in 30 countries and killing 774, South Korea eventually re-orientated its public health policy and did the groundwork for its current interventions. But for governments to act, the trauma has to be deep and repeated, and even then amnesia often wins ●

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<sup>1</sup> Press release, Observatoire de la Transparence dans les Politiques du Médicament, 18 March 2020 <sup>2</sup> Esteban Ortiz-Espina and Joe Hasell, 'How many tests for Covid-19 are being performed around the world?', *Our World in Data*, 20 March 2020, ourworldindata.org <sup>3</sup> Bruno Canard, 'Coronavirus: la science ne marche pas dans l'urgence!' (Coronavirus: science can't do emergency response), Université Ouverte, 4 March 2020, universiteouverte.org <sup>4</sup> Bruno Canard, 'La science fondamentale est notre meilleure assurance contre les épidémies' (Fundamental science is our best insurance against epidemics), *CNRS Le Journal*, 13 March 2020

## To our readers

THE Paris editorial team of *Le Monde diplomatique* put together the April 2020 edition remotely, far from their friendly office near the Place d'Italie. Despite the challenges and disruption to their way of working, it went out

on time, bursting with indispensable articles for our suddenly changed times. Our English edition also went to press on time on 1 April thanks to extraordinary efforts by everyone, including our printers, Sharman & Co, operating with a skeleton staff.

All of the 20+ language editions that distribute in print face huge difficulties in getting copies to readers. In

France, many newsstands are closing down, and the main distributor, Presstalis, has been unable to pay publications in full since February.

The English edition faces similar problems. Central Books, one of our two distributors, suspended operations in mid-March, so many newsstands and bookshops in the UK and Scandinavia will not receive copies of

LMD. Air Business, our distribution agent, warns of severely delayed postal routes that will affect print subscribers, although all copies to the US will be airfreighted, at least this month.

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Wendy Kristianasen



## AFRICAN PUSHBACK AGAINST POST-COLONIAL ATTITUDES

# And now get lost, France!

African countries that France once saw as its backyard, some still forced to use French-controlled currencies, are rejecting their old colonial patron's continuing control, and they suspect its motives

Fanny Pigeaud | Translated by George Miller

A CARTOON on social media late last year showed a cockerel in the colours of the French flag pecking a sack of grain shaped like Africa. It was popular in Africa's Francophone countries, part of unprecedented criticism in places France used to call its backyard.<sup>1</sup> There have been similar sentiments expressed in the media, public statements and meetings across Central and West Africa; shouts of 'Down with France!' on the streets of Bamako, Mali, during demonstrations in late 2019 and early 2020 demanding the withdrawal of troops involved in the anti-jihadist Operation Barkhane; and students ripped up a French flag in Zinder, Niger.

French officials, including President Emmanuel Macron, have spoken of a 'misunderstanding' or a 'misinformation campaign' by a rival power – blaming, but not naming, Russia. Moscow took advantage of France's fall from favour to move in on the security market in the Central African Republic in 2018. Some misinformation seems malicious, such as faked pictures purporting to show the French army supplying jihadists in Mali with motorbikes. The Ivorian opposition politician and former speaker of parliament Mamadou Koulibaly said in a video, 'We've had enough. This is a revolt, a rejection of the French state's hold on our authorities and, by extension, on our economies and our people.'<sup>2</sup>

The sentiments are not new, but criticism of French imperialism and the idea of *Françafrique* is spreading beyond activist and intellectual circles. Boubacar Boris Diop, co-author with former Malian minister Aminata Dramane Traoré of *La Gloire des imposteurs* (Imposters' Glory, Philippe Rey, 2014), says this change is the result of 'a generation coming of age which is unconcerned about what France might have meant to its elders and looks to [France] less and less.' As always, social media amplify and accelerate the spread of the message.

## 'CFA franc a non-subject for France'

Among the grievances against France is its 'monetary cooperation' with 14 African states, dating back to 1960. Activists, economists and opposition figures are publicly voicing criticism previously made in private, and fighting openly for the end of a currency inherited from colonialism. This is currently administered as the West African CFA franc and the Central African CFA franc, pegged to the euro and still under the control of France, which officially guarantees their convertibility. Critics claim the CFA franc holds back development by denying countries full sovereignty, and argue for the creation of regional or national currencies. In Senegal, the Front for a Popular and Pan-African Anti-Imperialist Revolution (FRAPP) leads this demand with slogans such as 'Get lost, France!'

Such protests have forced Macron to change his tone significantly. In 2017 he maintained that the CFA franc was 'a non-subject for France', but by December 2019, while visiting Côte d'Ivoire's economic capital, Abidjan, he made the surprise announcement of a reform of the West African CFA franc. The eight states that use it will no longer be obliged to keep 50% of their

foreign reserves in the French treasury. Around 50 African intellectuals still criticised enduring 'links of monetary subjugation', especially fixed parity with the euro and the French convertibility guarantee.<sup>3</sup>

With more terrorist attacks in the Sahel, France's military presence in Africa rouses strong public feeling. Since 1960, France has maintained a network of permanent and temporary bases there. The French army has often been used to bring sympathetic leaders to power or prop up incumbents, including Omar Bongo in Gabon in 1990 and Idriss Déby Itno in Chad in 2008. In 2011 French intervention to enable Alassane Ouattara to assume the presidency of Côte d'Ivoire during a post-election crisis was seen as settling scores with his predecessor Laurent Gbagbo.<sup>4</sup> In Douala, Cameroon, several hundred moto-taxi drivers demonstrated against this 'French interference'.

Criticism has increased since Operation Serval in 2013, as armed groups have regained ground, causing deaths in Mali and Burkina Faso. Boubacar Haïdara, a research associate at Bordeaux's Institute of Political Studies, says some Malians believe 'France only intervenes to protect economic and strategic interests that it doesn't admit to and contributes to destabilising the country to legitimise its presence here... [some believe] it has taken the side of the former Touareg rebels.' Chérif Sy, the Burkinabé defence minister, told South Africa's *Mail & Guardian* in June 2019, 'I'm surprised that the French have failed to eradicate these terrorist gangs... Do they really want to, or do they have some other agenda?'<sup>5</sup>

The French army's past alliances with groups such as the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) worsens distrust. In 2012 the MNLA, with Ansar Dine militia, first attacked military camps in northern Mali. Soon after, the French military allied with the MNLA against the jihadists. France 'gave' them the city of Kidal in 2013, according to France's former ambassador in Bamako, Nicolas Normand. That Macron announced the head of Mali's government would visit Kidal while it was still under MNLA control increased suspicions. Haïdara says, 'That was proof, for some Malians, that Macron holds the key to the Kidal problem. Malians see only the ineffectiveness, real or imagined, of foreign forces, without always taking account of how hard it is to tackle security problems, as issues are often so interlinked.' Malians distrust other foreign armed forces, including the UN.

## Doing as told by 'some kid'

Cultural figures have also recently spoken out. In an open letter to Macron, Malian filmmaker and former culture minister Cheick Oumar Sissoko criticised the 'colonial attitude' and the 'frame of mind produced by a superiority complex and sovereign contempt for peoples dominated and exploited by French colonialism, which is rooted, cultivated and maintained... within France's ruling class.' The Malian musician Salif Keita caused uproar in France by saying, 'There are no jihadists in Africa, only mercenaries in the pay of France.' He accused Mali's President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita of 'spending his time doing as he was told by some



This is a revolt, a rejection of the French state's hold on our authorities and, by extension, on our economies and our people

Mamadou Koulibaly

kid, Emmanuel Macron.' Boubacar Boris Diop said, 'Referring to the French president as "some kid" had never been done before, and everyone liked it.'

France, taken aback by the scale of the hostility, stepped up its rebuttals. Macron said on 4 December last year, 'France is not [in Africa] with neocolonial, imperialist aims, nor with an economic agenda. We are there for the collective security of that region and our own.' He echoed his predecessor François Hollande, who said in 2013, 'France has no interests in Mali. It is not defending any economic or political choice.' Such denials count for little against the view of Hama Ag Mahmoud, an ex-member of the MNLA and former Malian minister, regularly circulated on social media: 'There's a war over mining resources.'<sup>6</sup>

Macron's patience may be wearing thin. He complained about 'African politicians' ambiguity over anti-French movements' and said of the leaders of the Sahel G5 countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger), 'I'm waiting for them to clarify and formalise what they're asking of France and the international community. I need them to confirm this publicly, in front of their own people.' This was interpreted as a call for African governments to silence critics. Burkinabé president Roch Marc Christian Kaboré said in response, 'We live in a democracy. We can't stop people having an opinion.'

The French authorities are especially sensitive as China, Germany, Russia and Turkey are all seeking to expand their commercial and military influence in Africa and setting up bilateral agreements.

Boubacar Boris Diop asks, 'What should the French do? Accept they must decolonise. At the moment they're just prolonging the pleasure, or the pain. But they need to accept the verdict of history. Salif Keita said to Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, "Go before it's too late", and the same message applies to France. Even if we know it's not that simple.' In spite of a general feeling of being fed up, it remains true that 'whether in power or opposition, politicians – with only a few exceptions – are scared of saying anything bad about France.'

## One pressure or another

Francophone African presidents, some in power for decades, are caught between pressure from France, keen to protect its economic and security interests, and a growing popular demand for emancipation. Several know they remain in power only with French support, and all know the consequences for predecessors who ignored France's wishes, such as Ahmed Sékou Touré in Guinea, who suffered multiple destabilisation attempts, and Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso, who was overthrown and assassinated in 1987. Last December, the Ivorian authorities felt compelled to expel Nathalie Yamb, a Swiss-Cameroonian activist based in Abidjan and member of the Ivorian opposition party Liberty and Democracy for the Republic, for 'activities incompatible with the national interest'. At the Russia-Africa summit in Sochi in October, Yamb had accused France of treating Africa as its property and called African leaders in the CFA zone France's lackeys.

In recent years, only Cameroon's leaders have played the anti-France card in disagreements with Paris over its political future: pro-government media there put out a virulently anti-French message for months.

It is still rare in opposition circles to find criticism of French imperialism linked to a desire to revive the national development models advanced by Modibo Keita in Mali and Sankara in Burkina Faso. There is no sign of the French government changing course. On 2 February, disregarding the views of many involved who believe that security measures alone will not stabilise the Sahel, it announced that troop numbers in Operation Barkhane would increase from 4,500 to 5,100 ●

Good friends? Africans are suspicious of French support for leaders such as Ivory Coast's Alassane Ouattara

Fanny Pigeaud is co-author, with Ndongo Samba Sylla, of *Africa's Last Colonial Currency: the CFA Franc Story*, Pluto Press, London, forthcoming July 2020

1 See Olivier Piot, 'La fin du pré carré' (The end of the backyard), in 'France-Afrique. Domination et émancipation', *Manière de voir*, no 165, June-July 2019 2 'Jeudi, c'est Koulibaly!' 'M. Macron, vous pouvez donner mille instructions à nos chefs d'État...' (Thursday is Koulibaly! 'Mr Macron, you can give a thousand instructions to our heads of state'), YouTube, 5 December 2019 3 'Des intellectuels africains réagissent aux réformes du FCFA' (African intellectuals react to CFA franc reforms), *SenePlus*, 7 January 2020, www.seneplus.com 4 See Fanny Pigeaud, 'Débâcle de l'accusation contre M. Gbagbo' (The debacle over charges against Gbagbo), *Le Monde diplomatique*, December 2017 5 Simon Allison, 'I question France's motives, says Burkina Faso's defence minister', *Mail & Guardian*, Johannesburg, 4 June 2019 6 'La France nous avait donné son feu vert pour l'indépendance de l'Azawad' (France gave us a green light for independence in Azawad), *Le Courrier du Sahara*, 9 April 2015



# Impasse in Morocco

Morocco gives the illusion of success, but wealth remains in the hands of a few, investments haven't paid off, and healthcare, education and employment are all badly under-supported. The king holds all the power but is increasingly absent and unpredictable

Pierre Puchot | Translated by Charles Goulden

**N**OBODY KNOWS where Morocco is headed, not even its king. Mohammed VI recognises the limitations of the development model that ensured the transition from the regime of his father, Hassan II, in 1999.<sup>1</sup> 'Let me say this clearly and frankly: what undermines [the positive results] is that the effects of the progress and the achievements made have not, unfortunately, been felt by all segments [of Moroccan] society,' he said last July.<sup>2</sup>

The Moroccan model is one of an all-powerful monarchy that pursues ultraliberal economic policies through public bodies set up to implement spectacular projects such as the Casablanca-Tangier high-speed railway line (LGV), the Port of Tanger-Med economic and industrial zone, the Mohammed VI Theatre in Casablanca, and new motorways. These have international appeal and have helped the king to rule with his image unblemished, even in the French media. From Paris or central Rabat, Morocco appears to be a brilliant success, regularly taking part in African economic summits though it has no oil, and inserting itself into global value chains by becoming an important manufacturer in the automotive and aeronautical sectors.<sup>3</sup>

But the illusion is evaporating, like Morocco's water table under the dual pressures of mass tourism (sure to suffer in the Covid-19 epidemic) and intensive agriculture. Since the king's July speech, trickle-down economics has given way to authorised criticism of the insufficient redistribution of wealth. Reports by the Court of Auditors, Al-Maghrib Bank (the central bank) and Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE) discuss structural problems facing the economy.

## Few get to share the cake

All seems well on the surface: GDP is expected to grow 3.5% in 2020, consumer price index growth is under control (+0.6%), and unemployment was 9.2% in 2019 (down from 9.8% in 2018).<sup>4</sup> In October, in front of an audience including representatives of Germany, Switzerland and the World Bank, Prime Minister Saadeddine el-Othmani posed with a cake decorated with the number 53, Morocco's 2020 position in the World Bank's annual ranking of countries by ease of doing business, up seven places.<sup>5</sup>

Yet only a small minority are lucky enough to share the cake. Morocco looks very different in terms of indicators that really matter. The UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI), based on all factors indicating the state of a society, does not lie: in 2019<sup>6</sup> Morocco ranked 121st, down among the countries with 'average human development', and far behind Algeria (82nd) and Tunisia (91st), both in the 'high human development' category. This annoys the Moroccan elite, who often point to the conflicts in these neighbouring countries.

Morocco's ranking reflects a harsh reality: 'Around 10% of the population are living in extreme poverty,' said Taïeb Aisse, an expert on territorial development working with the government, currently led by the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD).

'They have nothing. No income. That's very dangerous.' The middle class also suffer from the huge gap between window dressing and reality.

The window dressing is evident in Morocco's north. Casablanca's Voyageurs railway station is as brightly lit as those in Rabat and Tangier, but in the first few minutes of the journey, as the three-quarters full LGV train ran parallel with the ocean at 314 kmph, I saw vast empty stretches of beaten earth with just a few houses, built of corrugated iron, breeze blocks or concrete. The authorities have cleared the most notorious shantytowns, including Sidi Moumen, a pocket of poverty on the edge

'I grew up in a village in the middle of nowhere. We had nothing, but at least state education gave us a chance to get out. The standard today is very low.' She dreams of emigrating. In two years' time, she hopes to be living Canada and to have 'regained [her] dignity'.

## Education needs radical reforms

Families that can afford it send their children to private schools, though standards vary as much as in the state sector. Reports published in Morocco and elsewhere underline the gravity of the situation. A study in the *Revue internationale d'éducation de Sèvres*

have halved poverty since 2004. We are making progress.'

The HDI also takes account of healthcare. GP Othmane Boumaalif told me, 'Basically, Morocco has no health system.' He is from the same generation as the activists of the 20 February movement that emerged in 2011 after the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, and is president of the Anfass ('breath' in Arabic) Démocratique association, which regularly publishes notes on Morocco's economy and society. 'It's a structural problem: we don't have a front line of GPs examining patients and guiding them according to their complaints. In Morocco, people go to

Akesbi said, 'We have a good investment rate [32%], but it doesn't produce enough growth or jobs. Ten years ago, one percentage point of growth was equivalent to 35,000 jobs. Today it's less than 10,000. The big public works projects only create jobs for a short time. And investment is 70% public. That's the greatest failure of the Moroccan development model.'

For 50 years, the regime chose to back the free market economy and the private sector, which received generous subsidies on the assumption that it would soon become autonomous and the principal investor. It's now clear that was a losing bet. The private sector invests very little and employs only 10% of Morocco's active population (1.2 million out of 12 million, in a total population of 36.6 million). There are also phantom workers: two million out of the active 12 million are registered as working but are not paid. They include people working on the family farm, and young people in artisanal occupations.

Chami said, 'We didn't achieve the 6-7% growth we were banking on. We need more sustained growth that will benefit more people. We invested too much in hardware [infrastructure] and not enough in software [added value].' This may seem like a good metaphor at first but its limitations are soon apparent, as most services in the south are deficient. It might have been better to build a railway line to Agadir, a major seaside resort and important staging post on the way south, rather than taking on debt to build the LGV when there was already a line from Casablanca to Tangier.

## 'The taxpayer foots the bill'

El-Othmani was embarrassed when I asked him about this: 'The decision had already been made when I became prime minister. I had nothing to do with it. I say we should keep the LGV but also try and build a line to Agadir.' Many Moroccans disagree. Akesbi told me the LGV was a disaster for the country, pointing out that for it to be profitable, tickets should have cost between \$90 and \$135 – far too expensive for the Moroccan middle class – but the state artificially lowered the prices so a journey from Casablanca to Tangier actually costs less than \$30. 'The National Railways Office covers the difference, so it makes an even bigger loss, and the taxpayer foots the bill.'

In Marrakesh's Jemaa el-Fna square, a huge poster praised the king for 20 years of success and economic development. But less than 300km away, the uneven pavements of Agadir were a reminder that development doesn't benefit everyone. When compared with the magnificent Marrakesh railway station, Agadir's shabby bus station casts doubt on the regime's economic choices. The city centre, filled with tired apartment blocks, is falling into disrepair. Agadir has three royal palaces, symbols of a glorious past, but the king prefers to stay in the north or visit other countries, and comes only rarely.

The regime's inequitable choices have condemned Agadir to underdevelopment. An advertising space salesman told me, 'In the past, Marrakesh didn't seem that far away; now it's like another world.' Though his clients



of Casablanca that was home to the suicide bombers of 2003. The inhabitants have gradually been rehoused elsewhere, in huge developments of identical low-rise apartment blocks. Hastily built, with no infrastructure or transport links, they recall the estates built in France in the 1950s and 60s, a decision from which the banlieues have never recovered. Morocco doesn't reduce poverty, but only shifts it away from city centres and foreign tourists.

To build the seafront promenade at Tangier, completed last year, the old bars were cleared, and the drunken idlers and drug dealers were chased away. There is an exceptional view of the Bay of Gibraltar from the walls of the medina, floodlit at night, but local people have other concerns. A teacher at a state secondary school told me, 'In Morocco it's hell getting anything done, even getting hold of official documents. They treat you like dirt.' Her experience illustrates how Morocco lags in one of the areas the HDI takes into account: education. 'For four years, I taught under difficult conditions in Fnideq. It's a very conservative city, and many men left to join ISIS. When I was transferred to Tangier, I thought it would be better. But that's when it really started to get bad.' She was just recovering after 18 months on tranquilisers for depression. 'This isn't an especially poor area, but the teaching conditions are unbearable.'

She was preparing to teach a class of 49 pupils. Her salary is \$590 a month.

**Around 10% of the population are living in extreme poverty. They have nothing. No income. That's very dangerous**

Taïeb Aisse

concludes Morocco must carry out 'radical reforms that will enable the education system to progress and fulfil its missions'.<sup>7</sup> In December 2017, when El-Othmani had just become prime minister, he talked of ending free higher education. The CESE did not back his plan. Its president, Ahmed Chami, a former general manager at Microsoft who was Morocco's industry minister 2007-12, said, 'We are making people pay twice – first with taxes, then by forcing them to send their children to private schools.'

El-Othmani defended the proposal and his record: 'We have greatly reduced the number of students per class. It's now closer to 40, and 49 is an exception. And, more generally, we

the doctor if they can get an appointment in less than six months, or to a university hospital if there is one, or to a free clinic. It's total chaos, and they often resort to self-medication.' Commenting on the new hospitals being built in partnership with the Gulf states, he said, 'They're building a handful of showcase hospitals, which are very well equipped, but no one can afford them. Morocco is still a medical desert, especially as many of our practitioners have moved to Germany, where their qualifications are now recognised.'

## Public services deficient

Why is there such a discrepancy between the flattering macroeconomic data and flashy infrastructure and the huge deficiencies in basic public services? Najib Akesbi, an economist who has recently retired from the Hassan II Institute of Agronomy and Veterinary Medicine in Rabat, said, 'The authorities need to take account of the issues facing the economy. They make building motorways a priority when the whole country is short of rural roads or tracks linking one village to the next, and that can't be a viable choice. The Fez-Oujda section [of the motorway], which has very high tolls, is only operating at 10% of capacity. Investment decisions are completely unrelated to the needs of the people.'

A shortage of resources is not the primary cause of economic imbalances.



**Below** Casablanca tram: public works boost the king's image **Right** Another world: Marrakesh railway station

include McDonald's, his turnover fell from \$115,000 to \$45,000 a month between 2012 and 2019. 'How can I get clients to come to Agadir when it's only 4% of the advertising market and Marrakesh is 12%?'

A retired primary school teacher and member of the Akal ('earth' in Berber) network, which is fighting for recognition of the Amazigh community in southern Morocco, told me he divides his time between Agadir and Sidi Ifni, an hour and a half further south by road. 'Recently, I was stung by a scorpion,' he said, showing me a picture of the culprit on his phone. 'There's no university hospital in that one-horse town, and there was no chance of getting an appointment to see the doctor, so I went to a free clinic. But they couldn't give me anything, so I spent the next 24 hours lying down, waiting anxiously for it to wear off.'

Last November, the king suggested serious consideration should be given to building a railway line from Marrakesh to Agadir. But Morocco's problems are not only a result of the palace's choices; they are also structural, inherent to the rentier economy and the many monopolies that already existed under French colonial rule. Akesbi said, 'That's the other side of Morocco's failed bet on the free market economy. Unearned income, income that doesn't involve work or added value, undermines economic activity. Take passenger transport: to set up a business in that sector you need an official permit. If you get one, it's not because your business plan is viable, but because you are in favour at court. Natural resources are subject to the

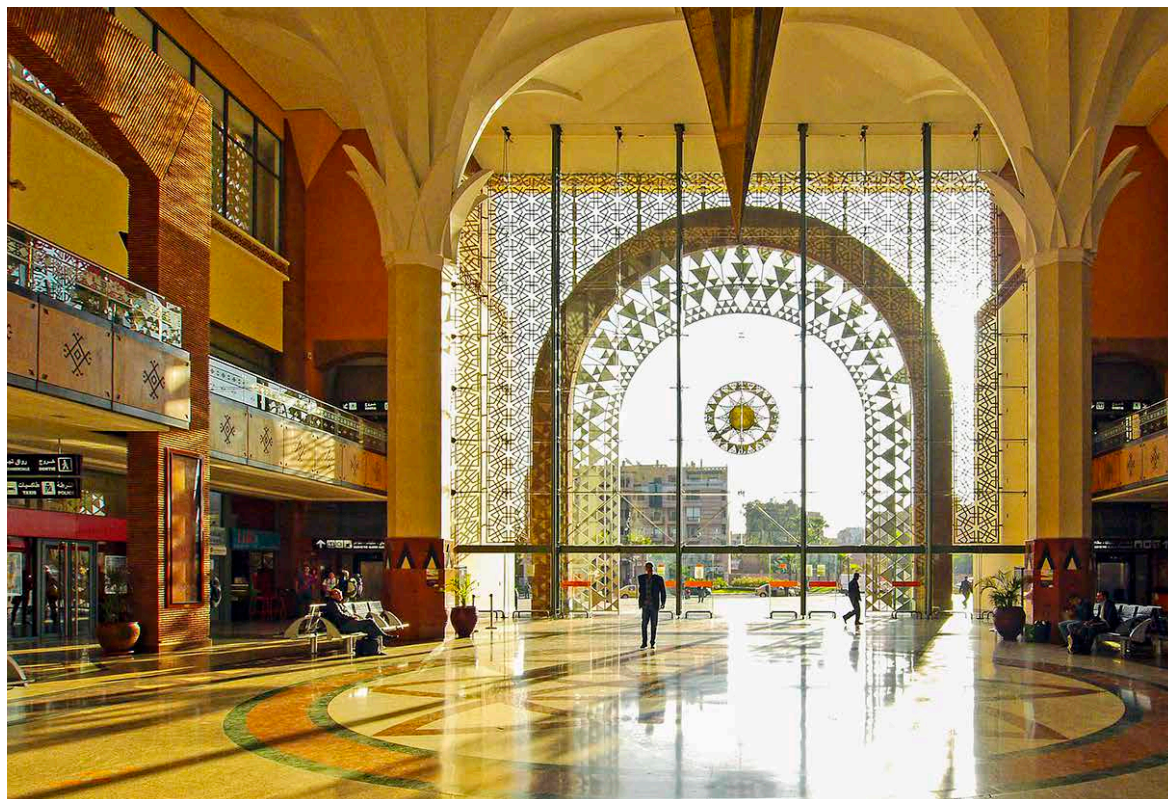
rentier economy too. In industry, 40% of businesses claim they're in a sector where there's an oligopoly or a duopoly. Bottled water, forestry, sand quarries, minerals, banking, fuel: no sector can operate without official permits.

## Big public works projects create jobs for a short time. And investment is 70% public. That's the greatest failure of the Moroccan development model

Najib Akesbi

The king, involved in many businesses, including the highly lucrative banking sector, and keen to keep up appearances while maintaining his grip on the economy, is promoting a 'new development model'. El-Othmani told me it was 'theoretically sound'. It may be, but it is not well defined, although the king last December appointed 35 prominent figures to a commission that is due to present its report in June. Will this lead to new legislation? 'Surely,' said El-Othmani. Which sectors will receive investment is still a mystery. Chami hopes it will be public services.

But investment needs to be financed. The security budget is 77bn dirham



(\$8bn), only a little less than the first item in Morocco's 2020 finance act: servicing Morocco's debt of 96.5bn dirham (\$10bn). A review last May concluded that Morocco is hampered by an 'unfair and inefficient' tax system. Until now, the kingdom has declined to reform it.

### 'The people should be governing'

Boumaalif said, 'Talking about new development without changing the way the country is governed is a waste of time. We need to work towards a new social contract, with a parliamentary monarchy. It's the Moroccan people who should be governing.' The palace remains deaf to such ideas. It seems more inclined to adopt an Algerian-type solution, mixing cooptation with repression, to overcome this political, economic and social impasse.

The case of journalist Hajar Raisouni attracted international attention. She was found guilty of having an 'illegal abortion' and 'premarital sexual relations', and sentenced to 12 months in prison before receiving a royal pardon. Her treatment highlighted the toxic climate that especially affects the Hirak (protest movement) in the Rif.<sup>8</sup> Since demonstrations began in 2017, several hundred protesters have been jailed, some for 20 years. Last December 55 were still in custody, and in February some began a hunger strike over conditions in their prison.

Amina Khalid, from a family of Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) party activists, coordinates aid to the families of the Hirak prisoners. The protesters were jailed, she said, 'just because they took part in non-violent protests asking for water, electricity and public services. It reminds me of when Hassan II was king. Repression has become state policy in Morocco again.' In a sign of popular impatience, thousands marched through Casablanca on 23 February to protest against falling purchasing power, corruption and the degradation of human rights. Khalid said, 'Moroccans have suffered so much that they no longer believe in anything. We've run out of hope; we are just waiting. Maybe the example of the Lebanese Hirak will inspire us.'

Morocco is trying to find its way in a climate like the final years of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali's regime, when Tunisia was dominated by his family-in-law, the Trabelsis. It could be the end of an era for Morocco, and the king's behaviour doesn't help. Last September, he did not attend the funeral of former French president Jacques Chirac, a great friend of his father. In October, he missed the Russia-Africa summit in Sochi, sending El-Othmani in his place. He is surrounded by a cabinet that is rumoured to have 2,000 members, but nobody knows what he is thinking, or if his silence is a sign of impending major changes. Journalist Omar Radi sees Morocco's future as increasingly uncertain. He told me, 'Anyone who tells you the king is the glue that holds the country together clearly has a vested interest in the current system' ●

Pierre Puchot is a journalist

<sup>1</sup> See Kader Abderrahim and Zakya Daoud, 'Is Morocco really changing?', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, February 2000 <sup>2</sup> Full text of King Mohammed VI speech on Throne Day', *Morocco World News*, 29 July 2019, www.morocoworldnews.com <sup>3</sup> See Jean-Pierre Sérénis, 'L'économie du Maroc: "Bien, mais doit (beaucoup) mieux faire"', (Morocco's economy: 'Good, but must do (much) better'), *Orient XXI*, 24 February 2020, orientxxi.info <sup>4</sup> Ecofin Agency, Geneva/Yaoundé, 22 February 2020 <sup>5</sup> *Doing Business*, 24 October 2019, www.doingbusiness.org <sup>6</sup> 'Human Development Report 2019', UN Development Programme, December 2019 <sup>7</sup> Rahma Bourqia, 'Repenser et refonder l'école au Maroc: la Vision stratégique 2015-2030' (Rethinking and reforming Moroccan schools), *Revue internationale d'éducation de Sèvres*, no 71, April 2016 <sup>8</sup> See Aboubakr Jamaï, 'Anger in the Rif', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, July 2017





IS ISIS REGROUPING IN SOUTHERN PART OF ARCHIPELAGO?

# Marawi, the Philippines' ruined city

ISIS lost control of the city of Marawi to the Philippine army in 2017 after a five-month siege, but local people have lost trust in the central government. As fighters from the Middle East return, ISIS is regaining strength and Mindanao remains a regional flashpoint

Antoine Hasday and Nicolas Quénel | Translated by George Miller

**H**UNDREDS of ISIS (Daesh) fighters seized the city of Marawi in the Philippine province of Lanao del Sur on 23 May 2017. The Philippine army besieged and bombarded the city for five months before recapturing it and taking down the black ISIS flag. The destruction in the worst affected zone was so severe that locals call it Ground Zero, and two years later, trucks are still clearing the rubble.

The fighting made over 300,000 people homeless, and 70,000 are still in temporary accommodation, mostly tents, with a few in more durable structures. People blame ISIS for the destruction of their city, but there is growing anger and distrust of the central government.

Those who lost everything have trouble imagining a future; their conditions are insecure and they are at the mercy of tropical heat, torrential rain and disease. Because of bureaucratic inertia, food and medical aid only reaches them slowly, when not diverted en route by corruption. A woman living in a camp for displaced people in Sarimanok with her husband and five children said, 'I can't go home, because my house has been requisitioned. We're angry, but what can we do?'

Around the second anniversary of the liberation of Marawi on 23 October, a bomb disposal team was working in the rain among the shattered buildings and mosques of Ground Zero. One team member said, 'We'll still be finding bombs 10 years from now.' They had discovered a 118kg bomb five metres below ground, at the base of a wrecked building. (It was blown up as a media spectacle a few weeks later.)

One of the traditional leaders, Sultan Abdul Hamidullah Atar, said, 'They talk of liberation, but what liberation? Liberation should mean freedom, the right to information and justice. Where's the justice when 7,000 homes and 27 mosques have been destroyed and hundreds of thousands are homeless?' The official siege death toll was 920 jihadists, 168 members of the Philippine armed forces and 47 civilians. But the sultan believes that most of the dead were civilians and that only 300 jihadists were killed, while the rest fled before the fighting ended.

## 'We shall never forget'

A few kilometres outside the city, a patch of waste ground has been turned into a makeshift graveyard that is already being claimed by weeds. As many as 200 unidentified bodies may be buried there. Rain has washed away the inscriptions on the grave markers, and just one stone monument made it possible to identify the place: 'Here lie those who fell in the battle of Marawi. We remember. We shall never forget.' This is a reminder of a deep sense of resentment. Atar said, 'We have collected proof of violations of international humanitarian law that happened during the battle, but we have to wait till martial law ends before we can take legal action.' Martial law has just been extended for a third year.

Corruption, insecure living conditions that have worsened since the fighting, and the historical mistrust of Mindanao's Muslim population



Bureaucratic inertia: displaced Marawi residents are still waiting for government help

towards the government, have long encouraged the formation of armed groups. This includes the most recent arrival, ISIS, created by the merging of local Islamist groups or their most radical factions: the Maute group, Abu Sayyaf, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and Ansar Khalifa Philippines (AKP). The fighters swore allegiance to their 'caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014, an oath renewed in 2019, as can be seen in the organisation's videos. The wealth looted from Marawi can be used for recruiting.

A man in his 30s<sup>1</sup> told us money was his main motive for joining Abu Sayyaf in 2011. 'You got a gun and 50,000 pesos' (around \$1,000, a large sum in this region). As an unemployed young father of seven living in the countryside, he was an easy target for the recruiter, who knew how to exploit resentment towards the central government. 'He told me we should be angry with the Philippine government for oppressing Muslims.' The recruit joined the faction of Isnilon Hapilon, Abu Sayyaf's second in command, who swore allegiance to ISIS in 2014 and was killed in the battle of Marawi. The recruit fled, and surrendered to the army when the bombs started to fall after two weeks of fighting and he realised he had few options.

A mother of eight followed her husband when he joined ISIS. He told her to leave Marawi early in the fighting to protect their family, and she managed to get out with six fighters and the then head of the armed group Owayda Marhombsar (Abu Dar). She surrendered to the authorities after her family spurned her; and she admitted she supported

Slowly but surely, ISIS is rebuilding the strength it had in 2017; it now has several hundred members

Paweł Wójcik

the establishment of an Islamic caliphate: 'We were fighting for the Koran and the hadith.'

Both these people regretted their actions and have renounced armed jihad, but only time will tell whether they return to armed struggle. Colonel Jose Maria Cuerdo, commander of the 103rd infantry brigade, said, 'Since we eliminated their emir, Abu Dar, a few months ago, the Islamists have had trouble recruiting and remobilising their troops.' But independent researcher Paweł Wójcik thinks the organisation remains active: 'Slowly but surely, it's rebuilding the strength it had in 2017 and now has several hundred members.' Cuerdo insists that only about 20 jihadist fighters remain in Lanao del Sur.

ISIS has suffered many recent military setbacks, but this low estimate of numbers seems improbable. Just a few text messages got us photographs of members of sleeper cells, and some

of them may have gone to ground in Marawi. On 7 October 2019 ISIS announced its return by claiming responsibility for the killing of a soldier on the outskirts of the city. The organisation's increased capabilities worry Colonel Cuerdo more than its numbers: 'The return of people who went off to the Iraqi-Syrian zone and the influx of foreign fighters have profoundly altered their fighting methods.' More improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are being used, along with suicide attacks.

## Suicide attacks are back

The southern Philippines, unlike neighbouring Indonesia, had not previously experienced suicide attacks despite decades of conflict, but there have been at least four since 2018. The first was on 31 August 2018, by a Moroccan national known as Abu Khatir al-Maghribi who detonated a booby-trapped vehicle at an army checkpoint in Basilan, killing around 10 people including a mother and child. In January 2019 two Indonesians attacked Jolo cathedral, killing 20 and injuring 111. On 28 June 2019 two men, one Filipino, blew themselves up attempting to enter an army camp in Indanan, and at least seven people died. On 8 September 2019 a woman detonated a suicide vest at an army checkpoint, killing only herself.

These events challenge the central government narrative. Professor Zachary Abuza, an expert on Southeast Asian insurrectional movements at the National War College in Washington, believes Mindanao 'will become the destination of choice for foreign fighters in the region'. The island has

long been a major rallying point, but its importance could increase with the loss of ISIS's territorial grip on Iraq and Syria.

Abuza said, 'Logistical networks already exist in East Kalimantan and in the Poso region [in Indonesia] and Sabah state [in Malaysia], old jihad routes that ISIS members still use despite increased cooperation between countries in the region. In 2018 Philippine political scientist Rommel Bantaoi estimated there were around 100 foreign jihadists in the country, a figure challenged by the authorities but thought credible by experts. Independent scholar Robert Postings said, 'They mainly come from neighbouring countries, but also the Middle East, the Maghreb and Europe, as demonstrated by the arrest of a Swedish national near General Santos City [South Cotabato] in late September.'

Abuza explained, 'The problem is that it doesn't take many foreign fighters to change the situation on the ground.' Cuerdo confirmed that 'they bring new skills, such as the making and handling of explosive devices, and help train local fighters in urban combat.' The threat could increase further. Around 50 Indonesian fighters who had been detained in Syria with their families are believed to have escaped last October during the Turkish offensive against the Syrian Democratic Forces.

To meet the challenge, the government in Manila is counting on the support of Mindanao's main Muslim separatist guerrilla force, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), with which it has signed a peace agreement after decades of conflict. This accord is intended to lead to the creation of an autonomous region and local parliament in 2022, with a mission to administer the region and raise it out of poverty. The accord also provides for cooperation between the MILF and the army in tackling ISIS. But in a region where tribal culture takes precedence over respect for state institutions, it is hard to imagine that MILF members will denounce individuals from their own family or village.

Zia Alonto Adiong, a member of the Bangsamoro transitional authority, which is responsible for establishing the future autonomous administration, said, 'The simple fact of having a new local government resulting from the peace process is important. It represents the struggle of the Moro people for equality and will stop extremists misusing social justice claims for their own ends, even if the challenges are considerable.'

The MILF old guard may still back the peace process, but the younger generation are more radical and might consider a resumption of armed struggle. Noor Lucman, a former parliamentary candidate who hid 70 people, mainly Christians, in his home during the siege of Marawi, said, 'The authorities have created a social catastrophe. President Duterte needs to act or people may turn against him.' If that happens, ISIS will reap the reward.

Antoine Hasday and Nicolas Quénel are journalists

<sup>1</sup> Some interviewees wished to remain anonymous



REAL AUTONOMY FOR ONE POOR REGION IN MINDANAO?

# Philippines revives self-rule for Bangsamoro

The Bangsamoro region of Mindanao is part of a poor, Muslim province in a mostly Christian country, whose indigenous people are under-represented, and has endured violence for 40 years. Part-autonomy failed before and the new interim government doesn't truly represent the region's people or needs

Philippe Revelli | Translated by George Miller



Shake it: President Duterte (left) hands Bangsamoro over to MILF's Al Haj Murad Ebrahim, February 2019



THE PROVINCES that made up the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) voted in favour of creating a new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) on 21 January 2019. Despite radical Islamist groups threatening terrorist attacks, hundreds of teachers of all faiths and political affiliations ensured voting went ahead at polling stations. The turnout was huge (87.8%, 1.738 million voters), and the yes vote overwhelming (88.57%).<sup>1</sup> When the result was announced there was jubilation, and 'Bangsamoro = peace' appeared on banners.

This vote ratified the 2014 peace agreement between the government of Benigno Aquino III (2010-16) and the insurgents from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), officially ending over 40 years of a conflict that killed more than 160,000 and displaced several million.

The new region extends over five provinces: Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur in the central part of the island of Mindanao, plus some territory in Cotabato and the islands of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. Unlike the ARMM, the new Bangsamoro region will be run by an elected parliament from 2022, with an increased budget and more control over natural resources. In the interim, a transitional parliament and government have been appointed by Manila. The new region does not, however, have a major port or significant industrial or tertiary sector. The only mining is nickel extraction in Tawi-Tawi, and the armed conflict ended tourism.

Bangsamoro's mainly rural population is 3.7% of the Philippines' total and 57% of people live below the poverty line.<sup>2</sup> The region is such a small part of the economy that granting it autonomy has caused no political tremors. But President Rodrigo Duterte, whose international image is mostly the result of his 'war on drugs', is treating it as an unqualified success.

Janel Pesons, secretary-general of Mindanao Peoples' Peace Movement (MPPM) and a staunch Duterte opponent, acknowledges that the autonomy was 'a vital step on the road to peace'. The MPPM is an umbrella movement for a large number of local and regional organisations promoting inter-communal harmony between Muslims,

Christians and indigenous peoples in Mindanao. It campaigned for a yes vote, 'but autonomy isn't a miracle cure. The experience of the former autonomous region [ARMM] is proof of that.'

In 1997 Nur Misuari, historical leader of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which signed a general ceasefire agreement with the government of General Fidel Ramos (1992-98), became the ARMM's first governor. Within a few years, the autonomous region was riddled with corruption; regional clans bargained with politicians in Manila who sought their support (and the votes they could deliver). Poverty increased, even as it declined in the rest of the country, and the MILF, which had been excluded from the peace agreement, resumed fighting. Its leader, Al Haj Murad Ebrahim, now heads the transitional government. It is impossible not to feel a sense of déjà vu. The new powers may not mean the voices of the most disadvantaged are heard, and it is uncertain whether the economic policies introduced by the Moro elite will help reduce poverty and inequality. Or reduce violence in a region where it is endemic, and the armed conflict just one contributory factor.

## 'Will we involve our people?'

When Ebrahim took up his role as head of the transitional government,<sup>3</sup> he promised to 'involve our people in reporting the performance, or the lack thereof, of our regional and local officials'. Alim Bandara, head of the Centre for Indigenous Development (CIDeV), said 'Involving our people is exactly what we're asking for,' but has doubts as to whether it will happen. Bandara has fought for recognition of indigenous rights in the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) and for indigenous people's inclusion in the region's representative institutions. The Indigenous People Rights Act (1997) establishes their rights over ancestral land along with rights to cultural integrity, self-government and social justice, and has been incorporated into the BBL. Two seats in the transitional parliament have been allotted to indigenous representatives. These concessions were decisive in indigenous communities voting yes in the 2019 referendum.

**Autonomy for Bangsamoro was a necessary step, but is not enough. If the new administration breaks its promises, the disappointment will be as great as the huge hopes the referendum created**

Janel Pesons

Representation in the new administrative body was on the agenda at the intertribal meeting organised by the CIDeV in July 2019 in the municipality of Upi (Maguindanao). Special guest Romeo Saliga, one of the two indigenous parliamentary deputies, was questioned about why indigenous representatives for local communities had been appointed from the top rather than from the grassroots. He merely promised to pass on these concerns.

But how? The Duterte-appointed transitional government has 40 MILF members, 20 representatives of central government, nine from the MNLF and eight to represent women, the young and non-Moro indigenous minorities. The opposition is unrepresented. Family clans and their loyalists control most provincial and town governorships. These local potentates, who often have their own private armies, form temporary alliances that do not follow ideological or religious lines, and sometimes fight each other.

Duterte's camp won an overwhelming victory at the midterm elections in May 2019,<sup>4</sup> reinforcing the hegemony of the MILF-government partnership—

former enemies turned allies—and the power of local dynasties: almost all the governors and mayors elected in the autonomous region were Duterte-approved. This does not look good for fundamental change in Bangsamoro's power structures.

## To re-establish peace and order

It looks like business as usual in economic policy too. Pronouncements by Moro politicians and businesspeople suggest that Bangsamoro, far from distancing itself from Manila's neoliberalism, intends to ride a wave of rapid economic growth and try to attract foreign investors. John Carlo B Tria, president of Davao's chamber of commerce and industry, said,<sup>5</sup> 'The creation of the new Bangsamoro government, [intended to put in place the necessary conditions to re-establish] peace and order [in] Mindanao, has generated a lot of interest from Arab investors.' At a chamber of commerce meeting in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Congresswoman Sandra Sema of the first district of the province of Maguindanao called for a Halal Economic Zone to be created in Cotabato City.<sup>6</sup> Zaid Mangudadatu, a politician with links to Duterte and member of one of the island's most powerful clans, wants to grant Chinese, Israeli and Middle Eastern companies the right to explore for gas under the Liguasan Marsh, an important wetland that covers parts of Maguindanao, Cotabato and Sultan Kudarat.<sup>7</sup> Ebrahim, after rhetoric about the need to protect the environment and the interests of local people, echoed this by 'encouraging' mining companies to consider investing.<sup>8</sup>

Duterte's 'Build, build, build' programme, a vast infrastructure scheme of mainly Chinese-financed projects, also involves the autonomous region. It includes the Bangsamoro Road Network Development Project to build or improve a 200km network of roads and bridges linking it to other parts of Mindanao. It's unclear how this will benefit rural communities neglected by the authorities. The new roads will appeal to investors and facilitate access for agribusiness and forestry and mining companies. Bandara has no doubt that 'granting mining concessions and expanding monocultures for export

will harm our ancestral lands and all small farmers, whichever faith they belong to. This will cause more pressure on land, and land was at the heart of Mindanao's armed conflict.' That was demonstrated in May 2017 when the city of Marawi was seized by a commando force from the Maute group, supported by Abu Sayyaf, which had sworn allegiance to ISIS (Daesh) (see *Marawi, the Philippines' ruined city*).

Since the authorities' recapture of the city, which began in October 2017, the militarisation of the island, with or without martial law, has not been enough to end conflict. Islamist groups remain and know how to mobilise popular discontent: the frustrations of former fighters from the MILF or the MNLF who never completely disarmed, the confusion caused by the MILF's cooperation with Manila, the mistakes and delays in rebuilding Marawi, land disputes, the neglect of rural communities and the distress of young people who feel they have no future. Pesons said, 'Autonomy for Bangsamoro was a necessary step, but it's not in itself enough. If the new administration breaks its promises and doesn't tackle the root causes of the armed conflict—especially poverty and issues of land access—the disappointment will be as great as the huge hopes the referendum created. And it's the jihadist groups that will benefit' ●

Philippe Revelli is a journalist

<sup>1</sup> Only Sulu province, where the jihadist group Abu Sayyaf is based, voted no (54.3%) <sup>2</sup> Jodesz Gavilan, 'Fast facts: Poverty in Mindanao', *Rappler*, Manila, 28 May 2017, www.rappler.com <sup>3</sup> Carolyn O Arguillas, 'BARMM Chief Minister to constituents: monitor performance of officials', *Minda News*, 1 April 2019, www.mindanews.com <sup>4</sup> Out of 12 senatorial posts, eight went to declared supporters of Duterte, four to 'independent figures' and none to the opposition. In the national parliament, Duterte's PDP-Laban party and its allies hold almost all of the 234 seats. Former President Benigno Aquino's Liberal Party has just 18 and the Makabayan groups (communist radical left) have six <sup>5</sup> Antonio L Colina IV, 'Davao Chamber VP: Bangsamoro sparks interest of Arab investors in Mindanao', *Minda News*, 10 April 2019 <sup>6</sup> 'Maguindanao solon goes to Saudi on 2-day investment mission', *Manila Standard*, 5 February 2019 <sup>7</sup> 'Senate bet wants China, Israel to explore Liguasan Marsh oil deposits', ABS-CBN News, 13 March 2019, news.abs-cbn.com <sup>8</sup> Pia Ranada, 'Murad encourages "pro-people, pro-environment" mining in Bangsamoro', *Rappler*, 9 August 2019



EVERY METROPOLIS FIGHTS FOR ITS CITIZENS' LIVES

# The return of the city-state

The world's great cities are cooperating where national governments are failing. In the Covid-19 crisis, US mayors are providing the responsible governing and healthcare the federal government won't deliver

**Benoît Bréville** | Translated by Charles Goulden



Deserted streets in Montelimar, France

**A**NY SERIOUS CANDIDATE for mayor of a major French city in 2020 needs to follow certain rules. For a start, promise to plant trees. Paris's incumbent mayor Anne Hidalgo has undertaken to plant 170,000 over six years; her rival, Cédric Villani, who hosted the opening last July of the Cartier Foundation's hugely popular exhibition about trees (*Nous les Arbres*), plans to create tree-lined walks through the city. In Marseilles, Les Républicains candidate Martine Vassal (centre right) wants to plant a tree for every child born in the city – currently running at 80,000 per mayoral term – three times more than her Socialist rival, Senator Samia Ghali. In Lille, candidates are promoting urban forests and urban green spaces.

A love of tree planting isn't enough. Candidates must also promise to build green buildings, encourage cycling and car clubs, convert school cafeterias to organic food, sponsor culture, promote energy transition, and make their city more attractive. Their manifestos must include the terms 'innovation', 'transparency' and 'participatory democracy', and use the word 'sustainable' as often as possible, in conjunction with development, city, area, tourism, construction etc.

All candidates, whether in Seattle, Montreal or Berlin, use the same words, formulae and ideas, and offer the same things, as if they were all shopping from a catalogue of good practices applicable to any city or country, and as if local policy could be reduced to a set of pragmatic responses and common-sense solutions to concrete problems.

'While nations talk... cities act,' Michael Bloomberg used to say when he was mayor of New York (2002-13) and president of the C40 Climate Leadership Group, a coalition of 94 of the world's largest cities against climate change. His maxim has gained a following: many city decision-makers feel national governments are too bogged down in ideological and partisan conflicts to act effectively, and believe cities must come together to make up for their deficiencies.

## City diplomacy

This idea, presented as a self-evident truth in urban planning literature, is the foundation of 'city diplomacy'. It dates back to the twinning of French and German towns to promote reconciliation after the second world war (see *Politics of city diplomacy*), but now inspires coalitions, forums and networks of global cities, whose number and influence have grown steadily over the last 30 years. In 1985 there were 55; today there are more than 200.<sup>1</sup> Besides the C40, they include Eurocities, the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), United

There are 50 cities, maybe 100, that are the intellectual, cultural and economic engine of the world. We are all working on the same things because we face similar opportunities

Rahm Emanuel

Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the Unesco Creative Cities Network, Mayors for Peace, and the WHO's Health Cities Network. Ivo Daalder, a political scientist and former advisor to Barack Obama, says, 'On inequality, immigration, health, security, governance, human rights and a host of other critical issues, cities are increasingly bypassing national governments and looking to each other for solutions.'<sup>2</sup>

These groups have the support of the World Bank, the UN and multinationals (sponsors of the last C40 mayoral summit included Ikea, Microsoft, Google, Velux and Dell Technologies), and are powerful advocates of the metropolitan cult of innovation that brings together local governments and businesses. The private sector is so keen on city diplomacy that it has set up its own groups, including IT giant Cisco's City Protocol and the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities network.

These international networks are key in defining the good practices passed on from city to city, as well as promoting the recycling of green capitalism. As part of their diplomatic activities, municipal councils attend congresses, shows and exhibitions, and go on study trips where they present their experiments and successes, hear from others doing the same, and take back home ready-made solutions. According to Alain Bourdin and Joël Idt, 'The use of practices established by others enables actors to combine two contradictory objectives: to create something new, while offering assurances that the practices to be applied have been validated elsewhere.'<sup>3</sup>

The C40 boasts of having launched more than 14,000 concrete initiatives on climate change between 2012 and 2018. Changwon (South Ko-

rea), Tokyo and New York shared techniques for cladding roofs to reflect the sun and cool down buildings. Barcelona, Singapore, Auckland and Warsaw shared expertise on electric buses. Field leaders (Paris for underground railway systems, Copenhagen for cycling networks) gave technical support to less experienced cities.

Every year, the best ideas are recognised at the C40 Cities Bloomberg Philanthropies Awards. In 2019 they included Medellín's (Colombia) green corridors, Seoul's solar panels, San Francisco's support for renewable energy, and Guangzhou's electric buses. C40 president Anne Hidalgo said, 'These projects should be studied by mayors and city leaders across the world.' Awards like these are assets to cities wanting to increase their international standing, and there is no shortage of them: each network, journal and level of government designates its own stars. Every year the European Commission chooses European capitals (green, youth, of culture, of innovation) and gives Access City Awards for being friendly to the elderly and disabled. France's economy ministry uses a French Tech label to foster 'tech champions' that may attract foreign investment.

The specialist media fetes award-winning cities, which may become models, or 'trendsetting cities',<sup>4</sup> their names associated with good practices imitated (or more often pastiched) around the world: Porto Alegre (Brazil) is known for its participatory budgeting, Singapore for its urban road toll system, Bilbao for its strategy of economic regeneration through culture (the Guggenheim effect), Hamburg for its management of flood risk, Seattle for its startup incubators, London for its management of sport mega-events, Vancouver for its sustainable development.

## 'Only Lyons'

Every metropolis dreams of being a model. Yves Viltard, one of France's few experts on city diplomacy, emphasises that economic competition between major cities 'goes hand-in-hand with competition based on the creation of attractive brand images, of branding'.<sup>5</sup> Participating in forums like the C40 is a great way to enhance a city's brand image and awareness, key assets in the competition to attract investors, businesses, skilled workers, students or major events that yield economic dividends. Rahm Emanuel, mayor of Chicago 2011-19, said in 2016, 'There are 50 cities, maybe 100, that are the intellectual, cultural and economic engine of the world. We are all working on the same things because we face similar opportunities. We have to make our cities competitive. The jobs and companies we talk about are not only global but mobile.'<sup>6</sup>

To help them appeal to investors, municipal councils hire urban development consultants, who compile dossiers in support of candidatures for awards and labels, fill in the application forms for grants from philanthropic foundations that fund urban projects, and come up with logos and slogans, preferably in English ('Only Lyons', 'So Toulouse', 'My Rodez'), to be displayed on all communications and at major events.

Competition inevitably draws cities into benchmarking, a race without a finish line, with each trying to be more innovative and modern, trendier than the rest, at national, continental or global level. So Aix-en-Provence presents itself to potential investors as if it were like San Francisco. A brochure published by the council's attractiveness and international cooperation department reads, 'The birthplace of the famous painter Paul Cézanne has moved with the times, earning French Tech certification and offering an ecosystem that appeals to project owners and business founders... A smart, connected city with a focus on digital innovation and an international outlook, Aix-en-Provence is a modern, cosmopolitan, cultural and dynamic city, open to the world.'

Yet these competing metropolises still get together to defend common interests and use city diplomacy to lobby. The Eurocities network's mission is to 'ensure that the opinions of major

cities are taken into account in the drafting of [European] policy'. The UCLG boasts of its political lobbying of the EU, as well as the World Bank and UN, to establish a European fund for city diplomacy. The ICLEI presses the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to emphasise the central role of cities against global warming. In 2017 the C40 established the Urban 20 association, which seeks to influence ministers involved in discussions at G20 summits.<sup>7</sup>

## Old territorial divide

All this creates a vicious circle: globalisation, by concentrating wealth and high value-added economic activities in metropolises, has increased their economic, political and cultural weight. Facing the same problems and with the same well-to-do and well-qualified populations, cities have started to look alike – New York and Beijing have the same tall buildings, sterile shopping malls and 'creative clusters' – and to club together. United in defending common interests, they influence centres of decision-making from the World Bank to the European Commission, steering public policy to their advantage and accentuating a spatially uneven model of development that neglects rural areas and small towns.

This old territorial divide has never been so great. Cities cover their buildings in greenery and introduce electric buses; outside them, people worry about housing that has been abandoned because there is no one to live in it, or about bus timetables that provide no service in the evening, on public holidays or at weekends. In most western countries the divide has widened considerably since the financial crisis of 2008. French GDP per capita stagnated between 2008 and 2016 except in the Paris region, where it rose by 3%. Over the same period US employment rose by 4.8 points in metropolitan areas and fell by 2.4 points elsewhere. In the UK, London accounts for 35% of the new jobs created since 2008.<sup>8</sup>

To Paris, New York, London, Amsterdam or Toronto, the 2008 crisis was only a passing episode; now employment is again high, housing prices are reaching new peaks, investment is pouring in, and there has never been a greater concentration of the rich, even if pockets of poverty persist, especially in social housing complexes.

But outside the big, successful cities, less densely populated, more working-class, areas are still suffering from that 2008 recession. They are trapped in a cycle where population declines because of the disappearance of low-skilled and industrial jobs, which leads to a fall in house prices and a crisis in local government finances. Fewer people, fewer jobs and cheaper housing mean less tax revenue, which impacts on public services and infrastructure maintenance. These areas become even less attractive to live in, leading to further population decline, and so the cycle continues.

The far right, and more broadly the populist parties, opposed to globalisation and the free movement of goods and people, are strongest in these areas. In the 2016 US presidential election, Donald Trump won in counties where income growth was slowest, the population declining and the mortality rate increasing; Hillary Clinton won in 88 of the 100 most densely populated counties (those which include major cities). In France and the UK, the Rassemblement National and Brexit-aligned parties won big in the areas worst affected by falling house prices.<sup>9</sup> The progressive parties, as advocates of free trade, green capitalism, opening up and innovation, won most votes in metropolises.

## Coalition of secular urbanites

In Hungary, in October 2019, Budapest elected an ecologist mayor, Gergely Karácsony, who is a fierce critic of prime minister Viktor Orbán. In the Czech Republic, in November 2018, Prague elected as mayor Zdeněk Hřib of the Pirate Party, who wants to plant a million trees and defends refugees, unlike Prime Minister Andrej Babiš,



who criticised 'immigration for the purpose of increasing the population' in Europe. Last year, Istanbul, which 25 years ago launched Turkey's Islamo-conservative president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, elected a mayor from the main opposition party (CHP, secular, social democratic). The *Washington Post* wrote in 2018, 'The coalition of secular urbanites, business, youth, women and minorities had mobilized actively... Turks, Kurds and Uzbeks share sidewalks with Senegalese, Qataris and Syrians. Seventh-generation Istanbulites live in this city with migrants, expatriates and refugees. Sharing spaces, if not lives, the myriad citizens are connected by a common urbanity.'

This rosy view has become widespread in the last decade. The *Guardian* believes that 'New York values, just like those of other world cities, are the values of optimism, diversity and tenacity we should all aspire to' (31 October 2016). The World Economic Forum in Davos has called metropolises an 'antidote to populism': 'Many of the world's cities are busily re-imagining politics, economics and environmental action from the bottom up. Some of them are constructing a positive, inclusive and plural vision of the future, even as nationalist leaders peddle fear, close borders and build walls.' Noting that 'urban and rural populations are increasingly worlds apart when it comes to values and priorities' it calls on metropolises to work together and step up their city diplomacy.<sup>10</sup>

Ivo Daalder, former counsellor to Barack Obama, recommends the establishment of 'mini-embassies' where cities have major interests, to bypass potential blockages at government level. São Paulo, London and Toronto have already experimented with these, but their citizens were angered by what they saw as a waste of public money. Daalder suggests 'a public-private partnership may be a possible solution.'

Some cities are now fighting populism directly. Last December, the mayors of Prague, Bratislava, Warsaw and Budapest signed a Pact of Free Cities, challenging their central governments and accusing them of spreading 'the kind of xenophobic nationalism that twice engulfed Europe in war in the previous century... We do not cling to an outdated understanding of the concepts of sovereignty and identity, but believe in an open society based on our cherished common values of freedom, human dignity, democracy, sustainability, equality, the rule of law, social justice, tolerance, and cultural diversity.' They all want cities to 'pool their resources and exchange ideas on what works.'

#### 'Destructive and un-American'

Some US metropolises present themselves as leading opponents of Trump. In January 2017, soon after he had moved into the White House, the mayors of San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Boston, New York, Washington, Detroit and Chicago announced that they would not apply his executive orders to intensify the suppression of clandestine immigration. Boston's mayor Marty Walsh called the legislation 'destructive and un-American', 'a direct attack on Boston's people, Boston's strength and Boston's values'. Washington's mayor Muriel Bowser said, 'Our city and our values did not change on Election Day in November 2016... we are not an agent of the federal government.'<sup>11</sup> A few months later, they revolted over environmental issues, with some intending to uphold the Paris climate accord despite Trump's decision to withdraw the US from it. Former New

York mayor Michael Bloomberg went so far as to stand for nomination as Democratic candidate to challenge Trump in the 2020 election.

Brexit roused some cities in the UK to action. The day after the June 2016 referendum, a petition calling for London's mayor Sadiq Khan to declare the city independent from the UK was launched, soon attracting 180,000 signatures. Khan did not want to go as far as advocating independence, but did wish to dissociate himself from the national vote to leave the European Union. Four days after the referendum, he and Anne Hidalgo published a joint open letter in the *Financial Times* and *Le Parisien*: 'Our cities are places where everyone, whatever their backgrounds, can feel at home. As the mayors of London and Paris, we are today committing to work ever more closely together in order to build far stronger alliances between cities across Europe and around the world. Together, we can act as a powerful counterweight to the lethargy of nation states and to the influence of industrial lobbies. Together, we can and will shape the century ahead.'

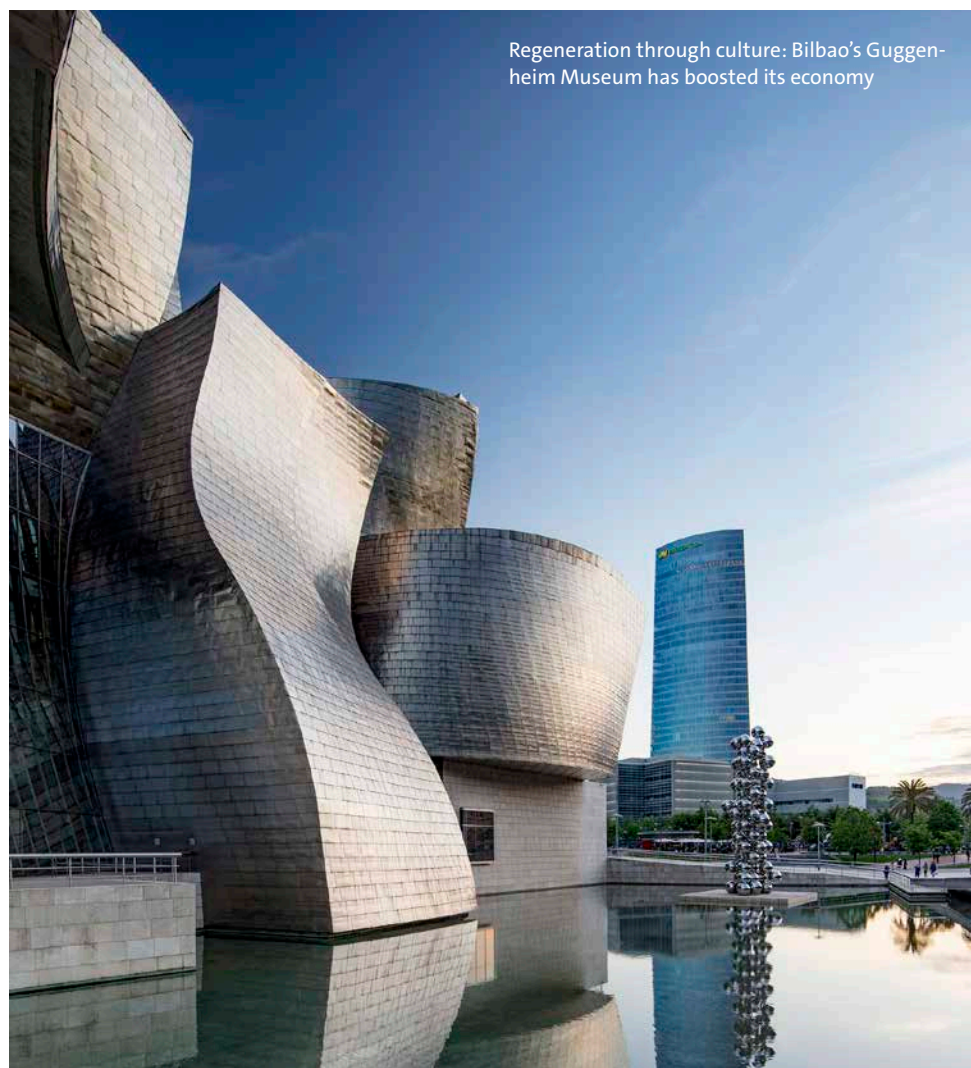
To reassure tourists and investors, Khan launched a PR campaign with the hashtag #LondonIsOpen. Backed by the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the City of London Corporation, as well as thinktanks and multinationals, he asked for the introduction of work visas valid for London only, and for London to be granted extraterritoriality in its relations with the EU single market. He got neither, but his fierce opposition to Brexit has brought him international prestige far greater than a mayor can usually hope for, and he now shares podiums with foreign government ministers and heads of state such as Canada's Justin Trudeau, Argentina's Mauricio Macri or France's Emmanuel Macron.

#### Resistance to Trump's policies

Leftwing media greet such resistance enthusiastically. In a special feature 'Cities take power' (1st quarter 2020), the French news magazine *Regards* sees the mutiny of US metropolises as evidence that 'there is scope for resistance to President Trump's repressive policies.' But this interpretation widens territorial divides by re-inforcing the idea that metropolises no longer worry about the fate of the rest of their country. It also turns socio-geographical divides into conflicts over values, a word that keeps coming back. The divide is no longer between areas that benefit from globalisation, free trade, the free movement of skilled workers and cheap foreign labour, and those that suffer from these things, but between areas that are open and look to the future and others that are closed and obsessed with tradition.

*If Mayors Ruled the World*,<sup>12</sup> by Benjamin Barber, a political analyst and former advisor to President Bill Clinton, is a book popular with city decision-makers. Barber caricatures the way urban elites see other national citizens. In relation to metropolises and major cities, he uses words such as open, creative, cosmopolitan, mobile, changeable, innovation, secular, progressive, sophistication, trade and liberty; for rural areas and small-town US, he uses terms like bordered, conventional, parochial, unmoving, stable, repetition, religious, conservative, simplicity, autarchy and tradition.

Political scientist Lawrence R Jacobs looked beyond the clichés with a 2019 study in Minnesota, where Trump took nearly 20 counties that had



Regeneration through culture: Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum has boosted its economy

voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012.<sup>13</sup> It singled out the huge pay gap between Minneapolis and the rest of the state as a major divisive factor. In 2017 Minneapolis decided to increase its minimum wage by stages to \$15 an hour, a measure commonly used in big cities to enable less skilled workers to afford housing despite high urban prices. Elsewhere in Minnesota, if workers can get jobs at all, they earn no more than \$10 in major corporations and \$8.15 in small businesses. The people Jacobs interviewed saw the pay gap as a form of exclusion. 'Everywhere [in Minneapolis] there are cranes and help-wanted signs for jobs that start at \$15 per hour,' said a resident of a small town that really needed its own construction projects.

Jacobs also emphasised how far the rhetoric and concepts adopted by Minneapolis progressives, meant to appeal to the urban upper classes, seemed out of touch with people elsewhere in Minnesota. He cited the idea of white privilege, misapplied by Minneapolis city councillors and local Democrat activists. Some of Minnesota's poorest counties are 95% white, and those who live there, condemned to low wages and precarious employment, do not feel at all privileged when they look at Minneapolis. They refer not to white privilege but to 'metropolitan privilege', a term they apply to both ethnic minorities and white collar workers.<sup>14</sup>

Big cities and their decision-makers are in ever closer touch with each other around the world, but increasingly cut off from places elsewhere in their own countries. Their uniformly innovative, open, sustainable, creative and intelligent discourse fails to hide their unprecedented capture of wealth, which may not make them the best qualified institutions to propose an antidote to populism ●

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<sup>1</sup> Michele Acuto, 'Give cities a seat at the top table', *Nature*, vol 537, no 7622, London, 28 September 2016 <sup>2</sup> Ivo Daalder, 'Why cities need their own foreign policies', *Politico*, 6 June 2017 <sup>3</sup> Alain Bourdin and Joël Idt, *L'Urbanisme des modèles: Références, benchmarking et bonnes pratiques* (Models of Urban Planning), L'Aube, La Tour-d'Aigues, 2016 <sup>4</sup> Vincent Béal, "'Trendsetting cities': les modèles à l'heure des politiques urbaines néolibérales' (Trendsetting cities), *Métropolitiques*, 30 June 2014 <sup>5</sup> Yves Viltard, 'Diplomatie des villes: collectivités territoriales et relations internationales' (City diplomacy), *Politique étrangère*, no 3, Paris, autumn 2010 <sup>6</sup> Quoted in Ronald Brownstein, 'The growing gap between town and country', *The Atlantic*, Washington DC, 22 September 2016 <sup>7</sup> Michele Acuto and Simon Curtis, 'The foreign policy of cities', *The russi Journal*, vol 163, no 6, London, December 2018 <sup>8</sup> See Roberto Stefan Foa and Jonathan Wiltom, 'The West has a resentment epidemic', *Foreign Policy*, Washington DC, 18 September 2019, and Thomas B Edsall, 'Reaching out the voters the left left behind', *The New York Times*, 13 April 2017 <sup>9</sup> David Adler and Ben Ansell, 'Housing and populism', *West European Politics*, vol 43, no 2, Abingdon-on-Thames (UK), June 2019 <sup>10</sup> See Robert Muggah and Misha Glenn, 'Populism is poison. Plural cities are the antidote', World Economic Forum, Davos, 4 January 2017 <sup>11</sup> Quoted in Nicolas Maisetti, 'Le Retour des villes dissidentes' (Dissident cities in the news again), report for the French Ministry for Ecological and Inclusive Transition, Paris, October 2018 <sup>12</sup> Benjamin Barber, *If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2014 <sup>13</sup> Lawrence R Jacobs, 'Minnesota's urban-rural divide is no lie', *Star Tribune*, Minneapolis, 26 July 2019 <sup>14</sup> On Wisconsin, see Katherine J Cramer, 'For years, I've been watching anti-elite fury build in Wisconsin. Then came Trump', *Vox*, 16 November 2016

## Politics of city diplomacy

Benoît Bréville

CITY DIPLOMACY is generally considered to have started with town twinnings (then known as 'matchings') intended to promote reconciliation between France and Germany after the second world war. The first, between Montbéliard and Ludwigsburg, was agreed in May 1950 and by January 1963, when the Élysée Treaty sealed the reconciliation, there were 130. Meanwhile, other countries had got involved: Troyes twinned with Tournai (Belgium) in 1951, Paris with Rome in 1956. Jean Bareth, one of the founders of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions in 1951, wrote, 'A twinning is a meeting of

two municipalities that intend to work together within a European perspective to address their problems and develop ever closer ties of friendship with one another.'

This ideal of fraternity in Europe remains one of the goals of city diplomacy today. In May 2015 a Council of Paris statement on the city's international action stated, 'Our duty today is to promote knowledge of and affection for Europe, by familiarising the people of Paris with it, and by promoting exchange and bridge-building with other European cities. In this, we will build on our privileged relationships with [cities such as] Rome, Amsterdam, Vienna and Lisbon, and on increased dialogue with the European Commission in Brussels.'

Opposition to Donald Trump's immigration policies among US cities is also part of a long tradition, in this case of political protest. During

the Vietnam war (1961-75), many municipal councils adopted resolutions calling for an end to US military engagement. Later, cities and counties joined the fight against nuclear power and nuclear weapons by declaring themselves nuclear-free zones – Missoula (Montana) in 1978, Takoma Park (Maryland) in 1983, Berkeley (California) in 1986 – or refusing to award public contracts to companies with links to the nuclear industry. In the 1980s around a hundred municipalities protested against Ronald Reagan's policy on South Africa by boycotting companies that did business with the apartheid regime. It was also at this time that the 'sanctuary' movement began, with cities offering Central American migrants refuge from the US immigration authorities. This was not about moral values, it was a political decision based on their disagreement with US foreign policy ●





THE PAST AND PRESENT OF STEVE MCQUEEN

# Looking without blinking

The artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen has been using the camera in fresh and original ways for over 20 years to develop a poetic imagery of the human condition. Exhibitions of his work were on at London's Tate Britain and Tate Modern until sudden closure due to Covid-19

Jon Bird | LMD English edition exclusive

TO REACH Steve McQueen's exhibition in Tate Modern's Blavatnik galleries, I had to go through the cathedral-like Turbine Hall, which was showing a towering, four-tiered fountain, *Fons Americanus* by Kara Walker. It's a riposte to the Queen Victoria Memorial outside Buckingham Palace, and an allegorical counter-narrative to empire building; its sculpted figures reference the interconnected histories of Africa, America and Europe, and its water signifies the transatlantic slave trade.

The fountain is a metaphor for the 'Black Atlantic' (British historian Paul Gilroy's term for the intertwining of American and European Black identity and culture); it engages with debates on the contemporary meanings of public monuments that implicitly celebrate colonial histories and politics. Gilroy wrote one of the essays for McQueen's exhibition catalogue.

McQueen, artist and filmmaker and Turner Prize winner (1999), is also an Oscar winner for Best Picture with *12 Years a Slave* (2013). His 14 film/video works and one sculpture share the critical and interrogative stance of the fountain, but without its explicit representation of the political. For Gilroy, McQueen's two decades of work in the exhibition, in its formal, conceptual and material structures, demands 'a new mentality and a wholly unprecedented human phenomenology'.

Traversing the darkened spaces of the Blavatnik galleries, I was made acutely aware of the perceptual and emotional range of the moving images and their soundtracks, assaulted and engaged in equal measure. In some works, such as *Western Deep* (2002) where the hand-held camera follows the descent into a South African gold mine over two miles below ground and its claustrophobic working conditions, or *Illuminer* (2001), McQueen's self-portrait shot only by the light from a flickering television in a Paris hotel bedroom, viewing became an act of focused concentration to make meaning of the visual and auditory narratives.

## Voice-over of Marcus's tale

Other works prioritised the soundtrack in the construction of meaning. *7th Nov.* (2001) presented a single image, a backlit photographic slide of a recumbent figure, the top of his shaven head occupying most of the frame, a scar running from ear to ear. This was Marcus, a cousin of the artist, who in voice-over told the tragic tale of the accidental shooting of his younger brother while loading a gun. The 20-minute monologue was delivered with a deadpan London accent that, together with the image, left the viewer to decipher the nature of their relationship. Was I observing Marcus or his brother, and what was the story behind the scar?

McQueen trained at the art department of Goldsmiths, University of London, which produced many of the YBAs (Young British Artists) of the 1980s. But although many in his generation gravitated to the moving image as their main means of creative expression, few transitioned to mainstream cinema. McQueen's major features – *Hunger* (2008), *Shame* (2011), *12 Years a Slave* and *Widows* (2018) – had an audience far beyond the avant-garde, and inform the cultural context in which these artists' films and videos are received. It is evident that McQueen brings a visual artist's aesthetic to filmmaking, in framing, narrative, mise en scène, and in the structural interdependence of the narrative with the camera's eye.

There is a profoundly tactile quality to his images, partly sensed through the lens's focus upon the body (generally the black, male body), and partly through the camera's movements, often hand-held and so subject to the stability, or not, of the operator's controlling hand. Many of McQueen's formal and technical tropes could be taken as evidence of a structuralist aesthetic, drawing attention to the device and the cinematic institution, the act of looking, through jerky movements that



de-stabilise the frame, or improvisation. However, McQueen says his approach, also present in his cinematic narratives, is 'about being present and responding to what is in front of you', which is not exactly a manifesto for structuralist theorising.

My first filmic encounter in the show was with *Static* (2009), a seven-minute 35mm film shot from a helicopter circling the Statue of Liberty in New York harbour. Immediately after the attacks of 9/11, it was closed to all visitors and only re-opened shortly before filming. The constantly circling camera isolates parts of the figure, following Liberty's upraised arm holding aloft the torch of freedom, focusing in on the uneven discolouration of the oxidised metal, picking out the dirt in the folds of her costume and a seagull's nest perched in her armpit, while panning the industrial architecture of the New Jersey shoreline. The uneven camera movement is transferred to the figure, further destabilising its meaning, to the noisy accompaniment of throbbing helicopter blades. These dystopian views dismantle the statue's celebratory monumentality and question its claim to welcome all to 'the land of the free'.

## Cross-section of life on earth

*Once Upon a Time* (2002) is a sequential projection of 116 images and voice recordings originally selected by NASA to be dispatched aboard the Voyager 1 and 2 spacecraft launched in 1977. It was compiled to present a cross-section of humanity and life on earth, including images of a new-born baby, city buildings and natural landscapes, flight and transport, and to show space, the moon and galaxies, mathematical symbols and equations for measurement and distance, overlaid with natural sounds, spoken languages and what sound like nonsensical utterances, glossolalia. The Voyagers, still travelling at 150 million miles a year,

have now entered interstellar space, transporting instruments and this highly selective databank. In theory, they could make the first contact with alien life.

Off the main gallery, in a small, dark, enclosed space, *Illuminer* tested my ability to make meaning from semi-abstract forms and an English/French soundtrack. McQueen filmed himself in a Paris hotel bed watching a programme on American special forces in Afghanistan. His body is a dark and hazy silhouette, and little can be made of the room, illuminated by the TV monitor. In foregrounding the camera's gaze upon the body and the limits of film technology, *Illuminer* is conceptually related to the other 16mm film works, *Cold Breath* (1999) and *Charlotte* (2004).

*Cold Breath* marked the chronological start to the exhibition, showing a close-up of the artist's bare chest with his fingers caressing, squeezing and pinching his nipple during a 10-minute take. *Charlotte* focused on the eye of the actor Charlotte Rampling, filmed through a red filter, as McQueen's fingers delicately probe her eyelids and surrounding skin, once making contact with the eye, as tense and painful to observe as it must have felt to her. Anyone who knows film history will connect it with the eyeball-slitting in Luis Buñuel's movie *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). In these works, looking becomes a phenomenological act as the relation between looking and touching is made present in intimate filmic narratives that shift between vulnerability, pleasure and pain.

McQueen has worked on many projects with the London-based arts organisation Artangel, which since 1991 has been under the directorship of James Lingwood and Michael Morris. Their intention is to work closely with individual artists or groups over an extended period, to produce temporary works in any medium that occupies space outside of the usual exhibition zones. Art-

ists are encouraged to think imaginatively about the encounter between work, site and audience, without restrictions of scale, budget or saleability. There were three Artangel projects in the show: *Weight* (2016), a sculpture made for a group exhibition staged in the cells and other spaces of HM Prison Reading; *Caribs' Leap* (2002), a 35mm film shot on Super 8mm and set on the island of Grenada; and *Western Deep*, filmed in a goldmine in South Africa.

When I visited the exhibition, *Caribs' Leap* was not being screened. But I remember from a previous viewing a split-screen projection, one side showing a grey, cloudy sky and the faint outline of a figure, suspended or falling out of frame, while the other screen documents the everyday life of Grenadians, with the ambient sounds of the island as a soundtrack. McQueen's family came from Grenada, and when he went back for his grandmother's funeral, he determined to make a film about a tragic act of resistance to French colonisation. In 1650 the former governor of Martinique bought Grenada from the Caribs for a nominal sum and then sent in troops to expel them. The Caribs, forced to the northernmost tip of the island, leapt off the cliffs to their deaths rather than surrender to French authority.

## Power and oppression

Mortality is McQueen's ever-present theme. The perils that threaten the black male body – from the racialised histories of colonialism to individual violence resulting from the social necessities of survival (why did Marcus feel the need to own the gun that ended his brother's life?) – trace the tributaries of power and oppression that result from the entwining of empire building and the slave trade.

*Ashes* (2002-15) was made from the spare footage from *Caribs' Leap* with extra material filmed in 2013. McQueen and his cameraman, Robby Muller, originally recorded a young fisherman, Ashes, casually sitting on the prow of his boat, the rise-and-fall of the sea creating a rhythm of water and sky behind his lithe black body. Totally self-possessed, Ashes looks back at the camera, stands, falls into the water, re-emerges smiling, climbs back into the boat, and the sequence repeats. Nothing is indicated other than an elegiac celebration of sensuous pleasure. The darkness comes from the visual narrative on the reverse screen, where two workers build a cement mausoleum in the island cemetery, the sounds of their work intruding into the idyllic space of the boat trip, alerting you to another reality. On his return visit in 2013, McQueen learnt of Ashes's drug-related murder, so the film is a narrative of love and loss, promise and potentiality snuffed out by the economic necessities of life as a young, post-colonial Grenadian.

During the making of *Caribs' Leap*, McQueen decided to reinterpret the central motif of the falling figure as a descent from sky to earth. However, *Western Deep* presents a very different order of descending, in a very different location (the film is named after the TauTona gold mine, close to Johannesburg). Filmed on Super 8mm in near darkness, it follows a group of miners as they enter a lift and descend two miles to a purgatorial netherworld of heat, dust, noise and bodies labouring to extract ore from the rock. You see a grim regime of visibility and concealment, both technical (limitations on the camera) and metaphorical, the histories of discrimination that determine these forms of labour. The sound deafens as drills fight to penetrate resistant matter, then there is silence as figures emerge from murky depths, alarming and then reassuring. The act of looking is an embodied and sensory experience as you strain to follow the visual narrative, feel the extremes of temperature and illumination, smell the dust, and tense to the staccato of industrial machinery. McQueen's choice of film stock means that the images, when enlarged through projec-





tion, are heavily pixelated, a visual expression of his intention that you should 'actually feel the molecules of dust'.

The third Artangel project breaks with the pattern of film/video work. *Weight* was initially included in the artworks exhibited in the decommissioned Reading Gaol to mark the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality. The playwright Oscar Wilde was jailed there for two years, 1895-97, after his conviction for 'gross indecency'. McQueen's sculptural response to this space of isolation and confinement was a gold-plated mosquito net suspended over a metal prison bedframe, lightness and delicacy enclosing/protecting the bare base.

#### Long surveillance of Paul Robeson

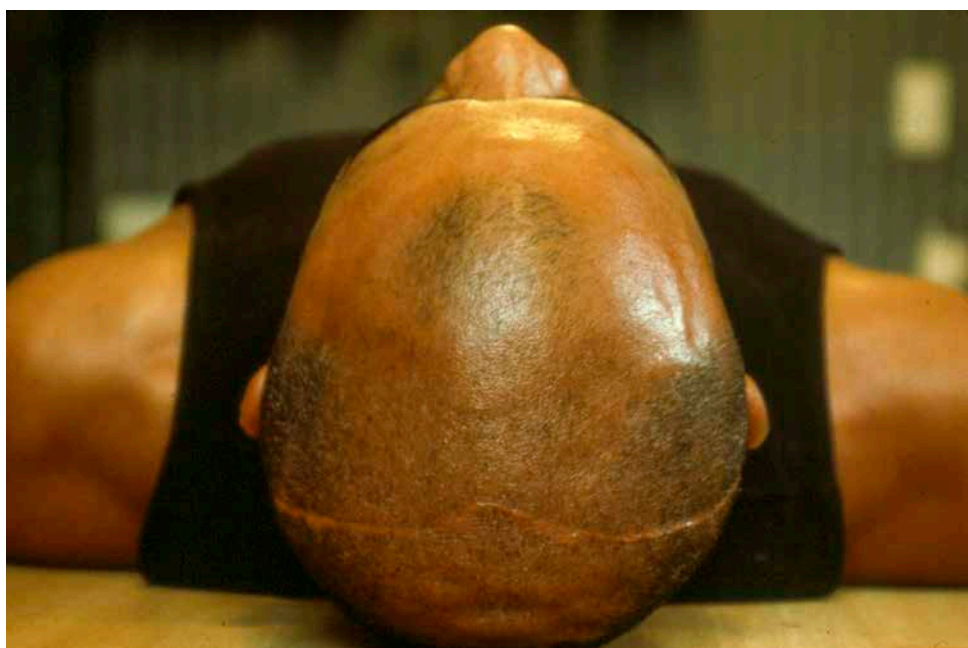
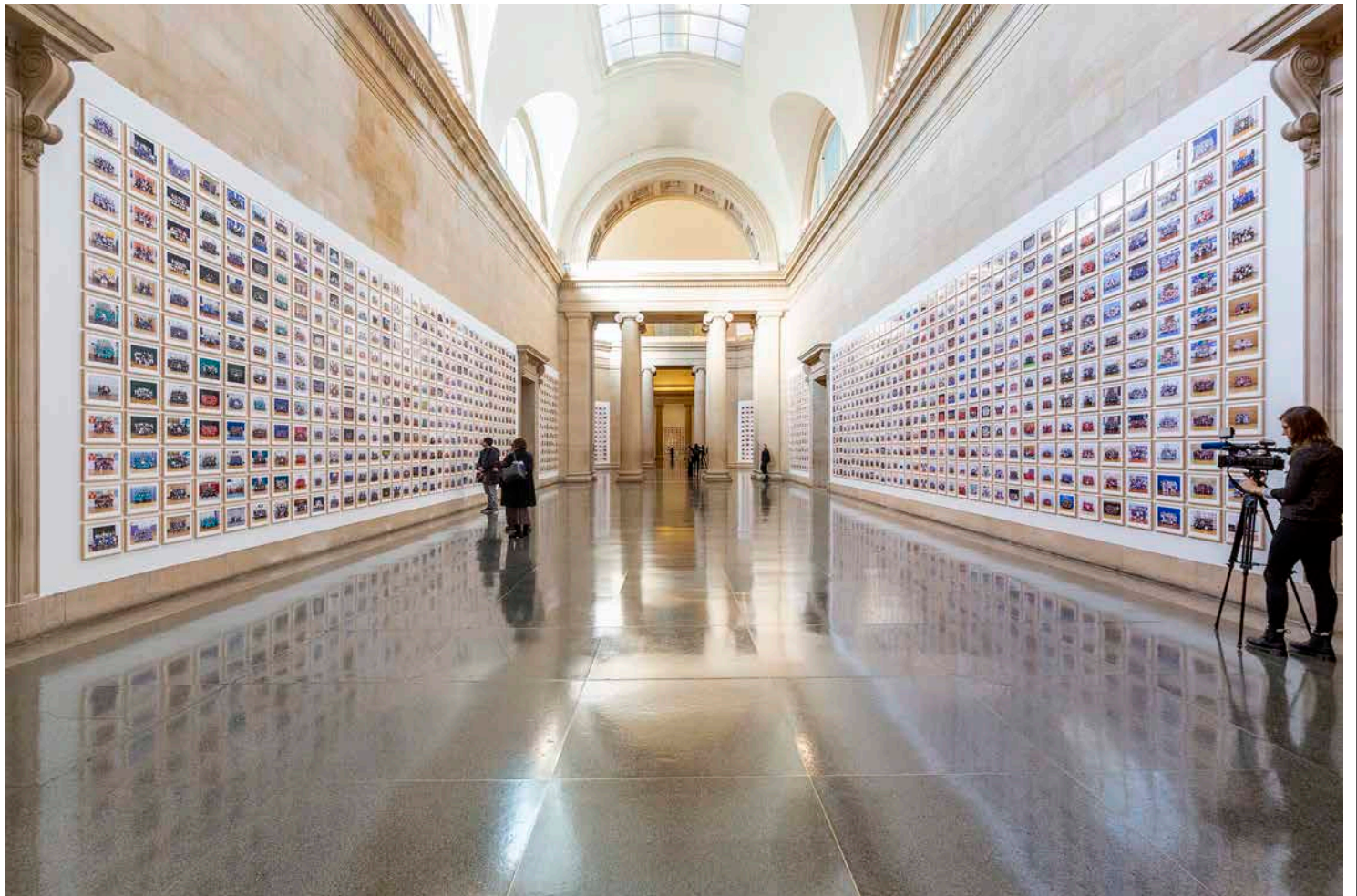
*End Credits* (2012-ongoing) is an open-ended video and soundtrack documenting the 35-year surveillance of the African-American singer and actor Paul Robeson. From 1941, continuing through the McCarthy era of anti-communist hysteria, the FBI monitored every aspect of Robeson's life, from his civil rights activities to the most mundane events. The camera scrolls through an archive of tens of thousands of documents made available through the Freedom of Information Act, many of which have large sections of text redacted. The soundtrack has male and female voices reading from the accounts, but out of sync with the images.

This work relates to *Once Upon a Time* in some aspects, encapsulating the inevitable failure of the mere accumulation of data to capture the reality of social being. However intrusively and extensively the FBI probed Robeson's life, they ended up with a partial and selective portrait. The banality of many of the texts, a meeting here, a speech there, represents a repetitive accumulation of information driven only by a paranoid bureaucratic mentality. *End Credits* was being screened in London, the second most monitored world city after Beijing, when there is heightened awareness of the omnipresent gaze of corporate and governmental power. It speaks directly to our data-overload and the blurring of boundaries between public and private, state control and individual freedom.

Tate Britain, upriver from Tate Modern, was hosting another McQueen/Artangel collaboration. *Year 3* (2019) is also a massive accumulation of visual information but with a very different agenda, a positive portrayal of a social complex at a moment of individual and collective becoming. McQueen worked with a team of photographers to visit and document as many children as possible in their third year at London primary schools, including state, independent and special needs categories. The results were displayed as a gigantic grid of identical-format colour images that filled all the central Duveen Gallery. *Year 3* presented a portrait of London as a multicultural and ethnically diverse capital city.

McQueen chose children at the age of eight, when their consciousness expands beyond the confines and security of the family and their imagination stretches to encompass new horizons of knowledge. The 76,000 individual portraits, assembled in their classrooms with teaching staff, produced 3,128 group photographs. For two weeks last November, a selection of them went up on 600 poster sites across Greater London. Although the work represents a moment of social synchrony, it also reinforces a narrative of the city as a place of multiple encounters and communities, identities and histories, of arrivals and departures. Being a Londoner has, as these images proclaim, a utopic dimension. It recognises complexity and difference as the necessary foundation to build a civic future ●

Jon Bird is an artist, writer and curator, and Emeritus Professor of Art and Critical Theory at Middlesex University, London

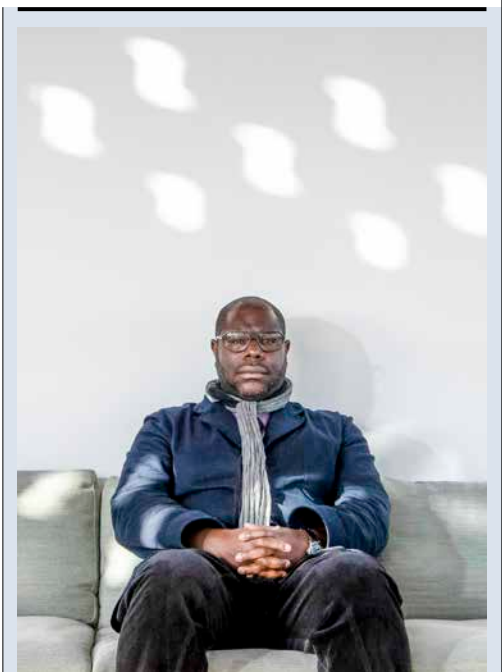


**Opposite page** Top: *Static* (2009); video still © Steve McQueen. Courtesy the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery. Bottom: *Charlotte* (2004); film still © Steve McQueen. Courtesy the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery

**Above** Top: *Year 3* (2019); photographs, inkjet print on paper, each 385 x 305mm (framed). Image ©

Tate Photography. Middle: *Ashes* (2002-15); video still © Steve McQueen. Courtesy the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery. Bottom: *7th Nov.* (2001); video still © Steve McQueen. Courtesy the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery

**Above right** Portrait of Steve McQueen 2020; Oli Cowling © Tate Photography



#### Artist and filmmaker

**S**TEVE MCQUEEN studied art and design at Chelsea College of Art and fine art at Goldsmiths, University of London (1990-94), followed by a brief period at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. His first significant film work was *Bear* (1993), a study of two naked black males wrestling that touched on issues of violence and eroticism. In *Deadpan* (1997) he restaged a Buster Keaton stunt – a favourite theme – from *Steamboat Bill Jr*, where the side of a house collapses around the standing figure of the artist.

He introduced sound in 1998 with *Drumroll*, in which three cameras record McQueen rolling an oil drum through the streets of Manhattan. He won the Turner Prize in 1999 and was made an official war artist in 2006, in response to the war in Iraq, creating *Queen and Country* (2007), sheets of postage stamps each bearing the portrait of a British soldier killed in the conflict.

McQueen made his first major feature film *Hunger* in 2008, followed by *Shame* (2011) and *Widows* (2018). With *12 Years a Slave* (2014) he won Best Motion Picture Drama at the Golden Globes, Best Film at the Baftas and an Oscar for Best Picture, the first black filmmaker to win the Academy Award. The boy born on a housing estate in Shepherds Bush, West London, in 1969, a child of Grenadian and Trinidadian origin who suffered various forms of institutional racism at school, has also won public recognition in the UK with an OBE (2002), a CBE (2011) and a KBE (2020) ●

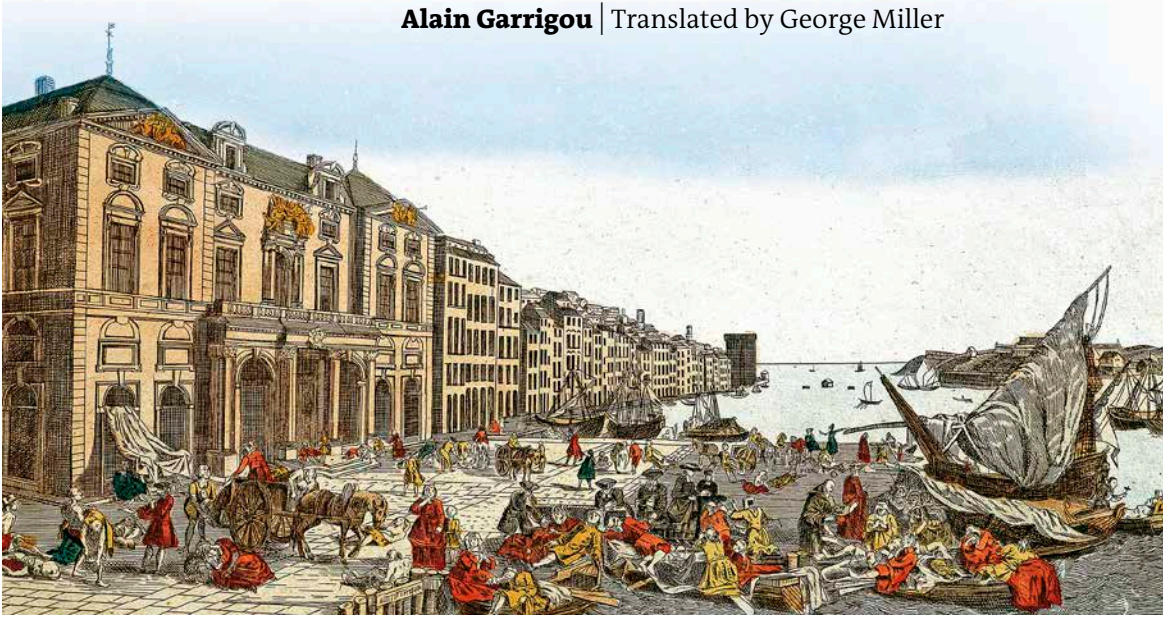


GREAT PLAGUE OF MARSEILLES, THE PRICE OF IMPORTS

# Gentle commerce and brutal trade

Montesquieu should have paid more attention to the relationship between trading and infection – where goods go, disease follows – because as a young man he lived through Europe's last major outbreak of plague, in Marseilles in 1720

Alain Garrigou | Translated by George Miller



Plague port: Marseilles, 1720

THE most influential exponent of the doctrine of *le doux commerce* [gentle trade] was Montesquieu. In *L'Esprit des lois* he states... "it is almost a general rule that wherever the ways of man are gentle, there is commerce; and wherever there is commerce, there the ways of men are gentle".<sup>1</sup> When economist Albert O Hirschman wrote about 17th- and 18th-century thinkers proposing the pursuit of material interests as a way to overcome humanity's propensity to go to war, he overlooked their blind spot: they failed to see that trade was not always as gentle as they claimed.

Their optimism should have been tempered by the harm that trade clearly did in aggressive colonisation and economic crises, and by the harm caused by pandemics. Between June and October 1720, when Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, was 31, plague killed a third of the population of Marseilles, half of Toulon's, and between 90,000 and 120,000 out of Provence's population of 400,000. How could Montesquieu and his peers ignore that trade came with its own catastrophes?

To be fair, he did not entirely ignore it. In his *Persian Letters*, written during the plague and published the following year, he mentions an earlier epidemic, probably the Black Death of 1347-49 which wiped out a third of Europe's population: "The most shameful of all diseases appeared in Europe, Asia, and Africa; in a very short time it had unbelievable effect, and had it continued its progress with the same fury, the human race would have been finished." At least he realised the worst outcome might be the extinction of humanity.

The Great Plague of Marseilles of 1720 was more limited in its spread than the Black Death, but just as significant in the history of epidemics. It began with the deaths of nine of the crew of the merchant ship *Grand Saint-Antoine*, on its return voyage from the Levant (Syria, Lebanon and Israel). It was refused entry to Marseilles on 25 May

1720 and was also turned away from Livorno, but was then quarantined off Marseilles, by the Île Jarre, reserved for plague-stricken ships. Ships' captains had to visit the sanitation board in Marseilles's old port to request permission to dock. In Sidon, Lebanon, the French consul had given the *Grand Saint-Antoine* a clean bill of health – certifying it had left the port free of contagious disease – as had the consuls in Tyre, where more cargo was loaded, and Tripoli, where repairs were done to the vessel. The captain informed Marseilles's sanitation board of the deaths at sea and, although a seaman died aboard after two days in Marseilles, the doctor who examined his body found no sign of plague.

#### Plague wall, military blockade

After sending the ship to the Île Jarre, the sanitation board had a change of heart. Bales of cotton from the ship were taken to a separate quarantine location, but its valuable cargo of silk was allowed ashore. A few days later, the board permitted all the cargo to be unloaded. It is not clear how the bales were distributed, but with them came the fleas carrying the plague. Porters were the first to sicken. Within days in late June, the epidemic exploded, striking first Marseilles's old quarters and then the new. It then spread through Provence. The town of Beaucaire was spared because it cancelled its fair, so goods meant to be sold there never reached it. The region was confined with a 'plague wall' and a military blockade to the north. Local people were traumatised, but popular memory retained positive images of heroic service to others rather than tragic scenes of bodies flung into the street and common graves. Statues were put up to the 'good bishop', Monsignor de Belzunce, and the Chevalier Roze, and streets named after them.

Divine will was invoked of course, but by the 18th century the authorities

would not let Providence shut down public life. The ship's captain, Jean-Baptiste Chataud, was charged, as was the city's deputy mayor Jean-Baptiste Estelle, a merchant who had received some of the ship's cargo. Chataud's defence was that he had obtained the necessary authorisation in Syria and had notified the sanitation board. Estelle died before it could be proved he had exerted influence to have the contaminated cargo unloaded. There is no documentary proof, but merchants seem to have pressed to have their goods taken off. When the vessel's health officer died the day before the ship's quarantine was lifted, the port surgeon diagnosed death from old age. The captain's log was doctored to show that those who died at sea had suffered food poisoning.

elsewhere, such as Nicolaas Hartsoeker in the Netherlands, who thought there might be 'invisible insects'. Only in 1894 did the Franco-Swiss bacteriologist Alexandre Yersin identify the plague bacillus and develop a vaccine in Indochina. In the absence of scientific understanding, political and medical responses were still conscious of its foreign origin. As was Montesquieu.

He remained sensitive to the threat and returned to it in *L'Esprit des lois*. But although he recognised the danger of epidemics to humanity's existence, he did not always make the connection to international trade. In a brief overview of epidemics, he mentions their causes: the Byzantine conquests and the Crusades (the Black Death), the conquest of the New World and the quest for gold (syphilis).

#### 'Distempers of the climate'

In his chapter on 'the laws in relation to the distempers [diseases] of the climate', Montesquieu discusses legal and other remedies. Writing of syphilis in the 16th century, he regrets the lack of recourse to an ancient law: 'As it is the business of legislators to watch over the health of the citizens, it would have been a wise part in them to have stopped this communication [transmission] by laws made on the plan of those of Moses.' (This 'Mosaic' law forbade touching lepers.) Montesquieu shows a degree of optimism already manifest in his *Persian Letters* 20 years earlier: 'How would it have been, had the poison possessed a little more strength, as it would certainly have done, if, fortunately, there had not been found a remedy as powerful as any yet discovered!' He does not say what this remedy was.

In *L'Esprit des lois* he is more explicit: 'The plague is a disease whose infectious progress is much more rapid. Egypt is its principal seat, whence it spreads over the whole globe. Most countries in Europe have made exceedingly good regulations to prevent this infection, and in our times an admirable method has been contrived to stop it; this is by forming a line of troops round the infected country, which cuts off all manner of communication.' Quarantine, confinement and force of arms are hardly grounds for optimism. If all else failed, there was always religion: 'The Turks, who have no such regulations, see the Christians escape this infection in the same town, and none but themselves perish.'

At least *le doux commerce* was unaffected. In 18th-century and modern epidemics alike, there is a disease with seemingly no remedy, even among the finest minds. It thrives even though we now understand its cause: a refusal to recognise the truth ●

It is almost a general rule that wherever the ways of man are gentle, there is commerce; and wherever is commerce, there the ways of men are gentle

Montesquieu

The existence of a bills of health system in the Levant itself indicated the desire to organise health protection, since the Black Death had supposedly revealed the Levant to be a source of major epidemics. Quarantine regulations in the port of Marseilles were part of this. There was vigorous debate between 'contagionists' and 'anti-contagionists' over how transmissible diseases spread. Doctors François Chicoyneau and Jean Verny of the University of Montpellier were dispatched to Marseilles at the instigation of the regent and his physician Pierre Chirac, who suspected plague.

The Great Plague of Marseilles brought the first tentative steps towards a scientific understanding of the disease, with its spread being attributed to insects or worms: tiny agents.

These ideas were put forward by medics who came into close proximity to the disease, such as Jean-Baptiste Bertrand and Goisson, the first to suggest this. It was pursued by doctors

Alain Garrigou is a historian

<sup>1</sup> Albert O Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*, Princeton University Press, 1977

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