
The Politics of Identity in the UK: Before, During and After Covid-19

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I. Introduction

Covid-19 is the most harmful and devastating pandemic the world has faced for over a century, and one hopes that biomedical science will provide the most effective clinical remedy to the virus in due course. When countries began to seriously pay attention to the rapid spread of the virus, it was commonly asserted that Covid-19 was an indiscriminate disease, which everyone was similarly vulnerable to, a claim which appears to be exemplified by the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, contracting the virus in late March 2020.

After several months of the spread of Covid-19 throughout the developed world, we now know that the fate of Boris Johnson revealed little about peoples' vulnerability to the virus. In stark contrast to the claim that the virus did not discriminate, it became quickly apparent that the likelihood of becoming infected is far higher amongst some socio-economic, racial and ethnic groups than others.¹ Identity is an aetiological factor in the spread of the virus. This is not because of the differing physiological or DNA composition of those who have disproportionately been infected by the virus. Biology is not destiny. Rather, those most likely to become infected and thus to die from the virus are also many of the poorest and most socially marginalised within our societies. In addition to its biomedical properties, Covid-19 must also be understood as a profoundly social and political pathogen, that sheds an unrelenting light on the social and political pathologies of affluent, notionally democratic societies such as the United Kingdom.

This paper focuses upon two pandemics and examines the relationship between them. The first is, of course, Covid-19. The second, that I suggest here, consists of a form of identity-fuelled politics which has quickly risen to the status of liberal democracy's most formidable adversary in many affluent societies, including that which I shall focus upon here: the United Kingdom. In a chapter I wrote in December 2019, I referred to this as the "pandemic of discontent".² In this brief chapter, I will analyse three stages of the pandemic of discontent: before, during, and "after" the Covid-19 pandemic. In so doing, I aim to analyse the pathological character of a particular form of identity politics in the UK, whilst also, albeit somewhat speculatively, seeking to show how Covid-19 might provide the basis for the human rights community and the defenders of social justice to begin politically disrupting key identity-based elements of the pandemic of discontent. My hope is that we might be able to derive some longer-term benefits from the terrible devastation which Covid-19 has already caused by reasserting the extent to which respect for fundamental rights is essential for the sustainable well-being of any and all diverse societies.

¹ See the paper by Caroline Bald and Sharon Walker in this volume.

² Andrew Fagan, 'Confronting Uncomfortable Truths: Liberal Democracy, Minority Rights, Identity Politics and Populism,' in Anna Maria Biro, Andrew Fagan and Dwight Newman (eds) *Minority Rights and Unstable Orders* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2021).

II. Before

Can you still clearly recall the UK as it was before Covid-19? Lest your frustrations with life in the age of Covid-19 have induced a state of nostalgia for what came before, let me remind you: significant parts of the UK had become infected by a wider political phenomenon, which, I have labelled the “pandemic of discontent”. Though not entirely consisting of a politics of identity, a particular form of identity politics was and is integral to this pandemic.

There is a large and growing body of academic literature devoted to the study of identity as a central feature of the political, socio-cultural and economic distribution of rights, resources and opportunities within established liberal democratic societies, such as the USA, the UK, France, and the Netherlands.³ Despite liberalism’s avowed commitment to equality and non-discrimination, which underpin a comprehensive body of equality and anti-discrimination law, many theorists, commentators and activists have repeatedly pointed to the multitude of ways in which formally rights-respecting, liberal democratic societies have failed to recognise and support the interests of groups of people whose avowed identity results in systematically restricting their enjoyment of equal opportunities.⁴ These critiques appear in areas such as, education, employment, housing, health-care, the protection afforded by the law, the criminal justice system, the enjoyment of one’s gender orientation, and the ability to practice key cultural and religious traditions and beliefs. Identity politics belies liberal democracy’s complacent assumption regarding the basically just and fair character of liberal institutions and liberal societies.

While advocates of identity politics are typically associated with positions on the left of the political spectrum, the identity-politicking components of the pandemic of discontent extends to include many groups towards the opposite end of that spectrum. Specifically, those groups that typically espouse nationalist and exclusionary causes and interests. While the underlying causes of right-wing populism are complex, a key element of right-wing populist identity politicking consists of the support it enjoys amongst communities of people who have come to view themselves as the victims of the liberal democratic order and the “elites” who are seen as administering liberal democracy.⁵ Ironically, for many of its supporters, much of the ostensive appeal of right-wing populist identity draws upon an experience of the ontological insecurity and vulnerability which has mobilised various minority communities to fight for their collective rights to exist and thrive since the emergence of the identity politicking age in the 1960s until the present day.⁶ The re-emergence, and several eye-catching political successes, of right-wing populism freshly highlights the extent to which identity politics now includes groups of people who claim that their own identities are increasingly vulnerable to the presumed legal, political, socio-

³ Bhiku Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (2nd edition) (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁴ Ayelet Shachar, *Multicultural Jurisdictions: Cultural Differences and Women’s Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Michael Kenny, *The Politics of Identity: Liberal Political Theory and the Dilemmas of Difference*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

⁵ Eric Kaufman, *Whiteshift: Populism, Immigration and the Future of White Majorities* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2019).

⁶ Ipsos Mori, ‘Populist and Nativist Sentiment in 2019: A 27 Country Survey,’ 2019, https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-08/populism-and-nativism-2019_0.pdf; Steven Hahn, ‘The Rage of White Folk: How the silent majority became a loud and angry minority’, *The Nation*, 27 September 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/the-rage-of-white-folks/>.

cultural and economic rights gained by particular minority communities within societies such as the UK. Illiberal right-wing populism is, to a large extent, the principal political manifestation, or symptom, of the pandemic of discontent, which itself is seen by many as posing the greatest existential threat to liberal democracy.⁷

In addition to unbridled prejudice, right-wing populism is fuelled by a wide range of concerns and anxieties which have emerged within the UK over the course of many years. The services and “goods” which the vast majority of us depend upon: education, employment, health-care, safe and affordable housing, access to a healthy environment, pensions which support a dignified old age for all, adequate social security, affordable public transport and adequately funded local authorities, have become increasingly precarious and vulnerable to under-funding and reduced accountability over several decades.⁸ Many people are entirely justified in feeling that the prevailing political system has routinely and systematically failed them. Under more democratic circumstances, these conditions might have led to wholesale popular support for a progressive political platform committed to addressing what some identify as the principal cause of this pandemic: an inequitable neoliberal economic order, which has led to the relative impoverishment and destitution of many different groups of people who inhabit the UK. There are demonstrable grounds for forging an electorally powerful, multicultural constituency comprising all of those who the prevailing order has failed, which would include many amongst the white British and BAME communities who share a common exposure to an inequitable economy and society. Against this possibility, right-wing populist identity politicking represents, arguably, the most powerful obstacle to forging a transformative politics committed to securing equal rights and effective opportunities for all communities and individuals within the UK. By weaponizing racism and xenophobia, right-wing populism divides groups of people who, despite their differing identities, are similarly exposed to many of the same social, political and economic ills.

As is the case with the Covid-19 pandemic, the pandemic of discontent has also disproportionately impacted many of the more vulnerable and marginalised communities within the UK.⁹ Racist, xenophobic and intolerant beliefs and attitudes persist within many liberal democracies, despite the existence of a comprehensive array of legal commitments and constitutional provisions designed to protect minorities from such harms. For many legal theorists and political philosophers, the very survival of liberal democracy rests upon robust state support for the rights of minorities, combined with concerted efforts to combat prevailing forms of racism, xenophobia and intolerance which some utterly illiberal sections of the population may cling to.¹⁰ One of the most disturbing features of right-wing populist

⁷ William Galston, *Anti-Pluralism: the Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018). Yascha Mounk and Jordan Kyle, ‘What Populists Do to Democracies’, *The Atlantic*, 26 December 2018; Jan-Werner Muller, *What is Populism?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2017).

⁸ Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

⁹ The Runnymede Trust, ‘State of the Nation: New comprehensive analysis on race in Britain,’ London, April, 2020, <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/state-of-the-nation-new-comprehensive-analysis-on-race-in-britain>; Equality and Human Rights Commission, ‘Healing a Divided Britain: the need for a comprehensive race strategy,’ London, 2016, <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/race-report-healing-divided-britain>.

¹⁰ Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge, Mass.; Harvard University Press, 1977). Alan Patten, *Equal Recognition: The Moral Foundations of Minority Rights* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).

identity politicking is the extent to which persistent tensions and prejudices surrounding race, ethnicity and religion amongst populations, have been mainstreamed into the political discourse and even the policy commitments of some governments within some liberal democracies. The UK provides one such example of this utterly illiberal development.

Thus, evidence from the British Social Attitudes Survey, published in 2019 found that between 1983 and 2018, the proportion of the population who describe themselves as 'very' or a 'little racially prejudiced' persistently remained between one quarter and one third of the UK population.¹¹ The figure has never fallen below 25%, and has actually increased since 1996. In respect of racially motivated hate crimes, UK Home Office figures demonstrate that racially motivated hate crime has risen every year since 2013.¹² In 2018, 71,251 such crimes were reported in England and Wales: the number of hate crimes has more than doubled since 2013. An extensive range of other governmental and civil society surveys reinforce the perception that racism and xenophobia are part of the lived realities of many minorities in the UK.¹³

Of course, one might counter that, within a liberal democracy, the government cannot be held primarily responsible for the persistence of illiberal attitudes amongst some parts of the population. Indeed, the very fact that criminal sanctions exist against those who seek to turn their hateful attitudes into actions testifies to the government's continuing commitment to minority rights protection. However earnestly this objection is made, it belies the extent to which prominent UK politicians and government officials have repeatedly sought to gain political capital by playing the race and ethnicity "card".

The most prominent and far-reaching example of this is, of course, Brexit. While it is entirely reasonable to assume that many people who voted "leave" in the UK's EU referendum were not motivated by racist and xenophobic prejudices, there is reliable evidence pointing to the numerically decisive role which racially and ethnically motivated voters played in ensuring the outcome.¹⁴ This is unsurprising given the fact that many politicians, public figures and several national media outlets repeatedly sought to persuade some voters that supporting the reassertion of a particularly restrictive notion of national identity was precisely what the EU referendum was concerned with. They, at least, should not have been surprised to see significant increases in racially and religiously motivated hate crime immediately prior to and following the referendum, including the terrorist murder of the MP, Jo Cox.

Other examples of state level right-wing populist identity politicking are easy to find. Take, for example, the then Home Secretary Theresa May's 2012 statement that the UK government was committed to creating a "hostile environment" for irregular immigrants in the UK.¹⁵ The hostile environment policy was then quickly underpinned by two highly controversial pieces of legislation in the form of the Immigration Acts 2014 and 2016, which were heavily criticised by impartial bodies such as the UN Committee on the Elimination

¹¹ John Curtice, Elizabeth Clery, Jane Perry, Miranda Phillips and Nilufer Rahim (eds), *British Social Attitudes: The 36th Report* (London: The National Centre for Social Research, 2019).

¹² UK Home Office, *Hate Crime: England and Wales, 2017-2018*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2017-to-2018>.

¹³ See Runnymede Trust, 'State of the Nation' (n. 9).

¹⁴ Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford, 'British Culture Wars? Brexit and the Future Politics of Immigration and Ethnic Diversity', (April 2019) 90(52) *The Political Quarterly*, 142-154.

¹⁵ See the Runnymede Trust, 'The State of the Nation' (n. 9).

of Racial Discrimination and, most recently, by the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance in her 2019 report on the situation in the UK.¹⁶ Theresa May's successor as Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, then had to resign in 2018 as a direct result of the shameful Windrush Scandal, which amounted to little more than an instance of state racism, highlighting how a campaign against irregular immigrants could embroil many non-white British citizens. The effective mainstreaming of racist and xenophobic prejudices was also highlighted in the previously mentioned UN Special Rapporteur's damning country report on the UK. Resorting to rather stark language, Tendayi Achiume stated that 'the harsh reality is that race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability status and related categories all continue to determine the life chances and well-being of people in Britain in ways that are unacceptable and, in many cases, unlawful.' (2019: p. 7) She concluded that 'in the United Kingdom explicit expressions of racial, ethnic and religious intolerance have become more acceptable, in ways that mark a notable shift.' (op cit. p.17)

Immediately prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was clear that UK politics and society were significantly infected by profoundly harmful pathogens, which had the most damaging effects upon many of the country's racial, ethnic and religious minority communities.

III. During

To repeat the claim I made towards the beginning of this paper, Covid-19 is not biochemically predisposed to infect certain identity-based groups of people. We are all of us exposed to the same disease. However, there are manifest inequalities in the rates of infection within the UK, which largely overlap existing socio-economic and identity-based inequalities within the wider population. Class and identity are integral aetiological elements of Covid-19.¹⁷

Socio-economic deprivation and marginalisation appears to be the most general category in which the discriminatory effects of Covid-19 are most apparent. Thus, in April 2020, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) revealed that those living in the poorest parts of England and Wales were dying at twice the rate of those living in the richest areas. The most deprived areas of England and Wales recorded 55.1 deaths per 100,000 people, compared with 25.3 in affluent areas.¹⁸ Of course, poverty is, to a certain extent, an intersectional injustice, which impacts many different racial and ethnic groups in the UK. Many poor and deprived white British people have also died from Covid-19. However, the racism and xenophobia which I set out above, serves to disproportionately consign many racial, ethnic and religious minorities to socio-economic vulnerability and marginalisation. This is apparent in the figures which show the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 upon many black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities in the UK. The same data showed that more than 16 percent of all people who had tested positive for coronavirus when they died were from BAME communities, despite the fact that the 2011 UK census

¹⁶ OHCHR, 'Visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance,' UN Doc. A/HRC/41/54/Add. 2, 27 May 2019.

¹⁷ Helen Pidd, Caelainn Barr and Aamna Mohdin, 'Calls for health funding to be prioritised as poor bear brunt of Covid-19,' *The Guardian*, 1 May 2020.

¹⁸ Chris Giles and William Wallis, 'Deprived areas hit hardest by the pandemic in the UK,' *The Financial Times*, 1 May 2020.

showed that 7.5 per cent of the population were Asian and 3.3 per cent black. More anecdotally, it was also very noteworthy that the first ten doctors and two-thirds of the first 100 health and social care workers who died of Covid-19 were from ethnic minorities.¹⁹ Public Health England has produced a report examining the causes of these disparities.²⁰

There is, no doubt, be a very complex set of factors and conditions which combine to expose many minority communities to significantly greater risk of becoming infected and dying from Covid-19. Some have pointed to cultural factors, such as the relatively larger size of family households amongst some South Asian-descended communities, which make socially isolating all the more difficult. However, it is clear that one of the principal factors is the greater exposure of particular occupational groups to the virus. Many of us, including many university staff, have been able to continue working from home throughout the period of social lockdown. The opportunity to work from home is, one might say, a particular privilege which Covid-19 has underlined. Many others, of course, do not enjoy this privilege. So-called key or essential workers have had to continue exposing themselves to a far higher risk of infection as they have continued to go to work. The most obvious such groups are health care and social care professionals, but the category of key workers extends far beyond these occupational categories. Identity is significant here for the simple reason that racial and ethnic minority communities are disproportionately employed in key-worker positions. For example, more than two in ten black African women of working age are employed in health and social care roles. Indian men are 150% more likely to work in health or social care roles than their white British counterparts. While the Indian ethnic group makes up 3% of the working-age population of England and Wales, they account for 14% of doctors.²¹ Similar figures are also found amongst other key occupational groups, such as public transport and public utilities.

The higher rates of infection and death from the coronavirus pandemic connect directly to the other pandemic I have been analysing in this chapter. Identity politicking based upon racism, xenophobia and intolerance are a manifestation of the social, political and economic marginalisation and vulnerability which many minority communities have been exposed to for a very considerable time and which has intensified in recent years as such prejudices have been mainstreamed into many areas of UK politics and society. The coronavirus pandemic has served to highlight the disturbingly pathological character and effects of the pandemic of discontent. The two pandemics converge to deadly effect.

IV. “After”

These words are being written in early June 2020 and I must acknowledge the speculative nature of contemplating any post-Covid age and the unavoidably tentative nature of any

¹⁹ Haroon Siddique, ‘UK government urged to investigate coronavirus deaths of BAME doctors,’ 10 April 2020.

²⁰ Public Health England, ‘Disparities in the risk and outcomes of Covid-19,’ June 2020, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/890258/disparities_review.pdf, although it’s important to note that the findings of the report have been quickly criticised by members of the BAME community. See, Haroon Siddique and Denis Campbell, ‘Censorship row over report on UK BAME Covid-19 deaths,’ *The Guardian*, 4 June 2020.

²¹ Omar Khan, ‘Coronavirus exposes how riddled Britain is with racial inequality,’ *The Guardian*, 20 April 2020; Lucinda Platt and Ross Warwick, ‘Are some ethnic groups more vulnerable to Covid-19 than others?’ Institute for Fiscal Studies, April 2020, <https://www.ifs.org.uk/inequality/chapter/are-some-ethnic-groups-more-vulnerable-to-covid-19-than-others/>.

predictions regarding what changes the post-Covid world will undergo. It does, however, seem reasonable to assume that significant changes will occur. The question is, will the overwhelming evidence of the indispensable contribution BAME communities make in sustaining the UK during (before and after) the Covid-19 pandemic, provide a means for undercutting the toxic identity politicking of the pandemic of discontent within the UK? A change is gonna come. The question is, can those of us who care about the equal rights of all steer this change in the right direction?

Right-wing populist identity politicking seeks to exploit long-standing socio-cultural differences to its own ends. Advocates of a politics which resorts to racism, xenophobia and intolerance seek to convert difference into hostile otherness. Further, the architects of right-wing populism have persistently sought to argue that the always vaguely defined essential interests of those sections of the electorate represented as the “genuine people” are necessarily at odds with liberal commitments to respecting the rights of many minority communities.²² It is possible that this interests-based appeal will be strengthened as societies like the UK face the huge economic challenges which Covid-19 will entail. History is rife with examples of severe crises being accompanied by populations turning against and scapegoating marginalised communities in their midst.

However, such developments are not inevitable. Periods of profound crisis also afford opportunities for developing radically different forms of political imagination and action. It is also possible to develop a very different narrative from our collective experience of Covid-19. While identity is a salient aspect of peoples’ vulnerability to the virus, identity has also been an essential feature of the UK’s social and economic survival over the past few months. The very same racial, ethnic and religious communities who were often targeted as posing an existential threat to the UK’s wider collective identity, have emerged as disproportionately populating the key and essential workers the media have come to depict as national heroes, worthy of being applauded once a week in a national rite of appreciation. This is particularly the case with many “front-line” health care professionals, amongst whom there is a massively disproportionate number of people from BAME communities. Thus, as of March 2019, 20% of the more than 1.2 million staff employed by the health service were BAME, compared with 14% of the general population of England and Wales. This proportion increases to 44% when it comes to medical staff. The latest figures show that 43% of senior NHS doctors and 47% of junior doctors were BAME as of March last year.²³ Indeed, other evidence has unequivocally demonstrated the indispensable role migrants from many of the UK’s former colonial territories played in staffing the then newly established NHS in the late 1940s and early 1950s.²⁴ Broadly similar claims can be made for many of the sectors included within the other key and essential worker occupations, upon whom much of the entire country has depended, not just over the past few months, but, of course, for many decades prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁵ Racial, ethnic and religious minorities have shown themselves to be

²² See Muller (n. 7).

²³ Haroon Siddique, ‘UK doctors’ coronavirus deaths highlight crucial role of BAME medics,’ *The Guardian*, 3 April 2020.

²⁴ Mend, ‘Overlooking the Incredible Contributions of BAME Staff in the NHS’, Muslim Engagement and Development, April 2020, <https://www.mend.org.uk/overlooking-the-incredible-contributions-of-bame-staff-in-the-nhs/>.

²⁵ Who the UK Government identifies as key workers during the coronavirus is provided here: UK Government, ‘Guidance: Critical workers who can access schools or educational settings,’ updated 16 June 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>.

absolutely essential for the development and survival of British society, despite the racism and xenophobia which they have often had to confront.

Right-wing populism draws support from across the socio-economic demographic sectors of the UK electorate and it is false to assume that its supporters are entirely relatively poorly educated and low-paid white British voters.²⁶ There is no denying, however, that right-wing populist political parties, such as UKIP, the Brexit Party and Boris Johnson's Conservative Party have capitalised on the support of such voters.²⁷ Right-wing populism has successfully depicted socio-cultural differences between white British communities and their BAME neighbours as, in some ill-defined sense, detrimental to the interests of the nation and its people. The experience of Covid-19 provides an opportunity to fundamentally defy and contradict this strategy, by manifestly demonstrating that the most vital interests of us all, staying alive and retaining some degree of socio-economic functioning, have been secured by countless numbers of people whom right-wing populists have sought to characterise as being, in effect, the enemies within. The NHS would collapse without BAME staff. Many of the essential services we all depend upon would grind to a halt without the very many BAME workers continuing to expose themselves and their families to greater risk of infection. BAME communities will play an absolutely essential role in rebuilding the UK's economy and society after a vaccine has been delivered. These irrefutable truths provide the basis for a political project of "building back better" as the world and the UK confronts an altered world social and economic environment.²⁸

The, admittedly rather optimistic, position I am asserting here has, perhaps, been further strengthened by the ongoing response by many people to the death of George Floyd in the US. The death of yet another African American at the hands of US police officers has sparked an astonishing reaction by a wide cross-section of people who are united in their outrage at continuing racism in societies such as ours. Initial attempts by right-wing populists to gain political capital from the killing of George Floyd have been largely overwhelmed by a different form of popular protest, one which stands up for the human rights of all and is demanding radical and transformative change. This political and social phenomenon points to the possibility of mobilising large numbers of people in support of a genuinely rights-based alternative to the hateful politics of the pandemic of discontent. A key aspect of politics consists of how we name the collective problems we are confronted by. Right wing populism has, for several years, sought to name the profoundly serious challenges we all face in ways which conspire to reinforce the pathologies which right-wing populism ultimately depends upon and which cause us so much harm and discontent. We now have an opportunity of renaming and thus effectively confronting the problems we face in ways which support the ongoing struggle to secure genuine justice for all.

²⁶ Catarina Kinnvall, 'The Postcolonial has moved into Europe: bordering, security and ethnocultural belonging', (2016) 54(1) *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 152-168.

²⁷ Nicolas Morieson, 'The Revenge of Farage: Right-Wing Populism at the 2019 UK Elections', Australian Institute for International Affairs, 19 December 2019, <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-revenge-of-farage-right-wing-populism-at-the-2019-uk-elections/>.

²⁸ See the UN Secretary-General's statement on "building back better" after Covid-19 – 'We are all in this Together: Human Rights and COVID-19 Response and Recovery', 23 April 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/we-are-all-together-human-rights-and-covid-19-response-and-recovery/>.

V. Conclusion

The two pandemics I have briefly analysed in this chapter converge around socio-economic and socio-cultural inequalities and marginalisation. Significant aspects of the pandemic of discontent should be understood as symptoms of a deep and underlying set of structural conditions that have adversely impacted broad cross-sections of British society. The very genuine concerns which have fuelled some aspects of right-wing populist identity politicking were, of course, never going to be remedied by the hateful “medicine” prescribed by the architects of right-wing populism. In contrast, the inequalities which Covid-19 have cast such an uncompromising light upon offer a glimmer of hope of developing a new political narrative, which recognises that we really all ought to be in the struggle to rebuild better together, because our relationships with each other are (or can be) mutually interdependent and supportive. In the final analysis, we all depend upon each other. I fear that the collective memory of our interdependence will not last too long without a sustained and rights-based political project to support it. Call me a naïve optimist, but the lessons we might learn from the Covid-19 pandemic provide the means for fighting back against and perhaps even neutering the right-wing populism pathogen at the heart of the pandemic of discontent.