

# Self-isolated and over-exposed: the limitations to Brexit's neo-liberal foundations

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Barely two weeks in to the UK's broader scale response to the challenges of Covid-19, and already the cracks are showing. We could here focus on the Government's proclaimed 'changes to the science', as a policy of herd immunity was dropped to 'flatten the curve', protecting both population and an already resource-challenged health care system. We similarly could focus on the challenges felt within the financial sector as indices retreated as swiftly as Boris when a fridge or free holiday is available.

What I want to focus on however is somewhat more significant. The implications for large swathes of the UK economy has become increasingly prominent in light of the PM's 'advice' to avoid theatres, pubs and social gatherings. This has led to mass closures for many organisations and businesses. For people such as myself within a university, this means buildings are closed but operations mostly continue. We are in a privileged position to utilise sophisticated online platforms and capabilities allowing us to deliver to our students in a more challenging, but regardless effective manner.

Those in such a luxurious position are limited. And this is to some extent personal. Last week, as prevention measures escalated, my partner who works part-time as a freelance creative producer lost £6k worth of work set for the Spring. Whilst this may be postponement rather than cancellation, the impact on cashflow is not inconsiderable. This week, on Boris' 'suggestions', across the country theatres closed their doors not knowing when they would again open. This again hit my partner, who also works part-time as a producer for a local theatre. With an absence of the extent of these measures, the realistic prospects for such organisations is they stay closed for a prolonged period due to the complexity of getting programmes, often including international touring companies, back up and running.

The Government's lack of sympathy for organisations like theatres – alongside those more broadly within cultural and related experience industries – illustrates a significant distance between expectations and realities for resource-limited, low margin operations. But it also illustrates something more significant in relation to the escalation of issues of precarity in modern industry and employment.

Both the cultural and the broader experience economy are populated by a high number of freelance and casual workers. The rationale behind preferences toward temporary and peripatetic employment – integrated through casual arrangements or zero-hour contracts – is it allows for flexibility for businesses to respond accordingly to shifts driven by the free market. This course of action is favourable to businesses, ensuring they are agile and (human) resource is transitional rather than fixed, and to workers, offering them employment with flexibility in both working hours and chosen opportunities. The reality is, such practice passes cost downward, forcing smaller organisations and freelance employees into precarious working and living conditions<sup>[1]</sup>.

The absence of any detailed package of support (at this stage) to address those employees and industries without a built-in safety net illustrates the challenge now facing the state and the economy. Proposed loan, rather than grant-based, financial support risks adding additional weight to the fragile balance sheets of organisations already existing on fine margins; being forced into such debt may prove the proverbial straw. Income guarantees for workers have been an element of packages introduced by other countries; in a UK where after 10 years the roll out of Universal Credit remains contentious with accusations of forcing claimants into poverty, such support is yet forthcoming.

Certain industries and firms have of course been able to respond to the current situation. Brewdog has turned its micro-brewery capabilities to the production of hand sanitiser. Outside the production industry, such opportunities are relatively scarce.

What is important here is the extent to which the current situation illustrates a fundamental flaw at the foundation of the neo-liberal, free trading debates batted around by pro-market Brexiteers and their

coterie of grifters in places like the (so-called) Institute of (so-called) Economic Affairs.

The Brexit pursued by such unscrupulous individuals (see Open Democracy's work on the dark money funding Brexit)<sup>[ii]</sup> posits a world in which Government has little role as its capability is second to the uncompromising wisdom and adaptive capabilities of the free market. This principle is fine in a world where the economy – and thus economic actors – exist in an environment where competition, where divergence, and where individual freedom are the driving forces.

As the outbreak of Covid-19 illustrates, this model has its limitations. Critical in managing the escalation of infection are principles anathema to the neo-liberal; central planning over deregulation, coordination over divergence, collectivism over individualism. And yet the ultimate price paid in the absence of such managing principals are those of the individual; health, welfare, life. Positioning the outbreak as a culling exercise -separating wheat from chaff – as certain commentators have approached it makes for sensationalist reading. And every one of them, should they become infected and require critical care, would obligingly expect their individual interests to be prioritised.

So the occurrence of a global pandemic makes a compelling argument for a recalibration of not only the anti-European project but also the core values and institutional infrastructure of both state and economy. Adoption and implementation of a greater safety net allows the government space to move beyond the rock of draconian action with economic consequences and the hard place of non-intervention with dire outcomes. The rationale of neo-liberalism has been an unfettered economy is the most efficient method of protecting citizen welfare. When citizen welfare is collateral damage as one seeks to protect the economy, it's probably time for a rethink.

<sup>[i]</sup> Danson, M., Galloway, L. and Sherif, M., 2020. From unemployment to self-employment: Can enterprise policy intensify the risks of poverty? <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpa.2020.102164>

<sup>[ii]</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/what-weve-discovered-in-year-investigating-dark-money-that-funded-brex-it-me/>