

# A revaluation of all values: Nietzschean populism and Covid-19

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*The weak and the misfits shall perish: first tenet of our love of man. And we should even help them to do so. What is more harmful than any vice? Active sympathy for all the misfits and the weak — Christianity...'* (Friedrich Nietzsche 1888, *The AntiChrist*)

*'spending £350 billion to prolong the lives of a few hundred thousand mostly elderly people is an irresponsible use of taxpayers' money'* (Toby Young 2020, *The Critic*)

In *Ecce Homo*, first written in 1888, a year before he lost his sanity, Friedrich Nietzsche announced with characteristic bombast: 'I am no man, I am dynamite'. Nietzsche's destructive power lay in systematically reducing the values of his age to rubble through all-out philosophical and rhetorical war. These were Christian values, the cornerstone of western civilisation, which Nietzsche rails against and literally curses, like a demented Archangel in *The Anti-Christ*, also written in 1888. For Nietzsche, the crisis of 'the death of God', which science and rationalism ushered in, enabled the overturning of bedrock assumptions and values on which society stood. Nietzsche, the son of a pastor, recognised and preached the need to embrace the full implications of this crisis in faith and was thereby instrumental in dynamiting the bedrock values of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, if not the preceding two millennia. His destruction of all that was sacred, his 'revaluation of all values' or 'reversing of perspectives' was, and remains, a shocking act of philosophical violence against not only the pious moralising of churchgoers, but the broader ethical values of the Enlightenment. Nietzsche's scorched-earth approach to morality was supposed to liberate man to create his own values – free from what he considered 'pitiful' Christian-inspired empathy and hypocritical selflessness, the 'slave morality' of the herd. Nietzsche proclaimed that in killing God and rejecting an afterlife, man can finally define his own future – become the Superman (*Übermensch*) – living fully, creatively, instinctually, *ruthlessly* and in the present. Nietzsche wrote of a vast difference between these superior individuals and 'the rabble' or unthinking and engulfing herd who he regarded with anti-egalitarian disdain and suspicion, especially in his latter works (see Hargis 2010).

Nietzsche died, insane, in August 1900 in Weimar in the care of his sister Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche who established an archive of his works there and supported, and was financially

supported by, the Nazi Party. Hitler who, like Mussolini, was an admirer of Nietzsche, met Elizabeth and was photographed staring intently at a bust of his philosopher hero at the archive which he visited several times. Following the collapse of the Weimar Republic in 1933 and the establishment of the Third Reich, the Nazi state shredded German's rights and enacted Hitler's fanatical ideology embodied in notions of a Germanic 'Master Race'. This ultimately resulted in the murder and death of countless millions by Hitler's pitiless, politically-indoctrinated Aryan *Übermensch* in SS uniforms. While most modern scholars of Nietzsche (who attacked anti-Semitism and nationalism) reject the claim that his philosophy enabled Nazism or the atrocities of the Holocaust, it is not so easy to uncouple his philosophical legacy from fascist and far-right ideology. Both scorn compassion and ideas of equality whilst celebrating strength, ruling élites, martial values and the 'will to power'. Yet Nietzsche's 'revaluation of all values' has inspired thinkers of every political persuasion and also laid the philosophical foundations for existentialism, critical theory, post-structuralism and postmodernism as well as inspiring, according to Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker, 'Nazism, Bolshevism, the Ayn Randian fringe of libertarianism, and the American alt-right and neo-Nazi movements today' (Drochon 2018).

Nietzsche's reputation was gradually rehabilitated and 'de-nazified' in the post-war era (see Whyte 2008) and he is regarded by many today as at the forefront of the canon of great thinkers, even the philosopher of values 'par excellence' (Râmbu 2016). He is championed as an ardent yet benign European who believed in the value of mixed races, opposed Bismarck's militarist ambitions for Germany and detested Wagner's anti-Semitism as well as the proto-Nazi views of his sister's husband, Bernhard Förster. The biographer Sue Prideaux (2018) goes so far as to claim, with evidence from his life rather than his work, that Nietzsche was no misogynist and was prepared to accept women into university and intellectual life as equals. Georges Bataille, Thomas Mann, Albert Camus, Michel Foucault, Walter Kaufmann and many others have sought to establish the 'radical incompatibility' between Nietzsche and fascists and populist nationalists of the twentieth century who claimed allegiance to his philosophy (Wistrich et al 2002, p.162).

Nevertheless, Nietzsche wrote presciently in *Ecce Homo* that: 'Some day my name will be linked to the memory of something monstrous, of a crisis as yet unprecedented on earth'<sup>1</sup>. So indeed, his work was seized and curated by the Nazis, published in 'field grey editions' to rouse and harden the hearts of German soldiers (Whyte 2008, p.173) and his ruthless, anti-

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<sup>1</sup> (Nietzsche 1888/2007, p.88).

democratic ideals embraced and weaponized by National Socialist ideologists such as Alfred Baeumler, Alfred Rosenberg and Martin Heidegger (see Whyte's 2008 excellent discussion of this). Nazi leaders, propagandists and ideologists appropriated, and selectively cited, Nietzsche's published and unpublished work<sup>2</sup> and elevated him as a far-sighted prophet of 'heroic realism' and racial war. They were not alone in this view as those fighting against the Third Reich condemned the 'real design' of Nazis as:

*[...] 'nothing less than the Nietzschean transvaluation of values; the education of Germans in Germany, the nihilistic revolution which would not stop at smashing countries, but would wreck the very hearts of men, utterly destroying the civilization of the west.'* (Butler, cited Voegelin 1944, p. 183)

The global conflagration of 1939-45 was the 'monstrous' crisis that cast its shadow over Nietzsche's legacy for decades to come and still leaves many readers queasy at his pronouncements on women, democracy, the 'herd-animal' or 'ruling and Caesarian spirits'<sup>3</sup>. Yet while aspects of Nietzsche's reactionary politics repulse many progressive critics, linking the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche to contemporary populists in the mould of President Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro or Prime Minister Boris Johnson is a problematic exercise, not least because Nietzsche explicitly rejects ideas like nation, state, and homeland. Indeed, given that Nietzsche viewed the idea of a motherland as 'the parasitic force that infects and impedes the creative genius of the wandering artist' (Clemente et al. 2018, p.44) he would most likely have sneered at Johnson's grandiose Brexit promises, Trump's boorish 'America First' dogma, or Bolsonaro's vulgar, nationalist rhetoric (whilst, perhaps, loudly cheering his antediluvian views on women).

Nietzsche may have described himself as an 'anti-anti-Semite' (see Duffy et al 1988, Wistrich et al 2002) in his long feud with Wagner, and proclaimed his *anti-populist* attitudes at every opportunity, but it is instructive to trace the connecting threads between his work and contemporary populism. For de Vrees et al. (2018, p.425-426) populism is as much a style of communication as a set of ideas communicated. It is, they argue, a 'communication

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<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche's *Nachlass* which Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche and her editors sifted through and falsified for her edition of *The Will to Power*

<sup>3</sup> "A question keeps coming back to us, a tempting and evil question perhaps. Would not the time have come, now that the type "herd-animal" is developing ever more in Europe, to try and begin with a clear-principled, artificial and conscious breeding of the opposite type and its virtues? And would it not even be for the democratic movement itself a kind of goal, salvation and justification, if someone appeared who would put it to his service - if at last its new and sublime perfection of slavery (for that is what European democracy will be in the end) would be complemented by that higher species of ruling and Caesarian spirits who would place itself on top of it, who would take hold of it, who would elevate itself by means of it? Towards new, hitherto impossible, to their visions? To their tasks?" (from *The Will to Power* Aphorism 954, cited Voegelin 1944, p. 201).

phenomenon' containing a characteristic set of key messages or frames that, firstly: appeal to the 'will of the people'; secondly: denounce corrupt élites and a malfunctioning establishment and thirdly: (in 'complete populism') offer to exclude threatening 'out-groups'. Nietzsche's writing carries faint traces of this populist ideological baggage in his attack on parliamentary government and church establishments and celebrities of the age. His pseudo-aristocratic snobbery against the working class *and* the bourgeoisie fills him with bile when contemplating the 'will of the people', but he is not against the possibility of manipulating 'the herd', or of identifying outgroups when it suits him, including slaves, women and 'degenerates' (see the discussion of how Nietzsche fuelled eugenic experiments in Stone 2002).

Yet it is not an easy matter to trace *any* consistent political ideology in Nietzsche's sprawling, anecdotal and profoundly ambiguous body of work, although there have been numerous efforts (see Siemens et al 2008; Donaldson 2000; Drochon 2016). By the same token, it is not immediately clear what the diverse populist insurgencies around the world today actually share in terms of core ideas and goals. Nationalist, authoritarian, chauvinist perhaps and, like Nietzsche in some respects, encouraging a corrosively sceptical attitude to logic or 'truth' and dismissive of experts, scientists and journalists. Furthermore, what Abbey and Appel (1998) rightly identify as Nietzsche's repugnant attitudes to the weak and his attack on equality and haughty contempt for liberal institutions are a match for some of the more illiberal views expressed by Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Viktor Orbán and other populists who have come to dominate the global political scene at the time of writing. Nietzsche's iconoclastic, polemical and shocking language does have the grandiose and menacing style of a demagogue about it, the violent tone of Mussolini and Hitler,<sup>4</sup> the calculated aim to offend political enemies embodied in the outbursts of Orbán, Trump, or his tropical alter ego Bolsonaro.

### **1.1. Nietzschean populists and Covid-19**

Nietzsche's performative, exclamatory style of address and his attack on 'herd values' resonate in further unsettling ways as we enter the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with populist leaders at the helm of nations as diverse as Turkey, India, Russia, Hungary, Brazil, Poland, the US and the UK. These populist leaders and their governments came to be judged against more liberal and democratic governments in their response to an unprecedented

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<sup>4</sup> *Hitler's oratorical style is captured perfectly by Chaplin's deranged and [gibberish speech](#) as Adenoid Hynkel in *The Great Dictator* (1940)*

pandemic crisis that shut down much of the world economy in 2020. In this year, the new SARS-like Coronavirus, named Covid-19 swept across every national border, left health care systems reeling and had observers reaching for comparisons with the World War of 1939-45 in terms of its global impact on every household and business. Of course, the destructive force of Covid-19 as measured by deaths or physical destruction was unlikely to come near that of the Second World War, or even the Spanish flu of 1918-20 which killed an estimated 500 million people (*The Economist* 2020). Nevertheless the scale of the pandemic, the range of responses by governments around the world to it, talk of ‘herd immunity’, attitudes to the vulnerable and weak and a revaluation of previously unassailable precepts and dogmas force us to assess our own moral values and previously unexamined ideas of ‘how to live’ as never before.

In the sections that follow we explore these issues in three ways: firstly, we provide an overview of national responses to the pandemic and compare how populist (male) leaders met the challenge compared to more ‘conventional’, liberal (and often female) leaders. Secondly, and linked to Nietzschean ideas outlined above, we critique the notion of ‘herd immunity’ and how illiberal, if not eugenicist, discourse developed around the elderly, ‘the vulnerable’ and/or those with ‘pre-existing conditions’. This discourse was seen to impact policy decisions and the framing of a ‘choice’ laid before voters between saving the economy or protecting the weakest of ‘the herd’, the latter framed, to a greater or lesser extent, by various populist leaders as an unaffordable or unworkable option. Finally, the debates around a post lock-down world are briefly explored, particularly the opportunity to radically reassess current norms and values and perhaps reshape the global economy in ways that could rescue the ‘revaluation of all values’ from the darker Nietzschean ideas touched on above. The health crisis is still ongoing whilst we finish writing up this chapter, so we only report on events that happened until April 2020.

## **1.2. The good, the bad and the ugly: how nation states met the challenge of Covid China**

The hugely differing responses to the pandemic around the globe was a clear illustration of national preparedness, spending priorities, political attitudes and the weight given to saving human lives and shielding health care services against protecting businesses, the stock market and the wider economy. In China, the initial response to the outbreak was delay, denial and suppression of information about the virus for at least three weeks with doctors who first

identified the threat of the novel coronavirus in Wuhan at the end of December 2019 reprimanded for discussing the illness with fellow doctors online. A local ‘wet market’ selling fresh meat, seafood and live, exotic wildlife was thought to be the source of Covid-19 which is a close relative of other viruses found in horseshoe bats possibly via an intermediary host, such as pangolin, although this awaits further research<sup>5</sup> (World Organisation for Animal Health 2020). By December 30<sup>th</sup>, the hashtag ‘Wuhan Sars’ was trending on the Chinese microblog Weibo, before censors removed it (*Financial Times* 2020). Under President Xi Jinping, China's authoritarian leader, increasing political repression allegedly made officials more hesitant to report cases without authorisation from the top (Washington Post 2020). By January 10<sup>th</sup>, Fudan University researchers in Shanghai had sequenced data on the virus, showing it to be from the same family as the SARS coronavirus and publicised their findings via the World Health Organisation. While cases surged and millions travelled home to Wuhan for the Lunar New Year the WHO alert of January 12<sup>th</sup> was ‘reassured’ by the quality of ongoing investigations noting: ‘The government reports that there is no clear evidence that the virus passes easily from person to person’ (WHO 2020). On January 18<sup>th</sup>, with 62 infected patients, Wuhan held a mass banquet for tens of thousands of people despite knowledge of the virus amongst local officials. Five million departed Wuhan in the weeks before the city was quarantined on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, which helped the virus spread all over the country and overseas. An unnamed senior advisor to China’s central government was critical of Wuhan’s mayor, who had, in his view:

*[...] neither the expertise nor the willingness to follow health experts’ advice. His concern is that an escalation in disease prevention may hurt the local economy and social stability (Financial Times 2020).*

The mayor’s response would prefigure more widespread and lethal inaction and failure of leadership to the rapidly spreading virus in numerous countries around the world.

On January 20<sup>th</sup>, President Xi made his first public comments on the virus, saying the outbreak ‘must be taken seriously’, while a leading Chinese epidemiologist, Dr Zhong Nanshan, announced on national television for the first time that the virus was transmissible from person to person. By then, more than 3,000 people had been infected during almost a week of public silence. On January 23<sup>rd</sup>, Wuhan finally came under a tight lockdown,

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<sup>5</sup> A more disturbing theory is that the virus originated in a bio-lab, perhaps in Wuhan close to the wet market identified as the likely source. French Nobel Prize winning AIDS researcher Luc Montagnier, claimed in an interview on France’s CNews that COVID-19 was “not natural” and suggested that this disease may have resulted from work done by molecular biologists who were attempting to create an AIDS vaccine, although this claim was widely disputed by other scientists (see Snopes.com 2020)

suspending all public transportation and air links out of the city of 11 million people. Other cities in the Hubei region quickly followed suit.

### **1.3. Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea**

Taiwan has been in a state of constant readiness to combat epidemics arising from China since being hit by a SARS outbreak in 2003. The island closed off all travel from China, its biggest trading partner, even as Wuhan remained open and the WHO was advising against such a step<sup>6</sup>. By April 2020, Taiwan still had only a handful of fatalities while shops, restaurants, bars, schools, universities and offices stayed open (*Japan Times* 2020). The government of President Tsai Ing-wen, whose deputy Chen Chien-jen is an epidemiologist, enforced very strict testing and contact tracing measures in the early stages of the crisis. The tracking and tracing were highly effective, and by April 2020 Taiwan was able to export millions of face masks to help the European Union and announced it was donating 10 million face masks to other countries most in need (CNN 2020a).

South Korea and Singapore also acted quickly, leveraging their IT infrastructure and capabilities to respond to the emerging pandemic. On January 23<sup>rd</sup>, densely populated Singapore reported its first case of Covid-19, but by April 21<sup>st</sup> it had reported only 11 deaths compared to New York's 14,828 Covid-related fatalities. Within 24 hours of each new infection being discovered in Singapore, more than 100 contact tracers assembled a complete contact map of the person spanning 14 days, using several digital footprints (Knowledge@Wharton 2020). Dr. Clarence Tam from the National University of Singapore explained how:

*“Singapore invested heavily in developing capacity and an infrastructure to deal with these types of outbreaks over the past 10 to 15 years, including increasing capacity for intensive care and patient isolation facilities, building expertise in infectious disease.” (CNET 2020).*

Some of the early success in Singapore slipped away as the virus spread in densely crowded, foreign worker dormitories, but the official number of deaths was still a remarkably low 14 towards the end of April (ECDC 2020). South Korea also orchestrated a rapid and effective response to the pandemic: installing drive-through tests for the virus, body sterilizers to spray on visitors passing through malls, and thermal scanners to test visitors' body temperature in other venues. The government used drones to disinfect large public areas, distributed a self-

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, Taiwan was not receiving WHO updates and was barred from the World Health Assembly even as an observer since Tsai's 2016 election, due to pressure from Beijing (*The Diplomat* 2020)

health check mobile app to track movements of overseas visitors taken up by over 90% of those it was offered to, and mobile apps which tracked and monitored those under quarantine (Knowledge@Wharton 2020). The number of deaths by the end of April was around 244 (ECDC 2020).

#### **1.4. New Zealand and the Nordic Countries**

In New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern took early action to shut down tourism and impose a month-long lockdown on the entire country, whilst carrying out widespread testing which helped limit coronavirus deaths to just nineteen by the end of April, when the government claimed it had stopped community transmission and thereby had effectively eliminated the virus (BBC 2020a).

Early, aggressive contact-tracing and the quarantining of suspected coronavirus cases characterised the response of Iceland, while Denmark and then Norway were also quick to adopt tough measures. Finland followed Sweden's more laissez-faire response before adopting its own strict restrictions on 17<sup>th</sup> March (Euractiv 2020). The higher total number of deaths per million in Sweden reflected the country's almost unique decision to impose mostly voluntary restrictions rather than legally binding orders. Elementary schools, bars, restaurants and businesses remained open, though with social distancing and other safety measures encouraged. The strategy developed by the epidemiologist Anders Tegnell and the Swedish government was essentially to pursue herd immunity allowing the virus to spread slowly while sheltering the elderly and the vulnerable until much of the population gained immunity, or a vaccine became available (Politifact 2020). By the 29<sup>th</sup> April, Sweden reported 231 cases per million against Denmark's 75, Norway's 39, Finland's 36 per million. This was also worse than Germany which reported 76 cases per million, but still less than the UK's, Italy's or Spain's which were 326, 452 and 509 deaths per million respectively (Statistica 2020). Italy and Spain were amongst the first European countries to experience the full impact of the pandemic, so these figures remain a provisional snapshot at this time.

In April 2020, Noam Chomsky, in an interview reported by *Al Jazeera* commented:

*"China, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore [...] seemed to have contained at least the first surge of the crisis."*

He explained that how the West prepared for the crisis differed markedly between countries:

*In Europe, to some extent, it's happened. Germany ... did have spare diagnostic capacity and was able to act in a highly selfish fashion, not*



*helping others but for itself at least, to evident reasonable containment. [...] "Other countries just ignored it. The worst was the United Kingdom [...] (Al Jazeera 2020).*

### **1.5. The UK's herd immunity policy and the fallacy of balance**

On the 5th of March 2020, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson explained in a television interview on ITV's *This Morning* that his experts had, at that point, recommended 'slightly counterintuitively' that things like closing schools or stopping big gatherings 'don't work as well, perhaps as people think' in stopping the spread of the virus. When asked by the show's presenter Philip Schofield if the government's delay in shutting down schools and public events was part of an effort to delay the spread of the disease 'so that it doesn't all happen at once and overwhelm the NHS', Johnson replied using a striking phrase:

*[...] one of the theories is, that perhaps you could sort of take it on the chin, take it all in one go and allow the disease, as it were, to move through the population, without taking as many draconian measures. I think we need to strike a balance. I think it is very important - we've got a fantastic NHS, we'll give them all the support that they need. We'll make sure they have all the preparations, all the kit that they need for us to get through it, but I think it would be better if we take all the measures that we can now just to stop the peak of the disease being as difficult for the NHS as it might be' (This Morning 2020).*

This reply is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, Johnson's promise to have 'all the kit' the NHS needed - a promise comprehensively demolished by investigative reporters (see *Panorama* 2020) which revealed 'no gowns, visors, swabs or body bags in the government's pandemic stockpile when Covid-19 reached the UK' and which led to some NHS workers 'wearing bin bags' (BBC 2020b). Secondly, the strategy Johnson reveals of 'striking a balance' between, on the one hand, letting the virus spread almost unchecked through the public (a variation of the voluntary distancing and isolation approach taken by Sweden) and, on the other, gradually applying a brake through recommendations, such as hand washing and social distancing before introducing more draconian and mandatory measures. The 'balance fallacy' of this position, it might be argued, was between allowing the pandemic to take its 'natural' course - thereby accepting 'on the chin' the (potentially avoidable) deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, against *slowing* these avoidable deaths thereby preventing a collapse of the NHS. The third option of *avoiding* deaths, wherever possible, by aggressively contact-tracing, quarantining suspected cases whilst closing down public events and travel from countries in the grip of the pandemic (as Taiwan, South Korea and New Zealand had done) was not considered.

A similar use of ‘balance’ rhetoric is often seen in CSR studies, where profitability is ‘balanced’ against doing good in society. The problem lies in the rhetoric of balance, or the false dilemma it invites and the ways in which such paradoxical situations are resolved. Entertaining the notion of ‘herd immunity’ and allowing people to die so that the economy grows, while those who survive have more money, is ethically problematic, but not inconsistent with how some corporations view morality and how they ‘manage’ false paradox. For example, in their study of the Volkswagen emissions scandal, Gaim et al. (2019) reveal that paradoxical promises were embraced at a ‘discursive’ level in responses to the scandal but lacked substance when implemented ‘on the ground’. The authors then argue that such rhetoric can trigger dysfunctional organizational behaviours, and they caution organizations and their staff from being ‘overconfident’ in attempting to resolve false paradoxes. Promises embraced at a ‘discursive’ level, but lacking substance when implemented ‘on the ground’ would come to characterise the government’s many promises around the protective ‘kit’ or PPE mentioned above.

However, the herd immunity strategy came under renewed scrutiny when on the 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the Imperial College Covid-19 Response Team released a report presenting the modelling which informed government policies in the UK and other countries. In this report two potential strategies for dealing with the crisis were explored: *mitigating*, which focused on the slowing down of the pandemic, and *suppression*, aimed at reversing epidemic growth. The study showed that mitigation – or a combination of isolation, quarantine of suspected cases and social distancing for the vulnerable groups only – ‘might reduce peak healthcare demand by 2/3 and deaths by half’, but suppression was actually the preferred option. Suppression - and related practices such as social distancing for all, isolation and quarantine of the cases and family members, school and university closures – was indicated as the most effective way to reduce transmission. The report concluded that a herd immunity strategy could lead to 250,000 deaths with ‘mitigation’, 510,000 without (Imperial College 2020, p.16). Media reports indicated that this revelation stopped further public discussion of a herd immunity scenario, and the government shifted towards more cautious public health policy, acknowledging the implications of the latest scientific findings in the ‘hope’ that excess death could be limited to 20,000 (*The Telegraph* 2020).

The government’s belated move from the illusion of ‘herd immunity’, towards the instruction to ‘stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives’ came, arguably, at least a week too late. Did this move signal a significant shift in the science, or were the government effectively forced

to abandon the herd immunity strategy in the face of a devastating national death toll without any guarantee, as the WHO would warn, that such ‘immunity’ was even possible? Across the private sector businesses, (independent) schools, sports venues, restaurants, bars were closing, unable to justify the risks to their staff and customers and putting corporate responsibility ahead of their profits, or even their ability to continue trading. Most sporting organisations including English Premier League, British football and Rugby Union were shutting down around the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> March. Some universities were also closing, although many (remarkably) remained open into the third week of March, apparently unwilling to confront the deadly reality of the pandemic in their ‘risk assessment’ procedures. In the absence of government intervention, the four day Cheltenham Festival in Gloucestershire went ahead from 10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> March with over 60,000 attending each afternoon and a Champions League match at Anfield between Liverpool and Atlético Madrid on 11<sup>th</sup> March attended by more than 50,000 (with over 3,000 Spaniards from Madrid at a time when Spain was already in partial lockdown) are thought to have contributed significantly to spreading the virus (Guardian 2000). Welsh rock band Stereophonics defended their decision to go ahead with shows in Glasgow, Manchester and Cardiff in mid-March attended by 40,000 fans by pointing to UK government guidance that there was ‘no need’ for a ban on large public gatherings. The band were responding to social media criticism of the band both in Britain and beyond, including China, where one bemused post asked ‘The whole world is working hard [to contain the virus], but why is the UK still holding concerts?’ (cited Bandwagon 2020).

The national lockdown measures finally announced at 8.30pm on the evening of 23<sup>rd</sup> March were the most draconian in British history, allowing people to leave their home only for very limited purposes – shopping for food, travelling to and from work where working from home was not possible, for medical need, caring for a vulnerable person or for one form of exercise a day. These measures were necessary because, as Johnson explained:

*To put it simply, if too many people become seriously unwell at one time, the NHS will be unable to handle it – meaning more people are likely to die, not just from coronavirus, but from other illnesses as well. So, it’s vital to slow the spread of the disease*

The consequence of the UK government’s initial, almost Nietzschean tranquillity in February at the prospect of the population as a ‘herd’ that would be thinned may also help explain the apparently incomprehensible indifference of the Prime Minister and others indicated in *The Sunday Times* expose of April 19<sup>th</sup>. The normally conservative supporting *Times* headlines

‘Coronavirus: 38 days when Britain sleepwalked into disaster’ pointed to the fact that Boris Johnson skipped five Cobra meetings on the virus, that calls to order protective gear were ignored and that ‘scientists’ warnings fell on deaf ears.’ These failings in February, the report observed, ‘may have cost thousands of lives’ (The Times 2020).

### **1.6. Donald Trump – the USA’s ‘medic-in-chief’**

If, in Chomsky’s view, the United Kingdom was the worst in Europe, he nominated the United States as ‘the worst of all’. The US President’s chaotic leadership was partly responsible, Chomsky argued:

*"One day [US President Donald Trump] says, 'There is no crisis, it's just like flu.' The next day, 'It's a terrible crisis and I knew it all along.' The next day, 'We have to go back to the business, because I have to win the election'. The idea that the world is in these hands is shocking." (Al Jazeera 2020)*

United States Covid-19 deaths which by the end of April were at 178 cases per million, compared to New Zealand’s 4 or South Korea’s 5 per million (Statistica 2020) stand as an indictment of that country’s preparation for and response to the pandemic, and is likely to eventually exceed the UK’s dire record of 326 per million deaths. There is no space to rehearse the rambling absurdities of Donald Trump’s numerous press briefings that include describing the crisis as a ‘hoax’, that the virus would disappear ‘like a miracle’, to suggesting that his scientists explore injecting light or disinfectant as a cure. However, his mendacious attacks on the WHO and decision to halt US funding of that body were a low in a catalogue of dangerous quackery and ‘ridiculous behaviour’ that baffled the watching world (see *The Intercept* 2020a). More worryingly the Communicable Disease Center (CDC) was sidelined by a newly formed Coronavirus Task Force, led by the science-denying Vice-President Mike Pence. This excluded everyone from the CDC except CDC’s director, Dr. Robert Redfield. According to Charles Duhigg writing in *The New Yorker* (2020):

*“The C.D.C. was ordered into lockdown,” a former senior official at the agency told me. “They can’t speak to the media. These are people who have trained their entire lives for epidemics—the finest public-health army in history—and they’ve been told to shut up!”*

Since then, as Duhigg notes, the primary spokesperson was not a scientist but President Donald Trump—‘a politician notoriously hostile to science’. Political analyst Marwan Bishara noted how the rhetoric of ‘war’ was mobilised around the world during the pandemic, nowhere more so than in the US where President Trump used the war as a pretext

for further deregulation, restrictions on immigration and political point scoring that appealed to his base of supporters:

*Unnecessary, preventable mortalities become "casualties of war". Thus, when Trump and his supporters demand the "liberation" of certain states from their reluctant governors and demand an early "return to normal" by reopening the economy, they merely see the potential rise in mortalities as the inescapable "collateral damage" of war (Al Jazeera 2020).*

Celebrity talk show host Dr. Mehmet Oz who has advised President Trump, told *Fox News'* Sean Hannity that the idea of reopening schools 'may only cost us 2 to 3 percent in terms of total mortality', a trade-off 'some folks' would consider:

*"We need our mojo back,[...] Let's start with things that are really critical to the nation where we think we might be able to open without getting into a lot of trouble. I tell you, schools are a very appetizing opportunity."*  
(cited *The New York Times 2020a*)

The discourse around virility was typical of some of the language of the far right used to defend sacrifices necessary to win the 'wider war'. On March 22<sup>nd</sup>, President Trump famously tweeted that 'we cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself' laying the groundwork to ease the measures put in place to deal with the coronavirus. Trump began to distance himself from his lead expert Dr. Anthony Fauci, the immunologist who heads the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) saying he disagreed with him on things like whether malaria drugs could be effective against coronavirus and showed impatience with the lockdown, tweeting repeatedly that 'people want to return to work'.

Through his impatience, erratic messaging and claims around the nation's supposed 'tremendous testing capacity', Trump soon found himself at odds with many state leaders, including New York's Governor Andrew Cuomo who urged him not to act in a 'dictatorial' style (*New York Times 2020b*). Yet Cuomo and New York Mayor Bill de Blasio also came in for criticism for micro-managing health supervisors and 'dithering' over how to react to the pandemic compared, for instance, to Seattle where scientists took the lead in tracking, tracing and locking down Washington State. This happened with the assistance of corporates like Microsoft who told their employees to stay at home on March 4<sup>th</sup>, when there were only twelve known Covid cases across the nation. This resulted in a hundred thousand people suddenly staying home and shifting attitudes in other companies so that by the time of the lockdown in mid-March, many bars, restaurants and places of business were already empty (*The New Yorker 2020*).

The swift corporate responsibility shown by Microsoft and other tech firms, and the leadership shown in Seattle and other cities across America lie in stark contrast to the blustering ineffectiveness of the American President. Yet if Donald Trump made UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson appear a model of responsibility, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's response to the global pandemic made Trump appear relatively measured and informed.

### **1.7. The Trump of the Tropics**

Jair Bolsonaro, the right-wing Brazilian president is well known for his outrageous statements and crude actions: from claiming Leonardo di Caprio gave cash 'to set the Amazon on fire' (BBC, 2019), to tweeting a pornographic video (Phillips, 2019). However, his Covid-19 dealings were astonishing, even by his own standards. He adopted infantile 'macho' discourse calling for Brazilians to face Covid-19 as 'males', in his own words: "We need to face it like a man, dammit" (Harris and Schipani, *FT* 2020). The president was vehemently opposed to social distancing measures and urged Brazilians to return to work, calling Covid-19 a fantasy and 'a media trick'.

From the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, Bolsonaro made statements downplaying the gravity of the situation and claiming the measures taken around the globe and by Brazilian governors were unnecessary, echoing Trump's early assertion that the crisis was a 'hoax'. At the beginning of March 2020, Bolsonaro stated that "it is a lot of fantasy, the coronavirus issue, it is not all of this the media is portraying" and that "other flus killed more than this one" (Arcanjo, 2020a).

During his televised address to the nation, on the 24th of March, the Brazilian president criticised the closures of school and commerce, attacked Brazilian governors who were supporting the new measures to tackle Covid-19 and blamed the press for what he called a "hysterical climate" within the country. Bolsonaro claimed that:

*"From my track record as an athlete, if I was infected with the virus, I wouldn't have to worry. I would feel nothing and won't be affected, at most, I would have the symptoms of a little cold or little flu..." (Della Coletta, 2020).*

He suggested this "immunity" was also shared by Brazilians at large, as the right-wing president asserted that Brazilians are immune to diseases and should be investigated, as:

*"They never catch anything. You see some bloke jumping into the sewage, he gets out, has a dive, right? And nothing happens to him." (cited Phillips, 2020).*

Needless to say, there was no scientific evidence produced to support his arguments. An institutional publicity video from the Presidency of the Republic summarized and officially communicated the government's proposals for the pandemic. The video showed self-employed people and health professionals willing to return to their normal work routine. The campaign “Brazil cannot stop” encouraged the population to return to work, even the ones infected by and self-isolating due to Covid-19 (Arcanjo, 2020C). However, on the 28th of March the Federal Court of Justice in Rio de Janeiro, prevented the campaign from being broadcast as it publicised information which was ‘not corroborated by scientific evidence’. The Court concluded that a publicly founded campaign cannot spread false information (Oliveira, 2020).

It is not only the Brazilian president’s words that are alarming, but also his actions. On the 15th of March, the president took the streets of Brasilia, Brazil’s capital, to join protesters against the social distancing measures adopted by the country, thus protesting against the Brazilian Congress. He then decided to shake hands and said, during a radio interview:

*“If I decided to shake people’s hands, I am sorry, but I did not ask the people to come to the streets, this is my right. After all, I came from the people. I came from the Brazilian people” (Arcanjo, 2020a).*

The president was out and about in various instances visiting supermarkets, pharmacies, shops shaking people’s hands and taking selfies with his supporters. When questioned by journalists about where he was going, the president replied “I have the constitutional right to come and go. No one will hinder my freedom to come and go” (Carvalho, 2020a). The president appeared to show understanding of the need for social distancing when he mentioned in a radio interview that he will have a “traditional small birthday party” for his wife and himself (Mariani, Takahashi and Yukari, 2020). However, he then went to the construction site of a new hospital in Goias State on the 11th of April. Again, this behaviour was against the recommendations from doctors and experts, as his visits often result in large public gatherings (Carvalho, 2020b).

During the ongoing epidemic, the president took part in another protest, on the 19th of April, even more controversial than the one in March, as he was supporting the coup d’état that took place in Brazil in 1964. This coup marked the end of democracy in Brazil and the establishment of military dictatorship that lasted until 1985. It was the darkest time of Brazil’s most recent history, yet during his speech Bolsonaro boasted that:

*“People can rely on their president to do everything necessary to maintain our democracy and to guarantee what is most sacred among us, that is our freedom” (Arcanjo 2020b).*

Bolsonaro argued against social distancing claiming that only people in high risk groups should follow such guidelines and advocated that people should be free to do what they wish (not respecting the guidelines from WHO and the Brazilian government). The Brazilian president also engaged in a crusade against governors who enforced social distancing, claiming the governors’ actions would have a catastrophic impact on the economy. He criticised the Rio de Janeiro governor because he closed the beaches, although Bolsonaro alleged that after the closure there were, in fact, more people on the beaches. He even suggested that the number of deaths in Sao Paulo had been altered, saying that:

*“It is really high for Sao Paulo... Without wanting to dispute with anyone, there is a state there, that guided by decree, that, ultimately, if there is not concrete cause of death, coronavirus should be added” (Arcanjo, 2020a).*

However, like Trump, Jair Bolsonaro is capable of many handbrake turns in his views that can have a disorientating effect, laying waste to any norms of behaviour in public office. On the 1st of April, the President suddenly changed his tone and acknowledged that the country was facing the major threat. The President switched to a religious discourse as he claimed that:

*“we, together with pastors and religious leaders, will ask the Brazilian people for a day of fasting in order for the country to be free from this evil as soon as possible” (Arcanjo, 2020a).*

The President had changed his narrative again by mid-April to claim that the country was already almost free from the virus, but that unemployment was its main issue. The focus on employment and the economy is recognised by some as a reminder that the Brazilian president has his eyes on the municipal polls this year and the 2022 presidential election.

Three former health ministers denounced the President to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. They accused Bolsonaro of violating the human right to health and life and of potential genocide for failing to follow the recommendations of health authorities and the World Health Organization for the Covid-19 pandemic (Bergamo, 2020).

By the end of April, the Brazilian health system was collapsing as Rio de Janeiro and four other major cities warned that their hospitals could not take any more patients. The country is expected to become one of the world’s pandemic hot spots. Experts claim that the number of infections and deaths will be much higher than has been reported because of the lack of



testing. Despite this calamity the President continues with his discourse that Covid-19 is only a ‘*gripezinha*’ (small flu), a minor disease and that social distancing is not needed (Phillips, 2020). More than 200 people with Covid-19 symptoms or confirmation of contamination by the virus were waiting for a bed on the intensive care unit in Rio de Janeiro on the 24th of April 2020 (in the municipal, state or federal health service network). All but one hospital, located in the state’s countryside, had reached full capacity on Covid-19 wards (Albuquerque and Barbon, 2020). To make matters worse, towards the end of April Bolsonaro fired his popular Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta, who had openly contradicted him. Bolsonaro seemed to prefer the risk of overwhelming hospitals if it meant ‘saving’ the economy and many of his followers supported this approach. As Andrew Fishman writing in *The Intercept* noted:

*“It is as if there is a group focused on people and health and another on the market, companies and money, but this divided, antagonistic and perhaps radical approach is not the one that will most help society to get through this problem.” (The Intercept 2020b)*

Here we see the underlying similarity between the apparent binary choice faced by populist and democratic leaders alike. Sacrifice the elderly and vulnerable minority (and minorities), those with ‘underlying conditions’, the weakest of the ‘herd’ or sacrifice the economy and livelihoods of the nation’s healthy majority. This false dichotomy offered between a Nietzschean ‘masculine’ elite coldly prepared to accept deep sacrifices in ‘the herd’ for the greater well-being of the nation; and weak, ‘feminine’ leaders who put the health of all their nation’s citizens first in an efficient, rapid but caring response indicated an existential choice between painful sacrifices. Yet the example of numerous countries (not always led by women - but many which are) including Taiwan and New Zealand, in particular, suggests that socially responsible leadership pays off in economic terms (with far less economic disruption) *as well as* lower Covid-19 mortality rates. Nietzschean populists have done nothing to save their economies – quite the opposite, they appear to have created far deeper long-term harm.

How are these apparently stark political choices being seen by the citizens they impact? While in the UK, there is a round of applause for the NHS at 8pm on Thursdays, in Brazil, there is the *panelaços* – a protest involving banging pans (*panelas* in Portuguese) to demonstrate peoples’ anger at Bolsonaro’s handling of the crisis. The *panelaços* take place every time the President makes a televised statement. Moreover, in some places around the country, this has become a daily exercise, at 8:30pm, to show widespread discontentment.

As the leader of the Chamber of Deputies in the Brazilian Congress stated:

*“The whole world is united against the coronavirus. In Brazil, we have to fight against the corona and the virus of authoritarianism” (Uribe, 2020).*

While there is much more to learn about the virus, the evidence currently suggests that male death rates are higher than female, although the reasons for this are still not clear (Statista, 2020). There has also been some media commentary around the fact that countries led by women have been more successful at managing the corona crisis so far at least (Wittenberg-Cox, 2020). From Germany to Taiwan, From New Zealand to the Nordic countries (Finland, Norway and Denmark – Sweden being an exception and having a male as Prime Minister), these countries are, at the time of writing, doing relatively well and have been able to start to ease their lockdown measures well before other countries. Obviously, this does not mean that countries that have male leaders are not doing well, e.g. South Korea, Greece and Australia. However, when compared with male politicians such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro that are disregarding science and appealing to strong emotions, one can start to consider that maybe a ‘macho’ narrative, or ‘masculine’ ruthlessness (in the Nietzschean sense) does not bode well in the current crisis.

### **1.8. The debates around a post lock-down world**

While many commentators are gripped with anxiety about the huge economic damage the Covid-19 pandemic may cause and the opportunity for authoritarian governments to widen and deepen the intrusive powers of the modern surveillance state (see Harari 2020), others are suggesting the possibility of more positive change, that nothing can be the same after this pandemic and that it is time for a radical rethink of the way we organise our economy around a neoliberal, globalised market system (see Politico 2020). For some commentators, putting the world on an extended lock-down gave everyone the chance to reassess their priorities, to re-evaluate the way we care for the sick and vulnerable, to reflect on our hectic, consumeristic lifestyles and consider if other more sustainable, democratic and caring ways of conducting our affairs were possible. The fact that countries were forced, in most cases, to respond urgently to the Covid crisis focused attention on the need for more urgent action on the climate emergency that may have helped spawned the virus. Journalist Paul Mason, writing in the *New Statesman* (2020) argued that the financial and economic collapse threatened could not be met by the usual government-backed soft loans and low interest bank capital, but required a huge ‘bazooka’ aimed at the existing system:

*After this is over, it will be impossible for capitalism to return to normal. Because this is not some “exogenous shock” – like an asteroid hitting an otherwise blameless planet. Wave after wave of zoonotic viruses have been produced during the breakneck and poverty-stricken urbanisation of the Global South, and by the deforestation and destruction of habitats. The fact that these viruses then hit societies with poor public health systems, insanitary and crowded housing, elites that do not care, and populations suffering massively from “co-morbidities” such as asthma, heart disease and Type 2 diabetes is, likewise, not an accident. It is a product of a social system called capitalism.*

Commentators remain very worried about increased corporate control and surveillance over an atomised citizenry working from home, while an underclass continues to work (delivering, farming, working in factories) and exposing itself to contagion. However, they also pointed to progressive transformations that had already taken place around health care funding, debt freezing and state aid to unemployed workers. As sociologist Jana Tsoneva (2020) wrote:

*Socialist solutions are unceremoniously imposing themselves. Britain effectively nationalised the rail. New York City put an abrupt end to years of helpless hand-wringing that not much can be done about homelessness by housing thousands of homeless people suffering from COVID-19 in hotels. Portugal suspended the byzantine asylum categorisation regime and afforded its refugee population residency benefits. California set up a disaster relief fund for undocumented migrants. US cities are restoring water access to households falling behind on their bills. And who would have expected that Donald Trump, of all people, would roll out a variant of universal basic income for a few months?*

These surprising policy moves indicated that ideas dismissed as radical and utopian just a few months earlier were being adopted by right-wing leaders whose values were being challenged by the harsh realities of a deadly global pandemic that did not recognise borders or bend to their bombastic and empty rhetoric. So, while the devastating medical and economic impacts of Covid-19 make themselves felt, including the potential loss of jobs for 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy (ILO 2020), there are signs of resilience, hope and opportunities for positive change. A report by the German news site DW indicated that many African countries had responded quickly, decisively and based on scientifically sound solutions in preparation for the virus based on their experience with other pandemics. This ‘rational’ response, like that of several countries explored above, stood in contrast to the emotional histrionics and attention seeking of many populist leaders. It also prompted calls by African cultural leaders such as Wole Soyinka for a transformation of Africa’s health care system and a move towards economic independence and a more diversified economy (DW 2020).

The pandemic has led to some authoritarian leaders, such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, assuming sweeping new powers and in others cracking down on political opponents and religious and racial minorities (see, for instance, developments in Turkey, India and the Philippines), but it has also shown that empathetic democratic leaders that respect scientific advice and act quickly and compassionately are in a stronger position to ease their countries out of the current crisis. The sheer statistics around the Covid-19 pandemic indicate that macho bluster and disregard for the need to protect the vulnerable and sick and not just the healthy members of ‘the herd’ fails on economic as well as moral grounds. This presents an opportunity for a ‘revaluation of all values’ in ways that Nietzsche’s fascist, eugenicist and authoritarian disciples would certainly reject, but that his more progressive champions might celebrate.

### **1.9. Conclusion**

Our survey of Nietzsche’s troubling notions of the ‘herd’, ‘masculine’, warrior values and attitudes to empathy for the weakest members of society have been shown to resonate in disturbing ways across the twentieth and twenty first century. They take a dark and deadly turn under Hitler and Mussolini in the 1930s and 40s and appear to throw a deeply troubling light on the response of several right-wing populist leaders (notably Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, but also others) to the Coronavirus pandemic sweeping the globe in 2020. What seemed, at worse, shocking unpreparedness and a casual disregard for the wellbeing of vulnerable groups, or the wider safety of the nation, indicated a lack of social responsibility that was thrown into dramatic relief by the quick, decisive action of other leaders, organisations and businesses. The pandemic also brought concerns around the growing power of some authoritarian governments to crack down on criticism, suppress opposition and monitor and control the activities of its citizens.

However, in the aftermath of the pandemic and the massive changes it has brought about there are signs of hope for what Nietzsche might have described as a ‘transvaluation of all values’. Crises often bring about such a radical rethinking of long-held values. Heraclitus observed that ‘War is the Father of All Things’, but as Claudia von Werlhof added ‘Nature is the Mother of Life’ (cited Mies 2005). Nature, like war, can bring death and destruction on a terrifying scale as review of natural disasters and pandemics shows only too clearly, but it also brings about radical and necessary change. In this respect the current pandemic gripping the world at the time of writing may be regarded as the ‘dynamite’ of our age.

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