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## **Failure by Design? Neoliberalism, Public Space and the (im)Possibility of Lockdown Compliance in the UK**

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### **Introduction**

Long periods of lockdown came to dominate 2020 across much of the planet. The use of 'lockdown' measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 was a ubiquitous feature of government responses to the crisis across the globe. However, the severity of lockdown measures implemented varies drastically: the most authoritarian iterations, in New Zealand or China saw the public confined to their homes for all but the most essential of purposes such as essential shopping or seeking health care. In the UK, the advice remained similar but with a considerable gap in enforcement, thereby placing a greater emphasis on 'individual responsibility'. This emphasis foregrounded issues of 'compliance', while the nature, effectiveness and coherence of the restrictions themselves remain relatively untouched in mainstream public discourse. As a result, those seen not to comply with lockdown restrictions were met with increasingly vitriolic responses, being held accountable for the spread of the virus and the UK's burgeoning death toll. The term 'covidiot' quickly infiltrated the lexicon of public discourse amid condemnation of those seen to be using parks, beaches and other public spaces. The (mis)use of public space had, it seems, become one of the key battlegrounds of cities under lockdown.

That transgression of the 'stay home' imperative, framed around the supposed failure of the individual, is perhaps unsurprising when considered as an expression of neoliberal discourse on individual responsibility, and regulation of public space. The individualistic narrative that emerged during the COVID-19 lockdown appears to be a logical extension of social, spatial and political transformations undertaken under the banner of neoliberalism. However, the conventional understanding of lockdown restrictions and non-compliance elides, inter alia, an understanding of the inter and intra urban inequalities. In this chapter, I begin by briefly sketching out the way in which the 'lockdown', and individualistic narratives depicting those who (mis)use public space as 'covidiot', exacerbates spatial inequalities which are built into the fabric of densely populated cities. I will conclude by framing this by reflecting on the (im)possibility of compliance with lockdown measures in the (neoliberal) city.

### **Public Space, Urban Inequality and the Lockdown**

In the initial phase of lockdown in the UK, beginning on March 23<sup>RD</sup>, the issue of public space became increasingly prominent in public discourse. In particular, pictures of busy parks, beaches and other public spaces were read, in the public imagination at least, as evidence of lockdown transgression and moral failure. Through this lens, the 'selfishness' of those who (mis)use public space during lockdown punctures the solidarity expressed by those who stay home and 'recklessly' endanger the lives of others. As such, the term 'covidiot' quickly established itself in the lexicon of public discourse, to describe those suspected of lockdown transgression. Local newspapers headlines proclaimed that *'Londoners bask in park sunshine despite Boris Johnson begging people to stay home during Covid-19 lockdown'* (Brewis, 2020),

illustrating the degree to which the issue of lockdown compliance had become individualised, with the government – apparently – lacking powers of enforcement beyond appealing to individual ‘common-sense’. Further, the widespread use of *#selfishpricks*, often tweeted in response to pictures of busy public spaces, to decry the ‘selfishness’ of individuals using public space during the lockdown further reinforces the extent to which lockdown compliance had become an issue of individual moral responsibility.

An unambiguous narrative had, therefore, emerged. A narrative which foregrounds individual (mis)use of public space and non-compliance with lockdown restrictions as opposed to the nature, and enforcement, of the lockdown itself. What this narrative elides, however, is the extent to which the battle for public space in cities under lockdown is consistent with the spatial inequalities of the neoliberal city. Indeed, the rise of neoliberalism has been concomitant with an increasing (re)regulation, privatisation and commodification of public space (Smith & Low, 2006). Some scholars have situated this shift within broader ideological assault, invoking an increasingly *revanchist*, or punitive, political assault on minoritised groups (e.g. Smith, 1996; MacLeod, 2002; Lawton, 2018). As MacLeod (2002: 603) states, the neoliberal urban form is ‘increasingly choreographed through control over and purification of urban (public) space’. It is within this context, within the ‘trenchant reregulation and redaction of public space’ (Smith and Low, 2006: 1), that we must situate the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK.

At the most basic level, the continued use of public spaces, such as parks, amid the lockdown is a reflection of the socio-spatial fabric of cities themselves. It will come as a surprise to little that those living in densely populated cities have less access to private outdoor space when compared with their rural or suburban counterparts. Hence, Andrew Smith (2020: 3) argues that ‘(parks) [are] fundamental pieces of green infrastructure that make our cities more sustainable and liveable’. In focusing, however, on the behaviour of the individual using the ‘covidiot’ mantra, elides the systemic factors which can drive (mis)use of public space, such as a lack of alternative green spaces out with local parks. It seems, therefore, that the issue of compliance with lockdown measures is not the failure of the individual, but rather failure by design – especially given the dubious logic of the covidiot narrative which suggests that the mere use of parks is tantamount to lockdown transgression. Access and availability of public and private outdoor space(s) is not politically neutral nor coincidental. It seems that by shaming those who have little choice but to ‘congregate’ in public spaces refracts the dominant spatial inequity of lockdown itself, insofar as this can be connected to access and availability of private outdoor spaces.

It is within this context that attention must (re)turn to issues of compliance, and the ‘policing’ of lockdown restrictions on public space. Issues relating to lockdown compliance have been policed, principally, by creating narrative forms – such as the covidiot narrative – which encourage compliance by ‘shaming’ those who fail to comply as well as encouraging the public to become informants within their communities. UK Health secretary Matt Hancock, for example, has claimed that he would ‘snitch’ on his neighbour for lockdown non-compliance, and added that it is the public’s responsibility to avoid ‘tougher’ lockdown measures by complying with restrictions (Owen, 2020). This message seemingly resonated with a

frightened public. In Humberside, for example, the local police received around 900 calls per day about lockdown non-compliance, which prompted the police force to brand the restrictions themselves as 'woolly' and open to interpretation (ITV, 2020). This reinforces the surveillance and regulation of public space which embodies neoliberal urbanism by encouraging the public themselves to become participants in it.

In addition to this, Police responses to the lockdown imperative further contours the developments of urban neoliberalism, particularly as this pertains to increasing regulation of public spaces such as parks. Indeed, police powers of enforcement during the lockdown mark a continuation of revanchist police practice which permeates urban neoliberalism, with controversial tactics such as stop and search and powers of dispersal used to curtail certain uses and users of public spaces. Indeed, up to 25<sup>th</sup> may, police had issued 15,552 fixed penalty notices for lockdown non-compliance, while aiming to 'ensure voluntary compliance' with measures in England (NPCC, 2020). This, of course, resembles what Setha Low (2015: 154) articulates, in the context of the US, as the neoliberal model of public space which relies on 'the militarisation and penetration of surveillance and policing apparatus to remove "undesirables"'. The COVID-19 lockdown has, therefore, exacerbated already established models of neoliberal urban governance and police practice which constricts the use and availability of public space, particularly in dense urban centres and gentrifying areas.

In any case, it is clear that focusing on 'individual responsibility' elides the way in which lockdown enforcement has been undermined by an assemblage of socio-spatial inequality and government (in)action. To be clear, this is not to suggest that individuals *cannot* act irresponsibly. Rather, this suggests that focusing on personal responsibility does not account for the systemic nature of lockdown compliance. Further, the covidiot narrative cannot simply be read as reactionary impulse against those visibly using public space despite the 'stay home' guidance. Rather, this reflects the dominance of neoliberalism within the lexicon of public discourse and government policy. Demonstrating, as Harvey (2007) argues, that neoliberalism has infiltrated our common-sense understanding of the world.

### **The (im)possibility of compliance: Neoliberalism and the myth of 'individual responsibility'**

It seems, therefore, that if the effects of 'lockdown' are felt unequally based on socio-spatial and socio-economic inequality. More generally, by situating lockdown within the context of neoliberalism, it is possible to understand the (im)possibility of lockdown compliance in the UK in two key ways. First, as outlined above, the spatial inequity in terms of access to, and availability of, outdoor private and public spaces necessarily implies different levels of public space usage, even amidst a pandemic. Second, framing lockdown compliance as an issue of personal responsibility is not a politically neutral decision. Rather, this is ideologically consistent with almost any archetypal description of neoliberalism itself (See Harvey, 2007; Hackworth and Moriah, 2006). In sociocultural terms, neoliberalism espouses a strong commitment to 'individual freedoms', compounded by an anti-statist belief that the individual should be free from state intervention. The freedom *from* has become deeply implicated within neoliberal public health responses which focus on individual behaviour as opposed to systemic pressures which can drive said behaviour (McGregor, 2008 ). This reflects what Srnieck and Williams (2015: 79) describe as '*negative freedom*' which is increasingly pervasive

in neoliberal rhetoric. Negative freedom refers to the theoretical fixation with maintaining freedom from interference from other actors including, but not limited to, the state. Through this lens, lockdown 'rules' only apply so far and that it is up to individuals to decide what is in their own best interest.

In practice, this ideological commitment to neoliberalism has embedded itself across the government's response to the pandemic, and erodes the government's willingness to introduce stronger, more 'draconian' lockdown measures. Indeed, from the government's initial plan to avoid lockdown completely by pursuing a 'herd immunity' strategy to the 'route map' out of lockdown which involved encouraging the public to 'eat out to help out' in hospitality venues to encouraging workers to return to offices demonstrate a strong commitment to protecting the 'economy' in each phase of the response to the pandemic. When viewed through the prism of neoliberalism, this is hardly surprising given that strong commitment to protecting market freedoms, protecting the (neoliberal) economy (see Srnieck and Williams, 2015). This illustrates that loose enforcement of lockdown measures (and associated non-compliance) reflects a deeply ideological commitment to neoliberalism and the sanctity of the market.

In spatial terms, however, appealing to individual responsibility creates space to construct both *acceptable* and *unacceptable* uses of public space during lockdown. While those pictured using parks and beaches at the beginning of the lockdown attracted scorn, other (mis)uses of public space have been ignored or even celebrated. This is encapsulated in the VE day celebrations which took place throughout the UK in May 2020 to commemorate the end of the Second World War. In a now infamous example, national broadcaster BBC news ran features on 'socially-distanced' VE day street parties, which included coverage of a busy street in Birmingham performing a 'socially distanced conga line'. This was at a time where government advice did not allow for multi-household meet ups, begging the question as to why such a jovial tone seemed to grip the press coverage. In stark contrast to this, the black lives matter protests that raged throughout the UK after the murder of George Floyd seemed to provoke a general unease about the 'irresponsibility' of protesting during the pandemic. Health Secretary Matt Hancock suggested, the virus does not discriminate despite the noble cause of such protests, highlighting once again the inconsistency of both discourse and enforcement during the lockdown period.

## **Conclusions**

In this brief chapter, I have reflected on the way in which the battle for and over public space during the unprecedented restrictions placed upon residents have exacerbated existing discourse(s), tensions and inequalities within the neoliberal city. It is clear, therefore, that the individualistic narrative that has been mainstreamed throughout the initial peak of COVID-19 in the UK is an insufficient explanation of issues of lockdown compliance in the UK. To begin, it is necessary to consider the situated, and context-specific nature of lockdown transgressions. It should come as little surprise, therefore, that when we consider the way in which public space has contracted in the neoliberal era, that access and availability of public spaces should be foregrounded during the lockdown. The individualistic mantra that has emerged in reaction to the 'selfishness' of those who use public space during the lockdown

elides a more meaningful comment on systemic nature of 'lockdown' transgression and inequity in their application. Second, in addition to the socio-spatial nature of the neoliberal city, I have also demonstrated the ideological nature of the 'covidiot' narrative which accepts, uncritically, neoliberal conceptions of individual responsibility and in doing so, pathologises individual (mis)uses of space as opposed to commenting on the inherently politicised nature of such (mis)use.

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