

Chapter 3

The Instrumentalization of Science and Expertise during Covid

Whenever a theory appears to you as the only possible one, take this as a sign that you have neither understood the theory nor the problem which it was intended to solve.

Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach*

The disappearance of a sense of responsibility is the most far-reaching consequence of submission to authority.

Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*

During an (in)famous research study on human obedience at Yale University in 1961-65, sociologist Stanley Milgram submitted subjects to his authority as a “scientist” in his laboratory and led them with disconcerting ease to torture others under the reassuring pretext that they were following orders and working for the good of science.¹ The study was unethical and was criticized as such, but it showed we tend to believe white coats no matter what they say.

This is why it is crucial to know what science and experts are. Just as in the case of Lead Stories, PolitiFact, and the Trusted News Initiative, mainstream media and their fight against disinformation have not always been helpful but have rather confused matters: “An entire industry of journalists, academics, and experts has arisen to hunt down, track, and

¹ See Stanley Milgram, “Behavioral Study of Obedience,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67, no. 4 (1963): 371–78.

police misinformation. In some ways, this industry is just as creepy and alarming as the conspiracy culture it gorges on, mirroring its familiar pathologies of distortion and hyperbole.”²

Not only was the notion of expertise abused during Covid, but few if any of the mainstream media seem to have pondered the possibility that the consulted experts themselves were under peer pressure and financial constraint to support the vaccine narrative. The American Hospital Association revealed, for instance, that it received three grants from the CDC to “support Covid-19 vaccine confidence” from 2021 to 2023, totaling 4.5 million dollars, specifically via running “public service announcements, newspaper advertisements, and radio spots” in English and Spanish; releasing educational videos and podcasts; convening events; and publishing more than 100 case studies on “vaccine successes.”³

The US government also used churches to convey its pro-Covid vaccine message, which caused some fury in the Christian communities when this was discovered.⁴ It similarly allocated \$219.5 million in 2020 and 2021 to tribal communities in the Indian Country in order to “support tribes and tribal organizations in carrying out surveillance, epidemiology, laboratory capacity, infection control, mitigation, communication, and other COVID-19 preparedness and response activities.”⁵

2 Simon Cottee, “The hypocrisy of the BBC’s Misinformation War,” *UnHerd*, March 7, 2024, <https://unherd.com/2024/03/the-hypocrisy-of-the-bbcs-misinformation-war/>.

3 See AHA, “AHA Receives \$1.5 Million CDC Grant to Build Vaccine Confidence, Partner with Children’s Hospital Association,” October 20, 2022, <https://www.aha.org/press-releases/2022-10-20-aha-receives-15-million-cdc-grant-build-vaccine-confidence-partner-childrens-hospital-association>.

4 Megan Basham, “How the Federal Government Used Evangelical Leaders to Spread Covid Propaganda to Churches,” *The Daily Wire*, February 1, 2022, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/how-the-federal-government-used-evangelical-leaders-to-spread-covid-propaganda-to-churches>.

5 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “CDC COVID-19 Funding for Tribes,” August 15, 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/tribal-health/cooperative-agreements/documents/ot20-2004/COVID_Funding_Tribes_062021.pdf.

The media did not seem to really factor in either that a number of large social media influencers (more than 50 according to the *New York Times*), as well as an “eclectic army” of small media influencers who were paid \$1,000 a month (it is not specified for how long), were hired to “reach vaccine skeptics and dispel myths.”⁶ This \$250 million campaign was funded by the White House in order to achieve the 75% to 80% vaccination rate which would allow society to reach herd immunity,⁷ a number made up on the fly by Anthony Fauci, as seen in Chapter 2.

The *New York Times* reported on this recruiting campaign, led by the same Anthony Fauci, taking the example of Christina Najjar, a TikTok “star” known as Tinx:

Discussing what she called a “happy vaxx girl summer,” Ms. Najjar peppered Dr. Fauci with questions: Was it safe to go out for a drink? Should we be concerned about getting pregnant after getting the vaccine? Do I look 26? “You have an ageless look to you,” he replied.

“I’ll tell my Botox doctor that,” she said.

Ms. Najjar called the session “a great time,” adding, “I think I flirted with Dr. Fauci, but in a respectful way.” A White House official said Dr. Fauci was not available for comment.⁸

6 The Guardian Staff, “US Recruits Social Media Influencers to Reach Vaccine Sceptics and Dispel Myths,” *The Guardian*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/aug/11/us-recruits-social-media-influencers-reach-vaccine-skeptics>.

7 See Graham Kates, “Inside the \$250 Million Effort to Convince Americans the Coronavirus Vaccines Are Safe,” *CBS News*, December 23, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/covid-vaccine-safety-250-million-dollar-marketing-campaign/>.

8 Taylor Lorenz, “To Fight Vaccine Lies, Authorities Recruit an ‘Influencer Army,’” *The New York Times*, August 1, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/01/technology/vaccine-lies-influencer-army.html>.

A quality outlet such as the *New York Times* apparently considered this exchange newsworthy, all the while refraining from investigating the financial ties between public health institutions and the pharmaceutical industry.

The capture of public health by the pharmaceutical industry

The Covid pandemic has revealed the extent to which the pharmaceutical industry has captured public health in the US, the UK, and the EU:⁹ 89% of the European Medicines Agency funding comes from the industry, up from a mere 20% in 1995; 86% of the UK Medicines and Healthcare Regulatory Agency; and 65% of the US Food and Drug Administration (a 30-fold increase since 1992), including 75% of the Food and Drug Administration's Drug Division.¹⁰ As a result and unsurprisingly, "Analysis in the US, where before the 1992 Act the FDA was a fully taxpayer-funded entity, has shown that 'reliance on industry fees is contributing to a decline in evidentiary standards, ultimately harming patients.'"¹¹

This matters because when this industry decides to sell a particular medicine or vaccine, it holds considerable sway not only over regulatory agencies but over mainstream media: 75% of TV advertisement spending in the US in 2020, for instance, came from the pharmaceutical industry,¹² and

9 See Sheena Meredith, "'Institutional Corruption' Permeates Drug Regulators Globally," *Medscape UK*, June 30, 2022, <https://www.medscape.co.uk/viewarticle/institutional-corruption-permeates-drug-regulators-globally-2022a1001obx>. See also the excellent episode from Jay Bhattacharya, "How Pharmaceutical Companies Control the Narrative, with Sharyl Attkisson," *The Illusion of Consensus* (podcast), September 11, 2024, <https://www.illusionconsensus.com/p/how-pharmaceutical-companies-control>.

10 Christina Jewett, "F.D.A.'s Drug Industry Fees Fuel Concerns over Influence," *The New York Times*, September 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/15/health/fda-drug-industry-fees.html>.

11 Meredith, "Institutional Corruption."

12 Michelle Majidi, "Pharmaceutical Industry TV Advertising Spending in the United States from 2016 to 2020," *Statista.com*, December 20, 2023, <https://>

over MPs as well, as the *Guardian* showed in the case of the UK.¹³ As for the Covid vaccine, another US public agency, the National Institutes of Health, claims to have co-invented it¹⁴ and thus to hold a share in the patent;¹⁵ hence, it has stood from the start to make a considerable amount of money with the vaccine it is recommending to the public as a supposedly independent authority. It received a first payment of \$400 million from Moderna in 2023¹⁶ and is still engaged in another lawsuit with Moderna over this patent issue.¹⁷ As this book was going into print, the NIH additionally closed a deal with BioNTech, the firm partnered with Pfizer, to receive \$791.5 million in Covid vaccine royalty payments.¹⁸

In France, the consulting firm McKinsey was contracted out by the government to help define its vaccination strategy.¹⁹ The French Senate Commission of Inquiry concluded that a “massive intervention by McKinsey in the vaccination campaign” had taken place for almost a year:

McKinsey consultants worked on central subjects such as

www.statista.com/statistics/953104/pharma-industry-tv-ad-spend-us/.

- 13 Denis Campbell, “Drug Firms Giving MPs ‘Hidden’ Funding, Research Shows,” *The Guardian*, June 25, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/jun/25/drug-firms-giving-mps-hidden-funding-research-shows>.
- 14 “NIH Contributions to WHO COVID-19 Technology Access Pool and Q&As,” *NIH*, May 12, 2022, <https://www.techtransfer.nih.gov/policy/ctap>.
- 15 Christopher Rowland, “Moderna Took NIH Money and Help for Its Covid Vaccine. Now It Wants to Leave Government Scientists off a Lucrative Patent,” *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/11/09/moderna-nih-patent-vaccine/>.
- 16 Benjamin Mueller, “After Long Delay, Moderna Pays N.I.H. for Covid Vaccine Technique,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/23/science/moderna-covid-vaccine-patent-nih.html>.
- 17 Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Rebecca Robbins, “Moderna and U.S. at Odds over Vaccine Patent Rights,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/09/us/moderna-vaccine-patent.html>.
- 18 Reuters, “BioNTech enters settlement with US agency, UPenn over COVID vaccine royalties,” December 27, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/biontech-enters-settlement-with-us-agency-upenn-over-covid-vaccine-royalties-2024-12-27/>.
- 19 Liz Alderman, “France Hired McKinsey to Help in the Pandemic. Then Came the Questions,” *The New York Times*, February 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/22/business/france-mckinsey-consultants-covid-vaccine.html>.

monitoring and projection of vaccine deliveries and injections, analysis of appointment bookings, support for the organization of the vaccination task force, etc. They also participated in the development of documents up to the top of the state, including for the Defense and National Security Council (CDSN, see below.)

Generally speaking, this case study demonstrates that key issues of the health crisis have been subcontracted to consulting firms, even creating a form of dependence of the state on said firms.²⁰

This influence of McKinsey on the French administration is compounded by the links between several individual actors:

- between President Macron and McKinsey, the latter having organized his first presidential campaign²¹ and still “helping,” reportedly “for free;”²²
- between the president of the Constitutional Court, Laurent Fabius, and McKinsey, since Laurent Fabius’s son, Victor Fabius, is Associate Director of McKinsey France, which did make it less likely that the Constitutional Court would disavow the freedom-depriving “Health Pass”

20 Arnaud Bazin, Eliane Assassi, “Un phénomène tentaculaire: l’influence croissante des cabinets de conseils sur les politiques publiques—Rapport,” Sénat—Rapport de commission d’enquête n°578 (2021-2022), *Sénat.fr*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.senat.fr/rap/r21-578-1/r21-578-124.html>.

21 Les Décodeurs and Service société, “French Prosecutors Investigate McKinsey’s Role in Macron’s Presidential Campaign,” *Le Monde*, November 25, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/politics/article/2022/11/25/french-prosecutors-investigate-mckinsey-s-role-into-macron-s-presidential-campaigns_6005636_5.html.

22 “Covid-19: on vous résume la polémique autour de McKinsey, le cabinet qui conseille le gouvernement sur la stratégie vaccinale,” *France Info*, February 10, 2021, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/sante/maladie/coronavirus/vaccin/covid-19-on-vous-resume-la-polemique-autour-de-mckinsey-le-cabinet-qui-conseille-le-gouvernement-sur-la-strategie-vaccinale_4291131.html.

recommended by McKinsey during Covid;²³

- between McKinsey and prominent pharmaceutical firms, including Pfizer: for an example from another country, Pfizer hired prominent McKinsey executives in the midst of the pandemic,²⁴ and McKinsey not only advised the government in Quebec on vaccination strategy but simultaneously worked for Pfizer as well, a conflict of interest which it attempted to hide from the Quebec government;²⁵
- between President Macron and Pfizer, since at the time when he worked in the Rothschild Bank Macron advised Nestlé on the purchase of Pfizer's nutrition division.²⁶

What deserves to be asked in this context is if the narrative of fear the public was submitted to concerning Covid on the part of health regulatory agencies was entirely neutral and devoid of interest. One answer could be: Covid was dangerous, but the public health narrative was disproportionately dramatized with the intent to sell an upcoming vaccine put together at lightning speed, moreover a vaccine from which

23 Vincent Coquaz and Danae Corte, "Conseil constitutionnel et pass sanitaire: Laurent Fabius est-il en situation de conflit d'intérêts à cause de son fils chez McKinsey?" *Libération*, August 8, 2021, https://www.liberation.fr/check-news/conseil-constitutionnel-et-pass-sanitaire-laurent-fabius-est-il-en-situation-de-conflit-dinterets-a-cause-de-son-fils-chez-mckinsey-20210808_OR-ZB5IZ3CNBNVPICGOXSHDIA4A/.

24 McKinsey executives such as Amir Malik joined Pfizer: "Pfizer Announces New Chief Business Innovation Officer," Pfizer.com, August 26, 2021, <https://www.pfizer.com/news/press-release/press-release-detail/pfizer-announces-new-chief-business-innovation-officer>.

25 Jacob Serebrin, "CAQ Leader Defends Paying Millions to US Consulting Firms during Pandemic," *CBC*, September 30, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/caq-legault-mckinsey-pandemic-consulting-1.6602374>.

26 Matthieu van Berchem, "Macron, le 'banquier de Nestlé' à l'Elysée?," *Swissinfo.ch*, May 4, 2017, https://www.swissinfo.ch/fre/economie/election-pr%c3%a9sidentielle-fran%c3%a7aise_macron-le-banquier-de-nestl%c3%a9-%c3%a0-l-elys%c3%a9e/43153142.

health authorities were to profit. Jay Bhattacharya recalls the fact that anyone proposing to try any other medicine²⁷ or to trust natural immunity²⁸ was derided as mistaken; anyone attempting to question the stringency of the response was branded a “granny killer”;²⁹ anyone daring to question the wisdom of mandating a hastily tested vaccine was thought to have “lost the plot.”³⁰ The virus was deadly and only the vaccine would save the public.³¹

It is not the purpose of this volume to entirely deconstruct the influence of the pharmaceutical industry on various governments, a task which serious mainstream media should have embarked upon long ago.³² I only wish to point out in this section that it is an issue which deserves thorough investigation, and much of this information is readily available. Which begs yet again the question why mainstream media have so far declined to get down to business. Certainly, many of these media outlets themselves enjoy funding from the pharmaceutical industry, which places them in a position of conflict of interest. But I would also venture the thesis that

27 Scott Sayare, “He Was a Science Star. Then He Promoted a Questionable Cure for Covid-19,” *The New York Times*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/12/magazine/didier-raoult-hydroxychloroquine.html>.

28 Ian Sample, “Previous Covid Infection May Not Offer Long-Term Protection, Study Finds,” *The Guardian*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/17/previous-covid-infection-may-not-offer-long-term-protection-study-finds>.

29 David Mercer, “Coronavirus: Young People Warned ‘Don’t Kill Granny’ As Lockdown Measures Reimposed in Preston,” *Sky News*, August 9, 2020, <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-young-people-warned-dont-kill-granny-as-lockdown-imposed-in-preston-12045017>.

30 Aaron Blake, “The GOP’s Top Vaccine Skeptics Have Lost the Plot,” *The Washington Post*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/08/11/gops-top-vaccine-skeptics-have-completely-lost-plot/>.

31 “Benefits of Getting Vaccinated,” *CDC*, September 22, 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/vaccine-benefits.html>.

32 Others have started to do so. See, for instance, Laurent Mucchielli, *La Doxa du Covid*, vol. 1, *Peur, santé, corruption et démocratie* (Bastia: Éoliennes, 2022), in particular the chapter “Un grand projet de vaccination pour toute l’humanité.”

the strong adherence to the Covid narrative in mainstream liberal media is understood as an “anti-Trump” narrative with the same fervor as the “anti-fascist” movement once bound progressive forces in the interwar and postwar periods. This prevents them from criticizing the industry because it might rapidly amount to criticizing the vaccine, which has become an absolute taboo among Western liberals.

Mainstream media are quite supportive of the increasing crackdown on social media in the West also because it gives them an edge over a competitor that has done nothing but challenge their social relevance, intellectual acumen, and sources of funding in the past years. Needless to say, this support for authoritarianism is very shortsighted—once social media are tamed, mainstream media will be next in line if they ever venture to criticize governments. But the pandemic has shown that few individuals in positions of responsibility are still able to think ahead, if only by a few months.

It might be useful to recall, however, that the same left also has a history of picking the wrong battles. In Germany of the 1920s and 1930s, the communist party (the progressive force of the time) was so intent on destroying their social-democratic rivals that they rather sacrificed them than rally with them against the Nazis—thereby helping the Nazis to get into power and liquidate them both together. To designate any critic of the Covid narrative today as the equivalent of the former “fascist enemy” is to similarly favor the extreme right while curbing the only allies of the liberal left.

Moreover, the notion of “expertise” was abused to further the official narrative on Covid. Two figures played a key role in March 2020 in this respect: Neil Ferguson and Tomas Pueyo, but first I will examine the Czech case as a lesser known example of Covid “expertise.”

Roman Prymula: Conflicts of interest, racial genetics, and rule flouting

In the Czech Republic, army colonel and head of the Covid task force, epidemiologist Roman Prymula, previously served as hospital director in the university town of Hradec Králové from 2009 to 2016. During his tenure, he surprised Czech medical authorities by promoting the establishment of a traditional Chinese medicine clinic, funded by a Chinese company through an endowment trust. He attached it to the hospital under his command, arguing that Chinese medicine was a useful complement to Western medicine. The Ethics Committee of the Czech Chamber of Medicine disagreed and closed the center in 2019.³³ Meanwhile, however, Prymula himself had been relieved from his position by the Czech Health Minister due to an accusation of conflict of interest involving the firm Biovomed, owned by his daughter but conducting medical research sponsored by public authorities.³⁴

From 2017 to 2020, Prymula served as Deputy Minister of Health despite facing obstacles from the Czech National Security Office, which declined to grant him a security clearance, likely due to his connections with China. Nevertheless, he was appointed chairman of the Covid Crisis Staff in mid-March 2020, emerging as a key figure of the hardline stance against Covid. Acting as the Czech equivalent of Francis Collins, he argued for a stringent mask policy and harsh lockdown.

33 “Centrum čínské medicíny v Hradci končí. Vedoucí bude dále provádět akupunkturu,” *Aktualne.cz*, February 11, 2019, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/centrum-cinske-mediciny-v-hradci-konci-vedouci-bude-dale-pro/r~fe2742802dd611e99182ac1f6b220ee8/>.

34 Čeněk Třeček and Jan Nevýhoštěný “Šéf hradecké nemocnice Prymula končí. Kvůli obchodům s firmou své dcery,” *iDnes*, June 30, 2016, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/minist-odvolal-reditel-fn-hradec-kralove-roman-prymula.A160630_145424_domaci_hro.

In April 2020, at a time when the Czech Republic was relatively unaffected by the pandemic and Germany was doing better than many other Western European states, Prymula raised eyebrows by suggesting that “race” might play a role in this double apparent success. He marveled at the fact that “Germanic peoples,” a term seldom heard since the departure of Nazi occupation troops in 1945, “seem(ed) to be more resilient to the virus than Southern nations,” a happy coincidence since “Czechs are one-third Germanic.”³⁵ The argument proved rather moot when the Czech Republic eventually ended in the worst quarter of Europe as far as Covid mortality went.³⁶

In September 2020, Prymula’s expertise earned him the position of Czech Minister of Health. However, his tenure was short-lived. On October 22, 2020, he was photographed leaving a restaurant at a time when restaurants were closed for lockdown on his own orders, and notably without wearing a mask while in the company of several individuals, despite having made masks mandatory in public.³⁷ He was removed from his position as Health Minister but was appointed as Covid expert to the Prime Minister.³⁸

35 JAF, “Prymula: Zdá se, že Germáni jsou odolnější než jižní národy. A Češi jsou ze třetiny Germáni,” *Echo24*, April 11, 2024, <https://echo24.cz/a/SeAKd/prymula-zda-se-ze-germani-jsou-odolnejsi-nez-jizni-narody-a-cesi-jsou-ze-tretiny-germani>.

36 For a comparative panel of Covid mortality per capita, see https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer?zoomToSelection=true&time=2020-02-03..latest®ion=Europe&facet=none&country=ISR~PSE~FRA~ITA~SVN~BEL~CZE~SVK~HUN~USA~GBR~EuropeanUnion~DEU~AUT~European+Union~OWID_WRL~POL~BIH~BRA~NOR~PRT~NLD~NZL~JPN~UKR~HKG~CHN~SWE~KEN&pickerSort=asc&pickerMetric=location&hideControls=true&Metric=Confirmed+deaths&Interval=Cumulative&Relative+to+Population=true&Color+by+test+positivity=false.

37 Kub, “Prymula bude dál pandemii řešit jako vládní expert,” *Novinky.cz*, October 25, 2020, <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/domaci-prymula-se-bude-do-reseni-pandemie-zapojovat-na-expertni-urovni-40340355>.

38 Kub, “Prymula bude dál pandemii řešit.”

The saga continued the following day when it was disclosed that Prymula's daughter was now at the helm of another company that had received a significant state subsidy to produce disinfectant. Despite the subsidy, the company exhibited "minimal activity" and was "mostly operating at a loss."³⁹

Prymula's tumultuous politico-medical journey reached its climax in February 2021 when he was spotted attending an international football match in Prague, despite strict lockdown measures he himself had advocated. His defense that he hadn't taken any vacation that year fell flat, especially given his earlier proclamation that day that he intended to recommend even stricter lockdown measures to the Prime Minister due to the worsening epidemic situation. He was dismissed from his role as a public health expert.⁴⁰

Neil Ferguson: "Professor Lockdown," a doomsday predictor

Neil Ferguson, a British epidemiologist and professor at Imperial College London, is an expert in mathematical modeling of infectious disease patterns. His report, "Impact of Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions (NPIs) to Reduce COVID-19 Mortality and Healthcare Demand,"⁴¹ released on March 16,

39 ČTK, "Firma Prymulovy dcery získala dotaci k výrobě dezinfekce," *Novinky.cz*, October 24, 2020, <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/domaci-firma-prymulovy-dcery-ziskala-dotaci-k-vyrobe-dezinfekce-40340313>.

40 "Prymula k účasti na fotbale: To mám být jen doma?" *Novinky.cz*, February 18, 2021, <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/domaci-prymula-k-ucasti-na-fotbale-to-mam-byt-jen-doma-40351494>.

41 Neil Ferguson et. al., "Impact of Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions (NPIs) to Reduce COVID-19 Mortality and Healthcare Demand," Imperial College Covid-19 Response Team, March 16, 2020, <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/medicine/sph/ide/gida-fellowships/Imperial-College-COVID19-NPI-modelling-16-03-2020.pdf>.

2020, garnered global attention.⁴² The findings of Ferguson's report prompted Prime Minister Boris Johnson to pivot away from the strategy of pursuing "herd immunity" and implement instead a strict lockdown. Moreover, it provided governments around the world with the scientific rationale to impose lockdowns and mask mandates as crucial measures in combating the pandemic, although the model itself was little discussed or critiqued.⁴³

The report predicted a staggering number of deaths in the absence of interventions: "In total, in an unmitigated epidemic, we would predict approximately 510,000 deaths in GB and 2.2 million in the US, not accounting for the potential negative effects of health systems being overwhelmed on mortality."⁴⁴ When adapted to Sweden by a team from Uppsala University, the model predicted 96,000 deaths by the end of June 2020 without lockdowns and stringent NPIs, a scenario labeled as a "catastrophe."⁴⁵ In fact, by that date, Sweden counted 5,416 Covid deaths despite adopting no such lockdown or masks.⁴⁶ As already mentioned, it even emerged

42 Pilita Clark, "Neil Ferguson, a Virus Modeller Sounds the Alarm," *Financial Times*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/7e56cf84-6a9e-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75>.

43 For a critical discussion of models in general and this one in particular, see Juliette Rouchier and Victorien Barbet, *La diffusion de la Covid-19: que peuvent les modèles?* (Paris: Éditions matériologiques, 2020).

44 Neil Ferguson, "Impact of NPIs," 6–7.

45 Jasmine Gardner, "Intervention Strategies against COVID-19 and Their Estimated Impact on Swedish Healthcare Capacity," *MedRxiv* preprint, April 15, 2020, <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.04.11.20062133v1.full.pdf>.

46 See *Our World in Data*, https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer?zoomToSelection=true&time=2020-02-03..latest®ion=Europe&facet=none&pickerSort=asc&pickerMetric=location&hideControls=true&Metric=Confirmed+deaths&Interval=Cumulative&Relative+to+Population=false&Color+by+test+positivity=false&country=ISR~PSE~FRA~ITA~SVN~BEL~CZE~SVK~HUN~USA~GBR~EuropeanUnion~DEU~AUT~European+Union~OWID_WRL~POL~BIH~BRA~NOR~ESP~PRT~NLD~NZL~JPN~UKR~HKG~CHN~SWE~KEN.

with one of the lowest excess mortalities in Europe for the period 2020-22. At no point in the pandemic was Sweden without lockdown or masks ever experiencing more deaths per capita than the UK with lockdown and masks.

Another critical oversight of the model was its failure to consider the collateral damage inflicted by the lockdown itself. As evidenced by the significant repercussions observed in both Western nations and the developing world which were mentioned above, the societal and economic impacts of lockdowns have been tremendous. This underscores the complexity of pandemic response strategies and highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of the trade-offs involved in implementing interventions.

The Imperial College model also introduced elements of knowledge which were crucial, yet it chose to ignore them: “The WHO China Joint Mission Report suggested that 80% of transmission occurred in the household, although this was in a context where interpersonal contacts were drastically reduced by the interventions put in place.”⁴⁷ If 80% of the infections occurred at home, what was the point of the lockdown, i.e., of forcibly keeping people at home, in the first place? Let us recall that this report was published already on March 16, 2020.

Neil Ferguson’s track record already included a series of apocalyptic predictions that failed to align with reality. In 2002, he forecasted a death toll ranging from 50,000 to 150,000 from BSE (mad cow disease), yet the actual number of deaths was 177.⁴⁸ Similarly, he predicted in 2005 a death toll of 200 million from the bird flu, while the actual figure

47 Neil Ferguson, “Impact of NPIs,” 15.

48 Steerpikie, “Six Questions That Neil Ferguson Should Be Asked,” *The Spectator*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/six-questions-that-neil-ferguson-should-be-asked/>.

was 282.⁴⁹ In 2009, Ferguson's swine flu model projected a reasonable worst-case scenario of 65,000 deaths in the UK and already then recommended school closures. The government opted not to follow this advice, a decision that seems wise given that the actual death toll from swine flu in the UK was 457.⁵⁰

The impact of the Imperial College model in 2020 extended far beyond the specific measures it prompted; it also influenced prevailing attitudes and shaped public health policies across the world. Neil Ferguson and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), which advises the UK government, openly expressed admiration for the "innovative intervention" of the Chinese authorities, particularly the highly authoritarian lockdown implemented in Wuhan and later across China. This contributed to shifting parameters within Western countries, much to Ferguson's own surprise:

"I think people's sense of what is possible in terms of control changed quite dramatically between January and March," Professor Ferguson says.... "It's a communist one-party state, we said. We couldn't get away with it in Europe, we thought ... and then Italy did it. And we realized we could.... These days, lockdown feels inevitable." It was, he reminds me, anything but. "If China had not done it," he says, "the year would have been very different."⁵¹

It is interesting that until 1989, the Western liberal left firmly condemned the Iron Curtain and the repression of people who sought to escape communist countries, yet during Covid

49 Steerpike, "Six Questions."

50 Steerpike, "Six Questions."

51 Tom Whipple, "Professor Neil Ferguson: People Don't Agree with Lockdown and Try to Undermine the Scientists," *The Times*, December 25, 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/people-don-t-agree-with-lockdown-and-try-to-undermine-the-scientists-gnms7mp98>.

it approved of and sought to emulate the Chinese communist regime, which submitted its citizens to an even tighter grip than the one which prevailed during the Cold War. Fear is powerful when skillfully mobilized.

Like Prymula, however, Ferguson failed to live by his own recommendations: he was caught meeting with his lover, who lived in another household with her own family, during the strict lockdown he had advocated. Compounding the situation, Ferguson was at that time still in quarantine after having himself contracted Covid. As the *Telegraph*, which revealed the incident, remarked, “The revelation of the ‘illegal’ tryst will infuriate millions of couples living apart and banned by the government from meeting up during the lockdown, which is now in its seventh week.” Ferguson indeed resigned from SAGE.⁵²

Tomas Pueyo, or how a “Silicon Valley entrepreneur” was promoted to expert in epidemiology

Tomas Pueyo’s seminal article on Covid, published on the popular blogsite Medium, was a turning point for many, as it brought to light the severity of the pandemic in a way that erased any inclination to trivialize the virus.⁵³ With over 40 million views, his comprehensive analysis, spanning 6,000 words, depicted the alarming exponential growth of coronavirus cases: “The coronavirus is already here. It’s hidden, and it’s growing exponentially.” Pueyo cited the World Health Organization’s reported fatality rate of 3.4% for the virus—

52 Anna Mikhailova, “Exclusive: Government Scientist Neil Ferguson Resigns after Breaking Lockdown Rules to Meet His Married Lover,” *The Telegraph*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/05/05/exclusive-government-scientist-neil-ferguson-resigns-breaking/>.

53 Tomas Pueyo, “Coronavirus: Why You Must Act Now,” *Medium.com*, March 10, 2020, <https://tomaspueyo.medium.com/coronavirus-act-today-or-people-will-die-f4d3d9cd99ca>.

never mind that the actual rate later turned out to be around 0.3%, so Pueyo's was in fact a "vast miscalculation."⁵⁴ Worse, Pueyo's "take" was that the fatality rate could potentially reach as high as 6.5% (which is twenty times more than the real rate), particularly in countries "not prepared" to handle the outbreak. Such a fatality rate, he warned, would be "thirty times worse than the flu." However, he thought that "countries that act fast can reduce the number of deaths by a factor of ten."⁵⁵

What might account for such a gross exaggeration is that Pueyo naively accepted the statistics provided by China, according to which the number of cases remained very limited outside of Hubei thanks to the strict lockdown regime which was implemented there,⁵⁶ without ever considering the potential for underreporting or manipulation by the Chinese government.

Additionally, Pueyo's projections were based on the mistaken assumption that a significant percentage of Covid-19 cases would require hospitalization and intensive care, as purported, again, by the Chinese data: "Around 20% of cases require hospitalization, 5% of cases require the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), and around 2.5% require very intensive help, with items such as ventilators or ECMO (extra-corporeal oxygenation)."⁵⁷ An apocalyptic description of overwhelmed health services in Italy followed, concluding again on the would-be wise terms: "All of this is what drives a system to have a fatality

54 See Ronald B. Brown, "Public Health Lessons Learned from Biases in Coronavirus Mortality Overestimations," *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7511835/>.

55 Pueyo, "Coronavirus."

56 Raymond Zhong, "No 'Negative' News: How China Censored the Coronavirus," *The New York Times*, December 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/19/technology/china-coronavirus-censorship.html>.

57 Pueyo, "Coronavirus."

rate of ~4% instead of ~0.5%. If you want your city or your country to be part of the 4%, don't do anything today." Every day of delay in taking these "indispensable measures" was shown as having a catastrophic impact (a 40% increase in the cumulative number of cases).

On March 13, 2020, Pueyo, presented as a "Silicon Valley entrepreneur," was invited on Channel 4 News together with epidemiologist John Edmunds. Edmunds defended the notion that the UK would have to "achieve herd immunity," to which Pueyo theatrically held his head in his hands and exclaimed, "Do we really want 20% or 30% of the population to catch this,... so are we saying we want to kill 200,000 people in the UK? ... We don't want people to catch it, otherwise they're going to die!" He announced that the NHS would collapse in two weeks "if we don't take measures now": "We need to catch this before the weekend!"⁵⁸ The fact the Edmunds calmly (and rightly) pointed out that containment was no longer possible could not mitigate the effect of Pueyo's dramatic words: panic became the order of the day.

According to sociologist Warren Pearce, Tomas Pueyo contributed to making experts fashionable again.⁵⁹ Curiously, he had never made any claim to being an expert in epidemiology before: "a glance at his Medium profile showed ... a range of posts with titles such as 'What the Rise of Skywalker Can Teach about Storytelling' and 'What I Learned Building a Horoscope That Blew Up on Facebook.' This all seemed like

58 See the Twitter post of Channel 4 News (@Channel4News), "We need to catch this before the weekend," Twitter, March 13, 2020, 10:12 pm, <https://twitter.com/Channel4News/status/1238573667002523648>, or the whole show on YouTube at Channel 4 News, "Coronavirus: Are We Doing Enough?" YouTube video, 45:13, March 13, 2020, *Channel 4 News*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C98FmoZVbjs>.

59 See Warren Pearce, "What Does Covid-19 Mean for Expertise? The Case of Tomas Pueyo," *iHuman* (blog), June 16, 2020, <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ihuman/blog/what-does-covid-19-mean-expertise-case-tomas-pueyo>.

a poor fit for the new age of expert deference that we were supposed to be experiencing.”⁶⁰ Indeed, he published neither his method nor his code in his Medium post,⁶¹ an absence of falsifiable sources which brings us back to Popper’s definition of pseudoscience.

Commenting on Pueyo, Warren Pearce raises the question of what science is, which experts to trust, and how to disentangle science, emotion, and politics.⁶² Instead of Pueyo being exposed as the unqualified amateur that he was, it was John Edmunds who appeared again in the media a few months later to now claim that the lockdown delay had indeed “cost a lot of lives.”⁶³ Today, as shown in Chapter 2, we know from the Swedish case and the German inquiry that the lockdown most likely cost many more lives than it saved, i.e., it was never justified in the first place.

Warren Pearce also raises the question of the role of the blogosphere in helping to qualify the claims of would-be experts. Bloggers appeal to the public thanks to their spontaneity and perceived lack of arrogance, which goes to show, he claims, that the notion of expertise should be more inclusive and open to criticism.⁶⁴ He shows with the example of the speed at which the Covid cases were supposed to multiply that a misunderstanding had arisen as to the role of epidemiological models vs. advisers—the two are conflated, yet producers of models typically peddle a wider range of possibilities, which allows media to dramatize options: “Role conflation presents a challenge to science advice and highlights the need for a diversity of expertise, a structured process for

60 Pearce, “What Does Covid-19 Mean.”

61 Pearce, “What Does Covid-19 Mean.”

62 Pearce, “What Does Covid-19 Mean.”

63 “Coronavirus: Lockdown Delay ‘Cost a Lot of Lives,’ Says Science Adviser,” *BBC*, June 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-52955034>.

64 Pearce, “What Does Covid-19 Mean.”

selecting experts, and greater clarity regarding the methods by which expert consensus is achieved.”⁶⁵ The media, intent on sensationalizing issues, usually wastes no time on such musings.

Boldly claiming to be a “communications wizard,” “spell-caster,” and “world-class storyteller,” Pueyo later bragged about how much money he made thanks to Covid:

Soon, it would turn out that my skills were applicable outside of the corporate world. During COVID, my articles were read by hundreds of millions of people. I appeared on TV and in the media around the world. My ideas guided the domestic policy of dozens of countries like Germany, the US, India, Spain, Canada, Singapore, Japan, Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, the Philippines, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Kuwait, Argentina, Costa Rica. But that was just the beginning. Since then, I’ve gathered 85,000 people in this newsletter, and now I live off of it. I also have 330k followers on Twitter, with hundreds of millions of impressions every year. The early growth was from COVID, but you can easily tell when I started taking it seriously. And recently, I’ve been able to replicate this success on YouTube.⁶⁶

Tomas Pueyo might have profited from Covid in a rather insensitive and opportunistic manner in the context of such a global health crisis, but scientific expertise certainly did not come out of it stronger.

65 Warren Pearce, “Trouble in the Trough: How Uncertainties Were Downplayed in the UK’s Science Advice on Covid-19,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7, no. 122 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00612-w>. Many thanks to the author for providing me with these references.

66 See Tomas Pueyo, “How to Become a Communications Wizard,” *Uncharted Territories* (blog), March 14, 2024, <https://unchartedterritories.tomaspueyo.com/p/business-communication-course>.

When “science” serves to justify the irrationality of panic politics

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo often claimed in his famous daily press briefs in spring 2020, “I wear a mask to protect you” and explained that to wear a mask served to send the message, “I respect you.”⁶⁷ That this attitude was rather sanctimonious became clear when Cuomo, until then so humane, slammed the New York homeless who slept in the subways at night as “disgusting.”⁶⁸ He was indignant that they should display such lack of regard for transit workers as to risk contaminating them; on the other hand, he never wondered where else the homeless were supposed to sleep and if their lives were not worth protecting, too. Even more to the point, if the collective prophylactic purpose implied by the mask did not apply to the whole of the population and excluded sections of it as unworthy, it was useless and had to be insincere. But virtue signaling and class recognition were more important than “science.”

In the Czech Republic, people had to wear a mask at all times, including when they walked or ran alone in nature.⁶⁹ Rumors of drones circling up and verifying the compliance of citizens in woods, fields, and mountains started to circulate. The amusing story of policemen monitoring two nudists on an empty beach and making them mask up made world

67 “Governor Cuomo Urges New Yorkers to Wear Masks,” *Reuters*, 12, YouTube video, 1:57, May 13, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qbtd-piB1Byg>.

68 “Cuomo Calls Subway Cars Filled with Homeless People ‘Disgusting,’” *The New York Times*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/28/nyregion/coronavirus-new-york-update.html>.

69 Irena Válová, “Rousky v lese jsou stále povinné. Přes ujišťování politiků to říká opatření ministerstva zdravotnictví,” *Česká justice*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.ceska-justice.cz/2020/04/rousuky-v-lese-jsou-stale-povinne-pres-ujistovani-politiku-to-rika-opatreni-ministerstva-zdravotnictvi/>.

headlines.⁷⁰ At the time, the Czech Republic had an excellent Covid record, with very few casualties. Was this the proof that masks worked? It is doubtful if we remember that New York Governor Cuomo published figures in early May 2020, after weeks of lockdown and much publicity given to wearing masks, according to which 66% of new hospitalizations in New York occurred amongst people who had stayed at home,⁷¹ or alternatively, as Tomas Pueyo reported, that 80% of the infections occurred at home in China.

But at the game of purity, someone always plays better. Czech authorities could reproach Governor Cuomo that in New York, children didn't have to wear masks, whereas the more careful Czech children had to be masked from birth onwards. At least it was so for the first two weeks of lockdown, then the lower limit was raised at the end of March 2020 to two years of age.⁷² Czech authorities doubtless thought Governor Cuomo was irresponsible to let three-year-old children walk around without masks—and despaired Czech parents, who risked an €800 fine if their toddlers didn't comply. In Spain and Italy, authorities deemed both Cuomo and the Czechs irresponsible to let people walk outside at all. Their citizens were strictly confined at home, the only exception being to buy food. Children did not go out of their homes at all for three weeks in Italy and seven weeks straight in Spain.⁷³

70 Barry Neild, "Czech Nudists Told to Wear Face Masks by Police," *CNN*, April 10, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/czech-nudists-virus-police/index.html>.

71 Noah Higgins-Dunn and Kevin Breuninger, "Cuomo Says It's 'Shocking' Most New Coronavirus Hospitalizations Are People Who Had Been Staying Home," *CNBC*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/06/ny-gov-cuomo-says-its-shocking-most-new-coronavirus-hospitalizations-are-people-staying-home.html>.

72 Pavel Cechl, "Konečně. Ministerstvo řeklo, zda roušky musejí mít děti a ko-jenci," *Deník.cz*, March 30, 2020, https://www.denik.cz/z_domova/povinne-rousky-deti-cesko.html.

73 Mireia Orgiles et. al., "Psychological Symptoms in Italian, Spanish and Portuguese Youth during the COVID-19 Crisis: A Longitudinal Study," *Child*

In France, McKinsey designed an administrative authorization that people had to print at home, fill out, and sign, granting themselves the authorization to go out (outside of work) for one hour maximum, in a one-kilometer perimeter maximum, with one child maximum.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, in Austria, the mask was not compulsory for the first six weeks, then compulsory only for indoor shopping, while people were free to walk outside without.⁷⁵ In Germany, the Deutsche Bahn company made passengers wear FF2 masks, but the staff had to wear only surgical masks.⁷⁶

Where is the scientific logic in all this? And if the mask was so important, why were authorities repeatedly caught posing with their mask for the camera and taking it off as soon as they thought the camera was off?⁷⁷

In the Czech Republic, fathers were forbidden from attending the birth of their children on the pretext that their presence posed an infection risk to the hospital personnel. This was criticized by a Czech journalist as a measure tailored to “cost nothing while looking like the government is doing something.”⁷⁸ In France, fathers were allowed to come for the delivery but had to leave the hospital two hours after the

Psychiatry & Human Development, June 26, 2021, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10578-021-01211-9>.

74 Nicolas Monnet, “Confinement: 1 kilomètre pour marcher autour de chez soi, ça correspond à quoi?” *L'indépendant*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.lindependant.fr/2020/03/27/confinement-1-kilometre-autour-de-chez-soi-ca-correspond-a-quoi,8821248.php>.

75 “Covid-19 pandemic in Austria,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic_in_Austria.

76 See Anthony LaMesa (@ajLamesa), “The Science,” Twitter, October 7, 2022, 2:56 pm, <https://twitter.com/ajlamesa/status/1771700651275227433>.

77 See, for instance, here: Ancient Man, “Global Leaders at G20 Remove Masks after Posing for Photos!” YouTube video, 0:08, November 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AqIEwc2C8c>.

78 Petr Bittner, “Připravit otce o porod je to nejhorší, s čím vláda přišla,” *Deník referendum*, March 30, 2020, <https://denikreferendum.cz/clanek/30979-prip-ravit-otce-o-porod-je-to-nejhors-i-s-cim-vlada-prisla>.

birth and not come back, or else stay confined in the room with mother and baby and not go out for the duration of the stay (usually a few days). A similar measure was implemented in the state of New York but was rapidly revised in view of the outcry it provoked.⁷⁹ Who was right? In the ranking of Covid deaths per capita, the Czech Republic ended up in a worse position than the US, which ended up in a significantly worse position than France.⁸⁰ Among 21,027 women questioned in 12 countries of Europe, 62% “were not allowed their companion of choice” during labor in 2020-21.⁸¹ In many countries, women were additionally forced to wear a mask throughout their entire labor.

In Slovakia, a mother who gave birth while positive for Covid was allowed to see her child for the first time after twelve days.⁸² In the UK, a mother was kept apart from her dying newborn son because she had Covid.⁸³ As daycare

79 Holly Yan and Kristina Sgueglia, “New York State Overrules a Hospital Policy Saying Mothers Must Give Birth without Their Partners,” *CNN*, March 29, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/29/health/new-york-hospital-child-birth-policy-overturned/index.html>.

80 See the tracking website Our World in Data: https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer?zoomToSelection=true&time=2020-02-03..latest®ion=Europe&facet=none&country=ISR~PSE~FRA~ITA~SVN~BEL~CZE~SVK~HUN~USA~GBR~EuropeanUnion~DEU~AUT~European+Union~OWID_WRL~POL~BIH~BRA~NOR~ESP~PRT~NLD~NZL~JPN~UKR~HKG~CHN~SWE&pickerSort=asc&pickerMetric=location&hideControls=true&Interval=Cumulative&Relative+to+Population=true&Color+by=test+positivity=false&Metric=Confirmed+deaths.

81 Marzia Lazzerini et.al., “Quality of Facility-Based Maternal and Newborn Care around the Time of Childbirth during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Online Survey Investigating Maternal Perspectives in 12 Countries of the WHO European Region,” *The Lancet*, December 24, 2021, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpe/article/PIIS2666-7762\(21\)00254-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpe/article/PIIS2666-7762(21)00254-4/fulltext).

82 Denisa Gdovinová, “Žena rodila s koronavírusom a svoje dieťa uvidela až po dvanástich dňoch. Neizolujte matky od detí, vyzývajú odborníci,” *Denník N*, October 30, 2020, <https://dennikn.sk/2113967/zena-rodila-s-koronavirusom-a-svoje-diet-a-uvidela-az-po-dvanastich-dnoch-neizolujte-matky-od-deti-vyzyvaju-odbornici/>.

83 Neil Johnston, “NHS Staff Kept Mother with Covid Apart from Dying Newborn

centers and kindergartens reopened in Europe in late spring 2020, toddlers and young children were confronted with masked caretakers, a potentially terrifying sight for them. As they could not see their lips, psychologists warned they would be retarded in their speech development, which is exactly what happened.⁸⁴

In European countries with mask mandates, the populations were told that to wear the mask was necessary primarily in case they sneezed or coughed. So in spring, allergy season, they were expected to sneeze into their masks—and then what? Have their faces covered in snot? Was it not more probable that people would remove their masks to sneeze into a paper tissue before replacing the mask? If so, what was the point of the mask? And what to do with the numerous people who wore the mask on their chins? Should militia men wearing gas masks remain on standby in every subway carriage, ready to neutralize recalcitrants?

The Czech Republic was the first European country to make masks compulsory, but masks were unavailable, so people rediscovered a DIY nostalgia for communist times and made their own cloth masks. Hygienic issues stemmed from such usage. As people wore the same cloth mask for days or weeks on end, they rapidly smelled bad. When restaurants reopened but the masks were still compulsory, people raised their masks, ate or drank, and then put them back down over their mouths, so the masks now doubled as napkins. Prime Minister Andrej Babiš nevertheless boasted in a tweet addressed to President Trump on March 29, 2020: “@realDonaldTrump, try tackling virus the Czech way. Wearing a simple

Son,” *The Telegraph*, September 11, 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/09/11/nhs-covid-inquiry-dying-baby-catherine-todd-ulster/>.

84 Vanessa Clarke, “How Did the Pandemic Impact Babies Starting School As Children Now?,” *BBC*, September 1, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c39lkry9j3rno>.

cloth mask, decreases the speed of the virus by 80%! Czech Republic has made it OBLIGATORY for its citizens to wear a mask in the public. Pls retweet. God bless America!”⁸⁵ By May 1, 2020, the Czech Republic indeed identified only 257 Covid deaths (compared, for instance, to 2,719 in similarly populated Sweden). But by November 17, 2020, the Czech Republic had 6,416 Covid deaths, i.e., more than the 6,344 Swedish ones. By August 2021, Czechia had one of the worst confirmed death rate in the world despite its “Germanic genes” and its home-made masks.

Before the country became “best in Covid,” as the Czechs bitterly laughed, health authorities had randomly tested 27,000 people in spring 2020 and discovered that only about 100 people had been in contact with the virus. Covid was simply not present in the country: by sheer good luck, there were very few clusters of people who had traveled to the Czech Republic from infected areas before the borders were sealed at the same pace as the rest of Europe. Austria reached similar conclusions: less than 1% of the population had encountered the virus.

Vít Klusák and Marika Pecháčková shot a moving documentary film on the mobilization of Czech society during this first, rather stupefying, lockdown. The film is evocatively entitled *Velké nic* (The Great Nothing).⁸⁶ Apart from the stunning beauty of empty Prague streets shot with exceptionally good cameras not normally used in a documentary film but which were cheap to rent at a time when the film industry was on standby, the film depicts the dedication of Czech women,

85 See Andrej Babiš (@AndrejBabis), “Mr. President @realDonaldTrump, try tackling virus the Czech way,” Twitter, March 29, 2020, 8:19 am, <https://twitter.com/AndrejBabis/status/1244147274298654720>.

86 See Ian Willoughby, “It Was Very Visual: New Doc Revisits Covid Period in Czechia,” *Radio Prague International*, March 14, 2023, <https://english.raio.cz/it-was-very-visual-new-doc-revisits-covid-period-czechia-8777565>.

who sat down and sewed home-made masks in order to “help” those who might be in need of them, especially health personnel. As one of them put it, while herself unwittingly wearing her mask under her nose, these women did not volunteer their time to help the government or “the system” but to “save the people.” Another one explained that she “had to do something.” The mask was a “symbol” of “something positive”: “That the mask works or doesn’t work is completely equal,” she concluded.⁸⁷

To question the ethics of the measures was to snap Harry Potter’s wand in two

Many citizens around the world opened their windows at the given hour every day or week to cheer health workers.⁸⁸ Who would not applaud the selflessness of frontline workers, especially nurses and doctors? The answer is, those who had health personnel living in their building and who wrote anonymous letters of threat and denunciation or expelled them for “selfishly exposing them” to the virus: such stories appeared in all countries.⁸⁹ Many people normally treat ordinary small workers with little or no consideration but applauded “frontline workers” all the louder that they stayed home while they let these small people do the risky job outdoors. How much consideration would these people still get once the crisis was over? The answer was made clear soon enough: nurses

87 Vít Klusák and Marika Pecháčková, *Velké nic*, 2020, <https://www.csfd.cz/film/1246875-velke-nic/prehled/>.

88 Luke Hurst, “Coronavirus: Health Workers Clapped across the World for Battling on the COVID-19 Frontline,” *EuroNews*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/03/24/coronavirus-health-workers-clapped-across-the-world-for-battling-on-the-covid-19-frontline>.

89 Kirk Semple, “‘Afraid to Be a Nurse’: Health Workers under Attack,” *The New York Times*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/27/world/americas/coronavirus-health-workers-attacked.html>.

and physicians, so praised one year earlier, were ruthlessly dismissed and vilified if they refused to take the new Covid vaccine in 2021,⁹⁰ including Professors Martin Kulldorff (Harvard) and Aaron Kheriaty (Irvine), both because they just had Covid and pleaded natural immunity. Ethics professor Julie Ponesse was also fired from Western University (Canada) because she, logically, refused the vaccine mandate for ethical reasons.⁹¹

People were not shy about lecturing others, either. A French sports journalist caught Covid and nearly died. He gave a vibrant testimony as to the suffering he endured, the health consequences, the devotion of the hospital team who saved him, and his sheer luck to even survive. He ended by lecturing to those irresponsible people who didn't take the virus seriously and flouted the lockdown. Hand on heart, in the name of all the people who were risking their lives to save ours, the least we could do for them, he said, was to follow the rules and not endanger them.⁹² This was a touching testimony, but less touching are the circumstances in which this journalist caught the virus himself: by going to Northern Italy to watch a Juventus FC football match at a time when the pandemic had already started. Going to a football match with 80,000 spectators in a contaminated area did not prevent him from feeling entitled to lecture others on proper behavior.

90 Carlie Porterfield and Lisa Kim, "Hospitals Begin Firing Staffers Who Refuse Covid Vaccines—Leading Some to Fear Staffing Shortages," *Forbes*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carlieporterfield/2021/09/27/hospitals-begin-firing-staffers-who-refuse-covid-vaccines---leading-some-to-fear-staffing-shortages/?sh=f8ca5b35f9e4>.

91 See Julie Ponesse, *My Choice: The Ethical Case Against Covid-19 Vaccine Mandates* (Toronto: The Democracy Fund, 2020).

92 Vincent Duluc, "Vincent Duluc, touché par le coronavirus: 'Tu prends une grande claque,'" *L'Équipe*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.lequipe.fr/Football/Actualites/Vincent-duluc-touche-par-le-coronavirus-tu-prends-une-grande-claque/1131307>.

French trade unions were worried about people going back to work and “risking their lives,”⁹³ but they were equally fiercely against the government preventing them from taking their summer holiday by keeping beaches closed. In France, it was too dangerous to work but not too dangerous to cross the country by train to lie on the beach for a much-needed respite.⁹⁴

Breath is death

“Breath is death,” an Orwell-inspired motto which circulated on social media, aptly characterizes the atmosphere in the Western world as the Covid pandemic broke out. To terrify people into believing that only the mask could save them from Covid and from almost certain death has not remained without consequences. Social media abounds to this day with postings from individuals who wear increasingly complex contraptions, convinced they can survive their outings in public only thanks to them. As Lachlan Blake, a Twitter user from Australia, put it, after such social conditioning, these ordinary people are “suffering from a hyperinflated fear of becoming critically ill and have made pathological changes to the way they socialize in order to cope with this new phobia.” Again, inducing and using fear of contaminated air is nothing new in biopolitical governmentality. The Czechs who are old enough remember having to wear gas masks in the 1980s to

93 Raphaëlle Besse Desmoulières, “Coronavirus: les syndicats veulent protéger les salariés obligés d’aller travailler,” *Le Monde*, March 20, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/03/20/coronavirus-les-syndicats-veulent-protéger-les-salariés-obligés-d-aller-travailler_6033791_823448.html.

94 Pauline Rouquette, “Pourquoi les vacances de l’été 2020 seront historiques,” *Europe 1*, July 4, 2020, <https://www.europe1.fr/societe/vacances-post-coronavirus-des-vacances-historiques-et-exceptionnelles-selon-un-Bresocio-logue-3979223>.

train against the biological or chemical warfare that the West was going to launch “any time soon.”

A video of the same Lachlan Blake garnered 700,000 views on Facebook in 2021. It showed him being handcuffed, age 17, by Australian police for refusing to tell his name and address—unless the real cause of his arrest was his calm, amusing lecture to the police on his own civil rights, which visibly irked the officers dealing with him.⁹⁵ He was prompted to show his ID because he was not wearing a mask outdoors at an anti-lockdown protest and was subject to control if he was within the ten-kilometer radius from his home in which Australians were allowed to travel in the frame of the lockdown. Ten minutes after this spectacular arrest, he was released on the reasoning that he had been drinking a coffee, so he hadn’t needed to mask after all—this was “science.”

Summary of Chapter 3

Chapter 3 showed that during Covid, the instrumentalization of science and expertise was evident in various ways, including the use of financial incentives to shape public health messaging and the close ties between regulatory agencies and the pharmaceutical industry. This raises concerns about conflicts of interest and the neutrality of the narrative surrounding Covid and the vaccination efforts. Mainstream media’s role in amplifying this narrative, often without questioning the underlying motivations or potential biases of consulted experts, further compounded these issues. This absence of critical thinking highlights the need for greater scrutiny and transparency at the intersection of science, public health, and industry interests. The story of three particular influencers

95 See MCJ Report, “Lachlan Blake converses with police,” Facebook, June 12, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=250273656874105>.

of the pandemic illustrated the hubris, exaggerations, and opportunistic motives in public health expertise. The pandemic response in various countries was marked by multiple inconsistencies and controversies, leading us to relativize the notion of “science.”

