

# Coronavirus and Capitalist Realism

ADAM LEON BRISLEY

There was something about the images in the press of North American kids defiantly attending “spring break” parties in Miami last week (1) that made me think of a famous quote from Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism*: “it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism”. (2) Perhaps, I thought, the “spring breakers” can imagine neither, nor any other significant change to the social reality they have always inhabited, and therefore the coronavirus pandemic simply fails to move them.

Whilst COVID-19 is not the end of the world – nor will it likely spell an end to capitalism – state responses to the pandemic have given rise to radically new forms of everyday sociality in many parts of continental Europe. Barcelona, where I live, has been in a state of lockdown for a little over a week. My housemates adapted to the new situation seemingly unphased and now begin each day by turning our front room into an office, where they work until 6pm, before transforming it into a gym.

A new communal ritual has taken hold throughout Spain. At 8pm each night, we go to our balconies to clap and cheer in a show of solidarity with the healthcare workers who expose themselves to the virus on our behalf. (3) A local musician has written a beautiful account of people playing live music to their neighbours from the rooftop terraces of our neighbouring *barrio* of *Poblenou*. (4) I must admit however, the best I have



seen so far was a half-naked man dancing in his window. I clapped at him and he clapped back, but I remain unsure about whether our exchange had anything to do with coronavirus.

The streets of Barcelona are mostly deserted now, both night and day. The buildings on part of my street overhang the pavement, providing some shelter for a group of homeless people who have been sleeping there for the past year. They are still there, but in the absence of tourism and street life, they now lack any obvious means of economic subsistence.

My family and friends back home tell me that the situation in the UK is has been markedly different from Spain's. For much of the last week, social life apparently continued much as before. On Wednesday, after thousands of teachers and students had already taken the decision to stay at home, Boris Johnson announced that schools would be closed from Friday. (5) By the weekend, further announcements had been made about the closure of pubs, clubs, and restaurants. (6) The same measures were taken a week earlier in Germany. (7) As Novara Media's Michel Walker commented, the only obvious benefit of the UK approach is that "people get to go to the pub for five more days". The downside, however, is that people may end up "bursting out of ICU units because there aren't enough ventilators". (8)



The UK government's lacklustre response to the pandemic made me wonder whether Johnson, like those kids on spring break, lacks the capacity to imagine a different reality to the one he has always known. Perhaps, I thought, he is so caught by capitalist realism, so convinced that our current economic system represents "the end of history", that he is neither capable of comprehending a threat to the it, nor able to grasp the enormity of the response that such a threat requires.

It seems more likely, however, that the UK government has been slow to react because it values the maintenance of the existing economic order over public safety (8). Indeed, *The Financial Times* reports that "Given the capital's status as a major global financial hub, Mr Johnson and Rishi Sunak, chancellor, were determined not to further alarm the markets by putting the city into lockdown". (9) As research published last week by Imperial College London warns, the human cost of Johnson's equivocation could prove catastrophic. (10)



On the other side of the coin, the previously impossible suddenly seems possible. Senior US republicans are apparently mulling proposals that, if implemented, would provide universal basic income type payments to (admittedly, only some of) the US population. (11) Last Sunday, the Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez publicly called for an “EU Marshall Plan” of public investment to combat the economic consequences of the pandemic (12). On Friday, Rishi Sunak announced a set of emergency economic measures that were described by *The Times* newspaper as “an unprecedented peacetime state intervention in the economy”. (13) But perhaps the most surreal sign of this widening of the so called “Overton window” was an article published in *The Telegraph* newspaper – a publication jokingly referred to as *The Tory-graph* owing to its unwavering support of the British Conservative Party. The headline read “Boris must embrace socialism

immediately to save the liberal free market”. (14)

Back before the global financial crash of 2008, Fisher wrote that the “long, dark night of the end of history has to be grasped as an enormous opportunity. The very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect. The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again”. (2)

The coronavirus pandemic is not a tiny event. It is however, tearing a rather large hole.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Adam Brisley is a social anthropologist and post-doctoral researcher at *Universitat Pompeu Fabra* in Barcelona. His long-term research interest concerns the relationship between care, welfare, and capitalism in the UK and Spain, with a particular focus on the consequences of economic crises and neoliberal reforms to public healthcare systems. Adam was awarded a PhD in Social Anthropology by *The University of Manchester* in 2015, where he continues to work as an external PhD supervisor.

adam.brisley@upf.edu

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