

# Following South Korea: Collectivism and Individualism Responding to COVID-19

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## **FOLLOWING SOUTH KOREA: COLLECTIVISM VERSUS INDIVIDUALISM AND THE COVID-19 RESPONSE**

In the aftermath of the outbreak of Covid-19, countries around the world adopted a range of different measures. The catastrophic response of some Western countries such as the UK led to disastrous and often fatal consequence for their populations. South Korea, meanwhile, had relative success in clamping down on spiralling infections and fatalities.

This made me wonder: why is there such difference in response to such a great crisis? Why have there been more victims in the UK than in South Korea, when the UK had more time to prepare for the virus reaching its shores after the first case broke out in China? What failed?

While there is no single answer to my questions, in this paper I explore political culture – specifically whether it is collectivist or individualist – as one important factor. I strongly believe that good organisation, in conjunction with the Confucian-rooted collectivist mindset characteristic of East Asian culture, is one of the main factors that led to the relatively more effective and efficient response to COVID-19 in South Korea, compared to the UK. The South Korean example shows that when a society is confronting such a serious and important crisis, like a great pandemic, collectivism can trump individualism.

## **INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS COLLECTIVISM**

Differences between individualism and collectivism

profoundly influence and impact the way that societies are ruled, and the mentality and the ways of life of its members. But what are individualism and collectivism?

Generally speaking, individualism is a view that prioritises the needs and interests of an individual. That is, each person is distinguished from the masses and their interests considered more important than any socially imposed ones, with value placed on autonomy, uniqueness and self-sufficiency. According to De Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (1835-40) individualism is an egoism that disposed humans to be concerned primarily with their own small circle of family and friends<sup>1</sup>. In 1980, Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede developed a theory of 'cultural dimensions'. Hofstede used Values Survey Module questionnaires to conduct research into differences between national cultures along six dimensions: power distance, collectivism vs. individualism, uncertainty avoidance, femininity vs. masculinity, short-term vs. long-term orientation, and restraint vs. indulgence<sup>2</sup>. The 'collectivism vs. individualism' dimension measures the degree to which societies are unified in groups and their "perceived obligations" and their dependency on groups (Corporate Finance Institute, n.d.). In Hofstede's testing, the UK scored 89 for individualism, contrasting dramatically with South Korea's score of 18<sup>3</sup>.

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1 Luke, S., n.d. Individualism | Definition, History, Philosophy, Examples, & Facts. [online] Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/individualism>

2 Hofstede, G. (2011). Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1014>.

3 Hofstede Insights (n.d). Country Comparison - UK & South Korea.

## Following South Korea

In terms of governance, individualism is often expressed through free-market or libertarian politics that emphasize personal (individual) freedoms and responsibility, and reduced involvement of the state in the private life of citizens. As former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher famously said: “there’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families...It is our duty to look after ourselves and then, also, to look after our neighbours.”<sup>4</sup>

Collectivism allocates importance to obedience, social cooperation, and common goals, prioritising group interest over individual needs. A particular strand of collectivism can be seen in political formations that draw on Confucian traditions. Confucius advocated obedience and respect from citizens towards authority; that each person has an important responsibility to family and society and the needs of the group are more important than the individual<sup>5</sup>. Confucius believed in harmony between the universe and human beings. In order to achieve such harmony, he claimed that everyone should understand their status in society and behave accordingly.

Confucianism therefore centres around the notion of a societal interdependent relationship. It is a scheme in which people in lower ranks give obedience to people in higher ranks; within the family, from pupils to teachers, and especially when it comes to government and citizen relations. As a result, Korean and other East Asian societies encourage considerable respect and obedience to not only authorities, but also based on age. This is not simply about blindly following though, since the system places obligations on those in positions of authority to act in a way that is worthy of obedience. Alan Chong, associate professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Malaysia, explains in an interview: “People here – East Asia – are still collectivist in orientation of thought, meaning even if a certain government is despised, they will still listen to instructions, especially if they are reasonable”<sup>6</sup>.

Individualism and Collectivism in Practise: My Journey

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4 Keay, D. (1987) Interview with Margaret Thatcher, *Women’s Own*.

5 Park et al. The Influence of Confucian Ethics and Collectivism on Whistleblowing Intentions: A Study of South Korean Public Employees. *Journal of Business Ethics*, Jun., 2005, Vol. 58, No. 4 (Jun., 2005), pp. 387-403

6 Jennings, R., (2020). How Cultural Differences Help Asian Countries Beat COVID-19, While US Struggles. *VOANEWS*.

I am drawing on my personal experience of being brought up in North Korea, living and working in South Korea as a fashion designer, and my experience of living in the UK during the pandemic while studying for an MA in International Relations and Diplomacy. On my arrival to the West in the early 90s, there were three main things that caught my attention. Firstly, the expression of individualism through fashion in the West which revealed each person’s character, personality and uniqueness. There was a clear contrast in each individual outfit, even while keeping within certain long or short-term trends. Women seem to dislike copying each other’s styles, or wearing the same makeup. Secondly, the way citizens communicated with and about the government and authorities often displayed disrespect or disobedience. Thirdly, a comment from one of my co-workers that stood out to me: “I need to look after myself in order to look after others.” This comment captures a self-reliant and individualist viewpoint that was far less common among my peers in Korea.

During my childhood in North Korea, in my boarding school, one of my tutor’s favourite sermons was: “First, you think of and help your friends and neighbours, and then you think about yourself. Most importantly, you must respect and obey authority.” This kind of mindset (and subordination to authority) could be observed when the Heabangsan hotel, the place I lived when I was undergraduate student in Pyongyang, went into quarantine for 40 days in the late 90s. My brother was infected with measles. The response from the health authority was a quick and effective quarantine of the hotel. The obedience of the hotel’s employees was unanimous. This spirit of collectivism and obedience to authority was well captured in the Worker’s Party’s slogan: “If the party decides, we [citizens] do!”

While South Korea successfully adopted the Western liberal political ideology and economic system, I identified a strong trail of collectivism and Confucian ethics similar to North Korea during my time in Seoul. That trail manifested itself through fashion and social trends which emphasized conformity, and in the respect and obedience shown to relevant authorities within the company where I worked. For instance, in order to break such monotonous make up, style and outfit, I once suggested a new eyebrow style to one of my close friends. She refused to change the style, fearing being different from others and not obeying the widely followed (if unwritten) fashion rules. A strong sense of the collectivist mind-set embedded in Korean

culture trumped the individualist viewpoint. Regardless of their differences in ideologies – communist in the North and liberal-capitalist in the South – both country's cultures share this trail of collectivism and obedience to authority, which can be traced back in the Confucian idea of governing society.

### **HOW HAVE THESE BINARY VIEWPOINTS INFLUENCED THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19 IN SOUTH KOREA AND THE UK?**

When the first case of Coronavirus appeared in South Korea, the government acted quickly and efficiently. Their core strategy was to quickly identify those infected, prevent the spread, and ensure that they are recovered quickly through intensive treatment along with a high level of civic engagement in their Test, Trace, Treat program<sup>7</sup>.

The South Korean government was conducting tracking and diagnostic tests using credit card usage information, CCTV footage, mobile phone location information, etc., to the extent permitted by the Act on the Prevention

Protection App", allowing officials to check the health status of self-isolated people twice daily, and to keep track of their location. The app also includes contact information for the Korea Center for Disease Control and Prevention and officials, as well as instructions to be followed by those self-isolating.

All the effective organisation, quick response and strategy of South Korean government could not have succeeded without the Confucian rooted collective mind-set of obedience and trust in the authority's decisions, I argue. British health journalist David Cox observed:

[...] Part of this –achievement in tackling Covid 19- is down to the traditional obedience within South Korean culture, they also believe it is because the pandemic has not been politicised<sup>8</sup>.

Compared to South Korea, the UK government had more time to develop and implement preventative strategies between the first cases coming to light in China, and the first cases arriving on its shores. Despite

**...in a critical and serious situation like a pandemic, government policies that expect people to be individualistic are fundamentally ineffective.**

and Management of Infectious Diseases. Precautions were taken to avoid the exposure of citizens' personal information. The appropriate information revealed in the epidemiological survey results was disclosed anonymously to the public to ensure that the person who was in contact with the virus could receive an immediate diagnostic test if necessary.

The mobile phones of self-isolated people and dedicated officials were linked to the "Self-Isolation Safety

7 Kennedy, J. (2020) WHAT CAN THE UK LEARN FROM SOUTH KOREA'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19? Centre for Health and the Public Interest; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea (2020). Korea's Fight against COVID-19.

this, the effects of the pandemic in the UK have been devastating. The government's response has been described as "too little, too late, too flawed"<sup>9,10</sup>.

The first cases of COVID in the UK were recorded in January 2020. By early March, scientists in the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), realized that the National Health System

8 Cox, D., (2020). The way South Korea crushed its second wave is a warning to us all. WIRED.

9 The BMJ, (2020). UK's response to covid-19 "too little, too late, too flawed"

10 This section incorporates and was adjusted according to substantive feedback from editor Danny Lord.

## Following South Korea

(NHS) would struggle to cope as the COVID-19 spread through the population<sup>11</sup>. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Boris Johnson missed five government emergency committee (COBRA) meetings<sup>12</sup>.

Like in South Korea, the government in the UK made use a test and trace system, but it was introduced very late on in the pandemic, and was riddled with operational problems when it did come online. It was also less intense than the South Korean program, with self-isolation tracked using phone calls rather than location-tracking. The UK had two periods of nationwide lockdown, the first starting in late March 2020 and easing up later in the Summer, and the second coming into effect in October 2020, easing briefly before tightening up again in December, and easing up again from May 2021. Before the second nationwide lockdown, local lockdowns were implemented in different areas of the country. Social distancing measures were introduced from March 2020, and mask-wearing was made compulsory inside public spaces including on public transport from July<sup>13</sup>.

In the cases of both the Spring and Winter lockdowns, the government was slow to implement measures, partly because of the Prime Minister's "deep ideological reservations about turning Britain into an effective police state, as some other countries have done" (Wickham). Another major reason for the delays and general reluctance to bring in harsh restrictions was an expectation that people would not follow the rules for long, that they would develop 'pandemic fatigue'<sup>14</sup>. In a "land of liberty"<sup>15</sup> such as Britain, it was thought that people would not put up with their freedoms being limited. This is individualism guiding policy and blocking effective pandemic response. The delay to the Winter lockdown alone was said to be responsible for an extra 27,000 deaths<sup>16</sup>.

Despite the government's reservations – and despite

anecdotal evidence and many news stories suggesting widespread non-compliance – adherence to the most restrictions was high (over 90% on average) among the population<sup>17</sup>. Pandemic fatigue turned out to be a myth. Adherence to self-isolation requirements among people who had either tested positive or come into contact with someone who had was relatively low, however. But Reicher and Drury explain:

"Unlike hand-hygiene and social distancing, self-isolation requires support from others to be possible. This includes support from others in the community, in the form of shopping most obviously. It also requires material support in the form of an income and sufficient space. The lower adherence rates for self-isolation therefore suggest that the issues may have less to do with psychological motivation than with the availability of resources.<sup>18</sup>"

This partly explains why low adherence was especially common among people with dependent children at home, people in a "lower socioeconomic grade", people otherwise experiencing "greater hardship in the pandemic", and workers in key sectors<sup>19</sup>. The government introduced a furlough scheme which saw the state pay 80% of the wages of staff at businesses that had to close or reduce their operations. But what was missing was an expanded sick pay regime for people who did continue working but may have tested positive and had to self-isolate. Statutory sick pay for UK workers is among the lowest in Europe, and was found to be in breach of the European Social Charter in 2018<sup>20</sup>. As a result, many people had no choice but to breach restrictions and go to work. Many of the newspaper reports highlighting non-compliance showed footage of packed commuter trains and buses. Furthermore, many companies were pressuring staff to return to offices, in breach of government guidelines<sup>21</sup>. Despite this, not one business has been issued any fine or prosecution for breaching COVID restrictions. Meanwhile official police figures from February 2021 showed that nearly 70,000 individuals had been fined.

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11 Wickham, A., (2020). 10 Days That Changed Britain: "Heated" Debate Between Scientists Forced Boris Johnson To Act On Coronavirus. Buzzfeed

12 Walker, P., (2020). Boris Johnson Missed Five Coronavirus Cobra Meetings, Michael Gove Says. The Guardian

13 Institute for Government (2021). Timeline of UK coronavirus lockdowns, March 2020 to March 2021

14 Drury, J., and Reicher, S. (2021). Pandemic fatigue? How adherence to covid-19 regulations has been misrepresented and why it matters. Thebmjopinion.

15 Ibid

16 Booth, R. (2021) Delaying England's winter lockdown 'caused up to 27,000 extra Covid deaths'. The Guardian.

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17 Drury and Reicher (2021)

18 ibid

19 Smith et al (2020) Adherence to the test, trace and isolate system: results from a time series of 21 nationally representative surveys in the UK (the COVID-19 Rapid Survey of Adherence to Interventions and Responses [CORSAIR] study). medRxiv

20 IER (2020) UK sick pay nearly worst in Europe and in breach of international law.

21 Savage et al (2021) Staff 'pressured to go back to work' in breach of UK Covid rules. The Guardian

The responsibility of the individual is prioritised, in a way that prevents effectively combatting the spread of the virus. Press reporting continued to put the blame on individuals misbehaving selfishly<sup>22</sup>.

Various high-profile breaches of COVID restrictions by government personnel also steadily eroded trust in the government's own guidelines<sup>23</sup>. If collectivism requires a high degree of trust in authorities, this kind of behaviour undermines it. Collectivism is not just a matter of citizens looking out for one another, but also of people in control taking their responsibility seriously. Especially in a time of crisis, it is important for everyone, citizens and leaders, to be able to subordinate their individual whims before rational common interest.

The lack of effective strategy, organisation, and quick response to a crisis of such magnitude and importance as COVID-19, along with policies rooted in individualism resulted in the UK having one of the highest death rates in Europe. While South Korea accounted 169,146 Coronavirus cases with 2,044 deaths since the outbreak, the UK captured 5,155,243 cases with 128,431 deaths as per the time of writing this review<sup>24</sup>.

It is clear to me that South Korea's well-organised strategy and its fast implementation, in addition to its collectivist culture enabled a more effective response to COVID-19 than what we saw in the UK. It is also clear that in a critical and serious situation like a pandemic, government policies that expect people to be individualistic are fundamentally ineffective. Even in the UK, mutual aid groups developed spontaneously within different neighbourhoods, with strangers coming together to look out for each other<sup>25</sup>, and this is a collective spirit that should be encouraged and harnessed. Thus, it is maybe not as radical as we might think to follow policies that are rooted on collectivist morality, as South Korea did.

22 Roberts, L., (2020). Tube Drivers 'Furious' As Trains Remain Packed Despite Social Distancing Warnings. *The Telegraph*.; Maccarthy, C., (2020). Hundreds of young people try to enter Harrods in chaotic scenes as police make four arrests for affray and Covid rule breaches as huge crowds gather in Covent Garden. *Mailonline*

23 BBC (2020). Hancock Social Distancing Slip-Up Caught On Camera. *BBC News*; Sky News (2021) Dominic Cummings tells committee he didn't tell 'full story' about Durham trip - but Barnard Castle drive really was to test his eyesight.

24 Worldometers, Coronavirus data (n.d)

25 Power, A., Benton, E. Where next for Britain's 4,300 mutual aid groups? *LSE Blog*

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# Visualizing A More Perfect Union: Social Science and the Visual Arts Building Just Futures Together

Shelly Clay-Robison

In New York City public housing, small paper notices reminding residents to prevent the spread of COVID-19 are posted next to elevators. The notices were hastily posted and were there to protect housing management from legal repercussions, but they share little written or visual information on how residents can protect themselves from COVID-19, leaving the poorest among them to wade through rumor, fact, and the information in-between.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it comes down to decreasing attention spans and competition for attention, but capitalism, marketing, and advertising do visual communication very well. Why then, do governments often fail when it comes to inclusive and effective communication?

Public health communication is just one issue that requires attention, but society is also struggling with understanding and discussing issues like social unrest stemming from ethnic or racial oppression, economic inequality, and violence in our communities. Unfortunately, the 24-hour news cycle, social media, and increased amount of time online due to the pandemic, means that verbal communication is reduced and competition for our attention is increased. When it comes to designing public health communication and dispersing general information effectively to diverse

audiences, governments should consider the radical idea of employing social scientists and artists to help them do it.

## THE PROBLEM

Information about the state of the world is gathered and disseminated so rapidly that certain values needed for democratic governance and effective communication are stretched or are ignored. Transparency, equity and inclusive participation, and accountability, are compromised for the sake of quick delivery and short attention spans. There are urgent needs and systemic problems, like the ones experienced by the residents in New York City, that go unaddressed because they require time and consideration. Consequently, for democratic governance to be effective with respect to an issue like communication during a pandemic, government employees and citizens alike can contribute to the solution by doing the hard work of sitting and working with an issue or problem.

## THE SOLUTION

The solution to this issue encourages new methods of communication that dig deeply into the problems: Combine the research expertise of the social sciences and the communicative power of the arts to create

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1 The New Yorker, 2020

## Visualizing a More Perfect Union

partnerships with communities experiencing social and economic issues and to produce new, artistic methods of communication. This means that a government would hire trained social scientists like anthropologists, sociologists, peacebuilders, historians, and psychologists to work in partnership with hired artists, painters, photographers, and sculptors. The goals are to create effective visual communication regarding public health, social problems, and helping communities imagine a future where they thrive. In its ability to accomplish better communication and information sharing, this seemingly radical proposal will be able to address social issues through meaningful and productive community engagement.

### **RADICAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

In order to understand the root of what a community experiencing misinformation, violence, or socio-economic inequalities needs, it is critical that we

of others and experience issue fatigue<sup>3</sup>. Social scientists and artists can help uncover and address social problems while also helping governments communicate more effectively with the people they serve. This kind of community engagement is radical in that it is rare for federal governments to hire visual artists and social scientists who seek to engage a community for an extended time, uncover issues, and then create art that helps the local people and the global community continue to discuss those issues or find ways to solve them. Furthermore, rather than artists developing public art alone, their work should be created in collaboration with the social scientists and the community itself. In this way, the created content can help communities conceptualize and articulate their experiences of violence or inequality, and may help make sense of a conflict, reveal roads to navigate it, and transform living conditions<sup>4</sup>.

**Events are experienced through a diversity of viewpoints, but many, particularly those of marginalized groups, are either erased or deliberately forgotten.**

involve social scientists who know how to uncover the root causes and drivers of conflict and how to transform them. We then need to combine deep listening, which involves listening to understand and connect and not just to reply, with the arts, which have the power to create a discursive space for the oppressed public and provide areas for hope, such as the Black Lives Matter street mural did in Baltimore, MD<sup>2</sup>.

As our lives are lived increasingly online or in isolation, we are less compassionate and alert to the experiences

### **RADICAL, BUT NOT NEW**

While the idea of utilizing the collaborative efforts of social science and visual art to effectively address complex social issues may seem radical, it is not new. During the Great Depression in the United States, through arts-related programs incorporated under President Roosevelt's New Deal, artists documented and revealed issues around poverty and socio-

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2 Campbell, "A Lifeline of Hope," 2020

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3 Reiss, "The Empathy Effect," 2018

4 WochenKlausur, "From the Object to the Concrete Intervention," 2011



economic class. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) sponsored the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), which employed artists who were struggling during the Great Depression as well as the Federal Art Project, which brought art production to under-served communities while also providing opportunities to previously disenfranchised and unemployed artists, particularly African American artists. Similarly, the Farm Security Administration, a new agency created under the New Deal to address rural poverty, hired photographers and writers to document and portray the lives and issues of people living in these areas. While these programs were not intended as cultural projects, they nonetheless had significant positive impact on local and national communities through engagement and visual communication. Owing to their efforts, the US now has socially and culturally influential works like Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother,"<sup>5</sup> which created awareness of the plights of impoverished farmers, as well as "Washington, D.C. Government Charwoman" also known as "American Gothic"<sup>6</sup> by Gordon Parks that made visible the hidden labor done by many African Americans at the time.

Visual arts used in this manner can diversify the stories a country tells about itself. New images that incorporate multiple stories can help people make sense of the conflicts or social issues they encounter by diversifying understanding and inspiring empathy. They can make people consider for the first time that multiple, contradicting stories exist at the same time. Using visual art to communicate a story not only creates new communication pathways, it also pushes people to reconsider how they imagine others, and that then informs new actions toward them.<sup>7</sup> Blues singer-songwriter and activist Nina Simone famously said, "An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times."<sup>8</sup> Society needs more than just news media or government accounts to inform us. Events are experienced through a diversity of viewpoints, but many, particularly those of marginalized groups, are either erased or deliberately forgotten. We need visual art to help communities reflect, engage, and remember.

## THE SKEPTICS

Those with libertarian views or an interest in "small

5 Lange, 1936

6 Parks, 1942

7 Scarry, "The Difficulty of Imagining Other Persons, 1998

8 Stroud, "Nina Simone Great Performances." See also, Nina Simone Music.

government" politics may be skeptical and say that this programming could lead to government propaganda or the use of the arts for an authoritarian agenda. But the intention of this kind of project is to reinvigorate values of inclusive participation in civic life, information sharing, and accountability, not to induce nationalist sentiments. The community engagement and the art product should not be colonial in nature nor should it turn into state propaganda. A de-centralized power structure that is immune to political pressure is a way to protect against the art against being used as government propaganda. This is a chance for citizens to engage in collective imagining, to discuss issues beyond meme-sharing and tweets, and to visualize a future that needs and includes everyone, not just those in power.

## THE PROCESS

In order to listen deeply to the concerns of a community and then produce visual art that tells a story, educates, or diversifies the dominant narrative, the people hired for this programming will need to be diverse. Multiple voices and a range of identities and backgrounds are necessary to create inclusive, democratic participation and give all people the opportunity to contribute to a social movement and civic life.

### Step 1: Community Input

Understanding the issues within a community is a first step for the social science/artists teams, which would involve community interviews and listening sessions to determine how people make meaning in their lives and what their struggles are. The social scientists would use their skills in dialogue, qualitative research, and deep listening to work with community members or informal stakeholders. These community members should also be paid as consultants and working with them should be collaborative, not extractive. Using this information, the scientists and artists can work with the community to create art that informs, celebrates, educates, remembers, or inspires discussion.

An example of this comes from the city of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where brightly rendered murals appeared during the COVID-19 quarantine that equated loving one another with social distancing, and advocated for the use of technology to foster connection, utilizing messages in both English and Spanish to express community unity. The Office of Public Art paid artists

## Visualizing a More Perfect Union

to contribute to the “PSA Temporary Mural” program<sup>9</sup>, but the effects of the program reached beyond the artists’ experience and out into the community to share essential health information, while also uplifting spirits. The value these murals held was not only in the aesthetic work itself, but also in sharing information where it was lacking, and inspiring feelings of collectivity during isolation.

### Step 2: Creating the Art and Considering the Space

The space a piece of work resides in is as important as the piece itself. A space cannot help but be transformed with the addition of art, and sociopolitical work can open metaphorical and physical space for a diversity of voices that may have been previously pushed to the margins or excluded completely. It can redefine space as politicized and claim it as an active part of a struggle, and in turn, their messages are enhanced by the space, but they also make visible a cultural pride that may have previously been inaccessible due to marginalization.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the space chosen and the message conveyed by the art must be purposeful and intrinsically linked to place. For example, in Northern Ireland, the public art created during The Troubles gave voice to both sides of the conflict, but were also meaningless when taken out of their contexts. It is imperative that these works reside in spaces where people can interact with them free of charge. For example, in Chicago the AMENDS project, created by artists Nick Cave<sup>11</sup> involves the surrounding community that experiences racism, asking participants to dig deep into themselves and take responsibility for their own roles in racism. Hand-written, deeply heart-felt reflections are posted on windows where people acknowledge and apologize for their complicity. It is intended as a call to action that involves participants and viewers alike to participate in addressing racism together.

Including the social scientist’s and the artist’s description of the project and a statement of intent is important as viewers will bring their own experience to viewing the art and that can leave open the possibility of misunderstanding or risk co-optation. Having community discussions, publicly accessed videos, or blogs with QR codes on or nearby the art that explain

the project can be used to inspire conversation around misunderstanding. Descriptions of the project and its meaning will also help future community members to understand the struggles and celebrations in their neighborhoods and inspire them to continue imagining a better, more perfect future along with their elected leaders.

## CONCLUSION

The Founders of the United States sought to form a “more perfect Union,” by establishing justice, domestic tranquility, and promoting the general welfare of citizens. At the time, these privileges of an American citizenry were only extended to white, male, property owners. While progress has opened democratic participation to many more demographics since then, the US and countless other democracies remain far from perfect. Minorities voices and their needs are routinely ignored, and social issues or conflicts are not addressed from multiple angles. As the title of this piece suggests, it is possible to visualize and create a more perfect union when multiple voices are heard and complex issues are given the long-term consideration they need. Deeply listening to a community and helping them imagine a just future or visually communicating with them can open pathways for new relationships and alternative ways of understanding our world. This program will ask people to be vulnerable and to share their lives, but it is in this space that transparent communication can also move from the bottom up and democratic participation can flourish.

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# Conclusion:

## What now?

Danny Lord & Dr Marisa Tramontano

The breadth of analysis and recommendations that our authors have produced is testament to the wide-ranging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Crucially, though very few of the problems highlighted are themselves unique to the pandemic. By throwing the whole world into crisis, the pandemic has shone a light on pre-existing divisions, inequalities, and other social problems. It has revealed procedural issues in local and national governance, and in the dispensation of justice. The institutions we are supposed to rely on have been given a stress test and in many cases have not passed. But it has also revealed the range of other problem-solving mechanisms that we do already have at our disposal, and which we turned to at a moment of intense and widely-felt need.

In various ways, our authors have highlighted these alternative – and seemingly radical – problem-solving mechanisms in attempts to resolve governance-related issues and contribute to violence prevention in the broadest sense. In some cases, this has involved pointing towards ways in which certain groups have dealt successfully with the problems COVID brought up, ways that may not have occurred to others. In other cases, we have been reminded of historical interventions that may hold the keys for better understanding and addressing our present concerns. And in yet others, COVID has served as a spark that has drawn wider attention to long-fought battles for social justice. In all cases it has been shown that what may seem radical in one context is perfectly plausible and acceptable in another. Moreover, it has been shown that seeking out these radical solutions is absolutely necessary if we are to make our societies more equitable and peaceful.

In showing a diverse range of radical *solutions* to

governance issues, our aim is to move beyond problem-identification and to positively inform critique, which otherwise can be liable to misfire. The partiality of the institutions charged with neutral and effective governance, and the structures they both support and rely on, can severely impede the effectiveness of interventions that genuinely are enacted for the good of the population. This is true not just in terms of misallocation of resources, but also to the extent that it undermines people's faith in those institutions. Over the last year and a half, we have seen large-scale rejection of public health measures and an intense proliferation of conspiracy theories regarding vaccination programs in several countries, often orbiting around a generalized suspicion of vaguely defined elites. This skepticism is not without justification, of course. Vaccine hesitancy among Black and minority ethnic populations in the UK and US must be understood in historical context. Health systems in both countries have historically been used to promulgate racist ideology, and under their auspices non-white populations were the subject of violent experimentation<sup>1</sup>. More generally, measures implemented by various governments have required tremendous sacrifice of our civil liberties and this raises the stakes of the relationship between the state and its citizens. Missteps and misuse of office stand out particularly starkly when the full power of the state is laid bare, and systemic inequalities are even harder to swallow than usual.

It is not just the case that established mechanisms for governance don't work, but that they often *do* work for an increasingly narrow subset of people. To clutch that critique from the jaws of conspiratorialism, which often

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1 Esan Swan (2021), 'History is key to understanding vaccine hesitancy in people of colour'. Financial Times. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/a25a2463-9367-4a79-9f7c-012ba728bd3a>

ends up counterproductively serving the interests of those very same elites anyway, collaboration, cross-pollination between social movements, and collective education are crucial. The more we can share with one another the diverse mechanisms already available for challenging power and solving problems on macro and micro levels, the more a generalized sense of dissatisfaction with an unjust system can give way to constructive solutions to reorientate and rebuild it. And that is the process we hope to be making inroads on.

Given this, and given the urgency of the issues our authors have discussed, it is important for us to be able to present their thoughts and findings in a digestible and surveyable way. We have compiled bite-sized summaries of each contribution below accordingly:

- **Birjandian** argues that there is analytical value in understanding individual human beings in the masses as “administrations of justice” because such thinking can help to more accurately chart the types of social change required to establish just societies.
- **Calvete** documents a conversation between university students and lecturers based in Brazil, who identify the need to overcome a hegemonic individualism as fundamental barrier to significant progress.
- **Clay-Robinson** explores how governments, especially during a public health crisis like COVID, could combine the research expertise of the social sciences and the communicative power of the arts to create partnerships with communities experiencing social and economic issues.
- **Kirabira** proposes that the disruptions of COVID allow for the reimagining of justice and how court systems operate to ensure the focus is on healing and/or justice for the victim and not the punishment of the perpetrator.
- **Macias** dissects the individualist worldview prevalent in western countries like the United Kingdom in comparison to more collectivist countries like South Korea in the context of each country’s response to the COVID pandemic, concluding that collectivism fosters more effective response to crisis.
- **Okoth** suggests that we cannot understand the response to COVID in Uganda without recognizing the legacy of authoritarian rule and military violence and considers the family and the clan as a possible pressure point to address brutality.
- **Sample** discusses the ways COVID made us rethink

how we use public space, and who gets privileged access to it. She advocates for investment in community gardens as a way to strengthen intra-community relations and improve environmental education.

- **Tramontano** explains the ways that COVID accelerated the movement to defund and abolish the police.
- **Yamahata** shows us how looking at the role of international institutions during the AIDS and COVID pandemics reveals ways in which populations have the power to influence states, moving away from traditional theories of international relations.

## WHAT NOW?

It has become a trope to suggest that the ‘post-COVID’ world will be a totally different one to before. And yet this is not really true. Historical (and colonial) distributions of power, money, and influence map – with some exceptions – closely onto what has been described as a system of global vaccine apartheid<sup>2</sup>. Wealth has been further concentrated in the hands of a few, while countless others face joblessness, increasingly precarious employment, depressed wages, and worse. Well-worn prejudices have demonstrated their immense staying power thanks to their deep roots in the structures of our societies; historically marginalized communities have largely experienced the worst health outcomes in many of our countries, and in the UK, police were twice as likely to fine Black people than non-Black people for breaching lockdown restrictions<sup>3</sup>. This is not to mention the months of protests against ongoing and systemic racial inequality following the murder of George Floyd in the US.

One major (and hardly surprising) thread that winds through almost all of the essays in this volume is a rejection of the dominant, top-down, liberal model for organizing societies and propelling change. This is a model according to which change comes from formal institutions and via policy. There is a clear division between the public and private sphere, and we assent to public institutions through which we may lobby for change in return for privacy and liberty in our lives as individuals. What is highlighted during a time of crisis, but shown through this to nevertheless be the case in general, is that this model is at best incomplete and at worst an obstacle.

2 Reuters (2021), ‘World has entered stage of “vaccine apartheid” - WHO head’ <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/world-has-entered-stage-vaccine-apartheid-who-head-2021-05-17/>

3 Vikram Dodd (2021), ‘Met police twice as likely to fine black people over lockdown breaches - research’. The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/03/met-police-twice-as-likely-to-fine-black-people-over-lockdown-breaches-research>

## Conclusion

We should take note of Okoth's observation that the line drawn between institutions that can and can't legitimately affect change in the public sphere is ultimately arbitrary. More than this in fact, it simply does not reflect where change *actually* comes from, and who we listen to and let ourselves be guided by. In doing so it precludes structures and people – families, clans, neighbours – from positively affecting change. Similarly, some of our responses to the pandemic – for example the growth in mutual aid groups in the UK – show us ways in which what we might euphemistically call 'the masses' can be more directly impactful when our status as a collective is not mediated by the state and its constituent institutions. Focusing on collective efforts at the local level is one way of doing this, drawing on the shared experience of a particular place, our relationship to which, and therefore to each other, might be reinforced by Sample's proposals. We should remain vigilant, however, about the potential for local solidarity to turn into hostility towards outsiders. To paraphrase Tramontano, we should not be aiming for the positive peace of the suburbs, built as it is on structurally violent and frequently racialized exclusion. Thinking seriously and critically about institutions like the police that help to reinforce that exclusion is therefore crucial.

The issues raised and solutions proposed within this volume vary in terms of who they target as *agents of change* (i.e. who it is that should be enacting the proposed change), and who they target as *beneficiaries of that change* (i.e. who the change is *for*, whose problems it solves). And this is a key point to take away. Social change is a complex thing. Faced with such grand problems it is easy to feel overwhelmed or deflated. But what we hope to have shown through the contributions presented here is that there are ways to make inroads and importantly that everyone has a role to play.

None of us has to try to tackle all of these governance issues at once, alone. Indeed tackling any one requires collaboration. Collaboration not just in the simple sense of working together to achieve a common goal, but in a deeper, richer sense, in which we learn from each other's experiences in order to show how tackling several seemingly discrete problems *produces* a global community and in doing so helps us work to address the bigger picture. Each of us is necessary; none of us is sufficient.

We hope that these contributions, individually and as a whole, can inspire the reflection and action necessary to move forward from this crisis, and allow us to better deal with whatever comes next.

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