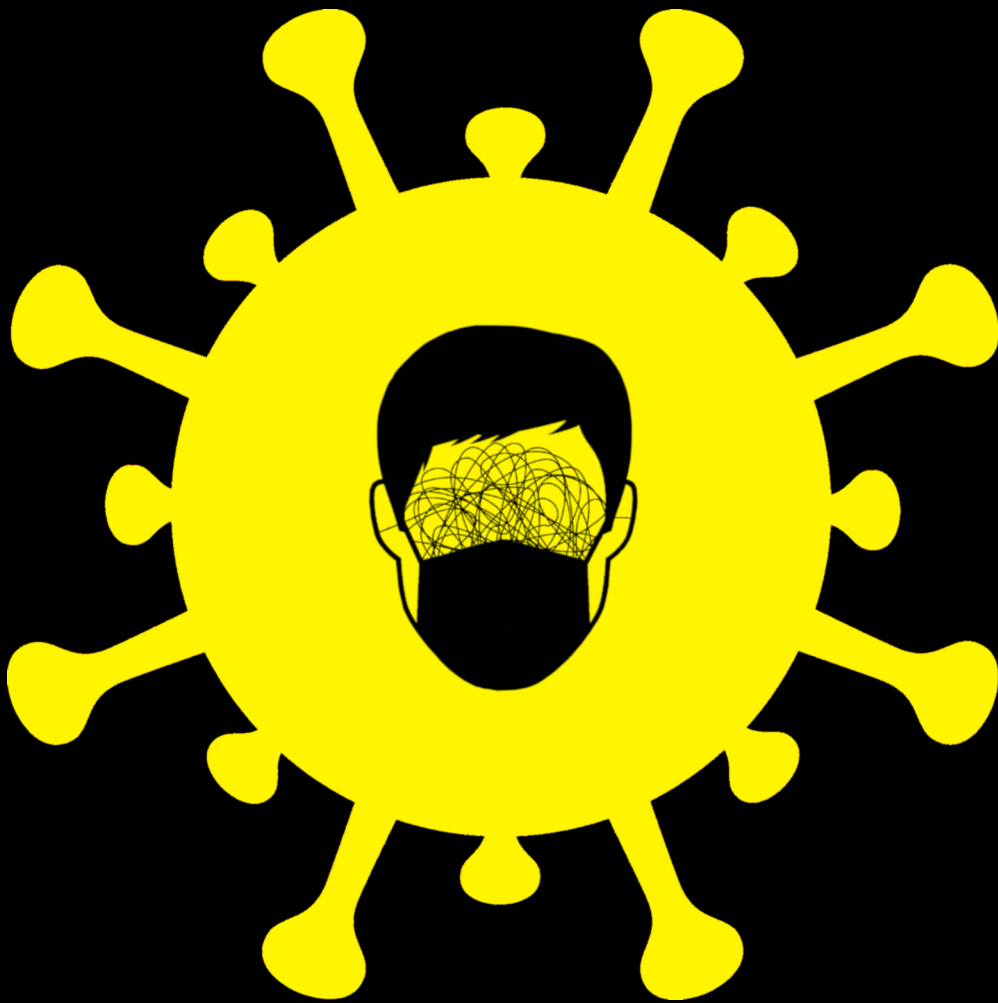


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# **Pandemic Perspectives: Reflections on a Post-Covid World**



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# Pandemic Perspectives: Reflections on the Post-Covid World: Introduction

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## Introduction

This publication reflects papers from the first conference hosted by the Pandemic Perspectives group, an interdisciplinary network of scholars interested in Covid-19's continued significance, and its manifold long-term consequences. Optimistically titled 'Reflections on the Post-Covid World', the conference united scholars from India, Canada, and across Europe and the UK in a discussion of the impact of the pandemic and their research and speculations into its long-term effects. The publication showcases the long-standing interest of the Pandemic Perspectives network in engaging in dialogue across cultural and disciplinary borders, with papers on topics widely ranging as the future of the office, women's health, and classical reception.

Pandemic Perspectives developed in the first of the UK lockdowns, in April 2020, through the initiative of the group's founder David Christie, then a first-year PhD student in Contemporary History at the University of Birmingham. Initially, Christie envisioned discussing and debating the effects of the pandemic with leading academic researchers within his University department. However, due to the pressures the pandemic had exerted on higher education, and the fire-fighting many more senior members of staff had to undertake, Christie very quickly realised that this sort of discussion group would be impossible to facilitate. Instead, he decided to reach out to like-minded doctoral researchers known to him, with many – though not all – belonging to the AHRC Midlands4Cities Doctoral Training Partnership. Pandemic Perspectives was born.

To facilitate and expand the group's developments, a core group gradually emerged to oversee the operation of Pandemic Perspectives. In addition to David Christie, Niall Gallen and Liam Knight — both literature researchers from the University of Birmingham — several doctoral scholars joined the organising committee, including classicist Richard Kendall from the University of Edinburgh; Birmingham sociologist Hanan Fara; literature researcher Sadegh Attari, also of Birmingham; historian Ronan Love, from the University of Warwick; jurisprudence scholar Carmen Torres, C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University; Warwick literature researcher Christopher Griffin, and historian Alastair Gardner from the University of Birmingham.

The group's initial weekly Zoom meetings tackled broad themes, tracking Covid's impact on the global economy, travel, and education. But with the increasing interest and participation of scholars working on particular topics, gradually sessions became guided by bespoke reading lists compiled by a specialist in the area. One such highlight includes Niall Gallen's session on the pandemic and technological acceleration, 'Covid and the Techno-Virus', which provoked a speculative debate about the long-term effects of the pandemic on the further integration of digital technologies in everyday life. As the group's ambitions grew, more senior academics within the UK were also invited to give talks. Highlights included a session led by Dr Jakub Benes of UCL on Gramsci and Covid-19, by Dr Helen Kingstone at the University of Surrey on the historiography of the pandemic, and a fabulous collaboration with the University of Birmingham's PGR Feminisms Group, whose founders Marie Allegré, Alice Seville, and Rianne Houghton delivered several sessions on the impact of Covid-19 on women.

As guest speakers caused interest in Pandemic Perspectives to grow, the Zoom platform enabled regular participation from scholars based all over the world, an impossibility in more traditional in-person discussion groups. Over the course of its existence, Pandemic Perspectives has attracted over seventy active participants from as far away as Iran, the USA and universities across the whole of the UK. In the spring of 2021, it showcased the extraordinary research by Israeli scholar Dr Smadar Ben-Natan (University of Washington) on protest and resistance in Israel under Covid-19, and the work of Palestinian doctor and academic Dr Osama Tanous (Visiting Scholar at the François-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard University) whose deeply moving talk on the interaction of Covid-19 and the Palestinian people took place against a backdrop of mass protest and oppression in Israel-Palestine.

With a stable organising committee and regular membership, Pandemic Perspectives launched a dedicated seminar series in the autumn of 2021, further expanding its range of activities. It hosted presentations on topics as diverse as Dr Joshua Edelman's (Manchester Metropolitan University) on ritual observance under Covid-19, the multi-university interdisciplinary collaborative work of the Play Observatory based at University College London (UCL), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) scholar Avantka Tewari's work on security and autonomy in the post-Covid world, and the insights of Jon Cruddas MP and his book, *The Dignity of Labour* (2021). The seminar series marked Pandemic Perspectives' emergence as a platform for researchers from a wide range of disciplines working on pandemic-related themes to present their work to audiences of academics and interested members of the general public.

Entering the third year of its existence and with help of its organisers, Pandemic Perspectives' second seminar series is well underway, and the group has established itself as a truly international network of scholars across the full spectrum of the humanities, offering a pointed reminder of the importance of our disciplines to understanding the manifold crises faced by the modern world. The accounts of its debates not only document the extraordinary scope of Covid-19's impact—on our perception of time, on religion, on the global economy, on human relations, language, and childhood, among many other topics—but also charts the evolution of academic thought over the course of the pandemic's tragic progression. The group has demonstrated the importance of interdisciplinary and cross-institution

collaboration and, by encouraging scholars to step outside of their comfort zones, has opened up new spaces for debate and reflection.

At the time of writing, the pandemic itself has waned in some parts of the world, but the possibility of further return waves, and its aftereffects, loom. Likewise, much of the developing world remains unvaccinated and frighteningly vulnerable to its devastating effects. The Pandemic Perspectives group believes that only through interdisciplinary collaboration can its far-reaching consequences be determined, and potential responses be formulated. As the effects of this seismic event continue to develop, the Pandemic Perspectives group will remain a platform, within academia and beyond, to chart, debate and deconstruct its every manifestation.

### *Journal Proceedings*

The journal opens with Amélie Doche's 'Lockdown, Literature, and Online Culture: Opportunities and Challenges', which offers valuable insights into how readers, writers, and literary development agencies have adapted to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing on several examples, Doche highlights how a shift to digital technologies has enabled literary festivals to not only reach larger and more diverse audiences but has likewise enabled them to celebrate the works of a more diverse range of writers. Doche also details how the social media activity of readers has evolved over the course of the pandemic, noting how the use of hashtags, photos, and interactions with editors, authors, and publishers has created an increasingly visible participatory culture around books and reading. In conclusion, the negative impact of digital technologies on readers' habits are considered, with Doche ultimately suggesting that rather than passively accepting algorithmically determined literary content, readers must exercise agency and choose which content they engage with.

From a focus on medium to that of content, Amanda Grimbo Roswall's 'Plague Fiction: Reading About Epidemics During Covid-19' is a study both of lockdown reading habits in the UK and Denmark and an innovative analysis of Albert Camus's *The Plague* in the light of the experience of global pandemic. The former is born of the work of the *Lockdown Reading* project based at the University of Copenhagen, which began in spring of 2020 and has, since September of that year, gathered over eight hundred responses to its surveys of individual reading patterns over the course of the pandemic. The frequency of Camus's novel in these experiences, Roswall argues, betrays our innate need to seek answers in our reading from historical or, in the case of *The Plague*, quasi-historical narratives.

While continuing the theme of reading and Covid-19, Anindita Shome's paper, 'Pandemic, Dystopian Fiction, and Increasing Inequalities: A Reading of Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits*', also explores how a particular instance of speculative fiction may behave as a predictor for what a pandemic-enforced dystopia might look like. Noting that it draws upon the recurring themes of surveillance, decaying societal order, and a pervading sense of hopelessness, Shome locates Basu's novel within what she identifies as a tradition of contemporary Indian dystopian fiction, despite Basu's assertions to the contrary. Shome reads Basu's novel within India's pre- and post-pandemic contexts, discussing how the novel's depiction of political dissenters disappearing and its presentation of a hyper-online populace amount to realistic projections of India today. Throughout the paper, Shome analyses how the digital inequalities of Basu's story-world reinforce and widen the various disparities that exist among India's different classes, castes, and faith groups. Shome parallels these inequalities with the power structures and systemic oppression evident in Indian society, concluding that Basu's dystopia merely replicates the nation's pre-existing social imbalances.

On the theme of inequality, the journal moves from social to the medical—assuming those two categories can be extricated—with Dr Michael Rimmer's 'Delivery of women's healthcare across the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic'. Drawing on survey responses made by NHS doctors, Rimmer explains how the healthcare industry adapted to the pressures posed by the pandemic to ensure that

women's healthcare was not adversely affected. Despite these efforts, Rimmer notes that certain poor health outcomes—including increased numbers of stillbirths, maternal mortality, and postnatal depression—have been reported within the UK and globally. Rimmer concludes by stating that the overall impact of the pandemic on women's healthcare will not be fully understood for years, but that policymakers must reflect on its impacts as they decide which aspects of care ought to be prioritised in order to avoid a continued negative impact on women's pregnancy outcomes.

Charlotte Parkyn's 'Oedipus in the times of Covid' is a study of classical reception in the time of the pandemic that weaves the experiences of two theatrical companies' (one based in New York, the other in a London suburb) productions of Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* in 2020 with that of the original Athenian audience of 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Frequently dismissed simply as a framing device for the dramatic core of the play, Parkyn demonstrates how the play's setting in a time of plague took on new resonance in the light of Coronavirus, rightly noting that the playwright and his Greek audience had personally experienced just such an outbreak and exploring the ways in which this text and the newfound strategies to perform it in line with current health regulations served a cathartic role for modern actors and viewers, similar to the ways in which they had over two thousand years before.

Leaving aside pandemic regulations, William David Green's 'Comedy and Plague in the Time of Covid: The BBC's *Upstart Crow*: Lockdown Christmas 1603' analyses the role comedy plays in the transmission of pandemic narratives. Focusing on the Christmas special of the BBC sitcom *Upstart Crow*, the article posits that the more mature, serious, and reflective tone of this episode illustrated a greater willingness to engage with the realities of life in such circumstances, noting that while the Coronavirus pandemic stands out as an exceptional time of upheaval in the contemporary western world, in the times of Shakespeare such outbreaks were significantly more common. Further, in the utilisation of terms and measures familiar to modern audiences, whatever be their applicability to Shakespearean England, the episode illuminated the ways in which comedy can serve to alleviate the stresses of our lived experience, as well as providing new insights into that of historical societies.

In 'Pandemic Futurities', Rob Booth investigates how the Covid-19 pandemic has altered our shared relationship to and experience of the future. Primarily drawing from the experience of the pandemic in the UK, Booth deploys theoretical insights from studies in political ecology to assess the pandemic's disruption to the temporal rhythms of social life in a way that will speak to various geographic contexts. From the spectral, potential presence of the virus in our social life and its impact on 'quotidian futures' — whether that be how we navigate a supermarket or the daily bus to work — to the epidemiological challenges now faced by the biopolitical state as it seeks to anticipate, calculate, and perform the future in the present, Booth argues that the pandemic has both reinforced the need to transition from anthropocentrism to an 'ethics of care' and highlighted the environmental, economic, and epidemiological barriers to such a future.

Continuing the theme of government attempts to discipline their populations, Victoria Fendel's 'A new hearth? Defining Social Units During the Covid-19 Pandemic' looks at two concepts used in the official press releases by the British Prime Minister's office over the first year of the pandemic: the household and the bubble. These concepts, Fendel argues, served to regulate people's social connections; they formed an inside versus outside binary system based on which permitted forms of social contact were introduced. This act, argues Fendel, effectively presented a trade-off between separation/isolation and protection, but also produced unintended responses from the British population. Whether it be a sense of being dominated by government intervention or loneliness, Fendel explores how these unintended responses were due to the government's mode of address.

In 'The Unsettled Church and State: The Case of Shincheonji and Covid-19 in South Korea', Mary Briggs moves from the discursive to the instrumental, exploring how Covid-19 served as a pretext for actions against Shincheonji, a new millenarian Christian church that found itself at the epicentre of Covid's outbreak in South Korea. After offering services in February 2020 that were labelled "superspreader"

events by the South Korean state, Briggs shows how this moment crystallised a broader historical concern with Shincheonji as a disruptive force to South Korea's modernity. By situating Shincheonji's recent rise against the backdrop of South Korean political and economic development since the mid-twentieth century — developments, Briggs argues, that were heavily intertwined with Protestantism — Briggs explores how Shincheonji is perceived as a threat to the South Korean state and society, and thereby gives much needed historical context to the scrutiny Shincheonji experienced under the pretext of Covid-19.

In 'The Office is Dead, Long Live the Office', Petra Seitz speculates on the post-pandemic future(s) of office spaces, taking the theme of discipline from the realm of government to that of the economy. Opening with a brief history of the modern office in architectural design, Seitz details the evolution of the commercial office, exploring how factors such as technological developments, cultural and national norms, and a drive towards profit-optimization have frequently led to shifts in office design philosophy. This brief historical overview grounds Seitz's criticisms of the overzealous popular predictions of the commercial office's demise, particularly those that use narrow sample studies to generalise the future of all office spaces. Seitz argues against a tendency in these analyses to overlook workers compelled to continue working within centralised office spaces during the pandemic, while also centring narratives on middle-class professions in the Global North. Seitz ends by considering the crucial role that office space plays in the capitalist labour process, acting as a key disciplinary environment for workers that, she argues, will outlast the pandemic.

### *Concluding Comments*

The diversity and scope of the papers in this collection detail the far-reaching impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the lives of people of all countries, classes, and occupations. Their publication together in this volume, it is hoped, will encourage a multiplicity of responses in our readers, from those who had direct experience of the topics and policies recounted in these articles, who lived through the lockdowns, travel bans and manifold other restrictions on day-to-day life, and those who will write the history of the Coronavirus pandemic in the years to come. For both audiences, this publication stands as testament to the initial responses of a range of early career researchers, whose contrasting geographical, disciplinary, and intellectual traditions nevertheless cohered in some unexpected and enlightening ways during the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic. Across the papers, the themes of centre and periphery recur, be it in Eurocentric obituaries of the death of the office or the surveillance of a marginalised religious group in South Korea. In many ways, papers of superficial dissimilarity fundamentally address the same basic question: did the pandemic create new problems, or simply exacerbate and foreground those which had been ignored in pre-pandemic society? The issues of women's health and social inequality in India seem to suggest the latter, while the question of futurities and political communication in an unprecedented health crisis demonstrate the new problems occasioned by the pandemic for which answers are still to be found. Finally, it is clear that the lived experience of the pandemic is not simply a question of scientific knowledge, but also involves our aesthetic sensibilities, creating new pathways for the engagement with art and media and reshaping the cultural canon. From millennia-old Greek drama to BBC sitcoms, from Camus to the staging of literary festivals, the pandemic has fostered innovation in the creation and interpretation of art in no less radical a way as it has affected science and healthcare. Such cross-disciplinary and institutional dialogue remains at the heart of Pandemic Perspectives, and we hope that this publication will inform, encourage, and perhaps challenge your own perspective on this most unorthodox historical episode.