

AFTER THE VIRUS

Why was the UK so unprepared for the pandemic, suffering one of the highest death rates and worst economic contractions of the major world economies in 2020? Hilary Cooper and Simon Szreter reveal the deep roots of our vulnerability and set out a powerful manifesto for change post-COVID-19. They argue that our commitment to a flawed neoliberal model and the associated disinvestment in our social fabric left the UK dangerously exposed and unable to mount an effective response. This is not at all what made Britain great. The long history of the highly innovative universal welfare system established by Elizabeth I facilitated both the industrial revolution and, when revived after 1945, the post-war Golden Age of rising prosperity. Only by learning from that past can we create the fairer, nurturing and empowering society necessary to tackle the global challenges that lie ahead: climate change, biodiversity collapse and global inequality.

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After the Virus

Lessons from the Past for a Better
Future

HILARY COOPER AND SIMON SZRETER

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Let today embrace the past with remembrance and the
future with longing.

Kahil Gibran, *The Prophet*

For Iridium, Ben and Zack

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PREFACE

The COVID-19 virus has starkly exposed just how vulnerable Britain's highly unequal society has become. The new decade of the 2020s has begun with an important moment of reckoning. We need to face up to the fact that this may well turn out not to be a one-off, but a dress rehearsal. As things stand there are going to be many more global-scale crises heading our way in the twenty-first century. Humankind has inadvertently become trapped within an unsustainable high-carbon, high-inequality, globalised economy that worships growth. This is now placing an intolerable pressure on the planet and our relationship with other species, right down to micro-organisms like the coronavirus.

This means that it is imperative that we take stock and learn all the lessons that we can to address the coming century's urgent problems. Science can be an important resource but equally important is a critical reappraisal of our society and our values. This book argues that history can play a vital role in enabling us to do this because history can emancipate us to think differently – about the future economy, our future society, how we govern ourselves and who we want to be.

Revisiting Britain's modern history, going right back to the reign of Elizabeth I, can enable us to see that Britain's undoubted success as a global economic leader by the beginning of the nineteenth century was not, in fact, based on today's unrestrained individualist, free-market economics. This only emerged later, becoming British government

policy during the course of the nineteenth century – and it caused terrible problems both domestically and globally. Ultimately, expansion of this ideological virus of voracious self-enrichment went global, leading eventually to the First World War, fascism in Europe and the Second World War. Temporarily set aside after the cataclysm of that second war, since 1980 the siren song of self-interest has returned once again in the form of neoliberal government policies that have pared back the public sphere, bringing the rising inequalities and weakened democracy that left us so exposed when COVID-19 struck.

It is well-known that the story of the industrial revolution and modern economic growth began in Britain. What is far less well-known is that two centuries before the first factory steam-engines began to be heard, Britain innovated something just as significant, a treasure that has lain buried and forgotten until the most recent generation of historians revealed it. This was the world's first ever welfare state, the universal social security system of the 'Elizabethan' Poor Law, first put in place in 1601. Its principles were those of a collectivist individualism, a unique English creation. Individuals were empowered and their independent capacities to take economic risks encouraged, but within a supportive framework. This was possible because every individual had a statutory entitlement to support from their community, which was funded by a compulsory, progressive local tax on land – the main source of wealth.

After 200 years of expansion in response to need, this empowering and nurturing welfare system had brought British society and its highly mobile workforce to its industrial revolution. But it was then abandoned in 1834 and the New Poor Law was born. Collectivist individualism was replaced by a harsher outright individualism. The poor were no longer viewed as deserving of assistance but as lazy,

deserving only the discipline of the workhouse. But this new economic orthodoxy did not deliver. No longer investing in the well-being of the wider population as it previously had, slowly but surely, under the New Poor Law the economy's leadership in international productivity ebbed away.

A tumultuous century later a national policy of collectivist individualism had to be reinvented by William Beveridge as the post-war welfare state and its iconic National Health Service. For the first time in seventy years the productivity of the national economy once again lifted after 1945 as the British people 'never had it so good', with secondary education, decent housing and secure employment increasingly available to all.

It was this same ethos of unconditional commitment to the support of others, encapsulated by the selfless workers of the NHS, which got British society through the darkest days of the coronavirus crisis. As this book shows, this was despite the repeated ineptitudes during 2020 of a shockingly unprepared administration in Westminster, reluctant to engage with the nation's provincial public health or local government services and instead spending the nation's money lavishly on private sector contracts, many of which, notably in the case of the highly expensive test and trace system, failed ignominiously. The government's principal success, the vaccination programme, was a classic and heroic creation of the public sector and the non-profit ethos.

This book argues that the most valuable lessons of British history – both throughout the last forty and the last 400 years – are that we need to rediscover our nation's long-proven capacity to prioritise collective commitment to support each other – especially the most vulnerable – and that this fosters a responsible, not a reckless individualism. Far from state support being the enemy of

individualism, initiative-taking by individuals has flourished most widely in this country's history – and has been of the greatest economic benefit to all – when society has committed itself to generous collective support and security for all. The late Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks argued that 'a nation is strong when it cares for the weak ... it becomes rich when it cares for the poor'. As Britain's history shows, it is not just a moral but an economic argument, too. Welfare's focus on nurturing human and social capital is a promoter of economic prosperity and well-being, not a burden on it.

We conclude our book by offering seven pillars of empowerment that describe the principles and practical policies required once again to build a nurturing society, empowering of all individuals, to face the oncoming challenges of the twenty-first century. Informed by our own history, this should rightly start here across the nations of the UK. We should once again take up the mantle, not wait for others to do the work for us.