Book review:
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Unprecedented? How COVID-19 Revealed the Politics of Our Economy, by William Davies, Sahil Jai Dutta, Nick Taylor, and Martina Tazzioli, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2022, 320 pp., $24.95 T (paper)

The book under review, co-authored by four social scientists, which enables a broad perspective, relates to the COVID-19 pandemic experiences in the United Kingdom over the period of March 2020 to September 2021. A second wave of COVID-19 was to follow. As the book observes, the UK had one of the worst records with COVID-19. There have been books setting out the delays and poor policy making, particularly in the first months of the pandemic, and they will be added when the on-going UK COVID-18 Inquiry finally reports. The approach of this book is to examine the neoliberal directions taken in the UK and the ways in which that had consequences for the effects of COVID-19 and the policy responses to it on British society and economy. The authors argue that "much of what transpired over 2020–21 was an embedding and exacerbation of tendencies that were already apparent." They provide an account of the lockdowns, confinements and emergency policies, with each chapter beginning by identifying crucial features of the pre-COVID landscape, which are argued to be decisive in shaping what transpired. These features include marketisation, financialisation, and the inequalities to which the UK is subject. The authors argue that "novel events are shaped by the socio-political circumstances that precede them, and it is crucial to locate them in their contexts, and not treat them as entirely *sui generis.*" The opening chapter discusses "some of the central social and political preconditions of the pandemic economy, which ultimately shaped and fuelled the policies and trends that we detail over subsequent chapters" (5).

Chapters 2 to 5 cover four different institutional and policy domains where the authors view the effects of the pandemic as having been transformative, and where major

interventions were necessary in order to sustain the economy and society. The four domains relate to public and private finance (chap. 2); work and the labour market (chap. 3), bordering and surveillance infrastructure (chap. 4), and education (chap. 5). These are areas where scale of upheaval and rescue packages was greatest. The pandemic and responses to it continued after the manuscript was completed, particularly in a second wave of COVID-19, and where the build-up of evidence and continuing impacts of policy responses to COVID-19 would support the analyses of this book (e.g. education).

The question mark after unprecedented is a sign that an event such as the outbreak of COVID-19 has its own characteristics and its nature, effects, policy responses and so forth surrounded by fundamental uncertainty. Yet there will be previous events with which comparisons made and lessons drawn—often of course bowdlerized versions of previous events. The subtitle of this book provides a quick indication of its direction.

Chapter 1 sets out events and policies of the pandemic in the UK. The first months of policy dithering, refusal by government ministers and others to recognize the scale of the pandemic, and some grievous policy mistakes have been well set out elsewhere and are now the subject of the ongoing official inquiry. The fiscal responses were notably with a "we'll spend what it takes approach" with fiscal rules suspended, major packages of support to business and loan guarantees, and the introduction of a job furlough scheme (where nothing similar had been tried before in the UK). The UK's fiscal response was amongst the largest in the world. The book notes that the Government borrowed £303 billion (which relative to the GDP was over 15 per cent) in 2020–21. This attitude to deficit spending and public debt did not last long and was soon replaced by "debt panic."

Chapter 2 is entitled "Endless Temporary Measures: The Politics of 'Leverage'" and covers issues of public and private finance. There were many routes through which government sought to support incomes and economic activity. These included the programme

of Quantitative Easing by the Bank of England supporting asset prices and lower interest rates: which has turned out to be a costly exercise when bank rate rose to over 5 per cent, adding to the profits of banks holding the reserves with the Bank of England. A novel (to the UK) furlough scheme was introduced providing employment income to those whose employment was suspended during the pandemic; then extended and then phased out as the economic lockdowns declined. A "Bounce Back Loan Scheme" supported loans, though many were not repaid and were subject to fraudlent claims. This book views these interventions in terms of the government attempting to sustain an "economy [that] *already* was constituted as a web of debt relations, underpinned by a state that was *already* deploying exceptional measures in order to keep a pyramid of promises from collapsing."

Chapter 3, entitled "New Divisions of Labour: The Politics of 'Flexibility'," relates to work and the labour market. It provides an overview of the nature of the UK labour and changes over recent decades, notably developments of a so-called flexible labour market, weakening the position of workers, strengthening employers' positions, and the rise of new and established forms of contingent work. The welfare system is shown to operate in sync with labour market flexibility, but its support diminished through years of austerity. There were though high levels of employment and low unemployment rates which may be seen as success, "yet it shaped a pre-pandemic labour market that left many groups fundamentally insecure and poorly paid."

A remarkable feature of the first months of the pandemic was the widespread realisation of whose work was essential to the everyday functioning of society (e.g. in health and social care, transport workers), with the term "key worker' frequently employed. Yet many of those were in low paid and/or insecure employment, and were in jobs which brought them into greater contact with COVID. People working on zero-hour contracts and similar

ones were particularly disadvantaged. The pressures to work from home favoured jobs which did not require direct contact.

The book charts the intersecting inequalities which shaped who continues to work and who doesn't, and under what conditions. The question is asked as to "what structural issues or pathologies have been exposed and how has flexible and insecure work shaped the crisis?" The conclusion is reached that "the way we understand some forms of 'key' work may have changed the popular imagination of socially useful work, and considering whether the prominent shift to homeworking may have opened up the politics of flexible working in new ways" (82–83). There was indeed a period when there were shifts in what was widely regarded as socially useful work (and by implication what was not socially useful), much of which has now been reversed. Similarly, there are pushbacks against the shift to homeworking. The shortcomings of the UK's sickness pay system in its coverage and generosity, and the weaknesses of the main welfare benefit of Universal Credit were well-known though often not recognized by the political classes. And, as this book shows, these shortcomings were clearly shown during the pandemic and required some if limited "sticking plaster" help.

Chapter 4, entitled "Confine and Track: The Politics of 'Protection'," argues that Covid-19 led to social and economic inequalities being also reflected in different mobility rights and freedoms. The chapter argues that "the sudden expansion in the political and market demand for the confining, testing and tracing of human bodies [was] a huge commercial opportunity, which [was] exploited by companies that specialise in the management of mobility and biodata" (134). There was also a story of failures to develop an effective "test and trace" system, and the ways in which private operators were brought into areas of public health. There was a reliance on a small number of contractors who were often

awarded on a non-competitive basis and to those politically well-connected firms, where the full extent of corruption is gradually coming into the public domain.

In Chapter 5, "Education without Context: The Politics of Learning," it is remarked that "Many children in the UK lost over a hundred days of learning between March 2020 and July 2021 due to school closures, while GCSE and A-level students in England and Wales suffered the chaos and emotional turmoil of exams being cancelled, and their marks being algorithmically set and then reset" (165–66). The effects of the educational disruption during the pandemic continue to be felt in terms of pupils' development, behavioural issues and school attendance (as I write this in 2024). English schools were compelled to close for 40 days in the spring and summer of 2020, compared with an OECD average of 60 days), and then an additional 40 days in early 2021. The loss of schooling tended to be greater in deprived regions. The lack of adequate access to technology and other factors meant that educational losses fell more on disadvantaged children.

Chapter 6 covers "Escaping Rentier Nationalism." The book uses the term "rentier nationalism" to "highlight the reassertion of the nation as an economic unit and 'imagined community,' but also to specify the main beneficiaries of this mutation: asset-owning households, financial elites, platforms and outsourcing contractors." It argues that the pandemic created "exceptional new opportunities to expand political and corporate control over strategic areas of the economy." The authors argue that "a distinctive type of national capitalism is emerging, based around an unashamedly larger state with higher levels of public borrowing and spending, especially on healthcare; an electoral base made up of older homeowners and ultra- high- net-worth donors; para-governmental industries of public service providers and digital platforms; and an unstable combination of labour market 'flexibility' and tight immigration control" (214–15). The UK has though emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic with a failing national health service through lack of spending,

alongside other failing public services. In the past couple of years there has been relatively high levels of net immigration though political parties vowing to reduce immigration. I would not see the state as having become significantly larger, and government and opposition parties not seeking a larger state, at least in terms of scale of expenditure and public ownership .

Listening to evidence being given to the UK COVID-19 Inquiry inevitably focuses on the roles of individuals in policy making positions and on highlighting ~~questions of~~ whether decisions were made soon enough, what information and ideas fed into those decisions, how well were they implemented, and what were their particular successes and failures ~~were there~~. This book should act as something of a counterweight—rather than failures of groups of individuals or even of institutions—it points more to systemic failures.

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