How can social theory help us understand current attitudes in the UK in response to the global Covid-19 outbreak?

By Laura Sheard, 13th March 2020

Based on epidemiological evidence, European governments are starting to shut down their entire societies in response to the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic. But the UK remains an outlier, choosing not to enforce structural changes and instead proffering behavioural advice to its citizens. Many UK workplaces, institutions and universities are waiting for official government advice that non-essential staff can work from home, but this has not transpired. Why in an unprecedented pandemic do people on the ground feel that they cannot make this decision for themselves or their workforce without higher authority? In this blog, I explore what we can learn from some of my favourite social theorists about why this situation may have occurred.

A looming emergency

The world has been watching in horror for the past eight weeks ever since reports started to emerge from China about the outbreak of a novel virus. Fifteen times more deadly than seasonal influenza and two to three times more infectious, Covid-19 quickly became a hot topic. During January and February 2020, most Europeans went about their lives as normal. Travel was not restricted and businesses and institutions remained open as usual.

But reporting and data coming out of China showed something definitive – the only way to curb the exponential rising tide of infections was to completely shut down the areas with a critical mass of infections. In the epicentre of the outbreak, the city of Wuhan was completely locked down once confirmed infections reached the 400 mark.

In mid-February, something startling began to happen in Italy. From less than a handful of cases, infections began to soar in an out of control explosion which has decimated the health service. As of today (13th March 2020), over 15,000 people in Italy have been infected with Covid-19 and over 1,000 have died. Reports emerging on social media from Italian frontline clinicians are distressing. ICU facilities are completely overwhelmed, care is being rationed in some hospitals with people over 65 and those under 65 but with co-morbidities sometimes not selected

for treatment based on likelihood of survival. Italian clinicians are now practicing warzone medicine in a country with one of the best resourced healthcare systems in Europe. The entire country is in unprecedented lock-down status with its borders closed.

Confirmed infections in the UK have now reached over 600 people, with ten deaths. This number of infections is now higher than when the city of Wuhan was locked down in late January. Epidemiological modelling shows that the number of confirmed infections doubles every three to four days unless drastic lockdown efforts are taken by a whole region to contain the virus. Whist other European countries such as Poland, Denmark and Ireland have recently taken decisive action and closed down schools, universities, public events and large scale gatherings; the UK has not moved towards such measures. Large concerts and sporting events with tens of thousands of spectators are still going ahead.

Institutional workplaces in the UK seem beholden to wait for government advice on allowing their staff to wholesale work from home. Leaders and managers seem paralysed by indecision, waiting for the official approval to move forward with social distancing measures when all the evidence to date from China and other countries around the world clearly shows that this is the only effective strategy to contain this pandemic. Why is this? And what can we learn from various theoretical thinkers that helps us to understand this?

The power of modern bureaucracy

The Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in his work *Modernity & the Holocaust* (1989) argues that the conditions which set in place and sustained the holocaust did not come about through large numbers of individuals who were evil or sadistic. Rather, the holocaust was a product of modern bureaucracy and hierarchy. Individual people did not question the aims given to them by their political masters and saw themselves as mere cogs in a machine, awaiting their next order. This was particularly true of bureaucrats, the vast majority who never encountered the concentration camps in person but unwittingly – and sometimes unknowingly - served their goals and aims which made such environments possible. An example of this is the thousands of middle managers who completed office paperwork which several times removed served to displace Jewish people. Organisational discipline was strong to enable people to carry on with their daily lives without questioning the outcomes of their own actions. The ability to carry out an

order from above was prioritised, regardless of whether the worker or manager personally disagrees with a course of action.

Particularly relevant to Covid-19, Bauman in 1989 put forward the idea of a 'bankruptcy of modern safeguards'. Bauman stated that populations generally trust in the safeguards which have been built into the fabric of modern societies. It is only in a few dramatic cases that doubt is cast on the reliability of safeguards, with one such case of course being the holocaust. This is in hindsight as populations trust governments to safeguard them when experiencing a major crisis. In 2020, a modern safeguard failure could be considered to be the government advice to proceed with business as usual despite a looming pandemic catastrophe. Will UK complacency regarding Covid-19 be a dramatic bankruptcy of safeguarding the health of our population?

Hierarchical roles and compartmentalised knowledge

The American sociologist George Ritzer published *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993) where he proffers that institutions and organisations in modern societies have adopted the same characteristics that are found in fast food restaurants: efficiency, calculability, predictability and standardization, and control. Everything is standardised to produce an output which is the same the world over, made in the most efficient way regardless of the effect on the worker. Consider the McDonald's worker who stands over the same grill for hours monotonously undertaking one task (flipping burgers) in order to produce a product that tastes the same in every McDonald's restaurant across the world. McDonaldization has rippled out across late capitalist societies affecting our worldviews, goals, identities and the leading to the global homogenisation of social life. Millions of workers adhere to rigid workplace rules or policies where they are aware that they can instantly be replaced if they stray away from tight managerial controls. Another facet of McDonaldization keeps people deskilled and focused on one small, concrete task or role to the exclusion of wider, organisational thinking. When people are explicitly told not to think more widely than their individual task or role, they become inherently docile and unquestioning.

Does the above focus on managerial control and the compartmentalisation of knowledge lead to a greater understanding of why we are seeing a paralysed response in the UK to the Covid-19 outbreak? Individual employees are unable to question the authority of managers to make an autonomous decision to stay at home during the pandemic. Middle and senior managers responsible for teams of employees are being told to wait for government advice to enact social distancing. Employees responsible for performance of their own individual projects plough ahead with face to face meetings and events during an unprecedented pandemic without an understanding of the consequences of how virus transmission may reverberate throughout their organisation.
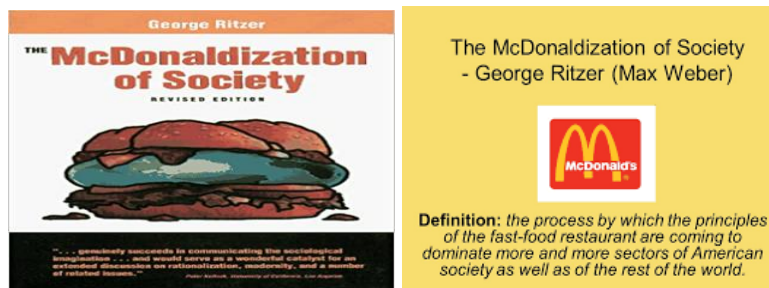

Conditions of neo-liberal capitalism leading to a lack of a co-ordinated global response

Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything* (2014) is important to learn from. In her book on global climate change, Klein argues that reversing catastrophic climate change is inherently difficult because it is, in fact, a product of the conditions of neo-liberal capitalism. These conditions make it difficult for governments to work together to reduce emissions globally, because all countries are in effect fiscally in competition with each other. For example, one country shutting down many factories to reduce carbon emissions whilst another country allows polluting factories to remain open and continues to reap trade is counterintuitive financially for the first country to enact.

The UK government in the past few days have been accused of putting the economy before the health of the population. As other countries with less than 50 confirmed infections shut down schools, universities and workplaces with an inevitable detrimental economic shock, does the UK government think that holding out on these measures will give its economy an advantage over others? At what cost to human life? Meanwhile, Trump's European travel ban (enforced 12th March) has

been criticised heavily by European leaders for a lack of consultation with allies. Countries across the world seem to be making wildly different choices about how to deal with the virus. This is a global pandemic. But there is no co-ordinated global response.
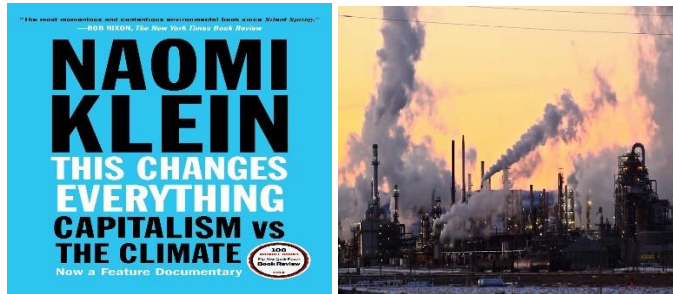
Thank you for reading this blog. I'm Laura, a health sociologist living and working in the North of England. I spend a lot of time thinking, researching and writing about complex systems, organisational structures and why people want to do things but find they don't have the power or autonomy to do them. The views expressed here are mine only and are not connected with any of the organisations I am employed by or affiliated to.